

## Area Studies in Flux

**Veranstalter:** Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS), University College London; School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES); Peking University (PKU)

**Datum, Ort:** 27.09.2018–29.09.2018, London

**Bericht von:** Paul Vickers, CITAS Center for International and Transnational Area Studies, Universität Regensburg

This conference formed part of the Institute of Advanced Studies' (IAS) strategic initiative of „Area Studies Re-mapped“. Previously, its goal was to work towards „area studies without borders“. But, as the organizers explained, in light of the clearly growing significance of borders and boundaries around the world today, the focus has shifted towards examining fluidity, contestation and boundary-making. Hence the relevance of the idea of flux framed this event that marked the culmination of a six-year Mellon Foundation-sponsored research programme at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) that has attempted to rethink Language-Based Area Studies. The collaboration with IAS and the Peking University (PKU, Beijing) is illustrative of efforts towards transcending Euro-American-centred perspectives on area, thus expanding both the geographical and disciplinary range of perspectives represented in area studies. At the same time, the conference planned to consider what makes area studies specific in relation to other fields and disciplines.

The event opened with a presentation of the ongoing Anti-Atlas project. SSEES scholars are attempting to provincialize area studies by adopting a deliberately situated perspective, in this case rooted in Eastern Europe. The objective is to recast views on planetary-scale issues relevant to area studies. The project leaders, represented by MICHAŁ MURAWSKI (London), argued that the usual perspective „hovers, god-like above the world (but that can also usually be traced to a metropolitan Euro-Atlantic region)“. The short presentations of individual projects, covering a range of themes from environmental matters to architecture to literary studies, sought to problematize universalist claims that permeate

area studies. At the same time, the initiative suggests how perspectives from the fringes could prove translatable for approaches relating to other world regions.

The conference's aim of combining global scope with studies of specific locations was evident in the keynote lecture by FRANÇOISE LIONNET (Harvard) who explored representations, from photography and literature to anthropological research, of the fishing industry in the Indian Ocean, with a focus on Mauritius. She framed connections of the people and ports to the global economy in terms of „minor transnationalisms“ that can expose the paradoxes, tensions and frictions of the long history of global systems and networks. Borders and boundaries prove a fluid yet permanent feature of experience when seen from the ground up.

The conference was arranged in four interconnected panels across two days exploring „Area and Disciplinary Thinking“, „Imaginarities of Place and Space“, „Thinking Area Differently“, and „Movements and Flows“. The key theme running through each panel was the relation between „locatedness“ or specificity and the broader, universal claims embedded in disciplinary practices and theories as well as in constructions of space and area produced through academic, artistic, social and political practice.

The first panel thus examined the relation between disciplines and area studies in the formation of Oriental Studies, with reference to Japan by KAROLINE POSTEL-VINAY (Paris), and Jewish/Middle Eastern Studies by SETH ANZISKA (London). Both papers addressed the epistemic inequalities that have shaped the emergence of the fields, as Euro-American visions of the regions were embedded in their foundational frameworks. Ultimately, though, by examining the entanglement of multiple historical imperial powers, as well as past and current global frameworks, which were involved in shaping these regions, there is potential for a multiperspective view that could also, as Postel-Vinay in particular claimed, question established notions of Europe or America. The necessity and value of examining other academic traditions' approaches to world regions was illustrated emphatically in LIU HAIFANG'S (Beijing) pa-

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per. She presented the global entanglements and networks of knowledge, ranging from Oxford to French to Soviet universities, that influenced the long-term formation of African Studies in China. She addressed the field's contemporary significance for China's strategic interests not only in Africa itself but also in competition with other Asian states, as well as its historical role in the Cold War.

SENG ONG'S (Cambridge / Nagoya) presentation also addressed a common theme running through the panel, namely the relevance of postcolonial approaches to area studies. He highlighted the challenge involved in determining critical self-reflection and dialogue when producing knowledge of other world regions. His close reading of two recent historical works on the Opium Wars noted that these academic studies applied postcolonial approaches effectively. Yet reviews suggest that in addressing popular audiences, the self-reflective demands placed on Britain's past failed to translate. Equally, the potentially transformative representations of China were largely read through preconceived Orientalizing frameworks.

Thus Ong's paper, like the panel as a whole, highlighted the extent of the challenge area studies face in enabling dialogue across regions and academic cultures, while also finding ways to communicate successfully and critically with the broader public.

The second panel on „Imaginarities of Place and Space“ continued the theme of addressing the significance of the location of knowledge production and the scales of analysis employed. MAJA and REUBEN FOWKES (co-directors of the Translocal Institute for Contemporary Arts, London/Budapest), examined how artworks, in this case from Eastern Europe, pre-empted the conceptualization of the Anthropocene by addressing environmental issues. Similarly to the Anti-Atlas project, they indicated how a local perspective could shed new light on universal arguments and planetary issues, hence Mignolo's „pluriverse“ concept strongly influenced their work. Taking the contested concept of *Heimat* as his starting point, PAUL VICKERS (Regensburg) also examined the creative tensions between the particular – or local – and the universal. He challenged exceptionalist fram-

ings of *Heimat* as something unique to German culture. Instead, he suggested applying the tools of area studies that combine broader comparative insights with in-depth localized knowledge to explore the complex of subjective emotional attachment to various „homes“ and the potential to instrumentalize this for both political and civil-society objectives. He stressed that the micro-oriented scales variously labelled as homely, local or regional should not be framed as parochial but as co-constitutive of global processes.

