Circles of esteem, standard works, and Euphoric couplets: Dynamics of academic life in Indonesian studies

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ABSTRACT: Indonesian Studies as a field is strongly influenced by its own social character as a community of competing and cooperating scholars. Outside individual universities, the dominant social form is not the powerful professor, but rather the “circle of esteem,” a cluster of scholars who respect each other, cite each other’s work, push each other’s ideas into the academic marketplace, and, occasionally, rise to each other’s defense. Circles of esteem arise because academic work has less to do with the industrial production of knowledge than with a constant search for novelty, which may arise from new sources or new uses of sources. Although novelty is prized, the value of new work is hard to judge, and it will be more easily accepted when backed by a circle of esteem. There are two effective ways to gain academic prestige outside a circle of esteem. The first is to write a standard work, a conservative strategy to create a work that will become citation fodder for others. The second way is to coin a “euphoric couplet,” which is an unexpected adjective-noun combination encapsulating a previously elusive analytical truth. Euphoric couplets are easy to remember, dissociated from theory, and intriguingly ambiguous.

One of the peculiarities of academic life is how seldom we turn our analytical skills on our own professional lives. To be sure, theoretical reflections and comments on the state of the disciplines abound, while festschriften and obituaries...
occasionally tell us some of the institutional history that would otherwise be locked up in university archives or in the memories of senior scholars. We can turn to novels for sharp insights into the internal politics of universities as institutions. Missing, however, from the scholarly literature on Indonesian Studies (and, I suspect, from what has been written on most other branches of academe) is any serious attempt to analyze and explain the social dynamics of intellectual change in the broader discipline. We know a lot about the intellectual dynamics of intellectual change — the processes by which new ideas confront and transform established orthodoxies. We also know a lot about the political dimension of intellectual change — about the ways in which both funding, general political preoccupations and hegemonic social values can shape the character of research. But we know very little — or at least we do not dare to write it down — about our ways of working and of dealing with each other and about how these patterns influence the spread and acceptance of ideas in academic circles. This article, then, is a brief and preliminary attempt to fill this gap.

The best places to begin to understand the social character of our discipline are big academic conferences such as IAHA, ICANAS, ICAS, ASAA, or AAS, all of them held on a regular cycle and attracting hundreds of scholars to a single place for a few days of intense academic exchange. Parallel sessions are the rule, meaning that no-one can observe more than a fraction of the presentations on offer, and the sessions themselves are only part of the business. These conferences are an opportunity for a multitude of formal and informal transactions, ranging from simple acquaintance, networking, and browsing in the book displays to job interviews and hard-nosed bargaining between institutional power holders. Hierarchy is always evident at such conferences (along with patriarchy), and both are reflected in who attends which presentations, who goes off to lunch with whom and who is invited to meetings. Yet, in comparison with everyday life in a university, hierarchy is attenuated. Not everyone recognizes the big shots by face or knows just where to place everyone else in a hierarchy of importance. Although keynote speakers are elevated above the rest, and poster presenters are clearly low in the pecking order, the common format of a fifteen- to twenty-minute presentation (plus questions) for most participants is a powerful equalizer between the hard-pressed professor and the well-prepared postgraduate.

Conferences of this kind play a crucial role in shuffling intellectual hierarchies. All participants get the chance to identify and judge newcomers; to consider whether mid-career researchers really have anything more to say than they have already published in their revised theses; to consider whether senior scholars have managed to reshape themselves as elder statespersons whose wisdom can guide younger generations or whether they have simply lost touch. Most important of all, this reshuffling creates the basis for what I call “circles of esteem,” which are the most important social feature of our discipline above the university level.

It is likely that the social dynamics of intellectual change in Indonesian Studies are different from those dynamics in fields that are dominated by scholars from a single country, for example political science (overwhelmingly domi-
nated by Americans), Australian history or Germanic linguistics. In such fields and disciplines, it is more likely that certain departments, journals, conferences and eminent professors will be able to exercise a much tighter, more hegemonic control over the discipline as a whole, that prizes and honors bestowed by an academic establishment will work to reproduce that establishment, rather than merely being a gratifying adornment on a CV like the Benda Prize or the ASAA President’s Prize. The international character of Indonesian Studies, by contrast, together with the discipline’s own internal diversity work against the development of a single hierarchy of authority within the discipline. Instead, the discipline is structured loosely into a multitude of circles of esteem.

