

# New Area Studies as an Emerging Discipline. The Way Ahead for Southeast Asian Studies

## Current Debates

Vincent Houben

Fifteen years ago, I wrote an article on the marginalisation of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany. This piece was meant to engage in stock-taking at a moment when major budget cuts were being imposed on the Institute of Asian and African studies at Humboldt University, only shortly after I started working there. Referring to the contradiction between the politics stressing the importance of Asia on the one hand and the factual reduction of the university-based knowledge infrastructure on Asia on the other, I pointed to the external and internal causes for this process of decline. As one of the so-called “small study fields” (*kleine Fächer*), Southeast Asian Studies was an easy target for university administrators trying to find places to cut costs. Subjected to rigorous quantitative benchmarking and represented only by small-scale units scattered across Germany, such fields were relatively defenceless. But there were internal factors as well that made this branch of Area Studies vulnerable at that time: internal conflicts between philological and social science approaches to the region, the unresolved debate on what an “area” in area studies actually was, the relatively isolationist character of the German orientalist tradition and a focus on the extension of existing knowledge rather than on innovation (Houben 2004).

Since then the externalities of Southeast Asian Studies have unfortunately altered very little, with neo-liberal technocratic university management still on the rise and, despite the rise of a multipolar world, a continued lack of political will among Western leaders to earnestly engage with Asia and the global South. Indeed, the sweep of populist conservatism has strengthened the tendency towards preoccupation with the Self at the expense of the Other. But

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the scientific dynamics of the field have changed in substantial ways. Despite all the staff reductions, this branch of Area Studies remains active and its practitioners are more vibrant than ever, as was recently shown at the tenth EuroSEAS conference in Berlin in September 2019. There German Southeast Asianists interacted with circa 700 colleagues from other centres of learning in Western countries and from the region itself. The scope of themes was markedly broader and involved issues of current global relevance such as climate change and democratic regression. Transdisciplinary and transregional approaches moved into the foreground. More than before, a process of self-reflection has begun to examine what Southeast Asian Studies is, what kind of knowledge it should produce and how it should develop into new directions ([www.euroseas2019.org](http://www.euroseas2019.org)).

In this contribution I want to present a mission statement on the future of Southeast Asian Studies and argue that it should strive to become a discipline rather than remaining a mere field of studies. Some would consider this move a surrender to an old, nineteenth-century model of university organisation, which was based on a classic division between a limited number of recognised, predominantly Eurocentric disciplines. Indeed, even until today, disciplines have acted as the watchdogs of established formats of scientific endeavour and, not unimportantly, as the main avenues through which funding for teaching and research have been channelled.

New disciplines have emerged in the natural sciences as a result of specialisation but, for some reason, the same development has not occurred in the humanities and social sciences. There new terrains are covered by so-called study fields, for which the financial resources fluctuate with societal acceptance but have never attained the same level of institutionalisation that established disciplines are still able to command. Instability and fluctuation also prevail in Area Studies in general and Southeast Asian Studies in particular. By becoming a discipline, New Area Studies could then strategically move into safer waters and become part of the main canon of university knowledge production, without constantly being challenged to prove its right of existence. Following the Humboldtian tradition, in Germany “world knowledge” (*Weltwissen*) has recently emerged as a concept in this context, implying both knowledge of the world beyond Euro-America and knowledge from places other than the centres of Western knowledge production.

Far from advocating a conservative agenda, I am convinced that by becoming a discipline, Area Studies in the plural must progressively converge into a common singular and develop the epistemic clarity that enables its own full-fledged “disciplinarity”. I think that in current debates on Southeast Asian Studies strong elements of such a convergence are already becoming visible (see the thematic issue of *South East Asia Research* 27(1), 2019, introduced and edited by Rachel Harrison and Geir Helgesen). A discipline fulfils a range

of conditionalities that make it exclusive in relation to other disciplines. These include a clearly demarcated subject matter, a set of basic theories, distinct methodologies, specific publication outlets, own programmes of teaching and research and a clearly identifiable scientific community.

