

# The Survival and Adaptation of Area Studies

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*Most of what is truly useful for policy is context-specific, culture-bound, and non-generalizable.*  
Francis Fukuyama (2005: 22)

## INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of the humanities, the significance of ‘area studies’ is largely unproblematic. The subject matter – be it the history, literature, art, or culture of a particular region – is presumed to be worthy of study in its own right. There are surely debates over the objectives and methods of an inquiry, with some more partial to critique or deconstruction and others more concerned with evoking the richness of human experience within a given society. Even so, area specialists housed in a humanities discipline typically feel no special need to justify their investments in expertise on a given country or region. The status of area studies within the social sciences, by contrast, has grown more tenuous over the past quarter-century.

Area specialists appointed in social science disciplines must contend with simultaneously engaging two kinds of scholarly communities, one representing the *discipline* or one of its subfields and one defined in terms of an abiding interest in a *geographic region*. The problem stems largely from the growing gap in assumptions about which skill-sets are most crucial and what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘useful’ scholarship. An area specialist’s efforts to generate social scientific knowledge on a given country or region is likely to run up against questions about whether and how that knowledge speaks to general theories or matches up with methodological ‘best practice’ within one’s home discipline.

This chapter is concerned with the trajectory of area studies in relation to the discipline of political science. It begins with a short history of the emergence and evolution of area studies, stressing in particular the long shadow cast by the Cold War. The second section turns to some important shifts and challenges that have emerged in the wake of the Cold War, both in terms of the resources available to area

studies research and methodological currents in the discipline of political science. The section also examines the different ways in which area studies scholarship has survived as part of a more globalized political science within the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. The next section addresses some of the problematic aspects of conceptualizing and demarcating ‘areas’, especially to cope with the more fluid processes and global challenges that have emerged in the past two decades. As the geopolitical agendas and theoretical frameworks of the Cold War era recede into the past, some of the newer intellectual and methodological currents that have taken root in the discipline are serving to intensify the trade-off between investing in approaches and theories touted within political science and accumulating contextual knowledge about socially constructed spaces called ‘areas’. The fourth section addresses efforts by scholars in comparative politics to manage both the methodological and practical dimensions of this trade-off. The section considers new ways to frame the contributions of single-area research so as to better resonate with disciplinary trends as well as the emergence of new rationales and designs for cross-regional qualitative research, including comparative area studies (CAS), qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), and sub-national comparisons within and across areas. The chapter concludes by noting that area studies, viewed from a global and long-term perspective, have not only survived and adapted but will likely remain a crucial element of the field of comparative politics.

### **AREA STUDIES AND POLITICAL SCIENCE IN THE SHADOW OF THE COLD WAR**

At the start of the 20th century, empirical research by Western scholars on non-Western societies was largely confined to historians delving into archives, or anthropologists

immersing themselves in distant lands, often isolated communities or colonized societies. The ‘father of modern anthropology’, Bronislaw Malinowski, published his study of the islands of Melanesia, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, in 1922; it came to epitomize the ethnographic study of the beliefs, rituals, and social relations of faraway communities. Although future anthropologists would criticize or refine Malinowski’s methods and interpretations, including his findings on Melanesia (Carrier, 1992), ethnographic practices would influence the general notions in sociology and political science that extensive field research was a necessary part of efforts to better understand foreign countries and areas. But it is only following World War II that area studies would grow into a core component of the discipline of political science, primarily within the subfield of comparative politics. To a large extent, this development was propelled by the sense that both the building of a stable post-war order and the containment of communism depended on deepening our understanding both of the main ‘enemy’ – the Soviet bloc – and of the growing ranks of newly decolonized sovereign states. In short, it was within the context of navigating the Cold War that area studies centers and institutes began to proliferate throughout the United States, Western Europe, and later, the Soviet bloc as well.

In the United States, the growing demand for knowledge among government agencies, such as the State and Defense Departments and the Central Intelligence Agency, came to be met by new streams of federal funding, notably the Fulbright Program enacted in 1946 and the Title VI of the Higher Education Act – which grew out of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 – supported by programs set up by leading philanthropic organizations such as the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. This set the stage for massive investments in learning foreign languages, deepening the understanding of previously less familiar societies, and developing frameworks for tracking economic, social, and

political transformations in particular states. Two academic bodies founded in the aftermath of World War I – the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies – helped coordinate the activities and funding programs of universities, foundations, and government programs (Szanton, 2004).

Across Western Europe, the leading universities became a natural focus for concentrating resources that could be used by rapidly burgeoning communities of researchers devoted to building up stocks of knowledge across the humanities and social sciences, spanning language study, historical research, and cultural studies, as well as analysis of the politics, society, and economic development of specific countries and regions. The University of Oxford's School of Global and Area Studies<sup>1</sup> developed graduate-level programs of study on entire continents (in the case of African Studies and Latin American Studies) alongside programs focused on either single countries (e.g. Japanese Studies) or sub-continental regions where one country clearly stood out (Modern South Asian Studies, and Soviet and East European Studies). In both the United States and Western Europe, national and international associations worked to promote research on various areas of the world, establish interdisciplinary area studies journals, and bring together scholars from different disciplines to area studies conferences each year.

