Blurring the Disciplinary Boundaries

Area Studies in the United States

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For this review, I define an area specialist as someone who devotes all or a substantial portion of his or her professional career to the study of another country or region of the world. Area studies is what area specialists do. For historical reasons, most Americans do not include the study of western European countries nor that of their own country in that term. If they included study of the United States, most disciplinary scholars would be area specialists. The term area specialist normally refers to a person whose work is focused on one or another country in Latin America, eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and East Asia. As we will note, while identification of specialists tends to be with a broad region of the world, the long-term trend among area specialists in the United States is for narrower and narrower geographic specialization, moving from world region to country to section of the country.

I want to note at the outset that I will be describing area studies as the field is currently organized in the United States, where laissez-faire growth has produced almost a pure market profile of this intellectual enterprise. While I have no systematic information on area studies in other countries, it seems clear that they have not, nor should they, follow this laissez-faire model. Indeed, many of the issues central to the academic debate about area studies in the United States—the relative value of an area versus a disciplinary focus, research technology versus content, and applied versus pure research—are peculiarly American. They do not seem to trouble scholars in other countries quite so much. Moreover, in many other countries the topical and disciplinary focus of area studies is determined by the interests of public policy, in particular, a government's need to devise an effective political or economic strategy with reference to a country or region. Indeed, in many countries,
much of area studies is carried out within government agencies or in separate academies that are responsible and responsive to government needs. In the United States, while there are individuals within government agencies who have a responsibility for providing policy-relevant information, the bulk of the basic research and writing on other countries is carried out in a university setting by scholars who set their independent agendas and who, in some cases, see themselves as not only independent of government policy but opposed to it. The fact that area studies in the United States is so firmly rooted in the university setting also gives it a teaching function often not found in other countries where area specialists confine their professional work to research and writing.

In the discussion that follows, there is no assumption that the American pattern is the one that other countries should adopt. In several respects, the way in which area studies is institutionalized in other countries has much to recommend it. There are, however, some trade-offs which the choice of one or another model introduces and I shall try to identify some of these. In addition, there are some intellectual issues that occur everywhere in the concentrated study of other countries, and I shall try to highlight those.

**RECOGNIZING THE NATIONAL NEED FOR SPECIALISTS**

As most countries discover, the development of a substantial cadre of people who are expert on other parts of the world tends not to happen without a deliberate governmental decision to create such a cadre and the investment of the resources necessary to bring it about. Without special effort, some disciplinary scholars may, over time, become a little more cosmopolitanized in their perspective, but the creation and maintenance of a corps of area specialists, particularly specialists on countries outside of their own cultural tradition, is unlikely to occur. The position in the United States preceding the 1940s is typical of the early stages of development of area studies more generally. Before World War II, only a handful of American scholars dedicated their professional lives to the study of countries outside of western Europe. It was the missionary, the ex-foreign service officer, and, to a lesser extent, the itinerant businessperson or immigrant national of the country who provided the bulk of American expertise on many countries of the world. Looking back, it was an odd view of the world that they provided for us, one which we are now trying to supplant in the same way that many European countries must try to dislodge their colonial perspective.

In the days before World War II, the few area specialists on the faculty of universities tended to be historians, students of classical literatures, or an
occasional linguist. It was American participation in World War II, and our need to deal successfully with many countries whose names most Americans had barely heard of, that created a need for a larger cadre of area specialists with a greater knowledge of the contemporary societies of the world. To meet this need, during World War II the few existing academic area specialists on each world area were brought together on a few university campuses to train students to be specialists on other countries. After the war, the military need for these programs disappeared, and many programs were dismantled. However, with help from several major private foundations, 14 organized campus-based area studies programs remained, many of them expanded versions of the small nuclei that had survived from the prewar days.

A BASIC ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION

The basic decision that was made during the war, a decision whose consequences were not even debated at the time, was to place these programs on campuses and to staff them with civilian professors, even though the people being trained in these centers at that time were all military personnel. They were, in fact, enclaved and had little to do with the rest of the campus. It might have made as much sense at the time to make the area centers free-standing, governmentally supported units outside the university system. Had this decision been taken, these army specialized training units might have been the prototypes of the "academy" style of organization of area studies that is so typical in other countries.

