

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Asian Studies/Global Studies: Transcending Area Studies and Social Sciences

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Abstract

The post–World War II growth of area studies, and Asian studies in particular, posed a serious challenge to the mainstream social sciences. Yet the epistemic and institutional foundations of area studies were never well articulated or justified, and the post–Cold War years brought a pervasive sense of crisis to its intellectual mission and justification. In particular, the author focuses on the tensions, if not contradictions, between social science disciplines and area studies. In advocating a more integrated human science, which depends more on mobile networks of scholars than on fixed fields of discipline-bound professors, the author suggests global studies as a fitting field of inquiry in the age of globalization.

Introduction

The field upon which one strides is perforce self-evident and self-explanatory. Bizarre would be a person who examines the solid ground, who hesitates to take the next step. More troublingly, reflections on a field of study smack of irrelevance, something that should be doomed to be parerga. Most dubiously, what possible impact can a short prospectus have on which steps, which directions, should be taken by scholars busily scribbling away on their idiosyncratic projects? Pondering the heavens, the first philosopher, according to Diogenes Laertius, fell in the ditch. Avoiding the ditch in and of itself won't, alas, ensure safe passage or arrival. Perfect scholarship probably requires at once views from everywhere and from nowhere—looking simultaneously at the heavens above and the ditches below—and is therefore humanly impossible. But better scholarship, I hope, is possible and that reflection—even at the risk of irrelevance—is probably a small but necessary part of the endeavor.¹ In this spirit, let me belabor the obvious and the otiose. Let me also add that I write as a sociologist working in the United

States. These two locations, as well as the current conjuncture (circa 2012), profoundly shape what I say below.

Asia and Asian Studies

The oldest and largest institution dedicated to the study of Asia is the (U.S.) Association for Asian Studies, founded in 1941. Since 1970, its four primary units are councils on South Asia, Southeast Asia, China and Inner Asia, and Northeast Asia. This division of intellectual labor seems convenient enough, and even compelling. Yet what historical or contemporary justifications are there? Philologically, the major civilizational languages should define the objects and categories of inquiry. In this line of thinking, the study of South Asia is founded on Sanskrit, which, as the root of the Indo-European language family, suggests kinship to the West, all the way to the U.K. and U.S. of the present day. Classical Chinese—both language and civilization—encompassed “Northeast Asia” as well as “Southeast Asia.” Yet linguistic, religious, and lifestyle differences among Southeast Asian nations are truly immense, and those among Northeast Asian nations are by no means negligible (though one may well say the same of China itself).² In short, the divisions are at best conventional, and the underlying unity of each is frequently nominal.

If we shift our focus to departments of Asian studies (or Oriental studies), then the parameters of Asia and therefore of Asian studies turn out to be highly variable. At the University of California, Berkeley, there are several distinct research centers that cover Asia: the Institute of East Asian Studies, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, the Center for South Asian Studies, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (for the western edge of the Asian continent and beyond), and the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (for Central Asia).³ At other universities, a department or a center may encompass only East Asia or stretch across from Japan to Israel. The variations are not unique to academe. Although few North American academics or East Asians consider Lebanon to be part of Asia, the categorization is common in South and West Asia (what North Americans call the Middle East).⁴ In this instance, Asia refers to a continent but also a collectivity distinct from Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Definitional imprecision and variation are found not just in the United States, but across the world.⁵

The classificatory confusion persists if we focus on nations. The contemporary pervasiveness of nation-states renders entities such as China or Korea as quasi-immortal. Yet the putative unity of nations turns out to be largely nominal, at least until recently. National-level linguistic, religious, or cultural integration is a modern phenomenon. Just as significantly, strict status divisions render most premodern, national-level generalizations problematic. A vast universe separated the nobility or the mandarins from impecunious peasants. Protonational identities of the premodern era were elite-based distinctions that largely excluded the non-elite.⁶

Several deleterious consequences afflict the problematic of drawing boundaries across or classifying civilizations and countries. First, areas or regions are not natural units or kinds. Japan and Korea may seem like “natural” units under Northeast Asia, but—if only because of the narcissism of minor differences—few scholars can lump them unproblematically as units under one category. Furthermore, as I noted, the very integrity of the national entity is a modern construct, one that resists facile invocation of nations as natural units.⁷ Second, principles of categorization are rarely applied in a consistent manner. One may plausibly claim the dominance of the Confucian order in East Asia: the classical Chinese civilization. Yet it seems misleading to describe the western, northern, or southern edges of Ming or Qing China as Confucian. At the same time, if we were to include Korea under the Chinese civilizational ambit, why not Vietnam? Why Japan? Third, there is little agreement on the foundational criterion to distinguish across areas and regions. Political rule is important, but imperial or colonial legacy is rarely clear cut. Economic relations often bypass political boundaries. Some plausibly invoke the dissemination of Chinese characters across East Asia, but when Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese academics or businesspeople meet today they use English. Others fatuously suggest cultural similarities, such as rice as the staple, but these claims merely expose their ignorance of the historical and contemporary reality of East Asian foodways.⁸ And even if they were to be applied systematically, historical transformations often wreak havoc on seemingly robust boundaries and generalizations. Quite simply, classificatory schemes vary across culture and time, especially for social entities that depend on distinct criteria. Societal boundaries shift and no society is truly homogeneous and integrated. Classification is therefore a pragmatic affair, propounding a more or less plausible scheme that is a matter of convenience and convention.

