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Debate on Southeast Asia – An Idea Whose Time Is Past?

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Debate

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Southeast Asia

An idea whose time is past?

Area studies

Seventy-five years ago, 'area studies' was an idea whose time had come.¹ Today, it seems an idea that is too constricting. The social sciences and humanities have moved on and so have the people living in the various designated 'areas.' The units of analysis have shifted and the objects of analysis are more mobile than two generations ago. In the social sciences and humanities, spatial fixing is infinitely more problematic and, partly as a result, funding has moved away from area studies to other fields. The study of Southeast Asia provides an example of this wider trend.

For people living in the region, all those years ago, the notion of Southeast Asia must have been a bit like an arranged marriage. More powerful others came up with the idea – those affected accepted it and hoped that love would blossom afterwards. It did, to a certain extent – more successfully for some partners than for others. Infidelity was frowned upon. But now that the kids are leaving the nest, is there any point in sticking together?

Where do we go from here? Thankfully the future is unknown, so we are free to speculate about it. My hunch is that area studies are destined to be around for some time to come. One reason is time lag. The global academic machine continues to produce new 'area specialists' in fairly large numbers. Another reason is that approaches that emphasize disembodied flows and global connectivity are often too abstract to make much sense. Groundedness and cultural sensibility remain essential, and these are what area studies deliver. The area mindset is firmly entrenched and area studies offer an opportunity to reflect on their assumptions. Let us take a brief look at four core claims of area studies.

¹ University of Amsterdam and International Institute of Social History. This note is based on a short presentation at the conference Future Directions in Southeast Asian Studies (Australian Netherlands Research Collaboration and University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, 8-12 March 2012). I thank the participants and a reviewer for their comments.

Claim 1: Deeper engagement with societies and cultures

This is perhaps the strongest point that area studies make but it is showing its age. It is rooted in a perspective of outsiders looking in and this has become increasingly problematic. The image of the external scholar burrowing into an exotic culture and explaining it to a home audience was free of neither late-colonial nor geopolitical overtones, and considerable soul-searching has resulted.

The emancipation of researchers *of* the area and *in* the area has begun to marginalize the role of outside (read: overwhelmingly Western) scholars in most specializations within area studies. This process can be expected to accelerate. For local scholars, deep engagement obviously has a very different meaning, leading to an important shift in the field.

This only reinforces the claim that long-term, multifaceted dedication to a particular area can produce knowledge that is superior to, and more contextualized than, knowledge of the hit-and-run kind. The assertion that area studies therefore produces more serviceable knowledge has been borne out many times. This continues to be their main success and strongest selling point. It is good to remember, however, that it is not exclusively card-carrying, self-professed 'area specialists' who produce such knowledge. For example, many scholars within Southeast Asia think of their specializations in terms of discipline rather than area.

Claim 2: The importance of proximity

This has always been a more problematic claim. The idea of a family resemblance, unity in diversity, has been more an article of faith in area studies than a serious research issue. Geographical proximity rightly plays a role in many of our explanations of social and cultural processes but the construction of a bounded intellectual universe in the shape of an 'area' is somewhat dangerous. Not only does it run the risk of downplaying the influence of factors and causes beyond the area but it also suggests special relationships within the area that may be spurious. The close kinship and cultural proximity between, say, the Philippines and Laos are not self-evident. Over time, with easier travel, new communications options, and instant virtual connectivity for some, there has been rapid but uneven time-space compression. As a result, geographical proximity should now be juxtaposed with digital proximity and air-travel proximity, both emphatically global phenomena. This reminds us that the privileging of vicinity over distance is problematic, and this holds true for earlier times as well. The claim of proximity – weak to start with – has lost much of its force.

Claim 3: A level playing field in the production of knowledge

Equally problematic has been the assertion that area studies can be equated with the study of an entire area, covering all societies and cultures in a specific world region. In reality, area scholars have focused far more on certain themes, privileging particular cultural, social and economic processes and paying less attention to others. Thus, even with an acceleration of knowledge production about an area, the bare patches show. Therefore, what we know well about the societies and cultures of an area cannot be presumed to be *pars pro toto*. The claim of emancipation – producing knowledge about world regions – has worked out far better for some processes than for others. There is also a spatial dimension to this: it has worked out far better for some places than for others, not just because of the training, predilections and choices of scholars but also because parts of Southeast Asia were (and are) difficult to access for political or other reasons.

