

We Don't Do Area Studies – Reflections on the Development of the Genre of Research from a Political Science Perspective

Bo Petersson

As a young PhD in the mid-1980s I came of age in an academic world dominated by border police. These self-appointed guardians had taken it upon themselves to define the outer borders of political science. They were eager to point out when something was not kosher, when something theoretically or methodologically was not clearly within the narrow borders of political science as they perceived them. The alarm could be sounded on every level, from Bachelor's thesis seminars to a viva for PhD defense, indeed even in exchanges of view between full professors at annual political science association conferences. In these contexts it was even considered suspicious to do what was perceived as 'sociology' instead of political science, not to mention what happened if one was bold enough to deal with inter- and multi-disciplinary research before this lofty title was even invented.

In those 30 years that have passed since then the developments have been tumultuous: the Soviet Union dissolved, the Cold War ended, the international situation has tensed again, and accelerating globalization has fundamentally changed the premises of doing area studies. From within academia, theoretical and methodological developments within area studies and the traditional disciplines have also challenged the basic state of play. This short article sets out to assess the situation that area studies face today, discuss what challenges have emerged before this genre of research, and advise how they can be met¹.

The general point of departure of the paper is that, whereas area studies in general stand to gain from regular interaction with the traditional disciplines, the latter would also be equally enriched through such an interchange. The rigor of analysis would generally improve among

area-studies practitioners, whereas the contextual richness and added empirical insights would be indispensable additions to disciplinary research with a specific geographical focus or with ambitions to formulate theories with general reach (Acharya 2006). So, while primarily being a plea for the resurrection of the reputation of, as well as the continued need for support for, area studies, the paper holds that disciplinary research would equally much stand to gain from a general boost of area studies credentials.

Area studies and multi-disciplinarity

Area-studies and regional studies research, which henceforth will be used as synonyms in this article, would be inconceivable without inter- and multi-disciplinarity, even if the opposite does not necessarily hold true since there are of course many other domains of application of inter- and multidisciplinary approaches except for area studies. However, area studies research in many ways represents the epitome of inter- and multidisciplinary research. Area specialists are 'multidisciplinary by inclination and training' (Bates 1997: 123). In many respects, therefore, inter- and multi-disciplinary research and area studies are predestined to live together, they move together and if they stop moving forward, they again do so together.

The scholarly border-police mentality of previous years had harmful effects in many ways. I am certain that many young and bright students were put off from pursuing further academic careers when told that their proposed research projects would not fit into prevailing paradigms of orthodoxy. The emergency brake system warning against straying too far from disciplinary folds no doubt inhibited scholarly advances in many areas. Like Umut Özkirimli (2010) writes, the anxiety not to transgress disciplinary borders largely explained the lag in the advancement of nationalism studies, another area of inter- and multidisciplinary inquiry, long after the end of WWII. Making forays across disciplinary borders in order to hone one's research tools simply did little to promote academic careers, and there were scant incentives to use the insights even from neighboring disciplines when analyzing complex societal phenomena that should have benefited from more holistic approaches. So it was for nationalism studies, and so it was indeed also for area studies at large. No doubt, this was very much to the detriment of the field of inquiry. As noted by two

promoters of interdisciplinary approaches in nationalism studies: 'It is only through a nuanced interdisciplinary perspective that we can come to understand not just the plurality of nationalism(s), but also their political and ideological malleability, their dependence on the specific political dynamics of each historical context, the dangers of taking their self-proclaimed lineage and rationale at face-value' (Jenkins & Leaman 2014:5).

According to the same two authors, relying exclusively on the established academic disciplines for the study of contemporary nationalisms would usher in risks of 'rigidities and over-determinism', manifested not least by orthodox practitioners of political science with their 'obsession with classification and typology' (ibid). Similarly, within the field of development studies there were early analyses arguing that the 'compartmentalization of sciences' provided one basic reason for the need for interdisciplinary approaches (Ichimura 1975: 112).

