

Mielke, Katja; Hornidge, Anna-Katharina (Hrsg.): *Area Studies at the Crossroads. Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 2017. ISBN: 978-1-349-95011-9; 363 S.

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Efforts to rethink and reconceptualize area studies have intensified since the mid-2000s, generating a „third wave“ (Sidaway, here p. v). Countering German regional studies' structural weakening, initiatives funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) generated international resonance, contributing to the field's „rebirth“.¹ Emerging from a 2014 conference organized by one BMBF multi-university competence network, Crossroads Asia, this volume can inspire scholars investigating other world regions. It critically considers key issues, including how area studies produces both knowledge about spaces and indeed spaces themselves.

Following introductory reflections on the state of the field in Parts I and II, the volume addresses transregional and translocal mobility (Part III), mid-range concepts' value for ethnographically-inflected research (Part IV) and ways of rethinking area studies teaching and pedagogy (Part V). It concludes with three future visions for area studies in Part VI. Ambitious in scope, *Area Studies at the Crossroads* contains epistemological, ontological, methodological and practical reflections, including discussions of approaches to teaching and relevance for policymaking. The crossroads produced by the volume features signposts pointing area studies in potentially innovative directions, including 'Towards Reciprocal Methodologies' as suggested in Kaltmeier's reflections on area studies in the Americas. This is followed in Part II by Antweiler's exposition of alternative areas/alternatives to areas in Southeast Asia. His notion of 'Area Science' (p. 65) as the exploration of 'socio-spatial relations' with „area [conceived] as family resemblances plus network“ (p. 74) resonates with Holbig's outline of de-

essentialized approaches to constructing regions in Part VI. Like Antweiler, Chou also highlights how Southeast Asian studies has flourished in the region itself, calling in Part V for greater dialogue with analytical frameworks produced there. In Part IV, meanwhile, Houben proposes „stretching indigenous concepts and thereby opening them up for other spatio-temporal contexts“ (209). These contributions point towards an epistemologically, and not only empirically, 'Mobile, Transregional Area Studies', as the editors' term their decolonized future model (p. 339).

Running through the contributions is recognition of the situatedness of knowledge and practices, which requires engaging with translocal and localized practices set in the context of globalization. The volume therefore offers an overview of some current trends in 'third-wave' area studies, which transcends the bipolarity of Cold War-inflected approaches. However, as shown in Schetter's thoughtful deliberations on the relationship of area studies to peace, conflict and security studies, which conclude Part II, producing policy-relevant knowledge is now particularly challenging, even as acknowledgment area studies' works towards „valid solutions to global problems in local contexts“ grows, as the editors state in conclusion (p. 337). As Schetter argues, such problems require in-depth „thick knowledge“, permeated with local expertise, rather than the top-down answers expected of area studies treated as mere „ancillary science“ (pp. 94-95).

Part V suggests ways of achieving this in teaching and pedagogy, with Fuhrmann discussing film as a medium for encountering place-making, while Chou emphasises the centrality of language learning (p. 245). By contrast, Amoo-Adare concludes Part V with a radical call for „deschooling“ academic society in order to „decolonize the structures of knowledge production in westernized universities“ and realize „post-disciplinary ventures“ (p. 269). How this sits with another of the editors' future models, namely 'Area Studies for and in Interdisciplinarity', is unclear, especially since pressing environmen-

¹Zoran Milutinović (ed.), *The Rebirth of Area Studies. Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the 21st Century*, London 2020.

tal and climate emergencies require, as Mielke and Hornidge recognize, collaboration with marine science and natural sciences, for example. Amoo-Adare's decolonizing approach complements the editors' vision of 'Analytical, Emancipatory Area Studies'. However, the path towards it, involving „integrating non-Western epistemologies“ (pp. 338-9), must still be cleared. The editors' stated goal is discussing „epistemological bases for non-Euro-Amerocentric knowledge production“ (p. 14). But with all seventeen contributors trained in the Global North/West at some point (all but four in Germany), and according to the biographies at most three also educated in the regions investigated, the volume produces certain frictions. Seeking to escape these binds can simultaneously tighten them, as the epistemological bases and conceptual frameworks employed largely remain grounded in established traditions.

'Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn' puzzlingly constitutes the entire volume's subtitle and the title of Part III. The editors state that these chapters „depart from the surplus value of the mobility lens“ (p. 17). The focus of the mobility lens, how it differs from the 'mobility turn', how it acquired surplus value and why departing from it is worthwhile, as well as the volume's overall position towards the mobility turn, is blurry. Outlining transregional studies in Part VI, Middell suggests that foregrounding global movements and flows has meant overlooking both attempts to control them and to remake them on the smaller scales that reveal the heterogeneity of globalization and experiences of it. The chapters in Part III resonate with this transregional approach to mobilities, although their reflections on knowledge production are limited. Benz examines student migration to Gilgit in Pakistan, tracing the translocal impact of acquiring knowledge, but the concluding sentences on the findings' significance for area studies seem tacked on, as they do in Dandekar's essay. It nevertheless offers a rich, historically in-depth account of Konkani Sufis' transcontinental movements between India and the Arabic peninsula. Reflecting on everyday mobilities and the interconnections of a bazaar in Almaty, Kazakhstan, with historical and political changes, as well as regio-

nal and global economies, Arff's insights, like many contributions here, are inspired by the spatial turn. They are crucial for demonstrating how centre and periphery are contingent on positionality, not 'essentialist and state-centred logic of territory' (p. 136). This part's three contributions chime with Holbig's outline in Part VI of a reflectivist area studies that examines space-making from an actor-centred perspective. However, she also suggests a further turn, towards 'reflexive essentialism', to recognize how reterritorialization, in Asia and beyond, entrenches boundaries and identities, with state actors' prominence growing.

The title of Part IV, 'From Local Realities to Concepts and Theorizing', not only summarizes the contributors' approaches, but also suggests progression from the preceding part's empirical focus. These more theoretically- and conceptually-oriented chapters cohere around the idea of 'mid-range concepts', adapting Merton's 'middle-range theories', to counter what Mielke and Wilde frame as area studies' earlier tendency towards „compilation of empirical data“ (p. 159). They elaborate on the 'mid-range concept' of Social Order through their actor-centred work in the Central Asian region of Transoxania, which in straddling multiple nation-states enables longue-durée comparison of current power relations with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Applying „local hermeneutics“ restates area studies' value for „teaching cultural mediation abilities“ (p. 173). Such 'thick knowledge' competences are also reflected in Lachenmann's intersection of development studies with a 'global ethnography' inspired by Burawoy. She demonstrates how 'glocalized' experiences produce the mid-range concepts of 'social space' and 'interfaces of knowledge' (pp. 181-82), querying many development programmes' top-down logic. Her intra-regional comparison through multi-sited study contrasts with Hornidge's exploration of water management in one space, Uzbekistan's Khorezm region but its focus on multiple ways of place-making illustrate this part's conceptual and methodological coherence.

'New Area Studies' is Houben's name for this model that enables an actor-centred, „deep, polycentric understanding of the world“

(p. 210) based in „processual mid-range concepts“ (p. 209), which he lists rather than elaborates. Inspired by the translation turn, he argues that this model involves „negotiating between local perspectives and global academic language“ and „making local epistemologies compatible with scientific language, without privileging one over the other“ (p. 206). However, here and elsewhere in *Area Studies at the Crossroads* a problematic binary marking the empirical-local and scientific-global does emerge. Hornidge, for example, notes that „the risk of Western domination or a hegemonic approach [...] could never be ruled out“ in her team of two Germans and one Uzbek, with „Western theoretical thought“ prevailing in the analysis (p. 225). The bind that makes transcending ‘Euro-Americanism’ and achieving the ‘Analytical, Emancipatory Area Studies’ she and Mielke propose so challenging remains tight, even with important, self-reflexive comments on scholars’ own positionality and knowledge production.

