
EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The value of the area studies enterprise is currently under attack. Political scientist Robert Bates of Harvard University, for example, recently asserted, "area programs are a problem for political science" characterized by "resistance to rigorous methods for evaluating arguments." He further charged that area studies "have failed to generate scientific knowledge."¹ Given the invidious nature of the academic community, it is probably not surprising that such sentiments have been heard before. A quarter of a century ago, Richard Lambert, an eminent specialist on foreign area studies, published a major study called *Language and Area Studies Review* in which he reported:

We were a bit puzzled by the force of negative feelings toward area studies of some non-area-oriented American scholars. The commonest cliché we heard in our travels was "going beyond traditional area studies," which had an implicit negative judgment as well as a promise of fresh approaches. The latter phrase, incidentally, came most often from other sections of the international studies community whose members might be expected to be natural allies—the discipline-based project-research scholars.²

Lambert went on to note that this attitude seemed motivated, at least in part, by envy of the resources that area programs attract.

The practical consequences of such resentments were limited in the 1970s by the consensus among administrators of government agencies, major foundations, and universities that knowledge of foreign languages and areas was vital to the U.S. national interest. The formative experience for this generation of functionaries was World War II, when for the first time the United States faced worldwide challenges. The cold war reinforced this "internationalist consensus." The internationalists coalesced to defeat an early effort by the Richard Nixon administration to eliminate federal support for foreign area studies. Nixon's initiative was motivated by resentment toward academic critics of his foreign policies, an attitude inherited from the Lyndon Johnson Administration. But despite White House anger during the 1970s, funding institutions remained convinced that in-depth knowledge of foreign areas and international issues not only

1. Cited by Christopher Shea in "Political Scientists Clash over Value of Area Studies," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 Jan. 1997, pp. A13-A14.

2. Richard D. Lambert, *Language and Area Studies Review* (Philadelphia, Pa.: American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1973), 2.

was important for shaping national policy but also had intrinsic intellectual value.

Foreign events of the same period had a profound impact on the field of Latin American studies. Hard-line military dictatorships seized power throughout most of Latin America and violated human rights on an unprecedented scale. The execution or disappearance of some academic colleagues, the exile of thousands of others, and loss of academic freedom in most of Latin America sent shock waves through the community of Latin American specialists in the United States and Europe. The effort to come to terms with this historic tragedy dominated the discourse of Latin American studies and gave it a common purpose.

Today's criticisms of area studies arrive in a different context. The generation of internationally oriented leaders of government programs, private foundations, and universities is gone, replaced by individuals with more domestic agendas. World War II is considered ancient history. The vast library of film and fiction rooted in the cold war seems anachronistic, almost embarrassing to remember. Villains in today's thrillers are no longer representatives of some threatening foreign country but creatures from outer space, madmen, or idiosyncratic terrorists. Foreign area specialists can no longer rely on a supportive institutional context but must compete for attention and funding against a plethora of other interests.

Latin Americanists now confront a region characterized by an array of democratic regimes and neoliberal economic experiments, each resulting in a variety of unanticipated social, cultural, and political consequences. Like Latin America itself, Latin American studies has survived tragedy to encounter diversity but in the process has lost much of its former sense of common endeavor. Similar complexities face specialists who investigate other foreign areas such as the former Soviet Union, Africa, and Asia.

Thus at a time when the intellectual challenges facing foreign area studies are multiplying, the very existence of research on such areas is being called into question. Carol Saivetz, Executive Director of the American Association for Slavic Studies, observes, "Regardless of the areas we study, we feel buffeted, if not besieged, by the same forces. We are constantly told that we are not up to speed, not methodologically pure, that we are not good [social] scientists."³ The issue is more than academic: at stake now, as in the 1970s, are the resources invested in area studies such as faculty positions, program support, and research grants.

Defense of the area studies enterprise has taken at least three tacks. The first seeks to correct misrepresentations of area studies, the most common being that area studies are bereft of disciplinary rigor because they are "interdisciplinary." This criticism confuses programs, which are com-

3. Cited in Shea, "Political Scientists Clash."

posed of persons from different disciplines, with research and training, which are almost always based in a single discipline. Department of Education data for all graduate degrees produced by Title VI National Resource Centers for Foreign Language and Area Studies from 1991 to 1994 show that 91.5 percent of graduates received disciplinary or professional degrees, while only 8.5 percent received area studies degrees, largely at the master's level.⁴ Likewise, foreign area research is almost entirely conducted by disciplinary specialists applying contemporary theoretical and methodological techniques of their field.⁵ John Creighton Campbell, Secretary of the Association for Asian Studies, comments, "We think that most of the things that people say about area studies are silly. Most of the stuff that people say area studies should be doing is what area studies is already doing."⁶

A second tack is to point out that there is no intellectually valid way of distinguishing between mainstream disciplinary research and area research, because all disciplinary research is conducted on and about world areas. The fact that mainstream social science is devoted to the study of behaviors and institutions in an area known as the United States does not endow it with greater scientific validity than research conducted on areas such as Europe, Asia, and Latin America. It may be possible to distinguish between good research and bad research by applying the current theoretical and methodological standards of a discipline, but the area of origin of data is irrelevant to such a distinction.

The third tack approaches the issue from the perspective of philosophy of science. The extensive literature on the epistemological issues faced by the natural sciences demonstrates that science proceeds through a process of interaction between theory and research, that is, by comparing theoretical models with empirical data derived from the real world. Inductive and deductive rigor in the development of theory and methodological rigor in the collection of data are essential, but the validity of scientific theory is ultimately determined not by the coherence of the theoretical model but by the correspondence between the theoretical model and the real world. From this perspective, criticisms of area studies are irrelevant because foreign areas are simply the source of information about the real world. Foreign language as a research tool and foreign area studies as a source of empirical knowledge are therefore necessary to any sys-

4. Ann Imlah Schneider, "Title VI FLAS Fellowship Awards, 1991-1994," memorandum to Directors of Title VI Centers and Fellowships Programs, Center for International Education, U.S. Department of Education, 15 Sept. 1995, p. 9, t. C.

5. Gilbert W. Merkx, "Plus Ça Change: Challenges to Graduate Education under HEA Title VI," in *International Education in the New Global Era*, edited by John N. Hawkins et al. (Los Angeles: International Programs and Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, forthcoming).

6. Cited in Shea, "Political Scientists Clash."

tem of knowledge that pretends to generalize about human affairs in those areas that collectively make up most of the world.

When the consequences of not having such knowledge are understood, the case for area studies seems even stronger. The history of Latin America from the arrival of the Spanish conquerors to the U.S. interventions in Grenada and Panama is rife with intercultural miscommunications and policy catastrophes, some absurd and others tragic in their consequences. A common factor in these debacles is the application of inappropriate models drawn from other contexts, uncorrected by empirical information about Latin American social realities. Foreign area research not only is integral to the enterprise of social science but also may offer a corrective to the tendency to turn national prejudices into models that guide international behavior.

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