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UNDERSTANDING AMERICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CULTURE AND POLITICS

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IN AMERICAN STUDIES

UNDERSTANDING AMERICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CULTURE AND POLITICS



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UNDERSTANDING AMERICA IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CULTURE AND POLITICS

Ever since Salzburg Global Seminar was founded in 1947 as the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies, critical dialogue about American history, literature, cultural institutions, politics, economics, and law has played a vital role in our organization's development and legacy. The Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association was founded in 2004 to continue this legacy. In 2018, its 16th symposium was held – *Understanding America in the 21st Century: Culture and Politics*.

The annual symposia convened by the Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association (SSASA) focus on topical questions and issues related to American culture and society, to foster understanding of how these issues are influenced by, and affect, the world as a whole.

The multi-disciplinary symposium, *Understanding America in the 21st Century: Culture and Politics* in September 2018 explored the sensitive intersect of culture and politics in America's rapidly changing landscape. The 2018 symposium built on the conclusions of the 2017 symposium on *Life and Justice in America: Implications of the New Administration*, which had explored historic events related to social progress and literary reflections of the nature and quality of life and justice in America.

The four-day program, bringing together 53 Americanists, political scientists and cultural and media professionals from 29 countries on five continents, sought to foster the participants' greater understanding of how the lives of individuals and communities in 21st century America are being reshaped as a result of current social, political and cultural forces as well as America's changing role in world affairs.

Participants examined factors related to leadership, race and ethnicity changes in America, transformations in media and digital communications, the decline of trust in political and cultural institutions, the direction and polarizing significance of popular culture and the arts in understanding America, and the implications of the above for the future of American Studies abroad.

Through thematic lectures, including a keynote from leading British Americanist Christopher Bigsby on "Understanding America," small table discussions and a lively "knowledge café," participants analyzed the likely directions of changes in America over the next decade, drawing on their observation of developments since the 2016 presidential election as well as political trends leading up to the mid-term elections of 2018, which were due to take place six weeks after the annual symposium concluded.

Ultimately, participants left Schloss Leopoldskron with a better understanding of the complexity of domestic and international forces impacting and driving America in the 21st century, which will now enrich their teaching, research, and practice.



Former US diplomat and
SSASA Advisory Board member
Mark Wenig speaks with
Rokhaya Toure from the Cheikh
Anta Diop University in Dakar.

INTRODUCTION

Given its ubiquity on our movie and TV screens, radios, newspapers, and social media feeds, many from the average media consumer to the expert academic could be forgiven for believing that they understand the United States of America. But the USA – with its recent unexpected presidential election outcome, persistent racial and socioeconomic tensions, and seemingly unique phenomena such as school shootings – continues to confound.

Why is America so hard to understand? That was the leading question for the 53 Americanists, political scientists and cultural and media professionals from 29 countries across five continents at the 16th symposium of the Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association (SSASA) in September 2018.

“One problem in understanding America... is spatial,” admitted leading British Americanist Professor Christopher Bigsby, director of the Arthur Miller Institute at the University of East Anglia, in the inaugural Ron Clifton Lecture on American Studies.

Indeed, the US is vast. A single country spanning the breadth of an entire continent (“from sea to shining sea”), its landscape includes frozen Arctic tundra and searing hot deserts, forests, prairies, swamps, mountains, canyons, huge metropolises and wide open, empty spaces. Its population is similarly diverse – and diverging. No longer the great “melting pot” but more a “multicultural mosaic,” the US is shifting demographically: The Brookings Institute projects that America will become minority white by 2045. It is polarizing culturally and politically. Urban vs. rural, “red” states vs. “blue” states, liberal vs. conservative, religious vs. secular, black vs. white, poor vs. the 1% – America is finding it as difficult to understand itself and each other as outsiders do. As Bigsby pointed out, “Those living in Manhattan may have more in common with those in London or Berlin,” than they would with their fellow Americans living in the Deep South.

To understand “America” is to understand there are many different Americas. There is the rhetorical America – based in history, mythos and modern media portrayals. But there is also the “real” America, experienced by diverse communities with increasingly little understanding and appreciation of or even belief in each other’s realities. Understanding America also requires an understanding of both the country’s unique history and the forces that are shaping its future, be they domestic social, cultural, political forces or outside of the country. As the US shifts from the sole global superpower of the late 20th century and early 21st century to a more isolationist country under President Donald J. Trump’s “America First” foreign policy, the world’s understanding and perception of it is shifting too.

This report seeks to summarize the rich discussions and insights shared across the four-day program. A full transcript of Bigsby’s lecture is also included, starting on page 23.

“One problem in understanding America... is spatial.”

Christopher Bigsby,
Director, Arthur Miller Institute,
University of East Anglia, UK

RHETORIC VS. REALITY

America's self-image is of a country born in revolution – the land of the free, home of the brave – where every person enjoys the four freedoms: the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom to worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear.

But despite the First Amendment, the US stands 45th in the World Press Freedom Index – a place only four places below where it stood before President Donald J. Trump declared the press to be “the enemy of the people.” Demands for “safe spaces” on college campuses are raising concerns that free speech is being quelled in academia also.

Despite the Establishment Clause separating church and state, many politicians, lawmakers, and bureaucrats, including current Vice President Mike Pence, use their (typically evangelical Christian) faith to justify their policy decisions.

Despite the American Dream, inequality in the US is widening. Almost one in eight American adults do not have any health insurance and as Bigsby told his audience in Salzburg, “It would take 150 years, or five generations, for a child from a poor family in America to earn the national average.”

Despite the successes of the civil rights era, as more recent movements such as Black Lives Matter highlight and protest against, many people of color in America still live in fear of the legal establishment; African American men are incarcerated at much higher rates than their white or Hispanic compatriots.

The rhetoric and reality are clearly not always aligned.

Unlike traditional academic conferences, the interactive nature of SSASA symposia also includes formats such as a Knowledge Café, allowing participants to discuss various aspects of American Studies in more depth, at greater length, and with more people. 2018's program included a Knowledge Café table discussion on Hollywood and contemporary American society and culture, led by Melvyn Stokes (right), professor of film history at University College London.



THROUGH THE LENS OF POPULAR CULTURE

Understanding the difference between American rhetoric and American reality is made difficult by reasons of both source and context. Americans and outsiders alike gain much of their insight into the cultural and political situation in the country from the media, be that the news media or more broadly from TV, film, music or literature.

Art and media can offer wide-ranging impressions of American life, from brutally realistic “prestige” TV shows like *The Wire* to fantastical Hollywood romcoms where every twentysomething graduate can afford a beautiful apartment in Manhattan. The pursuit of some aspect of the “American dream” is a frequently present theme, as too is that of reinvention and renewal, from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s James Gatz/Jay Gatsby to *Mad Men*’s Dick Whitman/Don Draper.

While Americanists regularly explore literature, film and increasingly TV for insights into the American psyche, popular culture such as reality TV is often overlooked. However, it can provide a particularly interesting and timely lens through which to understand a changing America. Talent-based reality TV shows, such as *American Idol* or *So You Think You Can Dance?*, reflect “traditional American values.” These shows are open all, rules-based and meritocratic. Hard work is rewarded, and both the winners and losers are expected to be gracious, blaming themselves – not the system – for their lack of success. Most significantly, these TV shows are “democratic” – there may be judges bestowing their expert opinion upon the contestants, but the winners are determined by popular vote.

However, despite their huge one-time popularity, viewership of talent-based reality shows has now waned in favor of “untalented-based” reality TV shows, which as one academic in Salzburg remarked, could be classed as “populist” rather than popular culture. Such shows as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Bachelor*, are not open to all. Instead unidentified, behind-the-scenes producers select characters (not contestants) based on their looks or attitude rather than skills or ability. In place of graciousness and decorum, shamelessness and “trashy behavior” are encouraged in pursuit of fame and notoriety rather than a pre-determined prize. Rather than hard work, ruthlessness is rewarded – but the “competition” or storylines are rigged by the faceless producers, not determined by experts or the voting public.

These changes in values, from hard work and graciousness to ruthlessness and division, are apparent not only in reality TV but also increasingly in the American political discourse. It is notable that *The Apprentice* – the primetime TV show that catapulted Donald Trump to a new level of national fame prior to his entry into politics – also falls into this “untalented” reality TV show genre. Not that President Trump is solely to blame for the degradation of American reality TV or politics; these trends long pre-date him.

THE 24-HOUR NEWS CYCLE AND LOSS OF TRUST

The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, the advent of cable news, and changing broadcast business models have given rise to partisan TV reporting, 24-hour news channels, news as entertainment, and a drive for viewership to support advertising. “Real-time” reporting, both online and on 24-hour news channels, offers quick, “hot takes” on the day’s news, but little in-depth information, leaving readers overwhelmed and under-informed. As it was remarked in Salzburg, “Serious journalism never has, never will make money,” and as was proven during 2016, it was much cheaper to have talking heads discuss Trump’s tweets than

“The old American dream was: you come to America, you work hard, you have upper role mobility, you achieve some kind of a middle class lifestyle, your kids do better than you did. Well that dream is in trouble, honestly. And what has replaced it is a dream of being single, living in the city, hanging out with your friends, drinking a lot of alcohol, having a lot of sex, having a great job, and putting off anything that looks like family responsibility, and having almost nothing to do with your family or your community of origin. And that to me is an American dream geared toward building a new elite, international elite of people who have very different values from most human beings on the planet.”

