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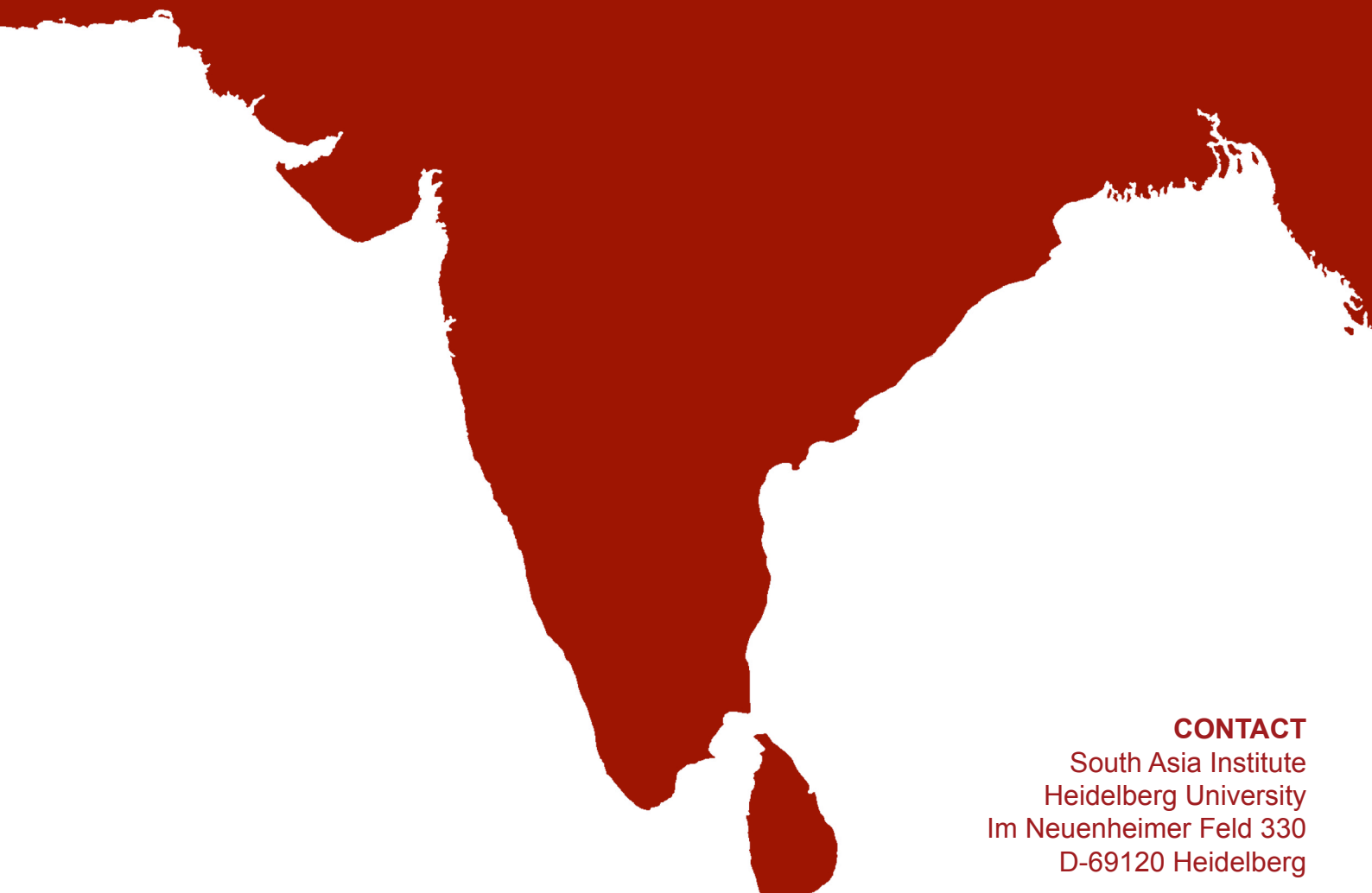
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**Sheldon Pollock (Columbia University):
What is South Asian Knowledge
Good For?**



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What is South Asian Knowledge Good For?

SHELDON POLLOCK

This paper is the text of a lecture delivered in Heidelberg as part of a festive celebration in the Alte Aula on May 8, 2012 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the South Asia Institute. Exploring the dichotomy between knowledge about South Asians produced in the Western university and knowledge produced by South Asians in history, it goes on to argue for the importance of the latter to human well-being no less than to true education. Additionally, it provides an outline of the development of South Asian studies in the US in order to point up the distinctiveness of the South Asia Institute.

I

Messrs. Ambassadors, Herr Rector Eitel, distinguished colleagues, dear students, and guests.

It is a singular honor for me to have been invited to deliver the address marking the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University, an institution that I have admired since I first visited in 1986 for a conference organized by Dr. Anna Dallapiccola on the “Sastric Tradition in the Indian Arts.” I have been fortunate to be able to return on several occasions in the past, once as a member of the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), which scheduled its annual meeting in Heidelberg in 1992 in order to strengthen ties with our German colleagues. I single out this SSRC-ACLS meeting not only because it was there I first had the pleasure of meeting Dietmar Rothermund, a leading force in the founding of the Institute, and the late Richard Burghart, whose passing deprived us of an anthropologist of great promise, but also because of the approach to South Asian knowledge

The following is the revised text, with footnotes added, of an address given in Heidelberg on May 8, 2012. I express my genuine gratitude to the faculty and administration of the Institute for honoring me with the invitation to address them on this special occasion.



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that this now-disbanded committee had represented for a half-century, but that remains alive and well in the institute we are celebrating today.

The South Asia Institute exists for the creation and inculcation of knowledge, of course, and it is therefore only reasonable that I should have chosen to discuss with you South Asian knowledge and in precisely what sense it may be said to be “good” for anything. The phrase “South Asian knowledge” is ambiguous, of course; indeed, I have chosen it precisely because of its ambiguity. “South Asian” can be taken in either an objective or a subjective sense: in the former case, the knowledge outsiders have produced about South Asia or South Asians, in the latter, the knowledge South Asians themselves have produced about their world or themselves. When we speak of “South Asian knowledge,” accordingly, we are confronted with two different if sometimes overlapping (or apparently overlapping) objects of analysis. And not just different objects but also different methods for studying them and different value assessments, of both objects and methods, by the world in general and, increasingly, by the university in particular.

