

Research note

Theory-Driven Conceptualization and Epistemic Reflection in Comparative Area Studies: Some Thoughts on “Unwritten Constitutions” and Research Designs

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Summary

The discussion of the relationship between disciplines and area studies often revolves around the two issues of theory and methodology. A shared understanding on the part of both disciplinary-oriented scholars and area experts exists with regard to the necessity of making empirical findings regarding the generation of theory, as well as regarding theory testing and conceptual “travel.” Opinions vary, however, when it comes to the degree of interdependence between area studies and disciplinary inquiry: Does area research have to make use of disciplinary-based theories, concepts, and methods? Or, can it do without them — relying instead on a paradigm that takes the field as a realm of encounter and thus dispenses with a translation of “unconceptualized” phenomena into the theoretical terminology of a particular discipline? Moreover, the definition of what constitutes an “area” is an ongoing topic of debate within area studies and disciplinary studies alike. The subsequent discussion in this article attempts to structure the discursive field of current area studies debates — albeit in a non-exhaustive manner. Against the backdrop of the broader discussion about knowledge production in and through area studies, it points to issues of context, condition, and position in such research. It then reflects on the theory-based approach of “unwritten constitutions” (as introduced by Birsl and Salzborn in this volume) as a case in point for creating research designs that take epistemic questions into account.

Manuscript received on 2014-01-13, accepted on 2014-04-23

Keywords: area studies, container categories, disciplines, positionality

Structuring the field: area studies, areas, and disciplines

The relationship between area studies and academic disciplines has been uneasy at times, and still represents a contested field for the thorough reflection on global knowledge production. While the days of mutual accusation — with the disciplines claiming that area studies are free of theoretical and methodological reflection, and area studies scholars rejecting the arrival at allegedly universal theories without their