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Relational Studies on Global Crises: beyond International Relations and Area Studies

(Lecture at CIRAS, Kyoto University. 17 February 2018)

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Abstract: Contemporary global issues are showing us the fact that what has been "common sense" in modern social sciences up to the 20th century is collapsing. A new approach should be introduced, that is the Relational Studies on Global Crises, to combine Area Studies and IR. What we emphasize is the relationships between various levels, from micro to macro, and the fact that the scales of these levels are constantly changing and mutually influencing one another due to the globalization of information and thought, objects, money, and the movement of people. In order to understand modern global society, RSGC will analyze not only the subject itself but also the relationships within the subject, which is a cobweb, a network of numerous criss-crossing relationships.

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In the 21st century, due to globalization, there have been a growing number of problems that transcend borders, involving both state and non-state actors, such as trans-/supra-/sub-national and socio-cultural networks. We can, therefore, see a tendency for local problems to become issues that have a global impact.

The fact that since June 2014 the “Islamic State (IS)” has been able to extend its power to various parts of a region, and that, since 2015, it could target both Europe and the United States, provides one example of the global spread of extremism and violent radicalism. As a result of the Syrian Civil War (2011-) and other prolonged regional conflicts in Yemen (2015-), Iraq (2003-) and Afghanistan (2001-), millions of refugees have flowed into Europe, and immigration, refugee relief and the establishment of a multi-cultural society have posed urgent humanitarian challenges, while blocking immigrants has begun in the EU and the U.S.. We are facing various problems, such as hate crimes, racism, intolerance of people of other ethnicities and religious “others”, on top of natural disasters and infectious diseases, which often lead to domestic poverty and unfairness.

Such global issues cannot be dealt with by any one nation or group of nations. They should be tackled globally.

Contemporary global issues are showing us the important fact that what has been "common sense" in modern social sciences up to the 20th century, the sovereign

nation and an international society centered on such, is collapsing.

Most of the above crises occur in the Middle East, and some scholars argue that, far from being unexpected or unpredictable, the situation there is a natural consequence of the artificial territorial state-building in the region. It is often said that these problems are not global post-modern phenomena but pre-modern and that IS, the Syrian Civil War, and trans-border terrorist networks are not to be explained by 20th century academic or 21st century post-modern paradigms but, instead, can be only understood via pre-modern or even medieval paradigms (Bull 1977). The premise is that the Middle East or Islam in the region are exceptional cases.

This argument, however, cannot explain why most countries in this area have maintained the same borders once they achieved independence after the WWI, and why supra-state or sub-state identities have almost never been strong enough to build a new state based on some alternative identity, even though the existing state system has been challenged in that time by various trans-border political movements, such as Arab Nationalism, Pan-Islamism and the Palestinian diaspora. Since early 1970s when most of the states in the Middle East became independent, only Eritrea (in 1991) and South Sudan (in 2011) have been able to achieve full independence and change the post-WWI state system which was a product of Western colonial policy.

In order to avoid Middle East or Islamic exceptionalism, a new approach should be introduced that can explain the situation in the Middle East as well as phenomena

in other areas of the world that have been experiencing an erosion of their sovereignty and a meltdown of the social and political order. This is the aim of our project of Scientific Research on Innovative Areas in establishing "Relational Studies on the Global Crises" (RSGC), as a new paradigm of multi-disciplinary and practical research that can function as an alternative to 20th century paradigms.

Beyond the Limits of Existing Academic Studies

None of this is to say that there have been no academic studies that deal with the global crises. Indeed, there are two major academic fields that can be useful for analyzing the current crises; they are International Relations (IR) and Area Studies.

International Relations

As a scholar in IR, I feel its limitations when I try to analyze the current global situation by focusing only on state-actors. Many constructivist and reflexivist scholars have criticized a mainstream in IR that is based on realism and rationalist approaches, IR tends to base itself on a narrow, state-centric understanding that considers the state border to be a solid demarcation between domestic and international politics (Smith 2004:505).

