In recent years the conceptual underpinnings and continued validity of area studies in a globalizing world have been severely questioned. Emanating from a critique of Orientalism, but also reflecting changing institutional politics in the American academe following the end of the Cold War, the attack on area studies has spread across the globe. This has resulted in growing pronouncements on the failure of area studies in producing a synthesis of knowledge that transcends disciplinary divides and power hierarchies between the Western and non-Western world. The spread of this critique has led to a common view that area studies is in a state of “crisis”.

Ironically, however, this critique of area studies comes at a time when regional perspectives are gaining ground in defining regions based on local priorities. The critical agendas that propelled the attack on area studies in Euro-America appear to undermine such promising effort. As the crisis of area studies galvanized scholars to deliberate over its fate, some scholars in Asian Studies have sought to find “afterlives” for area studies by pointing to regionally located scholarships as alternative sites from which Euro-American centric visions could be denaturalized. In the words of Miyoshi and Harootunian:

The afterlife thus refers to the moment that has decentered the truths, practices, and even insitutions that belonged to a time that could still believe in the identity of some conception of humanity and universality with a Eurocentric endowment and to the acknowledgement that its ‘provinciality’ must now be succeeded by what Said called ‘a contrapuntal orientation in history’ (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002, p. 14).

1 This paper is part of my introductory chapter in a forthcoming edited volume entitled, Decentering and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Yet the prospect of recentering knowledge production back to regions themselves raises its own sets of questions. For one thing, regional scholarships have always existed alongside Euro-American social sciences. In fact strident regional scholarships were contesting the dominance of colonial scholarships during the decolonization era in endeavours to map out national histories. These local voices were often dismissed as “nationalist” if not “nativist” and have remained under-examined and unnoticed even by scholars located within the regions themselves. The unspoken politics of theory at the time, supposedly speaking on behalf of some universal and objective standard, determined which scholarship could be regarded as theory and which were relegated to more subjective and parochial forms of knowledge.

Similarly, the quest for the afterlives of area studies is underpinned by epistemological imperatives of a North American style of knowing that has strongly shaped post Second World War discourses of area studies. The throwing back of area studies to local scholars comes at a time when the epistemological rules of the day appear to be about: a search for diversity rather than similarity; an eschewing of western and nation-state frameworks; and a rejection of the possibility of any bounded geographical and identity conceptions in the current world.

More poignantly, underpinning these imperatives is a vicious polarization of opinions over disciplinariness in the context of epistemological challenges to disciplinary foundations and debates on the politics of knowledge production. In this polarization where there is often no middle ground, disciplines are either seen as immutable and to be strictly defended or as oppressive and to be dismantled. Equally theoretical-political differences between the right and left, and even amongst these groups themselves, are bitterly divided, and growing more dogmatic in the face of postmodern challenges. In such an atmosphere, concepts and social categories become part of a social science language game; they are hijacked, reified, and frozen by dogmatic ideological and disciplinary purposes making alternative persuasions simply difficult or wrongly misunderstood.

In this context, how might local scholars negotiate the difference in what counts as “scholarship” in Southeast Asian and Euro-American settings, while remaining true to their calling to prioritize local perspectives? Given the global diffusion of Euro-American ideas

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5 The nature and consequences of the quarrel over disciplinary and theoretical differences in the North American academe have been extensively discussed in a volume by Louis Menand, ed., *The Future of Academic Freedom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). A latter volume edited by Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente on *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siecle* (2002) attempts to put an end to this fight by showing how disciplines are inevitably products of both disciplinary and anti-disciplinary practices.
in today’s world, how are alternative social scientific discourses possible? At the same
time, what are the conditions and processes that enable alternative epistemologies and
imaginings without falling into the traps of essentialism or chauvinism? If indeed the
project of knowledge production has become polycentric, would the agendas and ideas
from regional scholarships be accepted into dominant paradigms even if they were to
overthrow their fundamental disciplinary and epistemological (theoretical-political)
premises? What are the grounds for equal comparative intellectual exchanges that will
recognize epistemic dissent from regional practices and effect changes in existing canons of
knowledge? Could different analytical and ethical imaginings emanating from diverse
spatial and cultural settings help forge a new universal knowledge that does not explicitly
or implicitly return us to Eurocentric legacies? Could regional remakings of Southeast
Asian Studies within the context of power realignments in a post-Cold War era in fact
overthrow assumptions about area studies as being in a state of crisis?

This paper will explore these and other related questions in the changing parameters
of Southeast Asian Studies in which the crisis of area studies has revived controversies over
the distinction between and reconciliation of “insider” versus “outsider” perspectives, so
prevalent during the 1960s and 1970s. Using a picture of humanities and social science
practices in the region gathered from findings from a workshop series, organized from
between 2002-2004, involving Southeast Asian scholars representing different intellectual
cohorts from the early independence to current eras, this paper will trace the way regional
practices in the humanities and social sciences (henceforth “human sciences”) are
interconnected with, yet also distinct from, Euro-American disciplinary and conceptual
legacies. It will focus on two aspects of regional intellectual practices: 1) the changing
intellectual conditions, shared concerns, and continued scholarly commitment that have
brought different scholarship generations into dialogue on how to study but importantly also
problematize, Southeast Asia as a region; and 2) institutional, disciplinary and theoretical
dimensions produced and their potential to help address fundamental questions, gaps and
risk surrounding knowledge production on Southeast Asia.

This paper will present its arguments in two sections: 1) An exegesis of basic
conceptual anxieties in the field and their intimate entwinement with questions of subject
position (or where one stands/is located) to lay grounds to better appreciate alternative
dimensions of regional human sciences; 2) identify alternative disciplinary and
epistemological practices in regional thinking and their potential to address the current
politics of knowledge production and insider/outsider quarrels over area studies.

1. Subject Positionality, Agency, and the Search for Southeast Asian Perspectives

Background
In the development of Southeast Asia as a field of study, certain epistemological questions
have repeatedly surfaced over the past fifty years.6 Paramount among them is the issue of

6 Some examples of classical debates on Southeast Asian Studies are: J.C. Van Leur, Indonesia
Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History (The Hague: van Hoeve, 1967);
John R. W. Smail, “On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia”.
local contributions to building concepts that can better account for historical experiences specific to the region which are at the same time interconnected with larger histories given the experiences of migration, colonialism, foreign education, and other aspects of global interaction.

Scholars from the region have begun engaging with these concerns since the 1950s. During the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, indigenous voices vigorously contested the dominance of colonial scholars in mapping out the field of Southeast Asian Studies. Forming part of the “indigenization” and “decolonization” intellectual movements in many Third World countries at this time, these local voices were often characterised by passionate and emotive writings about regionally embedded agencies and identities which were analysed within nation-state frameworks. Often falling outside universal intellectual norms of impartiality and secular objectivity, they were sidelined as “Asia-centric” by academic discourses emerging from Southeast Asian Studies centres in the United States, Australia and Europe. Tainted by the problem of atavism and essentialism, these scholarships were seen to be in the service of nationalist interests.

There was truth to these critiques and “Asia-centric” discourses have indeed served to justify domestic oppression, ethnic inequalities and other self-serving purposes. Yet a complete dismissal may be too hasty as there are important ethical dimensions to such scholarships. Rather than a wholesale dismissal of Asia-centric viewpoints, there is a need to better understand and appreciate the local contexts from which they emanated at that point in time - especially those of colonialism, decolonization and the struggle to form new nation-states.

Within these debates, the avant-garde views of John Smail (1961, 1993), a historian from the University of Wisconsin (Madison), provided a watershed in efforts to transcend the dichotomy between Asia-centric/Eurocentric views during the 1960s. As pointed out by Sears (1993, p. 9), Smail was a radical thinker for his time. He was critical of the newer racist ideals of primitive mentalities and post-war modernization in Euro-America as well as nationalist styles of scholarship amongst indigenous scholars in Southeast Asia. As a way of transcending nationalist and colonialist impulses on both sides of these debates,


Miyoshi (2002: 45) has pointed to the self-serving use of history of victimisation to demand payment in some cases.
Smail proposed the idea of an “autonomous” history. “Autonomous” history, according to Smail, is one which is embedded in an objective, scientific, and universal rationality that looks beyond colonial and nationalist relations to focus on social structure and change among ordinary people rather than domestic elites. Smail was confident that all historians and social scientists would eventually take up “a single world culture or thought-world” (Smail 1993 p. 42).

While ahead of his time, with hindsight we can now say that Smail’s ideal of a universal, but implicitly western thought-world amongst all historians, reflects the ethos of classical western liberalism which recognises pluralism yet endeavours to manage diversity within a unitary code. The postfoundational turn in the humanities and the social sciences has put Smail’s approach in question.

Today, universalist models are no longer easily accepted. Instead current progressive impulses demand forms of social analyses which are embedded in socio-historical contexts and which make power relationships in the course of knowledge production transparent. Alongside new geo-political power realignments in a post-Cold War world these theoretical transformations have severely disrupted the area studies paradigm (not to mention a variety of disciplines as well). Not only has it set off a crisis of area studies in Western settings, the search for new ideas to reform the field has led to debates on the role of regional voices in centering knowledge production on area studies.

In Southeast Asian Studies, these debates have inevitably revived the insider/outsider dispute. Despite progressive sentiments, the current call for the participation of local voices appears to be double edged. We are in a situation where views of local scholars are sought to “parochialize” or centre Eurocentric conceptions, on the one hand, while fears over deviation from accepted universal/global norms of scientific values and ethics have also appeared, on the other. 9 Akin to older debates within the field,

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the newer search for “local/native” alterity is faced with a conundrum, that is, should we abandon or retain the idea of a shared/single/western/universal scientific form of knowledge and truth. Underlying this dilemma is the fear that “local/native” knowledge may succumb to the subjective, fictive, and emotive rather than conforming with the norm and ethical foundation of social scientific inquiry.

