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*Fragmented elites*

Writers on Southeast Asian politics are fortunate in counting Dan Slater among their numbers. His mission in battling the raw institutionalists, unyielding statisticians, and the blinkered aficionados of the oversized-n deserves our applause. In crafting careful historical accounts and deploying comparative methods, he has purveyed qualitative analysis at its theoretically most satisfying. And in *Ordering power*, he does not disappoint, serving up a very big book that addresses no less than the origins, forms, and varying resilience of authoritarian states in that very complicated region we delineate as Southeast Asia.

In tackling vastly complex questions about regimes, Slater’s knack is to forge in his book what seem at first to be straightforward answers, hinging refreshingly on elite-level relations. As he reminds us, elites are typically ‘fragmented’, indeed so habituated in personal and factional warring that they remain unable either to construct or to perpetuate an authoritarian state. Further, no amount of trusty state largesse, so reflexively invoked by analysts as essential to cohesion, can by itself heal their rivalries. Rather, says Slater, it is when elites find their statuses and interests threatened by combinations of class and ‘communal’ pressures from below that they begin to think seriously about surmounting their problems of collective action, enabling them at last to begin fashioning an authoritarian Leviathan. Accordingly, it is not the everyday need for ‘provision’, but instead, the far more urgent need of ‘protection’ that in some measure unifies elites.

But which elites are unified and how deeply? It is on this score that *Ordering power* offers its best insights. Where elites are challenged profoundly...
by a necessary fusion of class and communal forces in their capital city, uniformly threatening their safety and property, they come at last to acknowledge one another as elites, rather than as irksome pretenders or illegitimate foes. And long after the mass-level threats that have encouraged these elites to gain unity and to assert ‘dominance’ have abated, they may forge ruling parties, security apparatuses, and other institutions through which to extend their accommodation. Slater cites the PAP in Singapore and UMNO in Malaysia as rare, but hardly exemplary.

By contrast, where nothing more than regional uprisings or separatist rebellions tests elites, though they may be tinged with class or communal sentiments, their remoteness from the capital motivates only the military, in its unshakeable sense of territorial possession, to respond in cohesive ways. In this scenario, then, national elites are driven only partially to overcome their fragmentation, with a ‘militarized’ elite now seizing the reins of power. However, in possessing little of the dexterity needed with which to form parties, the unity of these elites and the resilience of their regime occasionally persists, as in Myanmar, but more usually fades, then collapses, as in New Order Indonesia. Finally, where elites are less threatened still by class or communalist pressures, as in Thailand, the Philippines, and, in Ordering power, a resuscitated South Vietnam, no pact of protection or authoritarian Leviathan can ever take shape, leaving their regimes weak and hence vulnerable to democratic transitions or even foreign conquest.

In unveiling his framework, Slater recounts the ways in which halloved ‘theoretical expectations’ about political change have been defied by Southeast Asian ‘anomalies’ (p. 10). And with much audacity, he then applies his framework to all of the non-single-party regimes in Southeast Asia save Cambodia and Timor Loro Sae. His political trajectories are plotted on a course of complex mass-level ructions and elite-level relations. Only belatedly, then, but rightly, does he introduce institutions, helping perpetuate collective elite-level action long after the initial impetus for accommodation has vanished. Further, as a kind of proxy for the effectiveness with which institutions might perform in this way, Slater relies less often on the brute coercion with which ordinary citizens are subdued than a deft capacity to extract tax revenues from fellow elites.

As we read on, delighting in the many analytical frills and historical vignettes with which Slater has adorned his framework, there is much else to enjoy. For example, in contending that early protection has counted for far more than present day provision in unifying Singapore’s elites, Slater observes that top officials in the PAP were brought together by Communist threats, long before the city-state’s vaunted prosperity began to secrete any patronage. To recount: threats to their statuses inspire elites to gain unity, but rewards, mediated by institutions, keep them that way.
Next, in assessing the political trajectory of classically ‘plural’ Malaysia, Slater cleverly notes how ‘weak nations can produce surprisingly strong states and vice versa’ (p. 34). Further, in Myanmar, with militarized elites having been driven by ethnic rebellions on the national periphery to seek partial unity, its generals may, as these conflicts wind down in ceasefires and armistices, be turning now from protection to provision, funded by foreign investment and allocated as patronage. But it is for this reason too that as their accommodation weakens, Myanmar’s junta may soon come to operate like any ‘ordinary’ military government. Indeed, though Slater’s account stops short of the country’s recent political changes, his framework would ably anticipate any democratization that a weakening of elite-level resolve makes possible.