This almost accidental decision—to fit area studies into the university context—produces structural and intellectual benefits:

- It allows the intellectual strength of the academic disciplines to constantly feed into area studies without having to cross an institutional boundary.
- It makes the recruitment of very good students and faculty more likely because they do not have to leave their academic institution to become area specialists.
- It makes a wide range of disciplines available to students to broaden their training.
- It brings into area studies a wide range of academic disciplines, particularly in the humanities, that would not be so likely to be represented in separate academies or government organizations.
- It insulates basic research from the pressure by government to make it serve exclusively government-defined national interests, or worse, to provide rationalizations for the policies of particular regimes.
- It combines area research with teaching, to the benefit of both.
Drawbacks of locating area studies on campuses, as against establishing them as free-standing entities, are equally apparent:

- It is difficult to guarantee that issues of great importance to national interest will be adequately researched.
- It is difficult to ensure that universities will provide staff positions for specialists on marginal societies or topics—for instance, central Asian languages or the Sri Lankan economy—even though the national need may be great.
- It is difficult to ensure that campus-based specialists will be able to devote their time fully to their area specialty.
- It is difficult to provide the special resources necessary to the production and maintenance of specialists when they are widely dispersed.
- It is difficult to assure that the orientation of research will be from the perspective of the home-country national interest. In general, the focus and style of university research tends to be overly scholarly and not directed to the needs of policymakers.

In different national settings, the balance of benefits and drawbacks of the university versus the academy model of area studies may be different. In any event, in the United States, the decision to sustain area specialists on university campuses was made at the very beginning.

**RAPID GROWTH**

The rapid expansion in the number of area specialists was one of the remarkable features of post-World War II academic development in the United States. In particular, the successful launching of Sputnik by the Soviet Union led to the creation of a major U.S. government funding program to support the training of area specialists. All of a sudden, there was another reason why American ignorance of other countries was costly. Competitors in science and technology, and more recently in business, had crept up on us unawares. Skilled other-country watchers were needed. There are now about 600 self-declared area studies programs on American campuses which range in size from only a few to hundreds of faculty and students. At the top of the range in numbers and quality, 80 or so programs annually receive support from the government. Between 1959 and 1981, these government-supported programs produced 88,000 students receiving academic degrees in language and area studies (Lambert, Barber, Jorden, Twarog, & Merrill, 1984). Over the past 5 years, the period of rapid expansion in area studies, with the possible exception of Japanese studies, has come to an end. There is now a stable corps
of about 7,000 academic area specialists (Lambert, et al., 1984), scattered throughout higher education, both within and outside organized centers.

AREA STUDIES AS A HIGHLY DIFFERENTIATED ENTERPRISE

As with most scholarly developments in the United States, the current pattern of area studies is the result of an essentially laissez-faire process of growth. To be sure, the national government has occasionally tried to reshape it, mainly through special financial support for underrepresented disciplines and unstudied countries and by attempting to raise the level of language competency. By and large, however, the growth of area studies has been the result of many separate institutional and individual decisions unrelated to government support. As a result, the very general term "area studies" hides vital differences among area studies that make generalizations extremely difficult. Accordingly, the first thing that must be done in any discussion of area studies in the United States is to unreify; it is not a single phenomenon. There are some features of area studies that are shared very generally by those who dedicate all or a large part of their scholarly careers to area studies. I will discuss the intellectual and organizational implications of some of them. However, there are many more that may apply to scholars in one set of disciplines studying one country or region and be totally inappropriate for others. As I shall show, we are dealing with a highly variegated, fragmented phenomenon, not a relatively homogeneous intellectual tradition like those in the various social science disciplines.

ELEMENTS WITHIN AREA STUDIES

In considering area studies and area specialists in the American context, one must look at several elements, including degree of specialization, factual knowledge, language competency, country or region of focus, and discipline. Indeed, area studies is best seen as a general rubric that covers many very different intellectual enterprises. The following classificatory variables are minimal criteria for specifying which aspect of area studies we are talking about.

DEGREE OF SPECIALIZATION

The American laissez-faire pattern has led to the diffusion of studies of other countries of the world throughout the academic world. Except for the
least studied countries—for instance, Burma and Rwanda—research and
writing on other areas of the world is by no means limited to a small, highly
specialized, highly trained set of area specialists. As it does in its education
system more generally, the United States democratizes area studies. This is
not the case in many countries, as noted earlier, where a small cadre of area
specialists located in special institutes outside teaching universities conduct
almost all of their research on other countries. The American system raises
real questions as to who an area specialist is.

In the American context, the degree of area specialization is a continuum
ranging from the person who conducts a single piece of research on another
country and then moves on to another topic, to the scholar whose entire
professional life is devoted to research and teaching on a particular area. The
latter group comprises a minority of those who are publishing scholarly work
on other parts of the world. Even within organized area studies programs—
the American equivalents to the academies—a substantial portion of the
faculty does not spend the bulk of its professional time in an areal special-
ization. A recent survey (Lambert et al., 1984) indicated that even among
those listed on the faculty of the federally funded language and area studies
centers that train most of our future area specialists, organizationally the inner
core of area studies, only 77% spent 25% or more of their professional time
studying or teaching about an area.

