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Area Studies and Disciplines: What Disciplines and What Areas?

Current Debates

Claudia Derichs

Area Studies (AS) debates often centre on the relationship between AS and disciplines, with a particular focus on so-called systematic disciplines including social sciences and economics. To my mind, this is a bit short-sighted and narrows the issue of what disciplines and AS mean. In the following paragraphs, I offer some thoughts about disciplines in a broader sense, about methods and about areas as a structuring element of the institutional academic landscape in Germany. I end with a recommendation for liberating the AS debate from the quest for the relationship between AS and disciplines and for a strong integration of transimperial, transregional, transnational and translocal dimensions into the segmentation of institutions and study programmes.

Disciplines

Natural sciences, life sciences, mathematics, economics, social sciences and the like demand to be characterised first and foremost by particular methods and methodologies. This feature also qualifies the subjects of study subsumed under such headings (e.g. physics, biology, sociology, political science) to be called disciplines. In the German language, disciplines are also called *Einzelwissenschaften* or *Fachwissenschaften*, signalling a kind of singularity and systematicity. They are seen as “systematic disciplines”, which is a term that is meant to distinguish them from allegedly non-systematic methods of scholarly inquiry. While systematic / non-systematic is a delicate binary in itself, the designation “discipline” merits attention for several reasons.

I would like to start out by reflecting on the temporality of disciplines and then move on to the methodological plurality of some disciplines. Concerning

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temporality, it is interesting to recall how dynamic the process of the designation of new and abandonment of “obsolete” disciplines has been throughout centuries. Historian Anna Echterhölter examined a case in point. During a fellowship at the German Historical Institute in Washington DC, USA, she researched the emergence and then disappearance of a discipline known as “descriptive statistics” (Echterhölter 2016). It was a discipline with a rather short life of less than a century (1750–1810). The author puts its trajectory into the context of its time:

It presents the odd case of statistics before data. In these early days, solid numbers were not easy to come by. Words were favored over mathematics, although units and lists, sizes and scopes were increasingly integrated into the text. The statistical descriptions of different countries, which appeared in great number, were much closer to a collection of historical facts, which could include numbers. (Echterhölter 2016: 83)

The discipline did not belong to economics or mathematics. It was the time before historicism, and “to contemporaries, descriptive statistics belonged to the ensemble of auxiliary sciences (*Hilfswissenschaften*)” (Echterhölter 2016: 84, italics in original). The author traces the birth and death of descriptive statistics, pointing out the aspects that moved the discipline’s critical scholar August Ferdinand Lueder to eventually reject it – in contrast to prominent proponents of descriptive statistics, among them Johann Christoph Gatterer, Gottfried Achenwall, Johann Stephan Pütter, Arnold Heeren and August Ludwig Schlözer (Echterhölter 2016: 86). This illustration of the ups and downs of descriptive statistics, its rise and fall from grace, also accompanies the development of “history” as the discipline we know today. Looking at methods such as comparing and measuring, from today’s perspective the work of historians around the turn of the nineteenth century seems to have been much closer to political science than to history. But political science was not yet established as a discipline. The dynamics are amazing, at least in retrospect, and they give us an idea of how fluid the history of knowledge and the history of science have always been. In the second half of the nineteenth century, we find new disciplines such as neurology (a spin-off from medicine), and in the latter half of the twentieth century, it is probably informatics that stands out as one of the most prominent new disciplines.

When it turns out that one discipline is not sufficient for the study of a problem, combinations such as neuro-biology, bio-chemistry, bio-informatics or geo-informatics are created to study the problem in a more comprehensive and encompassing manner. This quick glimpse into developments over time shows that disciplines are not fixed ontological entities that can claim eternal validity. Methods, too, can change and be transformed; they come and go, as do disciplines. There is no necessary nexus discernible between the designation of a scholarly approach as a discipline at one point in time and its revocation

at another. Nor is it definite that a discipline is always characterised by a particular method.

