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Reflections on Critical New Area Studies – in Conversation with Prof. Dr. Peter Jackson

Andrea Fleschenberg



Prof. Dr. Peter A. Jackson (Australian National University) has written extensively on modern Thai cultural history with special interests in religion, sexuality, and critical theoretical approaches to mainland Southeast Asian cultural history. He currently holds an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant for the project “Religion, Ritual and Health in Thai Gay and Transgender Communities”. His article “South East Asian Area Studies beyond Anglo-America: Geopolitical Transitions, the Neoliberal Academy and Spatialized Regimes of Knowledge”, published 2019 in *South East Asia Research* 27(1), pp. 49–73, was the starting point for this interview on his reflections on New Area Studies.

Keywords: New Area Studies, Southeast Asia, Germany, spatiality of knowledge, knowledge production, collaborative research, critique, interview

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *In your most recent article “South East Asian Area Studies beyond Anglo-America” you challenge “criticisms of Area Studies in light of the fact that, contrary to some predictions, spatiality has not been erased but rather has been reformulated in the context of globalization” (p. 50). And you also argue “for a theoretically sophisticated Critical Area Studies formed on the empirical reality that knowledge continues to be deeply spatialised in early twenty-first-century globalization” (p. 50). Furthermore, you later move on to refer to “new forms of border-crossing mobility” that are emerging as well as to new forms of bordered, monitored and policed restrictions of transnational flows and argue therefore that location and geography remain key issues for critical theory and comparative epistemology. Could you please elaborate this a bit with some illustrative examples?*

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PETER JACKSON: In terms of the spatialisation of knowledge, I think that the discipline of anthropology is a good example. Scholars from Western universities – those who have grown up and been educated in the West, in Australia, in Europe, in the United States, in Britain – usually don't think twice about the fact that they can study any particular part of the world and bring the methods of anthropology to research in that location. But if a scholar is from the South, from Asia, and they undertake a graduate programme in anthropology in a Western university, whether in Australia, Germany, or the United States, then their ethnic-national background will usually define their field of study for them. If a scholar is from Thailand, then they become an anthropologist of Thailand. Whereas myself, being from Australia, I could have chosen any particular field site to pursue my interest in comparative religion. One's positionality within the global system – it's not only a system of knowledge but also a geopolitical system of which knowledge forms a part – profoundly influences one's academic career. Even given the critiques of imperialism and neocolonialism, and even with the rise of Asia economically and politically in the last two or three decades, we still have a situation in Western universities where scholars from the South are much more marked in their research focuses. And the lower the GDP per capita of the country from which one comes, the more likely I think that you are to be constrained to become a specialist of your own country.

And in Thailand, which is my area of specialisation, the discipline of anthropology in that country focuses specifically on Thailand. Whereas in Australia, academic departments of Anthropology include scholars who specialise on a wide range of countries. By comparison, the national academy in Thailand is much more self-reflective. It is comparatively unusual for an anthropologist in a Thai university to study, say, Latin America, Europe or any country in the West. In the West it's not considered unusual for anthropologists to study Asia, but it's uncommon for anthropologists in many Asian countries to study the West. This is just one example from one discipline in which the spatiality of knowledge is still quite strongly marked. And it's marked by a strong correlation between the historical imperialist countries vis-à-vis historically colonised countries.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Referring to the questions of positionality and spatiality, you also point out the multiplicity of Area Studies approaches, and I quote you here again in terms of the specific forms of political, economic and discursive powers that intersect in each academic location. Meaning that “one's objects of study, one's research methods and theoretical orientations and, equally importantly, one's academic publications are all located within global networks of unequal power” (p. 51). If we were to draw a map, what kind of*

a map would you thus draw for critical New Area Studies institutions, debates and challenges for scholars who have to navigate somehow this what I would call a political geography – it is a geopolitical geography, you say, for critical knowledge production, particularly in non-Euro-American locations.