On the other side of the iron curtain, the impetus came from a Soviet leadership eager to carefully monitor trends in the West while increasingly seeking engagement with post-colonial countries in search of new candidates that might join, or at least cooperate with, the communist bloc. The most prominent area studies think tanks were the institutes set up as part of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (now, once again, the Russian Academy of Sciences), a vast multidisciplinary organization built around the core of the Tsarist-era Russian Academy of

Sciences (Zhuk, 2017). The largest of these institutes, the Institute of Oriental Studies, was first established in 1818. During the Cold War, the institute produced research focused on the countries of Asia and North Africa. The Cold War saw greater attention to the Americas, with the founding of the Institute of Latin American Studies in 1961 followed by the founding of the Institute of the USA and Canada in 1967. These institutes, as well as numerous other research centers and think tanks, accounted for thousands of researchers in the USSR (Gottmoeller and Langer, 1983) and in other Eastern-bloc countries. Many of these area-focused institutes and centers remain active as part of reorganized academic bodies such as the Russian and Polish Academy of Sciences.

What is interesting to note is that, despite differences among particular institutions and funding sources across regions, the overall organization and content of area studies scholarship during the period of the Cold War consistently reflected an unflinching interdisciplinary character of area studies, far from being a tangential attribute or a problem for cumulating disciplinary knowledge, was viewed as a distinctive asset for scholars housed in any of the social science disciplines. Political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists regularly joined area studies associations and attended area studies conferences alongside scholars representing the humanities, and their pursuit of area-specific knowledge did not detract from their status within their home disciplines. Perhaps the persistent theme of the (de)construction of 'modernity' in the humanities and the growing interest in problems of 'modernization' across the social sciences helped to make narratives about continuity and change in various contexts and regions intelligible across disciplines. In the United States, *modernization theory* provided a common analytic framework and theoretical vocabulary for social scientists analyzing the trajectories of political and economic development in different regions

of the world (Stevens et al., 2018). For better or worse, modernization theory also provided an overarching theoretical foundation that made deep, multifaceted interdisciplinary knowledge about countries and regions seem reliable and useful to Western policymakers seeking clues about how to contain the spread of communism and to respond to the varied developmental imperatives across the so-called “Third World” (Pakenham, 1973).

With the end of the Cold War, area studies centers and associations started to become the sites for new debates over historiography, methodology, culture, politics, and economics. These debates began to take off in directions not anticipated in the initial programs of government agencies and foundations to build up policy-relevant knowledge (Mosley, 2009). These debates would pull area specialists within the humanities and social sciences in very different directions. Within the humanities, a growing segment within area studies communities came to see their role as one of ‘deparochializing US- and Euro-centric visions of the world in the core social science and humanities disciplines, among policymakers, and in the public at large’ (Szanton, 2004: 2). Building on, or perhaps chastised by, Edward Said’s (1978) rebuke of ‘Orientalism’, this strand of thought called for a fundamental reorientation of Western area studies scholarship so that it would reject or transcend the binaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ underpinning overt and hidden relationships of domination between the West and the developing world (Sidaway, 2013). In historiography, this critique inspired a shift from a focus on national elites to a deeper consideration of the experiences and perspectives of ‘subalterns’, particularly in post-colonial countries (Chakrabarty, 2000). Importantly, these pointed critiques of past scholarship implied not a rejection of area studies but a more expansive and open-ended engagement with diverse social groups and contending intellectual currents within the countries and areas being studied.

A different set of challenges would be faced by social scientists, particularly

political scientists, who considered themselves to be area specialists. For scholars and policymakers alike, the end of the Cold War represented a critical turning point. The Cold War had provided the background condition for many of the arguments in favor of large-scale investments in the study of foreign languages, histories, and cultures, ostensibly to keep as much of the world safe from communism as possible (Clowes and Bromberg, 2015). With the Berlin Wall coming down in 1989, these heretofore substantial investments were scaled back sharply, creating new challenges for maintaining support for language training and the building of area expertise. This shift coincided with the crystallization of a more methodologically focused line of attack within political science. Although this critique was most explicitly articulated in the United States, there was a general sense that past efforts of area specialists had lacked the discipline and rigor that distinguishes the social sciences from the humanities. At least one oft-repeated indication of this shortcoming, according to some, was the presumed failure of area experts, in both scholarly and policy communities, to foresee the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War.

In political science, while area-focused research was not dismissed out of hand, it was seen as useful for building disciplinary knowledge only insofar as it shed its humanistic side and was primarily motivated by the theoretical debates and methodological principles of contemporary political science (Hanson, 2009). The result of these trends was not the ejection of area studies from political science but an increasingly stark set of trade-offs, both methodological and practical, for scholars in comparative politics. On the one hand, there was the imperative of leveraging extensive investments in area-focused expertise, fieldwork, and scholarly networks; on the other hand, there was the pressure to conform to research practices identified with ‘rigorous’ social science. This trade-off is not new, but in the context of the post-Cold War challenges faced by area studies, it has

given rise to new rationales for area-focused inquiry and new styles of within-area and cross-area comparative analysis (see below). The next section turns to the different ways through which area studies has managed to survive as part of a more globalized political science within the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world.

### **ADAPTING TO CHALLENGES: EMERGENT REGIONAL PATTERNS**

With the end of the Cold War, area studies research worldwide had to contend with new pressures and constraints. To some extent, this is the logical result of the thinning out of funding streams tied to the geopolitics of the Cold War, but it was also exacerbated by global financial crises in 1997–8 and 2008–9. There is also the impact of different intellectual currents tugging on different disciplines which put pressure on area specialists to reformulate the character and significance of their contributions to their respective disciplines. Yet the challenge has been just that – a challenge. It has not thus far led to any concerted effort to dismantle the organizational framework for area-based scholarship. Indeed, one lasting legacy of the Cold War era has been the durability of the various academic units created for the production and dissemination of area-specific knowledge (Stevens et al., 2018: 6). In addition, major events in the real world have played a crucial role in reminding political scientists and policymakers of the significance of deep contextualized knowledge about different parts of the world.

