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Global Studies and Transdisciplinary Scholarship

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Global issues, processes, and challenges are complex and dynamic, operating on multiple levels of analysis along a local-global continuum, and often integrated in complex ways that may not be immediately obvious.[1] For instance, relations

between states and global market capitalism are rapidly redefining the power and capacities of states to operate as sovereign territorial units as has been assumed throughout the modern era. As argued by Dipankar Sinha, “The state now functions in tandem with the market, and research studies obsessed with the stand-alone state can only produce anachronistic findings.” In a similar vein, Sasskia Sassen has written, “When we confront today’s range of transformations—rising inequality, rising poverty, rising government debt—the usual tools to interpret them are out of date.”[2] Acknowledging the limitations of our dominant conceptual framework carries deep theoretical, analytical, methodological and ethical implications for all social science and humanities disciplines. The emerging field of Global Studies, with its promotion of transdisciplinary scholarship,[3] provides one way to thinking beyond conventional intellectual positions in order to embrace innovative ideas and perhaps non-western perspectives, and nurture new forms of scholarly collaboration.

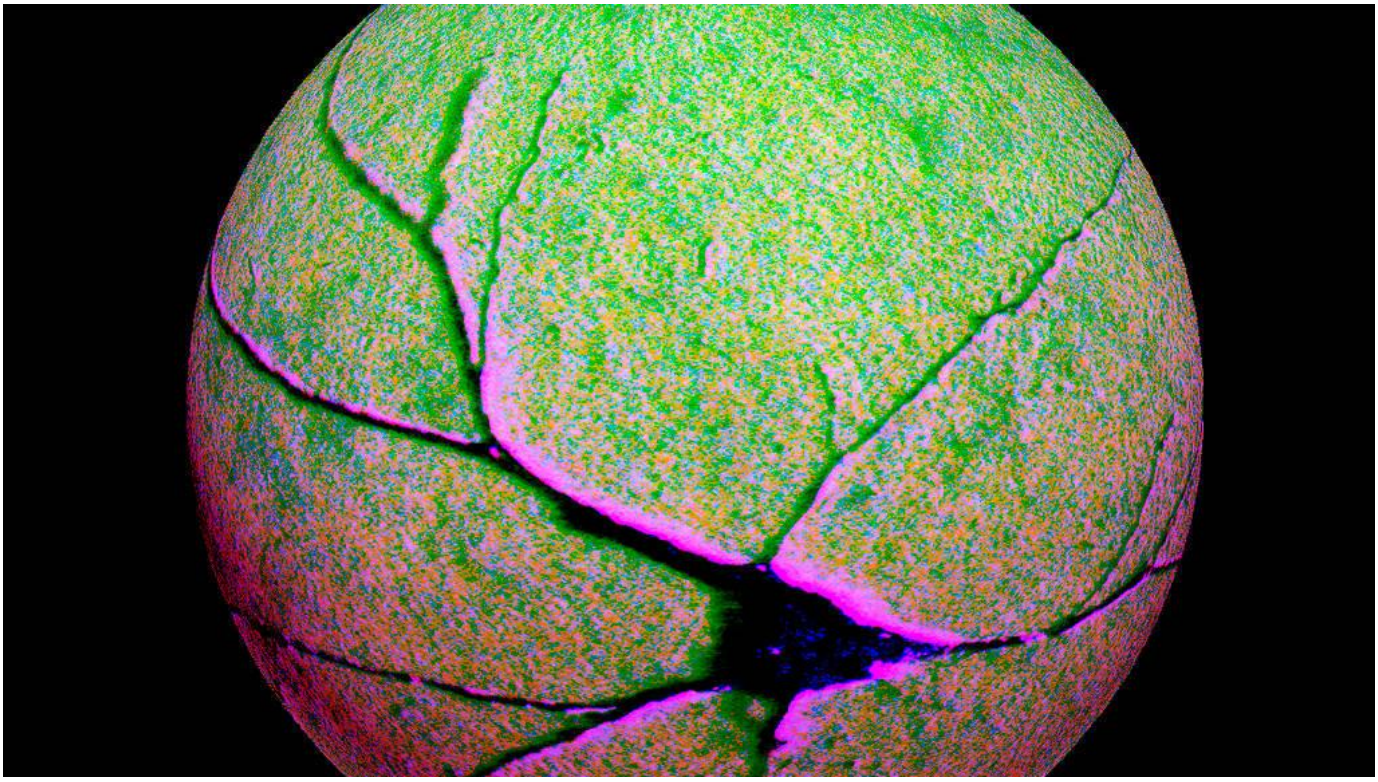
It is our contention that the Euro-American academy is entering a new integrative paradigm that is moving scholarly practice beyond the disciplinary/interdisciplinary divide. Drawing on the development of interdisciplinary approaches over the past four decades, we suggest that the theoretical and analytical boundaries between conventional disciplines are becoming less relevant in the creation of new lines of inquiry and the production of knowledge that expressly seeks to explore today’s complex global world.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that traditional disciplines and their specialized knowledge and methods are becoming obsolete or less important. Nor are we suggesting that transdisciplinary scholarship is widespread in the academy—we recognize that some scholars resist any efforts toward it. Still, we argue that leading intellectuals are—and have been for many decades—actively engaged in integrative scholarship that seeks to transcend disciplinary distinctions.[4] By building on these intellectuals’ lead, and layering on Global Studies’ additional insights, we can begin to develop new ways of theorizing and designing research projects that speak to the world’s current complexities.[5]

