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American Studies à la Française: An Introduction to Doctoral Dissertations in American Studies 1971-2005 for American Students

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As globalization continues to influence the world of information and undergraduate learning, subjects pertaining to the United States as a country and complex culture emerge as interests globally, so much so that American Studies programs in other countries offer tantalizing opportunities to gain other perspectives and knowledge about the United States as a distinctively American experience. As American students study in American Studies programs, they may require or find useful, other approaches to American subjects in their research. A particularly interesting possibility for students and scholars is to avail themselves of French research, specifically doctoral dissertations in American studies. Since American Studies in France occupies a small but concentrated university presence, it may not be obvious to many American scholars and students in American Studies, that French scholarly interest in American subjects at the graduate level is well-delineated. French dissertations in American Studies offer the U.S. researcher and student another corpus of valuable research and perspective for American Studies literature. To help librarians and users gain a cursory appreciation, an examination of dissertations for 1971-2005 were bibliometrically examined for their general characteristics and for their various disciplinary and subject orientations.

To begin with, American Studies constitutes a field of academic endeavor that represents multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activity, and is, an extremely fluid and dynamic field inviting and celebrating many possible approaches to central and not easily definable themes of research. It purports to encompass all things American and all aspects of American culture; i.e. civilization (Kurian, G.T. et.al.eds., 2001). Definitional concerns abound as attested to the critical methodological literature focused on American Studies per se. Often, broadly based perspectives in American Studies approaches clash with more delineated disciplinary perspectives in the humanities and social sciences. Unlike history, sociology, or political science, with their distinctive approaches, methodologies, and perspectives, American Studies casts a wider net embracing many approaches and aspects inherent in such a complex culture as exists in the United States (Wise, 1979). Often, American Studies is composed of various disciplinary arrangements best suited and intellectually enriches a subject or problem area. As illustration, research into late 19th c. consumer advertising and popular culture may incorporate techniques and insights from historical research as well as advertising theory, historical sociology, and/or communication history and studies. The final study may not resemble something produced within the disciplinary parameters recognizable to historians, sociologists, or political scientists. The possibility of merging various topics and techniques borrowed from humanities and social sciences disciplines is an intellectual characteristic of American Studies. To be certain, other area studies, Latin American, Canadian Studies, etc. wherever there may be both geographical and civilizational components melding offer similar characteristics.

American Studies in France

American Studies enjoys a strong presence in American academia. Programs abound and American Studies' ubiquitous nature fits well intellectually and pedagogically within the American higher education system. Outside the American context, American Studies enjoys a strong representation in international systems of higher education; so too in France. Since the end of WWII, American subjects have grown in popularity within the French higher education landscape, especially at the university level (Kempf, 2006). Nowhere is this more pronounced than at the doctoral level, where students focus their American subject interests within a research framework, culminating in the doctorate (Kouptsov and Barrows, 1994; Buchanan and Hérubel, 1995). In France, as elsewhere, the doctorate attests to a systematic attainment of research and scholarly acculturation, required of the serious scholar, especially those researchers intent on entering academe (Andes, 1997). For American Studies, this is certainly true, and doctoral research reflects the rich scholarly tradition set forth in American Studies programs in French universities.

Unlike American or Canadian and British universities, French universities reflect strong centralizing structures originating in Paris. Although universities are free to govern themselves, strong Parisian influence characterizes their research and pedagogical orientation. This is critical to understand if one is to begin to appreciate French university research in American Studies. In most western university traditions doctoral education has been seen as synonymous with research and the highest values placed on knowledge (Rutledge, 1994). Unlike doctorates in American universities, French doctorates prior to 1984 were unique to French higher education. The French situation is particularly difficult for American scholars and students as they begin to search out French doctoral dissertations while pursuing their research. Unlike the doctoral system in the United States, the French system has undergone profound change indicating interest in reforming higher education. Nowhere was this more so than during the period prior to 1984 when the Ministry of Education inaugurated the present doctoral régime. Since this pivotal year, French doctoral degrees and their respective dissertations are of two distinct types-- *doctorat nouveau régime* and *the habilitation à diriger des recherches*.

