

Area Studies: A Focus on a Multidisciplinary Approach in the Social Sciences* (1975)

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This essay briefly discusses the history of multidisciplinary research in the Philippines, citing its origins in the Cold War and the development of area studies programs in the United States. It then discusses the multidisciplinary approach of the Asian Center and examines its role in social science education and in achieving broader social goals. —

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Since the end of the last World War, social scientists, along with other scholars, moved towards a better understanding of man and his increasingly complex society. One result of this effort has been the development of the pre-war attempts at a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach in the study of human society and the formulation of possible solutions to social problems for purposes of improving the social, economic, political and cultural conditions under which men live. Suggesting greater cooperation, coordination, if not integration, of the social sciences disciplines, this “innovative approach” has been expected to correct what has been a widely held view: that social scientists have been narrowly provincial or parochial in terms of their respective disciplines. Therefore, what has been produced by them has been a disjointed, often seemingly inconsistent, understanding of the problems of man and his society.¹

If we view all organized knowledge and thought as divided into two large fields, one of them would consist of the social sciences; the other, of the natural sciences. Conventionally classified under the social sciences are disciplines such as Anthropology, Economics, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Sociology and other similar ones. Treating all the activities, achievements and attainments of mankind, the social sciences are as extensive as the scope of human interests and associations. More specifically, they are mainly concerned with, and contribute their respective disciplines' insights on the relation of man to man, man to society, and society to society.

I

Within the last decade or so, the multidisciplinary approach—a move away from specialization toward a more integrated approach in the social sciences—was attempted at three levels in the University of the Philippines. The first one was at the General Education level where the usual introductory course for each discipline was replaced by a general social science course. The second level was tried in relation to the various programs, to produce social sciences majors. Less successful than the first, the majors produced under this academic arrangement were to attempt an integration of various specialization courses in different disciplines toward a hoped-for competency in the social sciences.

The third-level was a try at integration by focusing various social sciences approaches on a specific area or region, such as the Philippines, Southeast Asia, East Asia, or South Asia.² Because the essential requirement of the last level of integration is expertise in one of the social sciences or humanities disciplines or the arts, it has been undertaken only on the Master's level. Without a solid disciplinary base, the multidisciplinary approach in the study of an “area” could cause confusion rather than integration in the students' minds. It is to this third level of multidisciplinary approach

that we shall later address ourselves, after briefly tracing the beginnings and the other possible foci of this approach.

The initial pre-war attempts at fraternization, if not amalgamation of the social sciences, was encouraged in the United States during the last war. With the help of government and foundation funds, cross-disciplinary studies of Japan and other areas of Asia developed in American universities. "Area Studies" Centers multiplied in the fifties and in the sixties. Such centers were established in various parts of Asia and in Europe. The multidisciplinary approach has helped American policy makers to understand and try solutions to their own country's post-war socio-economic domestic problems, such as the problem of a possible economic crisis following wartime prosperity, the labor problem, especially the problem of unemployment, the Negro problem and the problem of poverty in certain depressed areas of the nation.

Small wonder that, following the war, the move toward the multidisciplinary approach had gained enough momentum to struggle for its reluctant acceptance as a legitimate approach in the social sciences within the universities of the United States. Slowly, the initial hostilities of orthodox disciplines to this approach made way for cooperation and support of what is sometimes referred to by its opponents as this new "mongrel" or "super-discipline." Today, though pockets of opposition to the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences persist, it has been used as a means of coordinating the various disciplines of the social sciences around a focus of study usually organized within the framework of a committee, a center, an institute or a project of the University. At times, one finds it in a disciplinary department like Political Science or Anthropology.

One focus of the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences is the study of industrial relations. This focus can polarize social sciences disciplines engaged in the study of the labor field, industrial disputes, economic stabilization, the growth of organized labor and the need for rapid advances in productivity. It is now widely agreed that, together with

economists, the coordinated efforts of sociologists, psychologists, cultural anthropologists, political scientists and others are needed to achieve full understanding of the problems involved and to develop workable solutions to guide private or public policy.³

Such cooperative ventures among the social scientists from various disciplines are also evident in post-war historical studies which brought together not only the insights and interpretations of historians, but also of social psychologists, social anthropologists and sociologists, in an attempt to reconstruct and interpret the past.⁴ This has been especially true of social histories, histories of ideas, and biographies written after the war.