Caught in this limbo, we find a situation where the call for the inclusion of local/native voices is overwhelmingly supported, but this is accompanied by concern over the blight of “native blindness”. On the other, local scholars advocating “insider” imaginaries are overly defensive and go to great lengths to deny any advantage to knowledge over outsiders because of their birth, race, linguistic ease, nationality, and other criteria of regional membership (Abu and Tan 2003, pp. ix-xxv; Winichakul 2003, pp. 3-29). Such apprehension suggests that the invocation of the “insider/outsider” distinctions is immediately suspect of partiality, racism and/or ethno-cultural chauvinism.

Given this wariness, recent efforts to rethink Southeast Asia have tended to avoid the insider/outsider distinction preferring instead to rely on disciplinary and epistemological efficacy to steer cutting edge thinking on the region. In this quest, many have taken the Orientalist critique to heart and turn to newer radical epistemes in order to ensure critical standards and revolutionary theory-making in the study of the region.

At least two significant trends can be observed in such revisionary theorising.

A Survey of Revisionist Trends

The first of these revisionary trends is manifest in the problematic of disciplinary or newer anti-disciplinary frameworks which are believed to offer greater theoretical promise than an area studies approach held back by Orientalist legacies. There are two main proponents of this approach. The first is Victor King (2001), a leading British anthropologist of Southeast Asia, who calls for a return to disciplinary frameworks to produce cutting edge thinking on


11 Adrian Vickers has cautioned against taking the Saidian critique of Orientalist representations to an extreme in the study of Southeast Asia. He argues on the importance of textual reading as a form of knowledge contribution and a means for translating meanings across different societies within and beyond Southeast Asia (2009).
the region.\(^{12}\) Using anthropological studies of the region as his point of reference, King repudiates Southeast Asian Studies as a distinct field of study, arguing that the region is predominantly studied as a specific locality/country rather than as a region per se. As such he opines that Southeast Asia is at best an empirical site for testing ideas in key disciplines active in defining the region such as anthropology, history and geography.

The other approach is advanced by Ariel Heryanto, a reputed cultural literary scholar of Southeast Asia and strong advocate of regional scholarship, who views cultural studies as the vehicle to take the study of the region forward. In a provocative essay titled, “Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?”, Heryanto argues that a continued dominance of Western epistemology and the gate-keeping role of Western scholars make it difficult for Southeast Asian scholars to enter and achieve equal standing in a redefined Southeast Asian Studies.\(^{13}\) As a solution, Heryanto suggests that we turn to cultural studies - which he conflates with media and postmodern studies – to rebuild a “new” Southeast Asian Studies to replace the “old” framework. Heryanto proffers that the radical analytical structures of cultural studies characterised by a consciousness of “postmodernity” and critiques of “dominant paradigms” or “universalist theorization” will help dismantle the Orientalist and Cold War legacies of the “old” Southeast Asian Studies (2007, p.102). Heryanto’s turn to cultural studies could perhaps be in part understood as a reaction to the domination of positivist and empiricist approaches which tend to relegate culture as fluff or epiphenomenon in Southeast Asian Studies particularly in the Australian academe where Heryanto is based.\(^{14}\) However Heryanto’s faith in cultural studies is still in step with a wider Euro-American critique of area studies whereby cultural and postcolonial studies have been proposed as radical replacements of area studies (Chow 2002; Harootunian (2002)

A second revisionist trend seeks instead to dismantle traditional categories and conceptions, particularly those of nation-states, regions and fixed notions of culture and identity. These studies are characterised by a preference for globally oriented approaches with attention paid to external influences, the mobility of people, ideas, capital and goods, the fluidity of identity politics, and the porosity of territorial borders in attempts to revise understandings of the region. As a result, Southeast Asia has been increasingly studied via new frontiers such as the sea, “sub-regions” (King 2006, pp. 25), “Zomia” (Van Schendel 2005, p. 282), and so on, or via fluid social practices of disporas and trans-national populations.\(^{15}\) All in all, these developments have complicated and dislocated intact, coherent and established conceptualisations of Southeast Asia, its peoples, culture and societies.

There is a need to contextualise these revisionists arguments. It is evident that these approaches are propelled by specific critical agendas which reject the area studies paradigm

\(^{12}\) King has gone on to write two disciplinary-based books on Southeast Asia, i.e., \textit{Anthropology and Development in Southeast Asia} (1999) and \textit{The Sociology of Southeast Asia} (2008).

\(^{13}\) King has disputed Heryanto’s opinion on the marginalisation of Southeast Asian scholars in Southeast Asian Studies (see King, Southeast Asia: Personal Reflections on a Region”, pp. 23-44).

\(^{14}\) I owe this insight to Joel S. Kahn.

\(^{15}\) Zomia refers to the mainland massif of Southeast Asia which extends from the Central Highlands of Vietnam westward all the way to North-eastern India and South-western provinces of China.
for its Orientalist foundations and its irrelevance to a post Cold War world shaped by global processes deemed no longer containable within any single set of spatial, temporal, and cultural boundaries. These intellectual politics, as we know, emanated from progressive Euro-American intellectual currents in the Orientalist critique of area studies/knowledge production. They are aimed at reforming Euro-American models of area studies which, amongst other things, had led to a return to disciplinary or a call for anti-disciplinary paradigms, as well as concerted efforts to bring non-western societies (and “natives”) back onto the global stage in social analyses (see Harutoonian 2000; 2002).

While these critical imperatives may be warranted, it would be a mistake to presume their universal relevance to other models. Although area studies paradigms outside Western settings are entwined with Euro-American models, they are embedded in different temporalities which may require different critical interventions in response to the politics of knowledge in a post-Cold War world. In considering a direct application of critical imperatives originally aimed at rectifying Western scholastic traditions to academic practices in Southeast Asia, at least two problems come to the fore. First, it would mean freezing Southeast Asian Studies in its Orientalist/Western origins and missing out on the fact that alternative trajectories may have developed within the region which may require different forms of critical intervention. Second, it would bring about an unwitting reinstatement of Western universalism, albeit one shaped by progressive discourses, which places other ethical subjectivities which do not fully correlate with these critical logics at risk of erasure.

These predicaments aside, the claims of disciplinarity and anti/interdisciplinarity and a preoccupation with global or fluid/unbounded conceptions are not unproblematic. To begin, assumptions about disciplinarity, anti-disciplinarity and area studies as being at odds with each other may be misplaced. This is because interrogations of disciplinary formation in the human sciences have revealed that disciplines have in fact already been constituted by dialectics between disciplinary and anti-/inter-interdisciplinary impulses (Anderson and Valente 2002, p. 2). Hence, rather than pitting these different frameworks against one another, it may be beneficial to examine the history of interaction between disciplines/anti-disciplines and Southeast Asian Studies. Indeed precisely such an argument has been made by John Bowen (2000) who views Southeast Asian Studies as a distinct field of study which has brought about interactions between discipline/theory and place/empiricism and contributed to theory-making.

Likewise, a preoccupation with global/fluid categories and conceptions faces a serious epistemological problem. Such conceptions have missed out on the fact that these unbounded sites, units of analyses, or meanings do not merely shape human societies but are themselves also products of time. This epistemological problem has been raised by Arif Dirlik who has also warned that the deconstruction of reified categories such as nation-state, region or bounded identities if taken to an extreme may be counter productive to a better comprehension of the world around us (2005, p. 166). It may therefore be useful to develop theoretical perspectives which can consider the simultaneity and interaction of the global and the local, the inside and outside, the old and new, center and periphery, the stable and unstable, and so on, rather than seeking to replace one by the other in the efforts to redefine Southeast Asia.
We can surmise from the above that in exploring options to decenter colonial/imperial knowledge on Southeast Asia there must be no foreclosures to alternative critical registers. This does not mean that there can be no shared assumptions about progressive politics and critical analyses. The issue is about understanding how critical dissent against knowledge/power hierarchies may take on different epistemological trajectories under different conditions within the region. It is crucial to this effort to develop analytical procedures which can at once explicate alternative epistemological imperatives relevant to regional academic practices and recognise their coeval standing in the enterprise to decenter and pluralise knowledge about Southeast Asia.

To look for answers, we turn to debates beyond Southeast Asian Studies on the deconstruction of imperial/colonial knowledge, which grapple precisely with these questions.

Looking to Wider Debates
I shall begin with an important edited volume dealing specifically with the subject of area studies as a whole. This is the volume by David Szanton (2004) which provides refreshing insights into how area studies should be approached as a heterogeneous and dynamic intellectual movement by turning the critique of area studies on its head and questioning the politics that underpins it. Using contributions from American scholars working on various regions of the world, this volume stands out for emphasising open engagements with, and learning from, different models of area studies and calling for multivalent conclusions on the area studies paradigm. Proposing that we look at area studies as having heterogenous genealogies, this volume prescribes “historicised” and “contextualised” approaches in order to better map the constitutions, directions, and contributions of area studies paradigms over time and across different locations (Szanton, 2004, p. 3).

