

Area Studies*

For me, there is one central question: Can area studies overcome the damage done by the construction of social scientific disciplines early in this century? It is critical that we see that the disciplines of the social sciences in their modern "scientific" form were a recent and American invention (as recently noticed by Wallerstein and others but developed in my book, *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*).

There were good historical reasons for this, which I can but summarize here: Post Civil War America experienced an explosive capitalist development. This generated a host of new problems: immigration, urbanization and incipient class war, what had been called in mid-century Britain, "the social question." Second, the US had an extremely weak state. Federalism, the lack of a significant state bureaucracy, and a middle class culture which had de-emphasized politics, had marginalized governments in Washington, in the several states and the cities. Third, a new breed of "educational managers" in cooperation with "progressives" in the new corporate order would respond to the changing times. The fortunes of the Carnegies, Rockefellers, Stanfords, Cornells, Vanderbilts and Hopkins, would be used to build universities precisely with the intention of serving the new social order in the making. The key players in these new institutions had a problem: Could they secure authority and have an impact on this emerging order without convincing both those with power and those who lacked it that what they did was genuine science? Although it would be a generation before everything had settled down, the answer became clear.

As in the already established physical sciences, inquiry would be divided into distinct and largely autonomous spheres: psychology, sociology, political science, and economics. All of these would be separated from history (which at UHM is not even thought of as part of the social sciences!) Both moves were fully in the spirit of the new theories of science then being promoted by a host of physicists turned philosophers: Kirchoff, Ostwald, Boltzman, Poincare, Duhem, but especially Mach and his followers, but especially Karl Pearson.

The positivist wants explanatory generalizations. He insists that the human sciences, like the physical sciences, are nomothetic, not idiographic. Moreover, these general laws must be empirical, preferably in the form of empirically discovered functions and regularities, preferably quantified. For the positivist, too much so-called explanation is "metaphysical" exactly in Comte's sense. It appeals to unwitnessable powers, speculative forces, mystical abstractions.

It was easy enough to assume that at some level of abstraction, there would be laws pertinent to economies, e.g., supply and demand, others pertinent to the social system, e.g., regularities of group behavior, family function, and others which bear on the political order, e.g., the allocation of authority, the functions of legislative bodies. "Hypotheses" would be put forward and tested. All this would be "objective," "rigorous," "scientific."

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Historians and "humanists" could go their separate ways. History could be "narrative," still subject to tests of evidence but it need not be "theoretical" and it would reject the idea (except for residual Marxists and Spencerians) that it would seek general laws of history. Meanwhile the "humanist" studies, for example, oriental studies, would be "descriptive," legitimately "unscientific," perhaps also legitimately antiquarian.

With universities no longer in the hands of clerics and in the hands of businessmen, the upshot would be, as Veblen had already seen that the new social scientists would "enlarge the commonplace," and put aside questions of causes in favor of questions of use. The result was "a 'science' of complaisant interpretations, apologies and projected remedies" (Veblen, 1918). But it was not just that social science would accept Comtean "order and progress," but that it would produce mountains of ideology under the name of science. Examples are tragically easy to find.

I give but one here, taken from John Power's study, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1986). Dower summarizes the results of a conference of some forty "distinguished social scientists, psychiatrists and Japan specialists" who met in 1944 under the auspices of the Institute for Pacific Relations. He writes:

The working minutes from this conference summarized the discussion as follows: "The most conspicuous new insight that has developed was the comparison between the Japanese character structure and behavior which is characteristic of the adolescent in our society. This comparison makes it possible to invoke our knowledge of individual adolescent psychology and the behavior of adolescents in gangs in our society, a systematic approach to better understanding of the Japanese" (p. 131).

Both Talcott Parsons and Margaret Mead agreed: Arguing from his influential theory, Parsons noted that the Japanese found security "by fitting into a system of culturally defined patterns of group life" and that this was "analogous to the conformism of adolescent patterns" (p. 132). Mead offered that "whereas in the United States system [conscious conformity] is limited to our adolescents, in Japan, it permeates all through society" (ibid.). Edgar Snow had arrived at similar conclusions several years before: The Japanese had a "pronounced inferiority complex" because "the individual Japanese is aware of his unfortunate intellectual and physical inferiority to individual Koreans and Japanese, the two peoples subject to his god-Emperor. He is forever seeking ways of compensation." For Snow, as with the other distinguished experts, this explained Japanese aggressiveness and brutality (p. 133; Dower is citing Snow's *The Battle for Asia* (1942), pp. 65-70). This was not, to be sure, a genetic racism: These writers were sophisticated culturalists. Nor can we be sanguine that more recent social science, despite our best efforts, has freed itself of this sort of racism and Eurocentrism.

