

DOES AREA STUDIES NEED THEORY?

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There has been a long-standing debate between “area scholars” and “universalists” on whether or not area studies needs to have its own theories in order to progress as a social science discipline. This paper seeks to argue that area studies does not need its own social science theory per se, since area studies in itself is an amalgamation of several social science disciplines. Therefore, area scholars must draw upon the theoretical strengths of each discipline in order to obtain comprehensive knowledge of the area, as opposed to creating a specific “area theory.”

In the conduct of area research, it is nevertheless crucial that proper social science methodologies be employed as appropriate to each research topic or puzzle. This will enable the discipline to have proper direction and be able to contribute to theory building in other social science subjects, while at the same time garner respect for area studies as a social science discipline in itself. Otherwise, area studies will be a rudderless academic black hole that is neither standardized nor systematic.

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Introduction

There has been a long-standing debate between “area specialists” and “universalists”, which centers on whether area studies should be a multidisciplinary approach in pursuit of deep contextual knowledge of a given area, or adopt an “area theory” of sorts, which would enable the discipline to move towards a more scientific approach. At stake is the very nature of the discipline itself in how its research is conducted and findings disseminated. The dispute rages on within academic circles, with no conclusive victor. In this paper, we shall contend that such a debate is unnecessary. Arguments between scholars have amounted to a futile exchange of views that places a

burden on valuable academic resources. This is because both approaches have valid claims in their own right. What differentiates the two views is the *time horizon* under consideration. In the past, area studies may not have needed a social scientific theory due to the fact that the subject itself is an amalgamation of several social science and humanities disciplines, and therefore area specialists must inherently draw upon the strengths of each discipline to conduct methodological research, as opposed to having to come up with any universal “theory” *per se*.

As the advent of globalization and the invention of tools such as the internet have enabled knowledge of the world to become increasingly elucidated, if area

scholars are given enough resources such as funding, time, and energy, the window of opportunity could then present itself for area studies to take up the mantle of “area science.” This would involve a transdisciplinary (as opposed to multidisciplinary) approach that would enable area experts from various social science disciplines to come together and work on joint research to address common problems.¹ In such a scenario, it would be unlikely for area science to be further contested by the traditional disciplines, and the debate between “specialists” and “universalists” would finally be put to rest.

Area Studies: The Search for an Academic Identity

Since the discipline’s inception in the 1940s up to now, area studies has faced a struggle to find its identity. On the one hand, area studies can be seen as a continuation of “orientalist” scholarship, which originated from the age of European enlightenment and imperialism.² Like the travelogues and field accounts recorded by European explorers and colonialists, there have also been country-specific case studies based on exhaustive data collection through methods such as field research and participant observation that have been produced under the banner of area studies. Such methodologies, it could be argued, are the legacy of orientalist scholarship. Since knowledge of the area under study was limited, the type of work conducted in this manner tended to be inductive, humanistic, and interpretative, a trend that has persisted in a similar fashion to how an anthropologist would approach the study of a foreign society. On the other hand, the rise of positivism in the decades after the Second World War led to heavy criticism that area studies should develop a universal “theory” that would be generally applicable across

¹ The distinction between multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches is made as follows: multidisciplinary approach is understood to mean specialists from various disciplines working together on a research project, each making a contribution by drawing on their individual disciplinary expertise, whereas transdisciplinary approach entails the creation of a unified intellectual framework, a holistic integration of collaborative knowledge that transcends the established conventional disciplines.

all societies and regions of the world. There were calls from rational choice advocates, familiar with game theoretic models, as well as political science and international relations scholars favoring the use of statistical research data to establish patterns, generalizations, and hypotheses testing in the same vein as the natural sciences. It was hoped that “theories” could be developed for the area studies, in the same manner as with the “balance of power theory” of realism or the “democratic peace theory” of liberalism. America’s position as one of the two superpowers during the Cold War did not make things any easier for area studies scholars, as it meant that funding was tied to the US intelligence community and thereby programs were destined to serve US national interests.³

