

Practising Global Ethnography in Southeast Asia: Reconciling Area Studies with Globalisation Theory

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Southeast Asian Area Studies: Questioning Place, Boundary and Methodology

As an analytical lens, the discipline of area studies is not unaccustomed to methodological and epistemological criticism. According to Appadurai (2001, p. 3), it is the “largest institutional epistemology through which the academy in the United States has apprehended much of the world in the last 50 years”. Area studies is, generally, premised on two principles: that regions with common characteristics can be identified and examined collectively; and that regions should be studied “from within” on the basis of detailed local knowledge (Kratoska et al., 2005, p. 6). Broadly speaking, area studies are language- and culture-centred perspectives on constructed geographies in which the concepts of nation, ethnic and religious community are not seen to be problematic. Indeed, the discipline itself is a geographically embedded one because it is, “by definition, tied to a specific physical place, whatever problems there may be in defining that place” (Burgess, 2004, p. 125).

The problem of place is a leitmotif in Southeast Asian studies. Any student of the region will, sooner or later, ask questions such as “where do the perimeters lie?”, “what common characteristics does the region share?”, or “is there even an ‘imagined’ ecumenical community?” Scholars have advanced convincing cases to articulate Southeast Asia as an identifiable, if not coherent, entity. Beyond its construction by the colonial British as a specific area of military operations against the Japanese (Emmerson, 1984), scholars of Southeast Asia have offered some means of regional definition. Christie (1996) points to the historical events of the Japanese invasion and the later nationalist-separatist movements during the era of decolonialisation as issues of both national and intra-regional identification. Reid (1999) proposes a “saucer model” of identity whereby the “low centre” of Southeast Asia (comprising Singapore, Malaysia, and to some extent Brunei and Thailand) acts as the communicative focal point of the region. The “high periphery”

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of Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, and to some extent the Philippines and Indonesia, not wishing to be annexed by their larger non-regional neighbours of China, India or the US, have opted for regional inclusion. Others such as Beeson (2004) see the contemporary supranational construct of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) as an important collaborative instrument. Even with this brief literature survey it quickly becomes evident that the shape and boundaries of Southeast Asia are a perplexing combination of political construction, ambiguity, and shifting imagination. And if the geography of Southeast Asia is problematic, so too is the way in which it was initially conceived as an object of scholarship.

The advent of Southeast Asian studies can be traced back to the World War II needs of the Allied military, and it gained popularity during the Cold War because its emphasis on language and culture provided the vital resources for “understanding the enemy” (Harootunian and Sakai, 1999, p. 596; Bowen, 2002). For example, from the 1940s onwards, Allied soldiers learned Asian languages purely for practical purposes – that is, for interrogating the enemy and gathering intelligence. According to Wallerstein (1997, p. 200), it was this emphasis on language that was “the major justification for post-war US government financing of area studies”, and thus it is not by chance that “Asian studies” now typically refers to the study of Asian languages (Kamada, 1994, p. 2), consists of “a predictable repertoire of cultural icons”, and inclines towards the “stereotypical presentation” of national societies (Nagata, 1995, p. 7). The first US institution to bear the name “Southeast Asia” was the Southeast Asia Institute, established in 1941 in New York, with a branch in Berkeley, the board members of which included Margaret Mead and Raymond Kennedy (Bowen, 2002). In 1950 Cornell University initiated its Southeast Asian Studies Program with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, while another grant was simultaneously made available to Yale University in order to promote healthy competition, but also to pre-empt any charge of partiality (see Chou and Houben, 2006; Bowen, 2002). Hence Southeast Asian studies not only referred to the actual geographical space of study but also to the specific nature of the governmental interests that determined the discipline’s funding and viability.

According to Chou and Houben (2006), Southeast Asia was a “site of displacement” from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s because the region became known primarily as a site to observe, sympathise with and support displaced and marginalised groups within. “People opting for this field of study were doing so not so much for invested interests in the scholarship of the region, as for the strong emotions of that time to expand notions of freedom and justice” (Chou and Houben, 2006, p. 6). The Vietnam War and decolonialisation process had lent further political importance to the region, perhaps even adding an element of novelty to a discipline that was, at this point, organised around the category of the nation-state. “Southeast Asian Programs” sprouted in numerous US universities without any serious scholarly attempt to define the intellectual and theoretical boundaries of the discipline. More specifically, this led to “a flood of empirical research, but remarkably little conceptual work” (Kratoska et al., 2005, p. 6). As such, the seeds of erosion were sown. For even though research grants were still available, and empirical data was being churned out at a time of great political ferment and consequence, there were precious few theoretical and conceptual attempts to articulate Southeast Asia beyond the paradigms of Western social science, or for that matter immediate political interests. Western universities began to lose interest in the region from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Academic recession and the US defeat in Vietnam led to budget cuts

