Asia Pacific studies in an age of global modernity

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ABSTRACT This article argues that the end of the Cold War and the attendant globalization of capital call for a reconfiguration of areas, including the Pacific, has played a significant part in the ideological formation of globalization. The resultant formation is ‘global modernity’, representing at once the globalization and the fragmentation of capitalist modernity. The article discusses five intellectual responses to this situation in studies of Asia and the Pacific that propose new configurations to substitute for earlier area studies: civilizations, oceans, diasporas, Asianization of Asia studies, and indigenous studies. It argues that these substitutes themselves are tied in with new formations of power, and should not be taken at face value. Most important is to remain attentive to configurations from the bottom up that are products of struggles against oppression and exploitation.

KEYWORDS: Area studies, Asian studies, Pacific studies, oceanic studies, indigenism, diasporas

Two developments over the last decade provide the conditions for the reconsideration of area studies in general, and Asian and Pacific studies in particular. One is the end of the Cold War (which to my mind includes not just the end of socialist states, but also the end of colonialism in its modern forms), which had fuelled the global revolutionary ferment that modernization discourse was intended to counter. As modernization discourse has become superfluous in tandem with this, so has the utility of spatializing the world into areas that were products of its Orientalist legacies, reinforced by post-World War II geopolitical assumptions. The other development is the decentring of a now globalized capitalism by the appearance of new centres of economic power, which were to play an important part in the emergence to visibility of new areas – most importantly the so-called Pacific Rim, and the reconceptualization it prompted of modernization as globalization.

While globalization discourse is of obvious ideological utility in sugar-coating an unprecedented US corporate domination of the world, it also represents an effort to account for both new unities and new fractures in a globe that is now under the unchallenged hegemony of capital. This is the situation of global modernity, when the identification of modernity with Western European and North American nations and regions has broken down; allowing for alternative cultural claims on the modern, and reconfiguring the temporalities and spatialities of capitalist modernity.

I suggest below that any discussion of Asian Pacific Studies at the current conjuncture needs to account for its relationship to these regional and global transformations both for its conceptual validation, and to avoid instrumentalization in a new ideology of globalization. Given the apparently increasing volatility of our conceptualizations of the world, and the rapid global transformations we are going through, it is more necessary than ever to be prudent about claims to alternative spatializations of the world. The ferment over area studies that is almost as old as their establishment in the 1950s and the 1960s, and has come
to a head over the last decade, should give us pause when it comes to judging the outcomes of academic undertakings.

What may be discussed more fruitfully are the ways in which we grasp the forces that shape the region, and the meaning we assign to them, which in turn have a good deal to do with our politics. We are quite aware by now that there is nothing innocent about our spatializations of the world. The Pacific has played a significant part over the last two decades in the production of discourses of globalization. Conflicts over the Pacific in turn offer clues to grasping ideological conflicts within these discourses. How we view the Pacific, and regionalize it, is not just an academic question but a political one as well. They may all refer to more or less the same location, but terms such as East and Southeast Asia, Asia Pacific, Pacific Asia, Pacific Rim and the Pacific have different, and conflicting, referents that remain to be sorted out (Dirlik 1998 a, b, c; Yui and Endo 2001).

I will take up below five overlapping but nevertheless distinguishable trends that are especially noteworthy in their direct relevance to Asia Pacific studies, although others could no doubt be added to them. These are civilizational studies, oceanic studies, the so-called Asianization of Asian studies, diasporic studies, and indigenous studies. Theoretically, moreover, these new trends in studying the world are entangled in issues raised by cultural studies (the cultural turn), postcolonial criticism (cultural identity and politics), and globalization (the global and transnational, or networks, over nations and regions as sites of economic, social, political and cultural activity). These entanglements have also called into question disciplinary boundaries, as well as introducing into the study of the world a new language of analysis.

I choose these trends not only because of the visibility they have acquired in academic work in the United States and/or Asia since the late 1980s, but also because they are driven by important economic, social and political forces at large in the world, and represent efforts to grasp those forces conceptually. There is, in other words, a materiality to these conceptualizations that makes them compelling. They also represent intellectual constructs that endow those materialities with recognizable and comprehensible form, further focusing their force. As the forces they articulate are often at odds with one another, moreover, these intellectual trends address different aspects of contemporary political, cultural and ideological realities, often in exclusion or contradiction of other alternatives. It is not possible to reduce one to another, or easily contain their diverse concerns within one acceptable spatiality or temporality.

