The Theory and Method of Comparative Area Studies

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Introduction

In recent decades there have been several attempts to declare a truce between area studies and disciplinary political science, focusing on potentials for complementarity instead of competition (Bates 1997; Katzenstein 1996, 2001; Hanson 2008). Little substantive guidance, however, has been offered about how to accomplish this conciliation. While the truce appears to be holding within comparative politics as a subfield, the most prestigious general interest political science journals overwhelmingly publish large-n quantitative analysis or deductive models at the expense of country or region-specific studies (Munck and Snyder 2007a; Mahoney 2007; Bennett, Barth, and Rutherford 2003). The upper-echelons of the discipline appear relentless in adopting Przeworski and Teune’s (1970: 30) prescription that social scientists seek to replace proper names with relevant variables, either through qualitative analytical narratives that emphasize abstract and universal mechanism or large-n, quantitative analysis (see also, Bunce 2000: 721; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994: 35-6; Levi 1999: 36). In return, area studies experts often scoff at efforts to categorize and group (in political science parlance, “to code”) countries on scales made to measure the entire world and point out the poverty of the generic theories that seem to explain everything and yet nothing in particular (Johnson 1997; Williams 2000).

If, as Acharya (2008) and Katzenstein (2005) each contends, regions are central to our understanding of world politics, then efforts to displace them are sorely misplaced. This paper argues that the insights from area studies cannot be ignored by those aspiring to general theory, but at the same time, area studies itself must become more comparative.

1 These debates are also seen in sociology and anthropology. See Robinson (1998) and Guyer (2004), respectively.
in order to play a part in theory construction. The paper proceeds in four sections. The first section explains what area studies specialists mean when they talk about regions. Instead of regions as historical or geographic given, it offers a model of regional differentiation involving clustering of spatial, temporal, and institutional contexts between and above the country-level unit. The second section examines the ways quantitative analysis handles such nesting of regional attributes and, through a three year survey of leading journals, and demonstrates the paucity and poverty of quantitative attempts to understand the nature of regional variation. The third section discusses the importance of area studies in describing the contextual limitations on the enactment of abstract mechanisms involved in case studies. Only by examining regional structures can the distinctive unfolding of micro-level processes be understood. The last section offers methodological suggestions for the further development of comparative area studies as a new rubric that maintains the importance of regional knowledge while contributing general theory through contextualized comparisons and nested analysis.

*What is a Region?*

Both positivist and post-positivist strands within political science have found reason to criticize the practice of area studies. Ironically, both have been correct in their assessments in their own ways. On one hand, the insistence of limiting inquiry to small cluster of geographically proximate countries has tended to foster the creation of artificial geographic barriers to general social theory. At the extreme, area studies’ focus can be so narrow as to make particular countries or places appear *sui generis* and immune to comparison with any other places or peoples. On the other hand, one need not move too
far down the poststructuralist road to recognize that the current delineation of five (occasionally six) world regions and the erection of area studies centers in American universities was a construct closely intertwined with the projection of American power during the cold war. Area studies as such reflect more a particular imperial perspective than a useful analytic device (Lewis and Wigen 1997).

In both indictments, regions seem to reflect arbitrary groupings as much as any sense of clear conceptual coherence. Latin America spans from the Antarctic Circle to the tropics. Although Spanish is the predominant language and Catholicism the dominant religion, there are also significant pockets where other European and indigenous languages predominate, as do practitioners of other religions. This, however, is a far more consistent grouping than the delineation of Southeast Asia, whose members appear only to have Japanese occupation during World War II in common (Szanton 2004; Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002; Mirsepassi et al. 2003). The amorphous nature of regional domains is reflected in the fact that alternative scheme of regional classification are constantly being offered. Huntington (1996), for example, provocatively claims that broad affinities between “civilizational” blocs subsume individual countries and define the trajectories of social change and international conflict. More innocuously, Lewis (2002) divides the world by the culinary utensils, distinguishing the fork, finger, and chop-stick zones.