No one today will dispute the importance of acquiring knowledge about South Asia and South Asians, whether it is particular knowledge for a particular purpose or general knowledge for a global purpose. What do you need to know, say, about South Asian bodies and bodily attitudes to immunize the entire agrarian population of West Bengal against smallpox? What do you need to know about South Asian political ideologies to address international terrorism? What do you need to know about South Asian sexual practices to counteract the spread of AIDS? What do you need to know about South Asian industrial pollution to understand its place in global climate change? Or, to move from the serious to the trivial, what did you need to know about South Asian consumer habits and preferences to ensure that Pepsi can beat out Coke for the soft-drink market? Consider just this last instance: Pepsi won this contest because it deployed local as opposed to global forms, images, and ideas, and in particular, because it understood a deeply rooted Indian penchant for tamasha—or put simply, because it had acquired more instrumentally useful knowledge about South Asian consumer preferences.¹

This sort of knowledge is the product of what is often referred to these days as “problem-focused inquiry,” part of the new commitment to “applied knowledge”—in contrast to “basic science”—whose rise to prominence is one of the

1 See Mazzarella, William (2003): *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*; Durham (NC), Duke University Press; chapters 7 and 8 in particular.



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more noteworthy conceptual developments in the American university in the past two decades. In the context of my own institution, such knowledge about large-scale vaccination or terrorism or sexually transmitted disease or global warming or monetizable tamasha would be produced by faculty from one of Columbia's professional schools, whether Public Health, Engineering, the Earth Institute, or the Business School, or from a social science department, say, Political Science, where suicide bombing is now a hot topic of research, or Anthropology, where consumerism has long been an object of study. And this is what has become the predominant sort of "South Asian knowledge," where, generally speaking, South Asia is seen as a problem rather than as a possibility, an actual target of transformation rather than a potential source of it. No administrator looking at a tight budget—and budgets henceforth will always be, or be claimed to be, tight—needs to think long or hard to make an argument in support of such knowledge, because it has real-world success. It leads to fewer deaths from disease, more security, cleaner air, greater profits, or other kinds of quantifiable outcomes.

In addition to these particular objects of analysis of "South Asian knowledge," the institutional sites I have mentioned, from Public Health to Political Science, have developed their own methods for acquiring knowledge about the South Asian world. These are by design entirely independent of the knowledge South Asians themselves have produced about the world—and often, and by preference, independent of South Asia altogether because the methods are meant to be universal in scope. Sometimes of course local knowledge will have to be sought and mined (as in the case of tamasha). This will never be for its own sake, however, but in order to contribute to harnessing and transforming that local knowledge ("behavioral modification campaigns," as the advertising industry calls them), whether on behalf of the World Health Organization or Pepsi Cola. The sociologist Craig Calhoun captured something very significant, and significantly underreported, when he noted that today, foundations and hence universities

prefer to try to work directly to pursue change, usually without any lengthy detour through attempts to improve knowledge. They prefer to work on specific problems—AIDS, women's education, small-business support—but not necessarily on the larger contexts in which those problems are embedded.²

2 Calhoun, Craig (2010): 'Renewing International Studies: Regional and Transregional Studies in a Changing Intellectual Field'; in: Wiley, David & Robert S. Glew (eds.): *International*



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The “context” of such phenomena is, by contrast, the domain of basic science (a term we can apply not only to the social sciences but also to the humanities, including my science, philology).

Given the widespread dominance of the form of knowledge I have just described, that is to say, knowledge *about* South Asians, it has become far less obvious in the course of the past several decades what place in our epistemic régime is to be accorded to the knowledge South Asians themselves have produced, whether today or at any time over the course of the past four millennia or more that we can track such knowledge. I would venture to suggest that, in the eyes of those who have never crossed the threshold of the Institute we commemorate today, or the kinds of departments I have inhabited over my career, the value of South Asians’ own knowledge of the world, to the degree it is specifically South Asian and not Western knowledge that happens to be produced by South Asians—about information technology, for example, or pharmaceuticals or whatever, knowledge designed to be *devoid of any local inflection whatever*—is effectively a null set. Are there any decision makers, as they refer to themselves, at universities and foundations who would not agree that, in the cognitive sweepstakes of human history, Western knowledge has won and South Asian knowledge has lost? That the rest of the world is ineluctably becoming the West, not the South? That, accordingly, the *South Asian* knowledge South Asians themselves have produced can no longer be held to have any significant consequences for the future of the human species?

I am well aware that I am not offering anything very original with all this. In fact, probably the most powerful formulation of this view was expressed right here in Heidelberg, about a century ago, in the introduction that Max Weber wrote to the first volume of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, namely, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. You have all read it many times, but in the place that has refuted it so well, and on the occasion when we acknowledge that refutation, it seems right to read out some representative selections:

Welche Verkettung von Umständen hat dazu geführt, daß gerade auf dem Boden des Okzidents, und nur hier, Kulturerscheinungen auftraten, welche doch - wie wenigstens wir uns gern vorstellen - in einer Entwicklungsrichtung von universeller Bedeutung und Gültigkeit lagen?

Nur im Okzident gibt es “Wissenschaft” in dem Entwicklungsstadi-

and Language Education for a Global Future: Fifty Years of U.S. Title VI and Fulbright-Hays Programs; East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 227–254; p. 238.



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um, welches wir heute als “gültig” anerkennen [...] . Nachdenken über Welt- und Lebensprobleme, philosophische und auch [...] theologische Lebensweisheit tiefster Art, Wissen und Beobachtung von außerordentlicher Sublimierung hat es auch anderwärts, vor allem: in Indien, China, Babylon, Aegypten, gegeben. Aber: der babylonischen und jeder anderen Astronomie **fehlte** [...] die mathematische Fundamentierung, die erst die Hellenen ihr gaben [...]. Den nach der Seite der Beobachtung überaus entwickelten indischen Naturwissenschaften **fehlte** das rationale Experiment [...] [A]ller asiatischen Staatslehre **fehlt** eine der aristotelischen gleichartigen Systematik und die rationalen Begriffe überhaupt. Für eine rationale Rechtslehre **fehlen** anderwärts trotz aller Ansätze in Indien (Mimamsa - Schule) [...] die streng juristischen Schemata und Denkformen des römischen und des daran geschulten okzidentalischen Rechtes.³

