

Abstracts for presentation at the panel on:

*Area Studies of and within Southeast Asia. Problems and Prospects of Regional Theorizing within Global Flows,*

Convenor: *Prof. Dr. Christoph Antweiler*, Universität Bonn

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## **Abstracts**

### ***Introduction: Problems and Prospects of Area Studies on and within Southeast Asia***

**Christoph Antweiler, University of Bonn**

Southeast Asia is a diversified cultural realm with a high potential for generating theory. The region gave rise to several important concepts of the social sciences and cultural studies, e.g. *mandala state*, *plural society*, *involution*, *thick description* and *strategic group*. Area Studies are gaining a new momentum in Europe and Southeast Asia as well. Within the Bologna process new area-oriented studies were established at universities of several countries. In a world of trans-cultural flows we should ask again, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Area Studies. The potential of Area studies is to go beyond the current methodological nationalism and extreme relativism to seek for regional patterns or culminations of cultural flows. The dangers are e.g. misplaced concreteness and the tendency to overlook trans-boundary processes.

Some of the questions to be discussed are: What are useful ways of systematic comparison of societies and cultures within Southeast Asia? What is the relevance of interdisciplinary but regionally specific vs. disciplinary but regionally unspecified research? What are the specific contributions of classics in area studies which are useful for area-oriented theory work nowadays? What are political implications of Area Studies? Why do most researchers from Southeast Asia confine their research and teaching to their own culture or country? What chances lie in new approaches to critical regional studies coming from within the region? Specific topics potentially addressed in the papers could be: general traits of Southeast Asia despite the tremendous diversity, family resemblances of Southeast Asian cultures, Southeast Asian sub-regions, regionally controlled comparison, border regions of Southeast Asia, Area Studies as geopolitics, Southeast Asia as an imagined region, local concepts of Southeast Asia as a whole, strategic regional essentialism and alternatives to “Southeast Asia” (e.g. *Southeastern Asia*, *Asia Pacific*, *Pacific Asia*, *Australasia*). Regarding the current research scene in Europe we could also discuss – last not least – the question whether Area Studies are a clever means of current European science administration to cut down localized social science and cultural studies.

### ***Political Science and the state in Southeast Asia***

**Wolfram Schaffar, University Hildesheim**

The renaissance of studies on the state in political science has inspired a new interest in studies on the state in Southeast Asian countries. Area studies have to cope with the question whether they can add anything to a general theory of the state, or, less ambitious, in how far the state in Southeast Asia shows particular features which justify an area studies approach to it. The corpus of literature on the state in Southeast Asia roughly falls into three categories which can be characterized due to the criterion, in how far they acknowledge and conceptualize a specific regional quality of the state in the area.

Approaches drawing on ideas of modernisation theory would deny that there is anything special about the state in Southeast Asia. Peculiar features are seen as pre-modern and are expected to get leveled to global standards in an overall trend of modernization. In this respect, modernisation theory meets concepts of globalisation where not only a leveling of state structures is expected, but the notion of state itself is predicted to lose importance in favour of a more fluid and global set of regulating structures (global governance).

A second type of approaches can be traced back to concepts like Dependencia or World System Theory from the 1970s and 1980s. As fundamental critique on modernization theory, these approaches argue that the position of a country in the global economy and the resulting dependencies on industrialized countries limit the development options and predetermine a development into a specific direction. Since most of the countries in Southeast Asia fall under this category, many peculiarities of the state can be explained by the position in the world system. However, the peculiarity is not defined in terms of a region, but in terms of a structurally defined position. As such, these approaches can explain how and why the state in Southeast Asia is different from the state in Europe, but they fail to explain differences between the state in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

Thirdly, approaches informed by cultural studies and anthropology have proposed analyses of the state in Southeast Asia which capture distinct, culturally or religiously grounded features: In concepts like Mandala state, Theatre State, the state and its specific structure derives from specific concepts of power. Other approaches draw on culturally or historically specific trajectories of development and challenges of state building in the Southeast Asian area.

Although some of these analysis have influenced the general theory of the state (e.g. Anderson's analysis of "the nation as imagined community"), it is not clear, in how far these concepts can be transferred to other countries outside the area.

After a brief introduction to the above mentioned approaches, I will discuss how the notion of "contested modernization" and concepts of the state as "material condensation of social power relations" (Nicos Poulantzas) can capture recent developments of the state in Southeast Asia and account for specific features in the area.

### ***Epistemic Cultures of Southeast Asian Studies: The Making of a Cultural Area***

**Rüdiger Korff, University of Passau**

Knowledge on Southeast Asia is produced in highly diverse and structurally heterogeneous epistemic cultures. A main structural difference is that in the region research on Southeast Asia is a mainstream activity, while in Europe such studies are regarded as studies of specific issues. For researchers the difference is that for scholars in Southeast Asia to study Southeast Asian issues is part of everyday academic work. For those from Europe field research in the region takes place under special conditions outside of routine academic work. Furthermore, English as the main language in which current research is published implies relative exclusion of scholars from the region, as well as those from non-English speaking regions of Europe.

This has the double implication that firstly limited, often specialized local epistemic cultures of southeast Asian studies evolve with little interaction, like a German or French discussion, a Thai and Vietnamese or Indonesia etc. discourse. Secondly, the English (British and American) discourse is directly connected through the language with the international discourse. This leads towards a certain dominance, and valorisation of knowledge through which local discourses are ignored and pushed to the periphery. Keeping in mind the argument that innovations and “scientific revolutions” (Kuhn) are usually initiated from the fringes and peripheries, the question is how these discourses can be integrated into the knowledge production process.