

Regions, Areas and Exceptions: IR and the Hermeneutics of Context

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The Contribution of Regional Studies to IR Theory

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I.

What I will try in this paper is to provide a re-reading of the relationship between Regional/Area Studies and the discipline of International Relations, broadly defined. This reading starts from two basic and related principles: (a) “Areas”, “regions”, and by extension, also “states/countries” and “exceptions”, are in essence forms of *context* – differently defined and structured perhaps, but contexts nevertheless. (b) If to study regions or areas is to study contexts, then to practice Regional/Area Studies has always been to practice a form of *hermeneutics* – in the sense of attempting to understand something/someone different (at least potentially) and therefore something/someone that speaks in its own terms.

While the simplification effected by both these two principles might be contestable – although I hope to defend them below – it allows an examination of Regional/Area Studies that goes beyond the customary problematic of its dichotomous relationship with IR as a social “science” and the debates associated with it. Originally, this relationship was fractured along both lines: to think of regions as contexts was to emphasise their uniqueness and therefore to argue that the generalisation, cumulation and transferability of the knowledge obtained was implausible. Yet to practice social science was to seek generalisation and cumulation, preferably through large-N studies whose very starting point was to reject the assumption of the of uniqueness of context, which meant that to be hermeneutic was inevitably not to be scientific.

Reading Area-Studies-in-IR hermeneutically as a form of contextualism has three consequences, all of which call into question the defining attributes and elementary ingredients of Regional/Area Studies itself. A hermeneutic and contextual reading dematerialises “areas” as coherent analytical categories – and “dematerialise” is a fitting formulation, since Area Studies is at times imagined as the “practical” approach that deals with the “real world”, an antidote to both “scientific” fixations, and excessive meta-theorising. I outline them briefly below, and I elaborate their interplay and significance in the next three sections.

(1) The first is to call into question its relationship with disciplinary IR, which was divisive as it was constitutive. Discipline and Regional/Area Studies embodied (supposedly) different views on everything related to the study of anything, but at the same time, they identified each other as different poles of academic enterprise in a manner that legitimated both their “essential” epistemological and methodological attributes, and the *difference* between them. Thus, Area Studies was constituted through its opposition to the universalising and scientific drives of IR as a discipline. Once we understand the *discipline* in different terms, the polar opposition with Regional/Area Studies no longer holds. Eradicating this boundary deprives Area Studies from its shield of resistance and opposition, and erodes its authority and coherence.

(2) To study *areas*, regions or exceptions is not only to name them, but also to participate in their continuous construction as political categories. As suggested by its own critical reflections, a hermeneutic reading of Regional/Area Studies challenges the manner in which it appropriates “area” as the object of its concern, and it disputes its authoritative constitution of such an object. “Regions” and “areas” have acquired the habit to back talk to academic inquiry in multiple ways. Paradoxically, this happens in the very language of academic inquiry, which “regions” at times deliberately assume as their own language. This deliberate dialogue between an “area” and its students redoubles region-naming as a political exercise, because *its actors* (not only its students) constitute the region as an object of study in order to constitute it as a political object. The effect is not only the potential relocation of areas and regions from where they were thought to be, but also the emergence of “new” regions which are set-up deliberately according to one definition or another of *what* and *why* an “area/region” is.

(3) This leads to the third consequence of a hermeneutic reading of Regional/Area Studies: to *study* regions or areas brings acutely to the fore the problems raised by “seeing things their way”, to use Skinner’s inspired branding of contextualism.¹ If it is not possible to “apply” universal concepts to different regions, is it then possible at all – assuming that we wanted to, as Regional/Area Studies presumably does – to “see” these phenomena as *they* see them, i.e. without conceptual, historical, or even regional prejudice? This is the hermeneutical question par excellence, which Charles Taylor summed up as “confronting one’s language of explanation with that of one’s subjects’ self-understanding”² – and also, the very question that seemed to divide disciplinary IR from Regional/Area Studies IR. The clear transfer of conceptual categories between the theory and politics of areas/regions that affects the very category of an “area” or “region” suggests a much broader a *double hermeneutics* that challenges the very distinction between “our” way (be it theoretical, or Western) and “their” way (that of regional actors) of understanding issues that are region or area-bound.

If regional categories – including “regions” themselves, but also security, sovereignty or alliances for example – exist in-between theory and praxis, then the dilemmas of Regional/Area Studies are epistemological just as they are normative, and their resolution cannot lie either in reinforcing or in bridging the supposed divide with discipline. *Both* disciplinary IR and Regional/Area Studies IR need a hermeneutics of context.

¹ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics* Vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

² Charles Taylor, “The Hermeneutics of Conflict”, in James Tully (ed.) *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 226.

II.

