

L. Introduction

# AREA STUDIES, REGIONAL WORLDS

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## A WHITE PAPER FOR THE FORD FOUNDATION

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### THE GLOBALIZATION PROJECT

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

This White Paper is the result of a one-year pilot grant from the Ford Foundation to the Regional Worlds Program of the Globalization Project at the University of Chicago. The pilot program was designed to create new linkages between area studies and cultural studies. The initial year's research and discussion focused on the issue of rights and representation in South Asia. That topic was explored in the context of four colloquia and a final conference, "Reconceptualizing South Asia: Old Territories, New Places." This White Paper offers a summary of our critical approaches as well as preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

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## I. Introduction

The Regional Worlds program at the University of Chicago (and the larger Globalization Project of which it is a part) is committed to the idea that no serious engagement with the comparative study of global processes can avoid the specificities of place, time and cultural form. Thus the study of areas remains a central focus of our efforts. But we are also convinced that existing geographical approaches — involving bounded "civilizations", "cultures" and "areas" — frequently draw the wrong boundaries, ignore important interactions and are driven by obsolete assumptions about national interest, cultural coherence and global processes.

This White Paper engages the relationship between research challenges and curricular dilemmas entailed by these commitments. It is the product of a year of dialogue and interaction among a group of scholars at the University of Chicago, a group of scholars from a set of liberal arts colleges in the Midwest and a series of visiting experts from other major research universities. It sketches a framework in which the solutions and ideas generated in a large research university with a strong area studies tradition are combined with the ideas of colleagues teaching in smaller, liberal arts institutions, who face the task of representing global cultural complexity in very different financial, curricular and demographic settings. Our year-long intellectual partnership with these colleagues has yielded some ideas, solutions and materials which we consider to have wide potential applicability as American academic institutions of many kinds take on the project of internationalizing their curricula.

One major assumption underlies this White Paper. It is that we need to make a decisive shift away from what we may call "trait" geographies to what we will here call "process" geographies. Much traditional thinking about "areas" has been driven by conceptions of geographical, civilizational and cultural coherence which rely on some sort of trait list — of values, of languages, of material practices, of ecological adaptations, of marriage patterns and the like. However sophisticated these approaches, they all tend to see "areas" as relatively immobile aggregates of traits, with more or less durable historical boundaries and with a unity composed of more or less enduring properties. These assumptions have often been further telescoped

backwards through the lens of contemporary U.S. security-driven images of the world and, to a lesser extent, through colonial and postcolonial conceptions of national and regional identity.

In contrast, we have begun to explore an architecture for area studies which is based on process geographies, and sees significant areas of human organization as precipitates of various kinds of action, interaction and motion — trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytization, colonization, exile and the like. These geographies are necessarily large-scale, changing and tend to highlight variable congeries of language, history and material life. Put more simply, the large regions which dominate our current maps for area studies are not permanent geographical facts. They are problematic heuristic devices for the study of global geographic and cultural processes. Regions, in our approach, are taken to be initial contexts for themes which generate variable geographies, rather than as fixed geographies marked by set themes.

The "areas" that result from this perspective may not have the apparent coherence of the current "civilizations" that underpin many area studies curricula. But they have the advantage of alerting scholars and students to a much more exciting and fundamental fact, namely that movements and processes of many kinds, over the *longue durée*, have precipitated multiple geographies and multiple worlds. None of these can be examined without paying attention to specific languages, histories and cultural values but these specificities need not yield a single, immutable set of civilizations and regions. Rather they suggest a series of themes over space and time, with each theme yielding — in the manner of a shaken kaleidoscope — a different pattern of space, time and cultural form. These patterns are equally "real," equally coherent, but are results of our interests and not their causes.

The trouble with much of the paradigm of area studies as it now exists is that it has tended to mistake a particular configuration of apparent stabilities for permanent associations between space, territory and cultural organization. These apparent stabilities are themselves largely artifacts of: a centuries-old philological tradition which identifies and separates "classical" languages (e.g. Arabic/Persian, Chinese, Sanskrit) as the basis of civilizations; the specific trait-based idea of "culture" areas; a recent Western cartography of large civilizational land-masses

associated with different relationships to "Europe" (itself a complex historical and cultural emergent); and a Cold-War based geography of fear and competition in which the study of world languages and regions in the United States was legislatively configured for security purposes into a reified map of geographical regions. As happens so often in academic inquiry, the heuristic impulse behind many of these cartographies and the contingent form of many of these spatial configurations was soon forgotten and the current maps of "areas" in "area studies" were enshrined as permanent.

This sense of permanence was severely jolted by numerous developments since the mid-1980s, notably the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. At the same time, the compact between nation-states and culture-bearing groups seemed to unravel, not only in the ex-Soviet Union, but in many other parts of the world, where movements for autonomy from specific nation-states often drew on either sub-, cross- or transnational cultural affiliations. The popular movements associated with global Islam are only the most widely noted of these.

