

Emmanuel Godin and Tony Chafer
University of Portsmouth

An Area Studies Approach in a European and Global context: French Studies in Portsmouth.

In the 1970s, staff in the School of Languages and Area Studies (SLAS) at Portsmouth Polytechnic (as it was then) decided to develop a new type of language degree. At that time, the traditional model of the language degree was the 'lang and lit' degree programme. Students who wanted to study languages were more or less obliged to combine the study of their chosen language(s) with the study of (mostly) the literary classics of that country. There were a few exceptions: York University, for example, offered programmes in language and linguistics, Salford and Bath specialised in translation, while Aston offered students the opportunity to combine language study with business administration. But the vast majority of language students took a 'lang and lit' degree.

It was against this background that Portsmouth, along with a small number of other UK higher education institutions, sought to break away from the traditional model of the 'lang and lit' degree and develop a new type of language degree – the 'language and area studies' degree programme – that would combine language study with the study of the history, politics, economy, society and culture of the country or countries in question. The new approach was to be resolutely multi-disciplinary and was essentially but not exclusively rooted in the social sciences.

Research-informed teaching

The pioneers of this new area studies approach recognised from the outset the importance of research. This was essential, firstly, for the development of an intellectual framework for the delivery of the new degree programmes. What were the implications of multidisciplinary for curriculum development and delivery? Which were the key disciplines that should underpin an area studies approach and how could they be combined effectively? Was genuine interdisciplinarity, as opposed to multidisciplinary, a possible and desirable objective within an undergraduate curriculum? These were some of the key questions that pioneers of the area studies approach sought to address. Second, there was a need for up-to-date, cutting-edge, interdisciplinary research to

underpin and inform the teaching on these new degree programmes. The *Journal of Area studies* was launched in 1980 by staff in the School of Languages and Area Studies with these twin objectives: to provide a forum for theoretical reflection on the 'area studies approach' and an outlet for new empirical research in area studies. The journal sought to explain, theorise and legitimise this distinctive approach. Early articles stressed the importance of interdisciplinarity (Holt, 1981, Bramley 1985) and above all, the need to integrate language and area studies (Sager and Geake, 1981). As Eric Cahm put it: 'Since a modicum of knowledge of a foreign country is essential if one is to learn to speak its language convincingly, study of the country is an almost inevitable corollary of any but the most elementary language learning' (Cahm 1980: 7). The journal already advocated the study of 'extraneous forces', which were to become part of the fabric of life in a particular area, it encouraged comparative analysis and insisted that area studies research must be 'oriented towards current public issues' (as stipulated on the back cover of early issues, see also Heilser, 1980) and inform curriculum development (Berryman, 1982). This chimed with a critical, Marxist-inspired approach to the subject (see in particular the 'Presentation' of the second issue, autumn 1980). Moreover, a willingness to engage critically with theoretical and practical issues pertaining to the area studies approach remained a core feature of the journal, which regularly devoted articles and special issues that aimed at scrutinising and renewing its own principles (see for example, Cornick and Salemhamed: 1987, Brulard, 1995, Godin, 1997).¹

In the field of French area studies, 1980 also marked the launch by Eric Cahm and Tony Chafer of the School of Languages and Area Studies in Portsmouth of *Modern and Contemporary France* as the journal of the Association for the Study of Modern and Contemporary France (ASMCF) (see in this volume the contribution by Prof. M. Cross). Again the launch of the ASMCF reflected a desire to offer an original approach to French studies. Portsmouth played an important role in the life of the association. *Modern and Contemporary France* was initially edited by colleagues at Portsmouth, which has continued to have a presence on the editorial board to this day. The journal continues to exist and has established itself as a major outlet for French area studies research. Colleagues from Portsmouth have frequently served on the executive

¹ The journal continues to exist. From 1992 it was co-published by the universities of Portsmouth and Loughborough. It subsequently changed its name to *the Journal of European Area studies* (1999) and then to the *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (2002). It is now one of the leading academic journals in the field of area studies and is currently published by Taylor and Francis.

committee of the association and Portsmouth has hosted several of the association's annual conferences: France from the Cold War to the New World Order (1994); The French Exception (2001) and France and the Mediterranean (2009).

The development of French area studies

From the 1980s onwards the area studies approach was to inform the work of many colleagues in the field of French studies in places as diverse as Portsmouth, Loughborough, Aston, Wolverhampton, Sussex, Northumbria, Westminster and Bradford. However, major challenges to the area studies approach have emerged in recent years and this is reflected in the way French area studies has evolved at Portsmouth.

