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## ANTI-AREA STUDIES REVISITED

Writing in the middle of the twentieth century, as area studies came into its own in the US, anthropologist Julian Steward proclaimed that there was ‘general agreement’ about four key objectives of this new field of research. The four objectives, wrote Steward, were to ‘provide knowledge of practical value about important world areas’; to ‘give students and scholars an awareness of cultural relativity’; to ‘provide an understanding of social and cultural wholes as they exist in areas’; and to ‘further the development of a universal social science’.<sup>1</sup> Elaborating his theme, Steward pointed out that ‘anyone who becomes familiar with a new and different culture experiences what has been called a “cultural shock” – an awareness that everything in the new culture is somehow unfamiliar but is also part of a self-consistent and intelligible whole’. By understanding that each unfamiliar culture had such a ‘self-consistent and distinctive pattern’, the student would come to appreciate that ‘none is absolute or inherently superior to the others’. This understanding, Steward continued, ‘gives the layman greater tolerance of the peoples of the other areas, and it gives the scholar an objectivity which will help him avoid the methodological fallacy of ethnocentrism’.<sup>2</sup>

Rereading those words many decades on, several thoughts spring to mind. One is that ‘cultural shock’ no longer seems to be the exclusive preserve of area scholars who journey to distant regions. Rather, it has become

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1 Julian H Steward, *Area Research: Theory and Practice* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1950), p. 2.

2 Steward, *Area Research*, p. 4.

a regular part of daily life. In a world of global flows, unfamiliarity presses in from every side, but, far from being part of a 'self-consistent and intelligible whole', this unfamiliarity is overwhelmingly experienced as *unintelligible* in terms of conventional notions of region, area and space. International frontiers become at once more porous and more ferociously guarded, while new internal frontiers, often patrolled by the invisible but all-seeing eye of the surveillance camera, divide islands of glittering wealth from seas of urban decay. Transport and communication technologies increasingly detach temporal from spatial proximity, making the centres of the great world cities closer to one another in terms of travel-time, consciousness and culture than they are to their own rural hinterlands. It has become commonplace to speak not of the end of history but of the end of geography.

A related thought is that the contemporary encounter with the unfamiliar has ambivalent implications for the promotion of 'tolerance' or the conquest of ethnocentrism. On the one hand, old certainties about national, ethnic or cultural belonging are constantly exposed to challenges. But on the other, a rather common response to the unintelligibility of the world is precisely an attempt to *re-establish* these certainties by reasserting the power of national boundaries and patriotic symbols. The current influence of globally resurgent nationalisms can be seen not only in the appearance of certain new forms of right-wing politics, but also (more alarmingly, perhaps) in the popularity of mass-consumption chauvinism. As an Australian scholar working mostly on Japan, I am repeatedly intrigued but alarmed both by striking similarities in the rhetoric of popular nationalism in Australia and Japan, and by the way in which nationalist fears and stereotypes in different countries seem to feed off each other, creating a continuing spiral of incomprehension.

## Area Studies and Ethnocentrism

Having been involved in Asian studies – and more specifically in Japanese studies – in Australia since the early 1980s, I find myself increasingly impelled to reflect on the effect that education about 'Asia' has had within Australian society. To what extent has the enormous expansion of the study of 'Asia' fulfilled Julian Steward's mid-century vision of area studies as a cure for ethnocentrism? Has the effort to understand 'unfamiliar cultures' as self-consistent and intelligible wholes served the

cause of giving laypeople greater tolerance? In attempting to answer those questions, I have to begin by admitting to a deep discomfort with the word ‘tolerance’. (Who, after all, wants to be tolerated?) At the same time, though, it would seem unreasonable not to sympathise with Steward’s obvious longing for a field of study that would promote human understanding and mutual appreciation rather than fear and loathing. It would also be a mistake to underestimate the profound contribution the great growth of Asian studies in Australia over the past four decades or so has made to that understanding.

I feel, though, that there are good reasons for some self-critical reflection, not simply about the amount of ‘Asian’ content in the curriculum and in our media, but about the whole framework within which knowledge of the world beyond Australia’s boundaries is taught, researched and debated. One issue that prompts that reflection is the enduring influence of simplistic and reductionist generalisations about ‘Asia’ and ‘Asians’ in the Australian media and in public discourse. More widely than this, though, there is also the problem that I referred to earlier as the unintelligibility of the world. The global resurgence of nationalisms and ethnocentrisms in the past decade seems to reflect a very real and widespread feeling of powerlessness – almost, one might say, of disenfranchisement – among the citizens of many countries. This feeling of powerlessness appears to derive from a sense of being at the mercy of forces and institutions – many of them crossing the boundaries of nations and regions – whose workings are not just beyond the control of ordinary people but are also almost totally inscrutable.