### *New Epistemological Strategies*

One key to a new architecture for area studies is to recognize that the capability to imagine regions and worlds is now itself a globalized phenomenon. That is, due to the activities of migrants, media, capital, tourism, etc. the means for imagining areas is now itself globally widely distributed. So, as far as possible, we need to find out how others, in what we still take to be certain areas as we define them, see the rest of the world in regional terms. In short, how does the world look — as a congeries of areas — from other locations (social, cultural, national)? For example, the Pacific Rim is certainly a better way of thinking about a certain region today, than splitting up East Asia and the Western coast of North America. But a further question is: how do people in Taiwan, Korea or Japan think about the Pacific Rim, if they think in those terms at all? What is their topology of Pacific traffic?

To build an architecture for area studies around the idea that all "areas" also conceive or produce their own "areas," we need to recognize the centrality of this sort of recursive refraction.

In fact this perspective could be infinitely regressive. But we do not have to follow it out to the nth degree: one or two moves of this type would lead us a long way from the U.S. cold war architecture with which we substantially still operate.

Following this principle has a major entailment for understanding the apparatus through which areal worlds are globally produced. This production happens substantially in the public spheres of many societies, and includes many kinds of intellectuals and "symbolic analysts" (including artists, journalists, diplomats, businessmen) as well as academics. In some cases, academics may only be a small part of this world-generating optic. We need to attend to this varied set of public spheres, and the intellectuals who constitute them must join us as partners in our teaching and research so that our picture of areas does not stay confined to our own academic first-order, necessarily parochial, world-pictures. The potential pay-off is a critical dialogue between world-pictures, a sort of dialectic of areas and regions, built on the axiom that areas are not facts but artifacts — of our interests, our fantasies, our needs to know, to remember, to forget.

This axiom takes Ben Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" and turns it inside out to ask how the practices of media in various public spheres produces not only the nation-form but also the epistemology of areas and regions — of imagined worlds.

### *Challenges for a New Area Studies: History and Comparison*

If area studies is re-conceived along the lines suggested above, what happens to the historical, linguistic and geographical knowledge that the "old" area studies used to convey? Such knowledge can serve a new approach at two levels.

The first level would be centered on language studies, since languages are less obviously susceptible to new principles of organization than spaces or histories. This level, though focused on language, would incorporate basic cultural, geographical and historical knowledge, while introducing new ideas about language boundaries, language and ethnicity, mixed or hybrid

languages, socio-linguistics and the like. It would also incorporate the many recent advances in thinking about textuality as an historical and social phenomenon which have been generated from within linguistic and literary studies, as well as from anthropology.

The second level of this approach, concerned with history, would be more consciously "constructionist" and would explicitly build on the idea that histories — like geographies — are not facts but artifacts. In this view, histories would also be seen as products of the actions of nations, schools, elites and other actors in various regions. History would thus be critically taught as the refracted product of various sorts of public-sphere voices in societies in a globalized world. But such histories, closely tied to the "imagined worlds" discussed earlier, would be inaccessible to students and researchers without a solid grounding in the basics of language and culture contained in the first level. The trick, of course, is to find both research and pedagogical ways for integrating the two levels: seeing level one as a necessary condition for level two, while using level two to reflect critically on the premises of level one.

Another difficult challenge for any new approach to area studies is the problem of comparison. Since comparison and the comparative approach are now buzzwords in much new talk about area studies, it is important to reflect carefully on how comparative studies can function in the sort of high-velocity, shape-shifting, fast-changing world in which we find ourselves. What is now called "cultural studies" tends to force the realities of other worlds into the preoccupations of local high theory, which are by definition volatile, debated and restricted in their comprehensibility. Area studies has been explicitly comparative only in certain humanistic fields and problem areas where comparison is a well-established principle, such as linguistics, musicology and religion. Yet, even in the case of "comparative" literature, whose genealogy precedes that of "area studies," the idea of comparison relies on models of literary filiation, morphology, and national form (German, French, Italian etc.) which are poorly suited to capturing, for example, the dynamics of what is going in the European Community today or, for that matter, in an earlier social formation like the Hanseatic League.



Likewise, most social science approaches have yet to face how comparison really works in a world where interest rates in the U.S. affect auto markets in Japan, where labor migration in the Middle East is a key to national stability in the Philippines and where immigration policy changes in the United States affect politics and economics throughout the Western hemisphere. So, the task of rethinking cultural comparison is still before us. To get towards that objective (which involves interactive reforms in area studies, cultural studies and the social sciences as we know them) should be a central aim of interdisciplinary efforts in this general field.

### *The Pedagogical Challenge*

All this sounds complex and arcane, and potentially difficult to deliver to students who not infrequently lack even the most basic information about the world outside their home communities and societies. The pedagogical realization of this type of "constructivist" architecture for a new area studies is potentially much harder than its research realization, though the latter is hardly transparent. It will require hard thinking about maps, texts, language training methods, etc. which is only now beginning.