This type of IR emerged from the experiences of two world wars and was developed in the bipolar system under the Cold War. The basics of IR theory are the relationships between countries, and the idea that world-wide crises in the 20th

century stemmed from transformations in relations among nation-states. In other words, the 20th century was the century of Relations among Nation States¹.

However, this type of global order is now dissolving; the dominance of the state as an entity is no longer self-evident. Shibasaki has already expressed his critical view of IR, saying that the “incompatibility among the theories of IR is increasing as ‘new theories’ of IR are just added and attached to previous ones; thus scholars do not heed the integrated delineation of the world as a whole, which includes factors besides the inter-state relations which IR aims to analyze” (Shibasaki 2016). He argues, further, that the classical type of IR theory on inter-state relations is not enough, and that it is necessary to introduce a new IR theory, “mobile IR”, which focuses on transnational actors. He proposes the construction of a “new theory that can capture the integration and disintegration of, and the confrontation and co-existence of every arbitrary ‘gathering’, including those of the state-actors” (Shibasaki 2015: 35, 42).

Area Studies

The second academic field that has often been often applied to an understanding and solution of global crises is Area Studies. Area Studies in a broad sense has developed as an integrative discipline that includes the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences.

¹ Comment by Takehiko Ochiai, a professor in Ryukoku University, in a research meeting on 31 September 2017.

My sense of discomfort with Area Studies is that it is often expected to serve policy-making, or be used as a tool to influence, control, or dominate other areas either intentionally or unintentionally. Scholars in Area Studies are considered to have detailed information about local actors which might be useful for political mobilization and manipulation. Here I will summarize the problems of Area Studies as discussed mainly in Western academia.

There are a number of examples from history. T. E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia,” who played a decisive role in the British penetration of the Middle East on the eve of and during the First World War, is the best example. Another is Gertrude Bell, an archeologist who played an important part in establishing the state of Iraq in the late 1910s and beginning of 1920s, and who was known as the uncrowned queen of the desert (Howell 2007).

Here we face the same old predicament. Scholars of Area Studies might be involved in directing wars, as has happened to political scientists in the U.S. during the War on Terror since 2001. Various scholars in Area Studies collaborated with U.S. military operations in Iraq after 2006, when its army suffered from the resistance movements and insurgency there. The “Human Terrain System” was introduced so that the U.S. army could make use of the knowledge about local actors offered by scholars and researchers. The cultural anthropologist, Montgomery McFate, who served as the Senior Social Science Adviser for the U.S. Army’s Human Terrain

System, was a typical case (McFate 2008).

It seems the role of Area Studies might become increasingly important in the era of globalization, where non-state actors have a large effect on world security. David Kilcullen, a scholar who served as an advisor to David Petraeus, the former commanding general of the Multi-National Forces in Iraq, points out that “since the new threats are not state-based, the basis for our approach should not be international relations” (the study of how nation-states interact in elite state-based frameworks) “but anthropology” (the study of social roles, groups, status, institutions and relations within human population groups in non-elite, non-state-based frameworks) (Kilcullen 2007). In other words, it is time for Area Studies to play a crucial role in winning hearts and minds in wars and occupation.

Needless to say, there is criticism of scholars’ involvement in politics. Roberto J. González warns about the involvement of contemporary anthropologists in 21st-century counter-insurgency theory, and suggests that social anthropology “could be used as a tool to challenge, not support, colonial rule” (González 2009: 19).

It is more than a question of ethics as to whether scholars should maintain a distance from politics or not. It is worth noting that McFate is criticized not because of her involvement in U.S. policy-making but because of her emphasis on the role of “tribes”, since “many anthropologists have attempted to avoid the word, or deliberately isolate it in inverted commas because of its persistent ambiguities”

(González 2009:15).

Moreover, a simplified framework for the understanding of a research object may produce a new fault line. The case of post-war Iraq is a good example. During and after the Iraq War, the U.S. introduced a simplified understanding of Iraqi society as being composed of three ethnic/sectarian communities of Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiite Arabs. The idea of the three divisions of Iraqi society was reflected in the formation of the post-war Iraqi regime, which emphasized a sectarian allocation of governmental posts. The newly introduced electoral system encouraged sect-based mobilization and accelerated the fight over votes based on a person's ethnicity or sect. The U.S. anthropologist Julie Peteet expressed the following reservation, "If sect and tribe are reinvigorated for understanding and acting toward the Middle East, the onus is on the academy to provide a vigorous critique and devise new frameworks of understanding as to how their deployment may be making them a reality on the ground" (Peteet 2008:552).

