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Whither Area Studies?

The subject of area studies is never very far from politics.

On October 5, 2001, less than a month after 9/11, Lynne Cheney gave a speech in Dallas, Texas¹ which she began by saying "some educators are saying that we need more emphasis on other cultures in our classrooms. In last Monday's Washington Post, Judith Rizzo, Deputy Chancellor for Instruction in the New York City school system, declared 'those people who said we don't need multi-culturalism, that it's too touchy, feely a pox on them.' She went on, 'I think they've learned their lesson. We have to do more to teach habits of tolerance, knowledge and awareness of other cultures.' Now, this is not exactly a sensitive expression of the multi-cultural argument, but I think we could all agree that in the 21st century it is important that our children know about the great events and inspiring ideas of the cultures of the world." Ms. Cheney continued on to say that:

. . . the Deputy Chancellor's suggestion that we have to do more to teach habits of tolerance, also implies that the United States is to blame for the attack of September 11th, and that somehow intolerance on our part was the cause. But on September 11th, it was most manifestly not the United States that acted out of religious prejudice. In 1998, Osama Bin Laden told ABC News that his mission was to purify Moslem land of all non-believers. This was the intolerance that manifested itself on September 11th in the person of fanatics intending on causing pain and suffering as possible.

Cheney admitted that:

. . . our children as they go through school and college should learn about the cultures of the world. But if there were one aspect of schooling from kindergarten

¹ Speech to Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 5 October 2001, from Mrs. Cheney's White House webpage.

through college to which I would give added emphasis today, it would be American history. We are not doing a very good job of teaching it now. . . . [W]e should teach our children how hard the establishment of the country was. . . . [We should teach them how] So many were willing to risk so much because they treasured freedom. . . . These are the things our children should know. And I don't think it would hurt a bit, when we teach them about the Constitution to use the word 'miracle'.

As is so often the case, Ms. Cheney was a prophet of federal intellectual policy. Last year the Bush administration announced a program for the National Endowment for the Humanities to be called "We the People." This \$25 million initiative is intended exclusively to support the study of American history and culture. It actually follows along a \$100 million program sponsored by the venerable Senator Robert Byrd entitled "Teaching American History," and intended to foster the "traditional" teaching of U.S. history. And in the current session of Congress, Senator Lamar Alexander has introduced legislation to create a \$25 million dollar initiative to create summer academies for the teaching of traditional U.S. history and civics. Even more recently, Senator Judd Gregg has introduced a bill to establish an apparently similar support structure for the teaching of American history and civics, to be authorized at \$125 million. If all of these programs come to fruition (not likely), they would receive appropriations, totaling something like \$150 million dollars for the teaching of American culture at a time when the total budget of the N.E.H. is likely to be around \$250 million in FY 2005. One has to wonder why there is such a rush for the federal government, which has so little to do with the content of either K-12 or higher education, is suddenly so interested in fostering education about our country in this era of globalism and international conflict. By contrast, in the current fiscal year, the Fulbright Program is appropriated at \$123 million.

There are other ways in which the emerging international political situation is likely to affect thinking about area studies. The New York Times, published an article on March 19, 2003² about a recent study that warned against too much tolerance of Islam. It was written by Gilbert Sewell, a former education editor at Newsweek who heads the

² Section B, p.7, col.3

American Textbook Council, an organization opposed to multi-cultural teaching. Mr. Sewell examined seven widely used middle school and high school world history textbooks, and concluded that publishers “made an effort to circumvent unsavory facts that might have cast Islam in anything but a positive light.” For instance, textbooks have “defanged” the term “jihad”. Mr. Sewell contended that defining the term generally as the Moslem struggle for spiritual improvement rather than more narrowly as “holy war,” whitewashes a dangerous concept. Sewell relied on Prof. Bernard Lewis for this reading, but the Times article goes on to quote Rashid Khalidi, professor of history at the University of Chicago, who called Mr. Sewell’s study “a terribly biased document full of bigoted statements.” The Chronicle of Higher Education recently published two articles in the same issue (April 4, 2003) that are examples of a tendency to restrict or disparage area scholarship. One piece is entitled “Back Lash in the Middle East: Many Academics Fear Long-Term Damage in Relations Between Arab and American Scholars” and the other one is headlined “Overseas Research Becomes a Casualty of War: Many Scholars Postpone Projects in Islamic Countries Hoping to Return Some Day.”³ Scholarly understanding of Islam and the Middle East have never been more important to public policy than they are now, but one has to wonder whether the public debate can remain based upon serious academic area knowledge in an atmosphere of fear and xenophobia.