A highly esteemed discipline is medicine. Medicine is conventionally registered as a discipline in the natural or life sciences. It has numerous sub-disciplines such as pathology, dentistry, urology, pharmacology, ophthalmology, veterinary medicine and many more. Similarly, geography / geo-sciences and economics have numerous sub-disciplines that are often acknowledged as disciplines in their own right. This is understandable, since most human beings would feel uncomfortable if a urologist were to examine their eyes and prescribe glasses of a certain strength. Given these circumstances, I ask: Why it is apparently so straightforward to disapprove of Area Studies as a discipline (with numerous sub-disciplines)? Is there no method to Area Studies and its different strands? Is methodology in AS solely imaginable as an application of methods “borrowed” from the “systematic disciplines”? I pose these questions because I think that there are certainly various methods to researching a particular problem in different regional contexts, but that such methods do not necessarily have to be rooted in approaches from the (systematic) disciplines.

Methods and Areas

An example of the plurality of methods within AS is the introduction of new methodological approaches from Asia. A recently established network of scholars on and from Asia – the Shaping Asia network¹ – discusses numerous fresh and innovative methodological approaches from Asia. While emphasising their origin “from Asia”, it is at the same time certain that divisions such as north, south, east or west have become very much obsolete as markers for places of knowledge production. The network takes the criticism of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism seriously, and Europe is understood as just another region (area) on the globe. The term Area Studies designates an approach that renders Europe an area to be studied from “outside” using theories, concepts and methods that may or may not have been developed there.

Moreover, as Elísio Macamo put it, there is a “Eurocentrism of origin” that has to be distinguished from a “Eurocentrism of application” – a valuable distinction that twists the knife in the wound.² What it exposes is the fact that even if theoretical, methodological and conceptual approaches from the so-called global South are acknowledged in the so-called global North, they are not applied to objects of study in said North. Why is that so? What prevents

1 The Shaping Asia network brings together scholars from the Humanities and Social Sciences. It acts as a platform for trans- and interdisciplinary knowledge production among researchers working on and in Asia. Conceptually and methodologically, the network emphasises three main lines of enquiry (connectivities, comparisons, collaborations) and provides a framework for dialogue and comparative engagement among researchers working on related topics in sites across Asia.

2 Personal conversation with Elísio S. Macamo, Freiburg, 22 June 2018. See also Ouédarogo et al. 2018.

social scientists from, for instance, applying theories of tribalism to contemporary Western Europe? Why have some concepts developed to become applied only to “the South”? I would like to illustrate this by taking the concept of kinship as a case in point. Kinship has a splendid track record in anthropology but is hardly used as an analytical concept in studying liberal democracies. Nor is it prominent in sociology. In the former case, the “modern state” has been conceptualised as one that is organised by functional rather than kinship groups. In the latter case, the nuclear family has become understood as “more modern” than extended kinship formats. Hence, kinship studies are perceived to be suitable for analysing “traditional” rather than “modern” societies. This perception did not come about accidentally.

Central to Western self-understanding in the twenty-first century is that kinship plays no role in politics. This separation has a long genealogy and enormous consequences for research and policy-making. Particularly in the domain of modern politics the presence of kinship was (and is) seen as something to be exorcised in order to establish rational administrative systems, mobilise colonial populations and even destroy terrorist infrastructures. It is behind distinctions between modern and traditional, between Western and “Other” societies. (ZiF Research Group 2026/2017)

I was part of the above cited research group that committed itself to tracing the obvious conceptual split between kinship and politics. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Derichs 2018, 2017), this split has far-reaching consequences for disciplinary and Area Studies. Neglecting the category of kinship in research on Western democracies and societies renders it negligible for the analysis of those states and societies. But, needless to say, the fact of the Kennedys, the Bushes and others should raise a certain awareness of the oddity of neglecting kinship as an analytical category in research on democratic politics. The practice of *in vitro* fertilisation, the distinction between biological and social parenthood, or legal issues pertaining to paternity tests all illustrate that kinship is by no means an outdated category for social science on “modern” societies (the use of the words “modern” and “traditional” may be tolerated here for the sake of argument). What is at stake is thus no less than a thorough revision of said conceptual split. More precisely, what we did in the research group was

to explore the implications of viewing non-Western societies through the lens of kinship, and of excluding kinship from the analysis of Western societies, as has been common since the nineteenth century. A critical examination of the epistemological history of disciplinary categories [was] combined with empirical findings about the work that these categorisations still do today. (ZiF Research Group 2026/2017)

