

Remaking area studies



This collected volume offers fascinating insights and contentions in regard to studying and teaching about Asia and the Pacific. At its heart is a discussion about area studies within global transformations in the flow of capital and people, the rise of new political centers, and intense cultural exchanges and identity claims. Specifically, its essays critically engage the social, intellectual and institutional contexts within which knowledge about an area is produced.

Eyal Ben-Ari

Goss, Jon and Wesley-Smith, Terence (eds), 2010.
Remaking Area Studies: Teaching and Learning Across Asia and the Pacific.
Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
248 pages. ISBN 978 0 8248 3321 3 (paperback).

FOR THOSE OF US WHO TEACH, this collection also offers suggestions about student-centered practices through regional learning communities. Hence, the volume not only identifies the current crisis in area studies but also addresses solutions in terms of the production of knowledge through research and learning. Very well written with excellent editorial introductions to the volume as a whole and to each part, the collection will appeal to specialists in area studies and in the disciplines comprising in them (primarily the social sciences and the humanities).

Apart from the introduction, the volume is divided into three main parts. The excellent introduction comprises short summaries of the chapters and (more importantly) establishes an analytical framework for the volume in terms of critiquing present-day area studies. The first part looks at area studies from the perspective of processes centered on, and research related to, globalization. The idea here is to question the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices through which area studies have been created and recreated during the past few decades: for instance the importance of the Cold War for such studies in the United States where they were established in order to “know” regions of strategic importance to the American state. Of special interest is Dirlik’s analysis of recent (and now reigning) paradigms within “Western” academe: he critiques four frames that include civilizational studies, oceanic studies, Asianization of Asian Studies and diasporic studies. The second part includes essays about the emergence and cultivation of area studies in Japan and the Pacific Islands. What I found fascinating in this section are analyses of the sociology of institutions producing area studies. Readers are offered articles about the academic, official state and intellectual perspectives involved in particular contexts such as Japan or Singapore. The analysis found in the volume’s first two parts forms the basis for the final section includes a number of essays on the development of web-based courses that link institutions based in the US, East and Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The background to this fascinating volume comprises processes encapsulated in the terms “globalization” and especially the dominance and contestation of American power (economic, political, military and cultural) by Asian “powers”. The crisis the editors rightly identify centers on the apparent erosion of the conceptual and spatial boundaries historically identified with area studies. As they explain, such studies—be they for instance “Asian”, “Southeast Asian”, “Pacific”, “Chinese” or “Japanese” studies—are produced and reproduced historically and promoted and defended institutionally. With the changes brought about by the end of the

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Cold War, less funding has been available for “knowing” local areas (with the exception of the “Middle East” and parts of Central and Southeast Asia) bringing about pressures for institutional changes within academe. These transformations have been accompanied by new intellectual challenges centered on critical analyses of identity, a concept now seen as much more mobile and labile than in the past. Furthermore, the extended critique of centers of power has progressively evolved into an understanding of the relations between power and the production of knowledge. Finally, as the basic units of area studies—nation-states—have undergone significant changes during the past few decades (but, of course, have not withered away) so the certainty, clarity, and “objectivity” of a field comprising them are all questioned.

As a commentator based outside of the United States I felt, at times, uncomfortable with the contentions of some of the contributions. In what follows I offer a number of comments based on a cautious and respectful reading of this important volume. For example, in their very good introduction, the editors talk about what they call the complicity of scholars in area studies with the national security project and the continued need to face issues of ethics or integrity. To be sure, ethics in scholarly work often entails more than the stress on individual and (especially in the American case) legal responsibility. But my impression is that American-based scholars often use ethics as a synonym for politics (it is a bad word when directed at “us”), that is, they use ethics to refer to processes centered on the state, its policies and representatives, and involving impulsion towards activism. A more explicit focus on politics by the contributors, at least for me, would have raised questions not only about the worthiness of collective action and the transformational capacities of the state. No less importantly, it raises questions about political positioning in the academic world and how belonging to different political and ideological camps is part and parcel of contemporary debates within the scholarly world. By such positioning, I refer not to the hackneyed custom found among some American based scholars to check academic venues for their representativeness (are there enough female contributors to the volume? Why are there no South American scholars represented since they are of the “Pacific?”). Rather, I refer to the potential closure of questions implied by a certain political view within academic circles.

