



Carolina Zaccato, “A long-overlooked partnership: How Area Studies can improve the field of International Relations,” *New Area Studies* 5:1 (2025).

A long-overlooked partnership: How Area Studies can improve the field of International Relations

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Abstract

Nowadays, the discipline of International Relations (IR) is undergoing a profound transformation, aiming at becoming more plural, more diverse, more inclusive, and truly ‘global’. Henceforth emerges the need to adjust our theoretical frameworks to adequately incorporate the increasing plurality of visions and the diversity of authorships that currently populate the IR academic panorama. In this article, I make the case for a deeper, more meaningful, and more horizontal academic partnership between International Relations and Area Studies (AS). I believe it is the most appropriate way to decentre and pluralise the discipline of IR, via the attainment of profound, context-specific and locally situated knowledge of regional orders. As a preliminary step to further the engagement between these two disciplines, I address some aspects where AS and IR can establish a mutually enriching relationship. I do so by focussing on the English School of International Relations, while extending this call to entwine AS with other IR theoretical traditions.

Keywords: Global IR - Area Studies – International Relations Theory – English School – Regionalism



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Introduction

Contemporarily, the discipline of International Relations (IR) is undergoing a profound transformation, aiming at becoming more plural, more diverse, more inclusive, and truly global.¹ In turn, the contemporary search for plurality and inclusiveness encompasses not only the objects of study of IR (i.e. *what* is studied), but also its subjects of study (that is, *who* studies IR, and from *where*). Hence emerges the need to adjust our theoretical frameworks to adequately incorporate the increasing plurality of visions, and the diversity of authorships that currently populate the IR academic panorama.

In this contribution, I address the English School of International Relations (ES) as a viable framework to undertake this endeavour. Indeed, it has been widely sustained that the English School constitutes a *via media* between the Realist and Liberal traditions in IR theory.² Moreover, the ES is also in a privileged position as a *liaison* between IR and other related disciplines, such as History, International Law, Political Philosophy, and Anthropology, by virtue of its classical and humanistic approach, and of its ontological predisposition to interpretivism and co-constitution.³ For these reasons, the ES is placed in a particularly suitable position to further the enterprise of Global IR, and refine its purposes and research agenda.⁴ More specifically, one manner in which the English School can contribute to the improvement of the agenda of Global IR is by seriously engaging with Area Studies (AS). Thus, in this piece, I present and explore the potential synergies from the cross fertilisation between the ES and AS. This is not to say that the ES is not the only IR theoretical perspective feasible to carry this transit between Global IR and Area



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Studies. However, I do consider it to be particularly well-suited to undertake the challenge.

The present work is divided into three parts. First, I provide an overview of the (so far, reluctant) relation between the disciplines of International Relations and Area Studies. In so doing, I address the emergence of Area Studies as a discipline deeply embedded in the early twentieth century's European imperialism and in managing its demise during the Cold War era. Then, I elaborate on how furthering the dialogue between Area Studies and International Relations, through the approach of the English School of IR, can represent a mutually beneficial endeavour, particularly so if focussed on the novel ES' research agenda concerning regional international societies (RIS). In this section, I delve into some aspects that, I argue, offer the most fruitful fields for cross pollination between Area Studies, the English School, and International Relations, more broadly understood. Amongst these, I analyse the potential for refinement of the English School's ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions—and those of other IR theories, as well—together with greater reflections on researchers' positionality towards their object of study; the exploration of specific forms of world societies that may contribute to the appraisal of local orders through the study of indigenous practices and norms; the dynamics of co-constitution between the local and the global; and the analysis of regional cosmologies and conceptions of order. Lastly, I conclude by renewing this article's call for greater—and more horizontal—engagement with Area Studies to make the English School, and International Relations more broadly, more plural, more inclusive, more accurate, and more in tune with the Global IR agenda.

