

Context and Method in Southeast Asian Politics*

Thomas B. Pepinsky

ABSTRACT

This essay introduces and evaluates a central debate about context sensitivity in Southeast Asian political studies. Within this diverse field, there is no agreement about what context means, or how to be sensitive to it. I develop the idea of unit context (traditionally, the area studies concern) and population context (traditionally, the comparative politics concern) as parallel organizing principles in Southeast Asian political studies. The unit context/population context distinction does not track the now-familiar debates of qualitative versus quantitative analysis, nor debates about positivist epistemology and its interpretivist alternatives, nor even political science versus area studies. Context is not method, nor epistemology, nor discipline. Rather, the core distinction between unit-focused and population-focused research lies in assumptions about the possibility of comparison, or what methodologists call unit homogeneity. While I conclude on an optimistic note that a diverse Southeast Asian political studies (embracing many disciplines and many methodologies) is possible, the fact remains that unit context and population context are fundamentally incommensurate as frameworks for approaching Southeast Asian politics, and that population context is the superior approach.

KEYWORDS: methodology, comparative politics, Southeast Asia, area studies, context

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This essay discusses context and method in Southeast Asian political studies as understood by two academic communities: Southeast Asia area studies and mainstream comparative politics. Scholars working in each academic community commonly hold that research in the other tradition is insufficiently attentive to context. The natural consequences that

THOMAS B. PEPINSKY is an associate professor of government at Cornell University. He is the author, most recently, of "The Institutional Turn in Comparative Authoritarianism" and "Pluralism and Political Conflict in Indonesia." Email: pepinsky@cornell.edu.

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arise from this lack of context sensitivity are that research on Southeast Asian politics is at best trivial, and at worst incorrect. For both communities, the only remedy for the failings of the other's research is more attention to context.

Complaints about context sensitivity are rarely seen in print. Instead, they are made informally, over coffee between like-minded colleagues, in the halls of the Association of Asian Studies annual meeting, and in seminar presentations and referee reports—the hidden transcripts of debates about theory, place and methodology in contemporary Southeast Asian political studies. Yet they are unmistakably present. Context sensitivity defines the perimeters of the “circles of esteem”² among scholarly communities in Southeast Asian political studies, and it is perhaps the most powerful rhetorical tool wielded by scholars to critique those working in different traditions. It is striking that for both comparative politics and Southeast Asian area studies, context plays a critical role in defining what makes research on Southeast Asia important or valuable, yet the prescriptions of the area studies and comparative politics communities are almost diametrically opposed to one another.

This fault line within Southeast Asian political studies is best understood through a close examination of two different understandings of context. For comparativists, appeals to context are statements about the relationship between an *observation* and the *population* from which it is understood to be drawn: Kelantan is a state in Malaysia, which is an emerging market economy in Southeast Asia, which is part of the Global South. For area specialists, appeals to context are statements about a *case* and its *features*. Kelantan is an overwhelmingly Malay region with deep historical ties to modern-day Thailand and an active and vibrant aristocratic class, and the people who live there deserve to be understood as they actually live and on their own terms. When comparativists want “more context” for Kelantan, they are insisting that Kelantan contributes to our understanding of the political world only if we think carefully about what other things Kelantan is *like*. When area specialists want “more context” for Kelantan, they are demanding that we learn more about what aspects of social life in Kelantan constitute what Kelantan *is*.

This essay develops the ideas of unit context and population context as parallel organizing principles for Southeast Asian political studies, with more general implications for what Rüländ and Huotari (this issue) have usefully termed comparative area studies. I am not the first to have noticed this distinction—Duncan McCargo, notably, contrasts distinctiveness and comparability in Southeast Asian political studies³—but its implications are

² Robert Cribb, “Circles of Esteem, Standard Works, and Euphoric Couplets: Dynamics of Academic Life in Indonesian Studies,” *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 2 (2005), 289–304.

³ Duncan McCargo, “Rethinking Southeast Asian Politics,” in *Southeast Asian Studies: Debates and New Directions*, eds. Cynthia Chou and Vincent Houben (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies Press, 2006), 102.

not yet properly understood. I argue that the unit context/population context distinction does not track the now-familiar debates of qualitative versus quantitative analysis, nor debates about positivist epistemology and its realist and interpretivist alternatives. It is also not true that mainstream comparative politics, as practiced by political scientists in North American departments of political science, consistently prioritizes population context over unit context. Context is neither method, nor epistemology, nor discipline. Rather, the real difference between unit-focused and population-focused research lies in the assumption of comparability, or unit homogeneity, a concern which cuts across academic disciplines and methodologies alike. Context, therefore, is ontology. With these concerns in mind, I attempt a translation of the area studies objection to context as population in the methodological language of mainstream comparative politics, highlighting what I (a native speaker of mainstream comparative politics) take to be serious challenges that cannot be dismissed out of hand. In doing so, I make special reference to exemplars of population-focused research outside of the academic discipline of political science, illustrating that context sensitivity is an interdisciplinary concern.

The good news is that by recognizing these two different conceptions of context, scholars can begin to break down some of the barriers between Southeast Asian area studies and Southeast Asian comparative politics. One useful exercise for Southeast Asian political studies is “scaling down,”⁴ or reconceptualizing the features of a case in terms of a population at a lower unit of analysis. This means that subnational comparative methods may serve to bring population context-focused research to single-country studies, as I discuss in greater detail in the conclusion of this essay. Another is to take seriously the features of a case as providing limits on the external validity of the inferences drawn from it. It is possible to be sensitive to both unit context and population context in a single research project.

