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Inviting Differences: An Ideal Vision for Area Studies?

*Rachel Harrison and Geir Helgesen, SOAS University of London*¹

E: rh6@soas.ac.uk

E: gh141@soas.ac.uk

I think; therefore I am.
René Descartes

I think; therefore I am not.
Thich Nhat Hanh

¹ Since this is an equal partnership the names are ordered alphabetically rather than by degree of contribution.

Given the precarious and fragile state of the world we currently inhabit, this Special Issue of *South East Asia Research* emphasises the need for Area Studies to respond to global crisis by honing its abilities to develop a deeper and more empathetic understanding of that world. Area Studies, we propose in this introductory essay, has not yet fully realised its potential, above all other disciplines, to address these issues. An ideal Area Studies should enhance the appreciation of *difference* and hence the resolution of *division* in response to the global spread of animosities and conflicts that call out for us to sharpen our positive engagement with the Other, at all costs.

Speaking at the Conservative Party Conference in 2016, some months after Britain's vote to leave the European Union, Prime Minister Theresa May reminded her supporters that, "To be a citizen of the World is to be a citizen of Nowhere." What are the implications of this kind of statement for people's relationship to their community, to the World, and to an imagined or feared sense of being "Nowhere"? And beyond that, what are its implications for an academic field such as Area Studies? Whilst the ever-increasing pace of globalisation is sometimes presented as hastening the erasure of difference, and hence place, we argue that a respectful understanding of difference matters now more than ever before.

In a global swing towards the right, and its attendant rise in intolerance towards difference, a comprehension of area, and the ways in which *area* inflects *difference*, is essential. It is crucial to fully embrace the challenge of difference in the present, global moment, coloured as that moment is by religious and ethnic tensions, mass migration and persecution, and by the rampant devastation of the environment. An ideal Area Studies might achieve this by working against embedded and persistent divisions in the field; and by engaging with the findings of disciplines not conventionally associated with that field, such as neuroscience and cognitive, social and cultural psychology. In short, can a re-imagined and reinvigorated approach to Area Studies help us to develop the intellectual tools required to address the critical global challenges of our times? Can it better support society, beyond academia, in the necessary task of opening ourselves up to a more wholehearted acceptance of cultural diversity and moving outside recognised comfort zones?

This essay speaks in two voices, from perspectives that differ in certain ways, but are nevertheless significantly aligned. One of us is a Scandinavian cultural sociologist from the social sciences, a former director of NIAS (the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies) with over 30 years of experience working on North East Asia, and in particular on the Korean peninsula. The other is a British academic from the humanities, with a similar number of years teaching and researching in Thai cultural studies, and editor of *South East Asia Research*. Therefore, despite our differing disciplinary backgrounds, we both define our careers as having a lasting commitment to Area Studies. Developing our cross-disciplinary conversations from an initial forum at the European Alliance of Asian Studies² in 2018, where we represented our home institutions of NIAS at the University of Copenhagen and SOAS University of

² Established in 1997 as a joint effort by IIAS – the International Institute of Asian Studies in Leiden, GIGA – the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, and NIAS – the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies in Copenhagen, the Alliance aims at uniting forces in Europe on Asian Studies. The goal is to establish scholarly excellence in central areas of research and expertise on Asia and to develop high quality, border-transcending studies with a strong focus on contemporary issues.

London, we explore here the potential benefits that a truly collaborative approach to understanding Asia from an Area Studies perspective might have to offer.