The very multiplicity of possible approaches, and the uncertainty about their longevity, raises a further, even more fundamental question: the wisdom of settling on any one approach – or paradigm – to the exclusion of others. This is the question I would like to address here. If there is a crisis in our ways of studying the world, including the Asia Pacific world, then is this crisis likely to be resolved by the substitution of a new paradigm for the now seemingly defunct paradigm of area studies, or does the solution lie in a proliferation of paradigms in a world that does not lend itself to easy spatial or temporal containment? What we may be witnessing is an explosion into visibility of forces rendered invisible by area studies, the Cold War divisions of the world that area studies articulated, and, ultimately, modernity’s ways of organizing the world and knowing it, and which are now reasserting themselves, empowered by the successes of that very same modernity, as well as its reconfiguration by new dynamic forces that it has released.

The crisis of area studies

The legacy of a half-century of area studies is of necessity the point of departure for the discussion here. The trends I mark here are products of developments that have progressively exposed the problems of dividing the world into rigidly conceived areas, and are
positioned conceptually by their advocates against area studies’ spatializations. While these
alternatives have their own independent origins, they have been brought into focus, and
given further impetus (and financial incentive), by institutional activity to revamp area
studies. I am referring to the Ford Foundation initiative, ‘Crossing Borders: Revitalizing
Area Studies’, of which this volume is one product among many. This initiative is not to be
taken at face value, considering that the Ford Foundation also played a crucial part in the
1950s and 1960s in establishing area studies in United States universities. This most recent
initiative was intended not to abolish but to ‘revitalize’ area studies. The results have been
ambiguous. Be that as it may, the involvement in efforts to change our ways of knowing, by
one of the bedrock institutions of United States power and hegemony, provides an occasion
to consider how the past may be alive in a new global structural context.

There is little reason to rehearse here the many problems associated with area studies,
with their conceptual context in a teleological and Eurocentric modernization discourse, their
entanglement in the culturalist legacies of Orientalism, and their intimate relationship to a
hegemonic ordering of the post-World War II world by the United States (Cumings 2002a;
Harootunian 2000; Palat 1996, 2002). It is important, however, to point to some of the more
progressive features of area studies that are overlooked or dismissed too readily in more
naive critiques. The teaching of foreign languages has been crucial to area studies
programmes – in the case of many institutions, it has been their raison d’être. Few would
dispute the contribution of language skills to an improved understanding of the world, and
one wonders what withdrawal of support for area studies might mean for that particular
activity. For all the problems of interpretation involved, moreover, area studies have been
based on the premise of intensive reading into diverse texts, textual traditions, and histories.
It is easy to lose sight of the significance of this task when attention shifts from reading to
interpretation. Whatever the deficiencies of readings distorted by unequal relations of power,
there is also a price to be paid, as we seem to be paying these days, for not reading at all.1

There are two other issues raised by area studies that bear more directly on their impact
on the organization of scholarship and knowledge. These issues also point to differences in
the configuration of area studies depending on the region in question, say East or South
Asia, or Africa. First, the majority of so-called area scholars have specialized not in regions
but individual societies; say Japan, or Korea, or China. While a reified notion of civilizational
legacies may have shaped the understanding of regions, in other words, it is nations
that have been the units of scholarship. This would also suggest that the current critique of
area studies includes within its compass the critique not only of regional but also nation-
based scholarship. With both nation and region in question, the issue that faces us is where
to draw the boundaries (I use the word advisedly) of scholarly specialization.

Secondly, for all the culturally homogenizing assumptions underlying area studies, area
scholars have been anything but homogeneous in their scholarship or politics. Areas have
served as sites of conflict as much as unity, with significant implications for the boundaries
they have presented to scholarship or interpretation. Asian studies, for example, has been
divided, since its organized inception during World War II, over the relationship of Asia
scholars to Asian politics, a conflict that would become much sharper during the 1960s. The
politics have also shaped theoretical orientations and interpretations, as well as the relation-
ship of scholars in the United States to scholars in Asia. The culturalist legacies of orientalism
that were to shape modernization discourse, viewing regions and civilizations in isolation
from one another, have been challenged over the years by transnationalist approaches to the
study of Asian societies that have insisted on the importance of comprehending those
societies in terms of their historically changing relationships to one another – and to the
world at large. I do not wish to downplay the hegemonic power of the assumptions under-
lying area studies, or the organizational power of its enforcers, but it may be worth pointing
out that as long as scholars were willing to risk some academic marginalization, it was
always possible to challenge those assumptions, and to transgress the boundaries they
defined. This was what radical scholars did.2

Indeed, what distinguishes contemporary critiques of area (and Asian) studies scholar-
ship is not the critique of orientalism per se, which has been in question since the beginning,
but rather the inclusion in the critique of radical alternatives to Orientalist culturalism of
their Eurocentrism. There is also in these recent critiques a suspicion of Marxism, and of
Marxist-inspired critiques of Orientalist scholarship, which at times is extended tenden-
tiously to the denial of the theoretical formulations that Marxism provided for Asian and
non-Asian scholarship alike, which prepared the ground for contemporary critiques.

