

Areas and Ideas

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These days, the divide between the area studies and social science disciplines seems to be so wide as to make us forget that what is known as the “universal” social sciences have in fact a *regional* (European) origin. Europe was the working field of the founding fathers from Herbert Spencer and Adam Smith to Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, whose scholarship navigated through what have now become the rigidly separate disciplines of economics, politics, and sociology. To bring the social sciences back to their proper status, we need to revive that original tradition of marrying areas and ideas, history, and theory. Our aim, of course, should not be to create a new orthodoxy, particularism, but to break the orthodoxies that the European tradition subsequently entailed; our aim should be to bring the social sciences into intimate conversation with area studies, to contextualize and historicize knowledge, to enrich social theory. The pages of this newly relaunched publication can offer an invaluable venue for interrogating the modalities of such endeavor.

Despite notable progress in my own fields (Middle East studies and sociology) in recent years, area specialists and social scientists have yet to cross boundaries and communicate with ease. I have felt this separation through my own experience of working across academic institutions in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. On the one hand, I have been impressed by area studies’ passion for language training, meticulous instruction of literature, poetry, and history, and an education that often requires undergraduate students to prepare research theses on their field of specialization and travel to the “region” to conduct field work. On the other, however, I could not help being dispirited by the depressingly narrow scope, nonanalytical character, and dull, descriptive, and at times irrelevant disposition of those otherwise meticulously prepared studies. The use of social science categories was often considered, at best, a distraction, adding nothing meaningful to the subjects at hand.

The claim of distraction was probably not much unfounded, given that, on their part, the mainstream social science institutions operated in their own universe of building models and theories, treating them as though they were the universal explanatory tools to unravel social dilemmas. Most of these models remained distant from the intricacies of real life, local settings, regional cultures and histories. If there was an attempt to engage, it barely went beyond *importing* certain categories to *apply* to regions; otherwise intimate research into and knowledge of the “areas” remained uncommon. I recall how the convener of an international conference on urban research in the late 1990s would plead with researchers, “Please, talk to people!”—implying that many of the studies took place behind desks far away from the actual sites and settings. No wonder some authors would later publish books, for instance, about the Arab uprisings without even setting foot on the region.

Clearly this division between area scholarship and the social sciences, which has assumed paradigmatic and institutional dimensions, remains a challenge that needs to be tackled. The original union of regions and social theory as well as interdisciplinary tradition, needs to be revived if we seek to produce meaningful knowledge. The good news is that there seems to be a growing interest in this kind of approach. The rising popularity of “global studies” in Western universities is not simply a result of job market demands but also a recognition that the current regimentation and fragmentation of knowledge production is inimical to the meaningful awareness necessary to address the questions of our rapidly changing and interconnected world. More important, the idea of provincializing social sciences proposed by such scholars as Timothy Mitchell, Michael Burawoy, and others would open a valuable analytical space to engage the study of the regions with the social science categories to interrogate their universal postulation.

But two pertinent questions need to be addressed. First, are “areas” or “regions” not problematic categories? More precisely, are areas tenable units of inquiry when historically they are likely to have been constructed or imagined? Of course, here areas and regions such as the Middle East or Africa signify the geographical designations for “social reality” (as opposed to social theory). Yet, this social reality that we take as the unit of inquiry should possess an adequate degree of coherence to warrant the designation “area.” So, beyond attempting to provincialize the social sciences, we may also need to problematize the provinces. After all, some of the older and familiar questions still linger—for instance, what and where is the Middle East? Does it constitute a homogeneous entity? What about its diverse languages and economies? Or how much coherency, if any, should a “region” possess in order to serve as a workable category?

Some years ago, I had to grapple with these very questions when I was trying to make sense of the terms “Islamic world,” or “Islamic society”—entities that are even larger and more diverse realities than, say, the Middle East. In that attempt, instead of the singular abstract categories of “Islamic world” or “Islamic society” (the totalizing notions that are constructed by others to describe how Muslims are or should be), I proposed “Mus-

lim societies” as plural and concrete entities that could allow a self-conscious Muslim majority to define their own reality in an albeit contested, differentiated, and dynamic fashion. I defined Muslim societies as those in which aspects of Islam, interpreted and adopted in diverse manners, have influenced some domains of private and public life—including the realms of morality, family relations, gender dynamics, law, and sometimes politics and the state. The term “Muslim societies,” then, emphasizes not Islam per se but Muslims as the makers of their societies and cultures. My intention was to imagine a field of study that could productively and simultaneously incorporate, even if with tension, both the tenets of area studies and the insights of disciplinary fields in the social sciences.

