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New Area Studies and Southeast Asia – Mapping Ideas, Agendas, Debates and Critique

Editorial

Andrea Fleschenberg and Benjamin Baumann

“Debates on area studies have turned into something of a frenetic scholarly enterprise,” writes Victor T. King (2017: 758), Professor of Borneo Studies at the Institute for Asian Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam, in his review of *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* – one of the recent comprehensive contributions to the so-called Third Wave of Area Studies¹ (edited by Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, 2017). James D. Sidaway, Professor of Geography at the National University of Singapore (a key site of Area Studies within the region commonly labelled as Southeast Asia and beyond) identifies “Area Studies [as] an enduring source of fascination” with “always something new to think about”, as a cross-cutting knowledge enterprise, navigating manifold demarcations and (re-)connections along with (geo-)political influences (Sidaway 2017: vi).

This leads us to a number of questions that are part and parcel of this special issue and its quest to provide space for and continue with a multi-sited and multi-layered debate set around a number of questions as well as contestations regarding the current state of Area Studies. What is “new” about New Area Studies (not only with regard to Southeast Asia)? Why Area Studies (with capitals)? Who studies (with whom) and who is studied (and how)? Is it possible to rethink Area Studies in a way that not merely acknowledges power imbalances between studying “subjects” in the so-called global North and studied “objects” in the so-called global South, but genuinely transcends them? Is such a transcendence possible in Area Studies, or is the unequal distribution of power through the production of scientific knowledge about spatially grounded “areas” or “regions” the actual *raison d’être* of the field? How does Area Studies

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position itself within the wide range of academic disciplines? What could a current vision of Area Studies, one that acknowledges these issues, look like?

Take as an example the critique outlined by King in his book review and his challenging of some key components and propositions presented by key thinkers and scholars of what we would term “New Area Studies” (NAS, a term advanced in particular by Vincent Houben and Peter Jackson, along with Boike Rehbein and Claudia Derichs in this issue).² King points towards an “anxiety among scholars in and practitioners of area studies to justify what they do and what they have been doing”, faced with a fundamental critical gaze from (other) disciplines, and asks if “area studies can produce something that is arresting and distinctive” (2017: 760). He questions the fact that key components of New Area Studies as outlined by Houben (2020, 2017) or Mielke / Hornidge (2017a), such as mid-range concepts, epistemological or empirical insights produced from within NAS approaches, “haven’t already been generated within disciplines” (ibid.). In his critique, Vickers (2020) juxtaposes the New Area Studies approach with the Comparative Asian Studies approach (referring to the work of Arham 2011 and Middell 2018). Tapping into a larger debate with regard to what NAS aims to achieve through its key components of decentring, decoloniality, trans- and/or interdisciplinarity, scalar notions of locality and regionality as well as translocality and transregionality,³ he highlights that “[s]eeking to escape [...] binds can simultaneously tighten them, as the epistemological bases and conceptual frameworks employed largely remain grounded in established traditions” (Vickers 2020). NAS proponents would counter that a focus on a certain comparative approach doesn’t transcend containers – part and parcel of projects of ordering and othering – such as “area” or “region” and highlights what can be gained from a pronounced scalar understanding when transcending or opening up such containers.

1 Sidaway (2017: vi) demarcates this body of area studies as “conspicuously Cold War” and “displaying influences from social and cultural theory and registers geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts that are yielding a more multipolar world”. He argues that “[e]ach wave, with respect to the one before it, developed in a historical epoch associated with reconfigurations of space, time and scholarship; the first marked by the novelty of the telegraph and powered shipping, the second by television and aircraft, and the third by the internet and digitization. The transitions between each wave of Area Studies were marked by contention and a sense of loss of mission or crisis” (ibid. 2017: vi). The contention starts right here with this very notion of a specific kind of periodisation, using Global North-centred signifiers and thus centring what is looked at in the development of Area Studies in a certain academic gravitation centre reminiscent of Cold War and colonial legacies rather than opening up to a plurality of trajectories and centres of knowledge productions as, among others, the case of scholarship on and in Southeast Asia (see Jackson 2019 and Banerjee 2020).