This pattern of relatively open scholarly entry into the study of other
countries has costs and benefits. On the positive side:

- It allows for the continual infusion of fresh ideas and perspectives.
- It protects against the enclaving of area studies away from main currents within
  academic disciplines.
- It lessens the danger of dependence on a very few people for information on
  other societies.
- It reduces the likelihood of a descent into very narrowly defined, country-
  specific esoterica.

The pattern has drawbacks as well:

- It may swamp serious scholarly work on other countries in a sea of uninformed
dilettantism.
- It squanders scholarly resources that might be better spent on in-depth studies.
- It intrudes issues of the advancement of the discipline per se or of the
  technology of research analysis into the selection of topic and the conduct of
  research; the importance of the research to the understanding of a country or
  region becomes a secondary consideration.
- It dilutes the training of specialists so that attaining genuine expertise on a
  country or region is displaced by non-area-related disciplinary training.
In an attempt to minimize the negative effects of the American system of open access to scholarship on other countries, the natural tendency of those with a life-long commitment to scholarship on another area is to develop even more rigorous criteria for defining who is truly an expert. To give some idea of the proportion of the inner core of specialists to all scholars writing on a region, we recently supplied a list of names of all scholars who had written a scholarly article on one of the countries of South Asia in the past 5 years (Lambert et al., 1981). We asked respondents to indicate those whom they considered to be experts. Of a list of 2,046 academics who had recently published scholarly work on South Asia, 762 or 37% were judged to be truly expert. South Asia, with its English-speaking tradition, may make the proportion of experts to total scholars a little lower than would be true of China or Japan, but even for those countries, the experts would probably make up a minority of those publishing scholarly work on the region.

**BROAD FACTUAL KNOWLEDGE**

The criteria normally used to distinguish the serious area specialist are that he or she has mastered a substantial amount of factual information on the area, has extensive and recent experience of direct contact with the area, and has a high level of competency in a language of an area. These criteria show up most clearly in the training of specialists. The attainment of the "old hand" status of someone who has accumulated a substantial amount of knowledge on a wide variety of topics relating to a country or region—somewhat akin to what an educated native would have—is built into the curriculum by enrolling the student in coursework relating to the area in a wide variety of disciplines. In practice, this is difficult to accomplish. Given the heavy disciplinary focus of much of American graduate education, it is not surprising to find that few students actually distribute the courses in their training very far from their major discipline. Nonetheless, the goal of the formal training and a great deal of the informal reading and experience that follows it is meant to provide specialists with a large base of factual knowledge about the country or region of specialization.

Indeed, it is this quality of knowing many things about another society that makes it possible for them to relate effectively to nationals of that society. Intellectually, the general knowledge base anchors their research in the reality of the local society, minimizing to the greatest extent possible the distortions arising from the superimposition of American cultural and academic perspectives on societies where they are not relevant. Some groups of area scholars—most notably South Asianists and Southeast Asianists—have gone so far as to deliberately try to import analytic concepts indigenous to
the societies they study into their own analyses. A similar phenomenon occurred with the importation of the Latin American notion of dependencia into American scholarship on Latin America. This insistence on a locally rooted, factual base and a leaning toward indigenous conceptual constructs tends to separate these area specialists from others in their field who see their work as universal and not bound to any particular society. As area specialists point out, however, many aspects of the discipline are not universal but in reality represent hidden area studies of the United States. Out of just such symbolic battles are major academic wars spawned.

IN-COUNTRY EXPERIENCE

In the early years of area studies, it was possible for specialists to write and teach about other countries without ever having visited them. In the case of some closed societies to which American scholars are not admitted, this may still be the case. It is a rare area specialist now who does not make periodic visits to the country he or she is studying, and students are not permitted to complete their training without collecting data for a dissertation or enrolling in advanced language training in the country of specialization. The rhythm of academic life in the United States may limit student visits to an academic year or less (probably somewhat less than is needed to get an adequate exposure to the country), but almost every area studies student makes that visit. And becoming an “old hand” requires repeated visits over the course of a career.

The need for in-country experience, however, raises major structural and intellectual issues. In the early days of area studies in the United States, except for a few societies from which Americans were entirely excluded, American students and professors had reasonably free access to most societies to conduct their research. Gradually, however, more and more restrictions on the topic, sponsorship, and location of research have been introduced by one government after another. From the perspective of the host country, American research became viewed increasingly as an extractive industry in which data were gathered by Americans on short trips to the country, often by hiring local academics to carry out the data collection, and then taken home to be analyzed and published in the United States. Moreover, Americans have a taste for problems, and, particularly in studies of politics and economics, their views often ran counter to those held by policymakers in the countries they studied. In addition, the American intellectual style, especially in the social sciences, was increasingly viewed as ethnocentric and irrelevant by indigenous scholars. Add to this the vagaries of official relations between particular countries and the United States, of which the student or
faculty member may be the victim. Accordingly, governmental and academic screening of topics are now routinely grafted on the visa clearance process so that, today, acquiring in-country experience for a student or scholar is a complex and risky venture. Denial of access for research makes it extremely difficult for a student or a professor to continue as an area specialist.

