

Area Studies Responding to Globalization: Redefining International Scholarship

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Starting shortly after World War II, American higher education expanded its expertise about parts of the world that previously had been remote from mainstream academic concerns. Half a century later, under the label of „area studies“, there is now a significant number of scholars trained in a wide range of languages, histories, and cultures of every part of the world. An infrastructure of academic programs, library and teaching resources has been established. In the process, area studies affirmed the power of new ideas to change longstanding assumptions, not least about ourselves and the relationships that bind us to the world.

Area studies proceeded largely in terms of geographic boundaries; especially those that have prevailed since the Second World War hastened the end of the colonial empires. Area studies was not indifferent to the obvious fact that jurisdictional boundaries have always been porous, what has to do with cultural borrowing, trade routes, security alliances, population movements, and world religions. But the decades of the Cold War, characterized by superpower confrontation, was a period particularly conducive to organizing knowledge production with distinctions between Asia and Western Europe, or Africa and the Middle East, or Latin America and the Soviet Union much in mind.

Now free from the bi-polar perspective of the cold war and increasingly aware of the multiple migrations and intersections of people, ideas, institutions, technologies and commodities, scholars are confronting the inadequacy of conventional notions of „areas“ as bounded systems of social relations and cultural categories. Critical problems and research issues appear in forms that overwhelm conventional definitions of area and region – from the quality of economic, political, and environmental life around the globe to the conditions for ensuring the security and well-being of all people. These contemporary issues inspire new and urgent questions that highlight the contingent ways in which people have interpreted the conditions of their lives. It follows that we need new intellectual concepts and new ways to organize scholarship.

Basic Principles: Area-Based Knowledge

The Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) have found it conceptually useful to draw a distinction between traditional area studies, on one hand, and area-based knowledge, on the other. Area studies have taken regions in their totality as its primary unit of analysis. To be an area scholar is to participate in an enterprise that seeks to know all that can reasonably be known about a world region – its languages, history, cultures, politics, and religions. It

oversimplifies but helps to draw a useful distinction to describe traditional area studies as primarily producing knowledge about an area.

The term „area-based knowledge“ is intended to draw attention to knowledge production that starts with knowing about an area, but then using that knowledge to process trends and phenomena that transcend any given area. It is our working premise that geographically defined places, from remote villages to entire continents, are caught up in processes that link them to events, that although geographically distant, are culturally, economically, strategically, or ecologically quite near. To learn more and more about values or social conditions in a particular area, then, means to learn more and more about how that area is situated in events going beyond its geographic borders – but not thereby outside its culture or economy or ecology. Epidemics in Argentina or Chad are about conditions in those places, but also about the Geneva based WHO or the New Jersey based pharmaceutical industry. And so forth.

Self-evidently, the observe holds. Globalization does not render the specifics of place inconsequential; it reinforces the specificity of place. Globalization, whatever that term may mean is not something that is homogeneous or monolithic. The process to which the term points differentiates, producing winners and losers, the helped and the hurt. And the way in which these winners and losers respond to new opportunities and fresh defeats is no less conditioned by their histories and values than it was in times past. The SSRC/ACLS use the term „area-based knowledge“ to point toward a scholarly enterprise that can interpret and explain the ways in which that which is global and that which is local condition each other. Any number of phenomena – religious fundamentalism, for instance – occur on a global scale and yet vary dramatically from one place to the next.

In addition to bringing the particular to bear on the general and facilitating interregional comparisons, area-based knowledge has a larger epistemological role to play in contemporary scholarship. Here the SSRC/ACLS have in mind the philosophical debate that contrasts „views from nowhere“ with „views from somewhere.“ Area-based knowledge, broadly understood, anchors the positions that views do come from somewhere; that they are historically and culturally rooted. A commitment to area-based knowledge is also a commitment to scholarly traditions more prominent in the humanities than in the social science. It necessarily involves understanding the histories, value systems, and languages of specific cultures, just as it involves understanding their politics, social structures, and economies.

Continuing Tensions

Global vs. Local: The term globalization is not without its conceptual ambiguities (and political symbolism), but is used here to suggest that the pace and nature of trans-regional flows has accelerated since the collapse of communism as a doctrine around which to organize politics and economics. We have in mind capital flows, mass migrations, flexible labor regimes, telecommunications networks, tourism, cultural transfers, and international regimes in social as well as political and economic domains. None of these are new, but in combination and interaction they are changing the fixed nature of borders and boundaries. For example, there are novel ways in which globalization locates people, resources, beliefs, and information along new routes, in the process forging social connections between individuals and institutions which never before had contact or a common agenda. Area studies as a structure for organizing academic inquiry is challenged by these processes. Its familiar geographical boundaries have been disrupted, and today appear less stable, more permeable and fluid. Different phenomena of interest to the research community lead to different configurations of areas.

