Taking Expedience Seriously:
Reinterpreting Furnivall's Southeast Asia

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[*Abstract*]

Defining key characteristics of Southeast Asia requires historical interpretation. Southeast Asia is a diverse and complicated region, but some of modern history's "grand narratives" serve to unify its historical experience. At a minimum, the modern history of the region involves decisive encounters with universal religions, the rise of Western colonialism, the experience of world wars, decolonization, and the end of the "cycle of violence". The ability of the region's peoples to adapt to these many challenges and successfully build new nations is a defining feature of Southeast Asia's place in the global stage.

This paper will begin with a question: is it possible to develop a hermeneutic of "expedience" as a way to interpret the region's history? That is, rather than regard the region from a purely Western, nationalist, "internalist" point of view, it would be useful to identify a new series of interpretative contexts from which to begin scholarly analysis. In order to contextualize this discussion, the paper will draw upon the writings of figures who explored the region before knowledge

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about it was shaped by purely colonist or nationalist enterprises. To this end, particular attention will be devoted to exploring some of John Furnivall's ways of conceptualizing Southeast Asia. Investigating Furnivall, a critic of colonialism, will be done in relation to his historical situation. Because Furnivall's ideas have played a pivotal role in the interpretation of Southeast Asia, the paper will highlight the intellectual history of the region in order to ascertain the value of these concepts for subsequent historical interpretation.

Ultimately, the task of interpreting the region's history requires a framework which will move beyond the essentializing orientalist categories produced by colonial scholarship and the reactionary nation-building narratives which followed. Instead, by beginning with a mode of historical interpretation that focuses on the many realities of expedience which have been necessary for the region's peoples, it may be possible to write a history which highlights the extraordinarily adaptive quality of Southeast Asia's populations, cultures, and nations. To tell this story, which would at once highlight key characteristics of the region while showing how they developed through historical encounters, would go a long way to capturing Southeast Asia's contribution's to global development.

Keywords: Furnivall, Burma, Southeast Asia, political economy, Fabian and 'plural society'

Ⅰ. Introduction

Making Southeast Asia (SEA) visible to outsiders or to those who do not study it remains a challenge. The identity of regions is not always self-evident to both those who live within and the rest of humanity who do not. However, the ways in which regions have been conceptualized invariably involves not only historical dynamics and economic realities, but the needs of actors who seek to define the geographic spaces which come to be known as regions. This paper rests on the assumption that regional definition emerges from circumstances and therefore is itself open to interrogation. With respect to SEA, it seems possible that the needs of political

establishments have been relatively indifferent to the formulations or regional identity. In "Revisiting and Reconstructing Southeast Asian Characteristics", it is important to move beyond the borders of the region and try to understand its essentializing features. The argument here is that scholarship devoted to the study of the region should be bold in pushing beyond established academic categories. Both the colonial narratives and the nationalist scholarship which followed made useful contributions to understanding SEA; additionally, the region has benefitted from scholars in Western settings ("outsiders") as well as from practitioners who may be said to write from an "internalist" perspective. Instead, this discussion seeks to call attention to conceptualization through a historically informed study of SEA as a region, defined by the adaptive character of its indigenous populations. That is, it might be possible to write the history of the region not from the point of view of nations, but from commonalities which arise from continuous patterns of expedience—as the indigenous peoples that make up SEA adapted to the frequent and powerful external influences which had conditioned their encounters with modernity.

One might think of the historiographical approach which makes possible the tracing of the ways in which historians and other thinkers understood the region over time. This method can be easily extended to other disciplines so that the scholar's view of SEA can be made evident. The presence of departments of Southeast Asian Studies has ensured that the academic exploration of the region has been enshrined in many universities. The assumption that often undergirds this body of scholarship is that it is ideologically committed to social improvements (Goh 2011). While all of this might be regarded as laudable, it is hardly the only avenue for trying to revisit and reconstruct SEA. In fact, if the history of academic disciplines (apart from historiography) teaches us anything, it is that the knowledge which comes from the world of the university is frequently, if not inevitably dominated by political and ideological considerations—many of them quite crude and narrow. This paper adopts a different approach: it will focus upon a key thinker to revisit the way the region was conceptualized by an influential mind.

At the heart of this discussion lies an interpretation and

re-assessment of John Sydenham Furnivall (1878-1960) whose work, especially *The Fashioning of Leviathan* (1939) and *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* (1948), might be regarded as seminal texts. Students of the region will be aware that he also wrote directly about it*: Progress and welfare in Southeast Asia: a comparison of colonial policy and practice* (1941), *Problems of education in Southeast Asia* (1942), and *Educational Progress in South East Asia* (1943), all demonstrated a wide view of the region under various instances of European colonialism.

