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**Abstract**

At a time when nearly every topic seems to be labeled “critical” in geography, this article asks why the discipline has lacked a clear commitment to advancing a “critical area studies” agenda. The term “critical” can take many meanings but, I argue, it has generally been an important way to “other” geography’s past, including the encyclopedism of old-fashioned regional studies. With roots in the late 1980s, the idea of joining critical theory and area studies was initially challenged by questions of representation, which are inherent in area studies scholarship. Placing power at the center of their studies, and highly conscious of their own positionality, critical geographers have lacked a coherent approach to the political and ethical issues of representation. Another difficulty lies with critical geography’s general skepticism about engaging the “policy community”, which, especially in the US, tends to be imagined as an uncritical “other”. Given the discipline’s cyclical anxieties about policy relevance that typically surface when funding programs are subject to cuts, this has largely resulted in US geographers speaking *past* these audiences. With respect to both of these othering practices, I suggest that a critical area studies project would benefit from a more positive framing, stressing “deep listening” in empirically-informed work, and actively imagining what a critical policy community might look like.

**Keywords:** area studies, critical geography, region, politics of relevance

**Cyclical anxieties**

In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, the prominent Georgetown professor Charles King (2015) warned Americans of the dangers of what he described as a precipitous decline of international affairs in academia. “Things are changing”, he warned:

“Shifting priorities at the national level, a misreading of the effects of globalization, and academics’ own drift away from knowing real things about real places have combined to weaken this vital component of the United States’ intellectual capital. Educational institutions and the disciplines they preserve are retreating from the task of cultivating men and women who are comfortable moving around the globe, both literally and figuratively” (King, 2015).

While purporting to describe a contemporary state of affairs, King’s commentary represents a recurring script in discussions about the relationship between US foreign policy and academic area studies. Social scientists, geographers included, seem strapped into a periodic cycle of calling for a

stronger public commitment to regional and area studies when their “relevance” is being questioned by policymakers seeking to tighten the purse strings of research funding programs.

These occasional bouts of hand-wringing in US in academia, which jointly draw on nationalist and security anxieties, often use a major geopolitical event as a megaphone to pronounce the significance of scholarly work and the need to train the next cadre of regional experts. For example, in Toal’s (2003) *Political Geography* commentary, “Re-asserting the regional”, he argued that in light of the recent US response to the 9/11 attacks, “it may be time to re-think the commitment to the systematic and global and re-assert the importance of regional geographical knowledge” (Toal, 2003: 654). Critiquing the pervasive culture of techno-fetishism of both the US military-surveillance apparatus and many academic geography programs, he suggests the need for more ““thick” knowledge of the world to counter the “thin” and immediate technical geographical knowledge—the ability of satellite cameras and drones to provide real-time video images of obscure Afghan mountain passes” (Toal, 2003: 654).

Similarly, King’s commentary opens by noting the irony of the US State Department’s October 2013 decision to cut the Title VIII Program, which funded language and cultural training on Russia and the former Soviet Union, only one month before the cascade of events in Ukraine that led to Russia annexing Crimea and an ongoing civil war. Equally concerned about the US military’s techno-fetishism edging out knowledge-based approaches, he notes: “The end of the United States’ premier federal program for Russian studies saved taxpayers only \$3.3 million—the cost of two Tomahawk cruise missiles or about half a day’s sea time for an aircraft carrier strike group” (King, 2015).

Whether in the policy realm or in the context of disciplinary navel-gazing, the anxieties manifested in these cyclical discussions about the current state and future of area studies have deep roots and, within geography, regional studies has had an especially long and embattled history (Livingstone, 1993; Morin, 2012; Smith, 2010). Vidalian regional geography, which defined the discipline in the early half of the twentieth century, came under attack by the likes of Carl Sauer, who despised “trite regional descriptions” (Livingstone, 1993: 298). By the 1960s, it had come to symbolize atheoretical description, trapped in the “taxonomic amber” (Thrift, 1994: 209). It was only in the 1980s that geographers began to advocate a “new” regional geography, that moved beyond the sub-state regionalism of Vidal de la Blache, and advance a more critical regional studies as the “conceptual vanguard of the discipline’s contribution to the social sciences” (Pudup, 1988: 369; also see O’Loughlin, 1988; Paasi, 1986; Soja, 1985; Thrift, 1990, 1991).

At this time, the critical theory turn had just begun to reach geography. Scholars started to apply a critical lens to the concept of the “region”, with the Finnish geographer Paasi (1986: 121). decisively naming it “an institutional construction” that may unfold at any range of scales from the supra to the sub-state: “a region can just as well be a part of a city, a municipality or a county, as a province or nation-state”. Things looked promising for critical theory coming together with geography’s long

regional studies tradition, but despite all the enthusiasm of this agenda-setting discourse, the “new” regional geography of the 1980s never caught hold. Some years later, in a *Progress in Human Geography* article, Paasi (2002) again proposed a marriage of critical theory and regional studies as “critical regional studies”. Although Paasi’s other work has generated great interest, this suggested framework again failed to take hold.

