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Area Studies in a Global Context

By William G. Moseley

The study of global processes and a grounded understanding of world regions constitute the yin and yang of a solid internationalist curriculum. While the two sides of this cantankerous odd couple may occasionally feud, they actually need each other—a lot. Unfortunately, trends in the academic and grant-making realms have tended to undermine the area-studies component of internationalist education.

Many disciplines used to train regional specialists. It was commonplace, for example, in history, anthropology, and my own discipline, geography. Had you visited a geography department 50 years ago, you would have found a specialist for each major world region (Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America). That ended in the 1960s, when the old regional geography was subjected to a tremendous amount of criticism for being overly focused on the particulars of an area and blind to the impacts of transnational forces.

Now geographers are identified by their thematic expertise (I am an environment-and-development specialist), and only secondarily noted for regional knowledge. Similar changes have occurred in other disciplines. Cutting-edge dissertations in many fields now deal with transnational phenomena, at multiple research sites, rather than a deep understanding of one particular area.

This pattern follows broader trends in academe over the past 100 years wherein disciplines are mostly organized around the study of phenomena across space rather than the study of multiple intersecting phenomena in one area.

But the increasing paucity of area-studies training is a problem. A lack of basic area-studies knowledge is evident among the general American public. For example, a 2006 National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs survey of 18- to 24-year-olds found that only 37 percent of them could find Iraq on a map, and that six in 10 young Americans don't speak a foreign language fluently. Worse yet are public officials who have displayed an amazing ignorance of geographic difference, such as President George W. Bush's

comparison of democracy-building efforts in the Middle East to prior achievements in Germany and Japan.

Sadly, it largely has been the security concerns of the post-9/11 era that have recatalyzed government interest in area studies, particularly for strategically important regions such as the Middle East. That is unfortunate, because tunnel vision on security issues, without the perspective that area studies can offer, can lead to bad policy and wasted resources.

Looking at regions somewhat abstractly is also problematic in discussions that aren't directly security-related. That was made apparent to me when I worked at the World Bank for a short time. There I met dozens of brilliant young Ph.D.'s. Their understanding of theory and transnational processes was laudable. Unfortunately, they couldn't begin to imagine how a policy would play out in a particular place or region. The consequences of such ignorance can be devastating. Those who have studied World Bank-imposed economic or environmental programs in Africa, for example, can attest to the problem of policy making uninformed by an awareness of regional differences.

Of course the opposite is also true: that local policy or program initiatives that do not account for external influences are similarly doomed to failure. To take an example from my own research, we can promote local food production in West Africa until we are blue in the face, but those efforts will always be stymied if we do not account for national policies and international trade relationships that encourage the production of African cash crops for export markets.

At my own institution, we have a well-supported and thoughtfully organized international-studies curriculum that emphasizes the study of global processes. While we also have a strong suite of area-studies programs, the difference between those and international studies in terms of resources and planning is palpable. Those differences are not simply related to the internal dynamics of my college, but to the pipeline of new academics and the prerogatives of those holding the purse strings who increasingly view area studies as old-fashioned. Repeated conversations with colleagues and multiple exchange visits with other institutions have led me to believe that the situation on my campus is not uncommon.

Both global and area-studies advocates are guilty of blindly hunkering down in their bunkers. Rather than seek common ground and obvious synergies, we often fall back on simplistic caricatures of the other side: the jet-setting global theorists versus the dusty old

area-studies scholars obsessed with language and local-level detail. The reality is often quite different.

A new approach to area studies is increasingly in practice in most disciplines. We now teach about regions in their global context. In my Africa class every spring, my students and I not only examine the variation in physical environments and cultures across the continent but also study the global processes and historical patterns that bind Africa to other parts of the globe. The problem is that the new approach is not widely understood across academe or among those making college-budget decisions.

Another oft-heard concern about area studies is that it is organized around world regions that are arbitrary human constructions. Indeed, area-studies experts do rely on an artificial categorization of the world into regions. However, the organization of knowledge into disciplines is also subjective. If we retain disciplines because they are useful for fostering scholarly debate on certain phenomena, is it not also useful to encourage transdisciplinary conversations among scholars working in particular areas of the world?

While there is an array of processes that transcend regional boundaries, there are also commonalities that bind a region together, such as similar colonial experiences, shared traits in climate and ecology, related languages, or shared public-health challenges. Academe and society benefit from an interdisciplinary conversation about those places, even though we recognize that the boundaries between regions are porous.

A further critique of area studies is that it is a relic of the cold war. To be more precise, detractors point to Title VI of the National Defense Education Act, which, beginning in the late 1950s, supported the creation of area-studies centers at major research universities. The act also provided financing for Fulbright-Hays scholarships to support doctoral students and faculty research abroad. Did research centers and scholarship programs supported by that program produce scholarship that was useful to the State or Defense Departments? Maybe, but much of the research supported in that manner was of no direct use to U.S. geopolitical interests or was deeply critical of American and European imperialism. For example, a quick review of recent Fulbright-Hays grantees reveals projects with titles such as "Effects on Rural Households and Livelihoods of Increasing Rates of Illness and Death Related to HIV/AIDS in Malawi" and "The Making of Colonialism in Equatorial Africa."

I'd make two further points about the government support. First, many disciplines outside area studies have a long history of

entanglement in government projects, too. While that has led to some problematic theories and research (for example, physicists' support for the development of the atomic bomb), most disciplines have moved on in spite of it. Area studies existed before Title VI support. The approach was never wholly financed by that source, and much of the work supported by Title VI appears to be of no use to the defense establishment.

Second, U.S. foreign policy toward other parts of the world would arguably be much worse in the absence of area studies. Area studies contributes to a general understanding of other regions by our students, an understanding that American citizens need in order to hold their government accountable for its actions abroad. If some of those students go on to be policy makers whose decisions may influence people in other regions, all the better if they have a less America-centric view.

On the other side of the curricular coin, global-studies programs would be stronger if they insisted that their students gain an intimate familiarity with at least one region of the world. It is important that these students have a place in which they can envision how abstract policies and concepts play out. I would further argue that those with a grounded understanding of particular places often are better equipped to study transnational linkages.

Some of the best transnational work has actually been done by scholars who have a deep comprehension of, and a history of fieldwork in, a particular region. For example, Judith A. Carney, a geographer at the University of California at Los Angeles, is the author of *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2001), which won the 2002 Herskovits Prize of the African Studies Association. This seminal work is part of a growing literature on the Atlantic World, a global region centered on the Atlantic basin. Carney effectively demonstrates how African knowledge of tidal-mangrove rice cultivation in West Africa was vital for the establishment of highly productive rice plantations in the Carolinas in the 17th and 18th centuries—an insight that has changed our understanding of African-American history.

What is interesting about Carney's career is that she was an Africanist first, and only later became interested in America's Southeast. It was, I would argue, her detailed understanding of rice cultivation in West Africa that allowed her to recognize the role of Africans in the historical development of rice farming in the Carolinas. Without a previous background in African agriculture,

Carney's exploration of the African connections to the historical development of rice-farming systems in the Carolinas could never have been made as forcefully and as convincingly.

The reality is that both perspectives, area and global studies, are needed for a solid internationalist education. As educators we need to be concerned about how we are training the leaders of tomorrow. They will certainly need to understand broad, transnational phenomena, yet they must also know how those phenomena play out, day to day, in specific locales.

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