



## **International Relations and Global Studies: The Past of the Future?**

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Is Global Studies simply a more modern - some would say sexier - "branding" of the study of International Relations? Or is it truly different? This question matters to academic administrators, knowledge management specialists, those concerned about disciplinary rigor, and Ph.D. students and non-tenured faculty who navigate an

increasingly complex academic job market.

Should it matter to anyone else? The answer appears to be a qualified "yes". There are four dimensions on which Global Studies differs - or should differ - from the study of International Relations.

The first dimension, as Niklaus Steiner of UNC-Chapel Hill has pointed out elsewhere, is the *unit of analysis* or the focus of study. In International Relations (IR), the focus of study is the nation-state and its relationships. IR has increasingly dealt with voluntary associations of states (international organizations) and non-state actors, such as private companies, terrorist groups, and non-governmental organizations. Nonetheless, much of the analysis still revolves around the relationships of those actors with the state.

In contrast, the state is only one of multiple units of analysis used in Global Studies. Perhaps the best characterization of those units is that of *informal and formal networks* of groups of individuals and organizations linked to each other and to the global economy and polity. Micro-finance organizations, local NGOs, international private foundations, migrant workers, are just a few examples of the types of actors - in addition to public sector institutions at all levels - that belong to these networks. This is not as crisp and intellectually satisfying as having a predominant unit of analysis such as the nation-state. However, it does seem to accurately reflect how interaction takes place in the era of globalization. Over the longer term, it also may be indicative of the diffusion of power away from the nation-state.

The second dimension on which IR and Global Studies differ is the *theoretical basis*. IR, born from the interstate conflicts of the early twentieth century, is underpinned by classical and modern political thought. The phenomenon of globalization in the late twentieth century spawned Global Studies. While globalization has now taken on social, political, and ethical dimensions, its origin lies in the increasing integration of markets worldwide. One of the strongest theoretical foundations for global studies finds itself in the economic theory related to global public goods (GPGs). This foundation is likely to become increasingly explicit as Global Studies programs become more widespread.

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While the concept of public goods is not new (Samuelson 1954), the theory behind GPGs is a product of the 1990s, with impetus from the United National Development Program (Kaul 1999, 2003) and economists such as Joseph Stiglitz (1999). In a nutshell, GPGs are goods that cross national borders and are available in more than one state or region of the world. Unlike goods that are bought and sold in the private marketplace, consumption or use of GPGs is both non-rivalrous and non-excludable: consumption or use by one party does not affect consumption or use by another, and no one can be excluded from a GPG's consumption or use. Because of these unique characteristics, relying on the private sector to provide these goods - even with worldwide market integration - leads to shortages. Globalization has helped exacerbate the problem of provision of GPGs since it has also helped spread global "bads" like infectious diseases.

The most widely recognized categories of GPGs are, not surprisingly, subjects frequently found in Global Studies curriculum offerings. These are: peace and security, control and prevention of infectious diseases, international financial stability, the global trade and transit systems, environmental protection and dealing with climate change, and knowledge.

At the local and national levels, governments can step in to provide public goods. When the "bads" and goods are global, there are questions as to who will act and who will pay. Some GPGs are provided unilaterally by states and by international organizations. Increasingly, these efforts are being joined, or even overtaken, by informal and formal public-private partnerships and networks - a further explanation of why the latter are emerging as the unit of analysis and subject of study in Global Studies.

The GPG foundation also helps explain why Global Studies appears to be more oriented towards specific problems and empirically-based analysis, and less steeped in "world view theories" than IR. Non-provision and underprovision of GPGs, by definition, are market failures or "problems", and economics has traditionally relied heavily on empirical analysis.

This does not mean that Global Studies is confined to economics - quite the contrary. The third dimension on which IR and Global Studies differ is *the nature of the discipline*. Although some view IR as a sub-discipline within political science, many graduate-level programs in IR are *multi-disciplinary*. Arguably, political science

is usually the dominant discipline, joined by economics, international law and history, and occasionally by anthropology or sociology. With Global Studies, the number of disciplines has multiplied, reaching into the humanities and even the sciences. A survey of undergraduate Global Studies programs found related courses, for example, in religion, literature, languages, culture, and environment (Shrivastava, 2008).

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More fundamentally, Global Studies programs have consistently characterized themselves as *interdisciplinary*, with course offerings that blur the lines among traditional disciplines. Others talk about *discipline+*, having a firm grounding in one discipline, with Global Studies providing an interdisciplinary overlay. Global Studies, in its search for new insights, may well evolve towards being *transdisciplinary*, with global problems analyzed both within and beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. This would match well with the "problem focus" already evident in Global Studies.

The fourth and final dimension is *geographical reach*. The study of IR has been centered in the United States, Canada and Europe. Several IR programs can be found in Asia (Japan, Korea, China Thailand, Singapore, India), and a few in upper middle income countries, including Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, and a couple of others. It is not surprising that IR is of interest primarily in those countries who have either played a dominant role or who are aspiring to do so within the current international system.

At the moment, formally designated Global Studies programs are found only in North America, although some related courses are found elsewhere. Some of this reluctance to adopt Global Studies per se may be attributed to ideological/political bias against US dominance within the globalized world and the perceived negative effects of globalization (Shrivastava 2007, 2008). Global Studies, if it is to be successful, needs to embrace, both in its subject matter and its scholarship, a much larger geographical area. Because of its frame of analysis and the problems it seeks to analyze, its reach has to extend well beyond that of IR programs and include the poorest parts of the developing world. Yet, to be unique and value-adding, Global

Studies also needs to shy away from duplicating International Development programs. Although sometimes overlapping, there is a difference between achieving development and providing GPGs. The key difference is that GPGs are important not just to the poor, but to everyone. Global Studies has to maintain focus on those issues that are truly global.

So, why is it just a qualified "yes" to the importance of the question as to whether Global Studies and IR diverge? In the end, the current answer may not really matter on the grounds that inevitably the two will merge in substance and perhaps even in name. After all, each reflects a worldview that does not actually exist at the moment: one is looking backwards, and the other is looking forward. Even if it were to turn out that Global Studies is merely a clever attempt at academic "branding", its emergence and the ensuing debate would still be beneficial if the end result were to further increase the international - or, dare it be said, global - focus of universities worldwide, but especially in the United States.

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