Here the scholar in Area Studies has to answer a serious question. How can we know who represents the society we study? A knowledge of Area Studies may contribute to understanding, analysis, and solving global problems at the community level. One of the most creative and innovative roles of Area Studies is to introduce diverse viewpoints to relativize the Western-oriented world view in the search for global peace and justice. This helps to shed light on marginalized minorities and the

deprived, those who are burdened with harsh conditions in refugee camps, politically neglected in a collapsed state, or abandoned in ecologically ruined villages. This means that Area Studies can relativize the state-centric notion of IR and other political sciences.

The problem here, however, is that the relativization of the state as the sole actor may lead to the rise of non-state actors merely as an alternative to the state in the expectation that a non-state body can play the role of a coherent actor. What is ironical is that most Area Studies' scholars criticize a primordialist understanding of a community, while they adopt a primordialist approach when they try to identify their object of research, labelling it with names such as "Shi'a", the "Shammar tribe", "Tikritis", etc. Once a group is given a name, they start to act as if they are the actor, whether they are sub-state, state, or supra-state. Kurds and Shi'ites in Iraq, for example, have long been considered the greatest victims of Saddam's regime, and Sunnis have been labelled as supporters of the former regime. This leads to competition among certain groups that are recognized as actors with the full right to claim that they have a legitimacy to rule certain communities or states.

So, when I say I am a scholar in Iraqi Area Studies, what do I mean by Iraq or the Iraqis? Am I not neglecting others when I take up a certain social group in Iraq? Am I not changing the balance of power among Iraqi local groups by choosing one group as an example and writing their story?

This question leads to two others that are never answered. What is Area Studies? What do scholars in Area Studies study? This is the one of the main reasons why I am now proposing the idea of RSGC. The problem I raised above about Area Studies comes from the fact that most Area Studies, and comparative studies in general, are expected to fix a certain actor (state, local community, ethnic or religious group, etc.) as the target of their study, and focus on analyzing their nature or essence or substance. Area Studies tends to premise the special-ness of the society and culture of a certain area, and to consider the area as a coherent entity. The problem with Area Studies I mentioned above has its origin in the curse of this actor-centric stance.

At the same time, some work in Area Studies focuses on relationships among actors, rather than being simply an analysis of the substance of the actors. Peteeet argues, “Tribes do exist, but they are being imagined and mobilized in ways that assume coherency and corporate-ness and a questionable vision of shaykhly power. Rather than corporate entities, tribes are a way of reckoning relatedness” (Peteeet 2008:551). We can say the same thing about most traditional societies, such as sectarian communities, urban/rural bonds, and religious networks. What Area Studies’ scholars observe is just a snapshot of the complex dynamism of a society and the result of social relationships within certain time frames and conditions, not everlasting primordial entities. More than a quarter of a century ago, Wallerstein, though not a scholar of Area Studies, warned that “it is futile to analyze the processes

of the societal development of our multiple (national) ‘societies’ as if they were autonomous, internally evolving structures” (Wallerstein 1991:77).

Moreover, an area itself cannot be considered to be static. Osamu Ieda, a historian on Eastern Europe, clearly points out that we should both consider an area as an elastic space that is the creation of historically accumulated relatedness and shed more light on the flexibility of the boundaries of the area (Ieda 2008). It is widely understood that the area of the Middle East itself was invented during a power game among Europe’s colonial powers; it does not consist of self-claimed geographical territories.

