global-e



What is Global Studies?

May 6, 2011 | Volume 5 | Issue 3
Mark Juergensmeyer

What is global studies? Anxious administrators ask this question whenever a new program or degree is proposed. Is it anything different than simply international, or comparative, or area studies made over and outfitted with a bright new name?

This very question has been discussed by the Global Studies Consortium, an international organization of graduate programs in global studies. Originally

proposed at a workshop in Santa Barbara in 2007, the consortium meetings draw representatives from over forty graduate programs in Asia, Europe and North America. They meet each year at such diverse locations as Leipzig, Tokyo, and Shanghai.

At one of their recent meetings, the representatives agreed upon five aspects of their programs that all of them shared in common, and which distinguish global studies from international, area, comparative, or similar fields. The five key defining characteristics of the field are as follows:

Global studies is transnational. Global studies focus on the analysis of events, activities, ideas, trends, processes and phenomena that appear across national boundaries and cultural regions. The term “cultural regions” is meant to apply to associations of people bound together by a common language, religion, and heritage that are defined within a particular geographical area but may not be demarcated as a nation, or have occurred historically before the concept of nation was applied to states.

Strictly speaking, transnational and global studies are not the same, since an activity that appears beyond national boundaries can be largely within a particular area of the world (Europe, for instance, or the nations along the Pacific Rim), and not necessarily throughout the whole world. On the other hand all global phenomena are by definition transnational, since they occur beyond the limitations of national boundaries or control. In general, the term “international” differs from transnational phenomena since it applies to activities between and among nation-states. In common usage, however, many transnational phenomena are described as international, as in the description of some environmental issues as being international when the phenomena themselves—such as global warming—are transnational (though the responses to them may involve an international collaboration among nations).

Representatives agreed upon five aspects of their programs that all of them shared in common, and which distinguish global studies from international, area, comparative, or similar fields.

Global studies is interdisciplinary. Since global phenomena are economic, political, social, cultural, religious, ideological, environmental, biological, or involve new

technology and means of communication, they are examined from many disciplinary points of view. Scholars involved in global studies are found in all fields of the social sciences (especially sociology, economics, political science, and anthropology) as well as the humanities, including history, literature, religious studies, and the arts. And it involves some areas of science—environmental studies and public health, for instance.

Global studies is both contemporary and historical. Though the pace and intensity of globalization has increased enormously in the 21st century and the post-Cold War period of the 20th century, transnational activity has historical antecedents. There are moments in history—such as in the ancient Mediterranean world during the Roman and Greek Empires—when there was a great deal of transnational activity and interchange on economic, cultural, and political levels. European colonialism during the 19th and 20th centuries provides another example of a global stratum of culture, education, technology, and economic activity upon which are based many aspects of globalization in the 21st century. Thus to understand fully the contemporary patterns of globalization it is necessary to probe their historical precedents.

Global studies tend to be postcolonial and critical. Although many aspects of contemporary globalization are based on European colonial precedents, most global studies scholars do not accept uncritically the Western-privileged patterns of economic, political and cultural globalization. Some scholars avoid using the term “globalization” to describe their subject of study, since it sometimes is interpreted as implying the promotion of a Western-dominated hegemonic project aimed at spreading the acceptance of laissez-faire liberal economics throughout the world. Other scholars describe their approach as “critical globalization studies,” implying that their examination of globalization is not intended to promote or privilege Western economic models of globalization.

The postcolonial perspective of global studies is one that is viewed from many cultural perspectives. Scholars of global studies acknowledge that the perception of globalization and other global issues, activities, and trends are viewed differently from different parts of the world, and from different socioeconomic locations within it. For that reason scholars of global studies sometimes speak of “many globalizations,” or “multiple perspectives on global studies.” This position acknowledges that there is no dominant paradigm or perspective in global studies

that is valued over others.

Although many aspects of contemporary globalization are based on European colonial precedents, most global studies scholars do not accept uncritically the Western-privileged patterns of economic, political and cultural globalization.

Global studies programs aim at global citizenship. Academic programs in global studies often advance an additional criterion for programs in global studies: helping to foster a sense of global citizenship. Leaders in these academic programs aver that they are helping to create “global literacy”—the ability of students to function in an increasingly globalized world—by understanding both the specific aspects of diverse cultures and traditions as well as commonly experienced global trends and patterns. Other leaders of academic programs assert that they are providing training in “global leadership,” giving potential leaders of transnational organizations and movements the understanding and skills that will help them to solve problems and deal with issues on a global scale.

This essay is adapted from an essay on global studies for The Encyclopedia of Global Studies (Helmut Anheier and Mark Juergensmeyer, co-editors; Victor Faessel, managing editor) published by Sage Publications

Tags

global studies

higher education



Mark Juergensmeyer is Professor of Global Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara

View PDF