One could argue that Area Studies, and Southeast Asian Studies as a branch, have all of this but still only in a disintegrated, sometimes rather haphazard manner, which may offer to some a comfort zone for much variability and freedom to experiment but provide too little institutional punch. The critical question is therefore whether the field of area studies moves or should move into the direction of becoming a discipline or stay a scattered, open-ended and highly contingent field of study. I think there are good intrinsic reasons in favour of choosing the first option, or at least considering it seriously. By embracing the programme of becoming an own discipline, New Area Studies could adopt a progressive and forward-looking agenda instead of retaining its predominantly defensive mode in the academic competition for ideas and resources.

### Stock-taking: An emerging discipline

The first step would be to take stock and summarise where Area Studies now stands in the face of the criteria listed above for recognition as a discipline. As far as subject matter is concerned, Southeast Asian area studies occupies a clear-cut epistemological terrain, focusing on human world-making (or “worlding”) within the world region conventionally labelled Southeast Asia. Area is here not so much defined as a distinct territory but as a location from which perspectives on the world emerge that are different from those in other areas (not only the West). Far from trying to extrapolate the singularity of the area, the aim of this scientific endeavour is to gain a deep understanding of its alterity, i.e. relative difference in relation to other worldviews. Not only is the object of study relational but also its spatio-temporal embeddedness. Following up on current debates in the field of geography, area should be understood in the chronotopical sense, as a temporal-spatial constellation within which various time dimensions and spatial scales, ranging from local to global, intersect. This idea of area is open to human mobility as well as translocal and transregional dimensions.

The term “timespace” or “chronotope” refers back to Mikhail Bakhtin’s attempt to capture entities in the format of dialectic mutualities. In geography it was first applied by Mireya Folch-Serra to the study of spaces, regions and places. Other geographers have followed suit and argued against the Euro-American concept of time and space as empty containers. Instead they propose that timespace unfolds only through human agency, possessing a “becoming” quality through circulation, (re)combination and rhythmicity as condensed in

specific nexuses (Mulíček et al. 2015: 308–310). It is through these chronotopes that the area in New Area Studies manifests itself. Cultural formations can only appear and be fruitfully studied within such timespace dimensions.

Area Studies theory is not so much based upon a singular discipline, usually chosen from the humanities or social sciences, but is rather considered to be a cross-disciplinary (Jackson 2019) or even interdisciplinary endeavour. Instead of refuting Western scientific knowledge creation altogether, Area Studies has tried to cut across disciplinary boundaries or fuse theoretical notions from different disciplinary fields. Whereas disciplines are considered to be disconnected, largely autonomous undertakings producing results for a circumscribed terrain only, interdisciplinarity promises to integrate knowledge across disciplinary divides. In this manner phenomena that lie beyond single disciplinary endeavours become visible, allowing for “new” knowledge to emerge. However, interdisciplinarity in a predominantly disciplinary environment is still often considered to be a non-starter, as over time disciplines have developed their own languages, epistemological styles and assessment criteria, becoming durable as disciplinary units precisely for this reason (Jacobs / Frickel 2009). Relegating Area Studies theory simply to interdisciplinarity falls short of formulating an own, independent theoretical basis.

Therefore, in the theoretical sense New Area Studies should be more than cross- or interdisciplinary but rather “post-disciplinary”. Boike Rehbein has proposed a critical theory in the form of a kaleidoscopic dialectic, in which a relational epistemology transcends prevailing dichotomies of universalism and relativism. Western principles of scientific cognition, based on the universalist thought of René Descartes, Georg Hegel and Karl Marx, presupposed that the world is a unitary totality, which can be explained from one single, objective perspective. Theodor Adorno instead came up with a relational understanding of reality, which he labelled constellation or configuration. Following up on Adorno and Norbert Elias’s idea of figuration, Rehbein argues that the object of research is not independent but consists of a multitude of relations, which are situated not on the level of totality but on that of specificity (Rehbein 2015). The understanding of reality as a set of specific relations, which cannot be explained fully on the basis of cognition, is the fundamental point of departure for New Area Studies’s meta-theory.

