

Visions of America: An Interview with Professor Donald E. Pease

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While visiting American Studies Leipzig in December 2017, Professor Donald E. Pease held two lectures for students and faculty. His lecture “The President That Is Not One” analyzed the ‘state of exception’ the current US administration claims for itself and how that affects domestic as well as foreign policy. Pease suggests that this is done through ‘normalizing’ and establishing a ‘settler-colonialist’ alternative to formerly agreed-upon notions of acceptance and diversity. Following the lecture, he kindly agreed to elaborate on these ideas and answer our questions concerning contemporary American studies.

aspeers: First of all, thank you for giving us the opportunity to interview you today. We would like to start off by asking: How do you view the current relationship between the US and Europe?

Donald E. Pease: At this historical juncture, the relationship’s vital importance has been brought to the forefront once again. The institutions that have defined the geopolitical relationships between citizens of the US and citizens of Europe are under threat of dissolution and dismantling. I think this raises the question of what it was that made these institutions necessary in the first place. When an institution is under threat of dismantling, you must return to the moment that institution came into being, ask how it has changed, and question whether it can survive the threats it faces.

Prof. Donald E. Pease

aspeers: Considering the importance of this transatlantic dynamic, how have the relationships between Americanists in the US and European Americanists changed since you were a visiting professor in Europe?

Pease: I would say they have altered quite significantly. When I became a professor of American studies, the field was still functioning as a Cold War instrument for ‘winning the hearts and minds’ of Europeans. American studies adhered to a certain ideology that was imposing an understanding of how relations between Europe and the United States should be both understood and analyzed—strictly from the American perspective. American studies in Germany was considered to be part of the post-World War II reeducation and denazification campaign. For many German Americanists in particular, the implications of this campaign came across as certain imperial disciplinary impositions rather than as a liberating or emancipatory set of regulations. Since 1989, the relationship between European Americanists and Americanists within the US has undergone significant change. Increasingly, Americanists in Europe have called attention to the previously unacknowledged imperial inflection of American studies as practiced by US American studies scholars visiting Europe. This imperial inflection could also be understood as a kind of disciplinary exceptionalism in which Europeans felt they had to emulate American models of research, critique, or criticism. Today, the relationship is much more reciprocal, as US Americanists are learning from European Americanists about the differences of practicing American studies in universities across Europe.

aspeers: Can you think of other major shifts in thought that had implications across the Atlantic?

Pease: Freeing oneself from imperialist paradigms—both as a person and as a field of study—has of course many historical precedents. It is, for example, comparable in some ways to the period when American novels written between 1848 and 1860 were part of the transatlantic emancipatory movement in which American authors opposed slavery and the derogation of women and minorities. As these writers in the United States were undertaking that program of emancipation, they were also learning from processes of emancipation that were taking place across Europe in the late 1840s. The revolution of 1848 that moved across Europe became, for many American writers, a moment that had a strictly European inflection. As such, Americanists learned from the theorization and the reflections that took place

among European scholars and philosophers and of the profound significance of existential freedoms.

aspeers: In terms of your own scholarship, how have your studies of nationalism, transnationalism, and transatlanticism been influenced or changed by your experience of teaching in Europe?

Pease: My experience of American studies underwent a significant change when I began to read continental philosophers. I learned not only from studying Sartre, Althusser, and the descendants of Heidegger but also focused more on the differences of what was called close reading in the United States and post-structural analysis as practiced by scholars across Europe. When I talked to European scholars in American studies, my most intense conversations were taken up with scholars at the JFK Institute in Berlin and at Dublin's Clinton Institute. That transatlantic conversation brought about a change in my understanding of the invariant ways in which American studies was practiced in the United States. It changed my understanding of the scale of both literary periods and geographical relations. Whereas before, I tended to think of American studies primarily in terms of the territorial United States, that transatlantic conversation gave me a sense of the importance to consider American studies as part of a much broader transatlantic experiment that cannot exclude any of the continents.

aspeers: You and other New Americanists have significantly influenced the field of American studies as we know it today. Since you are currently working on a book about American studies after the New Americanists, what would you say are some of the most important developments in the field up to this point, and what predictions can you give us about its future?

Pease: I think that American studies today is moving in a direction in which the entire series of categories that organized the self-representation of the field for several decades is undergoing a transformation. The categories that are important to American studies scholars now are a result of the interventions of scholars who were interested in questions of ecology, biopolitics, and the environment—ecological and biological processes beyond geopolitical queries. This is a moment of danger since it is a moment of conjunctural transformation in which everything that was previously understood to be self-evidently true has now become the focus of ongoing skepticism. This, however, can also be a moment of terrific and truly vital reimagining. It solicits, for American studies scholars, not only the motive for becoming a scholar but it also demands from those scholars the capacity for radical

reimagination. Changing the underlying presuppositions and assumptions, then, reorganizes not only the field but also the practitioners' mindsets.

aspeers: After your lecture on the current US administration, there was a sense of despair among the audience even though you also offered an outlook of hope. Where would you locate the role of academia, especially of the humanities, when it comes to the public debate about civic disengagement or civic engagement? Additionally, what can academia, and American studies in particular, contribute at this moment in time?

