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Bridges and Borders of Area Studies and International Relations

An interview with Jan Hornát & Mélanie Sadozaï

Jan Hornát (Charles University, Prague) & Mélanie Sadozaï (University of Regensburg)

in conversation with Paul Vickers (Leibniz ScienceCampus, Regensburg)

Recorded on 25 July 2024



Left to right: Paul Vickers, Mélanie Sadozaï and Jan Hornát at the Center for University and Academic Teaching (ZHW) in Regensburg on 25 July 2024. Photo: Markus Meilinger

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Jan Hornát and Mélanie Sadozaï are two scholars working across area studies and international relations. In summer 2024, they were in conversation, exploring the intersections, complementarities, and tensions between area studies and international relations (IR). This text reflects the outcome of their discussion that highlighted how these fields can mutually enrich each other while also addressing challenges in their integration.

Jan Hornát is Head of the Department of North American Studies at Charles University, Prague. While often presented as an "Americanist", especially in the media, he is following a trajectory leading to further intersections with IR, as his research focuses increasingly on US foreign policy. In July 2024, he was a visiting researcher at the Leibniz ScienceCampus in Regensburg.

Mélanie Sadozaï trained in Persian language and civilization, before moving into international relations and war studies. Her current research as a postdoc at the Department for Interdisciplinary and Multiscalar Area Studies (DIMAS) at UR enables her to combine this expertise, adopting anthropological perspectives on Central Asia and Afghanistan within a border studies framework.

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> IR theories can sometimes 'float' above the ground realities. Area studies provide the empirical depth and historical context that theories often lack. They provide a field for testing more general theories and concepts. (Mélanie Sadozaï)

Paul Vickers: *You both work across IR and area studies, combining your in-depth training in particular regions with reflections on IR theory. These two general fields have not always enjoyed the kind of complementary relationship evident in your research. So, let's start with a broad question: Does IR need area studies, and vice versa?*

Jan Hornát: IR often deals with theories and concepts that aim for universal applicability, but area studies bring the depth and context needed to ground those theories. For example, in my work on US foreign policy, understanding discussions around identity, norms, and history are essential. Area studies help illuminate why certain decisions are made and how the US seeks to shape the world. Without this grounding, IR theories risk becoming detached from reality. Especially if foreign policy is seen simply as the outcome of power dynamics, the balance of power, or corporate interests. It is impossible to understand US foreign policy without, for example, knowledge of debates around US exceptionalism, something that has significantly sculpted the US vision of the world for over two centuries. Such in-depth knowledge can be particularly valuable for informing the public and policymakers, even if what is often asked of experts is a more general, flattened knowledge.

Mélanie Sadozaï: I completely agree. IR theories can sometimes "float" above the ground realities. Area studies provide the empirical depth and historical context that theories often lack. They provide a field for testing more general theories and concepts. When I started my fieldwork along the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border, I struggled to connect my ethnographic findings with classical IR theory, which often foregrounds the state. However, transnationalist IR theory, helped me make sense of what I was observing. It helped me to frame how non-state actors like the Aga Khan Development Network were shaping cross-border relations, developing infrastructures that enabled cross-border relations and exchanges. Connecting transnationalist IR theory and a more grounded border studies added significantly to understanding the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border region, bridging the theoretical and empirical.

PV: *You have both made a strong case for the complementarity of IR and are studies. But what about the perceived hierarchy, where area studies are sometimes seen as subordinate to IR, offering the empirical data while IR provides the theoretical and conceptual superstructure?*

JH: This hierarchy does exist, and it's a source of tension especially when area studies scholars feel marginalized if their role is seen as merely to confirm or disprove IR theories. But this perspective undervalues the unique contributions of area studies. It's not just about providing data; it's about challenging universalist assumptions and enriching theories with nuanced insights. This means going beyond the kinds of insights generated through approaches that, say, employ focus groups, asking ordinary people about their responses to potential scenarios and actions by states.
What I communicate to my students is that area studies add depth and background to generalised assumptions about a society. Area studies show the complexity and diversity of populations, something that perhaps goes against a recent broader trend in some fields of social sciences to work towards

generalisation.

MS: Indeed, that is what I advocate in teaching IR theory and political science at Regensburg, too. IR often aims for universality and general theories, but if concepts can't be tested in specific contexts or are challenged by fieldwork findings, their utility is questionable. But we need to understand that area studies aren't just about delivering case studies for testing theories. They're about depth. I think this is how the field derives its legitimacy, at least in research terms. On the other hand, media discourses often welcome discussions of foreign policy from commentators ready to talk about any region, even if the lack of context generates vague statements.