The sections that follow do not take up all of the issues or problems discussed in this Preamble. Their aim is to suggest concrete pedagogical steps forward, and to provide some examples of curricula and other materials that have proven suggestive to us. They are informed by a broad consensus among the authors about the general ideas — both about possibilities and about pitfalls — that have been discussed in this section.

## II. Rethinking Civilization

The word "civilization" has, notoriously, two rather different usages. The first, in the singular, opposes civilization as an achievement or possession to the barbarism of those without it. In modern times this usage derives from enlightenment France, where the barbarians in question were East Europeans and/or Asians. Earlier the French themselves, along with Germans, had been seen as barbarians by the *soi-disant* "civilized" citizens of Italian city-states, themselves post-Renaissance heirs to the opposition between Greeks (and thence Romans and Greeks) and Barbarians (or non-Romans/Greeks). This usage is not dead, indeed it lingers on in outdated but still prevalent academic notions of the unargued primacy of "Western Civ." Moreover, current controversies in Turkey, for example over Islamicization in general and over particular issues such as the veiling of women, are direct results of the introduction of western political and social mores by the elite, as a self-conscious "civilizing process" at the time of the Kemalist reforms in the 1920s. Within academia, this genealogy of the word must be acknowledged, along with its connection to current political conflicts. The term is far too deeply entrenched for any attempts at removing it to be more than quixotic.

The second sense, where separate civilizations, in the plural, exist alongside or against each other, is the sense which this paper seeks to rethink. The two senses are not unconnected, of course. If the word "civilization" is to be usefully different from that of "culture," then it must surely be because the cultures of some places, times and peoples possess something which others do not. This something is not by any means an obvious superiority on any level, ethical, aesthetic, cognitive or other: any such difference can only be provisional, descriptive and heuristic, for certain purposes. It would seem rather to have to do, *inter alia*, with two interconnected things: first, the cultivation or at least acknowledgment of a certain ideal style or styles of personhood, in behavior, language, cuisine, and the like; and second, the self-conscious practice(s) of preserving artifacts — oral, written, material or other — as a "Tradition," usually in one or more prestige languages (and thence involving some explicit attitude towards time and history). Not all cultures have such things, for good or for ill.

This way of addressing the issue raises immediately a pressing problem, both conceptual and pedagogical. For so often civilizations are seen in the idealist mode: as “based on” or “stemming from” ideas and values alone. Ideas and values are of course profoundly important, but the exclusion of material practices of various kinds serves not only to obscure certain equally profoundly important processes of civilization, of which ideas and values can be seen as the product (or at least, in a relation where processes and products are mutually influential), but also, by highlighting the aspects of civilizations which are most evidently different, to make it easier to see civilizations as wholly discrete things which can clash — an unfortunate, even dangerous element of recent public debates on the issue. This issue presents pedagogical challenges, since so many academics have been trained to specialize in one or the other. Put crudely, humanists oriented towards language and texts mostly focus on pre-modern ideas, while social scientists, more or less quantitative, focus mostly on modern practices, though of course social, economic and other historians attempt to recover the practices of the past, albeit often through written evidence. A new paradigm of civilizational study would also require an attempt, which is easy to state but very difficult to put into practice, to include the lived worlds of neglected groups such as peasants — the tax-base for all civilizations and empires — and of women.

It is perhaps fitting that this project should have taken place at the University of Chicago, for it was here that an earlier project (also funded by the Ford Foundation) established an influential paradigm of civilizational study: its well-known and widely adopted Western Civilization sequence established in the late 1940s. In the words of its introduction for teachers published in 1985: “From its inception . . . the History of Western Civilization course was fortified with an ideology.” This ideology was historicization: “This course was first introduced into the College curriculum in the late 1940s for the purpose of remedying what some members of the faculty at that time thought to be its principal shortcoming: the absence of a temporal perspective.” In the series editors’ forward, which prefaces all volumes of the current series of textbooks, it is said that “in the beginning it served as a counterpoint to the ahistorical and positivistic thrust of the general education curriculum in the Social Sciences in the Hutchins’ College.” This was deliberately intended to counter the approach — derived consciously from

Aristotle's preference for the general truths of poetry over the particularities of history — which saw education as the contemplation of timelessly true, and timelessly valuable, canonical texts.

It is surely no accident that these motivations were felt after the devastation of Nazism and the Second World War. The inception of the non-Western Civilizations sequences had this context quite explicitly. A letter from Robert Redfield to his daughter written in 1948 (found in his papers held in the Special Collections section of the University of Chicago's Joseph Regenstein Library) describes the shock that the dropping of the atom bomb had had on him. He went on to say that he had begun to think that one contribution academics could make to alleviating the dangers this unprecedented historical development posed was to educate members of different countries and cultures about each other.