Very few people now, I think, would subscribe to Julian Steward’s vision of the development of a universal social science that would render these forces and institutions totally transparent. But it is worth asking how well education and research serve the cause of helping to make a complex and rapidly changing world at least a little more comprehensible to the population at large. The argument I want to make here is that the spatial framework of understanding – the image of areas – that has emerged from area studies is in some respects an obstacle that makes the nature of the contemporary world system *less* rather than *more* visible and comprehensible. A rethinking of the spatial frameworks of teaching and research is therefore an important element in working through ways in which education confronts the problem of an unintelligible world. And the first step in that rethinking has to be a re-examination of the origins of the existing framework of area studies.

## The Origins of Area Studies

Area studies can be understood as having emerged from a reimagining of space that took place in the middle decades of the twentieth century. A particularly important feature of this reimagining was that it created a *common* spatial framework that could be used by a variety of different humanities and social sciences, and that therefore marked out a space for the interdisciplinary study of societies as totalities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the various disciplines had tended to operate on different spatial planes. For geographers, the major large-scale divisions of the world were continents, whose boundaries were defined by the physical geography of oceans, mountain ranges and so on. For political scientists, on the other hand, nations and colonial empires were more significant divisions of space. Historians, meanwhile, also tended to operate mostly at the national level, but if they thought in larger terms were more likely to use concepts such as Occident and Orient (as employed by writers like Oswald Spengler and Karl Wittvogel). The contemporary image of ‘areas’ such as the Middle East, and East and Southeast Asia, crystallised in the early twentieth century against the background of the rising international tensions that culminated in the Second World War. The expression ‘Middle East’ has been used since the nineteenth century, but the current sense of the word was firmly established by the British and US military only in the 1930s–40s, while the label ‘Southeast Asia’ ‘entered popular consciousness in the Second World War, when military strategists used it to “designate the theatre of war commanded by Lord Louis Mountbatten”’.<sup>3</sup> During the war, the work of the US Ethnogeographic Board helped to lay the foundations for the postwar boom in area studies by defining the new classificatory system of ‘world regions’.<sup>4</sup>

The war and its aftermath drew attention to the strategic value of cultural knowledge: information about the languages, histories and traditions of geographically distant allies and enemies was vital to the conduct of war, and to the international power struggles of the Cold War world. During the 1950s US policymakers explicitly recognised that the development of

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3 MW Lewis and KE Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 65–66 and 172.

4 Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, pp. 162–66.

area studies programs could contribute to the successful exercise of US world power, and substantial funding for this development was provided under the terms of the 1958 National Defense Education Act.<sup>5</sup>

In Australia, too, the Pacific War drew attention to the need for expertise in the languages, societies and political systems of neighbouring regions (particularly Asia), and ‘Oriental Affairs’ (as it was then called) was seen as an area of study deserving special national attention.<sup>6</sup> This led, among other things, to the establishment of a School of Pacific Studies with a strong focus on East Asia at the newly created Australian National University (ANU) in 1946, and to the creation of a School of Oriental Languages at Canberra University College (later incorporated into ANU) in 1952.<sup>7</sup> During the course of the 1950s, funding for Indonesian and Malayan studies was also provided to both Sydney and Melbourne universities. In the postwar development in Asian studies, therefore, most courses tended to be offered in interdisciplinary, regionally focused departments.<sup>8</sup>

Fundamental to postwar visions of area studies, at least in the English-speaking world, were the notions of ‘culture’ and ‘civilisation’, which became key unifying concepts connecting varied disciplinary approaches to the study of a given region. As we have seen, an emphasis on the relationship between society and culture, and on cooperation between the disciplines, was central to the work of Julian Steward, who played a leading role in the US Social Science Research Council’s Committee on World Area Research. Meanwhile, other scholars such as Robert Redfield, who in 1951 helped to establish the Ford Foundation’s Cultural Studies Project, were focusing attention on the comparative study of civilisations: ‘civilisation’ being defined by Redfield as a culture that possessed not only a ‘little tradition of the largely unreflective many’ but also a ‘great tradition of the reflective few’.<sup>9</sup> Redfield, like Steward,

5 GB Nash, C Crabtree and RE Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1997), p. 91.

6 Daniel Botsman, ‘Deconstructing the Past to Redefine the Future: A History of Japanese Studies at the Australian National University’, in *Japan and the World: Proceedings of the Seventh Biennial Conference of the Japanese Studies Association of Australia*, vol. 3 (Canberra: Australia Japan Research Centre, 1991), pp. 240–48.

