In Defence of Southeast Asia: A Case for Methodological Regionalism

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Abstract

Open nearly any general text on Southeast Asia and you will find that some space is taken up in the introduction assessing the reality and validity of the regional framework on which that text rests. Likewise, with the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), many scholars question whether or not the regional entity amounts to anything of any substance. In this article, I mount a defence of Southeast Asia as a regional framework in scholarship and draw attention to ASEAN as an evolving regional entity. While the concept of Southeast Asia among researchers and the politics of ASEAN are distinct issues, I treat them together in this article to highlight their interrelationship and parallels. My primary objective is to outline the displaced politics – of both academic and real-politik varieties – embedded in deconstructive and dismissive critiques of both Southeast Asia and ASEAN. Critiques of both are not without value, as they sharpen our attention to processes through which supra-national regionalism is produced. Nevertheless, I argue that regionalism remains a valuable method in both politics and scholarship, in no small part as a counterweight to the hegemony of methodological nationalism in contemporary thought and research.

KEYWORDS: ASEAN, Southeast Asia, regionalism, politics, methodological nationalism

INTRODUCTION

THIS ARTICLE MOUNTS A defence of the Southeast Asian regional frame of reference as more than a convenient, contingent devise (cf. Sutherland 2005). I argue that scholarly critiques of Southeast Asia and its most institutionalized embodiment, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), derive largely from displaced politics and academic polemics. When considered carefully, the value of such critiques, particularly from a progressive or 'left' perspective is questionable. The impulse to 'deconstruct' Southeast Asia or ASEAN, which by all accounts it is very much a work in progress, raises important questions as to the implications and consequences of such academic interventions. Drawing on an on-going project on Southeast Asian regional identities and perceptions of the region from within Southeast Asia, I argue for the importance of maintaining, reinforcing and continuing to build – rather than deconstruct and

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tear apart – this particular conceptual and political geography; of both a Southeast Asian and ASEAN framework.

Today many scholars will tell you with great assurance that Southeast Asia as we know it has only existed for fifty years or so. It is, they will tell you, a Cold War creation, emanating primarily from the schemes of Western superpowers (e.g. Glassman 2005; Limqueco 1987; Mahapatra 1990; Osborne 2004: 4–10; van Schendel 2002; cf. Emmerson 2007; Stubbs 2008: 457; Tarling 2007). It is, in their opinion, an artificial, contingent, convenient fiction of scholars and diplomats, and mainly of those from outside of the region itself (Charrier 2001). As widespread as this story is among scholars, this narrative is deeply misleading. At best, Southeast-Asia-as-Cold-War-construct is a partial story – partial toward a fashion of deconstructing that which human efforts and imagination have constructed. Southeast Asia is as real or unreal, factual or fictional, as any other region or nation. Southeast Asia is as real or unreal (take your pick) as Indonesia, Laos, America, Europe or Africa. While deconstruction is a useful critical skill to teach students, it is misleading to equate the ability to deconstruct something (like Southeast Asia) with a claim that it is not 'real' (in which case, there would have been nothing to deconstruct in the first place!).

Southeast Asia is as old or as young as we wish to make it. The name – *Tonan Ajiya* (in Japanese), *Asia Tenggara* (in Malay), *Asia Akane* (in Thai) and so on appear only in documents of the past one hundred years or so.[1] Yet the region, at least in a general sense, has interacted with humanity for at least 73,000 years (when the mount Toba super-volcano exploded, causing an ecological catastrophe that nearly wiped out *homo sapiens* in Africa along with many other species). Humanity (*homo sapiens*) has been making a home in Southeast Asia from at least 40,000 years ago, when the mainland peninsula stretched out much more broadly to encompass much of what is now the Indonesian archipelago and some of the Philippines (an area known as 'Sundaland' and now, submerged, as the 'Sunda shelf').

For several years, I have been working on an account of the region; which can be read as a history of ASEAN from earliest times (Thompson 2009). My aim is to examine regional processes, the making and unmaking of regionalism over time, and the deep histories that inform present-day realities. ASEAN as a *de jure* organisation has a birthday: August 8, 1967 when the Bangkok Declaration was signed. But ASEAN was born into and out of a particular history and context; as a child is born into a family, a society, a culture all of which have long histories stretching back generations, centuries, even millenia. The journeys of the

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[1]The origin of the name 'Southeast Asia' is most frequently given as the British and Allied Forces' "South East Asia Command" in the Second World War (e.g. SarDesai 1997: 1; Tarling 2006: 63). However, Shimizu Hajime (2005) has made an important but apparently little-known case that the Japanese term *Tonan Ajiya* (lit. Southeast Asia) was already a mainstay of Japanese geographical concepts by the early twentieth-century and that the Allies were reacting to this Japanese concept rather than inventing it themselves.

prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina and back have great bearing on every Malay child born today. The enlightenment of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha, still resonates in the lives of today's children from Myanmar to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and beyond. The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the doctrines of Confucius, the great epics of the Mahabharata and Ramayana, all of these and many thousands of lesser known persons, stories, events and occurrences of the present and past will weave their way into the lives children born today and the stories they will write tomorrow across the lands and seas of Southeast Asia.

So it is with ASEAN. This particular structure for organizing Southeast Asia may have been forged less than half a century ago, but what ASEAN is and what, if anything, ASEAN is to become can only be understood in the context of all that came before and all that encompasses and engenders it – the hopes, fears, dreams, beliefs, biases, desires, and even just the everyday getting-on-with-life of the half-billion or more people who live it and live within in. In the literature on ASEAN and more generally Southeast Asia, there are many ASEAN enthusiasts and scholars committed to a regional, Southeast Asian 'area studies' approach (e.g. Sandu *et al.* 1992; Siddique and Kumar 2003). However, in English-language scholarship emanating from the most esteemed centres of academia (particularly North America, Europe and Australia) there are also a great number of ASEAN-sceptics and others who would appear to be committed to conceptually dismantling Southeast Asia as a regional construct. Some of these critiques are specifically critics of ASEAN (e.g. Glassman 2005; Jones and Smith 2007; Sidel 2001) while others aim their criticisms at area studies generally (e.g. van Schendel 2002; see also Bates 1997).

