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Welcome

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Welcome to the first issue of *New Area Studies*—an interdisciplinary, open access journal founded as a space for a truly global scholarly conversation. The events of the past few months, in a year that seems to have lasted a decade, have only highlighted the necessity of this project. Contemporary world-historical events, from COVID19 to Black Lives Matter protests, have powerfully reinforced the extraordinary interconnectedness of life in the twenty-first century: viruses and viral content, pandemics and politics, effortlessly cross international boundaries with stunning speed. Yet at the same time, unpicking and understanding the local ramifications of these and other international happenings remains an urgent and necessary task, one for which Area Studies (with its constituent parts) and its unique multi- and interdisciplinary approaches is uniquely fitted as a field. Context still matters, now more than ever; Area Studies, positioned at the intersection of the local and the global, the macro and the micro, can uncover and interrogate political, cultural and social contexts more fruitfully than any other conglomeration of disciplines.

Yet why *New Area Studies*? The title of this journal signals a debt to the work of the scholars who have breathed new life into the field. In recent years, a variety of writers and thinkers have been contemplating and cogitating the trajectory of the domain (many of whom now serve on the Editorial Board of this journal).¹ Together they have

¹ See, for example, Edith Clowes and Shelly Jarrett Bromberg eds, *Area Studies in the Global Age: Community, Place, Identity* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016); Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge eds, *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Susan Hodgett and Patrick James eds, *Necessary Travel. New Area Studies and Canada in Comparative Perspective* (London: Lexington Books, 2018); Zoran



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a shared concern for the future of the field and a desire to re-conceptualise the ground at this pivotal point in history. A fuller account of the process of self-reflection that has been undertaken by Area Studies scholars is outlined elsewhere.² Evident throughout their work, however, is a collective musing on who the field is for, whose knowledge it represents, and how successful we are as researchers in gathering evidence, or insight, into what it feels like in “being there.”³ Underpinning these motives is the desire to improve the effectiveness of our research and, even in a small way, to make lives better. Such methodological musings were never simple, and in recent months that task has come to seem even harder. Can Area Studies make a salient contribution in this moment of profound global complexity and turmoil? That is precisely the kind of question we seek to answer in coming issues.

For some, of course, Area Studies still bears the imprint of its origins. As Ariel I. Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil have summarised: “the proliferation of Area Studies centers and institutes in Europe, the United States, and the former Soviet bloc through much of the 20th century has been connected to the putative goals of advancing imperial ambitions or international trade interests, and, later on, knowing ‘the enemy’ and seeking out allies during the Cold War era.”⁴ If it is necessary to note that Area Studies remains, for some, tainted by these early associations, it is also vital to assert—as many of our contributors do—that in the twenty-first century the discipline has undergone extraordinary transformations. As recently as 2010, Jon

Milutinović ed., *The Rebirth of Area Studies. Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the 21st Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020); R.A.W. Rhodes and Susan Hodgett, *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, forthcoming).

² See Susan Hodgett, “21st Century Area Studies: Blurring Genres, Evolutionary Thought and The Production Theory”, in Zoran Milutinović, *The Rebirth of Area Studies. Challenges for History, Politics and International Relations in the 21st Century* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 19-52.

³ See Máiréad NicCraith and Emma Hill, “Relocating the Ethnographic Field: From ‘Being There’ to ‘Being There’”, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 24 (1) (2015), 24-62.

⁴ Ariel I. Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil, “Comparative Area Studies: What It Is, What It Can Do”, in Ariel I. Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil eds, *Comparative Area Studies: Methodological Rationales and Cross-Regional Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6.



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Goss and Terence Wesley-Smith asserted that Area Studies was characterised by a “prevailing mood of anxiety and uncertainty”—not to mention “a fiscal and epistemological crisis”—dating back to the end of the Cold War.⁵ In the last decade, however, a mood change has been palpable—perhaps exemplified by Zoran Multinović’s assertion that Area Studies “currently demonstrates signs of dynamism, vitality and strength quite unusual for the presumed post-mortem state.”⁶ On the one hand, scholars have worked to reorientate Area Studies to make it responsive to a world that is increasingly interconnected and unbounded. As Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge have described, “the geographically fixed categories in which our world operates are increasingly characterised by degrees of dynamism that no longer justify a division of the world into territorially fixed units.” As such, “the call for interdisciplinary and transregional Area Studies research becomes even more pressing.”⁷ Despite the exciting interdisciplinary revival of recent years, there is still a need for scholars to move out of their area-specific silos—to find spaces to bring their particular place-based expertise and methodologies into conversation with scholars working on the same global challenges in different geographic spaces and from different perspectives.

