



Alexander Cooley in his office at the Harriman Institute in October. All photos by Jeffrey Schiffman

 INTERVIEW WITH

ALEXANDER COOLEY

NEW DIRECTOR OF THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

Alexander Cooley, professor of political science at Barnard College, Harriman deputy director for social sciences programming, and Columbia alumnus (Ph.D., 1999), took over the reins of the Harriman Institute from outgoing director Timothy Frye on July 1, 2015. A few weeks later Cooley was interviewed by the Center on Global Interests (CGI), Washington, D.C., about his goals as director of the Harriman, the impact of the Ukraine crisis on scholarship, and prospects for funding and research in the post-Soviet region. The interview was published on CGI's website, and is reprinted here with the kind permission of CGI.

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Q: You are the first Director of the Harriman Institute whose research background is not specifically Russia. Is this part of a trend where the Institute is looking to get away from its Russia-centric mission?

A: Well, it is certainly true that I am not a “Russianist” by training—I am also of what you might term the “post-Soviet generation,” as I conducted my own graduate work here at Columbia in the mid-1990s when the post-Soviet Central Asian states were moving to consolidate their newly acquired independence. My dissertation work was actually on how Soviet-era administrative legacies and patronage networks shaped the independence of the Central Asian states, so Russia has never been far away conceptually or empirically!

Institutionally, the Institute has a long-standing commitment to engaging with the broader region. Our course offerings, guest speakers, visiting scholars and programming span a broad geographic area from the Balkans to Eastern Europe to Central Asia, covering a variety of issues and disciplines. Indeed, how exactly we conceptualize the “post-Soviet” space and how this affects our work have been recurring questions for the Institute’s leadership. And we still grapple with these issues in our core course.

At the same time, maintaining an active focus on Russia is still critically important, arguably even more so in troubled times like these, so we will certainly not shy away from our Russian work. But I also think we need to understand that what it means to “do Russia” is dramatically different now than it was twenty-five years ago. Russian actors are far more immersed in broader regional, global and transnational networks and processes, which also has impacted how individual academic fields pursue Russia-centered research.



Q: You have spearheaded successful expansion of Harriman’s Central Asia and Caucasus programs. Will we see further focus on this region within the Institute?

A: Central Asia remains a compelling region to study because it really serves as a guide for studying the geopolitical trends, competing external influences and varying normative frameworks that increasingly characterize our multipolar world. Last year we were delighted to host the annual Central Eurasian Studies Society conference, in addition to the annual Association for the Study of Nationalities convention that we continue to host in April. We have conducted previous major research projects on U.S.-Georgia relations, the “frozen conflicts,” and a variety of energy-related issues, so we remain actively engaged in both regions.

But given our location in New York and our proximity to large diasporas, networks and communities with ties to Central Asia and the Caucasus, I think we can do even more in areas such as the arts, media, urban studies, international law and finance. My own new book project on Central Asia’s hidden links with the global economy and legal processes explores how

Central Asian actors interface with global hubs such as New York and London. The Institute will also continue to welcome distinguished lawmakers, scholars, artists and commentators from the region.

Q: What is your idea of quality as it relates to the Institute’s output?

A: We anticipate that our faculty, visiting scholars and researchers will continue to publish in leading academic outlets, such as major university presses and important scholarly journals, but I am more interested in fostering an environment that supports thoughtful and reflective scholarship, whatever the field or discipline. So much of what we do is geared not to our final products or “outputs” (books, journal articles, book chapters), but to encouraging creative thinking and intellectual experimentation, rigorous research, the presentation of ideas, and academic networking. If we continue to support the Institute as an active hub and incubator of Eurasian-related scholarship and debate, I am confident that good quality products will emerge.



Alexander Cooley in his office at the Harriman Institute, overlooking campus

Vis-à-vis programming, we will continue to organize and promote large, high-profile public events, such as the revived Harriman Lecture series (given this year by Michael McFaul), but will remain true to our mission by offering platforms for scholars and specialists to present their more specialized research to smaller, but engaged audiences. We can and should do both.

Q: How does your vision for the Institute differ from your predecessors? And where are points of continuity?