Thus, in the years since geography’s critical turn, the specific idea of a *critical area studies* has not advanced far. In the remainder of this short essay, I consider why we have still not seen a rigorous commitment to joining critical theory and area studies, asking whether a critical area studies is even possible. And if it is, what might this look like, and what it might mean for the cyclical anxieties about the state of regional expertise within academia?

### **Is a critical area studies possible?**

In today’s academic geography, nearly every topic seems to be labeled “critical”. Perhaps more a disclaimer and less a descriptor, the term “critical” may be understood as the culmination of geography’s recent engagement with poststructural and postcolonial theory. As used today, it indexes a theoretical orientation that places power relations at the fore of our intellectual puzzling, and hinges on social constructivist theoretical underpinnings. Although the term may be increasingly irrelevant if everything is “critical”, it has played an important role in the history of geography as a means of acknowledging the political lenses with which we interpret our research. In contrast to, for example, mainstream political science, geographers have made good use of post-structuralism’s concern with power by applying it to the mirror: significant theoretical and empirical advances have come from scholars’ effort to reflect on the political and ethical implications of our own geo-graphing.

But in many ways, the “critical” label also indexes an apolitical “other”. In part, this is a historical “other”, located across the discipline’s checkered past and associated, for example, with the hyper-quantification of the world during the heyday of numbers, or the encyclopedism of the old-fashioned, Vidalian regional studies. This critique of apolitical or atheoretical research also raised new challenges about the ethics of representation. How, many collectively asked, can we represent the world without reproducing essentialist and totalizing narratives, and in such a way that does not repeat the encyclopedism of regional geography’s past? And how do we, scholars-as-situated-actors, represent people and places in a manner that does not further entrench colonial power structures, which have long pervaded academic disciplines and area studies programs? (see for example Gupta and Ferguson, 1997; Said, 1978; Sidaway, 2013b; Spivak, 1988; Thrift, 1994).

That geographers lacked clear answers to these questions in the late 80s and early 1990s is largely responsible, I believe, for condemning the ambitious agenda of the “new” regional studies. Advocates were simply unable to counter critiques of regional research and area studies programs as being complicit in “legitimizing and maintaining” a static set of Orientalist conceptions of the world (Said, 1978: 302). The situation does not seem much better today, with geography becoming deeply

fragmented since the early 1990s, as scholars have grappled with the moral and political implications of representation in contrasting ways. Some, like Nigel Thrift (2008), have gone in the direction of non-representational theory, while others, including many feminist geographers, have argued that representation is both necessary and possible, so long as scholars do so reflexively and through foregrounding ethical questions (for example Gibson-Graham, 2004; Matthew, 2007; Megoran, 2008; Moss, 2002).

The vast majority of these advances, however, have focused geography conversations far away from the discourses familiar to policymakers, who can take little in terms of practical lessons from this heavily-theoretical work. This is, no doubt, often intentional – obscurity and obtuseness has a long history as the preferred academic defense strategies for dealing with the fact that our work always escapes us. But some, particularly in political geography, have underscored the need for geographers to engage with the policy world and to promote deep regional knowledge as an antidote to the imperial and destructive potential of ill-informed US foreign policies (for instance Murphy, 2006, 2013; Murphy et al., 2005; Ó Tuathail, 2010; Toal, 2003), as well as combatting perniciously essentialist accounts of geography in popular media, exemplified recently in Robert Kaplan's (2012) *Revenge of Geography*.

On these grounds, Murphy and O'Loughlin (2009: 245) argue that a responsible political geography simply “cannot ignore the meso-scale—i.e., that of major “world regions”, however difficult it is to define those regions and however much they are contested” (see also Murphy, 2013). Increasingly, this will require looking beyond the traditional referential circuits that define these meso-scale regional boundaries. One major obstacle, however, is that scholars themselves are still too often trapped by the effect of regions as “structures of expectations” (Paasi, 2009: 133). So despite the theoretical recognition that regions are constructed, geographers have been largely resistant to considering alternative scalings and definitions of the “region”, such as we see in the pioneering work in anthropology and history on Indian Ocean studies that advances an ocean-based approach to the region (Ho, 2006). This work has made nary a dent in geographic scholarship – and Lewis and Wigen's (1999) efforts to bring it to the field have been almost entirely overlooked (but see Chari in this issue).

Geographers, it seems, have preferred network-based analyses, such as those that trace a commodity, resource, or policy as it moves, socially and materially, around the world. While theoretically and empirically a boon for the discipline, such studies often work to simply bypass regional geographies entirely. The result is that this work is too frequently detached from local histories to make sense of the deeply historical circuits that give rise to transnational linkages – whether this is illegal timber, development discourses, or urban policy schemes. The fact that this sort of “fast scholarship” is filling many of our journals' pages, graduate students in geography are increasingly finding this regionally-*uninformed* approach to be an appropriate research model. Given skyrocketing student loan figures, high student fees, and research funding pressures, students are hardly to be blamed for finding a faster

model of research appealing. Unfortunately (from my perspective, at least), without a long-term research agenda in specific places, it can be easy to miss important local narratives that get systematically written out of media and scholarly accounts.

