

The Future of Ethnic Studies in North America

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Historical social science has been at a critical crossroads for some time, previously lifted by, but now burdened with, an academic division of labor, analytical categories and spatial-conceptual frameworks cast in the past century and a half, all increasingly contested in today's world-system as it undergoes profound structural crises with no end in sight.

First of all, the social sciences were born bifurcated. The systematic study of non-European peoples, as such, was reserved during the nineteenth century and for most of the early decades of the twentieth to the European anthropological gaze, which can be summed up as "*we the colonizers studying them the colonized for us to better understand and manage them.*" The natives were to be studied in their pristine state – they were presumed to have no history before European incorporation. The study of modern European nation-states, on the other hand, was divided, as we all know, into the study of each major country's glorious national pasts – history – and their respective national presents – the remaining social sciences: sociology, political science, economics. All of these disciplines adopted a space-time domain coterminous with the geography and conditions of imagined European national communities. Only after World War II and the dismantling of world colonialism were these disciplines transplanted and applied to the newly independent developing nations without modifying their compartmentalized epistemology or national frameworks.

The modern historical social sciences thus reflected and followed first, the actual tumultuous evolution of a few European empire-building states in a vast global social system these states were busy incorporating, and which, epistemologically at odds with a holistic approach, the national academies were at pains to explain. During the era of European imperialism, the best the British, French, and German academies could come up with were supranational formulations such as Orientalism, Primitivism, and Western Civilization, *Laissez-faire* Economics, and Scientific Racism, coexisting in fragile equilibrium with their traditional, nationally-circumscribed disciplines. In Eastern Europe, where imperial states dominated, the so-called "National Question" of which oppressed peoples had the right to form their own nation-states, following the pattern in the Americas a century before, became as burning an issue as the "Social Question" of class rule and class struggle in capitalist society. In the footsteps of the Russian Revolution and World War I, the "Colonial Question" rose to even higher prominence in Africa and Asia. The combined upheavals from 1848 onwards, culminating in the social revolutions and the national liberation struggles of the first three-quarters of the 20th century, would bury all previously enshrined supranational constructs and theories of social science, but not the national framing of the traditional disciplines. Even socialist regimes and global institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank, enshrined the principles of liberation, development and sovereignty occurring within the national form.

But in the United States, a country that went from being a junior imperial power in 1848 to global hegemon in 1945, with an academy that combined a romantic so-called Anglo-Saxon national history with the crudest racist social sciences, it nevertheless introduced a crucial new level of analysis to the study of peoples *within* the modern, advanced, dynamic capitalist nation-state such as itself: *ethnicity*. First proposed by Jewish scholars to analyze the Jewish enclave experience in New York City at the turn of the century – precisely to resist both racializing pressures (either towards undifferentiated whiteness or anti-semitic non-whiteness) and “melting-pot” cultural assimilationist theories, both in vogue at the time – by the 1920s the construct of ethnicity began to be extended to the study of all European immigrant communities and later on, with the closing of European immigration, to the study of race relations itself, though always within the analytical framework of the history and continuing building of the modern nation-state. Ethnic peoplehood, it seemed, started just off the boat and could go in any number of ways: endure, dissolve and assimilate, amalgamate into different melting pots. Non-white races had no such luck. It would be decades before racialized peoples demanded and got ethnic recognition.

As an illustration of how slow ethnicity as a construct took root, and the profound change it brought, in the scant study of Mexican and Puerto Rican migrants and emerging communities within the United States, bio-racialist and cultural assimilationist academic approaches prevailed from the 1920s until well into the 1960s, with rare exceptions. Ethnicity as the central organizing construct to the study of the Latino communities only took off from the 1970s on. And the scholars of the Latino experience, not coincidentally, changed too: from mostly U.S. Anglo men to mostly U.S. Latino men, and soon after that to Latinos and Latinas of various sexualities and immigrant generations, transcending and transgressing all sorts of conceptual borders. This explosion and diversification of scholars and scholarship escaping the rigid racialized and national straightjackets corresponds, of course, to the 1960s/70s insurrection of all U.S. communities socially constructed as *non-white others* in the previous era.

As a response to this mighty insurrection, the U.S. academy and numerous state agencies set out to concede and enshrine a new compromise paradigm for the new era: *the multicultural society*. Once legitimized by the Civil Rights Laws and backed by a myriad of newly funded state programs, it presented not just domestic communities of color with a new vision of opportunity and promise of cultural and social equality within the prosperous superpower nation, but it asserted a new plural but egalitarian model of nationhood for the world to emulate. This was considered a strategic ideological requirement of the Cold War, to win the hearts and minds of the peoples of the Third World from the allure of the socialist camp. The new academic task then became to re-write the U.S. national past and reformulate the present priorities and future directions to reveal, explain, enhance and celebrate the contributions and experiences of all domestic ethnic/racial peoples and Indigenous domestic nations.