Ordering power is thus a masterful book. But still, of course, there are areas in which its framework – and the claims that it sponsors – might be questioned. What is gained, for example, by characterizing class and communal protest, even where unusually potent, as ‘contentious politics?’ Slater buys into a fairly recent, yet perhaps transient concept that was coined a decade-and-a-half ago in hopes of grandly merging multitudinous threads of social theorizing. But alas, with these many theories necessarily left underexamined in his book, Slater’s striving repeatedly to uphold and curate the term amounts to an add-on and a distraction. His framework is quite strong enough that it needs no such prematurely aged and frail armature.

Next, how can Slater’s framework assess instances in which, rather than mass-level forces starkly confronting elites, elites defect from other elites in order to mobilize social forces, hoping thereby to assert their own personal or factional ascendancy? Thailand today is a prominent case, with strongly redistributive longings accumulating at the mass-level, but lacking in organization, until Thaksin Shinawatra, a curious elite-level amalgam of spatial and industrial lineages, shrewdly deployed new marketing and campaigning techniques that gave these sentiments expression and force.

In addition, after the rural poor had been activated by Thaksin, so supporting his government that they challenged the statuses and interests of elites that the military mounted an authoritarian reversal in 2006, what are we to make of their dedication afterward in seeking tirelessly to redemocratize politics? Slater writes, ‘I question the focus of the democratization literature on class actors and economic factors in driving mass democratic mobilization, highlighting the central role of emotive appeals to nationalist and religious sentiments and solidarities in Southeast Asia’s democratization struggles’ (p. 34). But it is difficult to see how in Thailand the Red Shirts, having been treated to populist redistribution, were in any way energized emotively by a bedridden king and his phalangist queen, a suborned Buddhist sangha, and arousing communal elites who are really only available in the marginalized and indeed, despised Muslim south. Instead, the Red Shirts streamed to the
capital from their rural redoubts and took to the barricades, risking their lives on orders of (some) class actors in the UDD. And as they did so, they often spoke snidely of the communal king who had once animated them, as well as his concentric circles of loathsome amnat. Moreover, their many deaths at the hands of the military afterward demonstrate plainly that though class affiliations form only slowly, they may finally acquire transformative commitment and weight. In time, the emotion that fires communalism in divided societies can energize class sentiments in stratified societies, driving activists into harm’s way with near ‘communal’ dedication.

Still more fundamentally, how can we account for the origins of Thailand’s ‘fragmented’ elite? And how might this fragmentation be calibrated? Though Ordering power is expert at its core, its side explanations occasionally lose precision, with a line on Thailand that runs like this: because Thailand was never (formally) colonized, its elites avoided the utter dislocation of conquest by the Japanese, instead amiably inviting their occupiers in. Hence, with local elites keeping their grip, Thailand never played host to Communist insurgencies after the war on anything like the scale of other polities in Southeast Asia. But in consequence, we are told, elites were never confronted by the redistributive pressures that would have encouraged them to seal their relations in protection and domination. Instead, though availed of the strongest authoritarian Leviathan in Southeast Asia after the war, Thailand’s elites squandered their opportunity, sinking instead into perennial fragmentation and regime instability. But this seems a strange predicament in which Thailand’s elites find themselves: unified enough that they could prevent redistributive pressures, but then left disunited by the absence of redistributive pressures.

What is more, while any re-equilibration of elite-level relations in Thailand might involve the pact-making which Slater emphasizes, this process would seem more usually to commence with stark elimination. Briefly, in trying to consolidate their unity and ascendency after their coup, military elites never sought any accommodation with Thaksin. Instead, they forced him into exile, using the courts to convict him of corruption, confiscate his assets, then to ban his party and top loyalists from political life. Only half-a-decade later have they perhaps begun to seek unity, agreeing to allow Thaksin’s sister to win the recent election, then to lead a new government. In turn, she has agreed to forego any retribution against the generals for their coup, as well as to delay Thaksin’s repatriation from overseas and the release of imprisoned Red Shirt leaders. If this arrangement holds, Slater’s framework will need adjustment, for it can at present only locate these dealings on Thailand’s political trajectory within a discrete capsule of under-theorized and ad hoc narrative.

