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Review Article

Benedict Anderson and Siam Studies

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Exploration and irony in studies of Siam over forty years
By BENEDICT R. O'G. ANDERSON
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In the wake of the bloody coup of 1 October 1965, three young Indonesia scholars, Ruth McVey, Fred Bunnell, and Ben Anderson, all working with George Kahin at Cornell University, set out to explain how things had gone so wrong. They began their analysis with a careful examination of the patterns of promotion and transfer in the Indonesian military, which seemed to indicate that tensions between Javanese and other officers played a major part in the coup. Keen to make this information available to other scholars, they quickly wrote up a draft version of their findings and tentative conclusions, and circulated it to a few friends and colleagues. This fateful decision, ironically, would reshape our understanding of Siam. Subsequently banned from entering Indonesia, McVey and Anderson would produce influential work on Siam, while mentoring younger scholars through thesis supervision and edited volumes. This collection, *Exploration and irony in studies of Siam over forty years*, is comprised of nine of Anderson's articles each outlined below, with an introduction by Tamara Loos, a successor of Anderson as director of Cornell's Southeast Asia Program. Loos' introduction places the articles in historical perspective, and in the context of Anderson's own personal history, including his networks of colleagues and students, and his other work. The essays provide an opportunity to reflect on Anderson's contribution to Siam Studies, as they illuminate the influence he had in opening up new directions for research, and new ways of conceptualising Thai politics.

Anderson was banned from entering Indonesia in 1972, and, after a time of reflection, shifted his focus to the study of Thai politics at least by 1974. He read the work of other scholars in English, which at the time was still limited enough that it could be managed in its entirety. He also read theses and articles in both popular and scholarly publications and studied the language intensively enough to read Thai language scholarship, and undertake translations. Perhaps most impressively, he made no attempt to build on his work on Indonesia, or to expand it to Siam, but took up Siam Studies as Siam Studies. After about three years of preparation,

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he had an extensive knowledge of the field, and embarked on his first major work on Siam,[1] the first article in the collection, 'Studies of the Thai state: The state of Thai Studies'. In this very ambitious work, he attempted to identify, and critique, the dominant academic conceptualisation of the Thai state; not surprisingly, this proved controversial, as one would expect of a highly critical analysis of the entire body of scholarly work on Siam, written by a newcomer. At the same time, in identifying the central assumptions and conceptualisations of Thai Studies, and in the specific ways he challenged them, Anderson established the foundation for his own subsequent work, and for the work of many of his students and other scholars.

In 'The state of Thai Studies', Anderson argued that the lack of colonialism had important consequences for Thai Studies. Without colonialism, the range of Thai specialists was limited — mostly white middle-class American males — constraining the diversity of opinion; access to archival materials was problematic, both linguistically and physically; and much of the anticolonial sympathy and admiration for independence leaders such as Ba Maw, Suharto or Jose Rizal translated rather oddly to conservative Thai nationalists such as Plaek Phibunsongkhram or Rama VI, who were themselves non-democratic leaders. This last factor also highlighted, for Anderson, another consequence: the lack of colonialism led specialists to consider Thailand unique, so that comparison was problematic if not impossible. The result, he argued, was a general consensus around four central axioms in Thai Studies: that independence was an unqualified blessing, making Thailand unique; that Thailand was the first modern independent nation-state in the region; that this had been brought about by a modernising 'national' royal dynasty; and that these successes were a result of a stable society and 'flexible' leadership by patriotic rulers. Thai Studies then was the story of a wise monarchy which successfully adapted to the encroachments of the West by modernising and by making limited territorial concessions in order to maintain Thai independence. These wise kings and their successors had uniquely adapted and modernised, while all around them kingdoms and sultanates were colonised. Anderson might have added that this depiction paralleled the story told to students in primary and secondary schools throughout Thailand, so that the standard version among Western scholars differed little from that learned by all Thais, except in the details and, perhaps, the sophistication.

