

The Subfields of [Regional] Studies

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The field of regional studies remains a fuzzy branch of knowledge.¹ The structure of regional studies remains the subject of considerable debate within the scholarly community.² Such a disagreement over its building blocks and their relationships represents a major barrier to the further development of the field as an interdisciplinary endeavor.³ In pursuit of progress, it may be helpful to take a closer look at general taxonomies that can be used to classify and/or categorize the core concepts that are located within this field of study.^{4,5} This article attempts to do just that. After considering the relevant core concepts, it proposes a lightweight ontology that could be used to formally define the subfields of regional studies and the relations that exist between them.^{6,7} To be clear, the adoption of this generalized way of thinking would mark a radical departure from the *status quo*. And it would require the abandonment of any notion that the field of regional studies equates with the field of area studies.

Regions

Region is a core concept in the field of regional studies. In general terms, a region is a bounded area with some common characteristic(s) that distinguish(es) it from other regions.⁸ This ontological subjective phenomenon is brought into existence through a social process known as

¹ See: Robert Stimson, "Some Challenges for Regional Science Research," *Investigaciones Regionales - Journal of Regional Research*, no. 36, pp. 11-34, 2016

² See: John Agnew "Arguing with Regions," *Regional Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 6-17

³ Linda Darling-Hammond, Suzanne Orcutt, and Kim Austin, "Organizing What We Know: The Structure of the Disciplines," Palo Alto: Stanford University School of Education (n.d.), https://www.learner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Learning-Classroom_Organizing-What-We-Know.pdf

⁴ Leo Obrst, "The Ontology Spectrum & Semantic Models," Washington: MITRE, January 12 & 19, 2006, <https://slideplayer.com/slide/697642>

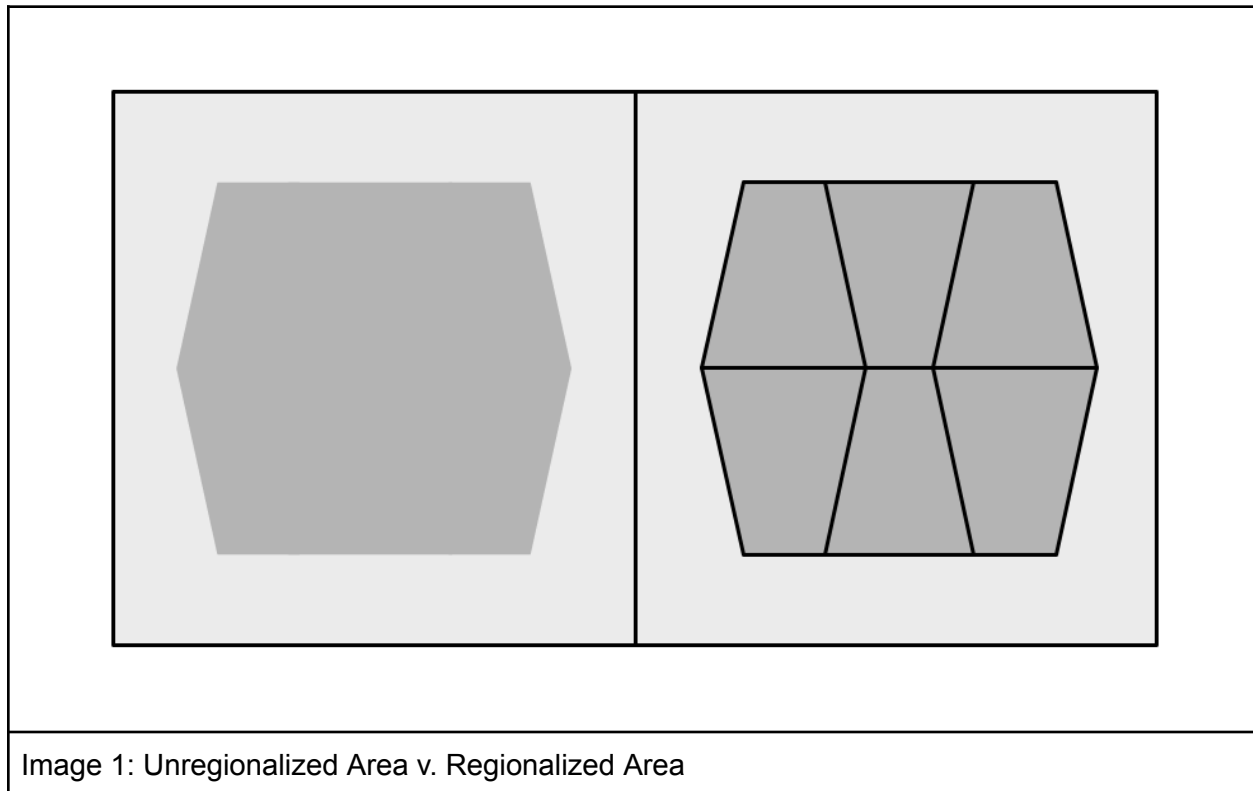
⁵ Richards Heuer Jr. and Randolph Pherson, "Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis," Washington: CQ Press (2011), 19

