

‘After’ Area Studies?: Place-Based Knowledge for Our Times

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Introduction

From today’s perspective early 20th century ‘Area Studies’ texts represent a relic form of geographical research and writing. These compendiums of place-based knowledge present what we now consider to be a layperson’s understanding of ‘geography’—details of landforms, climate, land use, economic activities, urban patterns and so on. This empirical content is described in language littered with the judgemental adjectives associated with hierarchical knowledge systems such as environmental determinism, economic stage theory, and theories of modern state formation. In this essay I interrogate one subset of these texts, namely those that were written about Tropical or Monsoon Asia, as it was often referred to. I situate the publication of these geographies with respect to major shifts in human and earth systems, and outline some preliminary ideas for how we could re-read these texts to recover place-based knowledge that might inform current research on economic resilience in Southeast Asia.¹

Tropical Geographies and The Great Acceleration

The large majority of geography texts on Monsoon Asia were produced in the decades from 1930 to 1970, with the greatest cluster appearing in the 1950s (Figure 1) (Power and Sidaway, 2004). The timing of this peak is significant for it coincides with the start of what has been identified as The Great Acceleration—when the impact of humans on earth systems dramatically increased in magnitude, marking the end of the Holocene and arrival of a new geological era, the Anthropocene. In a recent paper in *The Anthropocene Review* climate scientist Will Steffan and colleagues present an array of key indicators of the “human enterprise” and the “structure and functioning of the Earth System” from the beginning of the industrial revolution to 2010 (Steffan et al 2004; 2015).² While the human dimensions of the dramatic change that took place

¹ Research for this paper was supported by the Australian Research Council Discovery Project “Strengthening Economic Resilience in Monsoon Asia”. I would like to acknowledge my co-researchers Lisa Law and Ann Hill for productive discussions that have stimulated some of the ideas in this essay.

² Steffan et al (2015) acknowledges the connection between this naming and Polanyi’s The Great Transformation.

in the 1950s are common knowledge for many of us, the interlinked nature of these with biophysical changes “encompassing far more than a climate change” has come as somewhat of a surprise to earth systems scientists and social scientists alike. It seems that the decade of the 1950s marks not only the moment of take-off for economic modernization across the globe but also for the “trajectory of the Anthropocene” (82).³ What, I find myself considering, might be the connection between the proliferation of tropical geographies in the 1950s and The Great Acceleration?

Tropical geographers were self-professed pragmatists “concerned with material things and their associations on the landscape, both locally and regionally” (Dobby, 1961: 21). Their analyses were, nevertheless, imbued with the strong theory of the dominant knowledge systems of the times. Environmental determinism shaped early work on the tropics. Fascination with regions of the monsoon was intellectually stimulated by an interest in environmental differences—with unfamiliar weather patterns and agricultural practices—and how they produced a form of “daily life” and “cultural pattern” that seemed so “romantic and strange to the [temperate] rest of the world” (Dobby, 1961: 15 insert added). Though this determinist framing was resisted by some, such as the cultural geographer Pierre Gourou (1953) (Bruneau, 2005), he and others could not escape a Eurocentric commitment to the superiority of ‘western civilization’. People of the tropics were routinely positioned as ‘backward’ and practices as ‘clumsy’, needing modern economic development. This development was to come with modern state development. Colonial and post-colonial state boundaries delineated many of the geographies that were written and the white male geographers of yesteryear became ‘local specialists’ in the colonies of their nations of origin, focusing their attention on the management challenges of emergent statehood. As he noted in his Introduction to *Monsoon Asia* Dobby proposed that the geographer had a special contribution to make by assembling and surveying knowledge not only for the purpose of “understanding”, but more importantly as “a vital preliminary to development and planning” (21).

The need to plan to avert the coming catastrophe of population growth in the tropics is a common refrain in these texts (see for example Gourou 1953:112). Closely linked to this, but more veiled, is the potential allure of communism to a growing but poor population, and the

In this most recent paper the socio-economic trends that together indicate the “human enterprise” have been disaggregated into OECD countries, BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) countries and the rest, and for both human and biophysical spheres the time line has been extended to cover 1750 to 2010.

³ These graphs resituate the beginning of the Anthropocene from the beginning of industrialization in 1750 to 1950.

threat it posed to metropolitan allegiances and post-colonial states (Dobby 1961:20).⁴ These coming crises called for solutions. What our geographer forefathers recommended was the introduction of modern agriculture, fertilizer, cash cropping and to some extent land redistribution. The projected increase in rural-urban migration and urbanization were noted and welcomed as part of the modernization process. It was these assessments and recommendations made by tropical geographers, among others, that stoked the machine of economic development, provoking The Great Acceleration. As the selected graphs from Steffan et al (2015) show (Figure 2), the 1950s concern about population size in non-OECD countries seems to be somewhat misplaced given that the population explosion so feared by our commentators had yet to really take off. What is clear, however, is that the solutions proffered for meeting the projected demands of a growing population produced their own problems including rising CO₂ emissions and tropical forest clearing.

