

# INTERNATIONAL STUDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE NORTH AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

Los Estudios Internacionales en el contexto  
de la Universidad Norteamericana

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Este texto repasa los precursores en el siglo XX del desarrollo de los "Estudios Transatlánticos", a comienzos del siglo XXI. El ensayo sostiene que los "Estudios Transatlánticos" son una respuesta natural a la crisis de los "estudios de área" que surgió al acabar la Guerra Fría. El final de esta unido a los cambios intelectuales, ideológicos, estructurales y fiscales en la educación superior de los Estados Unidos impulsaron a los académicos de los estudios de área a reconsiderar y reconfigurar la interdisciplinariedad de los estudios de área. Los "Estudios Transatlánticos" han proporcionado un marco de estudio más fluido y dinámico para las investigaciones interdisciplinarias transnacionales que las áreas de estudios tradicionales. A su vez, el nacimiento y desarrollo de los "estudios de área" se debe a sus predecesores "Estudios Internacionales" y "Estudios Americanos".

## Palabras clave

Estudios Transatlánticos, Estudios de área, Estudios Latinoamericanos, Estudios Ibéricos, Estudios Internacionales, Estudios Americanos, Título VI, Ley de Enseñanza Superior, Historia del Mundo Atlántico, Asociación de Estudios Transatlánticos

This essay traces the 20th Century precursors to the development of "transatlantic studies" in the early 21st century. The essay argues that "transatlantic studies" was a natural response to the crisis around "area studies" that emerged after the end the Cold War. The end of the Cold War as well as intellectual, ideological, structural and fiscal changes in higher education in the United States prompted area studies scholars to reconsider and to reconfigure the interdisciplinary disciplines of area studies. "Transatlantic studies" provided a more fluid and dynamic framework for transnational interdisciplinary scholarship than had traditional area studies. In turn, the birth and development of «area studies» owed much to the earlier fields of "international studies" and "American studies".

## Keywords

Transatlantic studies, area studies, Latin American studies, Iberian studies, international studies, American studies, Title VI, Higher Education Act (1965), Atlantic World history, Transatlantic Studies Association

**T**ransatlantic studies is a fairly recent interdisciplinary framework within which to study the dynamic relationships and connections between Europe, Africa and the Americas. It is a scholarly field which is closely related to the history and historiography of the "Atlantic World", but as an academic paradigm it owes much to the evolution of "American Studies", "International Studies", and "Area Studies" in the United States academy of the 20th Century.

## 1. American Studies and Interdisciplinarity

Academia in the era following World War II in the United States underwent dramatic changes and growth. Sometimes referred to as "the golden age of higher education", the period between 1945 and 1970 was one of massive expansion. State governments as well as the federal government invested heavily in higher education, and a generation of US military servicemen entered universities (a large percentage of whom were first generation college students) using funds from the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, more commonly known as the G.I. Bill. The G.I. Bill was a government program that paid tuition and expenses for all returning soldiers who had served for at least 120 consecutive days and had not been dishonorably discharged. By 1956, an estimated 2.2 million students had attended university on the GI Bill. By the 1950's state governments as well as the federal government in the US began to invest heavily in sponsored research, specifically in social sciences, hard sciences and medicine. Most public university systems during this period grew exponentially –existing universities were expanded and new public universities were created.

"American Studies" is an interdisciplinary course of study which has traditionally emphasized the study of history, literature and critical theory with a focus on the United States. Although the history of this "interdisciplinary discipline" can be traced back to the 1920's, during the expansion after the Second World War, American studies programs and departments were created in many, if not most US universities. The American Studies Association was founded in 1950, and published the *American Quarterly* which is still the leading scholarly journal in American studies. Today there are 53 American studies journals in 25 countries.

The rise of these interdisciplinary programs coincides in US history with a massive growth in the social sciences. By the 1960's, the traditional approach to American studies (which was rooted in the Humanities and emphasized "American [U.S.] exceptiona-

lism"<sup>1</sup>) became the subject of serious critique by a new generation of scholars, who were more likely to have had social science training, and were critical of the role of the United States in many post-colonial transitions, particularly in Latin America. Moreover the civil rights and women's rights movements in the United States had forced many scholars to realize that traditional interpretations of the "American" experience were exclusionary and incomplete. With the rise of ethnic studies, women's and gender studies, cultural studies, and post-colonial studies, the discipline of American studies has undergone a profound transformation in the past 50 years. During the 1980's, approximately one-third of all US-based American studies programs were closed, but since that time the discipline has been fairly stable. The number of BAs awarded peaked in 1974 with 1844 degrees, and the number of programs peaked in 1984 at 302. Many of the programs which closed were at smaller universities and liberal arts colleges where faculty were stretched thin between disciplinary departments and interdisciplinary programs like American studies<sup>2</sup>.