And so he continues, with music (no “in rationaler Form [...] harmonisch geordnete Chromatik und Enharmonik”), architecture (no “rationale Verwendung des gotischen Gewölbes”), painting (no “rationale Verwendung der Linear- und Luftperspektive”), education (no “rationale[r] und systematische[r] Fachbetrieb der Wissenschaft”), the state (“mit rational gesetzter ‘Verfassung’, rational gesetztem Recht und einer an rationalen, gesetzten Regeln [...] orientierten Verwaltung”). In short, “nur im Okzident” was knowledge produced that can be called “gültig,” the kind that now defines what knowledge is for the world at large and that in fact has spread across the world at large. If South Asian “Weisheit” might still command respect, South Asian knowledge, whether in astronomy or architecture, music or mathematics, painting or politics, is no longer valid; it is worth knowing about only insofar it helps to measure the distance between validity and invalidity, between modernity and the archaic, between the future and the past. It is nothing but a *Fehlen*, a lack.⁴

What Weber wrote in 1920 captures, I have little doubt, the unspoken

3 Weber, Max (1920): *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*; Tübingen, Mohr; pp. 1–2 (emphasis added).

4 Cf. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, vol. 1, pp. 1–4. Weber’s original inverted quotation marks around both “Wissenschaft” and “gültig,” along with his curious parenthetical remark “wie wenigstens wir uns gern vorstellen,” render his argument at once less triumphalist but also less incoherent. If what the West invented was “science” and not science, which was “valid” and not valid, then what precisely is his point, since all the rest of knowledge is equally “valid” “science”? (Note that Talcott Parsons, Weber’s American translator, suppressed both quotations marks. [Weber, Max (1958): *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons and with a new introduction by Anthony Giddens; New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons; p. 13.])

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conviction of most outside the university and indeed, many inside. Western modernity has simply and peremptorily disqualified (to use Sudipta Kaivraj's precise wording)⁵ vast areas of South Asian knowledge—not premodern knowledge as such but non-Western and especially premodern non-Western knowledge (Aristotle's *Physics* may have been left behind but his *Ethics* has not, whether by Weber or Alasdair MacIntyre). It has done so either for offering false answers to questions that still concern us—regarding disease or political behavior or social cohesion—or for providing “correct” answers to questions we no longer ask—about kingship that is long dead, for example, or religious rituals that have been steadily discarded, or cosmologies that have been thoroughly discredited.

Some will of course object that there are most certainly forms of South Asian knowledge—knowledge South Asians have produced about the world—that have not been superseded in modernity and that remain valid (or at least, like Weber's Western knowledge, “valid”) and therefore valuable. Consider yoga and other forms of body discipline and meditation, which are now practiced, according to recent estimates, by more than twenty million people—nearly nine per cent of adults—in the US alone, or ayurveda and the whole array of alternative medical practices from South Asia, which have increasingly been penetrating the Western medical establishment.

And there are other, more technical, sorts of South Asian knowledge that can make the same claim to enduring pertinence if not truth in some Platonic sense. Let me give just two examples, no doubt less familiar, that may seem minor but are actually profound in their own ways. Consider first the tools for linguistic analysis developed in South Asia. In many languages, sounds change when words come into proximity; in many languages, the structure of words changes over time by means, for example, of the syncopation of phonemes; in many languages words enter into complex compounds. But no Western language I am familiar with ever developed a precise vocabulary to make sense of these phenomena. It was only in South Asia that an adequate terminology—the terms include *sandhi* for euphonic combination, *tadbhava* and *tatsama* for modified and unmodified word forms, *tatpuruṣa*, *bahuvrīhi*, *dvandva*, and other types of compounds—was developed and eventually adopted in scholarly discourse worldwide, a terminology that in a sense made these phenomena *knowable* for the first time. My second example concerns aesthetic re-

5 Kaviraj, Sudipta (2005): ‘The Sudden Death of Sanskrit Knowledge’; in: *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 33, 119–142; p. 132.



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sponse. There is no doubt that people at all times and in all places have had emotional experiences when hearing a story: they become afraid, feel disgust, turn romantic, grow sad. But what are the precise mechanisms by which a narrative actually produces such emotions, why does it produce the ones it does produce—and why, after all, do we like sad stories in the first place, so much so that we want to hear them again and again? It was in India that the first and to date most complete attempt was made to analyze this fundamental human phenomenon of aesthetic response into its elementary parts and to explain how they fit together to create emotion in literature—to create what South Asians call *rasa*.

So “South Asian knowledge” is clearly a more complicated concept than I first suggested, and additional distinctions need to be made. One that seems obvious is between forms of knowledge that may be thought to possess a truth value for the contemporary world (the nature and nomenclature of nominal compounding or aesthetic response) or at least a truth value for some people in the contemporary world (the benefits of yogic *āsanas* and *prāṇāyāma*, or positions and breath-control), and forms of a second order that have no claim whatever (and often make no claim) to any universal truth value in themselves,⁶ and precisely because they pertain to what are specifically South Asian modes of making sense of the world. This second-order form comprises what is in fact the greater part of South Asian achievements and understandings. Examples would include (to mention only questions that have been of interest to scholars at this institute) everything from the vision of *dharma* in the archaic world of the *Manu Smṛti* or the specificities of ancient asceticism to the local logics of pasturage among nomadic peoples in Nepal, the conflict management techniques coded in religious worship among low-caste groups in north India, the processes of mental visualization among pilgrims in Varanasi that once did the work of physical maps. Or to make the case even more pointed by citing topics that have been of interest to me: the cosmologies or discourses on the past found in the *purāṇas*; the analysis of complexly nested textual rules offered in *Mīmāṃsā*; the three hundred eighty-four types of female character (*nāyikā*) discussed in late works on poetics. Why should any of these sorts of “South Asian knowledge” be of any interest whatever to rational men and women faced with the problems of global epidemics like AIDS, glo-

6 I am enough of a Rortian to declare that I do not *necessarily* accept any such thing as “universal truth”; I am using the phrase in that quotidian sense of truth as putative correspondence with reality.



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bal threats of terrorism, global climate change—problems that may require knowledge *about* South Asia if they are to be solved, but for whose solution no knowledge developed by South Asians that is specifically South Asian will, or so it may be argued, render the least service?