At the end of the twentieth century, while perhaps too much may have been made of the drastic changes brought about by the end of the Cold War and the demise of communism (which have affected Soviet and East European area studies more directly than any others), it does seem that we find ourselves in an historical moment comparable to that of the late 1940s: the effect of the Regional Worlds discussions might well be seen as a furthering and deepening of the historicization central to the Western Civilization course, and an equal furthering and deepening of the contextualization and mutual understanding envisaged by Redfield. This deepened historicization and contextualization must apply both to the objects of our academic work and to its own modes and methodologies. Now, of course, this will take place, in and out of the classroom, in quite different demographic circumstances, as is discussed in more depth in the third section of this White Paper.

In the rest of this section, we try to give greater specificity to these general reflections under four headings: space, time, identities and themes.

## *Space*

Space is both seemingly obvious and obviously unsatisfactory. This is not merely because “East Asia,” “South Asia” and so on are clearly difficult to delineate with precision. It is, rather, because so many of the ideas, languages, practices and the like which we identify as those of a particular civilization have always been both in motion and in overlapping contact with others. Let us consider the example used in 1996 in the Regional Worlds program at the University of Chicago, that of South Asia. The fact of the sub-continental landmass, surrounded by ocean, may seem to demarcate a space, at least in the middle and south. But for two millennia the Indian Ocean has not been a barrier but a highway, carrying many facets of “Indian” civilization — such as the Sanskrit and Pali languages, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam — to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, both mainland and insular. The northern reaches of South Asia are impossible to fix, despite the Himalayan mountains. In the northwest, for example, it makes perfect sense, in terms of political formations, prestige language, religion and other things, to see Hindustan as stretching from what is now northern India to Afghanistan and beyond. One of the visitors to the Regional Worlds program devoted his lecture and seminar presentations to the history of Western cartographic picturing of South Asia and of the linguistic background to the idea of “Dravidian” “South India.” Another gave a talk on the various territorialities in which Sri Lanka participated in pre-modernity. What now gives “South Asia” the spurious unity it has is, surely, the fact of the modern Indian nation-state, along with those of Pakistan and Bangladesh, which together provide it with clear-cut borders. If we look at physical geography in the pre-nation-state period we find various possible routes for the movement of populations, goods and armies, and with them languages, texts and modes of cultivated personhood. These routes were in constant use, bringing changes of material well-being, dynasty, prestige language and religion. By focusing on these routes, we avoid the temptation of anachronizing India and seeing it as always having been an invadable nation-space.

### *Time*

The division of labor between humanists/the pre-modern and social scientists/the modern, which is very roughly but broadly applicable, is closely tied to strategies of temporal demarcation. The binary pre-modern/modern, nicely suited to two-semester courses on Indian civilization, has its first term divided up into "Hindu" and "Muslim" periods, such that the premier textbook of the last half-century can describe the pre-Muslim period as "The Wonder That Was India." The familiar European ancient/medieval/modern trichotomy, nicely suited to a three-quarter course, can accommodate these three periods, with the notion of "the classical" hovering uncertainly somewhere in the first two. On a theoretical level it will be clear to everyone that historical periodization produces stretches of time which make sense primarily in terms of the purposes of the periodizer; but, especially when combined with the unfortunate if familiar trope of a static, traditional India preceding modern progressivism (as introduced by the West), such stereotyped periods can seriously darken our historical vision. We need to combine a new awareness of spatial flows, interconnections and borrowings with a Braudelian-style emphasis on different rates of historical time: the slow-moving, slow-changing *longue durée* of ecology and geography, for example, alongside the event-history of social, political and cultural change, as common to pre-modern South Asia as to its modern world.

### *Identities*

We referred earlier to the link between notions of civilization and acknowledgment of certain distinctive styles of personhood. In much civilizational discourse and pedagogy this has taken the form of an invocation of static conceptions of identity mapped onto units of space and time in a fairly mechanistic way. Religion, gender, caste, occupation form some of the variables thus applied as essentialized explanatory categories. Examples current in both academic and public debate include "young Muslim women" or "Pakistani Islamic fundamentalist." While creating an illusion of definitional clarity and simplicity they can be misleading or worse.

A concern with identity categories, their uses and abuses, ran through all the Regional Worlds events. One of the colloquia presenters discussed the complex nature of gendered identity in Islamic communities in South Asia and contrasted the multiple manifestations of female Muslim personhood (as wage-earner, activist campaigner, prime minister as well as mother, daughter, wife) with the stereotypical assumptions exemplified in the *New York Times* reporting on policies towards women of the newly empowered Taliban in Afghanistan. Another colloquium considered the identity of "lawyer" (in Indonesia as opposed to Malaysia) and the sharp differences in self-image and social meaning between apparently similarly situated professional groups in different states, a result of localized variation in political and institutional social history.