Furnivall is one of the many understudied figures who came out of British Burma and possibly the most enigmatic. Furnivall would be very influential for a generation of scholars who studied SEA in the first generation in which empires gave way to nations. Wang Gungwu remembered that Furnivall opened his eyes to the "use of social science methods to deal with Southeast Asian questions." (2011: 68) It was Furnivall's conception of the plural society, which followed from his studies of Dutch colonialism, that made him an essential reading for those who embarked on the academic exploration of SEA. While it is possible that Furnivall's influence on the study of SEA peaked in the 1970's (Lee Hock Guan 2009: 36), it is clear that scholars regard him as "essential reading". Furnivall remains a frequently quoted and read author, but he has yet to be the subject of biographical study.

A brief sketch here must be necessary. He was born in 1878 in Essex, attended Royal Medical Benevolent College, and won a scholarship to Trinity Hall, Cambridge. He arrived in Burma in 1902, and not long after married a Burmese woman, Margaret Ma Nyunt.

It would probably be fair to add that Furnivall was an activist civil servant. That is, he understood his role to be connected to the development and improvement of Burma. He would be involved with both the founding of the Burma Research Society and the subsequent development of the *Journal of Burma Research*. Julie Pham has intellectual emphasized that Furnivall's trajectory was highly unusual. As an Indian Civil Service (ICS) man he had married a local woman, but must have been seen as a rising star in the

country administrative firmament. (2004: 242-244) Furthermore, he would convert to Buddhism, but 10 year later reconvert to Christianity. (Pham, 2004: 242) Furnivall retired to Britain in the 1930's, but unlike so many civil servants, he went to study at Leiden University. His desire to study comparative colonialism might be remembered as a small, but important point in the development of SEA studies. Here was a civil servant who moved beyond writing reflections about the country where he had played a role in governing and, instead, chose to investigate another colonial administrative system. He became a lecturer at Cambridge, and in 1940 published a Burmese-English dictionary. In 1948, he returned to Burma, bringing with him a frame of reference which drew upon the concerns of British policy makers. In the new independent Burma, he was appointed National Planning Advisor. Furnivall would be expelled from Burma by Ne Win's government in 1960. (Pham 2004: 240-244)

To put this sketch in perspective, by the time he wrote many of his key works, Furnivall had seen Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, lived through the First World War and Russian Revolution, seen British rule be challenged in India (which included Burma), and watched the rise of Japan and the emergence of totalitarianism. Furnivall arrived in Burma early enough to witness the apex of British colonialism. He also engaged the region during the period when colonial rule was increasingly challenged and then witnessed the Japanese conquests. Writing in the 1930's, he labored with the Great Depression and Japanese invasions of China in full view. In effect, Furnivall's regional perspective reflected historical circumstances. Possibly, Furnivall's brief led him back to the region as it began to successfully reject colonialism against the background of the Cold War. All told, the evolution of Furnivall's vision might be measured against the emergence of the region as a collective of independent nation-states, whose larger success was still very much affected by global political developments.

Furnivall's career, then, allowed him to see SEA from a number of vantage points. As we will see, the fact that he remained in Europe between 1931 and 1948 meant that he may have missed much about what the region was experiencing at it underwent

significant challenges and transformations. Furnivall does not seem to be sensitive to either the power of the nationalist movements which were quite visible in the region prior to World War II or the wide and irrevocable impact that the conflict had upon SEA. Future students of Furnivall ought to ponder this point carefully because these seventeen years were important—if not decisive—half generation for the region. It meant that while Furnivall was immersing himself in the study of Dutch colonial administrative practices in Leiden, his knowledge of SEA was almost certainly becoming progressively out of date.

This article takes another look at the concept of "plural society" because it had a substantial impact on the conceptualization of SEA. Furnivall famously described this condition:

> In Burma, as in Java, probably the first thing that strikes the visitor is the medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian and native. It is in the strictest sense a medley, for they mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, in buying and selling. There is a plural society, with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is a division of labour along racial lines. Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations. There is, as it were, a caste system, but without religious basis that incorporates caste in social life in India. One finds similar conditions all over the Tropical Far East—under Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, British, French or American rule; among Filipinos, Javanese, Malays, Burmans and Annamese; whether the objective of the colonial power has been tribute, trade or material resources; under direct rule and under indirect. The obvious and outstanding result of contact between East and West has been the evolution of a plural society; in the Federated Malay States the indigenous inhabitants number barely a quarter of the total population. The same thing has happened in the South Pacific. The Fiji chieftains invited British protection, and one result has been that half the inhabitants are immigrants from India. In African dependencies there are Indian immigrants in East Africa and Syrians in West Africa, and in some regions the 'coloured,' or Eurafrican, population forms a separate caste….One finds much the same thing

> in Java, and in all tropical dependencies 'westernized' natives are more or less cut off from the people, and form a separate group or caste. The plural society has great variety of forms, but in some form or other it is the distinctive character of modern tropical economy. (1948: 304-305)

In fact, it is almost embarrassing to quote directly from many key passages of *Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India* because the statements are known so well. Yet, the passage certainly helped to make the region visible and therefore it merits "revisiting", as a brief re-examination of the "plural society" should be in order. Furthermore, it might be remembered that much of the discussion about methodological issues in studying SEA worried about "genealogies of knowledge", often focusing upon the origin or early trajectories about particular issues in scholarship. These conversations have proven valuable and they are often connected to the much larger projects of social criticism and development. However, it might also be useful to reflect on those episodes in which scholarship about the region made an impact outside SEA. Studying the region from the outside also means gaining perspective on the ways in which developments in SEA had influence beyond it. With that, it would be just as convenient to reflect upon the viability of the "plural society" because it is a concept which was framed with information from Burma and the Netherlands Indies, but it has also applied to many subjects beyond SEA.