I bring up these issues not only to underline that the so-called crisis of area studies may
be a product not just of their failure but also of their success, but more importantly, to call for
the necessity of a more critical approach to contemporary alternatives to area studies. In the
enthusiasm these trends invoke as constructive responses to a changing world situation,
with some promise of overcoming past problems, it is also possible to overlook the problems
that they present, which demand critical attention because of their very social and political
implications. Preoccupation with overcoming past legacies may result in obliviousness to
problems presented by new forces, as well as to the persistence within them of those very
same legacies, albeit in new configurations. Area studies in their time had their justification
as a novel effort to comprehend new forces at large in the world, while also articulating the
needs of a new vision of global power of capital and the state faced with the threat of social-
ism and its Third World permutations, as well as the challenge of containing and extinguish-
ing that threat. We may similarly suggest that contemporary alternatives represent at once
efforts to comprehend a world in the process of transformation by new forces, as well as
new configurations of power. They express a real need to comprehend the novelties of a
post-socialist post-colonial world, in other words, but they are also ideological both in their
reification of these new forces – captured most cogently in the slogan of globalization – and
in obscuring new relations of domination and exploitation that follow somewhat different
fault-lines than they did in an earlier day, but may be dynamized by much the same forces.
Radical critiques of area studies may be necessary to overcome this ideological
obscurantism, but only if they are revised themselves to account for global transformations.

Alternatives to area studies

I would like to illustrate these observations by brief comments on the trends I identified
above as contemporary alternatives to area studies. For all their differences from area
studies, three of these trends (represented by civilizational, Asianization, and indigenous
discourses) are arguably continuous with them in terms of fundamental spatial assumptions.
The other two (oceanic and diasporic) have been set up consciously against area studies,
claiming entirely novel spatialities. It may seem peculiar that I should identify civilizational
studies as one of these alternatives, as they represent a throwback to a period even before
area studies, and the identification of areas with civilizational legacies may be one of the
fundamental weaknesses of area studies themselves. And yet, it is necessary to recognize
that contemporary developments have placed the issue of civilizations on the agenda in a
very urgent way. This urgency was dramatized by the events of September 11, but it had
been in the making for some time before that, ironically in conjunction with the discourse of
globalization.

It may not be very surprising that the scholar to place civilizations back on the agenda in
the early 1990s should be one whose scholarship is driven by geopolitical concerns:
Samuel P. Huntington. It is noteworthy, however, that Huntington’s controversial Foreign
Affairs article that pointed to civilizations as the units of conflict in the future was published
in the same year, 1993, as a volume sponsored by the American Historical Association, and
edited by Michael Adas, *Islamic and European Expansion: The Forging of a Global Order* (Huntington 1993; Adas 1993). The issue of Islamic civilization was raised dramatically, first by the Iranian revolution of 1979 that founded an Islamic Republic with radical goals. The same year witnessed the publication of *World Economic Development: 1979 and Beyond*, by Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute, that heralded the coming of the age of ‘NeoConfucian’ capitalism. The coincidence of dates here is just that, a coincidence. What is important is that the issue of civilizations, with Islam and Confucianism in the foreground, was placed on the agenda by political and economic developments from the late 1970s; the rise of political Islam, on the one hand, and the challenge to EuroAmerican economic dominance of Pacific Asian economic development, on the other. By the 1990s, the issue of Asian versus Western values had become a central concern of cultural discussion. Huntington’s argument may have exerted the influence it did because it fell on receptive ears, not just in North America, but more importantly among the proponents of alternative civilizational claims.

The civilizational argument is conservative in its assumptions, and it bolsters the most conservative interpretations of civilizational values in its reification of cultural boundaries, in ignoring different interpretations of those values, and in its obliviousness to the entanglements of all so-called civilizations in the practices and values of capitalist modernity. It also ignores populations in these societies who are quite divorced from received values, and identifies entire societies and regions with their most conservative elements. It is heir also to the dehistoricizing/desocializing culturalism of the more obscurantist practices of Orientalism. And yet, as Huntington shrewdly observed, the revival of civilizational claims in recent decades does not represent a throwback to the past, but is quite modern, and is empowered by modernity. While the reappearance of Orientalist practices does point to the persistence of colonial forms of knowledge past the political end of colonialism, these knowledges are now deployed by the colonized, in what is now the return of colonial cultural inventions against colonial modernity. This is most readily evident in the case of Pacific Asian societies, whose cultural self-assertion accompanied, and was empowered by, success in the capitalist world economy, which was to give rise to the Pacific Rim idea, which in turn has played a crucial part in the production of the discourse of globalization. Civilizational claims also have forced a rethinking of modernity, forcing a shift in recent years even in liberal and conservative circles from an earlier Eurocentric conception of modernity to ideas of alternative or multiple modernities that renounce teleologies informed by EuroAmerican modernities in favour of different civilizational routes to and out of modernity (Eisenstadt 2000).

