

Taking stock of New Area Studies: The present, past and future

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Introduction

The world has been in turmoil since the era of neoliberal globalisation and multilateralism, which marked the post-Cold War era, came to an end. We are now experiencing what the German historical philosopher Karl Jaspers once called an 'Achsenzeit' (pivot-time) in the direction of deglobalisation. The world powers, China and the US, and, on a smaller scale, also Russia, have turned to a competition for dominance through the fusion of xenophobic nationalism, absolutist government and territorial expansionism. As a result, long-standing international alliances have been jeopardised, bilateralism has replaced multilateralism, economic chains of supply are disrupted and authoritarianism has overwhelmed democratic institutions within domestic politics. There is a widespread fear that eventually one or more large wars will break out over the status of the European continent and over hegemony in the Asia Pacific region.

Currently, populist governments across the globe pursue anti-globalist and ultra-nationalist agendas using all possible means to mobilise the support of the crowds. They draw their strength from the anxiety of many people in response to the relentless economic globalisation, which since 1990 has produced more relative deprivation, eroded the middle class, and rendered a tiny group of super-rich unchecked economic and political power. As a result, ordinary citizens everywhere feel disrespected, disfranchised and victims of evil forces that are beyond their own control. The irony is that the appeal of the anti-globalist populism of radical



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powerholders first and foremost serves the interest of the tiny wealthy elite to which they themselves belong, in contradistinction to their claim that they act for the good of the common people. In the meantime, for netizens everywhere, it has become extremely difficult to acquire reliable information whilst they are being exposed to a deluge of disinformation distributed through social media platforms owned by the American and Chinese tech industry.

From a long-term perspective, the current global conjuncture is yet another rearrangement of the scalar fixes that lurk behind the world system in which each era is grounded. So, after the era of colonialism, the Cold War and globalisation we now know are experiencing a de-global turn towards multipolar system of competing regionalisms. It is a neo-imperialist world in which several centres, each supported by a range of client states, compete for global dominance. In this process the topography of existing areas of influence are being reconfigured; Canada and the Ukraine drift towards Europe, Slovakia, Hungary and Serbia towards Russia and parts of Southeast Asia towards China, whereas Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Australia will have to lean on the US more than before. In this new world, Latin-America, Africa and the polar regions constitute the new frontier areas in the global battle between the major power centres, as the current encroachment of the US on Greenland shows. Whereas China-cum-Russia and the US pursue expansionist schemes, Europe's main current agenda is to strengthen internal unity as well as safeguard territorial integrity so that it can survive as an independent region in which democracy coupled to a respect for human rights prevail.

The global transformation just outlined can, however, not be captured only through a geo-political or security studies analysis but runs even deeper — it amounts to a veritable epistemological counter-revolution of global proportions. The three fundamental pillars of this epistemological shift are localism and nation over cosmopolitanism, the Self at the expense of the Other, and falsehood instead of factfulness. These fundamental underpinnings of the ongoing counter-revolution are applied to the everyday world by leaders privileging erratic behaviour over rational action, opting for confrontation instead of consensus building, preferring presentist oblivion over historical consciousness, stimulating ultra-conservative conformism against civil liberty, and promoting an exclusionary national culture at the cost of diversity.



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In such an environment universities and research institutes, as the main vestiges of independent knowledge production based on critical reason, have come under severe attack. Not only the humanities but also the natural sciences — despite their claim to objectivity and their impressive, applied outputs — are put into question. Whereas the mainstream social and political sciences display a surprising muteness in the face of these all-out challenges, New Area Studies scholars, so I argue, are much better equipped to respond. This is because they have been part of an epistemological counter-project from the very start. Its practitioners are already used to working in an under-financed and under-staffed environment and being often viewed with suspicion by relatively well-resourced disciplinarians.

This essay will summarise where New Area Studies come from, what they are and what their potential for the future is. First the history of area studies as a field of inquiry will be outlined, before entering a discussion of how New Area Studies can be applied today and in what way they can be productive for a deep understanding of our world in times to come.

A short history of area in Area Studies

The answer to the question of what an ‘area’ is has been predominantly the product of the changing worldviews that emerged from a long contact history, particularly between Europe and the world beyond it. Through travel accounts, maps and descriptions of the known world not only Western but also Chinese, Islamic and other intellectuals have rendered different global spatialisations, mostly taking their own location as the centre and then moving outwards from there. For a long time, the European naming of areas was derived from partly corrupted autochthonous designations, which were adopted from that which emerged through trading activities and other forms of human interaction.