Area specialists habitually make general statements about their area even though these rest on quite uneven patterns of knowledge production. In area studies, there does not seem to be any concern about the tendency for research to be concentrated in hot spots nor have mechanisms been developed to counter this tendency. Although decentralization is a hot topic in Southeast Asian studies these days, decentralization is not a professional practice among area specialists. As a result, the ‘area-ness’ of pronouncements about the area is questionable.

Claim 4: Boundedness

In area studies the drawing of viable borders around world regions has been a constant headache. How to isolate Southeast Asia? The answer to questions such as ‘Why are the Andaman Islands in South Asia and the adjacent Coco Islands in Southeast Asia?’ immediately shows that it is not the much-foregrounded cultural affinities or family resemblances that determine an area’s borders but the political-administrative allocations that were in place in the mid-twentieth century. In turn, these colonial boundaries have spawned new political-administrative realities. For example, area studies are directly implicated in why the borders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are where they are.

By and large, area scholars have taken the easy way out of the conundrum of boundary making by declaring it as unimportant in view of the grand mission of putting the area on research and policy agendas. Discussions about it are rare, and the issue can easily be dismissed as arcane or nit-picking. But scholars working in the geographical margins of academic areas cannot

escape such discussions. For them the area is an ill-fitting coat. Here the fact that area studies produce conversations that are area-specific leads to division rather than unity. As a result of such feelings of discomfort, the question of area boundaries has not gone away— instead it seems to be pushing itself more towards the centre of thinking about world regions. This may be one explanation why, for example, interest in the new Asian Borderlands Conferences is growing so explosively.

Rethinking space

The simple geographic conception of space underlying the ‘proximity’ claim of area studies is no longer tenable. Carving up space and then claiming content are uncomfortably reminiscent of both imperial designs and 1950s nation building.

We have to rethink space. But who are ‘we’? The more important rethinking is going on, not among scholars, but among inhabitants of the regions confronting the wider world. Area thinking has become a significant resource in identity construction for some – to the extent that the ‘area’ in area studies has turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. For many others in the region, however, ‘Southeast Asia’ still means little or nothing. Furthermore, the claims of area studies have been received differently by inhabitants of the region and by people originating from it but living elsewhere.

Who has adopted the self-identification of ‘Southeast Asian,’ and why? It can be argued that it is mainly, and increasingly, *outside* the area that the label has practical relevance. The idea of Southeast Asia is more influential beyond the region – on campuses and in boardrooms, foreign ministries and control rooms – than within it. Indonesians, Vietnamese and Burmese who live in the United States, Europe or Australia find themselves categorized as ‘Southeast Asians’. How do such regional constructions relate to their self-identification? Are we seeing a thinning of national identities to the advantage of lower and higher levels of identity formation? This is a useful question to explore comparatively, and not just among diasporic communities. The vigour of national identities varies between regions as well. In this context it is instructive to look at the failure of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) to emulate its example and precursor ASEAN. National reflexes may be strong in Southeast Asia but they are far more intense in South Asia.

The varying social relevance of the area as a spatial scale is an issue of importance. Who claims the space of Southeast Asia today and why? What is in it for spin doctors, business tycoons, migrants, tour operators, military strategists ... and scholars?

Rethinking time

Space is not the only dimension that area studies make us reconsider. We also need to address the link between area studies and time. Southeast Asia is again a good example. Designated in the mid-twentieth century, scholars have extrapolated it back into prehistory and forward into the twenty-first century. Such creativity comes at a price because 'area-ness' varies from one period to the next.

