

Intersections: Asia and Australia

Welcome to our first edition of *Intersections: Asia and Australia*, a recurring section in the Newsletter on Asia-related studies in Australia. It is the result of an exciting new collaboration between the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden (the Netherlands), and the Asia Institute of The University of Melbourne (Australia). *Intersections* is edited by Ana Dragojlovic and Edwin Jurriëns, with assistance from Andy Fuller, from the Asia Institute in Melbourne.

Edwin Jurriëns and Ana Dragojlovic

FOR *INTERSECTIONS*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research interests and the broader academic field in Australia of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences and teaching, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a broad overview of Asia-related studies in Australia; after our first general edition, we will focus more specifically on themes such as language, popular culture, gender, urban development, environment and art. *Intersections'* main aim is to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia in the region. Our preferred style is subjective and conversational. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and Australia.

Engagement with Asia at the governmental and institutional levels in Australia has been notoriously fragile. Nevertheless, the pragmatic considerations of geopolitical proximity and commercial profitability have also renewed and increased awareness of the unavoidability and positive prospects of a shared future with Asia. Recent examples are the *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* of the Gillard government in 2012, and the 'New Colombo Plan' of the Abbott government in 2014. The latter includes scholarships to encourage Australian students to enjoy part of their education in Asia.

The work of Australian academics has undoubtedly been strengthened, influenced or compromised by these and other plans of their governments and institutions. Much of their work, however, builds on ongoing, highly personal and deeply grounded research connections with their Asia(n) counterparts. They often feature 'Asia' not merely in geographical terms, but as a research method in itself. Besides its interdisciplinary and comparative character, this 'Asia as method' offers a complex paradigm of layered knowledge. By layered knowledge we mean in-depth and mutually enriching analyses of various aspects of Asian societies, which are to be distinguished from more casual, in themselves relevant, (inter)disciplinary engagements with Asia. This paradigm encompasses the type of knowledge produced and promoted by the various Asia institutes around the country, but it is not limited to institutions and academics with a professional affiliation or natural affinity with Area Studies.

Intersections presents a snapshot of the breadth and depth of Asia-related expertise in Australia. We are confident, however, that our selected contributions are some of the prime representatives of the field. Moreover, we hope and believe that our examples have the potential to trigger and foster conversations with Asia experts elsewhere in the world.

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The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne's key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.

Asian Studies. On disciplines and regions

Vedi Hadiz



THE FIELD OF ASIAN STUDIES is by nature inter-disciplinary; yet it would do well to also become more inter-regional. In my view, the most interesting works in Asian Studies are not only those that are deliberately located at the intersections of disciplines (e.g., politics and sociology or economics and history), rather than positioned within the conventions and orthodoxies of single disciplines, but also those with themes that focus on the intersections between different (sub)regions of Asia. Otherwise, the adjective 'Asian' just gets added on for the purpose of staking a geographical claim to a work, without necessarily producing fresh perspectives. Inter-regional research has the potential to better reveal social processes that could otherwise go by unnoticed. I am keen to encourage those working in the field of Asian Studies, young scholars in particular, to not just think interdisciplinarily, but also inter-regionally.

I hope to have practiced some of what I preach in my own recent book, *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). While an interest in bringing together political economy and historical sociology guided the theoretical approach applied in the study,

the comparative work dealt with cases in the Middle East (Turkey and Egypt) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia). I felt that the exercise necessitated immersion into a set of literature pertaining to a region that I had not worked on before, in this case the Middle East. My hope was that by comparing the evolution of Islamic politics in my main country of expertise, Indonesia, with the evolution of Islamic politics well-beyond Southeast Asia, my research might yield different kinds of insights than would a study comparing Indonesia to, say, Malaysia or the Philippines.

In my work,¹ I found that there were many useful comparisons to be made between Indonesian and Middle Eastern experiences, in terms of the evolution of what I call Islamic populism. Apart from the obvious fact that Indonesia, Turkey and Egypt are major Islamic-majority societies, their experiences of state formation and capitalist development, the Cold War, as well as integration into neoliberal globalisation processes, have been important in all three cases. The Cold War was pivotal in the way that Islamic forces were co-opted by secular nationalist elites that held state power in battles against the Left, but were nevertheless

marginalised socially and politically throughout a large part of the economic modernisation process. This meant that Islamic lenses helped to develop new worldviews in relation to the new social dislocations and contradictions that accompanied social change in these societies, especially in the phase of neoliberal globalisation.

In other words, all of these countries have had social problems that can be traced to skewed development processes, to which Islamic populism can be seen as a response. These have included social disparities as expressed in the proliferation of a new urban poor as well as large cohorts of educated youths who are either unemployed or have little prospect of meaningful employment. In spite of the grand promises of modernity, their hopes of social and material advancement do not match their actual life-chances. Islam came to articulate social dissent under such conditions that were furthermore marked by the decline – or in the case of Indonesia, the complete vanquishing – of the Left and the relative weakness of political liberalism.

But the outcomes of these social processes and the struggles of Islamic populism would be vastly different. In Turkey, they came together eventually under the now-ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) that gained power democratically (in spite of its current authoritarian proclivities). In Egypt, until the Arab Spring, a highly suppressed Islamic populism led by the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the political opposition and civil society for decades, but was still unable to gain control of the state. Once it did, that control only lasted briefly and would have disastrous consequences. In Indonesia, yet another distinct trajectory can be identified. This is one of the continual failures of Islamic movements to win state power or dominate political opposition in both the eras of authoritarianism and democracy.

The project of my book was therefore to examine and explain these different trajectories, which I did largely on the basis of the successes or failures of Islamic populism to forge a project underpinned by coherent cross-class alliances. I would suggest that the sort of questions the book asks would not have come about had the comparisons been undertaken with countries that share the sub-region of Southeast Asia with Indonesia.

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References

- 1 Research on Islamic politics in Indonesia is strongly represented in Australia by scholars such as Greg Barton, Greg Fealy and Richard Robison, among others. The University of Melbourne is well-placed to lead in Islamic studies more generally through its National Centre of Excellence for Islamic Studies.

Above: Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Rally, Sydney, Australia, 1 September 2013; courtesy of Eye OnRadicals on flickr.