There are many more arguments, large and small, within Ordering power that give one pause. But this is a good thing. Ordering power is an important volume that is filled with bold questions and confident answers that make us...
think back about the historical records of the country cases that as Southeast Asianists, we have grown fond of in a way that among area specialists, only the Latin Americanists seem really to match. Great book. Stimulating analyti-
cally and enjoyable emotively. Hats off to Slater.

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Elites and the institutionalization of democracies in Southeast Asia

Over half a century ago, Harry Benda (1962:118) urged scholars to reject west-
ern preconceptions and write Southeast Asian history “‘from within”, mean-
ing in terms of the area’s internal developments. And they did. Some of the
terms they produced have taken off around the world – the mandala state
comes to mind, the theatre state, dual economy, plural society, bureaucratic
polity, and agricultural involution. Some even predate Benda’s call, but in
recent decades nothing so persuasive has emerged-until this year with Dan
Slater’s Ordering power.

This ambitious book builds a parsimonious new theory of the origins
of authoritarian postcolonial regimes on the basis of Southeast Asia’s post-
war political history. This is a fertile region for theory-making about such
regimes. Most of Southeast Asia have experienced extended periods of coun-
ter-revolutionary authoritarianism since World War II. The desire is clearly
to produce theory that also works elsewhere in the global south, from Latin
America to Africa.

Slater shows that Southeast Asia’s authoritarian regimes all had their
origin in one over-riding mechanism-the wonderfully unifying effect that
popular unrest had on bickering national elites. Political elites can normally
afford to indulge their love of intrigue and factional games. The hardest yet
also the most essential task for any leader is solving the collective action
problem among them. But the spectre of communism or genocidal ethnic
conflict from below can worry them enough to put aside their differences
and knuckle under to some central authority. The classic book on this state-
building mechanism came from the civil war in seventeenth-century England
– Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan (1651). In order to get themselves out from ‘that
miserable condition of war’, all agreed as follows: ‘I authorise and give up
my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this
condition; that thou give up thy right to him, and authorise all his actions
in like manner’. Slater evocatively calls all of Southeast Asia’s authoritarian
regimes – from Soeharto’s New Order to Marcos’ martial law – Leviathans.

The explanation is not limited to the mere existence of authoritarian regimes. It extends to variation among them. Some regimes have been effective and durable. Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore has thoroughly institutionalized its domination, growing stronger as the years go by. Others have been as ramshackle as dictatorships as they were as democracies. For all its rhetoric, Marcos’ Philippines remained an ineffectual state in which landed provincial elites maintained private armies and evaded their taxes much as they had done before. The difference, according to Slater, is not that one had strong institutions and the other weak, but that elites in one really were spooked by the unrest in their society, whereas in the other they felt things remained sufficiently manageable to make a game change unnecessary. In order to face down violent ethnic mass mobilization (Malays in 1950, Chinese in 1956), British authorities both acted repressively and introduced a compulsory savings scheme called the Central Provident Fund to improve people’s lives. Lee Kuan Yew’s People’s Action Party then became an elite protective umbrella that began to deploy systematic coercion in 1963 (p. 232). In the Philippines, by contrast, direct tax collection remained as flat as it had been before Marcos (apart from a brief surge in 1972-1973) because elites suspected that Marcos was using it to build his own factional following instead of the state as a whole (p. 167). In other words, institutions follow elite action, not the other way around.

The whole story is built in a masterly fashion out of vast reading in both the region’s political history and in comparative politics. Apt quotes illustrate every point as it is made. I loved this one from Singaporean academic Cherian George: ‘[T]racking Singapore politics is like observing a shiny new washing machine at work. You may marvel momentarily at its smooth, silent operation, its reliability and its cleansing power, but staring at it is not exactly the most thrilling of pastimes.’ (p. 230.)