Maybe [allow me to] add a little bit from my own experiences working in Pakistan. I was sent [there], very interestingly, upon the request of Pakistani colleagues. So they said, it's sort of Area Studies, the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, [which trains] people for the civil service but many go to civil society professions, teaching all over the country, which has its own centre-peripheries. But the university where I was based, Quaid-e-Azam University, is a public one and it's one which draws students from all over the place; a lot of them from marginalised peripheries, with scholarships. So these are not the students that you would find for example at other universities in Islamabad, which are either military-sponsored (so money we are talking about or well-off students) or private universities where you can get a kind of academic quality like you get in Oxford, which you have in Lahore, which is really the elite-elite. I don't have those students there. But if we look for example in Pakistan, we have students who come from the peripheries, we have people who come from certain elite networks, yet there are multiple elite networks. For [some] people to work in Islamabad, that's already the metropole you refer to in your article. While for [other] people in the same space, Islamabad is a provincial town because they are used to maybe New York or London. [...] When I read your article, I was really intrigued because I also think when students say: "Okay now if I want to continue this, I understand now how important it is for me to engage with these issues and I understand now what a hegemonic knowledge production is", which some of them might not even have noticed before – that they are subject not only from a Western point of view but also within their own country within the centre-periphery negotiations. So what do I counsel them? Where in the world can you go to train further? You also talked about this a lot. If you think about it, what map would you draw of critical Area Studies and the challenges we face, where people can go, gain exposure, learn about how to also negotiate these issues?

PETER JACKSON: There are so many issues in what you've mentioned ... If I could perhaps address one or two of the points you've made. One of the important issues is the language in which one writes, and the linguistic skills that one draws upon in one's research. You mentioned that you were invited to teach critical analysis. The academic literature on critical analysis is predominantly published in European languages, whether English, French or German. Increasingly English is the international academic language. If a scholar is not proficient in English, would they even have access to the source materials to

permit them to engage with discussions of forms of critical analysis? There is a high level of cultural capital associated with the language one uses.

To take this further in the context of your collaboration in Pakistan, if one is a Pakistani scholar who has acquired proficiency in the global languages in which critical analysis is communicated, where does one go from there? The critical analyses that you have mentioned have almost without exception emerged historically from Western academies. And most critical and analytical scholars in the West have neglected or overlooked the fact that critique and with it the production of general knowledge are implicitly associated with the geopolitical spatiality of the Western academy. By general knowledge I mean frameworks of knowledge that have the capacity to cross geographical borders. If we go back to Hegel, to Weber or to any major German theorist, then there has been an implicit assumption that the work of Hegel, Weber or whoever will be relevant beyond the borders of Germany. These scholars imagined themselves as engaged in something general, that is, that their work and ideas had the capacity be taken up and used beyond the national borders of Germany.

However, if one is a Pakistani scholar, even if one is interested in general knowledge, is one's work going to be read as a contribution to cross-border knowledge? More likely than not in many situations internationally that scholar's work will be read as a local Pakistani form of knowledge, which while regarded as being relevant to Pakistan, may be not be seen as being generalisable, that is, as not being able to travel across geographical borders. This does not mean that scholars in Pakistan are not producing critical work that is relevant in interdisciplinary cross-border situations. Rather, it means that the geopolitical frameworks of knowledge position them in such a way that they are expected to be local, that is, tied to place, rather than contributing to general knowledge, that is, engaged in the production of knowledge that crosses borders and which is not tied to any specific place.

Let's take this a step further. Even in a contemporary situation in which increasing numbers of scholars from diverse non-Western backgrounds are producing broad frameworks of critical reflective knowledge, they are only able to contribute to the global border-crossing knowledge system when they relocate to a Western university and have their work published by a Western academic press. Scholars from the South are only able to contribute to cross-border global knowledge after they have acquired a significant degree of intellectual and cultural capital. The geopolitical regime of knowledge means that it simply isn't good enough to be a brilliant person and to stay in Pakistan. It is very difficult to be regarded to be a generalist and to be read and taken seriously as contributing to global knowledge if one remains positioned within the Pakistani university system.

This situation still persists today. If you look at the big names in early twenty-first-century critical thought, what university are these thinkers based at? Even if they come from various parts of the Global South, they have had to acquire a global language – English, French, German. Then they have had to obtain a graduate degree, often in a globally recognised university, and subsequently win an academic position in a Western university in order to authorise, that is, to legitimate their work, and then to have their work read by scholars internationally. It is not the inherent quality or the insightfulness of one's own work that determines whether it is read internationally or across national borders. Rather, it is one's own location within highly spatialised and bordered global academic networks that determines whether one's work is read and whether it is taken seriously beyond a limited field of knowledge. I don't think we have decolonised forms of knowledge at all.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *And you make this point very well, saying we need to move beyond Euro-Anglo-American locations. And I like that you talk about it like luxury brands: theories are value added exports and travel only in one direction. But if we come back to this question of the map, let's be constructive thinkers: If you drew a map, where do you see entry points for critical New Area Studies beyond European, Anglo-American locations where debates are ongoing, where there are experiments even maybe to address those challenges that you described? Where would you place them on the map?*

PETER JACKSON: In reflecting on my own career starting in the early 1980s, being based in Australia, I made some decisions early in my career about where I would try to have my work published. I write in English, but I did not want to have my research published by an American academic press. I wanted my work to be accessible within Thailand, within Southeast Asia, and I felt that at that time American and European publishers were so expensive that their books were not affordable to most scholars in Thailand. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s, books published by Western academic presses were too expensive to be accessible for the people with whom I was working in Thailand. So, I made the decision to try to publish in Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia.

