



Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar, “Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies

Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar

Claudia Derichs, Humboldt University of Berlin.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1583-9728>

Wolfram Schaffar, University of Passau.

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3661-3226>

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to bring together the concepts of process geographies (Appadurai, 1997) and toponomes (Houben, 2022)—innovative approaches that have emerged from the rich debates within New Area Studies. We argue that it is precisely these approaches in Area Studies that are needed to overcome the threat of a return to a polarised worldview in the context of today’s incipient Second Cold War (Schindler et al., 2023).

The paper proceeds in three steps. First, we introduce the origins of the two conceptual terms process geographies and toponomes, which provide the analytical lens for our main argument. Second, we discuss the three waves of Area Studies (Sidaway, 2017) with a focus on the third wave, which took shape as New Area Studies under the conditions of post–Cold War liberalisation and globalisation. We argue that today the constitutive conditions for conducting Area Studies research have once again fundamentally shifted, passing a tipping point into what can aptly be described as a Second Cold War—one that threatens to push the discipline back into a pre-1990s configuration, risking its co-optation into the geopolitical logics of renewed global polarisation. We address Area Studies’ positioning vis-à-vis an assertive universalism on the one hand and a defensive universalism on the other hand. In a third step, we use the preceding reflections to empirically apply the concepts of toponomes and process geographies as analytical lenses and propose that these concepts offer a valuable foundation for a Fourth Wave of Area Studies rooted in emancipatory potential.

New Area Studies and Global Challenges: Making sense of *process geographies*

The concept of *process geographies* was introduced by Arjun Appadurai and a team of authors in 1997. In a White Paper for the Ford Foundation, they developed the argument that 'existing geographical approaches [to understand 'regions'] – involving bounded "civilizations", "cultures" and "areas" – frequently draw the wrong boundaries, ignore important interactions and are driven by obsolete assumptions about national interest, cultural coherence and global processes.' (Appadurai et al. 1997: 1) The conception underlying this argument is the understanding of areas and regions as heuristic devices. Areas and regional boundaries are in constant flow, never static, transcending borders, and questioning if not rejecting scalar fixes. Appadurai et al.'s White Paper introduced the succinct distinction between *trait geographies* and *process geographies* in order to generate a new perspective that departs from conceiving of areas as entities demarcated by geographical, civilizational and cultural coherence. *Process geographies* hence denote the perception of areas as entities of 'interaction and motion – trade, travel, pilgrimage, warfare, proselytization, colonization, exile and the like.' (Appadurai et al. 1997: 2) A case in point is the process of producing garments for fashion industries. Starting, for example, in Egypt with those who harvest cotton bolls, we can move on towards those who spin the yarn, from there to those who weave the yarn into fabric, dye and print the fabric, to those who transport it to places such as Bangladesh where it is tailored and sewed, further on to those who export the garments from Bangladesh to European fashion shops, and eventually the shop attendants who sell the garment to the customers. Methodologically speaking, this is an exercise in multi-sited fieldwork through modes of following (Marcus 1995; Coleman & Von Hellermann), or in the reverse direction through modes of tracing and tracking (Sinha 2023). The map that can be drawn from connecting the sites of various process steps is the map that shapes the area of analytical interest – our area. The geography that reflects the process of producing and selling cotton garments and the involved actors who are, knowingly or unknowingly, connected by this process is the *process geography* that demarcates the region in focus, be it as a region of analytical interest for scholars of labor rights, for organizational

sociologists, for economists, for feminist scholars or else (the subject lens is virtually unlimited).¹

The methodological approach is multi-scalar, embracing and implementing what Vincent Houben calls *pericentric* phenomena, and *topochrones* in reference to temporality (Houben, 2022, *passim*). Applying a pericentric perspective means to ‘adopt a lateral view by starting with a particular place and then looking in all possible directions’ across all sorts of scales (Houben, 2022: 3). There is no underlying assumption of a hierarchical importance of scales – the local is as relevant for analysis as the national or the global. *Topochrones* are specific space-time configurations; they ‘condense the precise nature of connections between several scales’ (Houben, 2022: 3). This allows for capturing the interconnections between events, actors, and developments on several scales in a certain time period. Adopting this understanding of *process geographies* allows us to make it productive for reflecting on New Area Studies in the contemporary period of global challenges.

We propose that the emergence of what can be called a Fourth Wave of Area Studies, which resists the danger of falling back into old-style polarisations, essentialist container thinking and trait geographies, ought to materialize. Against this backdrop, we opt for enhancing the resilience of New Area Studies as they have been conceptualized in recent decades. The argument is developed through i) briefly summarizing the trajectory of Area Studies from the beginning of the twentieth century to current time. From there, we move ii) to a reflection of Area Studies’ embeddedness in geopolitical polarizations, raising empirical examples of how geopolitics affect the conditions of contemporary area research. In the subsequent section iii), we make a case for protecting the achievements and merits of New Area Studies from an increasing political encroachment. We end with the suggestion to conceive of New Area Studies as an endeavor of areanists around the world in general and in Europe and Southeast Asia in particular to connect in the spirit of forming an entity that is informed by a shared thematic-analytical interest (as opposed to researching one another in and from different areas).

¹ For a concrete example, please refer to the scholar-cum-activist network TPOLS. Here, *process geography* serves as the medium between the quest of decent working conditions and the solidarity of international NGOs with local workers (TPOLS, 2021).

1. The trajectory of Area Studies in the twentieth century

Area Studies have been the subject of controversial debate since the 1990s. Critical debates have pointed out that Area Studies itself stems from the colonial era and was linked to an expansive geopolitical agenda. Area Studies proper emerged from this research tradition during the Cold War: the geopolitical logic and its accompanying belief in the universal validity of contributions to knowledge that hailed from the West became inscribed in the delimitation of the field of research, the methodology and the concepts.² When the geopolitical framework conditions gave way to optimistic globalisation with the end of the bloc confrontation, Area Studies diversified, but at the same time faced a crisis of legitimacy.

