

These reflections come from a position paper drafted by the [Leiden University Institute for Area Studies](#) (LIAS) in 2012 and updated since. Keywords: place, language, and positionality; the situatedness of scholarship; area studies and the disciplines. 'Where Is Here?' has also served as introductory material for 'Discipline and Place,' an annual [LeidenGlobal](#) lecture series for PhD and Research MA students from across the Social Sciences and the Humanities.

WHERE IS HERE?

Where is here? This question lies at the core of the kind of scholarship LIAS wants to pursue. Very briefly, this is about issues of place, language, and positionality.

In the big picture, one part of our genealogy is (1) the centuries-old tradition of Oriental studies. That is: the study, in Euro-America and Australia and New Zealand, of the areas commonly referred to as the Far East and the Near East in former days, and as Asia and the Middle East today, with a central role for philology and classical humanities subjects: archaeology, the arts, history, language, philosophy, religion. Another part of our genealogy lies in (2) the application of modern Western social science disciplines to 'Non-Western data,' mostly for the study of politics, economics, and society, which began in full force after World War II, and extended to Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. This was what the notion of area studies overwhelmingly referred to during the Cold War, mostly in the United States but also in Europe, albeit later and less high-profile. To a significant degree, its development was policy-driven.

Discontents of Oriental studies and Cold-War area studies are well known, with keywords including Orientalism, imperialism, and Eurocentrism. To some extent, their respective paradigms ran out of steam in the mid- and late twentieth-century. At the same time, they have generated vast knowledge and rich infrastructures that present-day scholars continue to use. The genealogy and the recent development of the Leiden environment enable us to transcend the confines of both traditions, and work from (3) a present-day, inclusive, globally conscious vision of area studies:

Area studies is an approach to knowledge that starts from the study of *places* in the human world from antiquity to the present, through the relevant source languages, with central regard for issues of positionality. It is a dynamic synthesis of area expertise and disciplines in the humanities and social science, relying on sensitivity to and critical reflection on the situatedness of scholarship, and foregrounding the areas studied as not just sources of data, but also sources of theory and method that challenge disciplinary claims to universality. It should be inherently interdisciplinary, by testing the boundaries of the disciplines; and actively but carefully comparative, by treating the why, how, and what of comparison as anything but self-evident. This vision draws on both tradition and innovation in scholarship. It is informed by the history of the field, and its ongoing development in a postcolonial, multi-polar, globalizing world.

Area studies at large: background, problems, potential

There is a wealth of engaged and often polemical discourse on present-day notions of area studies, their histories, and their discontents. While it is no exaggeration to say that reflection on the study of places in the human world started centuries ago, the notion of ‘area studies’ gained widespread currency starting with decolonization and the Cold War, most of all in the US, but with clear linkage to developments elsewhere. It has also been hotly contested and fundamentally questioned, certainly after the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalization. This has led to proclamations of area studies being in crisis, in political, financial, institutional, ethical, and epistemological terms, especially in the 1990s; and to reassertions of its significance and its ability to adapt, and continuation of its practice, roughly since the 2000s. This is not the place for a detailed survey, and the situation in Europe is different from that in the US, but it is important to mention some of the factors at play. Inevitably, the following, quick summary of this complex matter is highly schematic. The reader is asked to bear this in mind – all the more so since, ironically, an inclusive vision of area studies leads to the deconstruction of easy boundaries, dichotomies, and oppositions. Some relevant literature is listed at the end of this paper.

Below, the notion of area studies is occasionally used retroactively to signify not only the Cold War tradition, but more generally the study of a particular, usually ‘foreign’ place – minimally foreign to the researcher’s home institution, and often to the researcher herself – based on sources in the languages of this place, and resulting in the translation of this place for domestic audiences, not just in the linguistic but also in the broader, cultural sense.

History

Historically, area studies is compromised by its complicity with Euro-American or Western imperialism, colonialism, ‘objectifying’ science, and capitalism, and with the racism and exploitation associated with them, as an example of the nexus of power – economic, technological, military, cultural – and the production of knowledge. There is a parallel between the colonizer’s and the imperialist’s extraction of material wealth on the one hand, and of linguistic and cultural knowledge and heritage on the other, with this knowledge feeding an hegemonic, Orientalist discourse whose images of Euro-America and its Others were imposed on the areas in question.

Other defining moments are decolonization and the Cold War. This is when, in the late 1940s and the 1950s, a type of area studies actually called by this name began to be widely institutionalized in the US. To a considerable extent, this was framed in straightforward instrumental, Know Thine Enemy (and thine trade partner) terms, and partook in problematic ‘modernization’ and ‘development’ discourses with their telos in the West. As such, it was cognate to the colonial enterprise, at the very time of decolonization. Motivations for this type of area studies included the advancement of US government, political, and business interests in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East. Dedicated funding was forthcoming from sources including the Department of Defense, the Ford Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Fulbright Program.

