

2

Even Globalized, the World is Uneven: The Pandemic and Area Studies



Kota SUECHIKA

Professor, College of International Relations
Ritsumeikan University
(May 15, 2020)

Every time we have faced an “unknown” situation, mankind has developed new academic sciences. It is well known that the 17th-century British plague epidemic contributed to the development of statistics. The pandemic of the new Coronavirus occurring in 2020 may also trigger a

review of existing academic knowledge, leading to the birth of new academic sciences.

In the current coronal crisis, we are witnessing the power of numbers and figures to command our minds. Various kinds of numbers are lined up daily on TV and online news. Since the new coronavirus is an infectious disease, it is natural that various numbers based on “scientific grounds” should be emphasized, and even the most profound words may appear hazy in front of these numbers. In addition, the latest technology using big data and AI has emerged to predict the probability and spread of infection and propose “optimized” human behavior based on these numbers.

Under these circumstances, what role does the field that I am specialized in and teaching, the so-called Area Studies, have? Some students may feel anxious or even confused. Actually, even before the Coronavirus crisis, students sometimes asked similar questions. If so, such anxiety and confusion may be increasing.

However, we should not worry, because the world is full of “unknown” phenomena, for better or worse, which cannot be reduced to clear numbers. There are abundant things that we still have to research and learn.

The pandemic is apparently a characteristic of the globalized world we live in. No wonder it has become a universal phenomenon, attracting our serious attention. If we look at it closely, however, we find that, while the current pandemic crisis is covering the entire world, it has brought different consequences in different parts of the world, as shown by the fact that the number of people infected and the number of deaths is higher in Europe, though the timing of the spread was later there than in Asia.

In other words, this fact reminds us that the globalized world is not a level playing field, and uneven local realities endow each region with its own inherent nature. While anyone in any region has an equal chance of being infected by the virus and the basic condition is that the epidemic spreads indiscriminately throughout the world, contrary to the equality of these universal facts, each part of the world has a different reality.

Area studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that seeks to comprehensively understand the actual conditions of various regions of the world, which we call “Areas”. There is also a method of statistically analyzing the unevenness of the world, where demographics, climate conditions, medical systems, governmental measures, and other variables are calculated and analyzed, and the analysts will tell us tendencies and probabilities. However, this method measures differences with “known” variables, and does not offer a grasp of the deeper realities, inherent but often not apparent, of each region.

In order to understand the region, it is indispensable to approach the actual conditions of ecology, history, culture, society, politics, economy, and the like, in order to find out something that is unknown or untranslatable into numbers. For example, internal logics inherent in language and history specific to the region may dictate human behavior even during the Coronavirus crisis. If that was the real factor creating differences in the consequences of Coronavirus pandemic situations, the measures taken up to that point must be reviewed. It will contribute to our imagining not only the pictures of the region in the “post-Corona” era, which will come soon, but also how our world should be through new transformations.

Author's Profile

Kota SUECHIKA: Professor at College of International Relations, and Director, Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies, Ritsumeikan University. Ph.D. (Area Studies). Specialties: Middle Eastern Studies, International Relations, and Comparative Politics. Among his works: *Islamism: Search for an Alternative Modernity*, Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho, 2018; *Islamism and Politics in the Middle East: Resistance and Revolution of Lebanon's Hizb Allah*, Nagoya: Nagoya University Press, 2013; *State Transformation and Islam in Contemporary Syria*, Kyoto: Nakanishiya, 2005. Among his research articles: "Sectarian Fault Lines in the Middle East: Sources of Conflicts or Communal Bonds?" *Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics*, London: Routledge, 2020 (co-author with Dr. Keiko SAKAI) .