We sought to develop new approaches for using kinship as an analytical tool in the study of current questions of belonging and the making and remaking

of the political order.³ With regard to areas, European states and societies are sites for the enquiry on kinship in the same way as other areas on the globe. With regard to methods, examining kinship in US-American politics requires a different methodological approach than the study of kinship among Rohingya migrant communities in various states, for example. But it is thanks to the rich methodological toolbox of AS that kinship can be made productive as an analytical concept. Coming back to the disciplines, studying kinship with different AS methods is similar to examining, for instance, mental health in medicine with different methods (neuro-biological methods, pharmacological methods, etc.).

Transregional Area Studies

Having used Asia and Europe as designations of areas or regions in the preceding paragraphs, it is now time to scrutinise these area designations and discuss them more critically. To be critical does not mean to abandon the terms and seek alternative terminologies. What I think should be examined are the reasons, in the study programmes of higher education institutions, for segmenting the world into those regions offered for study. Observing the development of institutional representations of “world regions” in academic study programmes, it is striking how long it takes to translate scholarly inferences and empirical realities into institutional formats. While publications of contemporary research on the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, or the Bay of Bengal are filling library shelves,⁴ universities are rather slow in following up and offering degrees in Indian Ocean or Mediterranean Studies (exceptions confirm the rule).⁵ That being said, while Central Asian Studies are by now a tiny but nonetheless seriously acknowledged subject within Asian Studies, in the countries of Central Asia themselves it is quite unusual to have Central Asian Studies departments in higher education.

Similarly, I remember travelling through Southeast Asian countries less than a decade ago and trying to document the work of Southeast Asian Studies departments in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. To be honest, the majority of the universities I visited did not have a department of Southeast Asian Studies. The exception back then was Singapore, where the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute was indeed outstanding for its consolidated institutional framework and its high number of publications in this field of study. The Singaporean case shows that area studies maps may become accepted and adopted in the regions to which they pertain – Southeast Asia being indeed a case in point. The geographical areas themselves have

3 The results of this collaborative research are going to be published in an edited volume (forthcoming). For preliminary intensive reflections on the topic see Thelen / Alber 2017.

4 Out of many, the mention of a few works may suffice to map this field of study: Allen et al. 1998, Lewis / Wigen 1999, Vink 2007, Prange 2008, Jones 2009, Amrith 2013, Varró / Lagendijk 2013, Sheriff / Ho 2014.

5 For a concise assessment of Indian Ocean Studies see Verne 2019.

developed into units of shared visions, values, norms and identities. As Goh argues, such areas should be recognised accordingly:

While indeed much in the criticism of area studies as contrived geographical and cultural conceptions is warranted, what critics often forget is that the area studies map of the Cold War has been adopted throughout much of the world. Hence, as much as a territorially-bounded concept of the region can be theoretically deconstructed, there is a *lived reality* to this constructed geography. (Goh 2012: 91, emphasis added)

Goh has certainly hit the bullseye by reminding us of the importance of lived realities. I want to take this point further and use it as a bridge to the issue of research *beyond* regions and regional borders. Taking the lived realities, mobilities, connectivities and people's feelings of belonging as a vantage point for defining "areas" may lead to the approval of a "constructed geography", as Goh put it, but it may also lead us to disapprove of the rather stiff boundaries that are drawn by structuring area studies programmes into Japanese Studies, Chinese Studies, Korean Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, South Asian Studies, Central Asian Studies and the like. Oftentimes, and increasingly so in the wake of globalisation, "there is more Delhi in Oman than in India", a phrase referring to the strong presence of Indian communities in Oman. Transregional, transnational and translocal ("transversal" in one word) connectivities are most visible and relevant for people's lives; they reflect geographies that are not defined by borders between territorial or maritime spaces, but by the feeling of belonging regardless of "where in the world" one is physically located.