What area studies crucially lacks is a conceptual instead of taxonomical defense of the idea of regions. To this end, Hanson offers a theoretical justification for area classification and a model of regional differentiation, noting that nearly all accounts of individual regions share a common historical pathway: They begin with a period of
imperial expansion incorporation, which embed a territory with certain common
linguistic, religious, political, and economic institutional modes. Once imprinted by this
institutional mold, countries and societies within this territory tend to influence each
other through diffusion, emulation, and competition (Hanson 2008: 38-9). Stated more
abstractly, regional differentiation is a process involving the “deep impact” of a critical
junctures followed by interaction effects that perpetuates and deepens the cleavages
between regional clusters (Goldstone 1998; Pierson 2004; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007).

The ultimate decision about regional classification schema depend on logical
conjecture about which types of critical juncture and which forms of interactions matter
most to a given social scientific puzzle (Thompson 1973; Fawcett 2004). No regional
schema is totalizing or exclusive. Sudan, for instance, sits across and within multiple,
hierarchically-arranged regions, simultaneously part of the Middle East, Africa, the
Muslim World, and the economic periphery, among others. Moreover, every schema is
based fundamentally on an inductive, fuzzy-set relationship (Ragin 2000). Early versions
of dependency theory, for instance, hold that the timing of integration into the global
market accounts the modes of economic production. The distinction between economic
“core” and “periphery” regions is a mixed metaphor aimed to capture simultaneously
temporal, spatial, and institutional variation. As the theory matured, however, these two
regional categories proved insufficient to capture the evident diversity of economic
systems, so a new region (“semi-periphery”) was later introduced (Bratton 1982).

Ultimately, the regional categorization scheme proves no less valid a heuristic
devise than other attempts to divide the world based on regime-types, political ideology,
or other distinguishing characteristics. As with all analytical tools, area studies depends
on the skill of the individual practitioner in recognizing the unique strengths and weakness of the particularly regional lens. The following sections demonstrate the understanding regions and regional differentiation remains relevant to qualitative and quantitative studies, although both claim to have surpassed area studies in the pursuit of general social scientific models.

Why Regions Matter to Quantitative Studies

Since at least the 1960s and the behavioral revolution, large-n, cross-national statistical studies have been the nemesis of area studies, challenging its insistence on close, focused observation of a small number of cases. It is not that large-n analyses deny the possibility that regional units have distinct social qualities. As Brinks and Coppedge, for instance, caution in their quantitative study of patterns of democratization, any model that does not account for spatial relations among neighboring countries is theoretically underspecified (Brinks and Coppedge 2006: 484-5). This echoes the sentiment of geographers, who had earlier noted the specifically regional patterns of democratic transitions (O’Laughlin et al. 1998). Datasets like POLITY or World Development Indicators which qualitative researchers tend to rely on for country-year data even provide a column for Africa, Middle East, Latin America, etc. (Ebbinghaus 2005; Kittel 2006). But most large-n cross national studies follow the example studies in voting behavior and proceed with the confidence that all manifestations of regional divergence

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2 Efforts to create new datasets based on historical research, as in Acemoglu et al. (2001), are laudable but uncommon, as they are extremely labor intensive but still face many of the same challenges of other types of cross-national statistical research, particularly the demographic dilemma of affixing attributes to country units whose borders are not fixed (Abbott 2001: 40-44, 60).
can eventually be explained by a properly specified conceptual variable (Gieryn 2000: 476; King 1996).

Spatial, temporal, institutional, or cultural clustering above the basic level, however, violates fundamental statistical assumption about unit homogeneity and independence (Luke 2004: 8, 20-3). Quantitative research relies upon multilevel models to relax assumptions about unit independence and capture supra-unit interaction. One or more dichotomous regional dummy variables are added to the table, indicating whether a country does or does not belong to a certain regional grouping. These dummy variables can then be multiplied by (interacted with) other conceptual variables to create a random effects model that identifies variation both at the regional and the country-level unit (Western 1998; Di Pretre and Forristal 1994: Franzese 2005; Geller and Hill 2007).