The intellectual costs of this process are less clear but nonetheless important. Because the "safe" topics tend to lie in the humanities, there is a distinct shadow effect, which means the willingness of social sciences students and faculty to spend a career in the study of particular countries is sharply curtailed. As other countries develop their own cadres of area specialists and seek to give them in-country research experience, issues of dyadic relationships of each country with the others will require a host of complex bilateral negotiations unless a collective international solution to this problem is found.

LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

An even more tangible definer of the area expert is the command of a language of the area. The need for language competency differs from one topic or discipline to another. The econometrician or the demographer who can work with published aggregate data may have less need for language competency than does the anthropologist engaged in village studies, or the student of literature. And someone studying a region where the use of English is widespread may still work effectively as an area specialist without a competency in a language of the area. However, a command of a regional language and its use in research is becoming increasingly important in area studies scholarship.

In large part as a result of the needs of area specialists, the United States has developed a very substantial capacity to teach foreign languages. In 1982, the organized area studies programs on American campuses taught 76 different languages, from Amharic to Quechua and Zulu. Since the purpose of learning most of these languages is for use by area specialists in active research within a country, there is a very heavy emphasis on attaining a high level of competency in the modern spoken version of the language, although, as we will indicate, there are still substantial residues of classical and literary languages. To emphasize the importance of the spoken vernacular, a major national effort has been made to develop a common measure of language competency independent of the number of months or years that a student has spent learning a language. This measure, referred to as the ACTFL/FSI standard, is tested in a face-to-face oral interview. It uses the educated native speaker as a reference point, and it specifies particular linguistic tasks that a
student must perform to mark levels of competency. Currently, there is major
debate within the United States about the relative utility of this standard for
the less commonly taught languages, but in the end, some form of a common
metric across all, or almost all, languages is likely to emerge.

For countries initiating or expanding area studies, the demands of the
introduction of language instruction are substantial. For one thing, the
number of languages to be covered is immense. For instance, to fully staff a
South Asia program, all 14 official languages of India should be taught. In
Africa, there are 2,000 different languages, many of which have distinctive
dialects. Even to cover Latin America, in addition to Spanish and Portuguese,
some of the indigenous Indian languages, such as Quechua, must be covered.
American area programs, in practice, concentrate on one or two major
languages spoken within their region, but all add one or two other languages
of the area. Thus, from a national perspective, a large number of the major
languages of the world are covered.

The time demands for learning a language vary considerably. Languages
are roughly divided into four categories of difficulty for American learners.
In the first category, which comprises the western European languages, such
as French, Spanish, and Italian, it is estimated that 840 classroom hours are
required to allow an American student to achieve a minimal ability to satisfy
routine social demands and limited work requirements. In the fourth cate-
gory, which includes Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, 2,400 hours are
required. Obviously, for native speakers of other languages, the levels of
difficulty would be different. The basic point, however, is that in all countries
the successful development of area studies requires heavy investment both
by the country and by the individual in language learning, particularly for
those languages most difficult to learn. More than any other feature, this
commitment of language-learning time tends to distinguish area specialists.

"OLOGIZING" AREA STUDIES: COUNTRY OR REGION

The tendency of any intellectual tradition to create guild-like definitions
of qualification for membership is, of course, universal. I mention it here
because it highlights one of the long-term intellectual trends in area studies
in the United States. The combination of a high degree of specialization and
of the need for substantial amounts of factual knowledge about a country or
region, repeated visits to that country or region, and high levels of language
competency results in what I would call "ologizing" area studies. That is, the
study of Japan becomes the property of Japanologists; of China, Sinologists;
of the Soviet Union, Sovietologists. The growth of the "ologist" tradition is
most notable among specialists on areas where mastery of the regional
languages is most time-consuming: East Asia, the Middle East, central Asia, and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union and eastern Europe.

The "ologizing" movement in area studies in the United States is a natural consequence of the need to draw a boundary separating the real experts from dilettantes, because of the fully laissez-faire recruitment system. In many other countries where the open scholarship tradition in area studies is less evident, "ologizing" may be built into institutional structures. In the United States, it is more informal; it represents a constant tension. In either case, its impact on the intellectual direction of the field can be substantial. "Ologizing" means that recruitment to area studies is constrained by high entrance requirements, both on the part of established scholars and of students. This makes the interface between area studies and its various disciplinary components more troublesome. In general, it tends to push the disciplinary balance of area specialists away from the social sciences and toward the humanities, where language competency and substantive knowledge of other countries are more likely to be found and where the fungibility of interest from one topic to another is greatest. "Ologizing" particularly tends to exclude the "hard" end of the social sciences (e.g., econometrics, demography, and political modeling), where the supremacy of analytic technique over substantive content finds its greatest adherents. On the other hand, it does make for research that is more fully informed and more reflective of the country or region being studied, which is no mean accomplishment in itself.