I know, I am not providing a direct answer to your question about the map. You asked where are the entry points to respond to this situation. I think one entry point is the location of the output of one's research: where does one publish one's findings? This is important in terms of making a contribution to breaking down the persistent colonial borders of knowledge. In terms of making a forceful contribution to a New Area Studies, the location of publication is important. In my own academic politics I have tried to publish with non-

Euro-American presses and journals. Yes, I have also published in Europe and America, which has been strategically important in securing an academic position within an Australian university system that is still largely Euro-American-centric. However, publishing beyond Euro-America has also been important for me to try to contribute to building networks of knowledge within the Asian region itself.

I find it difficult to picture a map that you are talking about, because I think the answer might be different depending on whether you are talking about a graduate programme for research, a conference series or publications. To consider conferences, I think that having major academic conferences in Asia, outside the Western academic systems, is important to build networks and I have tried over my career to contribute to events and academic exchanges in Thailand, for example.

You were talking about a map. It's a good question, but I will have to think about it more as we talk. Perhaps one issue will be to consider sources of funding for building knowledge forms across borders. In reflecting on my own field of Southeast Asian Area Studies, after the end of the Vietnam War there was a widespread defunding of Area Studies in America. Britain has been in decline for some time economically in terms of funding. However, in Australia our geopolitical proximity to the Pacific and Asia means that Area Studies have remained important for geopolitical reasons. I know that recently there was the Excellence Initiative here in Germany that funded a renewed interest in Area Studies.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: ... *the new round will come next year.*

PETER JACKSON: Oh, it's happening a second time. My reading of the first round of the Excellence Initiative was that it was justified in terms of globalisation and repositioning Germany within global networks of human movements, the rise of Asia, and related issues. There was a geopolitical foundation for the decision by the German Federal Government to fund Area Studies. I found that interesting because Germany lost its colonies after World War I, so there is a different history of Area Studies here compared to other European countries such as Britain, France or Belgium, which all kept their colonies until the post-World War II decolonisation movements and colonial wars of independence. It seems to me that Germany has an opportunity to imagine and participate in a form of New Area Studies in which postcolonial critiques are not as intensely biting or as forceful as in say in the United Kingdom, France or even North America. This is one of the reasons why I became interested in the New Area Studies projects here in Germany. At the same time, however, and maybe this

is a critique of the resurgence of Area Studies in Germany, it has been facilitated within a decidedly neoliberal framework. You can see that the German Ministry of Education (sorry, I forgot the name in German), ...

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: ... *the BMBF [Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, Federal Ministry of Education and Research]...*

PETER JACKSON: Yes, thank you, I was just reading the English translation of the Excellence Initiative on the BMBF website and it seems to me that it is very much about positioning the German academy to produce knowledge that will be of value to Germany in a global situation, of a globalising economy. There is a decidedly neoliberal element to that. In fact, all of us are now subject to these neoliberal pressures. It's a situation impacting the academy everywhere and as critical scholars we need to try and find ways to respond. Perhaps a more anarchist-type approach would be to try to find gaps within these neoliberal academic systems. Yes, we need funding for our research, and we need to play the neoliberal games of meeting "national benefit" criteria to secure grants from our respective national research funding agencies. In Australia the Australian Research Council now requires all applications for research funding to be justified in narrowly neoliberal terms of "benefitting the Australian people". However, even as we play this neoliberal research funding game there are still spaces and opportunities for critique.

Perhaps it has always been like this in some way. Critique has located itself in the gaps, in the fissures within forms of hegemony. The forms of hegemony have changed with time. Fifty years ago, hegemonic power was structured by politically polarised Cold War frameworks. Now, neoliberal economic forms of hegemony are imposed on knowledge. Reading contemporary forms of critical analysis, one often gets the impression that neoliberalism is a more restrictive mode of hegemonic power than the capitalism-versus-socialism binaries of the Cold War period. Neoliberalism is indeed a different form of power, but I don't know if it's more constrictive than the situation four or five decades ago. Whatever the case, neoliberalism does require us to develop new strategic approaches to critical analysis.