ANDREI ROGATSCHEVSKI (Tromsø) offered a practical translation of the global significance of seemingly marginal regions in arguing for the formation of Svalbard Studies. Offering vivid illustrations combining film studies, international relations and ethnography, he presented this contested Arctic region – claimed by Norway and Russia, with a longer colonial past involving the Netherlands and the UK – as a site for examining competing cultural claims that overlap with global security and governance frameworks. Svalbard could perhaps act as another of Lionnet's „minor transnationalisms“, illustrating how turning to the local, everyday experience as a space entailing global processes can work towards pluralizing universal assumptions. By overlaying localized expertise and macro-perspectives, area studies' strength can be used to elucidate the broader significance of Svalbard Studies and its equivalents. DUAN QING and CHENG SUDONG (both Beijing) also demonstrated the importance of maintaining deep disciplinary knowledge in area studies by examining manuscript cultures of different regions of China and East Asia. They presented the formation of languages as a process of exchange and translation that ultimately shapes contemporary perception not only of spaces and regions, but also of basic practices such as reading and writing.

Their deep historical perspective led into the third panel, „Thinking Area Differently“. SUGATA BOSE (Harvard) offered a critical outline of the history of Asian Studies. He emphasized the need to examine connections between the continent and the Indian Ocean, thus opening up links to configurations involving surrounding regions. The speaker ar-

gued that area studies need to embrace the challenges identified in postcolonial and subaltern studies, including finding ways to write history beyond national or nationalist and Eurocentric perceptions. Part of this project involves addressing knowledge production, past and present, emerging from regions typically objectified and framed as epistemologically marginal by Euro-American scholars. SELÇUK ESENBEL (Boğaziçi, Istanbul) illustrated one way of putting in practice the critical area studies called for by Bose. Outlining a history of Japanese-Turkish connections, she highlighted the potential in retreating from the homogenizing claims of world history. Instead, she called for a project of comparative inter-area studies that could challenge a US-dominated model of area studies rooted in politicized and instrumental Cold War modes of knowledge production.

Also calling into question seemingly hegemonic definitions of regions was TUNDE OSENI'S (Ibadan) paper on constructions of the space known as Sub-Saharan Africa. He sought to illustrate the oversights that this label produces in a variety of fields. CHECHESH KUDACHINOVA (Altai Republic, Russia) offered an insightful paper addressing the issue of positionality in attempts to locate Siberia in the course of knowledge production. She addressed the multiple ways in which the region is spatialized and represented, leading to it being framed as both eastern and northern, depending on the position of knowledge producers. This framing also determined its geopolitical labelling, including being a bridge or contact zone between Europe and Asia. Taking a broad historicizing perspective she argued that today these past spatializations are fading in significance as the Arctic becomes increasingly strategically prevalent. Like many papers in this panel, and the conference in general, she drew attention to the implications of constructing and reconstructing spaces in the course of knowledge production, with particular emphasis on the relationship of the sites of production and the spaces under investigation.

The fourth and final panel, „Movements and Flows“, addressed two concepts that have become central in the wake of the „transnational turn“. The papers covered a

broad temporal and spatial range, as was evident in ZHU FENGHAN'S (Beijing) study of pre-Han migration in Northern China and Eurasia. He outlined how archaeology has contributed to the construction of knowledge about nomadic cultures' transition to more settled forms of existence. MICHAEL ROWLANDS (London) addressed a similar set of relations between disciplines and spatial constructions by examining the significance of anthropological research in producing knowledge of the Maritime Silk Road. His thought-provoking contribution addressed whether the concept of „civilization“ might still be relevant to a culturally-oriented area studies. YUNGCHANG YANG (London), meanwhile, examined contemporary young Chinese people's imaginations of the world, in particular the „Western Other“, through photography. Drawing on amateur photographers he offered an example of how insight into perceptions of the global produced from below could be gained.

Turning to professional artists and away from China, BILL PSARRAS (Corfu) examined performative embodiments of contested spaces in the genre of walking performance. Being physically embodied in the production and experience of spaces, of borders and their transgression, again emphasized the significance of a grounded, located approach for area studies' production of larger-scale models. Likewise addressing how the visualization of spaces and borders are entangled with everyday life, MARIJANA PETROVIC (Paris) examined the mapping of minority languages in the Romanian-Serbian borderlands. She also accounted for the impact of global migration on linguistic practice in seemingly peripheral spaces, as Chinese is also present in these areas.

