
Damien Kingsbury

Academic self-reflection in the sometimes contentious study of Indonesia is as welcome as it is rare. That Jemma Purdy’s edited volume seeks such reflection and takes as its point of departure the work of Herb Feith, who spent much of the latter part of his academic career in such self-reflection, is especially welcome. Reflection opens the door to frankness and these collected essays are revealing. Not least, they make explicit what has long been implicit in the work of this volume’s contributors and in much of Australia’s Indonesia Studies paradigm.

Full disclosure: I was invited to contribute to the volume being reviewed but declined, given that the collection’s premise was less self-reflection and more a critique of the field of inquiry. This review will, however, belatedly address some of that critique, in an attempt to unpack the book’s central themes. It is worth noting, too, that, along with another academic, I was banned from entering Indonesia in December 2004. Some time later, after the other individual’s ban had been lifted, I was told I could also have my ban lifted if I wrote “more favorable” articles on Indonesia. I replied that my writing on Indonesia was fair, but, as journalists say, “without fear or favor.” This, then, goes to Edward Aspinall’s observation (p. 72) that fear of being banned from Indonesia is a “constraining factor” in some academics’ writing, or what George Aditjondro referred to as “visa-driven scholarship.”¹ This review is, then, written by an academic still banned from the site of the study.

Returning to the reflective theme informing this book, Purdy’s account of Feith’s engagement with Indonesia is an honest, often lyrical and moving tribute to a person many considered a mentor as well as a friend and great scholar. One of the issues that continued to trouble Feith’s appreciation of post-New Order Indonesia, however, was the state’s treatment of Melanesian West Papuans.² That subject dominates the core of this book.

Importantly, Purdy, as do others, also discusses the decline of Australia’s academic interest in Indonesia. She recognizes Islamist terrorist attacks and consequent Australian travel warnings as being partly responsible for this decline. Similarly, as touched on by Lea Jellinek, Indonesia is viewed by some as less interesting than it once might have been.

But, critically, Purdy also identifies an exclusionary “community of assessment” (pp. xx–xxi) as being in part responsible for this decline, as highlighted by Robert Cribb’s “circle of esteem.”³ According to Arjun Appadurai, this circle decides “whether knowledge is new and compliant with the protocols in the field [my italics].”¹ A decision to step away from this system or to operate outside it will result in the marginalisation of

² This observation is based on personal discussions with Herbert Feith during 1998–2000.
your work" (pp. xx–xxi). As Purdy rhetorically asks, who has—or does not have—the "right" to comment on Indonesia (with the New Order-like overtones of censorship that implies)?

Perhaps as importantly, this paradigmatic Indonesian exceptionalism precludes comparative understanding, and thus casts itself as self-referential (p. 116), hegemonic, and alienating. As Purdy notes, this may have contributed to declining public acceptance of Indonesian Studies, at least in the form long dominant in Australia.

Jellinek was a student of Feith’s, and Jellinek’s chapter is the most “late-Feithian,” being more concerned with ordinary lives than interpreting macro events. Jellinek practices what is referred to in the development literature as “participant response analysis,” where one learns from within, interacting with and being part of the context. In this, Jellinek reflects Feith’s concern with “how to balance scholarship with moral obligation” (p. xi), an important and underrated quality in this field of study.

This underrating then leads to the common argument against “moral obligation,” which, according to Robert Elson, is that Indonesia needs to be understood in its own terms. Yet Indonesia and its past can also be well understood comparatively, for example, in the way Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter’s analysis sheds light on the transition from Suharto-era Indonesian politics, and in the commonalities between African and Indonesian post-colonial experiences.

Elson’s nine-page abstract on historical methodology seems to me misplaced. Moreover, he oddly singles out the “disastrous” observation in a newspaper article by international-relations academic Scott Burchill that contesting and redrawing boundaries never ends (p. 48). Elson’s attack on Burchill’s observation was written just one year after the people of Timor-Leste voted for independence (to which Feith and I were accredited observers), with the dismantling of the USSR and former Yugoslavia then still recent, and since then the independence of Kosovo and the divisions of Czechoslovakia and Sudan. It is not, then, that Elson chooses not to intervene in the debate, as he claims, but rather that he does so, paraphrasing Keynes, following a defunct paradigm.

For someone who has not written substantively on Indonesia, Burchill attracts undue attention, also being attacked by Aspinall for identifying a “Jakarta Lobby,” as well as for his critique of continuing human-rights offences in West Papua. Aspinall says that the Jakarta Lobby critique arose in the 1970s–80s, following Indonesia’s invasion of Timor-Leste, but locates the term with “non-Indonesianist” Burchill (p. 67) and not with its originator, Richard Robison.  

---

4 Freddy K. Kalidjernih, “Australian Indonesia-specialists and Debates on West Papua: Implications for Australia–Indonesia Relations,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62,1 (March 1, 2008): 72–93. Kalidjernih’s comments on my own views on Indonesia and, in particular, West Papua, are informed by a single newspaper article and are only partially accurate.


