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Inter-American Perspectives for the Rethinking of Area Studies

Abstract:

In the context of the re-newed academic, political, and public interest in Area Studies, this article explores the spatial-political perspectives of inter-American Areas Studies. In a first step the article discusses the construction of the “area” of the Americas in regard to the triangular of power-space-knowledge. In a second step it proposes a framework to rethink hemispheric Area Studies relying on the concept of the Americas as space of entanglement. Thereby the article proposes three heuristic approaches towards a spatial framework of the space of entanglement. First, the concept of flows allows addressing the transregional mobilization and circulation of people, objects, commodities, and media. Second, geopolitical imaginaries allow us to understand the articulation of several spatial fragments into a broader concept of space and its representation. Third, with the emphasis on environment the article address the aspect of the materiality of space. The article ends with a plea for entangled methodologies in terms of pluritopical, transversal, dialogic, and horizontal approaches.

Keywords: Area Studies, geopolitical imaginaries, space of entanglements

Since the end of the 1990s we have been facing a new conjuncture in globalization driven by a liberalization of trade, an expansion of the financial markets, and innovation in information technologies. With the the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the bi-polar macro-geopolitical world order,, geopolitical visions of World society and global governance emerged. In these visions the “end of history” as proposed in the neo-Hegelian framework of Francis Fukuyama went hand in hand with an “end of geography” and a “timeless time” of a global network society (Castells 1996). This has lead to the recognition of a time-space compression and a growing feeling of global interconnectedness which finds political expressions in global governance regimes and cosmopolitan attitudes. In this context area-based knowledge has lost its importance, and Area Studies were considered old-fashioned compared to the emergent global studies. They were harshly criticized for their lack of theory and methodology, while the disciplines reclaimed their primacy in the order of knowledge hinting at their universal scope.

Nevertheless, there are also dynamics that hint at a new importance of Area Studies. In this article I want to highlight three of them that are mainly articulated by hegemonic discourses. First, I would like to mention the growing importance of migration as well as cultural and ethnic diversity in the so-called “age of migration”. (Castles and Miller 1993) Diasporic cultures, migrant communities, and language diversity show the interconnectedness with remote areas, just as cross-border media flows and cultural production do. Specific Area-based knowledge is necessary in order to understand the specific cultural patterns of people, things, and ideas “on the move” and its articulation with other societies and communities. This finds its expression in the recent debates on interculturality and (post-)multiculturalism (Kaltmeier, Raab and Thies 2012).

Second, the world-wide organized economy is based not only on universal rule in a global social system, instead, knowledge of particular regions is needed to improve the success of economic enterprises and to understand dynamics in political economy, such as competing regional integration processes in form of NAFTA, the failed FTAA, or UNASUR Latin American integration. (Schmalz 2013) This is the point at which area-specific knowledge comes in – in critical and affirmative ways.

Third, political knowledge of conflictive areas is needed in order to control and, as possible, pacify conflictive areas. Facing the proliferation of “small wars” not foreseen in the Fukuyama vision – it is especially the military complex and NGOs engaged in peace-keeping missions that advocate Area-based knowledge. (Kaldor 1999) A debate on the use of anthropologist knowledge in the military complex and in counterinsurgency strategies arose in the midst of the 2000s in regard to the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq (see González and Price 2007; as well as the debates in *Anthropology Today*, especially in 2007 and 2008).

In this context several public and private foundations have made a plea for area studies. The program “Crossing Borders: Revitalizing Area Studies” that the Ford Foundation initiated in 1997 has been of particular importance (Dirlik 2010: 7, Mirsepassi 2003: 5)..In Germany the Area Studies program of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF), initiated in 2008, has the goal to “maintain and improve Germany’s competitiveness in the globalization process” (BMBF 2008, translation by the author).

