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Historical Dynamics in Global Studies

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Global Studies came to prominence especially in the 1990s as an academic pursuit with concern for contemporary social change, especially in economy, culture, and technology. This paradigm arose in the company of other global visions, and developed its specificity in interaction with them. Neoliberalism arose as a finance-centered, ahistorical ideology that achieved dominance among corporate leaders. World-systems analysis grew up within historical sociology, applying systems logic

for earlier times. World history arose as broad, pragmatic studies encompassing a wide range of issues. Thus while the academic trajectory of Global Studies leads logically to developing a strong temporal emphasis within analysis of globalization, the trajectories of world history and world-system analysis lead in parallel to engendering a more robust interdisciplinary and theoretical emphasis, including links to interdisciplinary study of the present.

The strengths of contemporary Global Studies go beyond a willingness to work across spatial limits and disciplinary boundaries. Global Studies has provided a framework for broad explorations in theory, within social sciences and cultural studies, both through efforts to link the macro and micro perspectives of individual disciplines and through exploration of theoretical links and contrasts from one discipline to the next. In addition, Global Studies not uncommonly adopts a systems approach to its global-societal subject matter, invoking sub-systems and interconnected levels and scales to give a picture of humanity in general. More specifically these have included particular attention to culture as an aspect of globalization, as well as to the importance and the interactions of governance, economy, social movements, and issues in health and climate. Moreover, the contemporary dimensions lend themselves with great promise to policy studies.

Sculpture - Stone Town, Zanzibar
Photo credit: US Slave Blog

An important point here is that contemporary analysis and policy prescriptions will be different if we address a wider range of temporal rhythms. The hope of such large-scale social analysis is to explore for past times the full range of social issues known at present and to develop a more detailed sense of the interactions in social change over time. Some of the temporal dynamics to be considered include episodes, cycles, growth, innovation, conflict and violence, inequality, and macro-level cultural choices, each having distinctive characteristics of periodicity and of interaction with social, cultural, and economic factors.

Cycles of gender relations

The great expansion in feminist and gender studies has proceeded impressively, but such studies could be enriched by greater attention to the historical dynamics of gender relations. The limited success of deterministic models suggests that there is either complex variation or fundamental eclecticism in gender relations, and that cyclical or episodic models should be explored in more detail. To set this sort of dynamic in global perspective, one would seek out episodic global shocks but also cyclical social changes, and then ask how gender relations in one society or another have shifted as local forces respond to crisis and opportunity. And because gender relations in multiple societies have been studied carefully over the last fifty years, for instance by Sylvia Walby, we should be able to document numerous short-term fluctuations in gender relations and use them as a basis for seeking out historical parallels. With a better sense of the short-term fluctuations, plus a sense of their distribution over time and space, we can turn to the question of long-term, species-level shifts in gender roles.

Cultural Choice in Slavery

The two previous examples of global-historical dynamics have emphasized regular and irregular cycles, respectively. One may also argue that there exist issues for which cultural or civilizational choices can become embedded and reproduced within a region so that they are resistant to overall global patterns. The nature and extent of slavery in societies is an example of such a distinction, and can be illustrated through a comparison of four regions (sub-Saharan Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, South Asia, and China) over a period of about five thousand years. While it may be assumed that small-scale enslavement existed in every human society, slavery developed into a large-scale social institution only for certain times and places. Developing most fully in Mesopotamia and spreading thereafter to the Mediterranean during Greek and Roman times, slavery also

expanded in north India. In these areas captives were drawn increasingly from adjoining regions: Central Asia, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa. For China, however, slavery did not expand to a great degree, even though state systems became very powerful. And while Central Asia, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa supplied captives, they did not develop slavery significantly at home. Beginning in the sixteenth century, slavery expanded dramatically in the Americas and drew far more captives from Africa than preceding systems. Meanwhile, African societies underwent a major social shift and expanded greatly their holdings of slaves in the nineteenth century. This example suggests that societies can instill and sustain various views of hierarchy, but these ideas are ultimately susceptible to pressure from global forces.

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In summary, the combination of Global Studies and world history can yield stronger interpretations of history, better contemporary analysis, and improved policy recommendations. The two fields will surely retain their distinctiveness, but much is to be gained by developing the experience of using each field to explore the other. Work at this global and historical scale is too great in quantity to do all at once, but collaboration can advance the scope of work and academic diplomacy among fields can speed the exchange of information and the location of important new problems. Historical Global Studies, as the interplay of interdisciplinary social and cultural studies in contemporary and historical time frames, appears ready for development.

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