Area Studies: A long-overlooked partner for International Relations

In its beginnings, Area Studies emerged in the European scientific community with the studies of geographies, societies, traditions and behaviours of the populations subjugated by the imperial metropolises. Therefore, the origins of Area Studies as a discipline are intrinsically interlinked with the geopolitical and racialised understanding of the subdisciplines of IR Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis, during the late stages of Western imperialism, and particularly so during the Cold War era, which coincided with the beginning of the dissolution of major Western



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empires.⁵ Illustrating the early origins of Area Studies and its intrinsic bond with International Relations, at the end of the Second World War the Realist theorist Hans Morgenthau claimed:

Area Studies, both historically and analytically, form a part of that field of knowledge which is called international relations.⁶

However, despite its relatively early beginnings, Area Studies has usually been considered as a mere testing ground, ‘a basket of data’ from which to get pieces of evidence to validate grand and middle range theorizing. This resulted in the AS field being considered as a minor discipline, in terms of its epistemology and intellectual goals, in comparison with International Relations and other cognate fields.

Moreover, even the term of ‘area’ is regarded as problematic. Indeed, the questions of how an ‘area’ is designated and demarcated, and what it includes and excludes, represent, in themselves, open-ended topics subjected to political and normative considerations and discussions. In this vein, the researchers’—and policy-makers’—subjectivity, and the historical contingencies contained in the designation of a given space as a specific ‘area’, often go unnoticed. However, these subjectivities are nonetheless always present and have a real impact on the research being carried out, and the subsequent policies enacted, on those particular areas.

Furthermore, while International Relations emerged as a holistic, synthesizing field of enquiry, with the aim of studying phenomena at the global level;⁷ Area Studies’ aim is precisely the opposite: to get a comprehensive, thick appraisal of a delimited region or area of the world, without pretensions of generalisability. Thus, it is in the very origins of the discipline of IR that we can find its ‘hostility’ towards the field of Area Studies.

However, an underlying query remains: how can we best define Area Studies? Interestingly, debates on this issue were already being held seventy years ago. Indeed, in 1952 there was an Area Studies’ special issue, commissioned by the UNESCO and published by the International Social Science Bulletin. In said issue, the contention on how to define what we understand by Area Studies, and its objectives, was addressed in the following terms:



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The exact meaning of the term 'area study', as used by American research workers, is still a little uncertain. It may be applied to any study of a particular area, at least if it is concerned with some branch of the social sciences, or it may have a much more specific meaning, an area study being a comprehensive study of a given region from several different points of view, with the object of determining its role in international life.⁸

Even more curiously, contemporary research on Area Studies and International Relations does not usually provide a precise and concise definition of the term Area Studies, either.⁹ Consequently, in this article I adopt a minimal definition of this term, which I borrowed from the Cambridge Dictionary. There, 'area studies' is defined as 'the study of the history, politics, economics, and cultures of various areas of the world or of a particular area of the world'.¹⁰ This definition stresses the interdisciplinary and sub-global character of area studies, which I find particularly suitable for the purposes of a piece seeking to stress and enhance the contributions that the field of Area Studies can make to the discipline of International Relations.

Notwithstanding the renewed engagement between Area Studies and International Relations in recent years, scholars devoted to Area Studies continue being criticised for 'horizontal ignorance' and accused of promoting and defending exceptionalisms and descriptivism.¹¹ In this sense, those who inscribe their work within the field of AS are reproached for leaving little room for generalisability beyond the particular case(s) under study, to which AS researchers tend to devote their entire professional life. In turn, experts on International Relations are criticised of 'vertical ignorance', accused of failing to shed light into "real societies and the conduct of historically situated human agents."¹² In this vein, criticisms of much of the work inscribed within the IR discipline have to do with IR's treatment of its case studies, providing a superficial knowledge of cases and relying on weak cultural and language skills to carry them. Moreover, these criticisms tend to extend to IR's implicit—and even sometimes, explicit—application of hegemonic worldviews as the measuring bar for comparison and analysis of case studies, whereas an ethnographic study would contribute context-bound, thick accounts of these cases.



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The differences between Area Studies and International Relations extend to the ultimate objective of their research enterprise. Indeed, within the canons of mainstream IR, the driving force behind research tends to be the quest for regularities, transcending spatiotemporal confines, to be applied across a multitude of cases. By contrast, Area Studies put the emphasis on seeking "to decipher the subjective understanding actors attach to their practices and discourses within their immediate contexts," working with primary sources, and mastering local languages and cultural codes.¹³

Consequently, to this day interdisciplinarity between the fields of IR and AS remains more of a buzzword for funding-seeking and publication projects, rather than a reflexive, conscious, and meaningful intellectual effort to merge insights and contributions from these respective disciplines. In fact, currently there is very little cross-fertilisation between International Relations and Area Studies, with different authors writing for differentiated audiences in distinct academic outlets.¹⁴