Acute theoretical questions have been ushered in by post-colonialism, Europeanisation and globalisation. These have led to challenges to the centrality of metropolitan France within French area studies and to a wider questioning of the possible delineation of what – and who – constitute the boundaries of French area studies. These theoretical uncertainties have been mirrored by practical choices and decisions made by students at Portsmouth: the number of students opting for a single honours degree in French studies dropped significantly (until recently), whereas degrees combining French within a European or international dimension became much more popular. At the same time, at a national level, the overall number of students choosing to study a language degree declined: in order to survive some modules, such as French politics or French history, were offered to non-language specialists – for example, to students on history and politics degree programmes – thereby undermining what had until then been considered a constituent part of the area studies approach, as these modules could no longer be taught in French. Likewise, although French classes offered by the Institution-Wide Language Programme remained popular, they also reinforced the idea that languages could be taught independently from the culture(s) in which they were embedded. Yet, against the national backdrop of the decline of foreign languages in UK schools, French area studies in Portsmouth managed to remain a buoyant affair.

However, the nature of French area studies has been strongly redefined in recent years by two key developments: evolving research agendas in French studies, and, linked to this, a growing desire to re-contextualise French studies in its wider European and global context. At the same time, as the employment market for graduates becomes

more difficult, there is an increasing recognition of the need to improve the employability of graduates through enhanced interconnectedness between students' programmes of study and the world of work. Against this background, one of the strategies put in place in Portsmouth to address these challenges has been to develop a distinctive pathway in French and Francophone studies, with a particular focus on Africa. Two key concerns have underpinned and guided the development of this pathway: that research should continue to inform both teaching and curriculum development and that the new degree programmes in French should maintain a level of integration between area and languages.

'New' French studies and the research agenda

French and Francophone studies research form part of a larger research centre – the Centre for European and International Studies Research (CEISR) – and have made a major contribution to Portsmouth's research entry under the European studies rubric in successive UK research assessment exercises (RAE). This is a useful reminder that French studies research is not always immediately visible when 'buried' under wider labels. However, belonging to a broader research grouping has proved to be an asset rather than a hindrance for a group of researchers whose interests mainly focus on the relations between France and its European and global contexts. Within CEISR the work of the French and Francophone research cluster is focused on two main areas. In the first, it is working on a reassessment of the legacy of French colonialism in terms of its impact both in the former French colonies and in metropolitan France. In the second, it studies the changing relations between France and the Francophone world since political independence in the context of increasing globalisation of the world economy and culture. Members of the research cluster undertake work that is interdisciplinary in nature and that draws on the study of the history, culture and language of both metropolitan France and other Francophone countries and regions of the world. Their research interests are focused on Francophone Africa, where they have particularly strong links and where they also lead consultancy projects. Two recent research programmes will serve to exemplify the approach adopted by members of the cluster.

1. Recovering the motivations, experience and memory of Algerian and Senegalese veterans of the Algerian War through comparative and transgenerational oral history

This British Academy-funded research partnership investigates a little-explored aspect of the shared history of Algeria and Senegal: the participation of Senegalese soldiers in the French army during the Algerian War of Independence. Postgraduate students and young scholars in both African countries will be trained and equipped to carry out this oral history project amongst the older generation, with a particular focus on interviews in rural areas. This research will produce an oral archive accessible to all via the internet, and students and scholars will also be analysing some of the key themes that emerge from veterans' accounts under the guidance of the project leaders in the three countries. In the light of these interviews, a further central aim of this project is to reflect on how to conduct oral history in the African context, from both ethical and methodological perspectives, and, arising from this, to develop and provide training in the relevant skills for conducting such research.

The three-year programme (2009-2012) is funded by the British Academy, through the UK-Africa Academic Partnerships Scheme. The aim of the project is not only to develop an oral history archive of veterans' accounts, but also to reflect collaboratively on methodologies for carrying out oral history in North and West Africa and to transfer this knowledge to postgraduate students in Algeria and Senegal. These students will then play an active role in developing the archive itself for the duration of the project and beyond.

A central activity of this partnership is a series of workshops in Senegalese and Algerian universities (Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Centre de Recherche Ouest-Africaine, Dakar and the University of Algiers and the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Bouzareah), bringing scholars from all three participating countries together with postgraduate students from the respective universities. Theoretical and methodological questions are discussed at these workshops, along with practical examples of oral history interviews. After these intensive workshops, postgraduate students and scholars in Algeria and Senegal will carry out oral interviews with veterans. These will be available as audio recordings and/or transcriptions on the partnership's website.

