



Bruce Knauft



When Bruce Knauft first visited Liberia in January 2007, he was struck by the devastation he witnessed in the wake of that nation’s civil wars. “All the previous government buildings have been not just gutted, but even the copper wires and electricity circuits are pulled out of the walls,” says Knauft, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Anthropology and executive director of Emory’s Institute for Comparative and International Studies. “And there was a whole cattle industry that’s completely gone because cattle don’t stand up very well to machine guns when people are hungry.”

Equally powerful, however, was the resilience of the Liberians he met. “It brings tears to your eyes to talk to people who have been through so much, who have such will and spirit to put their lives back together—to go to school again, to start small businesses, to rebuild their houses.”

It was that hope for recovery in several world regions that inspired the States at Regional Risk (SARR) project, led by Knauft along with some faculty colleagues and graduate students. The Carnegie Foundation provided funding for the \$483,276 project, which runs from January 2008 to August 2011. SARR aims to bring together scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and constituents in areas of instability or civil war in recent years, in hopes of cultivating networks of influence that bridge research and practical engagement to foster recovery. It focuses on West Africa, East-Central Africa, South and Central Asia, and parts of the Americas.

“A lot of the literature deals with the nation-state as a unit of analysis,” Knauft explains. “Some analysts have tried to look at various countries, gather quantitative data of various kinds, and aggregate these into an assessment of whether a state has become more or less stable (or stayed the same) during the past year. Those at the bottom of the list, the most unstable and uncivil, are said to have failed.”

“We wanted to complicate that. These are obviously regional conflicts, and it’s very hard to treat them only at the level of the nation-state. And the conflicts travel across regions, so the relationship between Sierra Leone and Liberia and Guinea and the Ivory Coast, for instance, is crucial.”

Key to the project will be workshops and conferences in the target areas involving academic specialists, political leaders, and on-the-ground practitioners from humanitarian organizations. Graduate students will also receive career training that combines scholarly understanding and practical engagement in states at risk.

In fact, Knauft credits two young scholars for charting new intellectual territory for SARR. Martha Carey, a student in the Graduate Institute of the Liberal Arts, and Jean-Hervé Jezequel, a history department lecturer, both worked for Doctors Without Borders in Africa and have used their studies to make more intellectual sense of their experiences.

“I’ve become increasingly convinced in my own work that theory and practice need to be superseded,” Knauft says. “And I’ve been encouraged in that by my students who in their lives are putting together practical engagement and scholarship in very creative ways. We have a tremendous capacity at Emory to bring those things together.”

by Allison Adams