Pease: During my lecture in Leipzig, I tried to explain the depressing relationship between Donald Trump's vision of America and moments in US history that American studies scholars across the world believed had been not only superseded but separated from everything that we wish the United States to represent. The xenophobia, the racism, the sexism, and the casual justification of everyday violence, all wrapped up in a nativist and ethno-nationalist package, is a vision of America that most American studies scholars would consider to be un-American. This vision was considered to be part of a past that the United States had liberated itself from. Now, to find a president representing that version of America is a deeply troubling, if not despair-imposing state of affairs. However, throughout my lecture I also indicated that those disconcerting structures are themselves quite susceptible to critique and subversion. An example of this would be the result of the December 12, 2017 Senate race in Alabama. The part of the constituency in Alabama that had been completely disregarded by the nativist America that Donald Trump represents were the African American voters. This group had been turned into figures who were oppressed by this nativist and ethno-nationalist vision, who had been left out of the political process, and who were considered to be extraneous to the political process altogether. All of those people became deeply engaged, which is proven by the fact that the vote against Republican candidate Roy Moore was a vote comprised of voters who had simply failed to show up in previous elections because they thought there was nothing they could do at the ballot box. The African American voters in Alabama who turned out for the Senate election exceeded even the numbers that had turned out to vote for Barack Obama in the 2012 election. Prior to the Senate election in December, most political commentaries were predicting a Republican victory. That prediction was overturned by what I would consider a form of civic engagement demonstrating how the imagination need not remain virtual but can materialize. It was a bright moment of hope.

aspeers: This next question addresses your extensive work on American exceptionalism and its use for propaganda purposes. We are interested in the particular construction and use of said paradigm since the 2016 election. What are the most striking aspects that either fall in line with or differentiate its current use from previous phases?

Pease: Let me put it into a stark contrast: When Barack Obama embraced the notion of American exceptionalism, he brought into consciousness what could be called the ‘moral model’ of American exceptionalism. He said what makes the United States exceptional is its willingness to turn itself into a nation state that wishes to live up to its highest ideals, while simultaneously attempting to overcome the conditions that contradict those ideals. That is what Obama described as a rift he inherited as president, striving to bring together the antagonists on both sides to try to discover what they have in common not only as American citizens but as members of a universal humanity. When Donald Trump says that he wants to represent the America he will make great again, he is referring to an America that described itself as an exception to the rules and laws that constituted the status quo. Donald Trump has moved away from the notion of exceptionalism as a moral ideal to an understanding of American exceptionalism in which the United States declares itself an exception to the rules in order to demonstrate its power, its military and economic *hyperpuissance*—as I think the French once described it. He has returned to an isolationist and imperial exceptionalist representation of the United States that presidents from Washington through Obama have acknowledged as a possible way for the US to practice exceptionalism but nevertheless as a practice they critiqued and wished to disallow. Trump has embraced the worst-case version of American exceptionalism. He advocates for this version with an arrogance and ignorance that is frightening not only to US citizens but also to people across the planet.

aspeers: For this year’s *aspeers* edition, our topic is ‘Alternative Americas.’ Positing the question of alternatives implies a status quo against which those alternatives are defined. How can we avoid reaffirming this status quo when we talk about these ‘Alternative Americas?’

Pease: One of the explicit themes of my lecture in Leipzig was that of the alternative America that Donald Trump and his base evoked. I already described it as a nativist version of America that most historians and US citizens believe has been historically superseded and left in a past that America has happily separated itself from in the

name of historical progress. There are numerous versions of the ways in which America can be imagined and all of those versions call attention to the limitations of others. You imagine alternative Americas because there is no single coherent representation of what the United States *is* or *should be* that is not subject to reimagining, reenvisioning, or critique. One of the ways to describe what you do when you construct an alternative America is that you particularize a version of a universal concept called 'America.' This calls for a comparison that solicits the faculties which enable you to make discerning distinctions that are predicated on critical understandings. That critical comparative exercise is designed to enable you to recognize, for example, the difference between a version of America that a German Americanist scholar would construct from a version of America that an African Americanist scholar would construct. Those alternatives multiply perspectives, and if you can get multiple perspectives, if your experience of what it is that America represents has been brought into a space of critical comparison with other versions of what the United States was, is, or should be, that very process is animating. It is a process encouraging conversation, interlocution, and acts of interpretive engagement that can only revitalize the field of American studies. It is only when you say your version of America is the decisive, definitive version that I believe you produce a troubling perspective.

aspeers: As a scholar of American literature, what role do you believe literature plays in the creation of these different Americas?

Pease: Writers are capable of producing perspectives that do not have to follow already established lines of thought or fields of emotion. Because of that freedom, fiction is constantly putting you into a position in which you have to perform activities that you would not have to perform if you were in a history or sociology class. That is, they take the already existing, regulated structures and they imagine otherwise, and by imagining otherwise, they produce a potential to change what has already been established and that disciplines exist to regulate. Writers exist to remove blinders, open up distance, and subvert regulations, thereby liberating the reader from regulated thought, and that is an ongoing gift that literature exists to pass on. The scholar of literature or any humanities has a responsibility to move beyond that which has already been envisioned. Thus, there exists a dual responsibility to do interpretive justice to what has already been thought and to begin to imagine what remains to be imagined. I believe the imagination is the

aspect of being human that connects all of us. Literature and the arts sustain the imagination and pass it on to future generations.

aspeers: Professor Pease, thank you so much for your time today and for your insights. As a concluding question, what advice do you have for us in the process of editing and publishing?

Pease: I think it is wonderful that you are all involved in assembling the eleventh issue of this journal because it will bring your relations to one another into a space of collaboration, insight, and deliberation that will create the most truthful, beneficial, and mutually supportive place possible. I also think you should keep in mind what I just described as the dual responsibility. Helping to create a livable future is what I think should be foremost in your imaginations as you work toward creating this new edition.