I became involved in the debate over the utility of area studies in the 1990s when I was working at the American Council of Learned Societies. Although I was trained in American studies (not that North America is not an “area”), I had recruited a number of area studies associations to join those groups already members of ACLS, and I was keen to support their efforts to promote the field. But, as it happened, this was an historical moment of contest about area studies, an intersection between two converging tendencies. One was a growing loss of faith in area studies as an academic enterprise, and the other was the emerging intellectual environment of “the culture wars.” The culture wars were mostly a rift within the humanities, a rebellion by those who were committed to very traditional intellectual approaches and, especially, American-centric approaches, against those who were taking more innovative approaches and who were more interested in other parts of the world.

³ pp. A39 and A13.

Little did I know that I had entered the field at the time when a great edifice was beginning to crumble. Area studies was by then about thirty years old, and it seemed to be firmly entrenched in the American university scene. It had developed a complicated but effective series of organizational expressions. It will be useful to recall briefly the range of these institutions: university area studies centers, many federally funded under Title VI; non-profit area exchange programs such as IREX, LASPAU, CSCPRC, and AMIDEAST; the joint ACLS/SSRC area committees and the Fulbright Program. There were also efforts within the older learned societies to support area studies, and new societies specifically tailored for the purpose – the Asian Studies Association, the African Studies Association, the American Association of Slavic Studies, and so on. There were international structures that supported area studies, as well as academic publishers and, especially academic libraries.

And of course, financially, there were a host of sources of support. The major and initiating force was of course the legislation of 1958 and then 1965, the National Defense Education Act, the FLAS fellowships. We also had Title VI, Title VIII, and the PL480 program, to name only some of the best known programs. Finally, there was the private philanthropic community, and particularly the Ford Foundation.