2 See contributions of all four in this special journal issue along with Houben 2013, Derichs 2017, Houben 2017, Jackson 2019, Baumann / Bultmann 2020, Baumann / Fleschenberg 2020, Baumann / Rehbein 2020.

3 As Benjamin Baumann has outlined elsewhere, New Area Studies can be understood “as an ethnographically founded transdisciplinary project that seeks to answer theoretical questions raised in the disciplines in the context of emplaced orders of knowledge. This form of emplacement is explicitly spatial, so that the situatedness of knowledge remains not limited to discourses, social milieus or moving bodies, but becomes emplaced in concrete locations. These locations are situated on different scales ranging from ‘the local’ to ‘the global’, thus producing the spatial continuum of New Area Studies” (Baumann / Fleschenberg 2020: 37). This ethnographically founded vision of New Area Studies or EFNAS is outlined in his contribution to this special issue.

This relates to our central question about how to rethink Area Studies beyond the existing and powerful power imbalances in knowledge productions that is also emphasised by Peter A. Jackson in this issue. How can one overcome or at least aim to transcend structures of domination, dynamics and entrenched asymmetries of “Euro-Amerocentrism” and neoliberal globalisation in scholarly practice, moving beyond “important, self-reflexive comments on scholars’ own positionality and knowledge production” (Vickers 2020) in terms of lived transformative (and ultimately empowering and inclusive) scholarly praxes? Vickers points here to a crucial point that we as an editorial team had to confront when preparing this special issue, seeking to invite collaborations from across locations and positions (and yet sometimes failing to do so, not least because of the pandemic-related work overload, but also because of the need for scholars – not only in Southeast Asia – to publish in specifically indexed journals).

How can we truly embody and live a concern for decoloniality and decentering, when the cognitive centres of gravitation continue to concern and reside within the academia of the global North from which we propose our critical project of New Area Studies? And what if the contributing reflections in this issue come from authors who are either based in the Global North-North (e.g. Australia, USA, Europe and Japan), the Global North within the Global South or have been (partly) academically trained in academic institutions of the Global North? What can and should be the critical potential as well as *modus operandi* of New Area Studies if the field is really concerned with taking on colonial legacies and continued (neo-)colonial asymmetries, enabling a multiplicity of epistemological perspectives and traditions along with reverse flows of theorising and concepts informing research processes and knowledge productions, while at the same time aiming for a certain universalising tendency when proposing the emergence of a “meta-discipline” (Houben 2020)? How does this vision of New Area Studies come together with diverse Area Studies projects and practices in the regions themselves and what is the latter’s standpoint on the highlighted relationship of “areanists” and those working from “conventional disciplines”? What centring tendencies might (re-)emerge or continue to be entrenched? What about containers that inform inquiries and subsequent tunnel views in the scholarship produced in the so-called “regions” (Derichs 2017)?⁴

4 Claudia Derichs (2017) critiques conventional Areas Studies for its tunnel vision, i.e., blind spots emerging from only taking into account a certain set of geographies while excluding others (such as emotional geographies of belonging that are transregional in character and connect beyond established containers of such as “state” or a specific region) and thus lived realities. She challenges such ordering projects as a practice of othering and centring in Western academia, particularly emerging from conventional disciplines such as sociology, political science or anthropology. She invites a rethinking about scales and geographies and how they are shaped and reproduced from outside as well as from within “regions”, leading to diversity and decentering as well as epistemic decolonising knowledges (see chapters 6 and 7 in particular, as well as Derichs 2015).

Adding further food for thought: Can such a New Area Studies critique of the disciplines (as outlined by Derichs and Rehbein in this issue), stemming from a transregional (and transdisciplinary) perspective and decentring quest, be read as characteristic for the (again) growing politicisation of Area Studies, and its entanglement with geopolitical projects or modern identity politics?⁵ This is discussed and problematised in a number of inputs about the proposed New Area Studies approach in our debating section (see for instance the contributions by Manan Ahmed, Ramon Guillermo, Ahsan Kamal) as well as in the articles of Baumann et al. and Antweiler and the Research Note of Gerlach et al.