Circles of esteem at heart are clusters of scholars who respect each other. These scholars may work on different topics, but they read each other’s work, cite each other and help to push each other’s ideas into the broader academic world. Circles of esteem are fluid entities, changing shape, size and composition as the research agenda of their members changes. They may be small or large, and many scholars will be a member of more than one circle. They may be egalitarian or hierarchical — a circle of esteem may represent a new generation of scholars that sets itself against an establishment or an orthodoxy, or it may encompass several intellectual generations clustered around an established mentor. They may be reinforced by gender, nationality, ethnicity or institution, though they seldom rest entirely on any of these identities. While they last, circles of esteem are positive and affirming to their members.

Esteem is one of those rather admirable emotions that provides pleasure to both the giver and the receiver. A recipient of esteem, of course, basks in the admiration of others, but the giver also derives great satisfaction from the sense of having made an apt judgment about another scholar. For senior scholars beyond retirement and active research, it is important for their reputation to be able to identify accurately the best younger scholars in the field. For younger scholars, it is important to be able to identify both the mid-career scholars who are still coming up with fresh insights and the senior scholars whose past work is still worth reading and whose current pronouncements are still worth listening to. On the other hand, esteem is also a risky business. To offer esteem to a scholar who is not respected by others casts doubt on one’s own judgment. Withholding esteem can also be risky, though less so, because it risks marking the withholder as churlish, mean-spirited or simply imperceptive. For these reasons, esteemers tend to flock, each person affirming his or her own positive and negative judgments by reference to the positive judgments of others.

A circle of esteem in Indonesian Studies (and presumably in other fields as well) typically rests on three elements. First, its members are likely to share a skill or skills that sets them apart from other scholars. These skills generally include specific language competence and empirical knowledge based on archival experience or in-country fieldwork, but they may also include disciplinary, theoretical or even technical expertise, such as competence in cartography or statistics. Second, they tend to share a sense of the political implications of their work. This is not to say that circles of esteem are overtly political, but rather that they tend to share a sense of comfort with particular political views related to

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their research. They may, for instance, feel at heart that Suharto was good for Indonesia or that he was bad; that colonialism was good, or bad; that free trade is, or is not, desirable, and so on. And third, the members of a circle of esteem tend to have a feeling that each of them is working a related part of the same story, manufacturing pieces, perhaps, for the same jigsaw puzzle. This sense of shared purpose enables them to cite each other and to exchange ideas.

We have become accustomed to thinking of the production of knowledge as an industrial process. In fact, however, research in Indonesian Studies resembles a rather more primitive economy. We are not so much industrial workers as conquistadors, swashbuckling adventurers who foray out into the world in search of intellectual treasure in the form of new research topics, which become the trophies with which we adorn our CVs. The title of the popular textbook, *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, summed up with unusual clarity the expeditionary nature of our endeavor.

The essence of research is the search for novelty. Unlike standard industrial production, in which the object is to produce more and more of the same thing at a cheaper and cheaper price, our aim is to be innovative and imaginative, to cross borders, to find a new peak to scale, a new topic that no one else has attempted, a new archive or informant that no one has previously tapped, or at very least a new way of looking at an old topic. There is little in our discipline that corresponds to what natural scientists sometimes call “big, hairy, audacious goals” (BHAGs) such as developing a vaccine for malaria or mastering cold fusion, but within our somewhat more limited horizons we are strongly aware of differences in scale. Some expeditions discover El Dorado, stumbling ashore on new fields of research and marching into conferences triumphantly laden with investigative riches. Others are shipwrecked on islands of diminishing importance, topics that have lost the power to generate new insights. Still others find themselves attacked and massacred by the indignant natives of some existing discipline like history or economics who object to the crude trophy-topic snatching that tends to characterize such early expeditions.

