How to Conceptualize Area Studies?

Anna-Katharina Hornidge
Katja Mielke 13–19
André Bank 20–27

Thesis 1 Crossroads Studies: From Spatial Containers to Studying the Mobile

Anna-Katharina Hornidge
Katja Mielke

The research network Crossroads Asia, funded by the BMBF, started off in March 2011 with the aim to question the validity of the conventional 'world regions' of Central and South Asia as defining bases for area studies as conceptualized, organized, and taught at German universities. The increasing mobility of people, goods and ideas along Asia's crossroads—so the network's underlying assumption—can no longer justify a division of the world in territorially fixed 'areas', defined by certain character traits to be found on the 'inside', but instead demands concepts of 'area' that take these dynamisms into account. For doing so, the network chose a novel approach with Norbert Elias' figurations at its conceptual cen-

tre. After three years of largely empirical, ethnographic research, the network has indulged in a process of bringing the different empirical insights on the role of mobilities and immobilities in the spatialities of everyday life together by discussing the conceptual, methodological, and epistemological research outcomes and lessons they offer for conventional area studies approaches. This text offers a brief summary and overview, hoping to invite other interested scholars into the debate.

Keywords: **Rethinking Area Studies; Crossroads Studies; Follow the Figuration; Multi-sited Ethnograph; Mid-range Concepts; Decolonising the Academy**

Charlie Hebdo, Ebola, and Crossroads Asia

The year 2015 was still young when the deadly attack on the French satirical magazine 'Charlie Hebdo' continued a series of events that—since the early summer of 2014—hold the world in motion. Events such as the renegotiation of the political border between Russia and the Ukraine or the activities of the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria point us to the relevance of Crossroads Asia's research foci on the mobile dimension of people's everyday practices and how these practices scrutinise existing categories of spatial and social organisation. The mobility of people, goods, ideas, and viruses inherently questions political borders and socio-cultural, ethnicity- and religion-based boundaries. The recent appearance of Da'esh', or 'Islamic State', graffiti all over Pakistan is just the most recent indicator of how symbols travel; the events in Paris illustrate how powerful symbols are in guiding human action. Looking at Africa, the recent outbreak of the Ebola virus in its western part illustrates how a virus spreading along the main transport routes and nodes leads to the compartmentalisation of cities into affected and non-affected parts, a tightening of border controls, but also to the drawing of new cognitive boundar-

ies, equating the region of Western Africa with 'the Ebola region'.

In line with our research within the competence network of Crossroads Asia, these events indicate that different types of mobility, just as much as immobility, and thus different types of borders and boundaries are negotiated, take on shape, come into being, or are deconstructed again in and as a consequence of human interaction, which is also always communicative interaction. The everyday practices of livelihood provision in the border regions between Pakistan and India, Iran and Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and western China, as well as at the verge of socio-cultural boundaries and modes of social differentiation and ordering in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, suggest that some of the geographically fixed categories that our world operates in are increasingly characterised by degrees of dynamism that transcend territorial fixity. This holds true for the conventional world regions identified after the Second World War, such as Central and South Asia within the Crossroads context. Yet, the above-mentioned events additionally infringe upon the sovereignty of nation states and their possibilities to act as territorially fixed entities. Ebola—as well as regional Jihadism—does not stop at political (national or regional) borders.

The competence network Crossroads Asia, funded by the Area Studies Initiative of the German Ministry of Education and Research, started off in March 2011 with the aim to scrutinise the conventional spatial concepts—the 'world regions' of Central and South Asia—underlying today's conceptualisations and teaching of area studies at German universities. The newly obvious and increasing mobility of people, goods, and ideas along Asia's crossroads—so the network's underlying assumption—does not justify a division of the world into territorially fixed 'areas' as 'containers', defined by certain character traits to be found on the 'inside', but instead demands conceptualizations of 'area' that take these dynamisms into account (Mielke and Hornidge). For doing so, and with the broader aim of rethinking conventional area studies approaches, the network brings together area studies expertise from Central, South Asian, and Iranian Studies with the social sciences and humanities, namely geography, political science, sociology, linguistics, social anthropology, and history.