⁶ Deborah McGuinness, "Ontologies Come of Age," In: Dieter Fensel, Jim Hendler, Henry Lieberman, and Wolfgang Wahlster (eds.), *The Semantic Web: Why, What, and How*, Boston: MIT Press (2001), <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=f71b2e9ee1bfd98bcb5c7bc79d540420a483d307>

⁷ Deborah McGuinness, "Ontologies for the Modern Age," Vienna: International Semantic Web Conference (2017), https://videolectures.net/iswc2017_mcginness_modern_age

⁸ Frans Schrijver, *Regionalism after Regionalisation: Spain, France and the United Kingdom*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006.

regionalisation. The process involves one or more human beings treating one or more unbounded areas as something(s) that exceed(s) the physical structure and possibly other pre-existing social function(s).⁹ The output of this activity is depicted below.



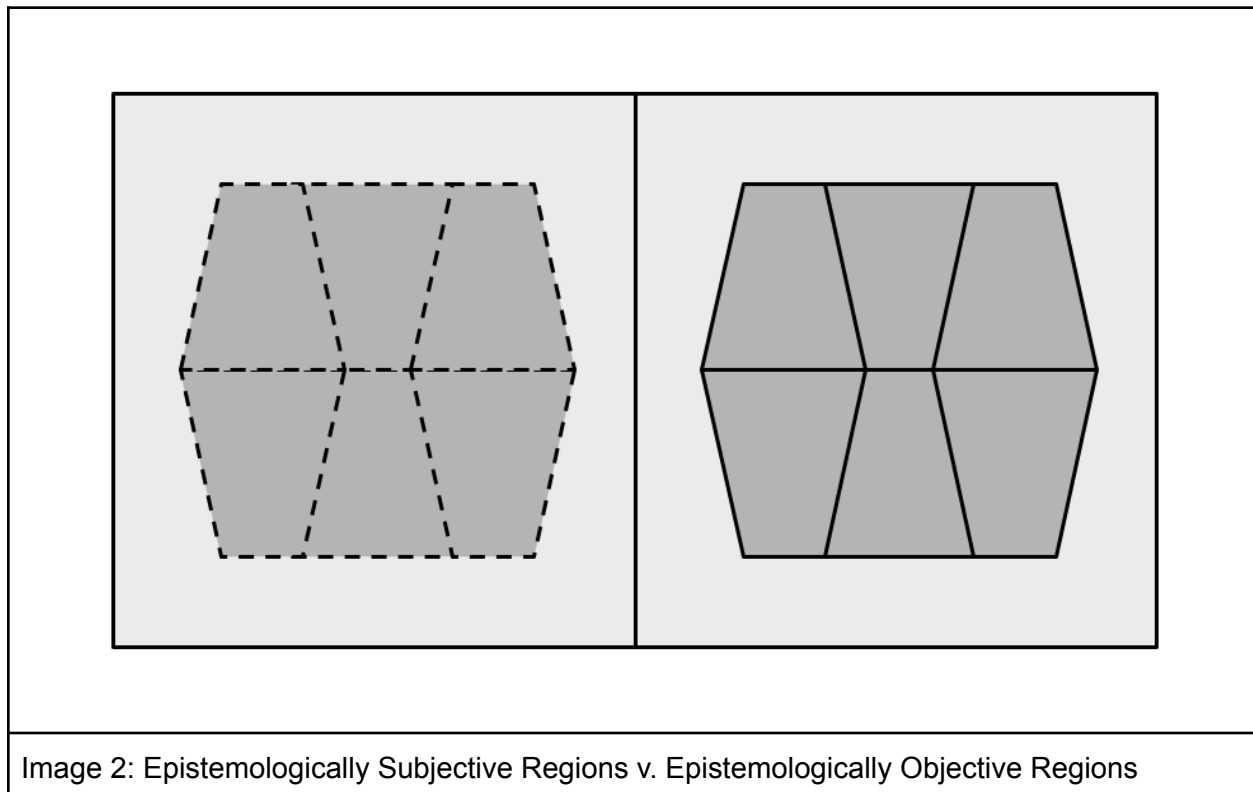
All regions are social objects that fundamentally depend on the human mind to exist.¹⁰ However, an important distinction needs to be drawn between statements made about regions on the basis of their epistemological foundations. From a Searlean perspective, it is entirely possible that some knowledge claims about regions “can be established as true or false independently of the feelings and attitudes of the makers and interpreters of the statement.”¹¹ Others cannot.

⁹ Marius Bartmann. “On the Very Idea of Imposition. Some Remarks on Searle’s Social Ontology.” *Rivista di estetica* 57 (2014): 155-164.

¹⁰ Jaap Hage. “Constructivist Facts as the Bridge Between Is and Ought.” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law-Revue internationale de Sémiotique Juridique*, 36, no. 1 (2022): 53-81.

¹¹ John Bradford, “Communication, Language, and the Emergence of Social Orders,” In: Harry Dahms and Lawrence Hazelrigg (eds.), “Theorizing Modern Society as a Dynamic Process.” Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited (2012).