Therefore, the struggle for area studies’ identity during the Cold War can also be viewed as the clash between the social sciences and the humanities in which the former seemed to have a definite victory until the 1970s. However, with the emergence of the critical schools of thought such as post-colonial studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies, a new ground was opened for humanities to claim once again an academic share in the understanding of the contemporary world.⁴

Globalization and the Great Divide

The end of the Cold War and the ensuing era of globalization presented a different challenge to the discipline. Western liberalism triumphed to be the prevailing ideology, leading to a “global” trend of business and consumerism. In the academic world, intellectual space became free from the prohibitions of the Cold War. At the same time, technological advancements, such as the internet, gave rise to the belief among scholars in some camps that knowledge of the world was moving towards a singular, unified entity, referred to as “globalism” or

² Biray Kolluoglu-Kirli, “From Orientalism to Area Studies,” *The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Fall 2003):107-108.

³ Bruce Cumings, “Boundary Displacement: Area Studies and International Studies During and After the Cold War,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (January-March 1997): 10-11.

⁴ Kulluoglu-Kirli, “Orientalism to Area Studies,” 109.

“universalism”. As David Ludden puts it, “universalists argue that globalization is defining a single world zone for the application of universal theory, which makes area studies irrelevant.”⁵ Perhaps no other academic exchange of views on the future of area studies was as fierce as that between Robert H. Bates and Chalmers Johnson. The former argued that the discipline had failed to generate “scientific knowledge,” that area scholars had “defected” to the humanities of history, languages, and culture. In addition to the required language training, Bates argued that area specialists should also be trained in statistical modeling, mathematics, and formal rational choice theories.⁶ The latter provided a vehement rebuttal, contending that rational choice theory does not transcend cultures. In order to truly understand a society, area scholars must study the language and culture in its individual context, which the rational choice project cannot sufficiently provide.⁷ In essence, the debate was between the “harder” social sciences that favor theoretical advancement, and the humanistic camp which sees no real need for the application of such theories. To make matters worse, disciplines friendly to area studies had come to value deep engagement on narrow, abstract topics as opposed to wide-ranging interest in societies writ large.⁸ Parochialism among the disciplines had entrenched scholars on both sides of the divide, making reconciliation even more difficult. Amidst this debate, there have been calls by some scholars for area studies to “cultivate its theoretical and methodological insight through scholarship,” thereby realizing its “theoretical potential and develop the vision area studies needs” by being

⁵ David Ludden, “Why Area Studies?” in *Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World: Recasting the Area Studies Debate*, ed. Ali Mirsepassi et al. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 133.

⁶ Robert H. Bates, “Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy?” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 1997): 168-169.

⁷ Chalmers Johnson, “Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 1997): 171-172.

⁸ Thomas B. Pepinsky, “How to Make Area Studies Relevant Again,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, accessed 7 July 2016, doi:

“comparative, methodologically self-conscious, theoretically ambitious and epistemologically daring.”⁹ Yet despite this vision that has been put forward, there remains disagreement on the direction which area studies needs to take in order to progress as an academic discipline. In this sense, it is necessary to explore further what a “theory” in the social sciences actually entails, and whether or not area studies needs such a “theory” for its advancement.

A Closer Look at “Theory”

Social science theories are far from ideal. As Benjamin I. Schwartz aptly observes, “the term ‘pure theory’ suggests something like the Kantian deduction of the categories – a process of pure reason based strictly on logical or mathematical implication, whereas in fact most of the theories in the (social sciences) disciplines are based on empirical generalization.”¹⁰ Indeed, one of the major qualms is that they tend to be probabilistic as opposed to deterministic, lacking the power to predict, unlike theories of the natural sciences (Newton’s law of gravity comes to mind). This is partly due to the fact that social phenomena are difficult, if not impossible, to replicate in the laboratory setting. The complexities of the human mind should also be pointed out. In the social world, human beings, unlike atomic particles or chemical agents, are self-conscious and can reflect on past experiences to inform reasons for shaping their future behavior.¹¹ Hence, major advocates and users of rational choice theory readily admit that the

chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2015/02/12/how-to-make-area-studies-relevant-again/

⁹ Michael D. Kennedy, “A Manifesto (of sorts) for Area Studies,” *The Journal of International Institute*, Vol. 4 Issue 3, Summer 1997, accessed 7 July 2016, doi: hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0004.302

¹⁰ Benjamin I. Schwartz, “Presidential Address: Area Studies as a Critical Discipline,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (November 1980):19.