Nowadays, this perceived incompatibility between Area Studies and International Relations, together with some suspicion of one another's work, negatively impacts knowledge production, professionalisation, allocation of research funding and perceptions of 'scientific' validity. Thus, how can Area Studies work in synergy with International Relations? Is this relation not only possible but also mutually enriching? In the following section, I offer some aspects where I believe that a fruitful dialogue can be established between Area Studies and the discipline of IR. As an initial approximation, I explore potential grounds for synergy between AS and the English School of International Relations. Naturally, these arguments are not exhaustive. Instead, they are presented with the hope that they ignite further dialogue on the matter, spurring new avenues for research collaboration between the two fields.

How can Area Studies contribute to the refinement of International Relations?

Reiterating the claim that international Relations would greatly benefit from a more meaningful engagement with Area Studies, in this section I provide some aspects and areas on which this mutually beneficial partnership can be undertaken. In this



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vein, as previously argued, I contend the English School is the most suitable approach to build this bridge between Area Studies and the broader discipline of IR. Furthermore, I argue this rapprochement would serve to make IR a more inclusive and accurate field, in line with contemporary calls to diversify and decentre International Relations. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that other strands of IR theory would also serve as fertile grounds for a meaningful engagement with Area Studies. Constructivism, by sustaining the co-constitution between agents and the international system, is likely to represent a viable alternative. However, in this piece I present some of the reasons I consider the ES to be particularly well-suited for the task.

To begin with, the English School represents a holistic approach to the study of International Relations, providing a comprehensive account of what IR stands for. Indeed, the English School conjugates elements of International Law, Sociology, Anthropology, Political Philosophy, and History. In this vein, by proposing to bridge International Relations with Area Studies via the English School, I am simultaneously making a call to return to the ‘classical approach’ to the study of international affairs.¹⁵ By virtue of being multidisciplinary in its very inception, I believe the English School makes for a particularly apt partner for Area Studies, a field that is also interdisciplinary by nature, through its engagement with the cultures, histories, languages, politics, and societies of other areas of the world. In this sense, we can start this ‘special relationship’ between the English School and Area Studies with the establishment of a common language: that of interdisciplinarity.

Another *trait d’union* between the ES and AS is the ontological assumption that agents and structure are co-constitutive. Differently put, both approaches believe that any social order—be it local, domestic, regional, or global—is the result of inter-subjective interactions among different groups of people. In turn, these people are shaped by the norms, rules, practices, values, and institutions of the order they make part of. Furthermore, they also create, sustain, modify, contest, and challenge these orders, through their own actions, habits, practices, discourses. This is what is meant by co-constitution. Thus, because it makes room for contingency, the English



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School provides an adequate framework not only for the study of order (global or regional) but also for the study of disorder and change.¹⁶

The English School is often portrayed as a *via media* approach. Indeed, by virtue of being situated between the logic of consequences of Realism and the logic of appropriateness of Constructivism, the English School understands 'self-restraint' not as compulsory external forces disciplining states, but rather as rational acts of self-moderation originating from within the actors themselves. In this vein, taking into account the long-term strategic importance of the survival of the international order they constitute, states tend to refrain from carrying out certain actions because they estimate they would be counterproductive to the maintenance of international order and, hence, to their own interest.¹⁷ Therefore, the main ontological assumption of the English School is also a compromise position: that international politics are situated in between anarchy and organisation/authority. This assumption, together with its macro-historical approach, provides the English School with an advantage over mainstream approaches that tend to either over-generalise or underestimate trends. While different approaches tend to either downplay or overestimate the breadth and nature of international phenomena, the world is much more than the Realists would admit, and much less than the Liberals would prefer. This claim retakes and builds upon a contemporary reassessment of the English School as an historically based and normatively-driven approach to International Relations.¹⁸ At the same time, these ES authors are sceptical about the possibility of drawing a neat distinction between normative theory and theory about norms, going against a positivist take on the English School.¹⁹ More recently, the argument that the English School situates itself in a middle ground, or *via media*, between Realism and Liberalism is deepened in a publication by various English School scholars born out of a European Workshop on International Studies (EWIS) held in Istanbul in July 2024, of which I also took part. In it, numerous authors, including myself, explore different manners in which the ES can provide an analytical synthesis of Realism's focus on 'power' and Liberalism's focus on 'legitimacy,' by analysing how the two dimensions interact within the realm of norms and institutions.²⁰