There was a clear emphasis on social science of the contemporary world: politics, economy, society. Policy relevance as a reason if not a hard condition for funding was potentially

compromising in that it cast doubt on the academic freedom of the researchers in question. Such doubts were counterbalanced by what is often referred to in Cold War contexts as dissent. This dissent was motivated by academic values per se – including insistence on the professional integrity of the researcher and the desire to do less ‘useful’ subjects like literature and the arts – as well as by political developments such as the Vietnam War. Cold-War Western Europe worked hard on knowing its enemies and trade partners as well, and there was much transatlantic traffic in this respect. With some exceptions, however, widespread development of social science of the contemporary world arrived somewhat later in area-defined programs at European universities, in the period from the 1960s (in the United Kingdom) to the 1980s (in continental Europe).

The image of area studies as a servant to other enterprises – rather than an academic pursuit in itself – is of course not just linked to the Cold War, or to ‘clash of civilizations’ thinking in more recent years. It is equally traceable to the (late) colonial era, especially after the development, in late 19th- and early 20th-century Euro-America, of humanities and social science disciplines. In this context, area studies was widely viewed as not science or scholarship in itself, but *applied* science or scholarship at best, as a ‘content’ provider for the disciplines.

In this process, its central strengths in rigorous training in (source) languages and philology, often geared toward translation in one sense or another, were at the same time a weakness. It has been widely recognized since the mid-20th century that language and translation of any sort are far from innocent, and inevitably enmeshed in power relations instead, with translation frequently generating epistemic violence – domesticization, foreignization and exoticization; more generally appropriation, distortion, erasure – as well as equivalence or transparency. In the late colonial era, however, it was a widespread vision of translation as a neutral conveyor of pure fact, and as a primary task and indeed a defining feature of area studies, that could relegate area studies to the status of a tool in the service of the disciplines, whose Western-centric grounding did not stop them from laying claim to universal validity.

In this scheme of things, the East (or the South) as *fact* requires translation in order to enable *reflection* on itself, which is only possible in Western (or Northern) disciplinary terms. Its languages can only ever be ‘field’ languages that operate prior to the entry of Eastern fact into the space for thought and interpretation enabled, and policed, by the *linguae francae* of the West, with English in an increasingly dominant and exclusive role. As such, translation also becomes the single passage from backwardness to a modernity monopolized by, if not identical to, the Western experience, with different temporalities for the one and the other at the same moment in calendar time.

Area studies and the disciplines

These colonial and Cold-War discontents lie at the beginning of an uneasy relation of area studies to the disciplines that continues to this day. The disciplines take area studies to task for the arrogance of holism in the absence of unifying theory and method, and for essentialism and appeals to native authority, authenticity, and the uniqueness of local and indigenous knowledges; with all these things, paradoxically, being extracted by *non-native* specialists, for shipping home to address non-native *non-specialists*. Area studies takes the disciplines to task for Western-centrism – which could also be read as exceptionalism, if only one lets go of the

West as the measure of all things – and for blindness to the possibility of multiple ways of knowing. This is another easy dichotomy, and today, the boundaries are blissfully blurred. But the coordinates remain valid, as long as they are not taken as pigeonholes.

The definition offered above holds that area studies is an approach to knowledge that starts from the study of *places* in the human world, with place – defined in geographic and/or cultural and/or linguistic and/or political terms – as a category of demonstrated interest and relevance, to scholars and lay people alike. Hence, a core question is how these places are identified. What constitutes an area? Who does the defining? Imperial cartography and nation-static boundaries that do not correspond to other local realities are cases in point.

‘Asia’ and ‘the Middle East,’ for instance, are deeply problematic categories, in that they are Western constructs. This is hardly mitigated by the fact that today, they occur in popular and specialist discourse without being problematized, including discourse *in* Asia and *in* the Middle East. ‘The West’ itself is equally problematic, not to mention West-Rest divides, and the outlandish category of the ‘Non-West.’ For one thing, inasmuch as Europe and the West are clearly identifiable, definable, or demarcatable to begin with, they were, and continue to be, profoundly influenced and shaped by their Others.

Also, while area studies is not practiced exclusively *in* the West or *by* Western individuals, or *on* the Non-West, it continues to be associated with the study by the West of the Non-West, if only implicitly. Often, then, the relevant source languages and cultures and their histories have a limited presence in secondary education in the West, or no presence at all. In sum, just like translation, spatialization of the world is never innocent. These issues become all the more acute with the ongoing decentering of the West, foregrounding the question of where area studies stands in a postcolonial, globalizing-and-localizing world. In recent years, for example, its relations to comparative literature, cultural studies, global history, international studies and global / local studies, anthropology, and social and human geography have received growing attention.