The debate on Area Studies began when, after the end of the systemic bloc confrontation, the conditions for global academic debate changed to such an extent that its tacit assumptions (i.e. an assertive claim of universality) and geopolitical entanglements became visible and could be openly addressed (Mielke and Hornidge 2017). James Sidaway (2017) distinguishes three consecutive generations of Area Studies. According to his periodisation, the first generation—symbolized with the establishment of Orientalist institutes—were part of the colonial expansion projects of the European states. Area Studies founded in the USA after the Second World War—the second generation—was linked to counterinsurgency and the USA’s global fight against communism. New Area Studies is conceived by Sidaway as the third and, so far, final wave of Area Studies.

Area Studies—like all social and cultural sciences—are indeed always politically embedded. Geopolitical impact on Area Studies research is unavoidable, in particular with regard to restrictions on access to information, to funding schemes and who is able to study what and where. In Timothy Mitchell’s assessment of Area Studies in the USA during the Cold war, for instance, the influence of intelligence service actors (CIA) and the subsequent self-organization of scholars from the Middle East becomes apparent (Mitchell 2004). Taking the deliberate silencing of debating the Israeli-Arab war of the 1960s in Area Studies conferences as a case in

² We use the terms West and Global North (non-West and Global South respectively) in relation to the time period in which they adopted discursive weight.

point, Mitchell (2004:76) offers a succinct evaluation of the trajectory of Area Studies that extends beyond Sidaway's three-stage periodization:

The genealogy of area studies must be understood in relation to the wider structuring of academic knowledge and to the struggles not of the Cold War but of science -- and social science in particular -- as a twentieth-century political project.

But political embedding of science does not necessarily mean being inevitably compromised by a colonial agenda—the 1922 established Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences being a case in point. Less colonial traditions of Orientalism in Europe could also be observed in the East.³

African studies and Asian studies in the former 'Soviet bloc', for instance in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), were certainly studies commissioned by the government of the GDR (Boatcă 2012), but it should not be overlooked that the proposed dialogue with the distant socialist 'brother countries' drew from a longer tradition.⁴ These investigations were embedded in a larger historical-materialist project, which was concerned, among others, with the question of whether experiences outside Europe could point to alternative paths of development in the pursuit of a more just society (Kössler, 1982). The Third Worldism of the time and the explicit commitment to decolonisation intensified, among others, through the Non-Aligned Movement, nurtured the ideational framework. The fact that during the Cold War and under Stalinism, these questions ossified into a Marxist orthodoxy notwithstanding, these historical debates prove to be a rich source of material and

³ This institute was established without colonial ambitions and out of genuine academic interest. Some of the scientists working there were aware that the young Czechoslovak Republic had just freed itself from the colonial dominance of the Habsburg monarchy, which led them to sympathise with the independence movement in India in the interwar period and Nehru's protest against the Munich Agreement in 1938 (signed in September 1938 between Germany, France, England and Italy and led to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia as a sovereign state and its occupation by fascist Germany, (The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic (n.d.)).

⁴ Since the 3rd Communist International (1919), academics in the Soviet Union - together with CPSU party strategists - had been grappling with the question of which social actors (revolutionary subjects) might be capable of overcoming capitalism under which conditions (Kössler, 1982).



Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar, “Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

are gaining new relevance in the course of the debate on the global rise of authoritarianism (Schaffar, et al. 2022).

In sum, Area Studies of the twentieth century—be they divided into phases or reviewed in long durée—were hence deeply interwoven with the political and geopolitical/geostrategic agendas of the countries and regions in which they were practised. Colonial and neo-colonial, anti-colonial, decolonial and socialist varieties all shaped the scholarly landscape.

End of the bloc confrontation, globalisation and a new era of Area Studies

New Area Studies is a project that re-configured Area Studies against the backdrop of justified criticism and in view of the newly opening channels for research after the end of the Cold War (Derichs 2017b). Hodgett rightly states that in the twenty-first century, “rather than descending into obscurity, Area Studies is undergoing a period of rich intellectual curiosity, a boundary-crossing productivity, while playing an acknowledged role in informing and supporting other disciplines” (Hodgett 2019: 19). It is not a far-fetched assumption however, that the third wave of Area Studies in Sidaway’s enumeration is currently experiencing a new rupture: With the global spread of authoritarianism, the COVID-19 pandemic, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, a New Cold War has begun. Moreover, the factual impact of geopolitical configurations has not stopped in the third phase either. Rather than being put on hold, it is becoming fully visible now in the wake of shifting standards in international relations and convulsions in the rule-based international order. As a result, the constitutive parameters and working conditions of New Area Studies have once again fundamentally changed, and the opportunities and challenges have once again significantly shifted.

The publications that take a critical look at Area Studies from the perspective of academic theorizing emerged after the end of the Cold War—i.e. precisely at a time when New Area Studies began to flourish. It is the beginning of what Sidaway sees as the third phase of Area Studies, and what Hodgett (2019) sees as the blurring of genres between Area Studies, Political Science, History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Drama.

Area Studies continues to be crucial to deep and satisfactory understanding of place and people in addressing difficult, modern and persistent problems. At best, it involves a frank conversation with power, intellect, policy, culture, morals, about 'we' and 'they' and why we still do not fully understand each other. And it addresses matters of the local, including structures and institutions, as well as the inevitable evolution of societal norms. (Hodgett 2019: 37)

Her assessment also includes the work of policy-makers, which is crucial for tracing the trajectory of Area Studies' relationship with politics. The new constitutional conditions that emerged with the end of the bloc confrontation can be identified on three levels: Increased mobility, conceptual convergence and improved technical possibilities for communication.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain facilitated cross-border mobility to a great extent. Invitations of colleagues from countries being researched in global and Area Studies burgeoned. Societies specializing in a particular region or theme, such as the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EuroSEAS), were founded during this time and increasingly included academics from Southeast Asia, as well as from Japan, Korea and China, in their panels.⁵ Other organisations, such as the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), held their major conferences alternately in Europe and Asia. For PhD students, opportunities opened up to conduct relatively unhindered field research during long stays in their regions of choice.

