
Chapter 4

The Politics of Studying Indonesian Politics

Intellectuals, Political Research and Public Debate in Australia

Edward Aspinall

Indonesia occupies a fraught place in Australian domestic political debate. The country looms much larger on Australia's political horizon than it does in other Western countries (the Netherlands was an obvious exception for a long time, but as the memory of the colonial experience fades, so does interest in Indonesia). In popular Australian political culture, Indonesia elicits a jumble of fear, fascination and hope, mixed, of course, with a great dose of indifference. Over the last two decades alone, it has been seen as, alternately and often simultaneously, a focus of dreams of economic redemption, a key to deeper integration in East Asia, a harsh and repressive military regime that should be within Australia's power to change, a site of chaotic and threatening political disorder 'on our doorstep', a site for emancipatory Australian military intervention, a tropical holiday land where hapless Australian youths are in danger of being swept up into a punitive anti-narcotics regime, and a breeding ground of violent and hostile Islamic terrorists. Underlying all this, it remains a source of inchoate invasion fears for a significant part of the population.

Large sections of the Australian public know Indonesia directly, if only through the experience of holidays in Bali, although a growing number have more intimate knowledge. Yet public perceptions of the country remain generally negative. A 2006 survey of Australians, found that 'Respondents felt that Indonesia was essentially controlled by the military, that Indonesia was a dangerous source of Islamic terrorism and that Australia was right to worry about Indonesia as a military threat' (Cook 2006, 2). Although views were somewhat warmer when a similar survey

was conducted in 2010, [a]sked whether "Indonesia is more of a threat to Australia or less of a threat than it was 15 years ago, or has there been no change", 38 per cent of Australians said there has been "no change" and 33 per cent said it was "more of a threat" (Hanson 2010, 6). At the same time, successive Australian governments have viewed building good relations with Indonesia as crucial to Australia's future economic prosperity and security. Australia's largest embassy is in Jakarta, and the city is most frequently visited by Australian ministers and even the prime minister. Moreover, Indonesia is now the greatest recipient of Australian overseas development assistance.

As a result of this context, the scholarly study of Indonesia is potentially more politicised, and fraught in Australia than in other developed countries. A straw poll of practitioners I conducted while preparing this article seemed to confirm this guess. In more or less equal numbers, those I asked to give instant characterisations of the study of Indonesian politics in Australia gave strikingly contrasting answers: some suggested that the field was elitist, narrow and politically disengaged; others said that most Indonesianists were inappropriately activist and politically biased. Different sorts of people gave the contrasting answers, and they obviously had different bodies of work, and individual scholars, in mind. Nevertheless, it was remarkable that there could be such highly charged and such contrasting evaluations.

In this chapter, I suggest that there may be some truth in both such characterisations and discuss public political engagement on Indonesia among Australian academics, focusing especially on scholars who work on Indonesian politics, but also straying into other fields of scholarly endeavour as appropriate. I look at three levels of structure and context that shape scholarly interest in Indonesian politics in Australia: the national political context, the institutional setting of the public university system where most Australian academics work, and what I call the structures of affect which underpin the motivations and drive the interests of most scholars engaged in the study of Indonesia. Although generally hidden behind a screen of appeals to scholarly objectivity and rigour, academics are also 'members of specific cultures and social orders' (Anderson 1982, 69), and to a large extent our enquiries are guided or at least constrained by the assumptions of those cultures and the imperatives of those orders.

I survey varied forms of political engagement and public commentary on Indonesia by scholars, considering how the different structures can produce different sorts of public postures. With some stylisation and

even exaggeration, I divide these variants into three main strands. First, a so-called 'Jakarta lobby', emphasising Indonesian security, stability and economic growth, and improved inter-governmental ties, was always weaker among Indonesia specialists than was sometimes suggested in the past. However, a practical and policy-oriented perspective on both Indonesian politics and Australia–Indonesia relations remains influential, and has arguably become even more so since Indonesian democratisation began in the late 1990s. Second are scholars who emphasise human rights advocacy and who view Indonesia through the prism of East Timor and Papua and according to a narrative of 'Australian betrayal' of those struggles. The third, and most numerous, strand consists of academics who hold liberal and progressive political views, are personally fascinated by Indonesian society and are committed to increasing public knowledge of, and sympathy for, Indonesia. Of course, these categories are ideal types, and in practice there are many overlaps, at least between the third group and the other two.

Scholarship on Indonesia in Australia, especially among the third group, is characterised by specialisation, both in terms of scholarly apprenticeship (acquisition of high-level language skills, lengthy fieldwork, etc.) and fields of individual research. Several factors mean that most scholars from the third group intentionally or unintentionally avoid public political debate on Indonesia. A result is that much public debate on Indonesia in Australia is dominated by individuals from the first two groups, who lack Indonesia expertise, and takes the form of a projection of domestic Australian controversy onto an Indonesian canvas.

Political science and the study of Indonesia

A recent and important volume by mostly American political scientists surveys the contribution that studies of Southeast Asia have made to the field of political science (Kuhonta et al. (eds) 2008). The book has many merits, but one thing that will be striking for most Australian scholars of Indonesian politics is how it raises fundamental questions that are rarely asked in Australia about the compatibility of Southeast Asian studies and political science as a discipline. Although Australian scholars do sometimes think about such questions, this book is marked by a seriousness of purpose, almost an angst, that is largely absent from analysis by scholars of Southeast Asia in Australia.