> The key is flexibility – understanding that areas are not confined to geopolitical borders and that various scales, from the local to the transnational, intersect. (Mélanie Sadozaï)

PV: *It seems like we could argue that the two fields often operate at different scales of focus in terms of the actors and spaces explored and in terms of the scope of epistemic validity. How do you define the "area" in area studies, and at what scale can it operate effectively?*

MS: In some contexts, I figure as a scholar of Central Asia but I am not comfortable with this. Not just because of the debates on deconstructing containers such as "Central Asia" or "post-Soviet studies". The region is huge. My research is super-localized, focusing on border interactions one stretch of the almost 1400-km long border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Yet these micro-level studies reveal broader transnational dynamics that exist outside the international relations framework of state actors and boundaries. The key is flexibility – understanding that areas are not confined to geopolitical borders and that various scales, from the local to the transnational, intersect.

JH: In my fields, whether American Studies or political science, the US is often treated as a single entity, but books like Colin Woodard's American Nations remind us of the regional diversity within the country. Woodard identifies eleven distinct 'nations' in the US, each with diverse political cultures and histories, with their founding institutions and norms continuing to shape political culture today. The debates around the extent of government influence on people's lives or the economy are one illustration of that. This approach shows that we need to look beyond state boundaries and consider sub-national and regional dynamics as one aspect of scale, complementing the trans-border and transnational dynamics that Mélanie has highlighted.

MS: Indeed. I am inspired by the late James C. Scott, who combined political science and anthropology, working on Southeast Asia. He saw the limitations of a state-centred political science for understanding the international system. I try to follow his approach in tracing micro-level interactions challenge the state-centric focus of traditional IR and show how local actors shape transnational dynamics. Such

examples highlight why it's essential to integrate area studies with IR.

> Teaching area studies offers a unique way to engage students. [...] Our graduates often find careers in journalism, diplomacy, or think tanks and consulting, where their regional expertise is in high demand. (Jan Hornát)

PV: *What about teaching area studies? How do you convey its value to students?*

MS: I tell students from the start that area studies and regions are unstable concepts. There's no single definition, and that's okay. English has "area studies", which in French as "*études aréales*" is seen as a neologism and not recognized by, say, Microsoft Word, even if it functions in academic discourse alongside *études régionales*. Rather than universals there are thus competing central analytical categories. And within the notion of 'area' there are of course the multiple scales of spatial focus: cities, border zones, world regions, and so on.

My openness to definitions applies to area studies' typical geographic realms, too. "Central Asia" has been defined differently by Russian, Soviet, and Western scholars. The students might have their own ideas of "Central Asia". So, I start classes by encouraging to reflect on any stereotypes they have in mind. Rather than leaving "Central Asia" as a general construct, whether produced by scholarly frameworks or popular stereotype, I encourage them to think beyond that. Central Asia functions as a useful analytical category, but with greater depth, context and diversity.

JH: I would agree. Teaching area studies offers a unique way to engage students. Our program in Prague combines regional specializations with broader international studies, allowing students to build empirical knowledge, focused in area studies as undergraduates, before increasingly tackling theoretical IR frameworks and addressing political systems as graduate students. So, they already have a very strong empirical grounding in place. And they are also prepared to approach the US or the European Union through an area studies lens, which is still quite unusual from within those regions. Our graduates often find careers in journalism, diplomacy, or think tanks and consulting, where their regional expertise is in high demand. But I also emphasize that area studies are not just about acquiring knowledge; it's about learning to think critically and contextually.
Of course, the whole IR-area studies dialogue does not always run smoothly. Disciplines can talk past each other, owing to different conceptual frameworks. And we have already discussed how the public service aspect of knowledge production does not always value the specialised depth of area studies or some of the more critical reflections it encourages.

> The future lies in embracing complexity. Area studies should continue challenging IR's universalist tendencies, while IR can offer frameworks to

> analyze broader patterns. Collaboration between the two fields is essential, but it requires mutual respect and recognition of their unique contributions. (Jan Hornát)

PV: *Finally, how do you see the future of area studies and its relationship with IR*?

JH: The future lies in embracing complexity. Area studies should continue challenging IR's universalist tendencies, while IR can offer frameworks to analyze broader patterns. Collaboration between the two fields is essential, but it requires mutual respect and recognition of their unique contributions.

MS: I see a lot of potential in bridging the fields through interdisciplinary research and teaching. By focusing on multiscalar and transnational dynamics, we can offer more comprehensive insights into global challenges. The key is to remain open to new methods and perspectives while staying grounded in empirical realities.

PV: Thank you both for this engaging and insightful discussion. It's clear that the interplay between area studies and IR offers a richer understanding of the world, challenging stereotypes and fostering deeper connections.

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