Take the whole notion of the (American or US) national security project which is left relatively unexamined in the volume. To be sure, many scholars in area studies (within and outside the US) have participated in security related enterprises and to an extent this trend has been intensified by the horrible “War on Terror”. But could it be that an almost knee-jerk reaction to the argument about complicity (and its accompanying plea for ethics and integrity) simultaneously responds to political expectations within academia and (perhaps) tries to assuage scholarly guilt, but also blinds us to the great contributions of scholars in area studies since the Second World War: be they critiques of power, educating

policy-makers, or self reflexivity. I would very cautiously suggest that underlying the genuine commitment of the contributors to this volume to going beyond accepted paradigms that dominate area studies is a political agenda broadly termed post-colonial: to “just-ing,” to redeeming past scholarly work. In this way, I courteously suggest, their agenda may close questions about the more “positive” aspects of area studies and a deeper reflexivity about the social circumstances within which knowledge within them is produced: for instance the unintended consequences of government funding for studies of Southeast Asia or China.

Along these lines, and following the editors, I see the major challenge that this volume presents as that of finding “new forms of area studies that take ideas of internationalization and democratization seriously [and] must find space for the other ways of knowing and living in the world that continue to shape the day-to-day lives of most inhabitants of the planet”. The key problem is to understand what is meant by “new ways of knowing”. There are a number of assumptions in the various articles in the volume, each of which encouraged me to think about different directions or solutions. The first solution entails producing multiple local or indigenous knowledges. Most strongly represented in Teresia Teiwa’s essay, this plea harks back to the 1950s and 1960s with particular calls for African or Asian ways of knowing that are somehow different than the received “Western” ones. The danger in such a view is that of a knowledge that is essentialized (only natives can “really” know) and privileged (their truth is paramount). The second solution (and one rather often celebrated in contemporary scholarly circles) is to underscore the special views that can only be had from the periphery. But the risk here is that of privileging the peripheral or marginal view, as has been asserted by advocates of critical approaches in the “West” for years (think of Marxist or feminist analyses). When coupled with an emphasis on indigeneity, one ends up with pleas for such things as the unique advantage of an Islamic sociology, a Japanese anthropology or a Chinese ethnology (to mention the disciplines most close to me). I have yet to find an analytical advantage to such conceptual frameworks that is somehow critically different from received “Western” theories

The third solution is interactional and one I find most interesting as presented in the volume. The emphasis here is on co-learning through cooperative efforts. But here the power imbalances between the institutions participating in the project described in *Remaking Area Studies* take on importance (and to be fair, the contributors are aware of this point). Take the modules developed for the joint seminars held between the institutions. To my ears, they sound like any fashionable modules developed in universities around the United States (and in the institutions I know well in Israel, parts of Japan and Southeast Asia): migration and multiculturalism; tourism, representation and identity, and globalization and popular culture. Let me be very clear, I am not denigrating these efforts but trying to understand what new forms of knowledge were produced within them. Furthermore, notice that it was a team at the University of Hawaii that initiated and established (with American funding) connections with other regional colleges: Did this fact mean that the de-facto center was American? And, if this was the case, is this fact important? At this historical point should we not, then, perhaps focus more on how interactive technologies (email, websites and video conferencing) destabilize the relationship between subjects and objects of knowledge, rather than be preoccupied with guilt underlying historical cases of exploitation and inequality? Again, I would like to clarify that I am not arguing for a move away from history. Rather, my impression is that too strong an emphasis on a certain kind of history—one that answers expectations related to the politics of identity—may foreclose issues such as internal exploitation within Asian and Pacific societies before the encroachment of colonialism, or the contemporary alliances between local elites and external conglomerates.

To conclude, my reading of this valuable volume suggests three avenues for continued scholarly attention. First, to develop further the interactional approach to studying and teaching but perhaps without the guilt, essentializing and privileging of knowledge implied by some present-day debates. Second, following the contributions by Eades and Kong, to be thoroughly aware of the actual institutional and organizational dynamics within which research and learning take place. And third, to carry the challenges posed by this fascinating collection to comparative analyses of area studies in other parts of the world.

I enjoyed reading this volume very much and would recommend it not only to scholars within “Asian” and “Pacific” studies but to anyone interested in the complex relations between scholarly activities and area studies.

Eyal Ben-Ari
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
feba@netvision.net.il