Crossroads Studies: Research Lens, Toolbox, and Approach

Drawing on Norbert Elias' concept of figurations (*What is Sociology*?), the network took on a relational perspective on space underlining not only the constructed character of social and physical spaces and 'areas' as manifestations of power relations, but in addition the interdependence of multiple spatialities, such as places, scales, networks, distances, and mobilities (Leitner et al.; Jessop et al.). Following the more general idea of a social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann), the network attributes importance to how social and spatial, 'subjective' (emic) and 'objective' realities are constructed through communicative action and interaction in correspondence with each other (Knoblauch, *Kommunikationskultur*, "Diskurs", "Konstruktivismus"; Keller, *Diskursanalyse*, "Approach to Discourse"). Building on local perceptions of reality and their manifestation in the construction of different types of spaces, the network's focus at the content level shifts to a more in-depth analysis of the dynamic processes of geographic and social mobility and immobility and the interactive negotiation of political, socio-cultural, and ethnic boundaries and borders in processes of boundary drawing and weakening. Besides this conceptual pillar on the 'figurative construction of space', we develop a methodological approach called 'follow the figuration' and—as a third (ethical) pillar—reflect on the potential impact of us as researchers: our own socio-spatial and

disciplinary positionality in the process of knowledge generation and the effect it yields on our results. The three pillars are each contributing to the development of 'Crossroads Studies' as an interdisciplinary research paradigm in the making.

Conceptual: Figurative Construction of Space

The debate on area studies versus 'systematic' disciplines has repeatedly revolved around two criticisms of the respective 'other', regarding (1) area studies as theory-distant and without 'proper' methodological tools; and (2) 'systematic' disciplines as Euro- and Western-centric, thus in fact being nothing other than area studies of the global North and West, the world regions that acted as their empirical bases (Mielke and Hornidge "Crossroads"). These criticisms have in the past 4-5 years evoked increasingly concerted efforts in the area studies themselves to self-confidently analyse their empirical data and conceptualise, developing non-Western, non-Northern 'mid-range concepts' (Houben). Robert Merton here speaks of 'middle-range theories', abstractions that "lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses […] and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain all the observed uniformities of social behav-

ior, social organisation, and social change" (Merton 39). Crossroads Asia's research so far has resulted in abstractions that could become stepping stones for 'mid-range concept-development', based on Asian empirics collected in difficult environments. These include concepts such as the 'Kashmir space' (Mato Bouzas "Space"), 'social order' (Mielke et al. "Dimensions"; Mielke "Constructing the Image") 'linguistic conflictuality' (Rzehak), as well as 'forms of functional-strategically motivated social differentiation' (Hornidge et al. "Boundary Management"; Hornidge et al. "Uzbekistan").

The concept of the 'Kashmir space' (Mato Bouzas "Space") assesses how the production of Kashmir as a specific spatiality draws heavily on boundary-strengthening processes linked to feelings of 'belonging' that also explain the cultural and social heterogeneity of Kashmir. Here also the dichotomy of being at a certain place and at the same time feeling to 'belong' to another is unveiled. The 'social order' concept (Mielke et al. "Dimensions"; Mielke "Constructing the Image") enables us to analyse local politics as processual and relational negotiation of interests based on emic rationalities and a qualification of the category of 'the state' as the dominant factor in people's everyday lives and as the epistemological base for understand-

ing governance. The concept of 'linguistic conflictuality' (Rzehak) assesses this human aim to structure and order the social reality that we live in—and by doing so constructing it—by assessing conflict as a universal aspect of social action and interaction in the functional semantics that we employ. These studies on the languages of Dari and Pashto thus offer a contribution to the field of linguistics of communication and functional grammar. Practices of functional differentiation—and the boundary-drawing and weakening practices that constitute these—also stand at the centre of 'forms of functional-strategically motivated social differentiation' (Hornidge et al. "Boundary Management"; Hornidge et al. "Uzbekistan"). The concept aims at developing ongoing debates of formal/informal forms of social differentiation further by differentiating formal (along formal rules), strategic (along formal and informal rules), as well as discursive practices (discursively compensating the deviations from the formal rules through strategic practices).

All of these early-stage 'mid-range concept' developments study processes and practices of boundary-strengthening and -weakening and their role in determining or simply shaping mobilities as well as immobilities of people, goods, ideas, and symbols. They suggest that a social

Anna-Katharina Hornidge

is Professor of Development and Knowledge Sociology at the Leibniz-Institute of Tropical Marine Ecology (ZMT) [www.zmt-bremen.de] and the University of Bremen. She holds a habilitation in development research from Bonn University and a PhD in sociology from the Technical University of Berlin. As the former scientific coordinator and current executive board member of Crossroads Asia, she is particularly interested in the interaction-based communicative and discursive constructions of everyday realities in non-Western/non-Northern contexts. Additional research interests include the linkage between natural resources governance and sense-making in the Anthropocene, cultural and knowledge politics, as well as innovation development processes. Her regional expertise comprises Southeast and Central Asia.
Email: anna-katharina.hornidge@zmt-bremen.de

and temporal-spatial concept of reality is constructed in and through communicative action and interaction, one which not only relates to local cultural knowledge reservoirs and practices, but also takes on relevance in transnational relationships. Encapsulated in language, such spatial representations transcend physical borders and the margins of traditional communities of speech, such as when the BBC service in Pashto coins neologisms that find currency in both Afghanistan and Pakistan; the figurative ties here stretch beyond Asia to London and all the way back (Sökefeld and Bolognani "Kashmiris in Britain").