These are examples of a growing body of recent work that problematizes static assumptions about the nexus between place, time and identity. Insufficiently applied to the concerns of traditional area studies, this approach raises the challenge of researching and teaching the intersection between the individual and differently constituted groups so as to elicit commonalities and general processes without obliterating particularity and spatial and temporal specificity. In this process new identities might emerge in some contexts as significant explanatory tools (Bradford-Muslims; Non-resident Indian; Islamic feminists) or attention to the earlier identity categories might reveal prevailing assumptions about inclusion and exclusion. Recent work on the South Asian diaspora, on the gendered aspect of migration, on the contestation between religious and secular models of constitutional law, all subjects of discussion during the Regional Worlds colloquia, highlight these concerns.

### *Themes*

In academia, as elsewhere, there are fashions and trends whereby buzzwords get attached, as legitimating mantras, to scholarly projects. Thus, a cynic might argue, where "class" or "community" once prevailed, "gender" or "ethnicity" now flourish. Certainly thematisation of research and pedagogy can be an opportunistic application of labels which fails to add anything to the project. On the other hand, the introduction and choice of innovative themes can open up

perspectives occluded by earlier constructs and can inspire productive questioning and investigation into conceptual and empirical assumptions.

The Regional Worlds colloquia and conference discussed several such thematic innovations — the use of the paradigm of globalization to reorient the relation between local and global, center and periphery, national and non-national; the introduction of human rights as an organizing principle with which to explore the interface between group and individual norms and entitlements, universal demands and local requirements, legal strategies and cultural claims; and the elaboration of environmental perspectives as a means of challenging assumptions about the correlation between development and technology, modernity and rights.

In each of these cases, the imperatives of detailed empirical knowledge and careful local research, within an innovative thematic framework, illustrated rich possibilities for reconceptualizing the “civilizational” project at the heart of traditional area studies. The tension between “deep” local knowledge and interactive conceptual models is taken up in the next section. But to exemplify how this might be resolved in practice, consider an issue explored by one of the concluding conference participants. In India (as elsewhere), organ transplant technology has precipitated the need for a quantifiable and workable definition of “death.” What has emerged is a new globally negotiated construct, “brain-stem death.” This tangible product of “globalization” intersects in multiple, culturally encoded ways with prevalent norms about “death” among relatives of the dead and hospital and mortuary staff. To legitimate the global scientific definition, junior doctors and hospital orderlies have to act as advocates in their dealings with donors’ relatives, brokering new meanings. No simple model of North/South or Global/Local hegemonic imposition captures the complex layering of religious, professional and societal pressures that are brought to bear on this negotiation.

Clearly the choice of appropriate themes is a critical part of any new construction of research and pedagogy: as the truism goes, the questions one asks determine to a considerable extent the answers one receives.



### III. Pedagogical Strategies

A pedagogy built around the new paradigm for area studies proposed here requires a fresh consideration of how these perspectives are to be integrated into existing curricula, an enhanced sensitivity to who our students are and how we can draw on their experiences in our teaching, a redeployment of faculty resources and a willingness to test new classroom approaches and non-traditional teaching materials. Below we consider each of these dimensions and offer some specific examples based on the discussions of the Regional Worlds faculty over the past year.

#### *Courses*

Area studies courses offer students the ethnographic background or detailed cultural knowledge that gives depth to a major in a traditional discipline such as Anthropology, Political Science or Economics. Where an area studies major exists, students who double major will usually treat it as supplementing their training in a traditional discipline. A student at a liberal arts college, explaining why she was a double major, said that one major was to help her get a job, the other to teach her the meaning of life. An area studies major is likely to fall into the latter category. Area studies courses enrich the dialogue within traditional disciplines by showing how (or whether) the arguments a student encounters apply in a particular cultural context.

The approach to organizing and teaching an area studies course discussed below does not lend itself to the traditional nomenclature for such courses: it is not an "Introduction to South Asian Civilization" nor is it a "Peoples and Cultures" course. Both these titles have connotations (especially the first) that would be inappropriate in this context. On the one hand, it is a course about a particular way of thinking and conceiving of the world: of the world as a dynamic system of complex cultural flows, of a world that is always becoming but has never actually become. On the other hand, we are teaching about one part of that world, the part we have come to call South Asia; our theory is grounded in that particular ethnography. An appropriate title might be "The South Asian World" reflecting the theme of the course, which would be an inquiry into how South Asia and South Asians, come to be constituted.

### *Students*

Rethinking how we teach an area studies course and what the content of that course will be is an important way to meet the changing needs of an increasingly diverse and multi-ethnic student body. Most American college campuses, to one extent or another, mirror the changing face of America; U.S. classes on South Asian history, society and language are frequently filled with Indians from Houston, Sri Lankans from Detroit, Pakistanis from Los Angeles and their multicultural counterparts from other diasporic communities. That many of our students have ties to the areas we teach about can be, from the perspective of the instructor, both a resource and a challenge.