A common thread that runs through all contributions to this special issue written by scholars from a “region” is post-colonial critique that addresses the power imbalances shaping the institutionalised knowledge production in conventional Area Studies as practiced within and outside “regions”. To what extent does such a critique (re)produce dichotomous containers of global North and South or how can this bind of a complex matrix of power relations along the axis of global North and South be transcended (see Rehbein and Gerlach et al. in this issue)? A point made by the two commentators on the piece by Claudia Derichs, Ariel Heryanto and Itty Abraham, for example, which serves to blur the boundaries between disciplines and Area Studies emphasised by Derichs is that the knowledge created in the disciplines is always to a certain degree spatialised and usually produced within the confines of nation states, which also remain the implicit point of reference. Given the methodological nationalism of most disciplines (Wimmer / Glick Schiller 2002), they are therefore to a certain extent always Area Studies (Jackson in this issue). This fact is, however, rarely acknowledged and frequently not even recognised by the so-called disciplines.

Another point Ariel Heryanto and Itty Abraham make is the relational quality of the classification as area scientists. While Asian scholars conducting research in their home countries are classified as social scientists in Asia, they become Asianists in Western academic settings (Jackson in this issue). They are thus excluded from the symbolic capital associated with disciplines and relegated to the less prestigious realm of Area Studies.⁶ This marginalisation also takes place within the region of Europe where area specialists are “being

5 Modern identity politics follow an essentially binary logic and presume an identity-shaping opposition of Self/Other that entails an inevitable devaluation of “the Other”. While this understanding of “identity” is universalised by modern science, it is challenged in various contemporary approaches that stress the non-binary foundation of identity in everyday and non-modern contexts (Baumann 2020). Mielke and Hornidge (2017a: 5f, 9) argue that political entanglements as well as political instrumentalisations of Area Studies are not new, but a continued legacy as well as reality, albeit different in its trajectories, institutionalised manifestations and political geographies. They stress that “the respective Area Studies throughout their institutionalization over time depended on (geo-)political trends according to related national science policies, and that the ‘debates’ can be read as the results of threats to downsize funding (and actual cuts) for departments and scholarly activities” (ibid. 2017: 9; see also Derichs 2017, Manan Ahmed and Ahsan Kamal in this issue along with Baumann / Fleschenberg 2020).

6 In his reply to Houben’s debate section, Elísio Macamo evaluates the distribution of symbolic capital between Area Studies and disciplines differently (see also Baumann et al. this issue).

kept at bay when tackling the big issues in the humanities and social sciences” argues Houben (2020), due to centred particular epistemological traditions and standards which are thought of as “universal” in Western academia. There subsequently arises a certain potential for irritation caused by the decentring gaze of Area Studies as “we use vocabularies that are different and we start from unfamiliar, strange places which cannot be understood by non-specialists” (Houben 2020). On the other hand, this potential to unsettle taken-for-granted axioms stems from the continued “marginalisation of knowledge from the Global South and on the Global South” and standards of epistemic relevance in the Global North Academia, as Houben stresses (2020).

In light of the above, Vickers (2020) however contends that “a problematic binary marking the empirical-local and scientific-global does emerge”, given that “[a]rea studies remain an endeavour pursued predominantly by outsiders looking in on another space and communicating findings outside it”. This contestation speaks to the notions of area, scales, spatiality and disciplinarity in New Area Studies and thus what is “new” or “universal” in its proposal of an emerging discipline in its own right and standing where “trans” notions are key as well as inviting contestation. Vickers (2020) thus challenges the contrasting of perspectivity in Area Studies (inside-outside perspectivity) and “disciplines” (outside-inward perspectivity) as presented by NAS proponents such as Vincent Houben and Claudia Derichs.