Even so, in the *United States*, area specialists have faced mounting challenges in securing the resources needed for building language proficiency and carrying out sustained research in the field, as the government has steadily scaled back funding for area expertise except in the limited context of providing specific types of information deemed to be

reliable and useful for the purposes of policymakers and media (Clowes and Bromberg, 2015). Within political science, it is scholars in comparative politics who would be most affected by these cuts. For most areas, steady cutbacks in the Department of Education's Title VI funding since the 1990s made it progressively difficult to obtain federal support for language training and area expertise – except for select projects that are of high priority to US national security in a post-9/11 world (frequently focused on the Middle East and China). Additionally, in October 2013, the US State Department also eliminated its Title VIII program, which had been once a massive source of funding for language training and area expertise for scholars studying Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union (King, 2015). Despite the spirited effort to highlight the importance of area expertise by many political scientists (e.g. Fukuyama, 2004; Hanson, 2009; King, 2015; Pepinsky, 2015), area studies have remained under strain in the post-Cold War era.

The strain has been magnified by a second trend: since the mid 1990s, leading political science departments in the United States have been placing less emphasis on the accumulation of area-focused knowledge in favor of methodological techniques consistent with the 'causal inference revolution'. Driving this shift is a basic epistemic notion, most famously championed by King et al., (1994), that there exists a universal set of methodological principles and logics of inference that define rigorous scholarship in both quantitative and qualitative research. This idea is certainly not without its detractors, as evident in ongoing debates as to whether there exist distinct 'cultures' of quantitative and qualitative scholarship with distinct understandings of evidence and causation (Goertz and Mahoney, 2012). Nevertheless, the growing attention to causal identification in the United States has reduced the space for stand-alone qualitative research, especially if focused on particular countries or areas. This is especially evident in flagship journals of the discipline (such as the

*American Political Science Review*), which rarely publish papers focused on one country or region, not counting the United States. And, at the very top political science departments in the United States, stand-alone qualitative research on a single country or area, no matter how compelling or original, is treated as lying outside the realm of ‘cutting edge’ scholarship in the discipline.

At the same time, there are indications that area specialists in the United States, though facing new challenges, have managed to survive and evolve. For one, *within* comparative politics, where political scientists with area expertise are generally housed, the majority of articles published in the subfield’s leading journals are country- or area-focused, though increasingly incorporating at least some quantitative analysis or field experiments. Moreover, books published in comparative politics tend to be overwhelmingly and disproportionately focused on single countries or small-N studies confined to a single area (Köllner et al., 2018: 17). This has been buttressed by the growing awareness that cut-backs in area studies training and research are depleting much needed reservoirs of deep knowledge on areas where US policymakers have been confronting new conflicts and crises. As Clowes and Bromberg (2015: 2) note: ‘The world saw the impact of inconsistent funding and training, for example, in American adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq at the start of which the US government scrambled to identify well-trained language experts and reliable local and regional information’. More recently, problematic developments across the former Soviet Union – the Maidan crisis in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and the steep downturn in US–Russia relations – prompted Charles King (2015) to point out the danger of ‘flying blind’ in an era where Title VIII funding is no longer available to support advanced language training and deep knowledge of a critically important part of the world. More broadly, Robert Gallucci, the former President of the MacArthur Foundation,

noted in a 2014 speech: ‘[T]his is a time when policymakers need more help than ever to understand the world not as an abstract set of generalities but as a finely-grained, complex, and unpredictable environment shaped by culture, language, religion, and history’.

While resource constraints have also affected area studies in *Europe*, the value of country- or area-specific research does not appear to have diminished. This may be in part because methodological debates have been less acrimonious and stand-alone qualitative research has continued to be recognized as valuable in its own right. In fact, across much of Europe, there are indications of a continued commitment to area studies scholarship within the social sciences, with new strategies for continuing to develop area-focused training, research, and scholarship. In fact, as the EU itself became more institutionalized and more responsive to the challenges of globalization in a post-Cold War era, pre-existing Europe-wide associations have been bolstered while new ones have been set up to pool resources and organize scholarly activities across different EU member countries. Examples of new associations include EASAS, the European Association for South Asian Studies, which began organizing Europe-wide conferences on South Asian Studies in the middle of the 1990s, and AEGIS, the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies, which was set up in 1991 to expand research on Africa’s response to globalization and provide academic and policy-relevant knowledge to the Africanist institutions of the EU.<sup>2</sup>

In *Britain*, major schools set up long ago to study various regions of the world continue to draw distinguished scholars and support country- or area-focused research. In addition to the aforementioned School of Global and Area Studies at Oxford, the School of Oriental and Asian Studies (SOAS) at the University of London remains a premier institution for the in-depth study of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, boasting the largest staff of area experts (over 300) of any university

in the world.<sup>3</sup> At University College London, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) remains the leading institution in the world focused on teaching about Russia, the Baltics, and Central and Eastern Europe. There are also a host of British area studies associations for various countries and regions, many of which have joined the United Kingdom Council for Area Studies Associations, founded in 2003. In addition, a joint initiative by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has provided funding for five new collaborative 'Centres for Excellence in language-based Area Studies' which are each housed at a lead institution and cover China, Russia, East Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Arabic-speaking world. This targeting of specific countries and regions may make it difficult in the future to devote resources for research on other regions, but overall, the commitment in British academia to area studies remains much more stable than is the case in the United States.