Liberal arts colleges are likely to differ from research universities in terms of the ethnic backgrounds of the students who take their courses. At the University of Chicago, for example, at least half the students in the South Asia civilization course are Americans of South Asian extraction. They are the "core constituency" for these courses. In such a case, the instructor is challenged to make the course relevant to the wider student body. The approach to teaching area studies advocated here, where one is not simply teaching about an area but also teaching how to think about that area (an approach that carries over to other fields of intellectual inquiry), may be one way to broaden the appeal of the course. Such a mix of students is much less likely at a liberal arts college, where the composition of the student body tends to be different. At Macalester for example, the "Peoples and Cultures of India" course, taught in the Anthropology department, has always had good enrollments, and almost all the students are white Americans. These two different sorts of audiences pose different problems for the instructor. For both kinds of student bodies, though, the problem is to provide them with foundational knowledge while critiquing that knowledge where it is warranted.

Students of South Asian origin often bring with them a set of assumptions about their cultural background that may be difficult to shake, particularly if the instructor is not himself or herself of South Asian origin. One of the authors of this document once gave a guest lecture at a large research university to a South Asian civilization class composed primarily of students of

South Asian origin. He later learned from his colleague, whose class it was, that his lecture on the caste system, which contradicted the received idea of Indian-American students that caste equals *varna*, was convincing to them because he was himself South Asian; he presumably knew what he was talking about. On the other hand, his colleague's exposition of the same viewpoint in earlier versions of that course had carried much less weight with students who had learned at home that caste equaled *varna*; on a point which contradicted strongly held beliefs, that individual's ethnic and cultural background (he was white) counted against him. With students of South Asian background, therefore, the challenge to the instructor is to disabuse them of their own received knowledge.

White American students, on the other hand, come with a different kind of "baggage" about South Asia that is mainly gleaned from the media and popular culture but which is nevertheless as difficult to shake off. For example, many students persisted in reiterating essentialist notions of Islam in the face of one Regional Worlds faculty member's efforts to confront them with complex and nuanced ethnographies that countered such conceptions. The increasing presence of junior faculty of South Asian origin in liberal arts colleges, many of which have a predominance of white American students, has also changed the dynamics of the classroom. Although students of South Asian origin might find the presence of faculty of South Asian origin more comforting and perhaps be more willing to learn from them, many South Asian junior faculty (especially women) find that they are susceptible to being stereotyped by white American students: though some students are more emboldened to question the "biases" and "agendas" of such faculty, others see them as embodying the "authentic" voice of all South Asians. These are issues that need to be confronted in the classroom, and questioned and challenged alongside other forms of knowledge within an areal framework.

### *Faculty*

A research university is likely to have a larger faculty pool to draw on in offering area studies courses (a recent innovation that has been adopted by several research universities has been to invite different scholars from South Asia to come and teach each quarter). At the

University of Chicago, the South Asia Civilization course is team-taught by a number of faculty and advanced graduate students, and because it is taught over the span of one academic year, it can engage the subject matter of a number of different disciplines; languages and literature, cultural history and contemporary politics for example. Year-long or two-semester area studies sequences are difficult to put together in a small liberal arts college. Typically, a small college is likely to have only a couple of faculty, at best, who specialize in a given area and, because they will have commitments to teaching their department's core offerings, will have less leeway in offering a regular area studies course, much less a year-long sequence. Concomitantly, the course is likely to be firmly grounded in the instructor's own discipline; the possibilities for cross-disciplinary teaching are rare. Thus, an area studies course may emphasize politics to the relative detriment of archaeology, history and anthropology, or the classical tradition to the exclusion of modern politics.

Encouraging faculty to work together to develop and teach area studies courses would make a signal contribution to faculty development, particularly at smaller institutions. In this regard we wish to draw a distinction between co-teaching or inter-disciplinary teaching and team teaching. Where a course is jointly taught by a number of faculty (co-teaching), it is often the case that the material is not tightly integrated; each instructor teaches his or her own discipline, and the connection between the materials used remains poorly conceptualized. A team taught course, on the other hand, is informed by a common vision of what has to be communicated to the student, with each member of the team drawing on his or her particular strengths to further the goals of the course. Such a course can be shaped only after intensive discussion and conference, a process which calls for a commitment of time and some resources. Thus, cross-disciplinary and team taught courses are potentially very rewarding, but if they are to be done successfully, there must be agreement among the instructors on what it is that is to be taught. Even more crucially, such endeavors need the support and encouragement of department heads and college administrators willing to think more innovatively about course loads and inter-disciplinary pedagogical projects.

### *Strategies for Teaching*

Strategies for teaching the kinds of ideas discussed earlier in this document must be devised with particular care, because, from the point of view of most undergraduates (indeed, of most people) the idea of process is counterintuitive. Our students are accustomed to thinking of identities, places, countries, civilizations and other social phenomena as fixed and enduring; what we are asking them to do is to begin thinking in a very different way. To think in synchronic terms is easy and intuitive; to convey the idea of process, and more importantly, to show processes at work, is much more difficult.