But this does not address the question of diversity and coherence. Would the fluidity and differentiation embedded in such categories as the Middle East, Africa, or South Asia, let alone the Muslim societies, not diminish their intended analytical purpose? This is a challenging question, and I do not have an adequate response. Yet I think that the point is not that these categorical areas or regions are not internally varied, but rather that the common concerns shared *within* these regions are perhaps larger than those shared *between* them and other regions or areas of the world. While there might be differentiation within, say, the Middle East, it is probably less so than the variety (in terms of history, culture, and languages, if not economic arrangements) one may find between the Middle East and Latin America, for instance. In this sense, the Middle East, one may suggest, holds enough coherence to allow for addressing meaningful analytical questions, even though all this ultimately depends on what sort of analytical questions we wish to raise and what aspect of social life we have in mind.

There is still a second question. No matter how we construct area as a meaningful category, how do we attain conversations among areas and ideas, regions and social theory, in the current institutional and disciplinary arrangements in which we are trained and socialized? What intellectual and logistical resources are needed? I am not aware of any ready-made strategy. In fact the pages of this journal might be a suitable space to precisely explore and elaborate on such questions.

If I were to reflect on my own very limited experience, I would say that as a social scientist, I deeply care about abstract ideas and categories, and I am keen on their potential ability to explain complex social processes. But as an area specialist, I am equally invested in understanding the empirical nitty-gritties of my region, the Middle East. I have an urge to observe and to deploy multiple methods (ethnographic, quantitative, comparative, and historical) to get the stories right, so to speak. I do not study the Middle East in order to interrogate social science categories; I study the Middle East because I want to understand it. But doing so, especially when I ponder the meanings of those stories, inevitably forces me to engage with abstract categories. In the process, the details of social dynamics I observe and discover may lead to vital insights and fresh perspectives.

For some years I have been trying to understand how the urban subaltern in the Middle East (the poor, women, and youth) manage to enhance their life chances under formidable political and economic conditions—what they do and how they do it, and what they think of their doings. Living and working in Egypt for many years while visiting Iran and the surrounding countries did provide me the necessary time and opportunity to observe and appreciate the nuances of the subaltern life. While these groups were often not allowed to organize to make their claims, they nevertheless, through their everyday doings, created significant changes in their own lives and in their societies at large. Now, how could one make sense of these subalterns' mode of operation and the logic of their practice? Realizing that the prevailing categories such as "survival strategy," "cooptation," "resistance," "social movements," or "contentious politics" were unable to help, I came up with the idea of "non-movements" as the collective practices of non-collective people, which I thought could capture the logic of practice among these subaltern groups. I hoped that this notion could critically and productively engage with the conventional notions of social movements, or perhaps with the Habermasian idea of the public sphere.

Even though the idea of non-movements emerged from my understanding of the realities of subaltern life in Tehran and Cairo, its conceptualization could not have been adequate had I

remained constricted to these two cities, or even to the Middle East at large. A rigorous and more complex study of a case, setting, or region would benefit immensely from broader vistas from which one can simultaneously view other cases, settings, or regions. In short, and perhaps paradoxically, rigorous studies of an area demand a global lens, a *comparative* vision. But comparison itself is a tricky and multilayered notion. A comparison may, in the first place, be *implicit*—we humans are constantly involved in everyday life, often unintentionally, in matching places, people, or prices as a way to produce knowledge. On the other hand, comparison may be in the form of *analogy*, where we deliberately juxtapose existing cases to decipher their similarities and differences. Such comparative practices can serve to alter or enhance our perspective even if we focus only on a particular subject of inquiry. Simply put, we are likely to learn a lot more about Egypt (depending on what we are studying) by traveling to and gaining knowledge about Brazil or Senegal. For we would ask questions about or notice things in Egypt that we would not had our observations remained limited exclusively to Egypt. Of course analogies of this sort are likely to bring up certain "lacks" or "absences," but this should not be of concern so long as these lacks and absences remain matters of inquiry and exploration rather than judgment. Finally, explicit and systematic comparisons entail more than simply juxtaposing cases for the sake of highlighting differences or similarities. The latter are not comparisons, strictly speaking; they are analogies. For real comparisons are not *ex post facto* acts of considering similarities and differences subsequent to studies already done. Rather they begin with certain research questions, which then compel us to delve into comparative undertaking. Here, then, comparing serves not simply as an intellectual exercise to satisfy certain curiosities but as an epistemological enterprise necessary to unravel analytical puzzles.

Comparison of this sort holds special purchase in the current conditions of intense globalization, where interregional flows and linkages tend to generate a complex amalgam of both uncanny resemblances and sharp differences. In fact, these emerging conditions can potentially set the stage for raising exciting questions, opening up

new horizons for social inquiry, and producing innovative perspectives that may call into question rigid orthodoxies, subvert essentialisms, and enrich social theory.

But we should also be mindful of possible drawbacks. In the current academic culture, the pressure for originality and innovation has become so overwhelming that it threatens to push practitioners to indulge in intellectual vanity or irrelevance—to produce fresh but futile scripts. Striking a balance between inventiveness and use value, between originality and relevance remains another challenge of our intellectual vocation. A truly productive engagement with and critical reflection on the social sciences is possible only by intimate area knowledge, wide perspectives, a comparative lens, and a search for meaningful knowledge directed at human emancipation. ■■■■

References

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