In summary, there are neither necessary nor natural foundational rationales for defining Asia or Asian studies. That is, no deep logic or axial principle constitutes Asian studies.

Disciplinary Marginalization

In the past 150 years in the West—and Westernization has profoundly shaped universities in the non-Western world—an academic discipline has been the predominant prism through which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Each discipline is said to cover a particular field: an analytical cartography is superimposed on the world. That is, physicists study the physical world; economists study the “economy,” or money and markets; literary scholars study “literature,” or texts, subtexts, and contexts; and so on. This is especially the case for the human sciences, encompassing the social sciences and the humanities: the sphere of human beings and human endeavor. There are a handful of disciplines that define the social and behavioral dimensions of human beings: economics (wealth and wealth-producing activities), political science (power and politics), and sociology (the residual social world outside of money and power). In addition, geography studies the spatial dimension of human existence, whereas history examines the temporal. Given the presumed deviance of the non-West from the West that was the province of the social sciences, social and cultural anthropology emerged to make sense of the nonindustrialized world, as proto area studies, such as Oriental studies, emerged to make sense of specific regions.⁹ In addition, humanities departments were formed to analyze human achievements, such as literature, musicology, art history, and so on.

A fundamental axis on which scholarly disciplines are arrayed is the continuum between the universal (or the nomothetic) and the particular (or the idiographic).¹⁰ The former strives for the general in the manner of the natural sciences, exemplified in the human sciences by mainstream or neoclassical economics and structural linguistics. The particular or idiographic form of knowledge seeks information and analysis in the style of the classical humanities, represented by literary studies and historical linguistics. Put simply, the universal attempts to expand the domain of applicability of its knowledge claims through laws, generalizations, and theories, whereas the particular seeks a narrower confine for its epistemic validity in the form of local knowledge or events, often deemed singular and therefore resistant to facile generalizations.

These are crude ideal types, to be sure, but there should be little dispute that economics, for example, has generally strove for the nomothetic whereas area studies has attempted to grasp the idiographic. Asian studies, in this line of classification, falls on the particular, or idiographic, end of the spectrum, stressing concrete knowledge of Asia. Generalizing knowledge claims are few and far between; much energy is expended on differentiating things Korean from things Chinese or Japanese, much less from the West. Given the genealogy of Asian studies—from the cradle of Orientalism that emphasized civilizational knowledge and philology—its stubborn center of gravity remains very much in history and the humanities. Area studies scholars valorize the knowledge of language, history, and culture, often regarding Asian studies as a discipline in its own right, with its own theories, methods, and substantive concerns. Sociologists or economists with generalizing ethos are viewed as yahoos for whom the concern with abstraction loosens their grip on concrete reality. It is not surprising, then, that area studies tend to be popular with humanists who work with the particularities of language, history, and culture.¹¹

In contrast, social scientists by and large belittle area studies as repositories of particularistic knowledge. The American Sociological Association, for example, is divided into some forty sections or subfields. Only four or five of them have anything explicitly to do with the non-U.S. world. More startlingly, anyone studying a society besides the United States or the West is regularly consigned to the label of a “comparativist,” a nonexistent field for which there is little demand professionally or pedagogically.¹² The pursuit of the particular connotes epistemic and status inferiority. Riding on the prestige of the natural sciences, where the laws of nature are presumably the same whether in China or Chile, social scientists have sought abstract, universal knowledge. It is not important to study the Chinese economy in and of itself but rather as an example of the economy or economic principles. In other words, universal or general knowledge is timeless and placeless. Hence, there is a great deal of stress on theoretical and methodological progress.

The paradox of disciplinary universalism is that in fact most disciplines develop on the basis of particularistic knowledge and, moreover, as essentially *nationalist*.¹³ As I have suggested, U.S. sociology is basically the study of the United States. The fundamental reason is that sociology—not only in the United States but virtually everywhere else—has developed as a discipline that is devoted to social (that is, national) problems in the hopes of informing and

formulating ameliorative social (that is, national) policies. Thus, whether U.S. sociologists study poverty or racism or health, they are fundamentally focused on the poverty, racism, or health of Americans. Yet these studies are regarded not so much as concrete instances of U.S. society at a particular period, but rather as general instances, with little heed for history or temporal specificity.

Furthermore, historical priority and national eminence have much to do with the salience of a case. It is not an accident that the classics of political economy—from Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* to Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* to Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation*—depend on the case study of British industrialization. That is, a particular experience becomes universal both because of the hubris of theorists who believe that they are talking about the general and because those theorists (and the case they study) connote power and prestige in the particular scientific field. Put crudely, the eminence and wealth of the United States—not to mention the correlative supremacy of U.S. social sciences—have led to the intellectual dominance of the U.S. case in the past fifty years.

