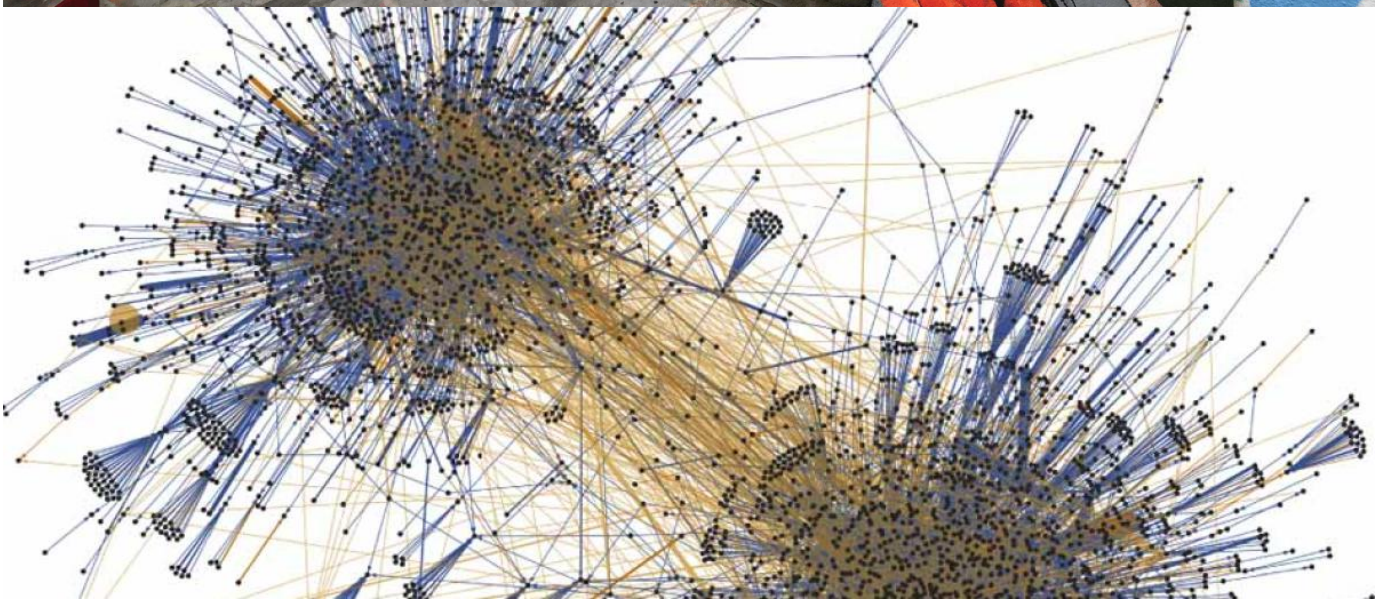
global-e





Globalizing the Research Imagination: Transdisciplinarity in Global Studies

February 23, 2017 | Volume 10 | Issue 12
Manfred B. Steger

In a book presenting a series of interviews with some of the world's leading global studies scholars, Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey conclude that globalization has deeply challenged many prevailing ideas and practices in the social sciences and humanities. The resulting imperative to globalize the research imagination has put pressure on conventional academic landscapes and architectures shaped by Western disciplinary logics developed in the previous two centuries. As Kenway and Fahey (2009: 4) put it, mobilizing this global imagination "becomes a form of 'disciplinary urging' encouraging those in the field to move beyond its impasses and absences, even beyond inherited ways of thinking." But such an intellectual enterprise of globalizing our inherited ways of thinking stands in stark contrast to established forms of academic tribalism that discourage relationships and exchanges between different disciplines.