We take the question of difference as absolutely central to this task because, as we see it, Area Studies holds a privileged position from which to consider the **positive** aspects of cultural difference (see also Helgesen in this volume). From a social perspective, beyond academia, the experience of cultural difference has also been shown to be highly desirable in challenging the heuristic-based thinking that shapes our automatic thoughts (Van de Vyver and Crisp, 2019), so helping us to exercise the problem-solving areas of the brain. At the same time, however, an attentiveness to cultural difference must also be careful to avoid the trap of exoticising difference and of Orientalising Otherness, both of which have been tendencies in the field. At its best, Area Studies has the potential, however, to challenge the notions of universality that pervade Western thought and which have likewise pervaded Western scholarship. Moreover, the infectiousness of various Western modes of thinking has been institutionally transmitted/marketed to Asian scholars who have been trained in the “highbrow” academies of the West (see also Jackson in this volume). This pattern of transmission of “knowledge” only reflects the world order that has been in place since the colonial era, but which, with the rise of economic prosperity in large parts of Asia now requires growing intellectual humility on the part of the Western world.

As an effect of these power relations, there has clearly been in the social sciences an almost knee-jerk reaction against the spectre of cultural relativism, countered instead by a focus on fact-finding and information-seeking with well-known and universally approved models. As most social scientists might argue in response to the call for a “culturalist” perspective: “economics is economics, here as well as there; a stone is a stone, whether in Europe or in Asia!” In this paper, however, we not only oppose the view that cultural context is irrelevant, but we also actively champion the notion that the recognition of cultural difference matters almost above and beyond all else. Seen through a lens focused in this way, societal development cannot simply be reduced to a process of growth, from less to more, a process of modernisation that can be depicted as a rising line, in which the under-developed periphery moves towards the developed centre. Instead, we take the view that there can be no universal trajectories of this kind and that societies develop in differing ways, according to varying cultural influences.

Writing on how knowledge about different cultures is shaking the foundations of psychology, Nicolas Geeraert from Department of Psychology at the University of Essex, notes that “cultural differences in thinking styles are pervasive in cognition – affecting memory, attention, perception, reasoning, and how we talk and think” (2018, page unnumbered). Geeraert goes on to indicate that the way in which people describe themselves also seems to be culturally bound:

Individuals in the western world are indeed more likely to view themselves as free, autonomous and unique individuals, possessing a set of fixed characteristics. But in many other parts of the world, people describe themselves primarily as a part of different social relationships and strongly connected with others. This is more prevalent in Asia, Africa and Latin America. These differences are pervasive, and have been linked to differences in social relationships, motivation and upbringing (2018, page unnumbered).

Within this framework of variation, we further draw on the more generalising perspectives on difference that are offered by the work of cultural psychologist Richard Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently*. Basing his findings on a series of psychological tests, Nisbett and his associates conclude that, broadly speaking, "to the Asian, the world is a complex place, composed of continuous substances, understandable in terms of the whole rather than in terms of the parts, and subject more to collective than to personal control" (2005, 100). By contrast, to the Westerner, "the world is a relatively simple place, composed of discrete objects that can be understood without undue attention to context, and highly subject to personal control" (ibid.). In short, people see the world differently because of differing ecologies, social structures, philosophies, and educational systems.

A social science or an Area Studies theory that disregards these differences will be a poor tool in understanding people and societies worldwide.

While refuting claims to universalist ways of thinking and recognising the importance of the differences that exist between areas of the world, and between the various scholarly methodologies used for studying them, we remain aware of the current negative consequences of focussing on difference. However, in the bid for a more ideal agenda for Area Studies, we argue that these differences can be harnessed to achieve positive, collaborative and open-minded approaches (of the type so particularly taxing in academia) that illuminate greater interdisciplinary and cross-cultural understanding. There is certainly no shortage of topics and problems to focus on in a new era of cooperative Area Studies. As in all interdisciplinary research, the best approach is to invite participants to concentrate on what they are trained to do, as long as they are aware of one essential fact: none of the partners knows it all. Even though this might seem obvious, and almost banal, scholars within each of our disciplinary straightjackets need to develop a more humble and open-hearted approach towards each other, as well as towards *the Other* that is our primary concern in Area Studies. We need to cultivate an awareness of and sensitivity to the fact that, when trained in a particular tradition, it is not always easy to really hear and understand colleagues from another tradition or another field of study.