Seeing the need to deconstruct geo-political regionalisations and transcend the power imbalances reproduced by them and simultaneously believing in the interdisciplinary vision of Area Studies and the analytic value of context-specific and spatially grounded research “areas” are important issues when looking for ways to think Area Studies anew. This rethinking, however, doesn’t have to proceed unidirectionally, looking exclusively into the future while searching for something “new” – the next paradigm shift promising to revolutionise the field – but may find crucial inspiration by looking back and beyond the narrow boundaries of “science” and nation states. Rethinking paradigms long discarded, rediscovering scholars already forgotten and reanimating methods declared to be obsolete may be promising as well, providing creative means of scientific progress, and may in the end help to deconstruct the modern myth of unidirectional scientific progress in such an interdisciplinary field as Area Studies (Feyerabend 1983, Baumann et al. this issue).

The power imbalances critiqued in the post-colonial contributions to the debate section are produced by orders of knowledge and institutionalised language games that are essentially modern and Eurocentric (Houben this issue). Despite their obvious Eurocentrism and their entanglement in modern identity politics, like the assumption of an identity-shaping distinction between Western “Self” and oriental “Other”, they are nevertheless treated as universals by scholars from a “region”. What is at stake in NAS is a questioning of these

orders of knowledge and their assumed universality through a showcasing of the lifeworld significance of local alternatives, one that characterises many decolonial projects, which also differentiates them from post-colonial critique (Anzaldúa 2015, De la Cadena 2015, Stengers 2018).

Beyond this, NAS must also address the power imbalances of a system of knowledge production that is not only essentially unequal, but legitimises the existence of inequalities on the basis of ostensible universals identified by the system, which are simultaneously instrumentalised in various political projects within and outside the system. Houben (2020) thus argues for New Area Studies and its “enormous potential in understanding the world and its structural asymmetries, starting from a non-European perspective, [...] a very necessary enterprise”.

New Area Studies at the IAAW – An ongoing debate and project

A re-imagining of Area Studies under the label New Area Studies at the Institute of Asian and African Studies (IAAW) started several years ago as a project to rethink the field at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies (Houben 2013, 2017). Its goal was and is to make Southeast Asian Studies sustainable, by opening the field to global processes, while remaining spatially and epistemologically firmly rooted in a “region”. The project gained new impetuses that were frequently the result of negotiations between faculty from different disciplines as well as transdisciplinary standpoints with sometimes irreconcilable understandings of Area Studies.⁷

Re-imagining Area Studies while combining Asia and Africa in a single bachelor’s programme (and soon master’s programme), the institute’s vision of New Area Studies now emphasises the processual character of globalisation phenomena, transcultural entanglements and an ever-increasing mediatation while aligning itself closely with the mobility turn or the “new mobilities” paradigm (Hannam et al. 2006: 2, see Mielke / Hornidge 2017). This vision is not only explicitly power-critical, but considers any language of “regions” or “areas” as an anachronistic manifestation of the global North’s hegemony. In this post-area vision of Area Studies the prefix “trans” legitimises the maintenance of an existing university structure of area institutes, while being simultaneously able to distance oneself from the symbolic violence exercised in all unequivocal classification processes through an emphasis of transimperial, transregional, transnational and translocal dimensions.

⁷ These negotiations also characterised the crafting of this editorial.