In the period following World War II and during the Cold War, American studies was also promoted outside of the United States, particularly in Europe. The US State Department and private donors subsidized and endowed American studies programs, chairs and institutes, particularly in Germany. These programs are often affiliated with US Cultural Centers. Related to the growth and development of Interdisciplinary American studies was the birth of "International Studies" as a new interdisciplinary sub-discipline of political science and "international relations".

## 2. International Studies

"International Studies" is an interdisciplinary discipline that came out of the field of political science also in the 1950's. The International Studies Association (ISA) was formed in 1959 as a break-away group from the American Political Science Association. Because of this history, international studies is still heavily dominated by social sciences, espe-

<sup>1</sup>"American exceptionalism" is a political ideology common among US-based conservatives which emphasizes the uniqueness of US history, culture and political values. As a basis for early 20th century American studies curricula, there is no explicit claim to superiority. Nevertheless a generation of neoconservative politicians and ideologues have used the «theory of exceptionalism» as an argument for U.S. superiority in the international arena.

<sup>2</sup>Jerry A. Jacobs, *American Studies: A Case Study of Interdisciplinarity*. Population Studies Center, University of Pennsylvania, PSC Working Paper Series, PSC 13-08. [http://repository.upenn.edu/psc\\_working\\_papers/48](http://repository.upenn.edu/psc_working_papers/48).

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cially with regard to scholarship. Most US-based universities, and many European universities still have international studies programs. The academic of course of study (particularly for undergraduates) tends to be more interdisciplinary (often including foreign languages and literature, cultural studies and history) than is the scholarly production coming from the self-identified international studies scholars, who are often still rooted in “international relations” (a subfield of political science) and other social sciences.

Unlike American studies. International studies has grown in popularity steadily throughout the decades since its creation, and it is often among the more popular majors offered in any major US university. It is often connected in the curriculum as well as the in the departmental structure of universities with “area studies” programs.

### 3. Area Studies

Area studies as an academic discipline has been the focus of much interest and debate since the end of the Cold War<sup>3</sup>. The idea of area studies is closely linked to the Title VI grants of the Higher Education

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<sup>3</sup>In a 1993 review of two books (Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier's *Shaping the Political Arena* and Alain Tourraine's *Palavra e Sangue*) in *Comparative Politics*, Gerardo Munck uses the opportunity to consider the state of so-called «traditional area studies». In 2001 an entire issue of the *LASA Forum* was dedicated to the question of the future of area studies. There are similar considerations in the *Slavic Review* and *World Politics* in the decade after the end of the Cold war. Earlier this year the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (Vol 19(1) 86-104) published «The International Infrastructure of Area Studies Centers: Lessons for Current Practice From a Prior Wave of Internationalization», by Jonathan Z. Friedman and Cynthia Miller-Idriss. In this study Friedman and Miller-Idriss closely examine 25 area studies centers in U.S. universities to determine their roles and efficacy in promoting and supporting the more contemporary strategy of «internationalization» that many large U.S. universities have been engaged in during the last decade. «Internationalization» is a goal and strategy of universities today and it is rooted in the more business-oriented models that undergird academia in the current context.

Act (HEA) of 1965. These grants funded the creation of interdisciplinary area studies “centers” in many US universities. These centers were supposed to train area studies and linguistic specialists. Presumably this push to train specialists was perceived to be in the national interest. And indeed military officers often pursued area studies degree at Title VI Centers –funded by the Department of Defense. The rationale and funding behind these grants was very much a product of the Cold War. As these grant monies have become increasingly scarce and contingent, and as the Cold War has ended, many University faculty and administrators, as well as other granting agencies and foundations (such as the Ford Foundation and the SSRC) have reconsidered the way in which area studies configured the world during this early phase.