The RSGC I suggest here is to combine Area Studies and IR by linking the strong points of both, adding the viewpoint of Area Studies, with its focus on non-state actors, to analyze global relationships, to the framework of IR for its focus on relatedness. The basic idea of the RSGC is the relationship, rather than the actors themselves. It is not a simple matter of relations among state-actors or a unilateral and non-reversible relation among actors. What we emphasize is the relationships between various levels, i.e., local, society, state, trans-state and global, and the fact that the scales of these levels are constantly changing and mutually influencing one another due to the globalization of information and thought, objects, money, and the movement of people. In order to understand modern global society, we have to analyze not only the subject itself but also the relationships within the subject, which

is a cobweb, a network of numerous criss-crossing relationships.

De-construct the “actor”

Then, what shall we do in the RSGC?

For a better understanding of the current global crises, the first goal of our project is to de-construct the “actor” or any unit that is considered to be an “autonomous realm of human agency” (Urry 2000:14).

Once we shift our eyes from the actor as the driving force of global politics, what should we focus on? We understand that global crises are the products of a web of interconnections, and occur as a result of the transformation of these relations. They are not due to any actor’s essential qualities. Furthermore, actors can be understood as a collection of various networks, which can be understood as elastic and changeable in different contexts.

The Complexity of Analyzing Relations

The problem here, however, is that the web of numerous crisscrossing relationships is too complicated to be analyzed. As I started my argument on the need to introduce RSGC because of the extraordinary aspects of the current global crises which cannot fully be explained by the “common sense” of modern social sciences up to the 20th century, let me clarify three aspects in the current global crises where we find unpredictability within the interconnection of relationships.

The first is the horizontal synchronicity of mutual influence, co-relating various political and social movements in an unexpectedly broader area. The impact of the mobility of the Syrian refugees is one example. The civil war in Syria affected people's mobility both within and outside national borders, transforming relations not only in the region but also between the Middle East and Europe, which brought about an increase in populism and an anti-migrant movement in the West.

The second point is the interaction and interdependence among societies on various scales, from the micro level to the macro level, as well as across time frames. For example, local conflicts over the exploitation by large landowners in southern Iraq in the 1950s sowed the seeds for sectarian discrimination in Iraq, which was then linked to the rise in the regional power of Iran from 1979, which stimulated the power struggle between Iran and the Arab Gulf states. This has developed into a wider perception of the sectarian conflict in the Middle East since 2003 as a source of the so-called "New Middle East Cold War" (Gause 2014), involving global powers such as Russia and the U.S..

Third is the polarization and radicalization of the framing of the networks or movements involved. Ideological differences are less crucial causes of intolerance than incompatibility among principles and the acceptance or rejection of pluralism per se.

Relations as Loop-type Interactions

These new phenomena of the unpredictable expansion of global crises cannot be explained simply by unilinear causal relations among existing actors. They are, by contrast, complicated, reciprocal interactions among widespread networks. These relations are not linear; they consist of loop-type interactions among subjects and objects, which means that the subject and object cannot be separated from one another.

Moreover, perceptions regarding these relations are not the same for those concerned. The subject does not share the same perceptions as the object concerning the relationships between them or with outside observers. Gaps occur in these perceptions, and these create mutual trust and/or distrust, and a consensus and/or misunderstanding in people's daily lives. Gaps also emerge in the narratives between those within the state border and those outside.

What are "events"?

How, then, should we analyze this complex global web of interrelatedness?

What we are trying to focus on is not a static, fixed relationship but elastic, changeable and flexible relationships, which become manifest in certain "events" like wars, revolutions, and social movements, when various relations meet, cross, interrelate, synchronize and become complicated when they conjoin in these "events".

RSGC analyzes these “events” not by shedding light on their substance but on the contingent-conjunctural nature of the phenomenon, i.e., the “Points of Access”, as Matsunaga explains².

Here “events” include:

1. Conflicts, military attacks, clashes, social-economic tension, etc.
2. Revolutions, political and social movements, institutional changes, etc.
3. The emergence and prevalence of thoughts, slogans, symbols, cultural trends, etc.

Picking some “events” as targets of analysis, we can prove that RSGC can explain these “events” better without being detached from reality. Scholars will focus on certain relations that emerge in the “events”, using various methods of analysis, such as big data, a statistical approach, text analysis, and ethnographic research.

