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Research note

Theory-Driven Conceptualization and Epistemic Reflection in Comparative Area Studies: Some Thoughts on "Unwritten Constitutions" and Research Designs

Claudia Derichs

Summary
The discussion of the relationship between disciplines and area studies often revolves around the two issues of theory and methodology. A shared understanding on the part of both disciplinary-oriented scholars and area experts exists with regard to the necessity of making empirical findings regarding the generation of theory, as well as regarding theory testing and conceptual "travel." Opinions vary, however, when it comes to the degree of interdependence between area studies and disciplinary inquiry: 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? Moreover, the definition of what constitutes an "area" is an ongoing topic of debate within area studies and disciplinary studies alike. The subsequent discussion in this article attempts to structure the discursive field of current area studies debates — albeit in a non-exhaustive manner. Against the backdrop of the broader discussion about knowledge production in and through area studies, it points to issues of context, condition, and position in such research. It then reflects on the theory-based approach of "unwritten constitutions" (as introduced by Birsl and Salzborn in this volume) as a case in point for creating research designs that take epistemic questions into account.

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Structuring the field: area studies, areas, and disciplines

The relationship between area studies and academic disciplines has been uneasy at times, and still represents a contested field for the thorough reflection on global knowledge production. While 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[1] — have passed at least, in most of the German if not "Western" academic debate in general the locus as well as the context and circumstances of knowledge production in general has become an important topic of discussion.

Three major discursive schools or currents can be identified as promoting a specific understanding of area studies, and moreover of what the field ought to deliver in today's global machinery of knowledge generation, knowledge flow, knowledge exchange, knowledge translation, and the like. I list these three in a simple typology and without any qualitative ranking. The first of these can be called the *conciliatory* current, composed of scholars who emphasize the mutual benefits of combining area studies with disciplinary approaches (theories, methods). In the context of Asian Studies in Germany, they have gained momentum since the mid-1980s and have become visible, for instance, in scholarly societies such as the German Association for Social Science Research on Japan (established in 1988), which has ever since its inception sought to promote exchange between social scientists and japanologists (see http://vsjf.net/?lang=en). During the last decade, proponents of inter- and cross-regional studies — based on using comparison as the methodological tool for research — have increased (see, for example, Ahram 2011; Basedau and Köllner 2007; Berg-Schlosser 2012). While inter-regional studies address the comparison of entire regions — such as Latin America and the Middle East — cross-regional research depicts what the subunits of a region are and then compares them with each other — for example Muslim majority countries across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.[2] By way of convention, this type of comparative area studies has been abbreviated as CAS. Ariel Ahram (2011: 84) sees a lot of value being added by CAS, and postulates that areas are analytical categories rather than simple geographical givens.

A second group of scholars can be called the representatives of the *new areas studies* current. They 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 thematic field of study" in respect to the latter (Houben 2013: 3). A historian and Southeast Asia expert, Vincent Houben writes further that:

> Whereas disciplines can boast of a very large, well-organized body of knowledge and established theories and methods in order to extend that knowledge, studies of non-

1 Most tellingly summarized by T. Mitchell (2002: 66f.): "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."

2 A comparative cross-regional study by the author and her team on transition, democratization, and Islamization in Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Malaysia) and the Middle East (Bahrain and Kuwait) is currently being prepared for publication. The project relied, as proponents of comparative area studies often point out, on solid expertise — including language proficiency in both regions. This is what renders CAS difficult when more than aggregate data is at stake.

> western areas face a number of problems which make them appear weak from the very start. The first problem is that their origins appear to lie within Orientalism, a Western way to view, categorize and ultimately attempt to subjugate the non-West. […] The second problem is the area itself, since it is unclear how it can be demarcated properly as a unit of analysis; "area" in itself does not explain how it could be studied in a fruitful manner (Houben 2013: 3f.).

As a supporter of a new area studies paradigm, Houben hopes that the potential of area studies will move to the center of scientific research — not least because the disciplines now find themselves in a state of crisis. This notion of a crisis is also shared by United States-based Middle East expert Timothy Mitchell (2002), who sees the crisis of social science in what he calls the de-territorialization of the disciplines — with political science suffering most because of the loss of the state as its central object of inquiry, thereby leading to the loss of the discipline's territorial focus. He suggests the role for area studies being to act as research that can "provincialize the social sciences" (Mitchell 2002: 74).