¹¹ Michael Barnett, “Constructivism,” in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, International Sixth Edition, ed. John Baylis et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014),137.

theory does not explain all behavior and that irrational behavior exists.¹²

Furthermore, in order to properly test hypotheses in the social sciences, the scholar must analyze the historical contexts of each incident in depth and attempt to identify and isolate key variables in order to anticipate significant events of the future. Yet independent variables cannot simply be readily changed, for example, like a chemist or physicist that could be afforded such luxury in a laboratory environment. Case studies and historical analysis, the essential foundation for comparative and statistical models, are products of history and as such it may take a very long time to put hypotheses to the test, let alone develop theories with any predictive power. One cannot simply go back in time or replay the exact circumstances by which each phenomenon occurred or policy decision made, nor can one know when and where the next “monumental event” will occur.

As a result, there is yet to be any single overarching theory that can explain all social phenomena in the world. This is partly why economic experts, with all their models and diagrams, are unable to predict economic crises. Likewise, political scientists and international relations scholars have utterly failed at predicting the end of the Cold War or crucial events such as the Arab Spring. Such failures provide testament that social science theories, while useful as frameworks for analysis and explanation, lack predictive powers such as those found in the natural sciences.

International relations (IR), an important subfield of political science and a close cousin of area studies, have come up with “theories” of their own, yet the definition and usage of the term “theory” in IR is in stark contrast to that of the natural sciences.

Throughout the past few decades, IR scholars have managed to come up with “theories” such as realism, liberalism, constructivism, Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, yet there is no consensus whatsoever on any one particular theory. As such, “theories” in IR can be viewed more like

“paradigms” or “approaches” to explain particular social phenomena through different sets of “lenses.” Each school of thought would approach, for instance, the rise of China or the Syrian crisis in fundamentally different ways, as they look at the problem from varying perspectives and base their arguments on different assumptions. Debate and disagreement is therefore a given in international relations, as each paradigm is trying to “sell” their approach to any given problem.¹³

The insight of “theory” in international relations is crucial to our question since international relations as a discipline is very much comparable to area studies. Both international relations and area studies are relatively young disciplines, and set out to study social phenomena. Yet there is still no concrete agreement among scholars in both fields as to how the disciplines should progress. Nonetheless, while international relations theories may lack the power to predict, they do provide grounded tools for the scholar to analyze events from a wide range of perspectives. The same cannot be said for area studies. This leads to the conclusion that if area studies is to progress as a scholarly discipline, some measure of social inquiry that is grounded in analytical, dare I say, “theoretical” frameworks is called for. Only then can the area scholar be able to make use of the vast data, be it qualitative or quantitative, descriptive or statistical, inductive or deductive, idiosyncratic or nomothetic, and provide a comprehensive explanation of regions and societies in a systematic and conceptual manner. With this in mind, we shall now turn to a brief discussion of the necessity and possibility of developing such a theory for area studies.

A “Theory” for Area Studies?

There is a tendency among area specialists to discard rational choice theory as being averse to culture. As Shane J. Barter claims, “area studies scholars approach the world in terms of peoples, places, and things – prioritizing proper nouns – as opposed to discipline driven studies that may treat

¹² Margaret A. McKean, “Rational Choice Analysis and Area Studies: Enemies or Partners?” in *Beyond the Area Studies Wars: Toward a New Institutional Studies*, ed. Neil L. Waters (Hanover/London: Middlebury College Press, 2000), 45.