And it pays to have company on these adventuresome forays into new topics, fellow travelers in a circle of esteem who will defend each other’s reputation. An individual scholar is vulnerable to charges of charlatanry, to the suspicion of being a maverick or a loose cannon, or even to being regarded as a Mandeville or a Munchausen peddling fanciful stories. Indeed, despite the authority with which reviewers praise or condemn the work of others, the judging of quality in Indonesian Studies is a hugely difficult and uncertain task. The same book or research proposal can receive reviews ranging from devastating through neutral to adulatory. Scholarship that is challenging and insightful to one observer may be anything from unimaginative to intellectually fraudulent in the eyes of another. Because we depend on novelty, and because novelty by its very nature leaves us with fewer than the usual number of yardsticks for making judgments, the assessment of quality in Indonesian Studies, as in much of the humanities and social sciences in general, is more akin to the notoriously arbitrary judgments made in music competitions. Thus, to some scholars Ruth McVey’s celebrated review of Karl Jackson’s *Traditional Authority, Islam, and Rebellion: A*
Study of Indonesian Political Behavior, which opened with the memorable sentence

Jackson’s book on “traditional authority, Islam, and rebellion” in Indonesia tells us nothing about its subjects. However, it is an excellent example of its genre, and its appearance in the year of the ayatollah is striking proof of the inadequacy of behaviouralist political science as an approach to understanding non-western societies

was a courageous blow for scholarly integrity, whereas for others it was a breach of scholarly etiquette. In this unstable world, unreliable and at times even pettily vindictive, a circle of esteem is a scholar’s best insurance. For a circle of esteem can be relied upon to at very least to protect the respectability of a scholar’s work if it is unduly attacked by outsiders, most noticeably as Anthony Reid rose to the defense of Leonard Andaya following a sharp review by Chris van Fraassen in 1994.

Circles of esteem are not stable entities. As in any good story in which a band of comrades ventures through unknown territory, there are always those who let the side down, whose weakness, ambition or avarice leads them to break solidarity by heading off in new intellectual directions, perhaps aspiring to join different circles of esteem, perhaps simply unable to keep up with their companions. At the same time, on the other hand, new recruits join the party in much the same way (to change the simile) as the cast of a long-running soap opera gradually changes. When postmodernist conquistadors undertook their prolonged campaign of pillage and destruction through the traditional terrain of the historian, they were joined by many scholars who were indigenous, as it were, to the discipline but who chafed at tedious traditional restrictions such as the dictum “No document, no history.”

Nor are circles of esteem reliably loyal to their members. Because the effectiveness of each circle depends on the perceived quality of each of its members, there is a sensitivity to the circle member who is not seen as pulling his or her weight. Circles of esteem corrode in the writing of lukewarm references and reviews, in casual exclusion from the caffeine- or alcohol-soaked sessions where the circle’s future direction is plotted, in being dropped from the e-mail message “cc” list and above all in not being cited. Not all circles of esteem are so close that caffeine, alcohol or e-mail form a significant part of their social repertoire, and indeed members of a circle of esteem may not even particularly like each other. Citation, however, is the lifeblood of esteem.

For the most part, Indonesian Studies is only weakly affected by the use of citations as an institutional index of scholarly impact. Most of our most eminent scholars are well represented in the Social Sciences Citation Index, but some are not, for reasons that have more to do with the nature of data collection by citation indices than with their scholarly caliber. For this reason, we correctly do not recognize any direct relationship between number of citations and scholarly standing. This balanced perspective, however, belies the importance that citation plays as a marker of esteem in our profession. How many of us can resist checking whether our name appears in the bibliography of a book in our field, or in the footnotes of a journal article? And how many of us have not felt a little
chill of betrayal if someone who seems to be part of our own circle of esteem neglects to cite our most relevant work? Being cited is a double joy, because it confirms both our wisdom in choosing a topic that other scholars find it useful to refer to and because it denotes respect for the quality of the research that we have applied to that topic. Not being cited always feels like a small step towards oblivion.

There is a complex politics, then, in citing and not citing our colleagues. We have all experienced the feeling that fine works of research are being disregarded by other scholars for reasons that may have less to do with scholarly judgments than with a failure to look beyond national boundaries or beyond existing circles of esteem. I have always been puzzled, for instance, by the failure of American scholars to take account of David Bourchier’s account of the so-called petrus killings in Indonesia in the early 1980s, which I consider the best published analysis of this phenomenon.12

Disregard of significant research such as this feeds those who might be inclined to believe in hegemonic conspiracies, but the problem probably lies more in the limitation of circles of esteem, powerful though they are in positioning us within our field. A circle of esteem provides supportive, appreciative and perceptive citation, but it does not of itself project the identity of a scholar into the broader academic community. For this purpose, two other phenomena play a key role. These phenomena are standard works and what I call euphoric couplets.