While both of these scholarly currents conceive of areas as entities existing beyond geographical proximity, they are not as radical in their departure from the geographical notion as the third current is. Herein, scholars are urged to rethink area studies epistemologically, to avoid thinking in container entities (such as that of "nation-state"), and to focus on the mobility patterns and communicative processes of human interaction. As such, we can call this the *rethinking* current. Reasoning that South Asia, as a case in point, may sometimes be more visible in the United Kingdom than in India or Pakistan, this current supports the 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 2014a). Crossroads Asia is a research network prominently representative of this current in Germany by the research network *Crossroads Asia*. According to this network, the necessity to rethink areas studies lies in the fact that there is no longer a tight coherence between physical and cultural space (Crossroads Asia 2014b; Mielke and Hornidge 2014).

Whether this reorientation should be called New Area Studies, Post Area Studies, or Critical Area Studies is still a matter of debate. Crossroads Asia's relationship with the disciplines is more relaxed than that of the "new area-ists" (Current Two), although the crossing of disciplinary boundaries is still a work in progress.[3] Another, partially similar, approach is taken by the ZMO (Zentrum Moderner Orient) in Berlin, which examines "Muslim Worlds" and incorporates into this concept the spaces and places where Islam as a "grand scheme" or worldview plays a role for people's daily lives (Freitag 2013: 1–3). Such worlds include Muslim diasporas as well as that of non-Muslims living under Islamic law (to name but two examples).

3 Personal communication with Crossroads Asia members during the network's conference "Mobilizing Religion," held in Bonn from July 18–19, 2013.

The "area" of interest is thus not confined to specific geographical regions and favors a de-territorialized approach to the inquiry into Muslim worlds. Awareness of the "situatedness" of scholars and of knowledge production is a core principle underlying ZMO's scientific endeavors.

While the area studies/CAS debate in and beyond Germany is ongoing, the fresh impact brought by the emergence of the *new area studies* and the *rethinking* currents seems promising in view of the subsequent adjustment of both area and disciplinary research to the complex empirical realities that scholars have to deal with. For the author's personal taste, a stronger exchange between social scientists, area experts, and linguists would add to epistemic progress. Approaches such as Jan Bloemmert's (2010, 2013) — which have introduced ideas of scaling, crossing, and indexicality in order to grasp the mobile resources of speakers ("sociolinguistics of mobile resources and indexical orders") — carry the potential to exactly match area scholars' idea of replacing the geographical with a figurational/sociospatial approach. Further discussion on this should, however, take place elsewhere. Going back to what unites rather than divides area studies scholars, a few issues can now be looked at.

Context, condition, and position

Demands for a "decentring and diversifying" of area studies, as Goh Beng-Lan (2011) articulates in the context of Southeast Asian studies, point to the ever increasing importance of a solid reflection on the situatedness 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 2013: 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 (2013: 66) rightly recalls. It also takes into account the significance of shifting the view from the centers to the peripheries of knowledge production. Doing so includes the reflection by individual scholars about their position therein, and about the conditions and context of their generation of findings. The procedure of seeking local interlocutors (read "data providers," often from the Global South) and translating their information into publications for the "scientific community" (read "data analyzers," mostly from the Global North) — a practice not alien to area research — has meanwhile become debatable from an ethical point of view (Mielke and Hornidge 2014: 28; see also, Freitag 2013: 7). What Farhana Sultana and others have long identified as a core principle in feminist research equally counts as true for area research: the awareness of one's positionality not only but particularly *in* the field. It is "an important concern, as 'writing with' rather than writing 'about' is a challenge that scholars have taken up in recent years in order to redress concerns about marginalization, essentialisms, and differences in representation" (Sultana 2007: 375). The underlying gist of this concern is obvious:

> 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 2007: 375).

The issue of positionality and reflexivity (as a consequence thereof) in area studies also tackles the question of "universal knowledge." In principle, giving due consideration to positionality means to admit that the generation of "universal knowledge" is actually virtually impossible — not to mention the rebuke it gives to the claim of having actually generated universal knowledge. From Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge's perspective, "with the consideration of positionality the idea of universal knowledge is rendered invalid" and "it is rather about the situatedness of knowledge and its production" that we have to reflect upon — not on how to achieve universality (2014: 32). The legitimate critique of universality points to questions such as "whose knowledge are we talking about?" and "who defines what is relevant knowledge or not?" Furthermore, the political dimension of "doing area studies," which is today an accepted fact, has to be taken into account. As Timothy Mitchell succinctly put it, "the genealogy of area studies must be understood in relation to the wider structuring of academic knowledge and to the struggles not of the Cold War but of science – and social science in particular – as a twentieth-century political project" (Mitchell 2002: 52). This implies acknowledging that political intervention in the organization of science has always taken place, and simultaneously recognizing as well a certain lopsidedness to theory formulation on the Global North–Global South scale.