What we know today is that the implications for Monsoon Asia of changes in earth systems are grave. There is evidence that meteorological, hydrological and climatological loss events have doubled worldwide from 1980 to 2014. Over this period Asia has experience 30% of the weather-related loss events and 69% of fatalities caused by them (NatCatService, 2015). It is in light of this greater realization of the unintended consequences of what tropical geographers advocated in Asia that we must further re-assess the legacy of these early Area Studies. One option is to completely abandon the old and embarrassing knowledge they produced, leaving behind its tainted distinctions such as the ‘west’ and the ‘rest’, the modern and pre-modern, the temperates and the tropics. Another, is to read ‘against the grain’ of the environmental determinism, Eurocentrism, modernization and state developmentalism of tropical geography texts to gather observations that might be useful today as the spectre of climate catastrophe looms large. It is this latter option that I will sketch out here after brief consideration of ways of thinking.

Anti-Catastrophe Thinking

In a slim book of essays, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy writes that “[t]here are no more natural catastrophes: There is only a civilizational catastrophe that expands every time” (2015: 34). He notes how Fukushima was an earthquake and tsunami that became a technological catastrophe, which became a “social, economic, political and finally philosophical earthquake” and, at the same time, intersected and intertwined

⁴ Dobby also alludes fearfully to the possibility of a “great march of hungry hoards from Monsoon Asia to emptier places” (Dobby 1961:20).

“with the series of financial catastrophes” whose effects in Europe had repercussions “on all global relationships”(34). This cascading event demonstrated the inextricable entanglement of technologies, politics and economies with the movement of earthly and meteorological forces (4). It rendered invalid the distinction between means and ends: “Everything becomes the ends and means of everything” (36). Above all, it destroyed the fantasy—so fundamental to both religious and secular political traditions—of an ‘after’, of a future “other world”, of “thinking about the ‘better’”, of the plan that offers a solution to a crisis.

This rupture with an imagined future does not, argues Nancy, let us off the hook of thinking, acting and “trying to make other tomorrows possible” (59). He urges us “to work with other futures—but under the condition of the ever-renewed present” (37). Nancy’s present is one “of an arrival, an approach” in which “something or someone presents itself” (38), a present that opens itself to and cares for “singular presence”. I have found these essays an inspiration for reading against the grain of the crisis predictions, pragmatic solutions and performative plans of tropical geographies that fuelled The Great Acceleration in Monsoon Asia. In this ever-renewed present we can attend to place-based particularity disarticulated from hierarchical knowledge systems, rejecting the catastrophic equivalence enforced by market or capitalist or western or liberal democratic principles. We can reposition productive understandings and continue with the pragmatic task of assembling place-based, ‘area studies’, knowledge that might be crucial to survival today.

An Area Studies for Our Times

With the aid of new thinking that is re-conceptualizing relationships between capitalist and non-capitalist development, governing and not governing in Monsoon Asia, and between humans and environments, I am interested to see what the original tropical geography texts might present to help make other, as yet unknown, tomorrows possible.⁵ My own research on diverse more-than-capitalist economies (see for example Gibson-Graham 2005) presents a framing that highlights the heterogeneity of coexisting economic practices, or what Santos calls “ecologies of productivity” (2004). But reading tropical geographies against the grain of the framing given by economic modernization is not easy. I know from my own field research and that of other geographers and anthropologists that diverse economic practices of non-market exchange, reciprocal labour, gifting, gleaning etc have to this day contributed to sustaining the lives of

⁵ This project of reading against the grain has only just begun and thus the number of sources I will draw upon are limited to only the writings of three tropical geographers Gourou (1953), Dobby (1961) and Spencer (1952 & 1966).

people in Monsoon Asia mainly in rural, but also in urban, areas (Gibson, Cahill and McKay, 2010). Documentation of these practices in tropical geography monographs is, however, sparse. It seems that the geographers of yesteryear were not looking out, or listening, for economic difference. In his 1952 *Land and People of the Philippines*, for example, Joe Spencer writes:

Modern problems of rural tenancy, debt, and credit are the result of a growth in population and the shift to a money economy. They are the result of grafting occidental ideas and practices onto an Indonesian culture, and evolved during Spanish and American times..... Features **essentially sound in the original native economy** were retained and have become harmful when translated into the patterns of money economy. (1952: 133 emphasis added)

Here reference to economic diversity is alluded to but devalued and rendered illegible. Only with more digging might these “features” be identified.

