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Farewell Area Studies, Long Live Transfer Studies !

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Companion slideshow available at https://prezi.com/xslk95qh_1va/

My perspective is to look at the development of *Area Studies* to explore how this approach can be contemplated in our current process of globalization. The hypothesis is to contemplate area studies as a transitory moment in the organization of research, knowledge and teaching in social sciences. I am being a little provocative: I am hoping to show that area studies are still relevant in “a world in flux”, as this conference describes it. But a world in flux is a global entity, not a world made up of regional areas as large, irregular, but juxtaposed tiles, in the mode that is now commonly associated to Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*.

I think it is more appropriate to approach area studies in a historic perspective. As we consider them today, area studies are definitely an academic concern, a way to approach or structure research, but I see the concept as pre-determined by three cultural processes that reach beyond academia:

1. The Empire/barbarians dichotomy
2. The development of national identities in the 19th century
3. The rise of interconnected knowledge in contemporary academic structures

The Empire/barbarians dichotomy

To the ancient Greeks it was clear that they represented the accomplishment, the climax of civilization. The citizens of Athens achieved this degree of perfection in the Republic thanks to the marginalization of portions of the population—peripheral peoples, females and slaves (area studies needn’t ignore the reality of struggling social classes). Beyond the Greek world were the Barbarians. We inherit from this outlook the sense that area studies are about *them*, not *us*. The Romans, and then the Christian world that succeeded them with the same capital, realized that Empires might change place, but also introduced the notion of legacy, of positive cultural transmission and enrichment, as summed up in the poet Horace’s famous line, ‘*Græcia capta ferum victorem cepit, et artes intulit agresti Latio.*’¹ Imperial Rome had

¹ “Greece, once conquered, in turn conquered its uncivilized conqueror, and brought the arts to rustic Latium.”
 Voir François Hartog, *Partir pour la Grèce*, Flammarion, 2015.

the might to conquer Greece, but was not so culturally sophisticated, so benefitted from it. The *translatio imperii* scheme survived the fall of the Roman Empire with its German successor, the Holy Roman Empire. In 1726 a British poet, George Berkeley, wrote his “Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America,” in which he thought he could foresee a time when the gradual shift to the West would cross the Atlantic, and the Empire would settle in America. As we all know, this came to be when the United States became a superpower. The new republic becomes the crucible of all western civilizations. This was favored by the objective fact that throughout the 19th c. immigrants from the entire world will pour into America, bringing their cultural heritage to the general melting-pot.

The development of national identities in the 19th century

The rise of this new nation is contemporary with another important development in cultural history: the rise of national identities that occupies the minds of intellectuals throughout Europe, in the wake of a pre-romantic urge that has been associated with the vision of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). According to this conception, in the western world, each nation is cemented by a cultural heritage, made up of a language, traditions, customs, technologies, myths, stories, a national epic or narrative and a territory that has become the nation’s “homeland.” On the same model, while the United States as a community would seem to be naturally drawn toward world syncretism, the United States as a nation seeks to define itself as a cultural unit distinct from the colonial power it wrenched its independence from and whose language they still use. The cultural exceptionalism, in this case, cannot be based on the language, except in the form of a translation of empire across the atlantic, but the cultural identity will be built on other strong notions, like the land of liberty embodied in the myth of the frontier. “What then is the American, this new man?” This is the template for the new man described by J. Hector St. John De Crevecoeur in his “Letters from an American Farmer”. The new nation also draws on the ideology of empire: although the continent is inhabited by natives, the American colonists will tend to consider that the space is empty.

Let us pause here for a minute to consider the differences between space and cultural areas in Europe and the Americas: at the time, the organization of Europe is inherited from a tragic legacy of power struggles, with overlapping legitimacies: nations have a hard time finding their unity, with Germans spread over the centuries, to the banks of the Volga, the Teutonic strongholds on the Baltic Sea or the plains of Transylvania. Catholics all over Europe tend to follow the dictates of the Pope of Rome, who until the unification of Italy is also a secular power. The Holy Roman Empire is made up of a mosaic of mini-states, the playthings of royal families. Empires there are, of course, but within these empires provinces can have very distinct prerogatives and dimensions of autonomy, so that the division of space into colored tiles does not do justice to the peoples’ perceptions—which constant wars and more and more violent bloodsheds illustrates.

On the contrary, in America, things are plain: the territoriality of the nation goes unquestioned. Native Americans may have had very different attachments to territory, denying ownership, but the Western Europeans who run the empire find them irrelevant. Western man's dominion over nature is not to be denied : for William Bradford, the first governor of the Plymouth colony in New England, the new world in the state of nature is "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." The only thing that counts is the advance of the colored tide of civilization over the untamed wilderness, according to the nation's "manifest destiny".

The combination of power, identity, and awareness of embodying and inheriting the tradition of Western civilization going back to ancient Greece breeds colonialism and imperialism, that has been widely at play in Cuba, the Philippines, Latin America, Vietnam and now the Middle East. But before I touch upon the development of area studies in the US, let me bring in the third leg of my cultural historic background.