Is transversal connectedness a new phenomenon? It is not. As Indian Ocean Studies and Mediterranean Studies aptly convey, seascapes and cross-regional landscapes have a rich and complex history. However, conceiving of world regions beyond established meta-geographies (cf. Wippel / Fischer-Tahir 2018) in a consequent manner is a desideratum in many institutions of higher education in general and AS institutions in particular – at least in Germany. The Institute of Asian and African Studies (IAAW) at Humboldt University Berlin has been responsive to the demand for recognising transregionality. From the winter semester 2019, three professorial positions for transregional studies have been held by colleagues with a strong track record in analysing phenomena that transgress national and regional borders.⁶ The provocative point of historian and Latin Americanist Michael Goebel notwithstanding – he found that "[b]y and large the limits of 'transregional studies' as a self-proclaimed field or perspective are identical with the boundaries of universities in German-speaking lands" (Goebel 2019: 64) – I believe that transversal perspectives in general and transregional perspectives in particular have tremendous heuristic potential. Of course, anyone can challenge the use of the very term "transregional" at any time because it implicitly hosts a particular comprehension of

6 The three professor positions are for Transregional Southeast Asian Studies, Transregional Central Asian Studies and Transregional Chinese Studies.

the concept of “region” and thereby acknowledges regions as entities. However, this is too easy a criticism and does not contribute to the epistemic value of transversal perspectives (of which the transregional is but one).

What finally merits attention is the comprehension of transregional AS with regard to the skills required for conducting such studies. I am a strong advocate of language proficiency as a necessary tool for practicing AS. Given this conviction, I consider it imperative to include language expertise in the design of transregional studies as well. The claim that I frequently come across is, not surprisingly, that an individual scholar can hardly live up to such a requirement because it would mean, at the end of the day, being trained extensively in several languages, preferably non-European ones. I respond by suggesting that transregional research can be arranged as teamwork, in possibly the same way as transdisciplinary research is often carried out. I see ample choices in the coming years to push for “working with” – or, as I recently called it in a lecture, proceeding from re-thinking towards “we-thinking” (Derichs 2019).

A Response to Claudia Derichs’s “Area Studies and Disciplines”

Ariel Heryanto

Claudia Derichs’s text is one of the best expositions that I have seen over several decades on the now lengthy series of debates about the nature, legitimacy and relevance of Area Studies in research institutions and tertiary education. In admirably lucid and succinct fashion, she critically examines key conceptual and operational issues. I am thankful to her, and to the editors, for inviting me to comment. The Asian Studies debate which I have been following centres on two sets of relations: 1) between traditional academic “disciplines” and “inter-”, “multi-” or “trans-disciplinary” fields, where Area Studies is widely assumed to belong, and 2) between “Asia” and the rest. Below is a modest comment on each, complementing or supporting many of Derichs’s points.

Area Studies and disciplines

The decades-long debate on Area Studies versus disciplines often falls into binary stereotypes, with different degrees of simplification. In the crudest version, it paints Area Studies as an under-theorised, crude empirical enquiry,

focusing on a single non-Western country, versus those in disciplines, characterised by erudite theoretical argument and comparative study of multiple countries leading towards some universal truth about humans or social change.