to university departments, resulting in a decline in staff numbers and, sometimes, discontinuation of programs. The situation was the same across the Atlantic in Britain. Nevertheless, Chou and Houben (2006, p. 7) continue, “What is noteworthy here is that it was precisely the withdrawal of the American forces from Vietnam in 1973, and the communist victories throughout Indochina in 1975 that accentuated the ASEAN governments’ interest in strengthening their own national foreign policies as well as in nurturing self-reliance and promoting regional cooperation”. To achieve this, they realised that solid knowledge of the region was necessary. Therefore, in 1976 the decision was reached at the first ASEAN Summit Meeting to promote Southeast Asian studies in the region itself.

Southeast Asian studies, like general area studies, has been diagnosed as suffering from the “epistemic violence” that comes with the imposition of foreign social scientific theoretical models. The unreflecting manner in which Southeast Asian studies has adopted Western-centric theories to illuminate local phenomena has yielded studies and analyses that are prized for their compatibility and comparability to Western experiences. But this has come at the expense of local narratives and voices that may not be neatly located in the accepted spectrum of cultural identities. Central to this mode of research is positivism, and in particular the way in which procedures and conceptual devices are deployed to separate social science from common sense, or objectivity from subjectivity. The data is collected by methodological modes that, like the data itself, are assumed to be theory-neutral. The resulting analyses and conclusions are, in many cases, laden with the values and prejudices of a system of representation framed by the political forces that sequestered the Orient into Western scholarship (Said, 1978). This is not dissimilar to the understanding of colonial societies from the perspective of colonisers where the “historical facts” and official cultural-political trajectory may deny the experiences of the “native”. As Abu-Lughod (1989, p. 118) argues, “If history is written by the victor, then it must, almost by definition, ‘deform’ the history of the others”.

Another stream of criticism of Southeast Asian studies concerns the postcolonial state’s influence on the production of knowledge. Along with the decolonisation process came a need on the part of the postcolonial state to collect and interpret knowledge, both intra-national and regional, for purposes of economic planning, nation-building and threat assessment. As noted by Chou and Houben (2006), the combination of national interests and nation-building imperatives led to the postcolonial state emerging as a key benefactor of Southeast Asian studies. The Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, established in Singapore in 1968 with funding from the Ministry of Education, was tasked with regional research. In 1976 the University of Malaya initiated its interdisciplinary Southeast Asian studies program while Vietnam’s own Institute of Southeast Asian Studies was set up within the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences with specific focus on Laos and Cambodia. Given the Southeast Asian postcolonial state’s vital role in resuscitating regional area studies, it was inevitable that “embedded statism” – a state-centred understanding of the social world implicit in social theory (see Soja, 1989; Taylor, 1993) – would become a major feature in the production of knowledge and discourses about Southeast Asia. The mainstream social sciences, identifying with “national needs” and policy agenda, has ended up promoting or reproducing impressions of a social world that legitimises the state – what Agnew (1991) calls “methodological nationalism”. According to Scott (1995, p. 3), the modern Southeast Asian state has made efforts “to arrange its subject/citizens in a manner that is increasingly ‘legible’, uniform, and

hence more amenable to manipulation and control from above". This has led to research selectivity or "tunnel vision", whereby the state focuses only on limited and specific aspects of broader research and reality (what Scott terms "state simplifications") producing the kind of knowledge that facilitates its need to act decisively and quickly.

In sum, the problems of ambiguous places, shifting boundaries and unsound methodologies have prompted some scholars to see Asian area studies as mired in crisis. Burgess (2004) points to the rootedness of Asian area studies in place and its inability to account for time-space compression as the source of its crisis. Following up on this critique, Clarke (2006) considers the crisis to be a product of the "anti-theoretical" nature of Asian area studies, and its resistance to innovation. Meanwhile, Chou and Houben (2006, p. 10) are less severe in their assessment, concluding that "Southeast Asian studies, as part of area studies in general, is [merely] undergoing great transformations". Whatever the diagnosis, it is clear that Southeast Asian area studies is increasingly deficient on three issues. Firstly, like classical social theory before it, the field often makes little distinction between society and nation-state, with the latter typically deployed uncritically as a unit of analysis. Secondly, it lacks the theoretical linkage between the local and the global, and thus fails to properly contextualise Southeast Asian locales within a broader network of global processes or a world system. Thirdly, it needs to be practised and articulated as *more* than an area-specific mode of scholarship, because this invariably assigns it a lowly position within a global hierarchy of political interests and concerns. Such a hierarchy will only revive core-periphery models that fail to account for the free-play of global flows. These three issues also challenge the way in which ethnography is conducted in an age of global processes, flows and deterritorialisation.