Thus, if we look at Chittagong, the present-day key port city of Bangladesh, in 1600, it was clearly not part of the area that we call South Asia today. At that time it was the main port of the kingdom of Arakan, with a largely Buddhist population and trade oriented towards the eastern Indian Ocean as well as Yunnan. Historians have described it as the hub of the 'non-Indic', eastward-looking half of the Ganges delta. Three hundred years later, however, it had become decidedly 'Indic': part of the British Indian province of Bengal, its new population made up largely of Bengali Hindus and Muslims, its trade oriented towards Kolkata and Scotland. Understanding long-term change in this city demands that we bridge the gap between South Asian and Southeast Asian discourses and that we overcome their smothering embrace. The processes and flows entailed in place-making over time force us out of the comfort zone of our area training – and this is a positive thing. It is the historical processes of place-making, rather than the external place-making of 'area studies,' that we are ultimately interested in.

A scholarly foreign policy?

The main question is how we can make use of the strengths of area studies without getting boxed in by them. As I have indicated, the greatest strength of area studies is their claim of deep engagement and hence superior knowledge production. The other claims – proximity, level playing field, and boundedness – are less convincing, and today there seems to be little enthusiasm among Southeast Asianists for putting these forward. On the contrary, they have added trans-area flows and processes to their research repertoires without much debate. But this movement has been somewhat haphazard and uncoordinated, much like a wild car chase in a Hollywood movie – 'Follow that car!', 'Follow that pack of migrant Southeast Asians!', 'Follow that bunch of crony capitalists!', 'Follow that bird flu epidemic!'

It is reassuring to see that regional specialists are becoming more tolerant of raising their heads above the parapet but I would suggest that a more planned and balanced approach is called for. There are many ways in which we could achieve this. For Southeast Asia specialists a most pressing task is to

make the reach of their region, as a bundle of research subjects and discursive engagements, even more global. As the area is thinning, we could make it go viral by developing what could be described as a scholarly foreign policy.

We are still far too concerned with the twentieth-century mindset whereby linkages between Southeast Asia and the rest of the world are thought of primarily in terms of 'the West.' The twenty-first century is still fairly young but it is already abundantly clear that the flows linking Southeast Asia to the rest of the world have changed. Today people from Southeast Asia are active all over the globe, just as people from other world regions have become part of Southeast Asian societies. These connections are growing rapidly. And yet, in other world regions the study of Southeast Asia is still relatively poorly developed, both in terms of taking the regional presence there seriously and in terms of a low level of knowledge production about Southeast Asia in these other regions.

One practical way of strengthening cross-area intellectual engagement is to 'follow the Southeast Asians' to the non-West. For example, it would be relatively easy to make it a standard practice to have, say, Vietnam conferences include an Africa panel. The point would not be simply to add novelty, or study the Vietnamese in Africa, or Africans in Vietnam. Such meetings could fruitfully explore the differential impact of broad economic and cultural processes on both Vietnam and societies in Africa, using these cases to understand broader processes better. Similar dialogues could be opened up by hosting Middle East panels at Indonesia conferences – not just for the study of Indonesians in the Gulf, but also to understand from Middle East specialists how these newcomers are embedded in their societies and in what flows (of ideas, goods and funds) to and from Indonesia they are involved. Thus the longstanding as well as new and variegated forms of Middle Eastern presence in Indonesia, and vice versa, could be developed jointly with Middle East specialists.

The mission of Southeast Asia specialists could easily go further: by proposing Southeast Asia-related panels in, say, Brazil conferences they could offer Southeast Asian perspectives to Latin American discourses. Comparative conversations of this kind will crucially enrich conversations among Southeast Asianists themselves and act as a deterrent to the inward-looking tendencies that characterize all area studies. And it goes without saying that what can be done with conferences, can be done with curricula, journals, policy dialogues and research programmes.

New transnational and trans-area connections are shaping today's world. For area specialists everywhere this means that there is an urgent task ahead: to develop a firm practice of jointly employing their knowledge *beyond* their area, if only to work out what can actually be considered to be truly particular to each region. By actively projecting their insights and concepts they can

contribute to an intertwined, worldwide corps of area studies that jointly explores analytical concepts across regions and that is vigorous enough to counterbalance simplifications and distortions in general models and grand theorizing. This is a necessary strategy to bolster the impact of contextualized knowledge on the social sciences and humanities – and to stave off being marginalized as parochial, irrelevant, obscure and backward looking.