Key components of New Area Studies

As might already have become visible between and above previous lines, thinking about New Area Studies can be regarded as a response to “the new multi-centric world [which] continues to be dominated by few, but changing, centres and structures (regarding publishing and academic merits) that further reinforce existing inequalities” (Mielke/Hornidge 2017a: 3) and the end of the bipolar world that “opened up avenues for knowledge production and caused several currents of rethinking the subsequently arising ontologies in how we see and order the world” (*ibid.*, see also Baumann / Bultmann 2020). It implies addressing and transforming the continued reality of othering and us-them-division within sciences, politics as well as societies at international and domestic levels, as Mielke and Hornidge (2017a: 3), among others, outline. This speaks to the “economisation” and political entanglements of academia as well as to continued and new assemblages of power imbalances and subsequent structures of inequality and thus ontological and epistemological ordering, “the drawing of new cognitive boundaries” which do not stop at political borders (*ibid.*: 4). What can be outlined and thus debated as making up the “new” in Area Studies includes (according to Mielke / Hornidge 2017a: 8): 1) trans-perspectives (trans-regionalism, transculturalism, translocality) and thus “new levels of spatial relevance”, a deconstruction of “the conventional container focus of Area Studies” and a de-territorialisation of terminologies; 2) comparative approaches and a “trend towards interdisciplinary research following certain thematic frames or newly (de-)constructed ‘area’ dispositions in a quest to look at the world differently”; 3) “reactivation of the debate on the relationship between Area Studies and ‘systematic’ disciplines” (see also Jackson 2019 on his notion of spatially bound epistemologies).

Furthermore, notions of decoloniality, deschooling⁸, deconstruction and de-centring the “hegemonic power-knowledge order between North and South” (Mielke / Hornidge 2017a: 15) and what “one believes to be true” (Rehbein 2020) are prominent among writings of key proponents of NAS, positioned across the Global North as one centre of gravity (see contribution in Mielke and Hornidge and this issue). Vincent Houben sees the NAS approach as a “provocation” and “thought experiment” to devise a strategy for the future of Area Studies “to be discussed among the key stakeholders”, shifting from Area Studies

8 Deschooling refers to a process of academic unlearning, described as “reflexive praxis for transforming knowledge through epistemological critique and the conscious co-constructions of evidence-based ‘truth claims’” (Mielke / Hornidge 2017a: 20, referring to the contribution by Epifania A. Amoo-Adare 2017). This notion is also linked to what Boike Rehbein (2020 and in this issue) identifies as a key problem of knowledge production: “to deconstruct what one believes to be true”. Boike Rehbein proposes to work at interstices, i.e. to contrast different systems of knowledge, theories, epistemologies, and empirical realities. To choose these interstices, these places of meeting, clashes and collisions, he argues, enhances our knowledge production as it challenges containers and our taking sides (*ibid.*).

as a “study field”, implying thus mono-regionality and -disciplinarity as in political science or sociology and leading to a “mosaic-like structure” to NAS as a “meta-discipline” (Houben 2020). While positioning himself as working from within a given institutional and disciplinary infrastructure, Houben considers that this project might go beyond a quest for reform and institutional weight and allow for a transformative potential. At the same time, the contestation over the relationship between Area Studies and “systematic disciplines” starts right here, among contributors to this issue as well as key proponents of NAS.

Without aiming to map a specific canon for theories and methods (see also Rehbein 2020), this includes, first, the development of a novel theoretical and methodological basis “by giving explicit attention to the Global South from a Southern perspective”, and, second, trans- and interdisciplinarity as well as collaborative research “across social cognitive geographies” in “pluri-local research groups” (Houben in this issue). As in Rehbein’s proposition of interstices and notion of configurations in this issue, key thinkers of NAS emphasise the potential for innovation that takes place when boundaries – disciplinary, epistemological and ontological – are crossed (see, among others, Baumann 2020, Houben 2020, Rehbein 2020).

Questions for moving forward

One of the key aims of this special journal issue of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* is to open up a platform for debate as well as for taking stock, since a number of critical junctures took place post-1990s. There are no foregone conclusions, nor clear “truths” that emerge, neither was this one of the aims of this special issue. We intend to contribute to this ongoing, open and contested debate with a series of articles, research notes, debating inputs as well as by interviewing Prof. Peter A. Jackson. We thus conclude as we started – with food for thought in the garb of questions and with an invitation to contribute, to counter, to think with/about/along.