In this paper, I argue for the conceptual and political importance of Southeast Asia. I take issue particularly with those 'progressive' scholars, with whose general inclinations – for emancipatory politics and social justice – I am in sympathy, but whose negative approach to Southeast Asia I find misguided by displaced politics – of both the *realpolitik* and academic variety. Regionalism takes distinctive forms, one as a political project or political regionalism; the other as an analytical project or methodological regionalism, though in many cases these two are existentially related (cf. Emmerson 2007). Below, where I refer to ASEAN or Southeast Asia in the same instance, it is not because these are one-in-the-same, but rather the particular issue at hand pertains to critiques of both. In other instances, I discuss critiques of ASEAN as an institution and Southeast Asia as a regional concept separately. I will begin by outlining and responding to several of the more prominent critiques of Southeast Asian area studies and of ASEAN. I outline, generally, my view of the displaced politics of these critiques. I then turn to a discussion of two specific critiques that exemplify broader critical approaches – the 'realist' critique of ASEAN by Jones and Smith (2007) from within international relations theory and van Schendel's (2002) critique of Southeast Asia area studies. Finally, I will discuss my approach to the

ancient history of ASEAN, which takes some elements of these critiques on board (particularly van Schendel's) yet at the same time proposes a positive methodological regionalism.

The argument I am advancing is not that political regionalism nor analytical methodological regionalism are superior to all other forms of politics or analysis. I do not argue for a singular approach to regionalism nor that ASEAN is an ideal political entity, superior to any other that we could imagine. Rather, I am arguing that the influence of ASEAN in shaping a grounded, everyday conceptualization of Southeast Asia can be seen in evermore substantive ways in the region today. Similarly, while methodological regionalism – or 'area studies' – should not displace all other frameworks for scholarship and research, neither should it be dismissed or abandoned (cf. Bates 1997). Methodological regionalism, by which I am referring to supra-national, regional contextualization of research, is a valuable way of thinking about the world which helps to eschew constraints of other frameworks – particularly methodological nationalism, disciplinary boundaries and universalising globalism.

DISPLACED POLITICS, OR, WHY SCHOLARS LOVE TO HATE ASEAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

In *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) writes eloquently about the political commitments of scholarship. His book is concerned with how European colonialists constructed an ideologically laden image of Malays and Filipinos as 'lazy natives' in order to advance European economic interests and projects in the region. Alatas is equally aware of that his own scholarship has ideological commitments, in this case to revising history and anthropology (or social science more generally) in a postcolonial and de-colonizing moment. He points us in the direction of recognizing that no scholarly stance – and certainly none within the social sciences or humanities – is completely ideologically neutral. There are always things at stake – i.e. a politics involved – in our representation of people as well as of social, cultural and political institutions and constructs. It is in this spirit that I seek to query the stance various scholars take *vis-à-vis* Southeast Asia and ASEAN. In particular, I examine recent work published by Jim Glassman (2005), David Martin Jones and Michael L.R. Smith (2007) and Willem van Schendel (2002). I do not attempt to survey all the broad range of publication on Southeast Asia and ASEAN, but I take these works to be indicative of key trends in writing *against* the idea of Southeast Asia (cf. Abu Lughod 1991).

Southeast Asia has been under sustained critique – one might even say assault – by academics for at least a decade or more. Here I will argue that this assault on Southeast Asia can largely be accounted for by a displacement of political battles and political positioning from non-ASEAN or non-Southeast

Asian domains onto scholarly accounts which seek to conceptually discredit ASEAN or Southeast Asia. I will outline three modes in which I see displaced politics in critiques of ASEAN and Southeast Asia: the politics of scholarship and academic positioning; the geopolitics of American global hegemony; and the postcolonial politics of emergent nation-states.

1. Academic positioning. Many criticisms of Southeast Asia appear to emerge from positioning within academia rather than having to do with Southeast Asia itself. A reasoned and valuable, yet nonetheless pointed, critique of Southeast Asian studies is that of Willem van Schendel:

> "Southeast Asian studies appear to form a more multicentred mandala based on an alliance of three major provincial factions: the Indonesia-nists, the Thai experts and the Vietnamologists….The concerns of these groups dominate the field. They tolerate weaker factions at the per-ipheries, for example those generating scholarly knowledge about lesser satrapies known as the Philippines, Laos, Malaysia, or Burma (Myanmar). And then there are the marches, the borderlands that separate the region from other world regions. In the case of Southeast Asia these are the liminal places referred to above: Northeast India, Yunnan, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, New Guinea and so on. Those who produce specialist knowledge about these places may occasionally be invited to court, but they will never be a part of the power elite." (van Schendel 2002: 650–651)

Van Schendel further argues that contemporary area studies may be viewed by scholars in the future as "expressions of some passé traitism or perhaps as forms of 21st century Orientalism?" (2002: 664; cf. Vickers 2009).

From van Schendel and others (e.g. Sidel 2001), there seems an almost Oedipal impulse among a late-twentieth or early-twenty-first century generation of scholars to savage the Southeast Asian frame of reference which their prede-cessors had laboured to construct. A related impulse stems from the academic fetishization of novelty (I say fetishization in the sense that merely being 'new' is an inappropriate, displaced object of desire which substitutes for 'good' or 'useful' or 'valuable' in much of scholarship). By the late twentieth century, Southeast Asia had become – within academia – a stodgy, old-fashioned way of thinking about the world in terms of research. Undeniably, much of the debate about Southeast Asia – is it legitimately a 'real' region or not (e.g. King and Wilder 2003) – had become rather sterile and unproductive by the 1990s, if not before. Other matters and frames-of-reference began to excite the scho-larly imagination – such as 'globalization' and the post-Cold War proliferation of regimes and relationships based on neo-liberal values, or 'border crossing' net-works, relationships and themes which specifically transcended the preceding generation's 'areas' of study – which Southeast Asia represented *par excellence* (the American Association for Asian Studies specifically promoted such

intellectual moves by advertising favoured status for 'border crossing sessions' at its annual meetings from around the year 2000 onward). In van Schendel's case and others, the critique of Southeast Asia stems at least in part from positioning within academia. While scholarship often advances through such critical moves (this paper itself represents such a polemic), the scholarly debate can slip into a debate about the subjects of scholarship, in this case the validity of Southeast Asia itself, thus becoming a form of displaced politics.