It is clear that Furnivall's description of the "plural society" became influential to those who were actively thinking about the development of SEA. For instance, Hans-Dieter Evers noted that Furnivall's conception of the plural society, "soon became fashionable in academic circles and among politicians side by side with the concept of the dual society it had thought to replace" (1980: 3). In fact, the basic idea of the plural society proved influential with policy makers as Evers noted:

> Furnivall's paradigm spread fairly rapidly and was applied to a great number of societies, particularly in South-East Asia and in the West Indies. It also carried favour with politicians and nation-builders.

> Slightly modified to 'multi-racial society' it became part of the national ideology of the Republic of Singapore in which an extreme diversity of ethnic and cultural groups was neatly classified as 'Malays, Chinese, Indians and others', granting cultural and language autonomy to each community, but demanding political and economic co-operation (1980: 3).

At the same time, the idea of the plural society was regarded as significant for social thought. John Rex, the British sociologist, argued in "The Plural Society in Sociological Theory" that the concept was of crucial and "strategic importance" for sociological theory (1959: 114). Rex related Furnivall's work to Bronislaw Malinowski and Gunnar Myrdal, and argued that it was important: "Furnivall was the first to emphasize, and has emphasized more strongly than any other writer, that the sort of society to be observed in Indonesia or Burma was of a different sociological type from any European society" (Rex 1959: 115). Furnivall, as may be seen, was regarded as an important voice of the postwar era, one who ostensibly established some of SEA's distinctive characteristics.

The argument in this paper, however, is that the "plural society" may well be a critical concept of regional study, but its limits might actually become touchstones for subsequent analysis. The point here is not to rehash criticisms of the "plural society", though this discussion will take proper note of some of them. Instead, the stress here will be to situate Furnivall into a broader canon of authors whose works helped conceptualize the study of SEA. Most importantly, in challenging some of the assumptions of the "plural society", it might be possible to develop a new vocabulary and set of questions for the reconceptualization of SEA.

One way to revisit SEA is to account for its the "classic" works, in order to better grasp the ways in which some of the region's features have been identified, remembered, and possibly "essentialized". It might be good to first remember that Furnivall did not seek to write comprehensively about SEA. Instead, he engaged a wider, but less defined target: namely the "tropical" world. The reliance on the characterization of SEA as defined by tropics amounted to a common "orientalist" trope. The discourses about the "tropics", of

course, was a fundamental part of colonial characterizations of the region.

However, it was the rigorous comparative approach to the subject which distinguished it from much of colonial scholarship. In addition, it was comparative study that drew upon the vocabulary of Fabian socialist thought, while reflecting what amounted to sustained field work. Possibly, the fact that Furnivall became a determined critic of colonialism in the region meant that his writings could draw upon the rich (if flawed) wealth of empirical information produced by imperial governance and use it to chronicle its destructive practices. That is, if the governing colonial discourses produced a wealth of information which might be used to justify imperial practices, Furnivall used the same resources to expose them.

Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India (1948) was listed in the 14 most influential books of Southeast Asian Studies (Hui 2009). The list, produced by *Sojourn*: *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia,* was gathered using a very stringent criteria that sought for books that

a) have influenced theory formation and/or empirical perceptions in Southeast Asia;
b) continue to serve as pivotal reference points for contemporary scholars; and
c) transcend the period they were written in (Hui 2009: viii).

Colonial Policy and Practice joined the seminal works of Geertz, Anderson, Ileto, Scott, Reid, Leach, and others. A good number of these classics were not written to present any kind of essentialized reading or definition of SEA. It may not seem obvious, but regions (and other entities) are made comprehensible, when they are made visible. In this instance, Furnivall's readers might conclude that one discourse applied to Burma and the Dutch East Indies would be applicable to SEA. That is, the relevance of the "plural society" lay in the concept's attractiveness for explicating the complex social relations and political economy of Southeast Asia.

Colonial Policy and Practice might well count as a "classic" of

Southeast Asian Studies because it has been widely read by more than two generations of scholars who have attempted to understand the political economy of the region. Following this trajectory enables us to raise yet another issue: how do various articles and books became influential in the first place? This is a topic for another day or conference, but it might well point to the multiple contexts (and disciplines) in which the study of the region has been configured (King 2015: 47). The case has been made that Southeast Asia Studies should be "de-centered" from its Eurocentric biases to help address the crises of area studies, which has revived the "insider" and "outsider" tension prominent in scholarship about the region in the 1960's and 1970's (Goh 2011:3). Rather than "de-center" the study of SEA, it might become the case that the best possibility of reconstructing the region is when its most provocative (however flawed) genealogies are taken seriously in the first instance. Recovering these genealogies (and interrogating them) should make it possible to first understand their wider ability to define the region and its characteristics, in order to ask new questions about SEA.