But not all of the gulfs between Southeast Asian area studies and comparative Southeast Asian politics can be bridged. The bad news (or perhaps good news, depending on one’s perspective) is that unit context and population context are fundamentally incommensurate as frameworks for Southeast Asian political studies. There is no foundational reason for anyone to conclude that any set of units are either homogenous enough to require cross-case comparisons, or heterogeneous enough to preclude such comparisons. Such a conclusion requires complete knowledge of both the observation, case or phenomenon under consideration and every other observation, case or phenomenon to which it might be compared. All claims that context matters so we need more history and field research, or that context matters so we need more comparisons across cases, are expressions

⁴ Richard Snyder, “Scaling Down: The Subnational Comparative Method,” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 36, no. 1 (2001): 93–110.

of preferences. For this reason, Southeast Asianists should remember that the intellectual force behind such claims rests primarily on the resources, prestige and position of the people who make them, and secondarily on the credulity of the reader or the audience.

The Area Studies–Comparative Politics Debate

Southeast Asian studies is perhaps uniquely prone to debates about area versus discipline due to the contested nature of Southeast Asia as a region. Neither comparativists in political science departments nor area specialists tend to have any particular attachment to the idea of Southeast Asia as a whole, defined as the ASEAN states plus Timor Leste. Southeast Asian area specialists have long questioned the unity and coherence of Southeast Asia as an entity.⁵ There are few comparativists who attempt to analyze politics across the entire region, presumably because Southeast Asian states and societies do not form a natural kind.⁶ The countries of Southeast Asia, or certain parts of them, might just as profitably be categorized otherwise: Vietnam as part of East Asia and Myanmar as part of South Asia; maritime Southeast Asia and the lower Mekong as part of an Austronesian or Indian Ocean community; Taiwan, Hainan, southern China, Northeast India, and/or Bangladesh included; Zomia distinguished from the lowland plains and valleys.⁷ But, for various historical reasons that need not concern us here, Southeast Asia is today an area of study. If you study Vietnamese or Filipino politics, Southeast Asia is your area studies home, and Papua New Guinean politics is excluded entirely while the politics of West Papua is “of course” included.⁸ This is just as true in Japan, Germany, Australia and Singapore as it is in North America.

For the purposes of my argument, the challenge of conceptualizing Southeast Asia as a region is unimportant. For the area specialist, appeals for context sensitivity are made at least one level of analysis down from the region, at the national, subnational or local level. Context matters because it gives meaning to concepts, theories and approaches imported from abroad. The study of broad concepts such as quality of government or social movements in the Philippines cannot contribute to the study of Philippine politics without a firm grounding in the actual politics of that country. This grounding, depending on the question, may come from in-depth field

⁵ See, recently, citations in Victor T. King, “Defining Southeast Asia and the Crisis in Area Studies: Personal Reflections on a Region,” Working Paper no. 13, Centre for East and South-East Asian Studies, Lund University, 2005.

⁶ The political science subfield of international relations in an exception, for ASEAN’s existence has come to justify studies of the international relations of ASEAN states.

⁷ Willem van Schendel, “Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance: Jumping Scale in Southeast Asia,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20, no. 6 (2002): 647–68.

⁸ See for example Danilyn Rutherford, *Raiding the Land of the Foreigners: The Limits of the Nation on an Indonesian Frontier* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

research, intensive interviews with important actors, or careful historical research. It almost certainly will not come from elite interviews in Manila, statistical databases, or the secondary literature by other country specialists. Mainstream comparative politics uses terms such as conceptual stretching, measurement error and selection bias to describe the problems that emerge when scholars are inattentive to context.⁹ But the area studies critique of the comparative politics mainstream is more fundamental than these objections alone: scholars working in the comparative politics mainstream quite literally do not know what they are studying when they use data or materials from Southeast Asia. Getting the context right means abandoning the assumption of comparability that forms the core of comparative politics as a discipline, because the assumption of comparability commits the researcher to understanding politics using concepts imported from elsewhere.

Comparative politics turns this criticism around. For many working in the comparative politics mainstream, area specialists have lost the ability to communicate meaningfully beyond their very small and tightly knit community. Theory building, theory testing and generalization—the other things that the scientific study of politics ought to be about—are supplanted by endless description with a refusal to conclude anything beyond one's understanding of a place. Indeed, "findings" are no longer "conclusive," but instead "experiences" are "suggestive." Differences in interpretation, when they arise, are irresolvable outside of appeals to expertise, measured by something like time in the field, linguistic expertise, or number of tropical diseases survived. And in the strongest political science critiques of area-focused scholarship, the pathologies go deeper. Seduced by their own mythology of context-sensitivity, area specialists become blind to the limits of interpretation, and do not see that they are themselves writing their own views of the world upon their subjects. At the limit, area specialists "gone native" can no longer be trusted to be faithful interpreters of the evidence that they have collected. In abandoning the scientific study of politics, area studies becomes irrelevant.

These descriptions of how Southeast Asian area studies and mainstream comparative politics view one another are caricatures, much like Robert Bates's descriptions of African area studies and political science.¹⁰ But it is easy to uncover instances of scholars invoking context to dismiss whole

⁹ On conceptual stretching, see David Collier and James E. Mahon, "Conceptual 'Stretching' Revisited: Adapting Categories in Comparative Analysis," *American Political Science Review* 87, no. 4 (1993): 845–55. On measurement error, see Robert Adcock and David Collier, "Measurement Validity: A Shared Standard for Qualitative and Quantitative Research," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 3 (2001): 529–46. On selection bias, see Barbara Geddes, "How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answers You Get: Selection Bias in Comparative Politics," *Political Analysis* 2, no. 1 (1990): 131–50; David Collier and James Mahoney, "Insights and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research," *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996): 56–91.

¹⁰ Robert H. Bates, "Area Studies and Political Science: Rupture and Possible Synthesis," *Africa Today* 44, no. 2 (1997): 123–31.

traditions in Southeast Asian political studies. We begin with Southeast Asian area studies. “Comparative approaches are of limited utility, unless we first know what we are comparing. Only with real and deep local knowledge can significant insights be gained, insights that underpin really original and exciting work that enhances our understandings of politics, not just within but also beyond Southeast Asia.”¹¹ “Nishizaki’s book should render unpublishable and above all unread work on the political life of the region that fails to engage the empirical contours of that life in a manner rather more truly rigorous and informed than has become the norm in North American ‘political science.’”¹² These are deep, sweeping critiques.

