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Vincent J.H. Houben

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES
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edited by
Christoph Schuck
Department of Political Science
Justus-Liebig-University of Giessen

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Introduction

Southeast Asian studies are a part of area studies; Indonesian studies a part of Southeast Asian studies. The area studies' approach is important but at same time controversial. I want to deal with some fundamental aspects first.

Scientific knowledge on human societies is produced by disciplines – fields of study that emerged in the West over the centuries and culminated in a structure that we find at the universities of today. These disciplines are strong institutionally and also theoretically.

Area studies are born out of contact with the non-European world, especially during the colonial era. Another type of knowledge production emerged not focussing on neatly divided parts of reality but on areas. Information on non-European regions was generated by the curiosity of travellers, the need to collect information on indigenous societies as a precondition for colonisation. Training of colonial officials was both scientific and vocational: language, law, religion, indigenous as well as colonial institutions of particular areas were studied and taught. After decolonisation a decline of tropical studies set in but then a re-emergence because of Cold War interests (non-synchronous between the US and Europe, countrywise in ex-colonies) and especially since 9.11. Global conflict resolution or prevention requires a critical mass of information especially with regard to soft facts.

Area studies take a particular region as an organising principle for assembling and generating knowledge. They are therefore set within a geographical delimited space but are at the same time multidisciplinary in focus. This has profound consequences in the practical and theoretical sense.

Area studies everywhere are in a constant struggle for survival for several reasons. They are often seen as 'unscientific' while too little theory-driven and too little theory-generating; globalisation as a form of homogenisation is supposed to render them superfluous (the idea of the global village). In America they were seen as product of Cold War interests (know your enemy), in Europe as 'orientalist' i.e. born out of the will to dominate and to colonise. Area studies are institutionally weak since they do not fit in with the disciplinary organisation of universities. Their knowledge production is also highly specific and difficult to integrate in generalising disciplines. Often they are seen as too exotic to assist in concrete decision-making. The concept of a demarcated region as such is increasingly under attack (globalisation, processes of transnationalism make boundaries of regions porous).

But there is another side of the coin that points into a more promising direction. The term Southeast Asia is only 50 years old, seems maybe overhauled in West but is increasingly important for Southeast Asia itself (ASEAN as re-emergence of pre-colonial patterns of interaction, international security concerns, border-crossing risks and disasters). Taking an area as heuristic tool is valid, should be defined from the core and not from the limits, asks what is different in Southeast Asia compared to China and India. More fundamentally discipline and area cannot be separated – many of the major disciplines (humanities, social sciences) are unknowingly area studies of the West although they claim to produce universal knowledge. In reverse, many area specialists are trained in a particular discipline – the interface between area and discipline simply leads to particular sets of questions to be asked and particular methods to be applied. Some of the terms springing from the study of Southeast Asia (agricultural revolution, mandala state, theatre state, moral economy, imagined community) have become key concepts in the social sciences. The specificity of Southeast Asia is characterised by cultural formations that need to be understood in order to see why and in what ways Southeast Asia/Indonesia is different from Europe/Germany. How I see Indonesia from my area studies' perspective I will show below.

1. Southeast Asian studies in Germany

In Germany area studies, Southeast Asian studies in particular, appear weak at first sight because Germany did not possess a colonial history such as Holland, France or Britain, its colonial possessions being rather limited in extent (East Africa, Samoa). Outer-European matters remained non-item for a long time – a change has come since the reunification and Germany's involvement in the global war on terror (Afghanistan). German Southeast Asian studies are also modest in stature because of the structure of the university system. Higher education policy is mainly a matter of the individual states within the German federation – therefore there is no national policy on Asian studies. In Germany there is still a strong philological tradition. Also teaching and research programmes are strongly shaped by the personal profiles of individual professors.

Chairs for modern Southeast Asian studies in general are to be found in Berlin (Humboldt) and Passau, whereas in Hamburg professorial positions are devoted to individual countries – Thailand + Vietnam – and Austronesian linguistics. In Frankfurt Southeast Asian studies mean Malay-Indonesian languages and cultures; in Münster Southeast Asia/Indonesia belongs to anthropology; in Freiburg it is part of political science and anthropology, in Cologne geography, in Bonn language and religion, in Gießen politics etc. Indonesia takes the primary rank in terms of student and staff numbers.

An entity of a different sorting, since it does not belong to the university landscape, is GIGA, the German Institute of Global and Area Studies, in which there is an Institute of Asian studies that is paid by federal money and has as its mission to study and watch the area, with the aim to generate information on current developments for official and public use. It has twelve staff members, of which three are Southeast Asian specialists. Finally, we find Southeast Asian specialists in research centres of the Max-Planck Foundation in Halle (Institute for Social Anthropology), in graduate schools (Asia Africa at Halle) and in international politics' think tanks of the federal government, such as SWP (German Institute for International Politics and Security) or research institutes such as ZMO (Centre for Modern Oriental Studies) in Berlin.

