



DEMOCRACY ON THE FRONT LINES:
POLARIZATION, CULTURE AND
RESILIENCE IN AMERICA AND THE
WORLD

SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR IS GRATEFUL TO THE FOLLOWING ORGANIZATIONS FOR THEIR SUPPORT FOR THIS PROGRAM:



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SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR WOULD LIKE TO THANK ALL PARTICIPANTS FOR DONATING THEIR TIME AND EXPERTISE TO THIS PROGRAM.

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DEMOCRACY ON THE FRONT LINES: POLARIZATION, CULTURE AND RESILIENCE IN AMERICA AND THE WORLD



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DEMOCRACY ON THE FRONT LINES: POLARIZATION, CULTURE AND RESILIENCE IN AMERICA AND THE WORLD

Democratic systems in the US and worldwide face complex challenges and threats. Authoritarian power, populism, anti-democratic propaganda, and political polarization have reshaped geopolitics and put democracy on the defensive. In addition, economic and racial divisions are driving political and cultural polarization, and the landscape of power, pluralism, and representation is shifting unlike any time in the last three decades.

Confrontations between authoritarian and democratic systems have been escalating for years, culminating in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and a full-scale mobilization to defend democratic values and the right to self-determination. In the United States, the attempted insurrection of January 6, 2021, and other internal threats to democratic values are deepening structural divisions and raising critical questions about the resilience of America's democratic institutions.

As part of Salzburg Global Seminar's 75th anniversary in 2022, and our long tradition of American Studies Programs, this program focused on how democracies are responding to internal and external threats and examined the role of American Studies in reinforcing democratic values for the next 75 years.

During this year's program, our participants debated crucial questions:

- What role can American Studies play in reinforcing democratic values while revealing the shortcomings of contemporary democracies, particularly in light of rising authoritarianism movements?
- How can American Studies help develop a vision of a more just world and stronger democratic systems in an era of radically changing geopolitical forces?
- How are current dynamics and unreconciled historical roots affecting the US' image and influence worldwide?
- What can the US learn from democratic trends and innovations in other countries? In what ways can new forms of cultural exchange support pro-democratic movements?
- How can citizens, media, and institutions re-engage across divides to build resilience and restore public trust?
- What lessons from the past can be applied to the present – and the future?

The highly-participatory program mixed curated conversations with distinguished guests, knowledge exchange, practical group workshops, and informal interactions on topical issues to maximize cross-sector interaction among participants. The format provided multiple opportunities for all participants to share their knowledge and expertise on equal terms and to build new alliances and research projects.

This report summarizes some of the discussions and takeaways from this year's session.



INTRODUCTION

Democratic systems in the US and worldwide face complex and unprecedented challenges and threats, ranging from political and cultural polarization to increasing geopolitical tensions. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine engendered a full-scale mobilization to defend democratic values and the right to self-determination. At the same time, it has been pointed out that Russia's war laid bare cracks in the modern global governance system and the world's preparedness to defend democracy. In the United States, the attempted insurrection of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, and other internal threats to democratic values are deepening structural divisions and raising critical questions about the resilience of America's democratic institutions.

At the same time, people look to democracies to help solve the world's major crises, such as the climate crisis, growing ethnic and religious intolerance, poverty and socio-economic inequality, rising geopolitical tensions, inflation and supply chain insecurity, pandemic unpreparedness, and misinformation campaigns and election interference. How to make sense of all these developments and threats to democracy? What should and can be done to protect democracies around the world?

As part of Salzburg Global Seminar's 75th anniversary in 2022, this program – the first on-site American Studies session since 2019 – focused on how democracies are responding to internal and external threats and examined the role of American Studies in reinforcing democratic values for the next 75 years. This report meditates on the challenges facing democracy, highlighting some of the rich discussions and insights realized throughout the four-day *Democracy on the Front Lines: Polarization, Culture and Resilience in America and the World* program. Separate sections are dedicated to the US' image and influence worldwide, the future of American Studies, and conversations and solutions concerning the protection of democracy.