Community studies offered another focus for experiment of multidisciplinary sharing of methodological problems and viewpoints by social scientists in the hope of mutually reinforcing each other's disciplines. Such a group of scholars study the community as a whole, thus avoiding some of the distortions common under disciplinary fragmentation. The "Coordinated Investigation of Sulu Culture" of the Notre Dame College of Jolo could be a focus of this kind of multidisciplinary integration.

The study of the concept of entrepreneurship has also been found as another focus of multidisciplinary participation. An example is Harvard University's Research on entrepreneurial history.

Cross-disciplinary study can also focus on the conditions and processes of economic development, conceived as involving changes in many non-economic aspects of culture. Examples are studies undertaken by the Center for International Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Centering on the emerging countries of the underdeveloped world, they have attempted to evolve an answer to the general question: why have the people of some societies entered upon technological progress sooner or more effectively than others?⁵ Obviously, the problems involved in reaching for an answer call the attention not only of the economists but also of the psycho-analysts, sociologists, social anthropologists, the cultural geographers, the linguists, the historians and the political scientists.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, multidisciplinary cooperation flourishes in “area studies” whereby increasing members of university historians, political scientists, linguists, economists, anthropologists, geographers, and other professional groups actively associate with one another in studies of such areas or regions as Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia or West Asia. It is this focus of multidisciplinary approach which is used at the University of the Philippines’ Asian Center.

II

Primarily a research institution established in 1955, the Asian Center offers an M.A. (Asian Studies) program with a major in an area of Asia. It was intended to promote studies on Asian countries from which the Philippines was isolated during her long years of colonial rule. Nevertheless, the founders of the Institute of Asian Studies and the law changing it into the Asian Center, emphasized Philippine Studies. It was believed that before Filipinos attempted to comprehend the history, society and culture of other Asian peoples, it would be well for us to understand our own first, especially at a time when the search for national identity is crucially important to our young Republic.

Therefore, the Asian Center has a special area of specialization: the Philippines area, which was the first one opened because of availability of staff, library and other facilities necessary to carry on an M.A. (Asian Studies) program of study. The other areas or regions which can be chosen as a major area are: the Southeast Asia area; the South Asia area; the West Asia area; and the East Asia area. Requiring the knowledge of, at least, one language of the area, any one of these different areas of specialization could serve as a nexus among the several disciplines by drawing from them scholars who focus on a specific area or region, each in his own fashion, or in collaboration with each other.

These scholars constitute a team of specialists who can contribute their knowledge, methodology and insights to the analysis of problems

within the area and attempting solutions to them. In this way, the Center was able to build an “area specialization” which was a “multidisciplinary specialization” on top of a “disciplinary specialization” acquired by a student in his undergraduate study. By using the multidisciplinary approach, the Center has achieved, to a certain extent, cooperation and some kind of integration among specialists from the social sciences and humanities disciplines in the study of a specific Asian area or region.

A pair of courses taken during a student’s first two successive semesters at the Center can be taken as examples of his “organized” exposure to the multidisciplinary approach in the study of a particular Asian area. Those specializing in the Philippine area are made to take the Seminar on the Philippines I and II; those in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asia I and II; those in East Asia, East Asia I and II; and those in South Asia, South Asia I and II. A student at the Center has to enroll in any pair of courses on the area he chooses to specialize. They constitute two of four core courses required of M.A. students at the Asian Center. The other two are: Pre-Modern Asia and Modern Asia which are expected to give the students a general and broad Asian background for their study of one of the specific areas of Asia. It is, of course, assumed that these students have had some background in world history or world civilizations in their undergraduate training.

The remaining part of the student’s program of study is a combination of courses made up of those offered at the Center, the graduate courses of the major department in which he worked for his undergraduate study or courses from related disciplines in the social sciences or the humanities (depending on the student’s background), his proposed thesis topic and his career plans. This study program, which aims at a multidisciplinary combination of courses, could allow a student to strengthen his graduate major discipline, especially if he intends to become a teacher in any Philippine school which is still oriented towards the traditional disciplines. At the same time, he can have a choice of attending courses in related Asian areas, for instance, a major in the Philippines area can take courses in the larger area of Southeast Asia or *vice versa*. He can also choose to

take other courses offered by the Center, such as the “Modernization in Asia” which is useful to a student majoring in any of the Asian areas of specialization.