Under these conditions, Area Studies changed dramatically. Mielke and Hornidge (2017) characterise New Area Studies in this period as methodologically and theoretically diverse—a diversity made possible by numerous 'turns' (spatial turn, mobility turn, materiality turn, ...) and an accompanying pluralisation of basic theoretical assumptions and methodological approaches. At the same time, the relevance of Area Studies was put into question: Why would we need Area Studies when the world is converging anyway and borders are becoming meaningless? As

⁵ The comprehension of "Asia" at that time recognised Central Asia and West Asia, but these regions were represented only to a minor extent in the scholarly landscape. The dominant conception of Asia included (North-)East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia.

Chou (2017), drawing on Mignolo (2000) puts it, "the crisis of Area Studies" thus pivots on "the crisis of old borders, be they nation borders or civilisation borders." (Chou, 2017: 237)

Legitimacy crisis

Multiperspectivity and diversity in Area Studies approaches notwithstanding, the dominance of a handful of paradigms - increasingly resting on quantitative methodologies and modelling on the basis of empirical examples from Western countries - remained a defining feature in many disciplines – the social sciences being no exception. Their alignment of theoretical assumptions and concepts meant that (political, cultural etc.) diversity was interpreted as a marginal phenomenon; at the bottom line, everything fitted into large social science models. In the USA, a debate between disciplines such as International Relations or comparative politics on the one hand, and Area Studies on the other hand ensued and became very controversial (Bates, 1992; Harbeson, 1997). It was only in the most recent decade that scholars actively sought for common ground (see e.g. Derichs, 2017a, Busse et al. 2024).

In Germany, Area Studies asserted itself against comparative political science in the form of comparative Area Studies (Basedau and Köllner 2007), but the comparative view would still conceive of areas as trait geographies in Appadurai's sense. In Japan, the approach of "relational studies of international crises" was proposed (Sakai 2020; Sakai 2024), which offered at least a strong commitment to the dynamics of relationality and process in the arena of international politics. Similar activities emerged across the board, among them advocacy for Area Studies in its role of providing *medium-range concepts* by analysing other regions of the world and thereby conceding the limitations of theoretical and methodological universality claims.

Despite all creative impulses and innovative methodological turns, Area Studies have—more often than not—been degraded to mere auxiliary sciences, feeding in to

the logic of social science paradigms on the basis of what can be called assertive universalism.⁶

Appropriations

When Mielke and Hornidge speak of a great diversity of approaches in New Area Studies, they are also referring to the theoretical and conceptual innovations in the social sciences, i.e. the different *turns* which questioned the very assumption of a common universalist knowledge base. Houben (2017) sees the shift here towards a concern with power. Hodgett (2019) calls for a genre-blurring conception of Area Studies, while Chou (2017) refers to Schwartz (1980:24), who feared that Area Studies could be crushed between ‘the spurious universality of holistic configurations derived from the West’ and an ‘ahistorical culturalism’.

The increasing politicisation of essentialist readings of culture since the 1990s reveals that the risks formulated by Schwartz and others were not merely arbitrary assumptions. Critiques of Western universalism, originally formulated by post-structuralist and postcolonial scholars with emancipatory intent, have often been co-opted by authoritarian regimes, particularly in Asia, to deflect external criticism—especially concerning human rights violations. The first current of such instrumentalisation took shape under the banner of *Asian values*, championed by Malaysia and Singapore and seconded by others as a culturalist rebuttal to liberal democratic norms (Thompson, 2004; Mols and Derichs 1995).

More recently, similar discursive strategies have been deployed by the Thai regime, which has resisted the label of authoritarianism by asserting the legitimacy of a “Thai-style democracy” (Hewison and Kengkij, 2010). Meanwhile, political actors like the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have gone even further, invoking postcolonial critique to convene international conferences on Islamophobia—events that unite various authoritarian governments in a collective pushback against Western and internal censure (Cakmar, 2022).

⁶ We do not use this term with any religious or outrightly militant undertone, which is associated in some strands of the literature. Rather, it should be understood in the sense of self-assured, self-confident universalism.



Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar, “Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

The self-assurance of this period of globalised Western-universalist science is reflected in the funding guidelines of the time, Germany being a case in point. Major projects funded through the German Federal Ministry of Research and Science (BMBF) in the 2010s aimed at strengthening Area Studies. The *Cross Asia* project, for instance, led to a number of publications suggesting innovative approaches to Area Studies (among them Mielke and Hornidge’s 2017 compilation). Funding guidelines such as the *Southeast Asia - Europe Joint Funding Scheme for Research and Innovation*, whose aim was to ‘bundle and expand existing bilateral approaches to cooperation between Southeast Asia and Europe’, operated on these constitutional conditions and characteristically demand close cooperation with partners in Southeast Asia, who should be equally involved in the funding, free access to research results, and a transfer of expertise in particular.

2. Second Cold War: Fourth Wave of Area Studies?

The constitutive conditions which enabled the thriving of Area Studies in the post-Cold War era, have undergone profound transformation in recent years, largely due to what has now been termed a Second Cold War (Schindler et al., 2023). While popular science narratives often trace this shift to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and China’s increasingly overt alignment with Russia, framing it primarily as a reconfiguration of global military blocs, our perspective is different. We contend that the emergence of a qualitatively new geopolitical condition cannot be reduced to a singular turning point or event, but that such an event can form a *topochrone* which literally ‘condense[s] the precise nature of connections between several scales’ (Houben, 2022: 3). Transformation is the result of multiple, interrelated crises, each unfolding autonomously on various scales but converging to push the global order past a tipping point—merging in a systemic rupture with the liberal globalism that defined the post-1990 era.