On a more pragmatic level, Area Studies can neither be merely descriptive (something it is often accused of) nor engage in the verification and/or falsification of Western theory but should produce theory itself. With its focus on specificity, the kaleidoscopic dialectic has the potential to generate theory, not of the universalistic kind but what has been labelled as “middle-range”. In another publication I have already outlined that mid-range theoretical concepts entail comparativity, in the sense that they are both globally referential and area-specific at the same time (Houben 2017). Earlier theoretical interventions

originating from Southeast Asian Studies match exactly this format – think of theatre state, *mandala* state, geobody of the nation, Zomia, galactic polity, etc. The key element shared by all these categories is that they have been grounded in area-specific cases yet framed in such a way that they could apply to similar space-time configurations in other parts of the world. The idea of Benedict Anderson on the “imagined communities” underlying Southeast Asian nationalisms (Anderson 1983) could successfully be extended to Europe and elsewhere and for this reason it entered mainstream theoretical work

Area Studies is often practised through the application of a mix of established methodologies. Superficially, this habit could be rated as an indication of its non-disciplinary character. Indeed, “areanists” often use the methods of the root discipline they were trained in at some point of their academic career, such as linguistics, history, politics, anthropology and the like. Newer methodologies are a bit more sophisticated since, depending on the object of research, they engage in methodological “triangulation”, i.e. a combination of disciplinary methodologies that seem to fit best for the study of a particular subject within an area. This mixed methodology is then thought to offer the best empirical results for non-Western area contexts. The problem is that the way in which research data is generated and then analysed still reflects Western ontologies, with the result that non-Western cultural patterns often fall through the cracks of the analytical grid that is applied.

Parallel to a comprehensive theory, it would therefore be important to develop a meta-methodology that is specific to Area Studies, which would then underscore its disciplinary nature. Without wanting to diminish the existing methodological repertoire, which includes participant observation, critical text analysis, conducting interviews, oral history, statistical analysis and the like, the question remains of how area studies should analyse the data generated in ways that are particular to the discipline. At this juncture a case could be made for the mapping method of situational analysis (SA), which is a sequel to the grounded theory method (GTM). The grounded theory method does not start from any existing theory, which is then tested in the form of a case study, but involves empirical data collection in combination with interactive analysis. The data are analysed in several steps in order to develop abstract categories that form the basis for independent theory production.

Critiques of the grounded theory method have emerged with regard to the biased role of the researcher and the nature of the interaction between the researcher and his/her interlocutors. Nevertheless, the advantage of GTM remains that the knowledge acquired and the abstractions produced always reflect specific chronotopical contexts. Yet how to integrate context into analysis and how to avoid conceptual simplification when making abstractions on the basis of rendering concrete social processes remain unresolved issues. In contrast, the situational analysis method (SA), as developed by Adele Clarke

and others (2015), does not research social processes but looks at social arenas, which are inferred from field data on the basis of several rounds of relational mapping exercises. SA ultimately aims at the production of situated knowledge, marked by place, time and circumstance. The aim is not to separate object from subject, micro from macro, individual from society but rather to show the ways in which these are intertwined (Connley 2019: 72–80).

Briefly summarising my previous discussion on the subject matter, theory and methodology of new area studies, it appears that the core of these lies in the aim of finding relational spatiotemporal outcomes instead of making static, singular and generalised claims of truth. The main subject matter, focusing on processes of world-making within a perspectival time-space constellation called “area”, puts human agency and positionality at the centre of the scientific effort. Its theoretical basis moves beyond multi-/trans-/cross- or inter-disciplinarity and adopts kaleidoscopic dialectic as the principle of knowledge generation in the format of comparativity. Its methods consist of no mere eclectic triangulation of disciplinary methodologies but are based upon situational analysis. Taken together this package is homogenous enough, so I argue, to qualify for disciplinary status.

Additional criteria of disciplinarity are fulfilled as well: own programmes of teaching and research, specialised publication channels and a coherent scientific community. Since these are well known, these dimensions can be dealt with in brief. Leading institutions of Southeast Asian Studies worldwide combine teaching and research but are also embedded in broader ventures of Asian, Afro-Asian or global studies. Their transregional and interdisciplinary institutional setups allow for students and specialists alike to transcend what Claudia Derichs called the tunnel vision of conventional Area Studies, to explore alternative epistemologies and engage in international scholarly cooperation across socio-cognitive geographies (Derichs 2017).

