

Workshop Report

CITAS Workshop #01 – Area Studies Revisited: Theories, Methods, Concepts.

Center for International and Transnational Area Studies (CITAS), University of Regensburg

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As the University of Regensburg seeks to consolidate and develop its research and teaching in area studies, this workshop, organized by the recently-established Center for International and Transnational Area Studies (CITAS), revisited ideas of area studies. The workshop considered whether and how scholars from multiple disciplines relate to area studies as a concept, method and field, thus pointing towards potential futures for research exploring different (world) regions and connections between them.

JOCHEN MECKE (Romance Studies, CITAS Executive Board Chair) outlined some of the questions guiding the event: are “area studies” and German “*Regionalstudien*” or “*Regionalwissenschaften*” synonymous? Do area studies have, or indeed need, a specific methodology, or can encounters between diverse disciplinary approaches be productive? Outlining his interpretation of area studies and its possible futures, Mecke addressed the question of scale, suggesting that having *Region* as the lead concept encourages subregional comparisons, while the notion of *Area* foregrounds comparisons at the level of transnational interdependencies. Referring to his own field, he argued that Romance studies have always conceived of themselves as regional and area studies, spanning multiple scales, given the field’s origins in comparative investigations across languages and culture. This tradition of countering claims of exceptionalism or particularism continues today. In an overview of area studies in Germany today across the disciplines, PAUL VICKERS (CITAS Coordinator) outlined the prevailing thematic, methodological and conceptual trends. Universities in Leipzig, Berlin (Freie Universität) and Hamburg (with GIGA: the German Institute of Global and Area Studies) demonstrate the compatibility of a global orientation with regional specialization and methodologically sound theoretical foci (Leipzig’s expertise in spatial theories or comparative area studies in Hamburg, for example). Given its specialization in North America, Western and Eastern/Southeastern Europe, he compared Regensburg with universities including Bayreuth, Bielefeld or Jena that have developed impressive profiles focusing on particular interconnected world regions. The transnational and spatial turns, he argued, are paradigmatic across the board.

The title of the first panel, Crossing Boundaries, proved emblematic for a central debate among those present that ran throughout the event: namely that the tendency for area studies to see the world as characterized by smooth flows, movements and border-crossings should be accompanied by stronger critical reflection upon how the globalized world remains shaped by frictions and multitudinous borders, both new and old. The situation in relations between disciplines and their boundaries was perceived in analogous terms. WALTER KOSCHMAL (Slavic Studies) initiated discussions on the value of comparative approaches and transcending disciplinary boundaries, stressing in particular the need to maintain methodological precision. His presentation examined the multiple overlapping centres and peripheries encountered in research on the east of Europe, underlining the importance of often overlooked rural spaces to understanding the region. Pointing towards the Polish/Ukrainian/Ruthenian/Slovak borderlands and the literature of Andrzej Stasiuk and Stanisław

Vincenz, Koschmal presented the local realm as site of transnational experiences of encountering the familiar and others. He saw Europe as a transnational realm composed of a patchwork of localized transnational experiences that are often obscured by the national containers and metrocentricism prevalent in many analyses.

Furthering the debate over relations between area studies, disciplines and location, URSULA REGENER (German Studies) considered whether German studies in Germany is area studies, especially if subregional units of analysis are prominent. She argued that with particular turns in German studies abroad, as well as cultural studies more generally, travelling home, the smaller-scale focus was no longer bounded by the national container, thus echoing Koschmal's argument. Likewise, the limitations posed by literary studies' previous dominance were being challenged, even if one of the new turns, 'postcolonial German studies', remained heavily text-based in its focus on sites and experiences inflected by colonialism. 'Intercultural German studies', meanwhile, offer a broader framework for examining encounters with others in a variety of spaces, generating evident synergies with area studies.