In response to that consensus, Anderson set out four 'scandalous hypotheses' which outline an alternative understanding of Thai Studies, and set an alternative research agenda. He suggested that: Thailand had been indirectly colonised, which, in some ways, disadvantaged it relative to its neighbours; that in some ways, Thailand was the last independent *national* state in the region (Anderson's emphasis); that the royal dynasty was modernising in the way that 'the regimes of colonial governors' were modernising, if it were modernising at all; and that when Thailand were compared to other Southeast Asian countries, its leaders were relatively inflexible, and its politics unstable. Anderson's alternative formulation depicted a monarchy that agreed to indirect colonisation — including ceding control of all import and export duties, shaping the regime in

1 Actually published in 1978 after, and no doubt overlapping with, 'Withdrawal symptoms: Social and cultural aspects of the October 6 coup' in its creation, it clearly takes precedence both in its conception and for understanding Anderson's contribution to Siam Studies.

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ways that resembled colonial governments, and inviting a host of foreign advisers into important government departments and ministries — in order to retain power. It thus 'modernised' by introducing colonial methods of rule, but it prevented the rise of the type of nationalism that would lead to the overthrow of colonialism elsewhere through its own indigeneity and through the promotion of royalism and later royalist nationalism. The result was an inflexible state that had changed little since the introduction of colonial methods of rule, and consequently was quite unstable, evident both in past struggles for control of that state and in then recent and concurrent attempts to revolutionise it. It will be readily apparent that these hypotheses, which have proven so useful as a research agenda, can be further narrowed to a single proposition, 'an axial twist' which Anderson advances himself, this time making the connection to Thai politics:

> These hypotheses call into question the accepted view of the modern Thai monarchy, and, still more important, the relationship between that monarchy and the modern Siamese nation. Rather than assuming a harmonious lineal descent from one to the other, they suggest contradictions between them. In fact, it is tempting to argue that it has been the identification of the two that has, on the scholarly level, systematically distorted understanding of twentieth-century politics and, on the political level, retarded the development of the Siamese nation .... (p. 21)

While we set aside the details of the argument, a few additional points must be made to illuminate the scope of the shift in paradigm Anderson encouraged, and the breadth of the new research agenda established in this article. First, Anderson highlighted the modernisation or perhaps rather the westernisation of not only the state, but also of the monarchy itself — a theme taken up in more detail by Walter Vella in *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the development of Thai nationalism* (1978), published too late for Anderson to have included it, but now one of the best-known works on modern Thailand. Second, he also noted the (partly consequent) identification of nation and monarchy, as if each is an integral part of the other, in Thai Studies, and in Thai politics. One effect of this identification of monarchy with nation, he argued, was that minorities had received little attention in works up until that time, as the nation was seen as the direct successor of Thai kingdoms, and was thus 'Thai-land' rather than a diverse country with a variety of cultures and identities. As Anderson pointed out, ironically the royal dynasty had intermarried with ethnic minorities for political reasons quite frequently, enhanced by the tradition of polygamy, making it one of the most ethnically mixed families in the country. But in the shift to identifying Thai monarchs for a Thai nation, the dynastic link to ethnic minorities that had served so well in Siam was severed, so that there was no particular reason for an ethnic minority to identify with a Thai king, leading to long-term consequences for national integration. By the 1980s, Anderson would consistently use the term Siam, unless speaking specifically of the Thai majority, or Thai dominated institutions. I have generally tried to follow his usage here.

Third, Anderson argued that, contrary to the work of David Wilson and Fred Riggs, Thai politics had been very unstable, with frequent coups and in some periods elections, and frequent turnover of leaders, especially when seen in contrast to Indonesia with then just Sukarno and Suharto in the postwar era. He found the

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answer in part in the contrast between Wilson (stability comes from a lack of modernisation at the village level) and Riggs (the bureaucratic polity remains, no matter the political leader), and in part in the incomplete transformation to a modern nation. Stability at the village level, he argued, was only possible due to the large-scale importation of Chinese labour. The Chinese, subject to a head tax rather than corvée labour, were thus advantaged in urban areas, so that for a long period they made up the bulk of the middle and working classes, while Thais remained in the countryside. As for Riggs' 'bureaucratic polity',[2] "the notion" that only the bureaucracy was politically salient after the nineteenth-century "reforms", for Anderson the reforms instead created an absolutist state, of the kind that had collapsed in Europe but here survived — at least until the social structures came under pressure from rapid modernisation in the 1960s. And then, as we see below, it evolved, and in some ways strengthened.