Indigenous studies, too, challenge EuroAmerican modernity, and go even farther in questioning modernity’s ways of knowing. Their distinctiveness, however, lies in the questions they raise about power and sovereignty, including the sovereignty of the nation-state, on the one hand, and the relationship of social organization and knowledge of place, on the other. What they call into question is the idea of civilization itself as an abstraction from life that is destructive of life itself. The question is of foundational significance, because it points to the relationship between politics, cultural identity, and practices of knowledge production.

In a passionate defence of ‘insider’s’ knowledges of the Pacific, Vilsoni Hereniko writes that ‘westerners seem to think they have the right to express opinions (sometimes labelled truths) about cultures that are not their own in such a way that they appear to know it from the inside out. Most seem to think they have the right to speak about anything and everything; many even think they have the right to coerce natives to divulge secrets about their cultures to them’ (Hereniko 2000: 86). The validity of knowledge-claims, therefore, is dependent not on methodological issues, but more importantly on who makes those claims, and to what end. Knowledge becomes cultural; the more so the more cultural boundaries – defined by origins – assume a sharpness in policing who is inside, and who is out. In describing why his own access to his own (Rotuman) culture may be privileged, Hereniko writes that, ‘the
foreign anthropologist who has recently returned from the “field” is likely to have a more accurate picture than I of the situation there. Yet there are certain matters, largely to do with intuition, emotion, and sensibility, that the outsider may never fully grasp, for these things are in the realm of the unseen, acquired through early socialization in the formative years, and perhaps inherent in the Rotuman gene pool’ (Hereniko 2000: 90).

We could dismiss Hereniko as a culturalist who reduces culture to unalterable essences, which ultimately render culture indistinguishable from race. Such a judgement may be too hasty; for we need to consider it not only in terms of the intellectual or academic, but also the ethical and political, issues involved. For one thing, Hereniko’s ‘insiderist’ claims are at best partial, pertaining only to certain, more subjective, aspects of culture and society. Intellectual choices moreover, are never just intellectual choices, but are ethical and political as well. There is a distinction to be drawn between the discourses of power, and the discourses of societies so fragile that that they can be protected, at least in the short run, only by drawing exclusive boundaries between the inside and the outside, against an outside that long has been bent on the abolition of the inside. A constructionist approach to culture that insists on the inventedness of tradition may be useful in the deconstruction of power; but it may also serve the interests of power when deployed against the weak and powerless, to undermine their cultural claims against oppressive power (Dirlik 1996).

The claim to an alternative knowledge, and an alternative history, is not simply a reflection in the minds of the colonized of the racism of the colonizer, but a means to the production of a cultural identity that can then serve as the point of departure for social, political and economic identity – an alternative way of life, in other words. As Epeli Hau’ofa puts it in his contribution to Remembrances of Pacific Pasts:

We cannot therefore have our memories erased, foreshortened, or directed. With weak roots, we would be easily uprooted, transplanted, grafted upon, trimmed, and transformed any way that the global market requires. With little or no memory, we stand alone as individuals with no points of reference except to our dismally portrayed present, to our increasingly marketized national institutions, to international development agencies, international lending organizations, transnational corporations, fit only to be globalized or whateverized, and slotted in our proper places on the Human Development Index. (Hau’ofa 2000: 464)

The project here is to create a Pacific version of the Pacific, which requires a re-writing of the past against a hegemonic historiography that claims scientific truth, and dictates what is and what is not proper historical documentation in the search for the truth of the past. This historiography privileges written documentation over other sources, and since such documentation exists only for the post-European contact period, relegates the pre-contact period to ‘pre-history.’ To quote Hau’ofa again,

Oceania has no history before imperialism, only what is called ‘prehistory’; before history. In many if not most of our history books, more than 90 percent of the period of our existence in Oceania is cramped into a chapter or two on prehistory and perhaps indigenous social organization. These comprise a brief prelude to the real thing, history beginning with the arrival of Europeans. As it is, our histories are essentially narratives told in the footnotes of the histories of empires. (Hau’ofa 2000: 455–456)