Globalisation Theory's Challenges to Area Studies and Ethnography

The science of ethnography is a "form of culture collecting . . . [which] highlights the ways that diverse experience and facts are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions, and given enduring value in a new arrangement. Collecting – at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible – implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss" (Clifford, 1988, p. 231). In the last decade a growing number of anthropologists and sociologists have responded to the challenges of globalisation by attempting to (re)theorise ethnography with reference to globalisation theories or, at least, to problematise the practice of ethnography in an age of globalisation (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992; Fardon, 1995; Miller, 1995; Appadurai, 1995; Eade, 1997; Burawoy et al., 2000; Hancock, 2001; Gille and Riain, 2002; Tsing, 2004). Contemporary sociologists and anthropologists now have to address the prevalent globalisation literature that conceives of the global cultural economy as a series of complex networks, scapes and flows (see Appadurai, 1990; Castells, 1996; 1998; Lash and Urry, 1994). Theorisations of these networks, flows and scapes have sought to redefine the global cultural economy as a matrix in which the global intersects with the local on a variety of levels and scales, thus blurring the boundaries of ethnographic "sites" and the conventional boundaries of area studies, making the task of participant observation more complex and vulnerable to blind-spots. Our sense of place is no longer static, but is understood in terms of social processes. Place is no longer demarcated by boundaries, but as a site in which the "inside" is part of the "outside". It is no longer characterised by a single or unique identity but by the internal conflict of the place (Massey, 1994). "Put

another way”, Appadurai (1997, p. 52) writes, “the task of ethnography now becomes the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality as a lived experience in a globalised, deterritorialised world?”

Though still a contested phenomenon, there are several widely accepted features of globalisation. Firstly, while it is not a recent phenomenon, and has historical roots in empire-building, colonisation and modernity, contemporary globalisation represents something qualitatively and quantitatively new in terms of the way individuals are connected. This leads to the second feature: the heightened interconnectivity and commonality of virtual spaces has led to a sense that the world is shrinking, i.e. the annihilation of space (Harvey, 1990). Thirdly, globalisation results in a collapse of universalism and particularism. This collapse signals the problematisation of any straightforward homogenisation thesis but, instead, draws attention to the way the global and local clash, as well as the way in which universal standards are now engaging with particularistic and locale-specific discourses. And fourthly and finally, this indicates the partial collapse of borders, as global flows and interests attempt to shape social divisions and classifications within the nation-state.

Globalisation theories are testing area studies and ethnography in various ways. Firstly, they challenge area studies’ notions of place and space, and problematise the traditional idea of the self-contained ethnographic “site”. Global processes and flows not only make national boundaries porous but also deterritorialise the local. Southeast Asian area studies, for example, has failed in its attempts to account for the wide discursive repertoire of a country-specific group such as Malaysia’s Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), because it lacks the theoretical framework to analyse the cultural politics of “Arabisation” within the Islamic political party. PAS cannot be understood outside the *dakwah* movement in Malaysia and Indonesia in the 1970s when preachers from Pakistan came to call for a revival of Islam in the region. Locally trained *pondoks* were replaced by those who went abroad to Saudi Arabia and Egypt for their Islamic training. It would seem crucial for researchers to be able to understand the identity politics that play out in the religious habitus of these new teachers, returning to the region bearing the influences of Arabic cultural-political traditions and practices. To do so requires a theoretical sensibility attuned to the nuances of such local-global interfacing. The belief that the answers are all contained within the site itself stems partly from the Chicago School’s classical premise that the events, behaviour and actions observed in the site of inquiry could be explained with resources gleaned from within the site. However, contemporary transnational connectivity is undermining the way in which classical ethnography has “made a fetish out of the confinement of fieldwork, the enclosure of the village, the isolation of the tribe” (Burawoy, 2000, p. 1). Ethnographic sites are now globalised because social processes cross multiple spatial scales and porous boundaries, thus making it necessary for global ethnographers to begin their analysis by embarking on “place-making projects” that seek to define new kinds of places, with new definitions of social relations and their boundaries (Gille and Riain, 2002).

