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Is Global Studies a Field? (part 1)

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"Is Global Studies a field?" This is a question that my colleagues and I at Sophia University have often encountered since beginning our quest starting in 2000 to create a graduate program in Global Studies (GS).

This question can be understood in various ways. One is whether GS has the elements of an academic field? Fields in the Academy are traditionally defined as

disciplines with an object of study and method of inquiry that is institutionalized in departments, curriculums and degrees. GS has to legitimate itself in the context of these expectations, a challenged faced by such earlier multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary fields as Area Studies and Gender Studies.

A second way is whether or not GS is old wine in new bottles? Through the influence of post-modernism, post-colonialism, and other intellectual trends, most fields now recognize global and transnational influences on their objects of study. Even within Area Studies, there are few, if any, specialists today who would consider their country of study only as a unitary and essentialist entity.

A third way is whether or not GS is an ideological spearhead of American neo-liberal imperialism after the Cold War? The concern is that such terms as "globalization" and "transnationalism" mask the drive for United States economic hegemony by representing this drive as depoliticized investment flows, media communication, transnational migration, and other natural and technical processes.

"Is Global Studies a field?"

My colleagues and I had to approach this multi-sided question "Is Global Studies a field?" not only on an intellectual plane but also in organizational politics and program design. We had to answer it when lobbying our university for recognition as a program with a claim on scarce institutional resources. Since the establishment of the Graduate School in Global Studies in 2005, we have been addressing it in regard to curriculum design, degree requirements, and student recruitment.

In reflecting on GS as a field it is instructive to begin by juxtaposing it with established fields. The archetype of a tightly bounded disciplinary field is economics. It rests on several key principles -self-interest, supply and demand, and so on- and a method of inquiry, namely statistics. It is very difficult to conceive of GS in this fashion. Consider the issue of establishing foundational principles. While some hold that GS decenters the nation-state in the analysis of global phenomena, others claim that GS recenters the nation-state. This underscores the problem of gaining consensus on principles in GS. As for an orthodox research strategy, the multi-disciplinary character of GS obviously precludes this.

A better fit for GS is those disciplinary fields that cohere around debate over a

master concept. Examples are "culture" in Anthropology and "politics" in Political Science. Discussion about these master concepts drives theoretical and methodological development in these fields. In the case of GS the term "globalization" is arguably the master concept, although many scholars are uneasy with the term due to its popularization in the media and politics. However, it is undeniable that since the 1980s significant theoretical development has hinged on debates about "globalization": What are its processes? When did it start? How can it be empirically measured? Does it weaken the nation-state?

If studies of globalization are increasing in existing fields with their own research traditions is there any value in conceiving of GS as a distinct field?

One debate to further reflection on GS as a field is the relation of the concept of globalization to other key concepts. Does "globalization" conceptually cover "transnationalism" and "diaspora?" Can a "world system" exist without "globalization"? Is "localization" an inherent process within "globalization"? Such questions may seem quixotic, but similar debates over conceptual hierarchy have driven theoretical development in other academic fields. In sociology Emile Durkheim's assertion that society constitutes the individual person was challenged by the argument that individuals constitute society. Ensuing debate helped establish "society" as the field's master concept and define lines of theory development, such as society-centric structural functionalism, the methodological individualism of social exchange, and attempts to reconcile the society/individual debate through agency theory.

Within GS there are also shared explanatory frameworks of globalization that overarch its sprawl of topics to give it the conceptual coherence of a field. In the Sophia program, we recognize three broad frameworks, which are no doubt familiar to you as well. One is a world systemic framework that sees the world as a single order: some examples are Immanuel Wallerstein's capitalist world system, John Meyer's world cultural polity, and some concepts of global governance. Another is transnationalism, which looks at flows and actions that move across two or more national state spaces. Examples are the works of Arjun Appadurai, Saskia Sassen and others. A third framework is global/local, which highlights how lives and processes in locales are constituted and animated by an awareness of being or existing in a global world: the works of Roland Robertson are seminal. Generally

speaking, this situation is similar (again) to sociology, where dozens of subfields are disciplined by a common canon, namely the Holy Trinity of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

Does GS have a distinct methodology? There clearly are methods that have taken shape to study and explain globalization. Consider, for example Woody Watson's simultaneous ethnographies to study globalization and localization of one global institution (McDonald's); David Strang and Patricia Chang's regression analysis to empirically prove and document the existence of a world culture; Peggy Levitt's anthropological ethnography to study Dominican migrants moving back and forth between Boston and Dominican Republic; Adam McKeown's historical study of communication flows in the Chinese diaspora. We teach these methods in our program and offer a course on ethnographies of globalization. However, these innovations are in disciplinary fields, namely anthropology, sociology, and history. This raises the key concern in thinking of GS as an emerging field. If studies of globalization are increasing in existing fields with their own research traditions is there any value in conceiving of GS as a distinct field? If GS does not have a distinct strategy(s) of research inquiry should it be a field in the Academy?

Note: This is a shortened version of a plenary presentation at the "Global Studies Graduate Education Conference", held at Sophia University, Tokyo May 16-18 2008. Conference attendees consisted of 25 representatives of current or planned graduate programs in Global Studies from Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America.

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