I will return to the uses of my second-order knowledge, the knowledge that South Asians themselves have produced and that modernity would seem to have thoroughly discredited. But I want to do so with a better understanding of the institutional structures that have produced and reproduce the two orders. This is not only because we are assembled here to celebrate the achievements of an institution, which need to be put into some historical context, but because this institution has attempted to offer some conceptual and structural resolution of a dilemma between the two types of knowledge I have just identified. These can be broadly viewed—to speak only from the perspective of a scholar working in the US and to speak very generally at that—as the domain of two fundamentally different forms of academic enterprise, the former (knowledge about South Asians) the sphere of interest of today’s disciplines and professional schools; the latter (South Asians’ own knowledge) the sphere of interest of what are broadly called area specialists in the social sciences and philologists (among others) in the humanities. The relationship that has existed in the US between areas and disciplines—and thus between my two sorts of knowledge—over the past seventy-five years has been uneasy, sometimes bitter, and certainly complicated. Whatever else we might learn from tracing this history, which offers such a sharp contrast to Heidelberg, I trust one thing will become clear: the US academy is still struggling to figure out how to institutionalize the study of “South Asian knowledge” in either sense of the phrase, and is becoming increasingly uncertain whether in its second sense such knowledge is even a worthwhile object of study at all.

II

The encounter with South Asian knowledge in the US began with Sanskrit, as of course it did in Europe from the founding of Sanskrit studies at the Collège de France two centuries ago (1814). I who stand before you embody in my own training some considerable portion of this original episteme (and in my subsequent career, each of its several successors!). At Harvard in the late 1960s the nineteenth-century Romantic ideology that viewed India as the cradle of Europe, linguistically if not genetically, could still be detected, however faintly, and



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accordingly, Sanskrit was offered as an appropriate, even obligatory, course of study for students of Greek and Latin (my undergraduate concentration). And this was almost all the South Asian knowledge available: modern languages (“tool languages,” as Harvard’s president Nathan Pusey described them in 1960) were expressly prohibited from being taught at Harvard until the mid-1980s (and they still have an entirely marginal status); South Asian history was entirely absent, while the social sciences relating to South Asia were almost seriously undeveloped. For most universities up until World War II, and for some (like Harvard) long after it, “South Asian knowledge” was largely Sanskrit knowledge. And so the primary answer to the question what it was good for would have differed little from that offered a century earlier by F. Max Müller: its value lay in the contribution made to Europe’s own self-knowledge by those whom Müller called “our nearest intellectual relatives, the Aryans of India.”⁷

This whole structure of scholarship was to be utterly transformed at many universities (if not Harvard) in the immediate post-World War II era, though the planning for that transformation (a fact always forgotten) long preceded the war. It was the Sanskritists themselves who “saw the peril in such a structure [i.e., of Indological dominance of South Asian knowledge production] and initiated steps to correct it,” as W. Norman Brown of the University of Pennsylvania put it retrospectively, and correctly.⁸ In 1926 they organized a Committee on Indic and Iranian Studies under the auspices of the American Oriental Society, which became a committee of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1930. In 1939 the committee published “A Program to Develop Indic Studies in America.” Here is how Brown formulated the key question:

American scholars interested in the Indic field feel strongly that our academic structure is exceedingly weak in Indic studies and must be greatly strengthened if it is to serve our future needs. We must remember that the students now passing through our educational machinery will live their effective lives during the second half of the twentieth century, and it takes no gift of prophecy to predict that at that time the world will include a vigorous India, possibly politically free, conceivably a dominant power in the Orient, and certainly intellectually vital and productive. How can Americans who have never met India in their educational experience be expected to live intelligently in such a world? Are we to wait until some

7 Müller, F. Max (1883): *India: What can it Teach Us?*; London, Longmans, Green; p. 15.

8 Brown, William Norman (1964): ‘South Asia Studies: A History’; in: *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 356, 54–62; p. 56.



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cataclysm brought about in large part by own ignorance and misunderstanding forces India on our attention? Or are we to plan our intellectual life so as to foresee the needs of the future?⁹

The first meeting in the US to address what would come to be called “area studies” took place in 1944, co-sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and the Rockefeller Foundation. This was followed by a major conference in 1949, from which came a key document entitled “Southern Asia Studies in the US: A Survey and Plan,” issued in 1951 by the newly formed Joint Committee on Southern Asia, the original name of the SSRC/ACLS group mentioned at the start of this talk (“Southern Asia” referring sometimes to the new political realities of the Indian subcontinent, sometimes collectively to South and Southeast Asia).¹⁰ Whereas the Indic and Iranian Studies Committee had consisted entirely of philologists, the new committee included historians, political scientists, economists, anthropologists, sociologists, musicologists, art historians, in addition to classical Indologists. Whatever may have been the causal connections—and there were real connections, which have been much studied¹¹—between emergent US neoimperialism and the production of area knowledge during the Cold War, the stated goal of Brown and his colleagues was simply to “normalize” South Asia in the American university, de-exoticize it, and make it known. For these scholars no grand arguments were needed about what South Asian knowledge comprised or what it might be good for. It was at once knowledge about and knowledge produced by South Asians, and it was needed, not because it represented an inheritance from the West’s infancy or offered data essential to the security state, but rather because, in Brown’s prescient and sincere formulation (which only conspiracy theorists would seek to parse), it would enable people “to live intelligently” in the coming new world of postcolonial equals.¹²

9 Brown, William Norman & Horace Irvin Poleman & Elmer H. Cutts (1939): *Indic Studies in America*; Washington (D.C.), American Council of Learned Societies (American Council of Learned Societies Bulletin, 28); p. 358.

10 Joint Committee of Southern Asia (1951): *Southern Asian Studies in the United States, a Survey and Plan*; Philadelphia, American Council of Learned Societies.

11 See for example Harootunian, Harry & Masao Miyoshi (eds.) (2002): *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*; Durham (NC), Duke University Press; and most recently, Dirks, Nicholas (2013): ‘Scholars, Spies, and Global Studies’; in: *The Chronicle Review*, August 13, 2012 (<https://chronicle.com/article/Scholars-SpiesGlobal/133459/>, last accessed January 13, 2014).