The view from comparative politics is little different in tone, although few mainstream comparativists—at least those employed in North American political science departments—have the inclination to lecture Southeast Asia area specialists about the inferiority of their approach to the study of politics. This might reflect the depth of their disdain for area studies, the frustration felt by many political scientists with other academic disciplines’ understanding of “politics,” or the relative inconspicuousness of Southeast Asia within political science. But the tradition is long for other areas of the world. Bates infamously instructed the comparative politics section of the American Political Science Association that “within the academy, the consensus has formed that area studies has failed to generate scientific knowledge.”¹³ Area specialists would be most helpful if they would “record the data from which political inferences [can] be drawn by social scientists residing in political science departments.” In that sense, being a Southeast Asia area specialist is like being a research assistant, with all of the asymmetries of power and prestige that that entails.

This issue of area studies and comparative politics, or North American political science in general, is an old one.¹⁴ Yet in recent years it has only rarely been addressed in the context of Southeast Asian political studies. One notable exception is Erik Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu’s *Southeast Asia in Political Science*, which makes a strong case that the regional expertise of Southeast Asianists ought to be brought into more direct conversation with comparative politics, in service of the intellectual goals of the latter:

¹¹ Duncan McCargo, “‘Knowledge Accumulation’ Versus Local Knowledge,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 187–90, 189.

¹² Michael Montesano, “Review of *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand*,” <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2012/05/04/review-of-political-authority-and-provincial-identity-tlenmrev-xxxvi/>, last accessed 3 May 2012.

¹³ Robert H. Bates, “Letter from the President: Area Studies and the Discipline,” *APSA-CP* 7, no. 1 (1996): 1–2.

¹⁴ Ariel I. Ahram, “The Theory and Method of Comparative Area Studies,” *Qualitative Research* 11, no. 1 (2011): 69–90; David L. Szanton, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 2002); Stephen E. Hanson, “The Contribution of Area Studies,” in *The Sage Handbook of Comparative Politics*, eds. Todd Landman and Neil Robinson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009).

knowledge accumulation, theory building, and so forth.¹⁵ The volume was well received by young Southeast Asianists employed in American political science departments,¹⁶ who are perhaps not as animated by a perceived area-vs.-discipline battle as their immediate predecessors were. Yet when the *Journal of East Asian Studies* brought together more senior representatives of mainstream comparative politics and mainstream Southeast Asian area studies for a roundtable discussion of the volume, it was curtly dismissed by both.¹⁷

Southeast Asia in Context

It should by now be clear that at least two different kinds of Southeast Asian political studies exist, and that they have different standards and expectations for high-quality research on the politics of Southeast Asia. Each demands a “contextualized” Southeast Asian political studies, yet disagrees about what that would entail. It might mean a focus on what Ruth McVey meant by “context sensitive”¹⁸ research on Southeast Asian politics as “local-level linguistic and other locally-grounded knowledge and expertise.”¹⁹ Or it might mean placing Southeast Asian political phenomena in relation to comparable phenomena across or beyond the region, which is the meaning that Victor Lieberman conjures with the subtitle of *Strange Parallels: “Southeast Asia in Global Context.”*²⁰ The former is best understood as “unit context,” and the latter as “population context.”²¹

Unit context calls attention to the features of a case with a focus on understanding how they give it meaning. To illustrate, I return to Yoshinori Nishizaki’s study of politics in Suphanburi, which has been held to be exemplary of the importance of unit context. Do voters in Suphanburi

¹⁵ Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu, eds., *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford: Stanford Univ Press, 2008).

¹⁶ See for example the reviews in Ehito Kimura, “Review of Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu (Eds.) *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*,” *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2010): 150–52; Thomas B. Pepinsky, “Review of *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*,” *Pacific Affairs* 82, no. 2 (2009): 351–53; Maria Consuelo C. Ortuoste, “Review of *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region and Qualitative Analysis*,” *Journal of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009): 1602–03.

¹⁷ Thomas B. Pepinsky et al., “Roundtable Discussion of Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater, and Tuong Vu’s *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*,” *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 171–208.

¹⁸ Ruth McVey, “Globalization, Marginalization, and the Study of Southeast Asia,” in *Southeast Asian Studies: Reorientations*, eds. Craig J. Reynolds and Ruth McVey (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 1998), 50.

¹⁹ King, “Defining Southeast Asia,” 9.

²⁰ Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800–1830*, vol. 2, *Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²¹ These are new terms which do not, to my knowledge, appear elsewhere in the literature. The term “population context” is used by cell biologists, but with a different meaning. I thank Mikko Huotari for calling my attention to this point.

conceive of their support for Banharn Silpa-archa in terms of the material benefits that they expect to receive (as a pluralist or clientelist analysis would suggest), or in “collective” and “ideational” terms?²² Scholars who do not have the language skills or field experience to spend time reading, conversing with actual people, and understanding the Suphanburi voter in his or her social and political milieu will almost certainly conclude that s/he simply votes for a patron to obtain selective benefits, in much the same fashion as political scientists have come to expect in Phnom Penh, Dakar, Calabria or Newark. Contextually sensitive research reveals that the analogy that licenses the comparison between the Suphanburi voter and the Newark voter is a false one. That conclusion is simply unavailable to the comparativist unless s/he stops thinking about the Suphanburi voter as just one more exchangeable voter in one more corrupt democracy.