2. Euro-American centred geopolitics. A second domain of displaced politics in the deconstruction of Southeast Asia centres on geopolitical critiques which are primarily aimed at critical theories of Euro-American hegemony, but in doing so distort the extent to which everything becomes read through the lens of colonialism, the Cold War, or more recently neoliberalism. Glassman's 2005 article "On the Borders of Southeast Asia: Cold War Geography and the Construction of Southeast Asia" in the journal *Political Geography* exemplifies this approach. Glassman and others perceive and critique both ASEAN and Southeast Asia as area of study within the framework of Cold War and American geopolitics. The stance here is of scholars vested in a critique of American global hegemony. Area studies become the handmaiden of American imperialism in much the same way anthropology was critiqued (starting in the 1970s but with greatest vigour from the 1980s) as the handmaiden of European colonialism (e.g. Asad 1973).

Highlighting the work of Charles Fischer ("a major figure at the School of Oriental and African Studies") and Donald Fryer ("a long time Reader in Geography at the University of Malaya"), Glassman would appear to hold out two conservative Cold Warriors within the scholarly community as prototypical of 'Southeast Asianists.' At the very least, this seems like a rather selective sample of scholarship on Southeast Asia in making broad claims about the complicity between scholarship and American Cold War interests.

Glassman concludes his account with a vignette on the "Islamic separatism and terrorism images under which…new wars are being organized" (2005: 205). He asks, rhetorically (?), "Can we hope…that Southeast Asianist geographers will avoid complicity in the construction of yet another monolithic Other?" (Glassman 2005: 205). If his question is serious, rather than merely rhetorical and if the answer would be found in a future analysis such as Glassman's where no scholars similar to Fisher or Fryer could be found, then the answer must surely be 'No.' The current generation of scholars, or at least some individuals within it, will surely be as guilty of complicity as the last. At the very least, there are certainly scholars who in fact position themselves politically (not merely academically) as supportive of attempts to identify, isolate and eliminate Islamic militancy; just as Fisher and Fryer were – by Glassman's account – Cold Warriors fully on board with those in the 'anti-Communist' West as well as Southeast Asia, who sought to eliminate the Red Menace and identified it in Asia as a threat emanating from the People's Republic of China (the 'Other' in Glassman's

account, constructed on Southeast Asia's border during the Cold War). Beyond this narrow criteria, that academia would somehow be devoid of scholars with less-than-progressive sympathies and credentials, Glassman's question in his last line signals the way in which his critique seems aimed at more than merely Fisher and Fryer, who explicitly supported an anti-Communist politics, and takes as it scope 'Southeast Asianists' in general (much as in van Schendel's 2002 critique). Glassman seems to call to account 'Southeast Asianists' in general.

In Glassman's account, the Cold War leads to SEATO which leads to ASEAN (2005: 791). This has become a taken-for-granted account among many scholars, particularly 'progressive' ones, regarding the place of ASEAN in the Cold War (e. g. Limqueco 1987; Mahapatra 1990). A similar line can be found in Jones and Smith (2007:176): "The idea of a 'Southeast Asia' emerged from the formation of a British theatre of operations in World War II – South East Asia Command – and is currently framed by membership of ASEAN."[2]

Glassman takes Fryer to task when writing about Communist movements within Southeast Asia, writing that, "Fryer manages to portray social actors within Southeast Asian societies as puppets of an Other whose position within the society in question remains unspecified and dubious" (2005: 800). Ironically, Glassman and others (e.g. Sidel 2001) are doing the same when framing ASEAN as an externally driven, Cold War manipulation (cf. Acharya 2000). The emphasis on American Cold War manipulation denies agency to the politicians and diplomats within Southeast Asia who actively forged regional international ties independent of and sometimes against the intent or desires of superpowers and other states outside the region. It is these endeavours which Acharaya (2000; see also Tan and Acharya 2008) explicitly traces, constructing a historical trajectory from Bandung through the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) and Malphilindo to ASEAN. From this perspective, the emergence of ASEAN can be seen as built upon the efforts of political leaders within newly decolonized and independent nation-states who were striving to construct platforms and frameworks for doing international relations. ASEAN, in this respect, emerges through a history of practical trial-and-error not Cold War manipulation by the West.

From Acharaya's starting point, which is the Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, the first lesson learned was that such a broad coalition was too unwieldy (although it did continue for some time under the banner of the 'Non-Aligned Movement', with the United Nations as the main organisational structure through which political efforts were channelled). The lesson of Bandung

[2]Over several years, in discussing Southeast Asian regionalism with academics at conferences and other venues, this account of the development of the regional concept and of ASEAN – as an 'anti-communist bloc' – is the one I have heard most frequently recited. However, in most carefully researched accounts of the development of ASEAN, its formation, and success, is linked to ASEAN's founding nations' explicit circumvention of ties between ASEAN, the United States and other Western powers (e.g. Narine 2002: 12; Tarling 2007).

reoriented Southeast Asian diplomats toward a less ambitious regional agenda. Both ASA and Malphilindo were attempts at multilateralism in this vein, but in part due to their timing these efforts were unsustainable (e.g. with the 'Konfrontasi' between Indonesia and its neighbours, especially Malaysia still under way). ASEAN's success was also in part due to fortuitous timing, especially with the partial easing of Malay-Chinese tensions in Malaysia through the carving out of an independent Singapore and with the fall of Sukarno and rise of Suharto's New Order, which dropped Sukarno's pretensions to a greater 'Indonesia Raya' which would encompass Malaysia.