In *Germany*, too, area studies scholarship appears to have not only survived the end of the Cold War but perhaps even progressed further, with expanded support for new graduate schools, research clusters, and collaborative networks devoted to various world regions. Since 2006, the German government has funded an ongoing competition among state universities with the express aim of creating several 'universities of excellence'. Moreover, the German Council of Science and Humanities has also backed new programs to advance area studies, giving impetus to such initiatives as the 2009 effort by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research to enable a range of area studies centers, providing research networks to expand their capacities to conduct research within and across various world regions. A related program has expanded the fellowship-based collaborative research centers focused on South Asia, Latin America, China, and sub-Saharan

Africa. In addition, the German government has teamed up with private foundations to promote new think tanks and funding lines for research on various key countries and world regions. Examples include the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) and the Volkswagen Foundation's funding initiative for research on Central Asia and the Caucasus (Köllner et al., 2018: 12).

In *Russia*, the chaos of the post-communist transition took a toll on the production of knowledge on areas. The break-up of the Soviet Union – and along with it the USSR Academy of Sciences and various other institutes – meant that research on areas became fragmented and severely underfunded. Sharp cuts in budgets and salaries during the 1990s led thousands of Russian researchers to either leave their positions in academia and/or emigrate in search of positions in other countries (Schiermeier, 2018). The situation improved markedly after the Russian economy began to rebound in 2000. In one global study of think tanks, several Russian area studies institutes rank among the top forty regional studies think tanks worldwide. Among them are the venerable Institute for the Study of USA and Canada as well as the Institute of Oriental Studies, which includes centers or departments focused on China, India, Japan, the Middle East, and Central Eurasia, among others. And, among university-affiliated regional studies centers, Moscow State University's Institute for Asia and Africa Studies is among the world's top thirty (McGann, 2019). More recently, the 2018 budget of the Russian government saw a 25% increase in the amount earmarked for research and development (R&D), while Russia climbed into the top ten in the number of research articles produced (Schiermeier, 2018). These shifts mark an improvement of the broader environment in which area studies research is being conducted in Russia now, at least compared to the early years of the post-Soviet transition.

The *developing world* has also begun to catch up in terms of both overall investments

in knowledge production and the generation of area and cross-area expertise. *China* has led the way and remains far ahead of the rest of the developing world or emerging economies, both in terms of the total amount invested in R&D and the rise in percentage of GDP invested in R&D, which doubled between 2001 and 2016 according to the World Bank. *India* and *Brazil* spend far less on R&D, but have moved into the world's top ten in terms of total expenditures on R&D. This does not necessarily mean that research on different parts of the world is flourishing across the global south. But, certainly, there has been a growth in the scale of expert knowledge amassed in some developing countries at least about their own regional 'neighborhood'. The Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore, established in 1968 as the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), has greatly expanded its visibility, activities, and resources in relation to research focused on Southeast Asia. Along similar lines, the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA), first established in 1960, was restructured and expanded in 2001 and now purports to 'produce some of the finest research on contemporary African Affairs by having its dedicated and highly qualified researchers conduct field research every year throughout the African continent'.<sup>4</sup> AISA has been rated among the top fifty best-managed global think tanks (McGann, 2019: 183). In addition, while the economic trends that gave rise to the term 'BRICs' in 2001 are no longer evident (given the lower growth rates in Brazil and Russia over the last decade), research on BRICS (now including South Africa) has become a cottage industry in each of the member countries. Most notable among these is the BRICS Policy Center in Brazil (attached to the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro), which has made it to the list of the top-ten best university-affiliated think tanks (McGann, 2019: 202). There is also now a BRICS Think Tank Council (BTTC) that was established in 2013 to boost cooperation on BRICS-focused research being done

at major institutes or centers in each of the countries. On the whole, while research on faraway regions remains substantially underdeveloped and underfunded across the developing world, the growing scope for intensive research focused on the 'regional neighborhoods' of particular emerging economies or rising powers have helped to greatly expand the production of area-based knowledge worldwide.

### **THE CONCEPT OF 'AREAS' IN PROBLEM-DRIVEN RESEARCH: OPPORTUNITIES AND TRADE-OFFS**

Area expertise within political science has been generally thought to refer to knowledge about one or more nation-states presumed to occupy clearly demarcated geographic 'areas'. This was not a problem for the kinds of questions that political scientists most commonly delved into within a global order dominated by the Cold War balance of power and by the pursuit of modernization by nation-states. Yet, within the actual organization of area studies research, there were always indications that what counted as an 'area' was not 'natural' or 'fixed'. One of these indications is the fact that, alongside research focused on whole spaces that sometimes spanned entire continents, separate research communities and associations formed around the study of specific countries that were implicitly deemed worthy of focused attention. In the United States, for example, the fields of Latin American Studies or African Studies came to be accompanied by the rise of 'Sovietology' as a self-contained field during the Cold War – and now it is Chinese Studies that is the most rapidly growing field devoted to the study of a single country. Likewise, in China, following the reorganization of the leading area studies research institutes in the 1980s under the umbrella of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the region-based Institutes

of European Studies and Asia-Pacific Studies (which now includes South Asian Studies) coexist with the single-country focused Institutes of American Studies and Japanese Studies (Sleeboom-Faulkner, 2007).