The flip side of this tightly focused and self-assured argument is that all rival explanations for the birth of these regimes are simply declared wrong. Cultural explanations do not even get the dignity of a reply – namely, the idea that Asian values of respect for authority are deeply rooted in a history of divine kingship (think of Geertz’s Theatre State or Anderson’s Javanese Idea of Power). Economic analyses are rebutted in less than half a page – ‘[a] Marxist approach is not very useful for explaining variation, insofar as it generally takes class conflict as endemic by definition; treats ethnic, religious and nationalist identifications as epiphenomenal; and considers Leviathan’s leaders the handmaidens of the bourgeoisie’ (p. 280). Other arguments that begin with institutional capacity, ethnic pluralism, natural resources, global capital, or with international relations are dismissed with equal confidence. The key variable is collective action among national elites, period.
Slater’s approach is part of an exciting development of social movements theory known as contentious politics. The basic insight of its leading scholars is that an explanation for political change must not be sought in macro level phenomena such as institutions, economies, or even public grievances. It lies in the middle level phenomena of collective action by specific organized groups. Contentious politics focuses on the use of disruptive techniques such as demonstrations, strikes, riots, insurrection, as well as techniques to counter them. The macro issues are relegated to context. An emphasis on motion, on social relations, on history and politics, saves the analysis from abstract institutionalism, economism, or behaviourism.

In Slater’s case it also saves him from the pitfalls of elitism, which his focus on national elites certainly skirts. Elites are inescapable in all Southeast Asian studies, but when they are portrayed as so autonomous as not to need non-elites, the portrayal loses its explanatory power. Slater does not do this. His Hobbesian departure makes him sensitive to the social contract dimensions inherent in elite coalitional politics. At least a nation’s middle classes need to be persuaded that they, too, face real danger if they do not cooperate with Leviathan. Indonesian middle class memories of fearing for their lives from communists long held the New Order together. Once they had forgotten, the need for Leviathan also evaporated. The New Order collapsed a generation after its inception.

The analysis is authoritative and deserves to be rigorously tested. One critical approach would be to look for misfits. I think these will prove to be relatively minor. The biggest of them is that the account has no explanation for the success of a leftist revolution in North Vietnam. Slater generously concedes that his framework cannot explain why the Vietnamese communists proved capable of outright military victory when everywhere else they were defeated (p. 253). Another uncomfortable fit is Burma. The complete absence of any conceivable social contract in this militarized polity stretches the notion of contentious politics so far as to leave at least this reader feeling dissatisfied, even after many pages of expert discussion.

A more serious objection might be that Slater focuses on his argument so doggedly that he tends to ignore larger contextual issues. Mark Berger (2004), for example, has made much more of the fact that these authoritarian states all lay on the frontline of the Cold War. While the United States substantially incorporated these fragile postcolonial states into the global economy it was creating, it gave its client regimes there considerable elbow-room to indulge authoritarian impulses. Slater has no doubt downplayed this external storyline because explaining why some of these states were so much more effective than others required him to look within. That is, I suppose, a defensible strategy, although the cost of abandoning some serious context remains high, and it leads to an even larger critical question.
That question is the one that lies closest to the heart of the argument – how can we draw general laws from the contingencies of historical action? Slater’s main inspiration was the 1980 paper by Hechter and Brustein on state formation in late medieval Europe, which was in turn stimulated by Perry Anderson’s book *Lineages of the absolutist state* (1974). The paper argued that the first modern states arose in those areas of Europe whose economies were the most feudal (England, France). Areas primarily based on petty commodities (Germany) or on sedentary pastures (Scandinavia) were less conflictual and therefore later in developing states. Feudal elites feared social unrest caused by their oppressive practices more than did elites elsewhere, so they worked together to build states to protect themselves. Hechter and Brustein, by the way, explicitly reject the notion of social contract in this one-sided process of state formation – an anomaly Slater does not address. Slater, as noted above, also does not adopt the economic argument underlying Hechter and Brustein’s account. But otherwise the comparison works well – elites fear unrest enough to overcome their aversion to collaboration and build authoritarian states to protect themselves. Southeast Asia half a century ago, when these Leviathans were built, lends itself well to the comparison.