Without going into further detail, the point here is the 'ASEAN as Cold War manipulation' narrative, while not 'false' (it did emerge at the height of the Cold War and inevitably was shaped by that framework), nevertheless misses the point of what the architects of ASEAN were doing and why they were doing it (Narine 2002; Tarling 2006). However, it is a powerful, oft recited story about ASEAN, largely because it fits well with the political inclinations of most Southeast Asianists, who for a variety of reasons, either because they are leftists or liberals from the West or nationalists from the East, are wont to attribute power and thus agency in the world overwhelmingly to a nefarious Euro-American West. My point is not that such critiques are entirely unjustified, but rather that they have the effect of reinscribing Western hegemony to the point that the agency of others, in this case Southeast Asian politicians and diplomats, is largely erased from history.

3. Leftist and liberal loathing of the corrupt, authoritarian tendencies of Southeast Asia's postcolonial, nation-state governments. This form of displaced politics is most specific to ASEAN rather than to Southeast Asia generally. As ASEAN is conceptually and institutionally a forum for and of interaction among these national governments, it is seen as inevitably and irredeemably the fruit of a rotten tree. These sentiments appear most clearly in John Sidel's review and critique of Amitav Achraya's *The Quest for Identity* (Sidel 2001). Acharya's positive approach toward ASEAN (and perhaps conceptually 'Southeast Asia' as frame-of-reference) is cast in this light as reactionary and collaborative with the authoritarian, oppressive powers-that-be of the region. Sidel opines: "Acharya's sympathies clearly lie with the so-called 'moderate nationalists' whose version of South-east Asian regionalism was always half-hearted and anodyne…. he obscures the crucial colonial and Cold War coordinates structuring the possibilities and implications of regionalism." (Sidel 2001: 162)

In this also lies a general uneasiness with nationalism and its tremendous success in Southeast Asia. Many scholars are, with reason, ambivalent about nationalism. On the one hand, nationalism in Southeast Asia is credited with rallying peoples of the region to overthrow colonial regimes and return sovereignty to local hands. Yet nationalism can and often does prove itself to be reactionary and exclusionary. For scholars within Southeast Asia, the regional perspective can be a valuable standpoint from which to do scholarship, while similarly having the

potential to be constraining in the ways that nationalism has sometimes proven itself to be (see Goh 2011).

Is all of this creative deconstruction or mere rubbishing? In light of the displaced politics of ASEAN-bashing outlined above, my question is this: what is the product of these modes of critical, deconstructive theory and writing, which are aimed in various ways to deconstruct or refute the meaningfulness of ASEAN or Southeast Asian regionalism? All scholarship is politically implicated – including my own and this paper you are reading. Even if we take, for example, a very weak formulation of Southeast Asia as a "contingent device" (following Sutherland 2005) doing so inevitably reinstantiates Southeast Asia and lends (constructive, constituting) support to the reality of Southeast Asia in our shared cultural imagination. In the following sections, I take up this question first in critiques of ASEAN as a political project followed by critiques of analytical methodological regionalism in the form of area studies.

ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND THE ASEAN-EFFECT

In their 2007 article on *"The Curious Case of East Asian Regionalism"* David Martin Jones and Michael Smith take aim at "an academic preference for constructivism" which in their estimation "has misinterpreted the growth in official rhetoric extolling East Asian regionalism since 1997 in a way that has helped produce and reinforce this paradox" (2007: 165). They argue that in spite of ASEAN's failure to effectively handle the 1997 financial crisis, the crisis appeared to validate the importance of ASEAN and its vague institutional norms, known as the 'ASEAN Way.' They point to a number of scholars who support a constructivist approach (Jones and Smith 2007: 166–167) and propose that "One might have thought that the ineffectiveness of the ARF between 1993 and 1997, and the absence of a coordinated regional economic response to the 1997 financial crisis would have destroyed the credibility of the ASEAN way and Southeast Asian, let alone wider East Asian application. Curiously, this was not the case." (Jones and Smith 2007: 168)

Jones and Smith declare ASEAN a 'failure' between 1990 and 1997. The problem here is in distinguishing between ASEAN's failure to achieve certain aims and the failure of the ASEAN regional framework to perpetuate itself. In this respect it is most useful to think of ASEAN as one would think of a nation-state (which is to some extent the sort of thing Jones and Smith are criticizing ASEAN for not being). Many nation-states, if not all, fail to resolve internal disputes (e.g. ethnic tensions) or avoid economic crisis, but "manage such problems without resolving them" (cf. Jones and Smith 2007: 178). These are not the grounds for throwing the very substance of the nation-state in doubt the way that Jones and Smith do with ASEAN. In important ways, ASEAN and the ASEAN way is a belief system as much as if not more than a rational,

institutional system for problem solving. In this sense, Jones and Smith are in fact pointing to how the social constructivists have gotten it right! "Regional myths are not easily refuted even when confronted by empirical evidence to the contrary" (Jones and Smith 2007: 169).

The problem lies with the rational-choice and *realpolitik* framework which Jones and Smith favour. A rational-choice perspective only works only if stable, discrete 'rational' choice-making entities (agents) can be identified. At various scales, such agents and their 'interests' can be identified and the choices they make on such interests assessed, e.g. individual consumers or firms in economic theory; nation-states in international relations theory. Moreover rational choice theory presupposes multiple, homologous choice-making agents. The problem in applying this to ASEAN or other forms of regionalism is that the world is not made up of replicable cases of regional entities which can be modelled as rational agents.[3] When an abstract model, such as rational-choice theory, fails to conform to empirical realities (e.g. regionalist political frames of reference), it is the theory not the reality which must be questioned.

The thrust of Jones and Smith's argument would appear to be that regionalism is only substantive if it can overwhelmingly subvert or circumvent interests conceived in terms of nation-states (Jones and Smith 2007: 180–183). If nation-states are shown to be able to continue their self-interested behaviour in spite of regional frameworks such as ASEAN, the later must be ephemeral myths and the nation-states 'real' actors. According to Jones and Smith: "The only fundamental norm (ASEAN) has reinforced is a realist commitment, not to the region, but to the sovereign inviolability of the nation-state" (Jones and Smith 2007: 185). Therefore, Jones and Smith argue that "What we have then is the continual re-imagining of the regionalist project in ever more capricious forms, but…nothing concrete ever appears" (Jones and Smith 2007: 185).

