

Interdisciplinarity and Methodological Challenges in Area Studies (1st Basel Summer School in African Studies)

Basel, 10-14 June 2013

More and more research funding institutions are demanding that research projects are designed in interdisciplinary ways. This seems to express the realization that traditional disciplines – in the social sciences and humanities as well as in the natural sciences – have become too small to accommodate within the questions which they traditionally ask all the aspects that phenomena in the real world possess. To be sure, this is an issue that has been at the centre of debate for over twenty years, if not longer. It was initiated in the humanities, where discussions over postmodernism led to a questioning of the Canon and, by implication, of the organization of knowledge production in the wake of the Enlightenment. The ball on this discussion was set running by Jean-François Lyotard's misgivings about "meta-narratives" which, as discussion came to reveal, drew much of their plausibility and strength from the belief that the project of Modernity with its narrative of progress and reason was self-evidently true.

Many of those who seized the word to speak about the order of knowledge had been socialised in colonized societies, where the upbeat narrative of Modernity had always been viewed with a great deal of scepticism. They soon became suspicious of the structure of knowledge production itself. As Edward Said, just to name one, noted in "Imperialism and Culture", it was impossible to speak about the English language, and by extension, English literature, without a look at the historical conditions within which it had come to be a symbol of Nation and English culture.¹ Colonialism was one of those conditions. This insight sharpened the senses of scholars to the artificial nature of disciplinary boundaries as it dawned on many of them that disciplines did not only enable the organization of knowledge production in theoretically, conceptually and methodologically sound ways, but also helped mask historically engineered relations among cultures at the same time that they helped constitute them.

Subaltern Studies, Postcolonial Studies and Coloniality of Knowledge/Power Approaches became important ways of questioning the authority of the Western Canon beyond a simple dichotomy of social/cultural sciences vs. natural sciences and the relative merits of disciplinary boundaries. In fact, such critical approaches raised questions about the soundness of knowledge produced within theoretical frameworks, which ignored the historical conditions that enabled the constitution of sci-

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993).



entific objects, Africa being one of those objects. Indeed, against such a background it seems almost impossible to think of African Studies without reference to such concerns. By their very nature African Studies, and Area Studies in general, have always defied disciplinary boundaries, even if on the whole they are held afloat by the contribution of single disciplines. To ask a sociological question is to ask a historical one; to ask a medical question is to ask an anthropological one; to posit the possibility of economic growth is to suggest ways of interpreting history and how it has constituted geography. Area studies are an interdisciplinary endeavour, of which scholars are aware to different degrees.

In choosing this topic for our summer school we aim at placing these degrees of awareness at the centre of discussion. More specifically, we intend to enquire into the extent to which young researchers are aware of the interdisciplinary nature of their study, whatever disciplinary subject it has been formulated in, and how a better awareness of this may be beneficial to their work. From a theoretical point of view we are asking questions about the real scope of the theoretical framework within which researchers working on Africa formulate their questions and expect to have answers.

Formats

Poster presentations: each PhD student presents his own research on a poster displayed at the Summer School venue in the first afternoon session.

Thematic discussion: three mornings are set aside (Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday) for the discussion of specific themes related to the topic of the School and bearing on theoretical, conceptual and methodological issues; these are introduced by invited (senior) guests (8.30-10.00). This is followed by a broad discussion (10.30-12.30) which will focus on selected literature suggested by the invited guests and read beforehand by all participants.

Workshops: three afternoons are set aside for thematic workshops that will discuss the individual work of PhD students in relationship with the issues discussed in the morning. Each workshop is chaired by the invited speaker(s) who present(s) the respective thematic input in the morning. A fourth workshop (theory construction) is held on Friday morning in the presence of students who have participated in a post-graduate course on the same topic offered in the spring semester 2013. The workshop consists basically in an exercise in the interpretation of data, i.e. in how data is turned into evidence. On the basis of a discussion of key texts in theory construction the participants will reflect critically on their own projects and will be encouraged to appreciate the structure and nature of their own claims.

Advanced Study Skills and Career Planning: the last afternoon session is dedicated to a discussion of publication strategies in Area Studies.