12 Brown, *Indic Studies in America*, p. 358.



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How was this academic transformation to be achieved? Tellingly, the new Joint Committee had little to say about the established disciplines. “The first step,” it declared, “is to build up the area programs,” by which was meant, not only and generally the “focusing of all the disciplinary competencies [...] upon a cultural area for the purpose of obtaining a total picture of that culture,” the definition of area studies given by the American Council on Education in 1947,¹³ but in fact the creation of a new discipline as such, or rather super-discipline, institutionalized in its own department and granting separate degrees, including the Ph.D. This had already been created at the University of Pennsylvania in 1947: the South Asia Regional Committee, which Brown envisioned as the future paradigm, a new comprehensive area-based *field* of “Southern Asian Studies.”

The fact of the matter, however, is that neither the American Council on Education’s general (and vague) approach to “area studies” nor Brown’s specific vision of a new field, a conceptually coherent, super-disciplinary, degree-granting university unit had any resonance elsewhere in the US, at least as far as South Asia is concerned. Something entirely different developed instead. Scholars in the social sciences came to be trained in their particular disciplines—political science, sociology, and the like—while acquiring at the same time some level of expertise in particular world regions; as for the old Sanskrit departments, these continued in their traditional intellectual forms but slowly expanded with federal support to include modern languages and literatures, and they constituted “area studies” no more—and no less—than departments of Romance languages and literature, or indeed, English. The situation at the University of Chicago, which housed perhaps the leading program in South Asia in the US during the second half of the twentieth century, perfectly exemplified the dominant model. Whereas a cross-disciplinary committee (the Committee on Southern Asian Studies) came into existence in the late 1960s, it has had no pedagogical let alone conceptual mission: it never mounted joint courses or initiated interdisciplinary research projects, to say nothing of offering academic degrees. Students always worked on South Asia exclusively from within their disciplines, which at Chicago (as at many other universities) included a Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, founded in 1965, replacing what had originally been a Department of Sanskrit and Indo-

13 Fenton, William (1947): *Area Studies in American Universities*; Washington, American Council on Education; p. 82, cited in Davis, Richard H. (1985): *South Asia at Chicago: A History*; Chicago, Committee on Southern Asian Studies, University of Chicago (Committee on Southern Asian Studies, new series, 1); p. 23.



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European Comparative Philology.¹⁴ (The “Civilizations” addendum to the department name, incidentally, gestured not toward area studies but toward a peculiarly Chicago concept that had emerged from the post-War Comparative Civilizations Project of the anthropologist Robert Redfield, which emphasized “civilization” as a “constructed object of thought” [and not as a “geographical or political entity”], and viewed the study of other cultures as serving broadly humanistic reasons, “influencing men’s ideas about one another” rather than producing “useful expertise.”¹⁵)

In short, the area studies model as a super-disciplinary form in the US university failed almost from the moment it was conceived, and instead, competences in Indian economy, polity, society and the rest were developed in the disciplines. Sociologists, political scientists, or economists who were interested in South Asia as a “case” and collected data there were expected to have some exposure to the history and culture and perhaps even language in order to understand the social, political, and economic phenomena they were studying—“the attempt to gain a comprehensive view of social life in specific contexts, connections, and/or concrete complexity” as it would come to be defined (to quote Calhoun again).¹⁶ They may well have come to be called “area specialists” but they were first and foremost members of a discipline. “Area studies,” for South Asia at least, never found institutional embodiment (beyond the SSRC’s extra-mural Joint Committee on South Asia itself). It was not a field let alone a university unit; it existed only as an attitude, so to speak.¹⁷

This state of affairs—with area specialists in the disciplines and philologists housed in newly modernized Sanskrit departments that maintained their se-

14 The department (in existence since at least 1902) was renamed “Department of Comparative Philology, General Linguistics, and Indo-Iranian Philology” in 1916, and “Department of Linguistics” in 1934.

15 Davis, *South Asia at Chicago*, p. 39.

16 Calhoun, *Renewing International Studies*, p. 229.

17 That area studies in the sense of an organized academic unit has been largely absent from the American university is something curiously if widely misunderstood in institutional histories, see for example Szanton, David L. (2004): ‘Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States’; in: Szanton, David L. (ed.): *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*; Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1–33; p. 6. Others, by contrast, seem to believe that “area studies” never included literary studies or any language study beyond the instrumental; see the odd assessment in Spivak, Gayatri (2003): *Death of a Discipline*; New York, Columbia University Press; pp. 4–9. For some other world regions, such as Latin America, area studies programs were in fact successfully built.



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parate existence—continued into the mid 1990s, when a remarkable reassessment, if one still too little discussed as the almost systematic transformation it represented, took place across the American academy. Although it had been gathering steam for perhaps two decades—driven by, inter alia, the critique of development and modernization theory; the increased prominence of professional schools and think tanks in international studies; and of course the end of the Cold War—its most memorable expression was a brief article by the Harvard political scientist Robert H. Bates. The venue was small (the “American Political Science Association Comparative Politics Newsletter”) but the words captured what I believe was the true conviction of many across the social science disciplines—and the charge it leveled broke like a thunderclap:

[W]ithin the academy, the consensus has formed that area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge. [...] Many see area specialists as having defected from the social sciences to the camp of the humanists. [...] They tend to lag behind others in terms of their knowledge of statistics, their commitment to theory, and their familiarity with mathematical approaches to the study of politics.¹⁸

Henceforth, the work of such area specialists would retain value only to the degree they provided “the data from which political inferences,” as Bates put it, “[might] be drawn by social scientists residing in political science departments.” Not only had the “camp of the humanists”—whose object of knowledge was the knowledge South Asians themselves produced—now become an enemy zone to which scholars could “defect,” but those social scientists who did defect ceased to generate “scientific knowledge.” Scientific knowledge had now become, by definition, knowledge *about* South Asia, which would be processed in the mills—by now almost exclusively quantitative mills—of Western theory. Ironically, around the same time important changes were happening in the humanities. For one thing, humanists themselves had begun to “defect” to the camp of the social sciences. Far more important, for South Asian studies, was the critique, centered in the camp of the humanists, that arose in the 1980s in the wake of Edward Said’s work on Orientalism. In its cruder forms (and many of its forms were far cruder than the source from which it sprang) this asserted that South Asian knowledge was always-already

18 Bates, Robert H. (1996): ‘Area Studies and the Discipline’; in: *Comparative Politics, Newsletter of the APSA [American Political Science Association] Organized Section on Comparative Politics* 1.7, 1–2; p. 1.



