Michael Kennedy’s Lecture “What Can Afghanistan, Kosova, and Poland Tell Us About American Universities?”

On Thursday, September 19, REEEC welcomed Professor Michael D. Kennedy who gave a fascinating lecture titled “What Can Afghanistan, Kosova, and Poland Tell Us About American Universities? Or How Area Studies Can Anchor Cosmopolitan Intellectualty and Consequential Solidarity.” Michael D. Kennedy is a Professor of Sociology and International Studies at Brown University. His research interests focus on both intellectuals and professionals in Eastern Europe as well as cultural politics, global transformations, and knowledge networks. Most recently, he has been exploring social movements and universities. His recently finished manuscript “Articulations of Globalizing Knowledge” provided the basis for much of his lecture.

Professor Kennedy’s talk considered the importance and difficulties of understanding and conceptualizing difference across the world. Through an examination of Afghanistan, Kosova, and Poland, he also discussed the features that unite us. He began by looking at the issue of where we choose to internationalize and why and he assessed the significance of linking together local and global networks. In particular, he explored why we look at some locations as possessing a certain intellectual value that other locations lack.

Professor Kennedy stressed that we need to explain why we perceive some locations to be more important than others. His lecture focused on being able to recognize the value in locations across the world and forge international collaborations. He explored these issues through a study of Afghanistan, Solidarność in Poland, Vetëvendosje in Kosova, and Afghanistan in light of its reception of international aid over the last several years.

He examined how Poland became a place that was "recognizable" and seen as a location of value because the Solidarity movement had become a phenomena of interest to scholars and intellectuals.

Kennedy demonstrated that world events have a major impact on the level of importance scholars assign to a country. He showed that sociological journals became heavily focused on Poland in the 1980s, during the time of the Solidarity movement. In contrast, leading anthropological journals did not see a comparable spike in interest in the country. I began to consider how different fields of study weigh the value of events and locations very differently. As Professor Kennedy stated, Poland in the sociological scholarship of the 1980s was an "exemplary place to make a theoretical point."

The lecture then shifted to a discussion of how the intellectual community does not see Kosova as possessing the same value as Poland, despite Vetëvendosje, a radical nationalistic political movement for self-determination. The reason, he mentioned, is that Kosova is “not part of the global imagination” and does not possess, among others, the substantial knowledge networks that exploring social movements and universities. His recently finished manuscript “Articulations of Globalizing Knowledge” provided the basis for much of his lecture.

Like Kosova, Afghanistan does not have strong knowledge networks, but Professor Kennedy highlighted that Afghanistan is “seen as a problem not a source of intellectual elevation.”

Within this context, he examined how these issues impacted policy implementation at the administrative level in higher education. Additionally, he underscored the need to foster greater intellectual responsibility both at the local and global level. According to Professor Kennedy,
we need “to get systematic about the challenge of difference across the world” and “inspire image and gravitate to places that challenge our cosmopolitanism.”

After this lecture, I now have a greater understanding of how challenging the issue of difference is, and that value is a very relative term when speaking about different nations. While I see improvements within the scholarly and intellectual community, more work clearly needs to be done to construct better international ties and global awareness. More than ever, I believe that improved area studies programs at American universities and greater ties between these different programs within a university can help facilitate positive changes.

Ryan Eavenson is a second year MA student. He is particularly interested in democratization, human rights, and European integration in the post-Soviet world. His additional interests include Imperial and Soviet Russian history. He received a AB in History/Russian and East European Studies from Lafayette College in 2010. After graduation, he hopes to find employment focusing on international affairs or continue his education.