The failure to problematise place in Southeast Asian research creates a variety of difficulties. The areas of Southeast Asian research most vulnerable to the unthinking application of nation-state categories are security and terrorism. For example, the contemporary literature on security and terrorism in Southeast Asia continues to locate the regional constellation of security measures, terrorist threats and collective action within the framework of nation-states and statism, thus failing to address the “darker

side” of globalisation and the very flows that facilitate economic and ideological interconnectedness, which now become the vectors of deterritorialised security and terrorist threats. This often leads international relations scholars to describe, in an abstract and unhelpful manner, ASEAN’s formation and function “as a regional security and economic ‘regime’ that allows each member [state] to preserve its sovereignty and pursue its own ‘national’ interests” (Acharya, 2001, p. 7). As a consequence, arbitrary and ambiguous notions of “sovereignty” and “national interests” continue to anchor the concepts of place and boundary in the literature, ignoring the day-to-day transnational processes that are visible in the national realm.

The concepts of place and boundary are also deeply entrenched in the research on terrorism. The phenomenon of global terrorism exposes the contradictions and conflicts within the logic of globalisation, one of which is that the very information communication technologies that the process relies on may be used to undermine and attack it. This is significant in that terrorism is an instance of “globalisation from below” *par excellence*, the flipside of global capitalism. However, the contemporary literature on terrorism persists in “locating the enemy” within “knowable” places. This is largely driven by military and governmental interest in terrorism research and monitoring, thus making it necessary for place and geography to be the central pillars of operational strategies (see Sahni, 2003). The consequences of assigning a fixed place to amorphous and highly elusive terrorist organisations and networks can lead to the targeting of sites that may have long been emptied of their insurgents or cells. Quite clearly, the rigid definition and application of “place” in contemporary Southeast Asian studies skews subsequent analyses and conclusions, painting a false picture of social reality.

Global ethnographers have argued for a looser notion of “place” to cope with the challenges of globalisation. Marcus (1995; 1998) proposes a practice of “multi-sited ethnography” that pays attention to the mobility and circulation that is now the norm in a world system of cultural formations. A multi-sited ethnography tracks political and cultural formations across various sites of activity, making it necessary for the ethnographer to be conscious of the spatial complexity and extensibility of his or her object (Marcus, 1998, p. 79). Applied to security or terrorism research, a “multi-sited ethnography” would track agents and processes of terror across time and space, turning “place” into a constantly altering site. This approach would treat terror and security threats as evolving phenomena that shape up according to the political and cultural environments of the sites that they are currently actualised in, while remaining conscious of their broader regional and global geneses and linkages.

Another alternative to the fixity of place is Massey’s (1994) definition of place never being static; lacking the boundaries that encourage simplistic inside/outside labels; more heterogeneous than homogenous; and as defined by its specific mixture of local and wider social relations. In sum, Massey (1994) adopts a wide notion of spatiality as the product of intersecting social relations and, on this basis, proposes an approach to “place” as that which is essentially open and hybrid while always provisional and contested. The ethnographic site also alters when it is subjected to constant re-visiting and re-evaluating by different researchers across different times.

The second challenge to Southeast Asian area studies is the move from fixed and traditional forms of state-recognised identity categories towards identity fragmentation. The former often misses out on the way local actors are influenced by external events. Research into the cultural formations of women’s movements in Malaysia, for example,

reveals two cultural assumptions: namely, that feminism is a Western import with no relevance for Malaysia; and that Malaysian women should be soft, gentle and virtuous, presumably in distinction to Western feminists (Lai, 2003). It is not surprising that dominant conservative interests are at the core of these cultural assumptions, driving home the point that “their counterparts in the West are not to be followed by Malaysian women as the family institution is an important pillar in Malaysian society” (Lai, 2003, p. 48). Such assumptions have been deconstructed, and the complex, multi-dimensional nature of Malaysian women’s identity has been clearly established in a literature that demonstrates the ability of Malaysian women to oscillate between performing traditional ethno-cultural duties, performing in the work-economy, and adopting Western feminist ideological perspectives. Despite this, Lai admits that she “purposely use[s] the term ‘women’s movement’ rather than ‘feminist movement’ in spite of [her] own preference” as it is still “strategically unwise” to use the term “feminism” in Malaysia because of the “negative connotations ascribed to it” (Lai, 2003, p. 50). This amounts to a conservative-national colonisation of the concept, whereby dominant interests and state discourses play a role in severely limiting the discursive potentialities of the agencies, institutions and histories of feminism that would offer a sharper theoretical framework to Malaysian women’s struggles. The inability of conventional Southeast Asian studies and area studies to account theoretically for state knowledge-production capacities and malleable identities means that these approaches remain subject to the restrictive demands of dominant interests.