Comparison (*Vergleich*) has been central to area studies and RAINER LIEDTKE (European History) reflected upon this core concept. While temporally and/or spatially comparative research is difficult, it is nevertheless essential, he argued. His own research exploring charity/*Sozialfürsorge* and welfare/*Wohlfahrt* in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Manchester and Hamburg showed that successful comparative research likewise reflects on the cultural and temporal locatedness of both the phenomena under investigation. Thus the analytical categories employed necessarily compare apples and oranges (or apples and pears in German). This tension of unbounded generalization and specificity is reflected in the field itself. Liedtke highlighted how "area" and German "*Region*" not only suggest different scales of analysis, but also different academic traditions shaped by the particular constellation of disciplines dominating area studies/*Regionalstudien* in different places and at different times.

While the impact of the spatial turn was evident throughout event, the second panel focused specifically on Rethinking Space across the disciplines. BJÖRN HANSEN (Slavic Philology – Linguistics) highlighted how linguistic spaces or 'areas of convergence' need not necessarily be contiguous, as common phenomena (such as modal verb structures in this case) can be observed in linguistic structures transcending familiar geographical, ethnic or national boundaries. Linguistics could thus inspire approaches to space and area that elaborate on macro- and micro-scales of commonality and difference, while also intersecting spatial factors with social variables in its analysis. Area-based linguistics (*Areallinguistik*) thus encourages reflection on area studies' ability to both transcend and create boundaries. EDGAR SCHNEIDER (English Linguistics) further developed the insights into conceptions of space in linguistics research by highlighting the various methodologies for examining diversity. Dialects in the USA, for example, can be traced through approaches ranging from recording subjective perceptions of linguistic features to bio-linguistic studies measuring the position of the tongue in the mouth. Everything in between, including mapping, is currently significantly informed by the digital humanities. Where area studies and linguistics could find fruitful common ground, he suggested, is in exploring the tensions of local cultural factors and global economic and political demands that influence the dissemination and transformation of languages across and within both political and cultural boundaries, as the use of English in Singapore and the ASEAN organization demonstrates.

ULF BRUNNBAUER (Southeast and East European History, CITAS Executive Board Member) revisited a common spatializing trope and analytical category, namely centre-periphery relations, to consider

whether periphery remains a paradigmatic concept in framings of South East Europe. Using quantitative markers such as economic performance or demographics, or assessments of its infrastructural connectedness would provide grounds for declaring the region's marginality. Yet both in the past and today, he argued, it is clear that global processes and historically significant events are evident or even originate in supposedly peripheral spaces, thus feeding back into the "centres" and transforming them. Alongside this postcolonial studies-inspired take on Southeast Europe, Brunnbauer suggested that examining decentred, non-contiguous spaces of globality created by, for example, global supply chains could also query the long-standing centre-periphery model. This 'cross-mapping across time and space' would add historical depth and locatedness to explorations of the often global-scale dynamics shaping the present.

Already crucial to the preceding discussions, the concepts of Transnationalism, Transfer and Contact Zones framed the third panel. SABINE KOLLER (Jewish-Slavic Studies) examined the experiences of liminality, diaspora and cross-cultural contact that have shaped Yiddish culture into a 'culture of translation' that provided a 'mobile homeland', Yiddishland. In its translatability it proved adaptable to the fluctuations of territorialisation and de-territorialisation with Yiddish literature, for example, gaining recognition from PEN despite not being associated with a particular state. She also offered insight into the methodological benefits of drawing on theories and concepts that have travelled from supposed peripheries, including the cultural semiotics of Lotman and Bhabha's postcolonialism, to examine the translational turn that Doris Bachmann-Medick, among others, has observed. These remarks anticipated subsequent discussions on how to include native, indigenous or marginalized epistemologies into area studies.