As far as specialised publishing outlets are concerned, there is no doubt that area studies has its own avenues of knowledge transmission. Major academic publishers have series of (Southeast) Asian Studies volumes and there exist specialised international journals – ranging from the prestigious *Journal of Asian Studies* and *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* to German national ones such as *IQAS*, *Asien* and the *Journal of Southeast Asian Affairs*. At the beginning of my digressions I pointed to the EuroSEAS association and its bi-annual conferences, where hundreds of Southeast Asianists meet, exchanging information and truly experiencing the fact of belonging to a single scientific community.

## The way forward

After having made a case for Southeast Asian Studies as a branch of the emerging discipline of New Area Studies, the question remains of what should be

done to realise this project of upgrading its status in the scientific landscape. The main answer lies, I think, in greater cooperation and exchange between institutions and scholars within and between the world regions concerned. Here too creativity and ingenuity are needed to transcend existing formats of scholarly cooperation and engage in a true exchange of knowledge based on mutual respect and equality as part of a New Area Studies ethics. The current digital infrastructure and improved conditions for mobility can facilitate this to an extent that was impossible twenty or thirty years ago. What is also needed is a reconsideration of the principles of intellectual property that are now vested in the individual scholars and their institutions.

Until now, and in contrast to the natural sciences, publications in area studies are mostly single-authored. The number and quality of publications of each individual scholar is an important criterion for his/her academic career. Therefore, all Southeast Asianists are more or less compelled to become involved in a rat race for the highest number and the most prestigious publications. Participation in joint publications and in publications that appear in Southeast Asia instead of the West are still ranked rather low. This logic of university assessment should be overhauled and replaced by a mechanism in which the originality and scientific merit of publications is appreciated rather than their individual authorship and sheer number.

In addition, students should be trained from the beginning to engage in group research. The scope of the most promising themes in area studies is simply too large to be covered by a single scholar any longer. These research groups can now be pluri-local, involving specialists as well as students from Southeast Asia and other parts of the world in virtual classrooms. Joint field research, online discussion groups and several persons writing simultaneously on the same paper are techniques that can easily be realised as a result of increased mobility and digital technology. The results of such endeavours should be uploaded on an open access platform, so that hierarchies of knowledge production are levelled. Rules organising proper scientific conduct in such an open environment and new mechanisms of scientific quality assessment should be developed, so that individual scholars still benefit from their engagement in scientific exchange for their own individual careers.

This all may sound very idealistic but the fact that Southeast Asian Studies is a rather small discipline-in-the-making, where most specialists know each other face-to-face and are informed about each other's research interests, creates a potential for commonality that is lacking in the large, established disciplines. At least in Europe national funding agencies are losing their importance in the face of European institutions. This heightens the pressure to engage in international cooperation in any case.

I am aware that my argument in favour of New Area Studies becoming a discipline and for a new way of organising research and teaching can be con-

tested. This outline is by no means a complete let alone finished project but only a blueprint for what should happen. Yet, given the current state of an ongoing and increasingly differentiated debate in area studies, I think it is the right moment to try to capture where exactly the potential for the future of New Area Studies lies. Despite many struggles and reorganisations, Southeast Asian Studies is still one of the most dynamic and intellectually vibrant fields in Area Studies worldwide. Its complexity makes its innovative potential high and I think that its practitioners should try to seize the opportunities that are now surfacing.

## **A Comment on Vincent Houben’s “New Area Studies as an Emerging Discipline. The Way Ahead for Southeast Asian Studies”**

Ramon Guillermo

Most accounts locate the heyday of Southeast Asian (SEA) Studies during the post-WWII era, especially when the Vietnam War was in full, devastating swing and a lot of money was being poured into US counter-insurgency campaigns throughout SEA. This all-around war effort naturally involved academic institutions, which found themselves awash with funds for undertaking research projects (including those not directly involved in the war or even opposed to it). Indeed, as the historian Wang Gungwu reminds us, the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) cannot be understood separately from two major events of the twentieth century, namely, the anti-communist massacre of 1965 in Indonesia and the Vietnam War. SEA Studies, as it is known today, was born in a state of exception and grew up in a state of war. There is nothing like a war to bring together interdisciplinary teams to work on a single goal, and there is nothing like a theatre of war to make one appreciate the value of an Area Studies approach. The end of this state of exception and transition to the “post-ideological” globalised era was arguably heralded by the EDSA Uprising in the Philippines, which produced in its turn an entire liberal, orientalist and mystificatory literature on the “peaceful” or “spiritual” Filipino.