Last, Anderson argued, it is a reified version of 'Thai culture' that holds together this consensus view of Thai Studies, which also has important political implications. While much of the focus on culture in the article is on the decline of traditional culture during the period of 'dependent absolutism', one brief comment would contribute more to future research agendas: that with the consensus view one of conflation of the monarchy with the nation, royal culture had come to be seen as Thai national culture. Surprisingly, Anderson did not tease out the implications of this observation, which has become central to Thai Studies (especially in Thailand), to Thai politics, and to Anderson's own later work. We take them up further below.

Anderson's path-breaking article can be fairly subjected to a wide range of criticisms: Why did it make sweeping generalisations about the shape of the field, but devote almost the entire article to setting out a new approach and a new agenda? If it was intended to analyse Thai Studies, why did it dwell so heavily on unpublished dissertations rather than the best-known works in the field? Why did it consistently garble the distinction between Thai Studies and Thai politics? How can we understand minority politics by looking only at the Chinese? And why was there no discussion of the lack of attention paid to women? None of these criticisms change the impact that this new agenda had on the field, as Anderson, his students, and many other scholars began to take up the questions he raised.

Anderson had already begun work on this new agenda with 'Withdrawal symptoms: Social and cultural aspects of the October 6 coup', published in 1977, just prior to the publication of 'Studies of the Thai state'. 'Withdrawal symptoms' set out to investigate the impact of the rapid economic change of the 1960s on social structures and consequently on the political upheavals of the 1970s. The particular focus here is on the dynamism of Thai society, and its consequent instability, in distinction to the work of Wilson and Riggs, both published during the period of rapid change, in 1962 and 1966, respectively. Anderson argued that the rapid modernisation associated with the Vietnam War development and security strategies had led to the expansion of four important social strata: provincial notables, who had benefited from the investment in their regions, reinvested in land and had become, often, large-scale landlords; unemployed, or underemployed rural 'drifters' (*lumpenproletariat*?) who migrated

2 Fred W. Riggs, *Thailand: The modernization of a bureaucratic polity* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1966).

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to Bangkok with no real prospects for improvement there or in their home villages; a petty bourgeoisie in the service industry: drivers, hairdressers, tailors, masseuses, receptionists, bartenders, and the like, again mostly migrants from the provinces; and last, a new middle bourgeoisie, mostly from Bangkok, generally tied to foreign capital and to the Thai state. These new classes, except the 'drifters', set out to consolidate their new-found class status through education, so that there was a dramatic expansion of the number of universities and students during this period. For Anderson, it was these new classes, represented in leadership positions by the students who were their children, who had been at the forefront of the 1973 democratic uprising.

However, the seeds of discontent that would lead to the same strata taking the side of dictatorship in 1976 began to grow. Despite the rapid expansion of the educational system, not all the children of the new strata could be accommodated; even among those who did gain entrance, only a select few could study at the top universities. Resentment against students who did gain admission to the top universities — generally also the most politically active — began to build among the bourgeois strata. In addition, students at universities were exposed to the wider world, both China and the West, so that their attitudes, opinions, and even appearance began to differ from those of their parents, as some students adopted everything from rock music to long hair to casual morals and revolutionary attitudes. Since for parents the primary purpose of university education was to get a good job in the bureaucracy, these new attitudes seemed counterproductive. Last, the bourgeois strata fully expected that democratisation and increased participation would improve their lifestyles. Instead, the oil crisis hit in the same year as the uprisings, so that the economy was badly damaged. With labour and farmers, often organised by students, increasingly making demands in the new system, it was a small step to blame the weak economy on unrest. Finally, the economic crisis and the departure of the Americans by 1975 meant fewer coveted jobs, in the bureaucracy and out, so that by 1976 university graduates were no longer guaranteed work. In short, for the bourgeois strata, insecure in its new-found status, democracy appeared to be the cause of instability at a time when anxiety was high, as Siam's Indochinese neighbours succumbed to communist takeovers.

