

ALA 2009 presentation

European Studies: Continuities and Change

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Thank you very much for inviting me. It is a genuine privilege to be on this panel and to speak to a group of people who have helped shape my life in fundamental ways.

Libraries continue to be one of the most exhilarating places to be for any academic. Originally, as undoubtedly you hear, I come from Germany. At my undergraduate institution—Hamburg University—we only had closed stacks. Most German universities are that way. I distinctly recall my first experience of the US university system's open stacks: to be able to explore freely entire sections, to browse in an organized fashion! Exhilarating. What I found on the shelves always helped shape my research questions and eventually the papers I produced. It is hardly that different today. University libraries in this country moreover have amazingly helpful, patient, and supportive staff—you make it all work! Thank you for all your hard work and dedication.

In preparation for this talk, I also visited with a few of my colleagues. As you heard in the introduction, I direct the DAAD Center for German & European Studies at the University of Minnesota. The 35 affiliated faculty members come from a broad range of departments in the social sciences, humanities, and public policy. They are housed in Anthropology, Sociology, History, Political Science, German, Geography, Economics, Applied Economics, Music, Theatre, Business Management, Public Policy, and Pharmacy.

Whatever else I would say to you, my colleagues asked I convey two key points: First, the book has staying power. It will not go away. Academics will always need books—especially those who are working in the social sciences and humanities. The second message: given the ever increasing array of electronic resources, the role of librarians is becoming **more**, not less, crucial. You continuously educate us on how our changing libraries work. You remain engaged with the **content** of books and new electronic resources. You are a crucial partner for all academic research. As one of my

colleagues, the historian Theofanis Stavrou, puts it: “The availability and organization of materials in libraries profoundly influences the way we scholars do our research.”

My comments today are entitled “European Studies: Continuities and Change.”

Specifically I will share with you some observations about striking a productive balance between disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. I make these observations as someone who directs an active and exciting area studies center and as someone who has been interested for many years in how the production of knowledge is organized. When I first became interested in this as a graduate student at Duke University, I readily absorbed the message that we have inherited our disciplinary structures from the 19th-century; I also absorbed the implicit, radical meaning: the existing division of intellectual labor is outdated and needs to be replaced. The future lies with interdisciplinarity. Today I’m older—not necessarily wiser. But I’m no longer as naïve as then. Disciplines perhaps are similar to books: they will not go away either. And that’s a good thing too!

The basic idea of area studies is very simple. It’s the belief that a large geographic zone supposedly has a cultural, historical, and often, linguistic coherence” (*Gulbenkian Report*, 36). As a result, area studies have been multi-disciplinary from the start. The list of zones elevated to the status of an area was quite diverse: the U.S.S.R., East-Central Europe, the Middle East, Africa, East Asia (China), South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Western Europe. I doubt whether today we’d still come up with this list, if given the opportunity. More troubling still is the political genealogy of area studies. While it is a way of grouping intellectual work, the impetus for undertaking such work was intimately connected to the beginning of the Cold War. David Szanton in his very useful 2004 collection of essays *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) identifies four fundamental critiques that have been leveled against area studies (24-25):

1. The first discredits area studies as a fully ideological undertaking: Area studies was just a political movement and part of the US effort to win the Cold War. A “Know thy enemy” enterprise.

2. The second is an intellectual critique: area studies supposedly was only focused on description; it lacked any power to build theoretical models.
3. The third is a conceptual critique: according to that view, area studies started out as US- and Euro-centric and will always remain so
4. The fourth objection to area studies is tied to the processes of globalization: globalization supposedly erases boundaries and effects a homogenization of localities, cultures, and social and political practices. In short, in an age of globalization, area studies are increasingly obsolete.

This last, fourth point seems the most salient to address. Is it really true that boundaries are getting erased and the world is becoming more homogenized? The research being produced by faculty affiliated with my Center challenges that view. Boundaries are not disappearing. Certainly not in Europe. Evidence for a homogenization of cultures and social practices seems hard to find also. Instead their research describes a complex interaction of global, local, economic, political, and cultural forces. Area Studies with their commitment to multi-disciplinary, cross-national approaches seem more important than ever.

Area studies were institutionalized in the US in two distinct forms: as stand-alone Area Studies Departments and as Area Studies Centers, Institutes, or Programs. The second form of organization has proved more enduring and highly productive. It is largely due to the disciplinary organization of knowledge production and the established system of rewards. But perhaps that's not the entire story. Perhaps one needs to give more credit to the center structure's implicit endorsement of the range of social science and humanities disciplines. Does the productivity of area studies scholars rest precisely on their simultaneously embracing and going beyond their individual disciplines? Is interdisciplinarity barking up the wrong tree?

The concept of "interdisciplinarity" increasingly confuses me. What exactly does it mean? Where is this oft-invoked place "between the disciplines"? Does it even exist as a point from which to start doing research? As I look at how the Europeanists at

my university research issues such as memory, or immigration, or reconciliation, I see four things:

- They work collaboratively as teams
- They value their individual disciplines' different focus and seek collaborators who are firmly grounded in another discipline
- They try to cross institutional and national cultures in assembling as research teams
- They really need to work hard to arrive at a common language

To me this indicates that globalization produces challenges of complexity that call on researchers consistently to mobilize multiple strong disciplinary, comparative perspectives. We are simply not trained in two, or even three disciplines. Nor will graduate students be trained that way. What they are learning, however, is how to communicate across disciplinary divides.

Thank you.