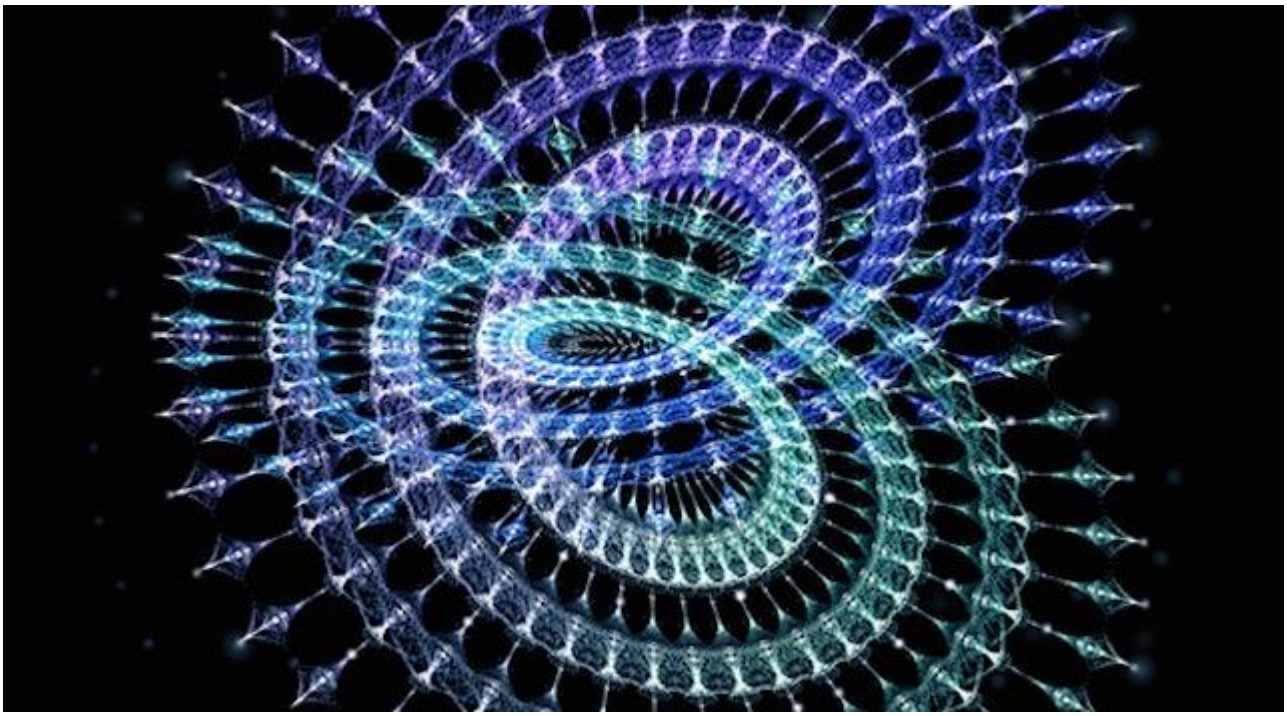
Transgressing disciplinary space means establishing relationships to knowledge that are more open to the perpetual intellectual demands for change and self-alteration. As one among many manifestations of this transdisciplinary spirit, the field of Global Studies (GS) encourages intellectual travel of the sort that produces wider academic horizons. But such a journey cannot be made without accepting the intellectual and institutional risks that come from challenging deeply engrained disciplinary modes of theory and practice. GS research must stretch far beyond the confines of conventional bounded concepts like 'society' or 'nation' that have long dominated academic thinking. Exploring global complexity means abandoning social science's methodological nationalism without sacrificing the focus on the specific that characterizes thoughtful area studies approaches. In short, one of the most formidable challenges facing global studies today is transdisciplinarity: finding new *and* applicable ways of globalizing the research imagination.

Full transdisciplinarity involves at least four major dynamics: the systematic integration of knowledge in the never-ending search for knowledge unification; the transgression of disciplinary boundaries; transcendence of the scope of disciplinary views by articulating them in a holistic framework; and an issue-driven focus on problem-solving in the life world that elevates concrete research questions and practices over disciplinary concerns (Alvargonzález 2011: 394-5). As various transdisciplinary initiatives have gathered strength in the last two decades, new fields of inquiry have turned into trendy academic programs that often contain the denotation 'studies'—such as environmental studies, urban studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, black studies, poverty studies, development studies, internet studies, and, of course, global studies. Such 'studies' programs in general not only represent fundamental challenges to the dominant academic superstructure, but their growing popularity also indicates widespread dissatisfaction with the prevailing order of knowledge embodied in the traditional forms of disciplinary organization (Repko 2011: 9). And yet, mainstream disciplinary discourses often assign such 'studies' an inferior role, implying that they lack the coherence, structure, evenness, depth, and sophistication of 'real' disciplines like history or political science.

Transgressing disciplinary space means establishing relationships to knowledge that are more open to the perpetual intellectual demands for change and self-alteration... Global Studies encourages intellectual travel of the sort that produces wider academic horizons. But such a journey cannot be made without accepting the intellectual and institutional risks that come from challenging deeply engrained disciplinary modes of theory and practice.

While it may be true that such 'studies' programs often lack a traditional 'canon' or established methodologies that are celebrated within disciplinary boundaries, a more generous, and perhaps accurate, perspective would replace such derision with the recognition of the *novelty* and *innovation* that one finds at the heart of many of these unorthodox newcomers. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2013) notes, the real distinction between disciplines and studies is one of seniority. The earlycomers claim to be foundational while the latecomers claim new objects of study: "Hence 'studies' are often introduced first at younger or newcomer universities, which cannot compete with the established universities in the disciplines, but can try to establish themselves and attract faculty and students in new terrains" (503-4). The most convincing intellectual rationale for the legitimacy of such 'studies' initiatives is,

therefore, that established disciplines are too defensive in their self-assigned roles as knowledge gatekeepers to allow for the necessary process of innovation in a given field of study. As a result, knowledge innovators often choose a transdisciplinary approach as the best strategy to pursue their research path with a minimum of disciplinary interference.



While newly emerging transdisciplinary initiatives might surpass the conventional disciplines in performing the necessary task of realigning changing forms of knowledge to the global challenges of the 21st century, the success of ‘studies’ programs might actually weaken the transgressive impulse at the heart of transdisciplinarity. How so? In order to be effective within the still dominant academic order of largely self-contained disciplines, GS and other ‘studies’ fields face considerable pressures (and incentives) to join the existing single-discipline club as—yes—yet another separate-discipline member. In other words, the more popular global studies becomes, the greater the danger of contracting the disciplinary disease of drawing conceptual boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which is institutionally fortified by the erection of protective departmental walls and the separate allocation of resources.

