

Keynotes – Area Studies, Innovation, and Public Policy in Europe and Asia
Overcoming the Predicaments of Area Studies – Focusing on Relationships

Keiko SAKAI
Chiba University

When I started to study the Middle East in the 80s, “Area Studies” was not as widely known as it is now. There were almost no classes or courses, not to speak of faculties, carrying the title “Area Studies” in universities. I myself graduated from a course in International Relations at the University of Tokyo, not from any course related to area studies. The Universities of Foreign Studies in Tokyo and in Osaka at that time were the only universities which had courses for teaching area studies, focusing on languages, history, and culture. There have been a few research institutes specializing in certain areas, such as the Slavic Research Center at Hokkaido University, the Institute of Developing Economies (both established in the 50s), the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Kyoto University and the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa at the Tokyo University for Foreign Studies (established in the 60s).

Maybe because I am not trained as a specialist in language and culture, I feel uncomfortable being called a “scholar of area studies.” Nowadays, some of the younger scholars tend to consider that area studies are less theoretical, less logical and less academic (Tessler 1999). Is this what I feel? No, not on that point.

Negative legacy of Orientalism

What I feel uncomfortable about is that area studies are often expected to serve for policy-making, or are used as a tool to control other areas intentionally or unintentionally, as Orientalists used to.

There are number of examples in history. T. E. Lawrence, “Lawrence of Arabia,” who played a decisive role in British penetration into the Middle East on the eve of and during the First World War, is the best example. Another example is Gertrude Bell, an archeologist who played an important part in establishing the state of Iraq, and who was known as the uncrowned queen of desert.

Here we face the same old predicament: Should our research contribute to policy-making in our home state, rather than maintaining neutrality from state interest?

These dilemmas are felt severely during tense political situations, such as wars and conflicts. Scholars of area studies might be involved in directing wars, as happened to political scientists in the US during the War on Terror.

Various scholars of area studies collaborated with the US military operations in Iraq after 2006, when its army suffered from resistance movements and insurgency there. The “Human Terrain System” was introduced so that the US army could make use of the knowledge offered by scholars and researchers, rather than the latter being able to make use of information obtained through military operations. Cultural anthropologist Montgomery McFate, who served as the Senior Social Science Adviser for the US Army’s Human Terrain System, was a typical case.

It seems the role of area studies might become increasingly important in the era of globalization, where non-state actors have a large effect on world security. David Kilcullen, a scholar who served as an advisor to David Petraeus, the former commanding general of Multi-National Forces in Iraq, points out that “since the new threats are not state-based, the basis for our approach should not be international relations (the study of how nation-states interact in elite state-based frameworks) but anthropology (the study of social roles, groups, status, institutions and relations within human population groups in nonelite, nonstate-based frameworks).” In other words, it is the time for area studies to play a crucial role in winning hearts and minds in wars and occupation.

Needless to say, there is criticism against scholar’s involvement in politics itself. In an article published in *Anthropology Today* (2009), Roberto J. González warns about the involvement of contemporary anthropologists in 21st-century counter-insurgency theory, and suggests that social anthropology “could be used as a tool to challenge, not support, colonial rule.”

Policy-oriented study may affect actual reality

It is more than a matter of ethics whether scholars in general should maintain a distance from politics or not. It is worth noting that McFate is criticized not because of her involvement in US policy-making but mainly because of her emphasis on the role of “tribes” (McFate 2008), since “many anthropologists have attempted to avoid the word, or deliberately isolate it in inverted commas because of its persistent ambiguities” (Gonzalez 2009). In other words, adaptation of scholarly works to actual political and military operations may damage academic cautiousness in the definition and usage of terms in oversimplification and reduction, leading to theories or research frameworks becoming distorted or misguided.

Moreover, a simplified framework for the understanding of a research object may cause a new fault line. The case of post-war Iraq shows a good example. During and after the Iraq War, the US introduced a simplified understanding of Iraqi society as being composed of the three ethnic/sectarian communities of Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and Shiite Arabs. The idea

of the three divisions of Iraqi society was reflected in the formation of the post-war Iraqi regime, which emphasized sectarian allocation of governmental posts. The newly introduced electoral system encouraged a sect-based mobilization and accelerated the fight over votes based on ethnicity/sect. US anthropologist Julie Peteet reflects with criticism, "If sect and tribe are reinvigorated for understanding and acting toward the Middle East, the onus is on the academy to provide a vigorous critique and devise new frameworks of understanding as to how their deployment may be making them a reality on the ground." (Peteet 2008).