For the former problem, both Mitchell and Goh offer ample examples in their critical assessment of Middle East Studies in the US and Southeast Asian Studies in that region respectively. Mitchell, for instance, recalls the reluctance among postwar US scholars of the Middle East to address the issue of Palestinian rights and to include Israel in the regional portfolio (Mitchell 2002: 60). Even more revealing was the halting of activities in the mid-1960s by the American Association for Middle Eastern Studies (including stopping publication of the association's journal *Middle Eastern Studies*) after accusations of it entertaining relations with Zionist organizations had surfaced. Other such scholarly associations were closed down too. "The abrupt closure of these journals and associations raised the question of the secret funding of Middle Eastern studies, including not only the possible role of Zionist organizations but also the part that may have been played by the United States Central Intelligence Agency" (Mitchell 2002: 61).

Goh mentions politically defined boundaries for professional research of a different yet equally significant kind in relation to Southeast Asia. The countries of the region split into either nonaligned or capitalist-friendly blocs in the course of the Vietnam War. Within the ASEAN region, academic orientation toward the US became the

dominant trend at this time. "As the regional human sciences became implicated in nation building projects and Cold War ideologies, disciplinary divisions and ideological splits found in American human sciences became prevalent," Goh reveals (2011: 22). But apart from this emulation of existing divisions, nothing much changed in terms of the monitoring effect of states and regimes on local scholarship. As Goh would (2011: 23) admit, "We all know that Southeast Asian scholarship has come under criticism for being co-opted by state agendas." (Goh 2011: 23). He continues:

> What are commonly known as "government think tanks" in South East Asia are one example; public universities, another. In fact most established universities in the region are state funded. In spite of this the struggle to transform the human sciences into forms of knowing which might counterbalance the tyranny of state benevolence or domination has not disappeared (Goh 2011: 24).

That attempted counterbalance is an ongoing struggle to this day. We can thus not separate knowledge and epistemology from politics and regimes. More often than not, the incumbents who took over the task of nation building in Southeast Asia established authoritarian regimes. Within such a setting — where scholars are expected to think for the state — creative minds are rare since their presence would involve walking a dangerous tightrope. An Indonesian social scientist working in the country's largest government-sponsored think tank, for example, says he has to "juxtapose the demands of being a 'good citizen' […] on the one hand, and being a good researcher who is critical of the 'objectivity' of scholarship on the other" (Fadjar Thufail, paraphrased in Goh 2011: 25). Researchers in Indonesia are called to conduct Applied Social Science research rather than to indulge in theoretical reflections. "Such constraints demand ingenuity on the part of researchers to carve out strategies which can tailor research projects to meet state requirements without sacrificing theoretical rigour" (Goh 2011: 25).

Having said that, the uneasiness with a "Western" or "Northern" bias in knowledge production in general and theory production in particular is not explainable solely by political conditions and local contexts. A factor that bears at least equal consideration is the reality that Social Science theories and concepts are first produced in the "West," and then later empirically "tested" in the non-Western world. Postcolonial studies have, of course, hinted at the lopsidedness of this process. Yet, the question remains of how to solve this problem and how to proceed in a manner that renders global research an endeavor conducted on an equal footing. This question can be directly connected to the attempt to employ the concept of "unwritten constitutions" to Comparative Area Studies inquiry, as suggested by Ursula Birsl and Samuel Salzborn in this volume. The next section briefly sketches two potential ways of negotiating research designs for a project on "unwritten constitutions" in Asia, Europe, and the MENA region. This outline relates to the three discursive currents that were previously mentioned.