It will hardly surprise us that the idea reflected both Furnivall's intellectual outlook as well as historical circumstances, or that it is impossible to think about SEA the same way after one has read *Colonial Policy and Practice*. Nonetheless, the fascination with the injustices which accompanied Western colonialism and the intellectual interest in depersonalizing exploitation by showing its being economically determined and therefore systemic came at a price. The conceptualization of SEA which emerged from the pages of *Colonial Policy and Practice* massively underestimates the peoples who labored under exploitative conditions.

Ⅱ. The Fabian Furnivall

Julie Pham emphasized the importance of Furnivall's Fabian outlook. Pham has carefully traced Furnivall's many connections to Fabian thought, showing that it was dialogical. He grew from his encounters with various Fabians and his ideas made notable contributions to the ways in which they regarded imperial questions. Pham reminded

us that while Furnivall was a critic of imperial policy (especially as it was manifest in Burma), he remained an advocate of the empire. More importantly, perhaps he believed that the new nations of SEA were likely to be dependent upon Western economic help and political support in the foreseeable future.

All of that said, the roots of Furnivall's social thought actually go back to even earlier traditions of British radicalism. The valuation placed upon the "organic" quality of society had been well articulated by both Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. These mid-Victorian intellectuals (many of whom tended to look back to the medieval period as a kind of "golden age") assumed that society had an organic character, which was increasingly under siege by the many facets of modernization evident in 19th century British life. For these thinkers, the Benthamite representation of social reality, epitomized in their day by John Stuart Mill, regarded society as being primarily composed of atomistic individuals. Society was constituted by these abstract individuals and it would not have made sense to regard the connections between these men and women organic. Above all, the concept of an organic society was invoked in terms of loss. Modern industrial Britain had been purchased by the destruction of an organic society, earlier characterized by community, moral values, and a strong commitment to Christianity. What replaced the organic society was commerce, industry, abstract individualism, urbanization, and a loosening of social bonds. The fact that the growing pressure of democratization reflected these trends was threatening and not reassuring, because an organic society was basically hierarchical. It might not be too much to say that modernity had transformed Britain in a systematic and rather violent way.

The Fabians drew from many of these intellectual traditions. Their priority was achieving socialism, but in a deliberate and peaceful manner. It might be remembered that the term "Fabian" was actually inspired by the Roman general Fabius Maximus who adopted a strategy of patience that wore Hannibal's forces down and avoided a head-on engagement. Furnivall would have been 6 when the initial organization which developed into the Fabian society began to meet. It would hardly have been surprising to find Fabian ideas in circulation at Trinity Hall. Pham is right to emphasize these

connections because it meant that when Furnivall explored SEA, he did so through with Fabian categories. As Pham demonstrates, he maintained an active relationship with Fabian thinkers throughout his life.

For our purposes here, the conceptualization of societies in Burma and Java bore a Fabian stamp from the very outset. This can be gleaned not only by reliance on an "organic" society, but also by the emphasis on the loss of traditional society in the wake of imperial rule and modernization. To anticipate matters a bit, the plural society shared characteristics which British radicals found to be true of 19th century Britain. Again, modernization was something that happened to British society and it came at a high cost.

There was a note of regret in Lucien W. Pye's comment that Furnivall might have been considered a part of the community of thinkers who "profoundly shaped the modern mind" because he was more interested in colonialism than in relating his work to the broader trajectories of European social thought (1964: 430). Two generations later, the sustained treatment of subjects associated with colonial SEA turned Furnivall as a pivotal figure in the development of scholarship associated with the region. However, a careful reading of *Colonial Policy and Practice* shows that Furnivall was actually cognizant of several strands of social thought. He may not have directly engaged the continental tradition (i.e., Weber, Durkheim, etc.), but he worked not only with Fabian thought but also on the earlier discourses of political economy theorists (Furnivall 1948: 312). Most important of all, the globalizing features of *Colonial Policy and Practice* reflect that Furnivall studied Burma and the Netherlands Indies not only to understand the wider region, but to illuminate a set of realities which he believed occurred in the "tropics". It might have been more accurate to assess Furnivall by saying that it was his reliance upon many forms of European political thought that inhibited him from better understanding the "tropics" (and with it, SEA). Yet, even if Furnivall lived through early decolonization, it does not mean that his understanding of it might make him better at adapting to it. *Colonial Policy and Practice* now reads as a historically conditioned text, reminding us of the many challenges faced by both early nationalists and those who sought to

build regional identity, out of the "tropics".