Owing to its cross-disciplinary nature, Area Studies has long encompassed a range of different scholarly perspectives, and has therefore often been dragged down into the animosities that can divide the social sciences and the humanities. This pattern of unhelpful schism reveals itself in the evolution of Asian Studies, for example, which, in the initial phase focussed on philology, philosophy, history, ethnography and religion. Writing from the perspective of his home institution of SOAS in this current *Special Issue*, Michael Hutt acknowledges the effects that the disciplinary divide has had on scholarship there. Summarising Ian Brown's (2016) history of this Area Studies institution, Hutt writes that, "for the first fifty years of its existence the School was essentially a school of languages, structured around regions, with History and Linguistics the only departments defined by specific disciplines. Social science departments were established only in the 1960s, and their faculty members were treated with contempt by many of the regionally organised language specialists, who regarded them as little more than overqualified journalists." [page reference will be in the current issue of the journal]

For the kinds of humanities scholars that Hutt refers to here, Area Studies was traditionally based on solid language skills and, more often than not, on extensive archival research; and language skills remain, especially at an institution such as SOAS, integral to the core identity of cultural understanding and Area Studies scholarship. Since human beings all over the world use language as a means of communication, and those languages differ from each other, humanities scholars tend to feel it their right to ask how one can study other communities and people without knowing their languages. This can prove a pointed and awkward question for social scientists in Area Studies, who are, more often than not, without such skills: and the typical response to being attacked in academia, is to retaliate. Language skills might be fine, a social scientist could quip back, but without intimate insight into theories and methodologies, how can anyone conduct a meaningful study of human activity, let alone whole societies? The humanities scholar might then respond with a counter-question: “Are you sure that your theories and methodologies are universally valid and useful? Your thesis looks fine, but for me, it does not capture the particularities and characteristics of the area and the people under study.” Now it is the turn of the sociologist to strike out: “So how do you know about these traits, having no professional tools to carry out a scientific study? Do you base your assumptions on gut instincts?” The trump card (if we dare use such a word in these difficult global times!) comes with the statement: “My mother is pretty good at the language she is born into, but I would not trust her to characterize the land and the people she is a part of! What is, for a cultural sociologist, cultural, is for her *natural*. It is how things are and how they have always been.”

Speaking from the standpoint of the Asia Research Institute (ARI) in Singapore, and also concurring with Jackson’s paper in this Special Issue, Jonathan Rigg et al. also highlight the persistent divide that is felt in Area Studies, not simply between disciplinary approaches but also between regional and disciplinary forms of knowledge, or empirical detail as opposed to theory. But digging in deeper with more arguments and counter-arguments serves only to further entrench opinions on either side of any divide, making it nigh on impossible to climb back down again from the dizzy heights of each faction’s ego-driven and absolute conviction. The result has been that we in Area Studies have continued to sustain the kind of polarized position that Benedict Anderson identified way back in 1978: that Area Studies scholars have either tried to follow their disciplinary trends, usually unsuccessfully; or they have resorted to “defiantly crawling deeper into an ‘area-ist’ shell insisting – in a defensive, ideological way – on the uniqueness and incomparability of the area of specialization, and engaging in the study of ever more narrowly defined and esoteric topics” (Anderson, 1978: 44-45, quoted in Rigg et al. [page number from this volume](#)).

Forty years after Anderson was writing, Area Studies continues, as the collected articles in this volume reveal, to be held back from realizing its full humanitarian potential due to an environment of *division*. From a more ideal perspective we ask whether dispensing with the negative connotations of difference might allow Area Studies to champion more positive academic approaches to the world. Would we not all benefit from peaceful accommodation and collaboration? Humanities and the social sciences, side by side, together? Coupled with a balance, or better still, an amalgamation of empirical complexities and discipline-based frameworks of interpretation? Would this be possible, in reality, not just on paper, after so many years of trial and error? Given that both parties have their strong positions and are part of academic environments feeling some, if not serious, animosities towards the other, how can a unification be possible? A more relevant and timely question, however, would

be: *how can we afford not to?* Taking a hard look around us, we are both small approaching the insignificant, even within a university setting: and outside academia, we are hardly visible at all! So, instead of continuing the fight, or nourishing seasoned animosities, it would greatly favour both parties to reach out positively towards the other.