Consider this simple example of a study examining the correlation between per capita GDP and rates of malnutrition.\(^3\) The country-level analysis is depicted in equation 1 below

\[
Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{GDP} + u
\]

where

- \(Y\) = % of population malnourished
- \(\text{GDP}\) = log natural of per capita wealth in constant 2000 U.S. dollars

The overall fit appears strong and the residuals fairly evenly distributed. Still, an examination of spatial representation would show that countries of Middle East and North Africa states (marked by circles) have far lower malnourishment than comparable units. Adding a dummy variable for major Middle Eastern and North Africa (MENA) in

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\(^3\) This example comes from Steve Heydemann’s ongoing work on the distributitional politics in the Middle East. The actual regression coefficients and results are shown in Appendix I.
equation 2, we can calculate a parallel regression for the Middle East versus the rest of the world, depicted in Graph 1.

Equation 2

\[ Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{GDP} + \beta_2 \text{MENA} + u \]

where
\[
\begin{align*}
Y &= \% \text{ of population malnourished} \\
\text{GDP} &= \log \text{ natural of per capita wealth in constant 2000 U.S. dollars} \\
\text{MENA} &= 1 \text{ for Middle East/North Africa countries} \\
&= 0 \text{ for non-MENA}
\end{align*}
\]

So far, this analysis has shown that certain geographically proximate states are regularly aberrant from the global developmental pattern. The dummy variable seems to adequately control for this aberration. Yet the dummy variable is just a mechanical mathematical devise; it does not explain the ways in which a particular regional cluster differs from all others. To interrogate this question further, a multilevel model with interaction terms must be used, further relaxing the assumption of unit independence.

Equation 3 shows the interaction terms for constructing such a multilevel model using the same example above.

Equation 3

\[ Y = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{GDP} + \beta_2 \text{MENA} + \beta_3 (\text{MENA} \times \text{GDP}) + u \]

where
\[
\begin{align*}
Y &= \% \text{ of population malnourished} \\
\text{GDP} &= \log \text{ natural of per capita wealth in constant 2000 U.S. dollars} \\
\text{MENA} &= 1 \text{ for Middle East/North Africa countries} \\
&= 0 \text{ for non-MENA}
\end{align*}
\]

In Graph 2, the flattened slope of the MENA line indicates not only that MENA states on average less malnutrition than other developing states, but that food security in the MENA world is much less dependent on increases in overall wealth. Thus, the interaction of overall wealth and food distribution is conditioned by region level
variables, a fact which would be statistically imperceptible without using a multilevel, interactive analysis.

<Insert Graph 1 here>

<Insert Graph 2 here>

But even though multilevel models are available to quantitative researchers in theory, they are both difficult to employ and impose a steep statistical penalty in practice (Shalev 2007: 243; Ragin 2008: 112-4). A three year survey of articles from seven major journals demonstrates how rarely they are actually used to capture regional variation. The sample consists of the three leading general journals in political science used by Mahoney (2007) and three major comparative politics journals used by Munck and Snyder (2007) respectively in their surveys of the discipline. It also contains one journal (Journal of Conflict Resolution) that specializes specifically in quantitative methodology. As shown in Table 1 below, eighty-two articles in the sample employed large-n cross-regional regression, logit/probit, or hazard models. Of these, only twenty-two used fixed effects models to test for regional heterogeneity and only two used multilevel models.

<Insert Table 1 here>

It is not just that techniques to analyze regional differentiation are underutilized, however. When regions do appear as independent variable, researchers rarely discuss the specific content of the regional cluster to which they ascribe causal significant or consider alternative schema of regional classification that might yield different results. There is little theoretical justification for including these variables beyond rote attempt to “soak up” unexplained variance (E. Lieberman 2005: 438; Engelbert 2000).
A theoretical treatment of regional dummies leads ineluctably to “garbage can” statistical models (Achen 2002; Steenbergen and Jones 2002: 234; Luke 2004: 23). Several specific problems are evident: Some studies are inconsistent in the use of regional dummies and thus miss important opportunities for cumulation of knowledge about a particularly puzzle. For instances, in a study of trade reform and liberalization among middle-income states with presidential electoral systems, Nielson (2003) divides his dataset into Latin American and non-Latin American states, while Samuels (2004) examines a similar puzzle and population but without including such a dummy. Closely related, is the non-comprehensive regional dummies, when a study inexplicably controls for only one or two dummies (often the nuisance region of Sub-Saharan Africa) and leaves the rest of the (normal) world as benchmark (Cf., Humphrey 2005; Timmons 2005; Smith 2004).