The task, then, is for the new transdisciplinary field to attract talented scholars willing to assume the burden of employing dynamic methodologies and remaining open to scholarly innovation. They must develop a clear agenda for transdisciplinarity in global studies that can inspire followers among students and

faculty. GS needs to expand its foothold in the dominant academic landscape while at the same time continue its work against the prevailing order. To satisfy these seemingly contradictory imperatives, global studies must retain its perilous ambition to project 'globalization' across the conventional disciplinary matrix, yet accept with equal determination the pragmatic task of finding some accommodation within the very disciplinary structure it seeks to transform. Such necessary attempts to reconcile these diverging impulses force scholars to play at least one, and preferably more, of three distinct roles, depending on the concrete institutional opportunities and constraints they encounter in their academic home environment.

First, GS sympathizers might have to assume the role of *intrepid mavericks* willing to establish global studies as a separate discipline—as a first but necessary step toward the more holistic goal of comprehensive integration. The collective efforts of scholars located in the UCSB Global Studies department or RMIT University's Globalism Research Center (now Centre for Global Research) represent an impressive model of how such difficult maverick activities can lead to remarkably successful outcomes. However, as Armin Krishnan (2009: 34) has pointed out, leaving one's discipline behind does not mean the wholesale abandonment of one's original disciplinary interests: '[P]ractically every new discipline starts off necessarily as an interdisciplinary project that combines elements from some parent discipline(s) with original new elements and insights'. To be sure, mavericks must possess a certain spirit of adventure that makes it easier for them to leave their original disciplinary setting behind to cover new ground. And being mavericks always carries the considerable risk that they and their new field will possibly fail.

The task, then, is for the new transdisciplinary field to attract talented scholars willing to assume the burden of employing dynamic methodologies and remaining open to scholarly innovation. They must develop a clear agenda for transdisciplinarity in global studies that can inspire followers among students and faculty.

Second, GS scholars must be prepared—if their academic context demands it—to embrace the role of *radical insurgents* seeking to globalize established disciplines from *within*. This means working toward the goal of carving out a 'global studies' dimension or status within specific disciplines such as political science or sociology. A specific example of such 'insurgent' activity would be Peter Dicken's (2004) fierce critique of his own discipline of geography for failing to engage properly with

intellectually and economically significant globalization debates. He challenged his colleagues to take up what he considers the 'central task for geographers'—to pay more attention to contemporary global issues and concerns such as the spatial outcomes of globalization that set the framework for crucial social dynamics in the 21st century. Dicken's plea did not fall on deaf ears, for one can find today many human geographers at the cutting-edge frontiers of GS research.

Finally, students of GS must slip into the role of *tireless nomads* travelling perpetually across and beyond disciplines in order to reconfigure existing and new knowledge around concrete globalization research questions and projects. The nomadic role, in particular, demands that GS scholars familiarize themselves with vast literatures on pertinent subjects that are usually studied in isolation from each other.

Indeed, one of the most formidable intellectual challenges facing GS today lies in its enduring commitment to making transdisciplinarity work in concrete university settings. This task requires the integration and synthesis of multiple strands of knowledge in a way that does justice to the ever-growing complexity, fluidity, and connectivity of our globalizing world.

Notes

Image Credits:

'Figure 4: Visualization of the dynamical network generated by Twitter interactions.' Source: Alessandro Vespignani, "Modelling dynamical processes in complex socio-technical systems." *Nature Physics* 8, 32–39 (2012). Published online 22 December 2011 http://www.nature.com/nphys/journal/v8/n1/abs/nphys2160.html

"Complexity graphic 14," by Tatiana Plakhova. Source: http://www.fubiz.net/2015/03/04/magical-complexity-graphics/

tag cloud 'interdisciplinarity'. Source credit: radiantskies, 123RF.com http://www.123rf.com/photo_16578886_abstract-word-cloud-for-interdiscipl...

References

David Alvargonzález. 2011. 'Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity, and the Sciences', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 25.4

(2011): 387-403.

Peter Dicken. 2004. ‘Geographers and “globalization”: (yet) another missed boat?’,

Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 29: 5-26.

Jane Kenway and Johannah Fahey, eds. 2009. *Globalizing the Research*

Imagination. London and New York: Routledge.

Armin Krishnan, 2009. ‘What are Academic Disciplines? Some Observations

on the Disciplinarity vs. Interdisciplinarity Debate’, Southampton:
University of Southampton National Centre for Research Method.

Jan Nederveen Pieterse. 2013. ‘What is Global Studies?’, *Globalizations*

10.4: 499-514.

Allen F. Repko,. 2011. *Interdisciplinary Research: Process and Theory*.

2nd ed. London: Sage.

Tags

transdisciplinarity

global studies

methodology



Manfred B. Steger is Professor of Sociology, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

View PDF