This new constellation has dramatically impacted all the foundational dimensions that previously enabled global academic exchange and critique (and made possible the emergence of New Area Studies). Most notably, freedom of mobility—a core precondition for the internationalism of Area Studies—has been severely curtailed. The tightening of EU visa regimes in the wake of refugee movements, global travel restrictions brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, and higher travel costs due to

climate protection measures such as CO₂ compensation payments, have all contributed to a new regime of academic immobility. The establishment of special funding schemes in Germany for scholars at risk from Turkey, Syria, Afghanistan, and the Ukraine notwithstanding, the prevalent outcome is not only a slowed-down South–North scholarly exchange, but also the emergence of new hierarchies and asymmetries in global knowledge production.⁷

With the rise of China, a new global actor has emerged whose success challenges the long-standing assumptions of liberal internationalism. Since 2019, the European Union has officially labelled China a “systemic rival”—not only in reference to geopolitical tensions but also because China’s sustained economic growth did not engender noteworthy political liberalization in the People’s Republic. China’s rise is accompanied by an expansion of its global influence, particularly in the Global South. One indirect yet significant consequence of this shift is the normalisation and consolidation of authoritarian regimes worldwide, including in Southeast Asia. Countries such as Thailand and Myanmar, once celebrated in the 1990s as empirical cases supporting classic modernisation theory’s promise of inevitable democratisation, now represent the opposite trajectory. The military coups in Thailand (2014) and Myanmar (2021) did not merely interrupt a democratic process; they marked the beginning of a new, durable authoritarian configuration, in which state repression is structurally embedded rather than episodic.

This shift to authoritarianism has brought with it severe and escalating restrictions on academic freedom as governments seek to control knowledge production, knowledge dissemination and public discourse. Yet these processes are not confined to Southeast Asia, China or Russia. A parallel de-democratisation is also unfolding within the heartlands of liberal democracy, including Europe and the United States. In Hungary, Turkey, and—arguably—the USA itself, authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian regimes have become entrenched. Even in contexts where right-wing or fascist governments are not (yet) in power, scholars have observed the proliferation of moral panics and culture wars that function to discipline, delegitimise, or defund critical academic work (Della Porta, 2024). These

⁷ Since the outbreak of Russia’s war against Ukraine, academic exchange programmes have been discontinued.

developments suggest that the erosion of academic freedom is no longer a peripheral or exceptional phenomenon, but part of a global trend of shrinking intellectual and political space.

Finally, the Internet, long celebrated as the technical embodiment of globalisation and the harbinger of an inherently democratising communication revolution, is now increasingly fragmented and restricted. In the early 2000s, prevailing optimism held that the Internet—due to its decentralised architecture and universal protocols—could neither be censored nor shut down. However, over the past decade, states around the world have developed sophisticated mechanisms of digital governance, ranging from algorithmic censorship to soft controls that promote self-censorship. While these developments initially unfolded within a still-unified, globally integrated cyberspace, we are now witnessing a deeper transformation: the emergence of competing digital sovereignties. After Chinese companies such as Huawei were marginalised in the 5G technology under pressure from the USA, a race is taking place to set standards and infrastructure that will lead to the Internet being split into separate spheres.

This techno-political bifurcation of the Internet is symptomatic of a broader fragmentation of global knowledge infrastructures. Where once a global, multilingual platform such as Wikipedia embodied ideals of universally accessible, shared knowledge, the rise of large language models (LLMs) trained on divergent datasets now threatens to create divergent epistemic worlds—each rooted in their own political, cultural, and linguistic assumptions. Rather than a single, globalised repertoire of human knowledge, we are approaching a world of digitally enforced epistemic pluralism, structured by geopolitical competition.

These new structural conditions fundamentally restrict the possibilities for Area Studies research. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, academic boycotts and export control regimes have become part of a broader securitisation of knowledge production. Scholars working on certain regions—particularly China, Russia, or the Middle East—increasingly undergo screening processes to assess their loyalty to European institutions and values. The transport of technical equipment across borders is also regulated, making fieldwork more logistically and politically fraught.

We interpret this new constellation as indicative of a shift from assertive to defensive universalism, i.e. to a position which mirrors the perceived need to defend one’s own values and convictions. Research institutions in Europe continue to invoke the language of universal scientific values—openness, critical inquiry, transnational dialogue—but increasingly from a position of strategic insecurity. The defensive posture is reflected in the oscillation of funding guidelines in Germany between promotion of cross-regional collaboration and the demand for knowledge generation at the service of domestic institutions. The most important federal funding agency Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), for instance, supported a research initiative of German and Asian scholars in the pursuit of learning how Asian scholars study Asia, and thereby bridging the rather compartmentalized subdivisions of East Asian, South Asian, Southeast Asian and Central Asian Studies in Germany.⁸ In contrast to this, a call issued by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) in 2024 for proposals to promote ‘Modern Asian Studies’ explicitly aimed at generating knowledge about Southeast Asia in and for Germany—*not* in collaboration with Southeast Asian partners, and not for mutual academic exchange. Co-operation with institutions in Asia was not desired.⁹

The latter tendency is even more pronounced in the field of China Studies, where a highly polarised debate has emerged around the political orientation and normative function of the discipline (Fulda, et al., 2022; Schubert and Alpermann, 2022). Against the backdrop of escalating systemic rivalry and the increasingly authoritarian trajectory of the Chinese state, some voices have argued that contemporary Sinology should primarily aim to educate students who are familiar with China but who have grown up in Germany or Europe, and are firmly grounded in European values.¹⁰ Particularly monitored fields in research are those

⁸ The funded project was called the “Shaping Asia Network Initiative” and comprised scholars from Germany and all sub-regions of Asia. The funding ended in 2025. For more information see the website of the network: <http://shapingasia.net/>.

