

## FORUM

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### **Thinking aNew: How Canadian Studies Underpinned the Birth of New Area Studies**

In 2017 two long term scholars of the study and understanding of Canada, one a former President of the British Association for Canadian Studies, and one a former President of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (and a Canadian) met at the University of Southern California (USC). On their minds was a persistent and knotty question. What had they learned through careers stretching nearly 30 years in examining Canada, and importantly, what was the value of that work? Furthermore, both academics were well aware of the struggle they had experienced, as Political Scientists, in studying Canada over a career. What had been the nature of that struggle? Why had they experienced it? And, frankly, was it worth the fight?

To those beyond the university this 'struggle' may appear inconsequential, bizarre, and difficult to understand; but to those inside the academy, and especially early career researchers in Political Science, more than a quarter of a century after the two Political Scientists above began their careers, the demands of the discipline remain the same. There are approximately 155 universities offering study abroad and Political Science in the United Kingdom (UK) proffering scholars the opportunity for employment, research and a career.<sup>1</sup> Only 35 of those schools offer any provision even in American Studies, which focuses on the leading state in the international system for more than a century.<sup>2</sup> Today there are no Chairs in Canadian Studies in the UK, the last being that of Professor Ged Martin at Edinburgh over a decade ago. For a scholar interested in studying life in Canada the options for employment, never mind progression, within British higher education (and elsewhere) are severely limited.

My initial interest in researching Canada began when I received a Government of Canada award under the *Understanding Canada Program* which ended in 2012. That seed funding precipitated a career which, over the next decades, would involve

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1 <https://www.educations.com/search/institutes/political-science-united-kingdom/c734-d1076>

2 <https://www.educations.com/search/institutes/political-science-united-kingdom/c734-d1076?page=2&q=american%20studies%20>

comparing policy on economic development in Atlantic Canada and the European Union (EU), examining the experience of immigration into Ontario, while exploring community infrastructure and development in both countries. This research brought me into contact with Canadian public servants in many federal and provincial government departments, enabling deep discussions on policy learning, international comparisons, and policy transfer. While working with several British Government departments on aspects of life and wellbeing in the UK, my admiration for the motivations and initiatives of the thoughtful Canadian officials became ensconced.

Had I been starting my career today, and without the seed funding supplied by Canada, it is unlikely I would have had the opportunity to research on, or in, that place. It is improbable I would have had the chance to understand the complexity of Canadian society, its provinces, and its people. Repeated return visits to Canada to investigate policy problems common in both the UK and the EU would have been impracticable. Today, in a time of reduced academic resources, it is implausible that I could preserve a long-term relationship with Canada, its officials and its people. If establishing and maintaining such a two-way relationship proves exacting (or perhaps impossible) now, the question remains, does the loss of such relationships and deep understanding of peoples and place really matter in the twenty-first century? This question, about the nature of expertise on space and place, formed the basis of the meeting between Professor Patrick James and myself at USC as we considered what the future might look like for those coming behind us, and mused on the troubled issue of scholarly succession for Canadian Studies.

This very question underpinned planning for our book *Necessary Travel: New Area Studies and Canada in Comparative Perspective* (2018). Readers of this journal will be familiar with many of the contributors to that volume, such as Caroline Rosenthal, Charles Batson, Claude Denis, Christopher Sabatini and Colin Coates. Each was asked to consider the past and the future in understanding life in their region and their discipline of specialism. Historian Colin Coates drew attention to the current context in Canada quoting Brian Palmer in his chapter *The State Against Canadian Studies* commenting that “neither Canadian Studies nor the broader appreciation of the need to know ourselves more thoroughly and more differently can be said to be healthy at the current moment” (155). Coates laid bare the parlous state of Canadian Studies in the country, reviewing its common criticisms at universities in Canada including: a fixation on searching for overarching national identities, the belief by some historians during the 1980s that Canadian Studies was useless, intellectually shallow and institutionally weak, and that it lacked the rigour of the disciplines.