I have spent so much time on the "ologist" tradition because it has major policy implications for a country seeking to inaugurate or expand area studies. It must decide whether to diffuse research on other countries widely throughout the academic community in each of the relevant disciplines or to concentrate resources on producing fewer specialists with a deep, all engrossing, concentration on an area and its languages. I have no data on the situation in other countries. My impression is that, in the main, they have chosen the "ologist" model. The American experience indicates that there are advantages and costs to each approach.

AREA STUDIES TRIBES

There are, in fact, totally distinct tribes of scholars focusing on each of the major world areas, tribes that are just as distinct as the regions they study. In fact, it has been remarked that American specialists on particular countries or regions take on some of the characteristics of the societies they study. As with tribes, most of the interaction is within the tribe and not with people outside the tribe. For instance, individuals specializing on Japan and China will have relatively little to do with each other professionally, and for either
to share an intellectual endeavor with a specialist on, say, Latin America or Egypt, is quite unlikely. There are some bridges. It is interesting that the metaphor of the Pacific Rim has brought together the Latin Americanists and the East Asianists in a curious coalition. Recently, a bridging scholarly group was forced to investigate the Muslim world stretching from the Middle East all the way across Asia to the east coast of China. Its research domain runs across the turfs of some of the area studies tribes. It will be interesting to see how durable the Pacific Rim coalition is. But, by and large, the world area studies tribes inhabit relatively watertight intellectual domains.

The regions represented in area studies reflect the broad cultural subdivisions of the world. The boundaries follow old colonial empires, especially the old British foreign office partitioning of the world. Afghanistan goes with India and Pakistan, but Burma goes with Southeast Asia. Africa breaks at the Sahara. East Europe follows the cold war. Central Asia is a no-man's-land. Within each of these regions, one or a few countries get the lion’s share of attention: China and Japan in East Asia, Thailand and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, India in South Asia, Egypt in the Middle East, Mexico and Brazil in Latin America, the Soviet Union in East Europe, and Kenya and Nigeria in Africa. But “tribal” identification is, by and large, with the region, not the country.

One peculiarity of the American area studies tribal identifications is that western Europe is not a tribe. Most American scholars studying western European countries see themselves strictly as disciplinarians and not as area specialists. This lack of tribal identification derives in part from historical reasons. The development of area studies in the United States was principally a reaction to scarcity: Until World War II, there were very few scholars who had any knowledge of most of the non-Western world. Hence area studies grew as a deliberate attempt to increase their numbers. At the time, there was no shortage of scholars studying Europe. However, the reluctance of European specialists to identify themselves as an area studies tribe was and is, above all, an intellectual preference. They tend to see themselves as members of a discipline who happen to be studying a phenomenon in a European country. In an important sense, expatriates became the true Europeanists. It is interesting to note that now that there are more doctoral dissertations on Chinese history than on all of European history written each year in the United States, some West European scholars are developing an area studies “tribe” of their own.

There are many examples of the differences in intellectual style among the various world-area scholarly tribes. A few examples will suffice. For instance, they differ on the extent to which they reflect the tradition of the oriental classicists, the scholars rooted in the great civilizations of the past.
Orientalism is not an issue at all in Latin American or African studies. While most historians in Soviet and East European studies concentrate on the pre-Bolshevik period, there are few equivalents to the classicists there. But for a scholar studying China or India, the classical civilization is part of everyday life. Serious scholars, even social scientists, must master it to make any sense of the contemporary society. Indeed, the appreciation of the relevance of history more generally to contemporary studies varies immensely from one world-area group to another.

In addition, the world-area studies groups differ considerably in terms of their penetrability, the degree to which “ologizing” has taken over. South Asian and African studies are porous. They are subject to a considerable amount of movement of scholars in and out of the fields. The heavy investment required for entry into Chinese and Japanese studies makes for tighter boundaries. Latin American studies is somewhere in between. And more generally, the distribution of academic disciplines differs from one world-area studies group to another. Latin American, African, and South Asian studies belong to the social scientists, although in the latter, the humanists are beginning to shift the balance. Chinese and East European studies belong to the humanists.

The implications of the tribalization of area studies are twofold. First, each world-area studies group has its own tradition, definitions of scholarship, and set of relationships with the countries being studied and the scholars in that country. Countries seeking to expand area studies will need to tailor their effort to the special needs of the particular area they are studying.

