

## Shifting Epistemologies in Area Studies: From Space to Scale

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Area studies suffer from various epistemic borderlines which have been drawn and grown during decades of constructing a 'world order' that is ultimately defined by political power relations. The question of what constitutes an 'area' or a 'region' is a timely and contested one. Moreover, epistemic borderlines have been constructed by a hegemonic way of identifying academic disciplines. The separation between area studies and disciplines, too, is a decision based on global epistemic

power relations. The following paper addresses the constructivist dimension of area studies and disciplines. The main argument is that area studies and disciplines are not primarily bound to geographical settings but derive from a politically-informed defining and 'scaling' of localities, ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures.

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A debate that is well established and continues to arouse attention is the debate over the questions of how, why, and to what end disciplines and area studies approaches should find a 'healthy' relationship with one another.<sup>1</sup> The background to the narrative of area studies and disciplines as 'strange but complementary bed fellows' goes back to the decades preceding World War II, and has recently garnered fresh attention in the course of alleged 'crises' in both the disciplines and the area studies. The status of area studies is, moreover, related to (if not dependent on) the political importance with which its academic endeavors are bestowed—boiling down to an assignation of the relevance of area studies by either increasing or reducing the public funding for it. The ups and downs in area studies funding become evident in various shapes and are currently visible in the huge sums that are allocated for studies on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region). They are mostly earmarked for projects that serve to accompany and flank political and social change in the wake of the Arab Spring. This does not come as a surprise. Development, political transition, social change, conflict resolution, post-conflict politics, transitional justice, state-building, peace-building, institution-building and the like are topics of constant attention which re-

quire a solid foundation in local and contextual knowledge. And accordingly, the disciplines of social sciences (and humanities to a lesser extent) have become almost 'natural' partners of area studies. Yet the partnership is not always working smoothly. A tension in the relationship between disciplines and area studies revolves, for instance, around the issues of theory and methodology. Does area research have to make use of disciplinary-based theories, concepts, and methods? Or can it do without them, relying instead on a paradigm that takes the 'field' as a realm of encounter and thus dispenses with a translation of 'unconceptualized' phenomena into the theoretical terminology of a particular discipline? While these are vital questions that evoke considerable contention in academic debates, the days of mutual accusation—with the disciplines claiming that area studies are free of theoretical and methodological reflection, and area studies scholars rejecting the arrival at allegedly universal theories without their being grounded in proper local expertise<sup>2</sup>—have passed. Today, a shared understanding exists at least with regard to the necessity of empirical findings. In Europe, it is almost commonly accepted that an overtly Eurocentric perspective on 'the rest' of the world will not lead to clear pictures, but that at the same

time, a staunchly defended cultural relativism is equally misleading. The parameters of global knowledge production have arrived at a critical juncture and concepts do not travel as easily any more from one part of the world to another. On the part of both disciplinary-oriented scholars and area experts the necessity of rooting the generation of theory in empirical findings is acknowledged. The same accounts for the exercise of testing theories and examining the possibility of conceptual 'travel.' Still, some questions regarding the relationship remain.

#### **Areas, Area Studies, and Social Sciences**

The grammatical *compositum* 'area studies' sounds innocent. Its latent pitfalls surface when we disassemble it: What constitutes an area, and what is the concept behind the scholarly activity called the study of one or more area(s), hence 'area studies'? In terms of a conventional understanding of area studies, we can follow Birgit Schäßler's handy definition. She describes the concept of area studies as scholarly research on a world region/world civilization, i.e. on a territory that is defined both geographically and epistemically. Another generally accepted definition of what constitutes area studies is that researchers learn the languages of their respective world

region, have spent longer periods of field work there, and have thoroughly reflected upon the local history, different local viewpoints, material and interpretations according to their disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches in order to understand non-European societies, cultures/civilizations, literatures and histories from within the region. (Schäßler 12)

Two terms merit attention here, namely 'world region' and 'non-European.' While area studies mostly take whole regions or even continents into their view (Latin America, Africa, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Middle East, etc.), they simultaneously concentrate on one particular country—Chinese studies, Japanese studies, etc.—or on a sub-region, such as Southeast Asia. What counts as an area is thus not precisely determined. Moreover, the designation of a particular geographic territory as an area is subject to political developments and the world order given at a certain time in history. Consider that before World War II and decolonization, no German scholars, for instance, would have produced research designated as Southeast Asian studies. The colonial powers of the time had allocated their names of choice to the territory of today's Southeast Asia, depending on what area