Take, for example, American Indonesianist Donald Emmerson's chapter entitled 'Southeast Asia in political science: Terms of enlistment'. Not surprisingly, Emmerson (like the volume as a whole) mounts a spirited defence of the necessity of area studies knowledge – language, understanding of historical and cultural context and all the rest – in the face of the claims of the proponents of rational choice theory, quantitative analysis and big-N datasets who have dominated most American political science departments over the last couple of decades. He begins his chapter with a quotation from one such author, David Laitin, who suggests that rational choice theories are becoming so powerful as a universal explanatory framework and that: 'The idea of having a political science specialist for every piece of international real estate may soon be seen as arcane as having a specialist for every planet in the astronomy department' (Emmerson 2009, 203, citing Laitin 1993). It is against such claims – claims to having access to general rules governing all human political behaviour that can be tested in a scientific way – that the Southeast Asia politics specialists must defend themselves in the United States. They have done so in a mere echo of a much larger debate, which went under the name of 'Perestroika' in American political science over the last ten years or so, in which adherents of case study and qualitative research tried to launch what one book detailing the debate called a 'raucous rebellion' against the domination of the field by rational choice paradigms and quantitative methods (Monroe 2005). This defence takes place, it should also be added, in a context where our US colleagues have experienced a significant decline of traditional area studies (Fukuyama 2004), and where many experts of Indonesian politics find themselves as lone Southeast Asia experts in political science departments with little interest in the Asian region, and where they have to justify their research choices to strict disciplinarians and comparativists, especially in the context of appointment, tenure and promotions.

Indonesian studies is in many respects an international endeavour, and it is typically written about in this way (see for example Cribb 2005). However, in observing this debate in the American academy, I was struck by how little it has been considered or engaged with by persons in Australia whose professional lives revolve around the study of Indonesian politics. Those of us who work on Indonesian politics in this country rarely feel inclined to justify or defend ourselves in disciplinary or even theoretical terms; we rarely attend general political science conferences or publish in general comparative politics or theoretical journals as opposed to area studies ones. Indeed, I suspect, although I have no concrete data to support

it, that most academics who teach and research Indonesian politics in Australia have not had extended postgraduate coursework training – and sometimes not even undergraduate training – in political science.

This is not to say that those who research and teach the politics of Indonesia do not feel the need to justify themselves and what they do in Australia. On the contrary, they frequently do so. However, when they do, they tend to do so by defending the relevance of Indonesia to Australia, and hence justifying the importance of sophisticated study and understanding of Indonesia. This is a debate, in other words, that largely occurs in the public sphere and is pitched in policy and national interest terms, not in strictly academic ones. This difference in turn reflects the very different way that Indonesian studies is carried on in Australia compared to in the United States. One obvious difference is the fact that a significant proportion of Australian specialists of Indonesian politics are located in Asian, Southeast Asian or Indonesian studies centres or departments rather than in political science departments. This is difficult to quantify, but one starting point is a list of 157 Indonesia experts recently compiled by Helen Pausacker (2009: 119–123). Of the 38 persons noted in that list as including ‘politics’ as one of their fields, just under half (18) are located in Asian, Southeast Asian or Indonesian studies programs, schools or centres. Of the remainder, about half are located in large catch-all units produced by university rationalisation, restructuring and reorganisation over the last two decades (such as schools of arts, of humanities and languages or of international studies). Half again (or about a quarter of the total) are located in departments, programs or schools of politics and international relations (or close cognates). Of that number, my guess is that only about half would view Indonesia as the major focus of their scholarly research, leaving less than 10 Indonesia specialists located in political studies departments around Australia.¹ This initial observation is a starting point for considering what sorts of contexts shape the nature of the Indonesian political studies in Australia. It seems to me that three contexts are the most important.

¹ To further complicate matters, some of these individuals are also affiliated with Asian or Southeast Asian studies programs or centres, or their departments are themselves located in over-arching area studies institutions (my own Department of Political and Social Change, located in the College of Asia and Pacific (formerly the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies) at the Australian National University).

Political context

Several decades ago, Benedict Anderson analysed the dominant thematic concerns and methodologies in American studies of Indonesia in terms of an underlying American 'cultural paradigm', which he said 'assumes a natural and inextricable interconnection between private enterprise and property (capitalism), constitutional democracy, personal liberty and progress' (Anderson 1982, 70). In his view, this paradigm interacted with the changing contours of domestic political dynamics in Indonesia and of America's role in the region to produce two varieties of liberal scholarship on Indonesia, which he labelled 'anti-colonial' and 'imperial' liberalism.

In general terms, the Australian cultural paradigm is similar in its content to the American one identified by Anderson, although we might argue about the margins. Where Australians' perceptions of themselves and their country's place in the world are clearly different from those in the United States is in terms of scope and ambition. Given that for much of the last century the United States has been the major global power, the scope and ambition of the American cultural paradigm has been almost without limit. It has also lent itself to the assumption that American values are – or should be – universal ones, with sometimes disastrous foreign policy results. It is in this context that we see the rise in American political science of attempts to devise universally applicable theories of political behaviour that eschew local cultural context and which are based on the quintessentially capitalist notion that politics is simply the playing out of calculations made by interest-maximising individuals. We might say that global power gives rise to attempts to devise globally applicable theories explaining social and political behaviour.²

In Australia, the situation is different. Australia is much more modest and insecure in its global role. It is not a global hegemon but a middle-level power (Cooper et al. 1993). Moreover, the relationship between Australia and Indonesia is rather special and unique (unlike that between the US and Indonesia, which is a relationship simply of imperial centre to one among many subordinates). Australian attitudes to Indonesia share much of the indifference and condescension expressed in advanced countries about underdeveloped ones. Historically, the British origins of Australian society and the White Australia Policy added a dose of paranoia and hostility in

² See Amadae 2003 for an elaboration of the Cold War origins of the rational choice approach.

attitudes to Indonesia and to Asia more generally (Burke 2008). However, attitudes have changed much over recent decades. In Australian official political discourse, foreign policy calculations and security planning, Indonesia has been seen variously as a pivotal and important country for Australia: the key to greater economic integration into the Asian region, a major source of security threats, and so forth. Moreover, Indonesia plays a role in popular political culture and debate which it can never do in the United States: as a source of invasion fears, exemplar of the foreign 'Other' on our doorstep, brutal oppressor of peoples who as inhabitants of 'our' sphere of influence 'we' should be able to protect, and so on.