Prior to 1984, French universities were free to offer three distinct types of degrees, which affected the research program a student and advisor would follow. It must be understood that these differences in doctorates does not indicate difference in research value—rather, they reflect different research objectives and requirements inherent to the degrees themselves. Each dissertation stands on its own merit. In 1984 the government abolished the *doctorat d'université*, the *doctorat de 3ième cycle*, and the hallowed *doctorat d'état*. To be replaced by the *doctorat nouveau régime* and *the habilitation à diriger des recherches* (See below, Hérubel, 2007).

Types of French Doctoral Degrees

doctorat d'université--Established in 1897 for all disciplines; for both French & foreign students [principle population]; most diverse in quality and duration of studies; did not

confer any professional status in France; ambiguous and least prestigious; dissertation range & strength is only guarantor of quality.

doctorat de 3^{ème} cycle--Established in 1954 for sciences & in 1958 for humanities, social sciences; three year long research technique oriented, with dissertation in very narrow subject within a discipline; indication of pursuing research techniques.; qualifies for beginning research or university post. Primary professional qualification for university teaching at entry level.

doctorat d'état--Established in 1810, representing the highest research contribution in all fields; 10-20 years (not unusual) of preparation ending in massive *chef d'oeuvre*; necessary for full professorship; most prestigious doctorate.

doctorat nouveau régime--Established in 1984 for all disciplines; 3-5 years in duration; equivalent to and modeled on the American Ph.D.

habilitation à diriger des recherches-- Established in 1984; no time constraint; open to holders of the *doctorat d'état* or *doctorat nouveau régime*; higher order representing major critical accomplishment in field; by dissertation, or collection of articles, books, etc; required for and confers full professorial status.

The *doctorat de 3^{ème} cycle* was designed to fulfill manageable research objectives, and offered an entrée into French academia, while the *doctorat d'état* guaranteed the candidate a professorial position within universities. After 1984, candidates still could offer their older degree programs, and finish them without penalty. Only those candidates pursuing the *habilitation à diriger des recherches* could enter full professorial status, capable of acting as doctoral advisors. The unique nature of the *doctorat d'université* did not permit entrée into any academic avenue. When considering French dissertations in American Studies, it is imperative to understand that these unique features characterize French dissertations a researcher may wish to consult.¹ Today, the *doctorat nouveau régime* and the *habilitation à diriger des recherches* dominate higher order diplomas. It is important to understand that the *doctorat d'état* may still appear until the last student registered within this older regime defends his/her dissertation, which still bears the cachet attributed to it, although the *habilitation à diriger des recherches* officially supplanted it in 1984. .

Purpose and Methodology

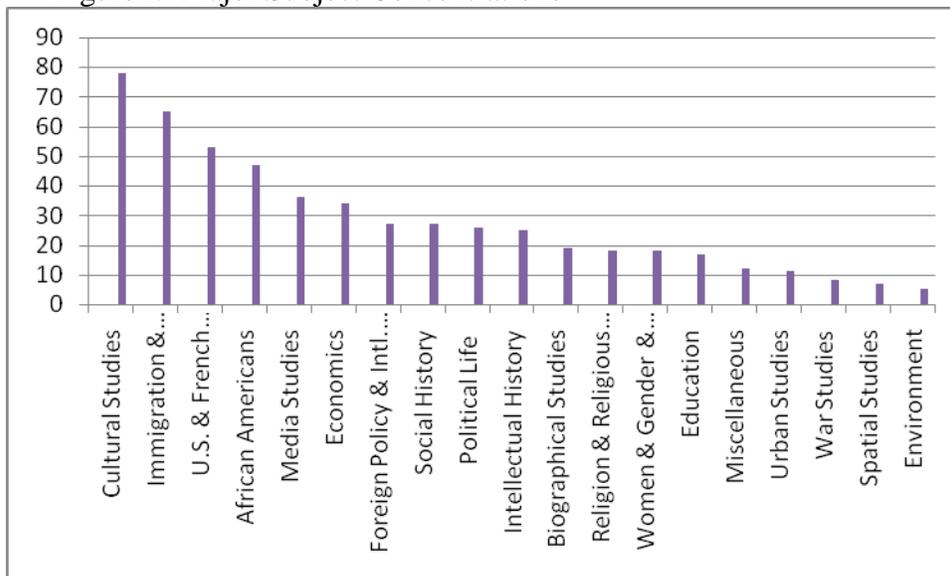
This cursory introduction attempts to frame the grey literature of French doctoral research by examining dissertations produced in France in the field of American Studies. A useful entrée to dissertations defended in France in American Studies is the compilation recently produced and maintained at “Répertoire des thèses soutenues en histoire/civilisation américaine de 1970 à 2005” (<http://www.univ-paris3.fr/recherche/sites/edea/thesesus.doc>). This effort entitled RÉPERTOIRE DES THÈSES SOUTENUES EN HISTOIRE ET CIVILISATION AMÉRICAINES (1970-2005) was compiled by Claire Delahaye, in cooperation with Serge Ricard at the Université Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle). This bibliography offers a sound approach to