But we are talking only of the 1960s and 1970s. These Southeast Asian states were a product of their times. This might make the elite anxieties that underlie *Ordering power* more historically conditioned, and hence less universal, than their author seems to suggest. Although today Indonesia is by no means a liberal democracy, it would be a stretch to describe it any longer as a Hobbesian Leviathan. For these times, perhaps a more recent historical analogy might be more appropriate than the medieval feudal one. It still revolves around elites, but this time they institutionalize democracies instead of building dictatorships. It was developed recently by North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009). Elites in France, Britain, and the United States in the early nineteenth century, fearing that intra-elite conflict might get out of hand and imperil everyone’s prosperity, agreed to depersonalize their privileges and extend them to greater numbers of people. Thus they laid the basis for the permanent, impersonalized institutions and open markets that have brought so much stability and welfare to western industrialized nations over the last two hundred years. This very different kind of elite collective action is today not without its proponents in Southeast Asia. During the Asian crisis of 1997 they argued that an old-style military dictatorship will always make a mess of crises by unleashing violence, while openness produces much better coping mechanisms. In an increasingly prosperous Southeast Asia, elite anxieties leading to the clenched fist might actually wash away on the tide of history, leaving the very different anxieties leading to the open hand to prevail.
The thorny problem of distinguishing between internal and external conflicts

The basic argument of *Ordering power* is partly expressed by a recent *New Yorker* cartoon showing a businessman in his private jet confiding to his associate, ‘I would happily pay more in taxes, if somebody made me’. If one inserts a less snappy, less humorous caption one has Slater’s argument in its simplest form: ‘I would be happy to live under a state with enough infrastructural capacity to compel me to pay taxes if I needed protection from an imminent threat of mass action from below’. When elites feel their backs are against the wall due to ‘contentious politics’, they forge a ‘protection pact’ and build a powerful state that overrides their factional interests.

That’s the simple version. Slater refines each component of the argument, building a model of unusual complexity. Elites come in four different types (state officials, economic elites, middle classes, and communal elites). Contentious politics comes in great variety of forms (rural and/or urban, class-based and/or communal-based, radical or reformist, short-lived or prolonged). Depending on the form of contentious politics and the composition of elite groups, the elite response may result in a military dictatorship, an authoritarian state led by a single political party, or a weak, ‘fragmented’ authoritarian regime. The profusion of terms takes on galactic proportions.
yet they remain coherent, gravitating around the idea of ‘elite collective action’ in the face of ‘contentious politics’. It is hard not to be impressed by the careful, methodical reasoning of *Ordering power*. Slater has constructed his arguments with remarkable precision.

Slater’s application of this model to the postcolonial politics of three Southeast Asian states (Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia) results in a persuasive explanation for the divergent trajectories of the three countries. Posing the issue of state capacity, especially the capacity to tax income, as the explanation allows Slater to reveal a deeper, often-unnoticed political process underlying all the drama of electoral politics that attracts the interest of most observers. With its ambitious region-wide scope, novel approach, and refined analysis, *Ordering power* is clearly mandatory reading for anyone interested in the politics of Southeast Asia. I agree with many of the arguments concerning his three case studies. I think the book poses the right kind of questions and provides convincing answers to them. It merits being the subject of a much more thorough and detailed assessment than this brief review can provide.

Here, I will focus on just one issue: the exclusion of international factors in the making of the postcolonial Southeast Asian states. Slater insists that the primary causes of state formation should be found in internal conflicts. He sees his book as nothing less than ‘a clarion call’ alerting us to how state formation has been ‘directed at enemies within, not just without’. (p. 281) This glosses over the thorny problem of distinguishing between internal and external conflicts. Many conflicts are an odd mixture. It also disregards the many ways that external influences have profoundly shaped the political trajectories of Southeast Asian states. If ‘elite threat perception’ is the ‘causal motor’ of the book (p. 279), why must external threats be so rigorously excluded from the analysis? The motor is not firing on all pistons.