I see major changes in the geopolitical context of epistemologies in Asia. In Southeast Asia things have changed very quickly. When I began my academic career in the 1980s, all of the Thai scholars I collaborated with received scholarships from Australia or America. However, now they come to study in Australia with scholarships from the Thai government. With the expansion of the Thai economy, Thai universities now have budgets to fund their scholars to travel and study internationally. This means that Thai scholars participate in

international collaborations in a markedly changed economic and political setting, which I think is contributing to a much stronger self-confidence amongst scholars in emerging academies. In part, this is an intellectual self-confidence as well as a social self-confidence on the global stage. While many Asian scholars might be too polite to put it so bluntly, the rapidly growing self-confidence within Asian academies emerges from the attitude that, “My country is no longer poor, so you Westerners don’t have to look down on us anymore.” The dramatic transformations across East and Southeast Asia are providing the foundations for a new type of Asian intellectual positionality that has the potential to authorise new forms of general critical analysis. I think we are beginning to see this type of intellectual self-confidence emerge academically – often it is happening in Asian languages rather than in English – but it has the potential to challenge the Euro-Amerocentrism of knowledge that I talked about before.

To return to your earlier question about where we might draw a map of sites of critical intervention to build a New Area Studies, I would draw the map in different languages. I would like to know what is being written in Urdu in Pakistan, what is being written in Thai, in Chinese, Korean, Japanese and the other languages of the diverse Asian national academies. I think the map of the intellectual world represented in these languages will look markedly different from the ones that are mediated by international academic languages such as English or French. This is one of the points that I made about the geopolitics of knowledge in my recent article. In that article I was in part responding to the American situation. A couple of decades ago, an especially strong critique of Area Studies came from sections of the American academy. Area Studies was criticised for being atheoretical, for being anti-theory, and for having a genealogy emerging either out of colonialism or of Cold War politics. However, the world has moved far beyond the setting from which those critiques were produced, and it seems to me large sections of the American academy still haven’t caught up with what is happening in the academies of places like Singapore, Hong Kong, Bangkok or Seoul. If we were to map the intellectual universes being produced in Asian academies within Asian languages we would gain an entirely different perspective. Part of the self-confidence that I see emerging in Asian academies is reflected by the rise of publication in those languages. In Thailand, for example, there has been a proliferation of new Thai-language journals in a wide range of fields in the last decade, and I think that we get quite a different picture of forms of knowledge if we look at these intellectual modalities.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *And you were talking in this article as well about the importance or the theoretical importance of languages or language skills. And*

just as a follow-up question: We have the rise of knowledge production in Asian languages but how do we deal with scholars who are only proficient in a vernacular language? They nevertheless remain outside of global theory, method-building and the publishing circuit. And I know that in many countries people say if only there would be more of a kind of translation. There is this debate – if we think about Judith Butler and also Nivedita Menon when they talk about translation. [...] I think, coming back to my teaching, one thing was also if you look at the textbooks of social theories, the examples that are given, the life worlds that are referred to. The same for books [...] on research methods, a lot of them they are designed from life worlds or certain perspectives and not so much from [diverse] grounded realities. I am just thinking: how do we deal then, thinking of entry points, how do we deal with scholars who remain proficient only in vernacular languages or wish maybe only to be proficient in that? I mean it can be a political point of view.

PETER JACKSON: I agree completely.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *I mean, even within countries, talking in Urdu or Dari as a hegemonic language if one comes from a Saraiki or a Pashto background. So, the language is also political. How do we deal with scholars who wish or can only be proficient in a vernacular language?*

PETER JACKSON: Your question relates back to my earlier point about the politics of language use. In Thailand I know of a number of scholars who are proficient in English or French but who have made a political decision to only publish in Thai. They are doing excellent important, critical work. In this setting, projects of collaboration become really important. The politics of language use also needs to be married with a politics of international academic collaboration. There is no easy answer to this. International academic collaboration takes a lot of investment in time, as well as an investment in resources.

I think a key entry point to building a critical New Area Studies is in terms of finding ways of building bridges that permit collaborative work. If you and I are based in Western universities and we want to take these issues forward, then an entry point is to make both political and personal commitments to collaborative research – in which, for example, we work together with colleagues in Asia and from the outset we understand that the outcomes of our research collaborations may be published in both Asian and European languages. I acknowledge that this is not easy, and it takes time. However, we have the responsibility of our positionality in globally privileged Western universities to build these collaborations.