Whether this criterion can be met depends on whenever collective recognition of the claim exists within that particular community of language users.¹²



[Regional] Features

Regions can be broken down into two basic elements: 1) areas; 2) demarcations. In the context of regional studies, a demarcation might be said to be a conceptual separation between two areas, while an area might be said to be the surface of an object. Note, an object can either be a physical object or a social object. Most social objects are derivative. They can be traced back to a physical object. However, some may be free-standing.¹³ These features are depicted below.

¹² John Searle. *Making the social world: The structure of human civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2010).

¹³ Barry Smith, "Debate with John Searle on Free-Standing Y-Terms," YouTube Video, March 19, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBWxz-Ot0ml>

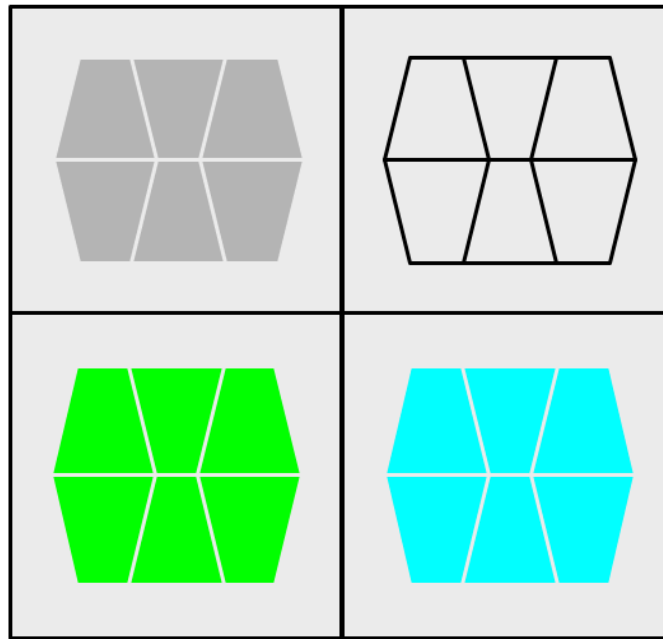


Image 3: Areas, Demarcations, Physical Areas, Social Areas

A general analytic framework for the empirical study of regions can be constructed around these features. Under this framework, any region would count either as a physical region or a social region. The physical region would be a social function imposed on a physical object (SFI-PO), while a social region would be a social function imposed on a social object (SFI-SO). These states of affairs are depicted below.

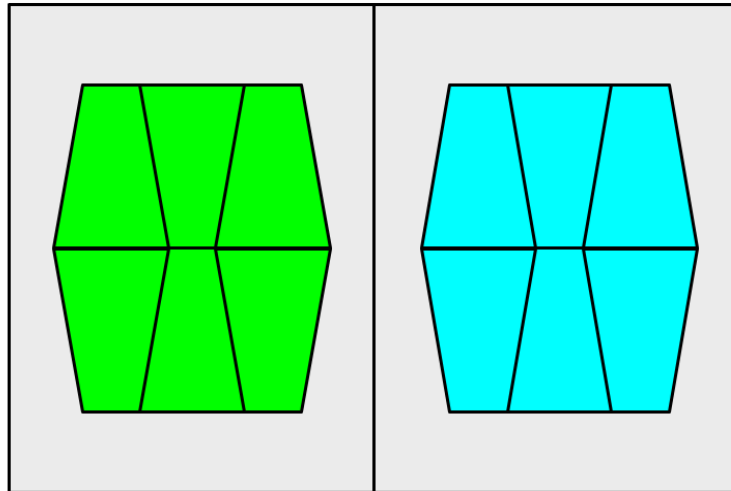
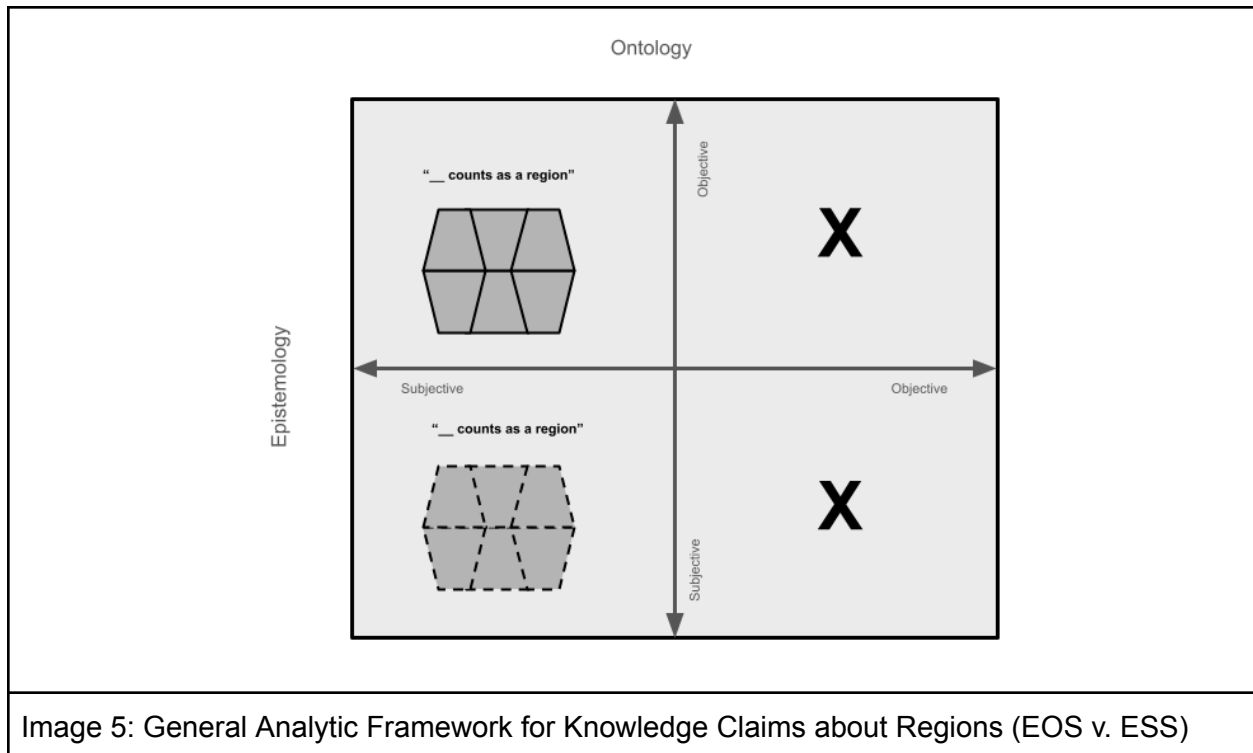