Martha Bayles,
Cultural critic and professor,
Boston College, Boston, Mass., USA

pay journalists to investigate and report on serious policy proposals during the presidential election. It is estimated that Trump received approximately \$9 billion of free airtime during the election thanks to this approach by the TV news channels.

But the validity and trust of these various news sources are being eroded. “Fake news” originally meant stories that were completely unfounded and untrue, such as “Pizzagate,” the conspiracy theory that tied Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign to a pedophile ring being run out of a Washington DC pizzeria. This term has since been weaponized, especially by President Trump and his administration, and applied to the news that one does not wish to be true. His declaring of whole media outlets, such as CNN and the *New York Times*, as “fake news” has led to a spike in mistrust of the media as a whole. Threats against journalists are being taken seriously by media outlets, several of which have increased security measures both at their buildings and for journalists on assignment. Some in Salzburg were surprised and almost incredulous to hear such measures were being taken in 21st century USA, but within a month after the SSASA program, pipe bombs were mailed to media outlets and prominent political opponents of the president. Rhetoric is inspiring action.

On social media platforms such as Facebook, readers more readily share news stories that support rather than challenge their world view. This approach leads to “social media bubbles” wherein people can consume partisan news without being confronted with opposing or differing views, which is further exacerbated by algorithms designed to show users more of the sort of content they “like.” Some of this content has been proven to be maliciously created by “bots” outside of the US with the deliberate purpose of sowing mistrust and division between various factions of American society. But to the “Average Joe,” these “news sources” can look just as reputable as any other legacy media.

It is not only the media that has lost the public’s trust. Various other institutions – from the government and religion to the sports and entertainment industries – or at least prominent individuals therein have also been found to be corrupt and untrustworthy. “Our heroes are being exposed,” lamented one speaker in Salzburg.

In response, viewers and readers – both in the US and outside – are turning to less traditional sources to understand American current political and cultural affairs. Gone are the days of Walter Cronkite, universally watched and trusted by viewers of all political stripes across the country. Today, conservative voters are more likely to get their news from Fox News, talk radio or new news websites such as Breitbart. While for liberals, late-night satirists are increasingly more widely trusted than nightly newsreaders, and thanks to the internet, their shows, or snippets thereof, are widely shared and viewed outside of their original American broadcast by international audiences.

“When I was in high school, I used to go to the American cultural center to watch movies at that time on the civil rights movement, and there was a professor, one of the professors at the university who used to comment on the film, the movie and create a debate after we watched the movie and I was really shocked and also curious and wanted to find out why blacks were suffering so much in the US. So this has intrigued my interest in American Studies... Also all of our countries are funded by the IMF, the World Bank, and so on. So we have to be interested in America in any case, but particularly I wanted to focus on the African American Community, especially women, that is why I got really interested into it.”

Rokhaya Toure,
Teacher, English Department of
Cheikh Anta Diop University,
Dakar, Senegal



INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCES

International audiences have long been exposed to American-produced movies, TV shows, music and literature, and now in the age of cable TV and the internet, they can view American news media first hand, too. This content forms the basis of many outsiders' understanding of the US, but that understanding is also colored by their country's own foreign policy relationship with America and its own national identity.

For many Americans, Russia is understood through Cold War spy movies, a Russian academic posited in Salzburg, whereas Russians think the popular Netflix series *House of Cards* to be an accurate portrayal of the American political system. "Both are far from reality." Both countries see the other as an external threat to their own country's greatness and use that "otherness" as a form of political mobilization. "When America is in crisis, Russia is the ready whipping boy" and vice versa. A recent poll in Russia found that 81% of Russians view the US negatively. This negative view is encouraged by the media, which focuses on American failures, scandals and contradictions, highlighting the hypocrisy and the US' inability to live up to its supposed "American values" and the high standards to which it attempts to hold the rest of the world.

Popular Russian political cartoons utilize American pop culture references but promote Russian viewpoints, such as portraying Russian president Vladimir Putin as *Star Wars* hero Luke Skywalker and former US president Barack Obama as his disgusting, immoral adversary, Jabba the Hutt. A shift has been witnessed, however, since the election of Obama's successor. During the 2016 election, Donald Trump was portrayed almost "romantically" as a "friendly other" – a sharp contrast to weak Obama and "demonic" Hillary Clinton.

Such biases are common elsewhere, also. As Bigsby remarked in his lecture, "we Europeans prefer a particular version of America in order to define ourselves against it. We look for its faults and declare ourselves innocent of them."

Each year SSASA brings together established and aspiring scholars, for not only a cross-cultural but also an inter-generational exchange on American Studies themes.

FORCES OF CHANGE

Besides understanding these different Americas (real or otherwise), one must also understand that America is changing – socially, culturally and politically, domestically and internationally.

SOCIAL CHANGE

The traditional motto of the USA was “E pluribus unum” – “out of many, one.” This motto was replaced in 1956 when, in the midst of the Cold War against the atheist Soviet Union, the official motto “In God we trust” was instead adopted. Today, the US is becoming more “many” and less “one.” While never a homogenous society, the prevailing identity has been one of a white Christian America. This is changing. With an aging white population and growing racial minority populations, the US is projected to become a minority white nation by 2045, when demographics are projected to comprise 49.7% white, 24.6% Hispanic, 13.1% African American, 7.9% Asian, and 3.8% multiracial.

Racial tensions and struggles have long existed in the US, from the early treatment of the Native Americans and slavery and segregation to more recent issues surrounding institutional racism and police brutality. For many African Americans in particular, a deep sense of injustice persists despite the civil rights advances of the 1960s. High profile and controversial acquittals of the perpetrators of violence against African Americans such as Rodney King (beaten by police in 1992) and Trayvon Martin (shot by a neighborhood watchman in 2012) have been met with anger, civil unrest and even riots, as in Los Angeles, Calif., in 1992 and Ferguson, Mo., in 2015 following the police’s shooting of an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown.

New civil rights movements, such as Black Lives Matter, are mobilizing in response, taking on issues from police brutality to the removal of Civil War monuments glorifying pro-slavery Confederate generals. This too is being met with a response; either one of apathy and rationalization of the current state of racial affairs, or worse – from white nationalist,

The SSASA faculty includes both academics and practitioners such as 2018 faculty member and former outreach director at the Southern Poverty Law Center, Lecia Brooks, who shared her personal experience and professional expertise in dealing with race issues in the US.



far-right groups, as was starkly apparent in August 2017 with the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Va. Early American history continues to resonate, and understanding both that and the accompanying sense of injustice is vital if one is to understand why racial tensions persist in the US today.

The US is commonly considered to be founded as a “nation of immigrants,” underpinned with symbols and mythos such as the Statue of Liberty – which was actually a gift from France to commemorate US independence and not originally envisaged as the welcoming beacon for the “huddled masses” of Emma Lazarus’ New Colossus that it has now become. When the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 was passed, abolishing the national origin-based quota system and instead ushering in a new immigration policy based on reuniting immigrant families and attracting skilled labor to the United States, the consensus of the political, business and media elite was generally pro-immigration. This has since changed. Today that same elites’ stance draws a distinction between legal immigration (good) and illegal immigration (bad). This is supported by a growing popular opinion that “there are too many illegals,” causing strain on schools and hospitals, driving down wages and increasing crime rates. Anti-immigrant sentiment, in general, is growing, but by focusing on the legal/illegal distinction, politicians have scope to increase legal immigration for economic reasons and yet still crack down on illegal immigration for political reasons. This is clear in the current administration’s immigration policy shift, simultaneously calling for an increase in skilled, English-speaking labor and the building of a wall along the southern border with Mexico to stop the “tidal wave” of “illegals” coming into the country from Central America.

Myths about immigration leading to increased crime persist in spite of their frequent debunking, but as one speaker pointed out, regardless of the truth of this myth, it is true that immigration impacts communities in a manner that can “create disorder.” The introduction of new cultural, social and linguistic practices into a community can lead to a feeling of displacement and breed discontent among the existing residents. Much of the handling of this discontent is done on a local level, but the discourse is happening on a national level, leading to misconceptions, domestically and internationally, of how “bad” the problem is.

One American academic in Salzburg controversially declared, “Just because we have been a nation of immigrants doesn’t mean we have to continue as one.” This idea drew audible gasps from the audience, but it was demonstrable of a changing attitude – even among traditionally “liberal” academia – towards this aspect of American national identity.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Identity, or rather identities, has grown in prominence in national discourse, be that political, racial, sexual, gender, religious or regional identity. Citing the poet Walt Whitman, “I contain multitudes,” insisted one American academic present, but lamented that she was often expected to only identify with one, singular or prevailing identity.