Ⅲ. Re-examining the Plural Society

The idea and discussion of the "plural society" remain the best remembered and almost certainly most cited parts of *Colonial Policy and Practice*. The idea may well have originated in a combination of Furnivall's thought about Burma and his studies in the Netherlands. To begin with, Furnivall acknowledges the importance of Julius Herman Boeke, who was Professor of Tropical Economy at the University of Leiden. Furnivall was impressed by Boeke's contrast between the "rationalist material attitude of western enterprise with the disregard of economic values that they regard as characteristic of the native element" (1948: 264). Following Boeke's *The Structure of Netherlands Indian Economy* (1942), Furnivall noted that "economic forces both create a plural society and, because unrestrained by social will, continue to prevail" (1948: 312). In a famous passage, he added that in the first half of the 19th century:

> economists eulogized economic man; in the last half they said he was a myth. Unfortunately they were mistaken. When cast out of Europe he found refuge in the tropics, and now we see him returning with seven devils worse than himself. These are the devils which devastated the tropics under the rule of laissez-faire and which it is the object of modern colonial policy to exorcise (Furnivall 1948: 312).

The myth which Furnivall would create drew upon information from Burma and the Netherlands India to explain the impact of capitalism on the "tropics" rather than SEA. Instead, Furnivall thought that the "plural society" was probably universally applicable to the much wider experience of colonization in tropical regions.

The plural society defined colonial condition as it was manifest in many tropical places, including SEA. Discourses about the "tropics" were basic features of colonial discourses in the first half of the 20th century. For Furnivall, the tropics tended to include Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Notably, India (as was

China) was often separated from the "tropics". One of the chief characteristics of tropical places was that they were inhabited by "natives". Furnivall could hardly be considered a racist, but his use of the term "natives", in conjunction with "tropics", meant that both Burma and Java were described through categories which were at once derogatory and deeply biased.

Readers might be forgiven for thinking that his image of pre-colonial society was a tropical place filled with relatively satisfied natives, possessing the community which helped define the kind of organic society, which was lost, first by Britain, and later by cultures such as that of Java and Burma. This kind of language reflected a very simplistic (if not quite ignorant) view of pre-colonial societies. Tropical social realities, to make this a bit more explicit, were ahistorical, unchanging, and homogenous. *Colonial Policy and Practice* significantly understated the ethnic complexity which already made up a basic feature of SEA before colonization. Instead, it showed how ethnic differences defining plural society tend to be those which were produced by developments associated with imperial rule. Hence, plural society was made up of natives (here a useful shorthand) and groups such as Indians, Chinese, and some cases Malays who had immigrated to a new location. Of course, the plural society contrasted this "medley" with Europeans who were largely removed, while being a small, but constitutive part of it. In essence, the components of the plural society reflected the categories of the colonial census where many groups might qualify as "Indian", "Chinese", or "Malay'. It might be argued that the need for these "orientalist: subdivisions reflected a priority of the ICS, of which Furnivall was a part (Pham 2004: 267-268). However, they fit with a different kind of "orientalism" when regarded with the vocabulary of natives and tropics—a vocabulary which does not reflect direct involvement in government, but the need to write for an audience with little direct knowledge of the subject matter.

Furnivall was confident that the plural society was not created by human artifice, but the result of easily understood economic laws. Tropical lands may have been pleasant places, but they experienced decisive change with the advent of European expansion. The impact of European economic development proved to be

decisive for the organic tropical societies. Indeed, it is not too much to claim that the arrival of capitalism was the snake in the garden which disrupted tropical life:

> One may distinguish three principles of economic progress: natural, rational and moral; but the two former, which are strictly economic forces are anti-social. So far as these economic forces were active in primitive society, it was a condition of survival that they should be held in check by social custom, and it was only through the evolution of social custom that primitive societies were protected against disintegration. But custom implies that man adapts his wants and activities to his environment. In accepting the rule of custom, man surrenders his unique prerogative, the ability to use reason in adapting his environment to his requirements (Furnivall 1948: 292).

Without any specific reference or concrete example Furnivall elaborated:

> This ability of man to master his environment is the key to human progress as distinct from social evolution; and in the tropics, although the rule of custom protected the social order, it was at the cost of progress. (1948: 292)

However, Furnivall went beyond the boundaries normally associated with political economy to add a civilizational argument which reflected the superiority of the rational Western mind over that of the natives. For Furnivall, the "orientalist" bias meant that the history of the Western world was different as it prioritized rational thinking (presumably over custom):

> Western Christendom, however, with the rebirth of reason at the Renaissance, achieved a new synthesis of Greek intellectual freedom and Roman law under the energizing and binding force of Christian ideals of duty to God and man. This laid the foundations of social order based on law, informed by will, that could allow far greater scope to economic forces without incurring the penalty of collapse; it raised economic potential to a higher level. Their goodly heritage emboldened Europeans to seek their fortunes in the tropics, and enabled them to impose western rule on the inhabitants. (1948: 292)

Furnivall believed that "in general the West comes to the tropics as a liberator" because it made it possible for social development to occur with the constraints of "arbitrary personal authority", which he believed characterized the nature of rule in tropical places. Furthermore, Western law expressed social will and reinforced custom, or forced custom to adapt to new circumstances (Furnivall: 293). However, the imposition of Western law meant that it was "imposed on society from the outside" and because it was not grounded in social will, "it is powerless to restrain anti-social economic forces" (Furnivall 1948: 293). Furnivall explained that

> These forces, liberated from the control of custom by the impact of the West, pursue their natural course, breaking down the social order, disintegrating native organic society into individual atoms, and, by thus depriving man of social protection against natural selfishness, operate more extensively, eliminating social values, and diffusing poverty (Furnivall 1948: 293),

Here would have been the great nightmare not only for the "tropics" but for English society; the stress on "organic society" would have been well grasped by the strands of mid-Victorian thought represented by Carlyle and Ruskin.