One obvious result is that there has been significant support in the government and among education policy-makers for the study of Indonesia in Australia, with it generally being acknowledged that the Australian contribution to the scholarly study of Indonesia is, at the very least, disproportionate to the country's population and to its contribution in most other fields of scholarly endeavour (Graf 2009, 200). But what else does this context impart to the study of Indonesian politics in Australia? No doubt there are many effects, but two seem especially important. First, it provides relevance: a public audience for discussion of Indonesia that is lacking in the United States or other major Western countries, and a need on the part of government for expert advice and especially, training of personnel. Second, it produces specialisation: Australian academics who research Indonesia are generally able to specialise to a degree that is rare elsewhere. These observations lead us back to the shape of the Indonesian studies field in the Australian academy.

The academic political economy

So what is the institutional context of the academy which produces the mixture of professional incentives and constraints that go towards producing specialist knowledge about Indonesian politics in Australia?

The obvious point to make is the one I made at the outset: it is an academic setting based around an Indonesian area studies context that stresses deep and specialised knowledge of the language, culture and history of the country before one can speak authoritatively about its politics. Most Australian academic experts on Indonesia were trained and now teach and research in such a setting. This is not the only setting in which studies of Indonesian politics are conducted in Australia, but it is the dominant one. Moreover, Australian academics of Indonesian politics rarely believe

that by studying Indonesia they will be equipped to study other countries, or at least this is rarely their aim. Unlike in the United States, with few exceptions Australian Indonesianists do not go on to conduct detailed or sustained studies of other places.

To be sure, this Indonesian area studies context has been threatened over the last two decades by the increasing dominance of neo-liberal principles in the higher education sector and its reorganisation along market principles. This shift has posed difficulties for Indonesian studies given generally low student numbers in Indonesian and Southeast Asian studies programs. Especially over the last 15 years, Indonesian studies academics in Australia have been increasingly worried about the decline of learning of the Indonesian language in both schools and universities, and gripped by fears about a resulting crisis in Indonesian studies. With universities increasingly organised on the basis of decentralised models in which individual departments and programs are distinct budget units which, in most cases, derive the lion's share of their funding from student income, declining student numbers do indeed pose a major challenge to the survival of Indonesian studies in many campuses. Programs have been closed, especially in regional and smaller universities. In a recent report, it has been noted that the number of universities offering Indonesian language programs has dropped from a high of 28 in 2001 to 15 by 2010 (Hill 2010), although the contraction may in part be seen as a correction after a large increase in the number of such programs between 1988 and 2001 (Hill 2010, 1).

However, the key point is that, unlike in the United States, Indonesia area studies scholars in Australia have been able to mount relatively successful rearguard actions against such pressures, and even take advantage of new opportunities provided by new competitive funding arrangements (notably the expansion of the research grants provided by the Australian Research Council, which have flowed to Australian Indonesia specialists with a relative ease that make us the envy of our American colleagues). The defence of Indonesian studies has largely been carried out by appealing to the larger national interest framework about the importance of Indonesia to Australia. In other words, this has not been a battle waged within university departments expressed in terms of the relative merits of deep country knowledge versus comparative, quantitative or theoretical approaches. Instead, it has largely taken place in formal and informal meetings between senior academics and policy-makers and, when things get tough, in the media. During the years of Prime Minister Paul Keating

(1991–1996), seen at the time as marking a qualitative jump forward in Australia's 'Asian engagement', scholars made these arguments by echoing what was then the government's mantra about greater economic integration into the Asia-Pacific region. During the years of Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) and in the aftermath of the collapse of the Suharto regime, the Australian intervention in East Timor and the terrorist bombings in Indonesia, these arguments were often reframed in security terms.³ The defence of Indonesian studies in these terms – especially after the Bali bombings of 2002 – has been relatively successful, especially in that many language programs have survived despite declining enrolments. One obvious example is the Indonesian studies program at the University of Sydney, which was under threat in the mid-2000s, but was saved after a lobbying and media campaign by staff and sympathisers.⁴

The irony is that many specialists of Indonesian studies are not especially personally committed to arguments that position Indonesia primarily as a source of economic benefit or security threats to Australia and Australians, and might in fact be personally repelled by them. They are not the concerns which motivated them to study Indonesia, they are not the reasons they view the study of Indonesia as important, and they are not the sort of things they believe to be important in the Australia–Indonesia relationship. Before I go on to look at the influence of such personal views in more detail, there are a few more points to make about the effect of this broader political context on the shape of Indonesian studies.

Arguably the most important effect is to generate a certain style of scholarship: practical and easily comprehended by a general and policy-oriented audience, and seeking to lay out in readily comprehensible terms the composition, outlook and internal dynamics of the Indonesian governing elite and the country's political and social dynamics more broadly. Much of the writing on Indonesian politics in Australia is noteworthy for its lucidity and accessibility, rather than for its deep engagement with complex theoretical argumentation or its framing in the stylistic conventions of mainstream political science (although of course there are many exceptions). In the New Order era, Australian policy-makers wanted to know about the key institutions and decision-makers, and how best to understand their

³ For one eloquent example, see Tim Lindsey, 'Learn the lingo to earn from Asia', the *Australian* (Higher Education Supplement) 26 August 2009.

⁴ See, in particular, Louise Williams, 'Fading expertise in close neighbour', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 2004; Bernard Lane, 'Indonesian rescued', the *Australian* (Higher Education Supplement) 17 August 2005.

interests and modes of behaviour. Since the New Order, a sort of practical 'reform orientation' has come to characterise much of the writing about Indonesian politics in Australia, where the main questions asked concern the major obstacles encountered in Indonesia's political reform, and how they are being, or might be, fixed (Crouch 2010 is an excellent example). All of this does not mean that Australian Indonesian politics specialists have a policy audience or wider public consciously in mind when they write their scholarly work. Nevertheless, the possibility of such an audience, and the broader policy context that shapes our institutional homes, shadow their work and exercise a subtle influence on it.