Image 4: General Analytic Framework for Regions (SFI-PO v. SFI-SO)

Similarly, a general analytic framework for the empirical study can be constructed around the ontological and epistemological features of regions. Under this framework, any statement about a region would be classified as either an epistemologically objective statement (EOS) or an epistemologically subjective statement (ESS). These states of affairs are depicted below.



[Regional] Phenomena

[Regional] phenomena are another core concept in regional studies. In general terms, a regional phenomenon is an empirical or theoretical phenomenon that is meaningfully located in a particular position relative to a region at a particular point in time. This phenomena might be located within a region or regions, and/or it might be located along the borderline that extends between two or more regions. Moreover, [regional] phenomena can exist in physical reality or social reality. These states of affairs are depicted below.

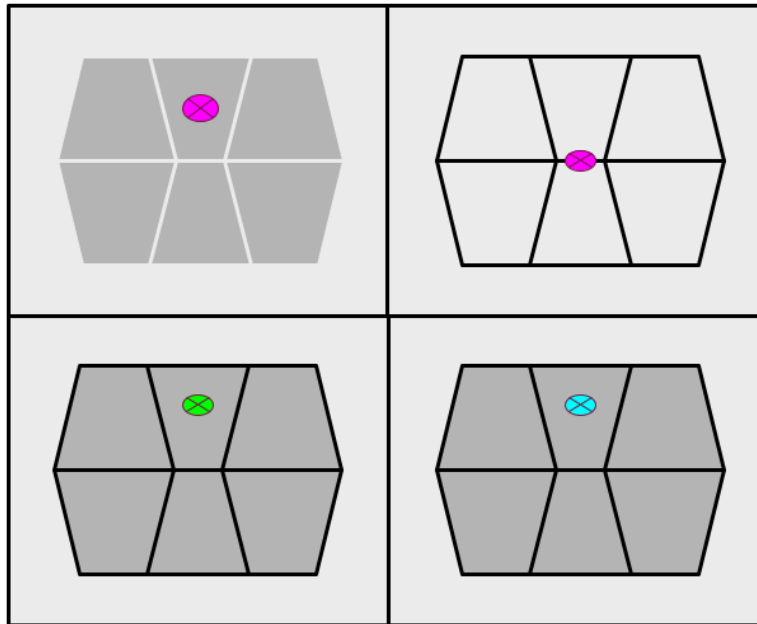


Image 6: Area, Border, Physical, and Social Phenomena

[Regional] Studies

Armed with this understanding of regions and [regional] phenomena, one can imagine at least six subfields of [regional] studies. These are described below.

Regional Studies

Regional Studies is the study of one or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located within a region. These regional phenomena can include physical and/or social phenomena. An example is depicted below.

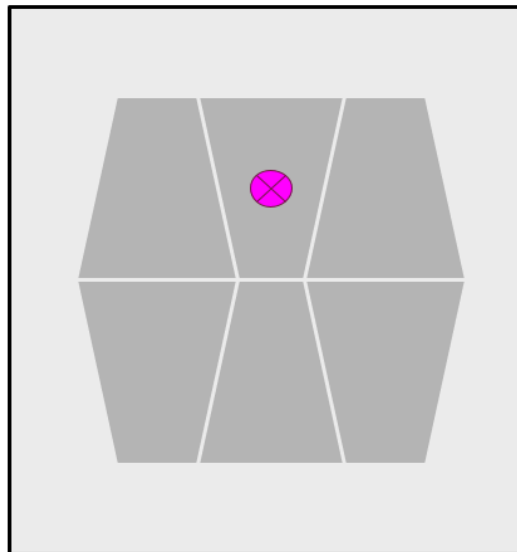


Image 7: Regional Phenomena

Interregional Studies

Interregional Studies is the study of one or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located between two or more regions. These multiregional phenomena can include physical and/or social phenomena. An example is depicted below.