The rise of interconnected knowledge in contemporary academic structures

The rise of the new nations is contemporary with the decline of the old, church-based European university system, and the rise of new academic structures closely inherited from the Enlightenment. Alexander von Humboldt can embody this movement, and he is also inseparable from the American continent that he explored so thoroughly, and with the open mind that made him sensitive to the interaction between nature, the climate and the men who lived in such environment, making up a "web of life". Man, by disrupting the natural balance, might bring about catastrophe. This outlook encouraged a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, pragmatic and holistic approach to the environment, which could run against the Western tendency to think in terms of pre-existing disciplines.

The Americans were not just the imperialists they are most of the time cracked up to be. Their lively literary Renaissance in the mid- 19th century also bred some of the finest environmentalists, who acknowledged their debt to Humboldt, like Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Law Olmsted, and John Muir, instrumental in devising the first institutions protecting nature as heritage.

Disciplines and area studies

Meanwhile the academic disciplines were also asserting themselves, on the model of the sciences of nature. Throughout the world, universities are organized a common set of disciplines. Area Studies—i.e. the studies of regional areas in the world, developed in the margins, and are less universally present than the disciplines. In the US they developed in two stages: first when the US turned away from isolationism and realized the need for their military operational staff to move and interact in unfamiliar environment, with new hazards and new people who did not speak English: that is the true rise of "area studies" in the strict sense, where culture was a minor component of the understanding of the alien terrain. Area

studies clearly stem from an international relations agenda and imply a world made up of a mosaic of large regional² clusters competing for power and influence.

The second period is better understood in the context of the social engineering of the 1970s and 1980s, when in order to mend the rifts caused by failures to impose the American order abroad and to stem the discrimination at home, it became appropriate to open up to sections of the national community that had been ignored: women, blacks, native Americans, minorities in general. “Studies” programs – Women studies, African American studies, LGBT studies, chicano studies were ways to acknowledge the underprivileged as dignified members of the national community, and also to provide them with academic niches where their careers could be reasonably favored and protected. Interestingly, these branches of research and training often developed under the umbrella of the good old “American Studies Association”, suggesting that America’s identity had to do with accommodating the diversity of the world. Although, like the first type of area studies, they often involve faculty who know foreign languages, such area studies are closer to the term used in French, *aires culturelles*, or “cultural areas.” Through this kind of affirmative action, minority students were integrated, and minority faculty could have protected careers. Often, where these new “studies” developed, the field of interest crossed the borders: African American studies originated an interest in Africana studies; chicano studies extended to Latino/a studies—with the risk that American filters of analysis might be arbitrarily applied to the foreign areas in a form of intellectual colonialism. In this, too, Area Studies have to do with asserting power and influence—in this case within the academic sphere.

This uncertainty about the term reflects the fact that the status of area studies with disciplinary approaches can vary widely. As Immanuel Wallerstein has pointed out, on the model of experimental sciences, the social sciences have tended to *universalism*, a most cherished legacy of the Enlightenment—their business is to find the laws of human behavior regardless of the cultural or geographical background, so regional studies will be better understood as *field* studies to verify the validity of universal laws. While of course the humanities may focus on cultural histories bound to discourses and languages that identify the cultural groups—even this can be disputed by the champions of history as a social science. There is a culture war raging between serious disciplines like business and economy and soft disciplines that depend on cultural expression and the awareness that any description of the world, scientific as it may claim to be, is still a history, i.e. a narrative.

Last year, in a previous symposium of this series³, Lawrence Whitehead, the president of the Institute of the Americas, had opened the conversation with the following question: if social sciences scholars concur on the assumption that their essential object is the study of all

² See the German term for area studies: *Regionale Studien*

³ 3rd symposium in the **TRiangulating Areas studies: Concepts, Evolutions, Stategies** project “[Conceptual Innovations in Area Studies](http://trac.hypotheses.org/148)” (10 March 14) <http://trac.hypotheses.org/148>

mankind, how do we argue in favor of the added value of regional studies? How do we avoid the risk of parochialism and the overstatement of regional differences? “

To begin with, it can be argued that while area studies specialists cannot command the whole range of disciplinary methodology, they generally master one, and their more limited object may be one area in which some circulation may be allowed to pass to create and organize interdisciplinary scholarship—something which is widely encouraged by international funding program, but sometimes difficult to engineer.

In the conclusions to the symposium, Bert Hoffmann, the director of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies hosting the seminar, underlined that the most systematic disciplines may still be open to a dimension of cultural diversity. Let me state that I believe national academic practices may throw their institutional weight in the debate, regardless of scientific validity. For instance Political scientists engage in comparative politics, comparing the institutions of other countries beside their own—which immediately raises the question of the purpose of such studies, which is certainly centered on the national interests of the researcher’s nation. Hoffmann was however comforting:

Just as area studies have no need to be on the defensive if they not only care for general theories of democratization but also how the struggles about democracy play out in Nepal or Nigeria. In eco-systems, it has become conventional wisdom that biological diversity is a high value, and that scholarship should seek to understand the breadth of this diversity, and not just the cash-crops and -cows of the dominant model of industrialized agriculture. As to “socio-systems”, area studies have been much better at understanding and valuing social and academic variety than the mainstream of the disciplines.

