

EUROSEAS-ROUNDTABLE "NEW AREA STUDIES AND SOUTHEAST ASIA"

Benjamin Baumann & Andrea Fleschenberg

As soon as we knew that the seminar of Southeast Asian studies would host the 2019 *EuroSEAS* conference, we decided to organize a roundtable on New Area Studies and Southeast Asia. Developments in the field, above all the deconstruction of regions in their conventional sense, severe budgetary cuts and the need to invent Bachelor and Master programs that attract as many students as possible, led to various responses at German universities. While some institutes responded by emphasizing the philological foundations of traditional area studies, others tried to align area studies more strongly with established disciplines like the political sciences, or they envision post-area area studies where individual themes and not localities determine the meaning of an area. At our institute, we try to formulate our own idea of New Area Studies, a process that is far from being completed. Therefore, we used this roundtable to reflect with colleagues who have also actively contributed to the debate on particular visions of New Area Studies and their potentials and limitations.

We invited Rachel Harrison from SOAS in London and Peter A. Jackson from the Australian National University to join us. Both have formulated their visions of New Southeast Asian Studies in various co-publications and joint projects.¹ Both highlighted the recent keen interest on inter- and cross-disciplinarity, evident also in the New Area Studies' approach. We were joined by James Fox, also from the Australian National University, who looked at the field from a comparative anthropological perspective. Having worked with speakers of Austroasiatic languages between Madagascar and Eastern Indonesia, he stressed the inherently transregional dimension of Southeast Asian Studies. Claudia Derichs and Vincent Houben outlined the approach of New Area Studies currently formulated at our institute and described themselves as of a hybrid academic background. Claudia Derichs critiqued incorrect imbalances of knowledge productions worldwide, in particular the lack of reverse flows from the

Global South to the Global North, apart from the paucity of transformative, situated knowledge as well as ontological ecologies. Vincent Houben envisioned various 'fields' of Area Studies as quasi 'disciplines' in their own right and highlighted interdisciplinarity as a key methodological-cum-theoretical approach of New Area Studies. Panelists expressed their frustrations due to and vis-à-vis discipline-based research in terms of limiting perspectives, incidents of methodological protectionism in the context of competing disciplines as well as in terms of emerging epistemological barriers or even boundaries. Inter- and cross-disciplinarity are therefore strategic and timely responses given issues faced in the contemporary world. They neither fit nor can they be contained by such boundaries and thus amount to obstacles and limitations in terms of research-based knowledge productions and fruitful cross-cutting conversations on issues of importance. Others argued that disciplines themselves were not 'set in stone' as new or hybrid ones do emerge and as disciplinary demarcations are dynamic – a task that New Area Studies needs to engage with more explicitly and fruitfully. Martina Padmanabhan explained her take on Southeast Asian studies as someone coming from the agricultural sciences and having primarily worked in other regions of the world. For her, inter- and transdisciplinarity along with the need to look beyond 'the region' are key. In terms of a transregional approach mindful of the mobility of ideas and communities, it is important to connect grounded research with global debates and emerging issues in wider societies. Benjamin Baumann from our institute, who moderated the roundtable, outlined New Area Studies as an ethnographically founded transdisciplinary project that seeks to answer theoretical questions raised in the disciplines in the context of emplaced orders of knowledge. This form of emplacement is explicitly spatial, so that the situatedness of knowledge remains not limited to discourses, social milieus or moving bodies, but becomes emplaced in concrete locations. These locations are situated on different scales ranging from 'the local' to 'the global', thus producing the spatial continuum of New Area Studies. The composition of the invited discussants already points to one of the central topics addressed during the roundtable: the differing perceptions of Southeast Asian studies in 'the region' and outside of it. While the deconstruction of geo-political regionalizations deeply affected the institutionalization of area studies in the global North, which manifests in their slow

demise at German universities, Southeast Asian studies are currently blooming in the region and beyond, as the growing number of Southeast Asian studies institutes in Japan, Korea and China prove. This also explains why scholars from the region, and still working in the region, engage in the theoretical debates about a conceptual re-imagination of Southeast Asian studies to a lesser degree.

All discussants agreed that we need to rethink area studies in order to adapt our theories and methodologies to the global challenges of the 21st century. This rethinking does not imply that 'the local' or 'regional' ceases to be relevant for New Area Studies, rather that 'the local' and 'the regional' need to be rethought.



Roundtable discussion "New Area Studies and Southeast Asia"
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