7 Botsman, ‘Deconstructing the Past’; William Sima, *China & ANU: Diplomats, Adventurers, Scholars* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), doi.org/10.22459/ca.12.2015.

8 John Ingleson and ME Nairn, *Asia in Australian Higher Education*, vol. 1 (Report Submitted to the Asian Studies Council, 1989), p. 34.

9 A Sartori, ‘Robert Redfield’s Comparative Civilizations Project and the Political Imagination of postwar America’, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 6, no. 1 (1998): pp. 33–66, doi.org/10.1215/10679847-6-1-33; Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilizations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

saw great potential for bringing together humanities and social science disciplines in collaborative efforts to comprehend the past and present of particular societies. Knowledge of the dominant civilisational patterns of each major world region would, it was felt, provide a historical basis for interpreting the contemporary and future destiny of each region in an interconnected modern world. Such US approaches had a substantial impact on the development of area studies in other countries including Australia, where studies by US area specialists (like John Fairbank, Edwin Reischauer and Albert Craig in Asian studies) came to be widely used as texts for an expanding range of area-focused courses.

The development of area studies in the US and Australia also resonated with emerging European approaches to the study of the world. Redfield's concept of comparative civilisations, for example, drew on the ideas of British scholar Arnold Toynbee, whose massive study of civilisational history was published in 12 volumes between 1934 and 1961. Toynbee's classification of civilisations was idiosyncratic – based above all on the foundational role of the great religions – but his research was driven by many of the impulses that inspired other varieties of mid-century area studies.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, in France a somewhat different version of civilisational history was emerging from the postwar work of the Annales school. From its founding in the late 1920s, the Annales group had envisioned large-scale collaborations between scholars trained in demography, psychology, social statistics and other disciplines, working together to produce a 'total history' of the everyday life of particular societies.<sup>11</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, Fernand Braudel built on this approach to present a vision of global history centred upon major civilisational areas, each of which 'has its own geography with its own opportunities and constraints, some virtually permanent and quite different from one civilisation to another'.<sup>12</sup> Braudel's famous textbook for French high school students, *Grammaire des civilisations*, divided the world into six major areas: America, the Muslim World, Africa, the Far East, Europe and that 'Other Europe' constituted by the Soviet Union. Each area, he argued, possessed

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10 AJ Toynbee, *A Study of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Original published in three parts: 1934, 1939 and 1954.

11 See, for example, Lucien Febvre, *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Lucien Febvre*, ed. P Burke (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973); François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*, trans. PV Conroy Jr (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

12 Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, trans. R Mayne (London: Allen Lane, 1994), p. 11.

its own deep underlying structures – ‘religious beliefs, for instance, or a timeless peasantry, or attitudes to death, work, pleasure and family life’: structures that persisted with only the most gradual of changes beneath the ever-shifting surface of transient historical events.<sup>13</sup>

## Mapping Cultures

Braudel’s study indeed offers a vivid illustration of some of the key strengths and weaknesses of the postwar area approach. On the one hand, it represented a genuine and deeply felt desire for a more universal understanding of social phenomena – an approach that would transcend the bounds of narrow nationalism or ethnocentrism. On the other, however, its temporal and spatial frameworks almost inescapably imposed particular limitations on the image of the world it presented. In order to deal with the study of very large areas such as ‘the Far East’, Braudel’s account begins by singling out certain features seen as fundamental cultural characteristics of the entire area. In the case of the ‘Far East’, for example, these included rice cultivation, the tenacious influence of old-established creeds such as Buddhism and Confucianism, and the eternal antagonism between settled civilisations and the ‘barbarian hordes’ who constantly threatened their borders.<sup>14</sup> Such deep structures provided the foundations on which the distinctive, and more rapidly changing, political, economic and social formations of individual nations within the area were built. Nations in turn embraced local regions, which – with their particular productive systems and cultural traditions – formed the locus of everyday life. This structure closely parallels that of many of the major area studies texts of the postwar decades – works like Reischauer and Fairbank’s *East Asia: The Great Tradition*, in which an overview of the underlying civilisational patterns of the region provided the starting point for more detailed analysis of the individual destinies of particular nations.<sup>15</sup>

The difficulty with this approach is that, since a region like ‘the Far East’ or ‘East Asia’ is a vast and diverse one with few overarching commonalities, those few characteristics that *are* shared by much of the region tend

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13 Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, p. 11.

