Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?

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When arguments become polarized, it often signals that divisions are falsely drawn. Such appears to be the case with this controversy. Why must one choose between area studies and the discipline? There are strong reasons for endorsing both. In this essay, I sketch the current debate and explore the ways in which local knowledge can and is being incorporated into general analytic frameworks. I conclude by stressing the work that lies ahead. In doing so, it should be stressed, I deal only with political science. The dynamics in other disciplines, I have found, differ greatly from those within our own (Bates et al. 1993).

Caricaturing the Present Divide

Within political science, area specialists are multidisciplinary by inclination and training. In addition to knowing the politics of a region or nation, they seek also to master its history, literature, and languages. They not only absorb the work of humanists but also that of other social scientists. Area specialists invoke the standard employed by the ethnographer: serious scholarship, they believe, must be based upon field research. The professional audience of area specialists consists of researchers from many disciplines, who have devoted their scholarly life to work on the region or nation. Those who consider themselves "social scientists" seek to identify lawful regularities, which, by implication, must not be context bound. Rather than seeking a deeper understanding of a particular area, social scientists strive to develop general theories and to identify, and test, hypotheses derived from them. Social scientists will attack with confidence political data extracted from any region of the world. They will approach electoral data from South Africa in the same manner as that from the United States and eagerly address cross-national data sets, thereby manifesting their rejection of the presumption that political regularities are area-bound. Social scientists do not seek to master the literature on a region but rather to master the literature of a discipline. The professional audience of social scientists consists of other scholars from their discipline who share similar theoretical concerns—and who draw their data from a variety of regions of the world.

Like all caricatures, these depictions distort in order to highlight important elements of reality. The implications of this reality have profoundly unsettled our discipline. Most immediately, the shift from area studies to “social scientific” approaches has influenced graduate training. Graduate students, whose resources of time and money are necessarily limited, increasingly shift from the study of a region to instruction in theory and methods. When confronted by a choice between a course in African history or one in econometrics, given their constraints, many now choose the latter.

The shift from area specialization to “social science” also alters the balance of power within the academy. Political science departments have long resembled federations, with their faculty in comparative politics dwelling within semi-autono-
mous, area studies units. Possessing access to resources for seminars, ad-
ministrative support, fellowships, re-
search and travel independent of the
department, the comparative politics
faculty has had little reason to defer
to the demands of department
heads. The move toward a disciplin-
ary-oriented view of comparative
politics, and the declining resource
base for area studies, has shifted the
political center of gravity back to the
chairs, who can now apply disciplin-
ary criteria, rather than area know-
ledge, in evaluating and rewarding
professional contributions.
Change in the notions of profes-
sional merit also alters the balance
of power between genera-
tions. Old field hands are
giving way to young techni-
cians. It is those in the
middle who are the most threat-
ened. Like their elders, they
have trained as area special-
ists; but they are being evalu-
cated by a new set of stan-
ards—ones by which they
compare unfavorably with
younger scholars. The mid-
career scholars now scram-
ble to master the new vocab-
ularly and techniques; and
departments that once would
have readily promoted them
too often decide to refrain
from doing so, in the expec-
tation of later filling the slots from
the best and brightest of the new
generation.
The result of these changes is
heightened tension within the field, as
the controversy resonates with
divisions between scholars of differ-
ent generations, locations within the
university, and stages in their ca-
reers.
Clearly, the causes of these ten-
sions lie outside the academy: they
lie in the rising concerns with gov-
ernment deficits and the end of the
cold war. The one has led to reduc-
tions in spending for higher educa-
tion; the other, to a lower priority
on area training. For reasons I do
not fully understand, rather than
cushioning the impact of these
changes, foundations have instead
exacerbated them by moving in con-
cert with the government. Resources
for the study of foreign areas are
therefore declining, and we in aca-
demics are being required to estab-
lish new priorities, as we adjust to
tighter constraints.

