
Book Review: Teori-teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika

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ABSTRACT

Quests in American Studies, along with discussions about the theories, methods, and practices that shape it, have been growing for decades as the study of American culture and society has undergone various changes in line with shifts in various scientific disciplines and changes within American Studies itself. Henry Nash Smith's article (1957, 197-208) entitled "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" explains that American Studies, in his understanding, is "the study of American culture, past and present, as a whole"; and by "culture" or "the way in which subjective experience is organized." As Smith's statement can be broad, Ida Rochani Adi offers readers of theories and methods in American Studies with broad, multi-faceted knowledge of America as a complex, diverse and dynamic nation, and its relationship with the broader world, within the myth-and-symbol school and transnational/post-national American Studies in her book entitled "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika". Adi's systematic, coherent, comprehensive, and applicable presentation makes this book a required reading for exploring and understanding American Studies, particularly in relation to theories and methods in interdisciplinary studies.

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American Studies, as a discipline, was established in the early 20th century and is considered a new paradigm for studying American culture. The study of American culture was driven by the rapid development of the United States as a new nation since its independence in 1776. Following its independence, America has faced and experienced a long history and experiences since the 16th century, which are subsequently reflected in American literature and thought. This long history of America makes it a compelling subject for in-depth study (Adi, 2015)

Scholars argue that America is too complex an object of study to be analysed within a single discipline. Therefore, American Studies offers an interdisciplinary field encompassing methods and theories that help understand the relationships between politics, economics, values, art, literature, and ethnic, racial, and gender identities. In other words, from its outset, academic American studies have offered sites for myriad debates and negotiations over content, theory, method, structural arrangements, and membership. In general, the history of academic American studies can be seen as an unevenly developing and often

contested movement toward enlarging the content of the field, diversifying the theories and methods brought to bear on that content, strengthening the often-unstable institutional arrangements for the field, and achieving greater cultural diversity. The writer of this book is aware that the emergence of American Studies can be considered as a tool to break through the old tradition of monodisciplinary thinking and move towards interdisciplinary research, with research now being highly diverse.

This book discusses how American Studies as a methodological discipline can stand alone. However, its development is inseparable from changes in social and cultural structures within society. This naturally presents various challenges for researchers. These challenges include advances in humanities studies like literature, history, language, and culture, the rise of interdisciplinary studies, changes in "momentum" due to social pressures, the interconnectedness of disciplines with society, and external forces.

Opening the book of theories and methods in American

Studies, in the first chapter of the book, Adi discusses "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika", inviting readers to pay attention to the relationship between American Studies and American history. Adi welcomes readers to trace back to the early time when the Puritans found what they called "A New World". Adopting the quote from Turner (1920) mentioning the distinctive and valuable experiences faced by the frontiers into new regions to create peaceful societies with new ideals in the successive vast and differing geographic provinces, Adi reminds the reader that American identities are initially constructed by comparing the American "New World" to "the Old World", referring to Europeans. Turner's ideas are not the only ones discussed in this book, Adi includes other references that readers can use to understand the historical foundations of American Studies, starting from American history itself. In one of the references presented, Adi mentions Leo Marx's "The Machine in the Garden" (1919), in which, like Turner using the term 'vast', he uses the word "machine" to refer to how America's expectations as a country that wants to develop its New World, based on the experiences of previous

immigrants. With an identity like this, it is not surprising that America as a country has developed rapidly in various aspects. What makes the starting point of the discussion of this book seems easy to understand is that Adi begins the discussion about the theories and methods systematically used in American Studies. First, she builds the reader's initial insights on early American history through the thoughts of Frederick Turner. Then, Adi serves information about American culture through Louis Parrington's writing in *Main Current in American Thought* (1927), which became the basis for Gene Wise's thinking in *Paradigm Dramas in American Studies* (1979). Finally, Adi mentions the role of literature used as a window to see American culture as put forward by Henry Nash Smith (1957).

Although American Studies is increasingly establishing itself as a new discipline, these breakthroughs are still considered less established because the methodology is not as strong as other disciplines that have existed for a long time and are used in the academic world, such as philosophy or anthropology. Therefore, in a previous article entitled "Pendekatan Intersisipliner dalam Kajian

Amerika", Adi (1998) stated that American Studies is a discipline that is still in its infancy. To support this idea, in this book, Adi quotes the statement of Cecil, F. Tate (1973), who stated that American Studies does not have a clear method, American Studies only focuses research on literary studies and the history of American thought, and American Studies only offers an organic holism paradigm that weakens American Studies itself.