Transnational labor flows provide a clear example of tensions posed, and illustrate the value of integrating knowledge of place with the tools and insights of the disciplines. Those involved in such flows, and there are millions, are connected with multiple households as well as with multiple communities and countries. They are citizens of no place and yet of multiple places. Transnational labor flows necessarily involve a dense web of people, ideas, and resources passing through existing political and economic structures, although not smoothly or predictably. The genealogy of labor flows cannot be untangled without reference to the specificities of given places and their histories.

Yet such questions as why workers cross national boundaries, whether legally or illegally, which workers move, what happens to those who do not move, and how workers experience their transition into new national labor markets are concerns that transcend place. They can be more fully comprehended by subjecting them to the methods of the social sciences, for example through anthropological insights into the changing dynamics of households during the transition from command to market economies, sociological contributions to the understanding of social movements generated by the entry of foreign workers into new labor markets, and economic models about the implications of social policy for labor mobility. Equally important, these mass migrations upset established ways of assigning meaning to social experience. Thus they create problems and opportunities for artistic and religious ways of interpretation and expression as people seek to establish continuity or to articulate new cultural juxtapositions.

It is one of the well-known tensions of globalization that as it promotes integration, it leads also to the intensification of difference. Even as places are being drawn together

through global transportation and information systems, peoples are asserting difference and rejecting sameness on an unprecedented scale, and with self-consciousness about how these assertions take place on a global stage. Recent waves of racism, nationalism, fundamentalism, and communalism underline again the persistence of the local. It is not surprising, therefore, that studies of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and nationalism – all carriers of the local and vehicles of the difference – are issues preoccupying many disciplines. These studies document that even the most global of phenomena – the Internet, for example, or international travel – are far from being equally available. Area-based knowledge traces the patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and helps us to see more clearly the ways in which global forces distribute rewards and penalties. Globalization provides powerful support for reconceptualizing the meaning of place in the contemporary world, and for promoting analytic tools that permit us to grasp the interconnection of the specific and the general.

American-Centric Scholarship: Area studies and comparative politics, as practiced by American social science in the decades after the Second World War, were frequently connected to the broad project of *diffusing* American economic and political values. The new mandate of comparative politics for example, according to a 1944 report, was to serve as a „conscious instrument of social engineering by importing our experience to other nations and integrating scientifically their institutions into a universal pattern of government“ (American Political Science Review 1944: 540–48). Area studies as it emerged from the war experience was closely linked to understanding distant places where the „free world“ was in competition with „communism.“

Critiques of this project, often led by humanists, have helped move the social sciences beyond these political rationales, but it is not easy to erase the legacy of the postwar construction of area studies as a project to export American experiences abroad, and the notion that there exists a universal pattern of government (electoral democracy) and a universal pattern of economic organization (markets). Among other things, these notions created powerful rationales justifying federal support for area studies programs, rationales that have reasserted themselves in the post September 11 political environment. The War on Terrorism requires language expertise, detailed knowledge of distant but dangerous places, and alliances with nations heretofore ignored. Investment in scholarship is often justified in terms that echo the post-Sputnik period.

But it is now much harder for an American-centric scholarship to dominate. The development of major scholarly communities around the world opens up new opportunities for international studies to be international in form as well as content. Though research has always been an international enterprise, American-based scholarship in the social sciences and humanities held an unusually privileged position in the decades immediately following World War II. That era has passed; the United States is a diminishing

point of reference for many scholars located elsewhere. The SSRC and ACLS have been centrally involved in this transformation of scholarship, in their effort – led by the joint committees – to strengthen the social sciences and humanities in dozens of countries around the world and, to the extent practical, to involve leading Latin American, African, Asian, and European scholars in Council-supported activities.

Area Studies vs. Disciplined-Based Research: A more thoroughly internationalized program of organizing research is important from another point of view, i.e., that of the U.S. discipline-based scholar. A largely discipline-controlled academy has often treated area studies as peripheral. Space does not permit engaging this issue fully, though perhaps mention should be made that most American discipline-based scholars have been engaged in area studies without recognizing it. Their „area“ has been the United States – its history, culture, politics and economics.

