

The Scope of Area Studies in the Era of Globalization

Sobia Kiran

Ph.D. Humanities Student, York University, Canada

sobia99@yorku.ca

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Abstract

Area Studies has always been approached ambivalently since its political birth after the Second World War. Despite a quiet acknowledgement of the contribution of Area Studies in the production of knowledge from the local lens to correct the ‘universal’ Western perspective of the knowledge produced by social sciences, questions are raised about its very existence in the era of globalization. This paper addresses the problematic of the marginalized position of Area Studies. The discussion will include; i) articles by Arif Dirlik, Ravi Arvind Palat, Tessa Morris-Suzuki to address the problematic of marginalization of Area Studies; ii) the articles by Edward Said, Aijaz Ahmad, Dispeh Chakrabrty, Vivek Chibber, and Kuan-Hsing Chen to assess the limits of Postcolonialism and Marxism in deconstructing Eurocentrism of Area Studies; and finally iii) the scholarly debates by Asef Bayat, David Ludden, Neil Smith, Naoki Sakai, Christian von Soest, and Alexander Stroh to discuss the utility of comparative method as a bridge to ford the rifts between Area Studies and social sciences. It is necessary to broaden the scope of Area Studies by engaging in cross-regional as much as cross-disciplinary research with the social sciences and other disciplines which are trying to meet the demands of transnational pressures generated by the global capitalism. The selected scholars highlight the need to revise Area Studies by proposing new approaches to free it from Eurocentrism and to make it more interdisciplinary to meet the demands of globalization.

Keywords— Area Studies, Eurocentrism, Regionalism, Comparative Approach, Globalization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Area Studies has always been approached ambivalently since its political birth after the Second World War. Despite a quiet acknowledgement of the contribution of Area Studies in the production of knowledge from the local lens to correct the ‘universal’ Western perspective of the knowledge produced by social sciences, questions are raised about its very existence in the era of globalization. This paper addresses the problematic of the marginalized position of Area Studies. The discussion will include; i) articles by Arif Dirlik (2005), Ravi Arvind Palat (1999), Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) to address the problematic of marginalization of Area Studies; ii) the articles by Edward Said (1978), Aijaz Ahmad (2008), Dispeh Chakrabrty (2000), Vivek Chibber (2013), and Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) to assess the limits of Postcolonialism and Marxism in deconstructing Eurocentrism of Area Studies; and finally iii) the scholarly debates by Asef Bayat (2013), David Ludden (2000), Neil Smith (2010), Naoki Sakai (2012), and Christian von Soest (2019), to discuss the utility of comparative method as a bridge to ford the rifts between Area Studies and social sciences. It is necessary to broaden the scope of Area Studies by engaging in cross-regional as much as cross-disciplinary research with the social sciences and other disciplines which are trying to meet the demands

of transnational pressures generated by the global capitalism. The selected scholars highlight the need to revise Area Studies by proposing new approaches to free it from Eurocentrism and to make it more interdisciplinary to meet the demands of globalization. The first part of the essay evaluates the discipline’s problems as pointed out by the selected scholars to highlight the need to revise it. The second part analyzes the solutions and suggestions proposed by them. The last section synthesizes the discussion with insights from the selected scholars supporting the approach of Comparative Area Studies (CAS) to broaden the scope of Area Studies.

II. THE PROBLEMATIC OF AREA STUDIES

The first problem with Area Studies is its “spatial framework” (Suzuki, 2000, p. 9), or its political birth in response to the political mapping of the world. Ravi Arvind Palat (1999) posits that Area Studies was a product of a shift from colonial to monopoly control after the cold war when the U.S. emerged as the world hegemon with an objective to study the peoples and cultures of the areas of geopolitical interest (p. 88). There rose two problems in the project. First, despite adding to the bulk of knowledge about Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, and Middle Easterners, it ignored the local historical experiences in their projection through

Euro-American gaze. Second, unlike other disciplines, Area Studies remained insular and segregated thus failing to meet the demands of the global network. This increased the rift between the West and the rest of the world. Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) asserts that the problem with spatialization, which Palat's (1999) article has also established as a political practice, is that it renders itself to racialization and ethnocentrism. Moreover, heterogeneity is compromised with an overemphasis on a few common characteristics imposed on the whole region. One example is Confucianism (p. 16). Another limitation is the production of knowledge from the Euro-American perspective, as most scholars belong to that region, and also because West is the source of theories to interpret the world. Spatial framework overlooks factors integral to understanding "global system" (p. 20). Similarly, Arif Dirlik (2005) points out the need to revise Area Studies because of increasing tension across the globe as a result of U.S. hegemony grounded in nationalism/exceptionalism and ethnocentrism. He considers two developments, the end of the cold war and rise of the Pacific Rim, as important conditions for revising Area Studies to meet the pressure of globalization that escapes "spatial and temporal containment" (p. 158).