In contrast, a nondominant case is a recipe for self-marginalization. Whereas a generalizing social scientific work that is based on a U.S. case requires no justification, non-U.S. (and at times non-Western) instances demand extended commentary. Most likely, a scholar who does not focus on the United States would be regarded as a comparativist—the catchall category of marginality—and at worst as an area studies scholar (with its inevitably pejorative connotations). In this regard, there is a great chain of comparative worthiness, in which the more powerful the country, the more justified one is in studying it. An exception that proves this rule is the longstanding interest in the study of the enemy: rogue regimes for the United States as part of national security. But there isn’t much point in studying an inconsequential country. In the United States, the popularity of Japanese studies in the 1980s or of Chinese studies in the early twenty-first century undoubtedly owes a great deal to the perceived economic threat—as well as opportunities—of the booming economy that renders it consequential.

Be that as it may, a great deal of social scientific work is ethnocentric, constitutionally averse to the very enterprise of nondominant cases (i.e., area studies). The inherent intellectual tendency to valorize the abstract, the general, and the universal therefore articulates well with the dependence on one case, which in turn is presumed to be universalizable and generalizable. One

negative repercussion is that, as Hegel said of Kantian ethics, the theory that emerges risks being empty, denuded of substantive content and concrete knowledge. At the very least, it is a highly provisional hypothesis that should require extensive comparative and historical inquiries to validate its theoretical propositions and knowledge claims.

Finally, the organization of disciplinary knowledge belies its epistemic incoherence. Ignoring that the disciplinary division of intellectual labor is an analytical fiction, or a matter of convenience, social scientists frequently erect a wall around their discipline, bypassing developments in other fields. That is, division of labor is legitimated in part on the presumption that someone somewhere would synthesize disciplinary knowledge claims but in fact there isn't really anyone around to do so. Consequently, many disciplines break the implicit division and intellectual labor and end up covering the entire social world by themselves. Sociologists, for example, have subfields of political sociology, economic sociology, social psychology, and sociology of development, conveniently neglecting the existence of political science, economics, psychology, and anthropology, which cover these areas of inquiry.¹⁴ It is very difficult, after all, to bracket completely concerns with power or culture when one analyzes money and markets, and it takes a great deal of academic discipline to convince novitiates, if not outsiders, that knowledge of mathematics is more important to economics than knowledge of concrete economies.¹⁵ Even economists, however, have ventured to reconsider psychology (experimental economics), ethics, sociology, and other fields as integral to economics.¹⁶ Over time, then, each social science field seems to generate all the subfields that are missing from its initial constitution, thereby implicitly forgetting the very division of labor that justified its separate and independent (if not quite equal) existence in the first place. As a result of the patent absurdity of each social science discipline encompassing the entirety of the social sciences, the call for interdisciplinarity has grown in the past three decades.¹⁷ Yet the insecure foundations of discipline-based knowledge organization are hardly ever probed or decried.

Intellectual division of labor is inevitable, and the current constitution of social science fields is more or less cogent and convenient. Yet the system of the social sciences is just over a century old and lacks any deep logic of naturalness or necessity. Certainly, its aspiration toward the presumptive universality of the natural sciences has left in its wake a series of blinkered

disciplines and theories that belittle at once comparative and historical cases and the contributions of other disciplines and perspectives.

The Post–World War II Development of Area Studies

Area studies has become a vibrant scholarly enterprise in the past half century in the United States and elsewhere. Needless to say, pioneers and exemplars are as old as human inquiry *tout court* and Orientalism, among other philologically oriented disciplines, flowered in the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Yet it would be misleading to ignore the unusual efflorescence of area studies in the post–World War II United States.¹⁹ For example, while there were only a score or so of Africanists at the founding of the (U.S.) African Studies Association in 1958, there were well over two thousand members by its half-century anniversary. There are at least two sources of academic success: intellectual and political.

Intellectually, there was a sustained effort to construct a truly universal social science in the mid-twentieth century.²⁰ After all, it did not take much imagination to realize that the way of life or the shape of power was not the same across the world. There was a gaping need to make sense of difference and diversity (as much as many scholars brazenly ignored the world outside their national borders). The dominant theoretical framework came to be known as *modernization theory*. Its underpinning was an evolutionary narrative that began from difference and was projected to end in convergence.²¹ Its subtext was often political—to make the world more like the United States: a liberal, democratic, and capitalist society, and friendly to the United States to boot. What modernization scholars, in spite of their considerable differences, held in common was a particular vision of Westernization (modernization) that was shaping the Third World to be more like the First World (i.e., the United States). The negative role model was the Second World (i.e., the Soviet Union), which projected a false image of the utopian future and became the object of intense intellectual scrutiny.²²

Modernization theory provided a cognitive structure under which social scientists could rationalize their entanglement in the particulars of another country or a faraway region. The particularistic knowledge of language and history were important insofar as they provided insights into the past and the present; the proper guidance for the future demanded background information. Thus, modernization theory at once preserved the dream of disciplinary

universalism (and the truly scientific constitution of the social sciences) and provided the rationale for particularistic inquiry. Precisely because modernization scholars broke free from the blinders of disciplinary universalism and its attendant ethnocentrism, some of them scored scholarly triumphs: consider the works of Albert O. Hirschman, Clifford Geertz, and Barrington Moore Jr.²³

The political backdrop of post–World War II area studies in the United States was the Cold War. The sustained struggle against Communism (and Marxism) demanded that Americans know more about the enemies and those who might be attracted to the enemies of the free world. Its subtext was intellectual: to spread the right way of thinking (modernization theory and the social sciences) around the world, which in turn would spread the values of liberal capitalist democracy.²⁴ Thus, in many ways, the intellectual and the political became intimately intertwined and encouraged the growth of area studies.