Indonesian Studies, no less than any other field, is marked by a number of books and articles that have a relatively special status as what might be called standard works. These are works that are commonly cited as reliable and authoritative statements of the present state of knowledge on a particular topic. In a recent analysis of Indonesian Studies, Simon Philpott described these works as hegemonic texts, powerful works of scholarship that impose on the field as a whole various sets of challengeable assumptions about the nature of Indonesia.13 For the study of modern Indonesian politics, Philpott identified the key hegemonic works as Kahin (Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia, 1952), Feith (The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia, 1962), Crouch (The Army and Politics in Indonesia, 1978), Robison (Indonesia: The Rise of Capital, 1986) and Anderson (“The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture,” 1972).14

Having asserted the existence of hegemonic texts, Philpott unfortunately neglected to offer any explanation of how hegemony was created or maintained, and instead devoted the bulk of his book to teasing out the challengeable assumptions that he saw as infecting the five texts. In fact, Philpott misunderstood the place of these texts in the intellectual construction of the Indonesian Studies field. The fact of a work being cited is not — even prima facie — an indication of its intellectual influence, but rather a reflection of the author’s success in creating what might be called citation fodder. We are all aware as scholars of the importance of citations as a mark of academic diligence.15 Although we tell our students that footnotes are an aid to the reader, enabling him or her to follow up our sources, and a courtesy to other authors whose ideas and information we have recycled, probably their most important function is to demon-
strate that that the author has anchored his or her arguments in the broader scholarship of the field. Citations locate a piece of research in the broader scholarly endeavor and in so doing they stake a claim to the academic respectability of that broader endeavor. It is not entirely coincidental that the word “reference” can mean both a citation and a letter of recommendation: the citation of a respectable scholar is in a sense an unsolicited claim to recommendation by that scholar. By citing a standard work, a scholar gives an assurance that he or she is properly knowledgeable of the field. Whether or not he or she is truly familiar with the work or shares its values is secondary to the appropriate citation of the standard work.

How, then, to write a standard work? Fortunately, scholarly quality is important. A work based on detailed and comprehensive primary research has more chance of success than a hastily written or speculative volume, or one based mainly on secondary research. Prior reputation and a well-known publisher or journal are a help, as is attendance at conferences and a profile in e-discussion groups. Still more important, however, is scope. Too broad in scope and the book will appear to be a textbook. Ricklefs’s fine and detailed History of Modern Indonesia is much consulted but seldom cited because it does not appear to be a “real” source. Too narrow a scope, on the other hand, and the book will seem too specialized for the role of scholarly anchor. Legge’s Central Authority and Regional Autonomy in Indonesia: A Study in Local Administration, 1950-1960 is a strong example, and the need to avoid narrow pigeonholing is perhaps the main reason why many scholars mask the narrow focus of their books in more ambitious titles. The title of Lucas’s One Soul One Struggle: Region and Revolution in Indonesia, for instance, gives only the barest hint that its focus is not national and extended but rather covering a few months of turbulent history in a small region on the northern coast of Central Java.

Just right is a book that focuses on a distinct historical period to which scholars of other historical periods are likely to want to refer. Herb Feith’s Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia was just such a work — erudite, reliable, well-researched and neatly covering a period to which many people needed to refer but that few wanted to examine. And how convenient it would be for all of us if there were just such a book on Guided Democracy, a work that would save scholars whose minds are on other things from the difficulty of deciding between Legge’s Sukarno, Sundhaussen’s Road to Power, Dan Lev’s Transition to Guided Democracy, Weatherbee’s Ideology in Indonesia: Sukarno’s Indonesian Revolution, or Feith’s “Dynamics of Guided Democracy” as their primary reference for this difficult and ambiguous period. In other words, the art of writing such a standard work lies not only in the quality of scholarship but also in selecting a topic that neatly matches conventional views of the way the world is ordered. The works of Kahin, Feith, Crouch, Robison, and Anderson are not cited because they are hegemonic, but rather because they provide a useful tag of legitimacy for other scholarship. In this respect, widely cited standard works are a fundamentally conservative phenomenon, largely regardless of the political or intellectual intentions of their authors.
For those who want to change the scholarly world, by contrast, another strategy is needed. A productive treasure hunt into new scholarly terrains brings glory, but there is no certainty that it will change anything except the esteem with which the hunter is viewed. The real world of Indonesian Studies does not reflect Philpott’s dismal picture of a discipline laboring inside the intellectual straightjacket of hegemonic texts. Rather it is a perhaps equally dismal world in which most other scholars note and read what we write at best quickly and superficially. We are sometimes like churchgoers who emerge from a Sunday service thoroughly impressed by the sermon, yet unable to remember the main point.