The key “problem” of Regional/Area Studies used to be its relationship with discipline and disciplinarity, and IR was not different from this point of view. This was mainly because the “discipline” (of IR) claimed scientific status, invoked a strong notion of objectivity, and pursued deliberately and with confidence knowledge that was not only cumulative, but also distillable in universal (or covering) laws. In contrast, Regional/Area Studies were constituted as a “subaltern” approach which rested on interdisciplinarity – ironically, the holy grail of research applications today – whose emphasis on understanding the local at the expense of the universal, and on specificity rather than generalisation almost self-selected a bunch of methodologies which were by default non-cumulative, and hence (presumably) non-scientific. As a result, Regional/Area Studies was bound to have a subaltern position in this relationship, in the sense that its products only mattered insofar as they could be cumulated or generalised, i.e. reduced to/transformed into/converted by “discipline” into the kind of products “discipline” wanted.³

The changing status of what is means to practice IR as “social science” brought by the linguistic-discursive-cultural-critical-pragmatic-constructivist “turn” of the late 80s and 90s changed the status and outlook of “discipline”, with three consequences that also transformed the place of Regional/Area Studies in – and relationship with – IR.

II.1

Although still disputed and undoubtedly fragmented, this normative and epistemological “turn” exposed the unavoidable situatedness of discipline, encapsulated in its foundational categories such as objectivity and rationality, which embedded a masculine, West-centric view of “everything” – from science and knowledge, to human nature and human rights, and to security, development, and international relations in general – in its deep fabric. The view from nowhere is no longer a practical possibility, and even where it remains a desirable goal, it at least includes the previously taken for granted on the check list of biases to be avoided and prejudices to be bracketed.

In a sense at least, this was a vindication of sorts for Regional/Area Studies, since its emphasis on the necessity of detailed historical and cultural knowledge adds up to a statement about the situatedness of the actors under study – even if the students’ own situatedness was much less the subject of scrutiny.⁴ Despite this, given the particular level where this effect occurred – that is, at the level of *discipline* and its foundational categories – the result was less dramatic in consolidating the “rival” perspective of Regional/Area Studies.

By establishing the situatedness of discipline, the “turn” also established the situatedness of Regional/Area Studies. Writing *about* areas or regions was – and perhaps is – as prone to making strong truth

³ See Robert H. Bates, “Area Studies and the Disciplines: A Useful Controversy?”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(2) (1997), pp. 166-169; Ian S. Lustick, “The Disciplines of Political Science: Studying the Culture of Rational Choice as a Case in Point”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(2), 1997, pp. 175-179; Chalmers Johnson, “Preconception vs. Observation, or the Contributions of Rational Choice Theory and Area Studies to Contemporary Political Science”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(2) (1997), pp. 170-174.

⁴ See J.K. Gibson-Graham, “Area Studies after Poststructuralism”, *Environment and Planning A* 36 (2004), pp. 405-419.

claims as the hegemonic “discipline” is. Equally, writing *from within* a regional or area-based perspective (about the same region) at times simply replaced one form of situatedness (that of the “discipline”) with another. Even if these claims were limited to the region/area itself, they risked taking for granted and hiding hegemonic assumptions of a different kind. Thus, the objectivity of universality was replaced by the objectivity of difference, which – as shown for example by the debates surrounding Orientalism or Asian values – was equally consequential politically.

Consequently, while previously ignored or marginalised views from elsewhere may have achieved the recognition they claimed and deserved, these views are now (or still, or perhaps more so) subject to the same critical suspicion – to use a Ricoeurian term – that was deployed against the hegemonic view from somewhere-that-pretended-to-be-from-nowhere. Paradoxically, the disciplinary “turn” has brought Regional/Area Studies under the same normative and epistemological scrutiny as the discipline itself.

II.2

The second effect of the “turn” was to reveal and to some degree reduce the disciplining effects of discipline. Previously an assertive (even oppressive) disciplinary norm, the very idea of a “proper” way of doing IR was sublimated by theoretical, epistemological, methodological and even regional diversity. The good part of this was an orgy of theory in journals, books and graduate courses alike; the bad part of this was an orgy of theory in journals, books and graduate courses alike.

In any case, this diminishing disciplining effect provided an opportunity for Regional/Area Studies to reconstitute in different terms its subaltern relationship with discipline. This opportunity was short lived, and the chance to re-write Regional/Area Studies in the absence of a coherent disciplinary other was eclipsed by the (inevitable) emergence of another “proper” way to do IR – which is to do *theory*, rather than *science*. Theory replaced the purported scientificity of positivism as the other of Regional/Area Studies. Yet rather than undermining discipline as a whole, the attenuation of the disciplinary effect undermined once again the coherence of Regional/Area Studies as a whole. “Doing” regions remained sort of uncool because it was perceived – correctly or not – as not doing theory. Moreover, the “turn” showed that we are all theorists now, because the study of regions inevitably has a theoretical dimension – even when this is explicitly rejected – only one that had been obscured by the Manichean representation of discipline-versus-area studies. While the previous “scientific” incarnation of discipline precluded the cumulation of “non-scientific” Regional/Area Studies, the multiple theoretical fragmentation of IR now reveals the inherent theoretical dimensions of Regional/Area Studies itself. If the first effect showed that to do discipline and Regional/Area Studies is to be contextually situated, the second shows that to do regions *is* to do theory of some kind.⁵

After all, to do regions is to subscribe to a number of very significant assumptions concerning not only the way they can be studied, but also regarding the very existence of regions or the inevitability of regional variation. Not only is applying theory to a region just a form of theorising, but also, reading the international relations of a region eventually throws up issues that correspond to those distilled into the

⁵ See Ian S. Lustick, “The Disciplines of Political Science: Studying the Culture of Rational Choice as a Case in Point”, *PS: Political Science and Politics* 30(2) (1997), p. 175.

foundational categories of IR as a discipline. Regional or national perspectives might be *different* views, but still views of (for example) national identity, sovereignty, human nature, or security. The “Polish view” of international relations is hardly Polish, in the same way that the “Egyptian view” is hardly Egyptian in any meaningfully exclusive sense.⁶ That this is so is of course the result of the continuous interaction between academia and policy-making more than it is that of some perennial essences of international politics being separately discovered in different regions or countries – an issue to which I will return below.