⁹ Applications for funding were required to be submitted in German, and while budgets could accommodate fieldwork abroad, institutional cooperation with Asian universities was not desired. The dissemination of research results was to be domestically oriented, disseminated primarily in the form of policy briefs for German and European decision-makers. A reciprocal transfer of knowledge to and from academic or civil society partners in Asia was not envisioned.

¹⁰ Personal communication with experts working in the field of research policy.

who produce potential dual use items. Higher education policy is hence geared towards creating an effective "research security architecture". This position implies a growing suspicion towards students with migrant backgrounds, whose familial and linguistic connections to China—once celebrated as ideal qualifications—are now viewed through a lens of security and loyalty. In this shift, the field retreats from its earlier openness to linguistic and cultural pluralism, returning instead to a nationalised, defensive epistemological framework.

These developments strongly suggest that, under the conditions of an emerging Second Cold War, the constitutive pillars of (New) Area Studies are undergoing a profound transformation. The comparison with the second wave of Area Studies, which flourished during the first Cold War (1947–1989), is both apt and instructive. Once again, knowledge production and knowledge dissemination are affected by strategic interest, subordinated to the imperatives of geopolitical competition and national security.

At the same time, Area Studies appear to be acquiring a renewed strategic significance. No longer simply concerned with cultural understanding or scholarly critique, they are now called upon to produce knowledge for the state, in the service of policy, and against geopolitical rivals. Yet, in embracing this new role, we risk losing sight of the hard-won critiques that have shaped the field since the 1990s. The insights of postcolonial theory, which have exposed the complicity of earlier Area Studies with imperial and Cold War agendas, remain unchangedly relevant. As Area Studies face this new realignment, the challenge will be to resist a relapse into political appropriation, and to defend spaces for critical, autonomous scholarship.

Geopolitical polarizations

The political world affairs of the present millennium have displayed neo-colonial relations of power, huge power asymmetries between and within parts of the world as well as individual nation states, and more recently an increasing revival of authoritarian political regimes. Political confrontations in the pursuit of regional or even global hegemony are as much a feature of current international relations as is the erosion of the frequently invoked rule-based international order. More often than not, economic competition and profit-seeking form the basis for politically



Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar, “Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

endorsed yet ruthless means of securing access to natural resources and fertile lands which translate into new forms of dependence if not slavery, human trafficking, and sophisticated forms of fraud, corruption and exploitation. The overarching explanation for the condition of this ‘turbulent world’ (James Dorsey) is geopolitical polarization, i.e. the politics of confrontation between forces that strive to expand and/or sustain their spheres of influence across the globe’s geographical terrains. Global infrastructure projects such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), or the European Union’s Global Gateway are prominent signifiers of attempts at influencing the flow of trade for their respective players.

Digitization accompanies these efforts; it accelerates communication and transaction yet brings about new challenges and space for criminal maneuver. The digital space is a geography of its own that deserves being studied through the lens of mobility and immobility, mobilization and demobilization as well as empowerment and disempowerment – in the same way as physical, material, spiritual, emotional etc. geographies do.

Geopolitical polarization and its embodiment in the current physical and digital space is another space-time configuration – a *topochrone* – that illustrates the heuristic value of *process geographies* in the field of New Area Studies. We argue that we need a Fourth wave of areas studies building on these methodological and conceptual principles in order to prevent a situation where the acting powers of the Second Cold War embark on blind flights (King, 2015).

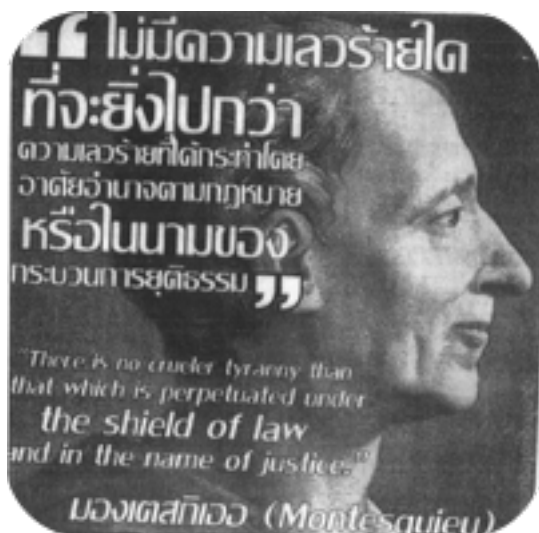
The lens that we look through combines the described (re-)authoritarianist and appropriative developments in the global political landscape and shows how they translate into concrete cases for Southeast Asian Studies. We next direct our gaze at two reflective examples: how processes of de-democratisation and pro-democratic social movements in Thailand and in Myanmar are being perceived in Germany.

De-democratisation and pro-democracy movements in Southeast Asia

One of the most disturbing phenomena and most difficult challenges of our time is the global decline of democracy and the rise of right-wing authoritarian

governments, each shaped by its own regional characteristics (IRGAC, 2024; Pinheiro-Machado, 2023). This trend can be observed not only in Europe but also in Southeast Asia—a region that was once considered an empirical confirmation of modernisation theory and its prediction of democratisation. In the 1990s, country after country in Southeast Asia saw urban middle-class movements take to the streets, demanding political rights and participation. These movements ultimately overthrew developmental dictatorships, paving the way for the establishment of liberal democratic systems.

