

The Impact of 9/11 on Area Studies

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In the United States, the production of knowledge about world regions stands at a crossroads. The subject of manifold rethinkings and critiques since the end of the Cold War, the project of U.S. area studies—“the most successful, large-scale interdisciplinary project ever in the humanities and the social sciences” in the words of former SSRC President Kenneth Prewitt¹—is experiencing what may be its most acute and prolonged crisis since its inception and institutionalization in the U.S. university in middle decades of the twentieth century. In this essay, we propose to examine the complex intersection of intellectual, institutional and political processes that have cumulatively contributed to the current crisis of area studies in the United States and to assess the impact that the events of 9/11 and their aftermath have had on this national scholarly enterprise. It is our contention that much as the end of the Cold War interrupted the longstanding frameworks that had organized the study of world regions in the United States since the late 1940s, the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington DC set into motion forces and processes of both national and global significance that quite dramatically called into question many of the intellectual and analytical certainties of the previous decade of the 1990s. But unlike the well-oiled (and well-heeled) transition from the epistemologies of the Cold War to the millennial dreams of capitalist globalization that marked the last decade the 20th Century, the interruption of the globalization paradigm that drove many of the intellectual and institutional initiatives during the 1990s has not been replaced by clearly defined analytical frameworks.

¹ Kenneth Prewitt. “Presidential Items,” *Items* 50, (June/September), 1996, p 15.

It is our contention, rather, that the impact of 9/11 on area studies has been markedly uneven, and at times paradoxical, across specific area studies fields as well as across the fields' constitutive disciplines and institutions. Rather than giving rise to new paradigms, our research suggests that 9/11 (understood as signifier, marker and watershed rather than as event) has thrown some of the key intellectual and institutional imperatives of the previous decade into disarray and have generated political pressures of various sorts on individual scholars, campus-based area studies centers and international area studies associations.² While the impact of these pressures on specific fields and disciplines has been uneven, these have had a significant impact on the campus environments in which area studies teaching and research takes place as well as on the national political spaces within which federal funding for area studies is deliberated.

Middle East Studies: The Canary in the Mineshaft³

There is little doubt that the most visible impact of 9/11 has been on the field of Middle East Studies. And while it may be too early to determine whether the events of 9/11 will significantly transform key questions and analytic approaches driving research and teaching in the field of Middle East studies (MES), we can say with certainty that 9/11 has dramatically affected the political and institutional environments within which this research and teaching takes place in the United States. Thus, “impact” or “change” must be evaluated across three distinct yet interrelated arenas: 1) the quotidian environment in which scholars, teachers, and students conduct their activities, 2) the varied institutional

² This essay is based on results of an ongoing research project on knowledge production on world regions, with an initial focus on the field of Middle East Studies, and on analysis of a vast number of book chapters, journal articles, digitally circulated commentaries, and press reports collected as part of this project. Data was collected through three main phases funded by the Ford Foundation and the International Research and Studies Program of the Department of Education (<http://www.ed.gov/programs/iegpsirs/index.html>). The first phase surveyed the impact of changes in analytical and disciplinary approaches and frameworks on Middle East studies in the United States, Japan, Russia, and France. The second phase focused on institutional infrastructures and the impact of 9/11 on Title-VI-funded MES centers in the United States. The third, current phase (also funded by the DOE) expands the study to look comparatively at ME/Eurasia/South Asia centers as well as at ways of institutionalizing cross-regional and thematic knowledge production. For more information please see http://www.ssrc.org/programs/mena/survey_of_middle_east_studies/.