Nowadays there seems to be increasing awareness that fundamental academic insights are achieved in the border areas between disciplines. What Ichimura noted almost 40 years ago is today widely recognized:

Interdisciplinary research implies ... more interactive cooperation of several disciplines for the purpose of attaining a broader or deeper understanding of common problems. It sometimes means a new inquiry into the "zwischengebiet"..., a development of new conceptions or a reintegration of different information in various disciplines (Ichimura 1975: 112).

Notably, inter- and multi-disciplinary research projects are often verbally encouraged and commended in declarations of intent by funding agencies. Often, however, one might wonder whether not these intentions remain on the rhetoric levels and do not quite make it from paper to practice. Peer review panels within funding agency structures are for example still largely formed to conform to disciplinary borders, and so are assessment panels tasked with the measuring of research quality (Jenkins and Leaman 2014: 3). Other examples abound. Journals with high citation indexes which are consistently among the best ranked in assessment contexts tend to fall squarely within disciplinary folds, whereas journals of inter- and multi-disciplinary research tend to be relegated to the periphery.

Troubled legacy, mutual suspicion

Everything about these legacies should not be blamed on the border police of bygone days. In many respects area studies practitioners had themselves to blame for the criticism they received. What aggravated the border-police minded colleagues most was maybe not so much the use of and inspiration from the theoretical and methodological approaches of the neighboring disciplines per se, or even the flirtation with inter- and multidisciplinary methodologies. In many cases the real crux was rather the totally non-theoretical approaches used by some, who were content to produce a sea of empirical knowledge without trying to fit it into more generally applicable, theoretical frameworks. We have all come across those examples, I think: the amassing of facts, without the author even trying to maneuver with the help of theoretical concepts. One need not be a member of the border police squad to react there. In the words of one commentator who was uncompromising in her criticism, area studies in many cases used to be 'in need of a soul-searching about the quality of its theorizing, the rigor of its research methods and the policy and political implications of its work' (Markusen 1999: 880).

Indeed, area studies specialists theoretically and methodologically often seemed to have little in common save for the interest in a certain region as such, and the insistence that deep contextual knowledge and proficiency in relevant languages are necessary for the attainment of area research scholarship of high quality. The latter dictum is still valid, even if technological advances and the global spread of English would seem to make it less imperative than it used to be.

The relatively vague least common denominators among area studies specialists have probably not contributed to making their reputation better among representatives of the traditional disciplines within the social sciences. As one analyst of the field remarked: 'Even if one accepts the broad depiction of 'regional studies' and 'regional science' – or wishes to debate it – such approaches might remain characterized as different in purpose, focus, the kinds of questions they can ask and answer, method, research design, analytical capability, policy implications, and so on' (Pike 2007: 1144).

The rather frequent insistence among area studies specialists that their particular region or country of study was so unique that exceptionalist claims were called for and any attempts

at comparison therefore became futile and irrelevant, of course played its part in inhibiting cooperation between area studies and traditional disciplines. Indeed, the old tendency among area studies scholars 'to reify and essentialize' their object of study to 'counter and exclude' perspectives from outsiders did nothing to promote dialogue with the disciplines (Acharya 2006: 4). Examples of this kind of thinking abound within the "Russia is different" as well as the "EU sui generis" debates, both rather lively not so long ago. Hopefully this kind of intellectual complacency has receded with the passing of time and, not least, the shrinking of the world under the impact of the processes of globalization.

As it has been made clear from the above, the academic snobbery in relation to the Others on the other side of the fence was at least as developed among representatives of the traditional disciplines in their relation to area studies practitioners. Most prominent among the elements of criticism were as mentioned the accusations of methodological negligence and a-theoretical approaches. However, in all fairness, area studies researchers have in recent decades represented the whole spectrum from theoretical and methodological rigor to their total opposites. Whereas the first generation of area studies after WWII was maybe more often marked by the absence of such rigor, later generations have increasingly developed theoretical sophistication as well as methodological maturity, particularly at performing single case and comparative case studies (Katzenstein 2001: 789).