Another area where the expression of interchangeable identity is crucial is the exploration of the Southeast Asian middle class. The literature is burgeoning and there is no need to delve into it at this point other than to note that scholars have moved beyond empirical descriptions of the middle class and now write about the regional middle class in terms of consumer lifestyle habits and diverse interest groups. Very few, however, write about the way in which some groups adopt different interests depending on the contexts they are in. In other words, while it’s true that the Southeast Asian middle class is made up of diverse, conflicting groups, it’s also true that some of these groups have diverse interests which may be contradictory, and express them according to the situation they find themselves in or the constituents they are addressing. How does the researcher theorise the way in which UMNO politicians articulate the logic of global capitalism to their economic constituents on the one hand, while warning Malaysian non-Malays not to challenge Malays’ economic rights and capital share on the other? Area studies has little to say about the interchangeability of identities, with the bulk of the literature preferring to look at the economic role, mode of cultural production and symbolic significance of those occupying fixed vocational roles such as journalists, academics, artists, military officers, state officials and professionals in commerce (Heryanto, 2003) – thus failing to understand how the interests of these occupations overlap and result in the nurturing of personal relations and the building of social capital.

Global ethnographers, however, need to be aware of hybridisation and fragmentation processes that encourage the proliferation of interchangeable interests and identities. This reflexivity is born of the postmodern de-centring of the human subject, and has problematised participant observation and the classification of cultural identities. According to Hall (1991; 1996) the shift from global imperialism to global postmodernism is fundamentally a transition from the ideological subjugation of identities under Empire to their articulation to a decentred world of American mass culture. This calls for conventional

identity markers such as class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and national citizenship – categories around which traditional ethnography and area studies are shaped – to be more sensitively deployed. Global ethnographers rely on vivid descriptions grounded in historical and social contexts, and yet strive to conceive of well-educated middle-class subjects as global citizens who are located in a world system within which they pursue both local and global interests, speaking different political languages to achieve these aims. Area studies, in distinction to cultural studies, lacks the vocabulary necessary to articulate the multiplicity of self-interested voices that emanate from the same individuals or agencies (see Burgess, 2004).

The third challenge is a broader one that confronts Glasner and Strauss's (1967) "grounded theory". This taps into the broader debate between the proficiencies of grounded theory and Burawoy's (1989; 2000; 2003) argument for the "extended case method". The criticism of grounded theory is that even if researchers claim that they enter the field without preconceived theories, they are still guided by their academic habitus with regard to the sites, questions and samples they choose. If so, grounded theory may effect a false sense of analytical distancing between the researcher and the eventual theoretical resources with which they choose to frame their data. So it is too with the tradition of theoretical generality over empirical particularity in Southeast Asian area studies. This tradition exists largely because early ethnographic studies of Southeast Asia were not conducted by professional anthropologists or sociologists but, instead, by colonial administrators, missionaries and explorers who were trained primarily in linguistics, law, philosophy or history (King and Wilder, 2003). Accordingly, the history of ethnography in Southeast Asia exhibits the same false sense of analytical distancing that prides itself on the objectivity of its data collection while it is, in fact, profoundly influenced by the disparate disciplines that colonial administration brought with it. It is thus no surprise that the theoretical underpinnings of early Southeast Asian studies and ethnography were noticeably functionalist in character. For example, functionalist examinations of small-scale native tribes or groupings tended to pay more attention to how these groupings cohered, and how they sustained and re-established order after a period of instability. Such an approach most often depicted such groupings as timeless and unchanging, and its preoccupation with social order and continuity reflected colonial interests, and later those of strong states, in maintaining orderliness among the natives and citizens they governed. It also led to conflict and change being perceived as unnatural and undesirable. Meanwhile, scholars such as J.S. Furnivall (1967) drew attention to the significance of overseas Chinese and Indian trading communities in Southeast Asian colonial societies, and how they functioned as vital economic intermediaries between Europeans and local populations. Furnivall's ethnographic work led to the conception of a distinctive type of colonial system in which different ethnic groupings were transformed into different economic classes, insulated in their own cultural worlds, and only met with each other in the market place. Furnivall's ideas were refined and improved upon but have remained a lasting paradigm for Southeast Asian scholars.