Aspinall’s denial that there is a Jakarta Lobby suggests that the academic “doth protest too much.” In part, the identification of the Jakarta Lobby is noted by Aspinall’s reference to the Australian National University’s “certain ambience or milieu” (p. 68). Robison’s original Jakarta Lobby was a Cold War-era grouping that dismissed or ignored some of the New Order’s worst crimes, a theme that was endorsed in practice by some later scholars. In a subsequent iteration, Cribb downplayed the New Order’s murderousness (20017), Elson imposed an explicitly conservative agenda on the field (p. 27), and Greg Sheridan (along with his colleague Paul Kelly) continued the apologia.8

An ideological successor of this “Jakarta Lobby” (see p. 79) has developed to the point where it claims “there is now relatively little serious dispute on basic political questions to do with Indonesia” (p. 69). This is despite a strong attack by McGibbon in the West Papua debate.9 Aspinall, meanwhile, is explicitly partisan, being “committed to the task of increasing public sympathy for Indonesia” (p. 55),1 0  1 1  as well as attacking scholars concerned with human-rights abuses in West Papua (p. 78), alleging that they are not similarly concerned with such issues elsewhere in Indonesia.

Among others, Clinton Fernandes,1 1 the magazine Inside Indonesia, and I1 2 give lie to this claim. Inside Indonesia was founded and published for many years from the Human Rights Office of the then Australian Council for Overseas Aid. Ironically, Aspinall has been an editor of it. Regardless, this distorted Indonesia-sympathetic, anti-specific human-rights critique is precisely the meaning of the Jakarta Lobby.

According to this perspective, to view Indonesia through a more critical lens is, somewhat illogically, to be regarded as “anti-Indonesian” (p. 69) or “racist,”13 rather than in favor of the human rights of all people who live in Indonesia.

---

7 Cribb estimated deaths in Timor-Leste from 1975 to be “closer to 80,000.” See Robert Cribb, “How Many Deaths? Problems in the Statistics of Massacre in Indonesia (1965–1966) and East Timor (1975–1980),” in Violence in Indonesia, ed. Ingrid Wessel and Georgia Wimhofer (Hamburg: Abera, 2001), pp. 82–98. Cribb’s estimate is in contrast to the closely detailed assessment by CAVR (Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste; Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in East Timor) that put the death toll at a minimum of 102,000 (plus or minus 10 percent) and a maximum of 183,000. See Chega! The Report of the Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (Dili, Timor-Leste: CAVR, 2005). CAVR was criticized for its high level of required proof; since entire communities were unable to provide first-hand information about casualties and violence because their residents were dead, the report thus understated the death toll during this time.

8 Greg Sheridan is the foreign editor of the conservative newspaper The Australian. He has a long association with the vehemently anti-communist and otherwise deeply conservative, Catholic-based National Civic Council.


12 Damien Kingsbury, The Politics of Indonesia, third ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Damien Kingsbury, Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Indonesia’s Arduous Path of Reform (Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 2012).

A human-rights orientation towards Indonesia refers to much more than just looking at the country through a “prism” of Timor-Leste and West Papua (p. 55), illustrative though this might be. Rather, it reflects the symbiotic relationship between civil and political rights and substantive or liberal democracy, which normatively applies to Indonesia as elsewhere. Aspinall’s use of the “silent majority” argument (p. 68) raises the question, which I put in my address to the conference from which this volume is largely drawn, with so much well-documented information available about human-rights abuses in West Papua, when does silence equal complicity?

Indonesian scholar Bob Hadiwinata also bogs down in the West Papua debate, attempting to categorize Indonesia-interested academics through that matrix. In this, he employs as exclusive terms “pro-Indonesia” and “pro-Papua,” excluding the existence of scholars who are simultaneously “pro-Indonesia” and “pro-Papua.” Rather, a more useful and accurate dichotomy could refer to “pro-Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia/national chauvinism” and “pro-liberalism/human rights.”

As with Aspinall, Hadiwinata neglects to discuss the wider field of Australian Indonesia scholars, many of whom have quite varied and more nuanced positions than his categorization implies. The exception to Hadiwinata’s doubtful political science models (pp. 80–81) is his identification of “ethical-normative moralists,” of which Feith was one. This is a more useful, if still slightly straight-jacketed, description of scholars with a concern over human-rights issues, be they in West Papua, Jakarta, or elsewhere.

Heather Sutherland’s contribution to the volume is a slightly odd choice for this collection, given her principle focus on the history of Indonesian studies in the Netherlands. Perhaps such a focus is valid, but raises the question of why the Netherlands and not the United States. Her one important contribution is, however, to suggest that “parochial” area studies—such as that of Indonesia—would benefit from a comparative methodology.

Richard Tanter brings the focus back to a critical review of Australia–Indonesia relations. His account of the varied relationship is, broadly, an accurate one, but his characterization of groups, as with Hadiwinata, is puzzling. To illustrate, figures who were explicitly of the international-relations-theory “Realist” school he refers to as “liberal institutionalists,” which is broadly associated with Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama.

As all contributors note, Australian studies on Indonesia, once at the forefront, have substantially declined. It may be that renewed support for language teaching and reduced official travel warnings will help address that. But it may be that Indonesia appeals less to today’s students and scholars than it did to previous generations. And it may be that the gap between the dominant Indonesian studies paradigm and public

---

perceptions, always a large one, will also continue to dissuade engagement with, and on, Indonesia.

In an increasingly globalized world, students and scholars tend to seek wider, not self-referential or exceptionalist, understanding of how and why things are as they are. Such wider or comparative understanding sheds light, not least, upon understanding Indonesia. So, too, the study of Indonesia helps inform our understanding of other places. The post-independence challenges that faced an emerging Indonesia and a still-emerging Timor-Leste have been common to many other countries; the reform and democratization that Indonesia continues to grapple with sheds light on the process that Myanmar is now approaching. A comparative turn may, then, be how to re-engage students and to re-energize scholarship on Indonesia. It may also provide insights, sometimes missing, from Australian studies on Indonesia.