The very fact that some research communities are organized around a single 'large' or 'important' country, while others are organized around spaces covering multiple religious and ethno-linguistic communities, is indicative of a long-standing issue: the concept of an 'area' or 'region', although often treated as self-evident, is in fact a reflection of geopolitical realities, particularly as experienced by those with the resources to fund and organize research in a given period. Simply put, what constitutes an 'area' is an imagined, socially constructed reality reflecting a mix of contingent factors (Acharya, 2014). These include availability of resources tied to policy imperatives, familiarity based on proximity or language, similarity in developmental levels, regional alliances, and geographic features (particularly where whole continents coincided with 'areas' to be studied). Nevertheless, 'area' boundaries that may have made sense for many of the questions and agendas in the Cold War era came to acquire an enduring and global significance (Stevens et al., 2018: 6). Just as the QWERTY keyboard has remained a fixture through all kinds of technological shifts, the basic organization of area studies persists even though the end of the Cold War has given rise to a different set of questions and priorities within shifting geopolitical contexts and resource environments. But this does not mean that the position of area specialists has remained unchanged, particularly within political science.

One dilemma that has become increasingly apparent is how the construction of 'areas' might match up with exhortations to be 'problem-driven' in designing research. True, certain 'areas' and 'problems' are well suited to each other. This is obviously the case where a question is narrowly framed so as to be only relevant to particular regions,

as in a study of how sectarian divides affect political stability in the Middle East or of what economic conditions may have helped strengthen the appeal of right-wing populist parties in Europe. There is also a good match in the case of more broadly framed problems so long as the full range of variation happens within a given geographic area as a result of the intrinsic heterogeneity of that area. In the latter scenario, it makes sense to focus one's attention on that region while designing a comparative study to construct or explore general causal inferences. For example, in his book on how contentious politics shaped authoritarian state-formation in Southeast Asia, Dan Slater (2010: 7) notes: 'While selecting cases from a single region frequently entails selection bias, choosing cases in Southeast Asia helps avoid this inferential pitfall'.

Yet, in the post-Cold War era, scholars of comparative politics have been increasingly researching a host of problems – from democratic transitions and the effects of globalization to the politics of economic reform and the rise of populism – where the distribution of relevant patterns and outcomes cuts across countries and locales that are situated on different continents and have little in common in terms of history or culture. For such broad questions, any qualitative study that purports to offer portable arguments will likely want to consider how the places they are studying match up with the range of outcomes that exists across the full population of relevant cases (Geddes, 2003). Therein lies a fundamental – and increasingly problematic – methodological trade-off with respect to the entrenched organization of institutions, research networks, journals, and associations around fixed 'areas'. The conversations that may take place among political scientists specializing in a given area may be more 'fluent' given the common background knowledge and deep familiarity with locales within that area. But these conversations would not necessarily encompass the more widely sampled observations and modes of empirical analysis that would be necessary

to draw the attention of the discipline of political science writ large. This is actually a manifestation of a familiar dilemma for political scientists with area expertise: case selection principles derived from the basic logic of the comparative method yield very different kinds of advantages than those that emerge from cases within a single familiar area on which one has deep background knowledge. On the one hand, restricting one's analysis to a space that one claims to have expertise on runs the risk of not having a representative sample of cases (Geddes, 2003). On the other hand, attempts to expand case selection beyond an area on which one has more in-depth knowledge and training comes with its own pitfalls, and there is no guarantee that the set of cases will be subject to the same manner of treatment given the unevenness in language skills, background knowledge, and engagement with scholarly networks.

Importantly, this methodological trade-off has a crucial *practical* dimension related to the enormous investment of time and effort required to acquire language proficiency, build a cross-disciplinary base of background knowledge, and accumulate experience in conducting research in a specific country or region. Yet the kind of skill-set required to establish credibility in the eyes of a multi-disciplinary area studies community is quite different from that which will bring recognition and status from other scholars in political science, particularly those that see the discipline's advancement as based mainly on demonstrating technical sophistication and/or theory accumulation (Sil, 2018: 226). That is, area specialists in political science, particularly in the field of comparative politics, have to balance the varying expectations of two very different kinds of audiences. For the disciplinary audience, it may be better to prioritize methodological rigor by examining a representative sample of cases without the advantage of expert knowledge on each case (which risks losing one's area studies audience); for the area studies audience, it would

make sense to leverage the stock of skills and knowledge acquired over years of study and research (which risks losing one's disciplinary audience).

