Università di Firenze Dipartimento di Formazione, Lingue, Intercultura, Letterature e Psicologia

L-11 Corso di Studio in Lingue, Letterature e Studi Interculturali III anno Lingua Inglese 2 (12 cfu)

Corso in Lingua e Cultura degli U.S.A. John Gilbert

**Introduction to Course on Language and Culture of the U.S.A.**

Any analysis of **language** and **culture** in a society is necessarily closely connected to the concept of **identity**. But first it is necessary to define our terminology.

A **language** is a system of primarily oral and written expression used by a group of people for communication. By **culture** we mean all of the human artefacts, traditions, customs, works of art and literature, etc. produced by a community, a society, a “civilization,” including **language**. Cultures are the products of human inter-actions, intersections, crossings, mixings, hybridization. They are in a constant state of change and evolution, fluid not fixed. And so are languages.

**Identity** is a symbolic socio-cultural construct, an artificial construction to define oneself and/or one’s community in relation to and in contrast with “the other.” Identity can be national, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, social, religious, political, sexual (in terms of gender and/or preference), etc. A person is not born with an identity, but acquires it from social institutions such as the family, school, religion, through the processes of acculturation and socialization. Identity is not fixed, but necessarily dynamic, fluid. An identity can be both individual and collective. A **collective identity**, according to a logic of “otherness’, of inclusion and exclusion, defines oneself and one’s community as a collective subject in opposition, in contrast to another collective subject: “the other, the “foreign,” “the alien,” the “extra-,” the “non-”

To understand the **language and culture** of the **United States of America**, and its respective linguistic and cultural identities as they have evolved historically, it is necessary to go back to the **15th century**, to the beginning of the **Age of Exploration** and the **global economic imperialism** of the major European powers with the **rise of mercantile capitalism** and the beginning of the end of the feudal socio-economic system in Europe. At this time Europe began the **colonization** of much of the rest of the world, including **the Americas** where European colonization and economic exploitation came to be based on three principal factors: the **expropriation** of the **lands** of the i**ndigenous population** and their consequent **genocide**, the **African slave trade** lasting over 400 years, and the mass immigration of **Euro-pean settlers** to “the New World.”

The brutal genocide of Native Americans and the horrific trade in African slaves was justified ideologically by the formation in the **15-16th centuries** of a **Euro-pean identity** based on the concept of “**whiteness**” and the idea of **“white” supremacy**, an ethnocentric and racist identity constructed on the contrast of “white people” and “white civilisation” with “the other,” the “non-white” peoples, primitive, barbaric, pagan, non-Christian and uncivilised. The term “white” became a racist term rooted in privilege, power and violence. The **peoples of Africa** and t**he Amer-icas** were systematically **dehumanized** as “inferior” peoples with no cultures or civilizations, reduced to the mere color of their skin differentiating them from most Europeans. They were no longer the African Yoruba, Wolof, Mande, Ashanti, Bantu, Kongo, etc. or the North American Iroquois, Wampanoags, Pequots, Huron, Powhatan, Cherokee, Creek, Apache, Comanche, Cheyenne, Navaho, Hopi, Dakota, etc., but merely “non-whites,” “blacks,” “reds,” “the colored,” with no language (instead speaking so-called African “dialects”), culture or civilisation worth acknowledging by “the white man.”

Even the European name “**America**”was given to “the New World” after its “discovery” by Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) , taken from the name of Amer-igo Vespucci (1454-1512), a Florentine who explored the coast of Venezuela in 1499. His name was chosen due to an inaccurate account published in 1507 which claimed that he had discovered the mainland in 1497. And the millennial history and cultures of the civilizations of the tens of millions of indigenous peoples living in “the Americas,” simply became “**pre-Columbian**.” Since the early 19th century the term “America” has been appropriated by the U.S.A. as a synonym for itself with the term “**American**” referring to its own citizens. In fact there is no equivalent in English for the Italian *“****statunitense****”* or the Spanish *“****estadounidense****”.* But interestingly enough, until around the end of the War of 1812 with the British in 1815, the term “**American**” had generally been used to refer to **Native Americans**. After 1815 it came to be used ethnocentrically to refer to the European population of the U.S.A., in particular the **W.A.S.P.**s (white Anglo-Saxon Protestants), the so-called “unhyphenated Americans,” as opposed to Afro-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, Jewish-Americans, Asian-Americans, etc.

So the first reality to take into account when considering the **historical origins** of the **United States** is that of the **racist genocide and slavery** at its roots and foundation. Indeed it is believed by some scholars that there were from **10 to 20 million Native Americans** living in **North America** at the time of the arrival of the European invaders, out of a total population including all of the **Americas** of some **70-100 million**, while the population of **Europe in 1492** was estimated to be some **70 million**. Thus there were probably more Native Americans at the time of the European arrival than there were Europeans back home in “the Old World.”

With regard to the over **400-year European slave trade of Africans**, scholars estimate that **10-15 million Africans** were taken as slaves to the Americas, while **millions of others** never survived the notorious **trans-Atlantic journey**, the so-called “**Middle Passage**.” The Spanish took the first Africans as slaves to the Caribbean in 1510. In 1526 the Spanish took the first African slaves to North America, to what is today South Carolina, where the ca. 100 Africans soon rebelled against the ca. 500 Spanish settlers, forcing the ca. 150 surviving Spanish to flee by ship back to their settlement on the island of Hispaniola. It is emblematic that the first Africans taken as slaves to North America successfully rebelled against their oppressors. Indeed Africans in North America never passively accepted their conditions of servitude and **hundreds of slave rebellions** took place until the final **abolition of U.S. slavery in 1865** after the terrible bloodshed of the **Civil War (1861-65)**. With regard to the **British colonies**, historians believe that the **first Africans** taken there as slaves was to Jamestown, Virginia, in **1619**, but recent archeological evidence indicates it might have been even earlier.