Another derivation of this problem is including dummy variables but then neglecting to report or interrogate their coefficients and significance (Cf., Mukherjee 2003; Pinto and Timmons 2005). Ferrera and Herron (2005) propose the null-hypothesis of no difference in party institutionalization between post-Communist and more established democracies, but when the dummy variable specifically shows significant regional variation, they provided no discussion of it. In a study of the effects of globalization on terrorism, Li and Schaub beg the question by noting the necessity of including regional dummy variables for Europe, MENA, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and North and South America because “terrorist incidents are unevenly distributed geographically” (Li and Schaub 2004: 243). Similarly, Birch explains away the significance of the regional dummies in a study of the effect of different electoral systems
on democracy by concluding that the “[t]he poor democratic credentials of many states in [the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia] appear to be related to cultural, physical, or other attributes of states not included in these models and do not seem to be a function of institutional design or colonial legacy” (Birch 2003: 334). Thus, most of the world’s population is apparently exceptional to his model.

Ultimately, this survey of the existent literature demonstrates a significant lag between theory and practice of large-n analysis in regards to understanding regional divergence. Prevalent techniques of cross-national statistical analysis essentially slip in through the backdoor the proper nouns that were not allowed in the front door of stringently general social science. If they even bother to test for regional variation, large-n studies remain at a loss to explain it. Large-n analysis overlooks the immense diversity in macro-social outcomes, leaving general theories that are often little more than platitudes meant to describe every case in every condition.

*Why Regions Matter to Qualitative Methods*

The relationship between area studies and qualitative methods is traditionally more amicable than between area studies and quantitative methods. Most area studies, after all, employs qualitative techniques of focused comparison, quasi-Boolean logic, and narrative process tracing to gain leverage on elements of causal complexity in a relatively small universe of cases (Gerring 2007; Bennett and George 2005; Abbott 2001). But with the rise of rational choice and its emphasis on identifying a discrete set of universal mechanisms to explain human behavior, area studies has confronted both new challenges and new opportunities within the qualitative realm.
Especially in its early articulations, rational choice was notoriously imperious in its claims to universal models of human behavior based on the deductive game theoretic formulae. It was only with the adoption of the analytic narrative technique that rational choice staked its theoretical sophistication against empirical evidence, attempting to reconstruct mechanisms of individual rational-calculations that led to actual observable aggregate social outcomes. There are both complementary and competitive elements in relationship between rational choice and area studies. On one hand, rational choice (at least in its analytic narrative form) gave explicit encouragement to pursue data across the globe. Bates, whose work on Africa had long utilized a rational-actor perspective, was one of the first proponents of analytic narrative. Regional experts were invited to search for, observe, and report on universal processes in far-off places in order to test propositions and find new data. On the other hand, rational choice assailed area studies’ parochial and ideographic tendencies as a barrier to generalizations.

The friction between rational choice and area studies relates to the question of what should be the focus of a narrative. For rational choice, it is the mechanisms that are the main characters (Bennett and George 2001: 147-52). Mechanisms are unobservable, recurrent, abstract micro-level processes that connect macro-level initial conditions and macro-level outcome (Elster 1983: 23-4; Gerring 2008). As its name implies, rational choice’s menu of mechanisms is relatively short, focused on the deliberate actions of utility-maximizing agents. Even with the inclusion of the possibility of misjudgment, incomplete information, and subjective preference-ranking, rational choice is aggressive in its methodological individualism. It is the aggregate of acts by such purposeful
(though not omniscient or infallible) agents that generates macro-political outcomes
(Monroe 2001; Hedström and Swedberg 1996).