Coates’ chapter in *Necessary Travel* is notable for its fine-tuned oversight of the state of Canadian Studies in Canada post millennium. His analysis rehearsed the closures of Canadian Studies Centres and programs across the country, including at his own institution, ironically during the one hundredth and fiftieth anniversary of Canada’s confederation. The “celebratory malaise” of that anniversary, described so poignantly

by Coates, was widespread too following the brutal abolition of support for Canadian Studies internationally by the Government of Canada. The shock of that reversal after 30 years support was profound and fundamental for Canadianists. It occurred during the Harper Administration, resistant to, and suspicious of, scholarly investigation. The government's outright dismissal of support for academic research in the country provoked a collective depression amongst the 7000 scholars affiliated globally to the *International Council for Canadian Studies* concerning the future of studying or researching Canada.<sup>3</sup> Yet academics, who had invested years building up an expertise on Canada, resisted the call to give up.<sup>4</sup> And some five years after the government support for International Canadian Studies was ended informed support for the investment remained in Ottawa.<sup>5</sup> Yet the headwinds for reducing financial support for cultural diplomacy and funded area studies programmes existed beyond Canada. Funds in the United States from Title VI (1958) to Title VIII Programmes (2013) having waxed and waned since the 1950s (Babbidge 1959). Worldwide funding for area studies research had been a declining trajectory adding to the gloom about the future of the field. Nonetheless, between 2010 and 2014 I had the pleasure of serving as Deputy Chair of the Area Studies Sub-panel of the UK's Research Excellence Framework<sup>6</sup> reviewing research from universities on a plethora of Area Studies topics. During this time, as Deputy Chair, I read outputs concerning many regions of the world written by area specialists from several British higher education institutions. I was impressed, very impressed, by the level of expertise, the commitment, the analysis, the care taken to adopt methodologies enabling thoughtful and careful insights into problems and issues that scholars (in both the arts and humanities and social science) chose to explore. Moreover, I was captivated by the evidence of reflective practice demonstrated in the writing of scholars striving to deliver best practice, and ethical approaches, to carrying out their work. I learnt a lot. Personally, this learning precipitated deep reflection in my approach – and deep anger. The source of my annoyance is outlined elsewhere but suffice to say that criticism from those beyond the field of Area Studies, and often from Political Scientists, which bagged its research as insufficient appeared totally unwarranted (Hodgett 2019). The commonplace

labelling [of] Area Studies as the product of post-Cold War security interests. [Being] [...] descriptive [...] parochial and oblivious to global forces, [...] [whilst acknowledging that] the building blocks of power remained with nation states (ibid.)

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3 <https://www.iccs-ciec.ca/>

4 See Stephen Brooks (2019), and <https://www.hilltimes.com/story/2017/03/01/time-restore-funding-canadian-studies-abroad/260141/>

5 <https://www.hilltimes.com/story/2017/03/13/99167/260208/>

6 <https://ref.ac.uk/2014/>

was no longer appropriate. And

criticism of the deficiencies of Area Studies [...] that [...] [we] gave too much importance to hegemonic cultures, while [...] privileging written texts over oral and elite over non-elite cultures (ibid.)

were no longer justified.

Area Studies, despite pessimistic predictions in the closing years of the twentieth century, was not suffering a *state of crisis* resulting from poor institutional infrastructure or a deficient intellectual agenda. The evidence, rather, pointed to a rash of provocative and reflexive publications demonstrating that, in the UK at least, the field was flourishing post millennium. Scholars over recent years, and now, were engaged in robust self-examination and lively collective debate.

One regular castigation from the disciplines of Canadian or wider Area *studies* has always been “the amorphous nature of the approach” (Coates 2018 in Hodgett et. al., 168) and the multi or interdisciplinary research methodologies used. Yet when I think back to presenting papers at the British Association of Canadian Studies (BACS) conferences at Oxford University, the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States (ACSUS) in San Diego and Las Vegas, the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries (GKS) conferences in Grainau or the Japanese Association for Canadian Studies meetings (amongst others) there was something common to these events. It was the joy of listening to *unfamiliar topics and arguments*, seeing things from *new perspectives*, meeting scholars from *different disciplines* (and countries) crossing, and recrossing, the borders between the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Therein the tired shibboleths from the disciplines, maintaining (and policing) a limited, rigid, problematic, vocabulary in language and theory – were as nothing to the delight of hearing, appreciating and considering *new ideas, information and perspectives*. This is the very essence of Area Studies – the cross-fertilisation of ways of thinking and knowing, the inevitable questions, the mistakes, the naiveties and the joyous, deep intellectual curiosity. It is this raucous combination of the separated and divided, of going beyond the black box, looking out with the discipline, *going over the top*, often warned against, and prohibited by the traditional disciplinary gatekeepers. Trained as a Political Scientist, I spent many years engaging with journals aspiring to ‘scientific credentials.’ In Canadian, and Area Studies, as R.A.W. Rhodes (2021) outlines in his foray into new methods of understanding (including autoethnography) – my lost humanity was found (Rhodes 2021). Backed up by lived experience (before becoming an academic I ran a political party in the midst of the violence of Northern Ireland’s troubles) and time spent engaging with public servants on policy and political issues. In every case, and with every problem, as a Political Science graduate ‘disturbed’ by the state of that discipline -grappling with the complexities of real life and real violence- I asked ‘What is the point of theory if it does no good for people? What is its point if it does not improve the quality of life