Indigenous culturalism is open to criticism along the same lines as civilizations, as it too engages in the reification of tradition. It ignores that the ‘West’ is already internal to the consciousness of contemporary Pacific islanders, that the very idea of the Pacific that informs it is a product of the post-contact period, and that the proponents of a cultural ‘Pacific Way’ are themselves elite products of the very scholarship that they criticize – and even that the insistence on recalling native traditions as the basis for a native history faces the predicament of privileging hierarchical social organizations, with all their class and gender inequalities, including inequalities in the access to culture. Perhaps most
importantly, while an indigenous culturalism may serve an important purpose in the struggle to overcome colonialism, past and present, it itself presents certain dangers. Indigenism, naturalized, may rule out distinctions between colonial oppressors and others, themselves escapees from colonial oppression, and justify oppressive practices of its own, as well as ethnic discrimination and inequality. There are Filipina maids not just in Hong Kong but on some Pacific islands, at the service of island ‘aristocracies’. Indigenism may also serve as an excuse to disenfranchise immigrant populations, and fuel ethnic conflict.

The third alternative I noted above, the Asianization of Asian studies, is also directed against the hegemony of Eurocentric knowledge, especially United States domination of scholarship. There is a suggestion here, too, about bringing into the dialogue over Asia insiders’ views of Asian problems and scholarship.

I am aware of two undertakings that are informed by this goal of Asianization. One is the ‘Asian Studies in Asia Network’, which is centred in Australian National University in Canberra. According to the homepage of the Network, the initiative for such a network grew out of ‘the developing understanding that, in an important sense and for important reasons, the core region for the study of Asia must be the Asian region itself’ (Asian Studies in Asia Network 2002: 1). There is an irony to an Asia-centred study of Asia that is spearheaded by Australia, and funded by the Ford Foundation. The Network was founded in 1998, in the midst of the Asianization of Australia. Now that forces of de-Asianization seem once again to have achieved supremacy in Australia, and Australian scholars are at one in bemoaning the decline of Asian studies, it remains to be seen if this move has any staying power.

The other, more radical, alternative, is represented by the journal, Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, which is centred in National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, but managed by an editorial collective that is spread across several Asian societies and beyond. This undertaking, devoted explicitly to cultural studies, is also driven by a conviction that cultural studies of Asia should not only have voices emanating from Asia but be based there as well. Its goal, however, is not just to study but to ‘problematize “Asia”’, as the first issue of the journal in April 2000 stated. As the editorial statement to this first issue put it,

Since the 1980s, a pervasive rhetoric of the ‘rise of Asia’ has come to mean more than the concentrated flow of capital in and out of the region: it has come to constitute a structure of feeling that is ubiquitous, yet ambiguously felt, throughout Asia. Historically, this feeling of the ‘rise of Asia’ is complicated by the region’s colonial past. While Asia’s political, cultural and economic position in the global system will continue to fluctuate, there is a need to question and critique the rhetorical unities of both the ‘rise’ and of ‘Asia’. Wealth and resources are unevenly distributed and there is no cultural or linguistic unity in this imaginary space called Asia. On the other hand, no matter whether there are common experiences shared by sub-regional histories, there is an urgent need for forging political links across these sub-regions. Hence, ‘Inter-Asia’ cultural studies. (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 2000: 5)

True to their radical mission, the editors also describe Inter-Asia Cultural Studies the ‘Movements project’, as ‘a transborder collective undertaking to confront Inter-Asia cultural politics’ (Inter-Asia Cultural Studies 2000: 5).

To their credit, scholars in neither of these undertakings pretend that they are out to provide ‘insiders’ views of Asia that are unavailable to outsiders; they recognize quite readily, I think, that they themselves are products of ‘non-Asian’ educations, as well as the obscurantism that is implicit in most claims to insiderism. If anything, these undertakings signal the self-confidence and assertion of modern Asian scholars against the domination of the study of Asia by scholars located in North America and Europe, with whom they may share a common education but not necessarily a common appreciation of the problems of Asia. The more important issue, I believe, is to bring to the forefront of discussions problems that may not be of concern to those outside of the region but are crucial to those within. Inter-Asia goes much farther, I think, in stressing Asian differences, including intra-Asian colonialism, and
the unity it envisions is not one that is implicit in Asia, so-called, or some abstract Asian culture, but one that needs to be forged in the course of political and intellectual activity. One problem is that neither of these undertakings have devoted much attention to Asia/Pacific issues, which is all the more striking in the case of Inter-Asia, given the concern of the editors for issues of labour and social movements.