Certain genres of research positioned in between the traditional disciplines and area studies have been highly instrumental in finding syntheses and trying to bridge the existing gaps. For example, the research line of comparative regionalism has, even though internally diverse and heterogeneous, been one of the most important, using the EU as the area of reference for global outlooks and comparisons (Sbragia 2008; Lombaerde et al 2010), and the 'new kid on the block' by the name of comparative area studies is another emerging sub-discipline with great potential to straddle the divide between area studies and comparative politics (Basedau and Köllner 2006).

Contextual and ideological transformations

Even though the Cold War context perhaps did not see the genesis of the area studies tradition as such (Middell 2013) the Cold War generation of area studies was heavily influenced by the ideological conflict between the two blocs. Thus area studies, typically Soviet studies as performed in the US or Western Europe, was often part and parcel of the ideological contestation, it was a scholarly weapon to be employed in the overarching political conflict (Katzenstein 2001). Funding for applied research was often forthcoming from governmental agencies on these grounds, especially in the US but also in Europe.

The end of the Cold War contributed to a substantially reduced demand for area studies analyses from the powers that be (Bates 1997b; Katzenstein 2001). In the words of Acharya (2006: 2), the end of the Cold War 'deprived area studies of its strategic rationale.' However, that particular situation was not to last for very long. The events connected with 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror reinvigorated the interest among Western state authorities to fund area studies, albeit this time focused on the Muslim world instead of the old Soviet Union. Undeniably there was, just like in the preceding period, an ideological imprint to this new generation of area studies, even though it had changed its main geographical vector.

The increasingly assertive external policies of the Russian Federation with its 2014 annexation of Crimea and its heavy de facto intervention in the civil war in eastern Ukraine may have reintroduced the willingness of Western states to spend funding resources on Russia-related research. As cases in point, in the Nordic setting both the Danish and the Swedish Institutes of International Affairs have during 2015 decided to launch major strategic recruitments of Russia-related research expertise. Critics could of course argue that such efforts represented late awakenings, and that with regard to doing research on Russia, effectively at least two generations of scholars had been lost, while the funding authorities were sleeping, dreaming sweet dreams that Russia would develop into a "normal", democratic, westernized and well-behaving medium-to-great power that would not seek to upset the geopolitical status quo in Europe. There is no doubt a lesson to be learned here. Area studies competence in regions that national funding authorities deem to be of potential strategic relevance need to be upheld on a continuous basis even in fair-weather conditions. When bad weather arrives, new generations of researchers cannot simply be conjured up.

Be this as it may, the manifestly ideological component of area studies and its Cold War legacy has thus at least partly been scaled down. This may itself have contributed to the improvement of the academic reputation of area studies, even if there is now comparatively speaking a greater shortage of funds available for area studies research. However, to the extent that a bigger quantity of empirically oriented think-tank driven projects has been replaced by fewer but academically more sophisticated university-milieu research enterprises this may in the longer run mean a net gain for area studies in qualitative terms (cf Acharya 2006: 3).

There is also another ideological matter that, albeit on another level, warrants constant attention by area studies practitioners in the West. One needs to bear in mind that area studies have a postcolonial legacy, and that the Western perspective of the areas to be studied has often been characterized by an Orientalist, patronizing outlook in the sense seminally elaborated on by authors such as Edward Said (1978) and Frantz Fanon (2008). However, the tendency to see the collective Self as the taken for granted norm, as the epitome of positive characteristics, standards and virtues, and the regionalized, area-ascribed Others as immature, deviating and not quite there yet, has to be constantly fought and averted. In other words, geographical regions inhabited by Others have customarily been counted as the objects of area-studies research as opposed to the norm-setting geographical region or area where the researchers themselves are based (Basedau and Köllner 2006:10).