Furnivall's economic laws reflected not only a Fabian confidence, but the influence of social Darwinism. Not only were economic changes all transforming, but also, they affected much more than political life, created social divisions, and destroyed traditional modes of social existence. Even the attempts at social welfare were undermined by the "survival of the cheapest" and the realities that consumers would be driven by the lowest prices. In learning to act out of economic self-interest, many in tropical societies did, in fact, behaved more as "abstract individuals" in an atomized society.

However, economic developments by themselves were not sufficient to create plural society. It also required the clash between East and West, as Furnivall argued that many of the fundamental cultural differences between the western world and tropical Asia meant that the peoples of the latter were unable to cope effectively with the transition and realities of modern capitalist economies. The

disintegration of tropical societies came not so much from colonial political control, but from the massive economic transformations which accompanied capitalist development. Therefore, the plural society, which required the loss of perceived public common good, came about because tropical societies did not have the cultural resources to accommodate massive economic change.

To state the obvious, here, among the things missing in Furnivall's analysis is any sense that the tropical peoples—mainly here from SEA—had any capacity for historical agency. That is, they found themselves acted on by colonial forces, whose power was all the greater because they happened to be backed by the force of economic law and were on the better side of the East-West divide. Many of the now independent nations were in "dependencies" which virtually ensured that they could never be regarded as having sufficient agency. To put this differently, the tropical peoples were acted upon as the bourgeois had upon the poor who became the proletariat. They seemingly had much less capacity to alter the transformations which would improve their fate. Furnivall, it might be here remembered, was a sensitive observer of developments in Burma. But in crafting the idea of the "plural society" he betrayed an intellectual lineage which predated both his professional career and maturation into a critic of colonial theory and practice.

Ⅳ. Reading Furnivall for Southeast Asia

Given the influence of Furnivall's writings on scholarship devoted to SEA, it seems prudent to reflect on the image of the region which emerged from *Colonial Policy and Practice*. It might be said that while the idea of the "plural society" has not been without its share of critics, it largely carried the day, as the survey for *Sojourn* illustrates. Yet, it seems clear that if SEA is the focus of our reading of *Colonial Policy and Practice*, then it becomes important to see if it was in any way predictive and, more importantly, whether the way it informs scholarship remains apt. The position here is that it should certainly be read as a historical document which shows how parts of the region were regarded in mid- century, as it also

rendered the peoples of SEA to be little more than victims of history. In fact, it might even be fair to say that refuting the implicit image of the "tropics"—here meaning the region—might be a good way to begin a conversation about developing methodologies for exploring SEA.

One way to regard *Colonial Policy and Practice* is to highlight its significance as a historical document. Beginning with the name and the terminologies, and moving to the basic ideas and the assumptions behind them, it is possible to rediscover some of the lost discourses of colonial writing. This might be a rich subject which could be explored usefully in a number of ways, but one of the things which is startling is the self-confidence of the author. This was a work which was written for an audience that probably could not foresee the independence of Southeast Asian nations. The subject (that is, for whom the author might be said to have written) was not future scholars of SEA, but the progressively-minded colonial administrators. As Syed Husssein Alatas has recognized in *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, the ideal would have been a progressive and enlightened colonial establishment (1977:13).

It is not surprising, then, that even though the work might be said to be steeped in "theory and practice", there is an absence of any kind of critique of knowledge—let alone "colonial knowledge". Instead, *Colonial Policy and Practice* drew from a mixture of economic positivism (possibly, out of the tradition of Auguste Comte and David Ricardo) and social Darwinism on the one hand and the author's observations and detailed knowledge of colonial administration. Furnivall's deep frustrations notwithstanding, the lack any kind critique of "colonial knowledge" would jar contemporary scholars. Absent from *Colonial Policy and Practice* was any kind of self-reflective hint that might interrogate the conditions required for the production of knowledge and analysis. More than two generations later, the critique of colonial knowledge is obviously among the most fundamental presuppositions for those who currently study SEA or other regions. Consequently, to engage *Colonial Policy and Practice* is to encounter a mind which now appears naïve and biased—if honest and critical.