Partly related to these programs, we can observe a new, self-reflective turn in Area Studies in academics. Despite the utilitarian dimension in Area Studies, postcolonial scholars have defended area studies by hinting at another aspect: The close knowledge of regions may serve to challenge the Eurocentrism in theories and practice, and thus allow a diversification in the dominant geopolitics of knowledge. In a more practical and material sense Mirsepassi has argued that Area Studies have often been an opener for the academic field for Postcolonial scholars (2003: 9), because it is in Area Studies where Western Academia, in the US empowered by politics of affirmative action, concedes non-Western scholars a place in the academic field. Indeed, for our argumentation the epistemological impacts are more relevant. Ludden has argued that Area Studies challenge simple conceptions of universalism by hinting at the plurality of knowledge in the global knowledge society. Thereby he makes the point that every knowledge is contextual knowledge (Ludden 2003: 131-5). With Walter Mignolo we can underline this perspective and make the point that the construction of situated knowledge itself – depending of the speakers locus of enunciation - takes place in a power-laden geopolitics of knowledge where Western knowledge has been positioned – with colonialism and imperialism – on the top of the power matrix (Mignolo 1999).

In the following part of this article I would like to focus on two aspects of particular relevance for Area Studies in the Americas. In a first step I discuss the construction of the “area” of the Americas especially in regard to the triangle of power-space-knowledge. In a second step I propose a framework for rethinking hemispheric Area Studies proposing the – still fuzzy concept – of the Americas as space of entanglement.

Construction of the Americas: Power, Space, and Knowledge.

The formation of area studies in Europe is closely linked to colonial projects. Counting, mapping, classifying, and representing the other were basic operations in the creation of power-knowledge complexes about the other and its space (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). Area Studies scholars Goss and Wesley-Smith pointed out that “area studies was an integral part of a modernist project that sought

to remake the world in the image of the West” (xii). The specifically Western production of knowledge implied that the other did not serve only to produce the self, instead, the self was universalized and set a standard to measure other societies. In making representations of the other, the Western image of culture and space was constructed. The power of definition was in the hands of the European colonizers. This mutual operation of Othering in the production of geocultural units was analyzed by Edward Said in his seminal work on Orientalism, as a Western discourse and construction of the Orient. Latin American scholars such as O’Gorman and Walter Mignolo have pointed out that the basic “orientalist” operation is at work in the construction of the Americas. While Edward Said has focused on the construction of the Orient in power-knowledge-complexes in the 18th century, Walter Mignolo argues that this construction of the Orient was only possible on the basis of the triumph of Christian Spain in the expulsion of Moors from the Iberian Peninsula and the conquest of the Americas (Mignolo 1999: 61).

This construction of the Americas had – as Aníbal Quijano argues – material and social impacts. Hand in hand with the economic and political conquest also a “coloniality of power” is established, that is based on identity politics. In the classification of the “racial” Other, the European self is constructed because the construction of the racial inferior Other served the needs of labor exploitation. For Wallerstein and Quijano this lies at the heart of the formation of the modern capitalist world-system. Therefore they point out: “Americanity has always been, and remains to this day, an essential element in what we meant by ‘modernity’” (Quijano/Wallerstein 1993: 549).

Also for approaches to the conception of modernity, inspired by Max Weber, the Americas mark a turning point. Sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt has argued that the construction and colonization of the Americas has had far-reaching impacts for the development of modernity. The Americas are – following Eisenstadt – the first multiple modernities beyond Europe. Against the argumentation of traditional theories of modernization Eisenstadt points out that new modern dynamics and interpretations that must be seen as autonomous emerged on the basis of European patterns. He highlights that occidental patterns cannot be seen as the only “authentic modern” ones, although they serve as the starting point for alternative modernities in the Americas.

In classifying the paths to modernity in the Americas Eisenstadt relies on the colonial constitution of the American societies. “Indeed it was in the Americas – in the English colonies in the North which later crystallized into the US; in Canada where French and English settlements became interwoven; and in the Latin Americas in the Spanish and Portuguese empires as well as in the Caribbean – that such distinct patterns of modernity first crystallized.” Thereby Eisenstadt not only highlights the difference to Europe, but also – in a Weberian approach – the distinct paths to

modernity between the US and Latin America that “differed not only from one another, but also from Europe” (Eisenstadt 2003: 701-2).