How can we know who represents the area?

In such a divided society, a scholar of area studies faces another serious problem: How can we know who represents the society we study? One of the most creative and innovative roles of area studies is to introduce diverse viewpoints to relativize the Western-oriented world view in the search for global peace and justice. This would help to shed light on the marginalized minorities and the deprived, those who are burdened with harsh conditions in refugee camps, politically neglected in a collapsed state, or abandoned in ecologically ruined villages. Knowledge of area studies may contribute to understanding, analysis, and solving global problems from the community level.

But the problem is, how can we know who the oppressed and the victims are? Let me give an example concerning the case of the Iraq War. It is well known that Mr. Kanan Makiya, an Iraq expatriate, had a great impact on US policy-makers, as he wrote a moving nonfiction novel titled "Cruelty and Silence" (1994). His book showed how Saddam's rule in Iraq was cruel and harsh, and how it destroyed humanity among Iraqis. Awarded the Lionar Gelber Prize, Makiya urged the US neo-cons to liberate Iraq from the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Since that time, Kurds and Shiites in Iraq have been considered the greatest victims of Saddam's regime, and to have a full right to claim that they are now the representatives of the post-Saddam Iraqi nation. Sunni Arabs, on the other hand, though labelled as supporters of the former regime, believe that they are the victims of the Iraq wars and claim that they are the true patriots in the resistance against the US.

So, what is Iraq when I say I am a scholar on Iraqi area studies? Am I not neglecting the others when I take up a certain social group in Iraq? Am I not changing the balance of power among Iraqi local groups by writing the story of one group?

How to overcome the above predicaments of area studies

So what is the *raison d'être* of area studies if it cannot live up to the expectations of serving

the policy-making of the home state, or stand by the marginalized in global politics? This question leads to a question that is never answered: What are area studies? What do the scholars of area studies study? Are they informants, full of knowledge on the area, or interpreters, or the mouthpiece of underrepresented societies in the world? In other words, are they expected to play an alternative role to the intellectuals originating from the area? Will they be replaced by local scholars from the area and their numbers diminish in the future, when the academic level of local intellectuals reaches the global standard, enabling them to start writing excellent papers in English or in Japanese?

Such a question arises if we judge the quality of area studies by the quantity of information, data, and experiences on the area of research. Yes, they are exchangeable with informative people from the research area if area studies are the study of the substance and content that is essential to the area. What should we do, then?

Pursuing a new perspective for area studies

My answer to this dead-end prospect is: Area studies are not such a study. Area studies exists to focus on the relationship among the various actors, rather than to simply analyze the substance of the actors. Julie Peteet (2008) argues that “Tribes do exist, but they are being imagined and mobilized in ways that assume coherency and corporateness and a questionable vision of shaykhly power. Rather than corporate entities, tribes are a way of reckoning relatedness.” We can say the same thing about most of traditional society, such as sectarian communities, urban/rural bonds, and religious networks. What scholars of area studies observe is just a snapshot of the complex dynamism of society and a result of social relationships within certain timeframes and conditions, not everlasting primordial entities. It is ironical, however, that most of the scholars of area studies criticize the primordialist understanding of the community, but at the same time they also take the primordialist way of thinking as granted when they try to explain their research object, giving them names and labels such as Shia is this, the Shammar tribe is that, and Tikritis is so and so.

An area itself cannot be considered as static. Prof. Osamu Ieda, historian on Eastern Europe, clearly points out that we should consider an area as elastic space that is the creation of historically accumulated relatedness, and shed more light on the flexibility of the boundaries of the area (Ieda 2008). It is widely understood that the area of the Middle East itself was invented during a power game among the European colonial powers; it does not consist of self-claimed geographical territories.

People may think that there is an academic field called “International Relations” that focuses on relatedness. However, IR basically emphasizes the relationship among states,

putting aside non-state actors. As I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, the role of non-state actors is now more vital to an understanding of the global crisis.

So what I suggest is to combine area studies and IR, linking the strong points of both academic fields; adding the viewpoint of area studies in analyzing global relationships with a focus on non-state actors, and utilizing the framework of IR in focusing on relatedness.

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, we have been witnessing unprecedented patterns of conflicts, clashes, and cross-border social and political networks that synchronize, interact and interrelate with one another. In this age of global crisis, it is crucial to revitalize human and social science in order to solve the issues involved. Area studies can play a central role in this.

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