Schedule

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.15-10.00	Welcome coffee Opening address Organizational issues (Veit Arlt)	Theme I: Theory and interdisciplinarity (Jeremy Gould)	Theme II: Working with concepts (Ralph Weber and Raji Steineck)	Theme III: Methodological issues (Rose Marie Beck)	Theme IV: Theory Construction in African Studies (Elísio Macamo)
10:00-10:30	Coffee break				
10.30-12.30	Keynote Address: Interdisciplinarity in African Studies (Elísio Macamo) Discussion	Discussion	Discussion	Discussion	
12.30-14.30	Lunch break				
14.30-16:00	Poster session Each PhD student shortly presents his own research on the basis of a poster that will remain on display at the venue.	Workshop I: Theory (inputs by PhD students, chair: Jeremy Gould)	Workshop II: Concepts (inputs by PhD students, chair: Ralph Weber and Raji Steineck)	Workshop III: Methodology (inputs by PhD students, chair: Rose Marie Beck)	Publishing Strategies in Area Studies (Susann Baller and Elísio Macamo)
16:00-16:15	Coffee break				
16:15-17.30	Poster session continued	Continued	Continued	Continued	Wrap-up, final discussion
18.30	Dinner				
Evening programme			Movie: Darwin's nightmare (in preparation of the workshop on methodological issues)		

Pre-programme:

An informal get-together is organised by the Basel participants on Sunday starting from 4pm at Stephanie Bishop's place. Address: Rheinfelderstrasse 25. Directions: Bus 34/31/38 or Tram 2 to Wettsteinplatz. Walk up Wettsteinallee, Rheinfelderstrasse is the 1st cross street ([Map](#)).



Readings:

Tuesday:

Paul Rabinow: "Midst Anthropology's Problems", in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 2002), 135-149.

Nancy Fraser: "From Discipline to Flexibilization", in *Constellations*, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2003, 160-171.

Mario Blaser: *Story Telling Globalization from the Chaco and beyond*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010, 1-37.

Wednesday:

Arindam Chakrabarti and Mark Siderits, "Contemporary Western Theories of Concepts on the Market" [excerpt of Introduction], in Mark Siderits, Tom Tillemans and Arindam Chakrabarti (eds), *Apoha: Buddhist Nominalism and Human Cognition*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 15–24.

Thursday:

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Film: *Darwin's Nightmare* (2011)

Friday:

Elísio Macamo: *Theory Construction – Hints* (nd).

Steven Miles: *Social Theory in the Real World*, London: Sage, 2001.



Experts

Rose Marie Beck is Professor of African Languages and Literatures at the University of Leipzig, Germany. She completed her Ph.D. thesis at the University of Cologne with a topic from Swahili everyday culture, i.e. the communicative uses of the wrap cloth *leso* (or *kanga*), and her “Habilitation” at Goethe University Frankfurt on “doing development”, observed through talk-in-interaction in a grassroots development organisation in Namibia (Herero). She was a senior researcher in the research project “Language, Gender, Sustainability”, funded by the Volkswagen Foundation in the program “Key Issues of the Humanities” from 2003 to 2007. In 2010 she won the “KfW-Förderpreis 2010 für praxisrelevante Entwicklungsforschung in the category “Exzellenzpreis” for a critical article on HIV/AIDS prevention.

Jeremy Gould is Professor and Programme Coordinator at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He has a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology from the University of Helsinki. His primary research sites have been in Zambia where he has conducted research since 1983. In addition, Prof Gould has conducted research, and led project planning and evaluation missions in Ethiopia, Kenya, Namibia, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. He has provided expert services to the Foreign Ministries of Finland, Norway and Sweden; the United National Development Programme and the World Bank Institute. Prof Gould’s research interests revolve around the socio-legal dynamics of post-colonial state formation.

Elísio Macamo is Tenure Track Assistant Professor of African Studies at the University of Basel. Previously, he taught development sociology at the University of Bayreuth, where he was a founding member of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. He holds a PhD and “Habilitation” in General Sociology (University of Bayreuth). He regularly offers methodological workshops to Portuguese speaking African doctoral students on behalf of CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa). His major research interests are the sociology of religion, technology, knowledge, politics and risk. His current research projects focus on the politics of the rule of law and comparative studies of development (Africa, Latin America and Asia).

Raji C. Steineck is Professor of Japanology at University of Zurich (UZH), director of its Institute for Asian and Oriental Studies, and president of the Gesellschaft für Japanforschung (GJF). He is also leader of the research group „Concepts and Taxonomies“ at the UZH's research priority program „Asia and Europe“. His research interests combine medieval and contemporary history of concepts in Japan and philosophy of culture, with a special interest in the various modes of symbolic expression, and in concepts of time.



Ralph Weber is Senior Researcher at the URPP Asia and Europe (research field: Concepts and Taxonomies) and teaches History of Political Ideas at the Universities of Zürich and St. Gallen. He received his training in Politics, Law and Economics at the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva and the University of St. Gallen where in 2007 he earned his doctoral degree with a thesis on Confucianism in a Pluralistic World - The Political Philosophy of Tu Weiming. His postdoctoral research is concerned, on the one hand, with Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Comparison, and with Writing Chinese Modernity, on the other.

Report: Basel Summer School in African Studies: Interdisciplinarity and Methodological Challenges in Area Studies (Basel, 10-14.06.2013)

■ JAMES MERRON

The 1st Basel Summer School in African Studies assembled students and experts from Universities in Europe and Africa. It was offered by the Centre for African Studies Basel through the joint PhD-training module Methodological Challenges in Area Studies supported by the Swiss University Conference SUK/CUS.

