

Editorial

Unbounding area studies: Malaysian Studies beyond Malaysia and other geographies of knowing

Issues of geography have assumed an unusual prominence in recent work in Southeast Asian studies. Mostly carried out by historians and anthropologists, this work shares human geographers' concern to de-naturalize the nation-state as the default unit of social scientific analysis and to consider alternative scales and spatialities of research. In this editorial, we consider the implications of such critical self-reflection in area studies and connect it to related debates in human geography. Geographical scholarship has long cautioned against the dangers of falling into the 'territorial trap' of state-centred thinking (Agnew, 1994) and recognized the existence of network and flow-based topologies of knowledge which challenge the 'territorial presuppositions' of bounded areas (Thrift and Olds, 1996). Yet we are concerned to avoid the tendency either to hold 'area' and 'flow' studies apart or else to presume that the latter have somehow rendered the former obsolescent. In what ways can shifting senses of 'geography' reinvigorate, rather than undermine, area studies? And what does this, in turn, imply for geographical scholarship?

In an edited volume historians Kratoska et al. (2005) collected a series of essays by non-geographers which, in different ways, unsettle the conventional geographies of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies. In introducing *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*, Kratoska et al. reflect critically on the 'scholarly partitioning of the world known as Area Studies' (p. 5). They identify two main problems. The first concerns what is lost or ignored by framing knowledge within bounded regional containers (i.e., in this case, 'Southeast Asia'). Thus, Kratoska et al. cast the growth of global scale studies of systems as having emerged from a recognition that, 'the examination of phenomena within closed geographical frameworks disconnected from wider world cultures led researchers to overlook historical connections and unequal power relationships that extended beyond regions' (p. 10). A second problem concerns what might be understood as sub-regional partitioning – or the sub-division of area studies expertise into nation-state ter-

ritories. It is specifically *national* borders which, according to Kratoska et al., 'dominate the academic conceptualization of Southeast Asia' (p. 4). Like other recent work in Southeast Asian studies (e.g. Barnard, 2004), therefore, they see their contribution, in part, as one of de-naturalizing national boundaries through historicization and so challenging the dominance of 'a political-bureaucratic perspective that took the state as the fundamental unit of analysis'. As the editors themselves summarize, the chapters in the volume 'do not take geography as given, or space as bounded by fixed borders following political or academic conventions' (p. 12).

This kind of self-critique suggests a need for alternative 'geographies of knowing' to those which underpin bounded regional or national framings (Van Schendel, 2005). In his chapter in *Locating Southeast Asia*, Willem Van Schendel invokes a series of rather different mappings – borderlands, lattices, archipelagos, flows – to help overcome what he terms area studies' 'geographies of ignorance'. In a rather different way, Howard Dick, maps a regional economic geography of urban corridors which constitute an 'open system' extending beyond the conventional boundaries of Southeast Asia (to include Hong Kong, for example) (Dick, 2005). Meanwhile, according to Kratoska et al., when compared to knowledge constructed on the basis of countries, 'alternative geographical units based on groupings of people, networks, flows of goods, or arenas of ideas, are often more revealing' (p. 15). To what extent are such alternative geographies opposed to conventional mappings in area studies? According to Kratoska et al., the vogue for border-crossing, transnational and globalization studies is directly linked to area studies' fall from fashion (and fundability). They suggest that, 'the contrast between globalisation studies and area studies is stark' (p. 10) since the former have little interest in nationally-bounded analysis or in in-depth knowledge of 'local' languages, cultures and societies. Yet surely 'local knowledge' should be indispensable to any study concerned to understand the grounding or territorialization of network processes. In addition, borders of various kinds – including those of nation-states

– remain important in ‘globalisation’ or transnational studies (how can there be transnationalism, for example, without national – or, rather, nation-state – borders?).

It is worth noting that those strands of work in geography which have sought to de-naturalize the nation-state in social research have also explicitly contested notions of deterritorialisation and the ‘end of the nation-state’. While growing recognition of global networks and flows may have provided an important spur for questioning state-centric thinking, geographical work has been at pains to emphasize that social and political transformations in a globalizing world entail a re-scaling of territoriality rather than the dissolution of boundaries into spaces of flows (e.g. Brenner, 1999). In addition, while such work has afforded increased prominence to scales other than the nation-state, that is not to suggest that this scale is now somehow redundant. There is a difference between cautioning against falling into the ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew, 1994) on the one hand, and suggesting that the nation-state is no longer a useful scale of analysis in social science, on the other. As Neil Brenner has put it, ‘the effort to escape the “territorial trap” of state-centrism does not entail a denial of the state’s continued relevance as a major geographical locus of social power, but rather a rethinking of the meaning of both state territoriality and political space in an era of intensified globalization’ (Brenner, 1999: 41).

State power and national scale framings may retain or assume even greater importance in Southeast Asia than in the North Atlantic contexts from where most geographical scholarship on rescaling has emerged. Indeed, it might be suggested that the universalizing pretensions of such work – which is rarely termed ‘Western’ or ‘Euro-American’ studies – serves to obscure reasons for the continued significance of the nation-state in Southeast Asia. In the first place, historically relatively ‘new’ nation-states in much of Southeast Asia are characterized by vigorous state-led projects of nation building. While the importance of work contesting state-centred thinking derives, in part, from challenging the taken-for-grantedness of national boundaries, in much of post-colonial Southeast Asia state geographies have not been naturalized in the first place. Second, and following on from this, there is the issue of the relationship between social science scholarship and state developmentalism. While the position of the social sciences in some parts of the world may allow or even favour anti-foundationalist thinking, in many national contexts in Southeast Asia, social scientists (including geographers – see Bunnell et al., 2005) are under pressure to demonstrate their contribution to national development and social progress. These issues certainly find resonance in Malaysia, the national context in which we have conducted much of our empirical work.