By population context I mean the wider collection of entities of which a case can be thought of as more or less representative. Describing state capitalism in post-communist Vietnam gives rise to comparisons with other state capitalist economies in the post-communist world, which may plausibly include Laos, the People’s Republic of China and Russia, to name just a few. Whether or not these are proper comparisons depends on the particular definitions of “post-communist world” and “state capitalism,” which are theoretical statements which might be inspired by particular cases but which ultimately exist independently of them. Population context for comparative research forces the scholar to look beyond the motivating case, event or phenomenon for theoretical insights, on the assumption that this will reveal the extent to which it is representative, and thereby what features require further study or elaboration. Understood this way, no case study is itself valuable without an exposition of how it fits into some broader population, and that broader population is probably not restricted to “the states of Southeast Asia.” In fact, population context almost certainly requires comparisons *outside* of Southeast Asia. Thus, the admonition to graduate students in political methodology classes to explain *what is your case a case of*, and exhaustive treatments of the possible kinds of case studies, always defined in terms of the relationship between the unit and the population: “typical,” “deviant,” “most-similar” and so forth.²³

It is worth noting that the concept of Southeast Asia itself presupposes some sort of comparability across countries within the region, as Ariel Heryanto reveals in his observation that someone from Southeast Asia cannot be a Southeast Asianist unless s/he either (1) becomes an expert in a country outside of his or her country of birth or (2) becomes an expert in issues that

²² Montesano, “Review of *Political Authority*”; Yoshinori Nishizaki, *Political Authority and Provincial Identity in Thailand: The Making of Banharn-Buri* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Publications, 2011).

²³ John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

are common across countries.²⁴ This peculiar presupposition, of course, is the source of many of the debates about Southeast Asia as a region.

There is, then, a tension between context as the features of a case, and context as the population from which a unit is drawn. Both are ways to give an object of study meaning, but one starts with an assumption of comparability across cases and the other of incomparability across cases. These are assumptions about *unit homogeneity*, or the degree to which entities in the social world form natural kinds. Comparative politics as a discipline—as practiced in most North American political science departments—is predicated on the idea that the unit homogeneity assumption is tenable for many interesting political phenomena. To continue the running example, Vietnam and China are both instances of state capitalism—and the fact that the two countries fall into different area councils in the Association for Asian Studies is, naturally, irrelevant. Scholars of Southeast Asian politics who adopt the discipline’s mainstream approach are making this claim. I will argue in the conclusion to this essay that area-focused Southeast Asianists do not strictly believe that all comparisons are impossible, but the starting point for Southeast Asian area studies is that for broad classes of political phenomena, the unit homogeneity assumption is not tenable. More is obscured than revealed by labeling China and Vietnam as two cases of state capitalism.

Context as Methodology, Epistemology or Discipline?

With context understood as a statement about a case and its features or a unit in relation to a population, it follows that there is no inherent connection between unit context or population context, on the one hand, and qualitative or quantitative research, on the other. This remains a central misunderstanding for some Southeast Asianists. There are certain affinities between quantitative analysis and population context in Southeast Asian studies, but only when quantitative analysis is done in the service of cross-unit comparison. Affinities between qualitative analysis and unit context also exist, but small-*n* comparative research in which two or more are studied intensively is best understood as an example of research that prioritizes population context rather than unit context. Likewise, mainstream comparative politics done by political scientists employed in North American political science departments often adopts a quantitative toolkit in research that focuses on unit context. Close attention to these issues reveals that the two understandings of context cut across disciplinary lines.

My argument that methodology and discipline have no intrinsic relationship to context sensitivity, however it is defined, proceeds by example. We start with population context and qualitative methods. Recent examples of cross-national work by Southeast Asia scholars which relies primarily or

²⁴ Ariel Heryanto, “Can There Be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?,” *Moussons* 5 (2002): 3–30.

exclusively on qualitative evidence to develop broader theoretical arguments include works by Vince Boudreau, Rick Doner, Erik Kuhonta, Andrew MacIntyre, Edmund Malesky, Thomas Pepinsky, Dan Slater, Benjamin Smith and Tuong Vu.²⁵ Other examples are easily uncovered. In each, we find one or more Southeast Asian countries employed as a case, and compared against one or more countries within Southeast Asia (Boudreau, Kuhonta, MacIntyre, Slater), outside of Southeast Asia (Malesky et al., Smith), or both (Doner, Pepinsky, Vu). Such comparisons across cases are instrumental for studying general political phenomena that are not specific to Southeast Asia. While quantitative analyses appear in some of these works, their central empirical strategies are qualitative. Contextual understanding of Southeast Asian case material in these works comes just as much from searching for comparisons as it does from exploring the distinctiveness of a particular case. There is nothing unique to political science in this regard: important contributions to Southeast Asian political studies from other disciplines, like history and anthropology, are frequently comparative in nature, and embrace what I have called population context.²⁶

These examples reveal how qualitative analysis coexists with population context. But while readers of Kuhonta et al. will no doubt find these points familiar, it is perhaps less well understood that political scientists working in the comparative politics mainstream have long used quantitative tools to make inferences about unit context. This, of course, is the essence of American politics as a subfield in political science (where the unit is the United States), but for many Southeast Asianists working on political topics, cross-unit comparisons outside of a particular Southeast Asian country or subnational unit are frequently only suggestive, and to rest on assumptions about unit homogeneity that are known to be untestable. Rather, the goal is to understand a particular feature of politics somewhere in the region. This is the strategy in Pepinsky, Liddle and Mujani's research on Islamist

²⁵ Vincent Boudreau, *Resisting Dictatorship: Repression and Protest in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Richard F. Doner, *The Politics of Uneven Development: Thailand's Economic Growth in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Erik Martinez Kuhonta, *The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Andrew MacIntyre, *The Power of Institutions: Political Architecture and Governance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Edmund J. Malesky, Regina M. Abrami and Yu Zheng, "Institutions and Inequality in Single-Party Regimes: A Comparative Analysis of Vietnam and China," *Comparative Politics* 43, no. 4 (2011): 409–27; Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Benjamin B. Smith, *Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007); Tuong Vu, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Thomas B. Pepinsky, *Economic Crises and the Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²⁶ John S. Furnivall, *Progress and Welfare in Southeast Asia: A Comparison of Colonial Policy and Practice* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1941); Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1968); Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands; W.F. Wertheim, *East- West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

party ideology in democratic Indonesia.²⁷ Their goal is to understand the role that Islamist party ideologies, rather than the other platforms that parties offer, influence voting behaviour. They answer this question by embedding experiments within nationally representative public opinion surveys in Indonesia. Of course, deploying this methodology required them to grapple with the unique features of politics and voting in democratic Indonesia, further demonstrating the essential role that unit context plays in carrying out what is a quantitative research project. While the article is framed as a way to study questions that matter for Islamic politics anywhere, the authors offer only tentative generalizations beyond the Indonesian case.

