



INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
Faculty of Social Sciences
Charles University

Call for papers

Whither Area Studies?

A workshop on the contemporary purpose and practice of the discipline

September 18-19, 2023

Prague, Institute of International Studies, Charles University

The discipline of Area Studies has been subject to a growing number of academic debates in recent years. The preoccupation with the discipline emerged as a reaction to Russia's geopolitical adventurism and aggression in Eastern Europe, but also – for instance – as part of the broader debate about the unsuccessful allied attempts to institutionally rebuild and democratize Iraq and Afghanistan after military interventions in the respective countries. More thorough and nuanced area-specific knowledge was often argued to be a possible solution to both defusing tensions between NATO and Russia and facilitating Iraq's and Afghanistan's transition to stable and legitimate governance.

Though not a panacea to the geopolitical ails of the contemporary world, Area Studies claims to see beyond universalizing theoretical approaches of the social sciences that often distort policy decisions. The discipline provides an epistemology rooted in the in-depth empirical knowledge of local economic, social, cultural and political realities, which may not conform to the theoretical knowledge produced in other parts of the world. Thereby, Area Studies maintains the potential to offer more solid understandings of socio-political contexts and more sound policy recommendations.

Arguably, the development of Area Studies as a discipline faces a positive momentum unprecedented since the end of the Cold War. For too long, Area Studies has been discarded as a discipline with a history of being overly politicized and even irrelevant given that the numbers of sovietologists were incapable of “predicting” the collapse of the Soviet empire and its aftermath. But it is no coincidence that researchers are now returning to basic inquiries posed by Area Studies and attempting to unearth social complexities that are often neglected by applied methods and veiled by myopic theoretical frameworks.

With the slow but steady revival of Area Studies it is time to ask how (and if) the methodological and theoretical frameworks in the field have developed and what purpose there is now for discipline. Incrementally, the field is adapting to increasing demand for its outputs, yet it is still struggling with



presenting and justifying its contributions to our understanding of the social reality. In short, we need to debate what is “expected” of Area Studies academically, but also in terms of its policy and social function.

In order to avoid the mistakes that led to Area Studies’ disregard in the post-Cold War period, the field needs to examine the following questions:

- How to prevent the “re-politicization” of the discipline in the face of creeping competition and multipolarity in the global context?
- What is the position of Area Studies toward universality in the social sciences?
- How to avoid and identify inherent biases in Area Studies’ methods and epistemology?
- Can the discipline shed its “colonial” and “colonizing” aspects and functions?
- What positions should Area Studies specialists adopt toward their research for which there is high political demand?

The proposed workshop will be composed of two blocks that will attempt to provide answers to the above-mentioned questions. The first block will discuss the contemporary direction of the discipline, its renewed relevance and the pitfalls of the political demand for more area-specific knowledge. The second block will focus on the methodological grounding of the revived Area Studies and the possible epistemological burdens the discipline carries since the Cold War period.

We are looking forward to receiving your contribution proposals (abstract of no more than 400 words) through this [Google Form](#) by **June 20, 2023**. Selected contributions will be communicated by mid-July 2023.

There will be **no conference fee**. We expect the participants to cover their travel and accommodation expenses. Participants will have access to a special rate in University accommodation facilities subject to availability. A limited number of travel grants for early career researchers may be available. Depending on the focus of the contributions, the conveners plan to coordinate the publication of a special journal issue as a result of the workshop.

Organizer: [Institute of International Studies](#) – Dr. Jan Hornát & Dr. Tomáš Weiss

For further information or questions, please feel free to contact us: [jan.hornat\[at\]fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:jan.hornat@fsv.cuni.cz).