Case study of “Events”: conflicts and refugees in Iraq

Let me take the series of conflicts and refugees/migrants in Iraq as an example of “events”. Refugee and migrant issues are the best case studies for grasping the interconnectedness of various relations from the micro level to the macro level in global society, because the problems of mobile people cannot be ascribed to themselves. They are, instead, due to the “sub-systems of an increasingly global

² Comment by Yasuyuki Matsunaga, a professor of Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, in a research meeting on 23 July, 2017.

economic and political system” (Castles and Miller 2009: 25-26).

Iraq has experienced a series of conflicts and wars since the 1980s that have caused constant waves of refugees. Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) and especially during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the oppressive policy of the Ba‘thi regime forced Iraqi Shi‘ites to leave Iraq claiming that they were of Iranian origin, not only for Iran but also for Syria, the Gulf Arab countries, and Europe. In this population, opposition groups formed against the Ba‘thist regime, such as Shi‘ite-inclined Islamist parties in Iran, Kurdish nationalists in Syria and pro-Syrian Ba‘thist groups in Syria. These developed after the Gulf War (1991) into larger-scale opposition forces with help from the U.S. and the U.K.. Especially after 1992, when the Iraqi National Congress was established and supported by the U.K., political expatriates established an inclusive umbrella opposition. At the same time, the idea of power sharing according to the ethnic/sectarian balance was introduced.

Apart from the political actors, ordinary Iraqis started to leave their country after the Gulf War as Iraqi economies deteriorated because of the UN economic sanctions (1990-2003). Most, regardless of their sectarian differences, migrated to Jordan, either as asylum-seekers or as migrants. In the peak year of 1992, 1.32 million Iraqis migrated to Jordan, according to Geraldine Chatelard (2003). Social tensions between the Iraqi migrants and the Jordanian government as well as with local communities may have changed the relations between Iraqis and Jordanians in such a manner as to

pave the way for the attacks by Iraqi Jihadists against Jordanian institutions in 2003 (the bombing of the Jordanian Embassy in Baghdad) and 2006 (suicide attacks on hotels in Amman).

Then the Iraq War in 2003 totally changed the situation. Political expatriates who had fled to the U.S., the U.K., Iran and Syria went back to Iraq immediately after the regime was toppled, but ex-Ba‘thists and those who were considered collaborators with the previous regime were obliged to leave Iraq, mainly for Jordan and, to some extent, the Gulf states. Returned expatriates used their close relations with political decision makers in their former host countries in the U.S. and the U.K.. The domestic politics of Iraq was heavily influenced by these external actors.

In this context, the civil war in Iraq during 2006-2007 and the invasion of IS in the north and west of Iraq during 2014-2017 can be understood as a juncture of various faultlines. There were rivalries, one, between supporters of the previous regime and the U.S./post-war regime, two, between the U.S. and Iraq’s central government and local socio-political agencies, three, among the proxies of the erstwhile host-states (the U.S./ Iran/ the Arab Gulf etc.), four, between Islamic radicals and secularists, and, five, among various ethnic and sect-based communities. All claimed rights under the post-war regime.

The migrants and refugees reflect these relations of rivalry that emerged from the conflicts and socio-economic marginalization, and the fault-lines, visualized and

embodied in the migrants and refugees, can be the source of further conflicts. IS is a typical example of marginalized people in exile introducing new conflicts in an apparently sectarian and reductionist style.

In order to grasp how violent conflicts and critical refugee problems develop and escalate in an intertwined way, it is useful to analyze migrants and refugees as symbols of the faultlines in these conflicts. Perceptions about who is fighting whom easily change. People on the move can be viewed as a mirror that reflects the perceptions of these rivalries, not as carriers of some essence that has to be fought and defeated. The story of the refugees/migrants is not simply an issue of those who are deprived of their lives. It is also a matter how they perceive their right to stay in their homeland and how people set borders around their community during a conflict.

Thus the perspective that RSGC offers is a focus on relations that broadens the scope of both refugee studies and conflict studies by shedding light on numerous influences at various levels in networks from the micro to the macro level in the intertwined and complicated relationships that exist in the world today.

RSGC can play a central and pivotal role in revitalizing the human and social sciences in order to solve the global crisis.

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