Conceptual travel and research design

Understood as a "theory-based approach to unwritten constitutions of political rule as a field of inquiry in Comparative Area Studies," Birsl and Salzborn concentrate on the three dimensions "that could assist in conceptualizing potential research project designs": an institutional dimension (which is manifested in written as well as in unwritten constitutions, and in political rule); a cultural and actor-oriented dimension (which reflects and/or is reflected in the political culture of a polity); and, a spatial dimension (which both includes and excludes actors from participation in the exercising of power). Although local, national, and transnational arenas can form the units of inquiry, the very concepts of institutions, political culture, and political space imply that the (nation-)state as their frame of reference. This, Birsl and Salzborn argue, is necessary since "the category of the state still remains indispensable for the analysis of political rule," and "theoretical considerations revolve around this seismographic epicenter." While this reasoning is certainly convincing when looked at from a discipline-informed and theoretical perspective, the above-mentioned issues of area definition and positionality are at stake too — all the more so when we try to apply the theory-based approach of "unwritten constitutions" to empirical realities on the ground or in the field.

As suggested by Birsl and Salzborn, the areas to be tackled in view of the "unwritten constitutions" that serve as informal, uncodified norms of human interaction are Asia, Europe, and the MENA region. While these regional entities cannot be clearly demarcated as geographical units (their territorial boundaries are rather politically defined — if defined at all), taking them as analytical categories in Ariel Ahram's (2011) sense requires the delineation of subunits — since there is no such thing as an "Asian," "European," or "MENA" institutional set-up, political culture, or political space (apart from the European Union). For the same logical reason, an inter-regional research design from within CAS would be a mismatch for this project — because it would equally require conceiving of the regions as units of analysis and hence demarcating what their borderlines are. The appropriate format to choose, consequently, is that of a cross-regional comparison — which again requires defining entities *within* a region (subunits) as units of analysis. The need to delineate subunits will ultimately lead political scientists to refer to the state and its administered space as the suitable frame of reference for their analysis. This is done by Birsl and Salzborn too. The theoretically driven approach of identifying "unwritten constitutions" might thus become empirically tested in a selected number of states that political convention designates as being Asian, European, or MENA ones. Methodological issues (small-*n*/large-*n*; method of data collection and data processing; identification and operationalization of variables, and so on) would need to be discussed, and fieldwork planned systematically, in order to arrive at a proper comparative research design. This format would then most likely resemble the ideational approach of the *conciliatory* type of the above outlined currents.

Bringing the potential research design of a project on "unwritten constitutions" in line with the concerns of Currents Two and Three (*new area studies* and *rethinking*) carries more difficulties. First, before any reflection on defining or demarcating the areas and units of analysis commences, a few epistemological questions would probably come to mind: Concerning situatedness, one would be inclined to ask where and under what circumstances concepts such as "political culture" or "political space" have emerged, what their empirical objects of reference were, and if they are familiar terms in the regions that are going to be researched? Another question to touch upon would be the positionality of the research team — who is going to do research where, and in collaboration with whom and why? What does fieldwork mean with respect to finding out about "informal rules"? What conditions does the field provide in terms of access to information, infrastructure, means of communication, freedom of movement, and so on? The category of "state," too, would raise concerns in certain environments — one might think of Hizbullah-controlled districts in Lebanon or tribal areas in Pakistan, where political decisions are made by nonstate actors and where the state is absent from people's daily lives (particularly women's lives).

Moreover, as Katja Mielke argues in this volume, the state-centric perspective embodies carries consequences for the conceptualization of politics and potentially touches upon the self-image of political scientists. Accordingly, she suggests an "analytical re-focusing on the process dimension of social practices and underlying cognitive factors." Since the social order in a society is constantly reproduced, she sees an approach that is not state-centric as "particularly relevant for understanding local governance dynamics, i.e. power inequalities, decision making and enforcement processes at community-level." In a nutshell, area studies scholars of Currents Two and Three would probably be strongly preoccupied with fundamental issues of knowledge production and arrive at a research design that is highly "exploratory" (if we apply a Social Science terminology), and that adheres to the principle of "writing with" rather than "writing about" (Sultana 2007). They would, furthermore, be inclined to choose an emic approach to "political culture," "institutions," and "space," rather than subscribing to a predefined Political Science understanding of these terms.

The "thinking aloud" presented here could be continued in this way, with researchers henceforth diving deeper into the problematic nature of mediating between the different ideational approaches in their search for a research design that attends to the concerns of all three of the currents outlined. Since the theoretical approach introduced by Birsl and Salzborn as well as reflection on its potential application to complex empirical realities are currently at a nascent stage, discussion and comments hereon are highly welcome.

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