

Panel proposal, EuroSEAS, Olomouc 2021

Title:

Rethinking Expertise in a Time of Global Crisis

Conveners:

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Description:

We are living in a time of crisis. A global pandemic is raging. The climate crisis is upon us. And throughout the world populist movements are exerting pressure on political systems. The main premise of this panel is that a defining feature of the contemporary global crisis is the ways in which various forms of expertise are constructed, contested, denied, mobilised, and marginalised both by those in power and by society at large.

Expertise, scholars have long observed, follows the fault lines of power, emerging through socio-political processes that create powerful epistemologies and social institutions. Historians and social scientists have studied the production and assemblages of, as well as the competition between, scientific, professional, religious, and indigenous knowledge, and revealed the role of technopolitics in shaping modernity. Some have researched the discursive and sensory performance of expertise. Others apply or reflect on their own (historical, anthropological, etc.) expertise to conduct socially impactful research, but sometimes find themselves entangled within broader regimes of expertise.

While the politicization of expertise is a general phenomenon, taking place everywhere in any time, a salient feature of contemporary Southeast Asia, and to some extent the global South more generally, is that some of the processes that facilitate the proliferation and contestation of expertise – mass education, mass mediatization, democratization, among others – have taken place in a comparatively short time. In this context of ‘compression’, and considering the fact that societies are both dependent on experts and fundamentally conflicted about their role, how do scholars of Southeast Asia make sense of expertise?

Papers may consider any or multiple of the following questions: What are the processes through which expertise is constructed, performed, legitimised, or contested? How do experts claim authority in a time in which lay persons, celebrities, and politicians revert to alternative facts or post-truth rhetoric to challenge any kind of expertise? How is expertise gendered, racialized, or reflective of broader socio-political realities? What do we make of the impact or (further) decline of marginalised forms of expertise? What futures are imagined or precluded through the construction or (de)legitimation of expertise? What is the relationship between expertise and social responsibility? What is the role of critical scholarship in valuing expertise and experts (including ourselves), while still analysing the forms of power that are wound up in the production, exercise, and application of expertise?

Single session