From a European perspective one obvious remedy would be to consistently try to use the same methodological and theoretical approaches for the study of EU-Europe as are applied to other parts of the globe (Middell 2013). Thus, to treat EU-Europe as one area among others, to be studied and compared with other regions on a par with them, might open up for a successful fight against the European glorification of the Self. The perennial Eurozone crisis has probably contributed somewhat to reducing the self-congratulatory stance of EU-Europeans as they assess the position of their region and put it in relation to developments in other parts of the globe (Bevelander & Petersson 2014). For Europeans to treat Europe or European sub-regions on a par with any other regions in the world is otherwise no easy task to undertake. As observed by Middell (2013:13), the inclusion of Northern, Western, Southern, and Central Europe into the area studies paradigm may mean 'the greatest

challenge yet for a redefinition of regional studies' in Europe. The desirability for analysts of US politics to likewise address North America as one region among others, and the inherent challenges of such an approach, has been pointed out in a similar manner (Bates 1997b).

Construction and fixity

Recent decades have seen dynamic developments within the field of theory evolution in area studies themselves (Middell 2013:27). Maybe the most important one is tied to the constructivist turn in social sciences and the humanities, which has spread the awareness that regions are not to be taken for granted or fixed but are socially and culturally constructed in the minds of people. As pointed out by Pike (2007:1143), this work has sought to disrupt notions of 'regions' as bounded territories. The ever accelerating processes of globalization have challenged the supposition of the existence of fixed regions even further (Acharya 2006). As the notion of stable regional units of analysis has been linked to nation-state centrism, regional studies have had their share of the criticism levelled against methodological nationalism as outdated and out of step with time (Katzenstein 2001; Acharya 2006). In consequence, the research objects of area studies have to a degree transformed and proliferated, as e.g. diaspora studies that are by definition not tied to a strictly delimited physical space have been added to the area studies repertoire.

If, however, regions are analyzed precisely as social constructions made by Self as well as by Other, these ontologically motivated reorientations of research are indeed rather prone to enhance the usefulness of area and regional studies under the contemporary conditions. The perceptions that people hold of themselves and each other and the different kind of boundaries that they draw between their own privileged groups and those that remain on the outside remain one of the basic driving forces of politics all across the globe.

With all this said, however, one also needs to point out that socially constructed or not, contemporary hotspots tend to be located to certain parts of the globe which are customarily identified as regions in common parlance. At the time of writing, in mid-2015, such hotspots have been centered in Russia, Ukraine, and the former Soviet Union, on the one hand, and the Middle East in terms of Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, on the other. To depict

these macro-regions as socially constructed is an academic luxury that we maybe can and should afford, but that does not take away the fact that area-specialist expertise is direly needed with respect precisely to what takes place in these geographical parts of the globe. Even if regions are socially constructed in the main, their location on the map undeniably tends to be rather stable, and the continued existence of such regions that are conflict-prone and clearly impact on international relations supports the case of maintaining a vital area studies tradition at our universities. Again, a brand new generation of scholars cannot just be dreamed up in times of dire need.

Inventory of best practices

Many of those involved in area studies have been experiencing the joys of fruitful inter- and multi-disciplinary undertakings first hand, but have equally often, I believe, been frustrated with the difficulties in talking and communicating across disciplines (Brettell & Hollifield 2008). What is needed locally as well on a more general scale is consistent work to chart out the methodological pitfalls but also benefits of exercising inter- and multi-disciplinary research. What should researchers do, what should they refrain from doing, and what specific challenges do inter- and multidisciplinary area studies research entail? The methodological problems and prospects of area studies research need to be brought into the open so that they can be visualized and thoroughly assessed. Cataloguing of best practices is a rather tiresome trend in social science jargon, but when it comes to the successful implementation of inter- and multidisciplinary research I believe that such a method would indeed be justified.

By way of example, my present home base, Malmö University, is a youngling university which prides itself of being a national pioneer in inter- and multi-disciplinary research. In such a setting there is a need to become more visible when it comes to disseminating experience and lessons learned about such research. What needs to be done is to recollect and assess concrete experiences and reformulate them into more general and practical propositions for research. These should be put on paper in e.g. textbooks, handbooks and methodological manuals for inter- and multidisciplinary studies. The advice could often be

quite hands-on and straight forward and concern such practical things as optimal size and composition of research groups, seminar structure, and the like.

