Jemma Purdey (ed.)


This collective volume deals with the nature of Indonesian studies in Australia and contains the reflections of some of its senior practitioners. As such this small but insightful book fits within a still growing body of literature, in which area specialists worldwide ponder the meaning and relevance of their endeavours as well as the appropriate future format of area studies within a globalised world.

In her introduction, Jemma Purdey outlines how Indonesia has been studied and known in Australia since the 1950s, as being situated within the three epistemological parameters of nation, discipline, and the self. Starting out from Herb Feith as an Australian pioneer of Indonesian political studies, scholarship has expanded over the decades to become a vibrant study field, culminating between 1996 and 2007. Since then, however, Asian studies in general and Indonesian studies in particular seem to be in jeopardy, as far as their resources and autonomy are concerned. By letting six more Indonesia experts (including one from Indonesia itself) reflect on their own scholarly career, key features of Australian scholarship on Indonesia come to the fore: personal socio-political commitment, disciplinary rigour and an awareness of the geo-strategic relevance of Indonesia to the Australian nation.

Important red threads which run through all the contributions in this book are main questions that preoccupy practitioners of area studies everywhere: what is the relationship between area studies and the disciplines? What does globalisation mean for the future of area studies? How should the researcher personally relate to his object of study? As could be expected, the responses to these critical questions vary. Emma Purdey demonstrates how Herb Feith in an exemplary way managed to combine moral engagement with outstanding scholarship, reflecting the broader issue of how Indonesianists deal with the injustices they observe. In an autobiographical account Lea Jellinek explains how personal involvement and detachment can produce synergy. Over time she moved away from academia and development aid towards NGO activism; her way of knowing Indonesia is primarily connected to local people and their problems. Bob Elson addresses the innate scepticism of historians against those drawing specific lessons from the past and trying to convert these into straightforward solutions for the present.

Ed Aspinall discusses Australian political science on Indonesia, grounded in a unique bilateral relationship, allowing for more area studies’ specificity.
than for instance in the US but also being driven by security concerns. This adds up to a distinctive Australian style of studying Indonesian politics consisting of three different postures: proponents of Realpolitik, left-wing human rights critics and a majority of progressive but largely silent academics. Next, Bob Hadiwinata provides a viewpoint from the Indonesian academy on what Australian political scientists do, highlighting the differences between them in terms of generations and degrees of training in Indonesian studies. This leads either to a stronger focus on explanation or on normative prescription with regard to issues like democracy in the 1950s or, more important for now, Papua.

Heather Sutherland addresses the lack of epistemological self-reflection in early Indonesian studies, set within Cold War geopolitics and the paradigm of exceptionality but later broken up by postcolonial critiques. She also reviews the development of Indonesian studies in Holland, which in recent years has been subjected to rapid decline. She suggests that a middle way is necessary, which implies a stronger realignment with the disciplines, especially emerging fields like global history. Finally, Richard Tanter deals with Australia-Indonesia security relations, which should be based on shared interests to deal with global problems rather than methodological nationalism, ambivalence, and asymmetric threat perception governed by different policy currents within Australia.

In sum, this volume brings up important insights into the epistemologies, framings, and methodological approaches in Indonesian studies, not only showcasing the diversity within this study field but also elements of specificity characterising the Australian contribution to it.

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