The surest way to influence the field is to create what I call a euphoric couplet. The term euphoria has had a checkered history. The Greek root means “bearing well or easily,” and the term came to imply “fertility” on the one hand and “dogged endurance” on the other. In eighteenth-century English it was transformed to mean “the state of feeling well and happy even when sick,” from which its meaning slid into the current sense of “elation, rapture and joy.” By euphoric couplet, I mean an unexpected and provocative adjective-noun combination that succeeds in effectively carrying an analytical truth that has previously been elusive and that can be applied to situations very different from those in which it was formulated. A euphoric couplet is an intriguing coinage, a neologism in two words that catches the imagination of a broader scholarly community, a little like the recycled place names in Douglas Adams and John Lloyd, *The Meaning of Liff.* A euphoric couplet is something less than an oxymoron, which is a union of two seeming contradictions (living death or, facetiously, military intelligence and fun run), but something more unsettling than a simple description. Feith’s characterization of a category of 1950s politicians as “solidarity makers” was apt but without nuance. Scholarship on Indonesia is studded with euphoric couplets:

- agricultural involution
- shared poverty
- Theatre state
- moral economy
- bureaucratic polity
- imagined communities
- rational peasant
- Guided Democracy.

The form is common, too, in broader scholarship:

- social banditry
- moral panic
- Oriental despotism
- hopeful monsters
- thick description.

The essence of a euphoric couplet is the unexpected but effective juxtaposition of two familiar terms creating a sense of nuance that reaches far beyond the specific conditions for which the term was coined.
Euphoric couplets are powerful for three reasons. First, they are easily remembered slogans, the easiest of all forms of knowledge to “take home” from a seminar, an article, or a book. Second, they are for the most part dissociated from theory: they do not rest unambiguously in any explicit theoretical framework and so they can be taken as is, without demanding any paradigmatic shift on the part of the user. And third, their ambiguity gives them potential value far beyond the empirical framework within which they were developed. Terms such as “imagined community,” “moral economy” and “social banditry” take on new meanings and therefore new strength every time they are used in a new context. They remain the coinages of Anderson, Scott, and Hobsbawm, but they have grown beyond whatever precise meaning their originators may have intended.

Of course, euphoric couplets are not the only effective coinages. The ambitious scholar can do almost as well with a provocative possessive:

- weapons of the weak
- age of commerce
- banality of evil
- invention of tradition
- circles of esteem?

The aesthetics of a provocative possessive may be slightly different from those of a euphoric couplet. These terms appear to be less assertive than straightforward euphoric couplets but on the other hand the possessive adds a slight air of gravitas. Clearly, however, these two forms are more effective than more complicated grammatical structures such as “lands below the winds” and “seeing like a state.” The peak of academic achievement is to coin a new word altogether, as Raphael Lemkin coined “genocide” in 1944, or to appropriate an existing word so thoroughly that it changes meaning, as Edward Said did with “orientalism” in 1978. The difficulty with new coinages is partly that scholars tend to be linguistically conservative and will object to any new word with a vehemence that they would not consider directing against even the most euphoric couplet or the most provocative possessive. Terms like “glocalization” seem doomed to extinction for sheer aesthetic reasons, and there is still strong resistance to terms such as “societal” and “consociational.” For the ambitious academic, the other disadvantage with coining new words is that their provenance tends to be lost rather more quickly than that of forms consisting of more than one word. Habermas probably turned the word “legitimation” from its former, mainly religious, meaning of the regularization of the status of an illegitimate child to an analytical concept referring to political legitimacy, but who now remembers this connection? In Southeast Asian Studies, there have also been attempts to transform local terms into analytical ones, as Anderson did with pemuda and Wolters did with mandala, but such terms tend to fail because they are rooted in specific local circumstances and so do not have the power to speak beyond the circumstances in which they were developed.

