

Review Article

A critical overview of the Area Studies model: A brief study of the current trends in Area Studies

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Abstract: Since its inception in the colonial era, Area Studies (AS) has evolved in accordance with policy-oriented demands. From the study of former colonial territories to strategic areas of the Cold War, and from September 11, 2001 through to the present day, this academic field has been entangled with government, with an impetus aimed at achieving policy goals. Using the seminal book *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony and Academia* as its basis, we present here a critical examination of historical context of the evolution of Area Studies and the current trends in the field. Some of the notable current trends in the field include observable rotations in area focus that over the last decade have manifested in a geospatial shift of focus to East Asia by US-centric academia, and the adoption of AS as a model outside of the United States and Europe. Regarding the latter, this brief study investigates the adaptation of an AS model by China, noting the transference of the practical negative attributes of AS, and critically engages in the AS dialectic by asking the question of whether the colonial, imperialist and Orientalist history and attributes of AS are inherent to the field when adopted by actors from outside its traditional milieu.

Keywords: Area Studies, critical approach, US-centric approach, China, historical analysis

Bölge Çalışmaları modeline eleştirel bir bakış: Bölge Çalışmaları alanındaki güncel eğilimler üzerine kısa bir çalışma

Öz: Sömürgecilik yıllarında ortaya çıkışından itibaren Bölge Çalışmaları politika odaklı bir gelişim çizgisi izlemiştir. Eski sömürge topraklarının etüt edilmesinden Soğuk Savaş'ın stratejik bölgelerine, 11 Eylül 2001 saldırılarından günümüze kadar, Bölge Çalışmaları disiplini hükûmetlerle birlikte politika hedeflerine ulaşma yönünde çaba sarf etmiştir. *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony and Academia* kitabını temel alan bu çalışmada Bölge Çalışmaları'nın tarihsel gelişim çerçevesi ve alandaki güncel eğilimler eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla incelenmektedir. Alandaki dikkate değer eğilimler arasında, son on yılda ABD merkezli akademik çalışmaların odağını Doğu Asya'ya kaydırması ve ABD ve Avrupa merkezli olmayan Bölge Çalışmaları modelinin tercih edilmeye başlanmasıdır. İkinci eğilimle ilgili olarak bu kısa çalışma Çin tarafından bazı olumsuz özellikleri ile birlikte benimsenen Bölge Çalışmaları modelini incelemektedir. Çalışma Bölge Çalışmaları diyalektiğine eleştirel yaklaşarak geleneksel çevreler dışındaki aktörler tarafından benimsenmesi durumunda da sömürgeci, emperyalist ve Oryantalist özelliklerin Bölge Çalışmaları alanına intikal edip etmediğini sorgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Bölge Çalışmaları, eleştirel yaklaşım, ABD-merkezli yaklaşım, Çin, tarihsel analiz

Introduction

This analysis of the contemporary evolution of Area Studies is based on the seminal book *Middle East Studies after September 11: Neo-Orientalism, American Hegemony and Academia*, wherein area studies is subjected to a critical examination from the perspective of Edward Said's thesis of Orientalism. Focusing primarily on AS – as an interdisciplinary field – the book highlights how many fields of social sciences and humanities resulted from colonial endeavours to study subjugated populations for policy-oriented purposes. The book identifies the origins of AS as being rooted in Imperialism, but also notes, somewhat importantly, that neo-imperialist and neo-Orientalist currents continue in AS through the position afforded to "Western "academia by the

corresponding hegemony, as well as through the evolving methods used by the State to incentivize academia. Accordingly, this article questions the outcomes of AS as it has grown under the aforementioned conditions and used as a model by such emerging powers as China.

The article begins by providing an overview and brief history of the evolution of Area Studies (AS), providing the necessary context for a critical approach to contemporary AS throughout the subsequent sections. After detailing the progression of AS since its inception, the current trends in AS in policy and scholarly terms is examined. Finally, the focus of this brief study turns to an important emerging factor in AS, being the adoption of an Area Studies model by an emerging global power from outside the “Western” paradigm, namely China. The findings aim to contribute to a dialectic on critical approaches to AS, and to spark further debate on its continued evolution and the wide distribution of Area Studies as a model.

Evolution of Area Studies

While focusing primarily on the Middle East and the Orientalism of Area Studies, *Middle East Studies after September 11* draws on the intersectionality of the factors that necessarily coalesce behind AS. The histories of colonialism, contemporary imperialist action and sustained orientalist perspectives make up the framework of Area Studies, but beyond this scope, the book broadly analyses the structures of the self-aggrandizing academic elites and the business platform behind AS. It provides a detailed account of the history and evolution of AS and its imperialist impetus, born out of the colonial era.