To give an example of the importance of acting responsibly in international research collaborations: I have worked with HIV education and LGBTQI human rights NGOs in Thailand for over twenty years. One of the major complaints that the members of these community organisations have expressed to me is that many of the Western scholars and graduate students who they have enthusiastically assisted have never returned to provide copies of the outcomes of their research. After these researchers go back to their university in the West and get an academic job, they don't always return to the people who provided them with the wherewithal to become a scholar. This is a question of the ethics of research that is fundamental to international collaborations. I am perhaps giving you a very roundabout answer, but I think there is no simple or easy response to the question of how we might draw a map of entry points into building a new critical Area Studies.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: ... *building bridges* ...

PETER JACKSON: Yes, building bridges. And also giving back to the people who have been interviewed. There is no simple answer, but whatever response we develop will require time. And I am painfully aware that within neoliberal universities based on performance indicators we are not given credit for the time that is required to make international collaborations really work.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Or it is disregarded as an action research activity ... And I think we can take a cue from Tuhiwai Smith or also Bagele Chilisa who talk about decolonial methodologies. And for example, I have always done action research. So, I do action research that is open access, which uses participatory methods but gets funding from, for example, German political foundations. But this does not count in terms of the funding that I get for the institute. But I always have a copyright agreement that I can use something for academic publications, those which are in career-furthering publishing houses or journals. Or if I then do community outreach, so I sometimes do volunteer consultancy with activist networks. It's fine, it comes out of my pocket and I think I have an obligation to do this, but they will say "this will not further your career, why do you do this? Are you an academic or are you an activist?" [...]*

PETER JACKSON: I know exactly what you mean. I have had similar experiences. I think that in terms of entry points, while you and I have had different careers, we are each trying to negotiate this. Maybe the project of the special issue of this journal is one way to contribute to bringing these issues to a wider audience – even if within neoliberal frameworks it may not be counted as a signifi-

cant research output – to use the language of neoliberal performance measures.

And just going back to reflect on this situation more broadly, one of the experiences that has informed the academic politics of my career, based on long-term engagement with a particular place, was my surprise when I first visited American universities. On that first trip to America, I was surprised to meet scholars who had done their graduate studies on Thailand, or another part of Southeast Asia, got a tenured job in a disciplinary department in an American university, and then subsequently moved on to study another part of the world. I did not understand the strong American academic culture of placing disciplinary knowledge above engagement with and commitment to understanding a place. In this not uncommon situation in the United States academy, it seemed to me that all of the networks that a scholar may have built up during their graduate studies would be lost.

I felt that this type of focus on placing disciplinary knowledge as primary undermines the type of political commitment to collaborative research that I talked about a minute ago. The politics of collaboration that provide entry points to challenging the geopolitical borders of the spatialities of knowledge and academic privilege requires commitment to the people of the place of one's research. It takes time to build the expertise, the linguistic skill and the trust of colleagues in other countries. The idea of using research on one place merely as a stepping-stone to an academic career in a Western university seems contrary to the academic politics that underpins successfully challenging Euro-Amerocentrism.

To an extent, the critiques of Area Studies that were put forward in the 1990s, for example, in the context of critical theory and poststructuralism, are valid. Area Studies does need to be much more critically reflective, and indeed it has become so in recent years. But the great value of area studies research is that it allows conversations across disciplinary borders. It permits a more issue-focused research. And in a world that is increasingly complex, I think that this type of research is much more valuable for responding to pressing issues in the real world. Whether it be issues in health, the environment or politics, the borders of disciplinary knowledge can often present barriers to developing comprehensive analyses and effective responses. In speaking up for the value of Area Studies, scholars who regard themselves as area specialists need to emphasise loudly that the issues we confront today cross existing disciplinary boundaries and for this reason we need to develop frameworks that bring cross-disciplinary work into play.

I keep coming back to the question of collaboration that I talked about earlier. Collaborative research can bring together the skill-base of multiple disciplines

and if you can negotiate this form of collaborative research across disciplinary boundaries it can produce much more relevant outcomes. I believe that Area Studies can transcend the history of its origins in colonial or neocolonial Cold War settings to produce the new forms of knowledge that are required to respond to the complexities of a world that also transcends the boundaries of established disciplines.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *One interesting point you raised was about theorising about power and I would like to address this in the next question. Be it within academic institutions in terms of teaching and research as part of an academic or public discourse within wider society or vis-à-vis political authorities. Negotiating hegemonic influences can amount to a daunting, even career- and life-threatening task for scholars in various locations across Asia, but not only. You highlight the need for a multi-nodal, multidimensional approach to critiquing hegemony when analysing power, moving beyond deconstruction as a form of analysis vis-à-vis newer and older hegemonies. Could you provide maybe one or two examples how you personally negotiated this challenge in your own research, in terms of how you approached this with research partners and research designs – if we think about theoretical frameworks, methods, resources, ethical consideration safeguards?*