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mediated by British colonialism and hence epistemologically out of reach as such. Combine all this defection and critique and you get a perfect intellectual-institutional storm.

The attack on area-based knowledge, even social-scientific knowledge, was only to intensify over the course of the next decade and a half. One highly symptomatic event was the disbanding of the Joint Committee on South Asia, and all the other area committees of the SSRC/ACLS, in the late 1990s. At the same time, the social sciences ever more emphatically embraced the “science” side of their identity and distanced themselves from the “social,” so much so that modeling of the most complex mathematical sort seems, to outsiders at least, to drive them all forward in a game of constant one-upmanship. But if all this was at first a *conceptual* challenge to the place of areal expertise within the disciplinary forms said to produce real knowledge, namely the quantitative disciplines, it was powerfully reinforced by an unprecedented historical conjuncture. First, problems of a new, and sometimes deeply unsettling, *trans-regional* character began to make themselves felt more strongly than ever before; problems such as climate change were precisely the sorts of issues areal knowledge as such was largely unequipped to address. Second, globalization was becoming less of a slogan and more a fact of life, threatening to erase the area-ness of areas, the very qualities that made areas distinctive. Third, beginning in 1989, countries and whole regions of the world that had once seemed fixed objects of areal knowledge began, if not actually to disappear (after 1991 the SSRC’s Joint Committee on the Soviet Union did not have much to do), then at least to *move* as never before, with more people—refugees, migrants, and others—in motion than ever before in history. Areas themselves were on the move, and seemed to be everywhere: South Asia was now to be found in London, Toronto, and New York no less than in Lahore, Delhi, and Dhaka.

It was only a matter of time before the area specialists, now viewed as mere data-mongers, would no longer feel welcome in their disciplines: they no longer contributed to rational choice or other dominant theories; they no longer even worked on real things, since globalized consumption and transregional movements were endangering the very existence of their object of study. The crisis of the disciplines, as the political scientist Timothy Mitchell described it, was not only conceptual, but institutional: it led to a gradual exile of the non-West from the social-sciences.¹⁹ Hereby, the relatively stable order of South

19 Mitchell, Timothy (2004): ‘The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science’; in



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Asian knowledge in the post-War American university, with classical and modern philologists located in small and independent (if vulnerable) departments of their own and area-specialized social scientists in the disciplines, began to disintegrate. In fact, in an ironic twist, *neo area studies* departments are now being created across the US from the first time since Brown, but in a sort of fit of absence of mind, without any fully articulated sense of purpose let alone critical self-understanding. My old department at Harvard, for example, Sanskrit and Indian Studies, has recently been eliminated and replaced by a “South Asian Studies” department that includes on its staff two anthropologists, a historian, an English literature specialist, and a very eminent economist. At the University of Pennsylvania, after Brown’s South Asia Regional Studies program died its slow and agonizing death, and Oriental Studies (the home of the language and literature people) was destroyed in the orgy of mechanical post-Orientalism that gripped the country in the late 1980s (the name itself was enough to doom the unit), a new Department of South Asian Studies was birthed, housing historians and anthropologists, without appointments in their disciplines. Even stranger, or perhaps better, more adventurous, paths have been followed elsewhere, none perhaps so remarkable as that at my own university. A brief history may be instructive, even amusing, though in the end it is the history, and a highly representative one, of how difficult it has proven for Western universities to come to terms with non-Western knowledge.

In 1890 Columbia University created a Department of Oriental Languages, as one of six new departments in the new Faculty of Philosophy (Oriental Languages consisted of Hebrew, Persian, and Sanskrit). That unit was split in 1925 into the Department of Semitic Languages and what seems (there is some uncertainty on this) to have been a program of General and Comparative Linguistics (headed by Franz Boas), which seduced away the Indo-Iranian philologists. A re-amalgamation occurred in 1954 with the creation of the Department of Near and Middle East Languages, but with the Indo-Iranian philologists back in; the department was rechristened Middle East Languages and Cultures in 1965, the latter term gesturing to the appointment, in a Brownian moment, of some faculty from History and International Affairs and, briefly, Government and Economics, all of whom quickly left. A new name, Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures, was adopted in 1992 supposedly to answer the need to acknowledge the presence of the Indianists in the department (though how

Szanton, David L. (ed.): *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*; Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 74–118; p. 98ff.



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precisely “Asian” achieved that I do not know). An eminent specialist in African history joined Columbia in 2008 and was placed in the Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department, later to be joined by an Africa anthropologist and political scientist. Their presence, along with other new appointments in political science—one studying India, another the Arab world—and joint appointments of a Middle Eastern and a South Asian anthropologist and a historian, clearly required a rectification of names. Given that the department now covered more physical territory than any other unit in the university outside of astrophysics, we entertained, for a brief moment, the idea to think entirely beyond areas: Dept. of Regional and Comparative Languages and Cultures; Dept. of Regional and Comparative Studies; Dept. of International and Comparative Studies; Dept. of Postareal and Comparative Studies; Dept. of Postcolonial Studies; Dept. of Postoriental Studies; Dept. of Global South Studies... . In a moment of nomenclature-fatigue, however, we settled on a hyper-charged areal name, “Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies”—which says everything and nothing.

Something far more important than nomenclature is at issue in this history, of course, namely, the transformed structure of knowledge—the kinds of knowledge we should be producing in view of the kinds of good we are supposed to serve—that these organizational changes represent. For one thing, the view that the social sciences as these relate to South Asia are seen as properly housed in “studies” departments presumably depends on the conviction that they produce an entirely different species of knowledge from that of their one-time disciplines. For another, the emphasis in teaching, hiring, and research has shifted almost completely to the modern period. These developments are by no means unwelcome per se. Social science situated outside of “social science,” looking in at the disciplines from the exterior and contesting the sometimes false and even harmful generalizations of Western theory can be invaluable, to be sure; new area-studies formations enable us to perceive transregional processes that areas more strictly construed can conceal. In the best of cases, such “postdisciplinary” formations—as we have come to characterize them, hopefully—have the potential to produce new interdisciplinary teaching and research, on such things as transregional Islam or globalization, comparative colonialism, varieties of postcoloniality, the political economy of the non-West—thus replacing containers with connections, as some have put it. Moreover, the transformation has given a space to modern South Asian humanistic studies that may otherwise have been slower to arrive, given the assumption, long-standing however erroneous, that whatever was authentic



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in South Asia was old and the province of Indology, and whatever was new was derivative and the province of the social sciences.