There are particular institutional structures that accelerate these tendencies. For instance, there is the special place of the Australian National University (ANU) in all this. It is not only that the overall weight of the ANU's contribution to the field is so great (according to one recent assessment 'the ISI-indexed output of the Australian National University (ANU) is alone by far bigger than that of any other institution engaged in Indonesian Studies worldwide, and in fact even bigger than that of all institutions in the Netherlands combined' (Graf 2009, 200). Even more relevant are the ANU's physical proximity to the centre of national government, and its status as a site where the interchange between policy and academia is especially intense. Consequently, the various tendencies towards realist, policy-oriented, practical, even elitist studies of Indonesian society are arguably strongest at the ANU. But there are also other institutions that contribute to the impetus for a practical, national interest oriented style of Indonesian studies scholarship, with support for policy-oriented research and research support provided by other products of the Australian-Indonesia relationship, notably the massive AusAID-funded higher degree scholarships scheme and much smaller grant programs such as the (short-lived) Australia-Indonesia Governance Research Partnership and the Australia-Netherlands Research Collaboration (ANRC) scheme, both of which had an explicit policy orientation and an Indonesia or Southeast Asia focus. The Australian Research Council has also taken into account 'national interest' arguments, allowing every Indonesia scholar who applies to stress in their application the central importance of Indonesia for Australia and of the development of robust Indonesia knowledge.

Another important change over the last decade or so is not so much due to the Australian context, but more to do with the broader international attempt to remake Indonesia in the image of a modern liberal democracy. Since the collapse of the Suharto regime, major donors, international

agencies and NGOs have poured many millions of dollars into such diverse programs as building democratic institutions, peacebuilding, election monitoring, Islamic civil society programs, and so on (Aspinall 2010). The rise of this 'democracy assistance' industry focused on Indonesia has also generated demand for expert consultants and for staff with Indonesia knowledge and other relevant skills. The new political consultancy opportunities have generated both a source of additional income and new research opportunities for at least a group of Australian academics who specialise on Indonesia, and the democracy assistance industry more generally has emerged as an important alternative career path for Australian graduates of Indonesian studies and former students who have participated in exchange programs in Indonesia (notably in the influential but dwindling program organised by ACICIS, the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies). Bodies like the Asia Foundation and any number of big international NGOs, also certain parts of the World Bank, USAID, the International Crisis Group and similar bodies have recruited many Australian graduates, and employed established academics as consultants.

It is difficult to pronounce definitively on the impact of the development of the democracy assistance world for scholarship, because it is relatively new and may prove to be largely ephemeral, but I think it is having an impact. Consultancy partly counters the trend to extreme specialisation that we see among Australian Indonesia experts, because the agencies seek generalists. Most importantly, it reinforces the tendency to adopt a practical outlook rather than a theoretical position, and a practical outlook that is unquestioningly placed within a normative framework favouring democratisation and the development of liberal institutions. Thus, although on the one hand the general institutional context allows for specialisation on and within Indonesia; on the other, the growing influence of political consultancy and policy-oriented studies imparts a certain reform-oriented practicality to much of the writing generated by Australian specialists on Indonesian politics.

Structures of affect

In addition to political context and academic political economy, a third layer of context is much harder to analyse and articulate: the influence of personal background, proclivities and experiences in motivating research

agendas and styles. I would suggest, however, that it is as important as these other factors.

Affect plays a big role in determining who is attracted to the study of Indonesia. Indeed, it is striking for anyone who has taught in Indonesian studies programs just how little calculations about national interest or personal career play in influencing the choices of many students to study Indonesian. Most students are instead motivated by personal experience – a childhood connection with Indonesia, a personal interest in the ‘Other’, a fascination with crossing cultural borders, the impact of a personal relationship, a church exchange, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, a marriage, often an inspiring high school teacher, more occasionally an inspiring lecturer. As Barbara Hatley (2009) documents in her personal account of her first encounters with Indonesia in the 1960s and 1970s, there are important generational differences here: the experiences of the Indonesianists who were recruited around the time of the late 1960s early 1970s counter-culture were somewhat different from those of my generation who first studied Indonesia in the late 1980s and 1990s, and of undergraduates today. For one thing, it seems to me that whereas that earlier generation’s first footholds in Indonesian society were cultural (involvement in a traditional art form, or a theatre group, or a fascination with literature, for example), today they are just as likely to be political (involvement in an NGO, an environmental group, or the like).

Out of this mass of highly varied personal experiences, I think most insiders would be able to identify a certain type who is predominant in the Australian Indonesianist scene: a person with a certain sort of soft left political sensibility, a commitment to pluralism, and a fascination with cultural difference. Again, participants in the field will be able to think of exceptions, but most will probably agree with the generalisation. Perhaps it is not surprising that this should be so: humanities scholars and social scientists are generally on the left in all Western societies (see for example Fosse and Gross 2010), and social scientists working on non-Western societies probably especially so. Such personal backgrounds and inclinations in turn influence the choice of topics to do with Indonesia that are studied and researched. In Australian academe, these often focus on this or that sector of Indonesian progressive life, whether in the arts, social movements, civil society, or the intelligentsia, or on this or that problem, form of oppression or inequality experienced by this or that sector of Indonesian society and the power structures that make such things possible. One could say that the outlook of the typical Australian Indonesia

expert roughly conforms with the outlook presented in the magazine, now online, *Inside Indonesia*. This outlet presents itself as aiming to 'provide a deeper image of Indonesia than that painted by mainstream media' and as focusing on 'human rights, environmental, social and political issues' though not being limited to those issues'.⁵ It is indeed significant that *Inside Indonesia* is one of the longest-lasting institutions in the Australian Indonesian studies scene, being founded in 1983, and that it survives almost entirely without institutional support, but relies instead on the voluntary labour and financial contributions from Indonesianists (although now increasingly also drawing in persons from beyond Australia). It hence can be seen as being fairly representative of a broadly shared political outlook among Indonesia experts, and it is noteworthy that almost every Australian Indonesian expert of note has written for the magazine at least once.