THE UNITED STATES' IMAGE AND INFLUENCE WORLDWIDE

During the 20th century, the world saw the US through a variety of lenses, including as liberator during both world wars (but also the only state to have used nuclear bombs in armed conflict), as Cold War superpower and defender of “the West”, and ultimately as global hegemon after the implosion of the Soviet Union. Developments in the first two decades of the 21st century have placed the US in a decidedly different light for many foreign observers, while others continue to project their hopes and demands on the US as land of freedom and possibility and as supporter of democratic values around the world. We asked: How are current dynamics and unreconciled historical roots affecting the US' image and influence worldwide?

**“A HOUSE DIVIDED HAS BECOME A HOUSE SPLIT, FRACTURED,
AND SPLINTERED. THIS HAS IMPACTED THE US' IMAGE ABROAD”**



AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM?

America's image as beacon of hope and spreader of freedom and democracy has unquestionably been damaged. The US has failed on several fronts, and its influence is abating. Recent developments and an increased recognition of unreconciled histories have, for many, chipped away at the US' image of the "shining city on a hill."

According to some, the US has been overly concerned with international security issues, especially after 9/11, somewhat neglecting intellectual and cultural exchange. In addition to the invasion of Iraq under false pretenses, the chaotic withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan have struck a dissonant chord with audiences around the world. In fact, America's image also suffered significantly due to its failure to secure fair elections in Afghanistan after toppling the Taliban regime despite investing at least \$620 million in the country's electoral process from 2001 to 2021.

President Trump's self-proclaimed "America First" unilateralism led the US to renege, among other things, on commitments in the Paris Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal. And in addition to wavering willingness, many question the US' ability to lead and provide solutions globally. This becomes clear in America's limited ability to ensure Europe's energy provision in the context of the war in Ukraine. Already in the financial crisis of 2007/8 and its aftermath, America's economic and financial capabilities proved limited, while the effects reverberated around the world. At the same time, the US' changing role stands in stark contrast with China's more assertive role on the global stage, as it rolls out its Belt and Road Initiative.

Concurrent to changes in US global posturing, an increased awareness of its unreconciled histories and social tensions has decreased its credibility abroad. Its long history of slavery and racist policies reverberates in the consistent practice of racial profiling and police killings of black people. Moreover, the constant effort on the part of the US to erase and normalize race-based discrimination makes it appear hypocritical and untrustworthy as defender and promoter of democracy worldwide. Relatedly, continual mass (school) shootings, increasing political violence, and the inability to enact robust gun control breeds a culture of violence that is incompatible with the image of the US as a safe haven. This, along with the recent overturning of the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision corrode the US' image as the arbiter of social justice globally. And yet, while the age of American exceptionalism is waning, America still has so much to offer, as we will see in the next section.

TOWARDS SOFT EMPOWERMENT

Just as the US' image has suffered as a result of foreign policy choices and domestic inconsistencies, there is a consensus that American culture is not as influential as it once was. The American cultural field has become more diverse and mediated through multiple channels. Additionally, while many young people around the world are still drawn to movies in the American tradition, the extent to which these are – in an age of global productions – truly "American" is up for debate.

Despite the concrete reduction in America's image and influence, as well as pessimism from Americans about where the US is headed, many from the

Global South and East still see appeal in the promise of American democracy and freedom, and they take inspiration from it while also remaining critical against America's enduring legacies of racism and inequality. Although the currency of American exceptionalism has suffered devaluation, the enduring inspirational force of America's ideals remains truly exceptional. In this sense, several Fellows expressed the view that perhaps others were being too negative in their assessment of the United States, including recent political developments: while the United States may not be perfect, the ideal of it has always been aspirational, and that aspiration continues to inform and inspire others around the world in ways other countries might not.

Rather than relying on an overzealous America aggressively spreading its own model around the world, robbing local actors of their agency in the process, many agreed that there is room for a renewed engagement by and with America in a changing world. The increasing realization that the US will not "come and fix things" dampens the world's dependance on the US as the world's police officer, but US restraint on issues which other countries can manage themselves can also reshape America's image and influence for the better. Many parts of the world seek in America a friend and partner who demonstrates commitment, responsibility, and humility. As its image and influence recedes, many look to the US for "soft empowerment" through equal collaborations and continued dialogue on improving the state of the world which includes the US' own unreconciled historical and current problems.



THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN STUDIES

Since Salzburg Global Seminar's founding in 1947 as the "Salzburg Seminar in American Civilization", promoting critical dialogue and understanding of American history, literature, culture, politics, and economics has played a vital role in the organization's development and legacy. The academic discipline of American Studies in Europe began with that first American Studies program at Schloss Leopoldskron, and what would become the Salzburg Seminar in American Studies is widely credited as being the founder of the European American Studies Association in 1953.

This year, the Program's 75th anniversary created an auspicious opportunity for rethinking the future of American Studies and probing its potential role in fostering democratic thought and change in the US and beyond, while acknowledging the recent changes to the US' image and influence around the world. From its very inception as an interdisciplinary field of thought, it was asked: How do we imagine the role of "American Studies" in the next 75 years? And in particular: What role can American Studies play in reinforcing democratic values, especially in light of "illiberal democracy," populist nationalism, and rising authoritarianism?

**“SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR IS ALSO A PLATFORM
FOR LISTENING; THERE IS AGENCY IN LISTENING.”**



THE VALUE OF AMERICAN STUDIES

In the aftermath of WWII, American Studies provided a platform for intellectual reconstruction, learning about what happened and how to prevent it in the future through democratic values and practice. This project of intellectual reconstruction after the carnage of two World Wars has been a considerably successful one. But as an academic field, it is currently struck by a general loss of enthusiasm around the world, especially among younger generations. Yet, the general sense among Fellows is that American Studies still carries enormous potential for intellectual analysis and the reinforcing of democratic values.

One evident complication when talking about American Studies in 2022, is that the center of American culture has essentially fallen out. While the jury is still out on whether America can constitute a useful empty signifier or whether we should move beyond the label of American Studies, participants agreed that the study of America in its diversity should include various disciplines and perspectives engaging with culture (including literature), society, economy, history, race, and politics. In fact, in the (re)conceptualization of America, there is ample productive space for reengaging with histories of the field of American Studies itself and challenging the various cultural images and symbols that attach themselves to the field. The American dream served as a focal point during the session to unpack a cultural image that has turned into a nightmare for many, while still serving as reference point for social action within and without the US. Similarly, a group of Fellows proposed to critically investigate the long shadow of the American self-made man.

In addition to the rich opportunities for critical reflection on America's anchor points and self-evident truths, American Studies has significant potential for reinforcing democratic values. With the emergence and fortification of anti-democratic forces today, some of which echo the early 20th century, American Studies can once again realize a substantive discussion on the type of democracy we want, how to achieve it, and under which conditions. In the face of propaganda, new technologies, polarization, nationalism, and the weaponization of history, the field can facilitate critical dialogue and model



discourses that embrace and address conflict. More concretely, it can model and promote discourses based on complex forms of cultural expression that cannot be reduced to two-party thinking, such as storytelling, literature, and public memorialization. Democracy requires sacrifices. American Studies helps define how to do that by taking the US as a testing ground for democratic concepts.

REORGANIZING THE FIELD

Brimming with potential as the field may be, American Studies needs to embark on a reorganization of its field along two axes: democratization and revitalization. Regarding the first axis, a plurality of voices must be integrated into its discussions and structures. These different voices should reflect not only gender diversity, race and ethnic belongings, and geographic spread, but also the different generations, class origins, and political leanings. Especially pivotal is the inclusion of LatinX, indigenous, migrant, and LGBT* voices as the field reorients itself. Additionally, the field must aim to sustain conversations with people working outside of American Studies proper for fruitful cross-pollination and mutual questioning.

American Studies' reorientation should extend to the subjects it engages with. In addition to critical examinations of cultural images, there is excitement among program participants for an American Studies field which ventures into points of friction, contestation, marginality, and ultimately reimagination. Such areas include themes such as the significance of borders in relation to migration and the American economy, as well as an extension of racial equity as focal point for research. On radicalization and extremism, the field should open up to the experiences and insights from other places in order to confront the rising popular perception in the US of physical violence as a legitimate tool in politics.

In relation to American literature, these concerns translate into the following question: who has the right to claim American literature? While some argue for American literatures (rather than literature), the danger of partitioning is real. What is clear, however, is the importance of distinguishing national from nationalistic literature. Literature is also a scene for linguistic experimentation and change. LatinX authors, for instance, inflect and enrich English with their own idioms and thereby reset conversations on life and society in particular ways.