The relation of area studies to the disciplines and its general in-between-ness are also reflected on the institutional level. There is, for instance, the observation that having particular areas institutionalized separate from discipline-defined units can be seen to imply the exclusion of these areas from ‘normal,’ ‘mainstream’ scholarship. If there is a history program, *and* a Middle-Eastern studies program that features history, does that imply that Middle-Eastern history is not history proper, or that what we (who?) know about history does not apply in the Middle East?

On this point, both area studies and the disciplines could accuse the other, and be accused by the other, of doing the excluding. If their relation was called uneasy above, this should perhaps be replaced here by ‘questionable.’ In a neutral sense: the question being whether the organizing principle of institutions such as humanities and social science faculties, and funding agencies, should be disciplines, or areas, or both – for program design, funding allocations, expert panel composition, and so on. Since scholarship is a human, functional endeavor, there is no ontologically correct answer. This is reflected in the different ways that the said institutions have been and continue to be organized. Maybe it is just what works best in a given place at a given time, and a matter of striking the balance, for the institution in question and the individuals that constitute it. And yes, this is begging the question of what ‘best’ and ‘balance’ mean, and to whom.

This section has extensively dwelt on problems and contestations of area studies for two reasons. First, the above issues have been less pronounced and high-profile in Europe than in the US, but they are relevant to area studies anywhere in this day and age. Second, this relevance is particularly poignant for area studies in the Leiden environment today. At the same time, it bears reiteration that the above discussion is a quick summary of a complex matter. As such, it has run the risk of one-dimensionality and caricature, and of generalization and moralizing. This is not what we want. The study of places in the human world has never been static, in ‘Oriental studies’ or ‘area studies’ contexts, and scholars did not start pondering the issues at hand just yesterday. There is no simple equation of Oriental studies with Orientalism, or of ‘area studies’ from the 1940s to the 1980s with scholarship in the service of the Cold War, in the US or elsewhere. Nor do we have the intention of portraying the disciplines as rigid or unchanging, or as unaware of, or uninvolved in, critical discourse on Western-centrism. That a field of academic inquiry is compromised by X (examples abound, in ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ fields alike) does not mean that X is all there is to this field, or defines this field – let alone the drive, or the ethics, or the intellectual make-up, of the individual researchers. And so on.

New area studies

As for the potential of area studies – and indeed, perhaps the need for area studies – following an acute sense of crisis in the 1990s, the notion of area studies has made a comeback in the 2000s, sometimes called new area studies, in the spirit of the ‘type-3’ scholarship and the mission statement presented in the opening paragraphs of this document. In a nutshell, while cherishing the strengths of type (1) and type (2), we want to do type (3). Again, if the outline of the field in these pages is overly schematic, this is not intended to reinforce stereotypes or pigeonholes in the big picture, or to homogenize individuals or fields. Rather, this paper wants to offer coordinates for reflection on principled and pragmatic issues that confront us structurally, for which closure is not just unlikely but undesirable.

On the potential of (new) area studies, suffice it to say in general terms that

- place, language, and positionality have not ceased and will not cease to matter
- difference and diversity are as prominent as ever, but many of the us/them boundaries and dichotomies in the discourse on area studies have become pleasantly problematic since the 1990s
- the fundamental situatedness of scholarship is becoming progressively clearer, as is the fact that its *situations* change all the time.

Area studies in the Leiden environment

Below, we hope to illustrate our vision of area studies, and to show that we are well positioned to contribute to its realization. As a scholarly community, the Leiden environment is a meeting-place for multiple

- *fields* of inquiry in the humanities and social science
- *approaches*: a variety of (inter)disciplinary theories and methods, e.g. classical philology, textual and archival research, in-depth fieldwork (from archaeological

excavation and audio-visual recordings to online questionnaires), visual analysis, quantitative social science analysis, critical theory after the linguistic turn, and so on

- historical *periods* from antiquity to the present
- geographically and/or culturally and/or linguistically and/or politically defined *areas* in the world, and the global presence of these areas, including their diasporas; and, crucially, their interconnectedness.

It is not as if everybody in Leiden runs around all day finding people to meet, compare, and interconnect with. Dedicated attention to a discipline (e.g. literary studies) or an area (e.g. Korea) or a historical period (e.g. antiquity) is emphatically recognized as a locus of identification for individual scholars, and often a cornerstone of their daily work, in both teaching and research. Nor is it the case that the above fields, approaches, periods, and areas can only meet *between* people. They frequently meet *within* single individuals, and many of us are expressly committed to doing more than one thing. But as a community of considerable critical mass by international standards, we do have great potential for comparative and interconnective work. Kinship in terms of thematics, approach, and profile enables synergy across specializations qua area, period, and discipline.