14 Braudel, *A History of Civilizations*, pp. 155–70.

15 Edwin O Reischauer and John K Fairbank, *East Asia: The Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958); Edwin O Reischauer, John K Fairbank and Albert M Craig, *East Asia: Tradition and Transformation* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

to be singled out as 'fundamental' and (it could be argued) given disproportionate weight. A good example of this is the almost obsessive attention paid to that shifting complex of ideas and practices commonly labelled 'Confucianism'. It seems clear that the influence of Confucianism has varied enormously across the region according to place, time and social class, and that for many people in many times it had little or no influence at all. But the visions of Chinese, Japanese and Korean histories as contained within the framework of East Asian history makes it almost inevitable that plausible common denominators like 'Confucianism' will come to be seen as the underlying motive forces of the region's past.

The overall outcome tends to be an image of the individual as standing at the centre of a series of ever-expanding circles of shared history, culture and memory. The richest and most varied array of common experiences, traditions and beliefs is shared with the immediately proximate communities of family, local community, village or town. As one moves outward in space, the sharing of more transient memories and experiences diminishes, leaving only the deeper strata of enduring culture that (it is suggested) are shared, first with other members of the national community and, at the profoundest level, with fellow inhabitants of the entire civilisational area.

US area studies scholars like Steward and Redfield, rather similarly, saw area studies as operating at a number of spatial levels, ranging from 'communities through regions, states and nations to large cultural areas'.<sup>16</sup> Area studies required both detailed, usually ethnographic, studies of small local communities and larger interdisciplinary studies of nations and world regions. Steward thus likened multilevel area research on human societies to multilevel biological research on living organisms, in which 'the cell is incompletely understood if it is not studied as part of an organ; and an organ is intelligible only as part of a total organism'.<sup>17</sup>

But mapping the world in this way obscures human commonalities not based on geographical proximity, not containable within the frontiers of nation, area or 'civilisation'. Of course, the area scholars of the 1950s recognised that civilisations interacted, and above all that 'modern Western civilisation' affected the lives of people throughout the world. The very nature of area studies, however, made it difficult to pursue

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16 Steward, *Area Research*, p. 20; see also Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chapter 3.

17 Steward, *Area Research*, p. 109.

investigation of the cultural commonalities that might link people in widely dispersed geographical locations on the basis of occupation, age or interest (for example, the commonalities between Catholics in Ireland and Zimbabwe, or between soccer fans in The Netherlands and Brazil).

Rather than opening the way to exploration of shared – or differing – experiences of the ‘modern’, area studies encouraged a comparative approach to the understanding of a process called ‘modernisation’. To what extent, in other words, did ‘modernity’ represent the triumph of the Western model of civilisation? To what extent could the fundamental patterns of other civilisations survive within, and adapt to, the modern order? Which areas possessed the patterns of culture and tradition that would best equip them for participation in the competitive struggle for social and economic development?

Area studies also involved a distinctive relation of scholars to their subject matter. The classical Orientalists of the nineteenth century had found it necessary to rely substantially on the interpretation of the written archive. Their work, until the mid-twentieth century, was supplemented by the writings of colonial officials, whose social experiences were shaped by the hierarchical structures of life in the colonies, yet who had often been required to immerse themselves in the details of administering a particular confined territory. The postwar area scholar lived in a different world: a world of air travel, an age of fieldwork – a concept extended from anthropology to a wide range of other disciplines in the middle decades of the century. From their base in the campuses of the developed world, area specialists were able to venture forth, armed with a training in disciplinary techniques and theories as well as language, for regular stints of research in ‘the field’. Implicitly, this research was envisaged as using the latest (supposedly universal) social theories, generated within the academic realms of Western Europe and North America, to interpret the diverse complexities of the particular region on which the area specialist focused. The scholar would thus return from the field with empirical data and case studies to enrich the development of universal social theory. No one can doubt that postwar area scholars in the still-dominant nations of Western Europe and North America contributed greatly to a deeper understanding of Asian, African and other societies and histories. Yet the very frameworks within which their work was conducted meant that this understanding did not necessarily lead to any fundamental rethinking of the vision of ‘Western civilisation’ as interpreter of the world, and as crucible of the modern.

