

Constructing Southeast Asia and the Middle East: Two Corners of the “Victorian World”

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Abstrak

How should we conceptualize regions? What is the context in which new approaches to regional study take place? What is the role of historical change in the reconceptualization of regions or areas? This article addresses this issue by using two case studies to shed light on the history of regional study by comparing some of the ways in which the Middle East and Southeast Asia have been conceptualized. Accordingly, the discussion traces the ways in which these areas were understood in the 19th century by highlighting the ideas of a number of influential Victorian thinkers. The Victorians are useful because not only did British thinkers play critical roles in the shaping of modern patterns of knowledge, but their empire was global in scope, encompassing parts of both Southeast Asia and the Middle East. However, the Victorians regarded these places quite differently: Southeast Asia was frequently described as “Further India” and the Middle East was the home of the Ottoman Empire. Both of these places were at least partly understood in relation to the needs of British policy-makers, who tended to focus most of their efforts according to the needs of India— which was their most important colonial possession. The article exhibits the connections between the “Eastern Question” and end of the Ottoman Empire (and the political developments which followed) led to the creation of the concept of “Middle East”. With respect to Southeast Asia, attention will be devoted to the works of Alfred Russell Wallace, Hugh Clifford, and others to see how “further India” was understood in the 19th century. In addition, it is clear that the successful deployment of the term “Southeast Asia” reflected the political needs of policy makers in wake of decolonization and the Cold War. Finally, by showing the constructive nature of regions, the article suggests one possible new path for students of Southeast Asia. If the characterization of the region is marked by arbitrary factors, it may actually point to a useful avenue of enquiry, a hermeneutic of expedience. Emphasis on the adaptive and integrative features of lived realities in Southeast Asia may well be a step beyond both the agendas of “colonial knowledge” and anti-colonial nationalism.