Methodological: Follow the Figuration

In order to capture the dynamic of the mobile, Crossroads Asia's research empirically builds on two methodological advancements: conducting research in multiple locations belonging to one figuration or one journey studied—in the sense of a 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus)—and joining the people, goods, and ideas with (im-)mobilities under study and thereby deriving the research space from their space(s) of interaction. In line with Elias' figurational approach, and inspired by a participatory and dynamic innovation development approach named 'Follow the Innovation' (Hornidge et al. "Transdici-

plinary Innovation"; Ul-Hassan et al. "Guidelines"), 'Follow the Figuration' as a dynamic, qualitative methodology for studying the mobile and the interdependencies that enable and restrict mobilities is being developed. The approach entails following travelling people, goods, and ideas and basically letting the mobility of the studied determine the researcher's next moves. Points of departure of these subjects, objects, and ideas so far have been located in the geographic region between eastern Iran and western China as well as the Aral Sea and northern India, yet following the mobile took Crossroads Asia's researchers far beyond these geographies. A study into the silent mobilities of women in northern Afghanistan, for example, assessed marriage networks crossing different ethnic and social groups. From the point of departure, namely Mazar-e Sharif, the research extended to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkey—all sites part of the studied marriage figurations. An interesting—and for the research, fruitful—implication of the multi-sited ethnography was that many respondents were substantially more open to being interviewed and observed when outside of their home environments (Durdu). Besides the enabling aspects of 'mobile methodologies' for knowledge generation, several research experiences in 'difficult envi-

ronments', characterised by mistrust, high levels of self-censorship, and lack of physical safety, in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran led us to start reflecting on the method's limitations in conflictual environments (Crossroads Asia Working Group Conflict) as well as on the limitations of ourselves as researchers trapped in not only our own worldviews (disciplinary, western, etc.), but also epistemologies.

Epistemological: Reflexivity and Positionality

Rethinking area studies as they are practiced in German teaching and research as of today requires a reflection on global and national knowledge structures, facilitating and to a large degree determining what type of and whose knowledge is heard, on academic disciplinary to interdisciplinary (maybe even postdisciplinary) knowledge production, as well as on our own researcher's position in reaffirming or changing existing epistemologies (keyword: positionality; Mielke and Hornidge, "Crossroads"). How do the theories and methods, largely originating from Western/Northern empirical contexts, while claiming to be of universal value, influence how we approach our research objects and subjects? How are we ourselves shaped by our disciplinary/area studies backgrounds, by our own socio-

Katja Mielke

is a researcher at the Bonn International Center for Conversion (bicc) [www.bicc.de]. She holds a PhD in development research from Bonn University. As founding member of the research network Crossroads Asia, she engages in the debate on rethinking area studies and epistemic ordering. Her further research interests lie in the field of political sociology at the intersection of conflict and development research and include questions of norm transfer, social mobilization and conflict, inequality and social (im-)mobility, local governance (politics, power, legitimacy, and representation) in rural and urban contexts, social order, and non-institutionalised forms of power and of movements. Her regional expertise covers Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.
Email: katja.mielke@bicc.de

cultural, ethnic origin, our sex, age, position within the academic sector, etc.? Are we (i.e. a German sociologist/Southeast Asianist, etc.) at all able to develop non-western 'mid-range concepts'? Are we able to leave our epistemological trap— e.g. through team research in interdisciplinary and intercultural teams? Or are we indeed trapped, and only the Tajik social scientist and the Kyrgyz anthropologist amongst us can call their work non-western 'mid-range concepts'? And finally, what are the research ethical considerations of this for our research? How do we overcome the 'us' and 'them' divide in the research process?

The communicative negotiation and relational construction of spaces also has a non-negligible impact on how acting subjects self-identify and what positionality they claim for themselves (Alff) or attribute to others (Boboyorov). And just as people in their everyday actions position themselves in translocal figurations involving, for example, educational mobility, researchers in their fields are also participants in a distinct figuration and must negotiate their own positionality.

