possible that the specific processes through which X_1 and X_2 cause Y_1 actually differ across the two regions. That is, X_1 and X_2 might cause Y_1 through one mechanism in Southeast Asia, and through an entirely different mechanism in Latin America. Such equifinality in causal mechanisms, again, holding variables constant, would call into question the cross-regional generalizability of the causal theory. Yet this is exactly where CAS scholars' deep area knowledge can bring balance to the analysis. By conducting fully context-sensitive case studies that "get the story right" as best as possible for each case through consideration of case-specific background details and vital idiosyncrasies, CAS scholars are well positioned to assess whether equifinality in causal mechanisms is caused by something systematic within or across regions or by factors that are unique to individual cases.

Political scientists will increasingly view Comparative Area Studies not just as a welcome addition to the qualitative methods toolkit, but as outright indispensable for moving comparative politics and related subfields forward. The two main goals of CAS scholarship—theoretical breadth and case-specific depth—are not at odds and actually enhance each other in several ways. Getting the most out of CAS, however, will require greater consideration of the specific causal role each explanatory variable plays within a causal theory as well as closer attention to whether or not causal mechanisms, not just variables, travel across regions.

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What's the "Area" in Comparative Area Studies?

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Comparative Area Studies (CAS) promises to bring together the method of focused qualitative comparison and a sensitivity to area context in multiple world regions. Ariel Ahram, Patrick Köllner, and Rudra Sil's *Comparative Area Studies* (2018), for example, provides a wonderful overview of how comparativists can learn from what might seem to be audacious cross-regional comparative projects. What could be more interesting than insisting that we read more European political history to make better sense of the case of the United States (Ahmed 2018) or identifying the "Arab" Spring in Israel and Mali (Ahram 2018)? I suspect that for many comparative social scientists, the very idea of learning about something familiar by comparing it with something very different is what attracted us to our field in the first place.

And yet the broader enterprise of CAS rests on what I consider to be a profoundly conservative orientation towards the world's regions. The starting point for this short essay is the observation that the literature on CAS almost universally conceptualizes "areas" or "world regions" in traditional Cold War terms (see e.g., Ahram, Köllner, and Sil 2018; Basedau and Köllner 2007). Although areas such as "Latin America" and "the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe" do reflect geographical features and some world-historical processes, as categories they primarily reflect Western, and in particular American Cold War, *political* categories. An alternative model for CAS would be to reject these traditional conceptualizations of area and embrace more historically grounded or socially meaningful understandings of the world: former Spanish colonies, former Ottoman territories, Zomia, the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean worlds, communist single-party states, and others. Some comparative area specialists have suggested how to do this; for example, Cheng Chen (2018) remarks that the post-communist world encompasses both the former Soviet Union and parts of Asia and Latin America. One future for CAS is to reconfigure "areas" and "regions" around these alternative ways of organizing cross-regional comparisons, thereby joining critics of "area studies" as commonly understood from across the humanities and social sciences.

The remainder of this essay develops this argument. In the next section I use the discussions in Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (2018) to identify what I consider to be

a relatively thin substantive understanding of regions or areas, and their contribution to the enterprise of CAS. I then turn to the case of Southeast Asia—a particularly diverse and rather problematic world region—to illustrate the limits of regional knowledge and the necessity of cross-regional comparisons for most useful comparative social science. Based on these examples, I then conclude by discussing a future for CAS that rejects traditional definitions of world regions in service of a more substantive understanding of how nation-states might be classified or categorized.

Area Knowledge in Comparative Area Studies

Area studies insights and regional expertise have always shaped the development of comparative politics; periodic worries about the demise of area studies notwithstanding, this is unlikely to change. Writing about the third wave of democratization twenty years ago, Valerie Bunce (2000, 716) explained both the pragmatic and substantive reasons why research has been organized by world regions:

> Intellectual capital, the temporally clustered character of these regional transitions, and the undeniable appeal of carrying out controlled, multiple case comparisons are all compelling and convenient reasons to compare Latin American countries with each other, post-Socialist countries with each other, and the like.

CAS looks beyond what Bunce called the "bounded generalizations" that come from within one region in search of the possibilities of (and limits to) further generalization—while remaining faithful to the insights that only area knowledge can provide.

In addition to seeing whether findings generalize, cross-area comparisons are particularly valuable for demonstrating whether *concepts* developed within one region travel or not. The chapter by Von Soest and Stroh (2018), for example, discusses *neopatrimonialism* in sub-Saharan Africa, and the roughly comparable concepts of *bossism* from Southeast Asia and *caudillismo* from Latin America. If neopatrimonialism only makes sense in its application to sub-Saharan Africa, then the concept is useful, but narrow; if it is roughly synonymous with bossism and caudillismo, then all three might be replaced with a more general concept that encompasses them all. Comparing only across regions while maintaining careful attention to the intention of each concept—which depends on the area studies context in which the concept emerged—makes this possible.