³ Comment by Lisa Anderson in her capacity as chair of the Social Science Research Council's board of directors, during a board meeting discussion of HR 3077. This section of the paper will appear as a commentary entitled “Between the Hammer and the Anvil: Middle East Studies in the Aftermath of 9/11” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 39 (2007) pp: 346-349.

architectures through which research and teaching on the Middle East are undertaken within and outside the university, and 3) the long-term intellectual history of the field. Firstly, the events of 9/11 and the rise of neoconservatives to power in the United States empowered and mobilized specific segments of *both* the state and civil society around a political agenda that, in the context of the university, has been advanced through “code words such as balance, fairness, diversity, accountability, tolerance, and not least, academic freedom to justify the enforcement of a political orthodoxy that undermines these very values.”⁴ Yet these more recent developments must also be understood in the context of the changing political economy of higher education and the growing privatization of knowledge production, which are diminishing the traditional semiautonomy of the university, on the one hand, and fueling a proliferation of knowledge production in locations external to it, on the other.

There is little doubt that actions of “private” external actors have had an enormous impact on university environments in which research and teaching on the Middle East take place. Following a model pioneered by organizations like the Center for Equal Opportunity in the context of the affirmative-action debate, organizations like Campus Watch in conjunction with campus chapters of conservative groups have developed systems of surveillance through which they have targeted individual scholars of the Middle East as well as entire institutions for what they claim to be their “analytical errors, extremism, intolerance, apologetics and abusive power over students.”⁵ Lists of “unpatriotic” faculty members have been created; prominent scholars have had their syllabi impugned and their lectures interrupted and filmed without their authorization, and they have been subject to defamatory accusations in widely circulating print and digital media. University administrators have had to establish committees to investigate student complaints while wealthy alumni have threatened to withhold financial contributions as a pressure tactic. These political attacks on MES target the field’s intellectual thrust as much as its perceived shortcomings, and thus their effects on academic environments

⁴ Beshara Doumani, “Between Coercion and Privatization: Rethinking Academic Freedom in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Academic Freedom after September 11*, ed. Beshara Doumani (New York: Zone Books, 2006), p. 30.

⁵ See “The Problems in Middle East Studies” on the Campus Watch website. <http://www.campus-watch.org/about.php>

cannot be underestimated. At the same time, the fact that these practices find validation in an increasingly corporate university culture in which students are understood primarily as consumers cannot be overlooked.

House Resolution 3077, in this context, may be seen as the emblematic attempt to bring this neoconservative agenda to bear on the second arena outlined above—the institutional architectures within which research and teaching on the Middle East take place.

Proponents of HR 3077 claimed that federally funded MES centers were failing to meet “national needs” and thus breached responsibilities stipulated by Title VI grants; they also indicted the whole field and its practitioners for “postmodern” approaches and for falling under the influence of Edward Said.⁶ What is interesting is that while even HR 3077 reaffirmed international education and foreign-language training as strategic needs, the much-rumored increases in federal funding following 9/11 have failed to materialize.⁷ What new resources that have materialized are being directed away from area-studies centers towards institutions that require security clearances, such as the National Defense University or the recently established Center for the Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland.⁸ Another possibility, already evidenced by centers for the study of terrorism funded by the Department of Homeland security, is that the study of processes taking place in the Middle East will be undertaken within conceptual and institutional frameworks that do not center on the region but rather on what is purported to be its main characteristic(s)—terrorism, Islam, or both.⁹

These developments and pressures have only compounded uncertainties about the institutional forms that international studies and language training will take on U.S. university campuses. The at times simplistic and mechanical imperative to “rethink” area studies immediately following the Cold War produced some much-needed critical perspectives and did much to strengthen networks between U.S. scholars and their

⁶ Stanley Kurtz, “Congress Targets Title VI,” *National Review*, 12 October 2003.

⁷ “Proposed FY 2008 Budgets for Social and Behavioral Science,” *COSSA Washington Update*: 26/4 (2007).

⁸ See the website for the Center for the Advanced Study of Language at the University of Maryland. <http://www.casl.umd.edu/message.php>

⁹ See, for example, the website for the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. <http://www.start.umd.edu/>

counterparts in the rest of the world. Yet 9/11 has profoundly undermined the impetus towards internationalization that so powerfully marked institutional debates of the 1990s. The number of international students coming to study at U.S. universities has declined noticeably, and visas for visiting scholars from the region are increasingly difficult to obtain.¹⁰ While circumstances vary quite significantly between institutions, our surveys and interviews with MES center directors suggest that these centers still exercise little or no control over permanent faculty appointments and generally “make do” with far fewer resources than they need to adequately fulfill their mission.¹¹ In the meantime, umbrella or “alternative” structures, such as “global” or “international” studies institutes, have not yet resolved the challenges of how to organize research and teaching in ways that adequately reflect actual processes in a world that is simultaneously globalizing and regionalizing, renationalizing and transnationalizing.