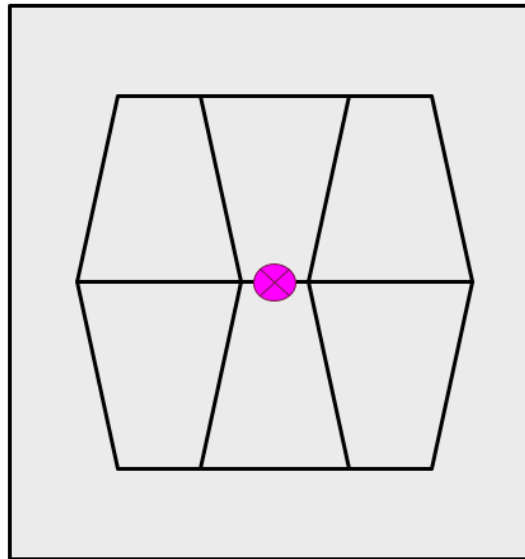


Image 8: Interregional Phenomenon

Multiregional Studies

Omniregional Studies is the study of two or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located within multiple regions or along multiple borders. These multiregional phenomena can include physical and/or social phenomena. One can easily imagine at least two variants.

Regional Studies

One variant is the study of two or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located within two or more, but not all, regions. An example is depicted below.

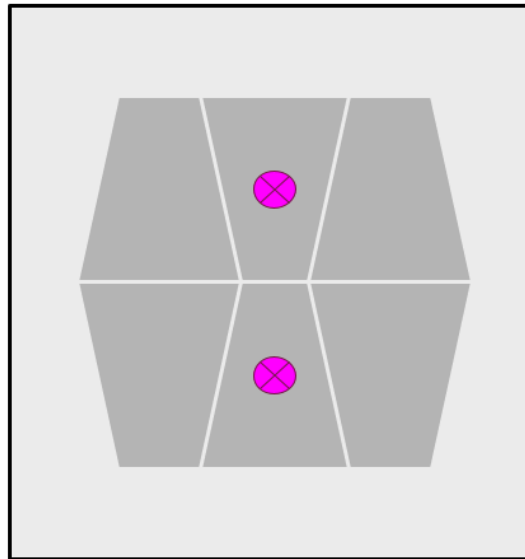


Image 9: Multiregional Phenomena

Interregional Studies

One variant is the study of two or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located along two or more, but not all, borders. An example is depicted below.

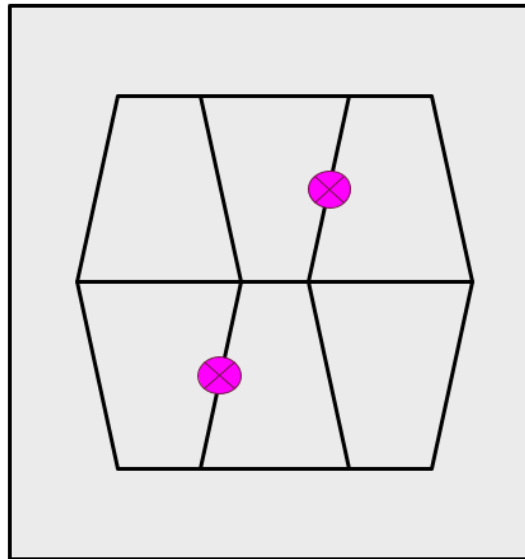


Image 9: Multiregional Phenomena

Transregional Studies

Transregional Studies is the study of two or more [regional] phenomena that are meaningfully located both within one or more regions and along one or more borders. These transregional phenomena can include physical and/or social phenomena. An example is depicted below.

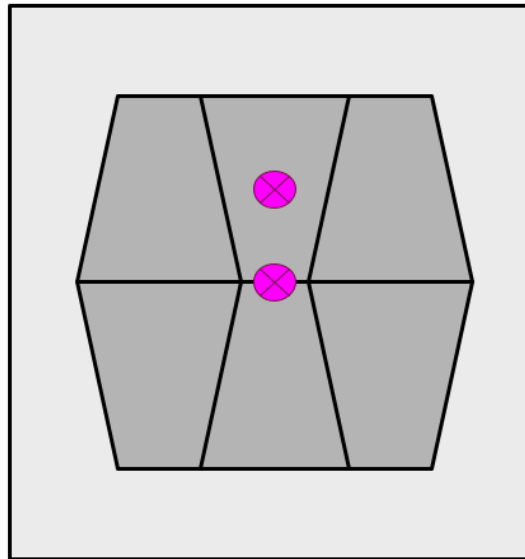


Image 10: Transregional Phenomena

Omniregional Studies

Omniregional Studies is the study of area and/or border saturation by [regional] phenomena. These multiregional phenomena can include physical and/or social phenomena. One can easily imagine at least three variants. These are described below.