Figure 1⁴

⁴ SSRC “Report to Ford Foundation” from Mary McDonnell, 4 April 2003

Joint Committee Structure until 1995

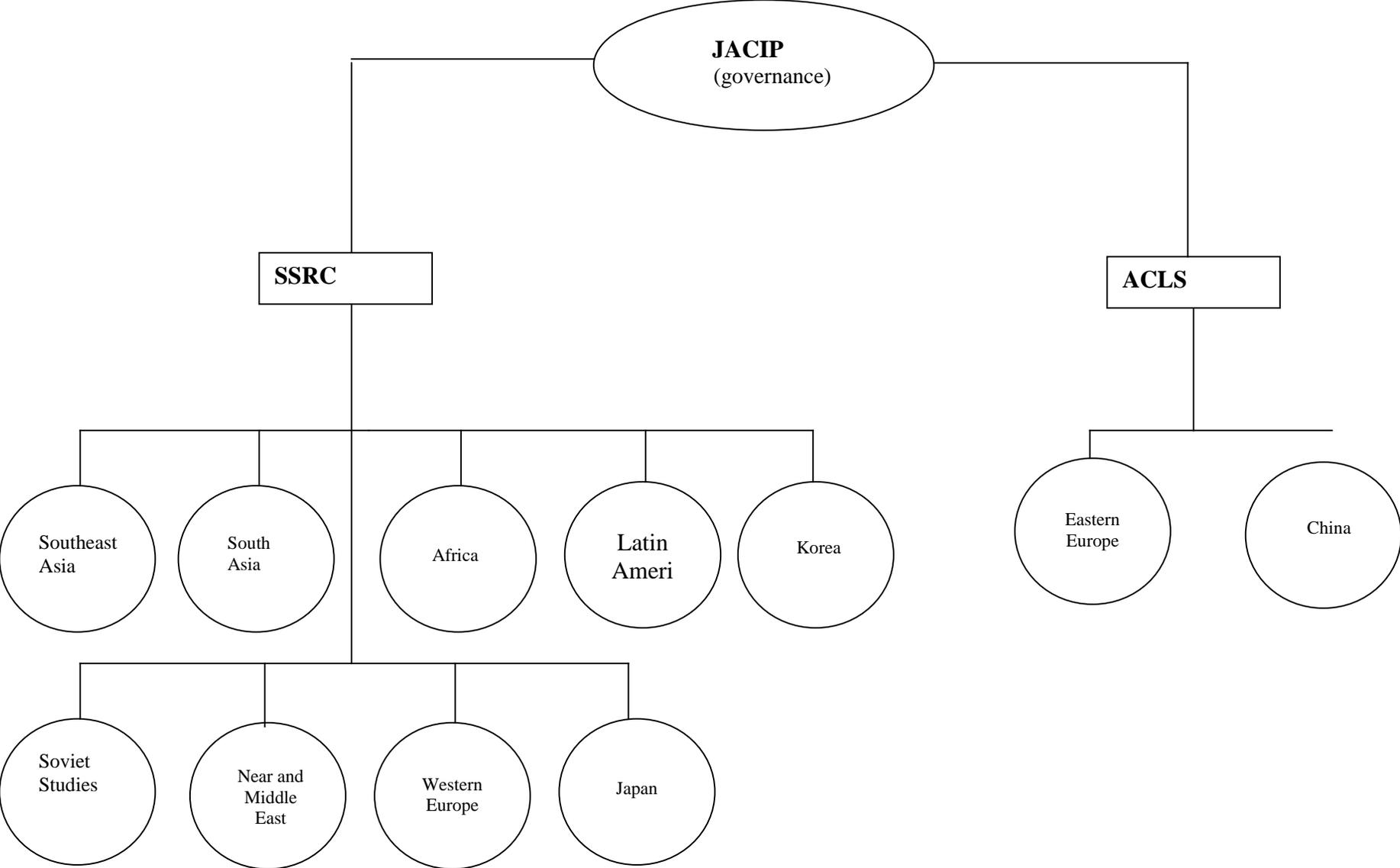
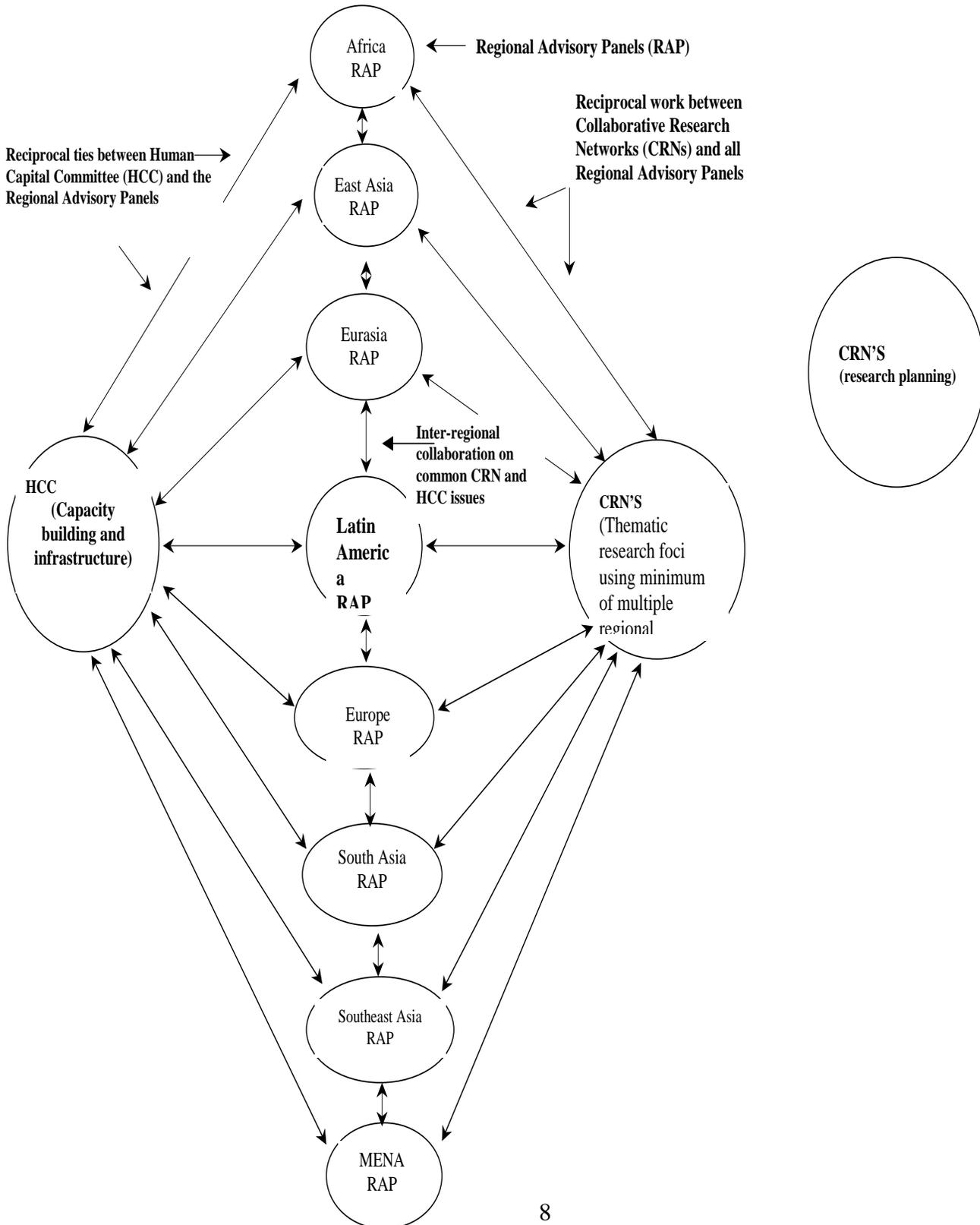