Needless to say, the powerful frequently promote a particular form of knowledge, whether to instill an orthodoxy, repel a heresy, or know (and possibly control) an enemy. Something like area studies, as I suggested, developed under British, German, and Japanese colonialism. The post–World War II United States was probably unprecedented in its coverage—the whole world literally came under its ambit—and in its independence from direct political or economic interests (though far from negligible, the U.S. government mostly did not seek outright political control). Not only the U.S. government (Departments of Education and of Defense) but also many of the leading foundations (Ford and Rockefeller) promoted area studies. The consequence was phenomenal. In virtually every area of the world, the United States became the center of scholarly knowledge production and reproduction.²⁵

Area studies became big business: institutionalized as research centers, it became an indispensable presence in most major universities. Professional associations and scholarly journals proliferated. Becoming a quasi-discipline in U.S. academe, area studies benefited from the massive growth of higher education in the 1950s and 1960s. However, the relative stasis from the post–oil crisis 1970s prevented area studies from becoming instantiated as autonomous departments and therefore independent disciplines. The failure to institutionalize area studies, to achieve disciplinary independence and autonomy, had serious repercussions for the later trajectories of social scientists working on non-Western areas.

Social Sciences versus Area Studies

How did the nascent area studies fields interact with the extant social science disciplines?²⁶ Did they overcome the epistemic chasm or the institutional division? The short answer is that, with individual exceptions, the intellectual and institutional rapprochement did not occur, to the detriment of both.

E.H. Gombrich opened his influential textbook by observing that there is no such thing as art, only artists. There would be more than a shimmer of truth if I were to claim that there is no such thing as an Asian studies subfield in the nomothetic social sciences, only Asian studies scholars in them. After all, many social-scientific articles on Asia can only charitably be considered contributions to Asian studies, as they treat Asian countries as case studies, whether quantitatively or qualitatively. That is, Asian data are parlayed to advance a theoretical or substantive argument in these putatively “Asian” articles. Disciplinary logic is what drives them and the empirical referent to Asia is of at best epiphenomenal significance. Put differently, most U.S. social science articles don’t advance our knowledge of Asia in any substantial way. In contrast, Asian studies scholars—however defined, and including historians and some social scientists—seek to advance our knowledge of Asia (among their other goals). From this substantive vantage point, then, there is the isomorphism of sociologists of Asia and contributions to Asian studies.

Another application of Gombrich’s point is that for U.S. academics there are only social scientists. One may focus on Asia, but that is considered an accidental, not an essential, trait. The study of Asia is categorized as area studies scholarship, as an endeavor orthogonal to disciplinary interest and progress. More concretely, one’s very self-definition as an Asian specialist is likely to doom one’s career prospects. That is, the nomothetic social sciences in the United States provide a barren field for Asian studies scholarship. There are several reasons for this state of affairs—the most obvious of which is the epistemic divide that I discussed—but one often overlooked factor is endemic to academic life.

It is a truth universally acknowledged among seasoned academic politicians that the fiercest struggles are waged over the placement of PhDs in top departments and universities. Non-PhD-granting institutions generally lack the resources to foster research and, more

indisputably, to reproduce academics. However, even among PhD-granting universities—Carnegie I institutions in the U.S. higher education classification system—scarcely two dozen departments regularly manage to produce PhDs who are in turn placed in the same sort of elite institutions. These institutions command the financial resources to recruit and retain research-productive faculty members, and they usually enjoy the historical legacy of reputation and resources, such as outstanding library collections. There are exceptions, to be sure, but these are few and far between. Because Asian studies failed to develop an independent discipline and departments, except as humanistically oriented Asian languages and literatures departments (again with some exceptions), those with dual interests in a discipline and an area (Asia, in this instance) had to pursue their degrees in a particular field. Yet each discipline in turn posed criteria of excellence that paid little, if any, heed to area studies scholarship. More generalizing social science disciplines, such as economics, at times ignore the interests of area studies altogether. Even disciplines amenable to local knowledge claims, such as social and cultural anthropology, generated their disciplinary priorities in theories and methods. In other words, social scientists working in Asian studies failed to prosper because the disciplines provided little intellectual support and because there were no career pathways in place to produce PhDs with dual interest and expertise in a social science discipline and Asian studies.