A third arena on which the impact of 9/11 on Middle East studies needs to be assessed is intellectual trends in the field. If the Social Science Research Council’s international research fellowship programs are any indication, MES continues to generate a dynamic corpus of dissertation proposals focused on both historical and contemporary questions, although there are no clearly detectable analytic shifts attributable to 9/11. Also important for the intellectual future of the field is scholars’ increased engagement in sustained dialogue with colleagues from other interdisciplinary and area-studies fields as a result of the perceived shared threat and impact of the current political environment. Younger scholars are also organizing to create resources and support for one another in negotiating difficult university environments.¹² Furthermore, scholars of the Middle East are playing key roles in broader debates about academic freedom¹³ and questions of responsibility

¹⁰ The problem of obtaining U.S. visas for scholars extends well beyond MES. At the 2006 Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, 80 percent of the membership voted in favor of relocating the association’s congresses to locations outside the United States to protest denial of visas to Cuban scholars and a growing number of Venezuelan and Bolivian colleagues. The 2007 congress was moved from Boston to Montreal, and the 2009 Congress will be held in Brazil.

¹¹ Elizabeth A. Anderson, “Internationalization and Interdisciplinarity: An Evaluation of Title VI Funded Middle East Studies Centers—Fieldwork Report.” Social Science Research Council, 2006.

¹² See, for example, activities and publications coming out of the Middle East Task Force in Anthropology, <http://www.meanthro.org/home.htm>.

¹³ See Beshara Doumani, ed., *Academic Freedom after September 11*. New York: Zone Books, 2006.

and ethics in higher education,¹⁴ as well as playing an important role in informing publics that extend well beyond the university.¹⁵

Area Studies as an Embattled Paradigm¹⁶

Since the globe is a region made large, the making of global scale brings forward questions of the various forms of region making that both facilitate and interrupt global claims.¹⁷

-- Anna Tsing

While we cannot yet fully evaluate the long term impact of these trends on Middle East Studies, or on the broader area studies enterprise, what is clear is that these developments must be understood in the context a more complex and longstanding confluence of processes that are shaping the intellectual and institutional environments in which they take place. Throughout the 1990s and well into the present decade, spirited debates about the nature, place and future of area studies in U.S. higher education have been a central concern for scholars, university administrators, disciplinary gatekeepers and private foundations. In many ways, the disintegration of the Soviet Union freed scholarly thinking from binary oppositions that had long structured knowledge production about the world. However, it also threw particular fields into disarray or obsolescence and more generally raised questions about the usefulness of, or indeed the need for, area and place-based knowledge. With federal support through the Title VI program steadily declining since its peak during the 1970s, the emergence of what then appeared to be uni-polar post-Cold War order and the emergence of the globalization paradigm as its central corollary, gave rise to a particular conjuncture in which both longstanding and newly emergent critiques of area studies converged. As the focus of research and analysis

¹⁴ See David William Cohen and Michael D. Kennedy, eds., *Responsibility in Crisis: Knowledge Politics and Global Publics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

¹⁵ A prominent example is Juan Cole, whose blog *Informed Comment* and whose regular articles in well-established web-based publications such as *Salon.com* have become a key referent for scholars, policy professionals, and concerned citizens across the United States.

¹⁶ This phrase is borrowed from Eric Hershberg. "From Cold War Origins to a Model for Academic Internationalization: Latin American Studies at a Crossroads." *Dispositio/n* 50, 1998[2000], pp. ??