At Leipzig University, a prominent effort is made in the writing up of a universal manual for regional studies. This handbook project is well under way to its completion, and will be an important milestone in area studies research (Troebst 2014). Slated to be completed in 2015, the project will hopefully be contributing to resurrecting the reputation of area studies research by demonstrating that this field of research nowadays has as solid theoretical and methodological underpinnings as do traditional disciplinary-based research only that it has some additional challenges to rise to. The project is an important forerunner and should inspire similar projects to follow.

Haves and have-nots

Clearly, political priorities dictate the allocation of funds. In times of scarcity resources are, like has always been the case, diverted into the areas that are considered most acute and pressing by the authorities. Even if one can argue in favor of the continued or even increased importance of area studies in contemporary times, the economic preconditions are far from always there to back up such recognition. In the US there have recently been significant funding cuts in the US Department of Education's Title VI program, which since the mid-1960s has supported language and area studies programs at the universities. For example, the US Federal Government budget for the fiscal year of 2011 reduced Title VI funding nationwide by 40 per cent (Rethinking Area/Asian Studies 2012), and even further cuts are anticipated for 2016 (ASEEES 2015). The cuts seem to have been unequally distributed, though: whereas funding for Russian studies have been significantly reduced there are still relatively good funding opportunities for studies centered on China or the Middle East. In the UK, interdisciplinary research centers have been among those hit hard by the more intense scramble for scarce resources in the wake of the financial crisis in the EU, especially since such centers were disfavored by the fact that, as was referred to above, assessment panels were often manned according to principles of traditional disciplinary belonging.

Germany has set its priorities differently with regard to area studies. Substantial resources have in recent years been allocated to a number of centers of excellence in regional studies research. Support has been forthcoming from both federal and Länder levels of government (Middell 2013). Norway is another example of increased funding for area studies. Substantial Norwegian Research Council funding has during the last few years been made available for universities all across Norway through the ambitious NORRUSS research funding program which is focused on Russian politics and society, especially with regard to security implications for the High North. The program seems indeed to be a powerful generator of competence in research on Russia on a nation-wide scale, not least promoting the growth of the next generation of area-studies scholars. Sweden can be said to have treaded a middle path. In the strategic research program launched and administered by the Swedish Research Council in 2009, social science and humanities research on Russia and the Middle East was identified by the government as one joint strategic research area together with the otherwise overwhelming majority of prioritized research areas within technology, engineering and medicine. As a consequence, two national university centers for regional research (Lund for studies on the Middle East and Uppsala for Russia) were given substantial funding for a period of altogether ten years, with a mid-term evaluation due after five. In this manner, area research was basically locked in at two selected locations, but it is doubtful whether the same dynamic effects can be achieved as in the Norwegian case.

Concluding thoughts

Increased cooperation between traditional discipline practitioners and area studies researchers would open up for creative syntheses (Acharya 2006: ii) which both sides would gain from. Society at large would also benefit as innovative insights are often gained in the border zones between and across the disciplinary realms. In order to achieve this several obstacles need to be overcome.

On the whole and despite their troubled legacy, one can say that practitioners of area studies are no longer as much frowned upon as they used to be. The Cold-War ideological connotations have at least partly been overcome and the often previously neglected theoretical and methodological underpinnings of area studies have in many cases improved.

Economically, the record is mixed and different countries seem to go in different directions when it comes to the funding of area studies research. In all honesty, however, the relative scarcity of funding for area studies research is probably no less severe than for social science and humanities research in general.

