

The Newness in New Area Studies

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The age of “Area Studies” in the United States ended in 2008, partly as a result of the global financial crisis, which de-valued endowments of universities as well as various philanthropic organisations. More importantly, it ended due to the shift in US government’s valuation of what constitutes valuable actionable “data”.³ The paradigm of domination that emplotted language, texts, culture and civilisation to geography has new contours in the post-2008 world. In this optical age, power privileges the “algorithmic gaze”, “distal” forms of knowing, and areas as “states of exception”. Since 2008, a new “Area Studies” has emerged, alongside “new” methods. At Columbia, Rochester, Berkeley, the University of Virginia, Cornell, Carnegie-Mellon and many other institutions of higher learning, data science institutes, centres and programmes have been launched. Funded by private endowments (often Google, Uber, Tesla, etc.) these new Area Studies programmes work in close synchronisation with existing disciplinary programmes such as Electrical Engineering or Computer Science. The faculty and students in these programmes work on critical features such as natural language processing, artificial intelligence and robotics. The technologies created – such as the remote viewing via unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) developed at Carnegie Mellon’s Robotics Institute – are chiefly deployed for surveillance and the killing of terrorists in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia.

The US-American “Area Studies” went global. The scholars trained at the University of Chicago, Cornell, Berkeley, or New York were able to write, and dictate, the grounded theories of knowing that shaped anthropology, linguistics, sociology and history on the global arena. The prestige and capital of the US-American academy, for a while, meant that scholars who wrote in the Area-Studies paradigm in Germany or Paris were forced to “translate” their work into the theoretical models given by McKim Marriott (kinship) or William McNeill (world history) – to name two examples from the University of Chicago alone.

Yet, Europe had invented “Area Studies” before the US. The “Regional Studies” stalwarts who were writing and thinking about “areas” – from William Dwight Whitney (1827–1894), Johannes Hertel (1872–1955) and Paul Haupt (1858–1926) to Joseph Schacht (1902–1969) – were all trained in Berlin and

3 For an overview of this argument, see Manan Ahmed Asif (2019), Technologies of Power: From Area Studies to Data Sciences, *Spheres: Journal for Digital Cultures* 5, pp. 1–13.

Leipzig.⁴ By the early nineteenth century, Berlin, Paris and Oxford were the long-established centres for the study of the colonies – the erstwhile “regions” and “areas”. The career and trajectory of Aloys Sprenger (1813–1893) – from a translator to a civil bureaucrat to a collector and finally an endower of the Berlin Staatsbibliothek – is an apt exemplar.

Colonialism was always an order of knowledge that organised the things of the colony. The physical and territorial domination was integrated with linguistic mastery and the power of description. This basic aspect of coloniality remained constitutive of Area Studies whether in Europe or in the United States. In fact, Sprenger was able to describe the epistemological “situatedness” of studying the Orient quite succinctly:

The acquaintance with the literature of the east shows us man reflected in his own creation under peculiar circumstances and through a longer period of time than the literature of Europe. The student is carried beyond the narrow limits of European prejudices and associations and enabled to enlarge them. Taking a historical view of oriental pursuits, they are of the highest philosophical importance. Oriental nations are no longer able to take care of their own literary treasures. This is not owing to a want of veneration for them but to apathy and imbecility (Sprenger 1857: iv–v).

It is Europe that is enlightened from the study of the “area”. It is Europe that holds the material artefacts that allow for the study of the “area”.

It would appear as if we have come a long way since 1857. Yet, even as we contemplate the New Area Studies, it is worthwhile keeping in mind the material realities that undergird the five layers of reconfiguring epistemologies identified by Boike Rehbein. Europe and the US continue to hold the libraries and archives for the study of the area. They continue to dominate the cataloguing and presentation of these historically displaced materials. The publication and distribution of new knowledges continues to be situated in Europe and the US. The resources for organising, speaking, connecting, training, teaching, publishing, reviewing, arguing and theorising continue to be centred in Europe and the US.

The post-colonies, to the extent that they can produce and articulate a science of knowing themselves, are wounded nationalisms intent on creating majoritarian discourses. Nor is it merely a question of reigning ideologies. Compare the annual educational budgets: Germany, with a population of roughly 83 million had an education budget of 129 billion (4.8% of GDP) in 2016, while Pakistan, with a population of 270 million, had an education budget of 4 billion (3% of GDP).⁵ From that macro perspective, imagine the realities of being a historian at the Centre for South Asian Studies (founded in 1975 and with a faculty of four) at Punjab University with the Humboldt-

4 The arrival in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s of Jewish Orientalists fleeing Nazi Germany is a less acknowledged history of US Area Studies.

5 Figures taken from data.worldbank.org (accessed 15 October 2020).

Universität zu Berlin's Institute for Asian and African Studies (begun in 1887) where the Department of South Asian Studies alone has a faculty of eight.

The episteme that organises relationships of knowledge between the erstwhile colonisers and the erstwhile colonies is not simply that of a "gaze", a "perspective", and even of a scale. It is not, as the scholars of the 1990s argued, simply a deficit of "theory" that segregated some as stuck in the "waiting-room of history". What is valuable in Rehbein is that a call for a "multicentric epistemology" resonates as agentive, and even ethical. The scholar in the global South, theoretically, can produce a way of knowing and seeing that rises, on the epistemic level, to global "theory".

However, no post-colonised scholar is asking simply to have their translocal perspective upheld as an exemplar. What the post-colonised scholar asks are the resources for being a scholar, for accessing the archives in Europe and the United States, for accessing the social capital of European and US-American universities, for availing themselves of the distribution circuits of printing presses of the world, newspapers of the world, conferences of the world. The post-colonised scholar wishes for the security for their body in order for their minds to be able to question their own local, their own history as constructed and as imagined. They ask that their compatriots in Europe understand that to study nationalism or sexuality or religion in the post-colony is to know that there exists a public in the local that will take their livelihood, or their life itself. This is not to blame the post-colony for being oppressive against knowledge production. It is to understand the material realities that shape each local.

Most recently, a new set of "global" phenomena is asking us to re-think our world, just as the spectre of the nuclear war shaped the work of scholars in the 1960s and 1970s. Our spectre is the climate crisis, and now the COVID-19 / SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The locals formed under these two "globals" look very different from those under the global Cold War or even the global "War on Terror". What is also clear from these recent phenomena is that it is not the relationship between the local and the global or the North and the South that is of relevance: it is between the Local and the local, the City and the city, the Old and the young, the sick and the anti-bodied.

What we have also realised is that, as Fanon pointed out, the post-colonised scholar must "define a new humanism both for itself [the colony] and for others" (Fanon 2008: 198). Can the New Area Studies offer such a humanism?

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