## Critiques of Area Studies

In more recent decades, of course, area studies have been criticised from several directions. A frequent focus of criticism has been the intimate connection between this field of research and US Cold War strategy.<sup>18</sup> While many US scholars resolutely resisted efforts by the state to mobilise their research for strategic purposes, there are numerous well-documented examples of government manipulation of area research in the Cold War period. One case, cited by George Kahin, was the ostensibly academic journal *Vietnam Perspectives*, which was launched in 1967 with substantial support and funding from the US military's Historical Evaluation and Research Organization.<sup>19</sup> As late as the start of the twenty-first century, United States-based historian of Japan Harry Harootunian could write:

Fifty years after the war, we are still organizing knowledge as if – in the case of Japan, China and the former Soviet Union – we are confronted by an implacable enemy and thus driven by the desire to know it in order to destroy it or learn how to sleep with it. While nobody would deny that this has produced mountains of empirical data on the peoples of these societies, this accomplishment has kept these areas from being assimilated into new theories of knowledge and categorizations that promise to end their isolation.<sup>20</sup>

As Harootunian's critique suggests, challenges to the link between area studies and strategic concerns are part of a wider questioning of the methodological underpinnings of the area approach. At one level, area specialists have been accused of exaggerating the autonomy of individual cultures and for paying insufficient attention to connections between one region and another. The civilisation theory of scholars like Toynbee has also been taken to task on the grounds that, by identifying 'civilisation' with powerful urbanised communities, it neglected large swathes of

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18 For example, Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Unintended Consequences of Cold War Area Studies', in *The Cold War and the University*, ed. N Chomsky, L Nadar, I Wallerstein, RC Lewontin, I Katznelson and H Zinn (New York: New Press, 1997), pp. 195–232; Bruce Cumings, 'Boundary Displacement: Area Studies and International Studies during and after the Cold War', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29, no. 1 (1997): pp. 6–29, doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1997.10409695.

19 George M Kahin, 'The Making of Southeast Asian Studies: Cornell's Experience', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 29, no. 1 (1997): pp. 38–42, doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1997.10409699.

20 Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 28.

human society.<sup>21</sup> Yet this critique has not necessarily led to a rejection of the organising framework of large contiguous regions defined in terms of an underlying common culture. Instead, it has tended to produce modifications of that image, in which boundaries are redrawn in the effort to create a more coherent and inclusive picture.<sup>22</sup>

One important modification to the postwar image of area studies was the emergence of the concept of the 'Asia-Pacific' or 'Pacific Rim', which enjoyed a vogue particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. This vision of geography transcended traditionally defined visions of 'civilisations', and sought to bring together the study of Asian, American and Australasian regions, which were in fact increasingly being linked by economic and cultural flows. As Arif Dirlik points out, though, the new concept itself was deeply embedded in the emerging economic and political power structures of the late twentieth century. The concept of the Asia-Pacific area served to:

set up a domain of economic activity and power for those who play a hegemonic role in the area (at present, the United States and Japan), to contain within it the relationships that in and of themselves are not confined to it, and thereby to assert a regional identity (and power bloc) against other similar regions in the world system, of which the European Economic Community is the immediate instance.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, however, a different criticism of area studies was increasingly making itself heard. Area studies schools and departments, it was argued, were not giving their students a sufficiently rigorous disciplinary grounding. In Australia, for example, at the end of the 1980s, the *Report of the Inquiry into the Teaching of Asian Studies and Languages in Higher Education* observed that the 'Asian studies model' had:

tended to marginalize the study of Asia, by cutting it off from the major disciplines and producing graduates who had a great deal of knowledge of one or more Asian country, often proficiency in a language as well, but who were inadequately trained in one of

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21 See Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, pp. 130–31; Nash, Crabtree and Dunn, *History on Trial*, pp. 164–71.