It is easy to show, I think, that there were two intellectual motivations for post-War "area studies." First, there was the problem of ignorance: Even if we include the efforts of those few who did turn to Asia during the WW II period, it was now recognized that the social sciences had generated frightfully little in the way of "scientific" knowledge of the non-Western world. Robert Hall, reporting in 1947 for the SSRC Committee on World Area Research argued:

...The universities have an obligation to the nation. National welfare in the postwar period

more than ever before requires a citizenry well informed as to other peoples, and the creation of a vast body of knowledge about them. The provincialism of the American public, so often bemoaned, is in no small way the fault of the American university (Quoted from Wallerstein, nd.).

Second, there was the fragmentation. Hall continued:

[T]he vertical pillars of knowledge, which are the largely self-isolated disciplines of today, leave between them both twilight zones and roles of complete ignorance. The cooperative attack upon the whole knowledge of an area is one way in which parts of these voids can be filled (ibid.).

There was, of course, an even more powerful geopolitical motivation for area studies: The Cold War.

I do not make a special point of this (which has been well developed by Ravi Palat and Wallerstein), since for me it represents nothing new. Nor do I see as the main problem that funding agencies always have interests which are inimical to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and that this infects, always, usually, or sometimes, the results. For me, the main problem is deeper and regards what I hinted at more generally as regards social scientific work: that it is premised on assumptions about science that are untenable and that as a usually unintended consequence, its products too often function to rationalize ideology, to distract, confuse, confound, misinform and mystify. When we are told, e.g., that we do not know what causes crime or poverty, that Japanese economic success is due to Japanese cultural traits, that Africa is a disaster because African leaders lack a commitment to "democracy," we must wonder about "science."

Have area studies overcome these conditions? By and large I think that they have not.

Area studies did produce a large supply of specialists who are available for public service--AID-- and private business, but (as Wallerstein argues), they failed to realize "a new model of university research and teaching." A large part of the problem regards the fact that "area specialists" are first of all specialists in a discipline and thus they carry into their work all the assumptions which their training has given them. This is reinforced, of course, by prejudice against any who try to break those boundaries since as Rosenau notes, the disciplinary specialist is "presumed to have superior theoretical and methodological--especially quantitative skills" (Wallerstein, p. 20).²

² See Professor Bates's very recent anxiety that social scientists working in area studies were more interested in language and culture than in comparing political institutions. They had, he feared "defected from the social sciences into the camp of the humanists" (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 January, 1997, p. A13). For Bates, who represents the reinvigorated positivism of "rational choice theory," being a "humanist" was probably OK; his problem was that these "real estate agents--with a stake in a plot of land rather than intellectual theory"--were social scientists who had rejected what *he* knew was proper science.

But the presence in area studies programs of inquirers who reject the positivist versions of social science hardly helps. These folks rightly pounce on the profound errors of mainstream, empiricistic social science, but there has been a distinct tendency on their part to offer an alternative which is at least equally as objectionable. We thus get versions of "culture studies" which while rejecting the pseudo-objectivist epistemologies of empiricism, offer versions of subjectivism and relativism which are, at bottom, incoherent. Nor is the presence of historians always a help since, too often, they so deeply resent "theory" that their efforts at narrative explanations fail to ever come to grips with the salient features of the history that they are examining. In any case, irrespective of conflicting epistemologies, the idea that we can study the history, politics, economics and culture as if they were autonomous spheres reproduces one of the problems which area studies was meant to overcome.³

So-called interdisciplinary programs end up sucking up resources merely to house a group of disciplinary specialists whose "cooperation" never goes beyond seeing one another in the corridor. Publication, promotion and tenure practices, of course, reinforce this.

People do good work despite the obstacles, which often enough are self-imposed. By good work, I mean good old-fashioned detailed comparative, multi-causal, historically grounded case studies--with no pretense of producing explanatory generalizations.⁴ Still, I am not optimistic. Not only is social science in America now profoundly ingrained in the structures of Higher Education, but social science everywhere has become Americanized. If real change is to come then, likely, it will take something like the changes which produced it in the first place. But that means the end of the University as we know it. And perhaps also the end of American hegemony in the world.

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³ As Comte, Marx, and Weber all had insisted, society cannot be studied either apart or ahistorically. It is totally impossible to glean any understanding, for example of an economy without understanding the system of belief--and conversely. Workers, after all, are flesh and blood persons who also marry, pray and celebrate. And grasping the differences between (say) the American political economy and Japanese political economy requires history: it requires, e.g., an understanding of the character of the Meiji restoration and of slavery and the American civil war.

Of course, nobody would deny this; but of course also as C. Mills long ago noted, we all engage in that "dull little padding known as 'sketching in the historical background, with which studies of contemporary society are often prefaced, and to the ad hoc procedure known as 'giving a historical explanation" (1959: 171).

⁴ My examples are Barrington Moore, not Theda Skocpol; Perry Anderson, not Reinhard Bendix; Edwin Reischauer, not Francis Fukuyama.