

Professorial Voice

Prof. David E. Nye
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aspeers: Good afternoon, Professor Nye. Since you are an American professor for American studies in Denmark, we would like to start with one question about your choice to teach in Europe: Which factors contributed to your decision to go to Denmark?¹

Nye: I had a Fulbright position in Spain and I liked teaching in Europe; I thought that was an interesting experience. The job market was not very good in the US in the late 1970s, early 1980s. So, when I saw this job advertised in Denmark, I thought: ‘Well, that would not be too bad, I can go there for a couple of years.’ It was not like I decided that I would go to Denmark and live there for the rest of my career. I just thought: ‘A couple of years, that would be nice.’

aspeers: What made you continue your career in Europe and not in the US?

Nye: I had been here for ten years and became a full professor, which means you are a civil servant. It’s not quite the same as in Germany, but being a professor in Denmark does mean quite a lot. So there has to be a really good job offer before you go back to the US. Still, in the first place it was not really a plan. Maybe you’ve heard that quote by John Lennon, who once said: “Life is what happens to you when you are busy making other plans.”

aspeers: You have taught in Spain, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Denmark, and other European countries. What would you say were the major differences in the individual countries?

Nye: There are quite a few differences. It may have changed now, but when I was in Spain in the late 1970s I was struck by how powerful the students actually were. They



Book or academic journal?

Nye: Book.

Fiction or nonfiction?

Nye: Fiction, particularly novels.

Rural or urban?

Nye: Urban.

Beer or wine?

Nye: Wine.

Writing or reading?

Nye: I prefer to write, but you have to read in order to write.

1 For more information about Professor David E. Nye, his career, and his publications, please see our introduction on page xi.

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would decide when the term began and ended, and, as a group, they would either come or not come. I don't mean just the individual classes but they would decide that courses would begin on this particular day and end on that day. They would also declare that they were not going to come to class because there was a holiday on Thursday, and they thought Friday should also be a holiday. At the same time, the faculty seemed to have very little to say about it. Not being used to these things, I had trouble adapting to it. It seemed strange to me.

On the other hand, and quite paradoxically, at that time in Spain almost nobody, except the full professors, seemed to have tenure. The whole department was dependent on the kindness or the being in good grace of that person. In Denmark there is only a short period where you are nontenured and if you become tenured, almost everybody is at the same rank. However, only very few people get to be full professors and about ninety percent of all the faculty literally have the same rank. All faculty members are equal in terms of everyday behavior and what people actually do on a day-to-day basis—it feels very much egalitarian. In Great Britain, on the contrary, you could really sense the differences. Britain has more classifications, they have a whole graded system of lecturer, senior lecturer, reader, and professor, and you have to do something extra to make it to the next one.

aspeers: We would like to know how your career started. Was there an incident during your undergraduate or graduate studies that had an impact on your future decision to become an American studies professor? Which scholars have influenced your decision to stay in academia?

Nye: When I was an undergraduate student, I was trying to decide whether I should go to law school or whether I should go to graduate school. In fact, I ended up going to law school but didn't like it. So after about ten weeks I decided to leave law school, which is fairly unusual because it's so hard to get in. In the US you can get a BA in American studies and then go to law school. However, I just felt that it wasn't me, it wasn't the right choice. So I went off to grad school.

As for the teacher who has influenced me the most, I'm sure that was Leo Marx. When I was an undergraduate, I had courses in American literature with him. Moreover, the faculty in Amherst College was quite good, especially in American studies. For that reason, I found it very appealing to teach in a small college in America. That was what I expected—and then I ended up in Europe.

aspeers: You have written an impressive number of books. We would like to know which of them you personally like best.

Nye: I think every book you write, especially when you are in the process of writing it and you are most involved with it, makes you think that it has the potential to be your

best publication. It is only after some years that you start to get some other perspective and wonder which one is actually better. I would say that none of my first three books in a row is the best one, that's for sure. The first that might be a candidate would be *Electrifying America*, which came out in 1990 and which is also a transitional book in my writing. At some point in your career, you start trying to write a book which is a little broader to try to connect various things. Out of that came the book *American Technological Sublime*, which is, I feel, very closely connected to *Electrifying America*. For a while, I would have said those two are the ones that were the best.

aspeers: What would you say triggered your writing of *Electrifying America*? Was there a particular inspiration?