In his comprehensive and systematic study of *Shifting Cultivation in Southeastern Asia* of 1966, on the other hand, we hear Spencer’s more nuanced and attentive voice:

The great majority of shifting cultivators think in terms of the **future group use** of once-cropped land, including **use by descendants**, and the **return of land to the regenerative process** is integrally a part of the developed concept of shifting cultivation. (1966: 17 emphasis added)

As we confront the effects of economic modernization, it is to these glimpses into other ways of ‘doing’ economy and livelihoods, ways that take account of ecologies and future generations, that we might turn to for insight and perhaps guidance.

Certainly James Scott (2009) has made a case for completely rethinking the role of swidden or shifting agriculture in Asia—naming it ‘escape-agriculture’ and highlighting its importance to the political viability of Zomia—the huge region of upland areas on the borders of all the continental Asian nation states (van Schendel, 2002). In *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2006) he writes:

Shifting cultivation was a fiscally sterile form of agriculture: diverse, dispersed, hard to monitor, hard to tax or confiscate. Swiddeners were themselves dispersed, hard to monitor, hard to collect for corvée labor or conscription. The features that made swiddening anathema to states were exactly what made it attractive to state-evading peoples. (2009: 191)

Scott’s reading of the power of mobility on the political periphery is conducted against the grain of modern state formation. His masterful book takes topography seriously, showing how hills

and valleys, plains and rivers shaped variegated zones of governance and non-governance (or non-state governance). The map of Zomia unsettles the political geography of Monsoon Asia as described by the sedentary-state focused tropical geographies. Mobility lies at the core of this vision of 'area' and may well need to become a key strategy for survival for many in Monsoon Asia in coming years.

Finally, we might start to read against the grain of environmental determinism by resituating humans with respect to the non-human world in assemblages where actancy and determination is theorized as multi, rather than uni-directional. Both Dobby and Gourou draw attention to the vegetative assemblages through which life is conducted:

Monsoon Asia is the home of a 'vegetable civilization', where wood and plant materials have been the basis of everyday things from houses to domestic utensils, farm implements and clothing (Dobby, 1961:16).

...great density of population is mainly associated with a low standard of food consumption and a material civilization based on the vegetable kingdom ...Peasants on the Tongking delta dress in cloth made of vegetable matter, build their houses of vegetable matter, use tools mainly made of vegetable mater, and, above all, are mainly vegetarian in diet (Gourou, 104, 105).

The reliance on vegetation for so many survival needs worked for centuries as a survival strategy in a region where intense climatic events had the potential to destroy housing, crops and livelihoods on a regular basis. After disaster, diverse economic practices of mutual assistance and reciprocity were, and still are, deployed to re-establish livelihoods. While these practices are associated with newly settled areas or shifting cultivation, they also appear to be more prevalent in areas where climatic uncertainty and disaster is more frequent (see for instance Bankoff, 2007). In the Philippines, *bayaniban*, a widely used term for communal work for a common purpose, is often illustrated by the image of people working together to relocate a house made of bamboo. Today, the resilient properties of bamboo are increasingly recognized and are the object of experimentation as a renewable building material suited to housing reconstruction in monsoon environments (Reyes, 2013).

Changes observed in the frequency, trajectory and magnitude of monsoons in Asia are linked to the coming of the Anthropocene. It appears that the monsoon's actancy has altered. If we see the monsoon as a human-non-human assemblage, that is, as comprised of climatic forces,

associational practices, vegetative materials, mobile livelihoods (and more), we may be able to work differently with elements of this assemblage, including climate change, to strengthen resilience.

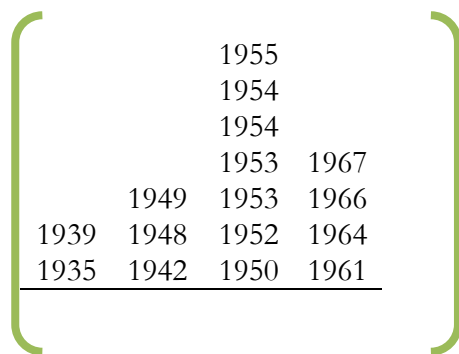
While there may not be an 'after' to Area Studies, we do have at hand approaches to knowledge that provide a way to assemble the place-based knowledge of Monsoon Asia differently and make tomorrows possible. I have suggested, or more accurately, speculated, that the knowledge framings of diverse (more-than-capitalist) economies, Zomia studies and more-than-human assemblages offer three ways of making meaning that might speak to the challenges of Anthropogenic climate change in our times.

