

Rethinking Southeast Asian Politics: An
inaugural lecture

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The study of Southeast Asian politics is a hybrid field, bringing together elements of the academic discipline of politics (known as political science in some traditions), and the interdisciplinary field of area studies. Whereas the emphasis in the discipline of politics is on comparability – Southeast Asian politics is often seen as a subfield of comparative politics – the emphasis in area studies is typically on distinctiveness. Whereas many academics working on politics start with general theories and conceptual questions, those in area studies typically begin with specificities: knowledge of languages, histories and cultures which informs a spell of in-country fieldwork. In other words, the study of Southeast Asian politics contains a built-in contradiction, ripe with the potential for a clash of academic cultures – though not of civilisations. The clash here is not one between western and Asian academic cultures – more of that later – but between two competing tendencies within the subfield. Any academic who works on Southeast Asian politics without reference to wider theoretical debates, or who fails to link her or his research to well-constructed analytical arguments, will not gain acceptance as a credible social scientist. Yet academic specialists on the politics of Southeast Asia who fail to keep pace with empirical developments in the countries they study, and are known to spend little or no time in those countries, in turn lose their credibility as authoritative analysts of the region. In short, the life of the Southeast Asian politics specialist is a demanding one, beset by competing challenges.

These challenges are compounded by the sheer diversity of the region itself: ten countries (now eleven with the advent of an independent East Timor) ranging from Singapore to Indonesia, from Brunei to Vietnam, with an enormous range of political systems embracing an absolute monarchy (Brunei), one-party communist states (Laos and Vietnam), a military dictatorship (Burma), and a wide range of partial democracies, façade democracies, and political orders in semi-permanent ‘transition’. All of this amounts to a bewildering picture, difficult to comprehend for colleagues who work on Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East. Not for us the single language which unlocks research access to most countries of the region, nor the standard tool kit of developmental and ‘post-colonial’ paradigms that offer a quick ready-reckoner for sizing up the politics of a less familiar corner of the region. Sukarno once memorably called Southeast Asia ‘the focal point of world contradictions’; whether or not this is still true, the region remains peculiarly difficult to read and decipher.

Historical tendencies in Southeast Asian political studies

Southeast Asia itself is a recent construct, a way of imagining and defining part of the world that only came fully into being after the Pacific War. That said, an identical region had been imagined much earlier: I have in my hall in Leeds an 1838 ‘Chart of the East India Islands’ which covers precisely the area of modern Southeast Asia. The academic study of Southeast Asia burgeoned in the 1950s and 1960s, in large measure because the future political direction of the region appeared crucial to American and western geopolitical interests. Fearing a communist bloc extending from Vietnam to Indonesia, the United States invested in academic research; the subtext of much of this work was to suggest ways in which communism could be thwarted, and governments sympathetic to western interests be installed and supported. Ironically if unsurprisingly, many of the American scholars working on Southeast Asia during this period were highly partial to the nationalist struggles of countries in the region, which they saw as analogous to the American struggle for independence from the most perfidious of all colonial powers, the British. Ralph Smith argued that a crucial distinguishing feature of early Southeast Asian studies in the USA was a critical view of imperialism, ‘accompanied by a tendency to sympathise with anti-European nationalists’... reflecting ‘a logical continuation of the

United States' own historical experience' (1986: 13). He singles out George Kahin's *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (1952) as a key illustration of this tendency. American scholarship emphasised work on individual countries, which were viewed as passing through three historical stages: traditional society, colonial rule and nationalist response, and national independence, sometimes produced by revolution.

The dominant tradition of Southeast Asian political studies, which might be termed the 'Cornell school', was a scholarship based on admiration for the cultural and historical legacies of the region, and a sympathy for nationalist causes. The dominant methodology of the Cornell school was a combination of historical exegesis and anthropological fieldwork, emphasising exercises such as the unpacking of a society's basic structures and order through village-based studies. Rather as British district officers in Burma or Malaya were instructed to 'know your patch', the first generation of scholars working on Southeast Asian politics sought to acquire a high level of expertise (typically linked with linguistic fluency) on a particular country, or region of a country. Specialists on individual countries (but different academic disciplines) were grouped together in project teams; the primary interest was in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. Smith notes the irony that Vietnamese studies was very underdeveloped during the actual Vietnam conflict, only 'catching up' when the war was over – and job opportunities in Southeast Asian studies began to dry up in the United States (Smith 1986: 16–17). Broadly speaking, this approach emphasised two big themes: 1) the pre-colonial order replicates itself in some way in the post-colonial order; and 2) you can generalise about how a society works at the national level by examining issues such as patronage networks at the village level. Most of the major books and articles published by scholars of this school are essentially versions of or variations on one or both of these themes. In other words, this was a study of politics driven by ideas borrowed from history and anthropology.