So by personal outlook, most Australian scholars of Indonesian politics (obviously there are exceptions) are pulled in the opposite direction of the current generated by the dictates of the wider institutional and political context. If the institutional context requires a practical approach and an elite orientation, personal proclivities push towards specialisation and the study of the politics of, if not resistance, at least reform.

Is there a distinctive Australian style of studying Indonesian politics?

Of course, it is still very hard to generalise. This is both because of the overall small numbers of participants involved, and because the work they produce is highly varied. But if we do generalise, some observations can be made. Firstly, in the Australian Indonesian studies scene, including that concerned with the study of politics, high value is placed on specialisation, both in terms of scholarly apprenticeship (the acquisition of high-level language skills and of lengthy fieldwork and in-country immersion) and typically in terms of topic as well. Indonesianists in Australia tend to judge their peers in terms of how they know a particular Islamic group or a region, for example, which they claim as falling within their area of expertise.

⁵ 'About us', *Inside Indonesia* website. Accessed 2 February 2011. Available from: <http://www.insideindonesia.org/about-us/about-us>. In the interests of disclosure, I must note that I am one of the coordinating editors.

Secondly, there is a tendency to empiricism. Emphasis is placed on the collection of facts in the field, especially from personal interviews with key political actors, rather than collection of information from less direct sources; high value is also placed on being 'up to date' (it is no coincidence that one of the key institutions in the field is the annual Indonesia Update conference at the Australian National University).

Thirdly, there is also a tendency – again not a universal one – to avoid theorising and comparison, or at least to limit the range of theoretical exploration to a few core themes or topics (see Philpott 2000, 145–46 for the key themes, although we would now need to add democratisation to his list). There is of course a practical dimension to this: accumulating language expertise, fieldwork skills and connections, and detailed knowledge on one's chosen topic is an all-consuming set of tasks which, when added to all the teaching and other burdens that are part of contemporary academic life, can leave little time for theoretical exploration (the absence of a coursework component in Australian PhD programs probably also contributes). It is not that most Australian scholars working on Indonesian politics are anti-theory; on the contrary most will draw on theoretical literature just enough to frame an argument, book-end an empirical analysis or make observations about its relevance to a wider universe of cases. But I suspect that few would feel that their primary contribution is theoretical innovation.

Three strands of political commentary on Indonesia

Australia is coming to an end of a period of a decade or so of intense media and public interest in Indonesia. This began with the 1998 collapse of the Suharto regime, an event that attracted blanket media coverage in Australia. Australian public interest was then sustained by the East Timor independence referendum and subsequent Australian military intervention, the series of terrorist bombings that targeted Australians among others, several high-profile arrests of Australians for narcotics offences in Indonesia, the 2005 Indian Ocean tsunami and large Australian aid response to that, as well as by a series of others issues such as the passage of Middle Eastern and other asylum seekers to Australia through Indonesia, and by the arrival of a few Papuan asylum seekers on Australian shores. This has been a period of very intense public interest that has in recent years begun to subside, as is made obvious now by the virtual disappearance of coverage of developments in the domestic politics

of Indonesia in the Australian media, in contrast to the early years of the post-Suharto transition.

In this context, Australian experts on Indonesian politics have been called upon to provide two overlapping kinds of commentary on Indonesian affairs for the Australian and international media. The first was specialist commentary on Indonesian events that are important for Indonesia and only indirectly so for Australia ('What does this or that outbreak of political violence signify?', 'What is the mood of the Indonesian population regarding the performance of the current president?'). The other is commentary about issues where the key question goes to some Indonesian decision or action that directly impacts upon Australia or Australians, or where it goes to a posture that the Australian government or Australians generally should adopt with regard to Indonesia ('What sort of threat do Indonesian Muslims pose to Australians?', 'Why have the Indonesian authorities treated the latest Australian narcotics detainee so poorly?', 'What should the Australian government's policy be towards the latest human rights abuse in Papua?'). It is this second category of questions that tend to generate most interest, and also most heat, in the Australian public debate, unsurprising perhaps given the utilitarian and often narcissistic manner in which Southeast Asia is viewed in public discourse in this country.

Indonesia specialists enter into these second set of debates at our own peril: we do not set the terms of the debates, and they can be a trap. Commentators can either end up trying to defend the indefensible in Indonesia or becoming a plaything of Australian nationalism and xenophobia and risk valorising and reinforcing popular myths about Indonesian alienness, hostility and dysfunction. Overall, on this second category of questions about how issues in Indonesia affect Australia and Australians, it is possible to detect three general postures among Australian Indonesianists.

A Jakarta lobby?

The term 'Jakarta lobby' (sometimes, 'Indonesia lobby') was first coined in the debates of the 1970s and 1980s that followed the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Put most simply, the idea was that there was a small group of people inside and outside the Australian government who promoted close ties with Jakarta in the interest of Australian elites, especially business elites, at the expense of human rights in Indonesia. As one critic of the supposed lobby described it, the lobby consisted of 'an

informal group of bureaucrats, academics and journalists who have tightly controlled Australian foreign policy towards Indonesia and East Timor ... The Jakarta lobby has long regarded Australia's relationship with Indonesia as an exceptional case requiring careful management by "experts" with a proper sympathy for and understanding of Jakarta's difficulties' (Burchill 1999). This accusation is still made in public debate, especially by Papua solidarity activists and their supporters.