A: Every director retains a distinct outlook, undoubtedly influenced by our individual research interests and our respective academic communities. But every recent director has strongly supported the interdisciplinary nature of our mission, even if the balance between the humanities and social sciences in some of the Institute's programming has swung back and forth. I share this broad commitment (indeed, my undergraduate study was in Art History and Political Science), even as we critically continue to interrogate the value of "regional studies" and "interdisciplinarity" today.

In terms of the Institute going forward, I would like to build upon the excellent foundations bequeathed to me by predecessors Timothy Frye and our late and beloved Catherine Nepomnyashchy. I plan on expanding the role of our National Advisory Council, offering more networking and programmatic opportunities to our world-class group of alumni and, with our 70th anniversary around the corner, I want to take stock of our own contributions, trials and tribulations by conducting an oral history of the Institute.

Given the dynamic nature of so many scholarly and professional fields, I also think it remains critically important to strengthen and promote our partnerships with other programs and schools at Columbia, because they are usually on the cutting edge of scholarly and professional trends.

One other priority is to involve more undergraduates in our activities and introduce them to regional studies at earlier points in their academic studies. To that end, we have just started a 5-year joint B.A./M.A. program and we will continue to support summer travel to the region and offer research fellowships for qualified undergraduates. We think it's a wonderful way of bringing them into our community, but their identifying fresh, new topics and trends also enriches us.

Q: It is no secret that U.S.-Russia relations are the worst they have been since the beginning of the Cold War. Too often, hostility in bilateral relations spills over into policy and even academic discourse in both countries. How will you promote an objective approach at Harriman in the current political climate?

Our students now work for international organizations, nonprofits and NGOs, think tanks, the international media, the private sector, and leading foundations.

A: I personally don't think that complete "objectivity" is practically attainable or even desirable from an institutional perspective. Rather, our guiding principle should be informed "exposure"—to solicit and showcase diverse research, intellectual engagement and viewpoints and to encourage dialogue and debate of these different perspectives. For some events, such as a panel discussion, opposing viewpoints might be encouraged and featured, but in other cases we will have single-person lectures and presentations.

Not every event, topic or presenter will be to everyone's liking, but they shouldn't be. My strong belief is that, over the course of an academic year, we offer a rich and informative set of events that will educate our community and allow them to draw their own informed opinions about current events with greater confidence. Above all, we must remain a "safe space" for the open exchange of ideas and opinions, especially as the rhetoric and political pressure increases across other institutional settings.

To that end, I am delighted that my colleague Kimberly Marten will be leading an exciting new program on U.S.-Russia relations, which will include a visiting speaker series, interviews and perspectives from leading policymakers, as well as hosting conferences on topics that are critical to the relationship. Most events will be video-recorded for our website.

Q: What do you see as some of the more important areas of research in Russia/Eurasia fields in the next 5 years and how will Harriman ensure it stays at the forefront of such research?

A: The region itself has been changing so fast, and we need to be nimble and alert to these transformations. Also, I

want to continue our tradition of organizing events that bring academics into broader dialogue with practitioners and encouraging interactions between various professional communities that are actively engaged in the region. They are often dealing with new trends and challenges before scholars have fully recognized them.

In turn, we have a special obligation to offer deeper academic perspectives and context on issues that affect the region and that are sparked by regional developments. We want to facilitate the difficult discussions that might not otherwise receive attention from other venues or funders. So in recent years, issues like human rights, media freedom, and transparency have been programmatic priorities. Similarly, I think that the Ukraine crisis, beyond the immediate questions surrounding Ukraine's political future and territorial integrity, has sparked debates about the nature of media and propaganda and broader questions about the post-Cold War international order. These are topics we will be engaging more extensively in the years to come.

Next year marks both the 25th anniversary of the Soviet collapse and the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Institute. We are planning a series of events that will investigate how scholarship produced about the former Soviet Union has helped to enrich, or perhaps even challenge, assumptions across different academic fields. Some areas that we are looking into include human rights, energy politics, nationalism and democratization.

Q: Harriman has for a long time been a leading institution for training the next generation of regional specialists on Russia and Eurasia. What are some new skills and demands that have arisen for aspiring experts in this field?