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Unfortunately, the Euro-American academy continues to be plagued by well-rehearsed debates over the relative value of interdisciplinary scholarship. These debates consume a great deal of time and energy and tend to rehash disciplinary antagonisms that have remained unresolved for decades. Scholars who defend the traditional disciplines imply that interdisciplinary scholars are dilettantes or argue that interdisciplinary research makes only superficial connections across theoretical approaches and bodies of literature. Moreover, interdisciplinary scholarship is often seen as unwieldy, unaccountable, fragmented, and difficult to assess for the purposes of merits and promotions. On the other side, the champions of interdisciplinary scholarship portray the disciplines as self-marginalizing dinosaurs on the verge of extinction. These debates can get bitter as communities of scholars fight over funding and limited resources within their institutions. In the United States, this has been very much the case in recent years as university administrators have tried to deal with the impact of the economic recession. As a result, support for interdisciplinary scholarship has generally declined across many university campuses in the Euro-American academy.[6]

Whether one is a supporter or a critic of interdisciplinary scholarship, one of the central problems is that these debates are entrenched in modernist concepts and logics such as individualism, nationalism, rationalism, and secularism.[7] Just as the field of international relations implicitly reaffirms the foundational status of nation-states, interdisciplinarity implicitly reaffirms the intellectual centrality of the modern disciplines. To put this differently, interdisciplinary approaches can only extend so far beyond the disciplines against which their innovation and purpose are measured.