It is our ambition that *New Area Studies* will prove to be that kind of meeting place. And it is an aspiration already borne out by the contributions in this foundational issue. In the virtual pages that follow, we have contributions and contributors that truly span the globe, push beyond traditional boundaries, and draw on a wide variety of (inter- and multi-)disciplinary methods, many of which may not necessarily have been previously considered in relationship to the project of Area Studies. In this issue

⁵ Jon Goss and Terence Wesley-Smith, “Remaking Area Studies”, in Jon Goss and Terence Wesley-Smith eds, *Remaking Area Studies: Teaching and Learning across Asia and the Pacific* (University of Hawaii Press, 2010), ix.

⁶ Multinović, *Rebirth*, 1.

⁷ Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, “Introduction: Knowledge Production, Area Studies, and the Mobility Turn”, in Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge eds, *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 5.



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our contributors: examine cinema in Latin America as a site of transnational enquiry; explore the Sahel region as a case study for Area Studies’s potential for policy relevant research; provide a cultural studies reading of Russian neonationalism; consider the relationship of Modern Languages to Area Studies; demonstrate the significance of music and music-focused discussion as an effective research tool in Latin America; explode the concept of area through an analysis of Australian “Welcome to Country” rituals; push forwards the idea of decolonisation with reference to the Indo-Myanmar borderlands; and for the first time apply systemism to the theorization of capability and wellbeing in Canada. Over the coming years, we resolve to keep testing and stretching the boundaries of the field in precisely this way, foregrounding interdisciplinary approaches and cross-disciplinary communication wherever possible. What these diverse, compelling voices share is a commitment to a capacious and generous understanding of both Area Studies and its disciplinary composition; in turn, our definition of what “Area” denotes will remain as fluid as our sense of what it means to study them.

At the same time, another insistent theme running through many of these inaugural articles is the concomitant and contradictory rise of nationalism in the twenty-first century. Counterpointing the profoundly global experience of being human in the contemporary world, the concept of a hermetic nation-state transcribed by clear and tangible borders has also had a popular resurgence in the last few years. Across the globe, nationalist movements are on the march. Understanding the local conditions that give rise to this new wave of ethno-nationalism remains a vital task for Area Studies practitioners of all stripes. And if nothing else, the experience of lockdown has made the significance of our immediate locales evident to all of us. As Edith Clowes and Shelly Jarrett Bromberg presciently argued in 2016, specificities of place still require our close attention, perhaps especially in a globalised world: the “particular communities in which people live their lives and the places to which they perceive themselves as belonging are of life-defining importance [...] Place-oriented narratives of self, histories, memories, rituals, traditions—all are the fundamental



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ground on which social and political communities are built and identity is formed.”⁸ As such, New Area Studies must also be a space for this deep understanding of places and the communities who live in them. We will, then, also seek to showcase work that does the necessary work of communicating the ongoing—and perhaps newly increasing—importance of the local.

All of this speaks to wider concerns about how we improve our methodological armoury to address the complex experiences of local life in the twenty first century. Our interest is driven by a pervasive unease that what we knew about *life in place* in the twentieth century has proven insufficient. And, as Hodgett and James have pointed out, this paucity of information has led to a sense of profound *shock* as our societies have experienced economic collapse (2008), ten years of austerity, Brexit (2016), the election of Donald J. Trump to the White House (2017), the rise of China, an assertive Russia, and an unprepared for deadly global pandemic (2019).⁹ All of this is experienced as fulsome and increasing unpredictability. Consequently, debate rages over how researchers can best explore life in polities and regions across the globe, for the benefit of those who live there. As Rhodes and Hodgett point out, blurring genres involving analogies and metaphors from the humanities is one successful research option. Social science in the twenty first century is less constrained by naturalism and Political Science can work effectively with Area Studies seeking out “empathy, enlarged thinking, edification, and the examined life.”¹⁰ Newer qualitative and interpretive methods, fieldwork, thick descriptions, narrative and historical analysis are seeking to explore more effectively what humans do. All of us seek better insight into actions, and what it means to be human, within a given culture. This proves

