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Author(s): Leela Fernandes

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Disciplinary Quandaries: A Metacommentary on the Relationship between Political Science and the Interdisciplinary Study of Asia

LEELA FERNANDES

The relationship between disciplinary practices and the interdisciplinary study of politics, culture, and society has long been a site of intellectual contestation within the U.S. academy. Such contestation has been particularly vigorous when it has been imbricated within relationships of power marked by inequalities like race, ethnicity, and gender or by historically specific global relationships of power between countries and regions of the world (Szanton 2004). Taken together, the commentaries in this feature provide an important analysis of the possibilities, limits, and challenges that the discipline of political science holds for the study of Asia and Asian diasporic communities and a productive avenue for an exploration of questions of disciplinarity, power, and knowledge. However, if the relationship between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity is to be fully addressed—both in relation to the study of Asia/Asian diasporas and in relation to the broader question of knowledge production—it requires an exploration of the ways in which interdisciplinary fields of analysis (and their institutionalized sites) may also become disciplined by the cross-disciplinary formations that are dominant within them (Fernandes 2013; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002). As the commentaries cogently argue, the turn away from “area studies” has had an impact on the discipline of political science. However, the question that then arises is how this

disciplinary trend has begun to impact the institutional presuppositions and conditions of knowledge production within the interdisciplinary study of Asia.

A central constraint that has shaped political scientific scholarship on Asia and Asian diasporas is the institutionalization of a set of dominant norms regarding “methodological rigor.” The question of the effects of disciplinary methodological imperatives cuts across all of the commentaries on the state of the field. Whether they address the constraints of disciplinary norms that privilege quantitative scholarship (Lee; Wong), the devaluation of single-country “case study” research (Chung), or the formulaic dangers of mixed-methods approaches (Kuhonta; Lee), the commentaries point to the intellectual limits of a methodological rigidity and narrowness that produce chasms between political science and the study of Asia. The issue at hand is not that work that has drawn on quantitative or cross-national comparative approaches has not produced innovative and important scholarship on Asia or even that such approaches have not drawn on or contributed to in-depth understandings of Asia. Mixed-methods approaches in political science now often contain a fieldwork-based component that may include interpretive methods that draw on oral interviews, ethnography, or discourse analysis. However, the methodological doctrine of political science presumes a hierarchy of knowledge practices that are tied to the kind of methods being deployed. Thus, for instance, in the mixed-methods formula, interpretive methods are generally deployed to flesh out, extend, or deepen a research design that is defined by the foundational rigors of quantitative or cross-national comparative methods.

Such questions of methods are also fundamentally questions about intellectual legitimacy within the discipline. Methodological practices in effect become the disciplinary signposts of what kind of knowledge matters. Dominant conceptions of methodological rigor are inextricably bound up with epistemological judgments of what forms of knowledge are generalizable and therefore of significance to the discipline. However, the question of generalizability is itself encoded with long intellectual histories that have juxtaposed universal theories (historically coded as “Western” and “white”) with particular cases, contexts, and groups (historically coded as non-Western or marked by race). Thus, whether we are speaking of the case of fields such as Asian American studies in political science or individual scholarly works that seek to analyze politics in single countries, these histories produce weighty intellectual obstacles to intellectual legitimacy. Consider Wong’s striking observation that not a single

article focusing on Asian American politics has been published in the three top-ranked American politics journals. Conforming to the dominant methodological norms of the discipline thus becomes an understandable route for scholars to gain intellectual legitimacy for their research.

The stakes in this cycle of knowledge production are high as they produce the epistemological boundaries that determine what is included and excluded in our understandings of Asia and Asian diasporic communities. That is, empirical, conceptual, and theoretical gaps accumulate over time to produce highly skewed, if not distorted, understandings of Asia. The central question that haunts such intellectual legacies is one that asks, what kinds of research agendas, theoretical questions, and empirical understandings are foreclosed by the weight of disciplinary practices? What are the cumulative implications for the way we understand Asia (and the world as a whole) when work that breaks with disciplinary norms is rendered marginal to the discipline through the mundane institutional practices and cultures that constitute disciplines? This may be in part an unanswerable hypothetical question, because it asks us to reflect not on individual scholars who may successfully navigate between political science, ethnic studies, and area studies but on generational training that shapes not just what kinds of questions are asked but the weighty legacy of questions that are not being posed by new generations of scholars. The silences of unasked questions are often the most critical markers of fields of knowledge.

The implications of the disjunctures between political science and the interdisciplinary study of Asia are not, however, limited to research agendas within the discipline. It is tempting to rest with a binary juxtaposition between a rigidly defined discipline and a textured, eclectic field devoted to context-specific understandings of Asia. However, a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of the important questions that frame this discussion requires a careful look at the ways in which the interdisciplinary study of Asia also becomes disciplined in subtle but significant ways. In other words, the drift of political science research agendas away from area-based work has an impact not just on the discipline but on the institutionalized interdisciplinary sites that are devoted to the study of Asia and Asian diasporas. How disciplinary practices creep into interdisciplinary sites will, of course, vary based on the field in question. My own consideration of this question stems from my observations about the field of South Asian studies.