Yet, there are other ways to read *Colonial Policy and Practice* as a text which reflected historical circumstances, beginning with understanding the ways in which the author regarded the immediate situation. Without wanting to reduce the discussion to "authorial intention", it is revealing that Furnivall thought that among all "the tropical dependencies few attract as much attention at the present time as those in the Tropical Far East" (1948: 514). He explained that the interest came from fact that there "is a focus of stresses and tensions which endanger peace" (Furnivall 1948: 514). This was, in 1947, primarily an economic question for Furnivall:

> When a recent Colonial Secretary was discussing international co-operation in colonial affairs, he urged that it was needed for security. Security is the keynote of almost every such project. But the word security is this connection savours of 'securities'—investments of foreign capital. We have seen that in the past the whole direction of economic life, and one may say of political life also, lay with foreign capital. After the war foreign capital will again be active in developing oil, tin, rubber and so on. When we talk of security, we are thinking of security for foreign capital? Capitalist interests will be more concerned in security for capital than in the maintenance of peace. It is true that in any given region capitalist interests are particular and local…But all capital has a common interest, well-organized and vocal—if need be, clamorous—and, for the protection of its interest, it can appeal for general support because we are all capitalist now, all interested, one way or another, directly or indirectly, in the capitalist development of the tropics. Organized capitalist interests demanding security for western enterprise in the tropics are likely to prevail over our silent unorganized general interest as citizens and human beings in the maintenance of peace (1948: 514).

To be sure, he added that peace was more important and it was the collective duty of humanity to "promote peace rather than security" (Furnivall 1948: 515). However, he had trouble grasping the immediacy and salience of the emerging political questions facing the region.

There is another side to this: postwar Asia was a difficult place. Ronald Spector has aptly documented the many challenges

faced by the victorious allies, the Japanese, and the many peoples of the region after World War II ended (2009). It is remarkable that Furnivall glossed over so much of this; students of the region could do worse than to focus on the year after World War II to understand much of what followed.

One lesson for those interested in the region: reviewing Furnivall's outlook reminds us that in 1948, the inevitability of the end of colonial SEA could hardly be assumed. In fact, what remains striking is that even as Burma approached independence, Furnivall does not seem able to understand the tropical world of which he regarded it as a part as being capable of self-government. The constructive position advocated in *Colonial Policy and Practice* would have maintained colonial power, which was aptly described as an "anachronistic fantasy" (Englehart: 786).

Furnivall could not foresee independence because there is ample warrant for suggesting that he was indifferent or hostile to nationalism (Alatas, 1977: 12-18). For example, it is worth citing Furnivall's attitude towards emerging national movements:

> In statements on colonial policy, self-government is usually identified with some form of democratic government, whether known as responsible government or by some other term. That is only natural, because the colonial powers are democratic powers, whose institutions have evolved as part of the Liberal tradition and who tend accordingly to identify self-government with those forms that they have learned to value for themselves; also it seems easier to export their own machinery of government than to invent new machiner y….Obviously democratic forms have a very practical appeal. They appeal to Nationalist politicians, who think that the numerical majority of the native group will ensure them control over the Government. They appeal also to men of Liberal sympathies in the colonial power, who fail to recognize that the difference in kind between homogenous western society and the plural society of dependencies demands new and appropriate machinery. And they may encounter no more than a show of resistance from the more astute opponents of Liberal ideals, who forsee that democratic machinery will prove the most formidable obstacle to self-government. (1948: 486)

The role of "modern colonial policy" aims to make it possible to redress the problems caused by capitalist economy in order that the "dependencies" might achieve adequate social development.

The more interesting way to evaluate Furnivall would be to locate him as a social thinker, who like many who came out of the broader Marxist traditions, prioritized economic change over political developments and underestimated the powers which were shaping new nations. Yet, it should be remembered that when we regard the nations of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) today, it might be recalled that a number of them adopted social policies which were at least partly Fabian in origin.

Furthermore, exploring *Colonial Policy and Practice* has the value of reminding us that the language associated with SEA as a specific region, was probably still in its infancy. Instead of comparing Burma and Java to highlight a number of colonial practices and misadventures, Furnivall was writing about places which were part of a much larger "world system". As John Darwin has formulated it, the world of colonialism was "a global phenomenon; that its fortunes were governed by global conditions" and its power came from "fusing together of several disparate elements" (Darwin 2009: xi). Consequently, when scholars look to reconceptualize SEA, it would be useful to understand that they are referring to a region now defined by nation states but actually carries with it a much richer and nuanced pre-history than is often recognized.

Reading *Colonial Policy and Practice* could be more than a look at colonial literature; instead, engaging Furnivall might be a template for finding alternative models for defining the region's major characteristics. Possibly, the most obvious problem with both the plural society and the intellectual apparatus which supported it was that Furnivall leaves little room for the peoples of SEA (or elsewhere in the tropics for that matter) to make their own history. In a sense *Colonial Policy and Practice* might be read as an early harbinger of the dislocation of the peoples of SEA within in their own history. It is not surprising that the quest of an "autonomous history and later the call to make sure that Southeast Asians were in Southeast Asian Studies followed at least in part from a scholarly

discourse in which Furnivall's influence was significant" (Smail 1962; Herayanto 2007).