An important contribution in this volume is the essay by Timothy Mitchell which questions the disciplinary assumptions that drive the critique of area studies. Mitchell argues that the future of area studies lies not in turning against itself. Rather, crucial to its future is its capacity to question and dismantle disciplinary norms which subsume area studies and knowledge from non-Western settings to disciplinary cannons and categories. Mitchell points out that Euro-American theoretical and disciplinary discourses have continued to set the standard for global comparisons of disciplinary and area study developments despite an age of theoretical deconstruction. He argues that unless the fundamental imbalance between area studies in the United States/the West and other regions is overturned, models outside the West will merely be “testing grounds for the universalization of western social sciences” (Mitchell 2004, p.98). Mitchell challenges area studies to stop being “a servant of American social sciences” and instead strive to become “a place from which to rewrite the history of the social sciences, and to examine how their categories are implicated in a certain history of Europe, and, in the twentieth century, an unachieved American project of universal social science” (Mitchell 2004, p. 9). For Mitchell, the crisis of area studies is therefore really a crisis of Western human sciences. As he puts it:

The question of the future of area studies is therefore a question about the future of the social science project rather than simply an issue of how best to learn about foreign parts (p. 76).
Mitchell is not alone in his radical vision of area studies. Achille Mbembe – a scholar who works on Africa – is similarly concerned about the limits of western social science categories and the need for regional knowledge to search for its own expressions. In his book *The Postcolony*, Mbembe advocates for a “different writing” [his emphasis] from Western social sciences so as to better capture African subjectivities, which to his mind, originate from and remain interconnected to world history and Western social science but do not fully correlate with Western theory, critical or otherwise (2001, p. 14). Mbembe argues that “African social formations do not necessarily converge toward a single point, trend, or cycle” (ibid, p. 16). While Mbembe’s treatment of Africa as a homogenous totality may be problematic, the point he is making about the need for the social sciences to learn from alternative narratives of real historical processes and develop a “different writing” to include them into scholastic discourse is an important one (Mbembe 2001, pp. 14-15).

Similarly we can learn from Vinay Lal, author of *Empire of Knowledge*, who considers “dissenting perspectives on the politics of knowledge” as imperative if we truly want to decenter, pluralise and democratise modern knowledge structures (2002, p. 4). Lal shows how imperial knowledge has profoundly shaped modern definitions of time, space, ideas and politics, silencing all alternative conceptions. He points out that current disciplinary (and anti-disciplinary) critiques of imperial knowledge, even of the most radical kind, are equally ultimately Western as they are largely derived from Western history. In such a scenario, Lal argues, colonial/imperial knowledge can only truly be decentered if we are not held hostage by modern knowledge structures but strive to pluralise the analytical categories through which we view the world (ibid, p. 4). He calls for the use of hermeneutical, dialectical, and dialogic approaches to bring competing “universalisms” into engagement in order to better capture other ways of renewing and renegotiating definitions of time, space, and society.

Yet dialectical and dialogical approaches are not enough in themselves to provide tools on how epistemological agency is to be enabled. What kinds of conditions and agency are needed to carve out locally relevant epistemologies? On these issues, I find the ideas of Walter Mignolo particularly useful. Mignolo is a scholar of Latin American history and literature who has written extensively on the coloniality of knowledge and political-ethical imperatives in decolonising knowledge.

At the risk of simplifying Mignolo’s complex ideas, I will draw on the part of his argument that deals with the links between epistemology, ethical agency, and the sensibilities of “the place of theorizing” to lay grounds for alternative thinking from and about Southeast Asia (2000, p. 191).

Mignolo’s work begins with the premise of a doubled-edged modern world system since the end of the fifteenth century whereby the experience of modernity is inevitably accompanied by a “darker” underside of coloniality (2000, p. 22). Modernity/coloniality are therefore instantenous existences or two sides of the same coin, so to speak. Modernity/coloniality are each equally constituted by doubled movements of hegemonic and subaltern knowledge formations. At its “visible” side, modernity is represented by movements of “global designs” which circulate “planetary” at particular local/national/regional levels, on the one hand, and the “subalternization” of other forms of knowledge, on the other. On its underside, coloniality (which is experienced in both metropolitan and peripheral countries) is shaped by contestations over “local histories”
between nationalist forces rearticulating “global designs”, on the one hand, and subaltern resistance and struggle to emancipate subjugated knowledge, on the other (2000, p. 64-65). Modernity/coloniality or global designs/subalternised imaginaries are not to be conceived in discrete terms but rather as simultaneities or continua which contest each other at the global and national/local/regional levels (ibid, p. 33).

It is from the simultaneity of hegemony and subaltern resistance that Mignolo constructs the capacity for ethical agency, using a concept of “border thinking”. According to Mignolo, “border thinking” is an ethical agency emerging from dichotomous imaginaries of the hegemonic and the subalternised but which also breaks away from both to form a new thinking (ibid, p67). Importantly, this ethical theoretical agency is not historically given but enacted and unfolds at both metropolitan and peripheral centres. This enacted subject positionality, or what Mignolo calls “locus of enunciation” is “an emerging discursive formation, as a form of articulation of subaltern rationality” (Mignolo 2000. p. 95). It arises from the development of a double-critique that enables one to become not only critical of hegemonic imaginaries but also reflexive of one’s own traditions. “Border thinking” is hence not neutral and, Mignolo argues, always foregrounded by “emotional sensibilities” arising from ethnic, national, cosmopolitan, sexual, class and other forms of oppression (2000, p. 191). The capacity for ethical agency, Mignolo asserts, is not determined by any essentialist terms but is formed and transformed through everyday experiences in the course of one’s lifetime whereby a political and ethical commitment is developed to emancipate subjugated knowledge associated with “the place of theorizing (being from, coming from, and being at [his emphases])” (Mignolo 2000, p.115).

Inevitably, Mignolo points out that “border thinking” will take different forms depending on the “place of theorizing” from which subject position is enacted. For instance, he argues that the critique of colonial knowledge from the perspective of western and colonial modernities in regions such as “Asia, Africa and the Americas /Caribbean” will likely be in conflict (2000, p. 11). Likewise, he opines that scholars born in the North/West or from the South/East but writing and teaching in northern locations, may have different agendas than academics born or writing in the South/East who often have to struggle against modern colonisation as well as theoretical domination. While such distinctions between North/West and South/East may be viewed with suspicion, Mignolo argues that there is a need for such lines to be drawn, not so much in terms of national identities but rather on the basis of their “loci of enunciation” (1993. p. 122). He insists that it is precisely by making such distinctions that subalternised knowledge can be released to remap the cultures of scholarship. In fact, Mignolo views the crisis of “area studies” as a predicament of “old borders” (i.e., national or civilisational) and of distinctions between “hegemonic (discipline-based knowledges) and subaltern (area based knowledges)” whereby “border thinking” gives rise to new forms of what he calls “area-based disciplinary knowledges” which are “bringing together and erasing borders between knowing about and knowing from [his emphases]” (2000, p. 310).

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16 For an elaboration of the problems of the dependency and inequalities in knowledge production between the First and Third worlds, see Farid Alatas’ article in Current Sociology 51, no. 6 (2003): 599-613 and his book on Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science (2006).
By locating theoretical agency as a capacity for ethical action at the intersection of domination and subaltern resistance, Mignolo’s approach provides a simultaneous recognition of the domination of authoritative knowledge yet also the coeval standing of entwined but differentiated forms of knowledge. Such an approach enables us to talk about forms of thinking from and about Southeast Asia which are different from, yet entwined and coeval with, current epistemological trajectories in the search for a new universalism of polycentric and multi-directional knowledge on the region.

Mignolo’s approach is also useful in working towards a détente between the insider/outsider dispute in Southeast Asian Studies in at least two ways. First, it provides a way out of the anxiety about racial-cultural chauvinism associated with the insider/outside divides by showing that racial, geo-cultural and historical sensibilities do matter and that recognising their impact on intellectual formation does not have to be the same, nor should it be confused, with racism and dogma. Rather, such a recognition enables us to analytically capture other forms of experience which arise in conjunction with, but also in differentiation from, dominant conceptual norms.

Furthermore, a subject position to think from and about the region does have to exclude others not from or located in the region. Rather both insiders and outsiders are capable of enacting such a positionality. What is only required is a scholarly commitment to the region, its places and people and a responsibility to articulate regional idioms of experience in and on their own terms, without subsuming them under existing knowledge claims. It is precisely a recognition of this value of scholarly commitment to the region that led Thongchai Winichakul, a historian of Southeast Asia, to recover the disdained native/indigenous category, replacing it with a more inclusive group of “home scholars” (Winichakul 2003, p. 6). To Winichakul, “home scholar’ is defined by commitment to the region and the stature and reception of one’s scholarship within the field of study rather than by natural internal membership. In step with such an inclusionary effort, Vincente Rafael has also pointed out that commitment to a place of study amongst foreign scholars to the place may often begin as chance encounters. But prolonged encounters often enabled these scholars to develop a “doubled identity” or an ability to identify with both Eurocentric and regional viewpoints (1999, p. 19). In fact there is now greater opportunity for foreign scholars to be based in Southeast Asia as they are increasingly recruited by regional universities and research institutions with ambition to become major players in the globalisation of education. Singapore is a case in point, offering promise of an emergent scholarship by foreign scholars who are also based in and thinking from the region.