they controlled (e.g. 'Indochina' for French occupied Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam). Since international power relations and academic demarcations between different area studies are almost inseparably connected to each other, 'Southeast Asian studies' is a comparatively recent label for this field of research. Area studies are, as Schäbler puts it, 'indubitably a child of the Cold War' and have frequently been subjected to the task of getting to know the enemy (15).<sup>3</sup> Ruth Benedict's wartime study of Japan, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, is an illustrative case in point for the way in which anthropological works influenced the understanding in the US of a 'foreign' culture. Timothy Mitchell goes even further in creating a direct link between Cold War area studies and the knowledge production project of social sciences. "The genealogy of area studies must be understood in relation to the wider structure of academic knowledge and the struggles not of the Cold War but of science—and social science in particular—as a twentieth-century political product" (Mitchell 2). However, area studies should not be understood as mere delivery service institutions for political decision-makers. Rather than notoriously complying with official politics, we find area

studies representatives to be critical observers who articulate well-grounded arguments against the dynamics that are at work in *Realpolitik*.<sup>4</sup>

The second term that merits attention in Schäbler's definition is 'non-European.' Indeed it is a rather strange phenomenon that, at least in Europe, the concept of area studies is usually applied to regions outside (Western) Europe. It is only recently that comparative area studies scholars articulate the need to include Europe—or 'the West' as another fuzzy but tenaciously utilized denominator—into the concept of area studies. It is obvious that the longstanding perception of area studies as non-European studies has shaped the status of areas studies vis-à-vis the so-called systematic disciplines. Results arrived at during fieldwork *outside* Europe were recognized if they matched the theoretical assumption developed *in* Europe (in the 'global North,' as one would probably say today). Mitchell succinctly points this out by stating that area studies contributed to the Western social sciences in two ways: on the one hand, 'area studies would cleanse social theory of its provincialism' and on the other hand, '[a]rea studies would serve as a testing ground for the universalization of the social sciences,' (8). The latter 'function' of area

studies in particular has informed social science research for a long time. Spin-offs of the classical modernization theory based on empirical reality in the West (including theories on the role of the middle class for political transition and democratization—as problematized in META 02-2014) are but one example for the testing of their universal validity in other parts of the world. The missing compatibility of such theoretical assumptions with the empirical reality at hand also led to a self-critical questioning if the 'travel of concepts' across the globe could be conducted so easily (if at all). Yet it deserves mentioning that one subfield in the discipline of political science, namely international relations (IR), has immersed itself in a thorough search for 'non-Western theories' of IR (Tickner and Wæver) and found them to be remarkably similar to Western IR theories. The results of the research done thus far are highly revealing and underscore what Pinar Bilgin has succinctly pointed out in her reflections on why IR offers "so little about the 'non-West'" (10). Her analysis illustrates that shifting the view to the non-West in international relations will not unearth much difference. Rather than finding discrete theoretical approaches, 'non-West[ern]' "ways of thinking about and doing world politics [...] renders problematic the ex-

pectations of finding ‘difference’ in the ‘non-West’ (Bilgin 10). The shift of perspective and the critical stance towards the ‘travel of concepts’ thus suggests we not fall victim to a hastily anticipated ‘difference’ between X, Y, and Z, but to accept their relational entanglement. The critical stance Bilgin takes towards area studies, however, reflects the perception of their uneasy relationship with the disciplines. In her view, area studies “failed to work with the disciplines to allow for cross-fertilization” (10).

Scrutinizing the application of Western theories and methods to non-Western contexts brought about novel and well-known approaches such as Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s *Multiple Modernities*. While these had a clearly refining effect on social science thinking, the fact remained that the reasoning behind such approaches was still embedded in Western epistemic logics and semantic contexts. Not surprisingly, this prompted an ideological departure from ‘theory production in the West and theory application in the rest’ of the world. A paradigmatic work in this regard was Jean and John Comaroff’s *Theory from the South*. The book invites the reader to reimagine the theories explaining how the world functions, i.e. to regard the production of universal knowledge as

originating from the African continent (instead of Europe/the West/the global North). The logic of Comaroff and Comaroff differs from that of an older study with a similar title—*Southern Theory* by Raewyn Connell—which denounces the formula of ‘data gathering and application in the colony’ and ‘theorizing in the metropole,’ (Connell ix). What this strand of thinkers has in common, though, is an appreciative stance towards viewing the production of knowledge from regions that have hitherto hardly been recognized as originators of (universal) theories and methods. Whether they would count as representatives of post-colonial approaches or not is of minor importance here. The merit of their approach lies in the constant reminder they put up against conventional forms of conducting social science research as well as area studies research—the awareness of one’s positionality as a researcher—for area studies scholars not only but particularly *in the field*. The underlying gist of this concern is obvious, as Farhana Sultana points out:

Conducting international fieldwork involves being attentive to histories of colonialism, development, globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control. It

is thus imperative that ethical concerns should permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualization to dissemination, and that researchers are especially mindful of negotiated ethics in the field. (Sultana 375)

The issue of positionality and reflexivity (as a consequence thereof) in area studies ultimately tackles the question of ‘universal knowledge.’ In principle, giving due consideration to positionality means admitting that the generation of ‘universal knowledge’ is factually impossible, and rebukes the claim of having done so. The ‘parochialism of universalism’ (Bilgin 7) is certainly worth being reflected at all stages of scholarly endeavors. This insight does not go along easily with the belief in universal theories and in methods that can be applied anywhere on the globe in order to gather data.

### Scaling the Global Knowledge Terrain

The push for rethinking not only the relationship between area studies and disciplines, but also the approaches used in area studies themselves has become stronger during recent years. Demands for a ‘decentering and diversifying’ of area studies, as Goh Beng-Lan articulates in the context of Southeast Asian studies, point to the ever increasing importance of a sol-

id reflection on the situational nature of research, and on researchers' own positionality. South-South relations, for example, serve to shift the perspective and de-center 'the West from historical and political narratives' (Freitag 2). De-centering also trains scholars to depart from container categories and territorialized units, so as to more aptly map the field of inquiry. The approach is conscious of the fact that 'historians produce geographies and not vice versa,' as Arjun Appadurai (66) rightly recalls. It also takes into account the significance of shifting the view from the centers to the peripheries of knowledge production, and from conventionally demarcated regions to non-demarcated regions. The latter notion of what maybe called non-demarcated regions was introduced by Willem van Schendel, who writes about a 'region' which he calls *Zomia* and which is not characterized by officially established borders, but by minority groups who have for centuries enjoyed their cultural and territorial affinities and have been able not only to preserve their local culture, but also to escape control and pressure from the respective states they are formally assigned to. The territory is comprised of the huge highlands and lowlands on mainland Southeast Asia. For van Schendel, the conventional area lineages that inform to-

day's area studies are merely 'imagined' ones. The author's work has had strong repercussions for the framing and the concept of area studies in the 2000s.

For the purpose of roughly structuring the current debate *within* the field of contemporary area studies, which addresses the themes mentioned above, I have elsewhere identified three major discursive schools or currents which can be seen as promoting a specific understanding of area studies (Derichs). Without claiming any legitimacy of the chosen categorization, I have structured the area studies landscape into a *conciliatory* current (composed of scholars who emphasize the mutual benefits of combining area studies with disciplinary approaches [theories, methods, and so forth]); a *new areas studies* current; and a *rethinking* current. Proponents of the first current would, for instance, value the research on party systems in different parts of world with analytical concepts and tools rooted in Western political science and comparative politics. The second current would acknowledge the contribution of the social sciences to the deepening of knowledge, but perceive area studies and the disciplines as each taking 'different points of departure'—that is 'a certain space' in respect to the former and 'a particular the-

matic field of study' in respect to the latter (Houben 3). Applied to the example of party systems, political scientists would take the very notion of 'party systems' as a point of departure, whereas areanists would start out studying politics in a particular area and maybe arrive—or not—at the finding that there exists something like a party system which is worth being compared to others. Supporters of the third current reason that a concentration on sociospatial relations and 'specific spaces constituted by human experience, imagination, and actions in contexts which are thematically defined in each case' (Crossroads Asia) is of increasing importance. South Asia, as a case in point, may sometimes be more visible in the United Kingdom than in India or Pakistan. Area studies focusing merely on the very *area* as a geographically defined entity have in this regard become somewhat mismatched to the empirical reality at hand. Space is important yet not informed predominantly by geographical parameters.

Referring to this finding, Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge have recently introduced an innovative understanding of area studies, which also takes the relationship between area studies and disciplines into account. The principle is to '[n]ot abandon, but modernize and revital-

ize' (Mielke and Hornidge 16). The agenda for the competence network *Crossroads Asia*, of which both authors are members, commits itself to 'Post-Area-Studies' in the sense of rethinking area studies. It seeks to:

Move human action and interaction and its role in communicatively constructing space into the center of attention. After two and a half years of research, the original focus on different forms of mobility and networks as studied spatial dimensions suggests to additionally include positionality (socio-spatial; us/them) and borders/boundaries/frontiers, assessed through the lens of human communication taking place in interactions, into the core of analysis. (18)