The internationalization of knowledge production has far-reaching consequences for the American-centric social science and humanistic disciplines. Because important scholarship is increasingly practiced in many parts of the world, to be current in econometric modeling, gerontology, comparative literature, or cultural analysis requires more than knowing what one's American colleagues are doing. As the discipline-based social scientist or humanist seeks out colleagues abroad, American-centric scholarship begins to fade. Probably more significant in the gradual (though certainly not completed) de-parochialization of the disciplines are the theoretical challenges highlighted by the task of explaining local variations in the context of strong tendencies toward globalization. Comparisons that matter very often cross area and cultural boundaries.

Basic vs. Applied: Probably no dichotomy has so haunted attempts to organize intellectual life as that which opposes basic against applied research. Although there have been many creative efforts at blending or re-labeling to try to escape this dichotomy, in the end there is a difference between scholarship that is curiosity-driven and that which is problem-driven, between scholarship which honors the principle of knowledge for its own sake and scholarship in service of broad social goals.

The differences are particularly important to recognize in a program that promises to join the humanities and the social sciences. For while both sets of disciplines incorporate basic and applied principles, the humanities are often regarded by skeptics as aloof from socially relevant issues. On the contrary, the humanities have much to say about the very issues of political and social identity, cultural transformation, changing gender role, and social cohesion which roil so much of the contemporary world. Humanistic scholarship is primarily interpretive and evaluative, employing methodologies that are pragmatic, strategic, and self-reflective depending on the questions posed.

Yet, for reasons noted in the next section, scholarship is needed that has no immediate practical purpose in mind.

New Factors – New Actors

That prior scholarly categories and approaches are viewed as increasingly obsolete is not surprising, for they were constructed largely by a scholarly community seeking to interpret a world in which nation-states were the central actors, linked to one another by security alliances, trading partnerships, the U.N. system, and the Bretton Woods institutions.

That world has slipped away, and the world that is replacing it features stresses and strains that are poorly understood and even more poorly managed. Scholars confront the rapid proliferation of new issues. The litany is familiar: climate change and environmental degradation, religious upheavals and challenges to modern value systems, population growth and large refugee populations, pandemic and emergent diseases, industrial relocation and replacement migration, terrorism and the redefinition of security. These processes have brought new actors to the fore, including global corporations, transnational religious movements, international NGOs, and international media empires. Issues of religious concern, cultural identity, and political community are now played out in new contexts.

Established political and cultural institutions are only partially managing to keep pace with these developments, often yielding place to new sites and forms of intervention. International human rights policy, for example, has been defined and often implemented by non-state actors, a dramatic but hardly isolated example of the role of transnational NGOs. Propelled by video and e-mail technologies, such issues as domestic violence and child labor must be confronted in an immense variety of local contexts around the world in ways that challenge long held assumptions about morality, identity, and autonomy. Similarly, multilateral lending agencies, accustomed to providing assistance exclusively through national governments, are now scrambling to catch up with the micro-credit revolution, a revolution whose origins and early practices emerged in a social space defined by neither the market nor governments but responsive to local forms of social solidarity.

These are illustrative of broad patterns. And if it is a truism to observe that the world is changing, so it is to observe that intellectuals are in the early stages of providing the concepts and constructs that will be drawn upon by those who have to manage or cope with these new conditions. Anyone who participates in meetings on any of the dozens of vexing topics confronting the international policy community will have heard the plea for „better understanding“ of the human dimension of a given problem, or its social context or its amelioration if influenced by conflicting beliefs and cultural practices. These pleas, however phrased, are in fact appeals for the knowledge that derive from research by the social sciences and humanities.

Examples of the power of new ideas to generate change are abundant. It is through the research of social scientists and humanists that we generate new definitions of security – taking into account the identities and vulnerabilities of sub-national groups around the world; that we promote insights on structural unemployment – taking into account historical forces seldom captured by the standard policy study; that we produce more nuanced conceptions of democratization taking into account the multiple ways in which citizenship rights can be extended to new actors or expanded to encompass a broader array of rights for segments of a polity; that we contribute to the eternal human effort to grasp how people understand themselves, their past, and their prospects.

Answers to questions such as these cannot be produced on demand. The deeper contours of the human experience

are unpredictable. Unpredictability recommends an important place in the program for undirected research. The central objective of the new program architecture is to stimulate basic critical scholarship that brings area-based knowledge to bear on global issues, that fosters integration of that knowledge with theories derived from discipline-based studies, and that is international in its purpose and organization.

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