

## Research Project

### Reversing the Gaze: Towards Post-Comparative Area Studies

#### Third-party funded project

**Project title** Reversing the Gaze: Towards Post-Comparative Area Studies

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**Department**

**Project Website** <https://www.reversingthegaze.net/>

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**Status** Active

This project proposes the approach of a “conceptual laboratory” to test the analytic purchase of mid-level concepts that seek to explain the crises of political identity and liberal democracy, through practices of reciprocal comparison. The overarching research question for the conceptual laboratory is the following: how can mid-level concepts developed in the Global South be made useful for knowledge production in general? The key critical theoretical assumption underlying the methodological level is the idea that we need to reverse the gaze, i.e. deploy conceptualisations developed in the South in the North. On a substantive level, we ask how useful the mid-level concepts “re-tribalisation”, “political society” and “the cunning state” are in describing, analysing and interpreting these crisis phenomena in liberal democracies of Europe (in comparison to already existing conceptual vocabularies developed in a European context), more specifically in the Alpine region (Switzerland, Austria and Italy)? On a theoretical level, we ask how freeing such concepts from the constraints of context can contribute to particular relational approaches to area studies (and disciplinary comparison). Finally, on a methodological level, we seek to draw lessons from the conceptual laboratory in operationalizing an epistemological practice of reciprocal comparison. We propose three empirical case studies which meet two main goals. On the one hand, they seek to offer innovative and conceptually out-of-the-box perspectives on and across the cases themselves, differing from those derived and developed exclusively within and against a European background. Moreover, they draw respectively from an old concept (“retribalisation”, Africa), a fashionable but contested concept (“political society”, Asia) and an emerging concept that still needs to establish itself in the area studies domain (“the cunning state”, Asia). Second, we approach the concepts as descriptions of the set of particulars making up crisis phenomena in specific settings. The question we ask is whether the particulars brought into view can help us shed more light on similar phenomena in Europe, thereby shifting the case for conceptual regionalism in favour of greater attention to the possibilities of comparison. These different histories of the concepts provide us with a diversity of mid-range concepts whose application in other empirical contexts beyond their area studies domain can be tested. Crucial to the research approach is the distinction between the object of research and the scope of inquiry. The former refers to the “Southern” background of the deployed concepts and the three case studies in the Alpine region within which empirical research takes place. The latter refers to the concrete phenomenon we describe, analyse and interpret in a given setting. Our project proposal is thus a response to recent critical reflections on Area Studies, comparative disciplinary work, as well as critiques from the South. In

building on these literatures while attending to knowledge production in practice, its scholarly outcomes include potentially new perspectives on comparison; a critical engagement with “universal” concepts and the politics of conceptual travel; and practical visions on how to imbue the pursuit of knowledge with a concern for ethical and political issues raised by these critiques.

**Keywords** Political Society, Interdisciplinarity, Post-Comparison, Retribalization, Conceptual Analysis, Comparison, Cunning state, Southern Epistemologies, Area Studies

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4606978	Macamo, Elisio; Weber, Ralph; Schmid, Pascal	Deval Desai, Lecturer in International Economic Law	Edinburgh Law School, University of Edinburgh	01.10.2020	30.09.2024
4606979	Macamo, Elisio; Weber, Ralph; Schmid, Pascal	Benedikt Korf, Professor for Political Geography	Department of Geography, University of Zurich	01.10.2020	30.09.2024