The challenge to SEA Studies in the West, which finds itself persisting beyond the state of exception, is how to flourish and to avoid the fate of languishing indefinitely or even of totally disappearing. The parameters that determine the

current state and future of SEA Studies, as well as all other academic disciplines, have been determined by what may be called the neoliberal takeover of the university. We live in an era of globalised competitive university rankings, quantitative performance benchmarking and performance metrics such as h-indices, citation rates and journal impact factors. At the mercy of these disciplinary forces, SEA Studies in the West, with its numerous “*Orchideenfächer*” (“orchid subjects”, i.e. exotic, unusual subjects with small numbers of students), has repeatedly fallen victim to rationalisation, downsizing, merging and even closure of many of its small academic institutions.

Given this difficult academic environment, Houben points to the perception of a lack of disciplinary coherence in SEA Studies as the key factor in the weak institutional foothold of SEA Studies in the academic domain. He therefore proposes the recognition of SEA Studies as a discipline called “New Area Studies”. As an emergent discipline, SEA Studies must possess a certain coherence in terms of its subject matter, theory and methodology, according to Houben. Despite the fact that he attempts to be as general in his formulations as possible, there is no doubt that Houben’s formulations are exclusively oriented to SEA Studies in the West. For example, his elaboration on the “clear-cut epistemological terrain” of SEA Studies, the main aim of which is “to gain a deep understanding of its alterity”, is arguably a project of SEA Studies in the West and not that of SEA Studies in SEA, where there may not be the same emphasis on matters of “alterity” to Europeans. Moreover, Houben’s proposals for going beyond “Western” modes of thought are based entirely on an internal Western conversation taking place within the Western intellectual tradition. His proposals for a theoretical grounding of the discipline in the “kaleidoscopic dialectic” (Boike Rehbein) and, for the methodological side, on “situational analysis” (Adele Clarke) are stringently Euro-American in origin. Southeast Asian scholars and their intellectual traditions are firmly and politely excluded from the all-important conversations regarding the subject matter, theory and methodology of SEA Studies.

Things become even more unreflective as Houben goes on to discuss how SEA Studies meets the additional criteria of disciplinarity such as teaching and research programmes, specialised publication channels and a coherent scientific community. By consistently eliding the problem of existing power relations among the various centres of production and dissemination of SEA Studies on a global scale, Houben can only provide us with an extremely incomplete and partial account of the current situation of SEA Studies. When he mentions in quick succession the “leading institutions of Southeast Asian studies worldwide”, the “major academic publishers” and the “prestigious journals”, one immediately wonders if any of these are located in SEA (barring the special case of Singapore). He admits, however, that “publications that appear in Southeast Asia instead of the West are still ranked rather low” and that “all

Southeast Asianists are more or less compelled to become involved in a rat race for the highest number and the most prestigious publications”. If, in light of their careers, it really doesn’t make sense for Southeast Asianists in the West to publish in “non-prestigious” journals in SEA, does the same apply to Southeast Asians doing SEA Studies in Southeast Asia? Is it really such a shame for Southeast Asians to publish in their “non-prestigious” journals, in their own languages, so that they can have some kind of humble, non-prestigious dialogue about themselves among themselves? Do Southeast Asianists in the West and in SEA (as well as those in other parts of the world) really belong to a “single scientific community”, as Houben believes? Do they really have the same kind of access to those “leading institutions”, “major academic publishers” and “prestigious journals” to which he refers? Is he really serious when he writes that “most specialists [in SEA Studies] know each other face-to-face and are informed about each other’s research interests”?

Granted, Houben may accept all of these “injustices” as givens which must, at least for the time being, be accepted as academic fate. But these injustices are precisely those that will continue to consign scholars and academic institutions in SEA to a permanent condition of marginality and intellectual dependency. SEA Studies scholars in SEA cannot therefore afford to be uncritical of the current directions and tendencies of the neoliberal university and how these shape their field of study today. But let us consider SEA Studies in SEA separately for a moment. Perhaps the error of SEA Studies in SEA is that it has tried for too long to become a mirror image, in terms of conceptualisation and institutionalisation, of SEA Studies in the West. Because of this, it has ended up trapped in a merely reactive game of catch-up. Worse, it has been locked in a perennial and seemingly inescapable “politics of recognition” that ensures its permanently dependent and subordinate status in relation to SEA Studies in the West (another colonial legacy for sure). This should not be the case. SEA Studies in SEA must assume a different form and must grow organically from the multiple and interconnected networks of scholars working in SEA.