Certainly, it is not inconceivable that, given one's inclination and the availability of plentiful resources (including time), one could acquire expertise in new areas. One illustrious example of this is David Laitin, who was trained as an Africanist but set out to build enough area expertise to conduct fieldwork for his study of identity formation among Russian-speaking populations in four post-Soviet nations (Laitin, 1998). For most scholars, however, this is a daunting feat – one that requires the luxury of being able to redirect substantial amounts of time and energy away from regular professional obligations so as to invest anew in a new pocket of expertise. This hardly seems like a worthwhile investment, particularly if it is solely for the purpose of analyzing *one* additional case in the course of pursuing a *single* research project. This is perhaps why even those political scientists who engage in small-N comparative studies tend to choose cases *within* areas where they already possess the relevant expertise, particularly where a single language provides access to primary sources and fieldwork opportunities throughout the area (Köllner et al., 2018). The two areas where this pattern is most evident is Latin America (where Spanish provides access to a range of cases, leaving aside Portuguese-speaking Brazil) and the Middle East and North Africa region (where Arabic, despite the different dialects, provides access to a range of predominantly Islamic societies). For example, James Mahoney's (2010) study of the long-term impact of Spanish colonialism employs comparative-historical analysis across a small number of cases from Spanish-speaking Latin America cases that share certain core similarities yet combine differently with general causal forces to produce a range of trajectories for post-colonial development. Similarly, in Middle Eastern and North African Studies, Amaney Jamal (2007) has examined

how top-down efforts affect the scope and character of civic engagement in the West Bank under the Palestinian authority, with comparisons to similar dynamics evident in civil-society formation in Morocco (and, in less detail, in Jordan and Egypt). Such studies generate invaluable insights about their respective regions by leveraging deep knowledge and expertise, including language skills. But their research questions are necessarily limited in scope, given the focus on regionally specific attributes and outcomes.

It is also worth noting that the advantages enjoyed by Arabic-speaking experts studying the Middle East or Spanish-speaking scholars studying Latin America do not extend to those researching other areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, and East and Southeast Asia. In cross-case studies within these latter regions, mastery of a single foreign language would not go very far if primary sources or immersive fieldwork are crucial to the design. Yet there are small-N studies where area expertise is assumed to be relevant and necessary even *without* the use of the local language for each and every case study. For example, Anna Grzymała-Busse's (2007) *Rebuilding Leviathan* offers a comparative analysis of nine countries within Central and Eastern Europe in the process of analyzing different pathways to state reconstruction. This impressive study is rightly credited for demonstrating deep expertise on the region of Central and Eastern Europe – but without the author relying on language skills for each of the case studies. This is by no means a critique of the work; it is simply an illustration of a tacit understanding that one can leverage ‘area expertise’ to support cross-case comparisons within some regions (such as Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia) without necessarily deploying language skills for each case as one might expect for the Middle East and Spanish-speaking America. This point is also crucial to understanding the relationship between area studies and *cross-regional* comparisons considered in the next section.

## RE-POSITIONING AREA STUDIES, ADVANCING CROSS-AREA STUDIES

The challenge of balancing the standards and expectations of area studies communities with those of non-area specialists in political science is not about to disappear anytime soon. This challenge can, however, be managed through different strategies that yield distinctive payoffs – strategies that have in common a reliance on *some* contextual knowledge of particular areas. This knowledge cannot by itself fortify the status of area specialists within political science. It is also necessary for area specialists to take an active role in framing the knowledge they generate in relation to evolving theoretical and methodological debates in the discipline. This implies a need to be more explicit and self-conscious in describing the epistemological assumptions and methodological principles through which qualitative observations from one or more areas are interpreted in relation to general concepts and theories in political science.

One common approach has been to present qualitative area-focused scholarship in the form of case studies within mixed-methods projects, usually alongside formal models and/or regression analyses (see Bergman, Chapter 26, this *Handbook*). The proliferation of mixed-methods research since the 1990s has been extremely rapid and has had some unanticipated consequences, including shrinking the space available for single-method qualitative research (Ahmed and Sil, 2012). At the same time, mixed-methods designs provide ‘cover’ for many scholars who remain deeply committed to studying particular areas and engaging area studies communities. For them, even if qualitative research is the primary objective, incorporating regression analyses or formal models can go a long way towards convincing non-area specialists to pay attention to the qualitative findings. One type of mixed-methods research that has been gaining in popularity is the integration of qualitative research with field experiments (see Bassi, Chapter 22,

this *Handbook*). In this approach, research designs that most closely resemble laboratory experiments are seen as the most reliable path to improving causal inference; yet, in the field, area expertise is indispensable for supplying the contextual knowledge required for strong designs (Dunning, 2012). However, mixed-methods research, even where it showcases deep area expertise, is generally less likely to appeal to area studies communities than to other political scientists (many of whom will know little about the area in question).

Thus, a second strategy may be preferable for political scientists who retain an abiding interest in engaging a particular area of the world. This strategy involves framing the main findings of area-focused qualitative research in a language associated with recognizable intellectual currents such as historical institutionalism and, to a lesser extent, interpretive research. Historical institutionalism has been evolving since the 1990s and has produced a sophisticated analytic toolbox – encompassing such notions as ‘process-tracing’, ‘critical junctures’, ‘contingency’, and ‘path dependence’ – for the design and presentation of qualitative research on a host of topics across the subfields of political science (Fioretos et al., 2016; Berntzen, Chapter 23, this *Handbook*). A somewhat smaller community of political scientists has gained recognition for the distinctive insights it has generated through interpretive styles of research such as ethnography (e.g. Schaffer, 2016; Wedeen, 2010). While those identifying with historical institutionalism are more likely to be considered ‘mainstream’ within the discipline, both of these intellectual traditions have helped to preserve some space for area specialists doing stand-alone qualitative research within political science.