Regional Studies

One variant is the study of regional phenomena that simultaneously exist within all regions.

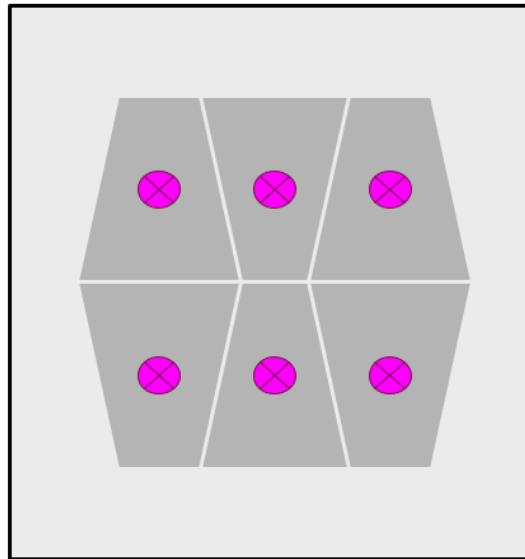


Image 12: Area Saturation

Interregional Studies

Another variant is the study of regional phenomena that simultaneously exist along all borders.

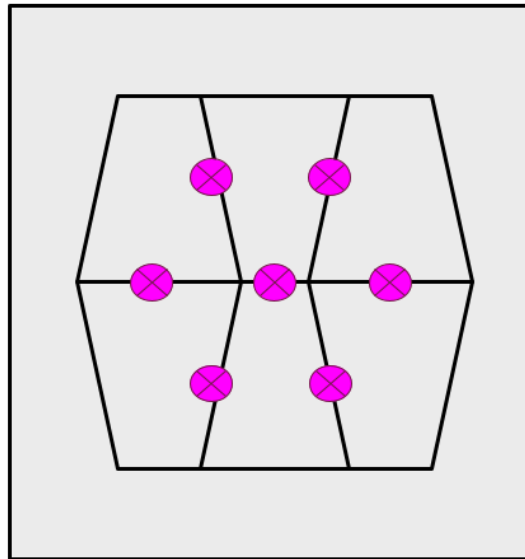


Image 13: Border Saturation

Transregional Studies

Yet another variant is the study of regional phenomena that simultaneously exist within all regions and along all borders.