Against this historical backdrop, the current emergence and consolidation of new authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia present a profound theoretical, social, and political challenge. The fact that strong, committed, and even militant pro-democracy movements emerged in both Thailand and Myanmar between 2020 and 2021 who directly challenged their respective military governments is ample proof of a strong connectivity between and convergence of European and Southeast Asian political thought. In Thailand, the Redshirt movement had already demonstrated its force in 2010, representing predominantly the rural poor from the North and Northeast. Between 2020 and 2021, a new wave of pro-democracy protests was led by school students and university activists in Bangkok, who boldly criticised the monarchy and its entwined political and economic power (Teeratanabodee, 2023; Sombatpoonsiri, 2021). In Myanmar, students, civil servants, and workers responded to the 2021 military coup with a general strike and a nationwide uprising—an insurrection that has since escalated into a civil war aimed at restoring democracy (Pedersen, n.d.). Notably, the democracy movements in both Thailand and Myanmar have explicitly drawn on political ideas and concepts rooted in European thought. The pamphlet cited below is one example:



Pamphlet delivered at the occasion of a Redshirt pro-democracy demonstration in Bangkok 2014. ‘There is no crueler tyranny than that which is perpetuated under the shield of law in the name of justice’ (Montesquieu)—protesting against the ruling of the constitutional court to disqualify democratically elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra.

This reference of Thai protesters to Rousseau is not articulated from an elite position and does not come from a "Western" NGO with the script of a colour revolution. The pamphlet shown here was picked up by one of the authors at a demonstration of Redshirts in 2014, whose base is the poor population of northern and north-eastern Thailand. Most probably, this pamphlet goes back to so-called *political schools* which were run throughout the country in the mobilisation for the 2009-2010 demonstrations (Naruemon and McCargo, 2011:1009, Charoensin-o-larn, 2013).

We see a similar straightforward commitment of demonstrators in Myanmar to seemingly Western liberal ideas in their initial demand to acknowledge the results of the elections, to let the parliament convene. Later, after the crackdown of the peaceful demonstration, more radical demands were articulated, such as overcoming the military sponsored constitutions of 2007 and moving towards a genuinely federal system. Such demands at first sight might sound like a reflection of the rhetoric of Western NGOs and liberal think tanks, which were active in Myanmar throughout the period of democratic opening. Yet, a closer look reveals that the demands and the repertoire was borne out of a genuine appropriation of democratic demands in reaction to the experiences of the authoritarian regime (Jordt et al., 2021; Egreteau, 2022).

Thus, the Southeast Asian region currently appears to be one in which references to Enlightenment thinkers play an important role in the current political debate, but the fact that these thinkers are from eighteenth-century France is irrelevant. The common ground is clear and processes a geography of like-minded actors who are physically disconnected but ideologically close to each other.¹¹

Postcolonial criticism of the concept and effective role of human rights (Anghie et al, 2003; Falk, et al, 2008; Mickelson, 2008) and the rule of law (Jayasuriya, 1999; Humphreys, 2010), as uttered by scholars in the West and about the West, is well grounded and necessary. It opens the eyes to the assertiveness and instrumentalisation of the claimed universalism and its entrenchment with a

¹¹ The constellation comes close to what Arjun Appadurai designates as "ideoscape".

capitalist and neocolonial agenda. And it serves to understand the discreditation of the liberal order in large parts of the Global South. This critique is not falsified by the assertion of Human Rights and liberal ideas in the current struggles for democracy in countries like Thailand and Myanmar. From the perspective of *process geographies* and against the backdrop of the concept of *topochrones*, we are able to reconcile both moments: analysing and appreciating the emancipatory role of European male thinkers in the strong pro-democracy movements and simultaneously the harsh criticism directed at the very same thinkers and their role in colonialism and neocolonial world order.

Concluding thoughts

At the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, we find ourselves in a liminal situation: the devastating effects of passing tipping points in the overexploitation of the planet's natural resources are becoming increasingly tangible, and the deterioration of the foundations of life has become an everyday experience in various parts of the world. Solutions, which need to be negotiated and implemented at the global level, are not in sight. On the contrary, democracy is in decline in many countries around the world, giving way to authoritarian and chauvinistic forms of rule. Wars are spreading, in which the principles of international law are being violated and war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and genocide are the order of the day. Here, too, the international system is proving dysfunctional in defending the foundations of an international order. On the contrary, the supposed defenders of a liberal multilateral world order are themselves involved, and against the backdrop of the polarization of a Second Cold War, the international community is failing.

Science, whose task should be to analyse problems and enable solutions, is becoming increasingly handicapped by this polarization. Research in all disciplines is to a considerable extent subject to the logic of the Second Cold War and, in the spirit of defensive universalism, is being positioned to defend a world order that is failing before our very eyes. Political science, social science, and Area Studies are in danger of becoming accomplices to a new project of domination, as they were during the First Cold War.



Claudia Derichs and Wolfram Schaffar, “Process Geographies and a Fourth Wave of Area Studies,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

Against this backdrop, we have called for reaffirming and defending the achievements of pluralistic, critical, and emancipatory New Area Studies. Since the conditions under which the Third Wave of Areas Studies unfolded in the 1990s have changed dramatically, we call for a Fourth Wave of Area Studies: Beyond essentializing a North and a South, Orient and Occident—with different attributions—it is important to research concrete situations of the current political and social conjuncture (*topochrones*) in the sense of *process geographies*. In concrete terms, this means forming emancipatory alliances with colleagues across borders and analyzing and overcoming destructive interdependencies across epistemic, ideological, and military boundaries.

The collaborative lens opens up a new perspective and is informed by fresh understandings of the defining terms *area* and *region*. Conceiving of areas and regions as entities constituted by thematic connectivity rather than *trait geographical* ones allows for shaping common epistemic ground regardless of ideological or geopolitical intervention. Calling this the Fourth Wave complies with both the achievements of New Area Studies since the 1990s and the vision of a twenty-first century Area Studies.