PETER JACKSON: It comes back to building long-term collaborations with scholars in Southeast Asia. It takes time to demonstrate one's bona fides, one's commitment to the place, and these vital types of collaboration can only be built in the longer term once trust has been established. Coming back to the point of multi-nodal forms of hegemony, I was thinking about the rise of China and how new forms of hegemony are arising even as the impact of older European colonial or American neocolonial forms persist, as we talked about at the beginning of our conversation. While I don't read Chinese, it seems to me that in the case of Southeast Asian Area Studies some of the critiques that were made of this field in the United States and Europe two or three decades ago could now be made of Southeast Asian Area Studies in some Chinese area studies institutes. I mentioned above that the German Government's recent support for Area Studies in this country emerged out of geopolitical considerations. Similarly, it needs to be recognised that some forms of Area Studies in China are also emerging within the context of the geopolitical aspirations of that country. We cannot overlook the likelihood that the forms of knowledge that develop within Chinese Area Studies centres may reflect the projection of Chinese power internationally. Yes, the interdisciplinary methods of Area Studies are vital in the 21st century, but we also need to remain deeply cognizant of the intimate connections of power and knowledge. While we urgently

need the cultural and linguistic insights of interdisciplinary Area Studies, we must at the same time remain aware of the fact we still have to overcome the histories of colonialism and neocolonialism and also engage the phenomenon of a new hegemony that is arising out of an anti-democratic dictatorship.

How does one position knowledge in this complex situation in a region such as Southeast Asia, which is caught between all of these modes of power? Southeast Asia was a site of colonisation by various European powers. Then it was a site of proxy wars between Russia, China and the United States during the Cold War. Now it is a site of China's expanding geopolitical interests. Southeast Asia has been and remains a site of the intersections of all these various forms of global power. How can we conceptualise and theoretically negotiate this complex history of multiple, over-lapping hegemonic powers? Perhaps understanding the well-known ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity and the many plural societies of Southeast Asia can provide insights into how we develop the intellectual tools to understand, and the cultural strategies to negotiate, a multipolar world of several co-existing hegemonic powers.

One of the things I find exciting about Southeast Asia today is that scholars in the various countries of the region are much more connected and aware of what's happening next door in neighbouring countries than they were twenty or thirty years ago. One of the main historical issues for Southeast Asia has been that it was colonised by so many different powers. Indochina was French; Burma, Malaya, Singapore were British; Indonesia was Dutch; the Philippines was Spanish and then American; and Timor was Portuguese. Until quite recently these countries continued to have much stronger cultural, academic and intellectual connections with their respective former colonising power than with their immediate geographical neighbours. Until very recently, Indonesia was still much more connected to the Netherlands than to Singapore or Malaysia; and Cambodia and Laos were more connected to France than to Thailand. However, over the past three decades these countries have all begun to communicate and interact much more among themselves. This is building very interesting forms of conversation that were not possible previously and I think this is one of the entry points for critique that you were asking about before. The increase in the possibility of cross-border conversations is potentially very productive.

Coming back to our positionality in the West, while we in the West have the historical burden of colonialism – which means that self-reflective critique must be the starting point of all our research and collaborations – we also have a responsibility to use the cultural capital that derives from our privileged location and positionality in the global system to promote the type of openings that you have asked about. One small example is the activities of professional academic associations. The Asian Studies Association of Australia has existed

for almost five decades, and in the past its biennial conferences were attended overwhelmingly by Australian scholars of Asia. However, over the past decade there has been a dramatic shift in attendance, with the majority of scholars participating now being from universities and research institutes in Asia. The Asian Studies Association of Australia, and its conferences, have in effect increasingly become venues for presentations and exchanges by scholars who are participating in the dramatic rise of Asian Area Studies within the Asian region itself. And the Australian Asian Studies conferences have become venues for critical work from Vietnam, China and many other countries that scholars in those societies cannot discuss openly at home because of political restrictions. Universities and institutions in the West can provide safer spaces that facilitate forms of critique and criticism that are not possible within authoritarian regimes in Asia. Even within the neoliberal university system that now dominates in the West, we still have levels of funding and cultural and intellectual capital that enable us to mobilise forms of critique that are denied to scholars in many Asian countries.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *If we come back to the example of China and the Belt and Road Initiative – and if we think about research of the Belt and Road Initiative in diverse countries such as, I am just making a list which is not exhaustive, Pakistan, Myanmar, China, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore, not even to mention Central Asian republics – what we see are hegemonic influences and also even securitisation or even a militarisation of such a let's call it a development project or if we want to call it an infrastructural project. Whatever it is, I mean I think these are the realities... What does this then mean for critical knowledge production on the issue at hand? I mean we really face the challenge that yes, we have entry points, we can negotiate spaces but there might be hegemonic influences which are so strong, spaces so restricted, where this impacts then on knowledge production, on certain issues. In this field, if we think particularly about China and the Belt and Road Initiative and research for example on emerging social movements, on demands for participation, how is it imagined, how is it planned? What happens to knowledge production and, again being constructive in that regard, what are counter hegemonic strategies and entry points for you? Considering also that there are different negotiating powers like you say between the local and the non-local scholars. But I would say even for scholars from the West it might just be red tape here, end of the line.*