The colonial era created bred ties between education and the state, from the creation of missionary schools in colonized spaces to the development of new academic fields. Here, Keskin highlights the establishment of such fields of social science as anthropology as state-funded endeavours to learn about colonized populations to support the further exploitation and quelling of anti-colonial movements (p. 06). The transfer of hegemony from Europe to the United States in the early post-colonial period opened the door on a new period in Area Studies, focused on two dimensions. First, the US focused attention on colonial spaces to guarantee the continuity of control, albeit under different circumstances, using different methods, as European powers were unable to maintain their authority over colonies following World War II. This led to a “transformation from British colonialism to American imperialism” (p. 07). The second dimension is based around the emergence of the Cold War and the areas corresponding to the so-called containment policy. Both dimensions demanded strategic considerations in US policy development, facilitating interdisciplinary

studies on the cultural, political, and linguistic characteristics of key geographical areas.

While the onset of the Cold War formed the basis for contemporary AS, the Reagan/Thatcher era spurred a further evolution in Area Studies coinciding with the evolution of US policy development. The 1980s solidified the transformation to neoliberal-based policies and the corresponding focus on AS. The events of 9/11 sparked an immense transformation of government policy, and consequently, the focus of Area Studies. This led to vigorous expansion of state-academic collaborations in Middle East studies, along with key language programs, producing a windfall of funding to universities and think tanks. The militarism and the neoliberalism of the preceding period were both augmented under the post-9/11 period, wherein AS became even more lucrative. Despite the increased state funding in AS-related centres and think tanks, neoliberal policy had a significant effect on academia, resulting in a general decrease in state funding, increased engagement with private enterprises and the increased adaptation of a business model. The influence of the government over academia resulted in it being “co-opted through the work of Middle East studies, African studies, Asian and Central Asian studies centres, the Fulbright and Boren fellowships, the FLAS (Foreign Language Area Studies) fellowship, the Peace Corps, and so on” (pp. 14–15).

Each period of AS transformation legitimized and increased the institutionalization of AS through the state and non-state apparatuses through which academic studies are funded and supported. Such state institutions include the Department of Education, the Department of State and the Department of Defense. Additionally, government affiliated programs such as the Peace Corps and Fulbright aid AS-related programs in Universities. Finally, AS related centres and departments, such as the Middle East, African and East Asian studies centres, have been established in universities in the United States and beyond. As policy continuously influences AS, studies are conducted through a prism that reflects policy interests. This has culminated in a cultural hegemony in which the perceptions of “areas”, or the concept of those areas, are shaped by the elite and the benefactors of State policy development. This cultural hegemony, or Orientalism, shapes narratives and perceptions internally, and externalizes cultural hegemony by exporting these narratives and perceptions of those within an “area” to those areas.

The evolution of AS throughout periods of change in policy development provides insights to current trends of AS in its traditional settings, as well as its application in new arenas. Developments in Area Studies have made vital contributions to academia, and its components have undoubtedly become

permanent fixtures in academic studies. That said, the colonial and imperialist history of AS, its contemporary neoliberal quality, the clear influence of state policy over academia and its sustained Orientalist outcomes are all important considerations when examining the current trends of AS and its adoption by the emerging powers.

Current trends

As highlighted in the previous section, the periods of pronounced change in policy approaches correspond to shifts in the territorial focus of AS. Furthermore, underlying developments, distinct from such specific territorial or regional focuses as neoliberal policy adaptation, have also transformed the nature of AS. Given its inextricable link to security and policy, as long as Area Studies exists in its current dynamic it may serve as a prescient factor in policy direction, if not in geopolitical forecasting. Just as historical trends are observable and briefly covered in the previous section, so too are the current trends in Area Studies. One palpable component of the current AS evolution is the noticeable rotation in regional focus based on policy orientation, and therefore, scholarship.