2. France and Britain in Africa since Saint-Malo

This three-year British Academy-funded research project (2007-10) aims to assess the extent to which the new policy of joint or 'bilateral' cooperation between Britain and France in sub-Saharan Africa, which was announced at the Franco-British summit in

Saint-Malo in December 1998, has been implemented. The project is the product of a collaboration between colleagues from the CEISR in Portsmouth and the Department of European studies at the University of Cardiff. It seeks to analyse the causal factors and constraints that have militated in favour of and against the introduction and implementation of this collaborative agenda, to examine whether this and similar 'bilateral' models can serve as a complement to traditional unilateral and multilateral approaches to Africa's challenges and to make policy recommendations to UK and French policy-makers which would, if implemented, enhance Anglo-French cooperation in Africa. The research has been conducted in London, Paris, Brussels, New York, Dakar, Kinshasa, Abuja, Khartoum and Addis Ababa.

A key feature of the project is to explain how, following the debacle of its involvement in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the mid-1990s, France has moved away from its traditional unilateral approach to Africa, which in the military field had earned it the reputation of the 'gendarme' of Africa, towards a new focus on multilateralism. In a context of accelerating globalisation and under pressure in Africa from new powers such as China, successive French governments have also since the 1990s sought to move away from the traditional exclusive focus on the African '*pré carré*' (mainly ex-French colonies) and diversify French relations with Africa to encompass former British colonies such as South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya and former Portuguese colonies such as Mozambique. France has also sought to ensure that its interventions on the continent take place within a UN or EU framework and French African policy is increasingly mediated through the EU, often with support from the UK, as in the case of recent ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy) military missions in Africa.

With their transnational focus, these research projects can be seen at one level as significant contributions to redefining the boundaries of French studies. In order to understand how France has developed and changed since the emergence of the 'age of empires' in the late nineteenth century, the study of France and French society have to be set in the context of their interactions with the Francophone world, much of which – notably in Africa – was the direct product of the imposition of French colonial rule. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century it has equally become imperative, in order to understand the evolution of France as a global power, to study the decline of France as a colonial power in a transnational and global context. A study of the

‘Hexagon’ that neglects these interactions with the wider world simply cannot make sense of the history, society, culture and politics of contemporary France.

From research agendas to the new MA Francophone Africa

As French studies changes, there is a need for new types of specialist who can analyse and understand these changes. The largest concentration of countries in the world in which French is the official language is in Africa. Yet very little is known in the English-speaking world about the history, politics and society of those vast areas of the African continent that were previously under French colonial rule and that are today referred to under the generic term ‘Francophone Africa’, largely because of the lack of language specialists who can work in Francophone African studies. To address this gap there is a need to train students with the required language skills and knowledge base. This means restoring the links between languages and social science, to enable students to have access to archives, government reports and the French press, as well as conduct interviews with key political, economic and social actors. Without such training, there will continue to be a lack of specialists who can interpret the cultural and political codes and meanings embedded in the language and have the interdisciplinary background necessary to make sense of these codes. It is hoped that this MA will also lead to more postgraduates undertaking PhD study in the Francophone Africa field, as there are currently very few UK students currently applying to do a PhD in this area..

The new MA focuses exclusively on Francophone Africa and provides students with an opportunity to study in depth France’s relations with both French-speaking North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. A key feature of the degree is that it incorporates a study of the history of the very different approaches to French colonial rule in each of these regions with an analysis of how this historical relationship has shaped – and continues to shape – contemporary relations between France and its former African colonies. France’s rapidly changing relationship with both North and sub-Saharan Africa in the contemporary period and the impact of France’s African empire on France today are also key areas of study. The MA’s approach to Francophone Africa will be informed by three distinctive intellectual approaches. The first will be comparative: the focus will not be on a particular nation or area, but will provide opportunities to examine connections and relationships across the whole of Francophone Africa and between Francophone and Anglophone/Lusophone Africa . Second, the course will

study Francophone Africa within a transnational context, underlining how Africans have engaged with, for example, decolonisation, nationalism, the Cold War, political Islam and globalisation. Third, the course will situate the region within its wider global context, with a view to analysing the singularity of the colonial and post-colonial experience of Francophone Africa.