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While these attributes make the English School a particularly insightful framework to study the contemporary international moment of great power transitions, and hence for the study of our contemporary moment of contestation to the liberal international order, I argue that they also make the English School a particularly apt approach to act as a bridge between Area Studies and International Relations.²¹ Furthermore, the ES' 'sum of compromises' extends beyond those concerning the Realist and Liberal assumptions of the world, and between their pessimistic and optimistic expectations from international politics. Indeed, the English School presents also a compromise position between agent-centred and structure-centric approaches, between order and change, and between regional and global approaches.²² To these, as already argued above, we shall add its ontological and methodological pluralism. This comprehensive character is what makes the English School a great framework to prompt a greater, and deeper, engagement between Area Studies and International Relations.

IR's 'regional turn' and the challenge of defining a 'region'

In a preceding section of this article, I argued that there is no scholarly agreement on what is represented by the term of Area Studies. In this section, I further contend that the term itself of an 'area' or 'region' of the world is also a problematic notion in the discipline of International Relations.

Indeed, as with many terms in the Social Sciences, 'region' is a highly contested concept. It is neither a given nor does it refer to a self-evident conceptualisation of observable phenomena. Instead, the notion of a 'region' is a discursive and political construct. Regions are not atemporal objects, fixed in time and space, but instead dynamic social constructions, produced and reproduced through socio-economic and political discourses and practices, that 'move' (i.e. change) through different changes in relations between territories and communities.²³ Regions are social and political projects that can be "constructed and deconstructed, ideationally as well as materially".²⁴ Even more so as regions are as much ontologies as they are processes and levels of analysis. Therefore, regions are not fixed, immutable, and all-alike, but, on the contrary, they develop, rise and "decay" following various levels of 'regionness'.²⁵ The notion of regionness can be appraised as spaces or "arenas for



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action",²⁶ comprising regional dynamics on a myriad of fields (economic, social, political, cultural), driven by multiple actors, linkage mechanisms, and institutional structures. This framework contests the idea of regionalism as a coherent and unitary model. Indeed, the notion of regionness recaptures the regional as "a space for deliberation and collective action, focusing on actors and types of practices," challenging understandings of regionness as a cohesive subject or actorness.²⁷ In this vein, regions are sub-global territorial demarcations, primarily geographical units, roughly delimited by physical barriers, and characterised by some sort of ecological features. After all, regions are rooted in territory.²⁸ However, they represent more than just a sub-global instance of the broader international order. Instead, regions are usually defined by shared cultural, political, economic, and biogeographical contexts.²⁹

To delimitate the confines of a region, one needs, first, to have a thick grasp of regional realities. Therefore, the contingencies and specificities of 'areas' and 'regions' have, for several decades, clashed with the reassuring formalism and predictability that much of the mainstream of International Relations proudly claims having, by being scientific in its outlook and universal and in its scope. Indeed, International Relations was first conceived as a holistic, synthesizing field of enquiry, with the aim of studying phenomena at the global level.³⁰

The recent 'regional turn' in International Relations, and particularly within the English School, might constitute the perfect springboard for exploring synergies between IR and Area Studies. Being traditionally focussed upon the global level, the English School has devoted little curiosity to the study of regions in their own right.³¹ However, more contemporary English School literature shows a growing interest in regional analyses to retrace regional stories and particularities. Thus, it is pertinent to ask why it is relevant to study regions for an approach that takes pride in its 'holism',³² by addressing the 'broader picture' both in temporal and spatial terms.³³ On this, I claim that the most recent regional turn in the English School carries a triple purpose: (a) retracing the 'regional-level stories' of the emergence and evolution of the current international order,³⁴ (b) claiming regional distinctiveness within the international order, so as to indagate upon the existence of different regional orders, and (c), following a broader trend in the field of



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International Relations, exploring the prospect of a regionally-structured world order.