Second, Mignolo’s arguments are useful in addressing the antimony between insider/outsider perspectives on Southeast Asia by revealing their complementarity. If we treat insider/outsider differences as products of different “loci of enunciation” characterised by different sets of commitment to differentiated sensibilities of “the place of theorizing”, then their quarrels may tell us more about divergent subject positions than the ontology of Southeast Asia itself. Consequently, we can argue that the views of both regional and foreign scholars are equally subjective, dispelling the biased one-sided qualms about “native blindness”. Accordingly, we must insist that neither side can claim accuracy or authority over the other. The way forward in the effort to reorganise knowledge about Southeast Asia is for each side to listen, respect and learn from the other.
The time seems right for Southeast Asian voices to be taken seriously when foreign scholars appear to be in full support of facilitating scholarship by Southeast Asians with some even advocating that the field should learn from new knowledge paradigms emerging from the region (Sears 2006; King 2006). As Thompson (2010) has recently pointed out, the world of Southeast Asian Studies is now “large and diverse enough to have numerous, overlapping ‘circles of esteem’”17 which no longer refers only to American, European or other International scholarship circles but also to emerging intra-regional networks of scholarship within the region itself.18

Such concerns and visions shaped two workshop series on local dimensions to the rise of Southeast Asian scholarships organised from between 2002-2004, involving Southeast Asian scholars representing different intellectual cohorts from the early independence to current eras. This paper will use the picture of local practices in the human and social sciences which emerged from these workshops to engage with the crisis of area studies and its impact on Southeast Asian Studies, and in particular, to explore a way out from the insider-outsider dispute.

Let me now turn to discuss disciplinary and epistemological practices which do not quite fit with, despite being inevitably connected to, Euro-American scholastic discourse as they emerged from the workshop narratives.

2) Alternative Disciplinary and Epistemological Potential

The Fluid Ecology of Knowledge: Early Formations
The narration of their intellectual biographies enabled workshop participants to paint an evolving picture of the human sciences as closely entangled with Western practices yet strongly shaped by changing social conditions and local imperatives within the region. The picture of human science practices that emerged is one of fluid disciplinary practices during the formative years of regional academies in the 1940s until the 1960s towards increasingly established disciplinary boundaries and political-theoretical differences with the advent of a more systematic influence from the North American human sciences since the Cold War. These biographies also reveal a strong commitment to applied knowledge, in which ideas from the human sciences are used for socially and ethically informed practice. During the formative years, the project of applying knowledge in the pursuit of development appears to have been easier because local societies were united by the common goals of decolonisation and nation-building. Nevertheless, as academic practice began to exhibit disciplinary and ideological divisions in latter years alongside growing social-political fragmentation of local societies, the imbrications of knowledge in social and moral practice

17 “Circles of esteem” is a concept introduced by Robert Cribb (2006). This concept defines Southeast Asian Studies as a field whereby knowledge production is constituted by complex and hierarchical scholarly networks which produce a system of professional evaluations driven primarily by esteem and derision.
18 Arif Dirlik (2005, p. 158) has also pointed to newer reconfigurations of Asia and the Pacific studies as scholars responded to the crisis of area studies. He identifies the study of “civilizations, oceans, diaporas, Asianization of Asian studies and indigenous studies” as newer paradigms replacing earlier area studies.
become more complicated as they become caught in battles over the defence of disciplinary and ideological/theoretical-political paradigms and contesting ethical agendas between state and these academic actors.

A picture of human science practices in the early period can be derived from the intellectual biographies of a “senior” generation of scholars. Their narratives show that disciplinary divisions as we know them today were virtually non-existent in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. While disciplines were already established in these early years, disciplinary conventions as we find them today were not yet strong. The formative era of human sciences in Southeast Asia appears to be a time when disciplinary boundaries were hazy, when no identifiable scholarship styles, classical texts, or approaches could be associated with any one discipline, when discipline-based institutions were rare. The biographies reveal that these scholars were not influenced by any single set of disciplinary ideas and approaches. Rather, all read widely across history, the social sciences, philosophy, and creative writings of their time. Their narratives reveal how borrowing from textual/literary studies, philosophy, area studies, music, the arts and the social sciences was a norm in the formative era. They were also well versed in structuralism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, and other interpretative and human-action oriented frameworks in the social sciences that were coming to the fore in the 1960s. Institutional divisions between the humanities and the social sciences during this “pre-social science” era also reflected the amorphous state of disciplinary practices. There were clearly no established practices, and institutional arrangements for the human sciences varied from university to university and country to country. These scholars also point to the absence of any single, dominant source of intellectual influence in the region. Ideas from the various colonial powers - Dutch, British, Spanish and American - were prevalent but so were other influences from France, Germany, Italy and Russia, as well as, China, India, Japan and the Philippines.

Ideological divides were not firm as late as the late 1950s. No particular political-theoretical positions from the right or left, whether Marxist, socialist, liberal or pro-capitalist, appear to have the upper-hand nor did any of the three “senior” scholars profess strong affiliation to any ideological position. Rather, their scholarship pursuits appear to be united by common “nationalistic” goals of wanting to get the colonial powers out of the various countries or towards issues around the building of national communities in their individual societies. During this era of common political struggle, the project of developing autonomous local academic traditions appears to have been a little easier for the early generation of scholars. However Independence and eventually the Vietnam War began to change things.

Nation-Building, the Cold War and the Rise of American Social Sciences
In contrast to the early fluid conditions, North American social sciences, characterised by sharp disciplinary divides and ideological divisions reflecting the Cold War became systematically more influential in the region. The advent of the Vietnam War (or American War to the Vietnamese) saw nationalist ideologies increasingly entangled with

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19 For a recent volume discussing the impact of American social sciences on Indonesian social sciences since the Cold War, see Vedi R. Hadiz and Daniel Dhakidae, eds. Social Science and Power in Indonesia (Jakarta and Singapore: ISEAS and Equinox Publishing, 2005).
Cold War ideologies as Southeast Asian countries split into capitalist and communist blocks. The Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN), an anti-communist group on the American side of the Vietnam War, was created amidst rising anti-communist political rhetoric which saw anti-communist purges in the region.20

As the regional human sciences became implicated in nation-building projects and Cold War ideologies, disciplinary divisions and ideological splits found in American human sciences became more prevalent. The workshop narratives point to a distinct rise of disciplinary practices of American social sciences in various countries, even those which were ex-British colonies. Although British influence remained significant alongside rising American dominance, by the 1980s, universities in the former British colonies such as Malaysia were clearly teaching American-oriented social sciences.

It is clear that America was gradually becoming a favourite place for Southeast Asians to pursue their graduate degrees from the 1960s onwards. In part this was due to scholarship programmes such as Fulbright. Nevertheless, even as local scholarship began to take on an American social science style, it is clear that disciplinary and theoretical-political divides in Southeast Asian contexts remained inseparable from nation-building projects, which themselves were shaped by political configurations, colonial experiences and the contemporary locations in the capitalist globalisation of Southeast Asia. Narratives presented suggest that the entrenchment of disciplinary and theoretical-political divides in social science practices during the Cold War occurred alongside strong contestations over social and moral agendas of national development within Southeast Asia. On the one hand, we find that the imperative of national survival amidst the threat of socialist revolution saw a pragmatic deployment of the social sciences for the economic and cultural agendas of various Southeast Asian nation-states. On the other, we find the human sciences becoming an important site for the spread of revolutionary or alternative social and moral ideals to offset dominant state ideologies. These divergent pursuits have come to constitute Southeast Asian scholarship on the region, both its virtues and problems.

It is tricky to evaluate these different normative practices in the human sciences. We all know that Southeast Asian scholarship has come under criticism for being coopted by state agendas. There is no doubt that the threat of the erosion of independent and critical scholarship vis-à-vis the state is real. Yet there has also been little attention on how the consequences of colonialism, poverty and social inequalities may have necessitated the deployment of the human sciences for development purposes in Southeast Asia. The intellectual narratives reveal that having to work with, or within policies of the state, remains a reality as well as dilemma of academic life for all generations. Under such realities, could we arrive at an unequivocal conclusion that working with the state is essentially bad while working against the state is inherently good? What are the yardsticks of ethical practices when one is called to think for the state and when one is called to think for one’s community/society? Could, in fact, both these calls be separated in all instances?

I do not presume to offer a resolution to these age-old moral dilemmas. Instead, workshop narratives elucidated different normative uses of the human sciences and the

20 ASEAN was formed in 1967 in Bangkok by five original countries, that is, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia. Brunei joined in 1984, followed by Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.
ways through which scholars coped with and made ethical meaning over time. Narratives represented suggest that conditions and meanings of knowledge production in relation to state and society are complicated in each era. Let me begin by examining the deployment of social scientific research by and for state interests.

The State, Public Intellectuals and (Trans)National Grounds: The Ethics and Politics of Knowledge
In the years of anti-colonial struggle and early Independence intellectual work was a decolonising tool and the nation-state was experienced as a source of promise to forge new communities. The deployment of the human sciences by the state and the elite for national development could be justified for making scholarship more meaningful to the general population. Senior scholars un-apologetically connect the human sciences to anti-colonial struggles and the project of building new nation-states. There was an undisputed certainty about the use of the human sciences for national development as the soon-to-be or newly independent nations were faced with threats to national survival and the need to forge unity amongst their diverse populations.

Undoubtedly, the deployment of the social sciences, particularly those of the “harder” disciplines such as economics and political science, for developmental purposes persists today. An example is the case of the Berkeley trained Indonesian economists during the Suharto’s regime. Given the growing authoritarian nature of the state in many Southeast Asian countries, the cooptation of social scientists by state agendas tended to be viewed negatively.

Experiences from all scholars reveal encounters with state agendas. In the region the links between state and social scientific research was materialised in a number of state-sponsored academic/research institutions. What are commonly known as “government think-tanks” in Southeast Asia are one example; public universities another. In fact most established universities in the region are state-funded. In spite of this the struggle to transform the human sciences into forms of knowing which might counterbalance the tyranny of state benevolence or domination has not disappeared. In one way or another, all scholars represented here talk about their efforts to bring to light subjugated knowledges in order to overturn monolithic conceptions of society and culture promulgated by the state.