PETER JACKSON: Sometimes as scholars we need to make individual career decisions: is one prepared to publish critical research on China if it may mean that it is not possible to return to China for further research? Or to use an

example from Thailand, given the sensitivity around public discussion of the monarchy and the draconian legal sanctions for criticising the monarchy, some international scholars who have voiced criticisms of the monarchy have done so knowing that they will not be able to return to Thailand, at least for the present period. Some critical Thai scholars have had to flee into exile to avoid being arrested and imprisoned. And some international scholars of Thailand have effectively been blacklisted by the Thai government, while others have been subjected to forms of intimidation by immigration authorities in the country. How do we in the West respond to these types of authoritarianism? I don't think there is a single answer and we each need to make strategic decisions in light of our own research topics, and in terms of our respective networks of colleagues and collaborators who live and work under dictatorial regimes, and who may also be impacted by our decisions and our actions.

I don't think that one scholar acting alone can respond to all of the various strategic options in situations like this. We need to take a broader, collective perspective on a spectrum of responses that may be taken up by different members of our respective academic communities. In my own case, I have made a decision to continue to work in a way that allows me to return to Thailand and to maintain direct connections with Thai colleagues, even if that means I may not be publishing everything that I am aware is taking place. To allow me to continue access ... It is a difficult thing ...

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: [...] *I know; it is a tough question ...*

PETER JACKSON: In terms of my own academic strategy, I have felt that it's been important to maintain direct solidarity with my colleagues in Thailand even if that means I have to undertake a form of self-censorship to allow me to continue that type of access. I strongly respect those who are speaking truth to power in Thailand, but in my own case I have decided to maintain collaborations even if that sometimes means having to engage in self-censorship at a certain level.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: [...] *Vincent Houben argues that New Area Studies are a discipline in the making, [an] interdisciplinary discipline, while Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, who you quote as well in the article, highlight the importance of Area Studies debates on issues of interdisciplinarity, cross-disciplinarity and transdisciplinarity. You have criticised established disciplines as disguised forms of Western Area Studies ...*

PETER JACKSON: Vincent says that as well. I quoted Vincent, I think.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Yes, you did ... Area Studies in particular also given the immobility of theory building and the theoretical importance of non-European languages for decolonial critical epistemologies. Like yourself, many highlighted [that] this debate takes place in a wider field of competing disciplines, in terms of theories, methods, institutional resources, training and career perspectives for students and also for early career researchers. One is reminded of the challenges that women's or gender studies have faced so far in terms of breaking through epistemological and methodological borders, achieving sustainable institutionalisation and resources.*

And now let us look forward, maybe the next ten years, so what are for you important steps for critical New Area Studies to take in the coming ten to fifteen years? Remaining conscious on the one hand, I am quoting you here again, from your article (p. 13–14), referring to Chun (2008), “of the caste-like divide between ‘local’ and ‘global’ intellectuals” as well as on the other hand of hierarchies within centre-periphery institutions within the country, the region or even within single academic institution”. So what would you say, what are the work packages that you would identify for critical New Area Studies to grow stronger, to have an impact or to, I mean, we say cracking in feminist research, cracking patriarchy or gaps or entry points? What would be the work packages for you? And of course, here it's a very broad question I'm asking, feel free to either think of students or early career researchers, university administrations, wherever you would like to start.

PETER JACKSON: It seems to me that in Australia the neoliberal framework of knowledge in terms of performance indicators is intensifying the disciplinary formations. For example, every publication is now measured as an output for federal government measurements. One needs to determine a number related to a discipline in reporting each of one's publications. This is a quantitative framework of disciplinary knowledge that is being imposed by the Australian Federal Government and which is so restrictive.