While this regional interest within the ES is not really novel, it constitutes a natural and more sophisticated development from the early research produced by members of the British Committee on the Theory of International Politics. Indeed, 'canonical' pieces addressed what would be nowadays labelled as regional orders in historical, political, and cultural terms, through the study of discrete 'systems of states'. However, this 'first wave' of regional analysis was undertaken without (the theorisation of) a wider global international society to refer to. When the English School finally presents the concept of international society, it is through the story of the global 'expansion' of the Westphalian European order. Therefore, the emergence of a global order was seen as a consequence of the diffusion of European norms and rules to the rest of the world.³⁵ In this vein, the idea of 'expansion' implies that the European international society simply scaled up, with its rules and practices remaining the same while the size of its membership increased.³⁶ Furthermore, this story is not only Eurocentric but also hierarchical, marked by a 'standard of civilisation' separating the core from the periphery, and indulging the former with special duties and responsibilities over the latter, through the practices of colonialism and international mandates.³⁷

Later, the global process of decolonisation would challenge this hierarchical conception of the international society. In a 'revolt against the West'³⁸, the newly independent states started asking for admission into the global 'club' of states on egalitarian terms, using the very institutions and practices of the Westphalian interstate system.³⁹ Yet, a pressing Cold War strategic ambience prioritised order and stability over demands for justice. With the end of the Cold War, the field of IR shifted to the study of a globalised world increasingly articulated in terms of regions.⁴⁰ Alongside this broader trend, the ES began exploring regional orders and problematising the previously held idea of an 'expansion' of the European interstate society into the rest of the world, positing instead concepts such as 'hybridising globalisation' and the 'co-production' of the norms of the international society.⁴¹



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Thus, what is truly novel about the current regional turn of the English School is that currently there are several regional orders coexisting within the umbrella of a broader global order.⁴² Consequently, this regional move enables queries on how these regional orders interact with their global counterpart, adapting global institutions to regional specificities; and how regional innovations can, in turn, impact global practices and institutions. For the English School, regions are conceived as being constituted in and through social practices. Therefore, “international society at the regional level is not simply international society writ small”⁴³. Instead, it entails demarcating an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside,’ while understanding the dynamics of relations of the ‘inside’ with the ‘outside’(s). Differently put, the appraisal of regions, for the ES, requires, in turn, understanding “how one world affects the many and how the many affect the one.”⁴⁴

Thus, searching for regional distinctiveness in the broader international order, recent works within the English School tradition assert that certain regions of the world configure distinct regional orders. These regional orders are then ‘translated’ into ES jargon as regional international societies (RIS). Amongst the distinctive features of a regional international society, its members must conceive their welfare and security as being interdependent with those of the rest, and with the interest of the society they form. Furthermore, the region must have developed some set of norms and mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of disputes. Lastly, regional international societies must differentiate themselves by presenting a distinctive set of primary institutions.⁴⁵ According to this definition, any given regional international society shall present primary institutions that are different from those present at the global stage, or, alternatively, reappraise institutions of the (global) international society and adapt them to regional necessities and particularities.

Nonetheless, the contemporary regional ES agenda is still characterized by a structural, analytical conception of regions, where ‘markers’ of specific social facts are identified, and studied, by using a predetermined set of theoretical concepts and hermeneutical tools, without justifying—or problematising—their meaning, applicability and legitimacy in distinct regional settings.⁴⁶ Thus, there remains the need to elaborate on how exactly the collaboration between the ES and AS is feasible, useful and, more importantly, needed.



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Why promote a horizontal partnership between IR and AS?: Preliminary approaches from an English School perspective

As a starting point to analyse how AS can serve to refine IR theorisation through the English School approach, we shall begin by the ES's ontological assumption that any international order—be it global or regional—results from the co-constitutive interaction between agents and structure.⁴⁷ Thus, normative and institutional orders are the result of intersubjective interactions between actors who, in turn, interact with—affecting and being affected by—norms, rules, principles and primary institutions. In turn, these socio-normative milieux first emerge through actors' practices and discourses. Differently put, an ES perspective considers human agency to be intrinsically entwined with the structures of any given social order. Therefore, the shared values, meanings, cultural codes, and local conditions of any order are crucial to the correct appraisal of said order, as well as to its sustenance and development. As social facts (with order being one of them) cannot be separated from the context from which they emerge, thus, a structural, overly analytical, approach to international societies risks missing the iterative, co-constitutive interaction between orders and their social local contexts. In turn, if we consider that contextual, situated meanings and practices do matter, then Area Studies turns into an indispensable partner to the study of regional and global orders. In particular, I present a few aspects where AS can work together with the ES to advance our understanding of regions and regional orders, by addressing both structural and agentic dynamics and providing 'thick descriptions' of social contexts.⁴⁸