Identities are becoming increasingly polarized and pitted against each other. Labels such as “liberal” and “conservative” have been weaponized and are regularly used conversely as either badges of pride or serious insults. Whether “identity politics” is a positive development or not is widely debated in the US and beyond. Intersectionality between various identities – recognizing, for example, that one can be a woman, African American, gay and a mother all at the same time and each identity comes with its own and interconnected challenges or

“I wanted the participants at the seminar to have a better understanding or a more intimate understanding of what it means to be a black woman living in US today... I wanted to add a personal dynamic to the discussions so that people can look at life in the US in a different way. I was thinking of Chris Bigsby, his first lecture, talking about the way that we define ourselves and how America gets defined and redefined and often times it’s quite distinct from reality so my interest always here and always is to hopefully interject some honest reality into discussions about life in the US.”

Lecia Brooks,
Former Outreach Director, Southern
Poverty Law Center (at the time of
the 2018 SSASA symposium);
Senior Specialist for Curriculum
Programming, Equal Justice
Initiative, Montgomery, Ala., USA

"I want to know how America... becomes what it is now. We come to realize our understanding of America is not what we have expected from, you know, reading textbooks so that's why one of the important reasons for me to attend the American Studies [program]... Getting a broader view to see people from different cultures doing American Studies, how they look at America from different perspectives. Not like what I used to do; went to the United States, attended different conferences, [and] basically getting an understanding how Americans think about America. But this time, I get to know more people like me, you know doing American studies, teaching and researching from different perspectives. So I find all these questions very thought-provoking and also a great chance to exchange with people from countries other than the United States."

Liwen Li,
Provost; Professor of American
Studies, American Studies Center,
Beijing Foreign Studies University,
China

privileges – is increasingly called for. As one speaker quoted the civil rights activist Audre Lorde: "There is no such thing as a single issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

Developing or retaining a sense of cultural identity is especially difficult for immigrants. A Japanese participant spoke in Salzburg of the difficulty of developing a sense of Japanese identity in his American-born and raised teenage son. Teaching him the Japanese language is a challenge, but so too is instilling cultural traits such as humility, which are also deemed deeply important. Japanese-Haitian-American tennis player Naomi Osaka's Japanese identity was widely questioned in Japan – until she humbly apologized and appeared to hang her head in shame after beating Serena Williams in the US Women's Open, something that was derided in the US press as profoundly un-American.

The polarization of cultural identity is further aided by the diversification of both the news and entertainment media. Many news outlets, including 24-hour cable news channels, newspapers, magazines and online sites, openly target audiences of specific political leanings or social/cultural identities, with little interest in appealing to a mass audience. Brand loyalty to these outlets, displayed by bumper stickers and tote bags, further underscores people's sense of identity, both individually and as part of a like-minded collective. The advent of first cable and later online streaming services has led to the decline of mass entertainment media also. "If you want it, there is a wealth of media," said one American academic in Salzburg, which may seem to be a positive development, but the cultural output such as movies, TV shows and music that is the most widely written about and highly lauded is often not the same as that with the biggest audience or mass-market appeal. This rise of niche media consumption has led to a divergence between popular and elite cultural reference points and the development of a "two-tier" media. "We now have less shared culture – and less understanding."

POLITICAL CHANGE

Politically, America is seeing a significant shift in norms, which began long before Donald Trump's precedent-busting presidency. Political partisanship is becoming much more deeply entrenched, and Congress seems at an impasse with little room to compromise on many major issues such as health care provision, immigration reform, and climate change action. Growing populism seems to have led American patriotism to grow into a more nefarious strain of American nationalism.

As *New York Times* Washington correspondent, Charlie Savage, laid out in the Henry Brandon Lecture at SSASA, presidential power, in particular, is changing and expanding. While the US president faces term limits and checks and balances on his power from the legislature and judiciary, in his role of Commander in Chief, the president is seen as above the law and Congress in the realm of national security. This role expanded significantly under President George W. Bush following the September 11 terrorist attacks and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In 2008, presidential candidate Barack Obama rejected what he saw as the false choice between security and the rule of law and American values. By 2016, however, President Obama had not only failed to close down the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, but also continued surveillance through the National Security Agency (NSA), expanded drone strikes, and instituted a notorious "kill list" of terrorists, which included US citizens.



“Creative lawyering” – grounding actions in existing statutes and using executive orders – gave Obama’s actions a veneer of legal protection absent in the Bush administration. Having now inherited both the norms as set by Bush and the legal protections from Obama, commentators in the US and overseas express concern for the possible further expansion in presidential power under Trump. The sitting US president has made extensive use of executive orders, declared himself immune to accusations of obstructions of justice, suggested he could pardon himself of any possible wrongdoing, expressed interest in bringing back torture, further expanded commando raids and drone strikes, and repeatedly stated his disdain for international law and normative constraints. So far, Trump’s actions have yet to match his rhetoric, but how might a president with such power respond to another mass terrorist attack? As Savage told his audience of Americanists, the tools that he has inherited give him huge scope.

Another Knowledge Café table discussion was led by Hana Ulmanová, Senior Lecturer, Charles University, Prague on “Teaching race, sex, gender and class and political correctness.”

The SSASA symposium was held in September 2018, shortly ahead of the mid-term elections that November, which saw the Democrats take control of the House of Representatives but the Republicans retain control of the Senate. Several races garnered widespread national and international attention, such as the gubernatorial races in Georgia and Florida and the Senate race in Texas, with both Donald Trump and even his predecessor Barack Obama stumping on the campaign trail for various candidates. This reflected the growing trend of “nationalizing” the mid-term elections, akin to a presidential election. However, while local aspect in such elections is fading as political parties become more partisan and party identity more entrenched, the mid-terms remain essentially “435 local elections,” and attempts by outside observers to conflate the national mood as presented by the media with local electoral outcomes will find themselves surprised by the results – as was the case in the 2016 presidential election.

INTERNATIONAL CHANGE

Beyond its domestic changes, the US is changing on the international stage too. American foreign policy and engagement with allies and adversaries has shifted repeated throughout its history, often in response to threats (perceived and real) from other countries.

Grand strategies have ranged from “offensive realism” at the height of the Cold War, followed by “defensive realism” as the Cold War thawed and “defensive liberalism” as the power balance shifted to unipolar, to a period of “offensive liberalism” as the sole global superpower sought to impose its democratic values and foster regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan. As

"It's very interesting now in Russia especially because [American Studies is] not so popular a topic as it was twenty or ten years ago because there [are] the tensions in political relations and therefore the young generation of Russians try to choose Chinese Studies or Asian Studies or studies of NATO."

Ilya Sinenko,
Assistant Professor,
International Relations Department,
Far Eastern Federal University,
Vladivostok, Russian Federation

Russia and now also China re-establish themselves on the world stage creating a multipolar balance of power, rather than employing deterrents or even displaying American military might to ensure American global primacy, President Donald Trump has instead employed a nationalist yet isolationist foreign policy of "America First."

Under America First, the US seeks to protect its material interests above all other reasoning for strategic engagement, acting only when its own – not its allies' – interests are in direct danger. Trump's calls for allies to spend more on NATO and claims of being "ripped off" reflect his transactional world view built through years in real estate and business, not diplomacy or governance as is often more typical of world leaders.

The transactional nature of American foreign policy is clearest in its approach to trade. In the 2017 US National Security Strategy Report, American foreign policy strategy was summarized as "principled realism that is guided by outcomes, not ideology" and that the United States would "promote free, fair and reciprocal economic relationships." While it did emphasize international cooperation on issues such as free access to seas, cybersecurity, Arctic lands, and outer space, it omitted multilateral cooperation on trade and environment, which had been present in the 2015 report. Trump has declared a preference for bilateral trade deals and the US has pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and launched a "trade war" with China. Trump claims that Chinese manufacturing and trade is at the expense of that of America, but as a Chinese academic in Salzburg suggested, "labor productivity, financial crisis, and international industrial division... influence the US manufacturing employment most significantly." Increased automation and the growth in the use of artificial intelligence are also impacting manufacturing jobs the world over, not only in the US and China.

Trump has greatly increased US military spending and made grand proclamations about American military might, such as threatening to unleash "fire and fury" on North Korea. However, this spending and these words have not been followed by comparable actions. In fact, in the case of North Korea, Trump has engaged in unprecedented diplomacy with the long-held adversary (with little success).

Given this significant shift in foreign policy, predicting American action on the global stage is becoming increasingly difficult, leaving allies increasingly confused and even nervous. Understanding Trump's transactional nature can go some way to understanding American foreign policy, but an element of unpredictability is expected to continue.

The 2018 SSASA symposium brought together 53 Americanists, political scientists and cultural and media professionals from 29 countries across five continents to Schloss Leopoldskron – home of Salzburg Global Seminar.



CONCLUSION

Academics, policymakers and journalists are supposed to understand the world we live in. However, time and again America has confounded. As was made clear in Salzburg, understanding America – its past, present, and future – necessitates going beyond our usual sources and recognizing that the US is never static and ever-changing.

As the academics, policymakers and journalists gathered at SSASA heard repeatedly, there is not just one America to be understood. The country, its culture, society, politics, and international standing are all changing, in some areas more rapidly and drastically than others. All who wish to understand this vast country must “break out” of their “bubbles” – be they social media bubbles, academic bubbles, or otherwise – and try to uncover the fuller picture of the country. Trying to impose one single narrative on so many disparate images can only lead to misunderstanding.