On the other hand, Neil Smith highlights the need for revising Area Studies to respond to a spatial rescaling of the world. The Area Studies was organized around the geographical divisions into First, Second and Third worlds after the Second World War, but these divisions have been destabilized since the 1970s due to a globalized economy. He argues that it is important to understand the process of unmaking and remaking of geographical units in the context of globalism, as this examination would provide "a vital foundation for rethinking how area knowledge in turn should be reformulated" (p. 26). His focus is "spatial critique of Area Studies" using recent interest in geography theory to highlight the need to take "conceptual departures" from the traditional framework of Area Studies (ibid). The spatial scale, a product of the political process, draws social or economic boundaries of a region. For many scholars, globalization marks "the end of nation-states" or beginning of a borderless world as a result of economic rescaling of the world (ibid). Supranational institutes like the IMF and World Bank have gained power and become necessary for a stable state. He argues that as national scale did not constrict the power of the city, similarly the present rescaling will not end the national scale, rather it will reorganize state-power "among between the scales" (p. 33). National borders may be open to the economy, but they are maintained on the political and cultural level. By implication of this rescaling, Area Studies needs to be redefined.

Second problem leading to marginalization of Area Studies is lack of funds that are generously allocated to social sciences and other disciplines which claim to meet transnational and global demands. David Ludden (2000) argues that national interests control the politics of Area Studies. Professional schools with global reach do not need Area Studies and hence are not willing to pay for its knowledge production. Similarly, social sciences, despite using Area Studies knowledge, are not willing to pay for it. Moreover, Area Studies seems limited in scope as it has little to offer the global studies and social sciences that challenge all national/regional boundaries that still mark Area Studies. Area Studies usually has to look for funding from the ethnic communities or the fee of the students interested to take Area Studies courses. Only those programs get funding which are of strategic interest to the funding organizations. The Title VI program in the Education department was responsible for the federal funding for exchange programs, Fulbright scholarships, and Area Studies programs. After 1970, the policy to fund these programs became questionable. "Military needs" saved the Area Studies, when Washington wanted to stop funding the programs (p. 3). Overall, the organizations and foundations re-evaluated the future of Area Studies, e.g. the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) required the need for change because "changes in the world political environment influenced knowledge production in the U.S. Academy" (p. 3). The end of the cold War endangered Title VI program, but through local support (donors, agencies) the Area Studies was re-established. Ludden (2000) gives credit for the continuation of Title VI and Fulbright program to the political significance of Area Studies associations and "ethnic lobbies and constituencies" (p. 4). He posits that globalism will not fund Area Studies unless it is revised to produce knowledge relevant to its demands.

The third problem is the dominant Eurocentrism of the field challenged by the scholars from Postcolonial Studies, Marxism and Subaltern Studies. The year of 1978, when *Orientalism* got published, marked a watershed in the history of Literary Theory, Comparative Literature, Middle East Studies, Orientalism and Marxism. *Orientalism* transformed the method of analysis by bringing the cross and multi-disciplinary approaches to inform the discussion. The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is that of power which determines their positions of dominance and subjugation. This positionality plays an important role in placing the West at the center disseminating knowledge that is not grounded on empirical research on the peripheries but "desires, repressions, investments, and projections" (p. 8). The Orientalist is an outsider and from this exterior position what he produces is 'representation' as distinct and distant from the real Orient (Said, 1978, pp. 21-22). Said

challenged the politics of intellectual mapping of the world that followed the geopolitical mapping and revisited the issue of positionality. His work deconstructed the Western position in the center by shifting the focus to the peripheries. Area Studies responded very slowly to the call of Postcolonial Studies in questioning the European theoretical framework.

Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2005) project also aims at provincializing the European universalism in theory, history, and production of knowledge. As a historian of South Asia, he proposes to decenter the European perspective in addressing the issues of "political modernity in South Asia" (p. 4). He takes to task the universalism of Western ideals like Marxism, historicism, and liberalism. The problem with capitalism and its Marxist critique is that they both neutralize the differences and share "a stagist view of history" (p. 48). Historicism views capitalism as a unifying force that has encapsulated the globe "over historical time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process" (p. 47). In India, political modernity is evident in the struggle from the marginalized position of a subaltern and his political agency despite that marginalization, and Marxism and historicism do not take this particular aspect into account. At the same time, he acknowledges that even the alternate records of new modernity are exclusionary for failing to transcend the binaries of Self and the Other, as they start constructing new norms at the expense of "forgotten majority" (p. 21). The very issue of provincializing Europe sounds problematic as he himself admits that European thought is "both indispensable and inadequate" to understand or analyze the political history of modernity of India or any other non-Western country (p. 6) and stresses the need to renew it "from and for the margins" (p. 16).