Prior to formulating this rationale, the shortcomings of area studies and disciplines as they have developed over time were identified by various actors, including the German *Wissenschaftsrat* (Science Council) as an institution of high reputation and with agenda-setting authority. Mielke and Hornidge condense the gist of this procedure to three tasks which require closer attention. They point out the need for revitalization in physical space, symbolic space, and institutional space. 'Physical space (scalar fix)', is certainly not adequate anymore 'in times of globaliza-

tion.' Altering the symbolic space, 'given the deconstruction of culture (cultural turn) and a subsequent reformation of disciplines and research agendas,' would be a measure not only to overcome the anachronism of 'scalar fix,' but also to reform the institutional space, 'which is dominated by scholarly lineages that limit its knowledge generation as a result of organization in self-referential epistemic communities and adherence to disciplinary subordination.' At least in Germany, area studies scholars have become motivated to rethink their paradigms, approaches, methods and position in and outside the field.

### Conceptual Outlook

How can the sociospatial dimension in area studies be conceptualized so as to make geographic, territorial, and administrative borders and frontiers less prominent as a frame of reference—and consequently less binding for the analysis of area-related phenomena?<sup>5</sup> An attempt in this direction almost necessarily skips the idea that such a conceptualization should derive first and foremost from the social sciences. It rather crosses the disciplinary borders and seeks approaches which might have gone through an exercise of throwing 'path-dependent' concepts overboard. An endeavor that is rooted in

the mission of grasping the empirical reality and binding it back to a conceptual framework has been introduced by ethnologists James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta. Their approach of 'spatializing states' brings us back to the sometimes exaggerated attention given to the national borders of states when doing area studies. Ferguson and Gupta's argument that 'an increasingly transnational political economy today poses new challenges to familiar forms of state spatialization' is not a new one to scholars of Kurdish or Palestinian affairs (1982). But rather than pointing at the fact of nations without states (such as Kurds and, at least to a certain extent, Palestinians), the innovative perspective of the authors lies in hinting at the 'verticality' of states, meaning 'the central and pervasive idea of the state as an institution somehow "above" civil society, community, and family' (1982). This idea, the authors claim, serves as 'a profoundly consequential understanding of scale,' that is:

One in which the locality is encompassed by the region, the region by the nation-state, and the nation-state by the international community. These two metaphors (verticality and encompassment; C.D.) work together to produce a taken-for-granted spatial and scalar image of a state that both sits



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above and contains its localities, regions, and communities. (982)

We can transfer this scheme to the understanding of area knowledge and the very production of knowledge about areas. Let us take the example of Spanish speaking communities. While Spanish is regarded a minority language in the United States of America and English codified as the national language, a few meters off the United States' territorial borders, Spanish is the language of the majority. Studying

Spanish communities in these areas as 'minorities' is thus a mere matter of perspective, for if we expand the scale and ignore the states' spatial presence, it does not make sense any more to speak of Spanish as a minority language. What has happened is that the state has turned a horizontal linguistic landscape into a vertical one—making a language a national language here and a minority language there. This is the effect Ferguson and Gupta also describe by verticality and encompassment. The reciprocal relationship be-

tween space (area) and regimes that 'scale' particular elements of empirical reality, as well as between macro-conditions and micro-processes, is obvious. The epistemic challenge thus lies in diversifying 'area knowledge' and decentering the perspective on the phenomenon that is chosen for analysis. The value-added aspect of area studies understood this way, we might reason, lies in respecting the dynamics of scales. The scale rather than the space becomes a key analytical tool.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Classic works on areas studies which also tackle the relationship with disciplines include Bates; Graham; Jackson; Mirsepassi, Basu and Weaver; Szanton.

<sup>2</sup> Most tellingly summarized by T. Mitchell (66): "Area studies scholars were told that their problems would be solved by getting back together with their disciplinary partners and accepting their authority. [...] Yet it is in fact this claim to represent the universal that is in question in the authority of the disciplines. The future of area studies lies in their ability to disturb the disciplinary claim to universality and the particular place this assigns to areas."

<sup>3</sup> Needless to mention that the connection between Cold War politics and area studies has also shaped the curricular set-up of area studies, with language, for instance, being a very important element in Middle East or Latin American studies. Critical questions such as those raised by post-colonial studies have also been considerably neglected until they generally gained more currency after the Cold War.

<sup>4</sup> Schäbler mentions the Vietnam War, the Cuba crisis of 1962 and the Post-9/11 politics as particular cases in point (15).

<sup>5</sup> Less prominent and less important is by no means intended to suggest a discarding of geographic or territorial dimensions.

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