Added to this comes one further, and vital consideration: that we aim, as scholars in Area Studies, to engage with questions of difference with necessary humility and open-mindedness. The traditional structures of academia, coupled with increased pressures derived from twenty-first-century preferences to run universities along neo-liberal business lines (see also Jackson in this volume), have tended to breed competition between academics as opposed to cooperation. This sense of competition can in turn encourage aggressive self-marketing, over-inflated claims to brilliance, the risk of worshipping false idols and the impossibility of admitting to mistakes, all of which feed a distracting prominence of the ego. We are reminded here of the importance of Ryan Holiday's message for academia in *Ego is the Enemy* (2016) that "Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, your worst enemy already lives inside you: your ego"; and of an online review (2018) of Holiday's book, by Director of McGill Global Health Programs, Madhukar Pai, in which he writes that, "Given the importance of this topic, you would think that universities would routinely offer workshops to their faculty on "how to conquer their egos." Holiday's book, in fact, could form the core of such a course. Sadly, I have not heard of any such offerings in academic circles" (Pai, 2018: page unnumbered).

In light of this, an article recently published in the *Times Higher Education* (31 January 2019) entitled "Six scholars learn the career and life lessons of their greatest academic missteps" makes a very refreshing read. Their confessional emerges from a project to create a radical new culture for social scientists, spearheaded by personality psychologist Julia Rohrer at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. Rohrer's *Loss of Confidence Project* was designed as a safe space for researchers to openly query the accuracy of their earlier findings. Reporting on this project, Brian Resnick (2019) acknowledges both the difficulty and the desirability of fostering intellectual humility as a crucial tool for learning, especially – and this matters in particular, we think, for Area Studies – in an increasingly interconnected and complicated world. The benefits, however, are of enormous significance in the way that we go about our work as academics, as Resnick (2019, page unnumbered) confirms:

Social psychologists have learned that humility is associated with other valuable character traits: People who score higher on intellectual humility questionnaires are more open to hearing opposing views. They more readily seek out information that conflicts with their worldview. They pay more attention to evidence and have a stronger self-awareness when they answer a question incorrectly.

It is not difficult to imagine how such character traits might help to foster a potentially more ideal vision of Area Studies scholarship and allow it to have a wider impact beyond the academy.

In addition to the relatively narrow scholarly fields of the humanities and the social sciences, Area Studies could benefit, we suggest, from taking account of the revolutionary findings of

neuroscience and cognitive psychology so as to develop a better awareness of how the human brain functions and what its limitations and prolific blind spots might be. Resnick's observations are again of importance here to our understanding of the world around us, and thus of the Other. As he explains, and as scholars in literature and film studies have long known in their textual analyses, our experience of reality will always be an interpretation. Our cognition is dogged with socially and culturally constructed illusions and ambiguities.

It is also important, then, for a potentially more socially committed and humanitarian application of Area Studies, that we hone our awareness of the limitations of our cognitive abilities. We have an ethical as well as an intellectual obligation to take into account, for example, the fallibility of human perceptions of "truths" and the effect that these restrictions have on our understanding of cultural difference. While this has been extensively explored in such disciplines as Anthropology and Gender Studies, an Area Studies project that is committed to an engagement with difference must sharpen its appreciation of the impact of human subjectivity – together with all its component blind spots and projections (see, for example Farish A. Noor's paper in this volume for a discussion of how these play out from a historical perspective).