The field of South Asian studies (largely focused on India) has had a long-standing tradition of political scientists who have shaped both area-based debates on politics and political economy and debates within the

discipline. This has encompassed an eclectic range of scholarship, including the foundational work of Susanne Rudolph (a past president of the American Political Science Association) and Lloyd Rudolph on democratic politics; Atul Kohli's work on democracy, inequality, and poverty; and Amrita Basu's work on social movements. Political science scholarship on India has continued to use single-country analyses (often deploying comparative methods that compare states within India's federal structure) and often has a strong fieldwork-based component that includes both qualitative and quantitative aspects. As commentaries by Kuhonta, Lee, and Wong note, it is critical for discussions of the discipline to produce accurate intellectual genealogies that take into account variations of sub-fields and that do not erase the significant contributions that have been made by political scientists in both the discipline and the study of Asia. For example, as Kuhonta rightly notes, there have been major contributions of political scientists (such as James Scott and Benedict Anderson) whose work at the intersection of social theory, Asian studies, and political science transformed theories of nationalism and resistance and shaped generations of social science and humanistic research.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, political science has become an increasingly marginalized component of South Asian studies. Empirical markers of this can be seen in the relatively low numbers of applicants (and recipients) of area-based fellowships and the relatively low levels of participation of political scientists in area-based conferences. These trends have had a profound impact on the conditions of knowledge formation within South Asian studies. The declining presence of political scientific approaches within the field leads to a disciplining of area studies through the disciplines that are consequently dominant in the field (such as history, anthropology, and literature). While such forms of disciplinarity are often subtle, their cumulative effect is as significant as the more overt forms of disciplinarity in political science. At the micro level, this may take the form of intellectual cultural dispositions that construct particular approaches to the study of politics, culture, and society as intellectually valuable or meritorious. These normative disciplinary judgments (that may rest on anything from the kind of theoretical approach deployed to the type of methods used or the style of writing) become normalized as markers of "cutting-edge interdisciplinarity."

Constructions of political science scholarship as lacking in nuance, in this context, are not merely about methodological divides. That is, the exclusionary practices that creep into conditions of knowledge production within South Asian studies are not merely about a rejection of scholarship based on quantitative methods. In fact, any attempt to strengthen the

social science components of fields such as South Asian studies by adding in political science work based on a checklist of methodological practices (for instance, trying to be inclusive of work that uses quantitative approaches) in fact simply reifies dominant conceptions of what counts as social science research and misses the pluralism and diversity of scholarly work that has and is being conducted by political scientists. The issue at hand rests with a much deeper set of disciplinary practices that become embedded in fields such as South Asian studies. What becomes foreclosed is an analytical terrain that falls somewhere between the “interdisciplinary” field of South Asian studies and the “disciplinary” field of political science (Fernandes, forthcoming). Consider just one set of examples of what is often shortchanged by divergences between the two fields. Both political science and South Asian studies have wide and deep literatures on questions of inequality, democratic politics, and state power. Yet what we see is a steep decline in analyses that speak to *systemic* explanations of the reproduction of socioeconomic inequality and the relationship between socioeconomic processes and cultural identities that depart from both the “disciplinary” normative advocacy of economic reforms in political science, on one hand, and “interdisciplinary” approaches that, on the other hand, assume that nuanced understandings of identity and inequality must rest on a diffused conception of power. “Interdisciplinary” studies of the state and democratic institutions within South Asian studies rarely (if at all) engage with the broad political science scholarship on such questions. Meanwhile, intellectual dispositions within South Asian studies (through the everyday practices that materialize fields of knowledge) tend to dismiss systemic explanations of inequality as outdated examples of structural functionalism. In the process, avenues for productive interdisciplinary exchanges are foreclosed and the accumulation of unasked questions continues, albeit in a different disciplinary mode.

For the conditions of knowledge production about “Asia” to be opened up and deepened will require a hard look at the cultural and institutional practices within fields, such as South Asian studies, that have increasingly begun to discipline the field. That is, if the task of this set of commentaries is to open up an analytical space that can encourage political science to learn from Asian studies, such an endeavor itself becomes a practice of disciplinary rigidity if it does not also ask what the study of Asia should learn from political scientists.

Of course, by way of a conclusion, it is worth remembering that this commentary on the production of knowledge about Asia is focused on institutional practices within the United States. Questions regarding the kinds of knowledge that matter may take a very different form when the

national and international geopolitical location of the intellectual shifts are taken into account. That is perhaps one of the most important cautions for the need for intellectual humility that must be made in any of the debates on knowledge production and in the claims of what counts as creative, contextual, interdisciplinary knowledge about Asia and its diasporas.

Leela Fernandes is the Glenda Dickerson Collegiate Professor of Women's Studies and professor of political science at the University of Michigan. She is the author of *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (Minnesota, 2006), *Transnational Feminism in the United States* (2013), *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills* (1997), and *Transforming Feminist Practice* (2003) and editor of *Routledge Handbook of Gender in South Asia* (2014). She is currently engaged in research for a new book project, *Public Works in a Post-liberalization State: Urbanization, Inequality, and the Politics of Water in India*.

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