Adherents of the Cornell school were funded largely by American foundations, yet never actually 'delivered the goods' in terms of producing research that was geared towards the containment of communism. Kahin argued that the Cornell and Yale Southeast Asian studies programmes received the basis of their funding from the big foundations in the

fifteen years after 1945, before the region became a priority in the struggle against communism (Kahin 1997: 38). He was also adamant that none of the major foundations of the time (Carnegie, Ford, Luce, Mellon and Rockefeller) made any 'hint that their grants were conditional on conformity with policies of the US government' (1997: 38). However, in the rather more full explanation of the origins of the Cornell Modern Indonesia Project offered in his recently-published intellectual autobiography, *Southeast Asia: A Testament*, Kahin made clear that he originally had to use all his powers of persuasion to ensure that the Ford Foundation did not fund the Project to focus primarily on studying Indonesian communism (2003: 140–1). Interestingly, Kahin attributes the strength of the Cornell Southeast Asia programme to an early decision not to award its own degrees; Cornell graduates gained master's and doctoral degrees in core academic disciplines such as political science, thus ensuring that they were much more employable than Yale and Berkeley graduates in area studies (Kahin 2003: 138–9). The Cornell school played down the differences between nationalism and communism in the region, and was primarily interested in the former. By contrast, the Asia Society's Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group 'took as its starting-point the idea of stability in South-East Asia and the need to defeat the "communist threat" in the region' (Smith 1986: 17). Both schools used an 'essentially national, interdisciplinary perspective' (1986: 17–18) sometimes comparing countries, but not developing an integrated regional analysis. The Vietnam conflict itself was typically seen as the preserve of international relations specialist rather than Southeast Asian specialists *per se*.

More conservative scholars made more efforts to deliver recommendations for the containment of communism, but their research made little impact in answering the practical questions of the American government, and especially the military. It is hardly surprising that since April 1975 funding for Southeast Asian studies in the United States has never been the same, and that much of the newer work in the field has been done by European and Australian scholars, as well as by local scholars who had often benefited from western scholarships to undertake graduate study abroad. The broad dilemma, though, remained unchanged: Southeast Asian political studies have been divided between those wishing to undertake 'pure' research based on country-specific

knowledge, training and fieldwork, and those seeking to advance a particular agenda related to the needs of policy-makers and power-holders. In other words, the subfield has two streams: a mainstream dedicated to supporting the state (and often the status quo), and another ‘counter hegemonic’ stream concerned with generating well-informed and often critical alternative perspectives. These two streams have parallels in the two ‘parent disciplines’ of Asian studies and political studies. Mark Selden summarised the position thus:

The field certainly includes people who have resisted career and financial temptations to subordinate their work to interests of the state in favor of scholarship and teaching that has highlighted, for example, patterns of repression and resistance in Asia and in US-Asian relations. Familiarity with Asian languages, histories, and civilisations continues to offer the best possible, indeed the only possible, foundation for a humane understanding of, and public policy toward, the region. The resolution of this tension in the assessment of Asian studies surely lies in significant part in recognizing the achievements and building on the foundations of the best-informed critical and principled scholarship, particularly the scholarship that emerged out of the intellectual and political clashes of the 1960s, not only with respect to US policies toward Indochina and China, but also extending to reassessment of dominant models and approaches to understanding Asia, Asian peoples and cultures, and ourselves (Selden 1997: 5).

The Vietnam conflict and associated ideological struggles caused a schism in Asian studies in the United States, symbolised by the breaking away of scholars on the left from the Association for Asian Studies in 1969, and the creation of the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (now relaunched as *Critical Asian Studies*).¹ These ideological divides clearly reach far beyond Asian studies in the USA. Similar tensions within political studies are all too familiar to British academics; many politics departments were riven

¹ Here I must declare myself as a member of this journal’s editorial board.

with conflict between Marxists and non-Marxists for much of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

The question of whether or not to take the government's shilling, though, is a particularly difficult one for specialists in the politics of the region. Writing for an academic audience and teaching students are important and enjoyable tasks, but most of us live in hope that something we say or write will influence the societies, political and policy processes and decisions we spend our professional lives studying. Eric Wakin has documented the extent to which many academic specialists on Southeast Asia received funding from the US defence establishment for research aimed at countering communist insurgency (Wakin 1992). Wakin's central focus is American anthropologists working on Thailand; he suggests that anthropology has a sort of moral responsibility to adhere to high ethical standards, given the nature of its focus on the lives of ordinary people, many of them in marginalised groups or living close to subsistence level. Yet his study incidentally touches upon the apparent involvement of political scientists in helping shape American policies in the region.² Bruce Cumings has suggested that working for the government is acceptable in the case of all-out war (as in the Second World War), but that intelligence services and the academic community should be completely separated at other times (Cumings 1997: 7). There is a difference between working for the government (writing a briefing paper on policy options for decentralisation, for example) and working for intelligence services, say by using academic 'cover' to gain information about radical or dissident social movements. Broadly speaking, it might be argued that three broad positions can be distinguished among early (that is, before around the 1980s) scholarship on Southeast Asian politics.