Launching area knowledge beyond the area should lead to sustained trans-area conversations. These will create novel ways of dealing with the issues of proximity, level playing field and boundedness that any regional study must face. Here and there, such trans-area conversations do occur – but they rarely endure. Far more effort could be poured into sustained ‘area foreign policies’ emanating from all world regions. The goal is to produce flexible versions of the deep knowledge of area studies that are pertinent and comprehensible across world regions and capable of being easily inserted into various current debates. More than anything, this will demonstrate that area knowledge is indispensable to understanding the twenty-first-century world.

So let us return to our example. Southeast Asia is not an idea whose time is past but – like all area studies – one in real need of breaking out of its comfort zone.

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‘Southeast Asia’: A good place to start from

All disciplines, all fields of study, need some self-reflexivity. If we don’t take time to step back and examine our assumptions and our relevance, we can be sure that others from outside will do it for us, sometimes brutally. On the other hand, too much self-reflection can be the intellectual counterpart of the audit culture that plagues so many modern universities: a distraction from the task of thinking and communicating, imposed in the name of compliance with rules that don’t quite cover the messy reality of academic life (Shore 2008).

Willem van Schendel is a friendly auditor from just outside the field (his main work has been on South Asia, and he is famous for inventing the concept of Zomia, a new region that stretches across the borders of what are conventionally known as Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Asia (Van Schendel 2002)). His thoughtful reflection on the possible redundancy of Southeast Asia as an analytical concept contains a mixture of serious chal-

lenges that need careful thought and audit culture nitpicking that does not.

Let's get the nitpicking out of the way first. It is a truism that Southeast Asia is an arbitrary concept, encompassing enormous diversity and with formal boundaries that often make little sense on close examination. But in fact hardly anyone except specialists on ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, uses 'Southeast Asia' as a constricting intellectual framework. In practice, we all write in practice about less – or more – than the region as a whole. Southeast Asia is not much more than a convenient geographical and administrative receptacle for our diverse endeavours. In this it is exactly the same as every other identified region in the world. Diversity and messy boundaries are a part of every category and we do not need to fret specifically about a lack of uniformity or precise fit in the case of Southeast Asia. In fact, Southeast Asia's messiness has repeatedly forced us into new insights about the internal complexity of the region and about its external connections in a way that other area studies have struggled to achieve (see for example Morris-Suzuki 2000). The intriguing fact is that the rich intellectual rewards to be had from starting with Southeast Asia and then deconstructing it have tended to blind us to earlier work that transcended Southeast Asia's borders but in a pedestrian way, such as the British colonial literature that uncomplacatedly and tediously treated Burma as part of South Asia. Even imaginative projects which set out to transcend artificial boundaries, such as ANU's Thai-Yunnan Project founded in 1987, tend to be forgotten. It is as if we mistake our own personal intellectual journey for that of the field as a whole.

The first serious challenge in Van Schendel's reflection comes from his observation that area studies is based on a paradigm of outsiders looking in. Academic research on Southeast Asia – probably more than in South Asian or East Asian Studies – has been dominated by scholars from outside the region: from the United States, Europe, Japan, and Australia. This external dominance is ethically unsatisfactory: why should Southeast Asians not speak for themselves instead of depending on foreign spokespersons (Heryanto 2007)? But the ethics here are complicated: it is one thing to defend, as Van Schendel does, the value of 'long-term, multifaceted dedication to a particular area', another – and more troublesome – thing to impose the credentialism that suggests that academic knowledge of any group of people belongs – or ought to belong – primarily to those people. Intellectual protectionism, whatever form it takes, tends to have ugly consequences. Fields of study that lack a significant outside perspectives tend not to be models of intellectual vibrancy.

The second serious challenge that Van Schendel offers is to take a more imaginative approach to comparison. Too often, area-focussed scholars choose the near and/or familiar for comparisons – Malaysia with Indonesia, Australia with Canada, the Netherlands with Belgium. In fact we could take a leaf out of the book of the economists and look much further afield for

stimulating similarities and differences. Lewis' recent comparison (2007) of Indonesia and Nigeria is a case in point, but there is a vast range of other possibilities – Thailand and Ethiopia, East Timor and Eritrea, Indonesia and Brazil – that could be explored. Even here, however, we have tended to forget earlier initiatives, such as the massive comparative study of India, Indonesia, and Italy sponsored by the Ford Foundation in 1954 (MacDonald 1956:107).