Unfortunately, the racist ideology of **white supremacy** continues to plague U.S. society today, despite the fact that scientists have conclusively shown that the **concept of “race”** has no biological or other scientific basis. “Race” does exist, however, as a powerful socio-cultural construct in the traditional hegemonic U.S. identity as propagated by the ruling social class, which has attempted to crystalize, reify the “nativist” white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (W.A.S.P.) identity of the U.S., which seeks to negate the multicultural origins and history of the U.S.A.

The historical reality is that the British and other European colonies in North America were always **multicultural** and **multilingual** from their very origins. After U.S. independence, the first national **census in 1790** of some 4 million people (excluding Native Americans, but including ca. 700,00 African-American slaves) reveal-ed that **60%** of the people in the U.S. were **not** of **English origins** while **40%** were **not even** from **English-speaking backgrounds**.

It is necessary at this point to define some more terminology. **Multicultural** merely describes the presences of different cultures (languages, ethnicities, etc.) in a particular social context, whether it is a classroom, a community, a society or a nation. It is not a value judgement, but rather an objective fact or description, a “photograph” of a particular reality. All human societies have always been “multicultural’ to some extent. **Intercultural**, on the other hand, is a term which seems to have been first used in French *(interculturel)* in the 1970s in the context of pedagogy. It is based on the concept of mutual exchange of cultural norms and ideas among different cultures (note prefix “inter-”), on dialogue, interaction, acceptance, solidarity and respect, the idea that diversity is a resource so that the synergy of 1 + 1 does not equal 2 but something more, with the development of social relationships and mutual change on all parts. **Interculturalism** is a social and educational approach to dealing with multicultural realities, based on the recognition and appreciation of cultural diversity, an on-going project not an existing reality. It is a sort of “pluralistic integration,” the opposite of “assimilation” or cultural absorption.

It is possible to use an **intercultural approach** not only in the multicultural classroom, but also when dealing with **language, history, literature, art history,** etc., by re-reading, deconstructing and re-interpreting the accepted norms and traditional canons, rediscovering the contributions made by historically-excluded subjects: “the diverse,” “the other,” ethnic minorities and immigrants, women, the work-ing classes and the LGBT+ community. In this sense, for a greater understanding of the **language and culture** of the **United States** an intercultural approach should be used to overcome the hegemonic distortions historically operated by “W.A.S.P.” ethnocentrism and racist white supremacy, classism, sexism and heterosexual patriarchy.

Looking at the **language and culture** of the **U.S.A.**, this is the approach which will be used in this course, as well as the common thread connecting the var-ious topics which will be dealt with. U.S. President John F. **Kennedy** (1917-1963) once said *“History, after all, is the memory of a nation.”* But **Umberto Eco** (1932-2016) reminds us that the social and cultural memory of a people is not only what to remember, but also what to discard and forget. Afro-American writer **James Baldwin** (1924-87) once quipped: *“American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it,”* and *“What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s heroic ancestors.”* **Historical memory** is always selective, mythologized. An **intercultural approach** will attempt to rediscover, recover, reclaim the history, the beautiful and terrible stories, the cultural and linguistic contributions which the traditional ethnocentric “nativist” W.A.S.P. vision in the U.S.A. has always worked to remove, obfuscate, discard.

Attached links:

Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade - Database

<https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#timelapse>

A Comprehensive Map of American Lynchings: The practice wasn’t limited to the South, as this new visualization of racial violence in the Jim Crow era proves.

<https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/01/a-comprehensive-map-of-american-lynchings/513293/>

Map of White Supremacy mob violence: The lynchings and riots to enforce racial superiority in the US

<http://www.monroeworktoday.org/explore/>

How ‘Strange Fruit’ Killed Billie Holiday

Holiday, who throughout her career called public attention to the devastating impact of white supremacy, drew the notice of the Commissioner for the Federal Bureau of Narcotics. He ordered her to stop singing the song…

<https://progressive.org/dispatches/strange-fruit-caused-the-murder-of-billie-holiday-180220/?fbclid=IwAR2qfKsML2dkO0_JV0GD9Nfvi_uSVVjNJpAJjgvvwZwGwc-8Rhh2x0gWPcs#.Xi2u2WHW-Es.facebook>

“What Did You Learn In School Today?” by Pete Seeger

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VucczIg98Gw>

Bob Dylan's memorable 1988 Live Oakland performance of With God on Our Side made into a historical / lyric video

<https://portside.org/video/2019-01-04/bob-dylan-god-our-side>

“Winter in America” by Gil Scott-Heron

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m2zKdIcOV5s>

The Top Language in Each State Besides English and Spanish (2014)

<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/56714/most-commonly-spoken-language-each-state-besides-english-and-spanish?fbclid=IwAR2Uso1smCa2TMaoc3zZRx70fXNdtl_CYFnb1RquKHx7BDsF5AkaX9t1aSU>

Latinx identity in the U.S.A.: According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2017), 58 million Hispanics in U.S.A. identify as white (65 percent), “some other race” (27 percent), mixed race (5 percent), black (2 percent), indigenous (1 percent) and Asian (0.4 percent). The U.S. population of 58 million Hispanics is more than Spain’s and second only to Mexico’s.

Reminder: 'Hispanics,' 'Latinos,' and 'Latinx' are not a race

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/9/22/1886364/-Reminder-Hispanics-Latinos-and-Latinx-are-not-a-race?detail=emailLL>

Does Hispanic Heritage Month erase Afro-Latinxs?

<https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2018/10/7/1800913/-Does-Hispanic-Heritage-Month-erase-Afro-Latinxs?detail=emailLL>

Afro-Latino & Proud

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCpg4PcionQ>