As a consequence, all claims for regional/area specificity have to reconcile the particularity of context with the generality of the categories that structure it. To do regional studies is therefore to study the conflux of theory and praxis that produces the region and its actors – and therefore inevitably to do theory and to do hermeneutics.

II.3

The third effect appears as a combination and confirmation of the previous two, in the evident opening up of an alternative space for alternative ways of doing theory, whose intention to “understand”, rather than “explain” (to use a suggestive, even if contentious dichotomy) made them all hermeneutic in effect – even if not always in intention, and even if not always in the same sense of the “hermeneutic”. Once again, this seemed to favour a rethinking of the role of Regional/Area Studies, because in a way at least this was what Area Studies had always done, in the sense that hermeneutics is equally sceptic of generalization, has a similar lack of appetite for the formulation of universal laws, and is equally predisposed towards a thick understanding of the actors’ views.⁷

However, this generic hermeneutic turn did not occur in the terms of Regional/Area Studies, and is not the product of work done under its broad umbrella. Rather, this was the result of internal debates, existential crises and mini turf wars inside a differently constituted discipline. If hermeneutics is just another guise of disciplinarity, then the obvious similarities with Regional/Area Studies risk making it its competitor, and thus to weaken the claims of Regional/Area Studies as a distinct form of research, since its foundational principles and methodologies have been partly taken over by discipline in its new guise.

Nevertheless, the fact that Area Studies has an inherently hermeneutic disposition does not mean that it has always offered a hermeneutics of international relations, only without the fancy name. Paramount in the distinction between Regional/Area Studies and hermeneutics are the latter’s continuous preoccupation with the interaction between context and its students, its constant interrogation of the liminal categories that structure meaning and action for regional actor and area specialist (or contextual theorist), as well as its fundamental questioning of the possibility of understanding “it” (the area, the region, the context) and “them” (the actors and their identity and history) in terms that are “theirs” only insofar as they are “ours”.

Overall therefore, the changes suffered by the discipline have changed significantly its relationship with Regional/Area Studies. Different lines fracture this relationship and different connections have

⁶ For example, in the 1990s scores of NATO workshops offered long successions of presentations entitled “X – a ‘national’ view”, which were often identical, and often identical with realism.

⁷ A point also made by Andrea Teti, “Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy”, *European Journal of International Relations* 13(1) (2007), p. 120.

emerged, for example regional specialists that now embrace and deliberately play up the comparative and cumulative potential of regional studies as a way of reclaiming their significance. There is a sense that Regional/Area Studies will never be again what it was, or seemed to be. To attempt to “salvage” Regional/Area Studies is an exercise that only reinforces the dichotomy with discipline – even when it tries to mediate it, or put the two on a par⁸ – but also, one that is at least partially blind to the increasingly intense and complex dialogue between regions or areas and the study of regions and areas.

III.

Such a reading of Regional/Area Studies – granted, one which is unlikely to be unanimously accepted – presents a number of puzzles. These, it must be emphasised, go beyond those customarily associated with the case study method, which have caused extensive debates that cannot be surveyed here. The transition from “area” to “context” prompts a question that will be familiar to all Regional/Area Studies practitioners: what is a context? There are obvious parallels between the naming of areas and the definition of contexts, but thinking contextually (and hermeneutically) adds depth to this discussion, and allows us to call upon the distinct literatures on regionalism and Area Studies. As anticipated above, the switch from area/region to context is not merely terminological. Asking “what is a context (and how do we understand it?)” reveals the difficulties inherent in carving out of the world in areas or regions, difficulties that simply cannot be resolved either by old-style disciplinarity (for example by “testing” different hypotheses about what a context might be), or by Regional/Area Studies (by asking harder the region/area in order to obtain a deeper and more precise understanding).

III.1

A general definition of the “area” in Area Studies does not – and probably could not – exist. Initially, area-labelling was thought to be an exercise in naming realities that were independent of their study: geographical entities like regions or continents, or political entities like states seemed obvious and natural in their existence as well as in their coherence and boundedness, for students and actors alike. We know now – in the sense that we no longer operate under the pretence that this is not, and has not been the case – that Area Studies has involved since its beginning a politics of labelling “areas” that was not only a product of a political need (i.e. the need of foreign policy establishments to have expert employees and expert knowledge about parts of the world that were of national interest),⁹ but was also a political playing field in and of itself.