Nonetheless, euphoric couplets have a limited life, though one might perhaps better describe them as having a half-life in the way of a radioactive isotope. Isolated from theory and vulnerable to misunderstanding, they tend to
lose their analytical force and freshness relatively quickly. Rather than disappear entirely from scholarship and discourse, however, older euphoric couplets tend to be assimilated and routinized so that they no longer carry a sense of special insight. Part of their continuing existence, moreover, is as exhibits in a genealogical display of disciplinary evolution, rather than as living terms. “Imagined community” (1983) is still a vibrant and suggestive term (just), but “moral economy” (1976) has already lost sharpness and freshness, while “social bandit” (1959) is distinctly stale. 46

The coining of euphoric couplets and provocative possessives is in fact only the most public manifestation of a subtler pattern of intellectual competition and complementarity that is deeply embedded in academic life. All communities tend to develop a division of labor, based partly on inclination and aptitude, partly on power, and the community of Indonesianists is no exception. The most obvious manifestation of this division of labor is the fact that we select different topics for research and different methodological frameworks to pursue each topic. More significant, however, is the division of labor between different forms of academic skill. We will defer to, and seek advice from, one colleague in matters of fact, another in matters of theory, yet another on points of grammar, and so on, and we all hope that there are areas of advice for which our colleagues would turn to us. This sense of complementary skills is an important element in the creation and maintenance of circles of esteem.

This tacit division of labor underpins the importance of scholarly personality in the character of the field. To outsiders, we may seem gray and uniform, but each academic community is conscious of a range of personalities and personality types that create yet another dynamic to our intellectual encounters. We all know some scholars who appear to be locked in a particular personality type, while others seem able to adopt more than one persona, depending on circumstance.

One of the most powerful personae is that of the empiricist. We are all aware of the moral advantage in any debate that comes from mastery of empirical detail, whether it comes from library and archival research or from direct experience. One of the most disconcerting experiences in academic life is to confront a disputant who is able to cite from memory the file number of archival documents or, worse still, who wins the argument with a statement that begins, “Well, when I was in Surabaya in 1967…,” or “As Henry Kissinger (or Nelson Mandela) told me in March…. ” Despite post-modernist doubts about the reality of knowledge, the ability to marshal abundant facts and to identify factual errors on the part of a colleague remains a hugely powerful means of claiming status. Correspondingly, it is ignominious for any serious empiricist scholar to be caught in a factual error. A claim on the basis of empirical superiority, however, is always vulnerable to being trumped by an assertion of superiority in theory.

The claim to theoretical proficiency takes many different forms, which are often also competitive with each other. At one extreme, mastery of a body of theory, with its specific terminology and customary reference to founding theorists, is itself an intimidating weapon in debate, but it has special power against empiricism for two reasons. First, as we know from Kuhn’s analysis of scientific
paradigms, theory is remarkably resistant to falsification. The mere existence of a clear truth that appears to contradict a theory will not lead the theorists to change their minds; rather, the fact itself will be bent to fit the theory. Empiricists have difficulty in handling this behavior. Second, theory has a powerful capacity to change the question being asked, so that vast fields of empirical information become irrelevant. The power of theory to generate new questions thus exposes disconcerting gaps in the knowledge of the empiricist.

There are, however, other practitioners of theoretical one-upmanship. They include correctors, the scholars who ask post-modern questions about the basis of knowledge, or who invariably remind us to ask where the women or the Indonesians are. Another category of theoretical challenger is the confounder, often a public agonizer, a scholar who summons paradox, complexity and uncertainty to the center of the discussion in a way that makes the empiricist seem naive and the theorist seem crude. The confounder’s skill is similar to that which produces euphoric couplets: it is a capacity to create a new intellectual order encompassing a small part of knowledge while ignoring or even throwing spokes in the wheels of theory. In other circumstances, the confounder may be a logician, a careful marshaller of arguments and evidence whose claim to status rests on a repudiation of the value of theory.