### 3.1. Title VI of the National Defense Education Act

After the launch of Sputnik by the Soviet Union in 1957, the United States intelligence community, the State Department and the Defense Department began to realize that there was a need for expertise – cultural, political and linguistic– in order to develop coherent and useful foreign policy, and to compete successfully with the Soviet Union for influence, particularly with many of the newer less-developed nation states that had emerged in the mid-20th Century. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 was promulgated by Congress in order to «insure trained expertise of sufficient quality and quality to meet U.S. national security needs»<sup>4</sup>. Prior to the passage of the NDEA, language study in the United States was mostly confined to the dominant European languages (Spanish, French, and German).

Initially the NDEA funded 19 language and area studies centers in large leading universities. The NDEA also supported fellowships and scholarships for language study (of less commonly-studied languages), international research programs, and language institutes. Millions of dollars were invested in area studies education during the last three decades of the Cold War educating a generation of experts and scholars who have taken advantage of this interdisciplinary training. Title VI area studies centers (now called National Resource Centers or NRC's) are an important marker of a university's stature and ranking in the United States.

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<sup>4</sup>The History of Title VI and Fulbright Hays: An Impressive International Timeline», U.S. Department of Education, Office of Post-Secondary Education. <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/iegps/history.html>

#### 4. End of the Cold War and Transformation of the North American University

While Congress has continued to reauthorize funding for Title VI NRCs and foreign language fellowships and scholarships, and politicians have emphasized the importance of area studies expertise since the end of the Cold War, funding for NRCs has declined while the demand (and competition) for the funds has steadily increased. This has coincided with the gradual de-funding of public higher education that began in the 1980's.

US universities, particularly public universities have been increasingly moving to business efficiency models since the 1980's. This has meant that public investment and subsidization of higher education has been declining at the same time that demand for university education has increased. US-based universities have had to resort to other means of raising revenue, including raising tuition rates, seeking out private funding and increased reliance on federal grant funding. This has made all federal grant monies much more competitive, especially as funding for these grant programs has decreased. This is true in all academic disciplines, but it is particularly acute in the non-STEM<sup>5</sup> fields such as international and area studies.

At the same time, scholars have also begun to reconsider the configuration of international and area studies. "International" traditionally emphasized the Westphalian notion of relations between states –it implied a political understanding of the nation-state which was rooted in the 19th Century. The term "global" has come to replace "international" as a broader and more flexible term which encompasses all aspects of global interaction which is recognized as inherently fluid. Likewise the "areas" which were designated in the 1958 legislation have come to be seen as limiting. Latin America, for example, is a coherent region with a shared history and some common cultural tendencies. Nevertheless, scholars have increasingly found it difficult to separate the study of Latin America from the study of Latino Diaspora in the United States and the relationships between the Americas and Europe, and even Asia. In the current globalized context, these traditional areas seem less bounded than ever before, and some cases they seem arbitrary. Because of the important historical and cultural connections between Spain and Portugal and Latin America, the merging of Iberian studies and Latin American studies has been done almost from the beginning of area studies. Because of the Title VI emphasis on language instruction, this was a natural combination. Portu-

guese has long been one of the funded "less commonly taught" languages. This has provided incentives for universities to develop Iberian and Latin American studies programs, often with Portuguese language instruction at the core. There are three NRC's which combine Latin American and Iberian studies<sup>6</sup>, and one other (non federally-funded) area studies center which does so<sup>7</sup>.

#### 5. The Future of Area Studies

The future of area studies is bright as the discipline has evolved to accommodate the changing intellectual and fiscal landscape. Indeed what used to be a multi-disciplinary field<sup>8</sup> has evolved into a more interdisciplinary field<sup>9</sup>. In the Humanities, area studies scholars are likely to be found in "cultural studies" rather in traditional language and literature programs. And historians are more likely to take a more theoretical approach to the study of «memory» and the relationship between memory, historiography and history.

In the social sciences, you will find area-studies scholars doing more problem-based analysis and teaching. So a "Latin Americanist" today might find her focus in human rights, environmental sustainability, conflict and war, media theory and analysis, or citizenship. These thematic foci do not lend themselves easily to the same traditional regional boundaries that were used to define area studies in 1958. This interdisciplinary scholarship is both much more complex and sophisticated (reflecting the real complexity of the globalized world in which we live) as well as more "engaged". Problem-based and thematic research is generally more "applied" than the traditional epistemological frameworks that undergirded scholarship in previous generations.