Such functionalist perspectives have developed a political and cultural logic that was confined to the activities and subjects that were studied, and failed to offer a broader, more globally interlinked explanation. In contrast, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki's (1927) classic *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* – a study of Polish people, values and organisation flowing across the Atlantic at the turn of the twentieth century – has been described as "global ethnography without a theory of

globalisation” (Burawoy, 2000, p. 10). Early ethnographers who were more aware of the stretching of global processes also devised frameworks to deal with the particularities of globalisation without being able to conceptualise it. Godfrey Wilson’s *The Economics of Detribalisation in Northern Rhodesia* begins by examining rural societies and networks as harmonious and well balanced, and then works outwards to account for external influences on these societies. The “extended case method”, for example, made famous by Max Gluckman’s *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand* and later entrenched in the Manchester School, is a methodological framework that examines how socio-cultural events in the local are influenced by external and even global forces. This extended case method has been updated and re-deployed for contemporary studies (see Burawoy, 1998; Sullivan, 2002). In this light, the extended case method is useful as a critique and reconstruction of existing theories, paradigms and cultural formations that area studies have produced through the years.

Reconceptualising Southeast Asian Area Studies as a Bourdieusian “Global Field”?

Globalisation theory’s challenges to central concepts such as place, identity and method have led to the purported “crisis” in Southeast Asian area studies. Most scholars agree that it is not the case that Southeast Asian area studies has become redundant, but that “the old, single framework version of area studies that focused on the static lines and boundaries between ‘peoples’, ‘cultures’, and ‘civilisations’ has become outdated” (Burgess, 2004, p. 128). Modifications have been suggested. Appadurai (2001) argues that traditional “trait” geographies, like the fixity of area, should give way to “process” geographies, where the emphasis is on spaces, interaction and fluidity. Burgess (2004) promotes a cultural studies perspective on the discipline to which Clark (2006) has responded with cautious optimism, citing both the benefits and limitations of a cultural studies approach. Such modifications are the best course of action because, as Morris-Suzuki (2000) argues, many of the skills traditionally required by area studies are still relevant.

This section concerns itself with the two key strengths of Southeast Asian studies – its sense of locality and emphasis on languages – and attempts to dovetail them into a theoretical framework that accommodates globalisation studies. The proposed framework is the late Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of the “social field”. It is suggested that Bourdieu’s field be re-imagined with a global dimension so that its conceptualisation as a network of power relations without clear boundaries may be utilised as an analytical framework with which to account for transnational processes, while at the same time offering the necessary theoretical devices to bypass the problematic fixity of place and identity categories, and the limitations in methodology, that remain symptomatic of area studies.

Bourdieu’s sociology has its genesis in his ethnographic work on the honour-based rural society of Kabylia, Algeria. It is from this work as an ethnographer that he developed his conception of the different types of capital that are present in modern society (especially symbolic and cultural capital), and also his related theorisation of the social field. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, p. 97), the field is

a network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they

impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.).

Or, as Jenkins (2002, p. 84) puts it,

A field, in Bourdieu's sense, is a social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them. Fields are defined by the stakes which are at stake – cultural goods (life-style), housing, intellectual distinction (education), employment, land, power (politics), social class, prestige or whatever – and may be of differing degrees of specificity and concrete-ness.

The investigation into the Bourdieusian field is not an investigation into individuals or groups *per se*, but an investigation into the relationships, power, domination, interests and struggle (or cultural politics) between these groups and organisations within this field. “To think in terms of the field is to think relationally” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 96), thus encouraging the researcher “to seek out underlying and invisible relations that shape action rather than properties given in commonsense categories” (Swartz, 1997, p. 119). Such a framework allows the Southeast Asian researcher to capitalise on locality – the social relations specific to the site – because he is interested in the relations of power and dynamics of struggle within the field. The Bourdieusian field thus retains the sense of locality that area studies thrives on by studying relational power positions. It also pays attention to languages which have to be studied in order to peel back the layers upon layers of power relations between individuals and agencies in the field.

Bourdieu's illustration of the field as an uneven distribution of capital, making it a “field of struggle” (Swartz, 1997), also allows Southeast Asian researchers to reveal undercurrents of tension and resistance that general area studies have failed to tease out. For example, the study of uneven power relations in Southeast Asia has shown that the relationship between Spain and the Filipino people is premised on the culture of *utang na loob* (debt of prime obligation), a complex system of reciprocal obligation and behaviours practised by the Philippine lowlanders. *Utang na loob* is the recognition that certain debts (one's duty to parents, having one's life saved by another, or being provided employment) can never be fully repaid, and that the obligation can last for generations. These types of debts enable a socio-political interdependency to develop whereby the benefactor can count on help and services from the beneficiary when necessary and the beneficiary may, in turn, ask for more help from the benefactor. This dynamic was played out between Filipinos and their Spanish colonisers, allowing the former to legitimately and effectively criticise the latter (Rafael, 1993). Such studies deploy the concept of reciprocity and the patron-client relationship as central pillars of their analytical framework, thus producing functionalist explanations of social organisation between the weak and the powerful. However, while explaining the location of power and the establishment of social order, how do such studies explain socio-political change and evolving relationships? How do they account for conflict between the weak and the powerful?

