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Global Studies—The Handmaiden of Neoliberalism?[†]

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ABSTRACT *The field of global studies has gained momentum over the past 20 years and today occupies a significant presence within many universities. As a result, there is now a burgeoning array of institutional support for global studies scholarship. Perhaps not surprisingly, concurrent to such institution-building there has been a spate of essays engaged with the question ‘what is global studies?’ that have promoted lively debate and commentary. In this essay, I ask a rather different question which is ‘who gets to define global studies, and what is at stake in these kinds of delineating efforts?’ I argue that debate about global studies demands the inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives from around the world. I conclude by urging global studies scholars to be deliberately conscious of their taken-for-granted assumptions with respect to power and the related capacity to speak for others from the global south and east who are largely still absent in defining this new field of inquiry.*

Keywords: global studies, knowledge production, neoliberalism

The field of global studies has gained momentum over the past 20 years and today occupies a significant presence within many universities. Scholars such as Roland Robertson, Manfred Steger, and Mark Juergensmeyer have been essential in creating an intellectual consciousness about the intensifying global forces that characterize our current era (Juergensmeyer, 2008; Robertson, 1992; Steger, 2009). More pragmatically, these scholars have been crucial in pushing universities, research institutes, and foundations to fund and promote global studies as a vitally important and necessary direction in twenty-first century research. As a result, there is now a burgeoning array of institutional support for global studies scholarship in

[†]A version of this paper was first presented at a plenary session ‘What is Global Studies?’ at the Santa Barbara Global Studies Conference ‘Crisis’; 24–25 February 2012. Speaking on this panel were five senior male colleagues, one woman (myself), and no scholars from the global south.

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leading universities around the world. In the USA, for instance, Indiana University established the School of Global & International Studies in 2012, and the Global Studies Department at the University of California Santa Barbara launched the first doctoral program at a Tier-1 research university in the country in 2014. Perhaps not surprisingly, concurrent to such institution-building there has been a spate of essays engaged with the question ‘what is global studies?’ that have promoted lively debate and commentary (see Juergensmeyer, 2011; McCarty, 2014; Nederveen Pieterse, 2013, 2014).

For bureaucratic and institutional purposes, it is important to arrive at some general consensus about what ‘global studies’ entails. This is necessary in order to formalize an intellectual community for scholars and students, and to garner resources and funding for research agendas. Having a general idea about what the field of global studies encompasses is essential in order to hold conferences, submit grants, and to have one’s work published, read, cited, and taught in classrooms. Moreover, articulating what constitutes ‘global studies’ today makes it possible to think about its possible directions in the years ahead as an emerging field of inquiry.

However, as important as it is to build consensus about the meaning of global studies, I hope we continue discussing and debating what constitutes global studies for the seeable future. In other words, I hope that there will always be opportunities to argue about how global studies is defined and agree to disagree. The value, for me, lies in the process of arguing about what the field of global studies is and could be, rather than coming up with any definitive answer. Like the enormous multi-layered, multi-sited, multi-cultural, multi-centered global complex we are studying, scholarly conversations describing and analyzing this complex should be messy, interdisciplinary, dynamic, passionate, and constantly open to rethinking.

So instead of asking ‘what is global studies?’ I want to ask a rather different question which is ‘who gets to define global studies, and what is at stake in these kinds of delineating efforts?’ This question derives from my work as both a commercial lawyer and anthropologist, and from my related experiences as a legal representative of powerful mining corporations and an ethnographer of marginalized indigenous peoples. Having occupied these two very different professional positions, the question that preoccupies me is who holds what power and so gets to speak for (and act on behalf of) whom? As a corporate lawyer it is automatically assumed that native peoples hold very little power. And for most indigenous peoples, it is assumed they are at the mercy of the dominant capitalist system. Differentials of power are deeply and historically embedded in all interactions between indigenous and Euro-American populations (Darian-Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1999).

Similar differentials of power are deeply and historically embedded in Western-based scholarship that produces knowledge that often unconsciously affirms a particular perspective and understanding of issues. Hence in any discussion about what constitutes the field of global studies, questions of power and who gets to speak for others should always be asked (see Winant, 2004). What I consider to be global studies is, I presume, very different from what a scholar in Indonesia, Nigeria, South Korea, or Tunisia would imagine it to be. This suggests that debating the parameters of the scholarly mission of global studies also demands that these debates include multiple voices and perspectives from around the world (Darian-Smith, 2013; Santos, 2007). Global studies as a scholarly field of inquiry is intrinsically pluralistic and diverse, engaged with a range of scales, sites, voices, perspectives, experiences, and imaginations (Steger, 2009). Whatever else we claim constitutes global studies, I think scholars identifying with this field would agree that this pluralistic characteristic underscores its interdisciplinarity and hence our capacity to claim that we are doing something unique within the established academy.