Consider the 1957-1958 PRRI and Permesta revolts in Indonesia that Slater classifies as ‘regional revolts’. (pp. 112-3). They were not exactly regional revolts. They aimed to make changes in the central government and received support from some elite politicians in Jakarta. They were regional only in the sense that they did not occur inside Jakarta. If they remained as they had begun, as inter-elite conflicts over power-sharing, they would probably have been resolved through negotiation. Talks with the president were showing signs of progress. Once the US stepped in, however, and backed the dissident colonels, this internal conflict became an international one. The Indonesian army’s suppression of the rebellions was understood inside the country at the time as a matter of protecting national unity against imperialist subversion. Slater sees the rebellions as provoking the militarization of the state. That’s true to some extent, though more weight should be put on the Darul Islam revolt (mentioned once in passing), that was more prolonged and closer to the capital. These rebellions also provoked a more anti-imperialist state.
Soekarno’s authoritarian Guided Democracy, begun in 1959, was a kind of ‘protection pact’ of Indonesian elites against a clear foreign threat. Soekarno wanted to unite the nation behind an ongoing anti-imperialist project, ‘returning to the rails’, as he put it, of the struggle for independence.

Slater is certainly correct to see the end of Soekarno’s government in 1965-1966 as the product of elite fears of growing leftist mass mobilizations. Large sections of the elites grouped behind the army and approved of Soeharto’s takeover. The imperialist threats that Soekarno kept pointing to looked hollow compared to the threats from inside the country. Nevertheless, the international factors behind the army’s power grab should not be overlooked. The army never would have seized power if it hadn’t been certain that the US and other Western states would provide enough foreign aid and investment to turn the economy around. Without help from abroad, the army would have refrained from overthrowing Soekarno and the civilian elites would have continued accommodating themselves to Guided Democracy. After all, prominent businessmen in cities and towns throughout the country aided the PKI and were in turn aided with obtaining licenses and government-controlled supplies. The PKI had managed to insert itself into the Indonesian elite, with mayors, district heads, and some high-ranking government and military officials in Jakarta belonging to the party. It should not just be seen as a force opposed to ‘the elites’.

Unlike Slater, I do not see ‘the elites’ of Indonesia as wholly self-determining, responding in their own way to internal conflicts. The violence against the communist movement, which was out of all proportion to what was needed to repress it, was partly meant to convince the US that the new army-dominated regime deserved its largesse. Soeharto’s envoys asked the US ambassador in late 1965 how much the dead bodies of the communists were worth. They behaved as bounty hunters wishing to be rewarded. Dean Rusk complained about a ‘cargo cult mentality’ among Soeharto’s officials. From the beginning to the end of his regime, Soeharto always kept one eye on Washington. It is wrong, of course, to see him as a puppet of the US, being wholly controlled by a dalang behind the screen. But if he designed his own performance on stage, he did it with his main patron’s tastes in mind.

The removal of the international context becomes particularly misleading when Slater tries to apply his model to South Vietnam (pp. 252-63) – one of the clearest cases in history of a puppet state. The US picked Diem to be the head of state and then built a state around him, oblivious even to the interests of the existing elites in the territory they claimed for South Vietnam. After 1954, US officials deluded themselves by thinking that the state had emerged on its own. Slater continues the delusion by drawing almost exclusively on their writings. Given the volume of the literature on Vietnamese history, this is a remarkably selective reading. South Vietnam, and post-1945 Indochina.
as a whole, does not fit any model focusing on elite reactions to internal conflict when international involvement (from the French, Chinese, the US, and USSR) overdetermined the internal politics.

As the arguments in this book are debated in coming years, I think further discussion needs to address this dichotomy of the internal and external. The economies of Southeast Asian countries have been largely oriented towards export production and this has meant that the elites I would also suggest some thinking about the cultural determinants to ‘elite threat perception’, or how perceptions are shaped by what some would call the ‘social imaginary’. Likewise, ‘elite collective action’ presupposes some ideas among the elite as to what the collectivity is. In *Ordering power*, threatened elites cooperate in building up the national state. But that reflects the historical period covered by the book, when Anderson’s ‘imagined communities’ gained state power. Elites in their ongoing factional conflicts operate at other levels, from the regional to the transnational, and the settlement of these conflicts might extend to these other levels in the future.

Slater’s own discussion of the relationship of his analysis to Marx, Marxism, and class analysis could be extended. For instance, his book can be compared to another comparative work, Vivek Chibber’s book (2006) on India and South Korea, *Locked in place*, which also centres on the question of ‘state capacity’. Chibber’s Marxist model concerns the relationship between the state and the bourgeoisie, not between the state and various ‘elites’. State capacity for Chibber is seen more in terms of industrial policy, not in the power to tax.