Yet the empiricist, the theorist, the corrector, and the confounder can all be trumped by an appeal to compassion, to concern for the wretched of the earth, the people without history, the voiceless, the homeless, and the powerless. The activist appeals equally to the Samaritan instinct, deeply rooted in the Christian heritage of scholarship, which asserts that we should not stand by and allow others to suffer when it is within our power to help, and to the Marxian injunction that the point is to change the world, rather than simply to understand it. What does it matter, the activist can always ask, if we get a few details wrong as long as we are contributing to the great struggle? Yet the activist, too, is vulnerable to the realist, typically the scholar who is well connected with power holders, who knows how things work and who fears the resilience of human evil and incompetence in the face of even the best intentions. Yet realists often have one foot planted in a world outside academia — consultancy, policy, administration — and seem to the rest to be cynics for whom pleasure in knowledge of the world has been supplanted by the seductions of real power.

Of course, the use of these intellectual personae is not only a matter of competition for status. On the one hand, academic personality drives some scholars to act as quiet searchers after truth while others become noisy polemists, which leads some scholars to shape their public presence as aggressive contrarians, others as tortured intellectuals, others again as conciliatory statespersons, and yet others as moral consciences for their colleagues. We can all think of the Candide, who asks questions so naïve that they might really be profound, of the adviser, who magisterially suggests that we would do a much better job on a different topic, the entrepreneur who always seems to know how to get grants. There are those who delight in taunting their colleagues with unorthodox scholarship, and those who ignore the opinion of their colleagues and pursue careers only within their own universities, where the opinion of the profession...
as a whole may be barely audible. Scholars whose status within their own institution is considerably higher than it is in the profession are especially prone to dismissing professional esteem as a valid measure of standing. In yet another category are those unfortunate scholars who apparently yearn to be taken seriously by the field, yet whose work fails to win esteem, perhaps because of empirical or analytical weakness. Occasionally, these scholars manage a transformation to become what might be called “groundless authorities,” scholars who interpret a field of study to some larger community, which remains oblivious to the fact that they are not taken seriously by other scholars in the field they purport to represent. And finally, of course, there are a few scholars who genuinely care little for status or for whether their work is read and used by anyone else.

The competition for status in Southeast Asian Studies is mostly polite and civilized, and even accusations of scholarly malpractice and moral weakness tend to be made in a restrained way. Nonetheless, there are significant differences within the field.

Indonesian and Malaysian Studies are far more tranquil than Cambodian Studies, with Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese Studies somewhere in between. Except perhaps in Cambodian Studies, we have experienced nothing comparable to what have been called Australia’s “history wars” over migration and the genocide of the Aborigines. The cause of academic vitriol remains an under-investigated topic. The saying, misattributed to Henry Kissinger, that academic politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small, is clearly inadequate. The proximate cause of bitter conflict within academic institutions is the ambiguous relationship between academic autonomy and bureaucratic hierarchy. Whereas in most institutions, defeat in a political or bureaucratic conflict leads to exclusion or definitive marginalization, the tenure system leaves the defeated party in place to fight again and again, armed with the additional venom of historical grievance. Nor is antagonism a function of the seriousness of the intellectual, policy, or political issues: if it were, the study of Indonesia would be a dramatically more fractious field than the study of Malaysia or Thailand. Nor is the degree to which academic debates are politicized within the country of study a reliable indicator. The relative weakness of the participation by Southeast Asian academics in the international study of their own society (in contrast with fields like Australian, Indian, or Japanese studies, where the national scholarly endeavor exercises a decisive influence on the field) is not correlated either. The most plausible possibility is that there is a relationship between academic tranquility and the sparseness of the academic population in each field, in relation to the subject matter. Indonesian and Lao Studies, for instance, offer a vast corpus of cases and of primary sources that has barely been touched by researchers. Indonesianists can create a reputation based on original research, without the need to seize ground from their neighbors. In more crowded intellectual fields, by contrast, competition over scarce intellectual resources encourages tension and conflict. The issue becomes not so much how you get your sources but what you do with them.
Is it a matter of scissors, paper, stone? Are we playing with intellectual techniques that make little difference in the long run? Not entirely: the intellectual tension that helps to keep us faithful to our principles is also part of a contest for status in which the intellectual direction of our discipline is shaped. We owe it to ourselves and to our discipline to understand what we do to each other.

Notes

Ancestral versions of this paper have been presented at the University of Amsterdam, Curtin University, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, the International Convention of Asia Scholars in Singapore in 2003, and at the Australian National University and I have benefited from the comments offered on those occasions. I am grateful to Helen Creese, Greg Fealy, Mike Laffan, Li Narangoa, and Ken Wells for comments on earlier drafts of the paper, but it is with more than the usual sincerity that I exonerate them of any responsibility for the views I express.