There are now many Southeast Asianists who possess both regional expertise and quantitative skills, and use both to understand one case and its features.²⁸ Other projects marry quantitative evidence about unit context with cross-unit inferences about population context, best exemplified by Allen Hicken's comparative study of electoral rules and party competition in Thailand and the Philippines.²⁹ By the same token, even historians focused on understanding the specific features of a case can use tools that are amenable to a quantitative interpretation, although they are usually not consciously given one by their authors. One example that suffices to demonstrate this point is Ben Kiernan's study of Democratic Kampuchea, a landmark contribution to Southeast Asian political studies.³⁰ He produces an estimate of the death tolls for various types of Cambodians during the 1975–1979 period, part of which I reproduce as table 1. The purpose of these data is to describe the features of the Pol Pot regime that allow us to understand the logic of genocide in that country. This is unit context: Kiernan is not interested (at least, not in this book) in comparing the Cambodian genocide to anything else, but rather in delving deeply into one case to understand genocide in the Cambodian context. Yet although these data are estimates—and they are certainly contested³¹—they are quantitative nevertheless, and one may use them to test various hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that urban Vietnamese and urban Khmer died at equivalent rates, or that rural Khmer and rural Lao died at equivalent rates.

²⁷ Thomas B. Pepinsky, R. William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, "Testing Islam's Political Advantage: Evidence from Indonesia," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 3 (2012): 584–600.

²⁸ Other examples include Edmund J. Malesky and Paul Schuler, "Nodding or Needling: Analyzing Delegate Responsiveness in an Authoritarian Parliament," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (2010): 1–21; Thomas B. Pepinsky, "The 2008 Malaysian Elections: An End to Ethnic Politics?," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2009), 87–120; Christian von Luebke, "The Political Economy of Local Governance: Findings from an Indonesian Field Study," *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2009): 201–30.

²⁹ Allen Hicken, *Building Party Systems in Developing Democracies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁰ Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

³¹ Michael Vickery, "How Many Died in Pol Pot's Kampuchea?," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 20, no. 1 (1988): 70–73.

TABLE 1
Approximate Death Tolls in Democratic Kampuchea, 1975–1979

Social Group	1975 Population	Number Who Perished	Percentage
<i>“New People”</i>			
Urban Khmer	2,000,000	500,000	25
Rural Khmer	600,000	150,000	25
Chinese	430,000	215,000	50
Vietnamese (urban)	10,000	10,000	100
Lao (rural)	10,000	4,000	40

Source: Adapted from Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 458.

TABLE 2
Statistical Inference on Death Rates for “New People”

	Urban Khmer	Chinese		Rural Khmer	Rural Lao
<i>Perished</i>	500,000	215,000	<i>Perished</i>	150,000	4,000
<i>Survived</i>	1,500,000	215,000	<i>Survived</i>	450,000	6,000
$\chi^2(1)=106515.9, p < .001$			$\chi^2(1)=1172.7, p < .001$		

Source: Author’s calculations.

Such calculations are clearly unnecessary for inferring that non-Khmers were disproportionately victimized in Democratic Kampuchea, especially given the evidence presented in the preceding 450 pages of Kiernan’s book. The point is that there is nothing inherently qualitative or anti-positivist in the

type of research which case-focused scholars of Southeast Asian politics conduct. And of course, when Kiernan widens his lens to study genocide in the comparative context, he looks beyond Southeast Asia to cases from around the world.³²

Kiernan's example also serves to remind us that the tensions between unit and population context exist in other disciplines as well. Kuhonta (this issue) describes broadly comparative historical work by anthropologists and historians—in addition to political scientists—that exploits variation across and beyond Southeast Asia to ask “why here, and not there?” To ask that question in historical or anthropological research presumes that “here” and “there” are instances of a natural kind, just as in work by political scientists. Just as some working on politics may reject such assumptions, so too do historians and anthropologists who prefer to explore in depth the local contexts of the places that they study.³³ This trans-disciplinary perspective on how to understand context further shows that context is not discipline.

Context as Ontology

If context does not correspond to either methodology or discipline, on what basis do we distinguish between unit context and population context as organizing principles for Southeast Asian political studies? The answer follows from the definition of unit homogeneity as the assumption that various entities in the social world form natural kinds. This is an assumption about ontology, or the nature of entities or categories. Clarifying this point has the benefit of identifying the stakes in the debates between various scholarly communities in political science, area studies, and in other disciplines as well.

The first implication of unit homogeneity as the fundamental distinction between area studies and comparative politics approaches to Southeast Asian political studies is the one addressed above: disagreements about unit homogeneity are not disagreements about methodology or discipline. Understanding the essential role of unit homogeneity in defining different scholarly communities also helps to translate area studies concerns into the language of comparative politics. One misconception held by some comparativists is that objections to unit homogeneity assumptions are ultimately unsustainable because comparativists can always rescue their assumptions by placing bounds or scope conditions on their propositions. Continuing with the comparison between voters in Suphanburi and Newark, one might argue that of course Suphanburi voters are different from Newark voters, but the differences between them are knowable. In fact, the fact that

³² See Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

³³ For an anthropological perspective, see André Gingrich and Richard Gabriel Fox, *Anthropology, by Comparison* (New York: Routledge, 2002). For a perspective spanning both anthropology and political science, see John R. Bowen and Roger Petersen, eds., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

they are different is what makes the comparison between the two a fruitful exercise, for it allows the researcher to study how contextual factors affect them. In this way, the comparativist reformulates the criticism of the two units as incomparable into a research question about the effects of context.