Nye: There was sort of a pattern: I first wrote a book about Henry Ford, and that led me to his friend, the older inventor Thomas A. Edison. Edison invented the electric light, of course, but he also formed the company that later became General Electric. Therefore, I wrote a book about the General Electric photographic collection: not about the company as a whole, but about how they used photographs as a means of communication. The collection was very large, and it allowed me to follow the electrification of the country year by year. You could see what they were photographing—the new electrical products, like trolley cars or street lighting systems, billboards, department stores, or subways. Just by looking at these photos you got a sense of how this process had taken place. I got interested in it and first did some more research to not just have photographs to look at but to also try to really understand the process. It turned out to be a book written not from the point of view of the corporation but from that of the consumer.

aspeers: Besides working as a professor, you have also worked as a narrator and scriptwriter for the Danish historical TV series *Inventing Modern America*. How was this work different from your academic work? Did your academic background make it easier or harder?

Nye: That was an interesting experience because, first, I wanted to treat it as a research project, but that was not how the media people at the national television treated it. The problem really was to take the academic theories and ideas and turn them into something that you could visualize. You could not talk about the presidency in the abstract. You had to show something. So, for example, when we were talking about the president as a national figure, we pictured various presidents by using news clips and other things from archives—everything that we could get hold of. So it was a very different process. You really have to turn the idea into something that can be visualized. As a totally different experience, we also made some radio shows where you could write a script and introduce a set of ideas and add some music or whatever you needed. That was much closer to what we do in academics.

aspeers: Students of American studies are frequently asked what relevance the field has, how it is important for them and their future. What would your reply be, why does American studies matter?

Nye: On the one hand, there can be a very simple answer, since as long as the United States is a large country, it ought to be studied and understood. That, of course, might be too facile, too simple. To answer in a more academic way, I think everybody who knows only their own country is, in a sense, a bit handicapped. There was a sociologist in the United States, fairly well-known, named Seymour Martin Lipset. He once said that a person who knows one country knows no country. I was teaching American studies at Notre Dame University in the United States, a university in the Midwest with very smart students; however, some of them literally could not imagine another culture. You are teaching people who are in danger of not knowing anything except their own country and who are at the same time blind to a lot of it. So it is good if American studies students in particular take a term or a year abroad. Nevertheless, I suppose one of the main reasons to study the United States is that it has this kind of cultural dynamism. There are always new things happening. It seems to be a country that does not stay the same, even if its basic structures are somewhat similar. Frankly, I think a lot of people study it because they just find exciting and unexpected developments taking place all the time.

aspeers: Which developments did you witness in European American studies in the last years? In how far did the academic exchanges between the US and Europe influence European American studies?

Nye: For some years after World War II, most European universities did not have American studies, they did not have much in the way of courses on the United States. However, there was the Fulbright Program, which would send people like yourself to America to get a year or two of academic experiences or maybe a PhD, and then come back. Many of the people who got Fulbright grants would end up teaching at a university. During the Cold War, the US felt that it was important to make sure these cultural exchanges were operating. The interesting change that I have seen is that European American studies is more and more internally funded and driven by its own agendas. The US Department of State and the Fulbright Program are less important nowadays, since Fulbright and other programs are getting less financial support in most countries. European American studies has become much more of a native European phenomenon, almost an indigenous phenomenon. There are all kinds of exchange programs now which have nothing to do with anything at the government level: It is the universities themselves that decide about setting up an exchange with another university or a group of universities.

The European Union also has its own agendas, its own structures. So, the sources of money are different, and exchange programs in Europe are changing as well. When I came to Europe, the change had just happened. People complained to me about a conference in Copenhagen where almost all the lectures were given by visiting Americans. The Scandinavians, who did good research as well, were just supposed to sit and listen. Many of them had PhDs from places like Harvard or Yale, and their own research was worth hearing about. I think the conference was paid for and organized with the idea that these Europeans could listen to the Americans. It was like doing missionary work. All that was true up to maybe the late 1970s. As you see, there has been an interesting shift: European American studies has become more of its own thing, it is no longer an appendage or an outrider of the American studies in the US. It has its own life, you might say.

aspeers: What makes Scandinavian American studies and their respective associations so special? What is their main focus and, in that context, what is the take on American studies in Denmark?

