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A World War Among Professors

By STEPHEN KOTKIN

Correction Appended

CLICK through the channels and you can find plenty of regional experts analyzing the nuclear-tipped tensions between India and Pakistan or a war with Iraq. But try finding a full-time political scientist who specializes in the Middle East or South Asia at the nation's top universities and you'd almost be out of luck. Stanford and Princeton don't have a single political scientist who specializes in the Middle East. Yale has no political scientist on South Asia.

Indeed, much of the most sought-after expertise on the contemporary world resides not in academic departments but in policy schools and research groups, said Lisa Anderson, president-elect of the Middle East Studies Association and Dean of the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia.

The reason isn't a lack of bodies. Today, the professional associations for area scholars claim 7,500 members for East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia; more than 4,000 for Latin America; 2,200 for Africa; and 2,600 for the Middle East. The number studying the Middle East is roughly equal to that for all of Russia, the rest of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. And while most area specialists are in the humanities, up to one-third are in social science.

Rather, the absence of regional experts in political science departments of many elite universities goes back to a long-running, rancorous debate over the best method for understanding the way the world works: is it using statistics and econometrics to identify universal patterns that underlie all economic and political systems, or zeroing in on a particular area, and mastering its languages, cultures and institutions?

Answers to this question affect jobs and resources for thousands of scholars and the education of generations of students.

Bitter divisions among universal modelers and regionalists have persisted after 9/11, which sliced across the debate. Al Qaeda appeared as an organization that operates globally, exploiting barely functioning states, while using a particular cultural and religious tradition as its motivation.
The federal government responded to the terrorist attacks by increasing funds for Middle Eastern, South Asian and Central Asian language study courses from $68 million to $86.7 million. But most practitioners agree that this rise will have only a marginal effect on the way international studies are organized and taught.

Still, the field may be in the midst of its biggest restructuring in four decades, interviews with many of the more than three dozen scholars and foundation officials indicated. To begin with, American universities are undergoing a major faculty turnover, as professors who were hired in the 1960's to meet the massive infusion of new college students have begun retiring.

The student body has also been radically changing over the past three decades, as the number of immigrants from Asia and Latin America began outpacing those from Europe. The children of these new immigrants are now pursuing Ph.D.’s in increasing numbers at the same time that growing numbers of foreign-born scholars are teaching in the United States. Finally, many American professors say that they and their colleagues are collaborating with more and more scholars from abroad.

"The internationalization of higher ed in the last 20 years has been an enormous transformation of our enterprise," said Kenneth Prewitt, the former dean of the Graduate School at the New School University and former director of the Census Bureau. Referring to graduate students, he said, "We're enormously dependent on foreign students, and no longer just in engineering."

To understand where international studies are today, though, you need to go back to 1957, when the Soviet Union shot Sputnik, the first satellite, into space. Sputnik vividly demonstrated the cold war's global competition for influence and even survival. It precipitated the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which created a new federal role in education and further galvanized the post-World War II investments in university-based study of the foreign world. This enterprise has been known as "areas studies," for the major areas of the world: East Asian studies, Middle Eastern studies, Soviet studies.

These ranks of American scholars studying the world expanded astronomically, far exceeding the pith-helmeted Africanists or the Orientalists of the British Empire.

But by the 1970's, even as American universities organized to study world regions, the world was evolving differently. Accelerated international capital and migration flows, the opening up of China and India, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the spread of AIDS, and the advent of global terrorists, all profoundly challenged what had seemed the major achievement of international studies: foreign language-based scholarship, involving multiple disciplines, organized by geographical region.

"Area studies got fat and happy, and was doing a lot of arcane, silly stuff," said Anthony Marx, a political scientist at Columbia who has done work on Africa.
Increasingly, area studies came under assault for the "ghetto feel" of its world area divisions. Equally important, economists and political scientists pushed for still greater stress on "hard" science: universal truths, not culturally specific knowledge. Powerful new research tools emerged, raising analytical rigor, though often in the guise of magic formulas.