*Ordering power* is a book that helps to powerfully order our analyses of Southeast Asian politics. As someone who has been primarily working on the history of non-elite politics in Indonesia, it has made me think about whether a similar kind of analysis could be done about the history of social movements of peasants, workers, and women – the movements that have threatened the elites about whom Slater has written so incisively.

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*With caution, with concrete evidence, and with constant discipline*

There is nothing more gratifying in our profession than receiving a bracing slap of thoughtful and informed criticism, delivered inside the velvet glove of sincere and substantive praise. The best way to honour such expert reviews is by setting aside the humbling compliments – with heart-felt gratitude – and
cutting to the chase in responding to this challenging array of well-considered critiques by three learned leaders in our field.

*Ordering power* is a book about many things. Yet it is about one thing above all else: namely, *divergence*. It offers a historical account for why some Southeast Asian states exhibit so much more governing capacity (that is infrastructural power) than others, and why some of the region’s authoritarian regimes have proven so much more durable (that is both enduring and stable) than others, thanks largely to the relative robustness of their ruling parties and cohesive support of their militaries.

This is a lot to try to explain. (And it would be an impossible amount of historical material for any book to adequately describe.) But these multiple political outcomes prove surprisingly amenable to a common explanatory framework. This is because the strength of party, military, regime, and state institutions in authoritarian settings ultimately has a common source: *elite collective action*. Variation in elite collective action is best explained by variation in the type and timing of *contentious politics* – or to use a less trendy term that Case might prefer, *social conflict* – that accompanied the emergence of Southeast Asia’s authoritarian Leviathans.

It also bears clarifying what *Ordering power* does *not* purport to explain. A prime example is the critical question of why authoritarian regimes arose throughout Cold War Southeast Asia in the first place. Since history yielded no variation on this front – by the early 1970s Southeast Asia had no democracies still standing – my book cannot explain it. Van Klinken is assuredly correct that any account of authoritarian onset in the region would need to reckon with the brilliant works on enduring cultural practices of rule by Anderson and Geertz. It is less evident how these works would shed light on variation in the *durability* of Southeast Asian dictatorships. If anything, they would point toward Indonesia being a case of authoritarian exceptionalism, not a hard-earned case of democratic exceptionalism, as it has recently (and to a large degree deservedly) become in the Islamic world.

In a similar vein, I wholeheartedly agree with Roosa that American influence played a significant role in helping authoritarian regimes in Southeast Asia emerge, and in shaping the patterns and scale of counterrevolutionary violence that attended authoritarian onset. Yet neither of these are outcomes that my book aims to explain. As for authoritarian durability, which I do aim to explain, Soeharto may have ‘always kept one eye on Washington’; but the same was true of Mobutu, Papa Doc, Mubarak, and the Shah – or Marcos, Diem, and Sarit for that matter. American influence was intense across all of these dictatorships, so it cannot explain their dramatic divergence in durability. In sum, *Ordering power* seeks to unlock the puzzle of authoritarian divergence, not authoritarian onset and dynamics writ large. This is why some causal factors warrant so much attention while equally important historical forces attract so much less.
None of this is to fall on my sword before the charge that factors besides contentious politics, particularly international factors, were simply ‘disregard[ed]’ (Roosa) or ‘ignore[ed]’ (Van Klinken). Rather, they were considered carefully and either discarded as unhelpful for explaining my divergence of interest, or subsumed into my contention-driven account. In its initial phases, in fact, my argument was much less ‘parsimonious’ (as Van Klinken puts it) in the explanatory factors it considered, and far less ‘galactic’ (as Roosa nicely phrases it) in the range of outcomes it endeavoured to explain.

My starting intuition was that violent events in Indonesia in 1965 and in Malaysia in 1969 had paralleled the severe internal conflicts that Hechter and Brustein saw fostering state-building in early modern Europe. Yet this immediately raised two further questions. First, if ‘severe internal conflicts’ helped build the state in Indonesia and Malaysia, why not in Burma, the Philippines, and South Vietnam? My initial reaction was to throw parsimony out the window. A combination of theoretical and case-based considerations led me to posit five intervening factors that could cut the causal circuit from social conflict to state-building: (1) inclusive ethnic politics; (2) intense foreign intervention; (3) abundant natural resources; (4) mobile taxable assets; and (5) incapable pre-existing tax institutions. At this point my argument was galactic in its causes, not its outcomes.