There are two reasons why this response is inadequate. One is that the differences between the two entities being compared (here, the Suphanburi voter and the Newark voter) may not be knowable absent the very sort of attention to unit context that the area specialist considers essential. To know what contextual factor or factors distinguish politics in Suphanburi from politics in Newark, the scholar must understand Suphanburi (and Newark as well). This is the logic of McCargo's statement that "comparative approaches are of limited utility, unless we first know what we are comparing."³⁴ Population context is fine, but it is subordinate to unit context, which must come first, and understanding unit context in one case is so difficult as to preclude such comparisons.

The second reason why comparative approaches cannot overcome any claim of unit heterogeneity is that while units may be homogeneous, the *effects* of the contextual factors that explain the differences across cases may be heterogeneous. Some factors, such as "class structure," may account for the differences between Suphanburi voters and Newark voters, but one might also argue that the effect of class structure is itself conditional on another factor such as "ethnic relations." If this is true, a comparative project requires, at minimum, four cases, not two, in order to identify these effects. Add to this the possibility that political agency, institutional rules, centre-region dynamics, local history, position in the global economy, and so forth also condition the effects of both class structure and ethnic relations. If these factors all jointly interact, then at minimum this requires a sample size of $N = 2^K$ observations (where K is the number of causal factors being entertained) to identify how contextual factors affect voting in corrupt democracies.³⁵ In other words, if the area specialist is right that context matters in complex ways that cannot be reduced to the additive effectiveness of small numbers of independent variables (colourfully described by Abbott as "general linear reality"),³⁶ it is unlikely that any population in the social world is large enough to evaluate contextual effects using any strategy based on cross-unit comparison.³⁷

Understanding context as ontology, and dependent on (1) assumptions

³⁴ McCargo, "Knowledge Accumulation," 189.

³⁵ This is still conservative. 2^K observations will just identify the conditional effects of various independent variables only if all factors can be conceived of as binary independent variables, there is no overlap among the values of these independent variables in any two observations, all independent variables are strictly exogenous, and causal relations are deterministic.

³⁶ Andrew Abbott, "Transcending General Linear Reality," *Sociological Theory* 6, no. 2 (1988): 169–86.

³⁷ For a related argument from within the political science mainstream, see Philip A. Schrodt, "Beyond the Linear Frequentist Orthodoxy," *Political Analysis* 14, no. 3 (2006): 335–39.

about the kinds of entities that exist in the world and (2) the causal complexity of the theoretical propositions under consideration, therefore helps to focus debates between various traditions in Southeast Asian political studies on the issues that should really animate them. While this essay motivated its discussion of context by contrasting the positions of mainstream area studies and comparative politics, this should be understood as a poor shorthand for what are in fact much more substantial divides across disciplines, methodologies and approaches.

Implications for Southeast Asian Political Studies

Why does any of this matter? On a purely personal note, I believe that it should matter to conscientious scholars of Southeast Asian politics because many of us find ourselves engaging with disparate academic communities at various points in our careers. Ours is an interdisciplinary field. We present our work to political scientists, area specialists and to audiences comprised of anthropologists, historians and others who may share with us nothing more than a common interest in a region of the world. Those of us who do not engage across disciplines and communities should do so. Accordingly, we should understand how different communities understand context, yet in my case, my own academic training lacked any serious engagement with the Southeast Asian area studies community aside from my language classes. I was not encouraged to take seriously the position that unit context is fundamentally important for Southeast Asian political studies. To the extent that I was, it was from the comparativists' perspective, which elided internal debates within political science about qualitative versus quantitative methods with the question about placing Southeast Asian politics within comparative politics. I believe now that that discussion misses the point about what unit context means for many working in the area studies tradition. And as I have argued here, unit context as a fundamental concern cannot be dismissed out of hand, even by committed comparativists.

Some scholars are today attempting to bypass the traditional distinction between unit context and population context by conceiving of the various features of a case (the unit context concern) in terms of their own population at a lower unit of analysis. This is what Snyder calls "scaling down,"³⁸ and it opens the door for a rapprochement of sorts between comparativists and those who prioritize unit context. The case is, say, Indonesia in the post-New Order era, but to give it context one looks at various subnational populations: provinces, districts, voters, movements, institutions, and so forth. Each province or voter or movement is understood as representing a broader phenomenon *within* Indonesia. Getting the unit context right for the Indonesian case means getting the population context right for the

³⁸ Snyder, "Scaling Down."

subnational units that constitute Indonesia. In Indonesian political studies alone, recent exemplars include works by Jacques Bertrand, Ehito Kimura, John Sidel and Christian von Lübke.³⁹ Each work here leverages variation across some family of comparable entities within Indonesia in order to say something about Indonesia itself. By contrast, Acharya's (this issue) discussion of the feasibility of comparing Southeast Asia as a region with other world regions might be termed "scaling up," and his discussion directly, if implicitly, recalls the tension between the unit homogeneity assumption in cross-regional comparisons and efforts to prioritize unit context within one region.