- Pragmatic scholars, who were interested in influencing the policy process, were relatively happy to link their research agendas to projects of interest to states and powerholders.

² American political scientists mentioned by Wakin include Guy J. Pauker, Lucien Pye, David Wilson and M. Ladd Thomas (1992: 18, 19, 25, 55); I must stress that I am not seeking to ascribe particular positions to any of these individuals by listing them here. Wakin also names most of the leading American

- Idealistic scholars were primarily concerned with the defence of their own academic integrity and the pursuit of an independent line (Kahin is arguably the leading example here); as Boyce puts it ‘knowledge of other societies, founded on knowledge of their languages, tends to subvert national chauvinism and ethnocentrism’ (1997: 28).
- Committed scholars adopted the approach sketched by Selden above, dedicated to supporting radical or critical positions, generally at that time informed by Marxist ideas and perspectives.

Yet in practice these are ideal types rather than fixed categories: even the saintly Kahin, who perhaps epitomises the ‘idealistic’ scholar, joined Bill Bundy’s toothless, ‘window-dressing’ East Asia Advisory Committee at the State Department in 1966, mainly to facilitate easier access to Vietnam (2003: 186–7). While committed scholars would probably claim a monopoly on idealism, it is possible to distinguish between the two. In effect, such categories obscure a broader spectrum of options, ranging from the pure policy wonk to the mere polemicist; different scholars will occupy different positions on this continuum at different times in their careers.

Nevertheless, scholars on the left have long been suspicious of ‘area studies’ as an intellectual project, seeing it as a way of constructing the world that emphasises local and regional differences rather than broader socioeconomic processes, with a tendency to dwell on questions of history and culture that divert attention from core issues of inequality, struggle, and the machinations of national and international capital. Similarly, those on the left view ‘comparative politics’ as a conservative project, concerned with comparing phenomena such as processes, institutions, parties and elections – whilst overlooking or sidestepping the economic underpinnings of these phenomena. Cumings suggests that a series of important books that helped lay the foundations of comparative politics in the 1960s was funded by the Ford Foundation in consultation with the CIA

anthropologists working on Thailand during the 1960s. The full story of the involvement of political scientists in American Southeast Asia policy in this period has yet to be written.

(Cumings 1997: 15).³ Ironically, in the United States area studies is now under threat because such funding is disappearing, both from the government and from foundations (Cumings 1997: 22), on the grounds that there is now a greater need for cross-regional scholarship. By implication, area studies specialists have failed to please their masters by delivering scholarship of the requisite quality; but more importantly, scholarship of sufficient utility. This trend coincides with the rise of rational choice and formal theory models of analysis and explanation in American social science.

Southeast Asian political studies beyond the United States

Much of the above discussion has dwelt at some length on the American roots of much work in the field of Southeast Asian political studies. These roots have a salience that reaches beyond the United States itself. It is well known that probably the majority of local scholars in the field were trained in the USA – especially those in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, which received large numbers of American-funded scholarships for graduate study in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet almost equally importantly, American and American-trained academics also obtained posts in Britain and in Australia when the US job market contracted after 1975. All but one of the Southeast Asian politics specialists currently holding teaching positions in the UK is either a Cornell graduate, or studied for a doctorate under the supervision of a Cornell graduate, and American graduates also hold positions in continental Europe and New Zealand. Other traditions of Southeast Asian studies have tended to reflect the country-specific preoccupations of former colonial powers (Britain with Burma and Malaya, France with Indochina, the Netherlands with Indonesia), and thus offer little intellectual alternative to the comparative approach that emerged in the United States. As the late Edward Said pointed out, the Foucaultian motto of the School of Oriental and African Studies – ‘knowledge is power’ – reflects this tradition of an area studies born of a desire to subjugate colonial peoples.

³ The series in question was ‘Studies in Political Development’, sponsored by the Committee on Comparative Politics of the Social Science Research Council, and published by Princeton University Press. Cumings lists seven books, including Gabriel Almond and James S. Coleman, *The Politics of the*

Britain developed an alternative model of area studies following the Hayter report of 1960, in which social sciences were placed at the forefront of work on Southeast Asian and other regions. In addition to SOAS, Southeast Asian studies centres were established at Kent and Hull, neither offering language programmes. Yet despite some expansion in funding – rationalised by the rapid economic growth and continuing political importance of the region – by 2003 both centres had closed (some of the Hull staff moved in August 2003 to create a new centre at Leeds). Neither centre had produced more than the occasional doctorate in a politics-related subject.