Rational choice has faced serious methodological and epistemological criticism
(Shapiro 2005), but the main argument from area studies is not that rational choice’s
assumption of self-interested individual are necessarily wrongly. Rather, it is that by
“cut[ting] deeply into the specifics of time and place” to get to the “essence of stories,”
(Bates et al. 1998: 12), rational choice tends to amputate the contextual features that
bound political behavior, underplaying the most important and interesting features of
social change. There is a certain aesthetic element to this criticism. Analytic narratives
often read like repetitions of the same script of a two- (or sometimes four-) player one act
shows, reciting again and again the lines of the prisoner’s dilemma or the game of
chicken. The more parsimonious and universal mechanisms become, the most likely they
are to seem banal (Roberts 1996: 66-7). Stated more substantively, analytic narratives
tend to miss or dismiss elements of suspense and uncertainty in outcomes, contingency
inherent in games with multiple equilibria, and conjectures that involve concatenation of
many events, agents, and sequences (Carpenter 2000).

Area studies places in the foreground the contextual variation which rational
choice shunts to the background. Context is the foil with which mechanisms collide, the
specific analytical, temporal, spatial, or institutional configurations that constrain
processes of social change (Falletti and Lynch 2007; Bunge 1997). As Geertz famously
quipped, a wink and tick can only be distinguished by the setting in which the act occurs
(Geertz 2000: 6-7). States Mayntz (2004:254), “it is not possible to build a substantial

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4 Even James C. Scott, one of the most vocal proponent of local knowledge and critics of rational choice,
points out this in his *Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1977), agents behaved rationally given their
circumstances of limited food supply (see interview Munck and Snyder 2007: 360).
theory out of context-free, general mechanisms.” Explanations about concrete macro-
social phenomena, like the distribution of property, the erection of different of economic
institutions, the adoption of religion, or the enactment of mass protests require situating
mechanism in the midst of specific social and historical moments (Mayntz 2004: 254, see
also Kittel 2006: 667).

Among the most dire problems rational choice faces is its inability to taking into
account the symbolic systems in which impute particularly identities and preference sets
to individual agents (Blyth 2003; Hechter and Kanazawa 1997: 209). Take, for example,
Laitin’s study of language acquisition and ethnic identity in post-Soviet space (Laitin
1998). Laitin argues that Russians living in the Near Abroad choose to adopt the
language of the titular national state when they believe it is in their interest to do so, but
that the perception of benefit hinges on the anticipated moves that other make. The
aggregate result is a cascading dynamic in which all Russians adopt the national language
or none (117-21). But as Laitin himself notes, Russians tend to be especially resistant to
learning Ukrainian, which is denigrated as a bowdlerized Russian dialect, much less
Turkic languages, which are deemed barbaric (155-7, 161). Thus, while Laitin stresses
the universality of his model, the plasticity of linguistic identity, and instrumentality of
individuals, the outcomes he actually identifies are in fact deeply constrained by the
exogenous and ideographic legacies of Russian imperialism and “Great Russian
chauvinism.”

An area studies approach would not necessarily deny the importance of these
ubiquitous acts of rational calculation, but re-center the narrative to emphasize the impact
of those contextual elements that make the outcome in question unique. Area studies
narratives have a more intricately-rendered setting, more expansive cast of characters, and unfold under a longer durée than typical analytic narrative. Consider the differences between the accounts of Africa state frailty and failure by Bates (2008) and Herbst (2000). They are in basic agreement about the logic of Africa’s state leaders pursuing short-term policies for immediate gain but which ultimately harm long-term prospects for economic growth and political stability. But for Bates, Africa merely provides an example of a “fable” in which two agents—the state (or violence specialist) and the citizen—interact in attempt to achieve public order in which citizens can engage in economic development while the state provides protection in return for extracting taxes. The specific factors that influence state calculations about whether to protect or prey on citizens are only vaguely mentioned and illustrated in a few summaries of the history of individual African states since 1970. To test his theory, Bates offers a logistical regression across a country-year panel of African states from 1970 to 1995. What Bates ultimately proves is that Africa’s leaders are yet another example of Olson’s hypothetical bandits, teetering between the decision to rove or remain stationary (Olson 1993).