It is of course true that Realpolitik views about the importance of Indonesia for Australia and what this should mean about official attitudes to East Timor, human rights, Papua or similar issues have been expressed frequently in Australian political debate down the years. They were especially liable to prompt controversy during the Suharto years, when many Australians felt uncomfortable about their government developing such close ties with an autocratic regime responsible for gross human rights abuses. Typically, the most forceful articulators of such Realpolitik views, however, were not academic specialists on Indonesia, but journalists and former diplomats, such as Paul Kelly and Greg Sheridan of the *Australian* and Richard Woolcott, the former Australian ambassador to Indonesia (each of whom still argues along these lines from time to time: see for example Woolcott 2006). It is questionable, however, whether there is a lobby in the sense of an organised group seeking to exercise influence over Australian government policy from the outside. There is no real need for a lobby of such a sort because all Australian government policy-makers and leaders over the last few decades have held the Realpolitik views ascribed to the lobby. Those people who are accused of being part of the lobby are merely publically articulating the government line.

Has there been significant involvement by academic Indonesia specialists in such a 'lobby' or in arguing the position that is seen as underpinning it? The ANU is generally identified as being a centre of such a tendency, in part because of the significant role played by economists in this institution, and their close connections with Indonesian economists, technocrats and policy-makers during the Suharto years. During his time as head of the Department of Economics (1960–1980) at the Research School of Pacific Studies, and after he retired, Professor Heinz Arndt sometimes wrote in the media to defend Indonesia's record in East Timor, in the face of all the evidence of the human rights record there, as well as to defend Suharto's development record or advocate closer Australia–Indonesia ties. More broadly, as I have indicated above, it must be acknowledged that there is a certain ambience or milieu at the ANU that makes it

different from the other major sites of scholarly research on Indonesia in Australia. Indonesia scholars at the ANU – currently a large and diverse group of several dozen persons – are certainly not closely integrated with the Australian government as a group, but many of them have informal and personal ties with serving and retired government officials in bodies like AusAID, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Office of National Assessments. Such links provide opportunities (albeit limited and indirect ones) for input into policy-making and evaluation processes and for providing information to government that are generally absent in other places. It is therefore not surprising that the ANU has remained the key centre of Australian academia and from time to time generates argumentative pieces that combine classically realist appraisals of Australia's national interests, cautious analysis of Indonesia's political circumstances and advocacy of close Australia–Indonesia ties (see for example Monfries 2006, McGibbon 2006, Mackie 2007, MacIntyre and Ramage 2008). Even so, the onset of democratisation and East Timor's independence have taken much of the public heat out of debates about Australia's relations with Indonesia, except on a few highly contentious issues such as the status of Papua. Anyone looking for a Jakarta lobby advocating a line of closer ties with Indonesia in defiance of all consideration of human rights and with deep roots in Australian academia will have difficulty finding it.

A critical position or an anti-Indonesia lobby?

Within the community of specialists of Indonesian politics in Australian universities there is now relatively little serious dispute on basic political questions to do with Indonesia. This is very different, say, from the Burma studies field which is deeply divided about questions arising from the sanctions debate (see for example Aung-Ihwin 2001–2002), and where personal rancour is sometimes extreme. It is also different from Indonesian studies in the 1960s and 1970s, when both American and Australian scholars were divided by the politics of the Cold War, the increasing radicalism of Indonesian nationalism, the post-1965 rise to power of the military, and the implications of such developments for scholarship. As a consequence of these factors, a radical critique of mainstream approaches to Indonesia arose both in the United States and in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s (see for example Levine 1969; Mortimer 1973; Robison 1981). In Australia, this division was partly institutionalised in the emergence during the 1960s and early 1970s of a purported division between Monash

University, which was seen (rightly or wrongly) as a centre of more critical scholarship on Indonesia, and the ANU, where the dominance of the economists was associated with a more sympathetic posture towards the New Order and its developmentalism.

Now, the left-right axis that once divided Indonesian studies has largely faded. The Cold War has ended. Democratisation has taken away much of the passion about how academics should best position themselves and their work vis-a-vis the Indonesian regime. Equally important, the Marxist project for remaking capitalist societies that underlay many of the radical critiques of mainstream analyses of Indonesian politics has also been eviscerated. In its place has come a post-1960s leftist sensibility that combines celebration of difference, identity and multiplicity with a liberal sympathy for democracy and human rights, which as I have tried to outline above permeates the Indonesian studies field. Evidence of this transformation is found, ironically, in the one place where there has been anything approaching a coherent neo-Marxist school of analysis of Indonesia in Australia – in the work of Richard Robison and that group of scholars he has trained and been associated with, with the chief of the Indonesia scholars among them Vedi R. Hadiz. Robison and Hadiz make use of the tools bequeathed by Marxism to devastating effect whether in portraying the class dynamics at the heart of the New Order regime (Robison 1986) or in portraying the continuities in oligarchic power in post-transition Indonesia (Robison and Hadiz 2004; Hadiz 2010). Yet the gulf between their analysis and those of other scholars of Indonesian politics is much narrower than it might appear, with an emphasis on elite dominance and recalcitrance being a widely accepted theme in studies of post-Suharto democratisation. If anything, they are distinguished chiefly by their pessimism about the prospects of Indonesia's democratic transformation, a pessimism that derives from the absence in their analysis of the belief in revolutionary change and the transformative potential of subordinated groups that once animated left-wing scholarship.

In Australian studies of Indonesian politics, we thus see little fundamental disagreement about the basic dynamics of Indonesian politics, the nature of Indonesian society or the direction in which Indonesia's democratic transformation should proceed.⁶ At most, there are occasional

⁶ Arguably, Max Lane is the only Australian author with long-standing Indonesianist credentials who stands outside this broad scholarly consensus (see Lane 2008) but, tellingly, until recently he has had no footing in the institutional structures of Indonesian studies.

disagreements of the glass half-empty or half-full variety about such issues. Overall, there is remarkable normative consensus about such issues, driven by the overpowering resurgence of what Rex Mortimer (1973, 114) once called the 'critical liberalism' that first became obvious in the early post-World War II Australian scholarship on Southeast Asia.