Another way that Southeast Asian political studies may embrace both population context and unit context is by using knowledge of the features of a case to define the extent to which inferences can be generalized beyond that case. The new focus on internal validity in comparative politics is well-suited to unit context, and is an area in which local knowledge and understanding is instrumental for research design. Malesky, for, example, makes a strong case for the affinity between case-specific knowledge and program evaluation methodologies drawn from the new development economics.⁴⁰ In response, critics of the new focus on *internal* validity have begun to worry about *external* validity. Why should we believe that the findings from a study of Vietnamese legislators in the 2000s apply to Mexican legislators in the 1980s? Should we assume that authoritarian legislatures are all comparable? Answering these questions requires an understanding of what might make legislative behaviour in Vietnam different. Here, unit context helps researchers to think about whether the unit homogeneity assumption will be tenable for other comparative cases, within or outside of Southeast Asia, which is fully consonant with McCargo's point that "comparative approaches are of limited utility, unless we first know what we are comparing."⁴¹

However, while scholars of Southeast Asian politics can combine unit context and population context in various ways to enhance our understanding of politics in the region and beyond, and which facilitate productive dialogue across disciplines and approaches, there are some foundational disagreements between unit-focused research and population-focused research that are irresolvable. Faced with any research question, it is not possible definitively to conclude *ex ante* that the unit homogeneity assumption is tenable or not. John Gerring is worth quoting at some length on this:

³⁹ Jacques Bertrand, *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Ehito Kimura, *Political Change and Territoriality in Indonesia: Provincial Proliferation* (New York: Routledge, 2012 forthcoming); John T. Sidel, *Riots, Pogroms, Jihad: Religious Violence in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Christian von Luebke, Neil McCulloch and Arianto A. Patunru, "Heterodox Reform Symbioses: The Political Economy of Investment Climate Reforms in Solo, Indonesia," *Asian Economic Journal* 23, no. 3 (2009): 269–96.

⁴⁰ Edmund J. Malesky, "Batting Onward: The Debate over Field Research in Developmental Economics and Its Implications for Comparative Politics," *Qualitative Methods* 6, no. 2 (2008): 17–21.

⁴¹ McCargo, "Knowledge Accumulation," 189.

Whether to strive for breadth or depth is not a question that can be answered in any definitive way ... Indeed, arguments about the “contextual sensitivity” of case studies are perhaps more precisely (and fairly) understood as arguments about depth and breadth. The case study researcher who feels that cross-case research on a topic is insensitive to context is usually not arguing that nothing at all is consistent across the chosen cases. Rather, the case study researcher’s complaint is that much more could be said—accurately—about the phenomenon in question with a reduction in inferential scope ... Case study research is often lauded for its holistic approach to the study of social phenomena in which behavior is observed in natural settings. Cross-case research, by contrast, is criticized for its construction of artificial research designs that decontextualize the realm of social behaviour by employing abstract variables that seem to bear little relationship to the phenomena of interest. These associated congratulations and critiques may be understood as a conscious choice on the part of case study researchers to privilege depth over breadth.⁴²

A more pointed way of making Gerring’s point would be to observe that the decision to favour depth (or unit context) or breadth (or population context) comes not from any deductive result about the superiority of either, but instead from whatever the researcher finds most interesting. The choice may rest on preferences and tastes, or instincts, or biases.

Of course, it is still possible to maintain that context should mean only unit context. Consider how one would demonstrate otherwise. To do that, one would have to show that none of the features that might make a case unique are actually unique. That can only be done with complete knowledge of that case and of every other case to which it might be compared. Both mastery of unit context *and* mastery of population context are required to determine that one is unnecessary. Of course, that also prevents us from dismissing the competing position that context should only mean population context. We are then left with the conclusion that there is no foundational reason to believe that population context or unit context is the correct or superior context, or that in any research situation we can ever prove that the unit homogeneity assumption is tenable or not.

Consensus, Dissensus or Hegemony?

At this point I might conclude by issuing one of two platitudes. I might write that both population context and unit context are important, so scholars should master both. I might also write that both population context and unit context are important, but that real conversation between the two is impossible, so the two scholarly communities should resign themselves to coexisting, each believing itself to represent the Great Tradition—the

⁴² John Gerring, “The Case Study: What It Is and What It Does,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Politics*, eds. Carles Boix and Susan Stokes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 106.

civilized, enduring and high-status core—of Southeast Asian political studies. However, in the spirit of debate, I want to conclude by arguing that population context ought to be the main organizing framework for a globally relevant and publicly engaged Southeast Asian political studies. For many topics, this will require scholars to embrace comparisons from outside of Southeast Asia. The cost of such a move may be a further dilution of Southeast Asia as a distinct object of study, but this will produce a much richer analysis that reflects the true interdisciplinary nature of Southeast Asian political studies and the complex interactions between the region and the world. For reasons just noted, I cannot defend this argument from any foundational position; however, I can defend it from a practical one. Even the most ardent defenders of context sensitivity as focusing exclusively on cases and their features believe that careful attention to these cases generates theoretical insights that are broadly relevant, with implications for general theoretical debates that extend beyond Southeast Asia.

There are four reasons why I advance this argument. First, orienting research towards population context is a natural way to highlight anomalies in particular cases that warrant further investigation. If there is no population context, then no phenomenon can be anomalous: puzzle, question, or problem-driven research⁴³ presupposes some set of expectations about what is and is not puzzling. Those expectations are always drawn from comparative perspectives, and explicitly recognizing how these comparative perspectives generate expectations against which a particular case is at variance is a standard way to motivate intensive research into particular cases that may, in fact, draw heavily on unit context.

This leads to my second defense of population context: it is simply a feature of social research that all observation is theory-laden. One may hope that one's research is unaffected by biases and baggage, so that the unique and important features of a case reveal themselves, but this can be no more than an aspiration. Comparative insights—implying some sense of population context—are always present, even in the most careful and contextually sensitive historical or ethnographic work. This is by no means a new argument: the interpretivist critique of positivism in the social sciences is in part a recognition of the theory-ladenness of observational social research. Unlike the interpretivists, however, I recommend that those working on Southeast Asian politics explicitly recognize that their enterprise relies on theoretical assumptions about the nature of the social world that can never be tested or proven, and reflect critically on the limits to generalization at all stages of the research process.

Third, even what might seem like single-unit studies are often implicitly comparative. Consider historical approaches to the state in Southeast Asia.