Area studies have their roots in expeditions of multi-disciplinary research teams in the 19th century who travelled from centres of knowledge production in Europe to non-European places. Data was collected, analysed, and archived which has since shaped scientific knowledge and public understanding of the world. The scientific apparatus, through its assumptions and empirical generalisations, often represented non-European regions in a way that served its domination. The critique of this 'bourgeois science' stemmed mainly from subaltern and postcolonial theories and was unified by scepticism toward the authority of knowledge claims made by 'Western' science about 'non-Western' worlds. Further controversies emerged in the latter half of the 20th century when area specific data became strategically instrumental for intelligence organizations, which have had lasting implications on research ethics and methods (particularly in anthropology).

Renewed interest in interdisciplinary and area studies was the platform for the summer school. The epistemological assumptions and forms of knowledge production that led to domination were discussed and fresh perspectives about interdisciplinary



Teamwork brought together participants from distinct universities (picture: James Merron).

research in contemporary academia were debated. Area studies raise more questions than they answer but provide valuable perspectives through which to probe deeper into the essence and validity of scientific endeavours themselves. The nature and implications of trans-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary research elude definition; nevertheless the basic premise is that no single disciplinary field can account adequately for the world. Singular accounts tend to naturalize the concept of 'disciplinarity', which is not a natural or a priori entity. Universities, funding regimes and academic positions are organised around the idea of disciplines, which themselves are not fixed but rather moulded through scientific and institutional contexts. The indi-

vidual knowledge producers who occupy their ranks play an active role in shaping the disciplines through models and theories – and teaching young scholars to behave in a certain ways.

At the summer school twenty PhD students introduced themselves and their projects during a poster session and their individual papers were discussed in the framework of thematic workshops. Prof Elísio Macamo (University of Basel) and Prof Jeremy Gould (University of Helsinki) led the students over the 'shaky bridge' of theoretical and ontological discussions. Along the way they exposed the tips, tricks and conundrums of social research inquiries. In probing deeper into the issues they addressed the more substantive criticisms of area studies, which contend that they are "overly ambitious and empirically unwieldy." This appears to be the case when considering the issue of translation, that is transferring the knowledge of one discipline to another. Converting one set of meanings into another set of meanings is impossible in so far as an idiom always gets lost along the way. However, the interesting point is that people do the impossible everyday by translating meanings across cultures through poetry and engaging in interdisciplinary research. It is in these practices that our social research inquiries take off.

What kinds of tools are necessary for interdisciplinary research? How do we formulate the object of research in a way that is acceptable across the disciplines? How do empirical generalisations affect decision-making and ways of gathering information? How are these methodological challenges affected by the concepts used in the construction of theories? What does this tell us about the conclusions we are likely to draw? How do we bring the natural and the social sciences together in a useful dialogue? How might research on Africa move beyond seeing Africa as a problem which requires solutions? Prof Raji C. Steineck and Ralph Weber (University Re-

search Priority Programme Asia and Europe, Zürich) artfully presented the "concepts that make theories intelligible." Tools of analysis were further demonstrated after a screening of *Darwin's Nightmare* (2004) and Prof Rose-Marie Beck (University of Leipzig) focused the participants' attention on the methodological issues of knowledge production.

These points were combined with homework assignments, which were often attended to by the participants working together in quaint settings such as the banks of the Rhine. Other meeting points were constructed around the frequent coffee breaks following thematic sessions as well as the extended lunch periods. A very special thank you goes to the participants of the summer school: Albert Tibajuka, Amadou Adamou, Carole Ammann, Francis Ngatigwa, Guilain Mathé, Jimam Lar, Joschka Philipps, Julia Büchele, Katharina Greven, Laura Weidmann, Maike Birzle, Nadine Wenzel, Pamela Chepngetich, Paul Sutermeister, Pierre-Nicolas Bounakoff, Pierrick Leu, Sabine Schultz, Stephanie Bishop and Susann Ludwig; a special thank you to Dr Veit Arlt and the staff of the Centre for African Studies at Basel University for organising the event; to the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) for providing the venue; to Dag Henrichsen who offered a guided tour of the BAB; and, finally, to Allison Goebel and Marc Epprecht (Queen's University, Kingston ON, Canada, visiting researchers at the Centre) for directing an additional workshop on Methodology and Ethics in Researching Sexuality and Gender Relations.

James Merron is PhD-student in African Studies at the University of Basel. He earned his BA and MA at Rhodes University, South Africa. His PhD-research concerned with Knowledges of water management and the transformation of land in South Africa is funded by ESKAS. Contact: j.merron@stud.unibas.ch.