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 cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary research before this lofty title was even invented.

Area studies and multi-disciplinarity

Let us turn to this essential component part of area studies first. Area-studies and regional research would be inconceivable without cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinarity, even if the opposite does not necessarily hold true since there are of course many other areas of application of cross-, inter- and multidisciplinary approaches except for area and regional studies. However, area studies research in many ways represents the epitome of cross- et cetera research. Area specialists are “multidisciplinary by inclination and training”.¹ In many respects, therefore, cross-, 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 argues, the

anxiety not to transgress disciplinary borders largely explained the lag in the advancement of nationalism studies, another area of cross- and multidisciplinary inquiry, long after the end of World War II. 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 al large. And 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.³

According to these two authors, relying exclusively on the established academic disciplines for the study of contemporary nationalisms would usher in risks of “rigidities and overdeterminism”, manifested not least by orthodox practitioners of political science with their “obsession with classification and typology”.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶

---

⁴ Ibid.  
⁶ Ibid.
Notably, cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary research projects are often encouraged and commended by funding agencies. Sometimes, however, one might of course 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.\(^7\) 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 cross-disciplinary research tend to be more on the periphery.

Still, there has undeniably been a sea change as compared to the situation 25-30 years ago. To use my own case as illustration, I was promoted to full professor of political science in 2006. As my academic career had largely been associated with Soviet and Russian studies, I actually doubt whether I would have been recommended for a full professorship by my peers had the same application with the same content been handed in some ten years earlier.

Everything should not be blamed on the border police of the time, though. I think in many respects area studies practitioners had themselves to blame for the criticism they received. I think that 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 cross-, 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 member of the border police squad to react there. In the words of one commentator who was uncompromising in her criticism regional and 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”.\(^8\)

However, in all fairness, area studies researchers have in recent decades represented the whole spectrum from theoretical and methodological rigor to their total opposites. And whereas the

\(^7\) Brian Jenkins and Jeremy Leaman 2014, p. 3.
first generation of area studies after World War II 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.9

Undeniably, though, regional studies specialists have theoretically and methodologically often seemed to have little in common save for the interest in the 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 the reputation of area studies better among representatives of the traditional disciplines. 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.10

After the Cold War: Contextual and ideological transformations

When assessing the state of area studies research today, one will of course first and foremost have to take into consideration the vast contextual differences between now and then, between contemporary conditions and what used to be the case during the years of the Cold War. Even though the Cold War context perhaps did not see the genesis of the area studies tradition as such11 the Cold War generation of area studies was heavily influenced by the ideological contestation between the two blocs. Thus area studies, typically Soviet studies as performed in the United States 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.\textsuperscript{12} Funding from governmental agencies was often forthcoming on these grounds, especially in the United States but also in Europe. Consequently, the end of the Cold War contributed to a substantially reduced demand for area studies analyses from the powers that be.\textsuperscript{13} This situation still persists, even if area studies dealing with the Muslim world still to a large extent bear an ideological imprint, especially so after 9/11.

This manifestly political component of area studies and its Cold War legacy has at least partly been dealt with as time has undergone dramatic changes. This may itself contribute to the improvement of the academic reputation of area studies, even if there is now comparatively speaking often 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 are 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.

However, there is another matter that warrants constant attention by area studies practitioners in the West. We still have to be mindful of the fact that area studies have a postcolonial legacy, and that the Western perspective of areas to be studied has often been characterized by an Orientalist, patronizing outlook in the sense seminally elaborated on by Edward Said\textsuperscript{14} and Frantz Fanon.\textsuperscript{15} This content is of course ideological as well, even if it manifests itself on a more subconscious level than the Cold War context does. 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. To my mind, one way of doing this in our part of the world is to very consistently try to use the same methodological and theoretical approaches for the study of EU-Europe as we do for other parts of the globe.\textsuperscript{16}

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 glorifying of the Self. Not least could this be done when studying the consequences of and impact on politics of the Eurozone crisis. The latter 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

\textsuperscript{12} Peter J. Katzenstein 2001.
\textsuperscript{15} Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}, New York 2008.
\textsuperscript{16} Matthias Middell 2013.
relation to developments in other parts of the globe.\textsuperscript{17} For Europeans to treat Europe or European sub-regions as just any region on a par with other regions of the globe is no easy task to undertake though. As observed by Middell, 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”.\textsuperscript{18} The desirably for analysts of United States politics to likewise address North America as one region among others has been pointed out in a similar manner.\textsuperscript{19}

Theoretical and methodological developments

However, the challenge might also contribute an impetus for the successful development of area studies in contemporary times. Recent decades have seen some promising developments within the field of theory evolvement in area studies.\textsuperscript{20} 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, this work has sought to disrupt notions of “regions” as bounded territories.\textsuperscript{21} The ever accelerating processes of globalization have challenged the supposition of the existence of such fixed regions even further. As the notion of stable regional units of analysis has also been linked to nation-state centrism, regional studies have had their share of criticism levelled against methodological nationalism as outdated and out of step with time.\textsuperscript{22} If, however, regions are analyzed exactly as social constructions made by Self as well as Other, responses to such criticism are rather prone to enhance the usefulness of area and regional studies under contemporary conditions. Also, as a rejoinder to this kind of criticism one should 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 early 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 and Lebanon, on the other. To depict these macro-regions as


\textsuperscript{18} Matthias Middell 2013, p. 13.