This plural turn, of course, gave rise to ethnic studies, women studies, gay studies, etc., but has been and continues to be fiercely resisted by those nostalgically imbued with the previous cultural supremacist notions of what the nation used to be, and ought to be again. This is what we mean by the relentless culture wars since the 1960s, exacerbated as the

U.S. itself began to lose its global hegemony in the early 1970s. The origins and zig-zag history of ethnic studies corresponds precisely to the rise and decline of U.S. hegemony. But nevertheless, in time all core countries of the world came to embrace the new multicultural paradigm and the need for ethnic studies as part, albeit minor compared with the traditional disciplines, of their official state educational systems. The Third World, on the other hand, embraced the *national developmentalist paradigm* as its lode star.

Even prior to the rise of ethnic studies, the United States instituted in all its elite universities another epistemological innovation immediately after world war II, the so-called Area Studies: Latin American studies, Asian Studies, African Studies, Middle East studies, and so on.

Area studies became the means by which the U.S. and its allies could fruitfully study and better manage all regions of the First, Second and Third Worlds in the era of decolonization, Cold War geopolitics, and global expansion of U.S. multinational corporations. From the beginning, this type of academic effort was disassociated from domestic ethnic groups, associated instead, funded, and utilized directly by the major sectors of U.S. power elite: military, corporate, intelligence, and political. Interestingly, the scholars remained mostly U.S. Anglo men with important connections, augmented by similar power elite representation from the countries in each area. This, of course, was by design at the peak of global hegemony. The contrast between, say, the Latin American Studies Association and the National Association of Chicana/Chicano Studies, couldn't have been greater – as bifurcated in epistemology, membership, and purpose as say U.S. Anthropology and History Departments in the 1920.

The two fields – ethnic studies and area studies – thus remained strictly compartmentalized in orientation, content, as well as participants until recently. Early merger attempts do occur among African American intellectuals, as seen in by founding of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African-American Research in Harvard in 1969, and the Africana Studies Department at CSULB that same year, but the academic and social separation of Chicano Studies, Puerto Rican Studies, Latino Studies, on the one hand, and Latin American Studies on the other, has persisted to this day.

In the meantime, two developments have occurred that destabilizes our present-day academies, both in the traditional disciplines and the new ones: one is the enormous wave of migration from the world's South to the world's North, which, despite the fury of the culture wars in the North, and woeful neglect and oblivion in the South, has destabilized the multicultural and territorial national society paradigms in receiving and sending states alike, raising the transnational Immigrant Question as a challenge to both, which by virtue of its socio-spatial dimensions, combines aspects of ethnic studies and area studies. This is the destabilizing epistemological and disciplinary effect of globalization from below to our bifurcated, nationally-framed social sciences, raising the question, again, of what is the proper unit of study and how do we study it? Should the experiences of U.S.-born, working class Chicanos be lumped with those of, say, recent Brazilian or Peruvian professional immigrants? Should they be studied jointly and socially recognized and granted access to the same U.S. social status and opportunities as all members of the same Latino ethnicity?

And what about the issue of inclusion and social justice for the tens of millions of undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants currently persecuted here and thoroughly ignored and neglected in their sending countries once they leave? Shouldn't those sending countries educational systems and academies incorporate their diasporic people's transnational experiences to their own national curricula and research agendas?

These issues are far from being settled academically, socially, or politically. Like the 19th century paradigms of racial nationhood and empire building, they challenge today's Northern and Southern peoplehood paradigms of the multicultural society and the still developing territorial nation-state.

The other profoundly disruptive development is globalization from above, the global reach of corporations, media, and regional blocks of states, the revolution in communications and transnational integration of global production assembly lines, the unfettered mobility of goods, services, and ideas on a global scale. Who are "we" is not clear any more, if it ever was in the golden years of the multicultural society and the national developing society. World material, geopolitical, and geocultural integration has subverted the very primacy of the sovereign nation-state as the unit of analysis of the social sciences. Look at the vast regional social rebellions like the Arab Spring. See the penetration of global civil NGOs into every suprastate IGOs. Try debating why Quebec should secede from Canada any longer, or Scotland from the United Kingdom, or Puerto Rico from the United States, or Cataluña from Spain, in the age of NAFTA, the European Union, and the World Trade Organization. Peoplehood in the 21 century has become de-territorialized and de-linked from states, it is increasingly virtual, wired, networked, and global.

And lastly, confronted with the truly urgent system-wide problems that require system-wide solutions – poverty, hunger and epidemics, climate change, energy and water shortages, deforestation and desertification, nuclear proliferation, non-state terror networks, human trafficking, etc. – the visible tendency this century has been to develop more inclusive, extended notions of peoplehood, citizenship, and society that interact, and perhaps supersede, the current national-state and ethnic forms.

But for now, the multicultural society and national developing paradigms are all we've got in social science, and there is no going back to the culturally supremacist national or imperial paradigms. We must therefore expand and deepen ethnic studies to all levels of the educational system, and begin the arduous process of transnationalizing the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the social sciences, denationalizing and deterritorializing its epistemology, and address the world holistically both in the academy and in society. We not only need to forge tolerant, educated, functional citizens of the inclusive, diverse nation-state, but of the inclusive, diverse world. In this task, California is well-poised to rise to the challenge and take the initiative to institutionalize a renewed curriculum. Mexico is well poised to incorporate the study of Mexican and Mexican American communities in the U.S.

It's up to all of us to make those two things a reality in the immediate future.