Area Studies in Flux: An interdisciplinary conference, organised by the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), to be held at UCL from 27 to 28 September 2018.

This conference marks the culmination of a six-year themed research programme established at UCL SSEES in 2012 with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, entitled New Horizons in Russia and Eastern Europe: A New Vision through Language-Based Area Studies. Going beyond a focus on Russia and Eastern Europe, the conference invites scholars worldwide to scrutinise what constitutes ‘area’ and how to best study it now. The conference is convened by SSEES and the IAS in collaboration with PKU, Beijing, and is designed to go beyond Euro/US-centrism to explore ‘area’ from diverse vantage points and emplaced disciplinary traditions.

*Area Studies in Flux* is not a euphemism for Area Studies in crisis. It is a starting point from which the conference sets out to explore a field that is not only itself in flux, but which faces the challenge of paying attention to the local and to ‘situated difference’ (Vincent Houben), while simultaneously trying to gauge the global in the form of a multitude of flows (of people, data, information, trade, ideas) that constantly subvert and reconfigure the local. The conference aims to identify ways to exploit this tension fruitfully. In doing so, we hope to transcend a critique of the field that merely repeats well-rehearsed calls for greater emphasis on the study of flows of all kinds in ‘our globalised world’ and the post-modern insight into the fluidity of boundaries (defining culture, gender, space, society). Instead, we are interested in identifying flexible concepts and practices of Area Studies that account for this increasing awareness of flux but are still definable and workable. We will scrutinise Area Studies’ positionality, i.e. its perspective from a particular locality/area (variously defined as a combination of spatial, temporal and thematic criteria), in relation to this focus on flux.

On the one hand, speaking about Area Studies as being in flux risks further confusing our understanding of a field whose geographical and disciplinary bounds are already very difficult to demarcate. Efforts to ‘re-map’ Area Studies, to pursue them ‘without borders’, to develop ‘unsited’ Area Studies that are thematically rather than geographically defined might end up diluting the field to the extent that it becomes undistinguishable from other interdisciplinary and thematic programmes such as Gender Studies or Ethnic Studies. On the other hand, flux also implies the potential for a more flexible, critical and viable Area Studies. First, stressing the fluidity of the areas the field has traditionally explored enables scholars to see them for what they are, namely units for analysis that uncover certain phenomena while obscuring others. Researchers may then reject these previous units of analysis, render them more malleable, or create new ones, such as urban and rural space, cultural, linguistic or virtual space as well as a space of shared historical experience, memory or future imaginings. Second, fluidity/criticality in relation to the disciplines that historically constitute Area Studies (or areas of study) signifies a chance to make disciplinary boundaries more permeable and encourage dialogue and collaboration. In fact, the very formation of disciplines themselves may be area-bound and geographically specific. What might be unleashed by thinking of these in flux?
All in all, emphasising fluidity and permeability in relation to both area and discipline might help researchers to break out of their rigid and isolated customary confines and see connections, parallels and entanglements across different units of analysis. It also has the potential to improve Area Studies’ capacity to discern and explain change and fluctuation and to highlight ambiguity and idiosyncrasy in an academic climate still dominated by disciplinary claims to universality that perhaps could do with a little Area Studies-induced recalibration.

Below are the four overarching themes that speakers are invited to address:

1. AREA AND DISCIPLINARY THINKING: How does the idea of area trouble assumptions about the production of knowledge and its disciplinary boundaries? How are place and field intertwined? How have Area Studies been configured from different locations? How does their emplacement in multiple and diverse locations challenge or reproduce power structures, inequalities and hierarchies?

2. MOVEMENTS AND FLOWS: How might a focus on mobility, flows and connections reshape our understanding of the dynamics of area? How useful is it to think about Area Studies and/in flux? What are the implications of a reconceptualisation of Area Studies as turbulent, transgressive and changeable?

3. IMAGINARIES OF PLACE AND SPACE: How have imaginative worlds in fiction and fantasy (novels, films, visual arts, music) been productive for conceptualising place and space within the fields of area studies? How might they be in the future?

4. THINKING AREA DIFFERENTLY: How do alternative space-makers (for example language, migration, religion, technology, infrastructures and networks) constitute/contest historical definitions of area and create new ones? What is at stake in such shifts?

We invite proposals for papers (15-20 minutes) to be delivered at the conference. It is expected that papers will be followed by exchange, dialogue and discussion between panellists, respondents, audience and Chairs.

Proposals should be no more than 250 words in length and should address the overall conference theme but with special reference to one of the above questions.

Deadline for submission is Friday 27 April 2018. Please send proposals to Albert Brenchat Aguilar at a.brenchat@ucl.ac.uk.