Another problem of Area Studies, that of reductionism, is generated by the efforts to reject European theoretical framework by replacing the universal with the particular. The movement against the universal European theoretical framework has been criticized by Marxist scholars like Aijaz Ahmad and Vivek Chibber. Ahmad gives credit to Said's work *Orientalism* for pioneering "Colonial Discourse Analysis" as a "major strand of literary theory", but in the same sentence attacks it for its narrow scope in separating the "inventory of colonial traces" from all other traces (p. 172). He posits that Said is essentializing the West becoming an "Orientalist in reverse" (p. 183). In the same way, Chibber (2013) defends Marxism against the marginalizing discourse of postcolonialism which holds that universalizing theories marginalize the agency of local categories. He argues that postcolonialism has not overcome the shortcomings of universalism (p. 65). He is against the outright rejection of all universalizing categories

considering some of them as "defensible" and "essential for progressive politics" (p. 64). Capitalism and class struggle are universal and should not be ignored by postcolonial theorists. He cites Chakrabarty's objection that universalizing capitalism denies non-Western world their unique histories and studies them as variations of Western history. Rejecting Chakrabarty's stance, he claims that globalization means universalization of capitalism. As capitalism has globalized itself in search of profit, it has opened the path for a "universal history" (p. 73), and therefore Area Studies should not replace the universal with the particular.

Likewise, Naoki Sakai asserts that if Eurocentric approach is blamed to be insular in undermining the role of the local forces, so would be the case with Area Studies in case of discarding European theories considering them all as Eurocentric. Sakai blames both cultural anthropologists and Area Studies scholars for their insular approach and thus widening the gap between the disciplines. Edwin O. Reischauer, the founder of Area Studies, considered separation "fundamental to Area Studies" (p. 73). By associating the West with theory some Area Studies experts try to advance an anti-theoretical stance to challenge Western hegemony. This rejection of theory is another mode of separation, the division between the West and the Rest. This goes in favor of the Western discourse of separation between the Self and the other. He argues that Area Studies specialists reject theory and avoid cultural and postcolonial studies to avoid reflection on the conditions of their knowledge production. The dislocation of the West is a perspective and also a task to be "undertaken in the transformation of the humanities and Area Studies" (p. 91).

III. WHAT IS THE SOLUTION?

The selected scholars suggest different approaches and configurations to free the discipline from Eurocentrism and political underpinnings that stand in its way to realize the dream to transcend nationalism and ethnocentrism in the era of globalization. Palat (1999) challenges the political determinism of Area Studies by arguing that need of the hour is to reformulate categories of analysis by incorporating histories of "non-Western peoples into the conceptual framework of humanities and social sciences" (p. 89). Compartmentalization or fragmentation of knowledge has resulted in the reductionism of cultures. The solution is a cross-disciplinary, even "anti-disciplinary" approach" (p. 118), and collaborative investigation to deconstruct the binaries between the West and the rest of the world. There is a need to incorporate "translations, comparative analysis, collaborative research" (p. 100). Likewise, Suzuki (2000) suggests that solution lies in a revised or anti- Area Studies which is alive to differences

by i) including indigenous communities; ii) studying the impact of ideologies across the globe, and iii) analyzing the impact of global organizations on societies and cultures. The objective of anti-Area Studies would be to promote "conversation" or dialogue "about issues of deep common concern" (p. 22). Consequently, the West would stop being the universalist standpoint on Asia. Dirlik (2005) also aims to discover a new approach to Area Studies, especially Asian and Pacific Studies, that challenges the Eurocentric perspective on Asia for ignoring/omitting any "pre-history" (p. 163). He proposes new configurations of civilizational, diasporic, oceanic, indigenous and Asianization of Asian studies because; i) they deal with the questions of oppression and exploitation by bringing the marginalized into the center, and ii) they are interdisciplinary and enjoy links with cultural, postcolonial and global studies (pp. 158-159). He admits that spatial analysis is essential, but its limits can be overcome by including and utilizing the above-mentioned paradigms to broaden the scope of the discipline. For Chakrabarty (2000), on the other hand, the need of the hour is to make space for "two kinds of histories" instead of imposing "the universal language of social science" in translating Indian or other histories in terms of Marxist categories (p. 71). Following the footsteps of Chakrabarty, Chen (2010) presents "Asia as method" to "transform the existing knowledge structure" in response to the old structure of "leaving Asia for America" (p. 213). Asia as a method means to replace the West with Asia as a referential framework, "so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt" (ibid). Asia should serve as a model for Asia. He asserts that the West as the Other needs to be deconstructed (p. 217). He agrees with Chakrabarty that the West needs to be provincialized or de-universalized. Citing Chatterjee, he postulates that the most important question now is what is the place of subaltern groups in a nation? Since theories are regional in their scope, so instead of some Western theory, Chatterjee's analytical framework is more relevant in studying Taiwanese problems facing political society or minjian, civil society, and state (p. 241). Thus, scholars from Postcolonial and Subaltern Studies propose to use local or the particular as the theoretical framework for Area Studies.