Salzburg Global Seminar, through SSASA, will continue in its pursuit of expanding academics’ policymakers’ and journalists’ understanding of America. The September 2019 symposium will focus on the American media. The program, *The Changing Role of the Media in American Life and Culture: Emerging Trends*, will bring together individuals with expertise in the current American media landscape, as well as academics teaching about the United States in universities around the world. Academics and practitioners alike will explore how the news media has developed an increased political role. In addition to its traditional communications goal of informing and shaping domestic and worldwide understanding, and alongside the three traditional branches of government – the executive, legislature and judiciary – the media has become a more active and significant institutional political part of an increasingly polarized America. What does the future hold?

Many of these issues are, of course, not uniquely American, but how the USA responds to these challenges will have wide-ranging implications for media markets around the world and how they in turn positively or adversely affect their own countries.

Cross-cultural, international gatherings such as SSASA symposia aid this much-needed bubble breakout and expansion of understanding. So too does reading and listening to opinions of those with whom we do not normally or readily agree. There were multiple instances in Salzburg where participants did not agree with each other’s interpretations and understanding of various facets of America, from the extent to which Americans have lost faith in their media and other institutions, whether Hispanics should be considered as aggrieved a minority as African Americans, whether American society is “post-racial” or not, and the extent to which Donald Trump caused or simply accelerated America’s demise on the world stage. We need to resist the urge to simply ignore or dismiss opposing views and instead garner an understanding of why and how those divergent views have come to be developed. What sources are being accessed? In what context?

As one participant remarked in the closing session: “The way I see things is not the only way things can be seen.”

CHARLIE SAVAGE: “PART OF THE FUN OF THE JOB IS THAT THINGS NEVER STAND STILL”

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reflects on the changing norms of the American presidency and his role in holding those in power to account

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Charlie Savage joined the SSASA faculty after moderating Salzburg Global Seminar's annual Cutler Lecture on the Rule of Law in November 2017.



While many journalists agree the job can feel thankless on occasions, the career of a reporter at least is never mundane – particularly at the time of writing. Charlie Savage, Washington correspondent of the *New York Times*, says: “Part of the fun of the job is that things never stand still... It is just different, constantly different.”

Savage was a faculty member at this year's Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association (SSASA) symposium – *Understanding America in the 21st Century: Culture and Politics* – held in September at Schloss Leopoldskron, Salzburg, Austria.

As a correspondent for the *Times*, covering national security and legal issues in a post-9/11 America, Savage has witnessed and reported on a fair share of significant change, covering both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama's administrations both for the *Boston Globe* and the *Times*. The 2007 Pulitzer Prize in National Reporting was awarded to Savage for his “revelations that President Bush often used ‘signing

statements’ to assert his controversial right to bypass provisions of new laws.”

After digging into the Bush administration further, Savage recognized there was a bigger story to tell. He says, “I started to understand that there was undergirding this [policy direction] a strong push coming out of Vice President [Dick] Cheney's office to expand presidential powers an end to itself... It was an insight that explains, in my mind, so much about what was going on, but you really couldn't do justice to it in a newspaper-length article or even a long magazine [article]. It needed to be a book to make the pattern – to sort of suss out their connections – and it just was a book I needed to write.”

As a consequence, Savage published *Takeover: The Return of the Imperial Presidency and the Subversion of American Democracy* in 2007, the sixth year of the Bush presidency.

Eight years later, Savage published *Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency*. In Savage's words, he describes the book as “kind of a sequel but kind of not.”

Why? “The Obama administration did not have an ideological approach to executive power like the Bush administration did that explains its pattern of behavior,” Savage says.

“They did accept that the war on terror was a real war, which some liberals deny, but they thought they could fight it within the constraints of what they saw as the rule of law – without making expansive assertions of presidential power to bypass laws and treaties like Bush and Cheney had done.

“The result was something of a muddle from one perspective, where they kept legalized versions of some policies they had inherited from Bush, like military commissions and warrantless wiretapping, but got rid of other things, like torture, which displeased people among both the faction that supported the Bush war on terror and the faction that loathed it.”

In the Henry Brandon Lecture at SSASA, Savage drew from both of these books. Commenting on his presentation, he says, “It was trying to get at the question of why it was that Obama did not govern in line with the expectations created by his campaign rhetoric, when everyone thought he was going to dismantle the war on terrorism that the Bush administration had erected – the architecture of things like warrantless wiretapping and indefinite detention at Guantanamo military commissions and all the rest... It was more like he right-sized it.

“[Obama] shaved off the rough corners and he did shut the door on torture but on other things he preserved these authorities even if he was trying to use them more sparingly and with greater legal standing or foundations than perhaps they had when Bush first created them.”

In his lecture, Savage commented on some of the early insights we could take away from President Donald Trump’s administration. He says, “[Trump’s] rhetoric suggests an authoritarian mindset: whether it is attacking the independent judiciary, attacking a free press, suggesting that he sees law enforcement as an instrument of his own will rather than some sort of independent rule of law based approach to these extraordinary powers.... But then I made the point that notwithstanding all that for the most part that’s not how his administration has governed. His administration has while criticizing adverse judicial rulings abided by them.”

In short, it is too early to draw conclusions, but Savage believes there is a disconnect

between what Trump has said and what he’s been doing in terms of how abnormal it is.

“People have often said to me: ‘Oh, you are going to have a great trilogy here,’” Savage says when asked if he is planning on writing about Trump’s approach to national security. While not ruling it out, Savage is yet to be fully convinced a book – at least in this area – is waiting in the wings. Savage says, “For all their differences, the Bush and the Obama administrations both had very coherent strongly philosophical legal policymaking behind them... You could see what they were trying to do and then you could see how from that insight many specific examples across many different themes fit within this pattern. And so, both of those books are very similar in that respect. I have an argument, and then I show how 100 different things all lined up with this argument.

“The Trump administration does not seem to have a very coherent legal [policymaking framework]. The role of lawyers in the Trump administration is very limited as far as I can tell and an awful lot of its policymaking seems somewhat capricious and sort of personality-driven and indeed a little bit arbitrary. That means that there is a lot of good books to be written about behind the scenes in these arguments and the sort of menagerie of idiosyncratic people who have their hands on government leaders of power right now. Books like the one Bob Woodward just did [*Fear: Trump in the White House*], for example, or *Fire and Fury* [by Michael Wolff] earlier... there are plenty of good articles about that too, but it’s not the kind of thing I do. It doesn’t fit within that legal lens.”

Both of Savage’s books were written in the sixth year of President Bush and President Obama’s administration. Will Savage’s opinion change if there is a sixth year of President Trump’s administration?

“We will see how things look,” he suggests.

“The Bush and the Obama administrations both had very coherent strongly philosophical legal policymaking behind them... An awful lot of [the Trump administration’s] policymaking seems somewhat capricious and sort of personality-driven and indeed a little bit arbitrary.”

Charlie Savage,
Washington Correspondent,
The New York Times

VICTORIA ZHURAVLEVA: WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND OTHER COUNTRIES ARE NOT “ONE-DIMENSIONAL”

Professor of American history and international relations from the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) discusses the state of American Studies in Russia

Victoria Zhuravleva joined the SSASA faculty in 2018 after taking part in the 2016 program *Images of America: Reality and Stereotypes*.



To say Victoria Zhuravleva is knowledgeable on the relationship between the United States of America and Russia is an understatement. The professor of American history and international relations at the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH), Moscow, Russia has dedicated much of her life to understanding the topic through research, conferences, exchange trips, and writing various publications. She is now working hard to provide others with similar opportunities.

Zhuravleva's field of research concerns American history with a specialization in Russian-American relations and US foreign policy. The existing relationship between the United States and Russia is complicated, and Zhuravleva believes there is an “urgent necessity to create a multi-level, multi-faceted knowledge” about both countries.

“Those who will be specialists on another country in the near future should understand that they can't have the opportunity to follow a one-dimensional vision: a black and white, dichotomous vision... We should understand

another culture inside – through the position of Americans or through the position of Russians. This [approach] is a very important instrument for a better understanding of the political culture of another country,” Zhuravleva explains.

Zhuravleva first became interested in studying Russian-American relations toward the end of the Cold War. It was during *perestroika* that new possibilities began to become available for her research of Russian-American relations with a specific focus on images and myths about Russia in the United States.

“So I started to study Russian-American relations from different perspectives,” Zhuravleva says. “And thanks to the exchange program between RSUH and University of Michigan, to the Fulbright Program and to the Kennan Institute Program, I received the opportunity to stay in the United States, to visit different courses of American colleagues, to do my research at the Library of Congress, at the historical societies of different states, and at the National Archives and Records Service.”

The fall of the Iron Curtain, Zhuravleva says, “created new possibilities for those who would like to know more about the United States.”

In addition to her role as a professor, Zhuravleva is also chair of her university's Department of American Studies, which was founded in spring 2018. It is one of two university American Studies

Departments in Russia; the other one exists at Saint Petersburg State University. RSUH's Department of American Studies is now teaching 25 courses on the United States, Latin America, and Canada.