Outlook

The three separate research components introduced above are contributing to the development of an interdisciplinary research paradigm for knowledge generation in different 'areas' of the world; we call it 'Crossroads Studies'. Based on Elias' concept of figurations, the tracing of human interdependencies in interactions across socio-cultural and physical spaces enables the identification and analysis of real and virtual spheres of activity that are opened up and dynamised by social, economic, political, cultural, and religious interactions. In the coming years, further systematic exploration will be required to uncover the limitations of the concept of figurations and how they can be compensated for or supplemented with complementary methodological approaches. In advancing this approach, our concern continues to lie on finding productive answers to frequently heard criticisms of what are perceived as deficits of area studies: thinking in pre-defined territorial research spaces and 'containers', the epistemological peripheralisation of particular geographic locations within 'areas' (van

Schendel), and, more broadly, ignorance of the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences (Schroer; Ingold; Löw). By synthesizing the empirical insights generated in the first four years of research, we expect to expedite the content-focused debates on area studies and space/spatialities, discussions on methodology, and the elaboration of theory in the respective specialist disciplines, and deliver on the frequently-heard demand that research on the global South should be more prominent within specialist disciplines (i.e. Lackner and Werner, Braig and Hentschke; Hentschke). The bundling of conceptual, methodological, and epistemological considerations under the notion of 'Crossroads Studies' as programme for research and teaching is not intended to lead away from 'areas', but rather to focus on the dynamic and (im-)mobile element that determines the social and communicative construction of spatial realities and to underline how the (re-)negotiation processes of physical, social, and thus also epistemological spaces have to stand at the centre of area studies research and teaching in the twenty-first century.

Works Cited

Alff, Henryk. "Post-Soviet Positionalities–Relations, Flows and the Transformation of Bishkek's Dordoy Bazaar." *Tracing Connections–Explorations of Spaces and Places in Asian Contexts*. Ed. Henryk Alff and A. Benz. Berlin: WVB, 2014. 71-90. Print.

Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit. Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie*. Frankfurt a/M.: Fischer Verlag, 1966/1984. Print.

Boboyorov, Hafiz. "The Ontological Sources of Political Stability and Economy: Mahalla Mediation in the Rural Communities of Southern Tajikistan." Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series no. 13 (2013). Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Braig, Marianne, and Felicitas Hentschke. Proc. of the Conf. *Die Zukunft der Area Studies in Deutschland*. Max-Liebermann-Haus, Berlin 14-16 July 2005. Berlin, H-Soz-u-Kult 2005. Web. 4 May 2015.

Crossroads Asia Working Group Conflict. "Conflict Research on Crossroads Asia: A Conceptual Approach [with Postscript to the Working Paper of the Conflict Research Group]. Crossroads Asia Concept Paper Series no. 01. Bonn: Competence Network Crossroads Asia, 2014. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Durdu, Ayfer. "Gendered Realms. Species of Spaces in the City of Mazāre Šarīf, Northern Afghanistan." Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series no. 19. Bonn: Competence Network Crossroads Asia, 2014. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Elias, Norbert. *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982. Print.

---. *Was ist Soziologie*? München: Juventa,1970. Print.

---. *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*. Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken, 1939. Print.

Hentschke, Felicitas. *Wege des Wissens. Transregionale Studien*. Proc. of Area Studies Revisited. Transregional Studies in Germany Conf., 13-14 Feb. 2009. Berlin, H-Soz-Kult, 2009. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Hornidge, Anna-Katharina, Kristof van Assche, and Anastasiya Shtaltovna. "Uzbekistan–A Region of World Society (?): Variants of Differentiation in Agricultural Resources Governance." Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series no. 26. Bonn: Competence Network Crossroads Asia, 2015. Web. 4 May 2015.

Hornidge, Anna-Katharina, Lisa Oberkircher, and Anisiya Kudryavtseva. "Boundary Management and the Discursive Sphere–Negotiating 'Realities' in Khorezm, Uzbekistan." *Geoforum* 45 (2013). 266-74. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Hornidge, Anna-Katharina, Mehmood Ul-Hassan, and Peter P. Mollinga. Transdisciplinary Innovation Research in Uzbekistan–1 year of 'Following the Innovation.'" *Development in Practice* 21.6 (2011): 825-38. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Houben, Vincent. "The New Area Studies and Southeast Asian History." Working Paper no. 4. Competence Network DORISEA, 2013. 2-10. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Ingold, Tim. "Against Space: Place, Movement, Knowledge." *Boundless Worlds. An Anthropological Approach to Movement*. Ed. Wynn Kirby. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009. 29-44.Print.