Herbst, in contrast, provides more detail on antecedent conditions, examines a longer length of the causal chain, and offers more prescriptive richness in his account. Herbst traces the lineage of Africa’s weak states to specific aspects of pre-colonial and colonial history. Territorial borders, physical infrastructure, systems of land-tenure, and organization of national bureaucracies and armies were all bequeathed to independent African states by colonial rule. Colonial powers often purposefully fragmented coercive authority, resting it in the hands of tribal and ethnic leaders instead of the state. He specifically shows how these colonial legacies continue to bind the decisions state leaders
make today and have a determining impact on state’s facility for cooperative penetrating society and regulating markets. Since so many African states were born with low infrastructural power, they have an immediate and logical predisposition toward predation (Chapters 5 and 6). Herbst also depicts the maintenance of public order was a more than simply a two-player contest between state and domestic society. Where Bates mentions of the impact of international community and especially access to international markets, Herbst highlights the crucial role of superpowers in rewarding existing states and penalizing any actor attempting to establish new state structures, essentially foreclosing the option to re-design states either through war or secession. On the question of why African states veer toward predation more than European, the answer is not the differences in decision-making processes, but in a very specific structure of incentives (Herbst 2000: 26, 130).

All of this can be summarized as saying that the “area” in area studies still matters. Even if two voters enact a common mechanism when inside the ballot box, the content and ramifications of their actions depend enormously on whether a vote is cast in Berlin or Bougainville. As rational choice theory has engaged with more diverse empirical cases, it has adopted a more “institutionalist” perspective that brings it closer to the historically-oriented tradition of area studies (Katzenelson and Weingast 2005; Peters 2005: 10). But even as rational choice seeks to engage in theoretical history, area studies reiterates that the drift away from actual history and context yields a product that is dull and un-insightful (Soltan 2004). Ultimately, as Solow warns, data are expensive and theory cheap (Solow 1997: 56-7). As discrete menus of abstract mechanisms are enumerated, structure and context assume even more relevance within qualitative
analysis precisely because they are manifestly diverse and concrete. These elements are crucial to explaining the specific choices rational actors make and the macro-social outcomes that ensue.

*Beyond Bounded Generalizations: Toward Comparative Area Studies*

The relationship between area studies and the larger discipline of political science depends on what Emmerson (2008) calls the terms of enlistment. Some consign whether area specialists to collectors of the “raw” observations and data which can then be interrogated (at a safe distance) using the discipline’s tools. Others place them in the position of devil’s advocate, providing “reality-checks” on formal models and statistical analysis. Area specialists continue to assert that they are equally equipped to contribute to theory-building and theory-testing, especially at the mid-range scale. They list a pantheon of regional specialists who have made significant contributions to theories of political development, nationalism and identity, and democratization, among others important puzzles.5

The mainstay of area studies remains what Bunce (2000) dubs “bounded generalizations.” These use regional context as an explicit scope condition limiting the enactment of mechanism. For example, Mainwaring and Perez-Liñan (2003, 2004) argue that diffusion is an important mechanism sustaining democracy in Latin America despite levels of economic development lower than other regions. They explain this region-level variation by pointing to the dissemination of new norms among the elites and masses, made possible by the predominance of the Spanish vernacular, anti-

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5 A string of edited volumes and a 2001 volume of *PS: Political Science and Politics* have endeavored to point out the contributions of regional case studies to major social scientific puzzles. Cf. Johnson (1997); Tessler (1999); Szanton (2004); Kuhonta, Slater, and Vu (2008).
authoritarian stance of the Catholic Church, and new aggressive policies by the Organization of American States in refusing to accept authoritarian retrenchment. Similarly, in the former Communist zones of Eurasia, Bunce and Wolchik (2006) and Beissinger (2007) identify the similarities of experience and the perception of a shared fate held by pro-democracy opposition as factors leading to the diffusion and emulation of effective tactics for challenging unfair electoral practices. Bounded generalizations use intra-regional variation to validate theories, focusing on variation among clusters of fairly similar cases (Basedau and Köllner 2007: 7, 15-6; Ekiert and Hanson 2003).