Such struggles are particularly acute for those working in government “think tanks”. The experiences of a member of the younger generation, who works with the Indonesian Institute of the Sciences (LIPI) – the prime state research body for both natural and human sciences –, is one such case.

Scholars face problems being a social scientist and a civil servant at the same time. They talk about their struggles to juxtapose the demands to be a “good citizen” who fulfils the “‘altruistic’ role of the social science in leading the society towards development” on the one hand, and to be a good researcher who is critical of the “objectivity” of scholarship, particularly its practical deployment for developmental purposes on the other. They talk about how there is often a price to pay if they privileged academic content over applied components of research. Such constraints demand ingenuity on the part of researchers to carve strategies which can tailor research projects to meet state requirements without sacrificing theoretical rigour.
Yet there are instances where scholars see the virtue in joining state institutions in order to help transform things from the inside. The case of a Thai anthropologist who moved from a university lecturer to being an administrator in a public institution provide some insights into efforts to build bridges between state and public interests. The Thai case shows that the model of “public anthropology” which emerged from the United States - a field to integrate anthropology into societal engagements and public policy advocacy - was not applicable. In Thailand, the insulation of the academic community from public issues had never happened given that Thai public intellectuals were already socially and publicly engaged. Rather the problem faced by Thai anthropologists in public engagement is of another kind: that is, “culture”, the subject of anthropological study had long been the handmaiden of Thai national values. Before the discipline of anthropology was even established in Thailand during the 1970s, “culture” was being used by the state to signify nation, Buddhism, and monarchy from the 1940s. Culture is therefore a component of Thai bureaucratic practices whereby cultural sites, artefacts, and practices are defined by the state for its own purposes.

There are no simple solutions to the entwinement between state and social science research, nor are there easy ways to mitigate state policies. Yet the imperative of trying to influence government policy is clearly there even for those not directly working in government institutions.

The entwinement of the state and the human sciences is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the project of making national cultural subjectivities. One of the most important state concerns of postcolonial states has been with building nationalist histories. The complicity between knowledge production and politics was what led to the gradual loss of the era of “cultural innocence” of knowledge production in the formative years. In the case of Indonesia, it was pointed out by a participant that the first National History Seminar in Indonesia in 1957 was a watershed, marking the rise of and contestations over national history in Indonesia. Questions over differing philosophical and ideological approaches to national history began to emerge: should national history be defined from colonial, local, or regional perspectives, even though there was no consensus as to what constituted each of these perspectives?

Such contestations are not unique to Indonesia but prevalent throughout the region. What is perhaps unique is that while disagreements abound over what constitutes the national, there appears to be a general commitment to the idea of the “national” across all the cohorts, although this commitment is more complicated among the younger scholars given theoretical pressures to repudiate the “national”.

Such departures from the state bring us to the oppositional role of the human sciences in Southeast Asian contexts. The narratives presented indicate that the human sciences became a prime site of oppositional politics as Southeast Asia became a hotbed of Cold War ideological warfare. Alongside a systemic rise of an American brand of social sciences and its disciplinary and theoretical divisions, university campuses in the region quickly became sites for the inculcation of revolutionary ideas. In one way or another, scholars, particularly those educated during the Cold War era, talk about their exposure to emancipatory ideals from a variant of classical and newer leftist ideas ranging from socialist but not necessarily Soviet-inspired Marxism, Maoism, third-worldism, world-dependency theory, and so on. However it is clear that the heavily secularist grounds upon
which Cold War ideologies were fought out in American social sciences proved to be constraining when applied in Southeast Asian contexts.

If there is one thing that the Cold War has made clear, it is that the complex sets of ideological struggles within scholastic discourses in the region are often inseparable from ethno-religious politics and are never fought over in secularist terms alone. Yet complex leftist ideological imaginaries within the region were often straitjacketed into Cold War ideological categories prevalent in an American style social sciences which increasingly gained prevalence in the region. For senior scholars, the beginnings of a divisive Cold War politics was manifested in differences between the colonial-backed nationalists and communists in how they understood decolonisation and the ways to go about achieving independence. This resulted in guerrilla warfare between the communists and the colonial/national state in some countries like Malaysia. During the Vietnam (American) War in Southeast Asia, ideological struggles between leftist and conservative factions became quickly flattened by the Cold War ideological binary divide. However, these inevitably became intertwined with racial-religious ideologies in countries such as Indonesia and Thailand. In Indonesia, the anti-communist campaign sparked off by the 1965 military coup became an anti-atheist pogrom which deepened the polarization between pribumi/indigenous groups and the Chinese, as well as divisions within the Muslim community.

It was the turmoil and legacy from this violent era that led many of these scholars to see the human sciences as a vehicle which could provide with solutions to the problems of their societies. Even apolitical students studying abroad at these times were affected by events in the region. Some became more politically conscious, having witnessed the sacrifice and idealism of fellow students in their countries.

A decade or so later, Cold War politics and its associated theoretical-political divides in the human sciences had come to roost in university campuses. By then, as many of these scholars tell us, leftwing struggles were not only threatened with annihilation by a powerful state but also deeply fragmented by different stands of socialism such as Marxism, Stalinism, Maoism, and other leftist academic ideals. For instance, the flagship University of the Philippines (UP) in Manila became an “ideological combat zone” of leftist ideals as students, academics and communist party cadres clashed over different types of socialist imaginaries. Caught and sometimes turned off by the fight among revolutionaries, some instead turned to work with the peripheral communities as their commitment to the leftist revolutionary ideals became profoundly unsettled. Some went into “exile” from their countries making them critical of both the extremes of nationalism and revolution. It is through such turmoil of political differences that some aspired to find a “third way’ of looking at progressive/radical writings, which is critical of both state and revolution” as they aspire to recover “subaltern” subjectivities missed out in existing nationalist discourses in the region.

Reflecting the milieu of this time, the intellectual battles of subsequent generations were caught between strictly defended disciplinary and theoretical paradigms emanating from Western human sciences as they pursued their graduate education overseas both in Western and non-Western locations.
Memories and the Return of the Real: Intellectual Predicaments and the War between Discipline and Theory

For many scholars, their intellectual sojourn during the 1980s exposed them to newer critical ideas emerging from the poststructuralist and postcolonial turns in the human sciences at a time when the West was beginning to deconstruct its own meta-narratives and hegemony. Many of the younger scholars found these newer critical approaches appealing given their concerns with questions of racial and cultural inequities beyond previous critical materialist currents. Yet the disjuncture between disciplinary and theoretical practices to which these scholars were directly exposed and what they and their societies were living through gradually drove them to rethink practices in the western human sciences rather than simply taking them as modus operandi for local academic practice.

Encounters with the rigidity of contemporary theoretical and disciplinary divides were often eye-opening and marked the beginning of a critical distance from western disciplinary and theoretical politics by many of the scholars represented in the workshop series. The experience of younger scholars in the United States are useful here. For some, they began to take on or see the spilling over of the quarrels back home as they returned to the region upon completion of their degrees. In other cases, the imperatives of new political hegemonies coupled with resistance that took conservative, sexist, and racist forms occurring confronted in the region as they returned home brought to light the disjuncture between theory and reality. This led some to begin to search for human science practices which could better respond to local imperatives. For some, it was their discovery that the meaning of student activism had changed a hundred and eighty degrees when they returned home from their overseas studies that jolted them into activism. Indonesian scholars talk of their shock to find that while student activists were protesting against the state in the 1970s, in the 1980s they had become the moral police for the state and Islamic orthodoxy. Faced with such challenges, it was inevitable that for some scholarship became inseparable from activism and social reform as these scholars joined a growing community of scholars known as “public intellectuals” in the region.

An Indonesian feminist scholar talked about how the looting and rape of Indonesian Chinese women in the chaos of the 1997 Reformasi era, which brought down Suharto’s thirty-two year rule was a transformative moment to her, as it was for many other Indonesian scholars. In her case, she found herself in a double bind as the realities that unfolded challenged the very foundations of her intellectual ideas. As a critical scholar she had always rejected all forms of racial, sexual and cultural essentialism. Hence when she was beseeched by others to speak against these atrocities using her identity as a Chinese female academic, she was at first hesitant. Yet she was disturbed that the brutal rapes of Chinese women were symptomatic of “structured” acts of racism and Othering all across conflict zones in Indonesia which warranted action. Ultimately external circumstances pushed her to make a decision to join Indonesians from different ethno-religious, class, and political backgrounds to band together through inter-faith and peace movements to protest against these criminal acts.

As their walls between theory and activism came down, others turned to writing in the vernacular and popular media in order to reach local audiences.
For many of the younger scholars, their concerns with the legacy of the nation-state building projects and perplexity with new social phenomena in their societies provided an impetus for them to rethink the disciplinary and theoretical paradigms in which they were trained.

This leads us to my final point on regional differences in human science practices, that is, the late beginnings of the field of Southeast Asian Studies in the region, and its distinctions from Euro-American and other models of the field.

**Southeast Asian Studies in the Region: Late Beginnings, New Departures?**

**Regional Practices**

As the human sciences came to Southeast Asia late, so did the field of Southeast Asian Studies. When compared to the earlier origins of the field in Western Europe, United States, Russia, China and Japan before and immediately after the Second World War, Southeast Asian Studies first emerged within the region in the 1970s and only became widespread during the 1990s. The first undergraduate program in Southeast Asian Studies was established at University Malaya in Malaysia in 1976. Some two decades later, during the 1990s, we find the widespread establishment of Southeast Asian Studies programmes.

