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THE CLINTON INSTITUTE: DOING AMERICAN STUDIES IN IRELAND

Liam Kennedy

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The Clinton Institute for American Studies was established at University College Dublin in 2003 with the support of the Irish government to promote academic research and public discussion about the United States in Ireland and beyond. In the last four years the Institute has developed Masters and PhD programs in American Studies, working closely with allied departments in the humanities and social sciences so as to maximize teaching potential, and has supported several dedicated research projects which promote collaborations between Irish-based and international scholars in American Studies. It also runs a program of outreach activities—including public lectures, exhibitions, workshops for teachers in Ireland, and an international Summer School aimed at graduate students from across the world (for details on the Institute's programs and activities, see www.ucd.ie/amerstud).

Under conditions of globalization the meanings of 'America' circulate widely today and there is a mass-mediated common knowledge about American life spreading across the world. Yet, wherever we are in the world, we perceive and understand the United States from regional and local perspectives, and in response to cultural, political and economic imperatives of our own locations. We are conscious of this as we develop teaching and research programs at the Clinton Institute, and we place a strong emphasis on viewing the United States from the 'outside', situating it in relation to comparative, transnational and geopolitical frames of study. Core strands of teaching and research focus attention on transatlantic issues, including US relations with Ireland and Western Europe. A key aim in the Institute's mission statement is to provide students, researchers and policy-makers with a forum for understanding changing relations between the US and Atlantic nations in their historical complexity and in relation to contemporary ideological, political and intellectual debates.

Ireland's relationship with the United States is a long and complex one. The history of Irish immigration to the US has proved the foundation for vital cultural, political and economic relations today, and strong bonds of shared identity—almost 40 million Americans cited Irish descent at the last census. At the same time, Ireland has rapidly emerged in recent years as one of the wealthiest economies in the European Union and a key political presence in the shaping of the 'new Europe'. Today, there is pub-

lic discussion of whether Ireland should follow ‘Boston or Berlin’ as symbolic models for policy-making or for imagining the future. Ireland’s contemporary struggle with its own identity and its symbolic transatlantic position make it an ideal vantage point for the study of past, present and future relations between Europe and the US. It also acts as a constant reminder of the dialectics of that study—in Ireland, as in so many other parts of the world, ‘America’ functions as a vanishing mediator of more localized issues of social change and national identity.

Being responsive to distinctive local contexts of doing American Studies in Ireland in the twenty-first century does not inhibit our intellectual perspectives or practices as Americanists; rather, it stretches these as we are challenged to develop our research and teaching accordingly. This is manifested, for example, in several of our research projects which counterpoint the US role in local/global dynamics involving Irish culture and politics. A project on photography and international conflict, which I direct, examines the role of photojournalism in framing understandings of war, conflicts and human rights issues. While the US is at the heart of the global dimension of the project, the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland provide a local case study. Another project, directed by a colleague at UCD, examines how the Irish Peace Process has been understood from an American foreign policy perspective and considers how this example of conflict resolution has shaped policy in relation to other global conflicts. Such projects have a strong local impetus and the benefit of rich local resources, but also have the potential to enrich the methods and practices of American Studies by developing fresh interdisciplinary frames (e.g. combining foreign policy and cultural inquiry) and pursuing fieldwork (e.g. oral history) in local environments. This is a form of American Studies research that is becoming more and more common with the ‘internationalization’ of the field and doubtless also reflects the unipolar prominence of the US on the global stage since the ending of the Cold War.

The internationalization of American Studies is only partially an intellectual endeavor. It also refers us to the emerging institutional roles of American Studies within university systems where internationalization is a buzzword for entrepreneurial developments. The Clinton Institute reflects this. It was created following competitive tender among Irish universities for government funding to create a center devoted to study of the United States, and named for President Bill Clinton to symbolically recognize his role in the Peace Process. The funding awarded to UCD was in part used to furnish a dedicated building for the Clinton Institute and a large portion of the Institute’s funding has continued to come from external sources. The Institute was conceived, in part, as a strategic vehicle to promote the university internationally. American Studies in this context is not so much a field of interdisciplinary studies as an investment in the symbolic capital Irish-US relations (and the name of ‘Clinton’ in particular).

Such symbolic investments are apparent in other American Studies centres across the world and all have origin stories that reflect the particular cultural and political contexts of their moment of formation. In Europe, for example, the Salzburg Seminar in Salzburg, the John F. Kennedy Institute in Berlin and the Roosevelt Center in Middelburg all have origins in Cold War paradigms. In more recent years, the seeding of American Studies centers in Central and Eastern Europe and in the Middle East reflect post-Cold War geopolitics and regional relationships with and perspectives upon

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the US. Indeed, the dissolution of the Cold War paradigm has reshaped both the field imaginary and the political economy of American Studies internationally. The results are mixed and conflicting, differentially located and articulated across regions, but there are certain tendencies that may be mapped and analyzed. Across much of Europe, for example, these tendencies include: the promotion of comparative programs and frames of study that seek to conceptually deterritorialize 'America'—the transatlantic, the Black Atlantic, the circumatlantic; the embrace of entrepreneurial models of activity, brokering American Studies as a contact zone with overseas students or as a focus for 'research institutes' which can lever external funding; the reconfiguring of American Studies within national reformations of higher education funding and state support. If all of these activities suggest a symptomatic responsiveness to transnational energies and deregulatory demands of globalization, they are also indicative of ways in which the meaning and value of American Studies are constantly under negotiation, and bartered in broader strategies of academic politics and entrepreneurial activity.