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Who Works Where: "The State of Our Disciplines" in a Fragmented Global Frame

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When the editors of this volume asked for my views on "the state of our disciplines within the American university" (with a note that, "subsequently," the "same general question" would be posed with respect to "what is happening elsewhere in the world, especially Latin America and Europe"), I was teaching a course titled "África en el imaginario español" at the Humboldt University in Berlin and was confronting, with a good deal of excitement, the fragmentary state of the study of Hispanic issues internationally. Even though I immediately thought that I could take my work in Germany, as before in Sweden, as the basis for a response, I was loath to do so, not just because I was still busy trying to orient myself, but also, and more importantly, because I had lately become less interested in self-reflective, meta-critical descriptions of "the state of our disciplines" (prone as they are to prescriptions as to what "the state of our disciplines" *should be*) than in the practical work of the classroom and in the historically, aesthetically, and theoretically informed work on the works of others. After a few hapless attempts to pull together the fragments of my experience and thought, I waited until after I had left Berlin, and after I had left Barcelona (where I taught for five months in Catalan), and had moved to Lyon, France (where I was also teaching, largely in French), to begin to

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address the "state of our disciplines within the American university." The lag could be justified, I hoped, by the fact that I had had the chance to work in even more European universities.[1] *The chance to work*: the banality of the phrase was quickly put to the test by an event that interrupted my academically discrete intentions and that reminded me how intricately the personal and the professional—as in "our disciplines"—are bound up in the collective.

For as I was finally hunkering down to assess the "state of our disciplines in the American university," a clamor of voices roused me from my seat: thousands of students and workers had taken to the streets of Lyon to protest Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin's *Contrat Première Embauche* (CPE), or Contract of First Employment, which allowed—or would have allowed—employers to dismiss employees under the age of 26 anytime during a period of two years without having to provide any justification for doing so. The demonstrations included the blockading of most of France's universities, including the Université Lumière-Lyon 2, where I was teaching, and revealed another fracture in the French promise of a good life, which had already been sorely tested by the more racially and ethnically charged disturbances of the *banlieues* in late 2005. Although some in the media cast the student demonstrations as an "elite" or "educated" counterpart to the riots, many of the students, and certainly many of those at the University where I was teaching, were from the working class (though the middle class prevailed in general) and presented their movement as one of young "pre-proletarians." That is to say, unlike students in May 1968, many French students today saw retraction and precariousness, not advancement and security, as the principal signs of the times. As one blogger put it: "in 1968, students were revolting against the idea of their own future being a dull career in plastics. Today they desperately want the career and are afraid that what they'll get, instead, is a life of short-term job contracts, instability, and unemployment" ("French Protests"). Or as Pierre Bourdieu put it years before: "On a affaire, dans les enterprises, à un management rationnel qui utilise l'arme de l'insécurité (entre autres instruments) pour mettre les travailleurs en état de risque, de stress, de tension. À la différence de la précarité 'traditionnelle' des services et du bâtiment, la *précarité institutionnalisée* des enterprises de l'avenir devient principe de l'organisation du travail et style de vie" (46-47, emphasis original). Institutionalized precariousness, long in the making, had arrived fully on campus, prompting students to project themselves as unemployed or underemployed workers and to close down the universities in protest (a good number of students were, however, against

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the closings, prompting debates about democratic process in the context of demonstrations).

The demonstrations, replete with sporadic clashes with the police, are part and parcel of the conflicting realities of economic globalization and national identity. An editorial in *El País* placed the accent—and the blame—on national identity and characterized the entire situation as a "psicodrama francés," reminding its readers that something similar to the CPE is already in place in many countries and casting the participants in the demonstrations as "unos ciudadanos frustrados, opuestos a todo cambio, que intentan preservar a ultranza un modelo social necesitado de profundas reformas" (12). For the editors of *El País*, "[e]l triunfo del *no* en el referendum sobre la Constitución europea tiene mucho que ver con las manifestaciones . . . en su rechazo a una Francia más liberalizada y modernizada que pueda competir en un entorno globalizado" ("Psicodrama francés," 12). In sync with the ideology of neoliberalism, the editorial reduced the defense of job security in France to a nationalist project anachronistically at odds with a modern, competitive global order whose hallmarks are supposedly change and reform—in and of the market. From this slyly stilted perspective, the conservatives were not *really* the politicians in power, but rather the "frustrated citizens" and students who, still daring to lean left in certain matters, could not get on board the European fast train (a sleeker, more stylish variant of the global fast train) and let go of such antiquated, non-competitive "privileges" as job security.

