On Campus

Columbia as a Global University

By
Nicholas B. Dirks
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Columbia has for years been one of the leading academic centers for the study of the world; it is home to seven regional institutes, focusing on East Asia, South Asia, Russia and Eastern Europe, Western Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America. These institutes emerged as centers of area studies in the cold war aftermath of World War II, funded in part by federal grants and major initiatives on the part of foundations, such as the Ford Found-ation. Columbia fostered its institutes, established new departments and programs, and took on a leadership role in global studies over the last half century. As a result, Columbia's faculty possesses an enormous range and depth of knowledge about the world. Today, the University has resources for the study of most major world regions that are an important basis for our national and inter-national reputation.

We might ask, however, what it would mean for Columbia to become a genuinely global university, rather than simply one with excellent academic resources for studying the world. Globalization implies not just an increased velocity and scale, but a re-centering of the globe, as it were. We know from recent scholarship and from our own experience that globalization — despite the necessary recognition that it has pervaded world history for centuries — is new in a number of respects. We know most about the economic effects of contemporary globalization, and if there are disagreements among scholars about the social as well as political and environmental effects of the world economy, there is broad agreement about the contours and significance of the phenomena themselves. We are only beginning to understand the ways in which globalization is a profoundly cultural phenomenon as well: ideas, fashions, attitudes, desires, languages, the arts, religion, and even politics circulate along with the commodities that no longer know national boundaries, or a world divided into different zones of wealth and power. At the same time, these international divisions have hardly disappeared: if anything, they appear

all the more stark, especially because of the expansion of media and communications that makes differences more visible and more immediate. On the one hand, the United States is increasingly international in its social and economic constitution; Europe is fast dissolving most of its internal boundaries and becoming a different kind of world power; China is on the verge of a new level of global economic influence; and India is at the center of the information technology revolution. And yet, vast sections of the world, most of them in the Southern Hemisphere, are in many ways more disadvantaged than ever before.

Globalization may be an obvious, if ambivalent, reality, but the irony is that it is deeply controversial, and not just in Genoa, Seattle, or Davos. Perhaps the greatest irony is the extent to which the imperial registers of certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy are at odds with globalization. The utopian character of globalization depends on the demise of political aspirations on the part of any single government for world domination, even as it requires collective participation in a variety of international institutions, agreements, and legal organizations, including the United Nations and the International Criminal Court. The university is in some ways the most international, and the best positioned, institution to promote genuine globalization. And yet, it is still not clear what it would mean to call for a new kind of engagement with the idea of a global university. Universities in the West need to come to grips with what it would mean not just for “us” to study “them,” but for developing new forms of knowledge, and new institutional structures, that will facilitate our understanding of and participation in a world that is far more interdependent than ever before.

In some cases, globalization calls into question the very definitions and professional character of the core disciplines that make up the university. For example, when I was in- vited to Columbia eight years ago to help rebuild our Department of Anthropology (the first such department in the United States), I wanted to recruit a few distinguished anthropologists from regions that had been among the core objects of anthropological study over the years. When looking for an African “Africanist,” however, I had to confront the fact that in most universities in sub-Saharan Africa, anthropology had been banned after decolonization because of the colonial associations of the discipline. In India, by contrast, anthropology had carried on certain colonial traditions of biological anthropology (calipers used in anthropometry to measure nasal indices and cranial size are to this day manufactured only in India), while the scholarly pursuits of sociocultural

anthropology could be found only in sociology, history, or political science. In retrospect, it is no accident that two of Columbia's senior anthropologists were trained as political scientists and have written some of their major scholarly works in history rather than anthropology per se.

Even when the core disciplines are global, university curricula focus more on the West. History departments in American schools, for example, typically cover the whole world, yet there are usually more historians working on U.S. history than those who focus on regions outside of North America and Europe. English departments tend to be far larger not just than all the other literature departments covering European languages but also all the non-Western language, literature, and culture departments combined. The sciences tend to be the most international — both in their global reach and in their actual makeup — of all disciplines in the Western university, yet the preoccupations of Western social science make study of the non-West increasingly difficult to include in our curricula.

There are many challenges that confront us as we seek to reimagine the idea of a global university. If area studies were inaugurated in the context of the early cold war, most disciplines were themselves inaugurated at the end of the nineteenth century, at a very different moment in the history of the world. Even as we rethink the organization and character of the disciplines in a newly global age, we have to recognize the limits inherent in the structures of the University itself. To think concretely for a moment, as we recruit more international faculty and students we will have to take into account global differences in academic training and organization. We will have to reconsider our fundamental notions of reputation, training, evaluation, and professional field. And we may have to establish new structures for making appointments, organizing curricula, and advising our students for life after the university. All this could be very exciting, but it is easier for universities to study change than to undergo it.

And yet, where else but Columbia are we so well equipped not just to study the world but to change it, and then to change ourselves in the bargain? New York City is the global city par excellence, and with Columbia's unique reserves of strength and excellence in global studies, we are well positioned to provide new models not just for how we study the world but also for what it will mean to think about the global university in the new century ahead.

Nicholas B. Dirks is Franz Boas Professor of Anthropology and History, Vice President for Arts and Sciences, and Dean of the Faculty.

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