The nature of these practices of spatialisation and naming altered after European expansion took off from the fifteenth century A.D. onwards, when it reached the Americas and Asia. During the nineteenth century period of high imperialism, toponyms were no longer endonym but instead became exonym. Colonial geographical names displayed at least two qualities. First, names marked an unequal spatial relationship between Europe and the non-European world. On maps of the



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British empire new, overarching concepts such as the Middle and the Far East appeared. France called its possessions beyond Europe 'France d'outre mer', the Dutch talked about their 'overseas kingdom'. These geographical constructs covered areas that were quasi-coincidentally spread across the globe. The second pattern consisted of the symbolic national appropriation of non-European areas by introducing names such as British India, Afrique-Occidentale française, Timor Português, the Dutch East Indies, German Southwest Africa. In Soviet Central Asia ethnic states such as Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan and others were created.

These spatialisations of area are significant because they formed the territorial boxes within which orientalist colonial knowledge was generated. Colonies developed into paper tigers, whilst colonial officials and scientists were utterly active in documenting and categorising the largely unknown areas around them. The results can be found in kilometre-long national archives and libraries, a paper mountain which, taken together, represents the dominant power-knowledge of that time. It was a Eurocentric form of accumulated knowledge which constituted, on the one hand, a way to understand indigenous cultures and societies but, on the other hand, an effort to find the instruments to put these areas under effective control. The legacy of the colonial sciences is still visible in the layout of some old area studies institutes, such as the School of Oriental and African Studies, the École française d'Extrême Orient and the Dutch (in literal translation) Royal Institute of Language, Country and Peoples Studies.

After the Second World War and the decolonization of most European colonies, a new kind of scientific endeavour emerged, which can from hindsight be labelled 'classical' Area Studies. These started in North America at several ivy-league universities, as part of a 'know the enemy' strategy in the context of the Cold War. New spatial formats were brought up, partly aligning with the new nation-states which emerged from decolonisation, partly giving way to new transnational geographical entities. In former colonies Area Studies were introduced and subsumed under studies of the national Self. In the West the areas of the non-European world were rearranged within the format of global regions. Asia now consisted of West, Central, South, Southeast, and East Asia. and this subdivision defined which branch of Area Studies an individual regional expert would belong to.



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In the wake of this postcolonial transformation of area, however, the experts on South and Southeast Asia stopped communicating with each other, as did those working on East and West Africa, and on other areas. The fragmentation of Area Studies ran even deeper where nationalised Area Studies prevailed. For instance, Indonesianists were no longer taking in the results of their colleagues working on Thailand or Vietnam. A similar tendency occurred within Area Studies of the West, as those working in British studies did not normally interact with colleagues researching the Nordic countries. Interestingly, during the colonial era, area specialists did talk to each other through conferences, correspondences and mutual field visits, so that a veritable transcolonial knowledge system emerged. But after 1945 this conversation across the boundaries of area largely stopped. The topography of area studies reflected the bipolar world order of the era.

After the end of the Cold War in 1990 the era of hyper-globalisation begun. Area Studies scholars again adapted their formats of spatialisation to the new global realities of borderless mobility and intertwinement. Three new spatial formats of area emerged. First, meta-regions such as Eurasia, Australasia, Pacific and the Indian Ocean were now conceived as the rising core areas of the twenty-first century. Second, trans-areas emerged either based on a global diaspora (Sinophonic studies on Chinese-speaking people across the globe, for example) or historical overlap (South and Southeast Asian studies). Third, global studies started to thrive in many academic institutions, sometimes with a particular thematic focus (global governance, global culture, urban studies, ecology etc.). A competition unfolded, particularly between global studies and classic Area Studies, with the globalists arguing that in the global era knowledge of the particularities of single areas would become obsolete. In response, the areanists, who did not adhere of the idea of global convergence, stressed that the global condition did in fact produce more disparities between world regions as well as rifts in global politics, economies and cultures than before.

The world is now undergoing transformation again and therefore Area Studies needs, once more, to be rethought. Exactly this work is being done under the rubric of New Area Studies. It is perhaps not a matter of coincidence that this label started to emerge simultaneously in different locations around ten years ago, notably at the University of East Anglia and in my own work. The second part of this essay is an



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attempt to take stock of where New Area Studies stands now, seeking to give an answer to the question of what an 'area' is and how to study it productively.

A basic outline of New Area Studies

As was sketched above, the demarcation of space which has been considered an 'area' has shifted over time. At the current critical juncture, it has once more become uncertain what meaningful areas are, or will be in the future. In response, New Area Studies adopts a flexible notion of area which is conceived to be socially constructed, open-ended and scaled. In concrete, area is defined as a deliberately chosen configuration of places and spatial scales that is meaningful when studying a particular phenomenon or development. Area as such is not preconfigured but needs to be flexibly deployed as the appropriate lens through which to study a particular something in a holistic manner. As a carefully chosen confluence of place and scale, area can be stretched in all directions from local to global, including all relevant intermediary ranges. In sum, area is essentially a particular perspective which allows for the calibration between several scales within a bounded, anthropomorphic space.