One may polemically argue that the so-called “disciplines” are actually a kind of “Area Studies” too, except that many fail to acknowledge them as such. Most works in social sciences and the humanities (disciplines) focus on a nation-state, with the important exception of anthropology, with its strong tradition of focusing on even a tiny part of a single country. According to Timothy Mitchell:

The social sciences at this time were built around the nation-state as their obvious but untheorized frame of reference. The study of the economy, unless otherwise specified, referred to the national economy [...]; political science compared “political systems” whose limits were assumed to correspond with the borders of the nation-state; society referred to a system defined by the boundaries of the nation-state; and even culture came to refer most often to a national culture. (Mitchell 2003: 158)

The familiar notion of regions as consisting, first and foremost, of nation-states is problematic for several reasons. It overlooks the immense diversity of their size and their formation. Some countries are tiny in size with a relatively short period of history (e.g. the city-state Singapore). Others are huge, with overwhelmingly diverse populations and a wealth of complex history (e.g. India or China).

A serious study of Indonesia is not possible without a substantive interrogation of the inflows and interface of Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern thoughts, people, languages, stories, songs and goods prior to European colonialism, nor without considering the impact of the Cold War. These are not simply external influences that can be studied optionally or in isolation from the internal dynamic of Indonesia. They constitute the founding forces that have shaped Indonesia from the very beginning to the present. However, incorporating all these global forces in a study does not require giving up a focus on Indonesia as a single country. For these reasons, Derichs’s idea of “transversal” is welcome. Likewise, Europe is as we know it today thanks to its rich and complex encounters with many parts of Asia and Africa.

Asia and the rest

The post-Cold War debate about Asian Studies as outlined above is an expression of the growing tension within knowledge production institutions in the West, where Asian Studies used to be strong. It is prompted by protracted competition over reduced resources within universities and among state departments. These unfold in the broader context of shifting global competition over capital and labour. Understandably, the outcome of such a debate is ultimately dictated by broad political and economic imperatives rather than intel-

lectual exchange or abstract reasoning. More often than not, it is a losing battle for Asian Studies.

This is not to say that interest in Asia has declined dramatically in the West. The rise of China's economy, following those in East Asia and Southeast Asia, has increased interest from global state and non-state agencies. However, this new interest does not translate into huge investments in academic training and research in universities, strengthening or enlarging the size of Asian Studies units. Instead, government think tanks and private institutions take strident steps to conduct their own research and publications, occasionally with some support, if any, from a small number of academics. Universities follow suit. They develop greater appetite for new engagements with Asia, but not necessarily in academic fields, and for various goals broader than purely academic research and training under the formal rubric of "Asian Studies".

In most of Asia, the debate over Area Studies versus disciplines has been non-existent or foreign. As Anthony Reid observes, most Asian scholars are "only 'Asianists'" when they are in Western academic settings but "social scientists" when they are at their home bases (Reid 1999: 142). For a complex set of reasons that I have discussed elsewhere (Heryanto 2002), the production, distribution and consumption of scholarly studies on Asia in internationally prestigious English-speaking venues are gravely uneven. With occasional exceptions from Singapore and several East Asian countries, Asia-based studies on Asia have long been under-represented in international conferences, research grants and networks, as well as in peer-reviewed publications. This situation will continue, if not worsen, in the near future.

Under such circumstances, it is never easy to hear and appreciate the voices of Asian scholars about their own region, or about themselves. It is tempting to dismiss their work for a lack of rigour or as a poor imitation of their counterparts who conduct the "real" scholarly activities half a globe away in America or Europe. By no means am I referring to "orientalism" or "racism" in any straightforward sense. Rather, as academic enterprises around the globe are increasingly incorporated into a global system of hierarchical knowledge production and legitimation, only those deemed relevant, valid or valuable to the centre will be on the radar of active researchers who are themselves a product of the system.

Consequently, it is easy to miss things of great concern to the lives of millions of local Asians. It is also easy to overlook the problematics of the notions of "real" versus "imitation" in scholarship and beyond. I have elaborated such issues with a reference to the ideas of "hero" and "heroism" in the production and consumption of the internationally acclaimed film "The Act of Killing" (Heryanto 2019).