Where do we stand, what questions need to be asked, what critique needs to be laid out (again) and engaged with when contextualising and reviewing the so-called “Third Wave of Area Studies” and any New Area Studies approach? While some ponder if “areas” have been and will be “passé” (Sidaway 2017: vii), what changes when following the proposal of Vincent Houben to shift Area Studies from a “field of study” to a “kind of emerging new discipline” (Houben 2020)? How does this relate to the idea that “globalisation [remains] the talk of the town” and that “[m]any of the critiques levelled at its predecessors are still in the air, for Orientalism was back on active service after 9/11 and the

legacy of the Cold War division of intellectual labor and areas lingered, although they looked increasingly arbitrary” (Sidaway 2017: vii)? What is “new” about the re-imaginings of the field outlined in this special issue?

Taking to heart our concern for positionality and self-reflexivity as well as decentring, if we criticise ourselves in a deep self-reflection process, what does emerge? Do we need to question that the reimagination of New Area Studies should rather be understood as logical continuations of developments which have shaped the field since the late 20th century, appearing to generalise the knowledge produced while simultaneously scientificising and politicising the field through a growing dominance of the social sciences and continued politicisation or political entanglements of research agendas? Or, does this vision of Area Studies – shifting epistemologically from the particular to the general, spatially from the local to the global, and disciplinary from humanities to the social sciences – lead to the production of generalists, easily adaptable to the changing requirements of job markets and the latest academic trends and paradigm shifts?

What becomes of the key component of the mastery of local languages, previously a distinguishing feature of area expertise, within the ethico-political frameworks characterising much NAS rethinking? How are scholarly subjectivities formed – for whom and by whom? How to move from an overt criticism of neoliberalism and neoliberal academia while continuing to perform within and along the critiqued structures and dynamics, and what are alternative and countering roadmaps, agendas and praxes (if any)?

How can decoloniality be practiced by white scholars from the global North who practice Area Studies in the global North but continue to address socio-cultural configurations in the global South? Is self-reflexivity and collaborative research really enough or just another appropriation strategy that seeks to assimilate the foreign in the familiar? What can be the potential of opening up Area Studies to global processes and comparative projects and thus the growing awareness of the ontological and epistemological multiplicities shaping contemporary socio-cultural configurations all over the world and the recognition that we can only understand them in transregional dialogue? How is this understood at the various centres as well as the still marginalised peripheries of knowledge production and what are praxes towards solidarity and inclusiveness? How and where does “local” scholarship from within the region feature in knowledge productions across regions? Who is allowed to speak (or not) and how is epistemic justice as well as tolerance achieved and safeguarded (and by whom)? What does this also mean for academic publishing practices, whether in terms of peer review processes, academic writing standards or language options?

Zooming out a bit further from the presentation of scholarly work, practices and debates in this issue, we need to acknowledge that most contributions were written before or at the beginning of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Mielke and Hornidge (2017a: 7) remind us about how critical junctures inform aca-

demic rethinking, as “neither in the USA nor in Europe were Area Studies existentially scrutinized before 1990. Only with the increasing impact of globalization [...], and subsequently arising influences from different evolving ‘turns’ in academia [...], including post-colonial perspectives and post-development, a debate set in.” The debate has begun on what the current pandemic means for scientific knowledge productions, knowledge transfers into policy circles and public discourses, and for notions of “expertise”, “expert authority”, “truth” – not only in light of fake news and conspiracy theories gaining prominence in world- and meaning-making (see Butler 2020). What is and can be the purpose of science, what kind of knowledges are required, what practices should be reconsidered (Das 2020, Hussain 2020)? A debate has also started to rethink research challenges and opportunities, not only but particularly for those working from one “region” on another “region” as well as within “regions”. Is it a rupture, a historical juncture, and if so, for whom and with what kind of implications? Or is it rather a continuation or even acceleration of existing phenomena, developments within pre-existing hegemonic structures as outlined by Aymar Nyenyezi Bisoka (2020), Boaventura Sousa Santos (2020) and Raza Saeed (2020)? The floor is open to research – and especially to re-search these questions.

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