The three alternatives above arguably represent intellectual and political differences within a common legacy; they could be described even as struggles that leave the basic regionalizations of the world intact, but bring additional complications into them – from the outside and the inside. The last two alternatives are somewhat more direct – and problematic – in the repudiation of areas. Oceanic Studies found their most cogent articulation in the ‘Oceans Connect’ project at Duke University, which its directors have described as ‘a maritime response to the crisis in area studies’. The project was simple. It sought to abandon areas, and organize study around major bodies of water: the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the Caspian. For the directors, the project was part of a larger project of deconstructing continents.5

This alternative, too, directly addresses realities of the contemporary world, of which the most striking is our subject here, the Pacific, which in its emergence to global political and scholarly consciousness in the 1980s also dramatized the importance of trans-Oceanic interactions and exchanges. This is also what renders this alternative as problematic as it may be relevant. The Pacific in its most recent emergence – as Asia Pacific or Pacific Rim – was hyped up as the new frontier of capitalism that ignored not only the problems that came with the new frontier, but erased those within the Rim. Its ideological implications were spelled out eloquently by Chris Connery when he wrote that,

> The idea of a Pacific Rim had a further advantage: it centered on an ocean. Water is capital’s element... The bourgeois idealization of sea-power and ocean-borne commerce has been central to the mythology of capital, which has struggled to free itself from tilling the soil. Movable capital is liquid capital, and without movement, capital is a mere Oriental hoard. (Connery 1995)

As Jerry Bentley was to point out in a discussion of an ‘ocean-centered’ view of history, moreover, the idea is not quite novel, but has a history going back in historical scholarship to Fernand Braudel’s monumental *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (Brandel, 1972–1973), followed by such seminal works as K.N. Chaudhuri’s *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Chaudhuri, 1989) and O.H.K. Spate’s magisterial three-volume study of the Pacific, *The Pacific Since Magellan* (Spate, 1979–1988) (Bentley 1999). These authors did not insist, however, that the study of oceans become a substitute for the study of land. Hans Bitterli has written in his *Cultures in Conflict* that scholarship in the eighteenth century, the century of Europe’s exploration and conquest of the Pacific, was obsessed with the oceans, and that it was only in the nineteenth century that attention turned to land (Bitterli 1986: 155–177). His observation has to say something about our own age as well, at least in its ‘Pacific Rim’ guise.

Without a critical appreciation of the role of power in structuring ‘oceans,’ the oceanic alternative itself becomes a celebration of power; power organized differently from the power that informs area studies but still power – the power of exchange and movement. There is a celebration also of off-ground cosmopolitanism, as is expressed clearly in a contribution by Carolyn Cartier to a special issue of the *Geographical Review* devoted to the subject (Cartier 1999). The ocean the contributors have in mind is not the ocean of Epeli Hau’ofa (Hau’ofa 1995). It is rather the ocean of the Pacific Rim, where those within the Rim are missing from the picture, as are those on the Rim, landlocked as they are, whose relationships of exploitation and oppression are driven to the margins of the sea. There is an elision in this alternative of the very obvious problems that oceans and seas do not just
shape the societies around them, but also are shaped by the latter. To set the one against the other, or to isolate the one from the other, is simply to deprive the relationship between land and sea of the dialectic that shapes both.

The final alternative I will take up here is that of diaspora, which replaces areas and groundedness with the motions of peoples. Diasporic spaces cut across nations, regions and oceans. These spaces, moreover, are products of motions that, while not quite random, are nevertheless subject to flux and variation, undermining efforts at the establishment of fixed and stable spatialities. The idea of diaspora has been quite important in deconstructing claims not only of regions and civilizations but of nations as well. The question of cultural identity raised by diasporas also resonates with the politics of identity and location that has been integral to postcolonial criticism.

Diasporas, nevertheless, present problems of their own. Diasporic identities, too, are place-based; products of the dialectics of cultural identities in concrete places (Ong 1999; Wang 1999). But there is an unavoidable problem in the notion of diasporas, that persists even in the grounding of diasporic populations: taking a single population as the site of identity formation and struggle. Even where place-based and other social differences (class, gender, etc) are recognized, the very naming of the diasporic population stamps it with ethnic, national or racial characteristics that survive despite all differences; as in Chinese diaspora, for example, where Chineseness becomes a marker even when the populations encompassed by the term are marked by significant historical and cultural differences. Diasporas easily lend themselves to racialization – both by societies of arrival, and by the diasporic population itself. This exacerbates divisions in societies of arrival, where the persistence of diasporic identification leads almost readily to underlining their foreignness, more often than not expressed in the language of race.