Figure 2⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*

**Question #3B: Diagram of the Current Organizational Structure of the SSRC/ACLS
Core International Program**



But the underlying reality was that the area studies community had come to take for granted the universities and a variety of external private and public funders who had been supporting the field for a very long time – since shortly after World War II. Indeed perhaps the biggest problem for area studies in the 1990s was that we had become dependent upon a very small number of large funders. Federal funding had declined very substantially by that time, and the major private funding alternative was the Ford Foundation -- area studies had become to a considerable extent the client of the Ford Foundation.

It was also the case that area studies had become an issue contested between the fields of the humanities, which saw culture as the central issue, and the social sciences, which were entering another scientific and universalizing phase, and beginning an infatuation with the idea of globalization. This conflict became an issue dividing ACLS and the Social Sciences Research Council, sister organizations who had long shared responsibility for research planning in area studies. The SSRC, with Ford, had become more interested in internationalization and globalization than in area studies more narrowly construed. In a sense, this was not surprising, since social science is typically more sensitive to utilitarian concerns than the humanities. And the Ford Foundation, the sole funder of the joint area committee system, was supportive of the SSRC's direction. When I realized that the Ford Foundation was making a decision to withdraw from funding area studies per se, I tried to argue that we needed to sustain area studies as well as the newer policy fields. It seemed to me that we were threatened with having a world in which policy makers would assume that area knowledge was available when the next international crisis emerged, only to find that we had few scholars who spoke the relevant languages and understood the local cultures. But at that time such arguments did not prevail. And, quite apart from humanities/social science and ACLS/SSRC conflict, the issue was also one of foundation burn-out. Almost all foundations have a limited attention span for programmatic activity, and in fact Ford had been amazingly loyal to area studies for an impressive length of time.

The larger point is that the institutional dilemma of area studies cannot be understood without an appreciation of the ecology of institutions maintaining and

supporting the field. committees. From about 1970 to 1990 the mature structure of the field was comprised primarily of university-based centers, each devoted to a particular area. The elite centers were identified and funded by the federal government through the competitive Title VI process. Graduate students were additionally funded by annual FLAS grants. SSRC and ACLS managed a national planning capacity in the form of 11 joint area studies committees, with a single coordinating committee. (See Figure1)

When it became clear, in the early 1990s, that Ford wasn't going to continue to provide money to be "divvied up" among these areas, however, the question for ACLS and SSRC was what to do next? Both organizations recognized that there were problems with the existing organizational structure of our joint committees. There were complaints that the committees did not cover all parts of the world (Australasia and North America being two obvious examples) and, more important, that the standing committees were too much identified with individual nation states, or small groups of nation states. There were also complaints that the ACLS/SSRC structure was dominated by an aging, establishment area studies elite. Our solution, produced in negotiation with both the Ford Foundation and the existing joint committees, was to reduce the number of the regionally based committees, but to enlarge the geographical coverage of each one. We called these new committees Regional Area Programs, or RAPs -- Africa, East Asia, Eurasia, Latin America, Europe, South Asia, South East and then Middle EastNA. (See Figure 2) We also made provision for thematic projects that could cut across the RAPs. The planning sessions for the new structure were some of the most painful meetings I have ever attended. We had groups of thirty and forty scholars who represented the old joint committees and the traditional area studies fields trying to agree upon what countries ought to go into what areas. But we finally succeed in gaining substantial support for the new research and planning structure, and the Ford Foundation agreed to support it, though much less generously than in the first iterations of the ACLS/SSRC program. One of the substantial innovations in the new iteration is a dramatic increase in the proportion of non-U.S. scholars on the various committees and projects. Area studies became internationalized.