For an idea of how the basic two-semester, formally organized multidisciplinary courses for each area of Asia are conducted, a description of the Seminar on the Philippines I, the first of two courses on the Philippines follows:

Like the other two-semester area seminars of the Center, the Seminar on the Philippines I is coordinated by a faculty member of the Asian Center who has a disciplinary major but has developed specialization in an Asian area and a multidisciplinary orientation. The “Seminar on the Philippines I” started as a series of lectures on the Philippines by some six or seven faculty members from the departments of Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Linguistics, History, Economics and Political Science, aside from the Asian Center. The disciplinary lectures presented the lecturers’ views on Philippine society and culture within the framework of their respective disciplinary concepts, methodology and substantive data. Reading assignments were, therefore, a combination of theoretical writings with empirical cases in which theory has been effectively—or at least—interestingly applied to a specific social problem. Some narrative or descriptive works were also included. Each lecturer submitted a reading list and an outline of the lecture topics decided upon and assigned to him by the coordinator who also plans out the coverage of the series of lectures, the sequence and schedule of each lecture. The outline and reading list of each lecturer are distributed in advance to the students.

The following year, the coordinator decided to give a more specific focus of the problems touched in the series of lectures; that is, a focus on the problems of integration of Philippine society. During the third year of the experiment, the problems were concentrated on “Transitional Philippines in Asia.”

As indicated in the copy of the schedule of lectures and outlines of each specialist’s lecture, four or five lectures on the geographic, economic

and socio-cultural aspects of our society are followed by lectures on various problems of “transitional Philippines.” Among them, the problem of ethnic integration, the crime and squatter problems, the population problem, the language problem, the problems of economic development, mass media, education, persistence of pre-conquest Philippine custom laws, social structure and politics, political ideologies and movements, political elites and policy formulation. Then, a series of lectures, mainly given by specialists on certain areas of Asia, project the Philippines against its Asian setting.

The “Seminar on the Philippines I” has drawn together a total number of twenty-three lecturers from fourteen units of the University, including the Asian Center and eight departments of the College of Arts and Sciences. It should be noted here that the students attending the Seminar are not only from the Asian Center but also graduate students from the Departments of Political Science, Sociology, and Anthropology of the College of Arts and Sciences, the Institute of Mass Communication, the Institute of Library Science, the College of Education and others who take Asian Studies as a cognate.

As expected of most graduate courses, a greater part of the work in the Seminar is left to the students. Keeping abreast of reading assignments is essential if the students wish to participate in the discussion and the question-and-answer period following the hour’s lecture. They can also learn more from the knowledge and insights of the specialist if they can ask him intelligent questions based on data and interpretations gathered from their readings.

A coordinator of the seminar course is necessary to start and direct discussions or questions to keep the class from veering away from the problem being examined. The coordinator ties in one lecture with the next, or one problem with another. He also takes care of giving and correcting examination and/or term papers.

These written works afford the coordinator an idea about the success or failure the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences has had upon the student's mind and way of thinking. Some papers are disheartening. But the examination and term papers have increasingly become more satisfying and encouraging. These can be viewed partly as results of the improvement of the course within the four-year experimental period, the more rigid selection of students admitted to the M.A. (Asian Studies) program, and the drawing together into the seminar course of more students from an increasing number of disciplines and units of the University, thus forming a multidisciplinary group of students. In fact, a few papers written by seminar participants during the last semester manifest the students' ability to borrow concepts and methods from various disciplines outside his own in the process of analyzing their problems and suggesting solutions to them. The last process is what I prefer to describe as the "interdisciplinary approach" which best takes place "within one skill."⁶

Thus, one will note that the "Seminar on the Philippines I" intends to provide incoming students, who choose to major in the Philippines area, a forum of discussion that will transcend their particular disciplines and specialties. It also introduces them to a wide variety of approaches of the social sciences disciplines in the study of Philippine society and culture so that, hopefully, these students can view the Philippines area as a whole, and its problems within this context.