Treating the US and Latin America as distinct units – as it is also the case in the Eisenstadt-approach - tends to ignore the inter-American entanglements. Early geopolitical imaginaries of hemispheric integration – from Simón Bolívar to the Monroe-doctrine – were applied in an anti-colonial sense and directed against Europe, although even between the 1830s and the 1850s certain imperialist patterns in US-policies towards the Latin American South were notable. When in the US the frontier and westward expansion ended (– in the realm of the westward expansion and the annihilation of indigenous peoples –) and after the 1860s with the conclusion of the civil war, Latin America and the Caribbean were declared a new South-frontier, initiating a new imperialism. The turn from 19th to 20th century marked a turning point in the Western hemisphere from a trans-Atlantic relationship with Western Europe towards a growing inter-American entanglement. In the Spanish, US-American and Cuban war in 1898, the last Spanish colonial domain ended the era of traditional European colonialism in the Americas. In 1867 the French left Mexico, and with the beginning of the works at the Panama Canal in 1904, the US triumphed over the French engineers (Parker 2008).

The shift from transatlantic to inter-American entanglements resulted in a new imperialist pan-American integration under US-hegemony. Since the 1890s the growing US-export economy tried to conquer new markets – especially in Latin America. This shift towards inter-American relations found its expression not only in economic and political entanglements but also in Area-specific knowledge production. In contrast to Europe – where geographical societies are related to colonial projects (Smith 2010: 24) - area studies in the US began to emerge later – in the late 19th century – and they mainly had a pan-American orientation, as is the case of the Pan-American Institute of Geography and History founded in 1928 in Havana and established in Mexico City.

This hemispheric geopolitical imagination under US-hegemony was not uncontested. Historian Michel Gobart (2013) argues that the recognition of the government of US-filibuster William Walker in 1858 by US-president Franklin Pierce fostered the idea of Latin America as a geopolitical and identitarian category against US-imperialism (Gobat 2013). This geopolitical imaginary was also expressed by anti-imperial writers such as Cuban José Martí or Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó. In this early dynamic of pan-Americanism we also find anti-hegemonic entanglements related to race, ethnicity and gender that – as David Luis-Brown (2008) has argued in regard to afro-American and certain indigenist movements – led to hemispheric waves of decolonization and ideas of hemispheric citizenship.

A specific conjuncture of Inter-American integration took place in the realm of the Good Neighbor Policy vis-à-vis World War II. In this geopolitical context the US was very concerned to establish good relations to its Latin American neighbors in order to impede the expansion of the fascist axis-powers in the Western hemisphere.

Nevertheless, after WWII (See Robert Hall's 1947 report "Area Studies with Special Reference for Research in the Social Sciences."), the global reconfiguration that made a world power out of the US and that produced the bi-polar geopolitical system of the Cold War, put an end to inter-American integration and led to a new conjuncture of knowledge production in Area Studies. Goss and Wesley-Smith have argued that Area Studies in the US have been strongly related to the post-World War II and Cold War, (Szanton 2004, Cumings 2002) often with the aim to collaborate with the military intelligence arms. This is particularly the case for Latin American Studies in the US. Latin American Studies emerged in the United States related to the geopolitical or geo-economic aims of foreign policies, as is also the case in Latin American area studies, due to the revolutionary movements in the "decisive decade" (Halperin Donghi) of the 1960s and 1970s because of the success of the Cuban revolution (Berger 1995). Even critical academic networks, such as LASA, had to position themselves in the Cold War power field in opposition to U.S. interventionism in Latin America and in Vietnam (Berger 1995, 173, Sadowski-Smith/Fox 2004, 12, Wesley-Smith/Goss xvi). Nevertheless, in contrast to other area studies, Latin American Studies in the US is characterized by a "double bind", on the one hand the common history of colonialism and nation-building, and on the other hand the reproduction of differentiated forms such as Protestant vs. Catholic, Anglo vs. Latins, North vs. South and later Empire vs. periphery (Mignolo 2003: 36). This dynamic had its repercussions in Western Europe. In Great Britain the establishment of Latin American Research Centers began with a state-sponsored program vis-à-vis the impact of the Cuban Revolution.