Meanwhile, many institutions and individuals continued to press Ford to find additional ways to support area studies directly. This led to a second thought on the part of the Ford people, who developed the notion of grants for “Crossing Borders”⁶ programs. This was a \$25 million dollar program, well-directed by Toby Volkman. Half of the funds were for traditional area studies and half “to foster innovative thinking and practices related to the field of area studies itself through a variety of partnership as well as disciplinary and other border crossings.” The idea was to have both geographical border crossings and disciplinary border crossings. About this time Ford also provided ACLS and SSRC with money for two area studies-related programs. One, called the International Pre-doctoral Fellowship Program, provided dissertation fellowships for young social scientists to induce them to take a predissertation year to learn another language and to get to know another area. Ford and Mellon also funded the International Dissertation Research Fellowship (IDRF), a dissertation fellowship program of a slightly different sort. After my time at ACLS there was also an NEH funded fellowship program that was not specifically area-based, available to support area projects when they came along. So a number of good national support programs emerged out of the noise and confusion of the 1990s debates about the value of area studies, and in retrospect I feel a bit as though I had played the role of Chicken Little at the time.

But I want to take the intellectual debate of the 1990s about the future of area studies seriously. A good starting point is former SSRC President Kenneth Prewitt’s 2002 essay in the SSRC’s Items⁷ newsletter: “The Social Science Project: Then, Now and Next.” The point Prewitt makes is that the social science project of the late 20th century was about America, and that the flaw in the project was that social scientists tried to generalize universally from data and cultural patterns that were primarily American. “International relations has been an extension of the American project to include protecting the great liberal, democratic experience from foreign threats and also, of course, protecting it abroad. The junction to make the world safe for democracy was the umbrella maxim, though now and more problematically it is being replaced by a different maxim, ‘make the world safe from terrorism’”.

⁶ *Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies* (New York, Ford Foundation, 1999)

⁷ Social Science Research Council, *Items and Issues*, vol.3, no.1-2, 2002, pp.1, 5-9.

Prewitt goes on to say that the international relations and area studies “. . . enterprise . . . has been *secondarily* to build a science and primarily to build a better society, with the society in mind more often than not the one in which we live or the places to which we were projecting our doctrines and values.” This, he suggests, was the key conflict. The attack on area studies was coming primarily from hard social scientists who were once again trying to turn social science truly into science -- a quantitative and theoretically sophisticated field in which there was no reason not to use data from everywhere and no particular need to process that data with any reference to its cultural provenance. My view at the time, and now, was that social scientists had to recognize that under certain circumstances numbers have culture, but I have not gotten very far with that argument.

The more interesting question at the moment is how much progress we have made since the height of the area studies debates in changing academic perceptions of the importance of international perspectives. We now have a very useful account by Sheila Biddle, a long-time former Ford international studies program officer, who has spent the last five or six years studying the internationalization of higher education. In a recent report⁸, Biddle has studied intensively a small number of universities to see what they have actually done by way of internationalization. I am of course particularly interested in her account of the situation of area studies and area centers, which she says face common problems. “Area studies as a form of scholarly inquiry has been questioned, together with its role in the academic enterprise,” for the following reasons: 1) the world has changed dramatically; 2) the genealogy of the area studies enterprise and its roots in the cold war now do not seem as relevant; 3) the obsolescence of the Title VI area categories, and their failure to reflect the new regional entities and changing demographics; and 4) the challenge to area studies as a form of intellectual inquiry.

Biddle contends that the two leading problems we have had to contend with in area studies are, on one hand, the high cost of maintaining area programs, and, secondly, the difficulty of making appointments in area studies, particularly in the social science fields. Her view is that the sense of crisis in the area studies community (which I have

⁸ Sheila Biddle, “Internationalization: Rhetoric or Reality?” pp.80-83.

described in part) had passed by the late 1990s, mainly because federal funding has, in fact, held up.

Area studies had proved remarkably resilient. But by the end of the decade of the '90s, the surrounding landscape had shifted. Within regional scholarship, there was now more emphasis on comparative work across and within regions; on collaborative work with colleagues from other disciplines and regional specializations, and with scholars from the region; and on problem-focused work on dealing with broad themes such as democratization, migration, ethnicity and identity.

She notes that “These new directions, particularly the last, favored some regions over others”: in particular Eastern Europe, Russia and the successor states of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, Biddle concludes that areas studies now faces “three interrelated problems:” 1) “the lack of recognition accorded to international, including regional, scholarship, within the academy” 2) “the matter of appointments” and 3.) “cutting across the first two, the question of resources.” “The era of quasi-permanent positions dedicated to particular regions of the world is over. . . . The situation is worst in social sciences – economics, political science and sociology -- but it exists in humanities departments as well.” “[T]here is little incentive for graduate students in social science fields (other than anthropology and history) to invest time and money in acquiring language in area expertise.” . . . [M]any younger scholars . . . are more open than their mentors to variety of methodologies and approaches. They have no stake in the “areas studies debate” and are finding new ways to incorporate a regional dimension into their work. Thus, the underlying problem is that there just are not resources or rewards for people who work in this area. In other words, the “area studies debate” may be over, but we are no further along in addressing the real world challenge of institutionalizing area studies in the academy than we were a decade ago.

