Comparative Area Studies: Disciplinary and Regional Studies Paradigms

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MA Programme in Political Science (1 year and 2 years)
Winter semester 2018 (2 credits, 4 ECTS credits)

Class meetings:
Thursdays, 17:20-19:00

Office hours:
Wednesdays, 13:00-15:00 and Thursdays, 10:00-12:00 (by appointment via email)

Introduction

Why study areas/regions? And how study them? Comparative area studies is one of the most promising new approaches both in comparative politics and in areas studies. It builds on the contribution that area studies has made to political science and takes methodological tools from comparative politics to develop a framework for comparing political phenomena within and across world regions and time. This approach to research design allows for a better appreciation and specification of regional similarities and differences. The fundamental insight from comparative area studies is that region mediates global and universal processes and therefore is an explanatory variable in its own right.

In the course we will contrast different approaches how to study areas in comparative politics and area studies. We will identify their conceptual and methodological differences. Apart from the various academic debates about pros and cons of these approaches, we will focus on the attempt to merge them in comparative area studies.

No prior knowledge is assumed. Students are expected to be present at all seminars and to come prepared. If you are unable to attend class, you should notify me via e-mail prior to the session.

Learning outcomes

At the end of the course the student should:
• Be familiar with the conceptual and methodological techniques of studying areas;
• Understand the potential of comparative area studies;
• Reflect on the notion of “region” in comparative politics;
• Reflect on the notion of “time period” in comparative politics;
• Skilled in research design comparing a political phenomenon across world regions or across time;
• Be able to participate in controversial discussions, summarize and present their own arguments, critically assess previous research, and elaborate their own research design.

Course requirements and assessment

✓ Active class participation (10%)
✓ Opinion paper (30%)
✓ Presentation of research design (30%)
✓ Final Paper with applied research design (30%)

Active class participation is expected and graded. Some guidelines: participate regularly, make informed contributions, refer to the reading, focus on the main points, formulate clearly, respond to others in the discussion, and demonstrate critical engagement.

Each student writes an opinion paper on the debate between comparative politics and area studies (different aspects of this debate will be discussed in weeks 1-5). The task is to summarize and critically engage with the arguments, concluding with your own evaluation. The paper is due midnight on the day before class in week 6 and should be no more than 1000 words long (everything included).

Each student will design a research project comparing a political phenomenon within or across two or more (sub-)regions and/or time periods. The aim is to get first-hand experience with the practice of comparative area studies. A first version will be presented as a PowerPoint presentation of 10 minutes maximum (plus 10-15 minutes of the follow-up Q&A). The guidelines for the research design and presentation will be introduced in the first session of the first week. The presentations will be scheduled for the last weeks of the semester (presumably in week 10; there will be no class in week 11 and 12). Students should receive the approval of the instructor on their chosen topic for the research design by week 8. This approval is mandatory.

The final paper will contain the final version of the research design, applied and tested empirically, using approaches of comparative area studies. It should be no more than 1,500 words long (without references, but including possible appendices). Details will be introduced in the first session of the first week.

Please note that for all assessments, late submission, and violation of the word or time limit will result in a lower grade. Plagiarism is not acceptable and will be punished according to the departmental rules.

Reading material

All the course material is available in electronic form. The syllabus only contains the required reading. Suggestions for further reading will be possibly made in class.
Course schedule

**Week 1 – Introduction: Topics, Requirements and Orga (11.1)**
The first session introduces students to the topics of (comparative) area studies, explains course requirements and clarifies all organizational issues.

*Readings:*


**PART I: Concepts, Methods and Knowledge in Area Studies and Comparative Politics**
In weeks 1-5 we will contrast basic paradigms of (comparative) area studies and (comparative) political science with regards to the concepts constructed, methods used and knowledge produced. We will also discuss the room for their mutual cooperation and joint research endeavors.

**Week 2 – Area Studies (18.1)**
Session 2 sketches the evolution of area studies and their contribution to theory-building, concepts construction and methodological differentiation in knowledge production.

*Readings:*


**Week 3 – Area Studies and Political Science (25.1)**
Session 3 explores the tension between area studies and political science, with a focus on Eastern Europe and Africa.

*Readings:*


**Week 4 – Cross-Regional Comparison: A Debate (08.02)**

Session 4 is devoted to a classic exchange about the merits of comparing post-communist democratization in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union with democratic transitions in Latin America and Southern Europe.

*Readings:*


**Week 5 – Building Bridges (01.02)**

Session 5 looks at some examples of scholars who have tried to build bridges between area studies and comparative politics as well as among different area studies themselves.

*Readings:*


**Assignment 1: Opinion Paper is due by 14.02 at 23:59**

**PART II: Empirics of Social Inquiry in (Comparative) Area Studies**

In weeks 6-10 we will analyze empirical examples of comparative area studies. We will explore research questions they address, the approaches to testing hypotheses they follow, rules of
case selection they observe and other issues of research design. Also, we will discuss the value added and limitations of their findings.

**Week 6 – Theory and Practice of Comparative Area Studies (15.02)**

In session 6, we look at the examples of theory testing by means of comparative area studies.

*Readings:*


**Week 7 – Case Selection in Comparing Areas (22.02)**

Session 7 discusses the ways of connecting and selecting cases in comparative area studies.

*Readings:*


**Week 8 – Comparative Era Studies? (01.03)**

What happens if we treat time periods as cases and compare eras as we do areas? – This is the question we will deal with in session 8.

*Readings:*


Week 9 – Comparisons over Time in Practice. The case of the Arab Spring (08.03)
Session 9 examines the contribution of comparative era studies to our understanding of the Arab Spring.

Readings:


Week 10 – Topics of Students’ Interest (15.03)
In the final regular session 10, we will deal with topics related to comparative area studies that have not been discussed in the previous sessions but are of students’ interests.

Assignment 2: Presentation is due week-10

PART III: Practical Application
No classes in week 11 and 12. Instead, we will reserve one afternoon (presumably in week 10) for the presentations and discussions of the student projects.

Week 11 – Students’ Presentations
Week 12 – Students’ Presentations

Assignment 3: Final Paper due 08.04. at 23:59