The idea that 'nothing concrete ever appears' is nonsense, unless 'concrete' is defined as nothing more than the metrics of efficacy and economic integration by which Jones and Smith choose to measure ASEAN (and declare it a failure). One can point to any number of 'concrete' effects of ASEAN. For example, symbolically, when one enters any ASEAN country, the arrival card one fills out carries the seal of the country (such as different versions of Garuda, in both Thailand and Indonesia or Angkor Wat in Cambodia) alongside which is the ASEAN logo of bundled rice stalks. ASEAN membership thus appears at the border in a 'concrete' (if symbolic) way. More practically, there are at many borders, special queues for ASEAN passport holders and mutual agreements based on the ASEAN concept to allow entry without visa for nationals of ASEAN countries.

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[3]We could imagine this: e.g. ASEAN, the EU, Arab League, Organization of African States, etc. as 'supra-national' states operating as rational agents in relationship to one another; but such entities are not presently commensurable enough that the argument can be pushed very far.

Further examples of what we might term the 'ASEAN effect' are the many and varied concrete initiatives at region-building that draw on an ASEAN rhetoric or frame-of-reference. ASEAN as an institution does not control a uniform modern educational system nor a nationally defined techno-scape of mass media, in the way that its ten member states and other nation-states do; which over several decades of decolonization and ideational 'nation-building' have engendered strong (if far from uncontested) senses of nationalism within each territorially-defined nation-state. In spite of, and in the absence of, such educational and media institutions, there are nevertheless many 'concrete' instances of discursive region-building by the formal institutions of ASEAN as well as by others. Among the more interesting are those emanating from non-governmental organizations and corporations. The ASEAN People's Forum, which runs in parallel to the annual ASEAN Summit, has become a major site of networking for civil society organizations across the region. In the commercial sector, companies such as CIMB Bank and AirAsia have taken up the ASEAN logo in promoting regional business initiatives. In sports, the Southeast Asia or SEA Games, which pre-dates ASEAN, has grown in popularity and scope with the development of regionalism and has more recently been paralleled by initiatives such as the AirAsia-backed ASEAN Basketball League.

Critical scholarship, not simply by 'ASEAN-enthusiasts', has also increasingly been oriented toward and ASEAN-framework. A particularly useful example is the book *Community in ASEAN: Ideas and Practices* (2009), edited by Tham Siew Yean, Lee Poh Ping and Norani Othman of the Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS) at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). This product of research and scholarship is an explicit response to efforts of ASEAN as an organisation to promote the idea of an ASEAN Community. In it, the authors by no means slavishly reproduce the propaganda of ASEAN as an organisation. Rather, the book is a set of critical reflections on the ASEAN Community concept.

First, the book as a whole is framed around a play between Community and community. In the first, capitalized version, the authors are referring to the top-down efforts of ASEAN as an organisation to generate community through economic relations (e.g. trade and investment) and political arrangements (e.g. political regionalism; also largely centred around trade agreements). They also examine lower-case 'community' with reflections on emergent modes and practices of transnational relationships within ASEAN. These include 'old-type' (ethic) communities (Abdul Rahman Embong), Muslim *ummah* faith communities (Norani Othman), and theatre collaborations (Summit Mandal). All of these are cross-border practices and imaginings of community, 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down' from an ASEAN perspective.

The authors by no means exhibit the sort of Panglossian naïve perspective which Jones and Smith attribute to 'ASEAN enthusiasts.' To the contrary, the assessment by Tham *et al.* of both Community and community "ideas and

practices" is a largely sceptical one. Top-down, for instance, in assessing various ASEAN projects from trade to labour regimes aimed at reducing poverty and income inequality, Ragayah Haji Mat Zin concludes that "despite many years of economic cooperation, the implementation and success of these projects at the government level have not been impressive" (Ragayah 2009: 112)**.** Abdul Rahman Embong concludes that such "…cross-border (ethnic) communities at the sub-regional level are not the engine to generate…consciousness and enthusiasm for the larger ASEAN Community" (Abdul 2009: 133). Norani Othman and Summit Mandal give similarly critical and sceptical assessments of faith-based Muslim communities and artistic endeavours in developing ASEAN-oriented communities from the 'bottom-up.' In all of these specifics, their assessments of ASEAN regionalism are not that far off from the scepticism of Jones and Smith. However, a tremendous difference lies in their respective orientations toward ASEAN.

Whereas Jones and Smith are dismissive of the concept of East Asian or ASEAN regionalism, the authors of *Community in ASEAN* are, for all their critical assessments of various 'concrete' practices, firmly committed to the idea of community in ASEAN (more with a lower-case than capital C). ASEAN here, to extrapolate from Shamsul A.B.'s (1996) discussion of Malaysia as a "nation-of-intent" is cast as a 'region-of-intent'. It is not a traditional construct passed down from past generations but rather an aspirational construct toward which the IKMAS scholars, among many others, are working. It is a social (as well as political and economic) construction in the making. ASEAN sceptics such as Jones and Smith can decry this and hundreds of other symbolic and practical 'concrete' instances in which ASEAN effectively 'appears' as insignificant or unimportant or failing to live up to the standards they presume to assert. However, they cannot legitimately claim that "nothing concrete ever appears" (Jones and Smith 2007: 185). While regionalism as a political project can and should be critiqued, it cannot be dismissed as 'unreal' or imagined in the sense of being fictional. Moreover, the efficacy of political regionalism – and ASEAN specifically – cannot be reduced to a mere account of the institutional initiatives of the ASEAN Secretariat and its various bodies alone. The ASEAN-effect, as outlined above, resonates well beyond the formal institution.

GEOGRAPHIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE

As with 'ASEAN scepticism' in international relations theory, critiques of analytical methodological regionalism aimed mainly at the American area studies tradition have engendered a far reaching, general scepticism toward Southeast Asia over roughly the past two decades. One of the most important of these critiques in the past ten years is that by Willem van Schendel in his influential article on "Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in

Southeast Asia" (2002; reproduced in Kratoska *et al.* 2005). Van Schendel makes a good case for the geography of ignorance around the area he calls 'Zomia' and which others have referred to as the Southeast Asian Massif (the mountainous region stretching from the Himalayas eastward toward the South China Sea). Van Schendel points out how this region has been marginalized in scholarship, in part based on its location as a borderlands, a 'no man's land' at the junction of South, East and Southeast Asia and more recently the emerging area of Central Asia. Furthermore, not only is Zomia divided geographically among these regions, it lies far from the centres of power and centres of concern of those regions. Yet, van Schendel's critique does not merely call for greater attention to Zomia. He goes further in asserting that Southeast Asian studies has had a particularly stultifying effect on scholarship in general; and it is on this point that I think he pushes his case against Southeast Asia too far.

Van Schendel argues, "the geographical metaphor demands that one 'area' ends where the other begins" (2002: 650). While this is true historically of area studies in the American tradition, there is no reason why it need be the case. Zomia is a good case-in-point. There is no reason why multiple, overlapping geographically conceived areas might not reasonably coexist, generating varied research questions and approaches. Research framed in terms of 'Zomia' and 'Southeast Asia' need not be mutually exclusive – rather, these alternative framings can create productive tensions and perhaps also synergies in conceiving social, cultural and historical research. And Zomia is far from alone in this respect. Other examples would be the 'Malay World' (*Alam Melayu*) or the Greater Mekong Subregion, both of which have been geographically conceived sources and frameworks for scholarly imagination. The lesson we should take away is not that one frame of reference is objectively superior to another (e.g. Southeast Asia, Zomia or any other). Rather, *all* frames of reference – including disciplinary ones – are contingent, necessary abstractions: Southeast Asia, Islamic networks, Sociology, Economics or any other whatsoever. To think of research at all, we need to think of it as being 'about' something.

A further criticism van Schendel aims at Southeast Asian studies is his claim that: "(Area studies) contributed to a certain ghettoisation of critical insights as area studies tended toward a guild model. Area specialists were rewarded for knowing their proper place: training in area studies centres, recognizing differences within larger contexts of the area's unity, offering their findings to area-focused seminars and journals, and devoting their careers to the study of the area of training, without necessarily keeping abreast of intellectual developments next door" (2002: 657).

Has Southeast Asian studies contributed to a "ghettoisation of critical insights"? The work of scholars such as Clifford Geertz, Ben Anderson, Anne Stoler, James Scott (who at one point was president of the Association for Asian Studies – the preeminent 'area studies' body for Asia in America), and others – one could list many more – would not generally be seen as lacking in

"critical insights." In the American university model, Centres for Southeast Asian studies almost always existed as interdisciplinary centres for scholars from multiple disciplines. As such, they served – if anything – as sites within universities for interdisciplinary engagements. Moreover, the picture van Schendel gives does not ring true to the experience of most American academics whose 'tenure home' was almost always in a traditional discipline. My own account is just as impressionistic as that of van Schendel, but my impression from studying as a graduate student in an American university with a Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, and knowing many who continue to work in such contexts, is that rewards came from publication and recognition in political science, history, anthropology or other disciplines, peer-reviewed by colleagues heavily biased to Euro-American frames of reference.

While unreasonably critical of Southeast Asia as a scholarly concern, van Schendel does usefully point us in the direction of "process geographies" – rather than fixed entities, all geographies are processual (2002: 661). He suggests that scholarship should be "moving from trait geographies to process geographies" (2002: 664). Regionalism, and specifically Southeast Asian regionalism, is best viewed in this light. Rather than falsifying or discounting a regionalist ('area studies') perspective, however, such a view shifts our focus to interrelated historical, social, cultural, political, economic and other processes of a region continually 'in the making.' As van Schendel and others argue, scholarship is involved – even complicit – in this process. Particularly in the human and social sciences, researchers cannot stand apart from the objects and subjects of their research. At the same time, some of the power of academics – particularly the American academy during the mid-twentieth century – in constructing Southeast Asia almost out of thin air seems remarkably overstated. Still in all, van Schendel's critique is an important and powerful one against the inclination to objectify and reify (one might even say 'petrify') the existential objects of scholarship such as 'Southeast Asia.'

Van Schendel calls for a focus on "flow studies," and drawing on Manuel Castells, Southeast Asia is usefully seen as a "space of flows." This does not make it amorphous, but rather morphologically fluid, shape shifting over time and in relationship to the perspective – frame of reference or lens – through which one is observing it. It is a region of interest, in one respect (especially in comparative regionalism), precisely because the processes giving it shape have not been persistently driven over the *long durée* by central and homogenizing forces – as is the case with Christian Europe, still largely echoing the Roman Empire or China and East Asia, still the echoing the Imperial Middle Kingdom. One could also point to Islam in shaping the Middle East or colonial and postcolonial conditions in shaping the Americas. In Southeast Asia, the current moment of nation-states and the ASEAN geo-body sits uneasily albeit effectively atop layers of previous, very uneven flows of people, trade, culture and various other networks which have washed across the region – some

dating back as far as 40,000 years ago and never completely assimilated within later flows.

One problem with our discourse about Southeast Asia is the compulsion to try to assimilate difference – what van Schendel calls "trait geographies"; attempts to identify traits that speak to the essence of Southeast Asia. But equally problematic, is the impulse to disintegrate the region in the absence of such traits. No one seems to take it as interesting to ask – how in fact was such impressive diversity produced? Process geographies should not only be about processes of homogeneity or processes of assimilation (which is taken-for-granted at the outset of any project which declares it will look at 'X' – be that illicit trade across borders, noted by van Schendel, or global Islam, noted by Glassman). While scholars will always compare and contrast in such cases, pointing to similarities and differences across cases, a sort of fundamental simi-litude – that we are comparing 'apples to apples' – has been presupposed by the frame of reference of such research. This is not unique to methodological regionalism (or nationalism), it is common to all scholarship; we all have to write and research about something; that something has to be defined, however problematically or contingently. The process geographies of Southeast Asia or other regions should be about diversity, divergence, and heterogeneity at least as much as they are about similitude within or identity of the region. If we in fact wish to celebrate difference (as the saying goes), we need to think about histories of diversification as much as histories of assimilation.