Perhaps this dilemma will be perpetual. It certainly is not new, for even in the late 1970s another version of the area studies debate was going on – employing different terminology and different forms of expression. As an example one might note Benjamin Schwartz’ presidential address to the Asian Studies Association in 1980 – a terribly defensive speech trying to make the case that there was still something worth doing in area based studies. His argument was that area studies were under pressure from two directions, one from scientific claims and the other from globalist thinkers (such as Immanuel Wallerstein).⁹ But more recently there have been important voices, coming from those who are sympathetic to area studies, asking whether there are not some fundamental flaws in the traditional conception of the field, and whether we have not made big mistakes in our tactics for support of the field. Greg Calhoun, the president of SSRC, for instance, has contended that the area studies community made a mistake in initially resisting a shake up of the ACLS/SSRC area studies programs. Throughout the 1990s, Calhoun was quoted in the New York Times¹⁰ as saying, “area studies often reacted to the challenges of globalization defensively, failing to make the positive case for why local knowledge and languages remained important. By contrast “. . . 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.”

Similarly, on 7 September 2002 my colleague, Steve Kotkin a Russian specialist, wrote a piece for the New York Times on the decline of area studies and he said “click thru 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 be almost 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.” Well, it turns out that he was wrong about it turns out Yale, but the general point is correct, and it has real life consequences. There is simply not enough area

⁹ Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Presidential Address: Area Studies as a Critical Discipline,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 40/1, November, 1980, pp.24-5.

¹⁰ Steven Kotkin, “A World War Among Professors,” *The New York Times* September 7, 2002, Section B; Page 9; Column 1

knowledge being created by specialists and communicated either to students or to the general public. We are doing something wrong with the area knowledge system as it is currently configured.

So what went wrong in the 1980s and 1990s? Clearly one of the problems was that we had come to the end of the Cold War, and that was significant in two ways. First, the national security arguments that had long worked to justify funding for area studies, especially in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe (Title VIII), were no longer politically effective. A number of advocates, attempting to raise any money for China studies, tried the national security argument in the mid-1990s: “if we were going to worry about security threats after the Cold War, we really ought to begin to worry about China;” but the Congress was apparently no longer interested in that kind of argument. In the end, after all, the area studies community never succeeded in developing substantial funding (apart from Title VI) for the Middle East or for South Asia, and we did not develop any federal funding at all for most other parts of the world. Further, with the Fall of the Wall, social science appeared to be wearing the Emperor’s clothes. The popular, and political, perception was that the academic community did not have a clue as to what was going to happen or, for that matter, as to what had happened. We did not do very well at predictions, predictions are what is expected of (social) scientists.

Secondly, area studies was negatively affected by the intellectual transformation of the social science disciplines themselves, largely because of the “turn to theory” in general and the emergence of “rational choice” theory in particular. The now dominant approach in fields like economics and political science, the publicly most prestigious of the social sciences, privileges the discovery of science-like general theory and tends to relegate context and specific data (for which, read “culture”) to the margins of academic inquiry. The topics that had constituted mainstream area studies social science in early years have fallen into disfavor with young scholars, because they can not get tenured doing that sort of research. In retrospect it is not surprising that IPFP program at SSRC, which was originally focused on recruiting dissertation-writing economists and other “hard” social scientists, has in the end succeeded most clearly in history and the other “soft” social sciences. It is more important to be good at mathematics and computer

modeling than to speak foreign languages or have long-term field experience in most social science departments.

But area studies has also been under pressure from developments outside the social sciences. It has been strongly affected by intellectual innovations in the humanities -- from cultural studies and post-colonial studies, in particular. Each of these has challenged important intellectual premises about the nature of culture, and also about the relationship of scholars and scholarship to the post-colonial world. And it is obviously there have been a whole series of changes within the broader university context that have made a difference. One of them, of course, is the decline of language teaching. One half of all American college students studying a language in college are now studying Spanish. Most of our students do not know French or German, much less any commonly taught language. A second crucial change is that the growing financial difficulties of the universities has meant that area studies centers are under increasingly severe pressure from their own universities, and ever more dependent upon external support. We have lost faculty lines and we have sometimes lost the support of our chief academic officers. As I have suggested already, we have lost, or are losing our graduate students both for lack of funding and for lack of career opportunities.