These straightforward functionalist explanations are avoided by adhering to the structural properties of the Bourdieusian field. Firstly, instead of being confined to a reciprocal

relationship, the Bourdieusian field is the field of struggle over four primary types of capital – economic, cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986). These forms of capital become both the object and means of struggle, eventually forming the social relation of power in the field. This struggle for capital allows the researcher to explain motives, changing alliances and diverse interests in the site of study. The exchange, bargaining and struggle for cultural and symbolic capital can comfortably account for reciprocal relations in area studies, while being sophisticated enough to move beyond this to address the possibility of conflict and tension. Secondly, the field is conceived as a social space structured in terms of dominance and subjugation, according to the amounts and types of capital possessed. With this, the researcher is able to move beyond personalities and dominant norms as explanations for the hierarchies and stratifications in Southeast Asian society. This allows the researcher to understand how a shift in one position will affect the boundaries of other positions, thus privileging a relational perspective on the ethnographic site.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define three types of struggle: conservation, succession, and subversion. Dominant individuals pursue conservation strategies, succession strategies are deployed by those who aim to gain access to dominant positions, and subversion strategies are used by those who have little hope of replacing dominant individuals. These three types of struggle take place simultaneously, offering the researcher a more complex vocabulary with which to describe social exchanges. This manner of thinking emanates from Bourdieu's sociological analogy of the "game", which forms a leitmotif in his work. Social actions and relations are games that play out in the field. For Bourdieu (1994), the game is constantly evolving depending on the economic and political conditions of the field – hence it is better to proceed "from rules to strategies" in understanding the social game. With the concept of "strategies", the Southeast Asian researcher will be able to move from fixed assumptions towards a better understanding of how individuals and groups frequently change the way they engage with others according to the situations they find themselves in. This is helpful in observing Southeast Asian communities make the rural-urban transition, or as neo-capitalist processes reconfigure social positions. Bourdieu (1993a) argues that all fields are, to a significant extent, determined by their own internal logic and development. According to Swartz (1997, p. 126), "Bourdieu speaks of the 'relative autonomy' of fields to convey the dual character of their interconnectedness with and independence from external factors". This allows sites of investigation to retain their sense of locality. The specificity of social relations embedded in ethnographic sites that Southeast Asian area studies articulates so well should be preserved, and the Bourdieusian field enables just this in the face of globalisation studies. On an individual level, it retains an appreciation of the personal sense or experience that members of the community need to negotiate the embedded politics of local society. With "habitus", the researcher has a theoretical device to explicate the human black-box of learned habits, bodily skills, tastes, and other non-discursive knowledges that are "natural" to a specific social group – i.e. knowledges that operate just beneath the level of ideology. With the field and the habitus, Bourdieu (2000) combines a structuralist framework with subjectivity. This produces a two-fold participant observation – researcher self-awareness and reflexivity in the interpretation of the subject. This ethnographic methodology will enhance Southeast Asian area studies because it creates awareness of the possible objectification or distortion of social reality and of the researcher himself as a participating actor in the field of study.

The Bourdieusian field may also avoid a recurring issue in global ethnography – attention to global processes at the expense of local action. The attention to global linkages and connectivity has seen strong, imaginative conceptual programs from contemporary ethnographers to track the long-distance effects of globalisation, what Giddens (1991) calls *phantasmagoria*. Using “friction” as metaphor, Tsing (2004, p. 6) advances a global ethnography that looks at “the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form, and agency”. Ethnographers should look for the frictions between global movements such as capitalism, migration, science and politics that are “required to keep global power in motion” (Tsing, 2004, p. 6). Tsing’s ethnographic program is innovative and useful in charting the trajectory of supranational and global processes but is limited in field specifics where existing power-relations and local political divides are affected in very different ways by the same process. Many times, global ethnographies fail to extend their analyses into the local, often illustrating vividly the kaleidoscope of global movements but leaving the local particularities to area specialists.