THE CASE FOR METHODOLOGICAL REGIONALISM: A PROCESSUAL ACCOUNT

All methodological frames of reference are matters of convenience and artifice. Social scientists have several ways of thinking about this. For some, especially the quantitatively inclined, a framework involves thinking in terms of 'units of analy-sis'. Geographers in particular are concerned with matters of scale. Sociologists often talk in terms of the macro, micro and meso. Anthropologists have both pro-posed and critiqued (almost to death) various framing constructs from tribes, bands and clans to peasants, villages, ethnic groups and nations. Two frames of reference – the individual and the nation – have been held up for scrutiny under critiques of methodological individualism and methodological nationalism. These critiques have sought to reveal the extent to which individuals or nations are *unreasonably* taken for granted as frames of reference in social science research. Van Schendel's critique, without explicitly stating it in these terms, is aimed at the *methodological regionalism* of area studies, particularly as it devel-oped in the American academy of the twentieth century. I turn here to a defence of methodological regionalism. I am not claiming that a regional framework is superior to all other frames-of-reference. My claim is that regionalism remains

a valuable part of our analytical tool kit along with other scales of analysis (e.g. 'local' – be it a neighbourhood or village – 'national' or 'global' scales) as well as disciplinary approaches. Moreover, I argue that methodological regionalism is tied in important ways to the politics of regional peace and prosperity, particularly in the context of a Southeast Asia made up of diverse nation-states.

Methodological regionalism has a strange status in scholarship and research. It grew up in area studies; but also came of age in a world of interconnected nation-states, in which regionalism as a *political* methodology (through ASEAN, the EU, and other bodies) has gained a certain amount of traction, though not nearly so much as the political methodology of nationalism. The world in which European colonialism held sway collapsed in the wake of World War Two. America – in competition with the Soviet Union and to a lesser extent China – took on the mantle of global hegemon, but preferred to exert power by proxy to a greater extent than colonial Europe. The mid-twentieth century saw a new map of territorial nation-states. This new map is so taken-for-granted that it is rarely commented upon. The instantiation more than two-hundred times over of national geo-bodies is a stark social fact. In this given social-cultural and political reality, a practical question then arises as to how these two-hundred or so territorially defined nation-states are to interact with one another; in other words, what is to be the basis of international relations?

It is in this context that modern supra-national regionalism emerges as a political reality. ASEAN, its history and pre-history, are an exemplary case study of this process. To summarize the case that others (Acharya 2000; Frost 2008; Narine 2002; Tarling 2006), have mapped out in great detail, the early national leaders of Southeast Asia spent more than two decades in trial-and-error attempts (to some degree still in progress) forging frameworks for international relations. In the early, heady days of independence, the charismatic Indonesian president Sukarno launched an effort to create a geographically grand Afro-Asian alliance, the highpoint of which was the 1955 Bandung conference (Tan and Acharya 2008). This framework, nearly but not quite as all-encompassing as the United Nations or its predecessor the League of Nations, was simply too large and unwieldy. In the meantime, multiple attempts were made to forge a more localized – i.e. 'regional' – multilateral framework for international political cooperation. Of these the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization – spearheaded externally by the United States – gets the most play in contemporary scholarship, as fanciful 'proof' that Southeast Asia and ASEAN are nothing but external, cold-war constructs. As Acharya argues, ASEAN was much more the legacy of efforts by local leaders than of American or Western machinations. Being aligned with American and Western European interests was certainly helpful to ASEAN's sustainability over several decades, but that does not make it an American invention as Glassman and others imply.

ASEAN as well as Southeast Asia is a social, political and economic fact. One can set up various metrics on which to judge its performance – as Jones and

Smith do – but as they (unintentionally) demonstrate, its "failure" on such metrics does not dispel its social reality nor for that matter its ideological power. Dismissing Southeast Asia as a Cold War construct (Glassman 2005) or ASEAN as nothing more than a tool of corrupt authoritarian leaders (Sidel 2001) is misguided as well. Not only do these narratives undermine the grounds of many local non-state actors to leverage ASEAN for their own progressive agendas (e.g. the ASEAN people's forum; see also Goh 2011; Tham *et al.* 2009), I have yet to see any critique of this sort which proposes any alternative to ASEAN or more generally Southeast Asia which would take the place of ASEAN's fundamental *raison d'être* – that is providing an imagination beyond nationalism through which the tensions of nationalism can be diffused (e.g. conflicts between Thailand and Cambodia, Cambodia and Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand, etc.). These are reasons, as I see it, to support – build up rather than tear down or deconstruct – a methodological regionalism in the context of Southeast Asia and ASEAN. The challenge is how to do so while eschewing reification and in particular eschewing the projection of exclusionary nationalism onto a supra-national, regional scale.

Such a project draws on Southeast Asian regionalism as an analytical framework, while tied to a regionalist political project. Here I turn, finally to considerations of what it means to write a history of ASEAN which projects Southeast Asia back into ancient history much as national histories are wont to do. Two points need to be stressed when doing so: first, attention to and emphasis on processual geographies and anthropologies following van Schendel; second, an account of ASEAN which emphasizes pluralism rather than homogeneity.