A place where declines in funding have made an enormous difference is international exchanges. The Fulbright program has taken a beating in terms of overall funding for a number of years. But the harm to area studies is not simply in the decline of appropriations. Rather it comes from the fact that Fulbright funding has, in historic terms, become skewed: increased amounts for undergraduate student exchanges and specialized professional programs, and decreased amounts for graduate students and research faculty. Those categories of Fulbrights have sustained our field in the past, but they are in political disfavor now. And international exchanges have been hurt for another, sociological, reason. I am thinking of the emergence of the two-career academic family. Back in the 60s, it was less of a problem for a male professor or graduate student to pack up and go and drag everybody abroad with him, or even to leave the family behind -- but that does not happen much anymore. I may be exaggerating, but I suspect that perceptions of enhanced personal danger have also escalated, so that fewer scholars

feel able to go to areas that may not be secure. Post Iraq-war fears of anti-Americanism abroad will also doubtless have a negative impact on the field.

It is hard to be specific about less tangible negative influences on area studies, but I also have the sense that the vitality of the field has been affected by what I am tempted to call the resegregation of higher education by wealth and prestige. In the glory years of early federal funding it felt as though everybody got money. New universities, departments and programs arose up, and there seemed to be Title VI centers everywhere. Everything, but most particularly graduate school places, seemed open to national competition. It made less difference which institution one attended, since so many fine new programs were emerging in new or previously less well-known universities. FLAS and Fulbright fellowships supported people from institutions across the country. But more recently, if a student wants to study a specific area, she had better go to a university that has a strong area studies center with its own funding, so the institution can send you out into the field to do your research. And that means that she is likely to be going to one of a handful universities that can offer a 5-year package to do graduate work. But the institutions offering such rich fellowships, and providing substantial research support for both students and faculties, are largely the a relatively small number of elite universities. The programs are superb, but we have lost something important in openness of access, energy and diversity of students in the process. It is harder and harder for departments to take risks on either students or faculty. And that I think is a terrible thing for the area studies project.

What is to be done? I surely do not have most of the answers, but let me make a few suggestions, some of them intensely practical in nature. The first is to maintain and strengthen library resources. This field was built on the availability of foreign area materials and specialist librarians, and both continue to be crucial to the success of the field. But in an era of serious decline in both book and serial acquisition budgets, it has become harder to continue the inflow of new area studies materials, and even to continue the foreign journal subscriptions that are the backbone of research. Other sorts of financial and technological changes in our great libraries are quite likely making it difficult to recruit and retrain the area bibliographers and acquirers who build our

collections and guide scholars in using them. So working with libraries in an era in which the very definition of what it means to be a library is at issue needs to remain high on our agenda.

Secondly, of course we need to continue to sustain the cultural institutions other than universities that have been our supporters. Museums are absolutely crucial to the field. Unfortunately, due to intellectual changes in the field of anthropology, some of the vitality has gone out of ethnographic museums, but their collections and curators remain crucial to area studies. We are also beholden to areas studies associations and to cultural institutions such as the Asia Society and other regionally-oriented nonprofit institutions. And perhaps most important of all now, we are beholden to the international academic community and to international cultural organizations. Although area studies began as an American project, it is no longer that. Information technology works for us here, but we must build the sorts of new institutions that build and sustain digital materials for the field.

Third, it goes without saying that we must recognize that there are distinguished area scholars all over the world. More and more of them have been raised and trained abroad, although some of them are teaching in this country. That is a purely good thing, and we have to find better ways to sustain it – without damaging the emerging academic centers of area studies abroad. The “brain drain” is a delicate problem for us. And the same must be said about graduate students. We still have a great many students coming here from around the world, but their numbers are declining. To some extent this is a good thing, since they are needed at home, but the ecology of area studies is fragile and we have to work out a new balance of production, supply and sustainability in the field. It will not be easy.

Fourth, as I have already implied, we have to work with the Fulbright Program to make secure more funding, and to ensure that the research component of Fulbright regains its vigor. The same is true for Title VI and other federal programs of support for area studies training and research. I hope we can agree that graduate student fellowships are our first priority, so that students can get abroad to familiarize themselves with

foreign areas, to work on their languages, and to integrate themselves into local communities and networks. And we have to encourage the philanthropic foundations to renew their interest in supporting foreign area scholarship. The Ford Foundation bore the brunt for too long. We need to show other foundations why what we do makes a difference to the welfare of humankind.