Therefore, one may very well speak of two cultures in area studies. On the one hand, there are “true” area studies scholars, housed predominantly in humanities departments (and most prominently in departments of Asian languages and literatures). On the other hand, some social scientists encroach on—and sometimes engage with—area studies scholarship. Historians and anthropologists tend to be liminal. Thus, they have come closer to transcending disciplinarity and area studies. Yet historians by and large remain wedded not only to the study of specific nations but also to particular periods (which is a matter of convention) and subfields (it is common to define oneself as, for example, a cultural, economic, political, or intellectual historian). Anthropologists probably have gone furthest in terms of breaking the boundaries of post-World War II social sciences and area studies, but their efforts have had little effect on other social science disciplines, especially economics and political science. In general, social scientists working on non-Western societies are marginalized by humanist-dominated area

studies scholarship and by other social scientists. The second culture of area studies—that occupied by social scientists—is therefore minor and marginal.

The power, prestige, and wealth of a scholarly subject may well correlate with the power, prestige, and wealth of the subject. Hence, economists' entanglement with money and markets or political scientists' entwinement with power and politics may account for their popularity and prestige with pupils, administrators, and the public. Yet there are no inherent reasons why area studies scholarship, especially that with keen importance to the business or policy elite, should not be accorded equivalent, if not superior, attention and funding. The weakness of area studies scholarship also has something to do with its intellectual shortcomings.

The stress on the particulars frequently considers the metaphorical trees at the expense of the metaphorical, and perhaps metaphysical, forest. That is, area studies may fall prey to parochialism and ethnocentrism, not unlike abstracting and generalizing social sciences. The saving grace may be that as non-natives, area studies scholars may possess passing knowledge of at least two societies, but the fundamentally parochial orientation cannot be gainsaid. Moreover, in eschewing abstractions and generalizations, area studies scholars often have neglected, or only superficially explored, the realm of theory (and methodology). In part, this stems from the justified criticism of the ethnocentric social sciences and their theories. However, it is impossible to discern what is unique or what is general without taking account of the world outside the chosen area of study. Furthermore, as the decisive epistemological critique of empiricism demonstrates, concrete facts and figures are in fact necessarily dependent on abstract categories and concepts.²⁷ That not everyone around the world engages in utility-maximizing behavior may be empirically true, but as a simple statement that criticizes neoclassical economic theory it is not especially cogent. In the absence of an alternative theory, a different schema, for understanding and explanation, there isn't much incentive to jettison the extant theoretical framework. Yet a theory-building project is precisely what is often missing from area studies scholarship, if only because of a tacit reliance on modernization theory. Ironically, the most impressive theoretical achievements have occurred especially in those relatively impoverished areas of the world—for Asian Studies, Southeast and South Asia.²⁸ In any case, area studies by and large failed to register theoretical advances or to justify its domain and constitution. That is, it could not

adequately answer why Asia, as I argued above, constitutes a coherent and independent field of study.

In short, mainstream social science disciplines and area studies developed in distinct fashions, leading to the marginality of the latter in the former, and the resistance to the former in the latter. The social science disciplines therefore exacerbated the inherent tendency to pursue the nomothetic and the general sort of knowledge, which not only ignored the non-Western world but also a historical, institutional, and ethnographic understanding of the West itself. Area studies, in contrast, bypassed the West—that is, by and large no area studies for Europe and North American—and eschewed the theoretical and the methodological. There were precious few concrete accounts of the West, save for those of some historians, anthropologists, and other exceptions, and very little effort to make the findings of area studies relevant to areas outside the field of study, even to those working on other regions within area studies. That is, universities produced largely abstract, general principles purportedly about the world and its peoples and institutions, and concrete, particular accounts of the non-Western world.

The Crisis of Area Studies

However minor and marginal it may be in the grand scheme of human knowledge, the post–World War II development of area studies is impressive by most measures. At its most optimistic, the tension, or contradiction, between the two cultures of the social sciences and of area studies was to be mitigated, if not quite eliminated, by an implicit matrix: each area of the world would be covered by all the major disciplines; all the major disciplines in turn would have an expert in every major world region. In a period of rapid growth, the scheme was far from being utopian, and perhaps a score of universities in the United States filled, or came close to filling, all the cells in the matrix. The post–oil crisis downturn from the early 1970s dampened any expectations of another period of rapid and sustained growth of universities, at least in the West. The post–Cold War years brought in particular the growing sense of crisis afflicting area studies.

Disinterested observers may be pardoned for wondering what the fuss is really about, however. Funding in some cases is down, but the same can be said about virtually every field in the human sciences (excluding the professional schools). The end of the Cold War in many ways

emancipated scholars from the straitjacket of Cold War epistemic and political struggles. Almost every area of the world is producing very accomplished scholarly works. The numbers of professors and students—if we use the degree zero of 1945 or 1950 or even 1955—have grown massively. The very idea of Korean studies, to take one example, would have struck even diehard Asianists as preposterous in 1950, perhaps even in 1970. Yet it appears to have a secure place in the U.S. academe in 2012. The heightened expectation and massive growth of area studies in the 1960s and 1970s have made the present seem humdrum, and hence in the doldrums.

The crisis is almost entirely intellectual. I do not want to deny the stasis—and occasionally even the decline—in the funding for area studies in particular and the human sciences in general. Yet the fundamental problem is that area studies scholarship has suffered from a lack of purpose and vision.