At the same time, clusters of work in Europe and Australia did reflect the emergence of new nodes of Southeast Asian political studies outside North America. While Kahin's Cornell series on the governments and politics of the region had been pre-eminent in the 1980s, in the 1990s there were new challengers. A growing number of publications in the field by British and European publishers – notably Curzon, Routledge and NIAS – represented the shift in output away from North American universities. The Routledge 'Politics in Asia' series – edited by Michael Leifer of the LSE with a strong Southeast Asian bias – was one such challenger, as were publications from various academics associated with the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University in Perth, notably Richard Robison, Kevin Hewison and Garry Rodan. Other work centred around ANU – exemplified by its annual Indonesia 'assessment' volumes.

Another trend was the putative 'indigenization' of Southeast Asian studies, arguably led by Singapore's ISEAS (again supported by a strong publications programme), and emulated by new teaching programmes established by many of the region's leading universities by the 1990s. These programmes drew on the many local academics trained at leading Asian studies centres in western countries, and sought to promote greater understanding of other societies in the region, in line with policies advocated by ASEAN. A fundamental weakness of such programmes was paucity of knowledge about neighbouring countries – most local academics trained in Southeast Asian studies had

Developing Areas (1960) and Lucian Pye and Sidney Verba (eds) *Political Culture and Political Development* (1967).

focused primarily on their own countries. It was extremely hard to find a Thai who could conduct firsthand research on Indonesia, for example, or vice versa. While the idea of a genuinely regional scholarship was attractive and important, results were relatively slow to appear. This doubtless reflects some of the structural problems faced by local scholars working in these fields.

Dilemmas for local scholars

The major universities of several Southeast Asian countries – notably Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – contain large numbers of academics who have gained masters and doctoral degrees in politics and related subjects from some of the best universities in the world. Virtually all of them have permanent academic posts. The size of these academic communities is at least equal to the size of the academic community of Southeast Asian politics specialists working outside the region, and is probably actually greater. Local scholars are close to the scene of domestic political action, with ready access to newspapers, archives, interview sources, and fieldwork opportunities. They also have considerable scope to hire their best students to act as research assistants, usually at minimal cost.

Yet the majority of books, journal articles and chapters appearing in English on Southeast Asian politics are authored by scholars working outside the region. If we leave out Singapore-based academics, and the journals, books and annuals published by ISEAS, the residual contribution of academics from the other four countries named is extremely limited. How many academics from these countries have produced a single-authored book on politics with an international publisher other than ISEAS, in the past decade? The exceptions could probably be counted on the fingers of two hands. At the same time, even if we count in all the single-authored ISEAS books and all the monographs published worldwide on Southeast Asian politics quite broadly defined, the total output is probably no more than a hundred or so books in the last ten years.

These questions relate to the role of the intellectual in Southeast Asia, which arguably has little to do with an active engagement in new research. Gaining a doctorate from abroad

is the apogee of many an academic career in the region: what the western world views as an entrance examination for the academic profession, has often become the culmination of a lecturer's ambitions. Going to the next stage, by turning that thesis into a book or a number of journal articles, is the exception rather than the rule. Continuing to publish substantial new work (other than textbooks or commentaries on current events) beyond the doctorate is even more unusual. Engaging directly in systematic fieldwork, conducting extensive interviews or using participant observation methods, is rare for an established Southeast Asian academic; more common are projects based on quantitative methods (survey and election data are especially popular), where much of the groundwork can be farmed out to a team of student assistants. This reluctance to pursue a serious research career clearly has complex causes. One element relates to financial concerns: in many countries in the region, academics are chronically underpaid, and seek to use their spare time to boost their earnings by teaching extra classes (often at other universities), engaging in consultancy, writing for newspapers, appearing on television and radio, or running businesses. While some academics could legitimately argue that they cannot afford to do research – and provision for research funding is often meagre – the fact is that many Southeast Asian academics never have lived from their university salaries. People who enter university life typically do so in the knowledge that they already have other sources of income, and many non-research-active academics have no real financial problems. The question of remuneration is at best only a secondary explanation for the low levels of research output on Southeast Asian politics.