We face a double bind. Students taking an "area studies" course expect to be taught something "concrete" about the region in question. The instructor must balance these expectations against the theoretical need to question our received categories, including our notions of what constitutes an area, and the need to introduce new, innovative scholarship into the classroom. Before the area concept can be problematized, or before categories such as caste can be interrogated, however, students need to acquire a foundational knowledge of the region in question. One cannot, for example, critique the way Western scholarship has constructed India as a caste society if students do not know what caste is or, even worse, have their own misconceptions of it (and this last observation is as true for students of South Asian origin as it is for others).

One way to address this problem is to structure the course as an inquiry into how knowledge comes to be constituted and shaped. One virtue of such an approach might be that it averts the dilemma referred to above — how to deconstruct a body of knowledge of which students are ignorant. Here we start at the beginning and each building block in effect critiques that on which it rests so that the student is exposed to an incremental questioning of the material. One could, for example, begin with James Mill's *History of India* and discuss why he wrote it the way he did (which would require the student to expand his or her horizons to include nineteenth century Britain as a relevant part of the South Asian "area") or, even earlier, with the orientalists in the British East India Company, against whom Mill was arguing. Drawing on the work of

Bernard Cohn and others, the course could go on to examine how colonialism constructs its knowledge of the other with reference to the various censuses, the Ethnographic Survey of India, travel accounts, painting and photography and so on (the Curricular Appendix discusses some of the materials that might be used in teaching). Such an approach can show students how knowledge comes to be constructed in different ways at different periods and the generally problematic nature of our knowledge of other peoples and other places. The subject can also be discussed comparatively; while caste tends to be discussed with reference to Indian materials, useful comparisons could be made with the very different systems of rank or hierarchy existing among the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and with reference to caste among Muslims. The result might be not only to leave the student with an appreciation for the complexity of the notion of caste and its location in a system of knowledge but also with an ethnographic understanding of how caste operates "on the ground."

The approach described here probably will not lend itself to general survey courses, but general survey courses may not be the best way to introduce students to an "area." Trying to provide a complete picture is always a chimerical venture and merely reduces one to covering too much material in too little time, making it difficult for students to absorb the complexity of the material or discuss it in class with the instructor. It also tends to push one to produce too much coherence and tidiness, to simplify issues too swiftly. Thus, some students may even come away from such a course with just the sort of stereotypes or reductionist understandings from which the instructor hoped to wean them. We suggest instead that the in-depth exploration of a few key topics would be a better approach; the point after all is to teach students to think processually, not simply to provide them with a body of information that they are expected to master. The topics selected could be those which students find most relevant to their contemporary realities and those which they are most likely to encounter in their own cultural milieux, from newspapers, televisions, their high school textbooks or even their immigrant parents.

Following on this last point, one approach to putting together a process-centered course that would interrogate the categories we think with, is to start with a contemporary event and then unpack its meaning and historicize it. For example, most students will probably be familiar

with the categories of Muslim and Hindu and may have some essentialized idea of what these categories represent. The justification for prioritizing these religious categories as a point of departure is that they have become politically salient in modern India and are the categories a student is most likely to encounter with respect to that region of the world. The instructor might begin by screening Anand Patwardhan's film "In the Name of God" which is available for loan at most area studies centers, including Chicago. The film deals with the perspectives of different groups of people on the events leading up to the destruction of the Babri mosque in North India in December 1992; high castes, Brahmins, Hindus, Muslims, untouchables, and members of "Other Backward Castes" are among those interviewed. The course could then concentrate on how each of these categories came to be constituted and to be politicized. Such an approach would also engender a creative dialectic on questions of time and space, identities and themes.

A focus on specific categories or particular events also performs a crucial function in dislodging a central component of many "area studies" or "civilization" courses: the resort to periodization and the naturalization of beginnings, the originary point of a particular civilization. For example, South Asian Civilization courses often start with Classical India which is epitomized by texts such as the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Such a framing and contextualization assumes that there is a known and coherent cultural object which has a particular origin and history. We are rarely pushed to question why we start with the *Vedas* because we have already naturalized their centrality in one genealogy of North Indian Hindu history. In turn, we assume this to be the genealogy of Indian (and sometimes even South Asian) history. The valorization of such an illusory temporality is also premised on the false notion that if we start from the past, we start with fewer assumptions. This does not mean that the teaching of an ancient Indian past should be abandoned. Rather, we wish to suggest that the teaching of such a past should also be rethought and tested, that history and geography (to reiterate a point we stress in Section I), are not facts, but artifacts. The possibility of several pasts and originary points could be raised, pasts dependent on which community in what region is recalling and claiming them. Similarly, one can teach about the past by locating it in contemporary debates and issues. One of the Regional Worlds faculty teaches about the Mohenjadarro civilization by juxtaposing different readings by diverse scholars

over the years, illuminating how one site and one past has been studied and analyzed and how such writings reflect the concerns of particular historical moments.