HUDA TAYOB (London) meanwhile examined the Somali diaspora in multiple locations around the globe, from Cape Town and Nairobi to Minneapolis. Her approach included architecture, economics and ethnography as she investigated the phenomenon of the „Somali Mall“. She presented it as a transnational form creating a sense of home and familiarity for Somali migrants. Yet it is also was entangled in their experience as migrants and refugees, leaving the migrants and

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their malls both part of the host countries and simultaneously outsiders to them. Like many of the successful and insightful papers at this conference, Tayob demonstrated how area studies combine an overview of global and regional-level macro processes with an eye for the details that deep specialized knowledge on particular spaces and cultures brings. The disciplinary dialogue and exchanges in her paper offered a keen illustration of practices identifiable across the conference that made single-discipline scholarship a rarity.

The conference might initially have been conceived with the idea in mind that area studies research was becoming indistinguishable from disciplinary endeavours. However, the event ultimately demonstrated that area studies can benefit from crossings between disciplinary and regional specialisms, as well as academic traditions. With such crossings occurring in conditions of flux, the ongoing presence and significance of boundaries, necessary in making comparisons, becomes clear. Even if communication across academic traditions is not always fluent, contact and translations are nevertheless enabled as area studies scholarship moves towards provincialization, to follow Dipesh Chakrabarty, by globalizing its scope and its knowledge producers. With more opportunities for dialogues across multiple times, spaces, academic traditions and disciplines, the prospect for multi-perspectival, critical and comparative area studies that benefit from flux seems to have found fertile ground.

#### **Conference Overview:**

Tamar Garb (UCL, London): Introduction

*Panel: Area and Disciplinary Thinking*

Chair: Peter Zusi (UCL, London)

Karoline Postel-Vinay (Sciences Po, Paris): „Disciplines vs. Area Studies“ as Self & Other: From Euro-Centrism to the Anglo Problem

Seth Anziska (UCL, London): Jewish Studies / Middle Eastern Studies, Israel Studies / Palestine Studies: Working Across the Disciplinary Divide

Ye Shaoyong (PKU, Beijing): A Method to Record the Evolution of Scripts and to Date Undated Materials: A Case Study of Nepalese

Scripts from the 5th to 9th Century

Liu Haifang (PKU, Beijing) China's African Studies in a Global Context

Seng Ong (Nagoya University of Commerce and Business): The Opium War and China Studies: Post-Colonial Spectres

*Panel: Imaginaries of Place and Space*

Chair: Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (UCL, London)

Maja Fowkes / Reuben Fowkes (Translocal Institute for Contemporary Art, Budapest): Towards the Pluriversal Region: The Environmental Revisioning of Eastern Europe

Paul Vickers (University of Regensburg): At Home in a Global World? The Domestic, Local and Regional Realms in Flux

Duan Qing (PKU, Beijing): Gods in Worship Were Not in Script

Andrei Rogatchevski (UCL, London/ UiT): Introducing Svalbard Studies Through Film

Cheng Sudong (PKU, Beijing): „Creating Chunqiu“: The Reformation of Writing Culture and Formation of Literati Literature

*Keynote lecture*

Françoise Lionnet (Harvard University, Cambridge): Islands of Labor: Photographing the Black Docker

*Panel: Thinking Area Differently*

Chair: Tamar Garb / Tariq Jazeel (both UCL, London)

Sugata Bose (Harvard University, Cambridge): An Ocean and a Continent: Reimagining the Indian Ocean and Asia

Selçuk Esenbel (Boğaziçi University, Istanbul): The Prospects for New Area Studies in Inter-Regional and Global Histories of Japan and Turkey

Tunde Oseni (Lead City University, Ibadan): Interrogating the 'Sub-Saharan' Narrative in 'Sub-Saharan Africa': Implications for Area-ism in Knowledge Production and Continental Development

Chechesh Kudachinova (Ongudai School, Altai Republic): Splitting Siberia: Northeast Eurasia's Shifting Spatial Meanings

Zan Tao (PKU, Beijing): Spiritual Connections between China and Turkey: History and Imagination

*Panel: Movements and Flows*

Chair: Megan Vaughan (UCL, London)

Michael Rowlands (UCL, London): Temples, Cults and the Maritime Silk Road

Zhu Fenghan (PKU, Beijing): The North China and Eurasian Grasslands before the Han Dynasty

Marijana Petrovic (Université Sorbonne Paris Cité / CNRS): Do we Have to Draw Borders When We Draw a Map?

Bill Psarras (Ionian University, Corfu): Performing Borders and Conflict Zones: Body, Action and Imagination Towards Poetic Interventions

Huda Tayob (UCL, London): An Entangled Typology of Refuge: Cape Town, Nairobi, Minneapolis

Yunchang Yang (UCL, London): Drifting in Movements: Landscape Images as the Re-Embeddedness and Re-Imagination of Values for Chinese Amateur Photographers

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