¹³ Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Science,” in *International Relations Theory: Discipline and Diversity*, Third Edition, ed. Tim Dunne et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 32.

proper nouns as variables, or critical scholars whose esotericism may confuse more than they explain.”¹⁴ In addition, area studies are where “good theories sometimes go to die, or at least to be reconfigured, as in theories of development, the middle class, and democracy in Southeast Asia,”¹⁵ indicating that universal grand theories may not be applicable across all areas and regions of the world. When referring to “theory” itself, Ian S. Lustick makes an insightful observation by pointing out that there is a pedagogical battle for ascendancy within the social science disciplines that is taking place by virtue of hard work in the publication trenches between different academic camps who attempt to gain hegemonic control over knowledge-based institutions such as journals, endowed chairs, peer-review panels for major grantors and departments at prestigious universities.¹⁶ As a result of these “wars of maneuver,” the term “theory” has become associated with rational choice, while game theoretic modeling has been implemented to “political economy,” and mathematical expertise has become regarded by some academic institutions as a crucial measure of competence for political scientists. Such a scenario has, in fact, occurred in a number of important departments across the US, with area studies having to play second fiddle to these overarching grand theories. Yet area studies scholars have hit back, claiming that no amount of general theory could ever produce complete knowledge, or even definite partial knowledge, about any one event, person, people, country, or institution.¹⁷ As David Ludden aptly puts it, “no single site can control or produce global knowledge because knowledge producers themselves are located in their world by the way they produce their knowledge, as various sites pursue diverging modalities of knowing.”¹⁸ To be fair, there have been attempts at reconciliation. For example, Margaret A. McKean’s

proposition that rational choice theory, if understood properly as being merely the assumption that human beings have preferences and that they try to pursue those preference, can in fact be a simple but useful tool for analysis that can examine a variety of cultural values and institutions along with other generalities in the human condition.¹⁹ Yet it seems that such olive branches have been few and far between, since it appears that, in general, area specialists remain skeptical of rational choice dominance. Peter A. Hall and Sidney Tarrow suggest, “the greatest danger in the current debate over area studies is that, in the name of studying global trends or advancing overarching theories about them, the next generation of internationally oriented social science researchers will give short shrift to area based empirical knowledge.”²⁰ What has been established in our discussions throughout this paper is that there is no concrete agreement among scholars as to whether or not area studies needs a “theory”, and if so, what such theory would look like. What is clear, though, is that area studies is still suffering from an identity crisis, and that area specialists for the most part are not content at being the understudy to universal “theorists.” In the next and final section, I will argue that area studies need not be so divided. The most productive way in which the discipline can progress and establish its identity is through the amalgamation of a transdisciplinary approach to scholarship, drawing from the strengths of analyses and research methodologies of both the social sciences and humanities fields.

From Multidisciplinary to Transdisciplinary: Towards Area Science?

Benjamin I. Schwartz suggests that the term “area studies” asserts no particular theory of society or theory of culture and no particular views of relations of society and culture to history or other areas of

¹⁴ Shane J. Barter, “Area Studies, Asian Studies, and the Pacific Basin,” *Geographical Review*, Vol. 105, Issue 1 (January 2015): 105.

¹⁵ Barter, “Area Studies, Asian Studies,” 108.

¹⁶ Ian S. Lustick, “The Disciplines of Political Science: Studying the Culture of Rational Choice as a Case in Point,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (June 1997): 177-178.

¹⁷ Lustick, “Disciplines of Political Science,” 175.

¹⁸ Ludden, “Why Area Studies?,” 135.

¹⁹ McKean, “Rational Choice Analysis,” 30, 58.