IV. COMPARATIVE AREA STUDIES APPROACH

Naoki Sakai (2012) postulates that truth is not universal. Mutual truth can be reached only through negotiation between disparate perspectives. Knowledge of the self is impossible without the other. He stresses to reduce the alienation between the two by constructing a new comparative perspective with a sense of shared responsibility to reduce the divisions in the globalized

world. The need of the hour is the negotiation between the two perspectives, European and the local, to fill in the gaps generated by the parochialism of each perspective working in isolation without acknowledging the truth in the other. Globalization and consequent transnational disciplines have shattered the fantasy of separation. Transnational classroom, with students from East Asia studying humanities and Social Sciences in the U.S., have also challenged "separation as the principle of strategic positionality" (p. 85). In this discourse of separation, "the production of knowledge supposes two conceptions of humanity" (p. 87): "humanitas and Anthropos___ modalities that define the two ways of being human___ the West and the Rest" (p. 87).

Sakai argues that it is necessary to change the conditions of knowledge production by making it a more reflective process guided by the principle of "not general but universal humanity" (87). The dichotomy between humanitas and Anthropos will only generate identity politics of Europe as it did in the past reiterating the discourse of separation because it helps the West to "assume the positionality of universal activity by assigning to the Rest of the world the positionality of particular passivity" (89). As Area Studies was the product of an age when so many nation-states emerged on the map of the world, so globalization "a big shift in the nation-state system would necessarily destabilize Area Studies" (12). The gap between the process of globalization and national and regional communities can be bridged by Area Studies scholarship. He argues that U.S. knowledge is "parochial and imperial" (12) and this is the result of its alienation from Area Studies. He proposes a collaboration across areas to evolve a broad theory to account for its historical development and its place in the globalized world.

Likewise, Asef Bayat also imagines a field of study that would merge the distinct features of Area Studies with social sciences. The concerns shared by otherwise different regions may bring them together as the subject of analysis. The strategy should be a use of interdisciplinary approach, and a combination of methods "ethnographic, quantitative, comparative, and historical" (262). His claim is that "rigorous studies of an area demands a global lens, a comparative vision" (262). In the face of globalization, a comparative approach becomes all the more important for the analysis of the issues confronting different regions. The comparative study of the regions would provide new perspectives to resolve the issues and to "enrich social theory" (263). Meaningful knowledge production in the era of globalization is possible by using a comparative approach.

Last but not the least, Christian von Soest and Alexander Stroh propose the use of Comparative Area Studies (CAS) approach because it enriches "both case-study research and large cross-sectional analyses" (68). The lack of theory in Area Studies is due to the under-representation of scholars from poor countries or the Global South in the conferences. Thus, despite globalization, academic communities from the Global South remain unheard in the Global North. One obstacle in the way of CAS is the rise of specialized knowledge communities that have created "restricted horizons problem" (70). Even within a region, there are divisions in the scholarly communities. Soest and Stroh argue that CAS can address these divisions between Area Studies and social sciences. CAS deconstructs regional exceptionalism by providing a holistic picture of the issues facing different regions and by "establishing universal mechanisms" (73). They suggest the use of controlled comparison by selecting the cases for cross-regional comparison. In short, "Cross-regional CAS constitutes a middle path between statistical analysis aiming at generalizations and single-case studies with their focus on specificity" (83). They propose CAS as an addition to present approaches because it provides a middle ground for qualitative and quantitative research. CAS encourages teamwork, collaborative research to bridge gaps between scholars from different regions and thus may help to avoid "over-regionalization" and "over-generalizations" (85).

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, CAS may broaden the scope of Area Studies by opening it to theories from the Global South as much as to the universal theories from the Global North. It may encourage collaborative research not with social sciences and other disciplines but also across regions. Neil Smith distinguishes between area knowledge and politically institutionalized Area Studies. The former is open to "theoretical influences___ postcolonial, feminist, Marxist, subaltern studies, anti-racist, queer, poststructuralist, etc. ___ that informed the critique of Area Studies in the first place" (38-39). CAS has the potential to succeed because of its openness to geographical theory and rescaling of the world, though there remain the risks of its institutionalization. The application of CAS is challenging because of the heterogeneity of regions, but keeping Area Studies closed to this approach might threaten its very existence under the pressures of globalization.

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