The second implication is that the territory lying between the tribes tends to be plowed by others. It takes special effort to make the separate groups interact since their natural tendency is to reflect the more disparate features of the countries they study. Comparative studies is one route to such interaction but it has weak roots in area studies. And broader considerations of multinational affairs outside of the dyadic relationships of a particular country and the United States tend to be left to an entirely different set of academic specialists, the international relations experts. Indeed, even political science area specialists tend to focus not on the external relations of the countries they study but on their internal political systems.

DISCIPLINE

I refer to the specialists on particular world areas as distinct “tribes” because each has its own culture and social organization, and each tribe has relatively little to do with the others. This, in part, reflects differences in the regions they study, but it is also a by-product of the fact that campus-based
area centers and the external funds that support them are area-specific. However, disciplinary differences in area studies are not so tribal. In part because of the structure of the field—both the organized centers and the professional organizations that bind individual specialists are defined by area, not by discipline—there is much greater contact by area specialists with other specialists across disciplinary boundaries. And students training to be specialists are usually required to take courses on their area in other disciplines than their major discipline.

Nonetheless, the basic reference point for most area specialists is the discipline in which he or she resides, and the long-term tendency is for more and more disciplinary specialization. This clear disciplinary emphasis carries over into the training of future specialists. While there is some attempt to expose area-studies students to a variety of disciplines as they relate to their area of specialization, the overwhelming proportion of their training remains within a single discipline, and in the social sciences about 80% of the courses that students take are not area-specific, but are confined to their discipline.

Given the heavy disciplinary specificity of most students' training and specialists' research interests, it follows that the most useful way to think of area studies is not as an interdisciplinary tradition of scholarship but as a set of subdisciplines, each of which lies inside the larger tradition of the discipline. Looking at area studies as a set of subdisciplines, how are area specialists distributed across the academic disciplines? Table 1 provides the most recent information on the disciplinary spread of area specialists in the United States, shown separately for each world area. The data in this table present the percentage of the faculty from different disciplines in each world area-studies group in all of the governmentally supported area-studies programs. Only those who reported that they spent 25% or more of their professional time working on the area are included. The number at the bottom of each column is the total number of faculty included and gives a fair idea of the core of specialists training most of the next generation of area-studies students. There are a number of more complete enumerations of specialists, including those not affiliated with centers, but the disciplinary distribution is similar (Lambert et al., 1984).

It will be noted that while area specialists are found in a large number of disciplines, in general, it can be said that the more a discipline is focused on what are presumed to be universal principles rather than substantive particulars, the less hospitable that discipline will be to area studies. Psychology, which is rapidly becoming a biology-based science, economics, with its center of gravity in econometrics and macroeconomic theory, and, to a lesser extent, sociology are less well represented than anthropology and political science, where elegant description-oriented analyses are still admired. It can
TABLE 1: Percentage of Area Specialists\(^a\) by Discipline and by World Area

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\(N = 100, 237, 204, 15, 219, 170, 122, 47\)

\(a.\) Faculty of government-supported, organized area programs who spend 25\% or more of their professional time on the area.
be seen from Table 1 that the heart of area studies lies in just four disciplines: language and literature, history, political science, and anthropology. In all world area groups, except Southeast Asian studies, about two thirds of the specialists are in these disciplines. More than half of the Southeast Asian specialists are in these four disciplines.

It can also be seen from Table 1 that the distribution varies by world region. Inner Asian studies is so small and so recent that specialists on that area concentrate on history, language studies and a nondisciplinary concentration on the area itself. History is well represented in East Asian and East European studies. Language and literature is well represented in most world area groups. Economics is relatively strong in African, Latin American, and Southeast Asian studies, but never reaches more than 15% in any of them. Anthropology is strong in the developing societies, but sociology is underrepresented everywhere. This distribution of scholars by degree of specialization, world area, and discipline is the result of a laissez-faire system of recruitment and growth in the American university setting. Other countries may well produce very different patterns.

AREA STUDIES AS A TRANSDISCIPLINARY ENTERPRISE

It is a mistake to think of area studies as predominantly an interdisciplinary enterprise. It is not inherently interdisciplinary if that term implies individuals from different disciplines joining in a common intellectual endeavor. On most occasions, it would be better described as transdisciplinary. If one looks at the set of scholars who have a long-term professional concern with a particular part of the world, it spans many disciplines. But that does not mean that scholars from these disciplines are engaged in intellectual collaboration across disciplinary lines. They happen to be working on the same geographic area, but each scholar's perspective is usually bound by his or her discipline. Area studies programs are predominantly nondisciplinary; the topics of research are usually chosen because of their importance for an understanding of a society. The conceptual and methodological superstructure of Western-oriented disciplines is often not very helpful in this endeavor. Furthermore, area studies may be considered subdisciplinary in that research by individual area specialists, particularly in the social sciences, tends to concentrate on particular subsections, rather than the full range of specialties, within each discipline.