The core reason for the shortage of local research and publications clearly resides in cultural difference, and variations in what Robert Cribb has termed 'circles of esteem'. Academic cultures vary from country to country, and from one period of time to another. In western societies, mutual respect among academics is derived largely from reputation based upon published work. Reputation is constantly being reassessed: well known academics who fail to produce a new book or some important articles for several years will experience a slow decline in their reputations. In most Southeast Asian societies, this is simply not the case; publishing one impressive book will give an academic a degree of intellectual standing and respect for life. In many cases, academics gain a reputation for

considerable expertise in a particular field despite the fact that no publications, or very few, ever appear: it is sufficient that they once attended a well-known university abroad, from which they may not yet actually have graduated. Given that status rather than wealth or output remains the core measure of achievement in most Southeast Asian contexts, research only matters insofar as it boosts status. Only through a gradual cultural shift can local academics receive the necessary incentives to dedicate themselves to researching political issues and developments in their own countries.

The choice between three approaches to academic work on Southeast Asian politics is a troublesome one for those living and working in the region, especially when they are citizens of the countries in which they work, and their primary professional interest is in their own country.

The pragmatic approach is one ripe with opportunity. Politicians and policy actors in Southeast Asia need advice and information to help them in a wide range of areas, from electoral strategies to foreign policy initiatives and domestic reform processes. Given the relative weakness of civil service cadres and think tanks in the region, they often seek to buy in such information and support from universities, most frequently by approaching individual academics. Academics can find themselves serving as prime ministerial advisors, consultants to political parties, constitution drafters, members of leading committees and public bodies, provincial governors, members of parliament, and even ministers. Or they can simply carry out research projects that support policy-related work. An alternative pragmatic route involves academics in developing a second career as a public intellectual, newspaper columnist, radio commentator, or television presenters. Again, the attractions of influencing events and reaching a wider audience are considerable. A third version of the pragmatic approach is to write articles or even books, typically in the local language but sometimes in English, which engage with current issues in a more accessible way – in other words, to write a form of political commentary rather than genuine research, commentary based on reading newspapers and familiarity with unfolding events rather than any more substantive academic process of discovery. In listing these options, I am not trying to suggest that there is anything wrong with

pragmatic approaches. Much of the work done by academics in political consultancy, public policy, journalism and popular commentary is extremely valuable and important. Many academics in western countries are frankly envious of these opportunities.

The idealistic path is perhaps the least trodden one for local academics, since it involves the single-minded pursuit of a personal intellectual agenda. Most countries in Southeast Asia have a poor system for funding and rewarding such research, and for many university lecturers personal research is an optional extra, something to be carried out on top of their other duties. This is particularly difficult where university regulations are relatively inflexible: provision for sabbatical leave is often patchy, academics may be required to spend a certain number of hours on campus (making fieldwork extremely difficult), teaching loads are heavy by international standards, especially for younger and more junior staff (producing rapid burnout, and socialisation into a culture of over-teaching, often associated with reliance on extra income from additional classes), and colleagues are frequently jealous of those with a good research reputation, especially one that leads to invitations to international conferences or other academic activities abroad. On top of this, capable and effective people tend to be in demand to serve in administrative positions, and the best researchers are those most qualified to serve in posts requiring academic leadership. Only a minority of pretty determined individuals can sustain an independent research career consistently. Nevertheless, such individuals do exist in practically every major university in the region, and very impressive they are.

The option of committed scholarship is another choice with its own indigenous forms in the region. A significant minority of academics see themselves as dedicated to furthering the lot of the underprivileged, or even to fermenting social – if not outright political – revolution. They make use of their academic positions to legitimate their own roles as activists and public intellectuals, typically as critics of government policies. But they also often conduct academic research that supports their social and political agendas. In this respect they often combine elements of the pragmatic and idealistic approaches to scholarship. Like idealistic scholars, they are frequently working against the grain of the system.

The three 'domestic' approaches to scholarship on the region in the early twenty-first century are broadly the same as the three approaches that prevailed in the United States in the 1960s, or Australia and Europe in the 1980s and 1990s. What is different is the proportion of academics adhering to the approaches in different cases. In Southeast Asia, a pragmatic approach to scholarship is the dominant position, and in certain countries has become practically hegemonic. In 1990s Britain, idealistic approaches emphasising high-quality personal research grew increasingly dominant, just as in earlier periods committed positions (especially opposition to the Vietnam War) were extremely widespread in the United States and elsewhere in the West.