1. David P. Chandler and M.C. Ricklefs, eds., *Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Indonesia: Essays in Honour of Professor J.D. Legge* (Clayton, Vic.: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, 1986) is a good example.

2. A useful exposition of these processes as observed in the natural sciences is A.F. Chalmers, *What Is This Thing Called Science?* 3d ed. (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1999). Chalmers outlines a succession of analyses of the processes by which scientific knowledge is verified, from Baconian induction through Popperian falsification to Kuhnian scientific revolutions.

3. This line of analysis has a long common sense heritage in the proverb, “He who pays the piper calls the tune” and an intellectual heritage in Gramsci’s notions of intellectual hegemony. See Anne Showstack Sassoon, ed., *Approaches to Gramsci* (London: Writers and Readers, 1982).

4. Johan Galtung, “Structure, Culture and Intellectual Style: An Essay Comparing Saxon, Teutonic, Gallic and Nipponic Approaches,” *Social Science Information* 20 no. 6 (1981): 817-56, describes the contrasting academic styles that the author had observed in France, Germany, Japan, and the Anglo-Saxon world, but reference to the Social Sciences Citation Index suggests that this issue has not been taken up by those who have cited this article. This would indicate that the article has been only sparsely cited, and then mainly by those interested in problems of cross-cultural education. On the other hand, in the natural and social sciences there has been a significant effort to map the character of the discipline in statistical terms. See Bonnie S. Fisher, Craig T. Cobane, Thomas M. Vander Ven, and Francis T. Cullen, “How Many Authors Does It Take to Publish an Article? Trends and Patterns in Political Science,” *PS Online*, December 1998, 847-56. On-line at http://www.jstor.org/browse/10490965.

5. International Association of Historians of Asia; International Congress for Asian and Northern African Studies; International Convention of Asia Scholars; Asian Studies Association of Australia; Association of Asian Studies.


7. In some respects, a circle of esteem resembles what C.S. Lewis describes as an “inner ring,” a circle of insiders to which people aspire to belong for the sake simply of belonging. In Lewis’s view, heavily conditioned by English public schools and universities, the inner ring exists to exclude others: “there’d be no fun if there were no outsiders.” Lewis recognizes, however, the different character of professional circles such as I describe here. See C.S. Lewis, “The Inner


15. See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). The astute reader will recognize this footnote as typical citation fodder. There is no significant intellectual or factual input from the scholarship of Grafton. Rather, in citing the work, I demonstrate that at least one other scholar has considered the topic worth writing about and that I have paid enough attention to the world outside my primary research field to be aware of it.

16. As far as I can see, the main risk in citation, apart from omitting those scholars who might take offense at not being cited, is to cite a doctoral thesis that has subsequently appeared as a more polished book, or a conference paper that has appeared as a more refined article. This kind of citation is evidence indeed of careless research.


20. Douglas Adams and John Lloyd, The Meaning of Liff (London: Pan, 1983). Adams and Lloyd explain: “there are many hundreds of common experiences, feelings, situations and even objects which we all know and recognize, but for which no words exist. On the other hand, the world is littered with thousands of spare words which spend their time doing nothing but loafing about on signposts pointing at places. Our job, as we see it, is to get these words down off the signposts and into the mouths of babes and sucklings and so on, where they can start earning their keep in everyday conversation and make a more positive contribution to society.” Three examples are enough to suggest the flavor of their efforts:

BANFF (adj.), Pertaining to, or descriptive of, that kind of facial expression that is impossible to achieve except when having a passport photograph taken.

HAPPLE (vb.), To annoy people by finishing their sentences for them and then telling them what they really meant to say.

POGES (pl.n.), The lumps of dry powder that remain after cooking a packet soup.


22. Ibid.


41. On “glocalization,” which purports to represent the process by which local political forces become more powerful or assertive in the context of globalization, see Wordspy, an online dictionary of new words: http://www.wordspy.com/words/glocalization.asp. This site is a fascinating introduction to the online world of neologisms.


45. O.W. Wolters, History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1982).

46. My impression is that the half-life of a euphoric couplet in Indonesian Studies is around twenty years, but it would take careful research to verify this impression.