It is just this situation, thick with contested meanings about the national and the international, the local and the global, conservatism and change, competition and solidarity, education and work, that is critical, I submit, to any serious assessment of the "state of our disciplines." In the light of my opening remarks, it should be evident that I do not take the subject(s) of the pronoun "our" and the "disciplines" whose state is here at issue to be self-evident. Perhaps even less self-evident is the status of work or, more specifically, academic work: not in the sense of what line of critical inquiry "works" best, or whose "work" is most compelling, or what "work" needs to be done to advance the study of Hispanic issues, but in the sense of who works, and where, and for whom, and under what conditions. My own work in Spain, France, Germany, and Sweden, where graduate students have decidedly fewer scholarships and decidedly fewer hopes of advancement within the academic system than in the United States, and where nothing remotely like the MLA "job market" exists, had already brought home to me the need to think of the "elsewhere" now rather than later, but the demonstrations impressed upon me the urgency of such thought—and of action. The lack of

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academic employment opportunities remits, that is, to a lack of employment opportunities in general, and hence to the institutionalized precariousness that Bourdieu examines. The divisions that still obtain between "college life" and the "real world" in the United States, and that still allow many educators to elide issues of class, do not generally obtain, and certainly not with the same "boys and girls gone wild" Spring-break insouciance, in Europe, let alone in Latin America and other parts of the globe. This is *not* to say that precariousness and growing class divisions do not obtain in the United States, for clearly they do, but that the historically entrenched sense of the university as a realm unto itself (the ivory tower syndrome most densely, but by no means exclusively, associated with "Oxbridge" and the Ivy League) stunts and stifles the reality of the "real world," at once imperious and precarious.

It is just this imperious sense of precariousness outside *and* inside the academic realm, given dramatic form by the CPE and demonstrations against it, that casts my remarks on "the state of our disciplines within the American university" as remarks on globalization, whose dominant modality carries a stamp "made in the U.S.A" (even though "Made in China" is arguably more imposing, stamping U.S. flags among countless other objects). The matter of globalization is not, however, what I had first intended to address. I had first intended, when in Berlin, to grapple with the remnants of the universal, not the roar of the global, and to invoke an internationally complex "we," one in which "our" disciplinary interests in Hispanic issues were, despite the relative dearth of dialogue and cooperation, still fairly straightforward and self-evident. We scholars of Hispanic Studies; we Hispanists, or Latin Americanists, or Peninsularists, or Latinoists; we Anthropologists, Historians, Literary Critics, and Political Scientists *specialized* in the Hispanic "region," "area," or "world," may not know each other or much about each other's discipline, but we seem to know a Hispanic issue when we see it, and we seem to consider it, inasmuch as it is Hispanic, worthy of our attention. We seem to know these things and to valorize this process even when we disagree about the relative force of essentialism and constructivism; the pull of place; the weight of language; the mark of custom, habit, and tradition; the breadth and depth of colonialism; the meaning of modernity; the drag of movement and migration; and the form and content of the first person plural itself. Within these by now familiar intellectual parameters, which travel and teaching in a variety of countries, languages, and academic systems had not quite rendered uncanny, I had intended to write that Hispanism, Latin Americanism, Hispanic Studies, and related formations are indeed

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fragmented, but that their fragments nonetheless allow for the ever-present illusion, located most intensely in and around "the university," of a once and future intellectual, cultural, and maybe even political community, some great pan-Hispanic or pan-Hispanophilic collectivity that persists, *sous rature*, even in some of the most intensely deconstructive critiques.

Within this cross-cultural, international frame, the *problem* that I had intended to present was that the attempts to reaffirm something "ours," particularly when issued from within the United States and/or from outside it by U.S. citizens such as myself, tends to reassert a trans-Atlantic relay that runs between the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Spain and a North-South relay that runs between the United States, Canada, and Latin America. It both cases, English functions as the privileged counterpart to Spanish, thereby delimiting "bilingual games"—to use my colleague Doris Sommer's happy expression—to their most hegemonic manifestations. My stays in Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Holland, and Catalonia (Spain, but not in Spanish) had, however, impressed upon me the skewed state of the aforementioned relays in which *both* the West and its "others" were reduced, their complexities elided, and their particularities silenced in favor of a "dialogue" that was, at best, more restrictedly bilingual than openly multilingual. In each country in which I taught I found dense and vibrant academic circuits in which the study of Hispanic issues was in tension with national formations (German, French, Swedish, etc.) that were themselves in tension with the transnational formation known as the European Union or, more simply and deceptively, Europe. Each country, though especially Germany and France, has its movers and shakers, most of whom have had relatively little exposure in the United States and other English-speaking countries (the work of British Hispanists is unquestionably more familiar to U.S. Hispanists, and vice versa, than that of their continental colleagues), though considerably more exposure in Latin America and Spain—provided they publish in Spanish.