Reacting to the New Realities

Many departments were once
characterized by a core of techno-
crats, many of whom specialized in
the study of American politics, and a
conglomerate of others, many of whom
studied foreign political systems. Stu-
dents of American politics viewed
themselves as social scientists; but
the political system on which they
concentrated, they came to realize,
was singularly devoid of variation.
Even comparisons across states
within the greater federation failed
to provide insight into differences,
say, between presidential and parlia-
mentary systems, much less between
polities in market as opposed to cen-
trally planned economies. A vocal
minority within American politics
had long dismissed students of com-
parative politics as “mere area spe-
cialists;” but the more sophisticated
increasingly realized that their hard
won, cumulative, scientific know-
ledge about politics in the United
States was itself area-bound. There
therefore arose among Americanists
a demand for comparative political
research, and some of the most the-
oretically ambitious among them
sought to escape the confines im-
pose by the American political sys-
em. On the one hand, this trend cre-
ates allies for comparativists who
seek to resist retrenchment; their
knowledge of political variation has
acquired greater significance. On the
other, this trend will promote a
transformation in the comparative
study of politics; it will force those
who have a command of local
knowledge to enter into dialogue
with those who seek to understand
how institutional variation affects
political outcomes or who see partic-
ular political systems as specific real-
izations of broader political pro-
cesses.
Pressures from outside the disci-
pline amplify these changes; they
emerge from trends that have af-
ected political systems throughout
the world. Following the recession of
the 1980s, authoritarian governments
fell, and the collapse of com-
munism in Eastern Europe
further contributed to the
spread of democracy. This
change underscored the
broader relevance of the
Americanists’ research into
elections, legislatures and poli-

tical parties. The spread of
market forces and the liberal-
ization of economic systems
highlighted the broader sig-
ificance of research con-
ducted on the advanced in-
dustrial democracies as well.
The impact of economic condi-
tions upon voting, the polit-
ics of central banking, the
effect of openness upon partis-
san cleavages and political institu-
tions: long studied in the Western
democracies, these subjects have
recently become important, and
researchable, in the formerly socialist
systems in the North and in the de-
veloping nations of the South. As
students of comparative politics have
addressed them, they have come in-
creasingly to share intellectual ori-
entations, and a sense of necessary
skills and training, with their more
“social scientific” colleagues in the
discipline.
The attention given to King,
Keohane, and Verba’s Designing So-
cial Inquiry (1994) provides a mea-
sure of the impact of these trends. It
suggests the urgency with which stu-
dents of comparative politics feel a
need for guidance, as they have
sought ways to move from the in-
depth study of cases, typical of area
studies, to sophisticated research
designs, required for scientific inference.

**Deeper Fusion**

The field is thus undergoing significant changes, and the increased stringency of funding strengthens these trends. Less visible, but highly significant, forces run just below the surface and these too will shape the final outcome. Insofar as they do so, they may well define a new synthesis. I refer to a synthesis not only between area studies and the discipline but also between context-specific knowledge and formal theory, as developed in the study of choice.

Area studies emphasizes the importance of cultural distinctions. Cultures are distinguished by their institutions. Game theoretic techniques, established for the study of economic and political organizations, provide a source of formal tools for investigating such institutions. They show how institutions shape individual choices and collective outcomes, and therefore provide a framework for exploring the origins of political difference.

Cultures are also distinguished by their histories and beliefs. The theory of decisions with imperfect information, newly prominent in political science, can be used to explore the manner in which such differences arise and matter. Individuals with similar expectations, it shows, come to diverge in their beliefs if exposed to different data; persons can be shaped by their histories. Even if exposed to the same data, decision theory suggests, persons will revise their beliefs in different ways, if they bring different likelihood functions to bear upon observations. The theory of decisions thus yields insight into the way in which history and world views shape individual choices and therefore collective outcomes. The theory thus provides a framework for exploring cross-cultural differences.

The relationship between “local knowledge” and rational choice theory can be illustrated by Elizabeth Colson’s well-known research into the Plateau Tonga of Zambia (1974). The lives of the Tonga, she reports, resemble the Rousseauian myth, with people residing in peaceful communities, sharing their belongings, and legislating wisely in village assemblies. But, Colson reports, the surface harmony disguises deep fears: of the greed and envy of neighbors, of their wrath, and of their desire and capacity to harm. While the lives of the Plateau Tonga may resemble the accounts of Rousseau, their beliefs, she finds, are between captured in the writings of Hobbes. Colson resolves the paradoxical contrast between beliefs and behavior by arguing that it is the beliefs that support peaceful conduct: people scrupulously choose to act in ways that preserve the peace, she argues, for fear of the violence they would unleash should they impinge upon the interests of others.