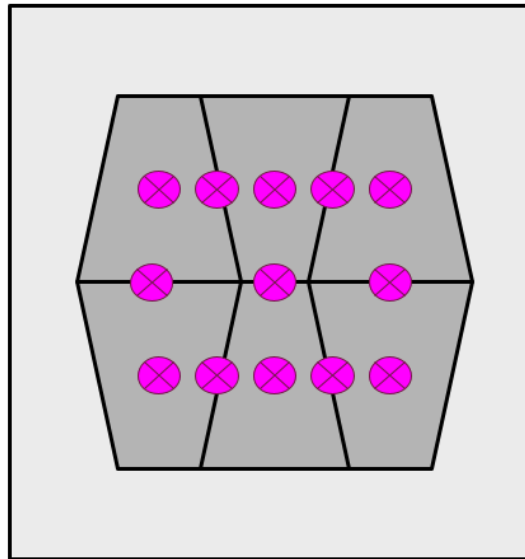


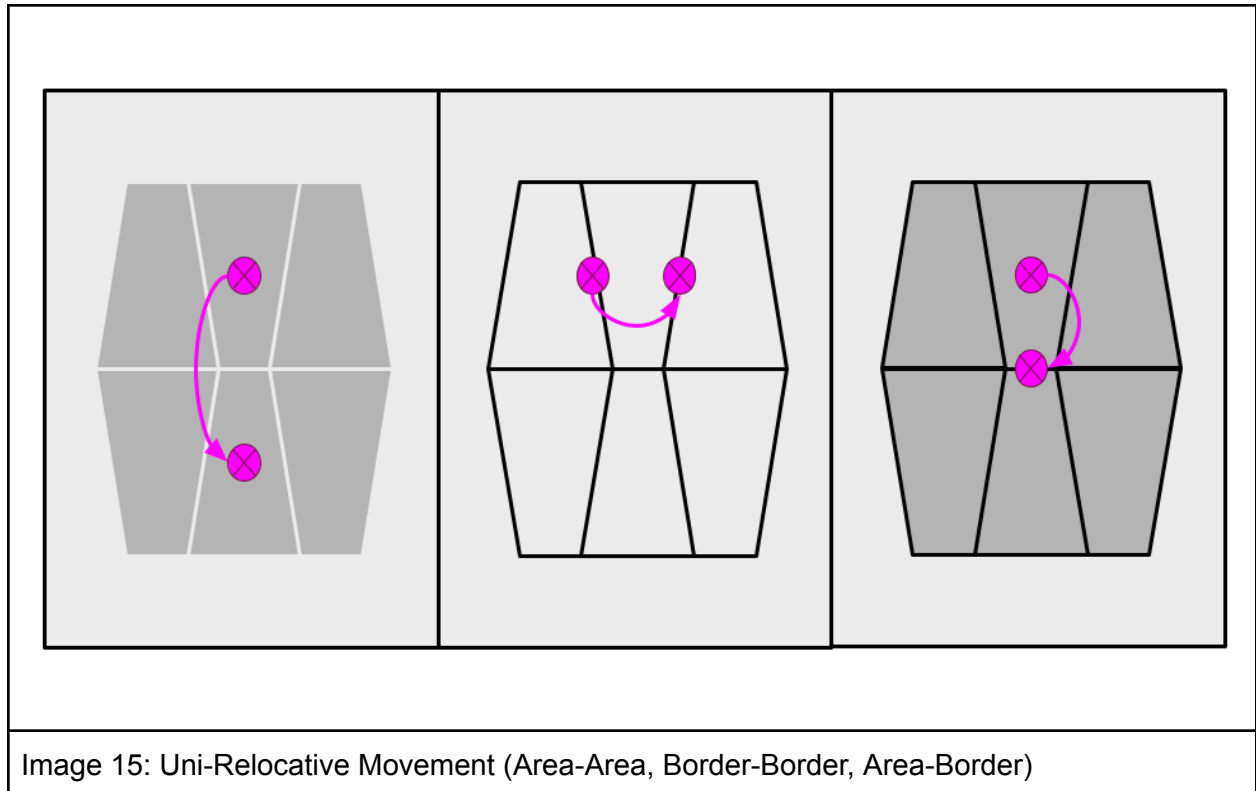
Image 14: Total Saturation

Regional Transition Studies

Regional Transition Studies is the study of the movement of [regional] phenomena between regions, between borders, or from regions to borders. These movements could be studied at a particular point in time. Or they could be studied over a time period. One can easily imagine at least three variants. These are described below.

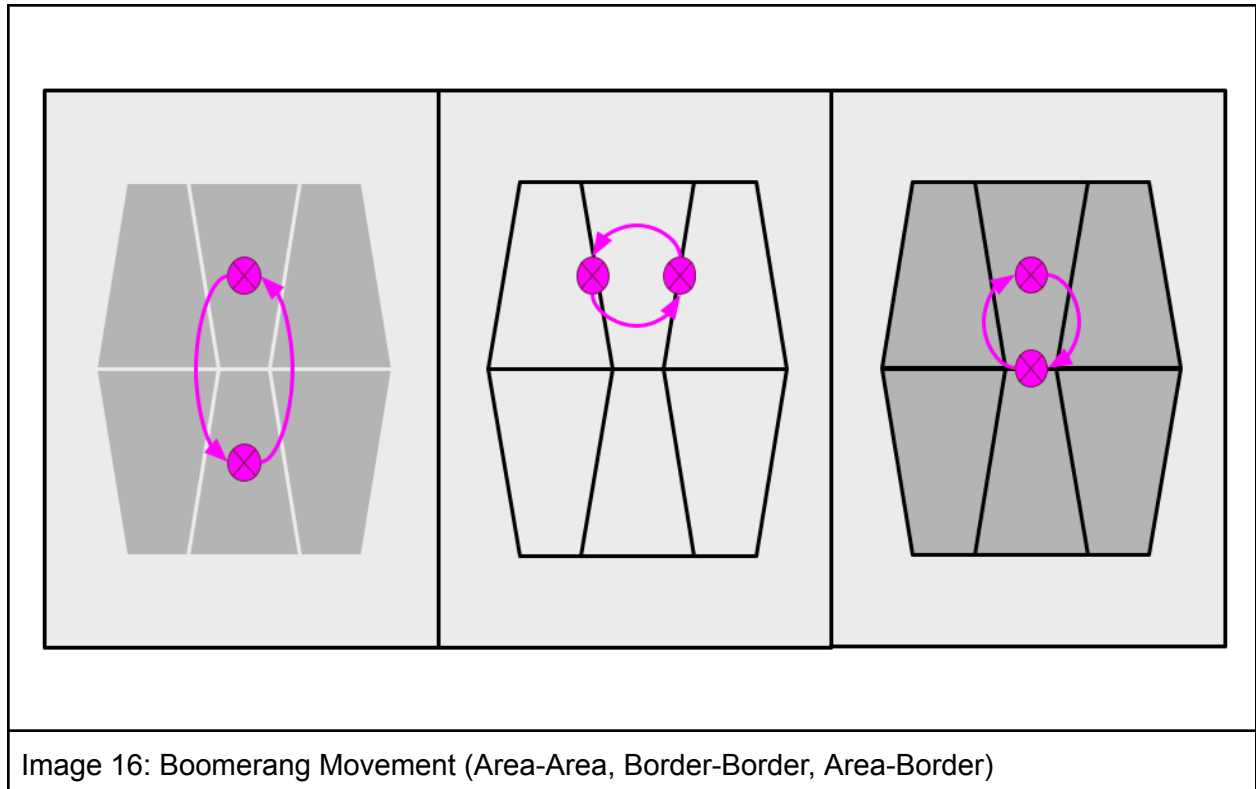
Uni-Relocative Movement Studies

Uni-Relocative Studies is the study of the movement of [regional] phenomena from one region/border to another region/border.