If the fragment is to be celebrated, and if the whole by which something that "we" call "ours" is to be celebrated too, the engagement with other national circuits that are *also* not predominately Hispanic constitutes at once a challenge and an opportunity for all those concerned with the state of "our" disciplines. A number of things hang in the balance: a more nuanced, multidirectional understanding of migrations and diasporas; a more complex appreciation of bilingual and indeed multilingual games with languages *other* than English; a more contextually sensitive conception of the "Latino" as a partly moveable sign of "Latin American" *beyond* the United States and Canada; a more

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ethically cautious assessment of the "numbers game," in which a minority supposedly advances its cause by proving itself to be larger than other minorities (Latinos may outnumber African-Americans in the U.S., but they, however they are called, are not likely to outnumber Muslims in France); and a more critical analysis of the status of Spain, or of the United States, as a self-designated bridge between Europe and the Americas. "The state of our disciplines within the American university" necessarily takes "us" *outside* the university, *outside* the United States, and *outside* the still surprisingly limited understandings (limited, no doubt, by the limits of "our" linguistic competence) of North and South, one side and another of the Atlantic, the West and its "others," and so on. The humanist project for a *universal* history, involving the recognition of what we might today call *national* insufficiency and *transnational* collaboration, finds itself overcome by an ever larger picture, one that involves outsourcing, neocolonial investments, anti-union activities, among other things, and that still from time to time, and to varying effects, spills out and into the streets.

The demonstrations that "interrupted" my work as a teacher of Hispanic issues in France also reoriented and reinvigorated it, not just because they brought me into contact with scores of students whom I would not have otherwise met, but also because they reasserted the notion of globalization as Americanization, and they did so, moreover, in a national context that is still, in general, rich, powerful, and privileged. Pierre Bourdieu's influential formulation of globalization as Americanization, which functions as a more lexically elegant alternative to "UnitedStatesization," is alive and well in France, as in much of the world, and necessarily implicates "the state of our disciplines within the American university." But the force of the preceding notion in France, and in Europe in general, is nonetheless not the same as in Latin America, and it is this difference that I would like to signal, ever so insufficiently, as I come to an impossible conclusion. For even as Bourdieu criticizes globalization as "un mot de passe" (84) that functions as if it were a *fait accompli*, he ties it so tightly to "Americanization," another "mot de passe," that he casts France and the rest of Europe into a quasi-colonized position that is disingenuous, to say the least. As persuasive as I find Bourdieu, I cannot but think that an unprocessed nostalgia for a French universalist project—or for a French-inflected internationalism—haunts his words. His call for "un vaste movement social européen" (12) seems to indicate that *another* hegemony, European, lies lurking in the counter-hegemonic guise of "une utopie rationnelle" (23). The dominance of the United States does not mean that France, Germany, and Spain, let alone the European Union, are *not*

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dominant in their own ways as well. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri emphasize, “the United States does not, and indeed no nation-state can today, form the center of an imperialist project” (xiv). The center, they contend, is multiple and scattered; not located fully and firmly in the United States, “Empire’s rule has no limit” (xiv).

“Globalization,” Hardt and Negri contend, “is not one thing, and the multiple processes that we recognize as globalization are not unified or univocal” (xv). So much is this so that the “we” that presumably recognizes the multiple processes of globalization is not unified or univocal either—for better and, of course, for worse: polyvocality, often taken as an undisputed value by giddy postmodern holdovers, *can* devolve into serial monovocality, into multicultural marketability, and into the hyper-individualism that undercuts solidarity. Before this dizzying picture of growing globalization, protracted nationalism, interrupted work, and intermittent protest in and out of the Academy, my first intentions to call for a more complex understanding of Hispanic issues beyond an Anglo-Hispanic binary or beyond a U.S.-Latin American-Iberian triangle have given way to a recognition of the precariousness that systemically affects the people whom “we” would teach and whom “we” would call “our” colleagues. Accordingly, it is time that reflection on the state of our disciplines within the American university be interrupted, at least partially, and lead to more concerted transnational action regarding the state of labor, and certainly at least academic labor, throughout the world. More specifically, it is time that “we” in the U.S. university system, especially in its richer echelons, address the competitive ethos that has graduate programs vying for a limited pool of applicants and spending considerable sums of money trying to persuade a select few individuals to come to one program rather than another. The contrast between the resources spent on wooing graduate candidates in the U.S. and the lack of resources available in Latin America and—*toutes proportions gardées*—Europe calls, in short, for more cooperation among university programs in and out of the U.S. and less market-like competition—difficult as that will be. This is only one of many “practical”—or “impractical”—recommendations that I would make; but that, I fear, is to bleed from description to prescription and to ignore that the collective will make itself known in some places, fortunately, regardless of what I, a privileged U.S. academic, have to say about it. It is not beside the point that by the time I finished this little piece even the strong-willed Villepin had had to recognize a will larger than his own—and that students in Chile were banding together to protest the structural inequalities in education that so profoundly mark “our disciplines.”

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Notes

1. The symbolic power of the trademark of my institution precedes and exceeds me, allowing the affective ties that are often at the root of the invitations to be a visiting professor to find relatively easy institutional backing. Similarly, the material power of my institution, with its generous sabbatical policy and matching funds, makes it feasible for me to accept the invitations. The opportunity to teach in so many different countries is thus structurally overdetermined, and in no wise stems from, or remits to, exclusively personal "merits."

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