Far from a neutral, observational act, the naming of “areas” was full of consequences that were academic to the same degree that they were financial, and that had effects not only on the institutional set-up

⁸ See for example Loren Graham and Jean-Michel Kantor, “‘Soft’ Area Studies versus ‘Hard’ Social Science: A False Opposition”, *Slavic Review* 66(1) (2007), pp. 1-19.

⁹ See Marshall K. Powers, “Area Studies”, *The Journal of Higher Education* 26(2) (1955), pp. 82-89+113; Bruce Cumings, “Postscript: Response to My Critics and Friends”, *Critical Asian Studies* 29(2) (1997), pp. 56-60;

of academia, but crucially, also on the relationship between academia and the policy-making community.¹⁰ To identify an “area” as a coherent object of study was not only a way of obtaining access to government funding; to some degree at least, it was to reflect, and thus embed and legitimate, the priorities of government and its reading of areas and the world as a whole. In this sense, Regional/Area Studies were inevitably inscribed in the “geography of power” both in structure and in consequences.¹¹

The ineluctable politics of establishing *particular* areas point out that any attempt to define “areas” as analytical *categories* is and will be contestable. Once Regional/Area Studies are understood as a *product* of the “scramble for the area”, as Schendel put it,¹² two consequences emerge. The first is to put its very coming into existence into context: such manner of framing or “scaling” contextual studies is itself the product of a particular context. The second is to effectively pull the rug from under Regional/Area Studies by calling into question its most elemental ingredient: its understanding of an area as a “region presenting a certain politico-social unity”.¹³ As demonstrated by an effervescent literature, the question concerning what regions really *are* is yet to be answered. Are areas/regions objective entities, or taxonomical artefacts that simplify the organisation of academic labour? Are they geographically bound categories, or the product of historically and geographically grounded common identities, or on the contrary, are they “just” discursive constructions in which actors and analysts alike engage, either by their mere association with an area/region, or – quite often, it proves the case – intentionally?

The issue here is not to settle this debate, which depends of course on the choices we make with regard the epistemological and ontological undercurrents that run through it.¹⁴ On the contrary, it is to point out how *unsettled* the categories of Regional/Area Studies are. This is not only due to such irremediable epistemological fractures, or to the coincidental – in other words contextual and therefore unique, whether undue or not – juxtaposition of academic politics and national foreign policy that produced the initial configuration of Area Studies. Whether “areas” are political products or just “are” can be irrelevant, in the sense that to a certain extent some areas now “are” despite the fact that they are political products and despite the fact that we all *know* this. At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume either the disengagement of Regional/Area Studies from politics, or to cast the objects of its attention either in the role of clueless recipients of academic knowledge, or in that of passive victims that suffer the consequences of one or another (theoretical) way of naming and knowing areas and regions.

¹⁰ See Vicente L. Rafael, “The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States”, *Social Text* 41 (1994), pp. 91-111; Itty Abraham (ed.), *Weighing the Balance: Southeast Asian Studies Ten Years After*, at www.ssrc.org/programs/southeastasia/publications/weighingbalance.pdf, esp. pp. 9-18.

¹¹ Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002), p. 657.

¹² Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing”, p. 647.

¹³ Urban Whitaker, “An Application of Area Studies to the Teaching of General Education Courses in International Relations”, *International Review of Education* 5(4) (1959), p. 425.

¹⁴ See Anssi Paasi, “The Institutionalization of Regions: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Emergence of Regions and the Constitution of Regional Identity”, *Fennia* 164(1) (1986) pp. 105-46; Alexander B. Murphy, “Regions as Social Constructs: The Gap between Theory and Practice”, *Progress in Human Geography* 15/1 (March 1991) pp. 23-35; Gordon MacLeod and Martin Jones, “Renewing the Geography of Regions”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 19(6) (2001), pp. 669-95; Anssi Paasi, “Place and Region: Regional Worlds and Words”, *Progress in Human Geography* 26(2) (2002), pp. 802-811; Anssi Paasi, “Region and Place: Regional Identity in Question”, *Progress in Human Geography* 27(4) (2003), pp. 475-485; Anssi Paasi, “Place and Region: Looking through the Prism of Scale”, *Progress in Human Geography* 28(4) (2004), pp. 536-546.

“Areas” might well have been the product of a colonial mindset, both politically and academically; Area Studies might now struggle to come to terms with its own colonial past; and again, we could all, as students of regions/areas, might attempt to come up with new (or old) ideas about what and where areas/regions are. Over and above these struggles, the actors of regions are now wide awake not only to the politics of area-naming, but also the political consequences of academic debates about area-naming, be it particular (i.e. “What/where is region X?”), or categorical (i.e. “What is a region?”). To put it differently, regions and areas talk back, and their back talk can no longer be considered just the passive object of academic debate, because it has become a *part* of the debate.

