What is Global Studies?

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In his evocative way, my colleague Jan Nederveen Pieterse has raised a host of interesting questions about the emerging field of global studies, beginning with the puzzler of whether there is a difference between globalization studies and global studies. He implies that there is. I agree.

It is often said, as Paul James puts it, that globalization is the subject of global studies (James 753). And it is true that globalization is one of the things that people in global studies examine. Yet the story is more complicated than that: globalization is explored in many other disciplines, and global studies as a field looks at more than globalization.

The study of globalization is done in many different ways in many different disciplines. Economic globalization is covered in economics; social and cultural diasporas are explored in sociology; global issues of health and environmental concerns are included in public health and environmental studies, respectively; and so it goes through the disciplinary range.

But global studies as a field is larger than this. This emerging new field is deliberately multidisciplinary, but this does not mean that it is simply a collection of different kinds of studies and that people who are identified with it just go off on their own. In the best of global studies faculties, scholars share insights and often work together on common problems that are by their nature larger than one discipline’s ability to tackle. In a global studies project on global warming in which I have recently been involved, participants look at the potential impact of this environmental disaster not only from the point of view of environmental studies but also from global political, sociological, legal, historical, religious and other cultural perspectives as well.

Moreover, global studies looks not only at the macro level of the broad phenomenon of globalization but also at the micro level. It examines the “glocal” phenomena, as Roland Robertson put it, instances of transnationality that illumine the larger whole (Robertson). Hence scholars in global studies explore case studies of transnational communities, events, actions and actors that are affected by, and help to shape, larger global forces.

Put simply, the difference between “globalization studies” and “global studies” is this: the first is a subject and the second is a field. Globalization studies are the combined instances in which globalization is studied from various disciplinary perspectives. Global studies is the emerging transdisciplinary field that incorporates a variety of disciplinary and new approaches to understanding the transnational features of our global world.

But this brings us back to the question of global studies. Just what does this new field encompass? Are there any guidelines to understanding what is global studies and what is not?

These were the questions in the minds of a group of scholars who met in Tokyo in 2008. They were representatives of over a dozen graduate programs in global studies that had been established in Europe, Asia, and North America in the preceding decade. They had met the year before in Santa Barbara, California, to explore the possibility of creating a new international organization—the Global Studies Consortium—to represent the new graduate programs around the world that were called “global studies.”[[1]](#endnote-1) The first college programs to use that name had been formed in the mid-1990s, and within a decade there were hundreds. Students flocked to the new programs, intuitively knowing that this was something important. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, graduate programs had been established in dozens of universities in Asia, Europe, and North America, including Japan, South Korea, China, India, Egypt, Germany, Denmark, Russia, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States. The field of global studies had arrived.

But what was in this new field of study? When the scholars came together in Tokyo in 2008, their main goals were to answer this question and to define the major features of the field. They came expecting to have something of a fight. After all, each of these programs had developed independently from the others. When representatives of all these different programs came together, they did not know what they would find, thinking that the field of global studies would be defined vastly differently in Tokyo, Leipzig, and Melbourne. But as it turned out, this was not the case. Happily, there was a great deal of agreement at the outset regarding what the field of global studies contained and how to go about studying it.

The five characteristics of global studies that the scholars agreed on at that memorable founding meeting of the international Global Studies Consortium in Tokyo are the following:

***Transnational.*** The scholars in Tokyo agreed that the field of global studies focuses primarily on the analysis of events, activities, ideas, trends, processes, and phenomena that appear across national boundaries and cultural regions. These include activities such as economic distribution systems, and ideologies such as nationalism or religious beliefs. The scholars used the term *cultural regions* as well as *nations,* since these kinds of global flows of activity and ideas have occurred before the invention of the nation-state in 17th and 18th century Europe. There were historical events and activities that transcended the limitations of particular cultural regions even when they are not demarcated as national boundaries. Historically, much of the activity that we call “transnational” might more properly be called “transregional,” and even today much transnational activity is transregional as well (see Bentley, Bridenthal and Yang).

Moreover, local or regional studies can provide studies of global trends and transnational themes in microcosm. Often the most productive way to understand global phenomena is through the prism of particular cases. In an introductory textbook for undergraduate classes in global studies that I have recently prepared, the first half of the textbook covers global themes by examining their presence in particular regions of the world, from Africa to the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the Americas (Juergensmeyer). Only in the second half of the course do the students deal with large themes of the global economy, erosion of the nation-state, the rise of new media, environmental and health issues, and transnational religious and political ideologies as phenomena that transcend their local and regional manifestations.

***Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and problem-oriented.*** Since transnational phenomena are complex, they are examined from many disciplinary points of view. In general, the field of global studies does not keep strict disciplinary divisions among, for instance, sociological, historical, political, literary, or other academic fields. Rather, it takes a problem-focused approach, looking at situations such as global warming or the rise of new religio-political ideologies as specific cases. To make sense of these problem areas requires multiple perspectives, which may be economic, political, social, cultural, religious, ideological, or environmental. Scholars involved in global studies often work in interdisciplinary teams or freely use terms and concepts across fields of study. These scholars come from all fields of the social sciences (especially from sociology, economics, political science, and anthropology). And many of the fields are also related to the humanities, including particularly the fields of history, literature, religious studies, and the arts. Some scholars have expertise in areas of science, such as environmental studies and public health.