It is important to be honest and acknowledge that despite the best of intentions, the majority of scholars involved in the process of defining the field of global studies are predominantly elite, white, male, privileged academics from the global north. This comment about a scholarly community of predominantly elite academics is not meant to be offensive, or a chastisement, or a finger-pointing exercise. But it is intended as a reminder that, often for very practical reasons, scholars in the global north fall far short in efforts to include the academic voices of those living in the global south. So in any discussion about global studies we must be very careful not to imply that we, sitting in our institutional positions of privilege, represent anything but a fragment of a much bigger conversation. As scholars of global studies, I want us to be deliberately conscious of our taken-for-granted assumptions with respect to power and the related capacity to speak for others.

As a trained anthropologist, I see many similarities between the history of the discipline of anthropology and the emerging conversations that seek to define the field of global studies. Within anthropology over the past 20 years there have been sincere efforts to include non-Western collaborations and co-authorships in academic work. This came about after a crisis within the discipline in the 1990s that threatened to engulf it (Clifford & Marcus, 2010; Marcus & Fischer, 1999). This crisis was in part a result of anthropology coming to term with its historical connection to European colonialism which led some historians to call the discipline the ‘handmaiden of colonialism’. As a field of inquiry, anthropology has been forced to acknowledge the degree to which colonial and postcolonial power has structured its knowledge, methods, and conceptual formations based as they are on asymmetrical power relations between anthropologists and the people they study (see Asad, 1993; Gough, 1968).

Today, anthropology as a discipline has recovered and anthropologists now actively seek to engage with and learn from others (Faubion & Marcus, 2009). To the degree anthropologists are successful in this endeavor is debatable. Still, as scholars they are now conscious of the imperial evolution of their disciplinary field. As a result, today it is nearly impossible to receive a grant for ethnographic work that does not include some funding for collaborations with colleagues in the non-Western places that many anthropologists work. There is, in other words, an explicit attempt to decolonize anthropological knowledge from within the discipline itself.

In a similar vein, scholars involved in global studies may want to think about how to decolonize this new field of inquiry and be more inclusive of pluralistic perspectives and subject-positions within our global research. This would require us first acknowledging the current power biases within the field of global studies, and then actively seeking conversations and collaborations with colleagues from across the global south, east, and north. It would require us to move past macro structural frames and analyses that many of us hide behind, and engage with the local, the particular, the unpredictable, and the personal. It would require us to be open to new, perhaps counter-intuitive, concepts, and narratives. And it would force us to interrogate our own deeply embedded and historically informed ethnocentric Western assumptions (McCarty, 2013). I am not suggesting that this could happen overnight, or that it will even happen any time soon. But I do think it is important to talk about. Otherwise, global studies may end up being a white man’s club. Worse still, future historians may call the field of global studies the ‘handmaiden of neo-liberalism’.

As a field of inquiry, global studies has obviously come a long way in a relatively short period of time. There are new global studies programs and departments popping up everywhere, testifying to its validity and relevance. This is great news. But it does not mean that we should become complacent and rest upon our laurels. For those of us who are privileged scholars in

the global north, we must continue to debate and argue and interrogate our taken-for-granted assumptions about what globalization is and what it may come to mean to us and to others from different worldviews and perspectives.

As individual scholars it is not enough that our work engages with pluralistic perspectives—in other words I am not talking about any one person’s research agenda. What I am talking about is that as a field of inquiry, global studies is informed by our *collective* responsibilities and accountabilities and pedagogies. What I am talking about is the need for a combined commitment in building the institutional structures and resources (and sense of obligation) so that we hear the bottom-up voices of the global south, and enable these voices to have presence, weight, legitimacy, and significance. Global studies is an emerging and exciting intellectual field and I am enormously pleased to be associated with this venture. As scholars we are engaging with analyzing histories as they unfold before us. My hope for this new line of inquiry is that while today we hold the power to define ‘global studies’, tomorrow the millions of people who are not yet represented in this conversation will have the power to show us just how lacking this definition really is.

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