Apart from democratizing American Studies, scholars ought to revitalize the field. In light of a reduced enthusiasm for the field and a shrinking resource base, the academic and cultural institutions and networks carrying American Studies require a new impetus through funding and novel exchange networks. The need to reinvigorate American Studies in Europe is particularly high, considering that other powers such as China and Russia spend significant amounts of money on changing hearts and minds and spreading misinformation. The consensus among program participants is that academic and professional exchange programs are especially valuable, not only for enlarging cultural knowledge of America abroad but also for allowing Americans to bring back insights and knowledge to the US which may come to fruition throughout their lives.

Finally, American Studies must rethink its connections and impact beyond academia. Scholars of American Studies must discuss and explain democratic values in the "real world", or their impact will be minimal. This calls for using

*LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. We are using this term as it is currently widely used in human rights conversations on sexual orientation and gender identity in many parts of the world, and we would wish it to be read as inclusive of other cultural concepts, contemporary or historical, to express sexuality and gender, intersex and gender non-conforming identities.

inclusive language and learning to communicate shared goals and overlapping conceptual vocabularies with non-academics. Reaching out to existing community organizations to break down race and class barriers that university education too often reinforces is but one way to rethink how American Studies knowledge is not only produced, but also consumed. If it manages to renegotiate its boundaries and priorities, revitalize its institutions and networks, American Studies can yet again have an outsized role in fostering democratic values around the world during the next 75 years.

**“AMERICA’S STILL FASCINATING STORY SHOULD BE TOLD
‘WARTS AND ALL,’ AS EDWARD MURROW WAS TASKED
TO DO FOR US PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN THE 1960S.”**

PROTECTING DEMOCRACY

Democracies around the globe are in peril, facing various yet related challenges to their values, institutions, and practices. The idea and ideal of democracy still resonate strongly around the world, but concrete democratic systems – including the US, India, France, and Brazil – suffer from increased citizen disillusionment, polarization, and political violence. The attack on the US Capitol on January 6th, 2021, and the recent assault on Paul Pelosi, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s husband, serve as reminders of the real threats to democracy and of the urgent need to take action. American Studies has much to offer to the world, including in terms of thinking through global challenges to democracy. But the state of democracies worldwide also requires a truly global discussion on trends, innovations, and lessons for protecting democracy. As such, Fellows asked: What can the US learn from democratic trends and innovations in other countries? And: How can citizens, media, and institutions around the world re-engage across divides to build resilience and restore public trust?

COMMUNITIES, DIALOGUE, EDUCATION

Communities are the driving force of democracy. We must work to rebuild and redefine communities that speak to the new identities and realities, especially in light of the migratory nature of our present lives. Recognizing the layers of community—family, city, regional, national and transnational—will help sustain communities. It is also important to realize that every national or subnational space constitutes a multiplicity of communities and that a plurality of community memberships can strengthen those communities and build crucial linkages. Thinking of multipolar democracies helps us see the possibilities for cooperation.

A key ingredient of community-building but also of healthy inter-community

relations is dialogue. Disagreements in a society are unavoidable and perhaps even indispensable for its advancement. The current threat is that issues cease to be resolved within a democratic and peaceful framework. Relearning the value and practice of respectful dialogue, underpinned by empathy and respect, is essential to diffusing tensions, recognizing our shared humanity, and driving home the power of democracy. Debate culture, as seen in the US, can be useful, but discussions there have become overly sensationalized and driven by seemingly irresolvable animosity. A group of Salzburg Global Fellows proposed to create a hotline between political poles with the aim of preventing political violence and setting the basic conditions for dialogue. Yet another group of participants intend to set up a peace and conflict resolution forum in which small-scale stories, told through various mediums, serve to distribute concrete lessons in conflict resolution, underlining it as a cornerstone for strong societies and the possibility of dealing with differences.

Equally important for democracy yet threatened, is the role of education in shaping critical minds inclined to democratic values and practices. Classroom material teaching the importance of democracy has proved crucial around the world, from a divided Korean peninsula to Hong Kong and Afghanistan. Students should learn critical thinking skills, including about how to review the trustworthiness of information sources. Sadly, school curriculums in the US are increasingly subjected to external limitations and self-censorship, ranging from the exclusion of critical race theory, science, histories of conflict and contested works of literature. This is a worrying trend and raises questions of the long-term impact of discrepancies in studies.