The primary aim of the seminar is the extension of the range of choice of students by introducing him to concepts and methods that are otherwise too easily missed or overlooked and to which the traditional program of graduate study has seldom given a place. The seminar does not attempt to persuade students of the Center, who are required a disciplinary undergraduate major, to adopt new approaches at the expense of traditional ones. Truth can be fruitfully approached from many angles, and a healthy disciplinary department is one in which a diversity of methods and viewpoints coexist, mutually stimulating and criticizing one another. The seminar does not also try to make students proficient in any one of the social sciences. Instead, it seeks only to expose them to work now

being done in the social sciences disciplines most directly relevant to the study of the Philippines area.

One of the benefits of the course has been to allow the students to see the limitations as well as possibilities of “new ways” in his own discipline. In other words, once a student is exposed to the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences, even when he works out problems within his own discipline, he will tend to seek the other disciplines, especially when he is faced with the limits of his own. In this way, the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences provides the students at the periphery of his discipline a wider range of choice of concepts and methods in analyzing and solving social problems.

The multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences, as applied in the teaching of a course focused on the Philippine area which has been described, is limited only to the “organized” type of this approach. The working together of social scientists can, however, take many forms and at various levels. It may occur in the preparation of a social science textbook in which compilations of theories and findings are made without any serious attempt to develop meaningful relationships among them. Or it may take place in faculty meetings of social sciences departments of colleges or universities for such purposes as curriculum planning, support of research and others. Or individual sociologist, psychologist, anthropologist and economist may work up a joint course on research project. Or it may take place in constant consultations or even informal conversations among social scientists based in different disciplines who enjoy each other’s mental stimulation. It is this last level which the Asian Center has successfully encouraged. Such joint collaboration may develop in a planned or unplanned fashion.

The point I wish to stress here is that the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences, which the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines has utilized, has been a response to a long-felt need of achieving “multi-disciplinarity,” both in teaching and research for increasingly complex problems relating to human behavior within an Asian area. For instance, as we entered into the space age, the problem of the individual’s

relationship to the organized group within the developing countries of Asia is not simply a matter of concern of the economist, psychologist, sociologist or political scientist alone. Each has a contribution to make, but no single contribution itself has met the problem. Thus, the urgent need for a multidisciplinary approach which is more a means for the internal development of each separate social sciences discipline than it is for the establishment of a unified, integrated, all-inclusive discipline or “super-discipline.” It is not an end itself but a tool and a stage.⁷ There is a need for the continuous development and vitalization of the basic disciplines in the social sciences, if the multidisciplinary approach itself is to continue to be a useful and valid approach and if it is to continue stimulating the social sciences disciplines in developing “new ways.”

It is too soon to judge the success or failure of the multidisciplinary approach used in the study of an Asian area at the Asian Center. But even though “multidisciplinaryism” at the Center has not yet achieved the effectiveness that was hoped for, and teamwork in teaching and research leaves much to be desired, the experiment in using the multidisciplinary approach in the study of an Asian area is evidence of growth and of widening awareness at the University of the Philippines of the broadening problems, methods, and scope of our increasingly complex and confusing world.

III

Now, what are the implications of the area-focused multidisciplinary approach to teacher-training in the social sciences? First, on the level of training teachers in the social sciences at the elementary and secondary levels, it is recommended that critic teachers in the social studies, or those engaged in instructing teachers how to teach social studies effectively, acquire some idea of, if not some exposure to the multidisciplinary approach in the study of an area, especially of the Philippines area. This will give them the necessary background for developing future teachers who can

understand human behavior, social values and attitudes within a given society and culture, which are primary concerns of educators and education.

Unlike teachers of the social sciences on the college or university level, whose main goal is the training of specialists in the search of truth and knowledge of facts as facts, the most prominent of the objectives to be achieved by the elementary and secondary school teachers is the training of pupils for citizenship within Philippine society. Teachers at these first two very important and crucial levels of our educational system carry the responsibility of utilizing materials of the social studies as means of providing the basis for making the country and the world today intelligible to their pupils. Moreover, as teachers in the social studies, they are charged with the training of their students in certain skills and habits, as well as inculcating in them attitudes and ideals that will enable boys and girls to take their places as efficient and effective members of our society.

I would like to point out more specifically the responsibilities of teachers in the rural areas where they occupy prominent positions as civic and social leaders. A multidisciplinary area approach on the Philippines in the training of teachers, not only teachers in the social studies, would be a great help to them in understanding and explaining existing conditions within their community in a more realistic way. They can also become more effective inspirations and guides of the residents within the community in improving themselves and their venue so that they can share the responsibility of transforming their country into a viable modern, industrial society. Furthermore, events and developments taking place outside their small world or society can be more validly interpreted by teachers with the goal of integrating their community to the larger one, that is, the nation.

