

BOOK REVIEWS

***Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis.* Edited by Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008. Softcover: 455pp.**

This audacious collection of articles takes on the insouciance of the American sub-field of “comparative politics” towards area studies in general and Southeast Asian studies in particular. The authors make a strong case for how Southeast Asia’s dense history and politics can serve as a “laboratory” in which to test theories of comparative politics, thereby contributing to the drawn-out debate between area studies and the quest for “grand” theory (and over which methodology best explains political realities). The editors also claim that bringing Southeast Asian studies into comparative politics would help “in breaking down essentialist mindsets” (p. 328), notably “primordialist views of identity” and religion.

Where does this boldness come from? In part it derives from the authors, especially the authors at the rank of assistant professor, who have been well-trained in their craft. They deploy with ease the latest concepts in comparative politics, such as game theory, constructivism, situationalism, middle-range theory, and place them alongside the rich and long *tradition of qualitative research on Southeast Asia*.

Likewise there is a pride in being legatees of an area studies scholarship that has produced path-breaking concepts such as “plural societies”, “booty capitalism”, “moral economy”, “imagined communities” and “weapons of the weak”. The essays include impressive reviews of the works of Southeast Asianists dating from the colonial era through to late twentieth century giants like Clifford Geertz, Benedict Anderson and James Scott, to the generation

immediately preceding the young authors such as Mary Callahan, Thomas McKenna, Duncan McCargo, Vedi Hadiz, John Sidel and Paul Hutchcroft.

The authors' engagements with state theory (Erik Kuhonta), democratization and authoritarianism (Dan Slater), party politics (Allen Hicken), civil society (Meredith Weiss), religion (Kikue Hamayotsu), political ethnicity (Jamie Davidson), political economy (Regina Abrami and Richard Doner), rural political economy (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung), peasants (Benedict Kerklviet), contentious politics (Tuong Vu) and globalization (Greg Felker) are outstanding, although there is some unevenness among them. For example, most of the essays read like literature reviews in a dissertation, the result perhaps of the authors having to work within the parameters laid out by the editors. Moreover, the collection could have been more engrossing if more of the authors had tackled the inadequacies of comparativists who have uncritically applied recent theory to Southeast Asian politics. Dan Slater adopts this approach towards Barbara Geddes' otherwise highly praised work on authoritarian breakdown using game theory. The book could also have been improved if the authors had expanded their review to include the works of Southeast Asian scholars (or those based in the region) and engage them in the same way Meredith Weiss does with local studies on Malaysian civil society movements. But perhaps these have been set aside for a future volume. (On a side note, one cannot help but notice how only two authors — Weiss and Allen Hicken — have made it a point to include non-English Southeast Asian sources in their essays).

Don Emerson's reflections on the debate between "area studies" and "theory" will enable readers, particularly non-political scientists, to better understand the context in which this book has been published. It is not clear, however, whether it will resolve the controversy over the discipline's conscious attempt to end the life of area studies. Emerson, one of the book's senior authors, remains optimistic, although it is difficult to share this sentiment. Little has changed since Ben Anderson observed in 1992 that "there is no 'natural' fit between the institutional and intellectual logic of modern American universities and area studies, nor, I think, *will there ever be*" (*Southeast Asian Studies in the Balance*, 1992, pp. 30–31, emphasis added).

Indicative of the problem is the admission of one senior comparativist quoted by Slater that those in the field "still do not know why and when people with guns obey people without them"

(p. 79). Considering the outright hostility of those like David Laitin, who sees area studies as “a warping of the scientific frame” and “a threat to scientific progress” (quoted by Emerson, p. 302), one wonders what reception this remarkable collection of essays will receive in the United States.

On the other hand, it is equally unclear how Southeast Asianists will respond to the contributors’ respectful but critical overview of their work. The criticisms levelled at their work for being “descriptive”, insufficiently analytical and non-comparative will surely sting. And while they note exceptions, the authors also worry about the preponderance of “one-country studies”. Yet, they seem to forget that “descriptive” or “one-country” studies are not uniquely Southeast Asian; they litter the terrain of comparative politics. The sub-field has actually produced very few works that cover a wide span of societies; the best are often done by scholars who are not formal comparativists. Some began their careers as such but matured intellectually only by becoming multi-disciplinary and refusing to be encumbered by the theoretical demands of the sub-field. Indeed, if one thread unites the top Southeast Asianists reviewed in this book, it is their refusal to work within the constricting narratives of their formal training.

The intellectual idiosyncrasy of these scholars has produced works which have had a profound impact beyond political science and contributed to both “knowledge accumulation” and “theory building”. Emerson astutely points out that “openness remains greater in Southeast Asian studies than in political science” (p. 309). Dogmatism in fact comes from the “scientists” of the discipline; it is in area studies where intellectual flexibility appears increasingly to be the norm.

Another factor is the general public. Emerson reiterates Francis Fukuyama’s frustration with the failure of political science departments to provide Americans with convincing explanations for the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and succeeding events. Unsurprisingly, the works of an Anderson or Scott are read and commented upon by an immense diversity of readers, while the public audience seeking Laitin’s or Robert Bates’ works is very thin.

There may be hope, however. The shift away from the simplistic worldview of American neo-conservatism to the political realism of the Obama administration has revived focus on the political and empirical realities of the world. Studies on Southeast Asia, a critical area in the US fight to eradicate groups like Al Qaeda and Jemaah Islamiyah, may again become the beneficiary of state resources as

once the Vietnam War brought federal funding for studies on the region. If this does happen, *Southeast Asia in Political Science* will be an indispensable guide to those wishing to understand the region's dynamic political life.

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