Several features stand out when discussing area in New Area Studies. Area is not a closed entity, since, because of the ongoing mobility of people, goods and ideas, it is always included in larger networks. Secondly, as already mentioned above, area is scaled, since it necessarily incorporates micro – and macro-worlds, globalised localisms as well as localised globalisms. The interpenetration of several scales in an area is much more complex than the model of a scalar ladder ranging from local, regional, national, transnational, international to global. Thirdly, area as a spatial category needs to be placed in its relative positioning vis-à-vis other areas, which are not necessarily Europe. Only in this way can the relative alterity of area in the form of 'situated difference' be captured and explained.

Connected to this new definition of area, change over time also needs to be reconsidered. Instead of assuming, as most historians still tend to do, that change occurs in a chronological fashion since time strings are a necessary consequence of how cause-effect relationships shape reality, change itself is scaled and can also move in different directions simultaneously. Layers of time include, as Fernand



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Braudel suggests, events, conjunctures and long-term structures. Commenting on the changes caused by globalisation, James Rosenau points to the complexities of current nonlinear processes and their feedback loops, in which forces of globalisation and localisation converge and fragment at the same time.

One of the key features of classic Area Studies, which I argue still holds, is the adoption of a view-from-within. The lifeworlds of those who live within the area are the inverted lens through which area knowledge is primarily assembled. This view-from-within stands in stark contrast to the view from the outside which characterises most disciplinary-based studies on areas. Area specialists, who possess a deep personal familiarity with their area of research and possess appropriate language skills, are entitled to speak as authoritatively on area as so-called home-scholars, who originate from there. In fact, it is through international and interdisciplinary exchange and cooperation between both that the most fruitful results of area studies' research have been achieved. In such an institutional setup, extractive knowledge transfer from the area to the established centres of knowledge production in the West is precluded.

These considerations then lead to the question of what methodologies are applied in New Area Studies. To put it in brief: area is the method and there are basically two ways of implementing this. The area chosen is not studied by using the method of a single discipline, but it is approached from several angles by the triangulation or a mix of recognised methods from the humanities and social sciences – ranging from participatory observation and discourse analysis to social surveys and statistics. A combination of several established methods is mandatory since areanists try to see their area in a holistic manner, studying the entanglements of politics, culture, society, economy and the life experiences of the people living there. Besides that, methods-in-the-making have emerged which have the potential to become specific to New Area Studies. Three can be identified until now: kaleidoscopic dialects, alternative network analysis and situational analysis.

My late colleague Boike Rehbein suggested the adoption of so-called kaleidoscopic dialectics. It aims at the cognition of connections, relationships and similarities from all possible angles rather than striving for an understanding of a single, encompassing whole. It builds upon Norbert Elias' concept of figuration, Theodor Adorno's concept of constellation or configuration, as well as Lévi Strauss' idea of



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the kaleidoscope. It is in the conflation of different configurations and the multi-perspectival analysis of their relationships and similarities, that the area emerges.

Second, alternative network analysis might be a particularly useful method for New Area Studies. To study of flows and connectivities of all kinds has already become established research practice but precisely how area networks are constituted, maintained and altered still poses a methodological challenge. Classical network analysis, which aims at an understanding of how the social operates, often focuses on actors and their relationships, connections as well as entanglements. Newer approaches include interactions between humans and non-human entities, the translation of identities and the competences of actors as part of network-building processes. Yet, as Georg Kneer argues, in sociology networks are not seen as a spatial category and try to avoid spatial distinctions between inner and outer, proximity and distance, global and local. I would argue on the contrary, namely that allocating actors to different spatial scales and sorting out the qualitative dimensions of their interconnections is an essential methodological tool for New Area Studies.

A third method suited for New Area Studies is situational analysis, which was initiated by Adele Clarke. This is an extension of the grounded theory methodology, in which the researcher is in his/her area and creates situational maps of social arenas based on what actors and their discourses convey. Such data, which are compatible with area, are collected and processed in terms of situational space and relegated to larger contexts. This method enables the researcher to include their own subjectivity, epistemic diversity and to grasp the playing out of power asymmetries into the area of investigation. Like the kaleidoscopic dialectics approach, the core of this endeavour lies in the effort to connect variation and alterity to the unity of area.