The previous concerns were not proven true, especially because of the influence of the socio-cultural revolution in America and abroad, which caused American Studies to become popular with the offering of American Studies as a discipline. Amazingly, the existence of the *American Quarterly* journal from the University of Minnesota which became a forum for Americanists, researchers, and teachers to express their thoughts about America. In the first chapter of this book, Adi explains the common thread between American Studies and Area Studies clearly so that by reading this book, readers increasingly understand that after many crises experienced by American Studies as a discipline, American Studies was able to strengthen the

methodology used in the academic world, namely an interdisciplinary approach, which involves various fields of science, such as African Studies, Asian Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, Chicano Studies, Islamic Studies, and many more. Thus, the research areas of American Studies are increasingly open, including how American popular culture can increasingly internationalize the study of American culture. Adi's expertise as a writer in connecting American Studies, which was initially considered part of history, into a discipline with a broad scope, is one reason why this book is required reading for readers interested in studying or conducting research in this area.

After an in-depth discussion of American Studies as a discipline, Adi, quoting Creswell (2009) continues with an explanation of research design in American Studies, which refers to research methods and strategies that include paradigms, theories, methods, approaches, and research strategies that can be applied to conduct researches on American covert culture, subculture, counterculture, and popular culture. Adi emphasizes that selecting an appropriate research design

will enable researchers to analyse the topic or problem raised broadly and deeply.

Referring to the research interests, Adi began her explanation of American Studies research by explaining paradigms. From this, it can be understood that the main idea underlying this is because paradigms are the basic things that direct research, research questions, and research approaches. Referring to the four types of paradigms according to Cresswell (2009), namely post-positivism, constructivism, advocacy, and pragmatism, Adi stated that the paradigm used can be adjusted to the research focus raised. American Studies that culminate in an understanding of American culture, and this culture concerns people can use post-positivism as the research paradigm for American Studies at this university. Other paradigms, such as constructivism can be used in the perspective of transnational American Studies, which places itself within the world it studies, such as research of the connection between America and Indonesia.

Thus, Adi clearly provides guidance on which paradigm is appropriate to apply to research with a particular focus. Paradigms are, of

course, closely related to research approaches. The post-positivism paradigm focuses on quantitative approaches, often applied to the exact sciences, while the constructivism paradigm focuses on qualitative approaches, often used in the social sciences and humanities. In this book, Adi meticulously explains that American Studies does not rigidly apply a single approach to research, but rather, as a discipline that borrows various procedures and methods from other disciplines, employing an interdisciplinary approach that emphasizes the synthesis of knowledge. Possible approaches include mixed methods, quasi-methods, or a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Adi believes that interdisciplinary studies by applying mixed methods can answer both existing phenomena in America and broad and complex research problems to obtain complete knowledge related to matters related to America from interdisciplinary relationships. In addition, the selection of theories and methods in American Studies serves to examine the issues raised in research. "These theories and methods are used as approaches. And approaches are used as tools for analysis," Adi explained.

As an expert in American Studies, Adi, as the author of "Teori-Teori dan Metode Pengkajian Amerika", fully understands the rapid development of American Studies, from initially researching American social and cultural issues to exploring how to research America from outside the United States. This, of course, is inseparable from the role of globalization and transnationality in American Studies. Therefore, as a writer, Adi offers a more in-depth discussion of the origins of American Studies in the theory of *Myth and Symbol*, embodied in Henry Nash Smith's work entitled "The Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth." The virgin land is often referred to as The New World, as Alexis de Tocqueville claimed that this new world has different characteristics and features from The Old World.

In the application of the *Myth and Symbol* theory, the Transnational American Studies school emerged, arguing that to analyse matters surrounding America, the analysis must begin with myths, symbols, and historical elements in America. By studying this, America's identity as a nation-state will be revealed. Critically, Adi conveys that American superiority has existed since America proclaimed itself as a

chosen nation, or a *city upon a hill*. Because of the strength of the myths and symbols built by Americanists, the term *American Exceptionalism* emerged, which refers to America as a country with abundant resources. Trachtenberg (1979, p. ix) mentions, "a symbol has its place in the mind of the collective imagination of Americans.". Referring to this, Adi highlights the point that the *Myth and Symbol* school builds high nationalism and patriotism among the American people, as the depictions, images, and symbols of American character depicted in American literature are considered representations of American culture itself. Society needs utopia to provide a myth that might serve as an ideology to guide America in history. Adi proposes the idea that research on American Studies in the view of traditional Americanists will probably be related to American utopia, or what is famous as the term *American Dreams*. Looking at the details explanation from this book, this book is highly recommended as a compulsory reading for researchers who are new in the field of American Studies as Adi's explanation of the research design is not just comprehensible but also coherent.