Perhaps most useful to Southeast Asian studies in light of globalisation theories are the global dimensions of the field. Bourdieu (1993b) refrains from drawing field boundaries because it leads to a positivist instead of a much preferred relational view of the world. Furthermore, field boundaries are themselves often the subject of contention in some fields (Bourdieu, 1993a). There are two advantages to not drawing field boundaries – “first, the very definition of the scope of a research project is not exempt from institutional and professional pressures that can orient research in one direction rather than in another; and second, including or excluding particular components in an investigation can produce symbolic effects that limit one’s degree of objectivity” (Swartz, 1997, p. 122). For our immediate purposes, this allows researchers to bypass the problem of “place” and nation-state constructions. It also complements earlier global ethnographical methodologies such as the extended case method in tracking processes and linkages beyond the local. All these enable the reconceptualised area studies field to escape the criticism that it is conceived as a unified and holistic entity (Harootunian and Sakai, 1999).

The Bourdieusian field also complements existing devices such as “scapes” and “networks”, without their operational problems. For instance, how might one actually apply scapes as a methodological tool? If a researcher was looking at foreign domestic workers in, say, Singapore, through what lens should these workers be viewed – ethnoscape or finanscape? After all, the human economy of foreign domestic workers cannot be separated from the economy of financial repatriation. What theoretical device does the researcher use to pry apart scapes that have collapsed into each other? Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) outflank this problem by linking relatively autonomous fields with the notion of “structural and functional homologies”. “Fields are homologous to the extent that they develop isomorphic properties, such as positions of dominance and subordination, strategies of exclusion and usurpation, and mechanisms of reproduction and change” (Swartz, 1997, p. 129). This means that individuals and groups who are in subordinate positions in one homologous field will find themselves in similar positions in other fields, thus demonstrating the rapaciousness of capitalism, mass consumption and reproduction. Hence, homologous fields perform like different scapes in revealing the different landscapes of social life as shaped by the realities of the global cultural economy, yet offer the researcher structural and functional properties that allow him to compare the particular cultural logic and economy that operates in the site of inquiry with those found in other fields/scapes.

Conclusion: Global Area Studies?

Outlining a theory of “reflexive ethnography”, Burawoy (2003) argues that the need to revisit ethnographic sites in a constantly changing world demands a reflexive ethnography that is concerned with refutation of previous works, the construction of alternative theories and explanations, the re-describing of the site for updating purposes, and the accounting for the influence of external forces. A reflexive ethnography is sensitive to the fact that “There is a world outside ourselves, but ethnographers can only know it through their relation to it; and ethnographers are part of that world, but *only* part of it” (Burawoy, 2003, p. 668). In this context, the methodology of Southeast Asian area studies needs to be reviewed and adapted to the global cultural and economic shifts that have altered living, behavioural and communication patterns. Its focus on artificial boundaries, nation-state perimeters and collective cultural actors as national societies is widening the gulf between archaic theory and contemporary methodological needs. Traditional logics of area studies are ill-equipped to measure or describe the rhythms of globalisation and the complexity of globalism with any great accuracy.

This paper is a modest attempt to lend a global dimension to area studies. A globally-oriented area studies will synthesise the strengths of both perspectives, capitalising on the qualities of area studies, but placing the study of specific regions within a larger global network of transnational movements and processes. This combined approach is especially suited for ethnographers who prefer multidisciplinary and comparative perspectives. A global area studies will appreciate the broad sweep of the socio-political constellations that influence the subject, as well as having the sensitivity to note the manner in which the subject floats beyond the spatial confines of place. As nation-states grow more interdependent, the tools of globalisation theory offer a way to examine this interdependence more rigorously.

This, however, is not to assert that area studies has outlived its usefulness. Its emphasis on the sense of locality and language continues to be vital to any ethnographic enquiry into grounded cultures and communities. The rhetoric of globalisation should not obscure the importance of these two elements in area studies, especially in the region of Southeast Asia. As Hall and Tarrow (1998) explain, the meaning of area studies is flexible and has three general connotations. Firstly, it may be seen as a detailed description of a nation or region that does not explicitly seek to generalise beyond the specific case. The second connotation refers to studies that build on a relatively deep and context-rich knowledge of a specific society or region to develop propositions of more general applicability. Third, the term can mean interdisciplinary teaching or research by clusters of scholars grouped together in a program focused on a particular region of the world. According to Hall and Tarrow (1998), “The value of area studies to the social sciences depends heavily on which sense of the term one is using”. A global area studies will be engaged in sifting for observations and social principles that can be exported to other cultural sites and yet committed to the local and its relations, if only to ensure that exported observations and principles are sound. Such a mode of enquiry will find an equilibrium between over-generalisation and area-specific navel-gazing.

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