

David Ludden on the concept of Asian Studies.

Professor David Ludden, in Lund on October 23 to participate in a seminar organized by SASNET and UPF on the political development in Nepal called *“Where is the revolution? Towards a Post-National Politics of Social Justice”*, was also invited to hold a seminar for Master’s students at Lund University talking about the role and relevance of Asian Studies and area studies in general. In an illuminating talk, he briefly explained the US national agenda behind the set up and funding of Area Studies departments in US universities. The relevance of area studies (which had a prominent role during the Cold War years) was questioned in the 1990s by advocates of Globalisation as a new way to understand and articulate knowledge about the world; the need for experts on a particular area (or country) seemed outdated in the face of the new globalising world, where borders wouldn’t matter anymore and local differences would eventually be absorbed in the greater global frame. The tragic shock of 9/11, however, brought area studies back to the limelight; US realised it needed a corpus of highly professional experts on areas considered at risk for national security.

Aside from discussing the American political agenda – informing, however, the allocation of funds and thus strictly connected to the development of area studies departments in the US – professor Ludden raised some important questions, certainly relevant for researchers all over the world: what is the role and relevance of area studies? How are professionals to deal with their specialised knowledge? How to frame the concept of area studies in order to overcome nationalistic influence and arbitrary divisions? What are the criteria that define an ‘area’ or a ‘nation’?

The discussion highlighted the need for an inter-disciplinary approach, and perhaps, as Professor Ludden suggested, an effort to re-think spaces, peoples, borders, disciplines. The established view of South Asia, for example, tends to focus almost exclusively on India, at the expense of countries like Nepal, Bangladesh etc, which are nonetheless undergoing seminal changes; similarly, economic analyses of the area would prove more effective if they kept into account local history, ethnography, environmental issues and so forth. The concept of spatiality is changing; new perspectives are emerging which look at the world from different points of view and therefore can challenge conventional assumptions about the non-Western world.

Maria Tonini

SASNET Assistant

More information on David Ludden and his visit to Lund in October 2008, see <http://www.sasnet.lu.se/lundactiv.html#ludden>