And, in general, I think we have to find ways to make a better case for the field – to show the range of reasons why it is important for this country to understand the rest of the world, and to understand the role of local, national and regional values and traditions in the world. We need to move away from the sort of western universalism that characterized too much of the intellectual life of the 20th century. That means, in other words, that we need to modernize and internationalize the tradition of area studies. We need new justifications for an “old” field. The challenge is particularly acute and poignant in our newly anti-multilateral era – that is, an era not simply unilateral and bellicosely American, but increasingly and proudly American exceptionalist. And it may be literally the case that in the present crisis it might be a reinvigorated area studies community that can in fact provide the international mutual understanding that Senator William Fulbright championed, and which is in such short supply at the moment. But to do that, we have to tie some substantial part of area knowledge to the solution of social, political, economic and life problems.

But is this worth doing? Traditionally, the humanistic parts of the area students movement have resisted such presentism and pragmatism. Those of who have long been in the field must ask ourselves whether area studies, as we have conceived of it for half a century, it is worth saving? Are we still fighting the last war? Is it possible for us to rethink the field from the ground up? Can we, for instance, move to a more polycentric view of the world, and away from the by now traditional American-European view that generalizations that work for us ought to work for everyone in the world. It is now apparent that there are different conceptions of social science in different cultures. We need to know more about them.

In preparing this talk I was assisted by my superb research assistant, Simon Stacey, a South African who worked with us on a book on NGOs and the peace process in Northern Ireland, Israel, Palestine and South Africa.¹¹ Simon is just completing a PhD in political theory at Princeton, and when I called upon him for help he tried to beg off by saying that he knew nothing about area studies. But he has now read a great deal in and about the field, and I want to conclude by quoting a few lines of the e-mail message he sent me after concluding his research for me for this talk¹². In it, he began by saying, “The most general point I try to make – I freely admit that I’m not sure I believe it -- is that if area studies can’t summon enough resources and defenders, there’s probably a reason. It’s not a discipline with a long-established subject matter or methodology (admittedly, there are all sorts of arbitrarinesses to the established disciplines); it was largely a creation of a particular historical juncture; maybe its time has just passed?” He goes on to say that:

I’m still not entirely sure in what sense something has gone wrong with area studies. Two things could have happened that might lead one to say something had gone wrong . . . On the one hand, area studies, despite being intellectually healthy, self-confident and sure of its ground, respected, productive, predictively potent, might have stopped getting the money and support it needed to continue to do this good work, or might have stopped attracting graduate students, or might be contributing less than its fair share of publications to academic journals/presses. If a well-functioning field of study were to suffer like this, it would be perfectly clear that something had gone wrong, and that urgent work needed to be done to stop the rot. . . . [Alternatively,] the academic practice of area studies might be criticized for not being intellectually healthy. That is, it might be pointed out that it is often insular, that it relies over-heavily on ethnographic methods and resists advances in research techniques, that it has failed to anticipate events and processes it should have, that it can’t

¹¹ Benjamin Gidron, Stanley N. Katz, Yeheskel Hasenfeld, *Mobilizing for Peace: Conflict Resolution in Northern Ireland, Israel/Palestine and South Africa*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002.

¹² E-mail from Simon Stacey to Stanley N. Katz, 5 April 2003

explain things it should be able to, that it's inappropriate to study areas in a global era, etc.

Finally, Simon posed a question to me, "What is area studies for? Is area studies supposed to be useful? . . . And if it's supposed to be useful, is it actually useful?" Then he says "Area studies as we know it is today – as the relatively institutionalized, university-based enterprise it is --largely because during and after the Second World War the U.S. state made it this way. . . . But it was decisively inflected by the needs and pressures of its times. It should come as no surprise, then, that with the changing of the times, area studies has found itself in a new environment, and arguably not terribly well-equipped to deal with it -- it was never designed to. And so it had better adapt or it will die."

My first comment on Simon's response is are profoundly fortunate to be able to work with graduate students who are so perceptive and bright. The second is that say that I think that Simon has posed a challenge to all of us who care about area studies, if we are truly to be aware of where we are headed as we enter this new century. Even if we believe, as I do, that everything that happens globally happens in some place and some language, we need to ask the "so what?" question. Of course we believe that we are need to train students to speak and understand languages and to experience local cultures, but what ought to be the shape of the larger enterprise that sustains such training and scholarship? Does the term "area studies" best encapsulate the challenge of understanding and improving the frightening world in which we now find ourselves?