If what I have suggested about the rise of area studies—the general utility for the powerful interest groups, including the modern state—is true, then the plain fact is that area studies scholars have not provided what the benefactors wanted. This is plainly the case in Middle Eastern studies. It is not much of a secret that the funders—the government, foundations, and individuals—were overwhelmingly Zionist in orientation.²⁹ Yet, in the early twenty-first century, few Middle Eastern studies scholars share the political consensus from the 1950s and 1960s. But Middle Eastern studies is far from being unique. In almost every region, the political gravity of scholars—and this is of course true in general for academic life in the United States—has shifted leftward. Antigovernment or counterhegemonic, scholars rarely align themselves with policy makers or ideologues.

But the low marginal return and the corresponding disappointment go beyond the general political orientation or the critical nature of scholarship. The two cultures of area studies have basically left the rather large terrain of the kind of knowledge sought by political or business elites. Traditional humanists study the classics (including contemporary classics). However worthy, they are hardly of immediate practical significance. It is possible that, as in Victorian Britain, the elite opinion may have dictated the mastery of the classics as the prerequisite of leadership. But no such consensus exists in our democratic and demotic society.

Simultaneously, social scientists have forsaken the realm of the concrete in favor of the abstruse, whether of the theoretical or methodological variant. That is, social scientists, in their

effort to be scientific, have ceded the production of books and articles that may be of interest to policy makers, businesspeople, or the educated public. This trend is equally striking for economists constructing abstruse mathematical models as for anthropologists engaging in esoteric theoretical debates. Instead, the general histories, political overviews, economic conspectuses, and so on, are predominantly written by journalists and nonuniversity intellectuals.

To the extent that university-based academics engage in this sort of work, they tend to be humanists, working under the sign of theory, postmodernism, or cultural studies. That is, we look for the general overview of global capitalist development in the writings of a historian of early modern Britain and for the reconfiguration of the Asia–Pacific Rim region in the writings of a scholar of modern Japanese literature.³⁰ Not surprisingly, young and ambitious graduate students since the 1990s have looked to these scholars—much to the anger, bafflement, and consternation of positivist social scientists and traditional humanists—as the harbinger of the next scholarly wave.

The abdication of what I call “the knowledge of the present” by both social scientists and traditional humanists also reflects a lack of vision. Although it would be easy to mock neologisms such as transnationality and postmodernity, there is a widespread appreciation that nineteenth-century theories and twentieth-century methods are inadequate to make sense of the present, whatever we choose to call it. Lacking a descriptive vocabulary and a cogent framework, many scholars remain trapped in the prison-house of the nation and of tradition, often within yet another citadel of their scholarly discipline. The ivory tower would at least presumably have the advantage of a decent view; the contemporary university operates in the blind alleys of disciplinary and subdisciplinary walls, occluding and obfuscating the contemporary realities.

I wish to stress that the crisis is a general one that afflicts all the human sciences. Deaf to the siren call of their benefactors and blind to the dazzling and dizzying transformations around them, most human scientists are content to reproduce the scholarly status quo. The crisis of area studies is a microcosm of the larger crisis of the human sciences.

What Is to Be Done?

There are at least two broad responses to the perceived crisis in area studies in general and Asian studies in particular. One possibility is to institutionalize Asian studies as a discipline

in its own right. This path is difficult because of the general conservatism of the university. Given the steady-state nature of resource allocation, any new department must rely on the destruction of another field of study. The situation is especially dire in the human sciences, as the dictates of the economy tend to favor technical and professional fields. Intellectually, moreover, institutionalizing Asian studies relies on the reproduction of the status quo as disciplines and areas are imagined to be more or less static. New disciplines will therefore reproduce the fractal structure of the existing disciplinary matrix. This is a path that should be assiduously avoided.

The second and much more ambitious scenario is to disassemble the disciplinary structure. Clearly, the late-nineteenth-century disciplines are creaking and cracking. Unable to generate any overarching view of the present, each discipline is madly replicating a fractal structure such that economists vainly seek to theorize about everything from the family to crime and to undertake ad hoc experiments. Sociologists, in contrast, continue to seek to do everything from political sociology and cultural sociology to economic sociology and environmental sociology, albeit within their traditional disciplinary domain, using rapidly outdated methods, and squarely focused on the United States. Area studies cannot find any rapprochement with cultural studies or ethnic studies, though these distinct fields often study the very same phenomena. The walls that separate the disciplines and the fields no longer serve any useful purpose, save for academic politics of intellectual reproduction and labor-market allocation. Disciplinary boundaries are especially irksome as national boundaries are increasingly porous: transnational links, whether economic or social, are difficult to deny.

The shape of the future is notoriously difficult to grasp, but one possible model is to create research and teaching centers that are mobile networks. Rather than reifying divisions and pursuing disciplinary logic and progress, these project centers would focus on fairly concrete and practical problems. They would be, at least from the perspective of the present, wildly interdisciplinary. Not surprisingly, however, these are the modalities of knowledge innovation and production in the frontline firms of Silicon Valley. The Fordist model is quite clearly irrelevant in the age of the Internet and the social media. That is, the fixed matrix of disciplines and area studies would transform into fluid networks, perhaps with limited-term teaching programs and research centers rather than semipermanent disciplines and departments. The shift would be akin to that from Fordism to flexible production. This reorganization of intellectual

work would assimilate in part the salutary example of big science, such as the creation of project teams.³¹

Undoubtedly, this sort of proposal will strike many academics as utopian at best and anathematic at worst. In particular, the specter of dilettantism hovers over any idea for intellectual reorganization of university life. Yet the headlong rush to interdisciplinarity is most evident precisely where disciplines have been most successful—in the natural sciences and engineering. In pursuing new programs for teaching and research, inherently interdisciplinary areas such as the study of the environment, informatics, or biotechnology and bioengineering bring together everyone from physicists to philosophers.