Problems for outsiders: the international specialists

If local academics face severe distractions and temptations, the position for international academics is not much better. After fieldwork and completing PhDs, academics in western countries typically face a difficult period of job-hunting, attempts to secure a permanent or tenured position, the need to publish rapidly in high-quality outlets, and the need to prepare a range of courses which they must teach to growing numbers of increasingly demanding students. It is not normally until at least five or six years after their doctoral fieldwork that they are ready to contemplate another substantial project, and they may have to wait even longer for a good spell of research leave. Small wonder that the temptation is for academics to publish second books involving less fieldwork than for their doctorates, and sometimes practically no fieldwork at all. Internet sources and electronic databases mean that you can sit in Leeds or Los Angeles and generate fairly plausible articles about recent developments in Bangkok or Jakarta, all without leaving your desk. Gone are the days when you needed to travel to the region just to collect a few newspaper clippings for research purposes. A task that occupied me for around 6 weeks doing fieldwork in 1991 – finding all the references to a particular Thai politician in two English language newspapers, over a ten year period, and making copies of those articles here – thanks to the wonders of the electronic database lexis nexus, I could now do in a morning from my desk. Publishers like books with broad general

themes and more potential sales – someone approaching a leading publisher with an idea for a book on, say, political parties in the Philippines, will often be urged to write a comparative book on the parties of four or five countries in the region, requiring much more superficial research. Writing the more superficial book often goes over well with colleagues in your own department, who keep urging you to be more ‘theoretical’, and not to get yourself classified as a ‘country specialist’. People who can talk and write with some plausibility about lots of different places and issues are much more likely to get hired to teach in the average western university than those with a genuinely authoritative understanding of a particular ‘obscure’ Southeast Asian country.

After the second book, typically having acquired significant family and financial commitments, academic specialists on Southeast Asia will often find it increasingly unattractive to keep returning to the region for extended periods – and will also be diverted by administrative posts (head of department, for example....). While perhaps continuing to think of themselves as idealistic or committed researchers, many people in this position will make pragmatic choices, teaming up with well-established colleagues in the region, for example, and not putting in sufficient fieldwork to challenge received assumptions about political developments. The result is a taking of the eyes of the ball, a ‘response mode’ academic career, keeping up the output, but losing critical edge – and especially analytical depth.

Southeast Asia specialists as collaborators?

In a deliberately provocative article, David Martin Jones and Mike Smith have sought to impugn Southeast Asian studies – by which they really mean political studies, with particular reference to international relations and international political economy – on the basis that the subdiscipline has similar tendencies to Sovietology. In other words, they argue that academics in the field are unduly beguiled by their subject matter, to the extent that they are in danger of losing critical perspective on wider developments, and risk not anticipating seismic changes in the region. Their main evidence is based on the failure of scholars to predict the 1997–98 regional economic crisis, and the considerable political fallout that accompanied it.

They trace the origins of this approach in what they call the ‘Singapore School’⁴ of the 1980s, but argue that it came of age only during the 1990s, in work that they dub ‘ASEASNology’. Adherents of this approach made wildly optimistic claims about the economic and political rise of the Asia Pacific region, and about the potential of ASEAN. Jones and Smith accuse ‘ASEANologists’ of resembling Sovietologists in ‘a shared lack of insight into the region culminating in a woeful record of predictive ineptitude’ (2001: 846). This accusation is supported by three main claims.

The first criticism laid out by Jones and Smith is that ASEANologists were guilty of ‘surface impressionism’, a preoccupation with current events, and overvaluation of the ‘Asian way’ as the basis for a new form of regionalism. Their second criticism is that these scholars were guilty of ‘compromising academic integrity’, through allowing the emergence of ‘tacit concurrence’. While some analysts did question highly optimistic assumptions about the prospects of the region’s economies, most political scientists were deeply uncritical of the upbeat discourse about new regionalism being generated by ASEAN governments and their allies, failing to highlight problematic concerns such as latent religious and ethnic tensions. Yet after July 1997 ‘regional experts moved from pre- to post-crisis mode without missing a beat’ (2001: 851). In other words, most of the writing on the region during this period derived not from solid research, but from a quest to reinforce prior understandings and assumptions. Academics also colluded in adopting their own version of ASEAN’s consensual approach, which involved ‘non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states’ (2001: 854); scholars of the region’s politics were disinclined to adopt critical views of the countries they studied, accentuating the positive and underplaying tensions and weaknesses.

The third argument advanced by Jones and Smith is that serious methodological problems underlay the emergence of this scholarly pro-ASEAN consensus and misplaced faith in a stable regional system:

⁴ They list Chan Heng Chee, Jon Quah and K.S. Sandhu as founders of the Singapore School, and Thomas Bellows, R.S. Milne, Diane Mauzy, Philippe Regnier and Raj Vasil among their ‘western admirers’.