However, in spite of all the good intentions, even here the networks are extremely uneven. Linguistic, geographical, historical and cultural affinities in SEA continue to overdetermine in almost random and contingent ways the degree and extent of academic cooperation and intellectual convergence in SEA Studies. Nothing can be forced in this case. An exploratory and experimental spirit may therefore be more conducive to the organic development and growth of SEA Studies in SEA rather than a disciplinary process dictated from the West and formulated in accordance with the inexorable imperatives of the neoliberal university.

It may seem paradoxical, but one point of convergence for Southeast Asianists in SEA (though perhaps initially mainly involving Indonesians, Filipinos and Thais) was the great and warm personality of Benedict Anderson. Ben, an

“orang bule” who claimed to have invented the term itself, was a true Southeast Asian cosmopolitan intellectual. He was a “Western” Southeast Asianist who looked upon the intellectual traditions and cultures of the nations he studied with deep respect, astonishing openness and boundless humility. To enrich his own theories, he learned voraciously from “marginal” and “forgotten” thinkers of SEA with much enthusiasm and pride. Having often walked the streets of Metro Manila with him, I saw how he looked upon ordinary people and even street children as his teachers. He deplored the turn of the neoliberal university towards the devaluation of languages, literatures and cultures in the study of SEA. He despised the careerism, bean-counting and narrow disciplinary focus of the contemporary neoliberal academic milieu and thought that absolutely nothing good would ever come of it. A few years after his death, an extraordinary conference on Ben Anderson was held in Yogyakarta at the Universitas Sanata Dharma (2017). The great majority of participants were from Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines and Japan, and most of the papers on the most diverse topics were delivered in Bahasa Indonesia. In warm affection for Ben, hundreds of participants and students came even though school was out of session. At a meeting at the end of the conference attended by the organisers, we made plans for more such conferences and seminars to further understand, advance and critique Ben’s ideas and more importantly to use these meetings to develop a stronger dialogue among ourselves towards a deepening of SEA Studies by and for Southeast Asians. Though that plan has not yet materialised, there may actually be a lot of potential in it.

Southeast Asians weren’t mere objects of study for Ben. To him, we weren’t just fodder for dissertations, glorious academic careers and institutional respectability. We were his friends, interlocutors, fierce critics, collaborators and comrades. We were bound together in thinking and dreaming about the future of Southeast Asia.

In order to attain its potential, SEA studies in SEA needs to overcome at least two things initially. Firstly, scholars in SEA should overcome the stubbornly national orientation that limits the scope of their study. It is a fact that up to now, the great majority of scholars from SEA who take their PhDs abroad concentrate on studying their own countries while exerting hardly any effort to study other Southeast Asian languages or to engage in comparative approaches. They may thus be negatively pigeonholed as “scholar-informants” on their own countries rather than as being on a par with other highly trained Southeast Asianists. Another result of this parochial narrowness is the quite comical situation of universities in SEA having to rely on visiting scholars from Australia or the US, for example, to give lectures, analyses and timely updates on contemporary events in their neighbouring countries. Even among themselves, Southeast Asianists in SEA generally continue to be consigned to a marginal or secondary status as specialists on their own countries at the

“international” level. It is as if the pinnacle of scholarship on German Studies, for instance, could be achieved in Brunei rather than in Germany, or that such a state of affairs could even be tenable.

Secondly, efforts should be made to overcome the replication of the binary West-East logic in the orientation of SEA Studies even within SEA. In order to address this, and in spite of the extremely limited resources available, academic centres of SEA Studies in SEA ought to develop multi-nodal networks of sustainable cooperation in teaching, research and publication involving academic institutions within and without SEA. Such networks, which will have their centres in SEA, will hopefully give rise to more open dialogical spaces of communication where essential questions on the subject matter, theories, methodologies, power relations and ethical practices in and of SEA Studies can, for the first time, seriously be posed and collectively debated on a genuinely global scale.