Nye: Rather than talking about Denmark in particular, it is better to talk about Scandinavia as a whole because there is a strong community of people across the countries. There are even special funding agencies to support joint work. The association for American studies here in Scandinavia developed as an organization with Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Iceland as members. They did not have national associations until the 1980s, so this organization for the whole region was the first they had. As the support grew, some of the countries felt that they really needed their own, separate organization—separate in a sense that they had their own meetings, even though they would still attend the overall conferences. The main meeting is still being held every two years with the different countries alternating as hosts.

What is special about it? I suppose it is the political and economic comparison because when you are doing American studies outside the US, it is automatically a comparative field, by its very nature. You always keep in mind the following question when you are talking to the students: What is their culture and their situation as compared to the US? Since we have these four Scandinavian countries with a strong welfare state, social democracies, and socialized medicine, you cannot help but think about the US as a contrast. This particular contrast is very different for the Nordic countries than it would be for a country like Italy. That does not mean everybody does comparative work, but it sort of sneaks in.

aspeers: How about your work? Are you comparative in your scholarship, specifically about the US and Denmark?

Nye: My work is not comparative in an overt way, but I think every one of my books has been shaped partly by the fact that I am sitting over here and look at the US from

abroad. This was the case with *American Technological Sublime*. I got interested in the topic because I realized that there is no equivalent in Denmark. The Danish do not make a big thing out of their technologies. They have built a very large bridge recently, but it is not that big of a deal to them. They could build skyscrapers, they are technologically able to do this, and they debate it once in a while: 'Should we have skyscrapers in Copenhagen?' But the answer is always 'no.' They prefer the small, the cozy, the intimate. Of course, Americans, and this is why I got interested in it, they do not have that; they will take their scarce vacation time to go watch a rocket go up. I have never met a Dane, or a European for that matter, who would do that. I think it is valuable for US scholars to realize that there are these different views on what the United States is about.

aspeers: As you have mentioned, European and American students of American studies have a different perspective. Do you think that European students engage with the US more critically than American students, or less so?

Nye: Europeans are engaging in a critical way, they learn a lot of theory first and about the United States later. With Americans, of course, it has got to be the other way around. They grow up in the United States so they know about it first, and the theory, almost by definition, must come later. So Americans learn and experience all the empirical facts first, whereas Europeans may well become interested in the United States after already getting a fair amount of theory.

aspeers: Our journal is called *aspeers: emerging voices in american studies*, and we are, accordingly, highly interested in new developments in the field. As a professor for American studies, what do you see as upcoming academic trends, and what are your students interested in?

Nye: In general, there is more interest in ecology or environmental history, or the literature that has to do with such issues as global warming or disasters. For example, I will offer a course next term that is called 'disaster culture.' There, we will discuss both literature and history. A typical enrollment for an elective like this would be twenty to thirty students, but I have fifty-five signed up. That is not because I have suddenly become a much better teacher. There just seems to be an interest in what you might call the interface between technology and culture when the environment is involved. Environmental issues seem to be kind of hot. I am sure that there are equally interesting things going on elsewhere, but, for myself, I see that as an interesting area of development.

aspeers: What would you say is your favorite part of academic work: writing, editing, teaching, or the work for associations?

Nye: The writing is closely followed by the teaching. However, you did not mention administration. There is a lot of administration in the universities, and I think I am actually really good at it, but I really do not like to do it. I have organized one of the big conferences for the Nordic countries' association. So I did my share there, but it is a bit like editing *American Studies in Scandinavia*, the NAAS's journal: I am glad I did it, and I think it came out well, but I prefer teaching, doing research, and writing.

aspeers: This year our journal's topical spotlight is Nature and Technology, Revisited. In your publications, such as *American Technological Sublime* and *Electrifying America*, you also address the topic of technology. How did you get interested in this topic?