Zhuravleva believes in the power of exchange programs and academic mobility, which can act as "some kind of holiday for both sides." She says, "This is a very important experience for students who can take aside their stereotypes, their misunderstandings, and to talk with different people on the other side."

Unfortunately, the cost of these programs remains very high. For now, Zhuravleva emphasizes, they rely on partnerships with other US-based universities for this type of academic exchange to take place. She says, "There are agreements between RSUH and different American universities: they send students to us, we send students to them without paying the tuition. But unfortunately, it works only in two cases. Usually, our students have to pay the tuition, and it is incredibly expensive."

Zhuravleva suggests she faces a problem when organizing international conferences on American Studies. She knows she can apply to the Fulbright Program, the Kennan Institute or the US Embassy in Moscow for grants, but grants of this nature would not otherwise be available in Russia. In her opinion, "Without the exchange of ideas between specialists on American Studies from the United States and American Studies specialists in Russia, you can't understand the real state of this sphere or refer to this sphere of study."

Another problem, from Zhuravleva's point of view, is there are not special Russian state grants for those who would like to study the US, to visit this country or to do research there such as the those offered by the American government (e.g., the Title VIII Grant Program through the US Department of State), for American students of Russia.

In 2012 Zhuravleva published her fundamental book, *Understanding Russia in the United States: Images and Myths*. She was also editor and co-editor of several volumes on the US history and Russian-American relations such as *Abraham Lincoln: Lessons of History and the Contemporary World*; *War in American Culture: Texts and Contexts*; *Russian-American Relations in Past and Present: Images, Myths, and Reality*; *Russia and the United States: Mutual Representations in Textbooks*; *Russian/Soviet Studies in the United States*, *Ameriksnistika in Russia: Mutual Representations in Academic Projects*.

She evidently is interested in the study of the US, but why? Zhuravleva says she can retrace the history of a multifaceted society, a society with great achievements but with many problems as well, a society that is ready to recreate itself. She adds, "For me, this is a very important way for development, for progress, for [a] better understanding of yourself and the world."

"Those who will be specialists on another country in the near future should understand that they can't have the opportunity to follow a one-dimensional vision: a black and white, dichotomous vision."

Victoria Zhuravleva,
Professor of American history and
international relations,
Russian State University for the
Humanities (RSUH)





Long-serving member of the SSASA Advisory Board and leading British Americanist Christopher Bigsby delivered the inaugural Ron Clifton Lecture on American Studies.

THE RON CLIFTON LECTURE ON AMERICAN STUDIES

The 2018 symposium of the Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association, *Understanding America in the 21st Century: Culture and Politics*, saw the inauguration of a new lecture series – the Ron Clifton Lecture on American Studies.

Ron Clifton has been an ardent and loyal supporter of American Studies programs at Salzburg Global Seminar for nearly 30 years. Ron's leadership has been critical to Salzburg Global Seminar's efforts to sustain and advance its rich legacy of American Studies. In 1992, Ron was instrumental in securing a major grant from the United States Information Agency, which created Salzburg Global's American Studies Center. Ron served as the Center's founder and director between 1994 and 1996 and played an important role in the series of 32 American Studies Center sessions between 1992 and 2003. In 2003, Ron helped establish the Salzburg Seminar American Studies Association (SSASA), and over the last 15 years has worked closely with Salzburg Global Seminar to design and implement sixteen SSASA symposia. Over the past 25 years, Ron has served on the Faculty, or as Chair, of more than 20 American Studies programs. In 2017, Ron and Gwili Clifton created the "Clifton Scholarship in American Studies," which supports an annual scholarship in American Studies.

Ron Clifton is the retired associate vice president of Stetson University and retired counselor in the Senior Foreign Service of the United States. During 25 years in the diplomatic service, he served in Calcutta, New Delhi, Tunis, Dublin, Brussels, London, and Washington DC. From 1997 until 2005, Ron was an associate vice president at Stetson University and the founding director of the Stetson University Campus and Center in Celebration, FL. In 2018,

Ron received Stetson University's Distinguished Service Award at Stetson's Homecoming Awards Celebration, in recognition of his academic and professional contributions. Ron is a member of the SSASA Advisory Board.

Christopher Bigsby is a professor of American studies and director of the Arthur Miller Institute for American Studies at the University of East Anglia, in Norwich, UK. He has won awards for his academic work, for his fiction and biography. He has published more than fifty books, principally on American culture, literature, and theater, as well as a study of Holocaust literature, focused on W.G. Sebald, a friend and colleague at UEA (*Remembering and Imagining the Holocaust*). His biography of Arthur Miller appeared in two volumes (2009, 2011). Additionally, he has published eight novels, the latest being *Ballygoran* (2014) and *Flint* (2015), and is the joint author of two television plays for the BBC and of a drama serial for BBC Radio as well as being the author of radio dramas and radio and television documentaries. He was for many years a presenter for BBC Radio (domestic and World Service) and 18 years chaired the British Council's Cambridge Seminar, which brought writers, journalists, and publishers from around the world together. For 25 years he has run the Arthur Miller Centre International Literary Festival and has been a columnist for *The Times Higher Education Supplement*. He is a member of the SSASA Advisory Board and has attended many SSASA symposia as faculty member or participant.

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND AMERICA

The English philosopher John Locke once wrote, “in the beginning, the whole world was America,” a tabula rasa. The poet John Donne compared it to his mistress’s body which he explored, calling her his “new found land,” his America. It was a place awaiting its own invention, innocence eager for experience. What would it become? What has it become? In 2000, three Supreme Court Justices, in a minority report, offered the opinion that nude dancing was protected by the First Amendment. At the beginning of the American story, Increase Mather would have spun in his pulpit having fulminated against mixed dancing, which he called promiscuous dancing, of a kind in which many of you will have engaged. Since another word for mixed dancing was gynocandrical, you can see why the Puritans were against it. What to make of the contradictions of a country which would expand from sea to shining sea. Arthur Miller once told me, “the thing is that Americans are all crazy, but the good thing is that they are all crazy in different ways and at different times.” So how to understand it?

As I am sure you all know, Aeschylus was killed when a falling tortoise hit his head. It’s fair to say it must have been something of a surprise let alone difficult to understand, but scarcely more so than the election of Donald Trump, a man who refers to himself in the third person, a habit he shares with Smeagol in *The Lord of the Rings*, Richard Nixon and Elmo the red monster in *The Muppets*. Who understood and predicted his victory? Not the *New York Times*, which on election morning gave Hillary Clinton a 91% chance of becoming president, the *Huffington Post* preferring 98%, the Princeton Election Consortium [stating] 99%. They should have listened to him. After all, as he had explained in the campaign, “I will be the greatest president that God ever created,” “the most successful person ever to run for the presidency.” Did he not tell us that he was “a very stable genius,” and would, in the words of the note he dictated to his physician, be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency, with extraordinary physical strength and stamina? He could, he explained, “be the most presidential person ever.” “My IQ,” he remarked, “is one of the highest... I’m intelligent. Some people would say I am very, very, very intelligent.” There as he explained, “probably in the history of this country, probably in the history of the world ... never been anything like what happened in November of ’16.” On that last note, perhaps he was right. What were we thinking?

Those of us in this room – academics, journalists, those involved in government – are expected to understand the world we inhabit, to have our fingers on the pulse of the body politic. If we were doctors, though, I wouldn’t give much hope for the patient. We, or many of us, are in American Studies. Did we so understand America that we saw this coming despite the fact that there are almost as many

Ph.D.s in this room as there were signers of the Declaration of Independence? Hillary Clinton’s book is called *What Happened?* ITN’s political editor in Britain, Robert Peston, called his [book] *WTF?*. In the words of a Bjork song, “This wasn’t supposed to happen.” The financial crisis of 2008 was anticipated by no one, and the resultant austerity which metastasized around the world delegitimized government and arguably gave birth to the populism that would lead towards Brexit and Trump. Did we understand it was coming? Do we understand where it’s going? We are confronted with a classical aporia, stunned by the contradictions of a system which seemingly is no longer a system.

In truth, we would have been better off with Nancy Reagan’s astrologer, Joan Quigley, who determined when the alignment of the stars would favor a meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev, or Paul the Octopus who predicted each of the seven 2010 World Cup matches that the German team played, including the third-place play-off with Uruguay. Happily, for us, octopuses only have a life expectancy of three to five years, so we still have the edge over cephalopods. Incidentally, they enrolled another octopus for this year’s World Cup. It accurately predicted the winners of all Japan’s group stage games, but we now live in a different world. Its owner killed it and sold it for seafood.

Philip Roth, some seven years ago, before the current president was in office, remarked, “I know nothing about America today. I see it on television, but I don’t live there any longer.” And he was a writer who once seemed to understand the American psyche, its ego, and its id. Today, many Americans feel strangers in a strange land, and the rest of us look on in bewilderment. We share less than we

think, understand less than we imagine. And how do you understand a country which only has one *math*, is the only country in the world which in writing the date places the month before the day and which measures ingredients in cups rather than pounds or kilograms? One recipe called for three cups of cucumber. How do you understand a country in which towns in the Midwest have two signs outside them? One gives the population, the other the height above sea level. Is there a connection between the two things? The sea hasn't been in Kansas for millennia or, if you are a creationist, since Thursday. What should I have made of the American student I met who told me she was majoring in mortuary science and who when I asked why she had chosen that major said that she wanted to meet people? Why do Americans give standing ovations in theaters and in the State of the Union address where they bob up and down like grade schoolers on a trampoline?