References

- Anghie, Antony, Bhupinder Chimni, Karin Mickelson, und Obiora C. Okafor et al. (eds.) (2003). *The third world and international legal order. Law, politics and globalization*. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Appadurai Arjun et al. (1997). *Area studies, regional worlds: A white Paper for the Ford foundation*. Chicago: University of Chicago <http://www.uchicago.edu/cis/globalization/white-paper.html>.
- Basedau, Matthias and Köllner, Patrick (2007). Area studies, comparative area studies, and the study of politics: Context, substance, and methodological challenges. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Politikwissenschaft* 1, 105-124.
- Bates, Robert H. (1997). Area studies and the discipline: A useful controversy? *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(2), 166-169.

- Boatcă, Manuela (2012). Catching up with the (New) West: The German "Excellence Initiative", Area Studies, and the re-production of inequality, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 10(1), 17-29.
- Busse, Jan. et al. (2024). Contextualizing the contextualizers: How the Area Studies controversy is different in different places. *International Studies Review* 26.1 (2024): viad056.
- Cakmar, Busra Nur (2022). *Islamophobia continues to spread like plague in West: Turkish president. 'Islamophobia poisons all segments of society, from people on street to politicians, workers, and civil servants,' says Recep Tayyip Erdogan*. Anadolu Agency, 15 March 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/islamophobia-continues-to-spread-like-plague-in-west-turkish-president/2535867>.
- Charoensin-o-larn, Chairat (2013). Redrawing Thai political space: The Red Shirt movement. In Bunnell, Tim; Parthasarathy, D.; Thompson, Eric C. (eds.). *Cleavage, Connection and Conflict in Rural, Urban and Contemporary Asia*. Springer, Dordrecht.
- Chou, Cynthia (2017). The case for reconceptualizing Southeast Asian Studies. In Mielke, Katja and Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (eds.). *Area Studies at the crossroads. Knowledge production after the mobility turn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 3-26.
- Coleman, Simon and Von Hellermann, Pauline (eds). (2012). *Multi-sited ethnography: Problems and possibilities in the translocation of research methods*. New York: Routledge.
- della Porta, Donatella (2024). Moral Panic and Repression: the contentious politics of anti-Semitism in Germany. *Partecipazione e Conflitto: The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies* 17(2). Special issue: "Freedom and the Illiberal Zeitgeist in East-Central Europe—a Conflict-Laden Relationship" <http://sibaese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/29062/23816>.
- Derichs, Claudia (2017a). Area Studies and disciplines: What disciplines and what areas?—Current debates. *IQAS* 51/2020 (3–4), 35-49.
- Derichs, Claudia (2017b). *Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation*. London: Routledge.
- Derichs, Claudia (2018). Transnationale Verbindungen und Herausforderungen für die Sozial- und Regionalwissenschaften [Transregional Connections and Challenges for the Social Sciences and Area Studies]. In Steffen Wippel and Andrea Fischer-Tahir (eds.). *Jenseits etablierter Meta-Geografien. Der Nahe Osten und Nordafrika in transregionaler Perspektive* [Beyond Established Meta Geographies.

- The Near East and North Africa in Transregional Perspective*]. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 57–69.
- Derichs, Claudia (2019). Re-thinking towards We-thinking. Reflections on Epistemic Decolonization. Lecture at Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin, 26 September 2019, <https://www.zmo.de/veranstaltungen/reflections-on-epistemic-decolonization>.
- Derichs, Claudia (2002). Internet als subversives Medium? Politische Netzkultur in Malaysia. In Schucher, Günter (ed.). *Asien und das Internet*. Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde. 112-126.
- Derichs, Claudia (2022). The long sixties and Islamist activism: radical transregional solidarities. In Maasri, Zeina, Cathy Bergin & Francesa Burke (eds.). *Transnational solidarity. Anti-colonialism in the global sixties*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 279-299.
- Egreteau, Renaud (2022). Profile: Blending Old and New Repertoires of Contention in Myanmar's Anti-Coup Protests (2021). *Social Movement Studies* 22(5-6): 822-29
- Falk, Richard; Rajagopal, Balakrishnan and Stevens, Jacqueline (eds.) (2008). *International law and the third world. Reshaping justice*, London: Routledge.
- Fulda, Andreas; Ohlberg, Mareike; Missal, David; Fabian, Horst und Klotzbücher, Sascha. (2022). Grenzenlos kompromissbereit. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16. März 2022.
- Harbeson, John W. (1997). Area Studies and the disciplines: A rejoinder. *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 25(1) [Commentaries in African Studies: Essays about African Social Change and the Meaning of Our Professional Work], 29-31
- Hewison, Kevin and Kengkij Kitirianglarp (2010). Thai-Style democracy: The royalist struggle for Thailand's politics. In Ivarsson, Søren and Isager, Lotte (eds.). *Saying the unsayable. Monarchy and democracy in Thailand*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 179-202.
- Hodgett, Susan (2019). Twenty-first-century Area Studies: Blurring genres, evolutionary thought and the production of theory. In Zoran Milutinovic (ed.). *The rebirth of Area Studies: Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the twenty-first-century*. London: Tauris, 19-52.
- Houben, Vincent (2017). New Area Studies, Translation and Mid-Range Concepts. In Mielke, Katja and Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (eds.). *Area Studies at the crossroads*.