As Van Schendel suggests, we should not imagine that the resilience of the idea of Southeast Asia will persist in the face of globalization and the partial erasure of national borders. But it remains a surprisingly good place to start from as we embark on our intellectual journeys.

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Long live trans-area studies!

Not for the first time, Willem van Schendel has richly summarized the issues at stake in reconsidering area studies (see, for example, his landmark 2002 paper). Since the making of their area was a product of the Cold War and has been strongly institutionalized in scholarly and diplomatic circles, Southeast Asianists have been at the forefront of a large, trans-disciplinary debate on the status, merits and rethinking of area studies (for a sample of those debates in wider context and reading of Van Schendel's work, see Sidaway forthcoming). Approaches to Southeast Asia long bifurcated between maritime/insular and mainland viewpoints, indicating how the concerns over the coherence of area studies that Van Schendel diagnoses were in fact integral to Southeast Asian studies from the beginning. It has nonetheless fallen on those such as Van Schendel, working at the boundaries between established areas, to point out most clearly what is at stake, carefully balancing appreciations of area studies with persuasive calls to rework them.

I am reminded of a parallel from the discipline of geography, whose core analytical category of 'regions' (usually referring to sub-national regions, rather than the meta-ones that Van Schendel and others debating 'areas' have focussed on) has been swept aside by a series of conceptual revolutions (quantitative, radical/critical and postmodern) since the mid twentieth century. However, as one leading geographer remarked:

Ever since regional geography was declared to be dead – most fervently by those who had never been much good at it anyway – geographers, to their credit, have kept trying to revivify it in one form or another. (Gregory 1978:171.)

It's important to point out that that reinvention was expressed via new terminology and approaches, and demarcates new regional formations amidst burgeoning literatures on scale and process. Similar moves are apparent in many branches of area studies and Van Schendel's words here ought to be widely read. The argument that area studies have long offered valuable deep engagement with societies and cultures is rightly qualified by a note that this engagement advances when more scholars from (and not simply of) the areas join the conversation. Attendant geopolitical and economic shifts add to the challenges and opportunities. Thus, Van Schendel's recognition (2012) that adding deep historical and broad geographical frames are vital and 'force us out of the comfort zone of our area training' merits further scrutiny. I would like to close this commentary with two points related to this.

Firstly, what is at stake in some similar invocations of transnational connectivity or transgression being made by states and political movements?

They concern not just the type of scholarly 'breaking out' that Van Schendel advocates, but relate to worldly forces of imperialism, anti-imperialism, state formation, accumulation of capital and other expressions of power. Space limitations allow me to cite only one example here, derived from what Eng seng Ho (2004:210) describes as 'the history of relations between Western powers and transnational Muslim societies in the Indian Ocean'. Ho (see also his 2006 book) compellingly maps these entanglements through a focus on the Hadrami Diaspora connecting East Africa, Arabia and Southeast Asia. A variety of area-based scholarship was vital to Ho's scholarly task: Arabic texts and research at archives in the UK and those in Singapore, for example. His account of how this Diaspora became localized or indiginized (albeit interconnected and externally engaged) around the Indian Ocean is a compulsive read, shaking up assumptions about categories. What does this mean for area studies? Quite simply, it is evident that the legacy of twentieth century area studies (specialist literatures, language instruction, fieldwork, scholarly journals, and societies dedicated to areas) remains essential. But such scholarly architecture is also insufficient for the broader intellectual task of recovering the interconnected spaces of the past and apprehending those of the globalizing present.

Secondly, exile or absence from any 'comfort zone' is also the fate of many subaltern migrants. Consider, for example, those millions who move from South Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa to the Persian Gulf. Cities there have become the most 'foreign' populated anywhere (around 90% non-citizens, in the cases of Abu Dhabi, Doha, or Dubai). Adequate historical and geographical accounts require us to follow such lives across areas (see, for example, Gardner 2010; Mohammad and Sidaway 2012). Scholars, even desperate graduate students, do this in deeply privileged ways. This comes with a responsibility to bear witness, critically mobilizing knowledge in order to transcend areas.