In the first place, establishing a meaningful partnership with Area Studies would prompt the English School to refine, and specify, its ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions. This would occur by making the ES critically address discussions around some of its core notions and beliefs. Notably: what is 'an order'?, how can it be 'seen', 'recognised', 'measured', and 'appraised'? Are there alternatives to an international order? Indeed, the English School does not enquire into the possibility of something other than ordered relations, but instead takes international order for granted.⁴⁹ So, then, we must enquire where can this notion of order be found? How can these primary institutions be 'seen' and identified?



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These questions become even more relevant when applied to socio-cultural contexts where shared understandings of what constitutes a 'good life', or of the 'logic or appropriateness', might differ from those of the researcher.

In turn, a query closely related to this issue is whether the researcher can, and should, become part of the context they study, or if they must forever remain an outsider to the (international/regional) society they seek to appraise. On this issue, a deeper engagement with Area Studies would prompt scholars to be more reflexive and aware of their own positionality and socio-cultural biases towards their research topic, understanding 'positionality' as a process of constant, self-conscious scrutiny of the self as a researcher and of the research process.⁵⁰ On the one hand, 'insider' researchers start the research process with a great advantage, as they can understand the cognitive, emotional, and/or psychological precepts of participants, as well as tending to possess more profound historical and practical knowledge of their field, sharing language and language use, and being able to render more closely underlying or folkloric meaning, which may be misinterpreted by 'outsiders'.⁵¹ Indeed, if the logic of practicality is completely alien to the researcher, then they may not properly understand it within its context.⁵² On the other hand, if the meaning of a practice is deeply embodied by the interpreter, it might remain invisible as a second nature. Hence, when the researcher shares many elements of a culture with the subjects and social environment they study, they may find it hard to notice the more 'taken-for-granted' aspects.⁵³ Thus arises the need of learning to differentiate between what the researcher *knows* and what they *see*.⁵⁴ Additionally, insider researchers need to reflect on their own intentions and consider how their multiple roles and identities affect both fieldwork procedures and the way they write about research,⁵⁵ as positionality shapes the production of knowledge.⁵⁶

Therefore, from an interpretivist point of view, the challenge remains to make the familiar, strange.⁵⁷ In other words, making sense of regional practices and understandings requires addressing the "Mauss problem",⁵⁸ as "in order to decipher the meaning of a practice, its practicality must be *both alien and native* to the interpreter's own system of meanings".⁵⁹ Thus, the quest is to generate a type of knowledge that it is both native and foreign, devising a "subjective"⁶⁰ approach that at once generates "experience-distant" and "experience-near" insights.⁶¹ To do this,



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it is crucial to conceive positionality not in a static and essentialist sense, but as a fluid, dynamic, and continual practice of active reflexivity and self-interrogation of our own assumptions and of how our positionality is being read by others (e.g. interviewees), and how these assumptions and assessments might impact the research process.⁶²

Furthermore, Area Studies can meaningfully contribute to the study of local orders, through a deeper appraisal of indigenous practices and norms. In turn, this would enable the ES to properly delve into the element of ‘world society’, concerning all sorts of non-state actors; an aspect that has so far been neglected by this theoretical approach. In this vein, elements of order, coexistence, reciprocity, and predictability are not only ensured by governments and state-enforced mechanisms, but are also embedded in indigenous, community-driven practices and legitimised by mutual codes and understandings rooted in shared histories and philosophies, including religious events, festivals, and council of elders. This would grant more agency and saliency to the element of world society, the most relegated one in the ‘ES triad’ (i.e. international system, international society, and world society). In turn, it would serve to expand the nascent ES research on practices and institutions or regional world societies, making the conceptual and analytical boundaries between international and world societies more porous and intertwined.⁶³ Lastly, this move would represent a serious acknowledgment of local dynamics of socialisation, reproduction, and endorsement of norms and practices, but also of normative creation, innovation, contestation, and resistance.