ascertaining the nature of dissertation research in American Studies. All dissertations were tabulated from the listing and noted for subject orientation. Analysis of research revealed various loci of research interest and emphasis. *American studies* and its French variants were utilized as search terms and are different from *Etudes Nord-Américaines* (North American Studies) or *Etudes Anglaises* (English Studies).

Findings and Discussion

French dissertations in the field of American Studies offer a fascinating perspective on French research in this field. Although discrete in numbers, the target dissertations present some unique characteristics concerning American Studies in general. Firstly, they constitute a wide-range of subjects with highly specialized dissertations and topics pursued. However, the following general subjects were tabulated: Cultural Studies, Immigration & Minorities, U.S. & French Relations, African Americans, Media Studies, Economics, Foreign Policy & Intl. Relations, Political Life & Political Parties, Social History, Intellectual History, Biographical Studies, Religion & Religious Life, Women & Gender & Gay Studies, Education, Miscellaneous, Urban Studies, War Studies, Spatial Studies, and Environment (Figure I.) Within these groupings, one finds specific topics revealing established research on American culture and history in the main.

Figure I: Major Subject Concentrations

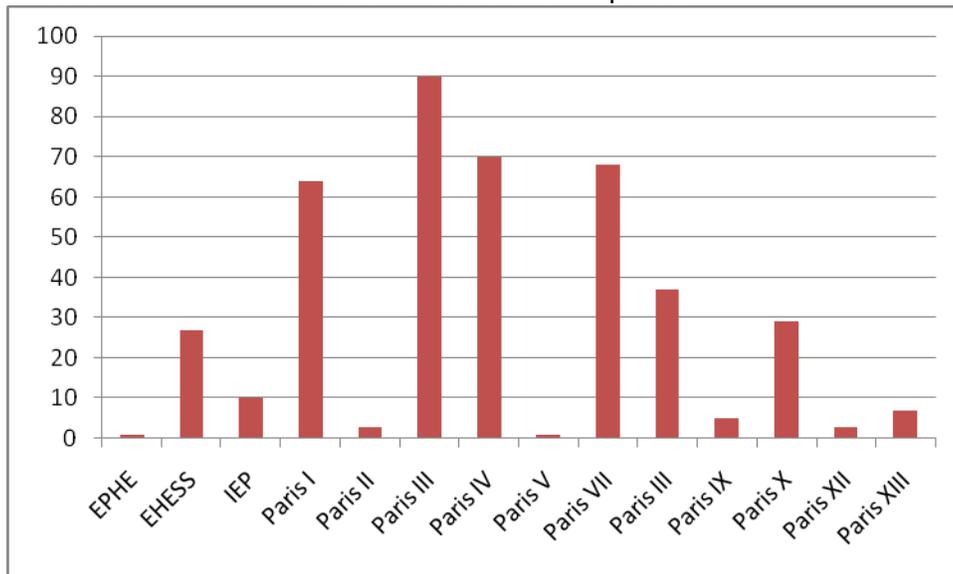


Within each category of interest, a veritable constellation of topics and emphases emerge, each with its own orientation to what constitutes American studies. As illustration, several categories reveal the breadth and depth of research contained in these dissertations. As the largest category, cultural studies is dominated by film studies, fine arts, including architecture and music. Immigration studies covers ethnic identity as well as broach specific topics relative to Arab, Asian, Hispanic, Italian, Jewish, and Native Americans, emphasizing minority groups and cultures. Another illustration may be found in politics and its attendant subcategories: History of Representations, Public and Press Opinion, French Immigration to the United States, Louisiana, Basque Country, The French and Politics in the U.S., French Participation in the War of Independence, France

and the U.S. during the Two World Wars, Foreign Policy Perceptions, International Relations, U.S. and Central/Latin America, U.S.-Asian Relations, The Cold War, Space Policy, The U.S. and North Africa, The U.S. and the Middle East, The U.S. and Europe. Among these dissertations, there are ample examples of research that would be of interest to American students and researchers.