Jessop, Bob, Neil Brenner, and Martin Jones. "Theorizing Sociospatial Relations." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (2008): 389-401. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Keller, Reiner. "Kommunikative Konstruktion und diskursive Konstruktion." *Kommunikativer Konstruktivismus– Theoretische und empirische Konturen eines neuen wissenssoziologischen Ansatzes*. Ed. Reiner Keller, Hubert Knoblauch and Jo Reichertz. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2013. 25-48. Print.

---. *Wissenssoziologische Diskursanalyse. Grundlegung eines Forschungsprogramms*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2011a. Print.

---. "The Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD)." *Human Studies* 34.1 (2011b) 43-65. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Knoblauch, Hubert. "Grundbegriffe und Aufgaben des kommunikativen Konstruktivismus." *Kommunikativer Konstruktivismus– Theoretische und empirische Konturen eines neuen wissenssoziologischen Ansatzes*. Ed. Reiner Keller, Hubert Knoblauch and Jo Reichertz. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2013. 25-48. Print.

---. "Diskurs, Kommunikation und Wissenssoziologie." *Sozialwissenschaftliche Diskursanalyse*. Reiner Keller, Andreas Hirseland, Werner Schneider and Willy Viehöver. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2001. 207-24. Print.

→ ---. *Kommunikationskultur. Die kommunikative Konstruktion kultureller Kontexte*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1995. Print.

Lackner, Michael, and Michael Werner. *Der cultural turn in den Humanwissenschaften. Area Studies im Auf-oder Abwind des Kulturalismus*? Bad Homburg: Werner Reimers Stiftung, 1999. Web. 4 May 2015. Suchprozesse für innovative Fragestellungen in der Wissenschaft 2.

Leitner, Helga, Eric Sheppard, and Kristin M. Sziarto. "The Spatialities of Contentious Politics." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 33.2 (2008). 157-72. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Löw, Martina. *Raumsoziologie*. Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, 2001. Print.

Marcus, George E. "Ethnography in/of the World: The Emergence of the Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 95-117. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Mato Bouzas, Antia. "Space(s) and Place(s) in the Baltistan and Ladakh Disputed Borders." *Tracing Connections–Explorations of Spaces and Places in Asian Contexts*. Ed. H. Alff and A. Benz. Berlin: WVB, 2014. 91-108. Print.

Merton, Robert K. "On Sociological Theories of the Middle Range." *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Ed. Robert K. Merton. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1949. 39-53. Print.

Mielke, Katja. "Constructing the Image of a State: Local Realities and International Intervention in North-East Afghanistan." *Local Politics in Afghanistan. A Century of Intervention in the Social Order*. Ed. Condrad Schetter. London, New York: Hurst and Columbia University Press, 2013. 245-63. Print.

Mielke, Katja, Conrad Schetter, and Andreas Wilde. "Dimensions of Social Order: Empirical Fact, Analytical Framework and Boundary Concept." ZEF Working Paper Series no. 78 (2011). Bonn: Zentrum für Entwicklungsforschung, 2011. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Mielke, Katja, and Anna-Katharina Hornidge. "Crossroads Studies. From Spatial Containers to Interactions in Differentiated Spatialities." Crossroads Asia Working Paper Series no. 15. Bonn: Competence Network Crossroads Asia, 2014. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Rzehak, Lutz. "How to Name Universities? Or: Is there Any Linguistic Problem in Afghanistan?" *ORIENT*. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Politik*, *Wirtschaft und Kultur des Orients*. 53.2 (2002): 84-90. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.

Schroer, Markus. *Räume*, *Orte*, *Grenzen. Auf dem Weg zu einer Soziologie des Raums*. Frankfurt a/M.: Suhrkamp, 2006. Print.

Sökefeld, Martin. "Stereotypes and Boundaries: Pathan in Gilgit, Northern Pakistan." *Urban Pakistan*: *Frames for Imagining and Reading Urbanism*. Ed. Khaled W. Bajwa. Oxford: University Press, 2013. 241-61. Print.

Sökefeld, Martin, and Marta Bolognani. "Kashmiris in Britain: A Political Project or a Social Reality?" *Pakistan and its Diaspora*: *Multidisciplinary Approaches*. Ed. Marta Bolognani and Stephen M. Lyon. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 111-31. Print.

Ul-Hassan, Mehmood, et al. "Follow the Innovation: Participatory Testing and Adaptation of Agricultural Innovations in Uzbekistan– Guidelines for Researchers and Practitioners." Bonn: Center for Development Research, in Collaboration with ETC Agriculture, the Netherlands, 2011. Print.

Van Schendel, Willem. "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance. Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia." *Environment and Planning D*: *Society and Space* 20 (2002): 647-68. Web. 10 Apr. 2015.