

An Argument for Area Studies by Mat Hudson

Only by studying all regions can one grasp the true nature of how events shape the world in which we live today. History is not just the recitation of dates and battles, just as it is not just the study of those great men of the West. To know the complete story one must investigate the areas which lay outside the established routes to historical knowledge. In his *Navigating World History*, Patrick Manning addresses the importance of area-studies and its place in true academic research. While necessary, there exist challenges in researching area-studies. As Westerners, what bias and voice do we bring to the far-fetched regions of the world and is it accurate? Our view from outside of the regional society provides a fresh and perhaps neutral assessment of the region. Yet, is it too late to gain a full and fair understanding of the non-Western world through Western eyes? Area-studies provide value in that they increase the historical knowledge of regions previously under investigated by Western scholars; however, the notion of area-studies from a Western viewpoint may not capture the full effect of the voices and lives of the regional histories.

In order to understand the impact that Western scholars could have on area-studies and the impact that other regions have on Western history, a definition of area-studies must be understood. Manning describes area-studies as “the application of the established sort of academic work to regions beyond the established terrains of study.”¹ The emphasis on Western history has long overshadowed the attention given to those areas seen only as colonies, combatants, or commodities. However, as historiography has evolved over the centuries, the study of all regions of the world has grown and the impact that each has on the total history has been captured with greater voracity. Area-studies more than just the effect that non-Western regions of the world have played in the shaping of Western history; it is an effort to provide an

¹ Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 145.

honest history of those non-Western areas by incorporating the historiography the West has spent millennia refining. The explosive advances in communication and transportation over the last century have increased the interaction between what were once the far corners of the globe. Every culture, region, and religious group has a role to play in shaping the world and only within a scholarly understanding of those unique regions can we incorporate a world history.

Even with the most pure of intentions, each researcher places his or her own stamp on the finished product. Western scholars must endeavor to avoid writing the history of other cultures through Western eyes. A continuation of Western history and how it affects the other regions of the world does not allow for a full study in those regions. “Historians must supply to this endeavor a world history that transcends the histories of special groups on global mythistory (a mixture of empirical and mythological elements) that would identify with the past triumphs and tribulations of all of humanity.”² The West has long seen itself as the leaders in scholarly endeavors. The Greeks and Romans viewed those outside of themselves as barbarians. The phrase ‘civilized world’ has become one used often to describe those nations with Western qualities. Yet, historians have become more adept and open to viewing the Third World on its own terms. The shelves of libraries and bookstores have been populated with texts on Latin American, Asian, and African histories. The same academic standard in which the great topics of Western history are written must be adhered to when applied to non-Western regions. Unlike the days of empire building and colonial masters, the melting pot that is North America provides the opportunity for Western trained researchers to discover the histories of the lands of their ancestors and to apply what they have learned to present that history with as little bias towards a Western mode of thought.

² Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 415.

Those too close to the history are not the best to assess or comment on it. The benefits of Western scholarship in reference to area-studies are incalculable. Not only do researchers from outside the region provide the history with a new voice, but those from the region benefit as well through discourse and techniques in study. There are many examples of how fields outside of history have given a glimpse into the history of a region. “The progress of decolonization brought the field of anthropology everywhere into an encounter of its complicity with colonialism, and to a wave of self-critique within the discipline.”³ In our ever shrinking world, the next global news headline sparks research and interest in whatever region the story originates. Where there is demand in the Western world supply will always respond. An explosion of works dedicated to Middle Eastern history has arisen in the past several decades as a response to the eternal turmoil that grips the region. Seeing the interaction of the regions and how they fit into one like story of history provides the academic world to expand the knowledge base. Yet, there still exists the problem of being too narrow of focus even in regards to area-studies. Historians have typically specialized on a topic, region, or period in history. This specialization continues today with area-studies. While specialization leads to more complete history, very few cultures, especially since the Age of Discovery, have been entirely isolated or created no impact to the rest of the globe. The benefits of providing a detailed history, global or regional, can aid understanding for the total picture.

Is it too late to capture the necessary information for those neglected regions of history? Many areas of the world, especially Africa, relied heavily upon oral traditions. No matter how sound a mind is, the story modifies itself based on the teller as well as the audience. Much like the researcher’s own unconscious bias filters what is included in his work; the oral traditions can skirt the line of history and entertainment. But, area-studies has its role to play in the generations

³ Manning, 149.

of historians to follow. While the influence of Western historiography is great on the rest of the world, Manning shows us there is distinctiveness in area-studies: the adoption of a different mix of influences, the influence of intellectual traditions of each region, and work in the language indigenous to the region discussed.⁴ While much has been lost to time and nature, the growth of area-studies can only benefit historiography. It can never be too late to incorporate the views and voices of those who impact the world around us and the forgotten stories of those who provide the meat to the Western skeleton of history.

Bibliography

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Manning, Patrick. *Navigating World History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

⁴ Manning, 162.