- Knowledge production after the mobility turn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 195-211.
- Houben, Vincent (2022). *Histories of Scale: Java, the Indies and Asia in the imperial age, 1820-1945*. Gliencke: Galda.
- Humphreys, Stephen (2010): *Theatre of the Rule of Law: Transnational legal intervention in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- International Research Group on Authoritarianism (IRGAC). (2022). *Global authoritarianism: perspectives and contestations from the South*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag.
- Jayasuriya, Kanishka (1999). Introduction. A framework for the analysis of legal institutions in East Asia. In Kanishka Jayasuriya (ed.) *Law, capitalism and power in Asia: The rule of law and legal institutions*. London and New York: Routledge, 1-23.
- Jordt, Ingrid, Tharaphi Than, and Sue Ye Lin. *How Generation Z Galvanized a Revolutionary Movement against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup*. No. 7. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2021.
- King, Charles (2015). The Decline of International Studies: Why Flying Blind is Dangerous, *Foreign Affairs* 94 (4) (July/August): 88-98.
- Kössler, Reinhard (1982). *Dritte Internationale und Bauernrevolution. Die Herausbildung des sowjetischen Marxismus in der Debatte um die Asiatische Produktionsweise*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.
- Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The emergence of multi-sited ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1): 95-117.
- Mickelson, Karin (2008). Taking Stock of TWAIL histories. *International Community Law Review*, 10(4), 355-362
- Mickelson, Karin; Odumosu, Ibironke and Parmar, Pooja (eds.). (2008). Situating third world approaches to international law (TWAIL). Inspirations, challenges and possibilities, *International Community Law Review* 4/2008 (Special Issue).
- Mielke, Katja and Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (2017). Introduction: Knowledge production, Area Studies and the mobility turn. In Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (eds.) *Area Studies at the crossroads. Knowledge production after the mobility turn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 159-176.
- Mignolo, Walter D. (2000). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Mitchell, Timothy (2004). The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Sciences. In David L. Szanton (ed.) *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. University of California Press. 74-118.
- Mols, Manfred and Derichs, Claudia (1995). Das Ende der Geschichte oder ein Zusammenstoß der Zivilisationen? – Bemerkungen zu einem interkulturellen Disput um ein asiatisch-pazifisches Jahrhundert. *Zeitschrift für Politik*, 42(3): 225-249.
- Naruemon Thabchumpon and McCargo, Duncan (2011). Urbanized Villagers in the 2010 Thai Redshirt Protests. *Asian Survey* 51(6): 993-1018.
- Pedersen, Morten B. (2023) Myanmar in 2021: A state torn apart. In Daljit Singh and Hoang Thi Ha (eds.). *Southeast Asian Affairs 2022*. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. 235–53.
- Pinheiro-Machado, Rosana and Vargas-Maia, Tatiana (eds.) (2023). *The Rise of the Radical Right in the Global South*. London: Routledge.
- Sakai, Keiko (2020). *Gurobaru kankeingaku to ha nanika* [Relational Studies on Global Crises]. Iwanami Shoten.
- 酒井啓子. (2024). グローバル関係学から見た「国際日本学」の役割. 日本文明の再構築: 岩倉使節団 150 周年に寄せて (国際日本文化研究センター第 4 期機関拠点型基幹研究プロジェクト「「国際日本研究」コンソーシアムのグローバルな新展開:「国際日本研究」の先導と開拓」キックオフシンポジウム), 117-130.
- Schaffar, Wolfram, Fahimi, Miriam und Flatschart, Elmar (2022). *Introduction. Critical state theory in the global South*. In Miriam Fahimi, Elmar Flatschart and Wolfram Schaffar (eds.) *Critical State Theory in the Global South - Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Studies*. Springer, 3-17.
- Schindler, Seth, Ilias Alami, Jessica DiCarlo, Nicholas Jepson, Steve Rolf, Mustafa Kemal Bayırbağ, Louis Cyuzuzo, et al. (2023). The second cold war: US-China competition for centrality in infrastructure, digital, production, and finance networks. *Geopolitics* 29(4): 1083-1120.
- Schlögl, Stephan; Bürger, Moritz and Schmid-Petri, Hannah (2022). Digital divides in the social construction of history: Editor representation in Wikipedia articles on African independence processes. In Scheu, Andreas M., Birkner, Thomas, Schwarzenegger, Christian und Fähnrich, Birte(eds.). *Wissenschaftskommunikation und Kommunikationsgeschichte: Umbrüche, Transformationen, Kontinuitäten*.

- Münster: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft e.V. 1-12.
- Schubert, Gunter und Alpermann, Björn (2022). Die jüngste Kontroverse um Zustand und Zukunft der deutschen Chinaforschung – eine vorläufige Bilanz. *ASIEN* 162/163 (Januar/April 2022), 95-107.
- Schwartz, Benjamin I. (1980). Presidential address: Area Studies as a critical discipline. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 40(1), 15-25.
- Sidaway, James D. (2017). Foreword: A third wave of Area Studies. In Mielke, Katja and Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (eds.). *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. v-vii.
- Sinha, Vineeta (2023), *Temple Tracks: Labour, Piety and Railway Construction in Asia*. Berghahn Books.
- Sombatpoonsiri, Janjira (2021). From repression to revolt: Thailand's 2020 protests and the regional implications. *GIGA Focus Asia* 1: 1-12.
- Steele, Janet (2023). *Malaysiakini and the Power of Independent Media in Malaysia*. NUS Press Pte Ltd.
- Stephan, Manja (2024). *Muslim Mobilities: Geographies of Piety and Belonging in Tajik Dubai Business* (Vol. 3). de Gruyter.
- Teeratanabodee, Wichuta. (2023). Thailand's 2020–2021 pro-democracy protests: Diversity, conflict, and solidarity. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 55(1): 3-27.
- The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic (n.d.) *The Oriental Institute*. https://orient.cas.cz/export/sites/orientalni-ustav/.content/files/_stare/vkn_11_web.pdf
- Thompson, Mark R. (2004). Pacific Asia after 'Asian values': authoritarianism, democracy, and 'good governance'. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(6): 1079-1095.
- TPOLS (2021). *Just Transition in the Palm Oil Industry: A Preliminary Perspective*. TPOLS, Sept 21, 2021. <https://palmoillabour.network/just-transition-in-the-palm-oil-industry-a-preliminary-perspective/>