The International Malaysian Studies Conferences (MSCs) which have been held bi-annually since 1997 provide a window onto the national positioning of social science work in/on Malaysia. At one level, of course, the

very notion of ‘Malaysian Studies’ smacks of the kind of ‘methodological nationalism’ that has been subjected to critical scrutiny in work by geographers and others (see, for example, Brenner, 2004). But the practice and framing of MSCs, in our experience, has often gone beyond methodological nationalism to what might more accurately be described as academic patriotism. Two brief examples will suffice here. The first concerns apparent reluctance on the part of some Malaysian scholars to engage in openly critical reflection on national social and political conditions. The underlying premise here seems to be that any public criticism could be ‘damaging’ to Malaysia’s international image, meaning either that the role of social scientists is not to be ‘critical’ at all or else that critical inputs are best made outside of public fora. A second example concerns the desire to demonstrate social scientists’ contribution to national development. The latest (5th) MSC held at Universiti Putra Malaysia in August 2006 opened with a keynote address from the Minister of Higher Education, Dato’ Mustapa Mohamed, in which he highlighted ‘the role of social science and social scientists in the implementation of the Ninth Malaysia Plan’. Yet in the face of such academic patriotism we continue to attend MSCs – and not merely to write about them! It is important to clarify that despite cases in which debate has been constrained by national image consciousness, the MSCs do provide space for the presentation of critical work by both Malaysian-based and international scholars. In addition, it is worth noting that there is nothing wrong with national policy relevance – indeed, this is something that is often diagnosed as lacking in human geography (e.g. James et al., 2004). But, above all, we continue to attend International Malaysian Studies Conferences as they bring together scholars with shared references to the effects and implications of national policies, social trends, developmental strategies and political frameworks. While appreciating the alternative geographies promoted by geographers and, more recently, by Southeast Asian area scholars, in other words, we do not see Malaysian Studies as irretrievably methodologically entrapped or as in need of replacement with other territorial presuppositions.

Our own contribution to MSC5 in August 2006 was the organization of a session on ‘Malaysian Studies beyond Malaysia’. The intention was to retain ‘Malaysia’ as an organizing category but in a way which is less fixed, closed or essentialized than has conventionally been the case in area studies. Contributions to our panel included consideration of: the complex national and other, differently-spatialized identities of Malaysian youths studying in Australia; the transformation of a Malay/Malayan/Malaysian community in Liverpool, UK, which predates the formation of the nation-state of Malaysia out of former British territories in Southeast Asia, but which became ‘transnational’ with the emergence of today’s political map; and the continued veneration of a Malay *keramat* in Cape Town, South Africa which speaks of trans-oceanic

geographies of exile associated with contest to 17th century Dutch commercial expansion in Southeast Asia. Each of these contributions involved fieldwork ‘within’ and beyond Malaysia, while also highlighting relational geographies which break down nationally-bounded notions of internal-ity and externality. The final contribution to the panel considered the diverse perceptions of ‘Malaysia’ as signifier within a constellation of Southeast Asian countries among people of other nations. By taking ‘Malaysia’ to be a multi-valent and contested idea, this paper revealed the complexity of its effects as a cultural category, rather than merely a unit of political action or analysis. Not only do historical and contemporary processes cross-cut Malaysia’s national boundaries, in other words, but ‘Malaysia’ itself is a mobile category which circulates through a range of discursive and material practices (including the texts and conferencing of area studies academics and other social scientists).

We conclude by contending that area knowledge may be revalorized through its engagement with alternative geographies. The essays collected by Kratoska et al. and perhaps, in a modest way, even our own contribution to MSC5 may be understood to form part of attempts to extend the scope and deepen the theoretical sophistication of area studies in Southeast Asia. Area Studies’ potential importance is not merely a matter of the continued significance of longstanding national or regional scale processes. Rather, it derives from recognition of the role that area knowledge can play in understanding phenomena at multiple scales and even in analyzing processes which are spatialized in non-bounded ways. As work by scholars with at least one foot in Malaysia shows, the kind of in-depth, fieldwork-based knowledge which has rightly been considered a strength of traditional area studies is important for understanding contemporary processes of political reterritorialization (see Bunnell and Coe, 2005). And, despite the tendency to presume that transborder networks and flows somehow float in deterritorialized ways, long engagement with specific sites is necessary for understanding social linkages which extend across national (Kahn, 2006) and even regional (Bunnell, 2007) boundaries. In recognition of this, might it be suggested that human geography has much to gain from engagement with area studies? Jenny Robinson certainly thinks so. According to Robinson, ‘contemporary geographical scholarship has retreated into theoreticism’, deepening the existing tendency for parochial knowledge to masquerade as universal theory (Robinson, 2003: 275). Following Robinson and, in a way, mirroring insights of recent work in Southeast Asian studies, perhaps it is time for a ‘re-placing of regional and area studies at the centre of the discipline of geography’ (p. 285) albeit in ways attentive to multiple geographical scales and spatialities.

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