In essence, *Colonial Policy and Practice* might be said to have silenced the people who lived under imperial rule. This was hardly Furnivall's intent, but the effect of the discussion was to make it difficult to imagine indigenous tropical agency. Writing about the prospect of "semi-colonial government", he observed:

> In tropical dependencies there is far greater need than in Europe for the organization of knowledge and thought. Europe is both the creator and the child of the modern world, while tropical countries are, at best, adopted children….If then, the object of policy to be make dependencies capable as soon as possible of independence, it would seem necessary to separate representation and responsibility, and in the first instance to create a National Assembly without legislative powers, deferring the creation of a legislature until there is a united and enlightened people." (Furnivall 1948: 497-498)

A generation earlier this kind of bias would have been less surprising. After World War II though, and the obvious and growing power of nationalist movements, it is now hard to understand. In fact, it is possible that bringing in the many challenges to colonial rule (and the many types of resistance used) might well have made the argument based upon economic laws for the plural society less compelling.

Rather, the point of my paper ultimately is that scholars looking to understand the region's commonalities might begin with the adaptive quality of its peoples. If anything, Furnivall underestimated the "medley" that is SEA as far more diverse than he seems to have recognized. In fact, one its characteristics is heterogeneity—which some would still prefer not to acknowledge. The title of this paper "Taking Expediency Seriously" is used to highlight this virtue to suggest that it is precisely in the adaptive, transnational, and multiethnic quality that SEA (and its achievements) become distinct. It might be remembered, for example, that the breakup of the Ottoman Empire produced terrible scars in the Middle East; the end of the Austro-Hungarian empire expedited World War I; the abolition of colonial empires in Africa left nations with unsustainable

borders; the end of British India produced the Partition; and the collapse of the Soviet Union (another empire) continues to produce significant dislocations. SEA was not spared these convulsions, but its new nations have made sustained economic and social progress since the late 1970's quite possibly because its peoples have made adaptation their *longue durée*. This is a story which predates early modern colonialism and will probably be relevant for the foreseeable future. SEA experienced the dominance of outside cultures, the arrival of universal religions, colonization, the rise and expansion of global capitalism, world wars, the Cold war, and the combined effects of many of these changes and episode. One hardly needs to adopt an ASEAN view of history to be able to underscore the region's many achievements, all of which this author believes to be testaments to the adaptive quality of the peoples of SEA. Indeed, the presupposition (a confession that the view of the future surely shapes our assessment of the past) is that SEA offers global development in a successful series of adaptations and hybridities. To underscore these features of SEA requires something opposite of the ways in which Furnivall articulated the casual factors which underlay the "plural society".

In practice this means highlighting expedience—the ability to adapt quickly as circumstances demand. The work of James Scott, for example, suggests that rather than see SEA through the lens of the language of civilized existence, it makes sense to explore the subject from the other end (Scott 2010). This approach will have its limits, but for those who seek to identify the region's most important characteristics, they might do well to give pause to the plural society, while expediently investing in research trajectories which begin with the achievements of the peoples of SEA.

Ⅴ. Conclusion

John Furnivall will probably remain a somewhat mythical figure in Burma and for those who have chosen to study SEA. He may come to be regarded as an enigma. Living in age of growing nationalism, he was a scholar-activist who attacked colonial administration, while

working to develop a framework which would perpetuate much of it. At first glance, he was not a likely candidate to write an influential text about the region. If anything *Colonial Policy and Practice* reflected not only his experience in Burma, but his absence from it. Furnivall was writing for a wide audience, but the work drew upon the categories of political economy, comparative study, and knowledge of British ideas about the future of the empire, to explore colonial administration and its consequences. Yet, the book was written without much direct knowledge of World War II in the region. Furnivall probably could not have sensed the profound changes which came with the conflict and its messy aftermath. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that it would also be Furnivall, who from an early moment in Burma, had embraced the country and its peoples. They could not have been "natives" for him and he had to know that there was more to the land than being part of the "tropics". To return to the plural society, Furnivall succeeded in making life in the region compelling. He showed how the combination of powerful economic forces, colonialism, and cultural difference changed the behavior of peoples all over the world. To believe that Furnivall was right was convenient for those who wished to challenge colonialism. For generation of activists and scholars, the fact that *Colonial Policy and Practice* left little room for Asian agency mattered much less than savage indictment which Furnivall made of colonial rule. For all intents and purposes, it would be the idea of the "plural society" which might be said to have helped make the region—not just the tropics—visible. But it did so without making them audible. At precisely the time when many of the region's peoples were finding the strength to recover from war and challenge colonial rule, Furnivall might be said to have neglected their perspectives about the social relations made easily visible by the compelling discussion of the "plural society".

SEA, accordingly, would be regarded as a region in which social relations had been destroyed by capitalism. It was a place where the corruptive power of Western ideas could be demonstrated in an Eastern setting. In Burma, Furnivall would be remembered as well for his activism and deep affection for the country. Ultimately, he was valuable because he was the informed critic from within in

the empire, with his work shaped by significant intellectual resources. All of these things might have meant that the less acceptable formulations of *Colonial Policy and Practice* were easy to overlook. Harry Benda recognized that Southeast Asianists have been reluctant to challenge Furnivall (Pham 2004: 267). However, if the region is to be understood better, scholars need to revisit the genealogies of knowledge which have framed their own conception of what is significant about it. Asking hard questions regarding Furnivall in particular, and possibly of "scholarly activists" more generally, might be a good way to begin.

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