Considerable leverage can be gained, however, by returning to the theoretical underpinning of regional differentiation—what specifically binds a bounded generalization? The answer invariably seems obvious to the area specialist, but is far from trite from the perspective of the discipline. Explicit emphasis on contextual boundaries generates important observable implications that can further hone theoretical arguments. Returning to the example of Mainwaring and Perez-Liñan, if language and religion are important media for the diffusion of democracy in Latin American, an important test for this theory would come from those portions of Latin America that did not fall under Spanish domination or are not predominantly Catholic.

Vague contextual boundaries, on the other hand, lead to overly ambitious or artificially circumscribed generalizations (Goertz and Mahoney 2006). Bratton and van de Walle (1994) narrow the scope of their arguments by creating typologies of “African” political regimes unrelated to any data or conceptual input from Latin America or East Asian variants. At the other extreme, Mozaffār et al. (2003) are at times overly ambitious in their desire to generate general theory about ethnicity and democracy. Since all of
their data are derived from Africa, their analysis frequently points out unique features of African society and history that impinge on mechanisms and significant portions of their conclusions pertain solely to Africa. A single region may be a good place both to test and build theories, but such case selection must be considered ad hoc unless accompanied by a justification for the application of scope conditions. If regions are contingent and emergent features of social geography that constrain social actions, it is incumbent upon area specialists to provide positive descriptions of how regions become contextual differentiated. While no scholar can linger indefinitely on historical background, more attention must be paid to the debates among historians, sociologists, and geographers about how regions develop. Rokkan’s (1992) and V. Lieberman’s (2003) “conceptual maps”—efforts to trace the impact of imperial conquest and disintegration in shaping the cultural, political, and economic geography in Europe and Southeast Asia, respectively—are exemplary. These not only demonstrate the conceptual coherence of regions as bounded systems, but also highlight important areas of intra-regional heterogeneity which can be the fodder for further comparison.

Another option for area studies is try to go beyond bounded generalizations and become more explicitly comparative. In this vein, Basedau and Köllner (2007) suggest a new rubric of comparative area studies (CAS) that adds to the repertoire inter- and cross-regional comparison, as shown in Table 2 below.

<Insert Table 2>

Adopting CAS in essence entails seeking out greater contextual variation in which mechanisms can be enacted. Could the diffusion of democracy have occurred in the absence of a common linguistic and religious heritage, as is the case in Southeast Asia?
Could the Arab world—itself a product of similar expansion of linguistic and religious communities—achieve a similar diffusion? These kinds of questions invite researchers to transverse intra-regional contextual homogeneity and identify cases of comparative analytical, instead of geographic, proximity (Locke and Thelen 1995; Pierson 2003). Often the sheer span of history and geographic knowledge involved in such “contextualized comparisons” requires the collaboration of numerous authors. For example, Beissinger and Young (2002) bring together specialists in Africa and the Soviet Union in an edited volume devoted to understanding the diverse paths leading to breakdowns of internal order and state control. They note how in Africa “state crisis emerged in the wake of independence rather than as a precipitant of [national] independence” while in post-Soviet Eurasia “the collapse of the traditional social controls exercised by the Soviet state preceded and indeed very much precipitated independence” (37). Recognizing that state crisis is a common feature of both regions, the book takes great pains to show how both similarities and differences in outcomes were conditioned by contextual variation.

A turn toward mixing qualitative and quantitative analysis may also be necessary for CAS to engage such a diverse range of comparative strategies. Coppedge (2005) and E. Lieberman (2005) suggest ‘nesting’ small-n within large-n global analysis to identify most-similar, most-different, and aberrant across regional domains. However, CAS need not necessarily submit to the hierarchical division of labor implied by beginning with large-n global analysis and then using qualitative methods to examine aberrations (Sil 2000). To explain the emergence of developmental states in East Asia versus patrimonial, rent-based states in Southeast Asia, Doner et al. (2005) combine a sparse
narrative with Boolean-type truth tables to evaluation various causal factors, pointing to the interaction of rent availability, the ability of the regime to make side payments, and the level of external threat compelling a commitment to infrastructural upgrade as producing different forms of state-society bargains. They are thus able to explain both inter- and intra-regional diversity using the same set of causal propositions.