Examples such as this, unfortunately, are rare among scholars working explicitly in the CAS tradition. Most invocations of CAS focus on what can be learned by comparing what might seem to be very different cases, and Mill-style defenses of the utility of comparing in this way. Actual *conceptual* insights drawn from comparing across areas are almost entirely absent.

It could be that as CAS continues to mature as an intellectual agenda, it will focus more on concepts and findings that have emerged from rich area studies debates, and that productively travel across regions. But what if such conceptual contributions are rare because "areas" are not analytically meaningful? Quoting Bunce (2000) further,

> At the most general level, region is a summary term for spatially distinctive but generalizable historical experiences that shape economic structures and development and the character and continuity of political, social, and cultural institutions… Region, therefore, lacks the specificity we value as social scientists. Among other things, it tends to be too variable in what it means—over time and across research endeavors. It is also easily misunderstood and all too often underspecified. (722-3)

In this view, comparative social scientists ought to be skeptical of world regions as conceptual categories. It is the "historical experiences" and "institutions" that are of real interest, and our attention should be focused on these rather than on the geographic "summary term" used to classify particular countries.

I do not wish to make too much of this critique. Plainly, sub-Saharan Africa just *is* different than East Asia. But for the "area" in CAS to be meaningful, it must do real analytical work. I see little evidence that the areas or world regions in CAS are doing anything more than representing a handy shorthand for "this country is different and far away from this other country."

What's in an Area?

My view is that areas are doing little analytical work in CAS because world regions rarely do much analytical work even under the best circumstances. To see why, I will invoke the case of Southeast Asia. Of all world regions or areas, it is perhaps the most obviously a social construction. It is not united by language, colonial history, climate, biogeography, race, religion, or anything else. Southeast Asia is nothing more than the stuff between South Asia, East Asia, Australia, and the Pacific.

Few Southeast Asianists really take the region seriously as a world region or area with an inherent or objective internal logic.[1] "Southeast Asia" exists because of what I have elsewhere termed the "historical accident" (Pepinsky 2015) of World War II, and it persists because of the convenience of perpetuating the academic division of labor. This is not to dismiss Southeast Asian studies as a field of study, but rather simply to note, as Ashley Thompson (2012) writes, that "the existential question—[what] is Southeast Asia?—has been constitutive of and essentially coterminous with the field of Southeast Asian Studies" (3).

A Southeast Asianist like me[2] will approach the very premise of CAS with some inherent skepticism. Sure, we should compare across areas or world regions, using the insights from other regions to enrich what we know about our own while endeavoring to remain sensitive to the regional or national context of each case. But that is what most Southeast Asianists already do, because we have to. Communist single-party regimes are rare, so comparing Vietnam with another case requires looking outside of the region, to East Asia (Malesky, Abrami, and Zheng 2011). Cases of regime collapse in Muslim-majority authoritarian regimes are also rare, so comparing the fall of Indonesia's New Order to another case of Muslim-majority regime change requires looking to the Middle East (Pepinsky 2014). My understanding of CAS in Southeast Asia differs rather starkly from Huotari and Rüland (2018), who focus on concepts such as Anderson's (1983) "imagined communities" or Slater's (2012) "strong state democratization" that might usefully travel to other world regions. In my view, Southeast Asia as a *region* has not done much analytical work in these or any other contributions. *Country* knowledge is essential; *regional* knowledge is not. Generalizing beyond the countries that inspired them is not Comparative Area Studies, it is just regular Comparative Politics. The same is equivalently true for many old and new classics in comparative politics that compare cases across world regions: Theda Skocpol (1979) on social revolutions in France, Russia, and China; Anthony Marx (1998) on race in South Africa, Brazil, and the United States; and Susan Stokes et al. (2013) on brokers in Argentina, India, and Venezuela.

And outside of the more positivist social sciences, the notion that one would look beyond the traditional world region is part and parcel of what most people who study the countries that comprise Southeast Asia actually do. Themes of movement, border-crossing, and reconfiguration of Western conceptual categories to reflect more socially meaningful geographies can be found across the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Such research is not really CAS in the sense that authorities in the methodology such as Ahram, Köllner, and Sil (2018) mean it, because it is not really about comparing units. But it does mean that the study of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand requires some understanding of a "southern Asian Buddhist world characterized by a long and continuous history of integration across the Bay of Bengal region" (Blackburn 2015), and that studying Southeast Asian *hajjis* means studying the Indian Ocean networks that they follow (Tagliacozzo 2013). And in fact, one of the most influential conclusions from the past twenty years of Southeast Asian studies is that vertical geography is often more consequential than spatial geography. The highland area termed "Zomia" (van Schendel 2002) that spans East, South, and mainland Southeast Asia comprises a more socially meaningful "region" for most of history than does the WWII-era concept of "Southeast Asia."