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23 For the origins of conceptions of Southeast Asia in Japan which dates back to the post World War I era, see Shimizu Hajime, “Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept in Modern Japan”, in Locating Southeast Asia, edited by Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt: 82-132. In recent brief affiliation at the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University, in 2008, I discovered that the Centre practices a unique model of truly interdisciplinary area studies approach where natural and human scientists are engaged in collaborative studies of the region.
25 At University of Malaya, Thai was introduced as an undergraduate subject in 1976 followed by Talalog in 1984 and Vietnamese in 1993. The Southeast Asian Studies Program at the University of Malaya became a full fledged department in 1989 (See Shaharil Talib “The Department of Southeast Asian Studies”, pp. 39-86).
degrees offered by departments in Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Given the lateness of its origins, it is not surprising that the study of Southeast Asia scholars amongst local scholars is largely undertaken outside the framework of a distinct field of Southeast Asian studies. It was only in the 1990s, at a time when area studies was experiencing a decline in Euro-America, that we see a flourishing of Southeast Asian Studies within the region with more local scholars being located at Southeast Asian Studies departments and research institutes associated with this field of study.

It is important to note that this latter spread and consolidation of Southeast Asian studies as a distinct academic program in the region came at a time of disciplinary and theoretical flux in the wider human sciences. These conditions provided a more conducive environment for interdisciplinary pursuits when compared to the experience of area studies in North America. Another distinctive feature is the institutional autonomy of Southeast

26 At National University of Singapore, the Southeast Asian Studies Programme established in 1991 introduced Bahasa Indonesia in 1992, followed by Vietnamese in 1995 and Thai in 1998. In 2007 Bahasa Malaysia became the fourth language offered to majoring students. Apart from the university, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), established in 1968, is a leading Southeast Asian Studies research and publication centre. ISEAS publishes two main journals: Sojourn (since 1986) and Contemporary Southeast Asia (since 1979). Other major Southeast Asian journals in the region are based at the National University of Singapore. These are: the Journal of Tropical Geography (now The Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography) (from 1953) [prior to the separation from University of Malaya], Journal of Southeast Asian History (from 1960), which later become the Journal of Southeast Asian Studies from 1970, and the Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science (1973) are based at the National University of Singapore.

27 The Centre for Southeast Asia Social Studies at Gadjah Mada University was the first department of Southeast Asian Studies in Indonesian universities. It was set up on 19 December 2000 (Personal communication with Aris Mundayat). A research centre for Southeast Asian Studies was established by LIPI, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, under its Research Centre for Regional Resources on 5 July 2001 (Personal communication with Yekti Manauti).

28 In Thailand, a program of Asian studies was introduced at Chulalongkorn University as early as 1967. It became the Institute of Asian studies in 1976. In 1971, a program of Thai studies was established at Thammasat University which became the Thai Khadi Studies Institute in 1975. In 1974, a research program of Southeast Asian language and cultural studies was established at Mahidol University but it became the Language and Cultural Research Institute for Rural Development in 1981. Silapakorn University started an MA programme in Southeast Asian history in 1974. A Southeast Asian Studies undergraduate degree programme was established at Thammasat University in 2001. See Charnvit Kasetsiri, “Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand”: 112-7.

29 In Vietnam, a Department of Southeast Asian Studies was established in 1973 within a government research organisation known as the Vietnam Social Sciences Committee. It later became the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies within the Vietnam Academy of Social Science. See Anthony Reid and Maria Serena I. Diokno, “Completing the Circle”, pp. 101.

30 The University of the Philippines introduced the teaching of Malay and Austronesian languages in the 1920s. See Anthony Reid and Maria Serena I. Diokno, “Completing the Circle”, pp. 96.

31 For an optimistic view on the distinctiveness of Southeast Asian studies in the United States, in particular the interaction between the study of the region and disciplinary knowledge and its contribution to theory building, see John Bowen, “The Inseparability of Area and Discipline in Southeast Asian Studies: A View from the United States”, Moussons 1 (2000): 3-19. For a
Asian studies departments. Many of the Southeast Asian Studies departments offer both undergraduate and/graduate degrees programmes and have the ability to recruit their own staff. This trend departs from the North American model where area studies are often subordinated to traditional disciplinary departments for purposes of faculty appointment, promotion, and the admission of PhD students.\textsuperscript{32} Having its own institutional autonomy has meant that the field of Southeast Asian studies has more leeway to consolidate itself as a traditional disciplinary department would.

However this does not mean that disciplinary turf wars between Southeast Asian Studies and other disciplines do not exist within Southeast Asian universities. My experience in Singapore offers an example. The National University of Singapore has become a growing centre for Southeast Asian Studies with the establishment of the Southeast Asian Studies Programme in 1991, where I am affiliated, and more recently the Asia Research Institute which has a significant focus on regional research. Yet the primacy of English at the National University of Singapore, as my chapter shows, also makes its model of areas studies more susceptible to a dominantly North American model. The American influence, coupled with the increasing pressures of globalisation to benchmark Singaporean academic practices against western universities, has meant that Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore are perhaps more encumbered by disciplinary and theoretical polemics emanating from North American human sciences when compared to its neighbouring countries. Soon after my move to the Southeast Asian Studies programme at the National University of Singapore, I discovered just how easily “in-between” practices and ideas about area studies could be misunderstood and straitjacketed by positions deriving from the fight between disciplines and area studies, and between post-colonial and area studies perspectives, over the representation of non-Western societies. Teaching and researching in a Southeast Asian Studies Programme has taught me to see how the postcolonial critique of area studies as an Orientalist paradigm and the dismissal of postcolonial ideas as nothing but narcissism by area studies specialists are both problematic. Trying to bring together these two warring paradigms made me realise that the only way in which Southeast Asian academic settings can benefit from the newer critical currents is for us to revise, complicate and expand the disciplinary and theoretical registers of Western disciplinary and academic discourse. I became further convinced of this position when I realised how the expansion of postcolonial politics into the political sphere had increasingly debilitated progressive politics as the struggle for freedom from oppression became quickly associated with Western ideology and rejected. These experiences led me to conclude that Southeast Asian Studies in the region has an ethical obligation to forge its own directions rather than being tied to any particular sets of disciplinary or theoretical outlooks. One is called to develop pedagogic directions which

\textsuperscript{22} contrasting view on the situation in the United Kingdom where individual country studies matters more than the study of Southeast Asia as a region, see Victor King, “Southeast Asia: An Anthropological Field of Study?”, \textit{Moussons} 3 (2001): 3-31.

\textsuperscript{32} Takashi Shiraishi, a historian of Indonesia, who was once based at Cornell University, has earlier pointed out the institutional autonomy of Southeast Asian Studies Programs in Japan which depart from the American model of area studies. See Takashi Shiraishi, “New Initiatives from Japan”, in \textit{Southeast Asian Studies}, edited by Anthony Reid, pp. 141-153.
are responsive to local social and material conditions based on a recognition of different ethical imaginations emanating from the region in order to build bridges not just within the academy but also within the region and between the region and the rest of the world.

The overview of regional practices in the humanities, social sciences, and area studies in Southeast Asia provided above suggests that, while conditioned by Euro-American disciplinary and theoretical traditions, regional academic practices have diverged from them in significant ways. For Southeast Asian scholars, thinking about the local is inevitably a combination of their location in time as well as their intellectual politics to resist domination and recover subjugated knowledge. In contrast to Euro-American settings, where area studies have lost their capacity to structure knowledge, Southeast Asian Studies has become an established reality in the region, being offered in an increasing number of institutions. If indeed the afterlife of area studies is, as declared, a moment where Eurocentric truths can be denaturalized, then there is a need to acknowledge the alternative “disciplinary” arrangements as well as divergent epistemological concerns emanating from the region.

There are three main differences that I want to discuss here. These are in the continued relevance of the East-West binary and the analytical frameworks of the region and nation-state for understanding regional dynamics.

**Challenges: East-West Binary Effects**

With a new epoch of capitalist globalization posing radical changes to older imperial hierarchies, bounded territories and unitary cultural identities, area studies scholars are increasingly challenged to reconsider non-Western transformations, which may no longer be adequately conceptualized in terms of differences between East and West or unitary conceptions of national and regional identification.

Intellectual concerns amongst workshop participants suggest that the rejection of the East-West binary may be somewhat premature when seen from the region. Despite changing geo-political configurations, globalization has yet to fully erase the colonial legacy or the material disparities between the Western and non-Western worlds. In Southeast Asia, globalization may still be seen as a force which reproduces unequal power relations on a global scale. In fact now more than ever, globalisation is creating conditions for new forms of conflicts between Southeast Asia and the West. The inequalities between West and East (or North and South) are often evoked and rearticulated within nationalist and regional discourses meaning the categories of West and East are still very much alive in the region.

The result is a situation where regional realities contrast academic efforts to debunk the East-West divide. While scholastic discourse is busy deconstructing the integrated totalities of these categories, within Southeast Asia, the “West” is often portrayed and/or perceived as a coherent entity.33 In fact, alternative modalities imaginings of human

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33 Talal Asad has argued that although the evocation of the “West” [or the matter of fact, also the “East”] is often debunked, we need to remember that “Europe has a geographical “outside” which “presuppose the idea of a space – at once coherent and subvertible – for locating the West” (ibid). Although there are no totalities to “East” and “West”, Asad maintains that they do however account for “distinctive sensibilities, aesthetics, moralities” (2003, p. 14).
existence, in both their progressive and conservative form, are often constructed from conceptions of East and West as opposing totalities.