On the negative side, however, it is clear that today's reorganization of knowledge has been reactive and not principled, a result less of planning than of hazard, evidence not so much of creative scholarly rethinking as of brute exclusion by the disciplines in the case of the social sciences, and in that of the humanities, a perceived unsustainability of small-scale philology units. We in the US seem in fact to be slowly coming around, in a way, to the position of the South Asia Institute, but we have done so circuitously, even accidentally. And it is no wonder, in all this unreflective reorganization, that little systematic thought should be given to the key question I have been concerned with here: What is South Asian knowledge, the long disenfranchised knowledge South Asians have produced, the kind that fits into no straightforward instrumentalist program of application, good for anyway?

III

While institutional structures may not determine thought in any strict manner, they can surely channel thought in one direction—and away from another. The initial failure in the US of area studies, *stricto sensu*, led to a salutary dispersion of South Asia across the disciplines, which bore fruit for both the area specialists and their non-area colleagues (we should actually write “non-area” in inverted quotes, not only because there is no view from nowhere, but because most such scholars in fact specialize in American area studies without acknowledging it). And scholars in departments of languages and literatures that were preserved or newly created maintained a space to cultivate their own gardens. The crack-up—or what I see as a crack-up—has produced not only disciplines far more provincialized than ever before in the past fifty years, and areas far more undisciplined than ever (making a mere slogan of the vaunted interdisciplinarity just mentioned), but also a far more problematic, dangerously asymmetrical relationship between area-based social sciences and the historical humanities, above all, philology. Caught in the space that is neither area (and not yet transarea) nor discipline (let alone transdiscipline), South Asian studies in general in the US today is conceptually nowhere; and if nowhere can have a center, let me add, then South Asian philology is in the center of nowhere.

In contrast to all this sound and fury in the US, the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg, at least to an outsider looking in, seems like an island of order in



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a sea of chaos. There are, to be sure, aspects of the problems just described that the Institute has proven no more been capable of addressing than any other institution. It is not clear how far the knowledge created in the Institute has helped to “arealize” the disciplines in the University at large, and it offers no strong evidence of the essential complement to such arealization, namely, the disciplinization of the area (South Asian language-and-literary studies, for example, except in a few stellar areas, has remained curiously underdeveloped in Heidelberg for decades, and so kept from contributing to the larger disciplinary formation, let alone to the creation of a reflexive, hermeneutical, *critical* philology of the sort for which South Asian materials provide material in such abundance).²⁰ But on balance we are offered an astonishing picture of success. For fifty years the Institute has offered a remarkably stable framework for research and teaching in which knowledge about South Asia and South Asians’ own knowledge are both respected and cultivated to the highest standards of excellence. Indeed, it may be the only such framework in the world where, first, both forms of knowledge are meant to be produced simultaneously and interactively in the same academic site; and where, second, not only do scholars not have to choose between the two but they are not *meant* to choose, since it is acknowledged that the extrinsically verified and the intrinsically validated are intimately linked, that the general or global recovers its richest meaning in the dense web of connections that exist only in the particular or the regional; and where, third, the institutional conjunction with the (supposedly) true and useful knowledge protects the cultivation of the (supposedly) untrue and useless.

It would be invidious for me, since I cannot name all names and all research projects underway at the Institute—I am, inevitably, unfamiliar with many of them—to name any names and projects. But even a cursory survey of its overall research horizon reveals some prominent themes and perspectives.

The South Asia Institute has found a way, again through its very institutional structure, to declare to the world that Buddhist epistemology is as important to our universities, and perhaps to the well-being of people across the world, as the political sociology of Pakistan. It has grasped that to understand ritual—and since South Asia preserves a synchrony of the modern and the archaic in a way matched by few other places in the world, it offers a profusion of empirical data on ritual, especially ritual in transition—is to understand something

20 See Pollock, Sheldon (forthcoming): *Kritische Philologie: Essays zu Literatur, Sprache und Macht in Indien und Europa*; trans. Brigitte Schöning; Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag.



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at the very core of social existence. It has declared by the careful cultivation of many of South Asia's literary languages that the region, by its three millennia of continuous, multilingual textual production, has made perhaps the most luminous literary contribution to world civilization. And this is just to touch the tip of the very deep proverbial iceberg.

Equally important, in my view, is how scholars at Heidelberg look at problems in a transhistorical fashion, making clear the role of the past in the present, whether this pertains to the phenomenon of pilgrimage, the nature of the city, or the formation of a national literature. But also crucial is how they look at problems in a seriously comparative spirit, generally between South Asia and Europe, as in the case of performance traditions, or between South and East Asia (as in some of the work on ritual), or between India and Tibet. In the last case we have not so much comparison as connection, a study of sustained transculturation where foundational questions of, say, reasoning as embedded in everyday life are analyzed and juxtaposed to the modes of formal reasoning found in works on logic. Moreover, we encounter thinking about traditional disciplinary methods in new and highly transdisciplinary ways, and here the very idea of "ethno-Indology" deserves to be singled out as exemplary.

In addition to these commitments to transhistorical, comparative, and transdisciplinary scholarship, what I find crucial at the South Asia Institute is the conceptual move to explore the question of South Asian *difference*, in everything from practices of ritual to views of the body, and to do so in a theoretically enriching way. Here we encounter perhaps the most powerful corrective to Weber's vision of "*Fehlen*," and which brings us back to the question with which I began. Let me make it clear that I have no intention of suggesting, because I do not believe, that South Asia's contribution is the most important ever made to world knowledge. The historical communities that have inhabited what we now call South Asia are no more privileged than any other for scholarly attention. What the region does provide is a record of the achievements of human consciousness, equaled by few other areas of inquiry in its richness and duration, and which thereby allows us to frame strong hypotheses about the nature of that consciousness and the conditions of its transformation. Making sense of these achievements *in and of themselves*—and not because they are somehow our racial inheritance, nor even because they somehow enable us to "live intelligently" in the world, to say nothing of the usual answers offered in South Asia itself: nostalgia, hollow cultural pride, and the deplorable if seemingly ubiquitous quackery of the sort that aims to find



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the recipe for cold fusion in some Vedic text—is a large part of what scholarly inquiry should be aiming for.