The organized area studies programs on American campuses, which gather together scholars from different disciplines who share the same area focus, vary in size from a dozen or so faculty members to almost one hundred.
The complement of faculty members usually includes teachers of the languages of the area, as well as scholars in a substantial number of academic disciplines. Similarly, the professional organizations that serve the scholarly interests of the field are transdisciplinary, that is, they will draw members from a large number of disciplines, but members' scholarly work lies within their own disciplines.

The same picture of transdisciplinarity is evident in the training of students who will be the specialists of the future. While the area studies program in which the student is training to become a specialist will normally offer courses in many disciplines, to a student it resembles a cafeteria in which each course is anchored in its own discipline. It is often left to the student to blend them together. Indeed, most students training to be specialists take the overwhelming proportion of their courses within their major discipline, and those courses are, by and large, not related to their area. A recent survey (Lambert et al., 1984) of the transcripts of students receiving fellowships to become area specialists showed that only 6.4% of the courses that these students took were on the area in a discipline other than their own major. In fact, 75% of all the courses they took were in their major discipline, and only 25% of their courses were related to the area, no matter what discipline they were offered in. It is clear that the training of specialists still comprises a gentle graft of a little bit of area and language training on top of a largely discipline-focused graduate education. In the United States, there is no equivalent to what one finds in other countries where students are being trained almost exclusively in language and other courses related to a particular country. The American tradition of area studies as a nonenclaved endeavor with a very loose definition of expertise is reflected in the education of area specialists.

AREA STUDIES AS AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ENTERPRISE

The true blending of disciplinary perspectives in area studies is most frequent in two types of activity. The first of these is in conferences, symposia, and thematic sessions at professional association meetings. A sample of the topics of representative conferences and professional meeting sessions dealing with China, or on other world areas, which have been held in the United States within the past few years would reveal a pattern of broadly defined themes on which scholars from a number of disciplines present separate papers; taken together they make up a multidisciplinary perspective. It is the topic of the conference, symposium, or session that drives the disciplinary mix.
The second type of blurring of disciplinary boundaries occurs in the research of individual area specialists. Once again, it is the topic that blurs the disciplinary boundaries. As individual scholars work on a particular topic relating to a country or world area, their research will inevitably draw on relevant parts of other disciplines. Since topics of scholarship in area studies are often selected because they are substantively important to understanding a particular country, they frequently do not respect disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, the work of an individual researcher becomes transdisciplinary with respect to a particular research topic.

Individual area specialists, in the course of their scholarly careers, will often take up topics that naturally belong in a variety of disciplines. If I may be permitted to cite my own career as an example, I have published separate scholarly articles and books on patterns of collective violence, the history of a political party, the economic implications of cultural values, patterns of urban morphology, industrial labor markets, social stratification, ethnic relations, religion, educational development, linguistic aspects of language skill attrition, and language policy. The style of analysis in these publications ranges from descriptive prose to highly abstract statistical modeling. Similar eclecticism can be found in the writings of many other area specialists. Intellectual interest follows the topic, and is informed, but not bound, by a particular discipline. However, in only two of these studies did I actually collaborate with a scholar in another discipline: one with an economist, not in the analysis of labor markets where it might have been expected, but in a book jointly authored on the history of economic philosophy in Asia; and the other with a linguist on language skill attrition. In the other studies, if there was some relevant intellectual apparatus that had to be borrowed from another discipline, I acquired it. My own experience is not unrepresentative of that of other area specialists.

AREA STUDIES AS A NONDISCIPLINARY ENTERPRISE

Such intellectual eclecticism has its costs, however. For one thing, it guides the choice of topics of research into domains where the methodological and conceptual superstructure of disciplines is less intrusive. It will be noted that the two formal collaborations in which I engaged were in disciplines with a high methodological and conceptual orientation—economics and linguistics. Moreover, both in the case of these collaborations and in other research domains I explored, the topics selected for research either fell well within my own discipline of sociology or lay in aspects of other disciplines that a generalist might have some hope of mastering.
In one sense, such research might be called interdisciplinary, since it crosses disciplinary boundaries. However, the better term is nondisciplinary, since the topics often fall in domains where the conceptual and methodological apparatus of particular disciplines is least relevant. Indeed, for area specialists working on many topics, the normal disciplinary apparatus is often seen to be narrowly culture-bound and largely irrelevant to the phenomenon being studied. Dissertation students engaged in field work often go through a sort of intellectual crisis as they discover that the conceptual baggage with which their home university faculty sent them into the field seems unsuited to the analysis of the situation in which they find themselves. The tension is legendary between U.S.-based dissertation supervisors rooted in their disciplines and home cultures and students working abroad, whose research must reflect the society they are studying. It can be no less a problem for the established scholar who often must face two ways, one toward a disciplinary audience back home and the other toward a substantively oriented set of colleagues sharing his or her interest in a particular country or area. In fact, it is often this tension that makes it difficult for area studies scholarship to feed back into the disciplines. There are exceptions, of course. For instance, specialists on socialist economies are often as econometric in orientation as specialists on capitalist economies, and their research is increasingly changing the nature of macroeconomic theory. However, the core of area studies in the social sciences lies in the nontechnical, frequently nondisciplinary end of the discipline.