Those working on Southeast Asian politics made sweeping assumptions about the inevitability of system stability, coupled with progressive change. Jones and Smith argue that the relative openness of most Southeast Asian societies, their accessibility to researchers (compared with the former Soviet Union, for example) and the widespread regional use of English means that there were few excuses for Western scholars of the region to misread conditions and fail to anticipate developments. They attribute the failure of scholars to predict the Asian crisis to three core inter-related factors. The first is the 'bureaucratization of academia' in the region; a second tendency they identify involves the coercion and cooption of outside academics. They criticise scholars from outside the region, for failing to help counter the bureaucratisation of academia inside the region, instead reinforcing 'the claim of the local scholar-bureaucrats to articulate the authentic voice of the region' (2001: 859). According to Jones and Smith, links between Western and local scholars have actually undermined disciplinary pluralism; international scholars were too often drawn into adopting uncritical views of the region, through participation in activities such as 'track 2' diplomatic gatherings. The emphasis here was on 'process' rather than 'product', which Jones and Smith see as a dangerous displacement of academic activity, away from the more urgent task of fresh and questioning empirical analysis.

While the Jones and Smith article is an important and engaging one, certain flaws must be recognised in its argument. The main weakness of the piece is the way it conflates 'Southeast Asian studies' with a particular school of international studies, associated with particular countries, institutions and individuals. The article is really about Singapore, and to a lesser extent Malaysia, and addresses a relatively small body of academic work dealing with questions such as regionalism. At the same time, it is certainly possible to use their broad approach to deal with a wider range of questions and concerns. The core accusation in the article is that 'pragmatic' views of Southeast Asian politics became so

dominant – both among local scholars and their counterparts outside the region – and academics missed much of what was really happening.

This argument could be made in quite specific terms with particular relation to Indonesia, where most country specialists singularly failed to recognise the impending demise of Suharto. I still treasure an e-mail I received in late 1997 from a leading specialist on Indonesian politics, reproving me for daring to suggest in a draft article that the New Order was close to its end, and insisting that Suharto would only leave office ‘at a time of his own choosing’. A similar argument could also be made in the context of Thailand’s ‘miracle’ political economy and associated ‘democratisation’; for years, those of us who dared to suggest that the Thai order was characterised by numerous structural weaknesses were regularly shouted down. Jones and Smith raise some important questions which should challenge people working in the field of Southeast Asian political studies to reflect critically on their own situations and practices.

Questions, themes and issues

The fundamental questions of Southeast Asian political studies scarcely change, since they are the underlying questions for all students of politics, questions raised by the former MP Tony Benn: who holds power, how do they gain power, how do they exercise power, and how do they lose power? However, these questions are articulated differently over time, and in different contexts. Many of the salient debates address the question of the relationship between formal and informal power, or power and influence. Others seek to unpack the nature of power in terms of state-society relations. Still others link political power with economic power and seek to examine the relationships between the two. Yet others are concerned with the ideas and ideologies underpinning the quest for power. And still others seek to transcend the domestic by emphasising international dimensions of political contestation in the region. Fashions come and go, but fundamentals rarely change.

I have reviewed changing fashions in the study of Southeast Asian politics in another article (McCargo and Taylor 1996), but a brief summary is in order here. During the 1950s and 1960s, questions of nationalism and communism influenced much of the debate about the nature of politics in the region, as did the issue of how far it was possible to create constitutional democracies in post-colonial Southeast Asia, especially in relation to delicate ‘ethnic bargains’. Political culture was a popular approach, typically seeking to generalise about national level politics from notions of the ‘Southeast Asian peasant personality’. The bureaucracy was an important focus of interest. Behaviouralism, a central tenet of social sciences during this period, was also selectively invoked to explain political developments in the region. By the 1970s many of these approaches had become dated. The emphasis now was often on questions such as civil-military relations, the origins of domestic conflict and insurgency, and the political affects of urbanisation (including the underlying causes of military coups and declarations of martial law), industrialisation and rapid social change. The 1980s saw the growing rise of political economy approaches, both radical and conservative, as political change began to seem inseparable from wider processes of socioeconomic transformation.

By the 1990s political economy perspectives were joined by a growing emphasis on emerging social forces, particularly a new middle class, as well as the rise of non-governmental organisations, the media and issue-based protests around environmental matters. A shift towards the study of local politics reflected a feeling that earlier studies had over-emphasised national developments, and placed too much stress on capital cities. This area of work also embraced emerging fashions for the concepts of civil society and social capital, as well as the ‘third wave’ of democratisation, which was linked to a series of political transitions and attempted transitions in the region. In parallel, there was a new stress on regionalism and the international dimensions of Southeast Asia’s political economy. Following the 1997 Asian crisis, ideas concerning ‘crony capitalism’ were very much in vogue, as were discussions of corruption, ‘good governance’, political reform, and a renewed emphasis on parties and elections. In the past couple of years, questions of

identity and ethnicity have gained increasing salience, and traditional assumptions about the borders of Southeast Asia and its constituent states are being challenged by ideas of transnational networks. Gender, minorities and difference have become more and more popular areas for study and analysis, as has the impact of new technologies such as the internet on social and political life. While rational choice theory has so far made only a limited impact on the subfield of Southeast Asian political studies, a number of scholars have used approaches derived from postmodernism and critical theory. While interesting in themselves, these approaches do mark a significant deviation in the subdiscipline, diverting attention away from core questions about the nature of power.