And what is it with the flag? In my country, almost no one can tell if our flag is flying upside down and, in truth, could care less. In America it has its own website and since 1942 has had its own official code following a joint resolution of Congress. There are 38 rules governing when and where it can be flown and how it can be used.

"Understanding America" is the title of a Frank Zappa album – one song being *It Can't Happen Here*. Sinclair Lewis's novel of that same name was about a man elected President who promised to return America to greatness, who ran on a policy of speaking for the common man, attacking the elite and punishing Mexico, so obviously not relevant to our concerns.

And how do you understand a country of 326 million people, with four million more every year? An American is born every 14 seconds. By the end of this hour there will be 257 more Americans, 63 of them African-American or Hispanic, and we don't get to choose who they will be. In 2017, 45 million were born outside the country, the highest for 108 years, not including an estimated 11 million illegals. How do we understand a country in which at least 350 different languages are spoken in American homes, in which there are 310 religions and denominations and 567 Indian tribes? There are 272 neighborhoods in Los Angeles, each distinct. New York City recognizes 31 different gender identities. Today, the hottest ticket in town is to *Hamilton*, a musical about an immigrant revolutionary, written by a man who is mostly Puerto Rican, performed by a multi-ethnic, multi-racial cast, in a musical form developed by African-Americans, which had its first try out in front of a president whose father was African. And we think we understand America?

Crevecoeur asked, "What is this new man: the American?" It is a question which never ceases to be asked. There are more books on American identity than that of any other nation not least because the clock of history is constantly reset. Innocence is regained. A gypsy woman in a Tennessee Williams play has her virginity restored with every full moon. A slogan of Ronald Reagan's election campaign was "It's always morning in America." In his inaugural address, President Clinton declared that it is up to every generation of Americans to say what America is. America is always starting again, with every full moon, every morning or every generation. Just when we think we understand it, it changes.

And what would Lynndie England, an evangelical who grew up in a trailer park in West Virginia and worked in a chicken processing plant, have to say to Daniel Akaka, she joining the army and torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib, he a school teacher from Hawaii, of Chinese and Hawaiian descent, who went on to be a Democratic Senator and vote against the Iraq war? It was Henry David Thoreau who, on the establishment of a telegraph line between Texas and Maine, observed that they might not have anything important to communicate to each other. Red states, blue states, gay, straight, poor, rich, those with access to some of the world's finest health care and those with access to none, those on Martha's Vineyard and those picking grapes in the vineyards of the Napa Valley, what is it they share? Those living in Manhattan may have more in common with those in London or Berlin than with those in Manhattan and Kansas, and I have lived in Manhattan and Kansas. Those on welfare in America hear only 28% of the words heard by those who are not. In other words, they occupy an alternative linguistic country, deaf to 72% of what fills the air in their own country. Much the same, though, is surely true of those in a deeply polarized America, who tune out what they prefer not to hear, fail to understand what their compatriots believe or declare, who listen to, watch, those news outlets and social media channels which confirm their own convictions like some feedback loop, an Escher drawing, in the same way that Amazon offers you what it thinks you already buy. Beyond that, as ever in an immigrant society, there is the tension between the centrifugal impulse of identity politics and the centripetal pull of a national consciousness.

We all stand somewhere, see the world through different eyes yet believe we see the same thing, undistorted. In *Moby Dick*, a gold doubloon with a curious design is nailed to the mast. As the whale men come forward to look at it, a black cabin boy declines the verb to see: "I see, you see, he sees." The white whale itself is what others project upon it

and no facts or statistics, such as Melville assembles at the beginning of the book, lead to an understanding of its true being, an image of an America which perhaps we try in vain to harpoon, to pin down, as if the assembling of facts implies understanding just as an autopsy may reveal the cause of death but not the truth of a life.

In *The White Album*, Joan Didion remarks that “We live entirely ... by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.”

For Roland Barthes, a city is like a text. So, surely, is a country. The question is how legible is it. And is it truly a single text? Or are we, indeed, imposing a single narrative line on disparate images? The English novelist B.S. Johnson published a book, unbound, in 27 sections which could be read in any order. For him, “Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories is telling lies.” Is this any less true of trying to tell the story of a country, particularly, perhaps, of America, a book with multiple plots, teeming with characters and which, perhaps like any country, tells lies about itself to itself? The American dream has three components, each one problematic, beginning with the definite article.

Incidentally, what is that dream? Is it Benjamin Franklin’s early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy and wealthy and wise; Horatio Alger Jr’s stories of luck and pluck; Frank Sinatra singing “The House I Live In”; Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*; Frank Capra’s *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; Norman Rockwell’s picture, on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, of a family gathered around a Christmas tree or in a convertible, hair streaming in the wind, smiling, always smiling? Is it a teenage young boy on a bicycle throwing newspapers on neat front lawns and dreaming of going to the state university and maybe marrying a cheerleader and coming back to a town where cars are parked aslant along Main Street in front of stores which bear the name of those who founded them and whose families still own them, going to the white steepled church on a Sunday because they know that God walks with them, people whose eyes can focus 20 miles away across the cornfields knowing that somewhere there are cities where people sell their souls and speak of them, with an edge of contempt, as living in fly-over states irrelevant to a country where the real dream is of moving up and becoming fluent in the language of money, money which can be transmuted

into power and then back into money? Is it the story of the Lehman brothers, immigrants who made their money at first in the South buying cotton produced by slaves, and then moved north where they, or the company theirs became, reached the zenith of success until, like Icarus, they flew too close to the sun, in the process destroying the dreams of so many, and not only in their own country?

The Germans have an expression – *Luftschloss*, a castle in the sky, a fantasy, a pipe dream, a phrase which echoes through Eugene O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* (a play as close to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as America has produced being inimical to a national Panglossian view of the future. There is a reason two of the characters are called Jimmy Tomorrow and Harry Hope, hope being the last item in Pandora’s box), while Arthur Miller’s salesman Willy Loman, a true believer in the dream, goes to his death baffled as to why he has never made it but, then, as his neighbor, Charley, says, “A salesman has got to dream... It comes with the territory.” Perhaps that is equally true of the country. And of course, Charley’s son does make it precisely by hard work. But whose dream is it?

American school children stand in class, hands on their hearts, and pledge allegiance to one nation, under God, indivisible – a phrase, incidentally, derived from post-revolutionary France (*la République française une et indivisible*) – even as Samuel Huntington, in a book significantly entitled *Who Are We?*, famously insisted that there could be no American dream even though there were 55 million Hispanics in 2016 and that by 2060, it has been estimated, Spanish-speaking people will represent 28% of Americans – a projection which he sees as carrying the threat of a reconquest of America. In fact, the Brookings Institute projects that America will become minority white in 2045. If 27 years seems a long way off, 27 years in the past only takes us to 1991, the time of George Bush and the Gulf War, when Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas was accused of sexual molestation, and his nomination was in the balance. How things change. Is America, then, different in different languages?

Incidentally, the pledge of allegiance was the product of a man, Francis Bellamy, a socialist minister, who devised it in 1891 when he was alarmed by the fact that Jews, east Europeans and dark-skinned people from the Mediterranean area were, as he delicately put it, “pouring into our country,” “dull-witted and fanatical immigrants” making America a “dumping ground.” In other words, the America celebrated in the pledge of allegiance which he devised was essentially

white and Christian, though the words “under God” would not be added until the 1950s, a time when the American motto changed from *e Pluribus Unum*, with its sense of inclusion, to “In God We Trust,” a phrase which occurs in the American national anthem, with its celebration of the land of the free, whose lyrics were written by Francis Scott Key, a one-time slave owner who referred to black Americans as “an inferior race of people,” and wanted to send them back to Africa. In Tony Kushner’s play *Angels in America*, an African-American nurse insists of the anthem that nothing sounds less like freedom to him in a country represented by his patient who he describes as terminal, crazy and mean. That patient is Roy Cohn, the henchman of Joseph McCarthy and mentor to Donald Trump’s father. “Where’s my Roy Cohn?” asked President Trump when Jeff Sessions recused himself. In hell, I trust, is the answer.