## **“New Area Studies as an Emerging Discipline” – A Critical Commentary**

Elísio Macamo

Vincent Houben’s think piece is a passionate and bold case for the transformation of Southeast Asian Studies into a discipline of its own. This, according to Houben, would serve two equally important goals. One would be to help address the problems that this particular area of study faces in terms of recognition within the German academic establishment, a condition that undermines the ability of its practitioners to secure research funds and adequate funding for academic programmes. The other goal would be to bring an intellectual developmental process to its logical end by not only acknowledging a distinct research and study object, but also by delineating a clear theoretical approach and set of methodological procedures to support any endeavours that invoke Asian Studies as a discipline.

It is fair to make a distinction between two types of concern in Houben’s think piece. There is, on the one hand, a practical concern and, on the other, an epistemological one. The former is a statement of the constraints faced by Southeast Asian Studies that necessitate its transformation into a discipline.

The latter offers a tightly argued scholarly case for the proposed solution. Both types of concern are compelling in and of themselves. However, it is not entirely clear whether together they make the case that the author believes he is making. Treating Southeast Asian Studies as a discipline in order to overcome logistical constraints is a legitimate case to make, one which does not place any kind of onus on the author to demonstrate that it constitutes a discipline in its own right. After all, developments since Bologna have created a broad institutional framework within which disciplines have increasingly played a subordinate role in the distribution of positions and funds within universities. It is true that old habits die hard and, consequently, an appeal to disciplines still commands respect. Nonetheless, it is fair to assume that Area Studies has not been disadvantaged on that account. Within universities it is arguably the case that the successful integration of disciplines within the Area Studies construct has, if anything, helped it more than harmed it. In other words, Area Studies appears to have symbolic capital that may be greater than Vincent Houben might be prepared to acknowledge.

The epistemological case is a refreshing statement of the (continuing) relevance of Area Studies. The way Houben frames the object – as “world-making” that occurs at a local spot where different time dimensions and spatial scales intersect – is a powerful attempt to avoid the pitfalls of essentialism that have rendered Area Studies guilty of being a tool for Western dominance. This is accomplished by adopting a decidedly relational approach that places emphasis on conceptualising reality as, to use Houben’s own words, a set of relations. Framed in this manner, the intellectual pursuit underlying the study of world-making does not aim at applying theory and validating it empirically somewhere, but rather at description, with the aim of producing novel theory. This is the sense in which Houben favours a methodological approach informed by grounded theory and, in particular, by situational analysis, for the focus is on emergent entities, rather than on perennial ones that are accounted for by overarching truths.

It is hard not to agree with Houben’s passionate description of what the discipline of “New Area Studies” is all about. However, the description is an equally strong case for the preservation of Area Studies as a framework within which disciplines constrained by the historical and political context of their emergence can engage in meaningful theoretical and conceptual soul-searching when confronted by an elusive object that must not be taken for granted. There is a powerful exercise in humility that Houben’s account of the new discipline invites us all to engage in. Such an exercise makes room for a deeper understanding of Area Studies as a form of methodology of the social sciences and the humanities, for the epistemological framework it offers is one that challenges researchers to critically evaluate how they frame their object and how they are able to produce credible accounts of reality.

Forcing Southeast Asian Studies into the corset of a discipline in order to respond to financial constraints blunts its critical edge by recreating the original sin of Area Studies, namely the Western gaze that renders the world intelligible as part of the “world-making” concerns of a community of scholars who feel marginalised at home. Such a discipline would necessarily invite a call to arms from the scholars from the region concerned. They would challenge a potential pretence of knowledge that pays lip service to unknown, or repressed, ontologies conjured up by the theorists of the new discipline to lend legitimacy to their own claims to truth. If there is anything that we have learnt over the years, especially in the exciting responses to the West issuing from the Rest, it is that the scholarly field has become a veritable minefield to any scholar based in the West who lays claims to knowledge about the Rest. However well-meaning this may be, and there is no doubt about this as far as Vincent Houben is concerned, it is easy to mistake such claims as ploys that serve the reproduction of Western dominance by other means.

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