The continuing power of this binary opposition can be observed both at the level of the state and below it. Nation-states in the region have been known to actively construct various forms of cultural authenticity in order to reject Western civilization, secularism and even modernity. In recent years, such claims have intensified, with some Southeast Asian states resorting to discourses such as “Asian Values”, Islam, and Islamic law as bulwarks against Western liberal democracy and universal human rights. This trend may be regarded as sinister to the extent that official forms of East-West rhetoric resonate with ordinary people’s experience of the legacy of colonialism and socio-economic inequality in their everyday lives. It is therefore not surprising that an anti-West stance is often adopted even by radical activists. Likewise a rhetoric of difference between East and West is also employed by conservative groups to discredit their progressive opponents for being Western lackeys or the dupes of Western discourse.

Clearly East-West imaginaries, no matter how problematic they may be, are major sites for the production of cultural difference in contemporary Southeast Asia. Therefore it is imperative not to dismiss their power, but to understand their social and political contexts and consequences. In particular there is a need for scholars to try to understand how the politics of East-West oppositions can place progressive agency in Southeast Asia in a perilous situation. This is because there is a danger that, on the one hand, academic discourse, that contests Western/colonial power and espouses cultural/religious difference from the West, may coincide with that of conservative powers and be easily rejected by outside critics motivated by a political correctness in contemporary social theory, where all evocations of an East-West divide are rejected as “essentialist”. On the other hand, critiques of the state, or other conservative forces in the region, can often be discredited for being colonised by the West and its liberal values. Indonesian and Malaysian scholars were commonly concerned by the complexity between academic analyses and political agency in the struggles between Islam, democratization, and universal human rights in their societies. As citizens of predominantly Muslim countries, they point to the way in which anti-Western (or postcolonial) politics has been appropriated by the state and conservative groups and used in defence of patriarchal, exclusionary, and ethno-religious orthodoxy in Indonesia and Malaysia. This hijacking of postcolonial rhetoric by the state and conservative groups has potently weakened progressive agency as well as making the academic project of theorizing local/regional difference much more difficult.

In the Indonesian case, the coming together of a pro-Western discourse of democratisation and local politics, which led to political decentralisation in Indonesia, had an underside: ironically it led to a return to patriarchy and the narrow forces of putra-daerahism or nativism. Despite this, Islamic conservative groups also joined the current anti-Western/global bandwagon to condemn progressive Muslims as dupes of Western interests. Similarly in Malaysia, the imbrications of Malaysia’s anti-Western rhetoric and the vicissitudes of global political Islam have led to a new Islamic conservatism that has increasingly gained the moral-political high ground. As Islamic orthodoxy expands into conflicts of jurisdiction between the country’s civil and syariah courts over religious freedoms as provided for in the Malaysian Constitution, bitter contests between conservative and liberal/progressive groups (comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims)
have broken out, further fracturing a society already deeply divided along racial and religious lines. This is troubling as these opposing ideological positions have played to the tune of official nationalist discourses which pit Islamization against Western liberal democratization. Both sides to this dispute are uncompromising: Orthodox groups vilify “liberals” as Western secularists, while “liberals/progressives” disparage Islamists as demagogues. What has made matters worse is that as radical activists-cum-academics intervene in this crisis, they often tout secularism, which is often immediately equated with Western liberalism in the Malaysian context, as the only workable democratic framework. Such progressive reactions have served only to fan further misunderstanding on the part of Islamists. The polarisation of religious and human rights discourses in Malaysian society has made it difficult for any nuanced positions or analyses to be heard – perhaps not unlike the theoretical deadlock in the push within the social sciences to decentre Eurocentric knowledge and reconcile alternative subjectivities.

These examples point to the need to move beyond conventional social scientific conceptions of rights and human agency if we want to better understand and overcome the dispute between Islamic and Western views on human rights in the region. If following western (post)liberal assumptions, we as social scientists insist that the politics of emancipation must involve a denunciation of racial-religious identifications, the result will be an impasse between the groups advocating Islamic orthodoxy and secular liberalism in Malaysian society. It is imperative that scholars of Southeast Asia find new ways of understanding how Southeast Asians work out resistance within the regimes of values and discourses that they live under. Islam is only one of the regimes encountered in Southeast Asia. We need to create spaces which can help create recognition and better define progressive ethics within the region in order to reveal their autonomous dimensions and interconnections with universal ethical values. Only when the fine distinctions of human existence/values which reflect local/regional aspirations albeit entwined with larger world histories and human aspirations are better identified and prevalently understood, will the deceptions of the ideological opposition between local/national and West/outside become exposed and better challenged.

**Strategies: Resuscitating the Region**

In the wake of the attack on area studies, there has been a shift of focus in the study of regions from a concern with “external” influences such as capitalist globalization and a changing new world order. Unlike the older regionalism, in which regions were considered bounded, the new regionalism has focused on the porosity of territorial borders, the fluidity of identity politics, movements of people, and so on (example, see Walters 2000). In contrast, local scholarship on Southeast Asia tend to depart from, and remain rooted in, a concern with the internal dynamics of change in the face of globalization. To be sure,


35 For examples, see Taufik Abdullah and Maunati Taufik Abdullah, *Toward the Promotion of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia*; Ananda Rajah, “Southeast Asia: Comparatist Errors and the Construction of a Region, pp. 41-53; UP Asian Centre, *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia*;
taking the region as a departure point needs qualification at a time when the concept of Southeast Asia has been condemned, at best taken as a contingent entity in recent debates.  

While much of the criticism of regions as contrived geographical and cultural conceptions is warranted, critics often forget that the area study map of the Cold War has been adopted throughout much of the world, giving legitimacy to the regional boundaries demarcated on this map. New geo-political realignment after the Cold War, alongside capitalist expansion into the Asia-Pacific region have led to various forms of regionalisation. Debates on the “Asianization” of Asian studies is an example (Dirlik 2005, p. 167). Likewise the current rise of China has led to a revitalisation of Southeast Asian and East Asian regionalisms, ASEAN being a case in point. These movements, no matter how contrived or problematic they may be, are part and parcel of the lived reality of the constructed geography of Southeast Asia. Hence, while a territorially bounded concept of the region may be theoretically deconstructed, the lived reality of regional identity and geography cannot be ignored. Furthermore, this lived reality is consolidated by institutions such as ASEAN, not to mention various other seemingly apolitical forms of regional association in educational exchanges, sports events, and so on. On top of this, there is a flourishing of symbolic imaginaries of a regional identity found in popular culture and the mass media. The existence of regional structures, ideologies, and symbolisms has clearly generated sentiments and identifications about the region which cannot be wished away, no matter how manufactured they may be. Surely they deserve academic attention.

Similarly, in the wider critique of area studies, scholars have rarely questioned the agendas that propelled the prioritization of the global and the repudiation of the local/region. As pointed out earlier, the dismissal of regions over the global appears to stem from the progressive aim of putting non-western societies on par with western societies on a global stage (Harutoonian 2000; 2002). While this may have been liberating in Euro-American area studies, it is problematic elsewhere. To be sure, a place like Southeast Asia, external influences are difficult to ignore. As a diverse region long exposed to migration of people, colonization, international trade, and so on, the study of Southeast Asia has long been charted through global connections. It is in local sites that people create meaningful experiences. Globalization should never be taken to imply that regions/areas/localities have no significance.

Emerging trends in Southeast Asia suggest that regional synergies have been a reason to rethink Southeast Asian studies from the perspective of regional locations and experiences. It is unmistakable that the field is being reclaimed by local scholars as a vehicle for local voices (see Abraham 2000; and Heryanto 2002). There are also new forces


36 In particular, see Paul H. Krastoska, Remco Raben, and Henk Schulte Nordholt. Locating Southeast Asia, pp. 1-19 and Heather Sutherland, “Contingent Devices”, in Locating Southeast Asia, edited by Paul H. Krastoska, Remco Sutherland, and Henk Schulte Nordholt, pp. 20-59.

37 A defence of the continued importance of regions to knowledge production vis-à-vis globalisation has been made by two anthropologists studying the Caribbean: Karla Slocum and Deborah A. Thomas, “Rethinking Global and Areas Studies: Insights from Caribbeanist Anthropology”. American Anthropologist 105, no. 3 (2003): 553-565.
such as Asian funding institutions with their own stake in the future of the region. Many recent academic developments in the region are sponsored by Japanese Foundations (in particular the Toyota, Japan and Nippon Foundations), which appear to have overtaken the Ford Foundation in promoting Southeast Asian studies within the region.\textsuperscript{38} While these institutions may have their own agendas to influence the development of Southeast Asian Studies, it should be noted that many of their funded projects to developing cross national expertise have led to the establishment of informal independent networks of scholars.\textsuperscript{39} For regional scholars, academic exchanges such as the one from which this volume arises have created opportunities for cultivating a body of knowledge on Southeast Asia in order to address some of the problems of knowledge production within the region. In fact, during the workshop many scholars lamented on the fact that regional scholars are often very well informed about works by Western scholars but know so little about works done by their other Southeast Asian colleagues. These sentiments explain why regional networking to share ideas and learn from each other remain vital in the thinking and critique of Southeast Asia.

Another reason to establish intra-regional conversations is that the field of Southeast Asian Studies has become an established local reality. There is now an increasing number of regional researchers and academic institutions and academic collaborations have become more common. Academic and student exchanges across nation-state based enterprises have provided grounds for rethinking Southeast Asia. Collective synergies have, amongst other things, brought about the idea of translation across national borders to cultivate a body of knowledge out of the various vernacular languages. Efforts of translations across the various Southeast Asian/Asian national-borders have been undertaken in journals such as the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies and more recently the online Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia based at Kyoto University, Japan. Such efforts can lessen dependency on global scholarship which remains linguistically delineated and disseminated in the English language. They can also enable students to learn about local ideas besides those emanating from the West.