22 See, for example, Lewis and Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, p. 157.

23 Arif Dirlik, 'The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a Regional Structure', *Journal of World History* 3, no. 1 (1992): pp. 55–79.

the social sciences disciplines, such as history, politics, sociology or economics. It also acted as an excuse for discipline departments ignoring the study of Asia.<sup>24</sup>

The report went on to propose greater integration of Asian content into 'mainstream' humanities and social science departments, recommending that by the year 2000 at least 20 per cent of student enrolments in those departments should be in 'Asia related' subjects.<sup>25</sup>

In practice, though, this proposal proved remarkably difficult to put into effect. The 1998 Australian Research Council review of the humanities in Australia revealed that initial efforts at greater integration had wilted in the face of the harsh economic climate of the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> Although some of the newer cross-disciplinary areas like postcolonial studies paid substantial attention to various Asian societies, many of the older disciplines remained overwhelmingly focused on Europe and North America. In philosophy, which (according to one observer) 'is usually thought of as a distinctively Western discipline', developments in the teaching of Asian philosophy could still be dealt with in a couple of sentences.<sup>27</sup> The situation in relation to areas like early modern studies was even more interesting. Here, Asia rated a mention only because Asian history was seen as a potential competitor with early modern studies for student enrolments. This begged the question: did places like Japan have an 'early modern' (as most Japanese historians clearly seem to believe it did), and, if so, how might this relate to the early modern studied by 'early modern studies'?

The ongoing tension between area studies and disciplines reflected, I think, something more than institutional rigidities and budgetary constraints. It reflected the fact that *both* the traditional disciplines *and* area studies often incorporate similar underlying assumptions about the nature of social space. Both, in other words, tend to take for granted the reality and integrity of entities like 'Latin America' or 'Southeast Asia'.

24 Ingleson and Nairn, *Asia in Australian Higher Education*, p. 260.

25 Ingleson and Nairn, *Asia in Australian Higher Education*, p. 265.

26 Beverley Hooper, 'Chinese Studies', in *Knowing Ourselves and Others: The Humanities in Australia into the 21st Century*, ed. Reference Group for the Academy of the Humanities (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1998), pp. 57–66, reference from p. 58; William Coaldrake and Kenneth Wells, 'Japanese and Korean Studies', in Reference Group for the Academy of the Humanities, *Knowing Ourselves and Others*, pp. 151–63, reference from p. 155; Ingleson, 'Southeast Asian Studies', in Reference Group for the Academy of the Humanities, *Knowing Ourselves and Others*, pp. 251–60.

27 Stephen Gaukroger, 'Philosophy and Intellectual History', in Reference Group for the Academy of the Humanities, *Knowing Ourselves and Others*, pp. 215–24, reference from p. 223.

They also incorporate similar ideas about the relationship between scholar and subject of study. That is to say, disciplines as well as area studies often embody an implicit image of ‘the West’ as the fountainhead of theories with which to interpret the rest of the world. So, commendable efforts to encourage the inclusion of material from Asian societies in various disciplinary courses in Australia went hand in hand with a worrying tendency to insist that the object of the exercise was to promote ‘Asia literacy’ – as though ‘Asia’ were a sort of hieroglyphic document that would become legible if only one could crack the code.<sup>28</sup> The Western scholar was still assumed to stand within a legible, transparent space that is the source of theories with which to interpret the enigmatic areas outside. From this perspective, Australia could all too readily come to be presented as an outpost of Western universalism fortunately located close to the perplexing realms of Asia, and so offering a convenient salient from which to ‘interpret’ Asia to the (English-speaking) world.

## The Possibility of Anti-Area Studies

In this context, it is crucially important to resist one particular variant of the critique of area studies: the view that area studies should be subordinated to a new brand of universalism based on the dominance of disciplinary knowledge. This view proposes that societies are to be understood in terms of scientific models, centred around notions such as ‘rational choice’. Detailed knowledge of language and history of specific societies thus becomes irrelevant, or at least of secondary importance, in interpreting contemporary trends, for once one has mastered the rules contained in the latest texts from Chicago or MIT, the behaviour of everyone from Javanese rice farmers to Taiwanese pop stars will be readily understandable and predictable. A version of this critique, for example, was controversially put forward in the mid-1990s by political scientist Robert Bates, who saw ‘area programs as a problem for political science’ because of their ‘resistance to the search for theory and to the use of rigorous methods for evaluating arguments’. He did not seek the abolition of area studies, but argued for something that he called a ‘mutual infusion’ of area and discipline approaches. By this, though, he meant that mathematics-based Western sociology and political science possessed the

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28 For example, Commonwealth of Australia, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), p. 167.

tools necessary to ‘handle area knowledge in rigorous ways’. For example, forms of game theory developed for the study of politics in the United States could (he argued) be universally applied to explain the impact of culture and history on politics in any context.<sup>29</sup>

