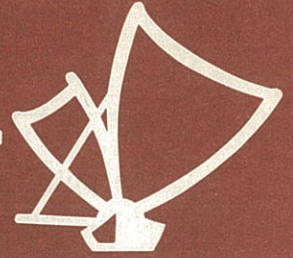


ECHOSEA

NEWSLETTER



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■ Economic History of Southeast Asia ■

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■ Project in the Modern Economic History of Southeast Asia

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Why Economic History?

Until recently, the world knew Southeast Asia primarily for its turbulent politics, and what economic successes there were tended to be dismissed as neo-colonial enclaves of little long-term relevance. The impressive ASEAN performance since 1970 can no longer be ignored, but it has by no means been understood. Is this a recovery from the artificially low levels created by post-war conflicts, a spillover from Japan and the NICs, or does it fit into long-term trends for the region? Were Myrdal's "soft states" an aberration of the fifties and sixties, or must we rethink the whole literature about the role of the state? Must we announce the failure of the centrally planned economies (Vietnam and Burma being the recent casualties in the region), or is there a pendulum swing between the social costs of the international market, and the economic costs of isolation? Can we at last evaluate the long-term effect of colonialism on this region, and understand the roots of underdevelopment as well as its solutions?

These issues require a comparative perspective on the development of the region in the long term. Yet this is an area in which scholarship has been exceptionally weak.

Among the distinctive historical features of Southeast Asia are a colonial past, an assertively independent present, and in

between the revolutionary traumas of the 1940s (prolonged in Vietnam to 1954 or 1975). The unusually bitter end to colonialism created a marked historical discontinuity, and ensured that the study of the region, like the region itself, would have a completely new start after the war. The older centres of "colonial" scholarship suffered a crisis of morale. The primary requirement of the new scholarship was sensitivity to the cultural distinctiveness and historical autonomy of the peoples of Southeast Asia, and especially to its nations as now organized. Since colonial scholarship was seen to have regarded the region as a kind of receptacle for foreign influence, we wanted above all to be sure we defined Southeast Asians in their own terms.

The new Southeast Asian studies had to rest above all, therefore, on the study of the national languages. This emphasis has produced genuine country specialists who can operate effectively in the modern countries they study. It has also given Southeast Asianists a head start over some other branches of scholarship in what has been called "culturalism" (by Ben Anderson) - essentially an emphasis on historical and political explanations which get inside the culture of the "other". If anyone outside Southeast Asian studies reads the work of anyone inside, it is for this imaginative leap in the work of Geertz, Anderson, Jim Scott, or Rey Ileto, for example.

The chief casualty of these necessary developments has been economic history. While work on other parts of the world (including Japan, India and China) made spectacular advances, little progress was made in Southeast Asia. The outstanding names in the field are still those of the 1920s & 30s - Furnivall, Gourou, Virginia Thompson, Robequain, Schrieke, van Leur, Burger and Boeke.

This post-war neglect has contributed to the gulf between economics and the Southeast Asian Studies enterprise. It has kept Southeast Asia out of critical contemporary debates on which it should have much to say, including the rise of capitalism, world-systems and "dependency", the impact of global trade cycles, clientship and labour markets, entrepreneurial diasporas, and the sources of modern economic growth. It has made Southeast Asia seem more fragmented than it is, by keeping the focus on the political and cultural expressions of nationalism rather than on the everyday lives of people, their relation to the environment, their agriculture, household economy, health, manufactures, and the strengths and weaknesses of their multi-ethnic political economies in striving towards modern development.

The time has come to reemphasize the economic history of Southeast Asia. The region's rapid growth in the last twenty years has attracted attention, yet the literature has hardly begun to explain its long-term meaning and context. The upheavals which began in 1941 severed the study of the past from the study of the present, so that the economic growth which began in much of the region around 1970 appeared to have no historical roots.

A new Southeast Asian economic history cannot, however, distinguish itself from all that has been achieved in other fields of history, in anthropology, politics, rural sociology, nutrition, demography, geography and literature since 1950. If it is to put people and their everyday welfare in the centre of its

concern, it will have as much need of language and cultural sensitivity as any other discipline. Statistics have advantages in making possible comparisons across time and place, and sometimes cutting through conventional categories of class, race and gender. Conclusions derived from aggregated data can usefully challenge the conventional wisdom derived from literary sources. But the dangers of relying on statistics alone are far greater in a set of societies as complex as Southeast Asia's. One might say that it is only beginning to be safe to go back into the quantitative water now that empathetic and qualitative studies have taught us something of the realities of life in the villages, longhouses, and squatter settlements of the region.

Anthony Reid



The ECHOSEA Newsletter

This Newsletter hopes to act as a clearing-house for news about the Economic History of the Southeast Asia. It will appear as often as appears necessary, probably three times in 1989, and will be distributed without charge at least during this year. Information about research initiatives, conferences, data sources and important publications should be sent to the address above, preferably by April and August of this year. An important goal will be to establish a network of scholars both inside and outside Southeast Asia. To that end we urge you to fill out the attached form with an indication of your current research in this field. In a future Newsletter we will list the results of this survey of research activity.

The Logo, based on a Madurese prahu in sail, has been designed by Julie Easton of ANU Graphic Design, and printed by ANU Central Printery.