A processual account of Southeast Asia examines the many layers of multiple processes through which the region has been constructed. We can include in this, for example, such very *long durée* processes as plate tectonics and climate change which have shaped the physical geography of the region – and with it the human environment – over many tens of thousands of years or more (see Boomgaard 2007; Gupta 2005). Layered upon this physical geography (amongst which I would include shifting, evolving ecosystems), are the human dynamics of gene flow, language flow, culture and technological flows, which archaeologists, geneticists, linguists and others have demonstrated are interconnected yet distinct processes shaping the human population of the region over many thousands of years (e.g. Donohue and Denham 2010; Glover and Bellwood 2004). More specifically, a processual history and anthropology of Southeast Asia will take account of flows of trade (e.g. long standing networks of inter-island exchange, appearance of Roman coins from two thousand years ago, the importance of Malaccan Straits ports), politics and social organization (e.g. the city-state *mandalas* and how they gave way to a succession of colonial then nation-state regimes) and cosmology and religion (from local practices to the complex patchwork of world religions throughout the region). These processes produced the heterogeneity for which the region is famous.

As much as the flows 'through' and 'within' Southeast Asia, the morphology of the region *per se* is fluid and dynamic as well. The ASEAN geo-body, built as it is on the specific jigsaw pieces of territorial nation-states of the twentieth century, echoes some of the geographic and anthropological processes preceding it. The morphology of the mainland states, for example, is not entirely disconnected from the physical geography of hills and river valleys within which it is situated (Lieberman 2003). But the current space of ASEAN is historically and temporally contingent; not that this makes it 'unreal'. Historical shape-shifting of various 'regional' (geographic) entities is part of the ancient history of ASEAN as well; including for instance the regions of Sanskrit Cosmopolis (see Pollock 1998, 2001) or the *Alam Melayu* (Malay World) produced in part at least through the Srivijayan polity and Islamic trade and faith networks (Barnard 2004; Taglia-cozzo 2009). At present, ASEAN itself continues to be a work-in-progress as well, most obviously, for example, with regard to the status of Timor-Leste (East Timor), which has yet to be admitted into the Association.

All of these processual geographies, anthropologies and histories contribute to our understanding of Southeast Asia and specifically to ASEAN as a regional political entity. Writing a history of ASEAN replicates writing a national history – as has been done for Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and all the member states of ASEAN. Taking Southeast Asia as a frame of reference for thinking about scholarship is no less and no more problematic than working on Malaysia, Vietnam or Myanmar. While this model of methodological regionalism is useful in many respects, it too must be eschewed or at the very least not overly reified. In particular, ASEAN need not and perhaps should not be written of, and thus conceived as, a nation-state writ large. It is far more accurately portrayed as a plural society writ large.

A final critique, which is cast into debates about ASEAN from time to time (e.g. I can recall this arising at a seminar in Southeast Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore in recent memory) is that ASEAN is not a 'real' thing because people within ASEAN do not identify with it; in other words, there is no ASEAN identity in an ethno-national or racial sense (as there are Malay, Javanese, Lao, Thai, Malaysian, Filipino, or Asian senses of identity). One can, in fact, point to some nascent examples of such an 'ASEAN' identity – for example, on Facebook in an exchange between an Indonesian and Burmese in which one mentioned the importance of remembering 'we are all ASEAN.' Likewise, in a survey a colleague and I conducted across all ten ASEAN nations, respondents (university students) by a large majority responded in the affirmative when asked if they considered themselves 'citizens of ASEAN' (whatever that meant to them – which is the truly interesting question; Thompson and Thianthai 2008). But such examples are beside the point. Whether or not people living in Southeast Asia identify with ASEAN, ASEAN and Southeast Asia have identities and those identities – as organizations or frameworks for political action as well as research – are brought into play in a variety of contexts from

diplomatic engagements through the much maligned 'ASEAN Way' or for that matter as maps in museums within which national geo-bodies are projected (Thompson 2012). In all these instances, questioning ASEAN or Southeast Asia existentially is a red herring pregnant with displaced politics. The question rather is what do we and others committed to the region make of Southeast Asia? To what use do we and others put an institution such as ASEAN?

CONCLUSION

Trends in scholarship come and go. Likewise, political territoriality is historically contingent. Southeast Asia and its particular embodiment in ASEAN bear this out. In earlier times, Austronesian speaking lineage founders, *'deviraja'* (god-kings) such as those who ruled over Angkor, Theravada Buddhist and Muslim rulers, European colonial powers and others all imposed their own notions of territoriality through which political order was established. Monks, priests, *ulama* (Islamic intellectuals), court chroniclers and other sorts of scholars likewise framed their understandings of places and regions following various conventions of the day – such as '*Negara*' (the city-state), '*Nusantara*' (the islands in-between), or '*Suvarnabhumi*' (the golden lands) – all of which are at least in part spatial constructs applied to and within Southeast Asia. In this sense, it is not inaccurate to call Southeast Asia, following Sutherland (2005), a "convenient, contingent devise." But to do so is somewhat misleading, as the same could be said of any sort or regional or spatial construct.

Southeast Asia may be as archaic a thousand years from now as *Suvarnabhumi* of the Sanskrit era is today. It would be surprising to anyone who knows history to imagine that ASEAN would exist a thousand years hence, given that very few political entities persist for that long. Today, however, as I have argued above Southeast Asia and ASEAN are useful, valuable frames of reference in scholarship and politics respectively. In both scholarship and politics, a national frame of reference or political and 'methodological' nationalism, is far more prevalent, powerful and taken-for-granted than supra-national regionalism. A scholar is much more likely to claim expertise on Malaysia, Indonesia or Thailand than on Southeast Asia. Similarly, national political identities and citizenship are far more powerful than senses of being 'Southeast Asian', or for that matter Asian. For this reason alone, Southeast Asian regionalism, whether in the form of ASEAN or otherwise, remains a valuable counterweight to the forces of nationalism.

The main purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that some of the leading critiques of Southeast Asia in scholarship and ASEAN in international relations are the result of misplaced politics. As noted, while I am sympathetic with the intentions of some of these critiques, they have the perhaps unintended effect of eschewing progressive efforts to resist both dividing forces of

nationalism and the homogenizing and hegemonic forces of globalism. I am not proposing that scholars or others accept either uncritically. I am suggesting that the basis of such interventions themselves should be interrogated. Moreover, Southeast Asia remains an idea and frame of reference that we should continue to build upon and construct in both our scholarly and political imagination.

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