This rising sense of insecurity opened the way for the anticommunist ultranationalistic right wing to gain the support of the new bourgeois strata, both for the ensuing violence and the dictatorship to follow. For Anderson, this provided the ideological component to the 1976 massacre. The ideology can be traced back to the kings-as-national-heroes theme we saw in 'Studies of the Thai state', but with the emergence of the Sarit regime, he argued, it took on a new form. Where Rama VI had invented the Nation-Religion-King motto to promote nationalism, Sarit made it much more explicitly political by using it to legitimise his authoritarian regime, employing both the monarchy and sangha in highly visible ways. This raised the status of the monarchy in particular, and, since it was no longer responsible for political decision-making, it could not be held to blame for any mistakes made. At the same time, the monarchy became associated with both development and a particular style of right-wing authoritarian 'stable' government. Thus the cost of the increased power of the monarchy was association with authoritarianism. In this

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sense, royal support for the students in 1973 can be seen as an attempt to break this association, although later events restored it. By the 1970s, according to Anderson, Nation-Religion-King had become not a motto, but an ideological rallying cry for the forces of the right, and, due to the near sacred status of both religion and king, and the association with rapid modernisation, the bourgeois strata were susceptible to the cry. They did not, of course, make up the shock troops: the killings came, in the case of farmer activists, from provincial notables, and in the case of Bangkok, from security forces recruited by rightist politicians, both linked to the old regime. Thus Anderson not only identified the emergence of a middle-class role in politics, he explained the ambivalence of the middle classes when it came to democracy, clarifying how they could demand it in 1973, yet support violent repression just three years later, in support of their class interests, and in the name of Nation-Religion-King.

Surprisingly Anderson left out the rise of the working classes, both urban and rural, including the rising numbers of market-oriented agricultural workers who have now replaced the self-sufficient peasantry of the past and the largely new factory workers. This latter group is particularly fascinating because it has always been migratory, and in that sense, provides a key link between Bangkok and the provinces, a decentralised channel with an entirely different focus than the Bangkok-oriented migratory bureaucrats. While this migratory group is quite old, going back to at least the early 1950s *samloh* drivers who came to Bangkok during dry seasons and returned during planting and harvest seasons,[3] investment in manufacturing during the 1960s, much of it from Japan, created a new industrial belt around Bangkok, eventually expanding through Nonthaburi, Pathumthani, Ayutthaya, Nakhon Pathom, Samut Prakan, and much of Chachoengsao, all later strongholds of Pheu Thai and the Red Shirts. The Vietnam War-era infrastructure development also allowed faster travel to once remote villages on relatively cheap buses, so that returning home became much easier. Not long after the turn of the twenty-first century, budget airlines proliferated, making the journey even easier, and at a cost factory workers could afford — with good planning, one can often fly for about the price of the air-conditioned overnight bus fare, and can pay for the ticket at the nearest 7-11, no credit card necessary. It is precisely this migratory working class that makes up the key strata of Red Shirt support, linking villages to national politics in ways neither state officials nor the provincial notables could. This is, of course, also the reason that village voices can no longer be isolated and silenced, not by the state, not by provincial notables, and not even by coercion.

Anderson's next major work on Siam, *In the mirror*, comprised translations of short stories, and an introduction, included in the collection, which turned attention from the Right to the Left. The new urbanised left that had also developed out of the rapid economic development of the sixties and early seventies, comprised of a progressive group gathering around the new but influential journal *Sangkhomsat Borithat*, most associated with Thammasat University, led by Suchart Sawatsi and Sulak Sivaraksa, and a less radical group gathering around Sinlapakorn University,

3 Robert Textor, *From peasant to pedicab driver: A social study of Northeastern Thai farmers who periodically migrated to Bangkok and became pedicab drivers* (New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies, 1961).