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If scholar foreign policy works...

An answer to whether or not Area Studies will be around for some time seems to have been increasingly dependent upon the government and institutional funding guided by their policies. Over the past two years, I have been at the two institutions famous for their Area Studies—School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London and Northern Illinois University (NIU) in Illinois, USA. From numerous conversations I have had in meetings and over informal gatherings, prospect for scholars to continue to be able do research and teach mainly in one specific country or in one area seems bleak. Long-established academics are curving out new niches outside their comfort zones or 'areas', attempting to claim that they are capable of starting afresh or understanding new regions. Freshly-pressed PhDs in area studies also have to highlight on the CVs their interdisciplinary research skills and draw attention to their inter-regional or inter-Asian research projects rather than their lone-country theses. Out of 17 jobs I applied, 12 had the terms such as *international*, *trans-national* or *inter-disciplinary* in their advertisements. This brief survey shows that area studies are deemed less relevant or attractive from the institutional perspectives, and if this trend continues, scholars, and especially PhD students will have to adjust to this trend by at least adopting a comparative approach or broadening their area research. Academic debates aside, money unfortunately will come to play a more important role in the future of Area Studies.

But is the decision to shift the focus on inter-regional or inter-disciplinary approaches justified? Van Schendel argues that the term 'Southeast Asian' has

practical relevance only outside the region. To a large extent, this claim rings true. The term 'Southeast Asian' has been an imported construct to the region, and for the residents of the region, they can only imagine themselves as being part of the Southeast Asian when Southeast Asian games come around every two years and when their national football team plays against other Southeast Asian nations during the games. Outside these games, a football fan from Burma will probably be more interested in learning more about Ghana where London-based Chelsea footballer Michael Essien originally comes from rather than about Laos, whose name they would most likely hear only every two years. In this digital and globalized age, the term 'Southeast Asia' implies the artificial and often state(s)-sponsored construct. For policy makers from Capitol Hill, Southeast Asia perhaps could not be imagined independently of China and also of Pacific reign and for the residents of the region, Southeast-Asian-ness might not mean more than partaking in Southeast Asian games every two years. Amidst this contrasting interests, what Van Schendel calls 'cross-area intellectual engagement' could reflect the spontaneous debates and events unfolding inside and outside the region free of artificial constructs be they by Western-trained scholars or state(s)-sponsored projects.

Van Schendel uses the term 'scholarly foreign policy' in proposing solutions to develop comparative conversations between Southeast Asia and other regions bypassing the intermediacy 'the West'. But as to whether this approach can deter the entrenched practice of inward-looking is rather difficult to answer. As he pointed out in Claim 3, area specialists tend to make general statements about the region of their interest and for Southeast Asianists, especially Burma studies specialists, to break the chain of making grand theories and generalizations, one needs to have a unrestricted access to archives, peoples and all different parts of the country, not the hot spots the scholars tend to see or are allowed to see. There are some logistical challenges and scholars will tend to remain less confident and competent to engage in comparative dialogues if they feel they could not even know one country well. Restricted access will also favour the tendency to distort history, and few that have access to archives tend to depict their study as unique to reflect and perhaps protect their privileges. But on the other hand, there remain claims in academic corpus such as 'Burmese way to Socialism' but as to whether Ne Win's Socialism could be characterized as truly Burmese as he argued needs to be challenged. There has been rare if not non-existent to compare Burmese socialism to a Latin American country's socialism and if more comparative studies are undertaken in the future, there could be less simplification and perhaps less exoticisation. Developing comparative conversations calls for a good collaboration not least by the authorities and institutions that hold key to archives.

Academic advisors at my current University are still calling Southeast

Asian languages exotic languages and if Van Schendel's proposed 'scholar foreign policy' works, there could be a change in the mindset of the advisers and students to view other regions as more connected and similar to theirs rather than being vastly different to the point of becoming 'exotic' and perhaps this could also influence the government foreign policies.