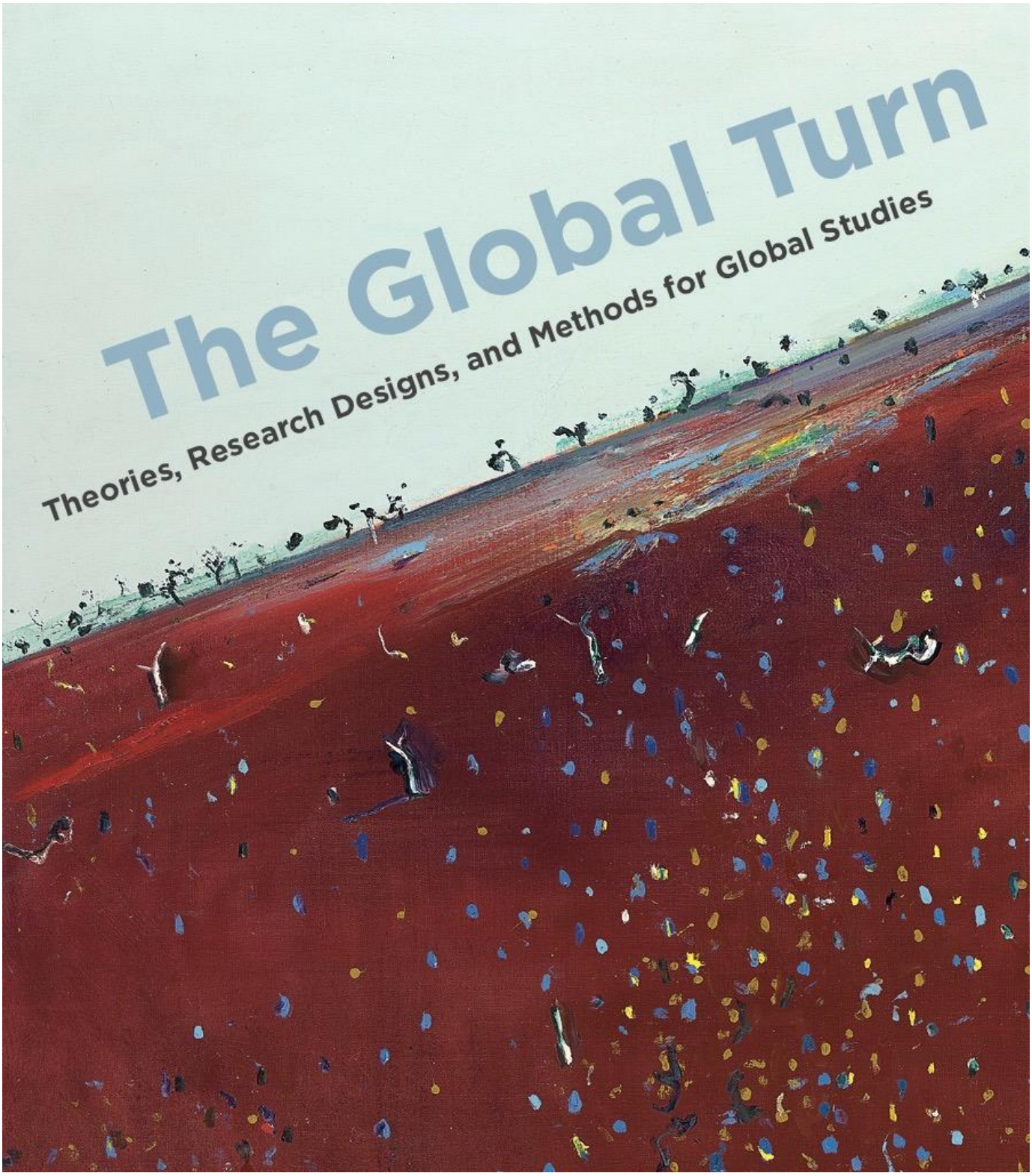


Neuroimaging capture, neuronal mechanisms in consciousness alteration

In an effort to move past disciplinary/interdisciplinary debates and “today’s arid rhetoric of ‘interdisciplinarity’,”[8] it is important to focus upon broader trends affecting not one discipline, or the interactive space between any two disciplines, but many disciplines concurrently. Neuroscience is a salient example of this convergent transdisciplinarity in the natural sciences. As a burgeoning field of inquiry, neuroscience “has become a combination of anatomy, physiology, chemistry, biology, pharmacology, and genetics with a profound concern for culture, ethics, and social context . . . To survive in the twenty-first century the neurosciences will have to link all of their parts even further and bring genetics, the environment, and the sociocultural context together in order to develop more complex models of [the] mind.”[9] Within the social sciences and humanities disciplinary boundaries have similarly been blurred, though this has often gone unacknowledged.

One of the important elements of transdisciplinary work is that it is problem based and thus concerned with the practical applications of knowledge in the real world, where issues tend to be multifaceted and call for multiple analytical perspectives. Transdisciplinary scholarship also explores how knowledge is constituted in the first place as a reflection and product of particular worldviews, ideologies, and cultural

biases. According to Rosemary Johnston, transdisciplinarity “overtly seeks ways to open up thinking to ‘maps of unlimited possibilities’…to create mindscapes that are unfettered by traditional patterns and procedures.”[10] Transdisciplinary scholarship is potentially emancipatory in that it explicitly seeks to free up modernist ways of thinking and our organization of knowledge in the academy by incorporating Western and non-Western knowledge into a more holistic approach to pressing contemporary issues. Adds Patricia Leavy, “Transdisciplinarity produces new knowledge-building practices . . . that [are] vital for making academic research an authentic part of the globalized world it claims to study.”[11]



We argue that combining transdisciplinary theoretical innovations with the unique perspectives emerging within the field of Global Studies creates the groundwork for a new coherent, accessible, and inclusive paradigm that we call a *global transdisciplinary framework*.[12] The framework makes it possible to study multifaceted global-scale issues in a holistic fashion, deploying various perspectives

at multiple levels and across spatial and temporal dimensions. The framework also intentionally includes previously marginalized perspectives and epistemologies in the production of new forms of knowledge. What is being forged, we suggest, is a new paradigm that is applicable and accessible to many scholars even when their research interests are not explicitly “global” in nature. In the longer term, it also has the potential to open up Western scholarship to non-Western modes of thinking and foster inclusive, productive, and relevant globally informed scholarship.

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We suggest that it is vital for Global Studies scholars to embrace transdisciplinarity, whether one self-identifies with its innovative research agendas or not. We feel that this is particularly important given the prevalence of corporate pressures within universities to “dice disciplines, faculty, and students, and finally experts into tiny, specialized fragments” that prevent scholars from thinking holistically and creatively, and engaging with “the most pressing moral, political and cultural questions” of our times.[13] Transdisciplinarity offers a way to overcoming what has been called the “balkanization of the academy into narrow enclaves,” in turn providing a mechanism for scholars to explicitly “engage in and generate deep critical thinking” that seeks to better understand our complex present.[14]

Editor's note: This essay draws from Eve Darian-Smith and Philip C. McCarty (2017) *The Global Turn: Theories, Research Designs and Methods for Global Studies*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Notes

[1] Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017.
[2] Sassen 2014:7.
[3] Steger and Wahlrab 2016.
[4] It was Swiss development psychologist Jean Piaget who formally introduced

the concept of transdisciplinarity in 1970. In his writings he used the term to refer to scholarship that “would not only cover interactions or reciprocities between specialized research projects, but would place these relationships

within a total system without any firm boundaries between disciplines" (Piaget 1972:138). Basarab Nicolescu notes that this description did not mean that Piaget advocated dismantling conventional disciplines in favor of a new super- or hyperdiscipline. Rather, Piaget was interested in "contemplating the possibility of a space of knowledge beyond the disciplines." (Nicolescu 2008:1).

[5] Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017. Op cit.
[6] Unlike many teaching institutions, leading funding agencies in the US such as the National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health have increased their budgets over the past five years for interdisciplinary and collaborative research and are on the whole embracing innovative research theories and methods.

[7] Ludden 2000.
[8] Fitzgerald and Callard 2014:4.
[9] Burnett 2008:252.
[10] Johnston 2008:229–30.
[11] Leavy 2011:14.
[12] Darian-Smith and McCarty 2017. op cit.
[13] Hedges 2008:89–90.
[14] Hall 2010:27.

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Tags

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