Here is another example: In a study of the cultural tastes and consumption of popular culture among Indonesians from middle-class backgrounds, Solvay

Gerke focuses on Indonesians who aspire to a modern Western lifestyle. In her view, these Indonesians have devised a strategy of “lifestyling”, which is a poor imitation of “real” middle-class lifestyles as found in wealthier Western societies (Gerke 2000: 137). She writes, “only a small portion of the Indonesian new middle class was able to afford a Western or urbanized lifestyle. The overwhelming majority was unable to consume the items defined as appropriate for members of the middle class” (ibid.: 146). Interestingly, in her study of Asian cinema, Krishna Sen (1991) identifies a common failure among Western but also some Asian scholars to understand why the majority of Indonesian moviegoers prefer to see a domestically produced film that unashamedly portrays the lifestyle of Americanised Indonesian protagonists, instead of the “real” Western blockbusters.

There are good and bad examples of scholarly work from Area Studies or the discipline-based circles. They need not compete with one another. But in a world of unequals, the potential values of diversity and complementarity are not immediately obvious. It is also unwise to think there are only two options for studying Asia, in a discipline or in Area Studies as we know it today, or with some modifications. Alternative and innovative options have yet to be further explored. One promising key to such exploration is to take Asian languages more seriously, beyond their practical function as a communicative tool, as Derichs proposes, and see language as social relations, as a way of being and world-making.

Disciplining Area Studies: A Comment on the Debate on “New Area Studies”

Itty Abraham

I write this comment from two standpoints: first, as someone who participated in and observed the end of one moment in area studies while working as a programme officer at the US Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the aftermath of the Cold War (1992–2005); and, second, as a scholar based at an area studies department “in the region” – in this case, the Department of South-east Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore (2012–present). Both vantage points offer particular angles from which to engage this emergent European debate on “New Area Studies”. And, if I may jump to a tentative

conclusion, seen from these dis-locations, while this debate is both critical and thoughtful, it may also be read as incorporating strategic silences while unconsciously projecting its own “areal” anxieties more widely. In its search for answers, especially the expressed call for institutional legitimacy, one must ask what is the problem for which this desire appears to be a solution.

Lessons from the United States

Area studies’ “ancestral sin”, as it has been referred to by some of my colleagues in a recent article that I otherwise disavow, is traced to its imperial and national security origins (Chua et al. 2019). In both the UK and US, founders of the modern tradition of area studies, it was the intimate linkage of state military and strategic needs with knowledge of a region and its peoples that “originally” contaminated this field of study. In numerous scathing critiques of the Cold War university, mostly written after 1991, scholars have shown how the tremendous international infrastructures of the American academy were built upon the millions spent by the US national security state to know both friends and enemies much better, often substantially aided by private foundations (Chomsky et al. 1998; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002). This desire (with local institutional variations) was reproduced in France, the Soviet Union, China, Japan and India during the Cold War, on correspondingly minor scales. Not coincidentally, these are all countries that sought or claim great power status in the modern international system.

What must also be pointed out is that in all too many cases, US scholars critical of area studies were themselves beneficiaries of the same state funding streams, which helped them learn foreign languages, visit foreign countries and acquire positions of academic influence. Only a few, notably the distinguished Berkeley East Asianist, Chalmers Johnson, were willing to turn their gaze on themselves as self-consciously as he did, referring to himself as a “spear-carrier for empire” once the scales had fallen from his Cold War eyes. Johnson, initially a specialist on Japan, would go so far as to acknowledge that he turned to the study of China “because that was where the money was” (Johnson 2000). His failing, retrospectively understood, was too much faith and trust in the *bona fides* of the American imperium. Whether we like it or not, the shadow of the state is all over area studies, new and old.

My point is simple. While the origin story is vitally important for understanding why modern area studies came into being, its reproduction over time requires examination also of a host of supporting institutions, including universities, government agencies, international development consultancies, foundations and think tanks, both for their purpose as well as for the opportunities they provide for training, careers and prestige. Inseparable from these institutional and individual passages are well-endowed academic infrastructures such

as grant opportunities, gate-keeping journals, libraries, museums and archival collections. In this light, it is hard not to notice the proliferation of new international research agents and centres in Asia in recent years, from European funding agencies to multiple German political party foundations (*Stiftung*) and French centres for overseas studies. To put it bluntly, why are they (now) so visible in Asia? What is their relation to the “new area studies”? Does including these para-state knowledge-producing-and-supporting institutions in the discussion help situate the “crisis” of area studies in Europe differently? At a minimum, in order to assess what is at stake in the “new area studies”, is it not important to consider the politics and impact of state institutions and funding streams for area studies research and capacity building, whether in Europe or overseas?