III.2

This is where any answers to the question “what is an area/region?” rapidly traverse back the (imaginary) boundary between theory and practice, academia and policy-making. Initially, the “scramble for the area” involved only the imperial actors of the relationship between area/regional theory and politics. Subsequently however, actors *from* “areas” or “regions” have joined the exercise of area-naming, and often openly embrace not only the contingency of regions “as a liberating moment to reconstitute their own regional environment”,¹⁵ but also the factiousness of the entire area/region-naming business. However, the “postmodern”¹⁶ impulse to make regions can neither take form in an ideational vacuum, nor can it be reduced to a dextrous implementation of whatever interests its actors may pursue – as was sometimes the case with the reading of Regional/Area Studies as an imperial, even imperialistic exercise. A close study of regional politics shows that regional entrepreneurs always use particular visions of *their* region, and also always deploy one or more *concepts* of areas and regions in general. This is significant in four interrelated ways:

(a) This incontestable conceptual transfer suggests a “double hermeneutics” - defined as “the mutual interpretive interplay between social science and those whose activities compose its subject matter”¹⁷ – that characterises each and every context, and thus each and every region and area. Sure, the “spillover” of conceptual categories in political discourse is neither new nor surprising, but it cannot be considered just an accidental transfer of vocabulary.

(b) Area/regional politics clearly rely on “interpretations of ‘regions’ and regional identities [that] are deeply political categories”,¹⁸ but these interpretations are themselves politically signified in a particular context. Conceptual logic and political praxis are therefore differently fused in particular contexts. In order to understand the coming-into-being of areas and regions we must note the conceptual proficiency of political actors, and study the political logics that stipulate the *need* for a regional/area construct. Rather than asking *what* a region/area is, we should ask *why* a region/area is formulated as it is in the discourses of internal or external actors. The question “Why this area/region?” is therefore likely to produce different answers in different contexts, and we can expect the strategies that actually make different interpretations of regions

¹⁵ Christopher S. Browning, “The Region-Building Approach Revisited: The Continued Othering of Russia in Discourses of Region-Building in the European North”, *Geopolitics* 8(1) (2003), p. 48.

¹⁶ Browning, “The Region-Building Approach”, p. 48.

¹⁷ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1984), pp. xxxii.

¹⁸ Paasi, “Region and Place”, p. 480.

politically meaningful *not* to be uniform and algorithmic according to some – no matter how many or few – categories of region. Thus, a contextual reading of areas and regions not only makes them forms of context, but also puts their “making” – whatever form this may take – in context, context that gives meaning to the concept and to the purpose of area/region alike.

(c) Once we establish that the *concept* of area/region can have a different meaning for the actors engaged in area/regional politics, this conceptual variation feeds right back into the study of areas and regions. It is tempting to read this political use of different concepts as a successful validity test of those theories which think of areas/regions as constructions – as opposed to those stressing their objective existence. However, the double hermeneutics of areas/regions is more likely another nail into the coffin of epistemologies driven by empirical validation, since the reality we are attempting to interpret not only turns out to be, but also tries to be imbued with theoretical constructs. In addition, the analysis of each empirical context suggests the simultaneous presence of different conceptual constructs that are politically equivalent. Even if they are *epistemologically contradictory*, the idea of a ‘constructed region’ is *politically equivalent* to that which sees areas as objective or ‘eternal’ realities, in the sense that both are politically consequential, and both are contextually signified.

(d) A “double hermeneutics of areas and regions” highlights the considerable difficulty of applying one or another theoretical category to any empirical setting, or more generally of using empirical referents in order to validate conceptual categories such as area or region (or security, sovereignty, or development). Concepts that exist liminally between theory and praxis are produced by this dialogue, and can shift empirically even when theory tries to lock them in (I think here especially of the concept of “security”). How then, do we study regions and areas – “their” concepts, so to speak – if these concepts are at the same time “ours”, and if our understanding is inevitably spilling back into the context we study? This, of course, is the fundamental hermeneutical question, and I will return to it in section IV.

III.3

At a general level therefore, the shift from “area/region” to “context” raises a more fundamental problem. If *we* define regions/areas in different ways, and if *actors* also define them in different ways for different reasons, is it possible at all to define peremptorily “context” itself? If the concept of “area” is in continuous construction, is the concept of “context” not? And if “contexts” are in continuous flux, how can we study the various dynamics that take place inside them in a manner that assumes at the same time their uniqueness, their contingency, and their stability?

In contrast to area or region, the definition of context is also a methodological issue. Although its consequences are equally political – in the sense that “context” operates a similar carving-out of the world – and hermeneutical – in the sense that it embeds strong ontological and epistemological assumptions about the “reality” and its knowing – the definition of context has implications for the manner in which “reality” becomes an object of *study*. To define a context is to put something in and leave something out, and also, to assume that the *same things* are to be put in and left out of each “context”.

Thus, the possibility of a thorough “contextualism” is imperilled not only by the *difficulty* of identifying precisely and exhaustively the right context, but also by the *achievement* of a peremptory definition. A definition of context is potentially unsustainable because each new context of investigation could fall outside apriori definitions of what constitutes a context. Essentially, defining context requires precisely the kind of rigidity that thinking contextually tries to avoid.