With all this said there is a continued need for solutions that can meet the funding needs of multidisciplinary research in general, and also better the preconditions for cooperation between area students and practitioners of research within the traditional disciplines. Such measures could include more directly ear-marked funding resources for area-based research on a multi-disciplinary basis. A hands-on measure would be to increase the influence of multi-disciplinary peer groups and review panels that prepare the funding decisions. Perhaps the most essential component would be continued communication and cooperation across the formerly so potent area studies/traditional discipline divides, through concrete research cooperation, joint publications, and the visiting of each other's traditional conference outlets. Not least significant, the reading of and publishing in each other's publications is an everyday academic practice that would bring tangible results in the long run.

All in all, contemporary area studies have the potential to serve as a standard-bearer for the development of multi- and interdisciplinary research endeavors within the social sciences. This could only be done in close interaction and dialogue with the traditional disciplines. However, there are still some stray border police out there. Don't heed their calls. They are voices of the past and should rightly be treated as the anachronisms that they are.

References

Acharya, Amitav (2006): *International Relations and Area Studies: Towards a New Synthesis?*. Nanyang Technological University: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies

ASEEES (2015), 'Act Now to Stop Cuts to Title VI & Fulbright-Hays', <http://www.aseees.org/advocacy/act-now-stop-cuts-title-vi-fulbright-hays>, accessed 2 September. 2015.

Basedau, Matthias & Patrick Köllner (2006): 'Area Studies and Comparative Area Studies: Opportunities and Challenges for the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies: A

Discussion Paper', [http://crossroads-
asia.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Literatur/Area_Studies/Basedau_Koellner_Area_Studies_and
GIGA.pdf](http://crossroads-
asia.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Literatur/Area_Studies/Basedau_Koellner_Area_Studies_and
GIGA.pdf). Hamburg: GIGA, accessed on 2 September 2015.

Bates, Robert H. (1997a): 'Area Studies and Political Science: Rupture and Possible Synthesis, *Africa Today*, Volume 44, No. 2, 123-132.

Bates, Robert H. (1997b): 'Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?' *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 166-169

Bevelander, Pieter & Bo Petersson (2014): 'Crisis, Oh That Crisis! The Financial Crisis and its Impacts on Migration in Europe', Pieter Bevelander & Bo Petersson (eds): *Crisis and Migration: Implications of the Eurozone Crisis for Perceptions, Politics, and Policies of Migration*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press.

Brettell, Caroline B. and James F. Hollifield (2008): 'Introduction: Migration Theory – Talking across Disciplines', Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield (eds): *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*, Routledge: New York, 1-30.

Fanon, Frantz (2008): *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.

Ichimura, Shinichi (1975): 'Interdisciplinary Research and Area Studies', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 6: 2, pp. 112-120.

Jenkins, Brian and Jeremy Leaman (2014): 'Editorial: In Defence of Interdisciplinarity', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 22: 1, 2-6.

Katzenstein, Peter J. (2001): 'Area and Regional Studies in the United States', *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34: 4, 789-791.

Lombaerde, Philippe de, et al (2010). 'The problem of comparison in comparative regionalism', *Review of International Studies* 36 (3): 731-753.

Markusen, Ann (1999). 'Fuzzy concepts, scanty evidence, policy distance: the case for rigour and policy relevance in critical regional studies', *Regional Studies*, 33 (9), 869-884.

Middell, Matthias (2013): 'Area Studies under the Global Condition. Debates on Where to Go with Regional and Area Studies in Germany', Matthias Middell (ed): *Self-Reflective Area Studies*. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 7-58.

Özkirimli, Umut (2010): *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pike, Andy (2007): 'Editorial: Whither Regional Studies?', *Regional Studies*, 41:9, 1143-1148, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00343400701675587> (accessed 30 September 2014).

Rethinking Area/Asian Studies (2012): <http://globalhighered.wordpress.com/2012/07/17/rethinking-area-studies/>, accessed 29 October 2014.

Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

Sbragia, Alberta (2008). 'Review article: comparative regionalism: what might it be?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 46 (1): 29-49.

ⁱ The author would like to thank Rebecka Lettevall, Hans-Åke Persson, and two anonymous reviewers for the constructive criticism of earlier drafts.