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Figure 1 The Timing of Publication of Selected Tropical Geography Monographs

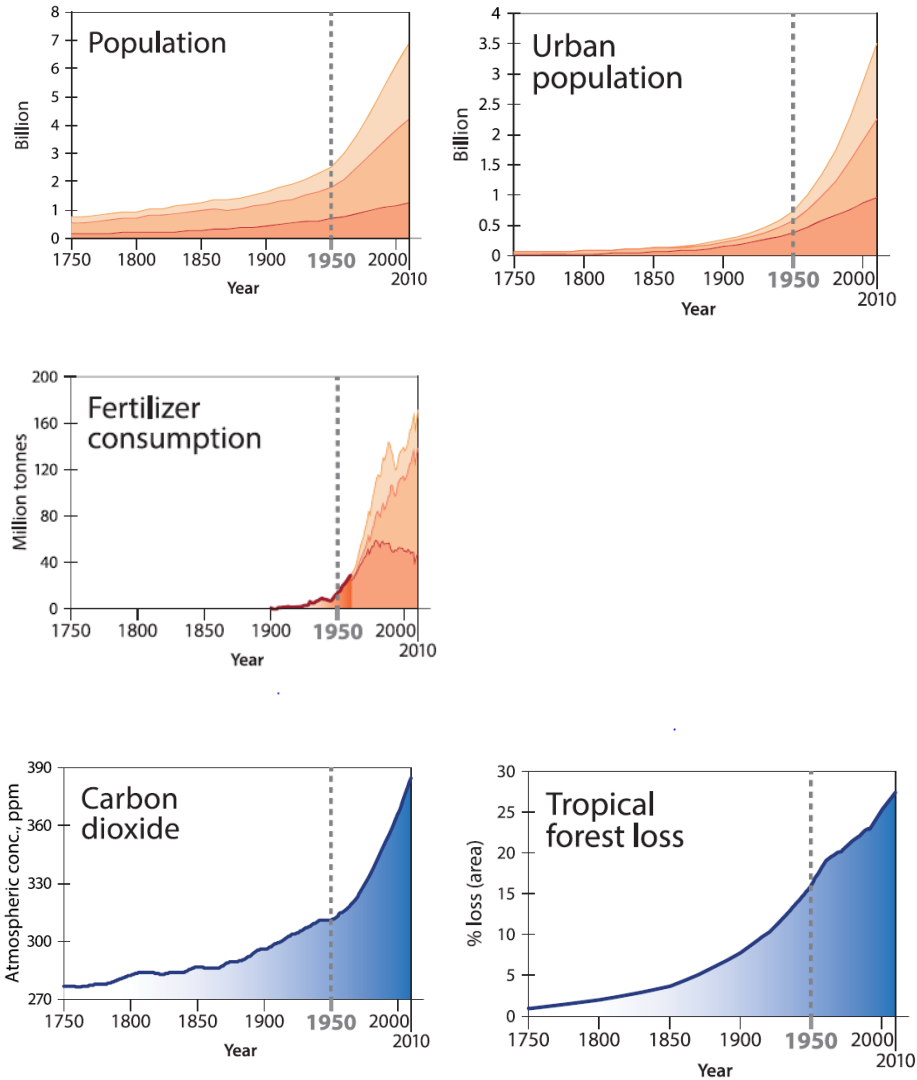


Tropical Geography Monographs

J Broek *The Economic Development of the Netherlands Indies* (1942)
 K Buchanan, *The Southeast Asian World : An Introductory Essay* (1967)
 W Credner *Siam: Das Land der Thai* (1935)
 E Dobby *Malaya and South-East Asia* (1948)
 Monsoon Asia (1961)
 Southeast Asia (1950)
 C Fisher *South-east Asia* (1964)
 P. Gourou *L'Asie* (1953)
 The Tropical World (1953)
 The Peasants of the Tonkin Delta: A Study of Human Geography (1955)
 K Helbig *Am Rande des Pazifik: Studien zur Landesund Kulturkunde Suedostasiens* (1949)
 O H K Spate *India and Pakistan* (1954)
 J E Spencer, *Land and People in the Philippines* (1952)
 Asia East by South (1954)
 Shifting Cultivation in Southeastern Asia (1966)
 L D Stamp *Asia: A Regional and Economic Geography* (1939)

Figure 2. Selected Graphs of The Great Acceleration

Source: Steffan, W., Broadgate, W., Deutsch, L., Gaffney, O. and Ludwig, C. 2015 “The trajectory of the Anthropocene: The Great Acceleration” *The Anthropocene Review* 2, 1: 81-98.



Note: The socio-economic graphs are disaggregated into OECD countries (darkest shade), BRIC countries (ie Brazil, Russia, India and China) and the rest (lightest shade)