Another aspect in which Area Studies can meaningfully contribute to the English School, and to the broader discipline of International Relations, is by uncovering the dynamics of co-constitution between the local and the global. AS can help IR to better understand how local and regional orders are socialised into global norms and practices—and how they can resist and challenge them. More importantly, Area Studies can also serve to trace how these local orders can impact and modify their global counterpart. A greater engagement between International Relations and Area Studies would contribute to uncovering and undermining deeply-rooted assumptions built into the language of the global and the local, where ‘the global’ implicitly represents the driving force of history, while ‘the local’ is usually portrayed as a reactionary, secondary agent, and read as either resisting or joining global forces

and movements, but never as being in itself a source of historical developments. By contrast, a serious engagement with Area Studies would shed light on the contingent nature of global phenomena, analysing the ways in which their global scope has been reached through constant interaction with local and regional agents, groups and social forces.⁶⁴

Indeed, I believe Latin America is a superb example of the co-constitutive dynamics between the regional and the global, particularly so in the normative domain. Far from being a passive, secondary *rule-taker* actor, Latin America represents an active agent in the making of the contemporary international order, a veritable *rule-maker* and crucial normative entrepreneur in numerous of the current global rules, norms, and practices.⁶⁵ One telling example of this aspect is the regional endorsement and zealous defence of the principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention in internal affairs. These principles were forged in the mid- to late nineteenth century against European and American (i.e. U.S.) legal and political pretensions, even encompassing the right to military intervention and occupation of a country in order to force it to honour its debts, as well as the pretence of extra-territorial legal jurisdiction over their citizens living on foreign soil.⁶⁶ Faced with these challenges from extra-regional great powers, Latin America conceived non-intervention as an absolute principle, deeply rooted in their sovereign status as independent states. In turn, this conception was crystallised in three legal doctrines that, to this day, remain regional (and global) cornerstones: the Calvo (1863), Varela (1869) and Drago (1902) doctrines.⁶⁷ These legal doctrines, respectively, enforce the equal treatment of nationals and aliens and the abolition of extraterritorial jurisdictions in financial litigations, the no right of territorial conquest after victory, and the prohibition of the use of force to collect debts.

Later, this regional understanding of sovereignty non-intervention was formally institutionalised in the regional Montevideo Convention (1933), which, in its Article 8 explicitly enunciates that "no state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another."⁶⁸ Additionally, it is crystallised in the constitutive principles of the Charter of the Organisation of American States (OAS), which explicitly states, in its article (g), that "the American states condemn the war of aggression: victory does not grant rights",⁶⁹ therefore quoting the famous phrase

pronounced by the Argentine Minister of Foreign Affairs following the defeat of Paraguay at the hands of Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in the Triple Alliance War.⁷⁰ In turn, the Latin American conception of sovereignty and non-intervention was diffused into the global international society via its incorporation in the Article 2 of the Charter of the United Nations, which bans the threat or the use of force against the territorial integrity and political independence of any given country.⁷¹

A further Latin American innovation in the realm of international law is that of *uti possidetis juris*, which has become a cornerstone of the international society. This doctrine states that previous imperial administrative boundaries would be turned into international borders to enable a peaceful coexistence amongst the newly independent Latin American states. This would be done by preventing the emergence of unclaimed territories (*terra nullius*), which would spark conflicts and new colonization attempts.⁷² In turn, this legal principle was later applied to manage the demise of the European empires in Africa and Asia, constituting a pillar of the global process of decolonisation of the twentieth century. Additionally, the principle of *uti possidetis* was also implemented to administrate the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to provide some structure to the political reorganisation of the Eurasian territories.⁷³

Hence, I contend that these examples from Latin America should prompt us to delve into the role that states from outside the 'core' of the global international society play in bringing about substantive changes in global rules, norms, practices and institutions. Furthermore, I argue this is of particular relevance as the dynamics of rule-making from the so-called developing world, and their broader impact on the international society, remain largely under theorised.⁷⁴ Indeed, in the mainstream literature of International Relations, 'peripheric' regions such as Latin America continue being usually depicted as 'rule-taker' actors.⁷⁵ However, a deeper engagement with regional dynamics and developments, and particularly so through the kind of context-specific, locally-situated knowledge that can be produced through Area Studies, can shed light into regions as 'rule-makers' and normative innovators and entrepreneurs. Therefore, AS would serve IR to retrace how 'global' norms and practices became globalised, thus acknowledging the different regional



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imprints that they carry. In turn, this would contribute to de-centring and decolonising the very mainstream of IR theory and knowledge production.