In the context of this seminar, it is entirely possible that we will have difficulty in understanding America because I suspect, though I may be wrong, that nobody here would have sought to abolish Obamacare, end the Iran deal, withdraw from the Paris Agreement and the UN’s human rights council, regard Mexicans as rapists and murderers, justified the seizing of children from their immigrant mothers, attacked the International Criminal Court, currently concerned with possible crimes by American military and civilian personnel in Afghanistan but also conducting a preliminary enquiry into Russia’s involvement in the Ukraine, withdrawal thus benefitting both America and Russia. Yet 63 million Americans voted for Trump. If we are trying to understand America can we afford to condescend to 46% of the American electorate? We in the UK have the same problem with the 52% who voted for the ritual suicide which is Brexit. In both cases, we are tempted to point out that the less well educated voted for Trump and Brexit. The problem is that that is the nature of democracy and democracy can, from time to time, summon demons. I give you Russia, Hungary, Poland, Italy, Turkey. You will all have your own list which, for some, may include Austria. All these countries, America especially, are currently about the business not of inventing the future but re-inventing the past, making a better yesterday, that moment when they were once great, when everyone acknowledged their national supremacy and importance, and when individuals, now feeling marginalized by global capitalism and their own experience of economic and social exclusion, reach back to a time when they wish to believe things were other. But when was that time? When was America great? Surely not this century with 9/11 and financial collapse. Was it the

good old times when racism was legal and homosexuality illegal? Was it the 1920s with prohibition and Al Capone, the 30s with the Depression, the 40s with WW2, the 50s with HUAC, the 60s with riots, assassinations, Vietnam, the me-decade of the 1970s, the decade of greed in the 1980s? Or was it further back with the robber barons, the Civil War or the heady days when the country came into existence, and a group of slave owners got together to write a constitution which spoke of freedom and equality?

How do we understand America? How does America understand itself? Is it through its institutions, its politics, its business people, its media, through the religions it embraces? Are these sources we trust? If so, there is currently a crisis of understanding. Every year the Edelman Trust Barometer is published. It looks at all those areas. Its conclusion this year is that “the United States is enduring an unprecedented crisis of trust.” “Trust among the informed public in the US” its report declares, “imploded... making it now the lowest of the 28 countries surveyed, below Russia and South Africa.” Overall, trust in institutions in the US has fallen 37% in the past year. In China, it has risen by 27%.

In common with 22 of those countries, the least trusted are the media (the US falls in the middle at 42%). 63% of people say they cannot distinguish good journalism from rumor or falsehoods. One in four Americans gets their news from social media. As you know, in the last presidential campaign a story on Facebook claiming that the Pope supported Donald Trump was viewed one million times. How many believed it? It is impossible to say. Not that credulity is novel. In his new book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari observes that “When a thousand people believe some made-up story for one month, that’s fake news. When a billion people believe it for a thousand years, that’s a religion,” and that, of course, is another mystery about America in which religions are invented on a regular basis, often being monetized. Even Joseph Smith tried to sell the copyright of *The Book of Mormon*. As to Scientology, currently worth some \$1.75 billion, if that doesn’t defy understanding, nothing will. It’s an impossible mission.

Distrust almost certainly fuels populism, at least that is the conclusion drawn by Edelman. Its other conclusion is that distrust is now the default position. In 1964, 77% of Americans said that “most people can be trusted.” In 2016, only 31% of Americans believed that most people could be trusted. America’s national motto, as I recalled, is “In God We Trust.” Today, fewer than a third of Americans even trust one another, let alone God, decline in belief having itself declined, according to Pew, dropping to 18% for 18-29-year-

olds. If you don't trust other people that may impact on agreeing to common policies, or even on what the definition of an American might be. Cheating in school and university has increased. In 2015, between 75% and 98% of college students admitted that they had cheated in high school.

Meanwhile, university students can buy papers online, even specifying the GPA level. American banks used to include the word trust and fidelity in their corporate names. Lacking a sense of irony, some still do. Nor are they alone in that. Consider the Nobel Peace Prize for Henry Kissinger or, indeed, Barack Obama who would send drones to kill more than one American, leaving a legacy, and not only in that respect, for his successor as Charlie Savage points out in his disturbing book.

Meanwhile, distrust is spawned at the very top as America seems to be suffering from truth decay as Sean Spicer confirms three million non-existent fraudulent votes in the presidential election and Kellyanne Conway refers to alternative facts, by which falsehoods become truths and vice versa even as the Washington Post and the New York Times try to keep a tally of the President's lies. Last month, apparently, it passed the 3,000 mark.

Beyond all this, quantum mechanics proposes that the thing we observe changes because we observe it. May that not also be true of we observers of America, journalists, and academics. We have our own biases. Perhaps we Europeans prefer a particular version of America in order to define ourselves against it. We look for its faults and declare ourselves innocent of them never, in truth, an innocent approach to understanding. When Alexis de Tocqueville planned his trip, it was America's penal system he wanted to investigate. Bernard-Henri Lévy followed in his footsteps in the 21st century, exploring Riker's Island once where New York's garbage was dumped and now a place charged with despair and violence.

There are obviously certain things which leave the mind stunned, which surely defy understanding. When it comes to America the thing above all that non-Americans, and, it has to be said, many Americans, find impossible to understand is its acquiescence in gun violence as though it were an expression of a natural law. Hannah Arendt described violence as mute and with each regular school shooting language comes up short, beyond the rote declaration, by presidents, of thoughts and prayers neither of which have, or ever will, inhabit the moral vacuum which is a consequence of a Second Amendment whose conditional nature is seldom acknowledged. It reads, as you know, "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a

free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." In the 18th century, with no standing army, you needed a militia to fight the British. There were 13 state militias. The good news today is that the British are not coming while America has armed forces, including reserves, of over two million. Ah, but you need guns, members of the NRA declare, to fight your own government, that having gone so well in 1861 to 1865, or to resist the armies of the United Nations apparently ever ready to send troops to Nebraska. Incidentally, in 2008 the Supreme Court, on a five to four decision, removed the suggestion that the right to bear arms depended on the need for a militia, well-regulated or not. In December 2015, the US Senate voted down, by 54 to 45, an amendment which would have blocked terrorists from purchasing guns and ammunition. Six months later, in June 2016, a man on the FBI watch list for possible terrorist links, declared his allegiance to the leader of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, shortly before killing 49 people in a nightclub in Orlando. They are serious about the right to bear arms in America, and seemingly willing to pay the price, any price. So, the right to bear arms would seem to be part of the American dream.

The American dream? Whose dream? How many dead children will it take before something is done, knowing that those who might act are mute, wondering how much hard cash from pro-gun groups it will take to be re-elected so as, once again, not to act when children lie dead among a clutter of desks, computer screens with cursers winking, waiting for someone to begin a sentence which will never be started. Perhaps if all the children killed in school shootings would oblige by gathering together in one place and dying there, it would have a greater impact, though I doubt it.

A terrorist drives a truck into people in New York; eight people die. Three people are killed in the Boston Marathon bombing. These are rightly seen as attacks on the republic requiring several agencies to be answerable. A teenager shoots a handful of his friends, and the local paper is the only one still writing about it a month later because by then other local newspapers are sending reporters to other morgues. We've all heard of Columbine and Sandy Hook. Who remembers Red Lake Senior High in Minnesota, 10 dead; Chardon High School in Chardon, OH, three dead; Maryville Pilchuck High School in Washington, five dead; or Aztec High School in New Mexico, three dead? Perhaps we do remember Santa Fe High School – 10 dead – because that was only May of this year. And I'm not counting the multiple deaths on American campuses. Hannah Arendt was right. Violence is mute. In 2017, there were mass shootings on nine out of every 10 days, though definitions

of mass shootings vary. The most recent were in Bakersfield, California, on the 12th of this month, six dead, and six days ago in Silver Spring, Maryland, three dead.

Switzerland has the third highest ratio of civilian firearms per 100 citizens, beaten only by the US and Yemen. Its last mass shooting was 17 years ago. Yet the curious fact is that only just under a third of Americans own guns while 3% own half of them. Stephen Paddock, who killed 58 people shooting from the 32nd floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas, owned 47. So is this a case of the tyranny of the minority or is freedom indivisible? Gun sales, though, are down. Earlier this year, Remington filed for bankruptcy while Smith and Wesson (whose CEO is British, a man who made his reputation selling bin liners), rebranded itself to de-emphasize its reliance on guns. It is now the American Outdoor Brands Corporation. Weapons used by both manufacturers were used in school shootings. Why are sales down, though? Because Donald Trump was elected. Sales were up when Obama was elected because the NRA said he would confiscate guns, as Trump said that Hillary Clinton would. With Trump, they have a friend in the White House. Incidentally, white Americans are one-third more likely to own guns than black Americans while Republicans are two-and-a-half times more likely to carry guns than Democrats. Currently, according to Gallop, 67% of Americans favor stricter gun controls, 92% favoring compulsory background checks for all gun sales. And what happens? By the end of the first week of this month, according to the Gun Violence Archive, there had been 247 mass shooting incidents in the United States this year. I confess I don't understand it.

One problem in understanding America, if you come from my country, where you can never be more than 70 miles from the sea, is spatial. In fact, the UK as a whole would fit into the US 38 times, no doubt to the considerable benefit of the United States. Texas is roughly the same size

as France and Switzerland combined, and there is, after all, a Paris, Texas. All 28 members of the EU, soon, alas, to be 27, occupy land less than half the size of the United States.

The poet Charles Olson, writing the word space in capital letters, said, "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here." And it does. The distance from Washington to San Francisco is the same as that between Salzburg and Omsk. Key West to Maine is the same as Salzburg to Baghdad. New York to Honolulu is the same as Salzburg to Santo Domingo or, indeed, Chicago. And since space and time are related Americans don't even occupy the same time as one another, unlike the Chinese who bizarrely do.