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led by Suchit Wongthet and Khanchai Bunpan. In Anderson's depiction, the influence of the United States, both in Siam and in American universities, was crucial in shaping the Thai literary left of the period. Along with the modernisation came war, prostitution, slums, drug addiction, and other social ills. At the same time, it brought educational opportunities for many bright Thai youth in American universities, where they were exposed to the civil rights and anti-war movements, and learned about the role of their own country in the Vietnam War through the American press. They were also exposed to a diverse left more broadly, from Joan Baez's music to Che Guevara T-shirts to Stuart Schram's anthology of Mao's work. Thus America loomed large in the development of the Thai left, both as enemy and inspiration — inspiration to build a better Siam. Ironically that dream ended shortly after the American military departed, in the lead up to the 1976 massacre at Thammasat University, leaving the left to flee to the Communist Party of Thailand, where they were welcomed but largely sidelined from any important role. Unhappy with the dogmatism of the elder leadership, then faced with the collapse of the CPT after the divisions in the communist world when China invaded Vietnam, most took up the offer of amnesty made by the government; by 1981 they 'were back where they had come from, sadder, older, and less illusioned, but by no means wholly abandoning the ideals of their generation' (p. 94). And given the odd relationship with America, it is not surprising that many of the student activists on the left would later go for graduate study in the United States, with several, including Seksan Prasertkul, Chiranan Pitpreecha, Kasian Tejapira, and Supote Chaengraew ending up at Cornell University, working with Anderson. Seksan and Kasian became professors at Thammasat, Chiranan became a poet, while Supote became editor of *Sinlapawatthanatham* (Arts and Culture).

Siam gradually inculcated parliamentary rule during the 1980s, and although Anderson believed the parliamentary rule of that period was not particularly democratic, he was nevertheless optimistic about its future prospects. This position can be clearly seen in his 1991 article, 'Murder and progress in modern Siam', where he took up in more detail the role of another of the social strata identified in 'Withdrawal symptoms', the provincial notables. Here Anderson began with a simple premise, that we can determine where political power is contested by looking at patterns of political assassination. Thus, he pointed out, prior to the Bowring Treaty in 1855, political assassinations took place in Bangkok within the aristocracy and particularly within the royal family, with frequently the line between execution and murder quite blurred. After a period of suspension while colonialism threatened, political assassination returned after the overthrow of the absolute monarchy, with intra-elite assassination attempts against prime ministers, followed by state executions of the perpetrators, and more famously, the assassination of Pridi[4] supporters, including several cabinet ministers, after the Second World War, again all in Bangkok, again with an unclear distinction between state sanctioned and private murder. Anderson argued that political assassination underwent a profound change under the Sarit

4 Pridi Bhanomyong was leader of the civilian faction in the 1932 uprising where Phibun was leader of the military faction. The two later became political rivals. The killings were carried out by followers of police chief Phao Sriyanon, who by then may have been more powerful than Phibun.

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dictatorship, as the types of victims broadened and as the assassinations became more clearly state-sanctioned. Arsonists, communists, and leftists all became targets, all extra-elite. Assassinations also spread to the countryside, where they became public displays, intended to intimidate villages suspected of being vulnerable to communism. In the countryside, the state found a new ally in the provincial notables who had emerged under the rapid modernisation of the 1960s. This group was responsible for the killings of peasant leaders, generally hiring former mercenaries and others loosely involved in 'security' to do the dirty work. These two groups were also heavily involved in the right wing organisations that carried out the massacre at Thammasat in 1976. As Siam transitioned to parliamentary rule in the 1980s, Anderson argued, political assassination increasingly became privatised, with aspiring parliamentarians hiring gunmen to attack political rivals, in order to ensure their electoral success. This, he argued, was ironically a positive sign for the survival (but not necessarily for the development) of parliamentary rule, as it indicated that parliamentary seats had become highly valued by powerful provincial notables.