Nye: My father was a mechanical engineer, so he certainly taught me some things without me really thinking of it as teaching. To me it was just talking to my father. Then Leo Marx, the teacher I had when I was a graduate, was talking about technology, and, of course, there is his *Machine in the Garden*. However, when I went to graduate school, I was very much interested in the 1920s in America, in literature, and in the 'Lost Generation.'

I was not thinking about doing something with technology until I took a trip with a German student, Dieter, who was studying engineering and lived nearby in the same part of Minneapolis. He bought an old car and decided to make a trip before he flew home to Germany, and I decided to go with him. It was the typical road trip you do when you are twenty-two and summer vacation is ahead. So we got to Detroit on this trip and Dieter said that he really wanted to see the Henry Ford Greenfield Village. I got quite intrigued by what I was seeing there. I started to think about why Henry Ford, who built the assembly line, was buying old houses and creating this ideal village from the nineteenth century. This is where I got fascinated with Ford. Since I was writing my thesis on the 1920s, I thought I should include Ford because he was one of the most popular persons in the United States during that time. However, when Ford went into the thesis he sort of took over. I did not expect him to be the center of it, but it turned out that the thesis was about Ford. So, that is how it happened.

aspeers: How do you see technology's impact on culture?

Nye: I tend to look at it this way: I do not see technology as something out there, it is rather something inside our heads. That is how we would have to think about the world, so it is an aspect in almost any topic you take up. Technology is not in one place or another. It is similar to topics like gender, race, and language—it is just there, and we are paying more and more attention to it.

aspeers: Are there any projects besides your teaching that you are currently working on?

Nye: Yes, I have quite a few. I am writing a book right now on the cultural history of the assembly line. The assembly line will be one hundred years old in 2013; therefore, the book will have to be done in January 2012. I am also involved in the network for Nordic International Environmental Studies (NIES). We got a grant that allows us to have a conference every year for three years on issues that have to do with the environment. As part of it, I am interested in an idea that I call the ‘antilandscapes’—a space that is actually dangerous to human life, one that ends or does not sustain life. An antilandscapes can be, for example, what happens when a major city has a blackout. For a period of time, a city can really sustain itself, but if this blackout would not be ended within four or five days, there would be quite serious a situation. We will have a conference on this topic in May, and that will be the book I will write right after the assembly-line book. It is a way of trying to think about the human-nature relationship.

aspeers: What role will technology play in future decades?

Nye: I hope that we will use technology to create more choices, not narrow down options. It can go either way—take the example of Los Angeles. It is not really an option to try to get around Los Angeles in any other way but driving. The system that has been constructed does not really allow for very much else. Walking would be quite dangerous, and I do not think that bicycling is possible either. There is hardly any public transportation, and it is certainly not adequate to get you around the city. That would be an example where technology is decreasing the options, even though there is a huge investment in it. For that reason, let us hope that in the future we will find ourselves more in a situation like in many European cities where you do not have to worry about choices. You can take public transportation, or drive, or bicycle, and in many cases you can walk. I hope that people will have the wisdom to use technology to increase their choices, whether it is on the level of the electronic or the virtual, the world of advertising and buying, or even that of scholarship.

aspeers: Our last question: If you could pick a theme song for European American studies, what would that be?

Nye: I do not know if I have one from the European perspective, but I have to think about Woody Guthrie and his songs in general. If you look at them as a whole, the songs have just about everything in them: Whether it is building big dams, or fighting in World War II, or the unions striking, or love affairs—whatever you name seems to be in Guthrie’s songs. I would think of the song “This Land is Your Land,” which in the popular version only records the first four or five verses. The last couple of verses of that song are not often played. In the last three verses it says:

As I went walking I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said “No Trespassing.”
But on the other side it didn’t say nothing,

That side was made for you and me.
In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,
By the relief office I seen my people,
As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
Is this land made for you and me?
Nobody living can ever stop me,
As I go walking that freedom highway;
Nobody living can ever make me turn back
This land was made for you and me.

It is for this kind of 1930s feeling of solidarity and optimism in the face of difficulties that I think of this song.

aspeers: That sounds like a great choice. Thank you very much for your time, and for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us.