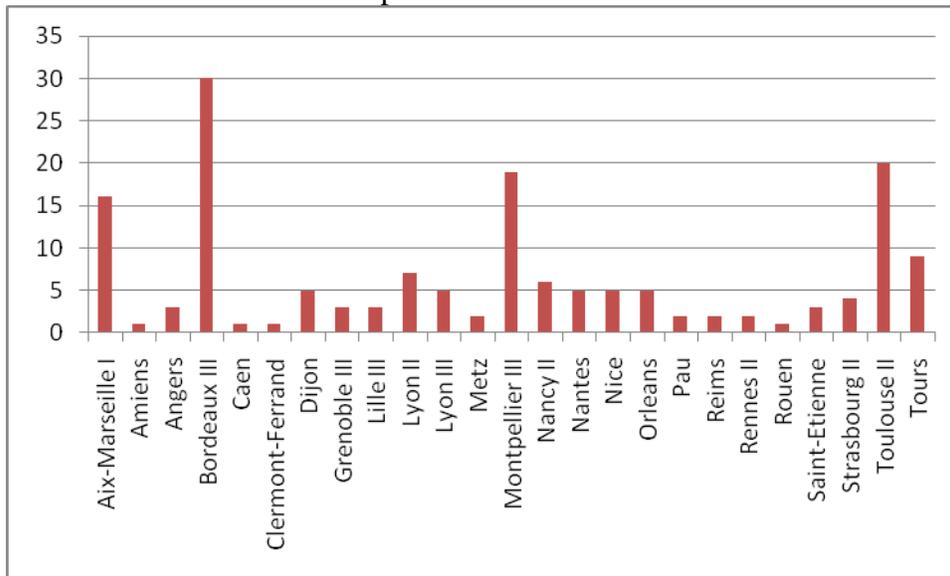
Institutional affiliation revealed important characteristics regarding research origins—but, more critically where such American topical research is actually situated. Of the 575 dissertations represented, Parisian affiliation accounted for 415 (72.17%) while provincial affiliation accounted for 160 (27.82%) dissertations. For American students and researchers, where to look for dissertation research is imperative, especially if one is intent on traveling to France to examine dissertation research. Unquestionably, Parisian institutions comprise the critical mass of dissertation research where American studies flourishes (Table II).

Table II: Parisian Institutional Dispersion



University of Paris III dominates in American studies while provincial institutions form a much more dispersed representation of American studies efforts. Among Parisian institutions, three specialized schools are represented—Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, and Institut D’Etudes Politiques. Among provincial universities, the following produced dissertations: Universities of Aix-Marseille I, Amiens, Angers, Bordeaux III, Caen, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Grenoble III, Lille III, Lyon II, Lyon III, Metz, Montpellier III, Nancy II, Nantes, Nice, Orleans, Pau, Reims, Rennes II, Rouen, Saint-Etienne, Strasbourg II, Toulouse II, Tours. A salient finding reveals that four provincial universities highlight American studies dissertation research: Aix-Marseille I, Bordeaux III, Montpellier III, Toulouse II (Table III).

Table III: Institutional Dispersion of Dissertations



An important qualification is needed here—those intuitions, especially provincial universities, were newly emerging centers of doctoral research. Such older foundations as Aix-Marseille I, Bordeaux III, Montpellier III, and Toulouse II reflect long-standing doctoral education as well as earlier interests in American studies.

Conclusion Remarks

American studies and doctoral research is not solely an American phenomenon, and it may prove useful, if not intellectually valuable to consult French dissertations treating American studies subjects. American students and researchers intent upon identifying and examining French dissertation research appearing in France, can gain an additional perspective in their respective field of interest by consulting French dissertations. This brief introduction to doctoral production in American studies in France permits an open window into another possible venue for essential research (Giles, 1998). Far from being a definitive presentation of French doctoral research in American studies, this cursory introduction attempts to frame the general contours of French doctoral research that may be of interest to an American audience. For librarian and seasoned graduate student or researcher introductory awareness of another research venue may prove useful and necessary to capture pertinent research appearing in doctoral dissertations. As American Studies becomes more internationalized, students and

scholars alike will discover the rich treasure trove of dissertations pertaining to subjects in American culture, history, and civilization (Ickstadt, 2010).

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