



# Globalizing comparative political science research on Southeast Asia The Focus

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## ► To cite this version:

David Frederic Camroux. Globalizing comparative political science research on Southeast Asia The Focus. [Research Report] 35, International Institute for Asian Studies. 2015. hal-03652365

**HAL Id: hal-03652365**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-03652365>**

Submitted on 26 Apr 2022

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# Globalizing comparative political science research on Southeast Asia

From my point of view, the scholar of Asia today is a ‘global scholar’, embedded not only in his/her area studies specialization, but also in constant intellectual dialogue with others in the same discipline, but focused on other Area studies fields. In practice, by dint of the complexity of the ‘object’, we are studying to becoming interdisciplinary. In short, the scholar of Asia today not only has greater savoir, s/he has an enhanced savoir faire: in a virtuous circle of scientific dialogue, greater interdisciplinarity leads to today’s Asia scholar making a more substantial contribution to his/her ‘home’ discipline. Below, I shall argue the case for political science.

David Camroux

IN LESS THAN A DECADE two interrelated developments have impacted on both the discipline of political science and the field of Southeast Asian Studies. On the one hand a new generation of scholars in North America, Europe, Australasia and Southeast Asia itself has emerged to revitalize research in political science in relation to the ten ASEAN member countries. On the other, the Southeast Asian experience has come to generate theory rather than, as was previously largely the case, being an object on which theory and theoretical concepts from outside were brought to bear.

Of course this latter development had previously occurred in other fields. Consider the work of two intellectual giants in their respective disciplines: Benedict Anderson in history and James Scott in anthropology. Anderson’s broad path-breaking work on Indonesia led directly to his seminal study on nationalism globally, *Imagined Communities*; first published in 1983, one that continues to feed into all debates on this subject.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, James Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak*, based on a study of peasant farmers in Malaysia, led to a general rethinking of power relations in rural societies globally.<sup>2</sup> While working on themes for his marvelous study of communities in the uplands of continental Southeast Asia, *Living Without a State*, Scott published an inspiring trans-national study on the State and on State capacity.<sup>3</sup>

In the recent past one can cite only two authors in political science/political economy who have had an impact on theorization in a global context. Jeffrey Winter’s important study of oligarchy in Indonesia, *Power in Motion*,<sup>4</sup> published in 1996, led later to his widely praised comparative study of varieties of oligarchy, in which, as a heuristic devise, he makes an international comparison between warring, ruling, sultanistic and civil oligarchies.<sup>5</sup> Muthiah Alagappa, in his conceptual introductory chapters to the five volumes he edited, sought to draw from the broader Asian experience to break new ground in thinking on subjects such as political legitimacy, civil-military relations, the study of international relations and processes of democratization.<sup>6</sup> These five studies were published in the ‘Contemporary Issues in Asia and the Pacific’ series at Stanford University Press, a cooperative undertaking with the East West Center, with Alagappa himself the series editor. It therefore comes as no surprise that, with John Sidel and Geoffrey White succeeding him as editors, that my first ‘bookend’ title featuring the new generation of political science scholars, was published within this series.

The publication in 2008 of an edited volume, *Southeast Asia in Political Science*, demonstrated that comparative political science research on Southeast Asia had come of age.<sup>7</sup> The eleven chapters by a new generation of scholars rapidly making their mark (as well as one by Don Emmerson, a pioneer in the field) are all theoretically rich and avowedly comparative.<sup>8</sup> The three editors of this volume – Dan Slater, Erik Martinez Kohunta and Tuong Vu – have since continued to make a significant contribution to political science research. Dan Slater’s innovative study of state formation in Southeast Asia has undoubtedly added substantially to the general comparative theoretical literature on State formation.<sup>9</sup> His typology of institutional outcomes and their causes has relevance beyond the Southeast Asian case studies he conducted, as does the link between contentious and conciliatory politics and authoritarian and democratic outcomes. Like his co-editor Tuong Vu, Slater emphasizes the importance of critical historical junctures in creating political path dependencies. Tuong Vu’s broad canvas study comparing emerging, or non-emerging, development trajectories in two Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia and Vietnam, with those in two Northeast Asian nations, South Korea and China, is theoretically sophisticated.<sup>10</sup> He posits a link between patterns of elite alignment and elite-mass engagement and the emergence, or non-emergence of developmental states. Martinez Kuhonta returns to the subject of development in his own broad

study of Southeast Asia in which he underlines the importance of state institutions and political parties in determining equitable outcomes, an argument applicable outside of the region.<sup>11</sup> All three place emphasis on the role of external forces and particularly on the immediate post-World War II period of decolonization as being a watershed in the path dependencies they describe. This insight is also crucial in Ja Ian Chong’s, a Singaporean based academic’s, nuanced comparative study of state formation in Indonesia and Thailand, as well as China.<sup>12</sup>

Three of the above volumes have been published by Cambridge University Press, which has emerged as the most exciting publisher in the area of Southeast Asian politics. CUP has also just published an edited volume by one of the three editors of the 2008 Stanford publication, Erik Martinez Kuhonta, who with Allen Hickens brings together a representative group of younger political scientists to discuss political parties in Asia in a conceptually rich way.<sup>13</sup> CUP has also published two textbooks by more senior scholars, Jacques Bertrand and Bruce Gilley, both of which attest to the mainstreaming of the new scholarship in Southeast Asian politics.<sup>14</sup> This is also the case in two comparative overviews of the state of democracy throughout Asia, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010 and 2014.<sup>15</sup> Routledge, alongside Palgrave Macmillan, the main British non-university press publishers, have contributed to this flowering of political science research on Southeast Asia by bringing to a much wider audience the work of a number of dynamic European political scientists: Marco Bunte, Aurel Croissant, Dirk Tomsa and Andreas Ufen.<sup>16</sup> Their work, like that of a previously German-based academic Mark Thompson,<sup>17</sup> is significant both in its comparative dimension and also in its delving into European political science traditions. Routledge has also been very active in publishing the work of Asian<sup>18</sup> and Australian scholars.<sup>19</sup> In crossing disciplinary boundaries, anthropology has become even more central to the research agenda of political scientists as evidenced in an edited volume published in 2012 on *Southeast Asian Perspectives on Power*.<sup>20</sup> Terence Lee at the National University of Singapore draws on anthropology in his study of military responses to popular protests in Asia, and in doing so provides theoretical insights that are salient beyond the Asian cases he examines.<sup>21</sup>

A mere seven years following the Stanford volume, to simply provide a measure of how far we have come, allow me to mention the fourth, very recently published volume in the Routledge Handbook collection devoted to Southeast Asia.<sup>22</sup> Edited by William Case, a prolific writer from the intermediate generation,<sup>23</sup> and entitled the *Routledge Handbook of Democratization in Southeast Asia*, it is a representative display of ‘the state of the art’, theoretically rigorous and resolutely comparative.

To conclude, in order to provide for the busy reader a very recent, readily available, example that supports the central argument of this brief overview: an extended article by Marcus Mietzner on the presidency of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) in Indonesia published online by the East West Center.<sup>24</sup> Mietzner, a Canberra-based European scholar who along with Edward Aspinall and Greg Fealy has made the ANU a mecca for the study of Indonesian politics. In this article Mietzner, by postulating a concept of ‘technocratic populism’ to describe Jokowi’s praxis, and juxtaposing this with other theoretical arguments drawn essentially from Latin America, demonstrates how the vibrant Southeast Asian political experience requires us to rethink a number of assumptions and interpretations based on observations in other regions of the world.

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