Houben suggests area studies has an „inside-outward perspective“, focusing on situated experiences, in contrast to disciplines’ „outside-inward“ application of models and theories (p. 202). Yet area studies remain an endeavour pursued predominantly by outsiders looking in on another space and communicating findings outside it. Indeed, the conceptual and theoretical coherence of Part IV queries Houben’s bifurcation of area studies’ and disciplines’ perspective. Scholars without in-depth social science or ethnographic backgrounds might view the fieldwork-based model and notion of mid-range concepts as disciplinary particularities, rather than as the near-universal model ‘New Area Studies’ implies. Its focus on comparative ethnography could be considered in relation to comparative area studies’ multi-scalar and multi-disciplinary vision, as outlined by Ahram and others², where in-depth contextualization is pursued in conjunction with a broad range of data and disciplinary approaches.

As an intersection of often particular, situated, disciplinary knowledge, *Area Studies at the Crossroads* at points assumes significant prior knowledge of key concepts, in-

cluding the mid-range, mobility turn and the „crossroads perspective“ that shaped the BMBF-funded project. The editors have elaborated on the latter elsewhere³, but here some shortcomings in copyediting mean certain key ideas remain unclear. For example: „The Crossroads perspective therefore placed this interrelation between the dynamic (mobilities and mobilization processes), the static (borders, boundaries, their establishment, negotiation and disassembling) and the many differentiations in between proving this constructed dichotomy wrong, studied through the lens of human (individual and collective) interaction“ (p. 14). The volume gives the impression crossroads are rarely starting points or destinations in themselves, but rather a useful space through which things – in this case empirical data, concepts, methods and future visions of area studies – can all flow in and out again in various directions. Indeed, with *Crossroads Asia* having ended in 2016, the ideas it generated are taking root and bearing fruit in multiple contexts within the broader network of area studies and disciplinary infrastructures.

That the volume largely resulted from a conference⁴ is clear, hence it does not possess the coherence of recent programmatic area studies handbooks⁵, or monographs focused on the history of area studies⁶ and its role in knowledge production⁷. While perhaps not quite the „path-breaking journey“ (p. 13) the editors’ introduction promi-

² Ariel I. Ahram, The Theory and Method of Comparative Area Studies, in: *Qualitative Research* 11 (2011) 1, pp. 69–90 (doi:10.1177/1468794110385297); Ariel I. Ahram / Patrick Köllner / Rudra Sil, (eds), *Comparative Area Studies. Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications*, Oxford 2018.

³ Katja Mielke / Anna-Katharina Hornidge, *Crossroads Studies. From Spatial Containers to Interactions in Differentiated Spatialities*, in: *Crossroads Asia Working Paper, Series 15*, 2014, Bonn.

⁴ Programme available: <https://www.areastudies.uni-freiburg.de/Content/files/external-news/xroads-newsletter-no.-14.pdf> (accessed 3 April 2020).

⁵ –Ahram et al, *Comparative Area Studies* (see footnote 2); Matthias Middell (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Transregional Studies*, London 2018.

⁶ Anne Kwaschik, *Der Griff nach dem Weltwissen. Zur Genealogie von Area Studies im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2018.

⁷ Claudia Derichs, *Knowledge Production, Area Studies and Global Cooperation*, London 2017.

sed, it does illustrate key trends in third-wave area studies, adding thrust to the move away from container-based and contiguous constructions of spaces in favour of actor-centred approaches. Whether the more ambitious future horizons outlined in Part VI and dotted throughout can be reached using the paths forming this crossroads remains open. But the volume's thought-provoking and sometimes provocative critical reflections on knowledge production and its domination by institutions and traditions of the Global North/West, together with its insights for ongoing discussions about the scale of area studies research, means *Area Studies at the Crossroads* can be recommended for any scholars (and institutional libraries) working not only in Asian/Southeast Studies but also area studies generally.

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