The way out of this conundrum – if a way out is indeed needed – is to adopt what could be called a meta-contextual position (or “meta-contextualism”): “what a context is” will always be a matter of context. Each context carries its own definition in the same way it carries the markers of uniqueness and specificity that are usually associated with any form of context, for example area or region. Since the boundaries and content of contexts are to some degree at least inevitably serendipitous, the focal point of “contextual” study is not necessarily the definition of context, but rather, the intersection between theory and praxis that produces the categories that make a context meaningful: both as a contextual category in and of itself, and as a coherent way of organising knowledge and practice.

If the specificity of context makes problematic the application of a concept of context in different cases, then the study of areas, regions and contexts must engage the much more general proposition that *all* concepts must be kept on their toes. “Contextual studies” in IR must therefore contextualise *concepts* themselves, an eminently hermeneutical exercise with significant normative and theoretical consequences, which I will address in the final section.

IV.

That context matters is in a way trivial. In practically all field of analysis in IR – from realism to constructivism, from critical theory to pragmatism, as well as in alliance theory, strategic studies, foreign policy analysis and critical geopolitics – one can find references to the significance of empirical variation, and as a consequence to the need to contextualise, to devise theoretical constructs that are context-sensitive and epistemologically and methodologically precise. All regional,¹⁹ postcolonial, or issue-specific analyses reflect a commitment to study international relations in context. However, the emphasis on the importance of context has seldom moved beyond general support, and the conceptual implications of this move have not been fully mapped out despite the fact that this principle is the driving force behind many recent advances in IR that challenge its assumptions of universality regarding central concepts (such as “rationality” or “interest”) or logics of interaction (such as “anarchy”).

What are, then, the consequences of a contextually-focused hermeneutics in IR? Three key problems emerge from locating areas/regions and their practices in the space *shared* by “one’s language of explanation with that of one’s subjects’ self-understanding”, to rephrase Taylor’s formulation.

¹⁹ See for example Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, (eds.) *Regionalism in World Politics: Regional Organisation and International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Peter Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005); Anthony D. Lake and Patrick Morgan, (eds.) *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

- (1) The first is a general problematic of philosophical hermeneutics, and concerns what it really means to “see things their way”. Hermeneutics is very much split on this issue, and critics still debate the possibility of grasping the “real” thoughts of the author of a text (in Schleiermacher’s psychological hermeneutics), or the quasi-positivist sense that “their” concepts and their meaning are somehow out there waiting to be discovered by the dedicated hermeneut.
- (2) A second consequence follows from here, and concerns the potential dissolution of all the central concepts of our discipline – security is my key example here – if they mean indeed “anything” that situated actors might want them to mean. How much do we *need* concepts that are at the same time perennial, and isolated from the vagaries of the area/region itself? Is it possible at all to formulate such concepts, and even if it is, would “pure” concepts be of any use?
- (3) Finally, an equally significant problem concerns the normative implications of a “context first” strategy: if “region”, “sovereignty”, “poverty”, “security”, “nation” or “war” mean whatever situated actors want them to mean, does this necessarily entail that IR must abdicate its normative impulse? What critical tools are left to Regional/Area Studies, and how can regional policies of all kinds be evaluated, if theory can no longer provide the “true” standards for the categories that inform them?

IV.1

Once we take regions or areas as forms of context, the hermeneutical depth of Regional/Area Studies becomes immediately apparent. Not only is studying areas/regions essentially trying to understand something that is by definition different, to attempt to make the unfamiliar intelligible, but also, it is to obtain knowledge through a reconstruction of meaning in more familiar terms, “our” terms – and thus, to engage in Taylor’s apparent contrast between “our” language and “their” language. Furthermore, through its emphasis on the *situatedness* of any attempt to make sense of *any* context, the post-scientific “turn” discussed above makes Regional/Area Studies the hermeneutic endeavour par excellence, since all its notes of epistemological and ethical caution basically point out that studying regions, areas and exceptions basically boils down to a meeting of prejudices – or, to put in Gadamerian terms, to a “fusion of horizons”.

A synopsis of the many debates of philosophical hermeneutics would be impossible in this short space – and given how deep and frequent these debates are, there would probably not be much of a point to such a synopsis anyway. Hence the point is not – it cannot be – to adopt this or that hermeneutical perspective in IR. My argument is that we need a hermeneutical perspective in order to make sense of *our own* activity as students of areas or regions. For this, I draw mainly on Ricoeur, Skinner and Gadamer – and also Mead and Garfinkel, and to a lesser extent on Taylor – but the names can change, and even if they change, and even if some epistemological issues will remain intractable, the hermeneutic impulse of Regional/Area Studies is simple. “We” want/need to understand “them”. In this dialogical relationship, the parties shift constantly, and so do the terms of the dialogue: “we” may be at the same time “theorists” and “Westerners”, and our prejudices may be national as well as theoretical; “they” may be at the same time lay actors or area-embedded theorists, and they could be “over there”, “over here”, or in both places at the same time.

Thus, hermeneutics and context are inextricable: To practice Regional/Area Studies *and* IR is therefore to contextualise, and to practice Regional/Area Studies *and* IR is to practice hermeneutics.