A: It has certainly been the case that Harriman has trained generations of specialists who went into government service and diplomacy. And while we continue to prepare such students, the types of careers and professional paths associated with the region have greatly expanded over the last two decades. Our students now work for international organizations, nonprofits and NGOs, think tanks, the international media, the private sector, and leading foundations. And many continue to use their Harriman training as springboards to pursue more specialized graduate studies at the Ph.D. level.

We wish to teach students about the region, but we also want to expose them to different types of fields, research and writing. And all our M.A. students will continue to be required to complete a rigorous and in-depth original thesis on a topic

of their choosing for which we will offer a course structure and research, methods and ethics training. We want to equip our students to successfully make leaps between professional worlds and be good citizens in all.

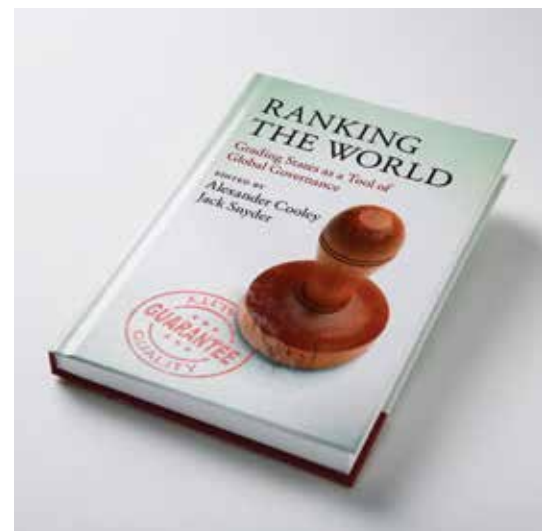
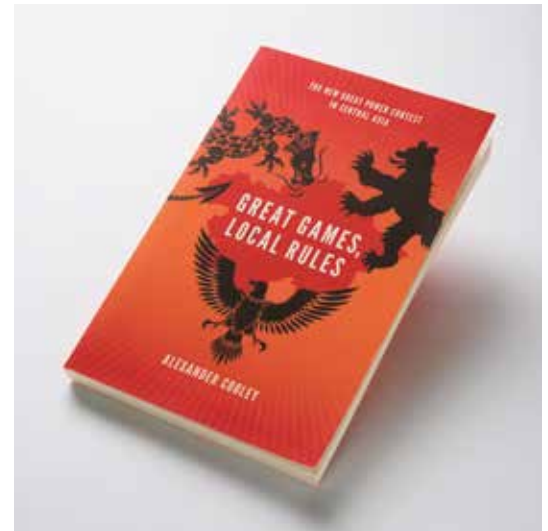
Q: For the past decade, private foundations and the U.S. government have significantly reduced funding for Russian and Eurasian studies. How has this affected Harriman programming specifically, and what is your outlook for the future sustainability of current programs? Do you also expect diminished access to study abroad opportunities in Russia and academic exchanges in coming years? If so, how would you plan to overcome this challenge?

A: You are right—the general decline in area studies funding and the budget sequester has been devastating to regional studies programs across the country. I, like so many other scholars of my generation, conducted fieldwork for my dissertation with funds from the State Department’s Title VIII Program via an SSRC fellowship. We hope that some of these cuts will be rolled back, but it is a shame that it takes an international security crisis to focus policymakers’ attention on the importance of the region. It’s a small investment to make that pays very big dividends in the future.

We also have been trying to find new ways to fund our M.A. students who have lost access to such funds such as the FLAS. But, overall, we are fortunate to enjoy a relatively generous endowment that supports our students, research projects and programming.

I think it would be a great shame if the reduced funding and tense political environment resulted in a drop in access to study opportunities and collaborations with scholars from the region. We will do everything we can to try and keep the channels of communication and contact with our Russian counterparts open. For example, we are currently involved in an effort to build a U.S.-Europe-Russia university consortium that can offer a platform for substantive dialogue and exposure about some of these critical issues. □

The Center on Global Interests provides an open platform for discussion. The views expressed here are the authors’ own.



(Top to bottom) *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* by Alexander Cooley (Oxford University Press, 2012); *Ranking the World: Grading States as a Tool of Global Governance* coauthored with Jack Snyder (Cambridge University Press, 2015)