These strategies, however, do not address the question of how to reconcile the pursuit of area-based knowledge with the analysis of phenomena typically manifested across broader expanses of time and space. For such problems, small-N comparisons frequently require cases drawn from different areas,

at least if they are to capture the full range of variation and trace the effects of various causal mechanisms under different settings. One example of this sort of problem is the study of the ‘resource curse’. Although the rentier states of the Middle East represent a reasonable focal point for tracing the political and economic consequences of oil rents, the top ten exporters of crude oil are situated on four separate continents within distinct institutional settings and political dynamics. Widening the range of comparable cases selected from different regions allows for a more open-ended analysis of how the ‘resource curse’, rather than invariably undermining institution-building in developing countries, can sometimes have the opposite effect depending on such intervening factors as the position of exporters in relation to the ruling coalition (Saylor, 2018). Similarly, in the comparative study of post-communist transitions, cases are frequently selected within the region of Central and Eastern Europe. This makes sense for a host of questions including, for example, the analysis of market reforms or constitutional changes related to accession to the EU by former communist countries. Yet, broader examinations of the causes and consequences of different pathways followed by former communist regimes can benefit from research designs that encompass countries in Central Asia, where post-communist politics has had to contend with the rise of Islam, as well as the East Asian regimes, where ‘communist’ party-states remain entrenched but have sought to expand the private sector and promote greater integration into the global economy (Chen and Sil, 2007).

To address such problems of broad scope, there is certainly the long-standing tradition of small-N analysis designed around some version of Mill’s methods.<sup>5</sup> This approach emphasizes the logic of the comparative method and the representativeness of selected cases. It does not, however, expect each of the case studies to rely upon area expertise or take heed of area-specific scholarly

debates. It is therefore worth highlighting a distinctive variant of small-N comparative analysis that is not limited to a single area but still seeks to leverage the sensibilities of a trained area specialist. This is precisely the approach touted in a recent volume on '*comparative area studies*' (CAS), which affirms the importance of continued investments in single-country or single-area research while highlighting the benefits of *cross-regional contextualized comparisons* (Ahram et al., 2018). The editors recognize that trade-offs between the pursuit of deep contextualized knowledge of an area and the construction of broad causal generalizations can never be fully overcome. Nevertheless, they contend, that there are distinctive intellectual gains to be had through research strategies that consciously split the difference between context-sensitive narratives that are attentive to area-specific debates and causal generalizations that depend on the quasi-experimental logic of the comparative method. In this approach, the use of comparable cases from different areas allows a researcher to set up an array of causal configurations that can yield portable inferences. At the same time, the sensibilities of an area specialist are crucial for recognizing the relevant context conditions and understanding how individual case studies relate to scholarly discourses within the relevant area studies communities. Thus, even as it seeks to generate middle-range theoretical propositions, CAS implies an active effort to identify *which* attributes of various spatial and temporal contexts matter in *what* ways for understanding how different kinds of mechanisms and processes produce a range of outcomes (Köllner et al., 2018).

In practical terms, the CAS approach does not require that a researcher becomes an expert on every country or area to be analyzed. And, it is certainly not reasonable to expect a researcher to keep learning new languages or finding new collaborators for each and every additional case in a small-N study. But, it *is* possible and worthwhile for anyone trained as an area expert to study cases

from a different area with an eye to regionally specific context conditions and with an awareness of how contending intellectual traditions and historiographic complexities shape discourses among the relevant area studies communities. In fact, there are a growing number of scholars who have taken on this challenge, and some of their work has been showcased in summary fashion in the aforementioned volume (Ahram et al., 2018). These studies highlight the payoffs of CAS in probing deeply into their cases and engaging area studies debates while also identifying portable concepts and causal linkages through cross-regional comparative analysis. In the process, CAS also serves an integrative function, expanding the channels of communication both between separate communities of area specialists interested in similar problems and between these communities and the discipline of political science writ large.

A related strategy of cross-area research is QCA, an approach that also appreciates the complexity of causal configurations but is markedly more ambitious in seeking out broader logical inferences across a greater number of cases (Rihoux and Ragin, 2009; Berg-Schlosser, 2018). QCA follows the logic of Boolean algebra and the principles of set theory while seeking to simultaneously increase the number of cases being analyzed and the number of variables under consideration. The initial 'crisp' versions of QCA relied upon binary coding of a set of variables (low/high, absent/present) across a number of cases. In response to criticisms that this limited coding generates claims that are overly deterministic, fuzzy-set QCA has been designed to incorporate multidimensional and continuous variables that allow for a much wider range of potential configurations (see Wagemann, Chapter 20, this *Handbook*). Given the interest in expanding the number of cases to cover the full range of causal configurations, it becomes difficult for a researcher using QCA to conduct in-depth process-tracing or ethnography for any single case (see Beach, Chapter 17, this *Handbook*). Moreover, given the focus on

assigning values to discrete variables across different sets of cases, QCA researchers are increasingly working with standardized algorithms and computer programs to analyze discrete matrices of cases and variables. Even so, area-based knowledge provides crucial contextual information needed to identify the relevant variables across a given set of cases and to assign appropriate values to these variables for each case. Thus, while QCA is not as dependent as CAS on the skill-set or sensibilities of an area specialist, it does provide justification for continuing investment in area studies research, without which it is not possible to identify plausible case-specific causal configurations.