Hence scholars of global studies pack their disciplinary skills in the tool kits with which they embark on the analysis of global problems; but sometimes the disciplinary tools are not big enough. One of the interesting features of the field of global studies is the development of transnational approaches: new theoretical and methodological resources for analyzing transnational phenomena that reach beyond traditional disciplinary limitations (see Axford, McGrew and Held).

***Contemporary and Historical.*** We think of globalization as being primarily contemporary, something unique to our time. The intensity and scope of globalization in the post-Cold War period is indeed truly astounding. But it is not idiosyncratic. Globalization has a history. Though the pace of globalization has increased enormously in the post–Cold War period of the twentieth century and even more so in the twenty-first century, transnational activities have had historical antecedents. There are moments in history—such as in the ancient Mediterranean world during the Roman and Greek Empires—when there was a great deal of transnational activity and interchange on economic, cultural, and political levels. The global reach of European colonialism from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century provides another example of a global stratum of culture, education, technology, and economic activity upon which are based many aspects of the globalization of the twenty-first century. Thus, to fully understand the patterns of globalization today, it is necessary to probe their historical precedents (for examples, Iriye, Nederveen Pieterse).

Moreover, some historians are exploring the notion of studying history globally. That is, not only is the subject matter a historical moment in globalization, but the way of studying historical events can themselves be done globally. This approach involves looking at common patterns during world-wide historical periods and viewing them from differing cultural perspectives with the goal of providing a global view of a globalized situation (Sachsenmaier). It is an approach to global studies that has applicability to other aspects of global studies as well, such as the study of contemporary socio-political movements that arise similarly in different parts of the world.

***Critical and Multicultural.*** As the new global historical approaches affirm, the American and European views of globalization are not the only ones. Although many aspects of contemporary globalization are based on European colonial precedents, most global studies scholars do not accept uncritically the notion that people in the West should be the only ones to benefit from economic, political, and cultural globalization. Some global studies scholars avoid using the term *globalization* to describe their subject of study, since the term sometimes is interpreted to imply the promotion of a Western-dominated hegemonic project aimed at spreading the acceptance of laissez-faire liberal economics throughout the world (see Axford). Other scholars describe their approach as “critical globalization studies,” implying that their examination of globalization is not intended to promote or privilege Western economic models of globalization, but rather to understand it (Appelbaum and Robinson).

To understand globalization well requires viewing it from many cultural perspectives—from African and Asian, as well as European and American, points of view. Scholars of global studies acknowledge that globalization and other global issues, activities, and trends can be viewed differently in different parts of the world and from different socioeconomic levels within each locality. For that reason, scholars of global studies sometimes speak of “many globalizations” or “multiple perspectives on global studies.” This position acknowledges that there is no dominant paradigm or perspective in global studies that is valued over others.

***Globally responsible.*** Scholars who work in global studies often advance an additional criterion for what they do: to help make the world a better place in which to live. By focusing on global problems, scholars imply that they want to help solve those problems. They also hope to foster a sense of global citizenship among their students to prepare them for a cosmopolitan world (see Appiah, Beck and Cronin). Some like to think that they are helping to create “global literacy”—the ability to function in the global age—by understanding both the specific aspects of diverse cultures and traditions and the commonly experienced global trends and patterns. Other teachers assert that they are providing training in “global leadership,” giving potential leaders of transnational organizations and movements the understanding and skills that will help them to solve problems and deal with issues on a global scale.

To a surprising degree, most academic programs that call themselves “global studies” adhere to these five guidelines. They do so naturally, rather than consciously having these criteria imposed upon them. The logical sequence of thinking that led to the creation of global studies programs in so many disparate places in so many parts of the world in the last fifteen years—from Tokyo to Beijing and Melbourne and Leipzig and Delhi—has been replicated because of the common nature of the subject. Those who study globalization are often frustrated with the limitations of their own disciplinary training, and have been motivated by some common assumptions about the characteristics of global phenomena and how to go about studying them. Happily, there is no need for a global studies police force to go about enforcing these standards from place to place. They emerge by themselves.

Part of the reason why these guidelines are adopted so readily is that the very subject of inquiry—globalization—shows the insufficiency of any one cultural or disciplinary view of the world to adequately perceive it. The peculiar divisions of academic life into disciplines have been shaped by past histories that are no longer relevant to many features of contemporary life, least of all globalization. The development of a new field of studies awakens the possibilities of theoretical insights to move beyond the disciplinary and cultural limitations of the past and not only illumine facets of the global era but also give the world-wide academic enterprise a more global dimension.

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1. See the Global Studies Consortium website at <http://globalstudiesconsortium.org> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)