¹⁷ Anna Tsing. "The Global Situation." Paper presented at the "Culture and Politics of Place, Locality and Globalization" conference, University of California, Santa Cruz, October 28, 2000. Cited in *Critical Latin American and Latino Studies*, Juan Poblete, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.

shifted away from the nation-state and its internal localities towards a global scale, many rightly questioned the suitability of existing area studies frameworks for apprehending the nature of emerging social economic processes and geographic formations that were, if not increasingly global, at least transcending regional boundaries as they had been defined.

The ongoing challenges to, and in some cases attacks against, the area studies paradigm have emerged from a broad array of institutional stakeholders and reflect a surprising political and intellectual diversity. Among these are the self-reflexive critiques of area studies practitioners themselves, sustained on a national scale by robust private foundation investments in the “rethinking” of areas studies during the 1990s; the longstanding yet recently reenergized and at times acrimonious debates between discipline-oriented scholars and their area studies counterparts regarding the merits and shortcomings of their respective scholarly practices and contributions; accusations of failure for not predicting the collapse of the Soviet Union and more recently the 9/11 attacks; invectives from certain sectors of the academic left locating area studies within genealogies of colonialism and empire; and more recently, attacks from sectors aligned with the neoconservative right for being too internationalized (read: too many scholars from problematic world regions) and insufficiently committed to “national needs”. Thus, the current crisis of U.S. area studies, both as an overall paradigm and as a set of distinct, geographically defined fields that are subject to the political and institutional dynamics of higher education in the United States, must be understood in the context of the particular evolution of the national institutions of higher education within which it takes place as well as in relation to historical developments related to the regions upon which they are focused.

Rethinking and Restructuring

Given that 15 years have elapsed since the disintegration of the Soviet Union and more than five since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington D.C., an analysis of this protracted period of crisis for area studies requires at least some basic

periodization, particularly as we attempt to assess the impact of 9/11 on the field. While it is not possible to make overarching claims about the impact of 9/11 on the field as a whole, 9/11 does serve as an important marker because it enables us to locate intellectual debates, institutional trends and changing political environments in their proper context. Most importantly perhaps, critical attention to the significance of 9/11 brings the period between the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Trade Towers—the 1990s, more or less—into sharper focus. An analysis of this period is crucially important for understanding the current debates about knowledge production on world regions for a number of reasons. First and foremost, the large investments made by private foundations during this period in the rethinking of area studies generated simultaneous and sustained discussions not only on campuses across the country, but also with the international interlocutors of U.S. area studies practitioners who were part of the increasingly global networks and frameworks within which these “rethinkings” took place. During this period, a vast number of essays, journal articles and edited volumes were published on the past, present and future of the area studies enterprise, covering its intellectual and institutional histories, its relation to humanities and social disciplines, as well as the genealogies of knowledge production within specific area studies fields and sub-fields. It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of programmatic initiatives and publication activities associated with the ongoing and still unresolved critique of area studies took place during this period.

A second key development was the rapid emergence of the institutional impetus to internationalize both the university and the production of area knowledge. Citing the very developments that were central to the critique and reformulation of area studies underway—the rise of the global economy, changing geopolitical affinities and geographies and the rapid emergence of global communications technology—university faculty and administrators nationwide saw the need to strengthen and expand the international dimension of research, curricular offerings, study abroad opportunities and available networks of international institutional partners. And while the impetus to internationalize was rationalized by the need to produce globally informed citizens and professionals, it was also seen as a strategy for strengthening the ability of universities to

capture top students in a growingly competitive higher education market and to make universities better able to capture resources for research, institutional endowments, and capital-intensive infrastructural expansion.

A third and closely related process that should not be overlooked here is the broader consolidation of the “deep” economic restructuring that took place during the 1990s in U.S. higher education, and its ramifications into the present. Neoliberalism arrived. As Craig Calhoun remarks in a compelling essay entitled “Is the University in Crisis?”