The view from the region

Area studies done in the region is not the same as area studies practiced in metropolitan countries (the discussion that follows refers primarily to social science fields, not the humanities). This is a fundamental point that must be appreciated. Regional area studies centres study the “home”; metropolitan centres of area studies study non-local places that may or may not represent the “other”. Moreover, in Southeast Asia, the region is studied at multiple sites, only one of which is the area studies department. Effectively, many scholars in disciplinary departments at my university are also area studies scholars, requiring the same training and expertise and meeting the same standards in order to be taken seriously and seen as credible. What differentiates area studies as practiced in regional area studies centres from area studies done in disciplinary departments in the region are their audiences, norms and approaches to knowledge production.

My colleagues in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies celebrate crossing disciplinary boundaries, they make claims to universal theory-building from local settings, they teach the region as a whole, whether as a unified or disjointed space, making clear their investment in a complex understanding of places and peoples beyond and below the nation-state. In contrast, my disciplinary neighbours are less adventurous, disciplined by their need to be recognised as peers by international colleagues who hold the same affiliations. My neighbours’ limitations are marked by their distance from the disciplinary mainstream, a separation that is flagged in the titles of their work: [*topic X or theme Y*] *in Asia, in Southeast Asia, in Singapore*. Disciplinary colleagues in the region are, all too often, relegated to empirical data production and theory-testing by their metropolitan colleagues who have claimed the prestigious high ground of theory-building for themselves. Regional disciplinary adherents (are

made to) feel parochial in a universal space; by contrast, my area studies colleagues see the particular as the ground from which universals may emerge.

The intellectual challenges facing area studies scholars are much greater, precisely because they cannot fall back on the alibi of disciplinary norms and boundaries. By the same token, they are also much freer to make grander claims and stronger assertions because they range more freely and with fewer methodological constraints. It is no surprise that when Southeast Asia becomes the source for universal theory it is almost always produced by area studies scholars, not disciplinary fellow travellers.

What I am getting at is a global division of intellectual labour that, in spite of welcome change in recent decades, still privileges theory that comes from the Global North. Yet, it can be argued, what is disciplinary knowledge other than area studies of the metropolis? The canonical figures of modern sociology – to take just one example – Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, were writing from and about their home countries, Germany and France, respectively. Why is their work considered foundational of a discipline instead of being seen as (merely) area studies? Their disciples' ability to claim that Weber's and Durkheim's findings are universal cannot be separated from the power differentials that divide and create Global North and South. In other words, these are claims not adjudicated through epistemology but rather via geopolitics. The global distribution of power/knowledge is what makes some national understandings universal – worthy of disciplinary status – while relegating others to parochial modifications, or worse, aberrations from the norm.

Area studies in the region is homologous with disciplinary knowledge in the metropolis. Area studies in the metropolis, by contrast, is constrained by its apparent distance from the established disciplines and its geographical area of study. By specialising in the study of foreign spaces and people, metropolitan area studies scholars relegate themselves to performing second-class knowledge in the eyes of their mainstream colleagues, forever having to justify, explain and legitimise themselves in non-intellectual ways. Little wonder that we see a drift toward overtly serving state objectives by so many area studies colleagues working in the United States – a compensation for institutional marginality? For those who don't want to do this, for good reason, the only remaining solution appears to be the old saw, "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em". Or, as these essays propose, identify area studies as a discipline. This response, while understandable, will not solve the greater problem of why some kinds of regional knowledge are privileged over others, a structural hierarchy that originates in the spatial origins of each knowledge formation.

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