<sup>6</sup>The University of New Mexico's Latin American and Iberian Institute, the University of Wisconsin, Madison's Latin American and Iberian Studies Center, and the Council on Latin American and Iberian Studies at Yale University.

<sup>7</sup>University of California at San Diego's Center for Latin American and Iberian Studies.

<sup>8</sup>A multi-disciplinary area studies program would train scholars in several disciplines, but with an exclusive focus on a geographical area. For example, the student would take courses in Latin American history, comparative politics (only related to Latin America), and Latin American literature or anthropology. But there would be relatively little attention paid to interdisciplinary synthesis.

<sup>9</sup>An interdisciplinary area studies program relies on interdisciplinary scholarship which examines questions and problems, and attempts to analyze them from a more fluid position "between" the disciplines. A student in a truly interdisciplinary area studies program will take courses in Latin American history and literature, but will also take courses in cultural studies or international studies which examine particular phenomena from a more synthesized interdisciplinary perspective.

<sup>5</sup>Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

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## 6. Trans-Atlantic Studies

Beginning in the 1980's area studies scholars began to reconfigure the boundaries of their disciplines. At the same time, the concept of the "Pacific Rim" began to permeate economic and political analysis. Although Latin America is technically in the "Pacific Rim", the term was used mostly *vis-a-vis* the Northern hemisphere. Likewise since at least 1917, the "Atlantic World" was a concept that has been used (mostly by historians) to study and analyze the history of interactions between peoples who border the Atlantic (Europe, Africa and the Americas) from the late 15th Century to the present. As the "Pacific Rim" came into vogue among international studies scholars and economists in the 1990's, the idea of Atlantic World Studies was attractive to a broad range of area studies and international studies scholars, but it is a term that already has enormous historical resonance. The Atlantic World already refers specifically to "Atlantic history" and is not an appropriate reference for the work of non-historians who are examining the more contemporary interactions (the effects of "globalization") that were being analyzed by scholars focused on the so-called Pacific Rim countries.

The Transatlantic Studies Association was created in 2001 to support and promote the work of a broader range of scholars (including Atlantic World historians) «for whom the 'transatlantic' is an important frame of reference»<sup>10</sup>. The organization was founded in Europe by Alan Dobson, a British interdisciplinary scholar who works on the history and politics of globalization and US-British relations. But the organization includes a broad membership from Europe (including the UK) and North America. The organization has in many respects defined how this newly emerging interdisciplinary discipline has evolved. Officially the objectives of the organization are as follows:

- to nurture research networks and disseminate research outputs in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary environment;
- to support the Journal of Transatlantic Studies;
- to provide a forum that will bring together academics with officials and specialists from other professions;
- The Association will embrace all aspects of transatlantic studies in all time periods<sup>11</sup>.

## 7. Conclusions

Transatlantic Studies is a very recent interdisciplinary discipline, and its roots can be traced back to the early 20th Century and the birth of American studies. It is a new discipline that is full of potential, because in addition to being interdisciplinary, it is also dynamic. The study of relationships and movement acknowledges the real complexity of our globalized world. The discipline of Transatlantic studies will prove itself to be more flexible than the 20th Century iterations of international and area studies which preceded it. It rests in a conceptual framework which is more nimble and will undoubtedly be flexible and expansive enough to accommodate our evolving planet and our understanding of it.

## RELEVANT SCHOLARY SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

- The American Studies Association (ASA)  
<http://www.theasa.net/>
- The International Studies Association (ISA)  
<http://www.isanet.org/>
- The Latin American Studies Association  
<https://lasa.international.pitt.edu/eng/>
- The Society for Latin American Studies  
<http://www.slas.org.uk/>
- Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (CLACSO)  
<http://www.clacso.org.ar/>
- The African Studies Association  
<http://www.africanstudies.org/>
- European Studies Association  
<https://eustudies.org/>
- Association for Contemporary Iberian Studies  
<http://www.iberianstudies.net/wp/>
- The Transatlantic Studies Association  
<http://www.transatlanticstudies.com/>

<sup>10</sup>Homepage for the Transatlantic Studies Association. <http://www.transatlanticstudies.com/>

<sup>11</sup>"About Us" from the homepage of the Transatlantic studies Association. <http://www.transatlanticstudies.com/index.php?id=106>