On the college or university level, teachers in the social sciences could benefit from an area-focused multidisciplinary approach, especially because most social science disciplines in Philippine colleges and universities have been traditionally general in orientation with only an occasional bow to an area, specifically the Philippines. Reflecting a

consequence of American policy in the teaching of the social sciences, this situation has resulted in a concentration on American materials, subject matter, and models in Philippine institutions of higher learning. Therefore, it is imperative that a deliberate reorientation in the direction of preoccupation with Philippine materials, without abandoning universal science and international outlook, be undertaken. This trend was among those recognized and, therefore, adopted by the Romulo administration which set it as one of the new goals for the social sciences at the University of the Philippines and which has been further stressed by the present administration at U.P. Related to making students more aware of the cultural, social and political environment in which they live, this goal parallels the effort of mobilizing higher education toward the attainment of distinctly nationalistic goals.⁸

Moreover, exposure to the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences in the study of an area, especially the Philippines, will be rewarding and functional to social science teachers in Philippine colleges or universities who are made to teach not only their disciplinary major or minor but also courses in other social science disciplines. Having been exposed to and having acquired some ideas of the concepts, methods and substantive data of the social sciences disciplines, they will be in a more advantageous position to teach courses outside their own disciplinary specialization than a disciplinary major who has not had any view of the multidisciplinary approach in the social sciences.

With a multidisciplinary background, on top of a disciplinary base, a person can easily use this training in any one of the research projects of public and private agencies. The Philippine government has been conducting a number of research projects dealing with economic development, modernization, and integration of Philippine society. These have been undertaken by such agencies as the National Economic Council (NEC), National Science Development Board (NSDB), Department of National Defense, Community Development Research Council (CDRC), which is the research arm of the Presidential Assistance for Research and

Development (PACD), and others. Private agencies, like business enterprises, newspaper publishing establishments, and private research corporations are in constant need for researchers with a good background and understanding of Philippine society and culture, knowledgeable in the social sciences, and, therefore, flexible in their ways of acquiring, interpreting, and integrating data on society and culture which are needed by these agencies.

The multidisciplinary approach in the study of an area is a good training for those who plan to become community development workers. It enables individuals an easier entrée into and operation within the community to which they are assigned. It also permits them to perceive specific social problems within the context of the community and the wider background of the nation.

The content and multidisciplinary approach of studying an area are useful to one who plans to make a career of the foreign service. Although the data used in a course are limited primarily to an area, the multidisciplinary approach of viewing an area can be useful to a foreign service man in studying another area, provided he learns the language of the area and gather the data he needs in comprehending the area to which he is assigned. His multidisciplinary training can, in fact, guide him in his choice of data.

Knowledge of the society, culture and language of an area are among the qualifications required of area managers, representatives or agents of business establishments. The possibilities of expanding business activities within an area, for instance, are easier to gauge when one has developed keen insights about it which can be initially gained from a multidisciplinary approach in the study of an area. Businessmen who can converse in the language of their local counterparts and read daily business reports in the local papers or journals are in a better position to make profitable business decisions.

Therefore, for both the specialists and generalists, a multidisciplinary area study offers the satisfaction of research, wider intellectual development

and discovery, and functional utility in specific occupations. Again, it is good to remember that whatever be the academic validity and the practical benefits of the multidisciplinary approach in the study of an area, it cannot long survive without the continued existence of well-developed and continuously developing disciplines of the social sciences.

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End Notes

- ¹ S. B. Levine, "Interdisciplinary Approach in the Social Sciences," *Social Sciences*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (April 1956), p. 76.
- ² R. Santos Cuyugan, "Trends in the Teaching of Social Sciences," (1965), pp. 5-6. Mimeographed copy.
- ³ Levine, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- ⁴ *The Social Sciences in Historical Study: A Report of the Committee on Historiography*, Bulletin 64, (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1954), pp. 13-14.
- ⁵ E.E. Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change* (Homewood, Illinois: The Dorsey Press Inc., 1962), p. ix.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. x.
- ⁷ Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77.
- ⁸ Cuyugan, *op. cit.*, p. 3.