Viewed in terms of game theory, Colson’s argument represents a claim that behaving courteously constitutes an equilibrium strategy. The strategy is supported in equilibrium by beliefs as to the costs that would be incurred were people to stray from the equilibrium path. It would be easy to use the theory of games to specify the conditions under which the argument follows. More significantly, doing so would suggest additional insights into what must also necessarily be true for the argument to hold. Given that this is so, transforming the narrative into a rational choice account would generate additional testable implications (Ferejohn 1991). Some of these implications might be non-obvious; when this is the case formalization inspires new insights as well. Others might be crashingly obvious. But even jejune propositions, if deduced from a theory, are significant; for when they are tested, it is the theory from which they derive that is put at risk. Embedding narrative accounts in theories thus increases the opportunities for testing; it therefore increases our ability to judge the adequacy of an explanation.

By the same token, theory must be complemented by contextual knowledge. Consider the problem faced by an observer who encounters a person who is inflicting damage upon another. If a family head, he may be refusing a request for bride wealth; if a faction leader, he may be withholding patronage; if a mayor, she may be bringing the forces of the law to bear upon a rival political. Such actions inflict harm. But, in interpreting their political importance, the observer will need to know: Do they represent initial defections? Or do they represent punishments for an earlier defection? Without knowledge of the history, the investigator cannot determine the significance of these behaviors. The first history suggests that they should be analyzed as a political rupture; the second, that they should be treated as a punishment phase of a game—a phase that may in fact constitute a prelude to reconciliation. In the absence of local knowledge, the actions remain observationally equivalent; nothing in the theory alone suggests their strategic significance and thus their implications for subsequent interactions. Just as in the parable related by Geertz, a “wink” differs from a “twitch,” so too does strategic behavior thus require interpretation. To be analyzed correctly, such behavior needs to be addressed by theory that is informed by empirical observation (1973).

To the degree that rational choice theory comes to occupy a central position within the discipline, then, the conflict between area studies and the “social scientific” core of political science will be misplaced. The approach provides explanations for difference; it requires knowledge of
the difference for the construction and testing of its accounts. It provides a framework which transforms ethnography and narratives into theory-driven claims, amenable to refutation and it requires precisely targeted observations to establish the force of its arguments (Bates et al forthcoming).

It is important to realize that the present debate has been energized by adjacent controversies. It echoes recent ideological struggles. The debate over area studies is often exacerbated by debates over the merits of the market, the state, or the impact of the West, with those who endorse area studies viewing those who use rational choice theory as being pro-market, anti-state, and being disenchanted by adjacent controversies. It echoes forthcoming.

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Perhaps as a complement, departments will also have to re-think their approach to evaluating junior personnel. Unless fortunate enough to be a native speaker of a foreign language or to possess an unusually strong mathematical background, most junior faculty will not be able to consolidate both area and analytic skills prior to facing the tenure hurdle, much less to produce research demonstrating a confident command of both. In making promotion decisions, then, rather than focusing purely on product, attention will have to be placed on investment: If initially in command of research methodologies, have the young scholars used their initial years to learn the history of their area or its languages? If emerging from an area-based program, have they taken themselves to the classrooms in the statistics, economics, or mathematics departments? The deliberations regarding tenure in comparative politics may therefore have to differ from those in other portions of the discipline. Questions such as these will have to be addressed and the answers given greater weight than in other subfields.

In earlier decades, the Social Science Research Council gave mid-career grants, enabling professors to return to the classroom. These grants virtually made possible the creation of “hybrid” fields, such as economic history. Historians trained as economists, and economists as historians. Clearly, the creation of such an awards program would represent a timely response to the present crisis.

How will we know when reconciliation has been achieved? One test will be the capacity of someone who has invested heavily in the knowledge of an area to respond to a dean, provost, or departmental chair who inquires: “What has the study of your area contributed to the broader discipline?” Each of us who specializes in the study of an area should be able to respond to this question. We will, I am afraid, increasingly have to do so.

**Note**

* This article draws heavily on Robert H. Bates, “Area Studies and Political Science: Rupture and Possible Synthesis,” *Africa Today*, Volume 44, No. 2 (1997), special issue on “The Future of Regional Studies.” I wish also to thank Timothy Cotton and Peter Hall, and the junior fellows of Harvard Academy, especially Daniel Posner, for their tough criticisms. I have failed to incorporate many of their suggestions, and therefore must assume complete responsibility of the defects that remain.

**References**


**About the Author**

Robert Bates is Eaton Professor of the Science of Government at Harvard University. Among his recent books is *Africa and the Disciplines* (Chicago, 1993), with Jean O’Barr and V. Y. Mudimbe.