Nor did it yet answer a second big question: what were the causal mechanisms through which conflicts built states? Drawing from my earlier collaborative work on state-building (which placed far more stress on international factors, as Roosa advises) (Doner, Ritchie and Slater 2005), my attention turned to coalitions. This was when things turned ‘galactic’ on the outcome side. After all, coalitions do not merely underpin state power; they underpin democracies and dictatorships. Could it be, then, that the same coalitions that drove state-building in Southeast Asia also shaped authoritarian durability? I thus commenced my second yearlong bout of fieldwork with the working argument that social conflicts shaped both state power and authoritarian durability through a complex labyrinth of intervening factors. Galactic in outcomes, yes; but parsimonious in causes, no.

Or not yet. To my surprise, deeper historical research convinced me not to pile on additional factors that I had failed to consider, but to cast aside factors that failed to help explain authoritarian divergence. Such was the fate of three of the five intervening variables mentioned above. Natural resource wealth, asset mobility, and pre-existing tax capacity were assessed and rejected as explanations for state and regime divergence, not ignored or disregarded.

That left ethnic politics and foreign intervention. Ordering power does not exclude these factors, but subsumes them into its framework centred on contentious politics and elite collective action. Variation in ethnic politics shaped variation in contentious politics, as captured in my theoretical focus on the
communal implications of class conflict. Ethnic variation was profoundly shaped, in turn, by divergent colonial-era nation-building practices (that is international factors), as detailed in my chapter on ‘critical antecedents’.

As for foreign intervention during the Cold War, this fit well – surprisingly well – into my account on elite collective action. Western powers intervened mightily in postwar Southeast Asia, to be sure. But their stances toward state-building proved strikingly similar to those of Southeast Asian state elites in their intrinsic ambivalence and in their contingency on patterns of internal conflict. Only when contentious politics took on especially threatening and unmanageable forms did Western elites join Southeast Asian leaders in pursuing state-building efforts. Otherwise, they showed similar disinclination as their local counterparts. Hence I explicitly include ‘external patrons’ in my definition of ‘state officials’ in cases that are ‘under colonial control or foreign domination’ (p. 15).

Southeast Asian elites are thus not ‘wholly self-determining’ in Ordering power at all, as Roosa claims. (See the dozens of references to ‘Great Britain’ and the ‘United States’ in the index, for starters.) If anything, it is Roosa who flirts with such an error by implying that Western elites were ‘wholly self-determining’ in their strategies toward Southeast Asia, rather than recognizing that elites on both sides were mutually determining. The obvious fact of ‘international involvement’ does not negate my argument that South Vietnam, like its neighbours, was profoundly shaped by ‘elite reactions to internal conflict’, because like British elites in Malaya, American elites in South Vietnam were central to any collective-action equation. It is all too easy to explain away South Vietnam by dismissing it as an incomparable, even inert ‘puppet state’. Ordering power strives to explain it instead, tracing historically how events like the Tet Offensive reshaped elite calculations and coalitions in ways that resonate quite well with parallel experiences in the region.

This is all perhaps a long-winded way of answering Van Klinken’s big question: ‘how can we draw general laws from the contingencies of historical action?’ My main answer would be: with caution, with concrete evidence, and with constant discipline in distinguishing what is and what is not being explained. Ordering power is a book that leaves much unexplained, including much of what has recently transpired in Thailand, beyond that country’s age of authoritarian Leviathans. Yet I also believe that it is a book that explains much – more in fact than I initially imagined possible. A pressing task now is to explain elite collective action in Southeast Asian democracies, which tends to resemble the kind of intra-elite armistice Case describes in contemporary Thailand more than the authoritarian ‘protection pacts’ that Ordering power theorizes. This is next on my research agenda¹ and, I hope, the agendas of many others committed to following Benda in writing Southeast Asian political history ‘from within’.

¹ For an early statement from this long-term project, see Slater 2004.
References

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