Prospects for the Future

New Area Studies approaches are capable of making sense of the trials and tribulations of the current world. As they are no mere extension of existing disciplinary knowledge and they have the potential to generate meaningful new knowledge. The criticisms of disciplinarians — that area studies have no theory and



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no method — as well as the critiques of global studies experts (that the inquiry into areas has become obsolete in a globalised world) simply do not hold. Yet, it is up to the practitioners of New Area Studies to strengthen their theoretical and methodological rigour to gain broader recognition. Researchers from all parts of the world who are engaged in the New Area Studies field need to relate to one another irrespective of the specific area they study. Through theoretical-cum-methodological strengthening and mutual communication across area boundaries, New Area Studies has the potential to evolve from a scattered field of study into a novel, twenty-first century discipline.

Currently an increasing amount of New Area Studies work is being published. My own seminal article of 2017 and the New Area Studies journal, which has now existed for five years, are prime cases in point. Other publications have followed, such as a theme issue of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* in 2020, my monograph on histories of scale in 2021, a chapter by Lindsey Black on the role of New Area Studies for international relations in 2023, and a collection of essays on cross-border transottoman perspectives by Stephen Conermann and others which is due to appear in 2026. All these publications have chosen New Area Studies as their explicit frame of reference.

Based on the discussions so far, it is possible to surmise where the specific merits of New Area Studies will in the future lie:

The recognition of the flexible nature of area as a lens allowing for the calibration of several scales anticipates the repetitive reconstitution of area as it happened in the past, is happening nowadays and will do so again in the future.

Allowing for a dynamic definition of area, many different formats of change through time can successfully be accommodated.

Looking for the alterity that marks an area enables us to broaden frames of comparison between areas all around the world without fixing a single core. How one area talks to other areas generates novel understandings of the human world.



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New Area Studies precludes the imposition of dominant knowledge upon the area and its inhabitants but instead allows for an inclusive way of mutual understanding across boundaries of all sorts.

New Area Studies scholars are open to combining the methods from several disciplines but are in the process of developing own new methods, which will lead to new forms of knowledge.

In the beginning of this essay, I argued that New Area Studies is better equipped than the mainstream social and political sciences to make sense of the current disruptions which are signalling a de-global turn and a conservative counter-revolution. Instead of starting from a segmented theoretical and methodological framework developed for nineteenth century forms of sociality and based upon reason only, New Area Studies includes the subjectivities of everywhere people and their entanglement in several spatial scales. These subjectivities are capitalised upon by current authoritarian powerholders and digital platforms of disinformation. New Area Studies enables us to use the lens of area to disentangle and analyse the mechanisms behind the current global transformation in ways established disciplines cannot do. As such it can produce new knowledge and pursue a counter-hegemonic project in times of trouble.

Concluding statements

The 'area' in Area Studies has shifted over time and has been the object of ongoing debate because the relevant spatialisations of the world needed to be adjusted every time a global transformation occurred. Whereas precolonial areas were open and dependent on local worldviews, Western imperialisms have introduced the territorial borders within which hegemonical colonial knowledge was produced. Since the end of World War Two areas in Area Studies have been reconfigured to make sense in Cold War international politics. Since 1990, during the era of globalisation, the relevance of Area Studies has been put into question but now, experiencing a de-global turn in the direction of multipolar imperialisms, the area is back again. Under present global conditions, it needs to be redefined and with it the very object of study. This is done in the framework of New Area Studies.

Instead of explaining the world from a primarily Western standpoint and looking for universal truths, the interdisciplinary venture of New Area Studies has put relative



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difference at the core of its endeavour. Despite their interest in difference, these studies, by looking through the lens of 'area', highlight what in fact connects humankind across boundaries of all kinds. Their inclusivist and holistic view also foregrounds what is often sidelined in mainstream humanities: a focus on those below and at the margins, an interest in everydayness instead of big structures and a de-centred approach making what matters to people from all whereabouts visible. In sum, there is a deep universal humanistic aspiration that drives New Area Studies projects, which have a vital program to offer for an alternate, truthful understanding of the world. Different from 'knowing the enemy' during the Cold War, New Area Studies approaches emphasise knowing our 'neighbours' as fellow human beings.

As such, New Area Studies approaches indeed constitute a project against the ongoing counter-revolution which pits countries, identities and social classes against each other and tries to gain from disruption and chaos. It takes a critical stance, but at the same time it does not subscribe to a particular political ideology. Its aim is to understand people everywhere in their own lifeworlds, how they feel and act as part of their own society, but also in what way they are inextricably entangled in dynamics on different spatial scales. As such area takes a different shape in different contexts and its specific characteristics are rendered visible through a holistic, multi-perspectival examination. In sum, New Area Studies have an important role to play in a novel understanding of what drove the world in the past, what happens now and how it will evolve in the future.

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