The tendency to nondisciplinarity shows up in scholarly activities usually thought of as interdisciplinary. This is true not only in the topics that span disciplines but in the disciplines most often engaged in interdisciplinary ventures. I mentioned earlier that there are four core disciplines which provide the bulk of the specialists in area studies: anthropology, history, literature, and political science. Not only do these disciplines predominate in area studies, but it is precisely at their juncture point—a kind of historically informed political anthropology, using materials in the local languages—that much of the genuinely interdisciplinary work in area studies occurs. History operates as a swing discipline, facing both the humanities and the social sciences, and the principal thrust of a particular research theme determines where in the spectrum it will lie. A large portion of the interdisciplinary conferences, symposia, book collaborations, and jointly taught courses fall within this range of disciplines.

Most of the social science used in area studies tends to be at the “soft” end of the spectrum because of the heavy representation of the humanities within several of the area studies “tribes.” The research is closely tied to topics that
normally foci within the humanities. Area specialists who are in the social sciences are likely to have a great deal more contact and shared intellectual activity with humanists than do most of their nonarea-oriented disciplinary colleagues. This tie to the humanities presents an unusual opportunity for intellectual cross-fertilization through dialogue with scholars in disciplines with which they normally have little contact. For instance, few nonarea-oriented social scientists engage in much intellectual interchange with classicists or philologists, who comprise an important part of area studies. Indeed, the early founders of area studies in the United States, in East Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern studies, tended to be scholars whose interests lay in the great classical civilizations and languages of those areas. Almost as a side activity, they occasionally wrote about other aspects of China, Japan, the Middle East, and South Asia. This anchoring of area studies in the classical period with its mix of philology, textual exegesis, archaeology, religious studies, and philosophy gives it a special antiquarian patina.

The pervasive humanities aspect of much of area studies is immensely enriching. However, for many social scientists not engaged in area studies, particularly those at the “hard” end of the spectrum, the close ties of area studies with the humanities reinforces their perception that area studies is not a scientific activity. From the perspective of the “hard” social scientist, the humanities are nondisciplinary. The fact that humanistic disciplines have their own distinctive conceptual and methodological framework does not alter their judgment since these disciplines do not follow the social science paradigm. To the extent that social science research in area studies leans toward the humanities, it is likewise considered nondisciplinary.

AREA STUDIES AS A SUBDISCIPLINARY ENDEAVOR

So far, we have talked of entire disciplines or groups of disciplines. However, area studies is not typically a blend of all aspects of its constituent disciplines. Rather, within each discipline there are particular subdisciplinary domains within which area specialists in the United States tend to work. We mentioned earlier that there are, indeed, economists who are area specialists. However, the majority (59%; Lambert et al., 1984) of them work in just three subfields: agricultural, development, and planning economics. For a discipline in a capitalist society, it is surprising that so little of the work of area specialists is in the subfields of economics which one might expect to be of interest to business leaders: Only 8.8% had to do with markets and only 6.4% with industry.
POLICY APPLICATION

In fact, one of the most striking features of American area-studies research is that it is only loosely related to public or private policymaking. Of 5,928 publications by area specialists between 1976 and 1981, only 16% had any policy relevance, using a very loose definition of that term. The bulk of those (55%) dealt with economic or social development within the country being studied and not with external affairs. Publications on foreign policy, broadly defined, comprised only 13.5% of all articles and books during this period, and less than 6% had any possible relevance to military or strategic planning. Whatever else it may be, American area studies is not an applied enterprise. Contrary to the view of many foreign governments and scholars, only in the most indirect sense does area studies serve the needs of the American government or American business. In many other countries, area studies is tied much more directly to the practical needs of policymakers. One of the advantages of bringing specialists together in extrauniversity centers and institutes is that collective agendas can be set to serve specific national objectives.

Under the American laissez-faire system, centralized narrowing and directing of the focus of research is not possible. Moreover, as I have indicated, the feeling of area-specific expertise tends to preserve the tribal orientation of area studies and keeps the field immensely fragmented. It can truly be said that area studies in the United States marches to a thousand different drummers.

REFERENCES