for individuals and communities?’ These questions, rather than the supposed ‘logic’ of rationale choice theory or ‘realist’ approaches prevalent at the time guided my research. In actual life, theory must demand relevance to address the multiplying everyday challenges which communities face. It was to these demands that Patrick James and I turned when we met.

In discussion with our interlocutors on the content of our 2018 volume, we chose the title *Necessary Travel: New Area Studies and Canada in Comparative Context* to flag our concerns and our hopes. In 2017 in our review of literature for the volume we noticed articles where scholars maintained that universities were increasingly denying funds for travel for field work because information was available digitally, arguing that in the digital age “being there” (Nic Craith/Hill 2015) was no longer necessary (Somer 2014, 585). Such complacency was a source of intense worry to us particularly in the context of reduced resources to visit Canada. It shaped our early discussions on the future of Area Studies. The second clause of the title reveals our intuitions about how the field would evolve and our fundamental belief that it was important to consider Canada in comparison to other places.

*Necessary Travel* was written during the first quarter of the twenty-first century at a time of increasing numbers of unsettling events. It looked backwards at how Area Studies had developed over the closing decades of the twentieth century and forwards over the opening decades of the twenty-first arguing that we were moving into a period of *serious and increasing unpredictability*. The editors, writing from the perspective of experience over their careers, were in conversation with colleagues’ expert in peoples and places. Together they discussed where the field was at that point in time, and where it would go. Criticisms of what we called *Traditional Area Studies* acknowledged that the field was maintaining false historical boundaries through colonial cartography and European notions of civilisation (Tessler et al. 1999). In the later years of the twentieth century *Traditional Area Studies* (TAS) was condemned for its Eurocentric ontology and epistemology, privileging elite cultures, and with work devoid of contextualisation. At century’s end, the field was said to be in perpetual crisis and terminal decline (Sharma 2005). All of this took place in the midst of the behavioural revolution which had swept through American Political Science with the arrival of personal computing. The consequential *over-valuing of quantitative data*, because we could crunch numbers, encouraged social science to emulate the methods of the natural *sciences* and eschew the vital insights of the humanities. This shift in priority, privileging breadth over depth, did not serve us well. The loss of detail, the inability to understand beliefs, motivations, thoughts, meanings and feelings, which would have been possible through interpretive approaches and hermeneutics, came at significant cost. It left us blind; we were unable to see the future coming.

In 2018, writing *Necessary Travel*, our list of significant social and economic ruptures not foreseen included: 9/11, the 2008 global economic crash, a decade of austerity,

growing social inequalities and devastating climate change.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, researchers even in their worst nightmares, failed to imagine the unprecedented calamities yet to come – the ongoing global COVID pandemic (6,610,661 direct deaths worldwide to November 2022)<sup>8</sup>, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia (what McKinsey described as “the greatest humanitarian crisis in Europe since the Second World War”)<sup>9</sup> plus the intractable, ghastly wars, famine, and prolonged drought in Africa (Asmall et al. 2021). The sheer magnitude of the disruptions, disturbance, and threat to millions of lives in the twenty-first century has shocked observers and challenged the long-accepted Bretton Woods Post War settlement underpinning democratic systems, and what Helleiner (2019) has described as “embedded liberalism.”