²⁰ Peter A. Hall and Sidney Tarrow, “Globalization and Area Studies: When is Too Broad Too Narrow?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 January 1998): 5, accessed 7 July 2016, doi: [chronicle.com/article/GlobalizationArea/99332/](https://doi.org/10.2307/4111842)

human experience. An area is, so to speak, a cross-disciplinary unit of collective experience within which one can discern complex interactions among economic, social, political, religious, and other spheres of life.²¹ Furthermore, he contends that:

*"[...] the area specialist should be open to any insight that the theoreticians within the other disciplines may have to offer, but he need not treat these theories as sacred doctrines in terms of which he passively categorizes as "facts" [...] the area specialist has an admirable vantage point from which to test the logical rigor and universal claims of the models he is being asked to validate [...] [the area specialist] may indeed find that many of the theoretical problems suggested by his own experience cut across the boundaries so sharply drawn by the disciplinary theoreticians [...] [the area specialist] certainly has every reason to be a critical participant in his own right in the debates surrounding the conflicting causal claims of various disciplines."*²²

It is this critical attitude and cooperative spirit that area scholars must uphold in their pursuit of knowledge and progress. For what other discipline in the world offers such a broad based approach to the study of its subjects? In a sense, the area specialist is fortunate to have all the tools across the social sciences and humanities at their disposal. They can draw, for instance, from the participant observation methodologies in anthropology, conduct fieldwork and interviews like sociologists, apply rational choice theoretical models from economics, and adopt various international relations theories in order to explain, analyze, and even venture to make predictions about the areas and regions they scrutinize.

If sufficient resources such as time, energy, and funds can be secured, area studies is in fact best placed among all the disciplines to produce the systematic study of humans in a globalized world. It is also best positioned to achieve the possibility of conducting research in the manner of "area science" through transdisciplinary efforts that would require a coming together of experts from various fields

contributing their knowledge and expertise to jointly tackle mutual issues of common interest. If achieved, this development would position area studies as the closest social science discipline to the natural sciences, perhaps even elevating area studies to the same level as other "hard" social sciences like economics or political science rather than being in their shadow. This scenario for area studies is not a distinct possibility but a very real one. After all, the blurring of the disciplines is already ongoing in many established discipline-driven social sciences such as the concept of bounded rationality in economics, which borrows from psychology, or the use of statistical analysis in adding on to the comparative method in political science and sociology. Area studies is certainly no stranger to "blurring" the disciplines, and therefore must take full advantage of its prominent position as, for want of a better phrase, the sort of "middle man" among all relevant social sciences and humanities disciplines.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the world is infinite. It is impossible to truly "know" and "understand" the world and all its contextual complexities without studying about different areas and regions in detail. This requires an inductive approach to the study of a given area, which would serve as a building block for hypotheses that would eventually lead to a deductive, top-down approach that could be tested on other areas. To do so, the area scholar does not need to come up with any generalizable "area theory" *per se*, since area studies in itself requires the amalgamation of knowledge from various social sciences and humanities disciplines, each of which already possess their own sets of inquisitive arsenals, tools that can be readily applied by the area scholar to collect data, conduct research, and provide analysis.

In conclusion, the study of an area or region cannot be fully complete without a comprehensive and holistic approach that incorporates all available means for fact gathering and knowledge production. Neither rational choice assumptions nor international relations theories nor anthropological

²¹ Schwartz, "Presidential Address," 15.

²² Schwartz, "Presidential Address," 19.

fieldwork nor historical analysis on its own is sufficient for this monumental task. A combination, indeed the amalgamation, of these approaches is necessary. Hence, transdisciplinary action among the various disciplines is in order.

While a general “theory” may not be needed for area studies, it is nonetheless crucial that social sciences and humanities methodologies be employed as appropriate to each research topic or question in the conduct of area research. Only then can the discipline have proper direction and garner respect as a discipline in itself. Otherwise, area studies will simply be a rudderless epistemological void that is neither systematic nor standardized.

Over time, knowledge of areas and regions of the world will expand and be studied in greater detail. The scope and depth by area experts who employ research and analytical tools from various disciplines will deepen. As a result, area studies has the very real potential to elevate itself to “area science” which would allow the discipline to use its vast wealth of empirical quantitative and qualitative data that have been acquired through various methodologies to test hypotheses and formulate generalizable theories that may even be able to offer predictive powers in a similar fashion to the natural sciences. At that stage, the mandate for area studies would be well-defined, and there would be little need for such fierce arguments and exchange of views as to the position of area studies among the disciplines. In such a scenario, the debate regarding the identity of area studies’ could finally be put to rest.

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