Taken together there is more manpower than you would expect but it is geographically scattered and covers a wide variety of combinations of discipline and country-expertise. On the other hand, you may argue there is a hidden German community of Southeast Asian experts, that all know each other in person. It is a pity that this manpower is not really bundled, although there are organisations that try to do this, for instance the DGA, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Asienkunde or German Society for the Study of Asia, which is focussed on bringing the modernists together.

2. What do area studies have on offer? The example of Indonesia

When I talk to a German public on Indonesian modern and contemporary developments I come up with a number of basic observations, which might be of interest to you too. Indonesia is shaped by three basic fault lines:

- the asymmetrical relationship between Java and the Outer Islands. The human and natural geographic basics are clear – whereas the limited territory of Java (7%) houses about half of the total population, the major economic resources (in the form of oil, teak forest, maritime resources and large plantations) are found outside Java. Most cities and industrial areas are, however, on Java. Essentially, therefore, the question since 1945 has been how to distribute power and income between Java and the Outer Islands. Whereas in the 1950s Indonesia was turned into a unitary state, in effect an integrated economic-fiscal system was only realised after 1965. At the end of the 1950s the rising tide of regional secession

was ended and decided in favour of the centre in Java, when the PRRI-Permesta rebellions were suppressed. Since the late 1990s decentralisation was again introduced.

- the problematic relationship between nation-state, Islamic preponderance and ethnic plurality. In Indonesia, the state inherited from the Dutch was only partly a nation, as the independence struggle had forged a temporary and unfinished nation. Islamic leaders were disappointed by the fact that in 1945 Islam was not given a position of preference, and basically a common goal of many Islamic parties today is exactly that. Ethnic policies were largely one-sided and coercive, in the sense that minority groups had to assimilate and adapt to a common, strongly Javanese-flavoured national identity.
- the struggle for power between parties or *aliran* on the one hand and institutionalised groups (like the army, corporate business, the bureaucracy, the presidency + clientele) on the other. Anderson, in his famous article on old state and new society, drew a comparison between the colonial state and the new order, which were both marked by a dominance of the state over society, whereas the turmoil of the 1950s was a consequence of society overtaking the state. Is the post-1998 order similar to the 1950s?

3. Reform and good governance in Indonesia

It all started in summer 1997 with the financial crisis, which rapidly spread out in the region and led to a crisis of governance. The World Bank definition of governance is helpful here: governance = the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development. To put things in a nutshell – international organisations intervened in the Asian Crisis and offered financial help to the countries that had run into trouble. But the help was conditional, since the causes were not sought in the dynamics of the global economic system but rather in internal structural deficiencies, especially in the field of political economy.

This development triggered another thrust – which came from society and led to the downfall of Suharto and the resumption of democracy. After the shock of the Asian crisis and the end of the Orde Baru were absorbed, there came another shock – that of 9.11 and the global war on terror, that put Indonesia, with its predominantly Muslim population, again on the international agenda, now driven by global security considerations.

Ongoing reform is needed to further a more democratic, accountable and transparent system of government and therefore extends to more fields of public administration than only the economy. It aims at the promotion of democratic or participatory government, the strengthening of civil society, the respect for human rights, an increased efficiency, more impartiality and less corruption of the executive and the rule of law (an independent judiciary).

However, as an area specialist, I am especially interested in the internal dynamics that move Indonesia in this direction or away from it. Democracy is not only a matter of institutions and elections but also internal contestation between different agents and cultural orientations – and it therefore takes time. Important is to know what the stakeholders in the Indonesian state and society have to win by democratisation and good governance, how the interface between external pressures and internal dynamics is changing. I think German experts on Indonesia do have a role to play, not only by giving independent advice to policy-makers in Germany but also by communicating with administrative and military elites in Indonesia, of whom you are representatives.

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About the Author:

Prof. Dr. Vincent J.H. Houben wurde am 2. Mai 1957 in Amsterdam geboren. Nach Abschluss des Gymnasiums, 1976, ging er nach Leiden und studierte dort moderne Geschichte mit Schwerpunkt auf Indonesien und mit Indonesisch und Javanisch als Nebenfächern. Abschluss des Studiums 1982. Danach wurde er als wissenschaftlicher Assistent angestellt und bereitete seine Promotion vor. Der Erwerb des Doktor-Grades folgte 1987 durch das Verfassen eines Buches mit dem Titel ‚Kraton en Kumpeni. Surakarta en Yogyakarta 1830-1870‘. Dieses Buch wurde 1994 in englischer Fassung publiziert. Seit 1985 war Dr. Houben wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter an der Abteilung Sprachen und Kulturen von Südostasien und Ozeanien, wo er moderne Geschichte Südasiens, insbesondere Indonesiens, lehrte. 1993 nahm er eine Gastdozentur an der University of Queensland in Nordaustralien wahr. Ab 1996 war er Studiendekan der Philosophischen Fakultät in Leiden. Vom 1. Oktober 1997 bis 31. März 2001 war er Inhaber des Lehrstuhls für Südostasienkunde an der Universität Passau. Seit April 2001 ist er Professor an der Humboldt Universität in Berlin.