Another mixed-method approach to understanding regional variation is to forgo dummy variable and interaction terms and instead break up the analysis into different regional models, then compare the results (Taagepara 2008: 58). Haggard and Kaufman (2004) do this in their study of differences in public spending patterns among new democracies in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia. They begin with regression analysis within individual regions and then proceed with comparative historical analysis of particular regional forms of authoritarianisms which continue to shape public expectations about the level of government services provided in the democratic era.

Nominal, ordinal, and interval comparative techniques help to make theory development more structured and parsimonious. They are no substitute, however, for the narratives which allow area specialists to examine empirically complex and sequential causal chains unfolding in time (Büthe 2002; Mahoney 1999). Whether in intra-regional bounded generalizations or inter- and cross-regional comparison, such induction sets area studies apart from rational choice analytics and global, quantitative analysis.

Conclusion
Regional context proves a crucial and yet often overlooked factor in both quantitative and qualitative social science. The unique ability of area specialists to closely observe political processes in discrete and diverse contextual settings provides an antidote to overly general and often vacuous general theories. At the same time, area studies can contribute further to social science by being explicit about what how regions evolve and what specific contextual features constrain more or less universal mechanisms. CAS offers strategies that bring contextual variation into starker focus, moving regional differences further into the foreground of the analysis through inter-regional and cross-regional comparison. Inevitably, attempts to explain regions of such diverse histories and attributes will begin to sound somewhat like “just-so story,” involving contingent conjunctions of factors precipitating unique social outcomes. What CAS research offers is the potential to make the mechanisms and context involved in these important changes portable and appreciable in general terms without neglecting historical specificity.
Bibliography


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Mirsapassi, Ali and Amrita Basu, and Frederick Weaver, eds. (2003), Localizing Knowledge in a Globalizing World: Recasting the Area Studies Debate, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.


Tessler, Mark, ed. (1999), Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.


**Appendix**

Standard Error in parenthesis

***= p-value <.01; **= p-value <.05; *= p-value <.10

Dependent Variable: Malnutrition80

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Equation 1</th>
<th>Equation 2</th>
<th>Equation 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>81.581 (4.870)***</td>
<td>81.439 (4.702)***</td>
<td>82.591 (4.713)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lnGDP80</td>
<td>-8.412 (.632)***</td>
<td>-8.273 (.612)***</td>
<td>-8.427 (.613)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MENA</td>
<td>-10.374 (3.416)***</td>
<td>-24.959 (9.256)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interact</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.036 (1.202)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R sqr</td>
<td>.611</td>
<td>.640</td>
<td>.649</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>177.221***</td>
<td>99.668***</td>
<td>68.509***</td>
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<tr>
<td>n</td>
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<td>114</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Use of Regional Dummy and Interaction Terms in Cross-Regional Regressions, 2003-2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal Name</th>
<th>Total Number of Articles</th>
<th>Articles Using Cross Regional Regressions</th>
<th>Articles Using Regional Dummy Variables</th>
<th>Articles Using Regional Interaction Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>J. of Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am. Pol. Sc. Rev.</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Am. J. of Pol. Sc.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>J. of Politics</td>
<td>163</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comp. Politics</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>World Politics</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>741</strong></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Three Types of Comparative Area Studies (CAS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object of comparison</th>
<th>Intra-regional comparison</th>
<th>Inter-regional comparison</th>
<th>Cross-regional comparison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples</strong></td>
<td>Political parties in Southern Africa</td>
<td>Regional co-operation in Asia and Latin America</td>
<td>Resource-rich countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Graph 1

Wealth vs. Malnutrition, 1980
Source: World Bank World Development Indicators

Graph 2

Wealth vs. Malnutrition, 1980
Source: World Bank World Development Indicators