Although the discussion of cross-regional comparison up to this point has implicitly treated the main units of comparison as countries, it is also possible to ‘scale up’ or ‘scale down’ cross-regional qualitative research. Scaling up implies comparing entire regions as a whole or comparing countries treated as representing the regions in which they are situated. This mode of *inter-regional comparison* emphasizes the relevance of discrete region-wide attributes and processes that can play a crucial role in mediating causal forces thought to originate at the global or national levels. By decentering the nation-state and focusing on regions, inter-regional comparisons are in a position to shed light on how regional-level historical inheritances or transformational processes might mediate between global and local forces and influence the trajectories of discrete clusters of countries. Peter Katzenstein’s (2005) *A World of Regions*, for example, makes a powerful case for identifying and comparing regional orders within the larger international system. While such orders may be ‘porous’ vis-à-vis the forces of globalization and internationalization, they still retain a regionally distinctive combination of economic, cultural, and institutional features that shape the behaviors and relations among countries within a given region.

Finally, scaling down to the local level offers the possibility of deploying what

Snyder (2001) has labeled the ‘subnational comparative method’. This approach encompasses *within-country* comparisons of cities or provinces as well as *between-country* comparisons of like units situated in different countries. The latter variant forfeits the possibility of controlling for national-level historical, societal, or institutional attributes; but it gains more traction in analyzing how similarities and differences in those attributes might produce similar patterns of subnational variation across different national settings. This fundamental design easily lends itself to cross-regional studies, where comparisons can focus on similar sets of sub-national units situated in different areas of the world. This is particularly useful for researching questions where the relevant sub-national dynamics are limited to countries that have certain common characteristics or face certain common challenges even though they are located in different areas. For example, Heller (2012) has illuminated local variations in the efficacy of reforms designed to decentralize aspects of policymaking and expand the scope for grassroots civic engagement in Brazil, India, and South Africa (Heller, 2012). Similarly, Smith (2018) has generated novel insights about the conditions that spur the emergence of separatist movements through context-sensitive comparisons of groups and locales in states formed out of post-imperial partitions in different areas. Both inter-regional and sub-national comparative studies bolster the argument that area expertise is an extremely valuable asset for identifying the contextual knowledge needed to design and execute cross-regional comparative studies.

### **CONCLUSION: REPORTS OF THE DEATH OF AREA STUDIES HAVE BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED**

Long before questions arose about the fate of area studies in the post-Cold War era, there

was ample evidence to suggest that the pursuit of area-specific knowledge and the advancement of political science had never constituted a zero-sum game. Key concepts – from ‘corporatism’ and ‘consociationalism’ to ‘developmental state’ and ‘rentier state’ – became cornerstone of major research programs in political science after initially having emerged out of area- or country-focused research by political scientists (Sil, 2018: 230). That is, area specialists in political science, far from being on the margins of the discipline, had compiled an impressive track record of introducing major conceptual and theoretical advances of the discipline. Nevertheless, the post-Cold War era has seen the emergence of new challenges for area specialists in the social sciences – in part related to resources and funding streams, in part related to methodological currents (particularly in the United States) that tend to discount stand-alone qualitative analyses of single countries or areas. These constraints have greatly intensified the pressures and trade-offs for area specialists in political science, widening the gap between the payoffs from the accumulation of area expertise and the rewards associated with adhering to disciplinary ‘best practice’.

The result of these trends, however, is not an irreversible decline in area studies but rather an expansion of the variety of research products that area specialists are able to offer. As we saw above, some have reapportioned their time and effort to incorporate quantitative analysis or mathematical modeling within mixed-methods designs, while others have connected their area-specific research to recognized intellectual traditions such as historical institutionalism. We are also encountering scholars who have area expertise but are exploring context-sensitive cross-regional comparisons. Importantly, the latter are not viewed as subsuming or supplanting research produced by area specialists. In fact, any comparative approach that is attentive to context conditions in various locales must necessarily rely upon area studies research and engage scholarly debates within area studies communities. Thus, area-focused and

cross-area qualitative research in the social sciences, rather than dueling with one another, are in a position to jointly affirm that their research output, far from being esoteric or idiosyncratic, has much to tell us about how global, regional, national, and local factors shape political outcomes worldwide.

Indeed, discussions along these lines *are* taking place – both across ‘horizontal’ channels linking scholars embedded in different countries and area studies networks, as well as along ‘vertical’ channels linking various pockets of area-focused research to disciplinary debates over concepts, theories, and methods. It is true that shifting flows of resources and intellectual trends in various disciplines have affected the scope for area-specific training and field research in some places. At the same time, on a global scale, area studies research remains active and fruitful, and there are now more centers for regional studies as well as more conversations among scholars based in different regions. Moreover, the real world keeps throwing up surprises that require deep insight and contextual knowledge, making it abundantly clear to academics, policymakers, and foundations that the scholarly study of different regions of the world cannot be scaled back to the degree that some envisioned immediately after the Cold War. All of these developments taken together suggest that area studies are more likely to keep adapting rather than simply peter out due to shifts in resource streams and disciplinary fashions at any given time. At a minimum, it seems safe to say that reports of the death of area studies have been greatly exaggerated.

## Notes

- 1 Website of the University of Oxford’s School of Global and Area Studies (OSGA), available at <https://www.area-studies.ox.ac.uk/about-us> (accessed February 20, 2019).
- 2 As noted on the website of AEGIS: <https://www.aegis-eu.org/why-aegis> (accessed February 25, 2018).
- 3 As per the website of SOAS: <https://www.soas.ac.uk/about/> (accessed February 27, 2017).

- 4 See the website of the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA), at <http://www.ai.org.za/about-aisa-2> (accessed February 25, 2019).
- 5 These refer to the methods of induction outlined by John Stuart Mill in his *A System of Logic* (1843).

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