At a time when polarization is the norm, it is useful to think that American literature is inclusive and democratic and provides hospitable spaces for different and discordant voices. A renewed reliance on humanism as a conceptual tool against ethno-nationalism is also promising. Finally, a number of Fellows want to build a democratic exchange network to leverage and pool institutional resources in order to support scholars and students at risk who otherwise get excluded because they are not “most at risk.”



TRUST IN INFORMATION AND MEDIA

Information ecosystems around the world have undergone a series of intense transformations over the past few decades, in many instances fostering polarization and decreasing trust in democratic institutions. Simultaneous centralization (of market power) and decentralization (of information networks and their funding), hypermonetization of information, fragmentation of audiences, weaponization of (mis)information, and an increased focus on entertainment value have eroded the social fabric in democracies to a certain extent. Officials, experts, scientists and journalists all face hostility, dehumanization, and even violence.

Especially concerning is the wide availability and traction of conspiracy theories. They empower the believer as someone with “special access to information,” make them feel part of a group, while simultaneously radicalizing them by playing on anger in an ever-intensifying spiral of outlandish and oversimplified claims that gain credibility through sheer repetition. These developments are informed by and shape the politicization of public institutions, such as courts in the US and Poland. The role of both traditional and social media is crucial, however, for they drive policy agendas and decision-making to a large extent. There is, therefore, a shared belief among many program participants that changes to the very design of information ecosystems are necessary to counter polarization and democratic backsliding.

One way to do this is to reinforce the media’s role as gatekeeper, for instance by a renewed emphasis on the role of editing. As for non-traditional media, regulation targeting the potential liability of social media companies for third-party content, reducing the role of algorithms on such platforms, or even directly addressing the profit incentives driving social media dynamics, could be a useful avenue. However, the internet is so diffused that enforcement would be difficult. Therefore, instead of e.g., amending Section 230 enacted through the US Communications Decency Act, we must also look at users’ incentives for polarization through social media. The trinity of “community, identity, empathy” is a useful framework for thinking through the possibilities for redesigning technology by relying on community auto-policing, humanity checks (as opposed to bots), and approximations of face-to-face contact. While this approach is promising for highly polarized contexts, it must also be remembered that social media in many places, such as in West Africa, still allow young people especially to connect, discuss, and organize, thereby bypassing information systems controlled by the political elite.

CONCLUSION

The 75th anniversary of Salzburg Global Seminar was a momentous occasion for engaging with some of the most pressing issues facing democracies around the world, and the role for American Studies in addressing them. In light of political and cultural polarization, Fellows' concerns around the health and future of democracy were converted into calls for a new role for America as facilitator of soft empowerment worldwide, for community-building with an emphasis on renewed dialogue and the value of free education, and for redesigning and regulating our information ecosystems in order to safeguard and restore public trust. Moreover, American Studies can directly and efficaciously contribute to protecting democratic values, but it should democratize by allowing a diversity of voices at the table and reorienting itself to areas of marginality and reimagination. The next 75 years of American Studies look bright if we can revitalize the institutions and networks that propel it.



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SALZBURG GLOBAL SEMINAR

Salzburg Global Seminar is an independent non-profit organization founded in 1947 with a mission to challenge current and future leaders to shape a better world.

Together with our world-spanning network of 40,000 Fellows, we have been at the forefront of global movements for change for 75 years, with significant impact on individuals, institutions, and systems.

Whether at our home of Schloss Leopoldskron, online, or in locations around the world, our programs are inclusive, interdisciplinary, international and intergenerational, and are designed to provide a global lab for innovation and transformation.

We convene cohorts of passionate changemakers across diverse fields and backgrounds. We develop and curate networks that support collaboration, share innovations with new audiences, and expand our impact by working with partners around the globe.

We are supported by a combination of institutional partnerships, generous individual donations and revenue generated from our social enterprise, Hotel Schloss Leopoldskron.

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The Salzburg Global American Studies Program fosters understanding and debate on America's changing role in the world. With a distinguished track record since 1947, its annual symposia for professional leaders and scholars address topical questions affecting American culture, society and politics, analyze their global implications, and advance applied research.

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