

Book Review: Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies

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Miyoshi, Masao and Harootunian, H.D., eds.
Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies.
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pp. \$22.95 (paper).

This text examines the changes in area studies programs in the post-Cold War era. The editors, Masao Miyoshi and H.D. Harootunian, are, respectively, the Hajime Mori Professor of Japanese, English, and Comparative Literature at the University of California at San Diego and Chair of the East Asian Studies Department at New York University. They, along with Rey Chow, also a contributor to this volume, are editors of the Asia-Pacific Series at Duke University Press. Not surprisingly, then, the text focuses solely on East Asia and within East Asia, there is an emphasis on Japan as five contributions consider that country alone. This is ironic and unfortunate in a text arguing the need to develop new perspectives for thinking about the generation and dissemination of knowledge of the world's regions.

Area studies began in the United States in the mid-1940s. The primary cause was the onset of the Cold War and government's need for information about regions newly important for American security. As Bruce Cummings notes "...the American state and especially the intelligence elements in it shaped the entire field of postwar area studies, with the clearest and most direct impact on those regions of the world where communism was strongest: Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, and East Asia" (261). He argues that there were "astonishing levels of collaboration" between universities, foundations, and American intelligence agencies, especially in the early years of the Cold War (262). To make his case, Cummings examines the Russian Studies programs at Harvard and Columbia and the influence of the FBI and CIA on tenure decisions at the University of Washington. The intelligence emphasis continues into the contemporary era and is much more explicit. It takes the form of the National Security Education Act, which requires that recipients of fellowships under its auspices serve a period of time in national security agencies.

Over time there was a change in the identity and purpose of donors to area studies programs. If it was the U.S. government that was largely responsible for funding area studies programs in their early years, foreign governments—especially Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan—provided funds in later years. These were not America's military enemies but its economic competitors. Moreover, the purpose of such

funding was often different, seeking not only to interest Americans in these societies and cultures but also to establish the primacy of native authority. This funding, too, has slowed down in recent years.

The erosion of traditional funding sources is one reason for the contemporary crisis in area studies. A second significant cause is pedagogical. This is related to funding, of course, because "the obsessive search for cash has resulted in suppressing any genuine concern with thinking through new ways to organize and disseminate knowledge about Asia or the Middle East" (6). In today's world, traditional techniques of studying regions outside Euro-America, e.g., through the lenses of traditional disciplines and the nation-state, are no longer valid. Disciplinary boundaries are breaking down, the cold war and colonial eras are over, and globalization is on the march. In addition, a number of contemporary theories, e.g., rational choice theory—the target of several contributors to the text, are dedicated to the obliteration of differences between regions and cultures.

As a result of these changes, "area studies" has entered its "afterlife," i.e., one in which old truths, perspectives, and institutions can be called into question. Illustrating challenges to existing ways of thinking and new perspectives is the purpose of this text. There are a number of interesting ideas in this regard. Rob Wilson asks what "Asia Pacific" means, examining both literary depictions and those of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum. The latter formulation, with its emphasis on open borders and the movement of people and goods, is "culturally and politically naive, ignoring, bypassing, or suppressing the cultural complexity, historical issues, and symbolic profusion of the region in order to form this regional identity" (246). Paul Bove asks if American studies can be area studies and concludes that it cannot, because the prime purpose of area studies has been the production of knowledge for the state whereas the prime purpose of American studies for the state is to promote its hegemony and culture. Moss Roberts makes the valid but often forgotten point that through the study of the other we learn more about ourselves, arguing that the way to understand America's wrongs in Asia is to focus on the victims and the perspectives of Asians.

Yet not every historical approach or intellectual dissident is necessarily relevant for contemporary re-thinking. Several articles examine forgotten or disgraced thinkers from earlier periods in Japanese history, e.g., Tetsuo Najita has contributed an article on Ando Shoeki, a "forgotten thinker"

in Japanese history, and Stefan Tanaka examines Japanese historians of the 1950s. However, these articles establish little connection between their subject and contemporary reassessments. The relevance seems to be merely that their subjects challenged conventional wisdom in an earlier era. Masao Miyoshi's article on the "ivory tower in escrow" has even less relevance for the text's theme, consisting largely of attacks on contemporary universities, ranging from university-corporate linkages, to course enrollments, the widespread use of adjuncts, and the changing priorities of university presses.

The failure to adhere to a single theme is a problem common to many anthologies. Another is a lack of consistency in format. In *Learning Places* there are notes following each article, but Chow's article on issues of pedagogy in area studies includes references as well as notes. A list of Ph.D. dissertations in American Studies written at Yale

University between 1988 and 1995 follows Bove's article; no other contribution includes an appendix. For a text published in 2002, the identification of dissertations completed between 1988 and 1995 might seem a bit dated, but they were current at the time this article was first published in 1997. Other contributions are also dated. Benita Parry's examination of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* begins with a "prefatory note" written in September 1999, perhaps because the article was first published in 1994.

As these comments suggest, *Learning Places* does a much better job depicting the crisis in contemporary area studies than it does suggesting new approaches and perspectives. It serves as the beginning of this discussion rather than the definitive word. Future assessments, moreover, would be strengthened by the perspectives of observers of Africa, the Middle East, and other regions outside of Europe and America.