⁸ Edith Clowes and Shelly Jarrett Bromberg, “Preface” in Edith Clowes and Shelly Jarrett Bromberg eds, *Area Studies in the Global Age: Community, Place, Identity* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2016), xii, xiv.

⁹ Hodgett and James, *Necessary Travel*, 6.

¹⁰ Rhodes and Hodgett, *Blurring Genres*, forthcoming.



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timely given the multiple challenges the world is facing at the start of the century’s third decade.

At the time of writing in November 2020, those challenges certainly seem significant; “unprecedented” has become a tired, but necessary, watchword. In short, all bets are off. In the immediate foreground, the global pandemic dominates the frame and makes predicting what comes next nigh impossible. Historically damaging wildfires—linked to the ongoing climate crisis—have devastated America’s West Coast and acres in Australia. The frailty of human endeavour has been exposed anew in a startling and shocking fashion. Beyond those immediate and ongoing crises—and only thinking Transatlantically for the moment—in the coming months Donald Trump will seek reelection for the Presidency of the United States and Britain’s exit from the EU will reach another climactic moment. Academics have concluded that we are seeing a major disruption of politics in several western democracies especially the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). Inglehart and Norris, in reviewing multiple data sources, argue that what we are watching is the consequence of the postindustrial age having generated deep schisms.¹¹

Economic insecurity, growing inequality, and cultural backlash now challenge the unregulated dominance of neoliberalism in place since Reagan and Thatcher. An emerging reactionary stance is characterised by a reassertion of “traditional” values; increasing opposition to what is perceived as rapid cultural change, including immigration; nationalism, flavoured with xenophobia; a general rejection of difference; and a defence of traditional gender roles. Michael Peters, writing on “The End of Neoliberal Globalisation and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism”, argues that the Brexit vote may even herald the decline and fall of the liberal globalized world.

¹¹ Inglehart and Norris note that support for Populist Right Wing Parties in Europe has risen from 6% to 13% and for Populist Left Wing parties from 2% to 12% in Europe between the 1960s to 2010. Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, *Trump, Brexit and the Rise of Populism: The Economic Have Nots and Cultural Backlash*, *Harvard Kennedy School Research Working Paper 16-026* (Harvard, 2016), 37.

The twenty-first century, he contends, is experiencing an upswell of ultra-nationalism and racism with “a slowdown in trade growth, [a] stand-off on trade agreements, [as well as] ... anti-immigration among[st] an anxious working-class.”¹² In both the US and the UK, raised levels of antagonism towards the traditional political elite have been seen.¹³ Globalisation, it seems, has failed to deliver for the working classes and many suspect it is no longer delivering for the middle classes.¹⁴ States long seen as bastions of democracy are under increasing strain. John Shattuck reveals that The Economist’s Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index downgraded the United States from a “full” to a “flawed” democracy in 2016, and that the campaigning organisation Freedom House suggests that American “democratic institutions have suffered erosion ... partisan manipulation of the electoral process, bias and dysfunction in the criminal justice system, and growing disparities in wealth, economic opportunity, and political influence.”¹⁵ In this election cycle, those concerns have only intensified. And looking beyond America’s borders, Freedom House—subtling its 2019 Freedom in the World report “Democracy in Retreat”—notes that this is a global problem: a crisis of confidence discernible in representative self-governing societies around the world, with twenty-two of forty-one countries losing ground. This marks “the 13th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.”¹⁶ The recent election in Belarus and its continuing fallout are only the latest manifestations of such fears.

¹² Michael A. Peters, “The End of Neoliberal Globalisation and the Rise of Authoritarian Populism”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50:4 (2018), 323-325, 323.