What precisely does it mean to contextualise the study of international relations? To contextualize means to adopt an epistemological and methodological perspective that privileges the actors' definition of the situation and the meaning they assign to their actions and environment. It is also to emphasise the liminality of the categories of meaning that structure theory and praxis alike. Even if the study of regions and areas must take notice of "their" own definitions and meanings, an understanding of "them" takes place only apparently in "their" own terms, because these terms – as suggested above in the discussion of the region-labelling – are simultaneously "ours". Thus we can no longer assume that "genuine area studies" requires the "researcher to break free of his or her culture",²⁰ nor can we assume, particularly in IR, that Regional/Area Studies can ever be a form of empiricism that simply registers "their" words, categories and meanings.

The thick contextual knowledge required by Regional/Area Studies in all its forms remains therefore essential, but a contextual hermeneutics has at its centre the very categories that structure this knowledge for analysts and lay actors alike. For example, the study of alliance politics in a particular context not only requires detailed local knowledge and expertise in alliance theory, but also demands a conceptual flexibility that permits local variation of the very idea of an "alliance", and hence of alliance politics in general. To put it in Gadamer's words, the starting point of a hermeneutics of context in IR is that "[what] is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only on the basis of its context, is also true of their content. Its meaning is not fixed."²¹

IV.2

Alarm bells will be ringing for those who want to hang on to theoretical prejudice (in a Gadamerian sense): surely, they'll say, our concepts – those defined by "us", IR theorists – cannot possibly mean *anything* situated actors want them to mean. If to contextualise is to *surrender* to any meaning we encounter, then contextualisation is not only not such a big deal, but it is also a rather dangerous idea which imperils both the status of theory and that of the theorist as privileged containers and proclaimers of the "real" meaning of important stuff, like power, or security, or region. If anything, the attempt of the discipline to establish concepts with unchanging essences – think of "security" in securitization theory, for example – shows an aim opposite to contextualisation. The choice seems an uninviting one: either concepts mean *only* one thing, according to our theory, or they mean *anything*, according to actors from this, that, or the other region. A hermeneutics of context precludes the perennial foreclosing of such concepts and does not predetermine the "winner" in Taylor's confrontation between the language of explanation and that of the actors, precisely because these concepts are embodied in the understandings of theorists and their subjects alike.

Can IR concepts have an unchanging essence? Semantically sealed concepts may be useful for marking out with certainty the objects of theoretical inquiry and disciplinary *domaines réservés*. However,

²⁰ Johnson, "Preconception vs. Observation", p. 172.

²¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised ed., translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), p. 177.

social science concepts in general, and those of IR in particular, are not only open to change – think of the meaning of “democracy”, for instance – but they also exist theoretically by virtue of a continuous conversation between theory and the praxis it tries to make sense of. IR is therefore saturated by the double hermeneutics that, as we saw above, brings into being regions and areas themselves. Whatever the theoretical benefits, it is unlikely that “sovereignty” or “power” cannot become something other than our current theoretical fiat, because it seems impossible that these eminently political concepts, which exist in a liminal space between theory and practice, to be suspended from politics and distilled into a perennial category.

If such change is possible, what are its limits? Of course, the scenario of IR concepts meaning “anything” for regional actors is very unlikely, but more importantly, it would be interesting rather than devastating. The conceptual “death” of power/security would be big news. Its significance must not, however, be judged in terms of the consequences for the IR as a corpus of theory, but rather, in terms of its effect on our understanding of the relationship between the theory and practice of international politics. Where international politics is concerned, “theory has become embodied and hides itself in a public praxis”,²² so the death of its concepts would provide an interesting live example of the transformation of conceptually-embodied political practice that has long been the subject of Skinnerian contextualism and studies in conceptual history.²³

An equally interesting question raised by the primacy of context is whether it is *possible* to analyse a context based solely on the actors’ definitions – i.e. without prior concepts – which echoes one of the long standing critiques of Regional/Area Studies in its a-theoretical guise. Of course, concept-free analysis is not only epistemologically dubious, but also practically impossible. The professionalisation of the discipline of IR ensures that analysts will always engage an empirical context equipped with a range of conceptual lenses (and most likely, a preference for one of them). By their very nature as IR theorists, IR theorists have already drawn the field of their inquiry in specific ways, so it is impossible – bar an unlikely situation of simple ignorance – to examine any empirical context, at any time, without such concepts.

What is more interesting in this sense is that the same can be said quite often about the policy-making communities, which is inevitably conceptually contaminated. Indeed, this is one of the key reasons why the probability that IR concepts could mean “anything” is very low. This signals that the key problem in this sense is not the openness of their meaning but rather, the *consequences* of analyses that take concepts as situated actors define them. Conceptual liminality can cause therefore the reproduction of the categories that govern a context, or their transfer to other empirical contexts, or the closure of alternative political horizons.

However, IR-Regional/Area Studies have no choice but to rely on the self-understanding of actors, precisely because their task is to probe, question and unravel these self-understandings – in other words, to practice a “hermeneutics of suspicion”. Contextual investigations constantly oscillate therefore between the recognition of our inevitable belonging to a tradition (stressed by Gadamer) that constitutes “us”

²² Patrick A. Heelan, “Hermeneutical Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Science”, in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.) *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 226.