But, as Vincent Houben has suggested, this urge for universality needs to be complemented by a sensitivity to diversity and specificity: ‘Whereas disciplines look for the universal within variety, Area Studies want to highlight variation within global universality’.<sup>30</sup> What is needed, then, is a different approach to the rethinking of area studies – one that retains that sensitivity, and therefore continues to emphasise the importance of detailed knowledge of human lives in particular places. At the same time, this approach would seek to reverse the process of spatial integration, through which area studies sought to create a single framework for the interdisciplinary study of social wholes. Rather, in trying to make sense of the contemporary system it seems important to be able to make simultaneous use of a range of *different* spatial maps to analyse *different* social processes and interactions.<sup>31</sup>

The point is not that the concept of areas like East or Southeast Asia is an anachronism to be thrown onto the intellectual scrap heap. The area studies vision of world regions as a basis for understanding has obvious uses. For a historian who wants to study the spread and evolution of the character-based writing system that originated in China, for example, the geographical category ‘East Asia’ makes sense (though it would make even better sense if it were expanded to encompass most of Vietnam, now usually classified under the heading ‘Southeast Asia’). But using ‘East Asia’ as the primary space for understanding the whole past and present of the area now encompassed by the nations of China, Mongolia, Japan, Korea and Taiwan is much more problematic. Difficulties arise when concentric circles of contiguous space come to be seen as the framework for a total understanding of the past and present, for this model of space obscures a host of experiences vital to interpreting the contemporary global system.

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29 Robert H Bates, ‘Letter from the President: Area Studies and the Discipline’, *APSA-CP: Newsletter of the APSA Organized Section in Comparative Politics* 7, no. 1 (1996): pp. 1–2.

30 Vincent Houben, ‘New Area Studies, Translation and Mid-Range Concepts’, in *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, ed. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), pp. 195–211, quotation from p. 202.

31 B Mazlish, ‘Crossing Boundaries: Ecumenical, World and Global History’, in *World History: Ideologies, Structures and Identities*, ed. P Pomper, RH Elphick and RT Vann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 41–52.

What I would like to suggest, then, is not a bland erasure of differences, but rather an attempt to rethink the way in which to map difference. One important element in this new mapping might be the development of an ‘anti-area studies’, whose aim is not to plot the communal trajectory of a civilisational area within the march of global progress, but to observe major global forces from a variety of positions that are far apart. Let us consider some examples of possible themes of this type of ‘anti-area studies’.

One theme could be a topic I am particularly interested in: the past and present of indigenous communities in various parts of the world. Despite their great diversity, indigenous societies worldwide face certain sorts of common challenges and problems that arise not from innate cultural similarities, but from shared experiences of the encounter between small, relatively decentralised communities and modern empires and nation-states. Forms of study and teaching that link the experiences of indigenous societies in (say) Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Russia and Brazil can bring to light important issues, differences and commonalities, which remain invisible when the history of indigenous societies is studied in a national or even a conventional area studies framework.

Another type of anti-area studies concerns the way in which a particular set of ideas or ideologies is understood, applied and developed in quite different situations. Examples of this are research projects on the varied experiences around the world of the late 1960s student movement. Here it becomes possible to consider how people from a broadly similar social stratum – mostly young, middle-class and university-educated – related to a broadly common set of ideologies in radically different circumstances. What is important, though, is that the ‘map’ of 1968 should include not only places like Paris, Berkeley and London but also Tokyo, Mexico City, Melbourne and Calcutta. In a similar vein, one might consider the way in which various new (and not so new) forms of religious thought – Scientology or the Unification Church – are received and evolve in distinct locations.

A third possible variant of anti-area studies would be research on the social formation of global systems or organisations: organisations like the World Bank or UNICEF. Such studies would explore both the evolution of these organisations and their interaction with local society in many parts of the world. This research might help to illuminate the ways in which international bodies, with their worldwide networks of employees and offices, develop their own set of cultural resources and

behavioural patterns: shared 'traditions' that transcend the boundaries of conventionally defined 'areas'. The map appropriate for this sort of study cannot be predicted in advance but would need to be carefully tailored to the research task. It might, however, focus on selected points in Asia, Africa and the Americas, and include urban as well as village communities. Research and teaching on these themes seems particularly important as a means of confronting the sense of incomprehension and powerlessness induced by the increasing complexity of international rules, systems and cultural flows in the contemporary world.