One argument in support of this claim, of the value of understanding the achievements of other, especially earlier, forms of human consciousness, and the kind of generalized openness toward knowledge that it embodies, was expressed in a celebrated lecture Leopold von Ranke gave in 1854, when setting out his *Ausgangspunkt und Hauptbegriffe* of historiography. Ranke, you will remember, offers a powerful critique of progressivism and of what is actually a kind of Whig history *avant la lettre*, strongly opposing the view “dass ... jede Generation die vorhergehende vollkommen übertreffe, mithin die letzte die bevorzugte, die vorhergehenden aber nur die Träger der nachfolgenden wäre.” “Eine solche gleichsam mediatisierte Generation,” he goes on to argue, “würde an und für sich eine Bedeutung nicht haben.” It would have no direct relationship to the divine; on the contrary, such a historical conception would presuppose divine injustice, since it would be evidence of the inequity of God in apportioning historical significance. For Ranke—and here is the famous phrase that people remember from this lecture if they remember anything—“Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott, und ihr Wert beruht gar nicht auf dem, was aus ihr hervorgeht, sondern in ihrer Existenz selbst, in ihrem Eigenen selbst.”²¹

I value Ranke’s argument even as a secular scholar, and it goes some way toward explaining why South Asian knowledge is important. At the same time, I feel there is more than evenhandedness to offer in support of my claims about specific forms of human consciousness in history, including South Asian knowledge. And this goes back to the question of difference I just mentioned. If real education, as the sociologist Andrew Abbott once put it, consists in finding “many and diverse new meanings to attach to whatever events or phenomena we examine,”²² then to be educated at all we need, even desperately need, some awareness of the radically different meanings South Asians (and others of course) have offered to the world over the centuries and are still offering, real options in how people have lived and might yet live their lives: differences in social orders, political orders, aesthetic orders, even economic orders. The now widely discredited knowledge I have referred to, it bears repeating, is the accumulated labor of millennia of human consciousness, which we cannot

21 Ranke, Leopold von (1971): *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*; ed. Theodor Schieder & Helmut Berding; München, Oldenbourg, pp. 58–60.

22 Abbott, Andrew (2002): “Welcome to the University of Chicago”. Aims of Education Address delivered on September 26, 2002 at the University of Chicago. (http://www.ditext.com/abbott/abbott_aims.html, last accessed January 13, 2014)



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lightly toss in the trash. To do so would be to enter willingly into a species-wide state of Alzheimer's, a state hardly less destructive on the grand scale than it is on the personal. I have been privileged to live my life amid this body of thought, and I have glimpsed, or thought I have glimpsed, a vast range of things I would otherwise never have known: relationships of culture and power, for example, that were nothing like those we know in the contemporary world of nationalism and imperialism; forms of vernacular life, such as language ideologies, that constituted, not a compulsion driven by ethnicity, but an accommodation to, literally, the particular ecologies of particular places; a cosmopolitanism that was voluntary rather than compulsory (like, say, Romanization), ethnicities that were fluid (if they existed at all), universalism that managed to co-exist with particularism. Other scholars far from my own world of study have begun to glimpse this too. These include the historian of science Bruno Latour, for example, who sees the Indian *mūrti* as unsettling the common-sense dichotomy of the truly real and the falsely constructed; and the sociologist Michael Burroway, for whom single gods with multiple avatars provide good examples of a "pluralistic universalism" all but unthinkable according to the reductive logic of modernity.²³ Such forms of knowledge produced by Indians have been, not fantasies, but lived realities, realities that disrupt what would otherwise seem to be the iron laws of Western knowledge—real *topoi* that give utopians, which all of us today must be to some degree, reason to hope. They provide us with new questions, sometimes very disruptive questions; they show us the world was different, and can be different.

In the brief limits of this talk I have tried to show that two different kinds of knowledge are signified in the question posed in my title, and that these have been the objects of spheres of scholarly inquiry that in the US have been increasingly differentiated—not just differentiated but problematically and detrimentally discriminated, for the new division of intellectual labor has produ-

23 See Burroway, Michael (2005): 'Conclusion: Provincializing the Social Sciences'; in: Steinmetz, George (ed.): *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others*; Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 508–526; p. 509; Latour, Bruno (2002): 'What is Iconoclasm? Or is There a World Beyond the Image Wars?' in Weibel, Peter & Bruno Latour (eds.): *Iconoclasm, Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*; Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 14–37 (see p. 42 in particular from the citation from U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Bharatapuram*), and more generally Latour, Bruno (2004): 'Whose Cosmos? Which Cosmopolitics? A Commentary on Ulrich Beck's Peace Proposal'; in: *Common Knowledge* 10.3, 450–462; for the rest, Pollock, Sheldon (2006): *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men. Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*; Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press.



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ced simultaneously a serious division of intellectual worth. As the Heidelberg South Asia Institute has been demonstrating for fifty years, however, while we desperately need to know about climate change and global epidemics and the rest of the problems that knowledge about South Asia can help us solve, knowledge of South Asia, knowledge that South Asians themselves have produced, has a critical role to play in our lives. A century before Weber, the English statesman Macaulay, author of the “Minute on Indian Education”—the longest minute in Indian history—denounced Indian languages as “useless,” with “no books on any subject which deserve to be compared to our own”; regarded as “exploded” all Indian sciences, “which, by universal confession, whenever they differ from those of Europe, differ for the worse”; spoke of India’s “false History, false Astronomy, false Medicine [...] and false religion.”²⁴ If our understanding of “usefulness” and “truth” has grown substantially in the time since Macaulay and Weber; if we have learned that they are no longer to be judged by the metrics of colonialism and capitalist modernity, this is in no small measure thanks to centers like Heidelberg’s South Asian Institute.

śataṃ jīva śarado vardhamānaḥ / śataṃ hemantāñ chatam u vasantān

May it live a hundred autumns in strength, a hundred more winters and springs. (RV 10.161)²⁵

Thank you for your kind attention.

24 Macaulay, Thomas Babington (1835): “Minute on Indian Education”, published in Sharp, Henry (1920): *Selections from the Educational Records, Bureau of Education, India*, vol. 1; Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing; reprint 1965, Delhi: National Archives of India; 107–117.

25 Arya, Ravi Prakash (ed.) (1997): *R̥gveda-saṃhitā*, vol. 4, Maṇḍala 9-10; Delhi, Parimal Publications (Parimala Saṃskṛta granthamālā 45), 555.





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