For example, in my own research, I have noticed that insufficient attention has been given to the rapidly-expanding connections between Central Asia and the Gulf Arab states. In large part, this is because observers in academic, policy, and media circles have tended to focus on connections between Central Asia and other parts of the “post-Soviet” space. But through listening carefully to my local informants and colleagues, I have encountered a great deal of agitation against the “post-Soviet” label, which people increasingly find as irrelevant at best, and stigmatizing at worst (Koch, 2013a). In contrast, through a set of aspirational narratives, residents of Kazakhstan and elsewhere in Central Asia and the Caucasus, are actively positioning themselves in line with the “modern” Middle East, the heart of which they locate in the Arabian Peninsula (Koch, 2013b, 2015). Of course, these narratives are not merely rhetoric, but are increasingly manifested in a dense network of social, political, and economic ties, exemplified in an informal discussion I had with the US ambassador to the United Arab Emirates in 2013. He frequently joked with his counterpart in Kazakhstan, he said, that it was easier to meet Kazakhstan’s ministers there in Dubai than in Astana.

In pursuing my cross-regional research agenda, initially designed around analyzing spectacular capital city development in resource-rich states, I have found that, despite the theoretical recognition of the flexibility of regional imaginaries and performances, scholars seeking to undertake “unexpected comparisons” (Myers, 2014) are often met with a series of constraints. Consistently coming up against critiques that Central Asia and the Arabian Peninsula are incomparable because they are so different, I have recently argued elsewhere that such a dismissal would overlook the potential insights of exploring *divergences* in cross-regional research (Koch, 2015). Now 25 years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, continuing the scholarly tradition of positioning Central Asia within post-Soviet regional studies can easily obscure as much as it can reveal. This is not to say that all comparative research has equal scholarly potential. Rather, it is to say that pushing beyond “traditional” comparisons and regional designations requires an engaged and critical approach to listening – especially to how our informants imagine and produce their own regions with reference to other regions.

### **“Deep listening” and imagining a critical area studies**

If we are to imagine a “critical area studies” in geography that aims to join critical theory and the area studies tradition, this will require moving beyond the simple deconstructivist impulse to point out *that* regions are socially constructed to ask *how* regions are constructed. Not only would this require moving beyond the clichéd “deep hanging out” of ethnographic research, but advocating a “deep listening” and critical reflexivity that might characterize a critical area studies. “Deep listening”, for me, is a prerequisite to empirically-driven advances in geographic theory: it entails reducing one’s research-dictated thematic filters to listen as broadly as possible to what situated actors are saying in

their interactions with “us” as scholars. It entails reading past formulaic media presentations of particular places – whether these are cities reduced to fantasy as in Astana (Koch, 2012) or countries reduced to countries characterized solely by exclusion and oppression as in the Gulf states (Vora and Koch, 2015).

As noted above, without a sustained commitment to research in particular places, it can be difficult to “hear” beyond traditional cognitive and interpretative frames. And without grounded, empirical research, geographers can too easily lapse into reproducing hegemonic discourses about regions and places, if only through the very questions we ask. Only through a deeply contextual research agenda can researchers retain the openness to surprise and the ability to perceive small changes, which (should) come with being intimate familiarity with local nuance. Given funding shortages, and a range of other factors, I recognize that not all scholars have the privilege of conducting long-term fieldwork somewhere far from (or even near) their home. But my point is not that “critical area studies” requires only extended ethnographic research – but rather a form of deep listening that pushes beyond commonplace metanarratives about certain parts of the world, or the trendy theoretical line of inquiry of the day.

Having been personally trained in the area studies tradition, I am sympathetic to the possibility of a critical area studies, and see significant potential for deep regional knowledge to advance geographic theory. I am more ambivalent on the question of what this means for the cyclical anxieties about “policy-relevance”. This is because I write and speak for many audiences and, for any given project, I am constantly asking myself, as Sidaway (2013a) does, what kind of geographical understanding am I advancing for whom? Similarly, as participants of this special issue collectively asked during the related workshop at the National University of Singapore on “reformatting” the relationship between geography and area studies, is this necessarily for the “better”? And for whom? The answer to each of these questions will always be different – not because each of us has our own political positionality and because the content of our research is relevant to different audiences, but because our various audiences “do not pre-exist discourse – they are brought into being and formed through it” (Morin, 2012: 4).

It is important to bear in mind that although we may make a concerted effort to speak to, and thus conjure, a specific audience, that this effect works also for those whom we strategically speak past. Perhaps more important than the audiences whom we directly engage, these audiences are also impacted by the decisions geographers make about how to engage with area studies – not least those in the policy community, which is still typically organized around world area designations. These are the individuals who are responsible for making decisions about those Tomahawk cruise missiles, satellite cameras and drones, noted by King and Toal at the outset of this paper, as well as those responsible for funding or defunding major academic research programs. Of course, directly engaging the policy community may not have the effects critically-minded scholars would like, since policy-makers often intentionally ignore geographic facts at their disposal (Ó Tuathail, 2010). But if we as

academic geographers speak only to one another, this has repercussions for the “policy community” insofar as we end up producing “them” as the uncritical others. Imagining a critical area studies may also require imagining a critical policy community.

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