But, of course, all this is not happening uniquely in universities. Quite the contrary, academics are merely among the more surprised (perhaps because longer-buffered) of the many members of established institutions who confront the new social trend of marketizing everything. Call it neo-liberalism. It is basically a collapsing of semi-autonomous social fields into markets.¹⁸

While the origins of this process of neoliberalization can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s—particularly to the 1980 passage of the Bayh-Dole Act which allowed universities the right to patent products developed with federally funded research, opening the way for them to pursue revenues from intellectual property—it was during the 1990s that these trends fully materialized as institution-wide administrative restructurings across campuses and public university systems. The large-scale expansion of universities during the economic bonanza of the Clinton years was driven in large measure by the expansion of science and engineering faculties and professional schools that was achieved through financial arrangements in which private donations and corporate investment played an increasingly central role. This expansion significantly altered the scale and importance of these administrative units within the university as well as the role of corporate monies in matters of research and infrastructure. In relative if not absolute terms, these transformations diminished the prestige and institutional capital

¹⁸ Craig Calhoun, “Is the University in Crisis?” *Society*, May/June 2006, p. 18.
<http://www.ssrc.org/staff/president/IsTheUniversityInCrisis-1.pdf>

of both the social science and the humanities disciplines—and thus area studies—among university administrators precisely at a time when external funding for these fields was either stagnant or in decline.

Thus, both the imperative towards internationalization and the expansion and restructuring of the university defined the institutional environments in which the rethinking of area studies took place during the 1990s. On campuses, these processes created multiple and at times conflicting pressures both on area studies and the disciplines. At a number of universities, the rise of global or international studies institutes during this period certainly drew upon the faculty and networks of area studies centers, but in ways that did not necessarily strengthen or benefit these administrative units, which continued to administrate core Title VI and FLAS funds at the same time that their affiliated faculty were drawn towards new global initiatives and institutional architectures. It was also the case that at least in some instances, rapidly expanding science and engineering faculties and professional schools implemented the internationalization mandate by building networks and establishing programs that bypassed area studies centers altogether, and that were often created in partnership with public and corporate benefactors. In the context of neoliberal restructuring, moreover, internationalization initiatives tended to privilege particular curricular and programmatic offerings for undergraduates and professional students, rather than for graduate training and research. This had a disproportionate impact on the humanities and the social sciences given their clear disadvantage in the patenting and profitability game. As part of their endless pursuit of competitiveness and rankings, many universities expanded study abroad opportunities for undergraduate and professional students who were increasingly perceived as consumers of a wide range of higher education products. This logic had a strong impact on the humanities, as language instruction was reorganized and commoditized in ways that separated it from the study of literatures and cultures to which it has been historically tied, thus administratively segmenting language and literature departments into more market-friendly language instruction units and less market-friendly sites of training and research, to the evident detriment of the both. Finally, it is no surprise that amidst such restructuring the core social science disciplines would once

again retreat to the natural sciences for their theoretical truths. While the retreat of the disciplines from area studies is part of a complex history that dates back to the professionalization and institutionalization of the social sciences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the most recent turn towards formal modeling and universal applicability must also be understood, at least in part, in the context of these recent processes and transformations.

The Return of the National Interest?

This dense confluence of rethinkings and restructurings characterized the period between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, and thus very much shaped the intellectual and institutional environments upon which the impact of 9/11 must be carefully assessed. In this respect, it is important to begin with the somewhat obvious observation that institutions change slowly, making any definitive claims about the long term effects of 9/11 untenable. As Sheila Biddle remarks in the introduction to her 2002 report on internationalization, “none [change] more slowly than universities; administrative structures and practices do not change with the calendar, new initiatives must build on those already in place.”¹⁹ And just as changes in university institutions have their own cadences and confront particular constraints, the diverse challenges facing areas studies each come with their own genealogies and temporal horizons.

This paper has sketched in a preliminary way some of these challenges, their origins and implications as well as particular intersections at the level of the university that are shaping the future of area studies as a knowledge enterprise. Much research and analysis remains to be done; most urgently on the new configurations of knowledge and power implicated in current re-imaginings of the ‘national interest’ of the hegemon that is the United States.

¹⁹ Sheila Biddle, *Internationalization: Rhetoric or Reality?*, 2002, pp. 4-5.