Perhaps a new peak in academia/state collaboration is an integration of Area Studies with the intelligence sector. Patton called for a new age of academic collaboration to create an intel field of “Sociocultural Intelligence” (2010), which indicates an effort to establish well informed actors on social, cultural and political norms within a specific geospatial boundary – essentially, a fusing of the aspects of Area Studies with intelligence operations. The concept of sociocultural intelligence studies has been further promoted in counter-insurgency operations by analysts “who are trained and educated to assess the behavioural characteristics of all elements of the local population”, “local” being as ambiguous a term as “area” and pliable to policy demands (Connable 2012). The call for sociocultural intelligence studies is rooted in the abysmal failure of the United States to comprehend the social, cultural, and political dynamics of Afghanistan during its ongoing invasion and occupation in the post-9/11 period. This was despite the extensive time and capital poured into Afghanistan by US industrial, intelligence, military, aid, media, and academic apparatuses for almost half of the 20th century (Hanifi 2018). This speaks to the failure, or perhaps success of Area Studies. Despite the deep, decades-long focus on Afghanistan, it was unrecognizable to US consciousness in the post-9/11 invasion, and after 9/11, scholars have noted “very little academic or public time or space devoted to the substantive American cultural distortions of Afghanistan that have assumed a reality of their own, very much to the detriment of US foreign policy, and the tens of millions of ordinary innocent inhabitants of the country” (Ibid., p.56). Either

this stands as evidence of a failure of AS, or, as in many profitable industries, speaks to a planned obsolescence in Area Studies. The evolution of an area that was directly changed by Orientalist and imperialist attention in the case of Afghanistan underlines a need for renewed focus and funding, through shifting geography corresponding to policy priorities. The planned obsolescence of AS has implications for current and future trends in Area Studies, as foundational “areas” can be treated with renewed fervour.

Such a shift, or renewed focus, would appear to have been the case in East Asia studies over the last decade. As an economic and foreign policy platform under the Obama Administration, the Pivot to East Asia, sometimes called the Pivot to the Pacific, the Rebalance towards the Asia-Pacific, or simply the Pivot to Asia, signalled renewed focus on East Asia, and particularly China. The Obama-era policy was a discontinuous resumption of the policies of the Nixon and Clinton administrations toward East Asia and China (Hundley, Kenzer and Peterson 2015). A policy shift towards East Asia is being considered in such security think tanks as the Center for New American Security (CNAS). CNAS, founded in 2007, developed a formidable Asia-Pacific directive that focused heavily on China. As a think tank devoted to the security aspect of AS, CNAS represents a fusion of policy influence in research, and is heavily funded by defence and intelligence companies and the US government, in addition to the tech and energy sectors (CNAS). Analysing data from 2011, Hundley, Kenzer and Peterson note that scholars representing East Asian studies in IR believed their field to be of vital importance for policy, although according to data from 2011, East Asian studies scholars were not engaged in policy-based research (2015). Significantly, due either to a lack of policy-centric research or any substantial change from 2011, East Asian studies received considerable Title VI funding in subsequent years. According to a US Department of Education International and Foreign Language Education 2017 annual report, East Asia accounted for the largest number of AS applications (2019, p.13), and in the same four year grant period, East Asia was the largest recipient of Title VI language course funding (Ibid., p.17).

Regional attention, or the “areas” of AS, appear to not only fluctuate, but to rotate. East Asian studies, for example are re-emerging as a key regional focus for policy and AS in the United States, although the field of Area Studies itself is dynamic, and is diffusing throughout the global arena. China, for example, while the key focus of AS in the United States, has been developing its own Area Studies using its application within the traditional paradigm as a model.

The Area Studies model and China

China is notable as a leading global power outside the United States, and the historical colonial paradigm to adopt the AS model has been focusing on developing AS to counter what is seen as a deficit in strategic regional expertise. This raises many questions relating to the effects of an emerging East Asian super-power adopting a policy model directed by academia built on imperial and colonial foundations. Nevertheless, China is fervently seeking to assume an elevated position in AS expertise. According to Myers, Barrios and Cunhai, China has maintained its long established focus on Latin American studies, but as the nation has risen on the global stage, so too has its focus on establishing new areas of expertise and further developing its capabilities in existing arenas (2018). For example, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) has a long standing Institute of Latin America studies; and the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, which hosts numerous AS institutes, such as the Center for West Asian and African Studies, and the Center for Russian and Central Asian Studies, was established in 1960 (SIIS). Aside from the well-established think tanks, Myers et al. point out the increased role of Chinese universities in furthering the country's AS ambitions. Universities such as Peking, Nankai and Fudan all feature Latin American Studies, although new AS centres are emerging in Chinese universities focusing on such "areas" as Western Asia (Middle East). For example, Shanghai Jiao Tong University has a newly established Center for Middle East Peace Studies, while Peking University, in addition to its own Center for Middle East Studies, founded an Institute for Area Studies in 2018 (CMEPS; Ma 2018). Furthermore, Shanghai University's Institute for Global Studies hosts Centers for Turkish, East Asian, and African studies (IGS). The coordination of academic AS centres through universities and think tanks is increasingly directed by the State with the explicit purpose of fulfilling its policy objectives, following the US model of AS.