In terms of the work packages, in my own work I try to write across the borders of disciplinary knowledge that are being intensified by neoliberal regimes of academic measurement. In my current research on new religious movements in Thailand my writing is partly anthropology, partly political analysis and partly gender studies. My research is issue focused. Throughout my academic career I have been interested in bringing comparative perspectives to broader issues. In terms of packages for priorities in the next ten-to-fifteen years, I think it will be important to identify broader intellectual issues as focuses of research that allow multiple disciplinary approaches to be brought to bear on those issues. Rather than seeing our topics of research as say an anthropological issue, as a historical issue, or as a question of political analysis, to instead con-

ceptualise our research more broadly and to bring different fields together into conversation on key issues. The important issues in the world don't fit within narrow disciplinary categories. And it is also a matter of finding spaces to allow these cross-disciplinary conversations. It will also be important to argue strongly for research funding that supports this type of approach. An important issue in the decade ahead will be exploring approaches that facilitate bringing together multiple disciplinary methodologies in issue-focused research.

We have talked about a number of difficult issues in this conversation; it takes time to develop skill bases in these various approaches. It also requires a certain breadth of perspective and an openness to listen in conversation to colleagues working in other fields. It also requires an openness to exploring new types of collaborative research, not only between scholars from Western and Asian universities, but also among scholars working in different fields of knowledge. This can only happen in conversation, and with an attitude of openness to collaboration, both across disciplines and across geographical fields.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *How does one create openness or the willingness to listen? If I think about gender studies, which has been doing this for a generation now.*

PETER JACKSON: Do you feel they are still minoritised within the academy?

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *[...] I think yes and no. I just wrote a handbook article on gender studies [in] a handbook in German [...] on international gender studies. I wrote about South and Southeast Asia and I said, "Wow, just South Asia is already so diverse and then Southeast Asia is even more diverse", so we had a big discussion about which countries I then use as case studies and why. But I read obviously the whole shebang and when you read those reports and talk to them, the colleagues that I know who are [at] gender studies centres or teaching there, I think they are still saying "Yeah, we are still marginalised in terms of having proper resources [for] Master/ BA programmes, applying for funding, then there are shrinking spaces because of right-wing populism so also the anti-genderism debate so we are trying".*

And there are different approaches, Thailand more in cooperation with civil society or with international development cooperation, others like in Pakistan, they have established centres of excellence, but they are sort of linked to a government programme and also to Western funding. In other countries they say "okay, we do that but then we have maybe a small steering institute, steering body, but then we borrow from the colleagues who are in law, who are in sociology, who are even in physics, not just to think of social sciences and humanities. And we run the programme we don't have our own staff and pro-

fessors but we borrow, but it always demands that we are in the good books and many of the colleagues who do it, do it on top of their field”, you know this is what I am thinking. [...] they have a lot scholarship out there and I think they are making an impact. But if we then talk about disciplines like political science or history and talk to colleagues. This is what I mean when I heard this debate now at the Institute, I was reminded a little bit of what I know from gender studies.

PETER JACKSON: Yes, I think it’s very similar at my university, the Australian National University. In the early 2000s, together with another colleague I set up a research network on Asian cultural studies. We got a small amount of funding from our departments and initiated graduate seminars, and over a period of time we built up a sufficiently large network of scholars that a new Department of Gender and Cultural Studies was able to be established within the College of Asian and Pacific Studies. This new department emphasises critical cross-disciplinary approaches with a gender studies focus on Asia and the Pacific. This was an example of successful negotiation within the discipline-focused academic structures. The scholars who came together to form that department were mostly from history and anthropology. This took some fifteen years to happen, and it began with academic seminars and building cross-disciplinary conversations. Then undergraduate programmes were created in the new department. So, that was an example of successful academic politics in the context of ongoing emphasis on disciplinary boundaries.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: ... *and I think even with Area Studies, you talked about this in your article, and this is just the last comment I have about the language, language training. It has been cut down in Germany as well. You have to compete in this field as well, in the field of various disciplines and resources are scarce. You see this in Area Studies.*

PETER JACKSON: This is not only happening in Germany. It is also taking place in Britain and Australia, where there have also been cuts to language programmes. Area Studies programmes have historically emphasised the acquisition of language skills to allow in-depth research of documentary sources, oral histories and to undertake interviews and conduct participant observation. If one knows more than one language, it opens up perspectives and worlds of knowledge that often don’t exist within particular frames of existence. So, the capacity to maintain language programmes is essential, I agree.

ANDREA FLESCHENBERG: *Thank you very much, Peter. I took a lot of your time, but really, really thank you. It was a very interesting conversation.*