The discussion of the theories of *Myth and Symbol* is the initial discussion conducted by Adi to initiate further explanation of American Studies. Adi, in the second part of this book presents "American Studies in Global Perspective", which discusses the broader scope of American Studies from a traditional perspective. that views America internally through its culture, to societal developments that discuss the influence of globalization and transnationalism on the development of culture and American studies. This book is not just written to provide information about stagnant American Studies, because as a contemporary writer, Adi tries to build a dialogue about the debates and criticisms that occur in American Studies, namely how the perspective of *myth and symbol* must be redefined due to global developments. Reading this book, readers are invited to think critically, as done by Rowe (2012, p. 12), "Cultural politics also refers to the processes through which the prevailing values of a society are internalized and lived by subjects who identify with the imagined community fashioned and reproduced ...". Moving from the initial theories used by traditional Americanists to analyse culture in America, Adi

discusses new theories in American Studies, which emerged due to the influence of the phenomenon of globalization.

Aware that world civilization entered a new era towards the end of the 20th century, Adi critically included a discussion of how the new era, called the era of globalisation impacted American Studies due to its influence on social, cultural, and community activities in various aspects of life throughout the world. The rapid development of technology and information has made this world into an interconnected global village. One of the most obvious things highlighted by the author in this book is the beginning of the fading of the specificity or uniqueness of a country due to increasingly unlimited interactions. In the context of American Studies, Adi refers to Faist (2010) and Davis (2013) is the existence of a transnational concept that connects all forms of social formations that transcend the boundaries of intercultural mobility, so that the study of American Studies no longer looks at American culture from within the country itself, but rather takes into account America's influence on the world stage. In addition to that, Adi also quotes Rowe (2000, p. 6) that

transnationalism refers to American Studies done by international scholars outside the US, especially scholarship that emphasizes the influence of America abroad. Therefore, Adi focuses the discussion on the role of America in various countries in the world with the application of *transnational theories* of American Studies.

According to Adi, the phenomenon of popular culture not only highlights the expansion of the scope of American Studies due to the influence of the globalization era but also capturing another fundamental aspect in the development of American Studies. In this book, Adi highlights that *American Exceptionalism* is no longer relevant. The perspective used to view America is not only from within America itself, but also considers minorities such as blacks, women, non-whites, and others who have been marginalized and considered 'the others'. Through the growing popularity of popular culture that displays various topics favoured by the public, the boundaries of American hegemony are increasingly declining. The phenomenon of popular culture that gives rise to the discourse of the dichotomy between 'colonizer' and 'colonized' due to the emergence of the courage to

voice their rights, expressed by *American Exceptionalism*, which measures things outside America by American standards that consider themselves exceptional.

From here, Adi opens further discussion about post-nationalist American Studies theories. In line with Philip Fisher's (1991) statement in his work "The New American Studies," which mentions a revolutionary shift in aesthetic authority from the national landscape to the international marketplace, Adi explains why post-nationalist American Studies as a new school in American Studies can answer the needs of the global community who criticize the dominance and hegemony of American culture over other cultures. This post-nationalist American Studies is also considered a field of study that provides spaces for American minorities or other nations to build their identities within the 'imperialism' of the American majority. For Pease (2001), post-nationalist American Studies is not a separate concept from the national concept, but rather how all parties related to America can highlight their respective existence in the process of globalization and transnationalism. In simple

language, Adi explains that post-nationalist American Studies is the construction of identity, ideology, and hegemony of American culture over other cultures and/or vice versa.

In Chapter 3, Adi attempts to connect theories in American Studies with interdisciplinary theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism, and neo-Marxism. She begins with structuralism, which Adi believes can be used as a theory, approach, method, and paradigm all at once. In American Studies, structuralism originated from the desire of Americanists to make the study of myth and symbol in America more scientific. In this section, Adi explains the relationship between structuralism and the myth and symbol school in American Studies. The emergence of structuralism in American Studies led to a shift in views on the concept of culture, which previously focused solely on noble culture and then began to consider the study of popular culture. Adi added that the influence of structuralism has made research in American Studies more socially positivist.

In addition to structuralism, Adi also discusses the influence of semiotic theories from

Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Geertz, and Barthes, which can be used to analyse cultural studies issues in American Studies. Furthermore, Adi also explains the use of representation theory in reading symbols in detail in this chapter. Through Hall's representation theory, the study of American popular culture cannot be separated from the discussion of hegemony, ideology, and power because the authorities will use all kinds of production to expand their power or hegemony, for example, through popular culture in the form of media. Adi also mentions how power and representation are underlined by Foucault, who said that representation leads to the production of knowledge through discourse.