⁴³ Ian Shapiro, *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

Single-country historical works by authors such as Benedict Anderson on Indonesia and Mary Callahan and Robert Taylor on Burma are deeply sensitive to unit context.⁴⁴ But the presumption that one can find—or even ought to look for—continuities or disjunctures between the colonial state and the post-colonial state rests on the idea that they are two instances of some entity called the state. This entails the existence of a population of comparable units (here, “states”). If not, continuities would be impossible, and disjunctures would be obvious. The practice of using comparison to gain inferential leverage is almost impossible to escape, even in the most sensitive area-focused political research. There is no reason to believe that these sorts of temporal comparisons are always and everywhere less objectionable than the more explicitly comparative cross-national comparisons that are now familiar in comparative politics. Both rely on an untestable assumption of unit homogeneity, an assumption that is made because it is *useful for generating insight*.

Fourth, as a matter of practice, area specialists routinely suggest that generalization across cases is a valid goal in their own research. Nishizaki, who suggests that insights from Suphanburi might be fruitfully applied elsewhere despite his impatience with North American political science, is typical.⁴⁵ It is no accident that in the interdisciplinary field of Southeast Asian political studies, the most lauded works of social science by scholars employed in political science departments are comparative works (here I am thinking of Anderson and James Scott). They compared both within Southeast Asia and outside of it, and that is why their work is so celebrated as basic research by Southeast Asianists and non-Southeast Asianists alike. My reading of the many disciplines of Southeast Asian political studies is that unit context, even for devoted area specialists, really does come at the service of population context.

In fact, even attempts to reconcile comparisons with in-depth knowledge are forced to adopt either population context as their organizing principle. Von Lübke’s argument elsewhere in this issue that “layered comparisons” transcend the dichotomy between unit and population context is illustrative. Layered comparisons begin by assuming unit homogeneity, and then bring in-depth unit contextual evidence to bear to probe the mechanisms that underlie generalizable phenomena, or to characterize the bounds or scope conditions on comparative claims. As welcome as von Lübke’s invocation of layered comparisons may be, it is an illustration of how on-the-ground knowledge can work in the service of population context-oriented research. It is not a reconciliation of the divide between unit and population context.

What might critics of population-focused comparative research make of

⁴⁴ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Old State, New Society: Indonesia’s New Order in Comparative Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 42, no. 3 (1983): 477–96; Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Robert H. Taylor, *The State in Myanmar* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).

⁴⁵ Nishizaki, *Political Authority and Provincial Identity*.

this conclusion? I do not wish to caricature their views, so I tread carefully, but I imagine three types of reactions. One is impatience with “research design-y philosophizing” that distracts from the central task of doing research on important topics, with the understanding that good research should be self-evident. Whatever the merits of that perspective, I could not disagree more strongly, for I do not think that we have consensus as a scholarly field about what makes for a good contribution, or about how we ought to confront the diversity of political formations in Southeast Asia. Explicit recognition of the assumptions that underlie comparative research clarifies exactly what is at stake in our research.

A second type of reaction might be to reject this argument as neo-positivist hegemony. Although careful readers will note that I have at no point advocated anything resembling the hypothetico-deductive method as essential to comparative research on Southeast Asian politics, the positivist origins of this argument are evident in the terminology of unit homogeneity, and should be acknowledged. To the extent that critics of population-focused research wish to contest this characterization of what divides the two approaches, and can reconstruct an alternative epistemological foundation for the research that they do (perhaps drawing on some variant of critical realism⁴⁶), then I welcome an ongoing conversation.

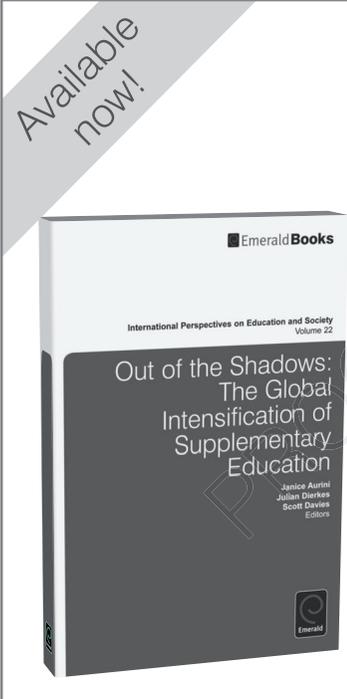
A third reaction is more substantial. Rather than arguing against population context in general, opponents might insist that population context is a laudable goal but one that must be subordinate to unit context. Only the latter provides the sorts of understanding of actual cases that allow for the comparisons, and without the contextual understanding of deep area knowledge, comparative insights lack foundations. Yet such an objection would misunderstand my argument in favour of population context as the central principle for Southeast Asia political studies. This is not a plea for bad or superficial area studies, but instead for consciously reorienting area knowledge towards the set of units of which it might or might not be representative. Anderson, Callahan and others do just this, without sacrificing rich and detailed country knowledge, and that is why they are widely read.

Cognizant that this argument may unfortunately fail to reach the very community to whom I wish to reach out, I nevertheless conclude that the argument that unit-focused research is distinct from and superior to the comparative endeavour cannot be sustained. Many scholars conducting basic research on Southeast Asian politics prefer to delve into unit context rather than to make comparisons explicit, and that is fine. But I believe that their work will never have the reach (either across disciplines or within them) that it could have, and I do not believe that this is because these scholars are

⁴⁶ Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science: With a New Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

indifferent to what others might learn from them. As we enter the seventh decade of modern Southeast Asian political studies, comparativists must be cognizant of the real political insights that research on particular cases and their features can provide, and the theoretical and conceptual baggage that comes along with the unit homogeneity assumption. At the same time, however, Southeast Asian political studies is an interdisciplinary field, and area scholars ought to abandon the presumption that they are doing something fundamentally different from what the comparativists do.

Cornell University, Ithaca, USA, May 2014



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