In this regard, I wish to highlight the pragmatist point that what people actually do is much more reasonable than their reflexive account of what they are doing. That is, my proposal entails the renovation or revolution not of the ways of individual scholars but of the larger scheme we use to organize and categorize them. The current organization of intellectual life is not attuned to the ways in which the world seems to work or even the ways in which scholars are making sense of it.

A still more urgent concern is what I have called the knowledge of the present. In the absence of knowledge production and dissemination by “professionals,” amateurs and dilettantes—if not demagogues—enter the vacuum. The peril of “nondemocratic” knowledge is that these amateurs and dilettantes, however bright and learned, do not operate in the scientific world of accountability and corrigibility. The best thing about science and disciplinarity is that knowledge claims are contested and institutional means exist to achieve corrigibility. Yet it is precisely these mechanisms of collective correction and progress that are missing in nonacademic modes of knowledge production.

I wish to propose Global studies as a transdisciplinary study of the human sciences in the age of globalization. When the salience of society and national borders and unity is in decline and nonnational, subnational, and supranational realities are manifest, we need to make sense of these new connections and constructs. The task seems especially urgent as many of the most pressing problems that we face are *global* in nature and scope. Global climate change, transnational terrorism, massive migrations: these are just three crucial issues that the nationalist social sciences and area studies are not ready by themselves to tackle. At the very least, we need

interdisciplinary efforts, and more likely a major overhaul of the extant academic division of labor. Indeed, there has been considerable effort to promote global studies, albeit principally as an interdisciplinary undergraduate major.³²

“What is to be done?” also raises the questions: Knowledge for what? Knowledge for whom? State-based or bureaucratic knowledge is undoubtedly critical for government bureaucrats, just as discipline-based knowledge is important for discipline-bound scholars. Yet, as I have stressed, there is a gaping need for knowledge of the present that is urgent for democratic, global citizens. Needless to say, scholarship exists not merely to inform the public, but collective enlightenment is surely a fundamental rationale for scholarship.

Asian studies, in this vision, would be part and parcel of global studies. The premise is that any adequate analysis of a contemporary—or, for that matter, past—phenomenon requires an explicitly interdisciplinary and transnational approach. It is impossible to talk about the political without making sense of the economic, the social, the cultural, and so on. Neither is it possible to talk about any area or country in isolation from the rest of the world. The horizon of interdisciplinarity should expand beyond the usual boundaries of the human sciences to incorporate the natural sciences and the professional schools. Whether we talk about energy and the environment or communication and transportation or war and migration, we cannot but incorporate technical and scientific factors into our analysis.

Returning to my opening point, rather than seeking to reify and define Asia and Asian studies, we should consider its fluidity and indefiniteness as a point of departure. Let me hasten to add that what is good about the disciplines and area studies need not be jettisoned, but rather should be incorporated into this approach. I would argue, furthermore, that this is precisely what good scholarship already achieves.

We have, then, nothing to lose by unshackling ourselves from nineteenth-century social science disciplines and twentieth-century area studies; we have, instead, the possibility of understanding our rapidly changing, complex world.

Let me close, as I began, on a somewhat gnomic note. All things excellent are rare as they are difficult. A new program or a new vision, a new paradigm or a new method won't necessarily lead to a plethora of truly outstanding works of scholarship. Furthermore, if an obviously implausible framework (at least from my perspective) called modernization theory

generated great works of scholarship, we shouldn't be confident that a brilliant and plausible paradigm will necessarily produce outstanding academic work. The real question, in any case, is whether the twenty-first-century university will play any relevant role in knowledge production and reproduction, dissemination, and innovation. This is as true for technical know-how as for the reflexive knowledge of the present.