"Some researchers studying politics did engage in a megalomaniac view that there was one world-applicable theory," said Gary King, a professor in Harvard's government department, who advocates use of scientific methods for qualitative as well as quantitative data.

Such major intellectual shifts can make or break careers. University social science departments competing for the top rankings have more and more equated excellence with "scientific" and "quantifiable."

If the cold war enabled area studies to flourish, its end meant it had to compete more aggressively for prestige.

And area studies were hampered by another problem. To break new ground, and maintain influence in professional battles, established area studies scholars, including those with families, often need to do new field work for months at a time, sometimes in places that lack sanitation or civil peace -- a challenge some of them find too great. Their quantitative and American studies counterparts don't have this problem: they can explore new material in front of their computers and still pick up the kids at 5.

Predictably, the area studies establishment initially resisted a shakeup, said Craig Calhoun, a sociologist and president of the Social Science Research Council, a nonprofit institution that finances the training of the next generation of scholars. Throughout the 1990's, "area studies often reacted to the challenges of globalization defensively," he said, "failing to make the positive case for why local knowledge and languages remained important." By contrast, he continued, the core disciplines "grabbed the globalization theme by saying it was one process the same all over the world," an argument derived from "views on the global economy that powerfully influenced the business types who sit on foundation boards."

Thus it was not surprising that eventually even the foundations most responsible for building area studies reassessed their commitment. The Ford Foundation started an initiative in 1996 to revitalize area studies. "Frankly, at the beginning I didn't have any idea how we were going to do this," said Toby Volkman, who was a Ford program officer from 1995 through 2000 and is now an associate research scholar at New York University studying transnational adoptions.

As it turned out, Mr. Volkman said, "we learned about interesting new stuff already going on at universities across the country, including institutions that Ford had not paid much attention to."

At institutions like Duke University and the University of California at Irvine, research and
teaching are organized not around Africa but around the Black Atlantic, a subject that brings together the Western Hemisphere with West Africa on topics ranging from the history of music to contemporary business practices. Similarly, other scholars began studying the Indian Ocean world, combining the usually separate spheres of India, the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia, or the Americas, both north and south. And now, instead of spending a year or two in a single locale, many field anthropologists prefer doing comparative research, studying, say, risk-taking behavior with commodity traders in Chicago as well as coffee farmers in Kenya, said Angelique Haugerud, an anthropologist at Rutgers University.

Area scholars have begun to catch on that globalization plays out differently depending on where you are, said Mr. Calhoun said. "You can't generalize from the local, but you can't generalize without the local."

This globalization of academia is creating a moment of flux. Whereas green-card and foreign-passport holders accounted for around 20 percent of the approximately 53,000 Ph.D.'s in social sciences awarded between 1960 and 1982, they represented around 35 percent of the approximately 39,000 social science Ph.D.'s awarded between 1991 and 2000, according to the National Science Foundation.

As more and more foreign-born as well as non-European descendants enter Ph.D. programs here, Mr. Prewitt predicts that what he calls the "parochialism" of American social science will further give way, so that "a study of Congress is not assumed to be a study of representative democracy" anywhere, and for all time.

Many experts on American politics are already incorporating non-American case materials. Christopher Achen, a professor at the University of Michigan, for example, works with English-speaking scholars in Taiwan who are also adept in quantitative methods. Still, such global collaboration cannot resolve the tension between seeing American-style democracy and markets as a universal frame of reference versus seeing the United States as just one among many culturally specific areas, however powerful.

Indeed, the trends associated with globalization will hardly stop the feuding between the modelers and the regional specialists. Still, many of today's younger researchers -- like Ellen Lust-Okar, an assistant professor of political science at Yale University, whose work on Jordan and Morocco combines both modeling and Arabic, readily accept the double burden of mastering both regional expertise and social science tools.

Even after 9/11, though, she said, "a good political scientist working on the Middle East is considered a hard thing to find."

Drawing (Ward Schumaker)