²³ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, translated by Todd Presner, Kerstin Behnke, and Jobst Welge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

simultaneously as analysts, interpreters, and regional actors, and the “reflective distancing” (central to Ricoeurian hermeneutics) required for “overcoming the naiveté of first reading”.²⁴

IV.3

This is how we arrive at the normative dimension of a hermeneutics of security: are ethnographies of international relations necessarily neutral? Is a normative commitment – to a particular vision of politics or to particular outcomes of foreign policies, as advocated by critical security theorists, for example – a facultative appendage of IR?

My answer is that normative awareness is inherent in the very principle that the meaning of the categories of international politics is contextually variable. To demonstrate this, we must ask first what kind of decisions the IR theorist can make when studying a context of international politics. Usually, these decisions are definitional, i.e. they are confined to observing whether the actors’ moves fulfil some theoretical parameters; the result often is to declare the conceptual (in)validity of a contextual manifestation: for example, NATO is not *really* an alliance, or the environment is not *really* a security issue. If definitional decisions are the norm, normative decisions are usually precluded by this particular view of the nature of theory, predicated on an intention to *avoid* normative evaluations, which belong to politics itself, not its analysis. Thus, the aspiration for objectivity comes from an acknowledgement of the fact that all the categories of international politics produced by situated actors are already and always normative.²⁵

As critical theorists have been arguing for quite some time, normative neutrality is not only undesirable, but also implausible. The normative dimension of hermeneutics has been the subject of its sustained dialogue with Critical Theory, and following Gadamer, Richard Bernstein argued that the idea of emancipation is “already intrinsic in hermeneutic understanding”.²⁶ From the hermeneutical perspective outlined here however, a normative *awareness* is not necessarily the product of a fixed normative *commitment* to a policy or another. The normative implications of a hermeneutics of context come primarily from its understanding of the effects produced by *different* categories and practices of international politics deployed in particular contexts.

“Our” categories are as normatively saturated as “theirs”, as are any apparently definitional decisions or analytical conclusions drawn from the study of context. We can only observe that a particular policy ignores the regional distribution of power, or that a gender dimension is absent from a particular practice of security only because we have *already* made a decision – a *normative* decision, not a definitional one – that such a dimension could or should be present. Conceptual prescriptions are therefore normatively contested and contestable by actors and their students alike.

²⁴ Gary Aylesworth, “Dialogue, Text Narrative: Confronting Gadamer and Ricoeur”, in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.) *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 66.

²⁵ An argument made for some time by the post-positivist IR literature. See for example Michael C. Williams, “Identity and the Politics of Security”, *European Journal of International Relations* 4(2) (1998), pp. 204-225.

²⁶ Richard Bernstein, “The Constellation of Hermeneutics, Critical Theory, and Deconstruction”, in Robert J. Dostal (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 271. See also Graeme Nicholson, “Answers to Critical Theory”, in Hugh J. Silverman (ed.) *Gadamer and Hermeneutics* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 151-162.

V.

So is “everything contextual?”²⁷ *Everything*? If so, does this vindicate the precepts of Regional/Area Studies? Or on the contrary, does the potential movement towards a general theory of context eventually metamorphose Regional/Area Studies into its theoretical other? A general theory of context might be possible – in the same sense that a general theory of interpretation is – but my purpose has not been to formulate one. The upshot of this examination of the relationship between IR and Regional/Area Studies has been neither to reduce either one to the other, nor to demonstrate the necessity of both or to somehow bridge their continued separate existence.

This reflection on the practice of contextual study – which is to say, on the practice of IR *and* the study of regions, areas and exceptions – shows that if indeed we cannot contextualise without conceptualising, we also cannot conceptualise without contextualising concepts themselves. Regional/Area Studies *and* IR must always contextualise; hermeneutics and context are inextricable; therefore Regional/Area Studies *and* IR are always engaged in some form of hermeneutics.

Although it is difficult to extract a methodological package from this general hermeneutical stance, its significance in terms of the conduct of contextual research (usually called “case study”) lies primarily in the attention it draws to the manner in which contexts speak to their investigators. This does not only refer to the need of thick contextual knowledge, customarily associated with Regional/Area Studies. More specifically, this concerns the manner in which contexts speak *deliberately* to “us” (theorists) in *our* (conceptual) language. In this sense, the hermeneutics of context moves one step further than interplay between theory and practice captured by Giddens’s double hermeneutics. If contexts (areas, regions) are increasingly *delivered* to analysts by their actors in a form that often matches their own categories, what remains of contextual specificity? How can we reconcile an analytically *contextual* understanding of regions and their associated categories of praxis (e.g. security) with the *constant* presence of “regions” (and “security”) in different contexts? The main task for the future development of a hermeneutics of IR is therefore this: to conceptualise in a manner that is sensitive to context, taking seriously the definitions and practices of actors, and is simultaneously able to look beyond these constructions, to denaturalise their meaning, to reveal their contradictions as well as their constructed nature.

²⁷ Yale H. Ferguson and Richard W. Mansbach, “Between Celebration and Despair: Constructive Suggestions for Future International Theory”, *International Studies Quarterly* 35(4) (1991), p. 367.