In this time of confrontation, what the *New York Times* dubbed the “age of constant disasters” (Thompson 2022), there are multiple commonplace challenges to life, length of life, and quality of life. This raises the question whether the status quo ante of discipline-based funded academic research has failed to serve us well. In short, has it outlived its usefulness? Patrick James and I say ‘yes’. Our need to *know better*, to understand the detailed drivers of change, and the complicated motivations of peoples, regions and nations, requires uncovering *more detail and more clarified insights*. We must fully appreciate how people live day to day, what challenges and frustrations they endure, and elicit ways to make their everyday lives better – even if only incrementally. This becomes particularly urgent in the context of falling living standards globally post pandemic and declining life expectancy in many countries.<sup>10</sup>

Our challenge to the traditional discipline-based ways of doing research comes from experience, and a profound disagreement with Lambert’s designation of the Area Studies specialist as being “with a broad region of the world, [...] for narrower and narrower geographic specialization, moving from world region to country to section of the country” (Lambert 1990, 712). Our experience researching Canada differed. Rather than narrowing our examination from the nation to the region and municipalities, we examined Canada in international context, using a multifaceted lens enabling study at multiple levels. My field work in Cape Breton Island for example, involved discussions with policy makers (federal and provincial), with local community groups, academics, politicians, and people. Stories and narratives were the means of collecting evidence, allowing a *deep understanding* of complex federal development programs and their implementation at Canada’s edge, considered in

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7 A study done by Monash University estimates globally that an extra 1.75m people’s deaths per annum were affected by temperature variability between 2000 and 2019 see <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2542519622000730?via%3Dihub>.

8 <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

9 <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/war-in-ukraine-lives-and-livelihoods-lost-and-disrupted>

10 <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2021/09/29/in-many-rich-countries-covid-19-has-slashed-life-expectancy-to-below-2015-levels>;  
<https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/09/08/global-living-standards-are-moving-in-the-wrong-direction>

comparison to EU initiatives (Hodgett/Cassin 2012). Lambert's other serious criticism of the "ologizing" (1990, 721) of Area Studies, that we spoke only to ourselves (e.g. Area Studies experts), made no sense in the context of our work. Canadian Studies' interdisciplinary ways of working spurred our fundamental rethink and the development of our concept of the *New Area Studies*.

The provision of personal computing and asynchronous communication at the millennium's dawn allowed academics working in different continents to work in new and innovative ways. Communication, and the exchange of information, became easier with interviewees and policy makers. Space shrank. The velocity of social change sped up, with information flows and frequent changes in direction. Area Studies (after the millennium 2.0 and the arrival of the digital era) is fast evolving and profoundly changed. *New Area Studies* (2018, 7) turned to the inter and the multi-disciplinary, with a reassessment of: scale, methodological choice, categorisations and the means of measurement. Parts of *Traditional Area Studies* continued to contribute notably history and the learning of languages, opening opportunities to other cultural aspects, including religion and gender (Hodgett/James 2018, 172). Where *New Area Studies* moves beyond traditional versions of Area Studies, however, is the inclusion of research methods typically perceived as social scientific and open to quantitative analysis. This may include, for example, graphic visual data and app-based information, new methods of information gathering in big data, through, for example, citizen science and the medical humanities.<sup>11</sup> Combined with the more traditional reflective practice of ethnographic and interpretive approaches *New Area Studies* forsakes any false dichotomy of qualitative information being in inevitable opposition to quantitative forms. Innovatively, the approach is open also to new sources of information, like translations (often important research in its own right), multiple languages, and the pursuit of ethical approaches in the coproduction of knowledge involving local scholars and local people (Page 2022; Groot/Haveman/Abma 2022, 237-238). This interdisciplinary approach creates a wider hermeneutical circle allowing us to know more and in greater detail, working beyond our home disciplines by blurring genres (Rhodes/Hodgett 2021).

*New Area Studies* incorporates ideas and concepts from beyond the boundary of existing paradigms, it works at multiple levels of theory creation, and with policy concerns. It responds to the increasing speed and complexity of the twenty-first century and its plethora of wicked problems unbounded by nation or discipline. Therefore, *New Area Studies* delivers cross-regional comparison using all the weapons in our academic armoury, from interpretivism to big data. It begins the much-needed expansion of what we know, how we research and understand the world, and looks afresh at how we might do it. Bringing imagination to the practice of research, it demolishes disciplinary boundaries imposed in, and suited to, the Victorian age. It searches for new forms of understanding, exploration, and knowledge, in new places

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11 See When et al. 2021.

with new people. And it acknowledges the dramatically changed world post pandemic- seeking the better-informed research necessary to address multiple challenges now urgent in a world more unstable and gravely unpredictable than any since the 1962 Cuban Missile crisis. For this most difficult decade, a *New Area Studies* proves absolutely necessary to better comprehend a world riven with multiple problems and paradoxes. This evolution in the field may allow area studies scholars to progress into the twenty-first century with a more positive outlook and confidence in researching and teaching on Canada.

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