In many respects, these discussions mirror the kind of changes discussed by David Ricci in his brilliant book *The Tragedy of Political Science* (Princeton 1981) a superb study of the comings and goings of academic fads and fashions. Ricci argues that scholars must retain a healthy scepticism about the validity of prevailing approaches in social science, but cautions them to engage in the practice of ‘robinhooding’, pretending to believe in political science until they have secured for themselves a tenured academic position from which they can begin to speak their minds about what really matters. By giving this lecture I suppose I am in a position to make that sort of declaration: that I don’t believe in the existence of political science, social science, or indeed that there is an academic discipline of politics. True to my original training in English literature, I believe that academic work is a humanistic endeavour concerned with the subtle reading of texts and the teasing out of layers of ambiguity – of which there are rather more than Empson’s seven types. I have chosen to explore those ambiguities through an approach based primarily upon firsthand fieldwork and participant observation. I believe only in the madness of my own methods.

Conclusion: trajectories?

Trends in Southeast Asian political studies are fairly easy to plot, but trajectories are harder to anticipate. New ideas come into vogue every few years, then are quickly overtaken by events, or displaced by the next wave of emerging themes and issues. I have argued here that the precise themes and emphases used by scholars in the field are in

themselves relatively unproblematic: what matters is that core questions about power remain at the centre of work in the subdiscipline. The crucial divide is not between those who study elections and those who study NGOs, for example, but between those adopting pragmatic, idealistic and committed approaches to the subdiscipline. The greatest danger for the field is that it becomes overdominated by one set of approaches or understandings, thereby creating crude and sometimes highly deterministic orthodoxies which go virtually unchallenged. Orthodoxies are the enemy of truth in a complex and rapidly changing region such as Southeast Asia. We need to strike the right balance between providing information useful policy-makers and asking awkward questions that throw power-holders off-balance. A purely idealistic academy, pursuing academic research for its own sake, runs the risk of becoming detached from the world around it – and this is a danger to be avoided. Yet the opposite danger – of a largely incorporated academy subordinated to the needs of states and powerholders – currently looms much larger, especially in the region itself. The risk of a politicised academy dedicated to radical polemics and posturing now looks remote – the greater danger is of universities purged of dissident perspectives.

The only solution is to get back to the methodological roots of Southeast Asian political studies, putting in the work to learn difficult languages, doing extensive fieldwork away from the comforts of home and capital cities, and letting the data determine the conclusions rather than the other way around. It means not ceasing to do active research after completing a PhD, but making yourself keep on going out there (wherever there is for you) for extended periods, in all political weathers. It means regularly working on new areas or even new countries rather than going endlessly over the same familiar ground. It is much easier said than done – but the alternative is that specialists on Southeast Asian politics simply lose touch, one way or another, with the societies on which they work. Logically, the core trend in Southeast Asian political studies ought to be towards greater indigenisation, towards a position where most of the key work is being generated by local scholars, frequently in collaboration by those based outside the region. There are two main ways in which those of us working outside the region can contribute to this process: by training future generations of regional scholars, typically through

supervising postgraduate and especially doctoral students who will go back to work in their own countries; and by creating strong personal and professional links with universities in Southeast Asia, long term links involving regular visits in both directions. These two projects have occupied much of my time during the past 6 years or so in Leeds.

Yet I have to say that I am far from sure that we can anticipate the full-blown 'indigenization' of Southeast Asian political studies any time soon. If we see scholarship as a parallel process to colonialism, and the nurturing of Southeast Asian academics as a form of preparation for fully fledged intellectual independence, then this indigenization should already have been completed. But in fact the colonial analogy does not hold good. Working on your own society is an entirely different intellectual challenge from working on another society in a completely different part of the world. For this reason, what I have termed 'international scholars' and 'local scholars' are on very different intellectual terrain; for a Thai to study the politics of Thailand is to take a familiar road, yet for a European to study Thai politics is to follow the road less taken. For the outsider, the academic study of Southeast Asian politics amounts to a deliberate act of self-marginalisation, a purposive avoidance of the familiar, the comfortable and the easy. It is, in fact, a perverse intellectual undertaking. It is my own belief that intellectual discoveries and deep understandings arise naturally from the deliberate making of difficult personal choices, and that the possession of a particular citizenship or ethnicity are not necessary or even desirable preconditions for the person who seeks truths about a given society. In this respect, the creative tensions between those we may label with the troubling badges of 'insider' and 'outsider' are invaluable when we attempt to think and rethink the politics of Southeast Asia.