In this sense it is obvious, that power relations are inscribed in Area Studies. The production of knowledge – and its funding – is highly political. Thereby traditional Area Studies are characterized by an uneven geopolitics of knowledge which finds its expression in the fact that Western (European and US-American) scholars control the production of knowledge while Asian, African and Latin-American scholars are barely taken into account. Nevertheless, it is not only instrumental. The academic field – although it depends on private and public funding – still has a certain degree of autonomy from economics and politics, and it has a high potential of self-reflection. It can not only produce "knowledge to give economic and political actors orientation" or "Fernkompetenz" (BMBF 2008), it can also reflect upon uneven Geopolitics of knowledge and offer interfaces of knowledge exchange and cross-cultural dialogue.

Space of Entanglement.

Since the beginning of the 20th century we can observe increasing processes of inter-American exchange, transfer, interdependence and entanglement. The latinoization of the US has changed not only demographics and cultural politics in the US but also the academy. The establishment of Chicano/a and Latino/a American Studies departments highlights that Latin American Studies is not a remote object but an urgent perspective in the midst of the US. The US-Mexican border is the most crossed border of the world, cross-cultural media flows shape consumer cultures in the North and the South of the continent, capital interest influences geopolitical imaginaries of hemispheric integration while drug and arms trade as well as its containments are other examples of the multiple forms inter-American relations can take.

The latinoization of the US, sub-regional integrations, and the growing importance of borderlands as “transfrontera contact zones” (Saldívar 1997) bring us to reflect upon the use of our spatial categories. In traditional area studies, space has often been understood in terms of a “container space”: as a recipient that contains specific cultural, economic, political, and social elements that distinguishes these spaces through discrete borders from other container spaces. The criteria for the identification of these areas vary depending upon the theoretical framework. The most widely known container space is – without any doubt – the territory of the nation-state, which is often conceived of as the basic unit of the post-colonial world after the end of empires (Ludden 2000). In regard to the Americas also definitions of cultural and religious areas are widely used. In resemblance to 19th-century theories of “Kulturareale” political scientist Samuel Huntington stated a “Clash of civilizations”. Also simple versions of dependencia-approaches with their juxtaposition of North and South fail to understand the new spatial dynamics.

In the light of recent debate on spaces, these approaches fail to give differentiated spatial insights as they conceive space as a given, independent variable that remains constant while cultural and social dynamics are the motors of change. Cultural and social elements are put in the container. Thus, the criticism of container-spaces does not mean to lose sight of the diverse forms in which space is fixed. Instead, our approach “puts the focus on a certain tension between fixity and fluidity, between the ways in which places, territories, and borders at all scales become comparatively fixed in space over a significant period and the ways in which such fixed entities are dissolved in favor of new fluidities and fixities” (Smith 2010: 29).

If we do not limit our understanding of space to absolute containers and if we take a relational understanding as a starting point for our spatial re-construction of area studies, we have to

introduce new spatial categories. Thereby we should not play off globalization against Area Studies. Instead, Mirsepassi suggests that “[t]he fluid concept of globalization can be made more precise and meaningful only by being grounded in area studies. It is precisely the relationship between global processes and area-based knowledge that opens up new perspectives on globalizing societies, nations and cultures” (2003: 13).

This cannot be achieved with a territorial concept of area. Therefore we propose the use of the concept of a space of entanglement. Entanglement becomes a key concept which allows the analysis of phenomena such as transfers between regions, regional intrinsic logics, deterritorialization and transculturation.

In our approach an area is not a given entity, instead it can only be described as a field of interaction and exchange that is relevant to the actors. In this sense areas have a “variable geometry” that is not limited by physical space. The constructedness of areas and their relations to others is highlighted by focusing on mutual observation, comparison, competence, interdependence and interplay. Areas are thus imagined spaces of interaction which are both addressed and influenced by the geopolitical strategies of institutional actors, economic interests, media, social movements and daily life experiences. As a result, entanglement also addresses power asymmetries without the schematics of older dependence theories.

In the following section of this article, I propose three heuristic approaches towards a spatial framework of the space of entanglement. First, the concept of flows allows us to address the transregional mobilization and circulation of people, objects, commodities, and media and their impact in the construction of an inter-American space of entanglement. While Manuel Castells has focused in his influential concept of the space of flows within an emerging age of information mainly on informational flows based on technological innovations, we propose here a broader concept of flows that includes the flow of people, animate beings, plants, things, ideas, etc....