\textsuperscript{20} Matthias Middell 2013, p. 27.

\textsuperscript{21} Andy Pike 2007, p. 1143.

\textsuperscript{22} Peter J. Katzenstein 2001.
socially constructed is an academic luxury that we maybe can and should afford, but that does not take away the fact that academic 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 for such regions that are conflict-prone and clearly impact on international relations their continued existence supports the case of maintain a vital area studies tradition at our universities.

Inventory of best practices

Still, further work needs to be done to boost the academic credentials of area studies, as well as indeed the practicing of cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary research in general. Among its practitioners it is no secret that such lines of academic research are challenging to undertake. Many of those involved have been experiencing the joys of fruitful cross, inter- and multidisciplinary undertakings in area studies, but have equally often, I believe, been frustrated with the difficulties in talking and communicating across disciplines. What is needed is therefore consistent work to chart out the methodological pitfalls but also benefits of exercising cross-, inter- and multi-disciplinary research. What should researchers do, what should they refrain from doing, and what specific challenges do cross-, 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 the social science jargon, but when it comes to the successful implementation of cross-, inter- and multidisciplinary research I believe that such a method would indeed be justified.

My present home base, Malmö University, is a youngling university which prides itself of being a national pioneer in cross- and multi-disciplinary research. However, even in a setting like this there is a great need to become more visible when it comes to disseminating experience and lessons learned about such research. This is an area where I do believe that Malmö University could and should take a national lead. What needs to be done is to recollect its 15-year old experience in this field, take a few steps back and from this perspective

analyze the experiences and formulate them into more general and practical propositions for research. These should be put on paper in e.g. textbooks, handbooks and methodological manuals for cross-, 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, an internationally prominent effort in this direction is made in the writing up of a universal manual of regional studies research, under the lead of Stefan Troebst and his associates. The methodological handbook of area studies project that the colleagues at Leipzig have undertaken is well under way to its completion, and will be an important milestone in area studies research. Slated to be completed in 2015, this ambitious project will presumably serve to resurrect the reputation of area studies research in the sense that it will show that this field of research has equally solid theoretical and methodological underpinnings as do traditional disciplinary-based research, only that it has some additional challenges to rise to that mainstream research has not. This does not render it less important to undertake.

Funding issues and concluding thoughts

Even if one can thus argue in favor of the increased importance of area studies, the economic preconditions are far from always there to back up such recognition. In the United States there have recently been significant funding cuts in the US Department of Education’s Title VI program, which since the mid-1960s 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 per cent. The cuts seem to have been unequally distributed, though: whereas funding for Russian studies have been significantly reduced there are still good funding opportunities for studies centered on China or the Middle East. In the United Kingdom, 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 European Union, especially since such centers were disfavored by the fact that, as was referred to

---

24 Stefan Troebst: “Keynote address on the experience of Area Studies at Leipzig University”, Workshop on Area/Regional Studies organized by Malmö University, Genarp, 22 September 2014.
above, assessment panels were often manned according to principles of traditional disciplinary belonging.

On the other hand, Germany has been going in the opposite direction. There, substantial resources have in recent years being allocated to a number of centers of excellence in regional studies research. Support has been forthcoming from both federal and Länder levels of government.\textsuperscript{26} Norway is another example of increased funding for area studies research. Substantial Norwegian Research Council funding has during the last few years been made available for universities all over Norway through the so-called NORRUSS research program which is focused on Russian politics and society, especially with regard to security implications for the High North. Sweden can possibly be said to have treaded a middle path here. 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 as one joint strategic research area together with the otherwise overwhelming majority of research areas within technology, engineering and medicine. As a consequence, two national university centers for regional research (on Russia in Uppsala and on the Middle East in Lund, respectively) were given basic 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, and it is doubtful whether the same dynamic effects can be achieved as in the Norwegian case.

On the whole, one can thus say that practitioners of area and regional studies are no longer frowned upon as the Cold-War ideological connotations have largely been overcome and the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of area studies have improved. Economically, however, the record is mixed and different countries seem to go in different directions when it comes to the funding of area studies research. This said, the relative scarcity of funding for area studies research in several countries is probably no less severe than for social science and humanities research in general. This, however, touches on another and maybe bigger debate than can be the subject of this particular paper.

\textsuperscript{26} Matthias Middell 2013.