While a diaspora contributes to the deconstruction of reified notions of region and nation, it can also displace regions and nations to the point where it has negative consequences for our understanding of the world. The preoccupation with populations in diaspora, or ‘transnations’, seems on occasion to obviate the need for closer understanding of situations in the societies of departure or arrival, in effect substituting the study of diaspora for the study of ‘established’ societies, or creating a tendency to view the latter through the eyes of the diasporic population closer to home, seriously affecting the understanding of the world. There is the opposite tendency as well, distancing the diasporic population from the society of arrival, in effect denying their historicity by encapsulating them in a cultural space defined by the society of origin. Rather than deconstruct nations and nationalism, in other words, diasporas may also serve to further project into transnational spaces the powers of capital and the nation-state (Dirlik 2002).

This confounding of diasporic populations with societies of origin is exacerbated by institutional tendencies in an environment dominated by multiculturalism and identity politics. There has been some tendency in recent years, under the sign of the diaspora, to merge the study of ethnic groups in the United States (Chinese Americans, for example) with the study of the country in which the group originated (such as ‘China’, a term that itself covers a great deal of difference) regardless of where, or how long ago. Given the cultural differences created in the course of a long history of migration, the merger of Chinese Americans and Chinese on the basis of some diasporic identity is not justifiable on the grounds of culture but feeds off racial identifications. The politics of identity is itself fraught with danger in perpetuating the language of race that it is intended to overcome.

**Global modernity, areas, places**

What do we make of all this? These trends represent developments that are not likely to go away. They may not signal the end of area studies, and perhaps they should not do so;
specialized knowledge of areas around the world becomes more important as the concentration of imperial power in the hands of the United States government increases chances of conflict around the globe, fuelled and justified by stereotyped representations of the Other. On the other hand, these trends do not merely revitalize area studies but also provide alternatives to the latter, as was indicated by a follow-up study by the Ford Foundation of the ‘Crossing Borders’ project (Ford Foundation 1999). This, too, is important as the fixed and stable areas of area studies no longer can contain forces that work to reconfigure economies, societies, cultures and politics globally. There seems little reason to make hard and fast choices between any of these trends as a dominant paradigm, as they speak to different aspects of these changes. Perhaps we have to learn to live with a world that does not lend itself to order, where no paradigm is likely to cover the changes at work, and anything goes that helps us deal with its vagaries. What may be more important is to decide what to do with these conflicting paradigms, and to what end.

This question has guided my discussion of the various trends that I singled out above for their relevance to Asia Pacific studies. Developments in and around the Pacific have played a major part in the production of the phenomena that call for new paradigms. The paradigms, in turn, help us grasp these phenomena, giving them some coherence. Civilizational revivals, the new attention to oceans, controversies over inside/out forms of knowledge, diasporic motions and indigenous movements are all part of the making of Asia Pacific, that call for new modes of understanding.

These trends, or paradigms, if you like, lend themselves to service in the consolidation of power as much as they do to its deconstruction in the service of social welfare and democracy. Civilizational revivals help challenge Euro/American domination of modernity; but only at the cost of cultural reifications that disguise relationships of oppression and exploitation that are internal to the civilizations. They also conceal the emergence of a transnational class that shares a common interest in global capitalism, and displaces its contradictions to the realm of culture. The ‘Asianization of Asian Studies’, at least in its establishment version, is an instance of such complicity. On the other hand, the Inter-Asia version, which demands questioning both of Euro/American power, and of the reification of Asia, draws attention to the possibilities and actualities of a radical oppositional politics – including the construction of areas from below, so to speak. Oceans may represent projections of place-based indigenous ideals into space, as they do for an Epeli Hau‘ofa, or they may be used in service of an APEC version of space in the service of capital and states. They also serve to conceal, in the latter case, that most struggles for liberation against injustice in fact happen on land. Diasporas may serve new forms of power, in the service of states or transnational capital projecting their power through dispersed populations; or they may serve to deconstruct the reification of culture and race in the service of power, substituting for the abstractions of globality place-based negotiations that seek to overcome national and racial difference. Even indigenism, the most radical of these alternatives in its challenge to the project of modernity, lends itself to the subjection of indigenous peoples to the prerogatives of power, as long as some among the leadership are accepted into the ranks of the powerful.