This approach allows us to describe border-crossing dynamics and processes of deterritorialization as well as the intersection of local, national, regional and transregional horizons of interaction. In recent mobility studies we partly see the argument of an intrinsic teleology of acceleration (often related to modernity itself), instead we argue that flows have different velocities. They can slow down and even stop. In spatial terms the concept of flow needs to be substantiated. Terms like routes, itineraries, channels, etc. might be helpful for this task. The micro-research strategy to follow flows is a privileged option to analyze areas which puts dynamics, fluidity and agency in the center.

Nevertheless, it seems inadequate to limit area studies to only this micro-approach. Therefore, we propose, second, the concept of geopolitical imaginaries. This concept allows us to understand the articulation of several spatial fragments (including flows) into a broader concept of space and its representation (Gregory 1994). We are first interested in the entanglement of different discourses in the construction of these spatial imaginations. This may concern the articulation of different functional discourses (media discourse, political discourse, etc.) as well as the articulation of different regional discourses.

Secondly, we are interested in the multiple ways in which these geopolitical imaginaries circulate and how they are used strategically in political communication. Or, put in another way, how geopolitical imaginaries themselves become concepts that travel and circulate in flows. Here we can turn to the experiences of Latin American Cultural Studies – particularly scholars working on the analysis of medialized urban imaginaries (García Canclini 1995).

Several recent theories on space rely on the dualism of spatial practice and the merging of spatial elements into a broader imagination of space (Löw 2001, Freitag 2005). We would like to add a third dimension. With the emphasis on environment we address the aspect of the materiality of space: a space that surrounds us, and a space of which we are an integral part. To do this, we focus first on how material space is socially produced, appropriated and transformed, and secondly, on the ways in which material space shape social interactions and imaginations.

These heuristic approaches of flows, spatial fixes in geopolitical imaginaries and environment do not in any way lead to a description of an integrated space of the Americas without conflict. Spaces of entanglement cannot be understood as smooth spaces, instead they are highly fragmented, incoherent, and shaped by uneven power-relations. By addressing entanglements we are particularly interested in the nodal points where different strands and flows meet. Here the flows not only pass through, instead these are dense points where complex processes of translation, transculturation and intersection take place. We propose the concept of “interface” to focus on the sites where different flows cross, entangle, and compete, and where new imaginaries are produced in processes of translation and transculturation. These interfaces are by no ways a guarantee for successful communication and interaction, instead they are junctions where communication and interaction can also be cut off.

Dialogue in Area Studies

In the last sections, I have offered elements for new spatial concepts in entangled area studies. Nevertheless, not only an un-thinking of area studies is needed, but also an un-doing. In this

sense, in place of a conclusion, I would like to present a final remark in regard to a methodology in area studies. Postcolonial thinkers such as Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria (2002) have argued that colonialism has led to an entangled history, which entangles the local histories of different areas (colonizers and colonized) and which establishes a new colonial power-matrix. This is also the case for the Americas that have their origins in the European colonial expansion in the long 16th century, and that – especially since the end of the 19th century – have been shaped by inter-American entanglement. The latter creates a space of a common experience in the rejection of a European colonialism, and a Europe that has been politically divided by the imperialistic politics of the US in the Western hemisphere.

The plea for an entangled conception of the Americas has methodological impacts. One can hardly argue that it is possible to understand the area from the perspective of one single place of enunciation. Entangled spaces need entangled methodologies to be understood in their complex articulations (for a discussion of dialogical methodologies inspired by the task of decolonizing the geopolitics of knowledge see Corona Berkin and Kaltmeier 2012).

The most basic, yet essential requirement of critical Area Studies in the Americas is the acknowledgement of the multiplicity and simultaneity of knowledge production in different areas and various disciplines. We need to record the differences, juxtapose differences and similarities and mobilize the existing sources of knowledge.

In a first stance, it is important to understand the different meanings and connotations the same concept may have in different contexts and from the perspective of different loci of enunciation in unequal power relations. This means to decolonize the existing geopolitics of knowledge, where the “valid” knowledge is still produced in the West, e.g. in peer-reviewed US-American journals. In a self-reflexive manner we have to acknowledge that our research itself has to be understood as an interface in the space of entanglement.

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