That fact surely changes perception. It is, perhaps, one of the reasons a distant federal government is distrusted. The British distrust Brussels and it is only 220 miles from London. In America it explains the relative significance of city and state governments, the fact that people take the local newspaper rather than a national one, watch local television news with its presenters flashing their whitened implanted teeth while engaging in banter as artificial as their smiles. Today (electronic versions aside), effectively only the *New York Times* is national, that and *USA Today*, which is less a newspaper than a series of bar charts and weather forecasts, though many read stories of national significance on screens only inches across. Did I say stories? I think I mean headlines. Meanwhile, the *New York Times*, and surely to its great regret, can seem the principal opposition party in America, along with Jimmy Fallon, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee, Trevor Noah, and John Oliver, presenters of late night television shows, those and the legal drama *The Good Fight*.

Another problem in trying to understand America is that its rhetoric and reality are prone to be at odds. In the World Press Freedom index the United States comes 45th



out of 180 countries, one below Romania. In the Index of Economic Freedom, it comes 18th out of 170 countries, one better than Lithuania. According to the OECD, it comes 33rd in infant mortality, one better than Russia. It is 39th in life expectancy and 19th for GDP per capita. It ranks 14th in the most recent world happiness report, below Mexico and Austria. Austria? Fewer than a third of Americans describe themselves as very happy, but then they are not dedicated to being happy but pursuing happiness. Meanwhile, suicides in America rose by more than 30% in half the states between 1999 and 2016 and in some by up to 58%.

On the other hand, since the happiest country is apparently Switzerland, followed by Iceland, where it is dark and freezing for much of the time, I am not sure I believe any of this, but the US comes third in the World Health Organisation's list of countries when it comes to depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use, one place above Russia. In terms of social progress, surely the conviction at the heart of the American dream, it comes 18th out of 128 countries.

It would take 150 years, or five generations, for a child from a poor family in America to earn the national average. Could it be, then, that the American dream is the tooth fairy for adults? The chances of moving from the bottom to the top are greater in the UK than in America, and with justification, nobody speaks of a British dream. Chances of social mobility in Canada are almost twice as high as in the United States, and social mobility varies with race.

When it comes to income inequality, the US is worse than all but six of 38 countries. Oh, and when it comes to freedom, the US boasts more than half of the global prison population, though perhaps boasts is the wrong word. Together, China, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States carry out all known executions. And what race are they? It was Richard Pryor who said that "If you go down there looking for justice, that's what you find – just us." More than a third of those executed since 1976 were black.

Meanwhile, according to President Trump, "We've got the cleanest country in the planet right now. There's nobody cleaner than us." In fact, as *The New York Times* pointed out, the United States ranked 27th out of 180 countries in an environmental performance review. For all a tendency to hyperbole, though, only 29% of Americans believe that their country stands above all others, 56% acknowledging that it is one of the greatest, and they are not wrong. Every year the *US and World Report* publishes a list of the world's best countries, using nine criteria. The United States comes eighth out of 80, which is not bad. The good news is that it comes one above France. The bad news is that it comes seven places below Canada. The UK is fourth.

And what of its attitude to history, which I also sometimes find difficult to understand? In Berlin, thanks to the work of the artist Gunther Demnig, victims of the Holocaust are commemorated by small brass bricks inscribed with their names. They are called *Stolperstein*, stumbling stones. History itself is a stumbling stone on a continent in which the past is inscribed in its very geography – social and political. In Europe, history is not something you can wish away. The borders are marked in blood. They are where the fighting last stopped and where the fighting could begin again, and has in the former Yugoslavia, Georgia, and Ukraine, though wars today are less between national states than within them. Since 1989 only 5% of wars have been between states. But history weighs heavily, particularly in Europe where colonial powers now find those they once colonized crossing oceans and penetrating those borders, seeking the repayment of a historical debt.

When President Obama declared that "we need to look forward as opposed to looking backward" there was a particular context, but it was also a statement which reflected a more general American approach. As a character in Clifford Odets's play *Paradise Lost* remarks, "We cancel our experience. This is an American habit." Nobody ever went to America to be what they were. They went to transcend the past, erase it, re-inventing themselves, self-made not only in constructing careers but constructing a self, an existential gesture in an existential country. They closed the door on the past as the golden door supposedly opened to them. Slowly, the past was shuffled off. Arguably, that is the price of assuming a new identity.

It was Gramsci who remarked that "History teaches, but has no pupils." That would seem to have a special relevance to what Gore Vidal called the United States of Amnesia. Of course, there is no shortage of historians, but I am talking about the mythos of a country. You might say that for the South the past has a present reality, as it does for the Irish, but in both cases, it is myth rather than history that is preferred, history as theme park concealing inconvenient truths. The figures on Mount Rushmore celebrating heroes of democracy were carved by a man, a child of Mormon polygamy, who was a former member of the Ku Klux Klan who had wished to celebrate the heroes of the Confederacy but when that proved impossible celebrated more acceptable heroes and did so on land stolen from the Indians on a mountain named for a white gold prospector. If it didn't prefer myth to history, how could America celebrate as martyrs to freedom the slave traders and slaveholders seeking to extend America's slave states, who died at the Alamo, Mexico having abolished slavery

seven years earlier? America regards itself as anti-colonial despite its very settlement being imperial, its acquisition of Spanish possessions in the Spanish American war, it having annexed Hawaii, while today having 14 dependencies, 750 military installations in 130 countries.

Winston Churchill said that “Before looking forward, it is first necessary to look a long way back.” Christopher Andrew, the historian of intelligence operations throughout the centuries, has said that “the things we understand least well about... other countries, we misunderstand because we’ve forgotten the roots of the present.” When on September 12th, 2001 George W. Bush said that the war on terror would be a crusade he was seemingly oblivious to the incendiary history of the word, or perhaps Europeans and those in the Arab world deliberately put their own construction on the word.

Arthur Miller insisted that the past is “the seedbed of current reality and the way to possibly reaffirm cause and effect in an insane world,” but the National Museum of African Americans wasn’t established until 2003, 140 years after the Emancipation Declaration and 54 years after the National Baseball Museum was inaugurated – baseball, incidentally, not being an American invention as you will know from reading Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. The National Museum of the American Indian had to wait until 2004, 128 years after the Battle of Little Bighorn and 106 years after the last Indian uprising at the Battle of Sugar Point. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, which commemorates lynching, opened in Montgomery, AL, this year, though admittedly, and unbelievably, only 23 years after the last lynching, by the Ku Klux Klan, in Mobile, AL, of Michael Donald. The National Museum of Latinos is no more than a proposal. These are, perhaps, signs of a change but America is a country inclined to wipe the past clean, to see itself as a virgin land caught in the paradox of declaring itself a utopia while insisting on the centrality of progress, an interesting case of cognitive dissonance. The green light across the bay in *The Great Gatsby* is at once the green of an untouched land and a shimmering image of a future yet to be claimed.

What connects the Knickerbocker Trust building in New York, the Hippodrome, the Old Metropolitan Opera house, the Hotel Astor, the Ziegfeld Theater, the Lewsohn Stadium, the Singer Building, the Ritz-Carlton, the New York World Building, and so on and so on. They are all iconic buildings in New York which have been torn down. The list runs to 63 pages. Arthur Miller wrote a play which featured this idea of a cityscape constantly erased, and with it the memories,

personal and social, that went with it, one narrative being overwritten by a series of others, what in painting is called *pentimento*, as it happens the title of a work by Lillian Hellman in which, almost certainly, she lied about the past creating a myth of her own life.

America is never stationary, never fixed, always Protean. That is the challenge to an understanding of it. It is always being terraformed as its inhabitants are shapeshifters, which is why American literature is full of those who change their names, from Cooper’s hero to Gatsby. And where immigrants did not change them themselves, immigration officials stood by to change them for them. And who, after all, is Gatsby but what he wishes to present himself as being in the land of the second chance. A president who resigned in ignominy could be born aloft at his funeral with a day of national mourning, presumably for its values. Fifty thousand people took 18 hours to pass by Nixon’s coffin, just to make sure he was dead, I presume. President Clinton praised him for giving something back to the world, perhaps because he had stolen it in the first place.

A quarter of the US population are first or second generation immigrants. As the British novelist David Mitchell observed: “We live in fractured times, in times of competing narratives.” That is surely true of America. Perhaps the slogan of this seminar in which we try to understand America should be summed up by two lines of Whitman’s great poem, speaking of himself and surely his country: “I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured.” His obituary for himself could apply equally to the nation he celebrates, its meaning always provisional: “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean... Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged, Missing me one place search another, I stop somewhere waiting for you.”

Cecelia Brady, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon*, says “you can dismiss it with the contempt we reserve for what we don’t understand. It can be understood ... but only dimly and in flashes.” She is talking about Hollywood but could be talking about America itself. We see it through a glass darkly depending on where we stand. It draws people today, as it ever has, not because it is fully knowable or even fully understandable but because it is a possibility, a place constantly reinventing itself. If it is a novel the next page has yet to be written, and the one after that. They are attracted because it is the white whale onto which meaning can be projected by whoever chooses to see it as a last great hope. They see what they wish to see. I see, you see, he sees.

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