In turn, Area studies can further contribute to sharpening IR theorisation by prompting it to consciously engage with how values, traditions, histories, and notions of ‘the good life’ vary across societies and cultures, rather than applying a universal ethical benchmark to assess different regional and local realities. In particular, the ES could advance, and deepen, its understanding of regional orders not only through the appraisal of norms, rules and institutions (and how they are practised, endorsed, and contested) but also by uncovering the deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions that provide the normative grounds to sustain a specific practice or a specific interpretation of a given rule or institution in said region. Therefore, this move would serve to shed light not only into regional orders, but also upon different regional visions/conceptions of order, thus fostering novel research agendas on comparative regional cosmovisions.⁷⁶

In this vein, by establishing a true academic partnership with Area Studies, the discipline of International Relations would be truly doing theory-building “from below”, carrying a ‘grounded’ theorisation’ of IR.⁷⁷ Therefore, IR would be meaningfully incorporating the real protagonists of IR—individuals and social groups—into the core of the discipline and of knowledge production about international affairs. To properly achieve this goal, IR scholars need to engage in meaningful collaboration with their colleagues from cognate disciplines, such as Anthropology, Sociology, History, Philosophy, and Political Thought, with relevant expertise on the areas being studied. This would aid IR in getting a comprehensive approach to the origins and meanings of local codes of conduct and behavioural expectations, which in turn impact on ‘universal’ understandings of norms, rules, practices and institutions, and their subsequent regional ‘translations’.

Furthermore, if the world is truly entering a phase of entrenched pluralism and high contestation of the liberal international order—as it is being increasingly argued within⁷⁸ and beyond⁷⁹ the English School—then a profound engagement with the knowledge produced within the discipline of AS is urgently needed to



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comprehensively appraise this new global order, the sources of its pluralisation, and the local and regional dynamics that constitute it.

It is also worth noting that an increasingly pluralistic world order does not imply the erasure of economic and social globalisation trends, processes, and even regimes. However, it does entail that spaces for alternatives would become more prominent and increasingly gain traction and legitimacy. Thus, an analysis of regional orders and of their global cosmovisions (represented by their fundamental normative and ethical beliefs, rooted in their local practices, histories, and values), becomes fundamental to understand the significance of the contemporary changes in the global international society and its future trends.

Conclusions

In this piece, I make the case for the establishment of an intellectual partnership between Area Studies and International Relations. I truly believe the undertaking of this proposal would bring about not only interdisciplinarity, but also methodological pluralism and analytical holism to the discipline of IR. Furthermore, I contend that this partnership is not only mutually beneficial for the two disciplines, but that it is also ‘needed’, given the contemporary trends in the academic discipline of IR, as well as in the professional practice of international relations, that make them more plural, more diverse, and more heterogenous fields.⁸⁰

In turn, the production of context-specific, regional-situated knowledge in the discipline of International Relations through a deep engagement with Area Studies does not deny the existence of the global dimension as a level of analysis. However, it does entail acknowledging that the global dimension is formed in a co-constitutive interaction with local and regional dynamics. Furthermore, it also means recognising that the global is always thought—and written about—‘from somewhere’ and with specific positionalities. This becomes all the more relevant at a moment of hegemonic transition and increasing contestation of the liberal international order, where appraising regional orders and dynamics becomes indispensable to the correct assessment of our world order in the years to come.



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I end this piece with a note of caution to the reader: bridging IR and AS is not an easy endeavour. Indeed, it requires rolling up our sleeves, learning languages, reading other kinds of literatures, engaging in fieldwork activities—interviews, observant participations, and ethnographies- and conducting archival research. All these with the ultimate objective of properly situating the ‘area’ components into the broader ‘IR’ theorising efforts, by producing more refined, authentic and context-situated regional knowledge. In turn, the partnership between AS and IR would further prompt dialogues with scholars from different, yet compatible, academic fields and from across the world, fostering an even more inclusive, diverse and plural IR field by truly acknowledging the diversity and intrinsic complexity of its object matter.



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