Myers et al. have shown how government policy in China has been directed at augmenting the country's AS capabilities, and the authors identify several policy applications aimed at accomplishing such a goal from 2011 through to 2017, including the Notice on Fostering Area Studies and International Education Centers, the Notice on Effectively Constructing Information for Area Studies Centers, Interim Measures for the Cultivation and Construction of Area Studies Centers, and the Notice on Effectively Constructing Work Related to Area Studies Centers for 2017, to name but a few (Ibid., pp. 3–5). The steady government promotion of AS in academia highlights the policy-centric nature of AS, being undisturbed in its adaptation.

The practical considerations of the limitations of AS, within and outside its “Western” matrix, are underscored in China’s pursuit of AS and area expertise as they are met with the same challenges. In addition to lack of first-hand experience in the target “areas” and the language barriers, in part due to the publications of Chinese scholars in Chinese, the “areas” of focus of academicians are highly influenced by state incentives, which are provided according to policy needs. The National Planning Office for Philosophy and Social Sciences of China (NPOPSS) oversees social science research in the country and can influence the areas of focus of scholars. The NPOPSS offers an annual grant, which is a necessary prerequisite for professional advancement in academia (Jiang 2020). This is similar to the US model for AS, as described by Keskin, in which state funding heavily influences research centres and academic research, either through direct funding via the Department of Education Title VI, or through a myriad of government affiliated think tank grants directed at centres of Middle East studies (p.12).

The adoption of an AS model may be a response to having been the subject of “Western”-oriented AS. Becoming a focus of US policy focus warrants raised anxieties considering previous “areas” of focus, most notably the Middle East. However, the re-balance or pivot to Asia or East Asia is rather ambiguous. Afghanistan, for example, is often included in discussions of the “Middle East”, which is itself an ambiguous Orientalist term used to denote an approximation of Western Asia. This ambiguity in “area” is a practical concern also for the Chinese adoption of AS. Area Studies focus on rigid geographic boundaries that are based on perceived territories, seeking to draw sharp lines where only blurred ones exist. While one could hardly argue that capital, information, goods and people flow with the same ease across borders, the rigid view of territoriality in Area Studies does not reflect the global factors of “area” ambiguity and flux. Such critiques of AS parochialism are reasonable, as territorial rigidity is also met with ethnic rigidity, and as McConnell points out, a rigid correlation to established nation-states, which can leave peripheral actors with an ambivalent view of AS (Powell et al. 2017). Though not a Western perspective of area studies, parochialism is still a relevant critique in the Chinese adaptation of AS, and one that is to be confronted, irrespective of orientation.

The practical shortcomings of AS are an important consideration, given its adaptation as a model by state actors outside its traditional paradigm. Despite the glaring social, political and economic differences between the United States and China, China’s position as a rising global power and its robust state structure make it susceptible to similar critiques as US- or UK-based Area Studies. Aside from the practical pitfalls of AS, whether the adoption of AS outside its original

paradigm neutralizes its Orientalist, imperial and colonial features, or whether these characteristics are inextricable from AS and are inevitably adopted and diffused, remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Using the book *Middle East Studies after September 11* to highlight the historical developments of Area Studies from a critical perspective, the evolution of Area Studies and its ties to State policy are defined here throughout the key periods of policy and scholarly transformation. Colonialist, imperialist and Orientalist currents have been found to influence academia and AS studies throughout its development. Such an evolutionary progression of AS aids in an examination of current trends, noted here as continued state/academic integration and the possession of a quality that can be likened to planned obsolescence, whereby the focus of AS is dynamic and rotates geographically. AS in the US would appear to be refocused on East Asia, and particularly on China, and from here, the study shifts to the more significant trend of the adoption of the “Western” AS model by countries outside its historical colonial framework – again, using China as an example. These countries do not, for the most part, share the history of a colonial empire, imperialist state policy or the Orientalist academic culture. However, the adoption of a model for global perspectives, built upon these foundations and following policy-based state direction, may not be without its deleterious outcomes, warranting careful consideration. Aside from the practical pitfalls of AS, whether the adoption of AS outside its original paradigm neutralizes its Orientalist, imperial and colonial features, or whether these characteristics are inextricable from AS and are inevitably adopted and diffused, remains to be seen. Are these characteristics engrained in AS, or is the onus instrumental in the content of state policy that drives the study? If normative positions are to be taken, due diligence in the dialectic of colonially and policy driven academia is essential. Rather than attempting to answer these questions directly, this brief article establishes the colonial history and Orientalist and imperialist nature of AS as it existed within the so-called Western milieu, and in doing so, aims to incite debate surrounding the adoption of the area studies model by countries outside this paradigm.

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