Cabbages and Kings: A student's view of SOAS

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The origins of SOAS as a colonial institution, training district officers for empire lends itself easily to satire. Political Science of an American type with its emphasis on area studies would have given a distinctively transatlantic twist to the colonial paternalism that still disfigures much British academic writing on what is now politely referred to as the Commonwealth. Despite a widespread sense that such antiquated traditions of thought are today irrelevant they remain embedded in the assumptions of many whose disciplinary choices and areas of study would seem at first sight far removed from such tropes of empire. Invited speakers to our regular seminars at the Department of Political Studies often begin with a series of diplomatic excuses for their lack of 'empirical expertise', suggesting by way of compensation that 'theory' of one kind or another may be helpful even to those of us up to our elbows in the grubby business of 'fieldwork'.

The fixed prejudice that the non-European world represents a series of 'cases', whilst the concepts we deploy have no particular history or location, reveals difficulties and tensions that cannot be resolved by well-intentioned gestures. If self-consciousness about the colonial origins of an institution represents one kind of necessary engagement, here at SOAS the other is with the unintentional parochialism of much of what passes as political and social theory perhaps best understood as a kind of European Area Studies. Such parochialism cannot be understood as purely geographical and therefore cannot simply be resolved by collecting facts about the fabled land of not-Europe.

For this very reason romantic attempts to provincialise Europe and create entirely indigenous frameworks of knowledge are unlikely to be any more successful. The history of the department in the years I have been associated with it is one of constant attempts to grapple with what are best understood as necessary but creative internal tensions, rather then external divisions between Area Studies and the 'mainstream'. Pragmatic controversies about whether to sell the department on the basis of middle range theory of the comparative politics type, or perhaps to capitalise on the school's location to capture the emerging market of post-colonial studies have tended to reveal deep problems with assuming such crude distinctions between mechanics and philosopher kings. No student of the politics of communal politics in South Asia, for example could afford to be ignorant of the kinds of philosophical questions alluded to here. Attempts to conduct theoretical enquiries of a history of ideas sort would however be worthless if not linked to the kind of detailed empirical knowledge associated with the (of course) flawed area studies tradition.

The dilemmas of the situation are perhaps best captured by one senior member of the department reflecting on a recent and particularly fascinating discussion of Marxist thought in 1930s Japan in our recent 'Liberalism and Empire' series, the only drawback of which was the paucity of members of staff who felt qualified to intervene in the discussion (research students being perhaps less restrained). When it was suggested that the problem was a context too rich and therefore somewhat daunting for anyone unfamiliar with philosophical thought in 20th century Japan, his response was to suggest that 'this was as it should be'. What kind of serious discussion of, for example, Locke would be comprehensible to someone utterly unfamiliar with the internal arguments within 17th century thought? Bafflement of this kind is suggestive. The curious asymmetry between Japanese intellectuals in the 1930s, familiar with the western intellectual scene and the parochial and formalist readings of theoretical texts prevalent in the west are striking. There are thus serious questions about attempts to separate 'history of ideas' from the operationalisation of concepts for comparative purposes. How much more interesting might discussions of this literature be in relationship to the question of non-European fascism then misconceived attempts to puzzle out how much Japan is like Italy?

It is the very seriousness with which such arguments are pursued even though (or perhaps because) they cannot by their very nature be resolved that makes the department such an attractive place for a research student. Tall claims about the interdisciplinary nature of the institution are deeply misleading. Informally however the kind of creative fragmentation alluded to above means that the typical research student engages in productively incomprehensible exchanges within their department whilst pursuing arguments and ideas with research students scattered across the different departments of the institution who are engaged on the same 'patch'. This allows for the development of a far more complex and critical kind of interdisciplinary expertise than that imagined in brochures. The result is a tendency to treat formal disciplinary boundaries (political studies, international relations, history etc) with a suspicion that cannot be confused with the philistinism of old-fashioned area studies. Despite the best efforts of government and administration it's an exciting place to be.

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