

CONTEXT AND METHOD IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN POLITICS

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Context Sensitivity

Central concern and standard of evaluation for Southeast Asian political studies

How to be sensitive? Depends on what “context” means

Denigrating the Insensitive (I)

- “Nishizaki’s book should render **unpublishable** and above all **unread** work on the political life of the region that fails to engage the empirical contours of that life in a manner rather **more truly rigorous and informed** than has become the norm in North American ‘**political science**’”
(Montesano 2012, emphasis added)

Denigrating the Insensitive (II)

- “Within the academy, the **consensus** has formed that area studies has **failed to generate scientific knowledge.**” Solution? Area specialists should “**record the data** from which political inferences [can] be drawn by **social scientists residing in political science departments.**” (Bates 1996, emphasis added)

Context Sensitivity

Central concern and standard of evaluation for Southeast Asian political studies

How to be sensitive? Depends on what “context” means

1. “Local level linguistic and other locally-grounded knowledge and expertise” (King 2005)
2. Appropriate sensitivity to comparable regional, historical, or global phenomena

Two Contexts

Unit Context

- the features of a case and how they give it meaning
- Sensitivity = more features and more meaning

Population Context

- the wider collection of entities of which a case can be thought of as more or less representative
- Sensitivity = more reflection on representativeness

Context Is Neither Method Nor Discipline

		Methodological Core	
		<i>Qualitative</i>	<i>Quantitative</i>
Unit Context	<i>Political Science</i>	Standard area studies, including the Cornell school and others	Malesky 2009, Malesky and Schuler 2010, Pepinsky 2007, Pepinsky et al. 2012, von Luebke 2009
	<i>Not Political Science</i>		Kiernan 2002
Population Context	<i>Political Science</i>	Boudreau 2004, Doner 2009, Kuhonta 2011, MacIntyre 2003, Malesky et al. 2011, Pepinsky 2009, Slater 2010, Smith 2007, Vu 2010	Cross-national quantitative political science (including by some SE Asianists like me)
	<i>Not Political Science</i>	Furnivall 1941, Wertheim 1965, Geertz 1968, Lieberman 2009	Mainstream economics, quantitative sociology and development studies

Kiernan the Quantoid

Social Group	1975 Population	Number Who Perished	Percentage
urban Khmer	2,000,000	500,000	25
rural Khmer	600,000	150,000	25
Chinese	430,000	215,000	50
Vietnamese (urban)	10,000	10,000	100
Lao (rural)	10,000	4,000	40

	Urban Khmer	Chinese
Perished	500,000	215,000
Survived	1,500,000	215,000

$\chi^2(1)=106515.9, p < .001$

	Rural Khmer	Rural Lao
Perished	150,000	4,000
Survived	450,000	6,000

$\chi^2(1)=1172.7, p < .001$

Context Is Ontology

Unit homogeneity assumption: two or more social objects represent exemplars of a natural kind

Unit context: this assumption **is not** warranted

Population context: this assumption **is** warranted

Assumptions are neither true or false; they are useful or not

Areas of Compatibility

1. Multi-level research designs
2. External validity and the domain of generalizability

Areas of Incompatibility (I)

Heterogeneity and causal complexity: *how different is Suphanburi from Newark?*

What if the contextual differences all interact with one another (effects of history antecedents are conditional on global income and social structure and elite agency and...)?

$$\begin{aligned} Y &= f(X_1, X_2, X_3, X_4, \dots) \\ &= \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \beta_4 X_4 + \dots + \beta_m X_1 X_2 \\ &\quad + \beta_{m+1} X_1 X_2 X_3 + \beta_{m+2} X_1 X_2 X_3 X_4 + \dots \end{aligned}$$

If so, with K contextual factors, you need 2^K cases to “just identify” contextual effects (and that is only if all IVs are binary, all IVs are exogenous, no two cases overlap, and causal relations are deterministic): **no general linear reality**

Areas of Incompatibility (II)

The unit homogeneity assumption, being untestable, makes differences unresolvable

How do you **prove** that two units are or are not similar enough for comparison to be feasible?

THE POINT: The unit context perspective ought to be taken seriously by the comparativists. No **foundational** reason to prefer population to unit.

No Platitudes!

1. “Unit context and population context are both valuable, so we should strive to do both”
2. “Unit context and population context are both valuable, but incompatible, so they should just coexist”

Everything is valuable, but population context is the superior framework for Southeast Asian political studies.

My tastes...and yours

1. Observations are theory-laden; theory means comparison
2. Within-unit comparisons assume a population too
3. Most “unit context-sensitive” works actually believe that generalization is possible
4. The “great works” of Southeast Asian political studies are comparative
 - *Imagined Communities*, not *Java in a Time of Revolution*
 - *The Art of Not Being Governed*, not *Political Ideology in Malaysia*

Take unit context seriously. But recognize comparison as the goal to which Southeast Asianists strive.

Five Step Action Plan

1. Forget about Southeast Asia as the specter of comparison (examples: Blackburn, Cohn, Hatch, Logevall, Loos, Fiskesjö, Kuruvilla, Pepinsky, Tagliacozzo, Taylor, Willford, Williams)
2. Learn the logic of causal inference *and* the critiques of general linear reality
3. For unit contextualists: “we cannot compare Thailand and Bolivia because W X Y Z, and I would be wrong if A B C D...”
4. For population contextualists: “I claim that Thailand is comparable with Bolivia because W X Y Z, and I would be wrong if A B C D...”
5. Create two, three, many von Lübkes