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Notes

1. Countering the echoes of Husserl (to the things themselves) or Wittgenstein (to the rough ground), this essay nonetheless eschews any hopes of totalizing theory that some trace to Plato and others to Kant and Hegel. Also see Husserl ([1913] 1993), Wittgenstein ([1953] 1984), Jay (1984), and Popper (1945). A much more general statement of the possibilities and limitations of social theory is elaborated in Lie (forthcoming).
2. Consider only the linguistic diversity of China, which is as varied as that of Europe tout court. See Ramsey (1990). Indeed, the contemporary fact that China is deemed a nation-state, formally equivalent to Germany or Greece, bypasses the reality that China and Europe are comparable units of civilization.
3. This division corresponds to that of the major U.S. professional associations for area studies that cover Asia: the Association for Asian Studies, the Middle East Studies Association, and the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.
4. Contemporary Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese frequently share a common geographical outlook of the Sinocentric and ethnocentric perspective. To be sure, Chinese are more likely to invoke India as part of Asia, contiguous as the two countries are. Indians, in turn, are more ready to mention West Asia, which, after all, places South Asia at the center of Asia. Classical Orientalism simply referred to everything east of Europe (hence, the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies). To be sure, a one-dimensional view of Orientalism – itself historically and culturally varied across the West – threatens to become Occidentalism. See, for example, Irwin (2006). For a volume especially relevant to this paper, see Lach (1990, vol. 2, book 3).
5. See Lewis and Wigen (1997) for a cogent argument along this line of thinking.
6. For an elaboration of this argument, see Lie (2011).
7. For Japan, see Lie (2001). For Korea the strength of nationalist historiography has resisted a truly historical understanding of the national integration of Korea. See, however, Deuchler (1992) and Tongbuga Yöksa Chaedan (2010).
8. Rice was indeed the chief staple of temperate and even tropical zones but not of the northern reaches of East Asia where barley, millet, and even wheat predominated. For China, see Chang (1977) and E. N. Anderson (1988). Symptomatically, it is not the diversity of rice-based liquors

that quench the thirst of East Asians today, but recent European imports, such as beer and wine. See, for example, Norihisa (2009).

9. Needless to say, this cartography of the human science disciplines is far from complete. Proto area studies developed, especially in German research universities in the nineteenth century, to encompass not only Oriental studies but also classics, German studies (*Germanistik*), and so on.

10. The classic distinction was proposed by Wilhelm Windelband ([1912] 1993), though a much clearer articulation can be found in Rickert (1915).

11. It would be unthinkable for any serious department of East Asian languages, literatures, or cultures in the United States today to hire someone without linguistic competence in one of the East Asian languages, but a similar criterion is bypassed or belittled in many social science departments.

12. Interestingly, U.S. political science institutionalized “comparative politics” as one of the four major subfields, thereby establishing a reasonable presence of non-U.S. research in comparison to sociology or economics.

13. See Wallerstein (1991) and Lie (1995).

14. See Abbott (2001).

15. See inter alia Colander (2007) and Mirowski (1989).

16. See, for example, Akerlof and Schiller (2009) and Akerlof and Kranton (2010).

17. At least the call is loud enough to produce an Oxford handbook: Frodeman, Klein, and Mitcham (2010).

18. Herodotus, for example, can be seen as an area studies scholar in contrast to the more generalizing and theory-friendly Thucydides. Orientalism and other civilizational studies, whether as an expression of fantasies about the others or a scientific search for origins or a practically oriented desire to learn about the natives, flourished in various times and places, especially in empires with the accumulation of wealth and knowledge about faraway places. Not surprisingly, then, both Germany and Japan developed area studies in the latter period of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. For Germany, see Polaschegg (2005) and Marchand (2009); for Japan, see Yamamoto and Tanaka (2006).

19. See the overview in McCaughey (1984), especially part 2.

20. For one example, see Parsons (1951). Whatever Parsons’s theoretical shortcomings, he was instrumental in expanding the domain of sociological and social scientific inquiries to include historical and comparative case studies.

21. Evolutionary theory and convergence theory were frequently interchangeable, replete as they were with normative assumptions of progress and even teleology. See for example Burrow (1966). The comparative method, similarly, frequently had as its goal the search for universals. See for a classic statement Radcliffe-Brown (1957). Evolution, however, does not necessarily, or even frequently, end in convergence. Comparisons, similarly, may demonstrate more differences than similarities. If we take the *locus classicus* of evolution in the realm of nature, then the reality of convergence and difference, as well as the irrelevance of human assumptions about the hierarchy of beings becomes clear. See, for example, Eldridge (1988) and Gould (2002).

22. The vast literature on “modernization theory” frequently overstates its theoretical unity or substantive agreement. Parsonian evolutionary structural functionalism rubbed shoulders with historical institutionalists. For two summary statements, see Gilman (2004) and Latham (2000).

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23. See for example Hirschman (1981), Geertz (1966), and Moore (1966).
 24. See Simpson (1998).
 25. See Szanton (2004) and Harootunian and Miyoshi(2002).
 26. There is a substantial literature on this topic. In addition to the two edited books by Szanton and by Harootunian and Miyoshi, see two thought-provoking pieces by Immanuel Wallerstein (1997) and Cumings (1998).
 27. See, for an elementary exposition, Malherbe (2002).
 28. For Southeast Asia, see Anderson (1983) and Scott (1977); for South Asia, see Bhabha (1980), Chakrabarty (2000), and Spivak (1999).
 29. See, for instance, Lockman (2009) and Mearsheimer and Walt (2007).
 30. See, respectively, Brenner (2006) and Miyoshi (2010).
 31. For another articulation, see Taylor (2010).
 32. See, among others, global studies majors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (<http://global.wisc.edu/>), UCLA (www.international.ucla.edu/ips/globalstudies), and the University of Pittsburgh (www.ucis.pitt.edu/global). The College Board in fact lists global studies as one of the majors available for prospective undergraduates, replete with recommended high-school preparation and career possibilities (www.collegeboard.com/csearch/majors_careers/profiles/majors/30.2001.html).

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