

On the Current Prospects of Area Studies in Lithuania

Reported by Juha A. Janhunen (University of Helsinki)

Area studies is a post-WW2 paradigm that was created to replace the more conventional philologies, which had focused on specific languages, literatures and countries. Area studies programmes were actively created in many universities in the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, and they typically concerned relatively large geographical and geopolitical entities, or even entire continents, like South and North America, the Middle East, the Soviet Bloc, Asia, and Africa. In the 1990s, area studies programmes lost some of their popularity, and many programmes were even discontinued. However, after a short period of regression, area studies programmes are today coming back in a partially reformed shape. One reason behind the need for area studies is the current structure of the globalized world as an integrated network of regions.

Traditional philologies are inherently multidisciplinary, involving applications of a large number of disciplines, such as linguistics, folkloristics, ethnography, cultural history, and the study of arts and literature. In a similar way, area studies are multidisciplinary, but their paradigm of disciplines is different and comprises, in particular, human geography, environmental studies, political history, regional economics, and other social sciences. However, most area studies specialists recognize that the study of a region requires also a knowledge of its language(s), which is why language studies, especially for practical purposes, are today considered to constitute an integral part of area studies programmes all over the world. Many major languages function as regional languages which open access to the understanding of the corresponding regions, examples being Spanish and Portuguese for South America and Chinese for East Asia.

Programmes in area studies are also needed in smaller countries like Lithuania. There are some regions in the world that are simply so important that a country cannot ignore the necessity of studying them in an academic context. Asia is perhaps the best example of this type of region, and Asian Studies programmes are currently being created in many countries that have no previous tradition in the field. In a small country it is rational to concentrate the resources and competence on Asia in a single university, which in the case of Lithuania must be Vilnius University. This has to some extent already been done,

in that the Centre of Oriental Studies at Vilnius University functions as the principal place of study and research on Asian countries and languages in Lithuania. The centre follows the model of similar institutions elsewhere, the best known of which is the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of London University.

Another region of obvious relevance to Lithuania is Europe, and a European Studies programme should certainly be a part of the Lithuanian university system. There are, however, also smaller regions that require the approach offered by area studies, and the most important of them in the Lithuanian context is the Baltic region. The best approximation to a Baltic Studies programme in Lithuania today is the programme in Baltic cultures offered by Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas. This programme aims at a holistic look at the Baltic region from the point of view of cultural studies, but with the inclusion of a substantial amount of studies in the Baltic languages, which in this context mean not only Lithuanian and Latvian, as well as Estonian, but also the other languages of the Baltic Sea region (Russian, Polish, German, Scandinavian, Finnish).

There are basically two types of area studies programmes, and both types are already present in Lithuanian universities. The first type, which typically includes language studies, functions best at the BA level, as is the case with the Asian Studies programme at Vilnius University and the Baltic Cultures programme at Vytautas Magnus University. The second type, which is more adapted to the MA level, offers a more general approach to the region from the points of view of several non-linguistic disciplines, as is the case with the Modern Asian Studies programme at Vilnius University. The main difference between the two types is that the first is focused on substance and practical skills, while the second is focused on theory and understanding. In an ideal case, these two types of programme should serve different audiences. Those who enter an MA programme in area studies should ideally have a BA background in some general discipline - for instance, geography or history or political science, while those who graduate from a BA programme in area studies should opt for a general discipline at the MA level.

In universities all over the world having area studies programmes there is a constant discussion on whether these programmes, which are inherently multidisciplinary, can also be interdisciplinary. In principle, it is possible to gain interdisciplinary insights only at the MA level, where the research skills of the students are sufficiently developed to work at the

interface of two or more disciplines. The big unsolved problem in the MA programmes in area studies is how to include in them the necessary amount of language skills. As the understanding of a region is virtually impossible without access to primary and secondary sources in the local and/or regional languages, it would apparently be necessary to require a certain level of language skills from all of those who enter an MA programme in area studies, irrespective of what their background at the BA level has been.

There are also other unsolved issues about the epistemic nature of area studies, but as far as Lithuania is concerned, the country has so far solved the basic problems very well. Most importantly, area studies has been recognized as a separate type of enquiry that requires a distinct type of university programmes. Area studies is not limited to any particular general discipline, such as "ethnology", under which these programmes used to be classified. Instead, this is a field in which the resources of several general disciplines, combined with an understanding of the substance matter related to the target region, will produce added value and result in such new insights into the region as would not be possible to gain from the angle of a single discipline.

24.5.2013