After explaining the relationship between American Studies and structuralist theories, in chapter 3, Adi also elaborates on the relationship between American Studies and post-structuralist theory. As a reaction to structuralist theory, he refers to five French philosophers: Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Roland Barthes. These philosophers emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Their thoughts influenced the development of American Studies

in the 1980s. These theories question the truth or objective reality that emerges through signs. In this section, Adi provides an example of research using Derrida's theory of deconstruction to analyse film as a product of popular culture to examine minority issues in American society.

In the same chapter, Adi explains the relationship between American Studies and Neo-Marxist theories as a continuation of the Old Left, both of which are related to the Marxist movement and ideology. Adi explains that in its development, due to the strong growth of industry in America, the Frankfurt School produced two schools of thought. The first, this school of thought places literature and art in a social perspective, and the second is social criticism. This condition is closely related to the American tradition that is full of chaos, with the emergence of minority rights movements. Regarding American Studies, the New Left movement influenced the change in American Studies research which is the flow of myth and symbol, which is criticized as American Exceptionalism. Theories in Neo-Marxism that are then often referred to in American studies include Herbert Marcuse's social science theory, Antonio

Gramsci's theory of hegemony, George Lukacs's concept of reification, Louis Althusser's structural Marxism, Raymond William's theory of cultural materialism, and Mikhail Bakhtin's semiotic Marxism. By adopting these theories, research in American Studies takes the object of research in the form of American popular culture and media products, as does the field of cultural studies. The influence of Neo-Marxist thinkers triggered the emergence of an interdisciplinary approach by combining textual, economic, political, and social analysis in capturing phenomena occurring in America or other countries influenced by American culture. According to Adi, the term culture industry is key in understanding the process of mass cultural industrialization and commercialization. Denning stated that theories of American studies are a weak alternative in accommodating Neo-Marxist thought because initially American studies only focused on American Exceptionalism (Denning, 1986). Gurian added that the difference between American studies and Neo-Marxism is that the focus in the beginning still concentrated on the superiority of American values, while Neo-Marxism looks more at existing reality (1969).

Through Neo-Marxist thought, the object of study is no longer a noble product but everyday culture, such as popular culture in the form of commodified cultural products or culture that then becomes a commodity.

The development of the concept of globalization and the technological and information revolution has brought about a major shift in the paradigm of American Studies, from the traditional myth and symbol school to transnational or post-nationalist American Studies. Adi stated that as a consequence of globalization and the technological and information revolution, there has been a cross-cultural interaction between countries, leading to debate and re-questioning of identity and the nation-state. Furthermore, Adi added that the rise of popular culture has influenced changes in the behaviour and identity of some people. Identity has become the most significant issue to be criticized and highlighted as an impact of popular culture. Quoting Hall, Adi added that identity, culture, and power are important factors or aspects that must be considered in this era of globalization and transnationalism. In this sub-chapter on cultural studies

theories, Adi provides explanations of figures and concepts regarding popular culture, for example, those brought by Hall, Storey, Fiske, and also Nachbar and Lause. The relationship between identity, culture, and power is greatly influenced by the development and changes in welfare and social systems in society at a certain time. From a cultural studies perspective, a cultural product is inseparable from the power hidden within it, as it indirectly constructs actions, beliefs, and reality. In short, cultural studies theories aim to analyse the influence and role of popular culture in production mechanisms and the influence of American popular culture on other cultures. Adi added that the key concepts in researching popular cultural products in cultural studies are representation and meaning.

After providing explanations and examples in the first three chapters of this book, in the final chapter, Adi provides readers with several research themes that often appear in American Studies. The discussion in this chapter is divided into three parts. The first theme is themes related to history, religion, language and literature. Adi provides three examples taken from three research about diaspora identity from different points

of view. It proves that American Studies research can work on many kinds of topics. The second part contains an explanation of research themes in popular culture. On the second part, Adi also gives two examples of popular culture. Both research use popular culture products (popular literature and film) as the source of data to see the American culture. The final part discusses themes in minority groups. In this subchapter, the examples are taken from two research regarding minority issues. The first one is related to the educational rights of the minority and minority ideology. In this chapter, apart from explaining research themes, Adi also provides more examples of research that raised these themes in American Studies research. This chapter provides an interesting overview for readers, especially researchers or students who want to conduct research in the field of American Studies. By providing examples of research that has been conducted in the context of American Studies, readers will be able to determine themes that can be addressed in research in the field of American Studies. The explanation of paradigms, concepts and theories explained in the first three chapters is applied to the discussion in

the final chapter through examples of research that have been carried out. Therefore, this book will be very useful for academics who are involved in the field of American Studies as well as students and researchers who want to discuss American culture.

COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

Herewith the author declares that this article is totally free from any conflict of interest regarding the assessment, review and revision, and publication process in general.

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