However, there has been over the last decade or so one area that presents a significant exception to this scholarly consensus, and where there has been considerable critical and even vociferous public scholarship about Indonesia in Australia. That area is the secessionist regions of Indonesia: formerly, East Timor, now Papua. Precisely because of the relevance to Australian policy, these topics have attracted great public attention and given rise to a new form of activist scholarship that seeks to influence public opinion and change government policy in the direction of placing greater support for human rights and/or self-determination. This activist scholarship and the associated public debate is not, however, dominated by Indonesian studies scholars. Instead, the chief protagonists have tended to be individuals who have come to their topics directly through an avenue of political solidarity, and who sometimes do not know Indonesia well or lack the language skills or extensive Indonesian fieldwork experience that are so prized among Indonesian studies professionals (representative books by Australian authors on Papua over the last decade include Elmslie 2002; King 2004; Leith 2003; Fernandes 2006). Such works, and even more so, much of the public debate and commentary about human rights and self-determination in Papua (to take only the most recent example) promotes a strong position of solidarity with the people of Papua, in an idiom that is borrowed from earlier anti-imperialist solidarity campaigns (most obviously the anti-Vietnam War movement). They also tend to view the issue through a narrative of 'Australian betrayal' of the Papuan people and their struggle, and to occasionally echo broader fears and suspicions of Indonesia that are deeply embedded in Australian popular culture (Aspinall 2006).

The silent majority

As Freddy Kalidjernih (2008) has suggested, most Indonesia specialists in Australia, with a few exceptions, have shied away from public debate on sensitive issues such as Papua. In the case of Papua, this silence is no doubt partly because most Australian Indonesianists are trained to view specialist knowledge of a topic as a prerequisite to being able to speak authoritatively on it, a belief that constrains few other commentators in

public debate on Indonesia in Australia. Perhaps the fear of being banned from Indonesia, or of otherwise suffering adverse consequences for one's own research, is a constraining factor. However, the deeper and more fundamental problem is the moral ambivalence or conflict that arises from the contradictions between Australian Indonesianists' political attitudes and their desire to promote public sympathy for and interest in Indonesia. Exponents of critical liberalism, Australian Indonesian specialists are often personally highly committed to issues to do with human rights, such as those afflicting Papua and, previously, East Timor. Yet the driving rationale of the Australian Indonesian studies scene remains a determination to combat Australian fears, misperceptions and stereotypes about Indonesia (and in so doing to contribute to an Australian polity and society that is itself more plural and multicultural). At the very least, this combination of motives can give rise to a degree of nuance, complexity and qualification that does not equip one well to be a commentator in the media, where quick and clear judgements are generally expected. And although the Papua case is a particularly difficult topic, similar problems arise in commentary on almost any issue where Australian interests are involved and public opinion is aroused. As a result, it is not surprising that much of the public debate and commentary about Indonesia in Australia tends to be dominated by people who do not know the country well. The low quality of much public debate about Indonesian affairs in Australia frustrates many of the country's Indonesia specialists, but perhaps we are ourselves partly to blame for it.

Conclusion

I have tried here to explore some ways in which political and institutional contexts have shaped the way that the study of Indonesian politics is carried on in Australia, and their implications for how Indonesian studies scholars participate in public debate. Compared to the relationships that most Western advanced capitalist countries have with developing countries, the relationship of Australia to Indonesia is unusual. Australia's position vis-a-vis Indonesia is not that of a former colonial metropole to post-colony or of a contemporary global power to a marginal player in the world economic order. To be sure, Australia's relationship with Indonesia was marked, especially in the early decades of Indonesia's independence, by considerable indifference and ignorance on the part of the Australian public and policy-makers. Indonesia studies scholars in Australia consequently viewed

themselves as blazing a trail that would enlighten Australians to the implications of their geographic location on the periphery of Asia, and to begin the long task of making Australians, as the current buzz phrase puts it, 'Asia literate'. As Indonesia has evolved politically and economically, and as trade, tourism, migration and other flows between the two countries have expanded, the country has come to play an increasingly large role in Australian public imagination and policy debate, whether as threatening danger, source of promise, or both.

Not surprisingly, this unusual relationship has produced opportunities for the development of a field of study of Indonesian politics in Australia that is disproportionate to the size of Australia's population and its academy. But it has also left its mark on aspects of the study pursued in this country in the form of, among other things, considerable specialisation, an area studies approach and an emphasis on detailed empirics rather than global theories. At the same time, Indonesian studies scholars have viewed themselves as interpreters of Indonesian political events for a wider Australian public and for government, and as advocates of closer Australian engagement with Indonesia, even if they are not always well suited to playing those interpretative and advocacy roles on the issues that most excite public controversy in Australia.

It is difficult to foresee any of this changing much in the near future while Australia's relationship with Indonesia continues to be widely viewed in Australia as both important and problematic, and with the important proviso that considerations of national interest continue to at least partially inoculate the Indonesian studies scene from the market pressures that might otherwise lay waste to it. Over time, however, it might be that economic and other changes in both countries, and greater integration and exchange between them will have transformative effects. To be sure, it is still hard to imagine an Australian society that achieves the degree of social and cultural integration with Indonesia, and the sophisticated knowledge of the Asian neighbourhood, to which many Australian specialists of Indonesia aspire. Nor is it yet easy to imagine Indonesia experiencing such a seamless integration into a liberal-democratic order that its politics are seen as so normalised that they no longer give rise to a perceived need for specialist knowledge and area studies skills. Even so, economic and social changes in Indonesia, and their attendant effects on intellectual life there, might still affect the way the country is viewed and studied in Australia. Already, Indonesian studies in Australian universities is increasingly populated by scholars from Indonesia, whose contributions have included not merely

bringing their own form of specialised knowledge about Indonesia but also of injecting a new level of theoretical sophistication.⁷ One can only speculate on what the growth of Indonesia's own intellectual life and the increasing participation by Indonesia-based scholars in international scholarly debate and publishing on their country's politics, will have on transforming the international study of Indonesian politics, including in Australia.