Curriculum development at undergraduate level

There is a strong commitment to disseminate research results not only among our postgraduate but also our undergraduate students. As in many other departments, final year undergraduate students are offered modules which reflect the research interests of staff, such as ‘Colonialism and the end of empire in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa’, ‘France in the World’, or ‘*La France contemporaine* and the French model in a European and global context’. Such modules are supported by extra-curricular activities, such as study half days that bring together academic researchers, professionals and frequently also actors and witnesses to the events being studied. Feedback clearly indicates that students appreciate teaching that is embedded in research. In addition, the curriculum is also supported by larger events, such as international conferences (eg. 2009: ASMCF Annual Conference: France and the Mediterranean; 2010: Conference to Mark the 50th Anniversary of the Year of Africa: a French Solution for sub-Saharan Africa?; 2012: 50 years of Algerian Independence).

Bringing language students together in the same classroom with those studying, for example international relations or history, has been a challenge. Driven by institutional rationalisation and the need to reduce the cost of delivering courses, there have nonetheless been some benefits. For example, while it has not been possible to maintain teaching in the target language, some elements of this have been retained through the use of a variety of texts and assessments depending on language competencies. At the same time, bringing together French studies, European studies, international relations and history students has had a number of positive effects, with students making connections that they would otherwise in all probability not have made. This has also led to a more outward-looking curriculum, with students perceiving French studies as being at the confluence of many other approaches. This ‘problematization’ of French studies is appropriate to, and in keeping with, the growing fluidity of the concept.

The period of residence abroad

This 'redefinition' of French studies is also supported by the period of residence abroad, with students being offered the opportunity to spend all or part of their year abroad in Senegal. The Dakar placement is unusual in that it comprises a combined study and work placement, with the exact balance between the two being negotiated to meet students' own interests. Portsmouth has a number of educational partnerships in Dakar, with the Université Cheikh Anta Diop, the Centre Africain d'Etudes Supérieures en Gestion, the Ecole Supérieure du Tourisme et de l'Enseignement des Langues and a bilingual pre-school, La Source Vive. It also has agreements with a local NGO for a placement in the health field and with an international NGO, Plan International, for a placement in their public relations and communication department.

The period abroad is assessed within the degree programme in terms of academic, cultural, intercultural, linguistic, personal and professional outcomes, with the language aspect situated in the full educational context of the study abroad. The period in Senegal is an intense learning experience – in the broadest sense – for students, as they adapt to the cultural and linguistic differences that they encounter. Yet no systematic study of the experience has so far been undertaken. A research project studying the long-term impact of the year abroad, in cultural, linguistic and employability terms, on students who have spent part of their period abroad in Senegal is therefore currently being undertaken.² As John Canning has rightly pointed out, language degrees cannot – should not – be reduced to the acquisition of language skills: 'graduates with an intensive knowledge of the cultures and societies of specific countries and experience of living and working overseas develop attributes for employability that language skills alone cannot provide' (Canning: 2009). This is, after all, what the area studies approach is striving to achieve.

Conclusion

The area studies approach provides a coherent framework within which French and Francophone studies have been reconfigured over the past decade or so. Avoiding an exclusive focus on metropolitan France and adopting an approach that sets France and the French-speaking world in their international and European context have enabled

² By Tony Chafer (University of Portsmouth) and Jim Coleman (Open University)

French and Francophone studies to be part of a wider research and curriculum agenda. Admittedly, the concept of French studies has become more fluid and its delineation a major challenge, as Charles Forsdick explains in this volume. From an institutional perspective, managerial support has been forthcoming as French and Francophone studies have made a crucial contribution to past European studies RAEs and provided flexible but coherent solutions to curriculum development in the field of European studies, international relations and development studies. One of the major challenges has been to maintain a strong link between area studies and language learning: this necessitates a degree of flexibility in the way the curriculum is delivered and the assessments are designed, which may sometimes run counter to HE institutions' desire to rationalise provision. Here, it is essential that senior managers support language programmes, not simply as an added skill for students who are taking another subject, but as an integrated, multidisciplinary programme that combines the attainment of advanced language skills with the acquisition of cultural competences. The number of universities offering modern language degrees in the UK has declined from 121 in 2002 to 67 in 2010, with the closure of language degree programmes being particularly marked in institutions which had broken the link between learning a language and understanding the social and cultural contexts in which it is spoken. The Portsmouth experience demonstrates the benefits of the area studies approach that considers language degrees as being firmly rooted in the social science and humanities disciplines.

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