A Teachable Moment: ‘Explaining’ Asia in The Asian Century
By Kanishka Jayasuriya

Recent debate in education circles in Australia about how to improve the country’s understanding and knowledge of Asia has highlighted the broader issue of flawed approaches to “explaining” Asia to Europe and the US, and even efforts within Asia to approach Asian studies.

What is needed, writes Kanishka Jayasuriya, is a new approach that frees “Asian studies” from the constraints that marginalize the topic from mainstream academic discourse and repositions it as part of a new global social science.

There has been much recent discussion on enhancing Asian literacy in Australia, which is about getting to “know” Asia — a discussion that is relevant to the rest of the world as the economic and geopolitical weight of the globe shifts increasingly to the East. Let me be somewhat provocative and argue that the strategic issue is not developing knowledge about Asia, but how and in what way the study of Asia can contribute to the creation of a truly global social science. But such a global social science can only be achieved by transcending the so-called “area studies” problem that underpins much of the discussion of Asian literacy. An area studies problem refers to a configuration of research problems based on an attempt to understand a particular geographic “area,” which is an approach that does not lie within the academic world’s traditional discipline-centered perspective, but rather is defined in terms of the distinctive characteristics and circumstances of the area itself.

Asia is a region always “out there” rather than “within” the mainstream of academic disciplinary inquiry. Instead of regarding the study of Asia as a special case, we need to incorporate it into the social sciences at all levels — people, institutions and content. It is only through such mainstreaming that we can develop a fully global social science. Yet, paradoxically, this requires us to shift away from an area studies problem that is the implicit rationale for the study of Asia in Australia and elsewhere.

Of course, area studies — particularly Asian studies — grew rapidly during the Cold War period when the US government funded these kinds of initiatives. The dynamic for its support and development in Australia was somewhat different in that the notion of engaging Asia was closely associated with the area studies notions of Asian literacy in Australia. In any case, the development of area studies in countries such as Australia or the United States was closely associated with the social and political challenges of Asia. In these cases, Asia was a problem, challenge and an opportunity that had to be studied.

Hence, research and study on Asia continues to act as support for key concepts and organizing perspectives of the mainstream social sciences that continue to be based on the experience of social and political developments in Europe and North America. It is particularly troubling that for mainstream social science, it is Asia — whether it be its success, exceptionalism or backwardness — that needs to be explained. One index of the dominance of the area studies problem is the continuing influence of modernization theory on the study of Asia. In fact, post-modernist responses to the study of Asia that suggest alternative trajectories of modernity are mired in the same area studies problem of Asia. Hence, the response of some scholars who seek to develop non-Western approaches to social science is equally problematic.

But there are reasons to believe that the advance of the so-called “Asian Century” gives those of us in academia an opportunity to create a truly global social science that is not trapped in the ghetto of area studies. There are three reasons for this.

First, the very nature of the deep-seated capitalist transformation that is taking place across Asia permits us to explore how these general transformative processes are locally based, and context dependent. Crucially, this enables us to situate and make other trajectories of transformation relative — or in the words of the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty, to “provincialize” Europe, although in this case, it is not modernity but understanding of the uneven spread of capitalism in specific localized context that is crucial to the development of a global social science.
In abandoning this area studies problem, we approach Asia not simply as an under-laborer of the social sciences, but rather as one taking a more active part in the process of creating new methods, concepts and theories within the social sciences — in other words, mainstreaming the study of Asia into the social sciences.

The breathtaking rise of capitalism — particularly in China — has been taking place in the context of local and national particularities alongside deeper global transformation to a more integrated global economy with transnational rules, changes in the organization of production to flexible production networks, and the decline of socialist alternatives. The upshot of these transformations is that Asia is not traversing Europe’s past or carving out new forms of modernity but creating distinctive social and political institutional patterns in an emerging post-Westphalian world. It may well be that studying transformation in the contemporary Indo-Pacific region may well — by reversing the usual West-to-East intellectual traffic — provide an insight into contemporary transformations in Europe and North America. This transformative approach provides a pathway to construct for the first time a genuinely global social science.

Second, Asia is now a focus of study in Asia itself. This is reflected in the rapidly growing university sector — in resources, reputation and students — across the Asian region, but particularly in China. This growth comes not only in the natural sciences, but also in the social sciences and humanities, and indicates a pivotal shift in the nature of the production of knowledge on Asia that will impact on the methods and priorities of research in countries such as Australia and the US. No doubt, they work within very different political constraints, but here is the opportunity to build a more global as well as a more equal social science community.

Finally, a truly global social science will need to move towards a different orientation towards the understanding and explanation of social change, with a decided emphasis on what I have referred to elsewhere as a problem-oriented research strategy (PORS). This strategy will enable us to build research around key issues, problems and puzzles of social, economic, and political transformations pertaining to the region as a whole. These problems are rooted in tangible real-world problems, and contribute to the theoretical development of social science/humanities disciplines, while at the same time challenging the taken-for-granted disciplinary boundaries. The PORS approach acknowledges and recognizes some of the key issues of our time — inequality, climate change and financial governance — all of which have similar transnational roots, but its understanding and response need to be tailored to specific political and social contexts. In this sense, a global social science is not simply about incorporating the social and political experience of non-European regions. It is fundamentally about a more deep-seated change in the production and forms of social knowledge.

In abandoning this area studies problem, we approach Asia not simply as an under-laborer of the social sciences, but rather as one taking a more active part in the process of creating new methods, concepts and theories within the social sciences — in other words, mainstreaming the study of Asia into the social sciences. Here, I mean not just the inclusion of Asia — in terms of resources and staff — into mainstream disciplines, but a more fundamental incorporation of the social, political and economic experience of what we call Asia — and other regions as well — into the key theoretical perspectives of the social sciences. And I would insist here that we build a global social science and not an “Asian” or “European” or “Southern” social science.

Above and beyond these factors, a global social science will allow us to challenge the implicit “methodological nationalism” that characterizes much of contemporary social science and area studies. This takes for granted the national state and society as its frame of reference. Methodological nationalism is ingrained in the social sciences. Certainly, given that the national state and society is more visible in the post-colonial era, the process of national state formation remains a prominent feature of area studies. Nevertheless, the dominant focus of area studies continues to be territorially bounded within the national state and society.

A critical issue relating to methodological nationalism lies in its failure to recognize that many of the pressing concerns — the provision of public goods, inequality and migration — can no longer be isolated within a national context.

The source and transformation of global forces have challenged some of these national elements. This clearly suggests that one of the defining features of global social science is likely to be the adoption of a transnational perspective, denoting a close examination of the social and political mechanisms which link various parts of the world. I need to add here that it is not only the interconnections that we need to subject to scrutiny, but also the limits of these connections and links.

Hence, it is much more useful to consider the entanglement of the US and China in the emerging Asian economy rather than concentrate on unproductive debates over the demise of the US, or the rise of Asia. It seems to me that it is precisely the connections and linkages that make the rapid capitalist transformation of China explicable. The fact that party capitalism in China feeds on the debt of private consumption in the US is just one example of how a focus on transnational linkages enhances our understanding of the great transformation now under way in Asia.

These transnational processes have always been with us, but it is clear that the nature of these interconnections and mechanisms have intensified in a way that challenges some of the methodological, nationalist assumptions of the area studies problem. Again, none of this should be surprising for those who study Asia seriously. It needs to be acknowledged that the very concept of Asia itself is a product of these changing connections and networks. Scholars of Asia are ideally placed to exploit the advantages of such a transnational perspective. But, to this end, we need to shift away from an area studies approach that defines so much of the research on Asia.

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