"Areas" as Substantive Themes

One response from a defender of CAS might be to hold that Southeast Asia is a misfit area, not representative of the other areas. Perhaps this is true. But I wish to offer a more constructive response, in which the Southeast Asian experience generalizes. One future for CAS would be to redefine "areas" or "regions" as traditionally understood. Rather than reifying world regions as substantive entities or even as analytical categories, CAS might reconfigure world regions or areas along substantive themes: colonial, religious, linguistic, geographic, or political. In what follows I offer examples of each, drawing from prominent themes in Southeast Asian politics.

That different colonial regimes endowed postcolonial societies with different social and institutional legacies is an old theme in the social sciences. Rather than imagining Southeast Asia as a region, one might instead look at the former British or Spanish empires as providing the natural regions within which to compare what are otherwise very different countries like Myanmar and the Philippines.

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1 It is interesting to note that international relations theorists take the region-ness of Southeast Asia much more seriously than comparativists or area specialists, whose job it is to know the politics of the countries in it (see e.g., Acharya 2013).

2 I recognize that there is an irony in identifying as a Southeast Asianist but then criticizing the usefulness of this concept of Southeast Asia. In my own case—which is common among regional experts—I became a "Southeast Asianist" only upon applying for academic jobs and being expected to teach courses on Southeast Asia.

This might suggest comparing direct and indirect rule in British India and British Malaya, or "cacique democracy" in the Philippines (Anderson 1988) with its counterparts in Latin America. These comparisons are only surprising "inter-regional" comparisons relative to a narrowly geographical understanding of regions.

World religions also provide a substantively meaningful way to conceptualize world regions. The Muslim world and the Theravada Buddhist world, as noted above, both would group some Southeast Asian countries with other countries from South Asia (the Theravada Buddhist world) and further afield (the Muslim world). Catholic majority countries would lump the Philippines with southern and central Europe and Latin America; Vietnam and Singapore would join China, Japan, and Korea in their combination of Mahayana Buddhism with Confucian principles. For questions of identity, religious mobilization, or state-religious authority relations, these might prove to be much more useful conceptual categories than would any geographic area.

Southeast Asia's linguistic diversity is particularly striking. Also striking is how *some* countries find themselves part of a broader community defined by colonial language. Timor-Leste, a former Portuguese colony occupied for a quarter century by Indonesia, immediately joined the Lusosphere upon independence in 2002. Although this group of countries also shares a history of Portuguese colonialism, so colonial and linguistic heritage overlap perfectly, the phenomenon of a European language spoken primarily by a *mestiço* elite serving as a tool to build national identity in plural societies travels well across the Lusosphere (and travels poorly elsewhere in Southeast Asia).

Geography does serve as a convenient tool for classifying world regions, and "horizontal" or "flat map" geography does capture important spatial variation around the world. But as discussed above in the discussion of Zomia, "vertical" geography provides an alternative conception of space that can unite upland peoples across world regions—and, as a result, lowland peoples as well. Other geographies might focus on water rather than land as the unifying characteristic: the Indian Ocean world, for example, or the littoral states of East and Southeast Asia around the East Vietnam/West Philippine/South China Sea.

The final substantive theme through which to reconfigure world regions is political. The postcommunist world includes Vietnam and Laos alongside the former Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and so forth. Petroleum-rich hereditary sultanates include Brunei Darussalam alongside the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Other regime types unite the competitive authoritarian regimes of Singapore and (formerly) Malaysia with counterparts in Tanzania and (formerly) Mexico, and the junta in Thailand under Prayut Chan-o-cha with Egypt under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014).

Each of these examples follows a common logic: rather than seeing whether concepts or findings travel from one regional context to another, they start with the assumption of comparability based on a substantively or theoretically relevant characteristic and use this to define the scope conditions of a particular analytical or empirical claim. There are naturally risks to this exercise, as the assumption that communism or colonial heritage forms a natural comparison set itself warrants further investigation. And insofar as world regions serve as the primary organizational units for comparative politics more broadly, this argument also implies that the broader subdisciplinary practice of conceptualizing the world into regions warrants further scrutiny.[3] But refiguring "areas" around substantive rather than geographic variables may prove to be a useful way to develop the logic of CAS further, with implications that travel to comparative politics as a discipline more broadly.

The argument I make here is not to imply that CAS ought to discard "Latin America" or "the Middle East and North Africa"[4] as categories. Rather, CAS researchers ought to strive to "replac[e] proper names of social systems by the relevant variables" (Przeworski and Teune 1970, 30); here, this means focusing less on regions and more on the substantive features that a collection of countries shares. If this is not possible—and I believe that it sometimes is not (Pepinsky 2017)—then we need substantive engagement with regions *qua* regions.

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3 And indeed, one interpretation of the "area studies wars" of the 1990s was an argument that regional knowledge was subservient to comparative social science (see e.g., Bates 1996).
4 Or "Southeast Asia," I dutifully insist.

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