Another strategy to challenge the notion of areas as fixed, enduring cultural worlds is to pursue a "world history" approach. Drawing on the work of Marshall Hodgson, Janet Abu-Lughod or Amitav Ghosh, the instructor would try to show how the Afro-Eurasian world as a whole was the context in which world-historical processes worked themselves out. Thus, in an introductory, context-setting module — that could lend itself with some little adaptation, to courses taught by historians, anthropologists, political scientists and others — the interrelationships between South Asia and other regions throughout history could be highlighted and the point made, following Hodgson, that they all belong to one seamless historical landscape. One could, for example, discuss South Asia as part of the Indian Ocean world tracing its economic and cultural connections to the Swahili coast, the Persian or Arabian gulf and the Southeast Asian peninsula and archipelagoes. A similar exercise could be carried out with respect to the "great traditions" (Islam, Buddhism), their flow through time and space and their dialectical encounter with innumerable "little traditions." The course would then go on to focus on the Indian sub-continent as a node (one of many) in that world-system. The point would be to establish at the outset that a particular cultural or "civilizational" area is not a region unto itself but connected to other areas in a continuing field of activity in complex ways. At the same time, our entry into this field of activity would be through one of the "regional worlds." Capitalism, for example, which many scholars have argued was an emerging process throughout the Afro-Eurasian system prior to the fifteenth century (not simply a European phenomenon in its origins), could be examined through a discussion of what was happening in the South Asian region and of how those processes fit into a larger scheme.

### *Teaching Materials*

In Section I, we discussed the global dispersion of the human and material resources that help us imagine areas and signaled the importance of our attending to the varied sets of public spheres and of engaging, as joint partners, with those intellectuals who constitute them so that we



do not stay confined to our parochial world-pictures. This is a desideratum not only for research but for teaching. It is not just that we need to think of the variety of materials and sources we can draw on — maps, novels, pamphlets, films, videos, web sites, etc. — but also of where these materials have been produced and by whom. There is a thriving publishing industry in many South Asian countries, for instance, which now makes available the work of intellectuals located in that region for assignment along with Euro-American texts. Similarly, advances in information technology now make it possible for interactive exchanges among students, activists and scholars globally. These tools will be an important component of the new area studies we propose.

## IV. Recommendations

Following are some preliminary recommendations that have emerged from the pedagogical discussions that have been a central component of the Regional Worlds program.

### *Conceptual Approach*

Our major recommendation: "areas" need to be thought about as results of processes, including research processes, rather than as objective clusters of cartographic, material or cultural facts. Emphasizing "process" geographies suggests new ways to approach both space and time in relation to "areas," with space becoming more flexible and porous and time less sequential and cumulative.

### *Curricular Methodology*

In practical pedagogical terms, these shifts in approach open the prospect of organizing courses around themes, problems or events (which might already be familiar to students) and using them to unpack local histories and to open spatial linkages that spill across conventional regional maps.

This thematic, problem-centered approach to exploring "process" geographies, far from relieving us of the need to teach specific languages, traditions, cultural styles and texts, places renewed emphasis on these fundamentals. Particular importance attaches to the teaching of languages, without which neither conventional nor processual approaches to space, place and identity can be engaged in the classroom.

Language studies, in turn, need to be better integrated with problem-oriented or disciplinary courses at all levels, and special attention needs to be paid to integrating appropriate new technologies for home-based language learning with innovative use of study-abroad programs.

### *Engaging Diverse Perspectives*

In view of our emphasis on the centrality of the ways in which "areas" are imagined regionally (thus creating "regional worlds"), it is vital to bring voices from the public spheres of societies outside the United States — through real or virtual participation — into the classroom to give students a sense that world-pictures are not solely a concern of the United States and that other "areas" produce their own world-pictures. This democratization of perspectives on world "regions" or "areas" is both a challenge and an opportunity for teachers in the United States.

Many of the above recommendations imply the importance of team-teaching, with faculty drawn from different disciplinary or geographical specializations, who have, or wish to develop, a common pedagogic vision through debate and classroom experience. This idea of team-teaching is markedly different from traditional co-teaching arrangements, where different approaches are juxtaposed without mutual debate or cross-fertilization.

Perhaps most important, the teaching of world "areas" in the manner implied in the previous recommendations requires renewed sensitivity to diversity at all levels: diversity across research universities, diversity between liberal arts colleges and larger universities; diversity within liberal arts colleges given their geographical, political and economic contexts; diversity among specific student populations which can take a markedly different form even within single states and in institutions of similar scale. These various kinds of diversity require different forms of collaboration and pedagogic sensitivity.

### *Linking Technologies to Concepts*

While new technologies (especially those involving cross-national information-transfer, tele-conferencing, language-learning and interactivity) can be vital tools for new approaches to the teaching of "regional worlds," these technologies are unlikely to be helpful unless they are consciously guided by hard thinking about the very architecture of "areas," in the manner suggested throughout this White Paper.