¹³ See, for example, Pierre Ostiguy and María Esperanza Casullo, “Left versus Right Populism: Antagonism and the Social Other”, Presented at the 67th PSA Annual International Conference, Glasgow, UK, 10-12 April 2017.

¹⁴ See, for example, Peters, “End of Neoliberal”, 324; Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents Revisited: Anti-Globalization in the Era of Trump* (London: Penguin, 2018).

¹⁵ John Shattuck, “How Democracy in America Can Survive Donald Trump”, *The American Prospect*, February 23 2018, <https://prospect.org/power/democracy-america-can-survive-donald-trump/>. Accessed 21.9.2020.

¹⁶ “Freedom in the World 2019: Democracy in Retreat”, *Freedom House*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/democracy-retreat>. Accessed 21.9.2020.

Pointing to the dangers of disenchantment, Kathy Hytten counsels that democracy is not a given and that the system, particularly in the US, requires attention. She turns to an earlier twentieth century conception of democracy and particularly to the figure of John Dewey who recommends the reinvention of the concept by each new generation. Hytten argues that large segments of the American population need greater engagement in the democratic process reminding us that, for Dewey, democracy was not only a system or a set of procedures, rather a way of life evoking democratic habits.¹⁷ These habits include attitudes and dispositions towards other people and the world as well as seeking information and decisions based on credible evidence. Moreover, democrats “consider the impact of their choices on others both near and far, support and care about their fellow citizens, and work to develop shared interests.”¹⁸ As Dewey put it, democracy proves “more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.”¹⁹ Hytten argues such approaches encourage citizens to live together in harmony and seek out individual enrichment, which is communally desirable. This conception of a richer, deeper democracy offers hope—quoting Rebecca Solnit—“as an orientation of the soul, spirit, and heart” as we work to cultivate the common good; they necessitate too the acceptance of pluralism and experimentalism.²⁰ Dewey’s idea of active citizenship thereby obliges new people and perspectives to become involved in searching “for commonalities even while we attempt to understand and value differences.” In short, for Hytten, we must pursue a “habit of hope [to] cultivate the good” through “critical thinking and experimental action [to]... bring about better worlds.”²¹

¹⁷ Kathy Hytten, “Globalization, Democracy, and Social Movements: The Educational Potential of Activism”, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 48:10 (2016), 981-996, 984.

¹⁸ Hytten, “Globalization”, 984.

¹⁹ Quoted in Hytten, “Globalization”, 984,

²⁰ Quoted in Hytten, “Globalization”, 988.

²¹ Hytten, 986-7.



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New Area Studies, then, is a small attempt to contribute to that goal of bringing about a better world. It arrives at a pivotal moment in the trajectories of both academic disciplines and world history. The events, issues, forces and bellwethers outlined above are international in scope and shape, but remain local in their particular expressions and inflections. As such, the transnational and interdisciplinary approaches showcased in this journal, now and in the future, remain essential. Crucially, we will strive to make sure that these global conversations include and centre interlocutors from around the globe. At a time when decolonisation is a deeply important topic in all academic endeavours, Area Studies, with its profoundly colonialist roots, must continue the work of unpacking its structural inequalities and centring indigenous and local scholars in the discussions of place that occur in this virtual town hall. Now more than ever, all of these approaches shape a field and its disciplines which needs to be responsive to the demands and struggles of the twenty first century—the global, the local, and the spaces in between. To do this we seek contributions of *breadth and depth* in conducting our explorations of space and place. History, politics, languages, and interpretive analysis must play their role along with geography, culture and science. To reproblematised *that which we think we already know—and what we clearly don’t*—we must exploit all weapons in our academic armoury from ethnography to big data. In this way we seek an expansive and *very human* New Area Studies to open up new spaces, places, thoughts, conversations and concepts.

Finally, we offer thanks to our Editorial Board and, particularly, the contributors to this inaugural issue who have begun conversations that will continue in the coming years. This endeavour would have been impossible without the support of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the School of Art, Media and American Studies at the University of East Anglia. The arrival of this new journal and this site for scholarly exploration continues the institution’s long belief in the value of interdisciplinary research and learning. Thanks to them this journal is available to all, for free, across the globe.