To allow us to heed these human, and academic, limitations of cognisance we must further pay attention to another aspect of human experience that has also been largely absent from Western modes of scholarship – and that is the role of the body, *in connection with* the brain. It is this that the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh alerts us to in his play on Descartes – "I think, therefore I am not" – proposing that to "overthink" is to refute the embodied self. This notion comes in sharp contrast to the dualistic theory of the disembodied mind that has flourished in Western thought since Descartes' pronouncement that "there is a great difference between the mind and the body, inasmuch as the body is by its very nature always divisible, while the mind is entirely indivisible... the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body." (Descartes, 1984-91: II 59). Accepting this perspective, academia has largely clung on until now to two basic ideas: that reason is disembodied because the mind is disembodied; and that reason is transcendent and universal (McNerney, 2011). This Cartesian framework firmly re-inscribes the problem of the universal. And while we acknowledge that much work has already taken place in, for example, the field of Anthropology, this has yet to have a pervasive effect on Area Studies, hence undermining the potential of an ideal Area Studies with a focus on difference in relation to the contemporary world.

Taking on board Nisbett's observations on the obsession in Western intellectual history with categorisation (2005: 154), Western-based Area Studies scholarship has **more than a little** to learn about the need to dilute divisions and compartmentalisation. Nisbett's work clearly teaches us that Asian modes of thinking, for example, are more attuned to the tendency of humans to be *relational* rather than to operate as *discrete* individuals – a social function that has been de-emphasised in Western modernity. His observation is clearly illustrated in his comparative discussion of children's primers. In the American series *Dick and Jane*, popular between the 1930s and the 1960s, for example, protagonists Dick and Jane are typified as active individualists. Nisbett remarks on how the first page of an early edition depicts a little boy running across a lawn, to which the sentences are added: "See Dick run. See Dick play. See Dick run and play." By contrast, the first page of a Chinese primer of the

same era shows a little boy sitting on the shoulders of an older one, with the text: “Big brother takes care of little brother. Big brother loves little brother. Little brother loves big brother.” Here it is relationships between the characters that seem the most important issue to convey in the child’s first encounter with the printed word (Nisbett, 2005: 49-50). It is precisely this kind of relational sensitivity that, we believe, would serve the project of Area Studies so well. Honing our abilities to think in stronger *relational* terms would better facilitate the endeavour to understand and to communicate with cultural Others. To know and to feel this is to know and to feel the importance of intercultural understanding. It is hence also to know how to develop approaches to a myriad life-threatening, interconnected global problems, among them mass migration, violence and war, climate change, unsustainable development, inequality, poverty, disease and the yawning chasm of difference in life experience between the rich and the poor: in short, critical issues which a more connected form of Area Studies can be called upon to engage with in a very practical as well as a scholarly sense.

In order to come closer to achieving this level of practical engagement, Area Studies – and indeed academia more widely – might be invited to reconsider the importance, therefore, not just of the mind and the brain in producing its analyses, but also of the body. That is, we believe it to be of value for the field to move beyond the Cartesian dualistic person mind/body separation that arguably impedes many of the disciplines of Western scholarship. In this connection, we draw on the relatively new scientific field of embodied cognition, which teaches not only that the mind is connected to the body, but that the body influences the mind. In short, the mind is inherently embodied.

Writing in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (1999) George Lakoff and Mark Johnson demonstrate that because our conceptual systems grow out of our bodies, meaning is grounded in and through our bodies. As a result, they call for a thorough re-thinking of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and postmodernist philosophy – ideas which lie at the core of much of the traditional Western approach to Area Studies. As Lakoff and Johnson assert:

The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason. Thus, to understand reason we must understand the details of our visual system, our motor system, and the general mechanisms of neural binding. In summary, reason is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Instead, it is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural structure of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world. (1999: 4)

The authors consequently reach a threefold conclusion, that:

- Reason is not completely conscious, but mostly unconscious.
- Reason is not purely literal, but largely metaphorical and imaginative.
- Reason is not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged. (1999: 4)

The implication of these assertions, in Lakoff and Johnson’s view, is that it is therefore impossible for any of us to share precisely the same disembodied transcendent reason as

anyone else, or to be capable of knowing everything about his or her own mind simply by self-reflection. “What universal aspects of reason there are arise from the commonalities of our bodies and brains and the environments we inhabit. The existence of these universals does not imply that reason transcends the body. Moreover, since conceptual systems vary significantly, reason is not entirely universal.” (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 5)

Despite this, however, there is some capacity in the concepts of embodied cognition, for the existence of some forms of common, stable truths since embodiment is, in Lakoff and Johnson’s view, universally experienced to some extent. The degree to which they are right in this assumption provides one area for future enquiry in Area Studies that is beyond the scope of this current essay. Suffice it to say, at this point, that Area Studies may have the tools to challenge the assumption that embodiment is indeed universally experienced: that too is likely to be inflected by difference.

If the human body matters as much as the field of cognitive embodiment suggests it does, then this implies that *emotions* also matter in relation to reasoning and hence to the scholarly work that academics produce – even if we have been traditionally trained to think otherwise. Not only are the long-standing forms of resistance to the acknowledgement of emotion and imagination as a driving force in human reason present in academia but also in culture more widely. By reassessing the role and value of emotions in our processes of cognisance, however, scholarly work in general, and in particular in the field of Area Studies that we are considering here, can be a significant beneficiary. Recent discoveries in neuroscience suggest that information is first processed in the emotional part of the brain before it reaches the part of the brain that is connected to so-called “rational” thought. As Valerie van Mulukom (2018: page unnumbered) writes:

Emotions are actually not dumb responses that always need to be ignored or even corrected by rational faculties. They are appraisals of what you have just experienced or thought of – in this sense, they are also a form of information processing.

Intuition or gut feelings are also the result of a lot of processing that happens in the brain. Research suggests that the brain is a large predictive machine, constantly *comparing* incoming sensory information and current experiences against stored knowledge and memories of previous experiences, and *predicting* what will come next. This is described in what scientists call the “predictive processing framework”.

Professor of neuroscience and psychiatry at the University of Sussex, Sarah Garfinkel echoes this finding when she too writes that the heart “knows” what the mind does not yet realise, and that access to this bodily signature can guide intuitive decision-making to a better outcome (2019: page unnumbered).

If this is indeed the case, then emotions are arguably of enormous significance in Area Studies scholarship if it is to be a genuine and ethical quest for knowledge and the production of understanding the differing experiences and beliefs of others. Moreover, by implication of our emphasis on the role of emotion, we argue that it facilitates two further features necessary to the development of Area Studies as an engaged academic project-

that is: heightened levels of social empathy; and a commitment to write in more accessible and fully embodied ways about realities that are rooted in lived experience.

Returning to the work of Garfinkel (2019), we can see that her descriptions of the internal states of the body sensed by the brain as a necessary aspect of survival are further linked to the development of empathy:

As well as telling us about our own emotions, our bodies respond to the joy, pain and sadness of others. Our hearts can race as loved ones experience fear, and our pupils can adopt a physiological signature of sadness in response to the sadness of others. If you pay attention to your heart and bodily responses, they can tell you how you are feeling, and allow you to share in the emotions of others (2019: page unnumbered).