In his last major piece to focus directly on politics, published after the 1991 coup and subsequent 1992 uprising (not in this collection, but reprinted in *The spectre of comparisons*[5]), Anderson remained optimistic about the future of parliamentary rule, and perhaps a democratic future. In 'Elections and participation in three Southeast Asian countries', Anderson compared Siam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Anderson argued here that electoral participation was a two-edged sword. On the one side, where extra-parliamentary activities such as strikes, sit-ins, and boycotts aimed at a single company or place, legislation would take effect nationwide, so that it was a much more efficient way of implementing change. On the other side, electoral participation tended to replace other forms of participation through a single lonely act — casting a ballot in a voting booth — effectively domesticating politics. For Siam, he argued, the 1973–1976 period, while democratic, was particularly unstable because legislation did not deal with issues such as the labour laws and land reform that were of greatest concern to those participating in other ways. Consequently, neither nationwide change nor the domestication of participation took place, so that, combined with other insecurities and fears discussed above, democracy collapsed. When parliamentary rule returned in the 1980s, it was without the left, without labour or the students; participation was domesticated, serving the interests of the provincial notables and the new(ish) bourgeois strata. Thus when the coup of 1991 came about, followed by a tainted electoral procedure, it faced resistance — though not from workers and students this time, but from the 'cell phone capitalists' and parliamentarians. With generals increasingly pursuing political office through elections, and with a strong bureaucracy capable of effective nationwide implementation of legislation, he argued that Siam had the best prospects for continued parliamentary rule among the three nations, albeit without participation from many groups, especially on the left.

In a sort of postscript in the foreword to the second edition of *In the mirror*, Anderson later noted that a number of former activists did return to politics, and

5 Benedict Anderson, *The spectre of comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the world* (London: Verso, 1998).

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made their way into Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party and even into his cabinets. Partly, he argued, this was due to their marrying into the families of bureaucratic and business leaders. It was also due to a desire to take a form of revenge on the bureaucracy that had once wronged them, by overseeing it, and it was an opportunity to put in place policies that might help the underclasses, in the form of Thaksin's populism. Other activists joined the PAD, some chose to influence politics through NGOs, journalism, and labour organisations. He also noted that the time for the October generation is finally winding down, with most nearing or already in their sixties, leaving opportunities for younger generations to establish new directions in scholarship and politics.

After about 1993, Anderson turned his attention fully to Siamese culture. Loos explains this shift in terms of Anderson's personal history, noting that the simple explanation for this shift, provided by Anderson in the introduction to the second printing of *In the mirror*, is that he had always loved literature more than political science. She also points out that Anderson's interests have always been influenced by those around him (p. 13), and we learn in the revised introduction to *In the mirror* that Anderson was at an early stage surrounded by Thais with an interest in literature, and of course Anderson's long-time colleague and successor as director of the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Cornell, Thak Chaloemtiarana, shifted to the study of literature about the same time. No doubt these personal reasons and interactions are a part of the explanation, but there seem to be other reasons as well. Anderson had initially turned to translations of radical literature because he did not want to see it suppressed by the dictatorial regime that followed the 1976 uprising, as had happened with the work of Jit Phumisak and an earlier generation. During this period, he was also part of an effort to translate Niddhi Eoseewong's *Pen and sail*, finally brought to fruition under the leadership of Chris Baker in 2005.[6] Niddhi's work on literature and history, like Anderson's 'State of Thai Studies', posited a class-based cultural divide in Thailand, manifested in the nature of Thai nationalism, which had profound implications for political power. In addition, Anderson's own seminal work, *Imagined communities,* had placed great weight on the novel and print capitalism in explaining the development of nationalism over the years, so that for Anderson, literature and politics had always been intricately linked.

Anderson has promoted this more holistic approach in trying to propagate Area Studies over the years. He has argued that Area Studies to succeed has to become fully Area Studies, with scholars studying areas as totalities, rather than dividing by both discipline and area (i.e. become Southeast Asianists, not Southeast Asia historians or political scientists working on Southeast Asia).[7] This proved problematic, however, as the professionalisation of universities had created specialists in fixed academic disciplines where jargon and writing for specialised audiences increasingly took precedence over writing for the broader public. Anderson argued that Thai scholars faced additional institutional barriers: to sustain an appropriate lifestyle, rather than

6 Niddhi Eoseewong, *Pen & sail: Literature and history in early Bangkok*, ed. Chris Baker and Ben Anderson (Chiangmai: Silkworm Books, 2005), especially Baker's 'Afterword', pp. 361–84.