These debates have been evident in American studies, a field whose history VOLKER DEPKAT (American Studies) outlined. Originating as a movement promoting interdisciplinarity, primarily among historians, literary scholars and social scientists, American Studies initially sought to analyse US-American culture as a whole and on its own terms. Convinced that the United States was created and subsequently developed differently to other, especially European countries, spatial dynamics were crucial in explaining the supposed distinctness of the US, with Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" the most prominent example. Despite its spatial focus, American Studies did not consider itself "area studies" per se, especially since the area studies that emerged in the US during the 1950s and 60s produced politically usable information about other world regions shaped by a transcultural interest in other places. This sat awkwardly with early Americanists' exceptionalism and monolithic vision of US culture, as they showed little urge to bridge cultural differences to better understand the USA. With its recent transnationalization, as outlined by BIRGIT BAURIDL (American Studies/ Regensburg European American Forum), the field has turned towards subregions in the form of critical regionalism, fragmenting the supposed homogeneity of US-American culture by exploring subnational or cross-border 'regions' as participants in and analytical mirrors of (trans)national processes. In her outline of current concepts in American Studies, Bauridl stressed transformations and entanglements, with 'prismatic' (Desmond) and 'transangular' (Bauridl/Hebel) approaches highlighting the United States' participation in multiple simultaneous and possibly conflicting constructions of areas. Transnational American Studies re-locates its interest to 'contact zones' where US presence becomes evident outside the state's borders and contributes to the constitution of new areas of cultural and political negotiation. These 'deep spaces' (Bauridl) temporalize 'contact zones', pointing to the diachronic dimensions of different cultural presences in one location.

The workshop's concluding discussion pointed towards possible future directions in area studies research. GERLINDE GROITL (Political Science, CITAS Executive Board Member) noted that the

workshop shed light on competing definitions and understandings of “area” and “area studies” across academic disciplines. Whether this would be productive or a barrier to fruitful research remained up for debate. Ulf Brunnbauer was hopeful that the productive frictions resulting from encounters between disciplines could be harnessed, since the complexity of global-scale problems requires a multi-perspectival and thus multidisciplinary approach. This multidisciplinary approach was recognized as one of the structural strengths of area studies in Regensburg, though the question of which themes and foci could realize its potential most effectively in comparative research remained open. Avoiding the reaffirmation or construction of new central and peripheral regions was deemed crucial, with the translation of ‘critical regionalism’ beyond American Studies emerging in discussions as one route towards opening up cross-regional analysis to smaller-scale sites and spaces. Continuing to engage scholars and students from the regions investigated through exchanges and the numerous bi-national degrees offered here was also presented as an important element of area studies in Regensburg.

The combination of international and transnational area studies, oriented respectively around relations between political actors and structures across borders, on the one hand, and cultural and social encounters across boundaries, on the other, have emerged as key pillars of area studies in Regensburg. The expertise on particular regions, especially North America, Western and Southern, and Eastern and South Eastern Europe, across the disciplines could thus provide the foundations for addressing genuine problems, in past, present and future, that are also of global significance. What the workshop made clear was the value of reflecting critically on practices of comparison and on the scales that they adopt, particularly where certain regions or spaces, or indeed disciplines, are still considered in terms of centres and peripheries.

Workshop Programme

27 June 2018, Center for International and Transnational Area Studies, University of Regensburg

Jochen Mecke: Grußwort

Paul Vickers: Area Studies in Deutschland – ein Durchgang durch die Forschungslandschaft

Panel 1: Grenzüberschreitungen

Walter Koschmal: Europa. Eine transnationale Region im interregionalen Kontext

Ursula Regener: Germanistik als Regionalwissenschaft

Rainer Liedtke: Vergleich in den Geschichtswissenschaften

Panel 2: Raum neu gedacht

Björn Hansen: Bedeutung von Raumkonzepten in der Linguistik

Edgar W. Schneider: Areas and language variation in the English-speaking world

Ulf Brunnbauer: Peripherität als Paradigma? Südosteuropastudien neu gedacht

Panel 3: Transnationalität, Transfer und Kontaktzonen

Sabine Koller: Prozesse kultureller Übersetzung, Kulturtransfer und Extraterritorialität

Volker Depkat: Die Areas der American Studies

Birgit Bauridl: Raum- und Regionskonzepte der transnationalen Amerikastudien

Perspektiven: Diskussionsrunde.

CITAS, UR, ihre Kooperationspartner und die Welt – Gemeinsam in die Zukunft der Regensburger Area Studies