From Hemisphere to Country: A Genealogy of “America”

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When and how did the word "America" begin to be used in the United States as synonymous with "United States of America"? Using Michel Foucault's methodology of "archaeology" and "genealogy," this lecture explores how the utopian notion of "America," initially applied to the full Western Hemisphere, is transformed within the emerging nation of the United States.

The conflictive interaction between the idea of the "American people" and the idea of the "states," where the notion of "America" denotes a utopian form of union, is first developed productively in "The Federalist." Subsequently it becomes a bone of contention, not only in the tensions resulting from U.S. territorial expansion, but also into the conflicts resulting in the Civil War. Finally, during the Spanish-American War (1898), when the United States occupied the Philippines, Cuba and Puerto Rico, the utopian notion of "America" is once again deployed when the U.S. presence in the Caribbean and the Pacific is articulated to a vision of the United States—increasingly self-defined as "America"—as a new world power that protects emerging nations from European imperial domination.