Hence the concept of “region” remains meaningful for local scholars not only as a lived reality but also as a conceptual tool which enables collective reflections on social formulations and existential meanings in Southeast Asia. While much of the criticism of the artificial origins and borders of the Southeast Asian region is valid, we must also remember that there are political, experiential and epistemological grounds for the continued relevance of Southeast Asia as a region and as a conceptual category in an era where knowledge production can no longer be determined by any single political-theoretical logic.

\textsuperscript{38}The Toyota Foundation and Japan Foundation have co-sponsored the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP). The Nippon Foundation funds the Public Intellectual Program for academics in their mid-careers.

\textsuperscript{39} In 2002, the Asian Centre in University of the Philippines formed an Association of Southeast Asian Studies in Asia via a Conference-workshop in Manila held in January 2002 with the theme “Southeast Asia in Asia: An assessment Towards a Collaborative Action Agenda.” Regional institutions and centres were invited to this conference. An existing institutional setup for regional exchange is the ASEAN University Network which is based in Bangkok.
Finally, we turn to the delicate matter of resuscitating the “national” in regional scholarship against the push to repudiate and transcend “national” frameworks in contemporary social theory.

**Commitments: Nation and Redemption**

According to current academic convention, what counts as “good” scholarship often requires Southeast Asian scholars to: exhibit “independence from nationalism”\(^40\), move beyond “national narratives” (Antlov 2005, pp. xix-xxi), or search for “history at the interstices” or “history of the margins” away from national influences (Winichakul 2003, p.10).

Against this trend, the framework of the nation-state and nationalist narratives remain meaningful to local scholars. The framework of the “nation/national” remains a vital force that structures the prioritization of the local. The narratives culled from the workshop series show how the structures of rule and regimes of knowledge of the nation-state remain important forces within and against which scholars struggle to interpret their own lives and the societies around them. Indeed, the implicit presence of the nation-state provided one of the few constant and common frameworks linking the contributors. Despite the particular histories of nation-building across the region, the problematic of the nation emerges time and time again in the intellectual questions raised. Although everyone agreed on the need to contest the hegemony of official/state discourses of the national, the idea of transcending the national is not accepted by all. The differing intensities of concern about the importance of national legacies reflect differences among their countries’ and personal histories.

Amongst the earlier generation, who began their intellectual work in the era of decolonization, the nation-state was clearly experienced as a source of promise and as emblematic of a hope to forge a new form of community. For subsequent generations, the experience of the nation-state was more complex. On the one hand, the nation-state was a problem which needed to be deconstructed or re-evaluated in order to understand and expose its hegemonies and limitations. On the other, many remain committed to the idea of a “national” project, especially when considering the legacies of colonialism and the forces of capitalist globalization. As products of the various nation-making projects and living in a world shaped by capitalist globalisation, neo-imperial desire, and fluid boundaries, the younger generation appears to be more preoccupied with the crisis of the nation-state project and the power of capitalist globalisation in their societies. While they clearly endeavour to reject or undermine the rigidity and exclusions of state discourses on the national, it is also evident that many, if not all, remain committed to rectifying the meanings of the national from outside, or below-the state. Their commitment to the “national” is perhaps best manifested in their drive to engage with the social and political dilemmas that beset their own societies as well as to dismantle hegemonic definitions of national identities, which often take the forms of ethno-chauvinist identifications.

Given the postcolonial intellectual conditions within which the latter generations operate, they have tended to focus more than their predecessors on the subaltern capacities and agency which to an extent escape the regimes of nationalist power in the informal,

\(^{40}\) See James Scott in Itty Abraham, *Weighing the Balance*, p. 27.
everyday, or peripheral spaces of human creativity. Predictably, this is also a universal trend in scholarship, to which younger scholars are especially attuned. This sometimes creates tensions between different generations manifested in contestations over experiences and meanings of the “national”. However, there is also a need to guard against establishing clear distinctions between the concerns of senior and younger scholars. Conditions change with time and scholarship will respond to the change. Alongside inter-generational tensions and differences, there are always also more continuities across generations than meet the eye. How will all these inter-generational dynamics eventually be localised in Southeast Asia? What kinds of stories will local scholars tell in forty or fifty years from now?\footnote{Vickers has noted that recent PhDs graduates from Southeast Asian universities have shifted research agendas on the region to study narrative and cross-cultural forms and as a result contributed to more equal interaction between local and Western scholarships (2009).} Only time will tell.

For now, the diverse thinking over the meaning of nation and national sensibilities reveals at least two significant trends: first, that the definitions of the nation are never reducible to the political pursuits of the state alone; and second, that the category of the nation, while disputed, deconstructed and problematised, remains meaningful to intellectuals in the region. In a region which has given rise to some of the major nationalist movements in the 20th century, nationalism, while often hijacked by the various Southeast Asian states, remains as a necessary means to express shared geo-historical and ethno-cultural sensibilities even at levels below-the state. Hence while deplorable atrocities, marginalisation, and manipulation have taken place in its name, the “national” also has its appeal and meaning in local/regional histories.

Therefore, it is important for us to grasp the complex meanings of the “national” beyond the simple dichotomy between state and non-state or the ethical versus the immoral if we want to go beyond the preconceptions inherent in western human scientific frameworks of the national. As has been pointed out by many Western scholars, the relationship between the state and nationalist discourses is only historical and never teleological (see Karl 2002: 24). Taking ethno-cultural or nationalist sensibilities seriously does not necessarily mean agreeing with the state. Contemporary Southeast Asian nationalism may in fact provide us with grounds to think about alternative conceptions of society and political agency in the contemporary world. Such a project speaks directly to the challenge to de-centre and pluralise Western social scientific discourse.

Hence, rather than eschewing national frameworks, it seems the more important task is to decouple nation and state and to explore how people make their own histories and meanings of decent/rightful human existence within the constraints of political and economic realities as well as cultural imaginations and social categories. Perhaps as a start we need to remember that the formation and transformation of social and political orders are necessarily informed from the start by people’s shared histories, emotive allegiances, as well as their self-orienting recognition of what counts as justice, equality, rights, emancipation, and so on.
Conclusion
This paper offers a perspective on the future of dialogical and multi-directional human science of Southeast Asia by considering the thoughts and critiques of Southeast Asian scholars as they draw on their experiences both within and outside the region. It is a response to contradictions arising from both the critique of area studies/Southeast Asian Studies as well as regional political-economic configurations in the post-Cold War era. These transformations present tremendous challenges to Southeast Asian scholars studying the region in how they should respond, on the one hand, to re-articulations of area studies in a new global order where region and nation have come under scrutiny in new progressive scholastic discourse. And, on the other hand, what they make of the consolidation of national and regional powers and their new hegemonic ambitions, which are often articulated in a radical critique of western/imperial domination under new regional materialities in a world in transition.

These contradictions have pushed regional scholars to consider how the humanities and the social sciences can be used to respond to local needs. It is through these interrogations that the moments of the highly local in the constitution of Western humanities and the social sciences are better revealed and notions about its universality questioned. The rethinking of Southeast Asia from the perspective of the local/regional, as this paper suggests, is hence a project which is entangled with, yet also distinct from, Western disciplinary and theoretical influence.

Inevitably, a rethinking of Southeast Asia from regional perspectives requires scholars to navigate connections and tensions in disciplinary conventions, the socio-political environments of their embedment as well as their ethical agendas as researchers. What is ethical/progressive is inevitably value laden. Any claim of the ethical/progressive is equally a claim to a higher moral ground which inexorably will also be contested. As the ethical/progressive is appropriated and used to signify different meanings by competing groups under different historical-political contexts, what are the grounds for us to distinguish between the ethical and the un-ethical? There are no easy solutions to these questions. Yet, it is clear that, ethical dilemmas over the interpretations of experiential and value differences are real and will continue to bedevil us as societies grow more complex. Intellectual dilemmas are equally both political and ethical ones as well. The ethical choices that we face and the decisions that we have to make may sometimes never be dialectically resolved. Despite difficulties, and for the lack of any better word, it still makes sense to hold on to the meaning of ethical/progressive, if such a term is closest to signify the struggle for emancipation from all forms of suppression and domination and to recover subdued knowledge.

In the pursuit of decentering knowledge production, Southeast Asians, as well as the alternative, albeit emergent, models of area studies based in the region, must participate in the debates over the future of Southeast Asian Studies so as to highlight interconnected yet also different sets of concerns and imperatives from regional practices and perspectives. There is a still a need, at least in the short run, to create a platform to speak about Southeast Asian perspectives, despite their problematic nature, so that regional scholars sharing the same convictions can come together to discuss issues that may not be of concern to those
outside of the region.\textsuperscript{42} In the changing stakes of area studies in the post Cold War era, regional efforts to rethink the region may provide evidential and theoretical grounds on different modalities of political and ethical imaginings of human existence and emancipation. Unless alternative theoretical-political logics and rationalizations on social formations and human action which are different from, yet NOT unconnected to, Western ideas, modernity, and capitalism, are acknowledged and reconciled by a diverse/polycentric universal project of knowledge, the progressive call for the de-centering of Eurocentric knowledge will remain locked in its own cultural and political relativism, inhibiting a true transformation of knowledge production.

\textsuperscript{42} Arif Dirlik has noted this concern in an article on “Asia Pacific Studies in an Age of Global Modernity” in \textit{Inter-Asia Cultural Studies}, Vol. 6. No.2 (2005): 158-170.
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