On the question of empathy, Elizabeth Segal's 2018 work *Social Empathy: The Art of Understanding Others* provides a further degree of inspiration in the development of our ideas around an ideal Area Studies. As Segal notes, "Social empathy blends the individual ability to read and understand the feelings and actions of others with an understanding of history, the context within which human behavior happens, and the experiences of different societal groups." (2018: xii) Although writing from the perspective of a US-based professor of social work, Segal's explanation of the role of empathy resonates for engaged scholarship in Area Studies as much as it does in healthcare. As she explains: "empathy gives us more than our survival; it also supports our growth and prosperity. Empathy takes us beyond adapting for survival to thriving, which can lead us to a fully lived life. Thriving, the opportunity to prosper and flourish, is what pushes human beings to accomplish great things" (Segal, 2018: 29-30). If we are skilled in interpersonal and social empathy, Segal argues, then we are better equipped to navigate social situations, better able to cooperate with others and to achieve the highest sense of ourselves as individuals; and, most importantly, to create communities that are cohesive, caring, and successful (Segal, 2018: 30).

If Area Studies can be open to learning from the recent findings of psychology and neuroscience, it stands a chance of equipping itself with tools that make it not only relevant but integral to honing better intercultural understanding between different areas and across different regions of the world. To this it might also be encouraged to find a place for the role of the imagination, despite the fact that academia tends to require an artificial separation between imagination and "rational method", dispelling the possibility of freer creativity. Yet, as professor of natural philosophy, and author of the book *The Poetry and Music of Science* (2019b), Tom McLeish reminds us, "the few scientists who have vocalised their experience of formulating new ideas are in no doubt about its contemplative and creative essence" (McLeish, 2019a: page unnumbered). Here he draws on Einstein's experience by way of illustration. In *The Evolution of Physics*, Einstein wrote: "I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world" (quoted in McLeish, *ibid.*).

An incorporation of these ideas in a study of the world provides the opportunity for us to engage collaboratively, across disciplines, to explore difference from a humane and open-

hearted perspective towards the Other, and to therefore take on new, critical contemporary challenges. Moreover, the openness that comes from greater empathy also opens up ways for the academia to acknowledge its own “blind spots” and prejudices and to modify them with forms of knowledge that are rooted in other, non-Western philosophical traditions. In short, what can the places and the people of different parts of the world teach Area Studies about ways of understanding, and empathising with the Other?

The challenges in front of us are monumental; and the future of mankind is at stake. This is due to the fact that we are confronted with extreme and often unprecedented situations. In order to preserve peace and to promote international cooperation in the face of current global challenges, a common diplomatic language is not enough: more is needed. That “more” is deep knowledge and understanding: in particular, knowledge about differences in world outlook, and thus in ways of perceiving “the Other”. If culturally based values and norms, ideas and preferences *differ* from each other, and we believe that they do, then these differing values and norms have an impact upon ideas and upon social and societal activities and actions, thus producing different outcomes in human behaviour and societal development. The task at hand is to strive to understand this complex dynamic, with its combination of the local and the global, and of the change-resisting and the change-promoting forces that affect both institutions and individuals, and which are challenged by a myriad haphazard events, often occurring outside scholarly focus. This task, we argue here, is precisely what Area Studies must confront and engage with in our present day and age.

With this approach in mind, our fundamental position is that Area Studies must, in our current global, social and political climate, prioritise a nuanced and empathetic engagement with the experience of being human, at all costs. There is an urgency, as we see it, for scholarship in general, and Area Studies scholarship in particular, to take up the ethical challenge of responsibility for building and nurturing a stronger sense of community and cooperation. Area Studies has the power, in this regard, to address the kind of fear of being a citizen of “Nowhere”. For, through an enhanced understanding of the Other, people can more readily aspire both to belong “somewhere” as an expression of their local, national and regional cultural identities, and to simultaneously be a citizen of the World. These two dimensions do not need to be in conflict with one another. Armed with a better understanding of difference, there is little reason to prevent people from behaving in keeping with their own, cultural self, while also having the capacity to empathise with, appreciate and engage constructively with the distinctiveness of Others. In this sense we envisage Area Studies not merely in terms of a much-debated set of ‘concepts’ of geographical regions, divided by hard borders or liberated by semi-porous ones: rather, we see it as a rich field of human interaction, in which the appreciation of difference can be at its best - as a positive and energizing force.

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