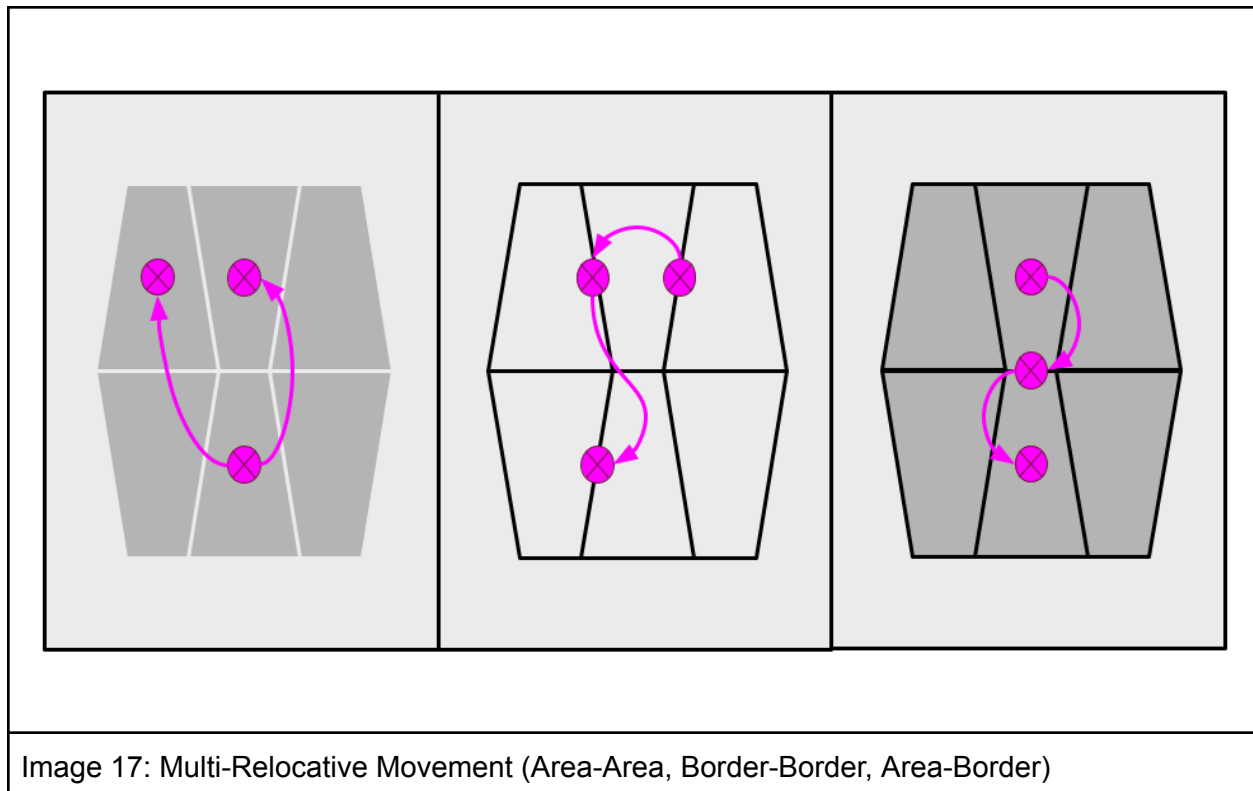
Boomerang Movement Studies

Boomerang Studies is the study of the movement of [regional] phenomena from one region/border to another region/border and then back.



Multi-Relocative Movement Studies

Boomerang Studies is the study of the multi-movement of [regional] phenomena from one region/border to two or more other regions/borders.



Conceptual Clarity

The novel framework that has been proposed can be used to help clarify several existing concepts that are under-conceptualized or misunderstood. Two examples are provided below.

Transnationality

In global studies, transnationality is sometimes conceptualized as the study of [transnational] phenomena that exist across all geopolitical regions in the world. This only reflects one variant of omniregional studies. It merits consideration whether this narrow conceptualization of transnationality should be abandoned in favor of a wider conceptualization of transnationality that includes all variants of omniregional studies involving [transnational] phenomena.¹⁴

¹⁴ Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Evolution of Global Studies," In: The Oxford Handbook of Global Studies, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2018): 21-36, 23.

Geographic Seams

In American foreign policy, geographic seams sometimes refers to “a location of policy-relevant interaction between two or more regions.”¹⁵ This account could refer to an interregional, multiregional, omniregional, or transregional phenomena that exist along borders. It therefore merits consideration when this conceptualization of global studies should be limited to interregional, multiregional, and omniregional phenomena that exist solely along borders.

About the Author

Michael Walsh is a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

¹⁵ Michael Walsh and Stephen Porter, “U.S. Policymakers Need to Mind the Gap between Think Tanks and Geographic Seams: Policy Recommendations for Improving Research Studies and Expert Commentary on Africa and the Middle East at American Think Tanks,” APSA Preprints, 1, <https://preprints.apsanet.org/engage/apsa/article-details/662f769221291e5d1d0203d4>