So the future of area studies with systematic discipline, like quantitative economics, if they are allowed a say, rests with their capacity to come up with new, unthought of cultural concepts. They are arguably better equipped to take into account concepts and notions coming up in their object areas that are all but “untranslatable.”

Area Studies and Public Accountability: the moment for Transfer Studies

Specifically, can area studies provide enlightenment to the urgent current conflicts and tensions, at play even here in Europe? For example, it is easy to argue that those Western politicians who dismissed the revolution in Ukraine by clinging to the idea that Ukraine should be content with being within the zone of influence of Russia were short-sighted. That those who ignored the differences between the various Islamic sub-currents but clung to the border division established in the Middle East a century ago by the British, wasted precious time that, if well used, could have prevented some of the refugee crisis Europe is trying to face. While we are saying that borders to national cultural areas are a contingent construct, can we ignore that citizens across the continent want more borders?

Cultural areas have never been isolated; in the darkest Middle Ages, culture was lively because it recycled foreign influences in creative ways--that is what we do as humans. European nations can differ as to their perception of this state of things. The change is that now these exchanges have been tremendously intensified. In the internet world, each individual is caught in a web of overlapping cultural areas and is generally content with playing on these different levels. Can we dismiss the call for more borders as a consequence of anxiety with long-established cultural strongholds? With the ever-increasing speed of technological innovations, can people process the dynamism of this postcolonial moment? Would it be the time for **transfer studies** not just as transnational circulation among the social sciences but as the study of the metabolism of civilizations as they reshuffle cultural features in a global world in which area studies are now *entangled*⁴.

What can we see down-stream for area studies? They are obviously to be seen in a more global perspective. Transversal cultural areas come into sight, that bring into play the common cultures of social classes, minorities, diasporas, language groups across borders and throughout the world. Necessary responses to climate change also make area studies approaches more relevant, as when the populations' resilience is rooted in their cultural memory, language and practical knowledge. More than systematic, universalist disciplines, area studies are apt to pay more attention to the cultural responses of human groups that do not occupy a central position in power and influence.⁵

In the intensification of cultural circulation moreover, there is not necessarily time to think rationally. As Pierre Hassner emphasized in a recent essay⁶, there was a brief euphoric moment at the end of the twentieth century when reason seemed to have prevailed: the market economy seemed to have put an end to its cyclical crises, globalization had spread it all over the world, organized in regional alliances like the European Union and a cluster of planetary agencies revolving around the United Nations, with promises of freedom and prosperity for all. The end of history was in sight. Then September 11 came round, ushering in a new century of more history. A redistribution of Aristotle's discursive triangle or *logos / ethos / pathos* is needed. *Pathos*, which already had a lot to do with identity building, becomes more important. But there is not just *logos* (applied science) in the running of businesses, but a good measure of passion and arrogance that can spoil the most obvious interest-driven deals. And a turn to *ethos*—the values of all this, what justifies the position we hold in the society—would be legitimate. And this extends to what we do in area studies: our approach may be relevant to explain the world, and they may be much in demand from young people who want to see the world, but what are the job-perspectives for the students taking these programs? Bert Hoffmann concluded his contribution with these lines:

⁴ In the word of Olaf Kaltmeier, <http://trac.hypotheses.org/148>.

⁵ This was recently explored in Sophie Croisy, ed., *Globalization and "Minority" Cultures : The Role of "Minor" Cultural Groups in Shaping Our Global Future*, Leiden, Boston: Brill Nijhof, 2015.

⁶ Pierre Hassner, *La Revanche des passions : métamorphoses de la violence et crises du politique* (Fayard, 2015).

It is true, area studies face an uphill battle in the ranking of academic journals and in scholarly evaluation processes where scholars from the systematic disciplines dominate. However, they have solid demand going for them. For practitioners in politics, media and business area experts are among those social science scholars deemed most relevant, rather than the sophisticated model-builders that may thrive in the academic market-place. Moreover, at universities there is consistent high demand from the student side. While often ironically called “Backpacker B.A.” area studies not only attract many students but also, generally speaking, fare no worse in terms of job market perspectives for their graduates than political science or sociology or cultural studies proper.⁷

To conclude, cultural areas have been a reality, at regional, national or local levels, and globalization is not killing them, just changing their metabolism. Area *studies* are another matter, and, useful as they can be in an increasingly complex world, the case for them will depend on the ecology of careers in international relations and interdisciplinary approaches in academic research.

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⁷ <http://trac.hypotheses.org/148>

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