References

- Amadae, S M. 2003. *Rationalizing Capitalist Democracy: The Cold War Origins of Rational Choice Liberalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1982. 'Perspective and method in American research on Indonesia', In *Interpreting Indonesian Politics: Thirteen Contributions to the Debate*, edited by Anderson; Benedict; Kahin, Audrey. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University: 69–83.
- Aspinall, Edward. 2006. 'Re-thinking Papua, Indonesia and Australia'. *Policy and Society* 25 (4): 121–130.
- Aspinall, Edward. 2010. *Assessing Democracy Assistance: Indonesia*. Madrid: FRIDE (Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior).
- Aung-Thwin, Michael. 2001–2002. 'Parochial universalism, democracy jibad and the Orientalist image of Burma: The new evangelism'. *Pacific Affairs* 74 (4): 483–505.
- Burchill, Scott. 1999. 'The Jakarta Lobby: mea culpa?'. *Age* (4 March).
- Burke, Anthony. 2008. *Fear of Security: Australia's Invasion Anxiety*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Cook, Ivan. 2006. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2006. Australia, Indonesia and the World: Public Opinion and Foreign Policy*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- Cooper, Andrew F; Higgott, Richard A; Nossal, Kim Richard. 1993. *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Cribb, Robert. 2005. 'Circles of esteem, standard works and euphoric couplets: Dynamics of academic life in Indonesian studies'. *Critical Asian Studies*. 37 (2): 289–304.
- Crouch, Harold. 2010. *Political Reform in Indonesia after Soeharto*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Elmslie, Jim. 2002. *Irian Jaya Under the Gun: Indonesian Economic Development versus West Papuan Nationalism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

⁷ In the political studies field, obvious examples are Vedi R. Hadiz and Ariel Heryanto.

- Emmerson, Donald K. 2008. 'Southeast Asia in political science: Terms of enlistment.' In *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*, edited by Kuhonta, Erik Martinez; Slater, Dan; Vu, Tuong. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 302–324.
- Fernandes, Clinton. 2006. *Reluctant Indonesians: Australia, Indonesia and the Future of West Papua*. Melbourne: Scribe.
- Fosse, Ethan; Gross, Neil. 2010. *Why Are Professors Liberal?* Working Paper, Department of Sociology, University of British Columbia.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 2004. 'How academia failed the nation: The decline of regional studies'. *Saisphere* (Winter).
- Graf, Arndt. 2009. 'Indexing a field: The case of Indonesian and Malaysian studies'. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43 (2): 191–221.
- Hadiz, Vedi R. 2010. *Localising Power in Post-Authoritarian Indonesia: A Southeast Asia Perspective*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hanson, Fergus. 2010. *The Lowy Institute Poll 2010: Australia and the World, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy* Sydney: The Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- Hatley, Barbara. 2009. 'Encountering Indonesia as a student, then and now'. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43 (1): 95–103.
- Hill, David T. 2010. *Indonesian in Australian Universities: A Discussion Paper*. Murdoch University.
- Kalidjernih, Freddy K. 2008. 'Australian Indonesia-specialists and debates on West Papua: Implications for Australia-Indonesia relations'. *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 62 (1): 72–93.
- King, Peter. 2004. *West Papua and Indonesia Since Subarto: Independence, Autonomy or Chaos?* Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Kuhonta, Erik Martinez; Dan Slater; Vu, Tuong (eds). 2008. *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Laitin, David. 1993. 'Letter from the incoming president', APSA – CP (Newsletter of the American Political Science Association's Organised Section in Comparative Politics), 4 (2): 2, 18.
- Lane, Max. 2008. *Unfinished Nation. Indonesia Before and after Subarto*. London: Verso.
- Leith, Denise. 2003. *The Politics of Power: Freeport in Subarto's Indonesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Levine, David. 1969. 'History and social structure in the study of contemporary Indonesia'. *Indonesia* 7: 5–19.
- McGibbon, Rodd. 2006. *Pitfalls of Papua: Understanding the Conflict and its Place in Australia-Indonesia Relations*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- MacIntyre, Andrew; Douglas E. Ramage. 2008. *Seeing Indonesia as a Normal Country:*

- Implications for Australia*. Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute.
- Mackie, Jamie. 2007. *Australia and Indonesia: Current Problems, Future Prospects*. Sydney: Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- Monfries, John, editor. 2006. *Different Societies, Shared Futures: Australia, Indonesia and the Region*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Monroe, Kristen Renwick, editor. 2005. *Perestroika!: The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Mortimer, Rex. 1973. 'From Ball to Arndt: the Liberal impasse in Australian scholarship on Southeast Asia'. In *Showcase State: The Illusion of Indonesia's 'Accelerated Modernisation'*, edited by Mortimer, Rex. Sydney: Angus & Robertson: 101–158.
- Pausacker, Helen. 2009. 'Is gender still off the agenda? Involvement and visibility of women at Indonesian studies conferences in Australia'. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* 43 (1): 105–127.
- Philpott, Simon. 2000. *Retbinking Indonesia: Postcolonial Theory, Authoritarianism and Identity*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Robison, Richard. 1981. 'Culture, politics and economy in the political history of the New Order'. *Indonesia* 31: 1–29.
- Robison, Richard. 1986. *Indonesia: The Rise of Capital*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Robison, Richard; Hadiz, Vedi R. 2004. *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: the Politics of Oligarchy in an Age of Markets*. London: Routledge Curzon.
- Woolcott, Richard. 2010. 'John Howard is right to placate Indonesia: Australia's relations with Jakarta should not be hostage to our sympathy for Papuan refugees', *Australian* (21 April).