Many other variants of anti-area studies might be imagined, but here I will sketch just one more that is particularly central to the theme of this book. Anti-area studies might also be advanced by placing oneself not within the boundaries of traditionally defined world regions such as 'Latin America' or 'Asia', but precisely *on* the boundaries: in the frontier zones where these regions interact and intersect. The focus of research then becomes the shifting and fluid nature of these boundaries themselves. By observing the ways in which conceptual and political boundaries have been redrawn over time, we become aware of the sometimes arbitrary forces that determine how frontier lines are defined, and can observe the way in which each redrawing of frontiers makes certain social or political features more visible while rendering others more obscure. This in turn, I would argue, can destabilise some of the certainties of conventional area studies approaches to history, culture and society, and open up new ways of looking not merely at the border zones themselves, but at the world and the mental constructs through which we perceive it. It allows us, in other words, to (as it were) reverse the angle of vision. Instead of using modern Western academic theories to elucidate the peculiarities of places in Asia or elsewhere, we can use a viewpoint from the borderlands to look back at those modern Western theories with questioning eyes, and probe the processes by which they came into being.

Over the past couple of decades, the rapid expansion of various forms of 'border studies/frontier studies' has provided a rich source of inspiration for such a frontier-based approach. On the one hand, scholars such as Malcolm Anderson and Stefan Wolf have explored the history of frontier-drawing and its role in the generation or resolution of conflicts.<sup>32</sup> On the

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32 Malcolm Anderson, *Frontiers: Territory and State Formation in the Modern World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Stefan Wolf, *Disputed Territories: The Transnational Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict Settlement* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2003).

other, Donna Guy, Thomas Sheridan, Janet Carsten, Martin Stokes and many others have focused on the experiences of interaction between the groups who inhabit those borderlands that Guy and Sheridan term ‘contested ground’.<sup>33</sup> Frontier studies open up an alternative vantage point for viewing social space. And, as we shall see in the chapters that follow, focusing on and questioning the nature of spatial borderlines also leads us inevitably to cast a questioning eye on the borderlines that historians draw through time; for, as Imogen Seger Coulborn has argued, temporal boundaries are created not by the facts themselves, but rather by ‘what one wants to know or compare’.<sup>34</sup>

Anti-area studies in this sense would require many of the skills traditionally demanded of area studies specialists. It would need people with a real knowledge of different languages and societies, and with a strong theoretical understanding of the issues to be researched or taught. It would also often involve collaboration between several scholars studying, and based in, different places. But it would differ from conventional area studies in the sense that it neither pulls together a range of disciplines into the study of a single social whole, nor combines a variety of area specialisms into a single discipline. Instead, it uses knowledge of a variety of places and a variety of disciplinary approaches in order to elucidate problems that cross boundaries. In doing this, it accepts the need to draw its own maps.

This book aims to contribute to anti-area studies in several ways: by highlighting the contingent and shifting nature of the boundary lines we draw between nations and regions; by viewing history from the perspective of a zone that has been repeatedly subdivided by ever-moving political and conceptual frontiers; and by focusing on the ‘imbricated history’

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33 Donna J Guy and Thomas E Sheridan, ‘On Frontiers: The Northern and Southern Edges of the Spanish Empire in the Americas’ in *Contested Ground: Comparative Frontiers on the Northern and Southern Edges of the Spanish Empire*, ed. Donna J Guy and Thomas E Sheridan (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998), pp. 3–15; Janet Carsten, ‘Borders, Boundaries, Tradition and State on the Malaysian Periphery’, in *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers*, ed. Thomas M Wilson and Hastings Donnen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 215–36, doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511607813.009; Martin Stokes, ‘Imagining “the South”: Hybridity, Heterotopias and Arabesk on the Turkish-Syrian Border’, in Wilson and Donnen, *Border Identities*, pp. 263–88, doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511607813.011.

34 Imogen Seger Coulborn, ‘A Question of Utility?’, in *The Boundaries of Civilizations in Space and Time*, ed. Matthew Melko and Leighton R Scott (Lanham and New York: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 268–69, quotation from p. 268; on the relationship between temporal and spatial boundaries, see also Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Original published in 1983.

that emerged as diverse social formations came into contact within this zone (an approach that will be developed particularly in Chapter 4). The geographical focus here will be a relatively narrow one, mostly confined to the area around the Okhotsk Sea, though sometimes extending a little further to Japan and the broader East Asian region. The hope, though, is that this may offer ideas and approaches that can also contribute to the wider rethinking of spatial and temporal boundaries occurring in the study of many realms of our world's complex and interwoven history.

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