Area studies as we want to pursue it is undergirded by the following key categories:

- *Positionality*, meaning the need to ask about consciously or unconsciously assumed perspectives, images of ‘self’ and ‘other,’ and above all the situatedness of scholarship (researcher, data, theory, method, institutional and socio-cultural context). Where is here? How is it that *we* think we know, here and now, about *them*, then and there – and how meaningful or useful are such dichotomies? Who is it that knows and speaks about the area, or for the area, or to the area, or with the area, and to whom? Where is the area, to begin with? What are the political implications of these issues?
- *Deep linguistic and cultural knowledge*, with at its center solid and present-day expertise in the relevant languages and philology. This is essential for direct access to source material and scholarship in the languages of the areas in question, and the ability to contextualize this material with due regard for not just historical context, but also positionality.
- *Translation*, in the conventional, interlingual sense, but also more broadly as cultural translation and the translation of culture. Translation is at the core of area studies, and one of its most fascinatingly contested features.
- *Engaging the areas*. While area studies is often on the outside looking in, an important part of its remit is to ask how things look from the inside out, and to address and preferably to preempt discussions ‘about them, without them.’ Above and beyond the extraction of data, area studies scholars engage with scholarship from the area, on the area, in the area’s language, consciously receptive to local approaches to knowledge – and often writing back to the area. This works differently for Middle Kingdom Egypt than for 21st-century Russia, but still. The metaphor of extraction is used advisedly, to flag the dangers of violent decontextualization.
- *Multi- and interdisciplinarity* within and between individual scholars, meaning synergy flowing from both the combined and the interactive practice of distinct disciplines or fields, e.g. archaeology and the study of religion. Multidisciplinarity and

interdisciplinarity are part of science and scholarship at large, but reinforced by engagement with the areas studied in their integrity, and in their full complexity, without succumbing to exceptionalism ('things just work differently in Iran').

- *Engaging the disciplines.* Critical engagement with disciplinary theory and method is by no means the exclusive prerogative of area studies. But it is especially important for area studies, and area studies is especially well equipped for it. This is true inasmuch as the historical emergence of the disciplines and their development to date are locally grounded, often Eurocentrically or Western-centrally; and inasmuch as the disciplines lay explicit or implicit claims to universal, place-independent validity and applicability nonetheless. While case-study-level falsification or adjustment of Western theoretical models is important, this also runs the risk of remaining confined to thinking in terms of 'difference' from claims to universality. Engaging the disciplines should also happen by *starting from other places* in approaching knowledge, toward more inclusive and globally conscious theorizing. This holds particularly for central concepts whose ubiquity and seemingly straightforward translation does not make them stable across space and time. For example: 'art,' or 'family,' or 'gods,' or 'government,' or 'grammar,' or 'history,' or 'law,' or 'literature,' or 'philosophy,' or 'politics,' or 'religion,' or 'the state,' or 'truth.' Crucially, area studies should not want to choose, or be expected to choose, between the area and the disciplines. An image of area studies and the disciplines as mutually exclusive or antagonistic is fundamentally flawed, and damaging on all sides. Rather, area studies should identify the tension between the area and the disciplines, and make this tension productive. Reflection on area studies and the disciplines, in conjunction and in their historical development, will also show that 'discipline,' as a defining concept, and '*the disciplines*,' as its concrete manifestations, are anything but ontologically given.
- *History of the field*, meaning awareness of, and conscious positioning vis-à-vis, various incarnations of area-defined scholarship, even if this was not and is not always called area studies. This history has been violent and turbulent, and politico-historically deeply charged. The minimal summary offered above includes different incarnations in the colonial period, the Cold War, and a postcolonial, globalizing world.

Without laying claim to 'coverage' or 'completeness' – both questionable notions to begin with – the Leiden environment enables a truly global perspective on the study of *places* in the world. The LIAS is committed to the advancement of the scholarly agenda outlined above.

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FURTHER READING

The following list of readings on area studies and the disciplines, or 'discipline and place,' is a loose assembly of essays of different and sometimes conflicting persuasion, that have emerged at different moments and from different vantage points in (mostly) the years since the 1990s. It also includes reflections on place as not just (part of) the object of study but also the *setting*, and hence a powerful determinant, of scientific inquiry, in the 'hard' sciences as in the humanities and (narrative) social science.

The list is intended to open up the issues and spur on the conversation, rather than producing definitive positions and conclusions. Faculty and students working in various fields have offered valuable additions. Suggestions for more material are most [welcome](#), as additions, or as substitutes for current items.

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