Asia Pacific as an idea is a product of these conflicting tendencies. Asian Pacific American emerged early on in the course of ethnic struggles in the United States to underline a commonality of interest among Americans of Asian and Pacific descent. As far as I am aware, however, its entry into the language of the social sciences accompanied the popularization of Pacific Rim discourse in the 1980s, when a rush began to rename formerly East and Southeast Asian studies programmes to gain access to newly available funds from East Asia. The term, in other words, bears upon it the stamp both of APEC discourse (‘APEC means business’), and a legacy of radical opposition to ethnic and racial discrimination in United States society, which in its origins was informed by a social radicalism challenging not just ethnic but also class and gender oppression.
I observed in a recent essay that the contemporary Pacific is the site for a number of cultural conflicts: East/West–North/South–Inside/Out (Dirlik 2001: 2–28). The East/West conflict is a conflict between civilizational claims, most notably so-called Asian values versus Western values. The North/South conflict points to immense inequalities in the Pacific region that APEC discourse has sought to contain and conceal. The Inside/Out conflict is that between indigenism and the values of civilization, Eastern or Western, which are equally devoted to ideologies of development.

‘Asia Pacific’ is a term that weighs the Pacific toward Asia, away from its Eastern shores. It is ironic that a term that was a product of United States perceptions of Pacific Asian developments should come to serve the purpose of bringing the Pacific closer to Asia, but there is good reason for it. The reason does not lie in any particular closeness between Asian and Pacific peoples, or in an assumption that a Pacific that is closer to Asia would fare better under Asian civilizational values than under so-called Western ones. It lies, rather, in the motions of labour, capital and culture that bring Asians to the Pacific as investors, tourists, and workers, more often than not (although I am on risky ground here) as sub-contractors in production for the United States market.

We have here a different area formation, if we want to use that term; one that is based not on abstractions of civilizations, languages, etc, but on interactions, from the top and the bottom, that shape lives on an everyday basis; where the interplay between national, regional and global forces, from labour to capital, at particular locations, shape the notion of areas, which are integrally related to other areas, and to the structures of globality.

Recognition of areas in their concrete formations exposes the ideological mystifications promoted by the spatialities of area studies. Border crossings are crossings only against a legacy of abstractly established borders, which do not correspond to the borders shaped by flows of labour and capital in the modern world. Asia and the Pacific formed a common area from the early nineteenth century, when Asian labourers were transported to the Pacific islands to meet the needs of colonial production. The labourers, no less than the indigenous peoples, were products of colonialism.

A radical perspective on Asia Pacific needs to grasp Asia Pacific as a formation of contradictory forces; most importantly from the top and the bottom. Capitalism may be reconfigured by its very globalization. On the other hand, it is still capital, now distributed around a multiplicity of centres across the Pacific, that shapes the motions of labour and commodities, as well as the fate of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific. Capital has the power to structure the region, and to shape the content of Asia Pacific studies as a contemporary version of area studies. This structure, however, is a structure of contradictions, producing difference as well as sameness within, undermining the very boundaries it sets in its aspiration to globality. It is these contradictions that make possible alternative visions of the region, as well as challenges to its structuring of power. Place-based analysis is crucial in either case: to the analysis of this regional formation in motion as a recognition of difference within a general framework of the global and the local, and in exploring possibilities of overcoming difference in alliances for democracy and social welfare. Place-based analysis, however, must account for the larger structures that impinge on places. The inside/out perspective needs to come to terms with the north/south perspective, so that different experiences of oppression, exploitation, and erasure in a colonial historiography may be articulated to one another in the formulation of oppositional strategies. The alternative is APEC forever.

Notes

1. While postcolonial criticism has been important in underlining the relationship between power and representation, the fashionable preoccupation with representation has led to a decline of interest in Third World locations, and what people in those locations have had to say about themselves. The ignorance
about Islam, Afghanistan, and Western Asia at a time of crisis may testify to this problem. For a forceful critique, see Cumings (2002b).

2. The organization of Asian studies was plagued from the beginning by political questions involving the Institute of Pacific Studies. For a discussion, see Hucker (1973: especially 58–81).

3. The relationship between empire and history as epistemology is a prominent theme in contemporary critiques of colonial cultural hegemony. For other examples by two distinguished thinkers, one Indian, the other Amerindian, see Nandy (1995), and Deloria Jr. (1995).

4. For a reasoned consideration of the issues involved, see Jolly (1992). Pacific writers are not unaware of the predicament of tradition. Hau’ofa writes that ‘we cherish and respect our connections to our aristocracies, mainly because we have no choice; and for the same reason “we love and respect our oppression,” as a waggish colleague puts it. Nevertheless, they are the major component of our heritage and so we must carry them all, the good and the ugly, for only then can we learn properly from our histories’ (Hau’ofa 2000: 463).

5. The project directors at Duke University were Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen. They were also the editors of a special issue of *Geographical Review* devoted to the problem of areas (Lewis and Wigen 1999). See the introduction to the issue. See, also, Lewis and Wigen (1997).

References


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