7 'State of Thai Studies', p. 45; Benedict Anderson, 'The changing ecology of Southeast Asian Studies in the United States, 1950–1990', in *Southeast Asian Studies in the balance: Reflections from America*, ed. Charles Hirschman, Charles Keyes and Karl Hutterer (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 1992), pp. 25–40.

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undertake creative research, they spent their time writing government reports, writing newspaper columns, commenting for television, or taking on second jobs. 'Academics pragmatically align themselves with the political elite' to ensure access to research money, again resulting only in official reports and not publications. In the past, public intellectuals such as Constantino, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, and Sulak Sivaraksa, with no position in academia or the civil service and often little formal education had helped fill the gap; however, they had no successors, except Amir Muhammad in Malaysia.[8] And yet, he argued that despite the institutional barriers faced by Thai academics and the decline of public intellectuals, all the best Thai Studies work was being done in Thailand, by Thai scholars, with much of it in Thai.[9] Anderson's shift to a more holistic approach with a focus more on literature, movies, and culture can be seen as engaging with the type of Area Studies and the broader Thai-speaking audience he thought best positioned to move the field ahead.

While all these motivations are certainly part of the reason for the shift, we see this interest in Thai culture and its relationship to politics in Anderson's earlier work as well. As we noted, Anderson pointed out in 'Studies of the Thai state' that the consensus view of Siamese history led quite naturally to the assumption that royalist culture was Thai national culture. He further explored this same theme in 'Withdrawal symptoms', where he argued that the old motto of Rama VI, 'Nation-Religion-King' had become the ideology of the right, and the king had, under Sarit, taken on near sacred status. And yet, Anderson explained, this sacred status came precisely because the king had no *formal* power, so that he could not be blamed for anything that might go wrong. In this sense, the power of the contemporary monarchy is not primarily in a 'network monarchy' as Duncan McCargo put it,[10] nor in an *ammat*/aristocracy, as the Red Shirts explain it. The support of a pro-royalist network is at best a secondary factor. Similarly, the vast economic power of the monarchy is a secondary factor. We might better conceptualise the nature of the current social order in terms of the persistence of the 'ancien régime', a concept we borrow from Seksan Prasertkul, for the power of the monarchy does not rest primarily on networks, nor on aristocratic titles, but rather on its domination of what Thai culture is and what especially the middle classes think it should be. As Jit Phumisak argued, the middle classes accept elements of '*sakdina*' culture where they benefit from it,[11] but in the process, they invest the exemplars of that culture with tremendous power. To be truly, fully Thai, one must emulate the culture of the monarchy, and especially of the monarch.[12] This is

8 'Few intellectuals in court of public opinion', *Bangkok Post*, 28 June 2010.

9 Filomeno V. Aguilar et. al., 'Benedict Anderson, comparatively speaking: On Area Studies, theory, and "gentlemanly" polemics', *Philippine Studies* 59, 1 (2011): 107–39.

10 Duncan McCargo, 'Network monarchy and legitimacy crises in Thailand', *Pacific Review* 18, 4 (2005): 499–519.

11 Jit Phoumisak, *Chom na sakdina Thai* (Bangkok: Sripanya, 2007), pp. 61–2, or in translation, Craig J. Reynolds, *Thai radical discourse: The real face of Thai feudalism today* (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1987), pp. 57–8. See also Hobsbawm and Ranger's notion of invented tradition, where the absolute state reinvents traditions to restore pre-existing social relations in times of rapid change; Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

12 Thus the underlying problem with the succession: the behaviour of the current monarch fits middle-class images of Thainess, so that he can serve as an exemplar of their vision of Thainess, while the

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propagated, as Thongchai Winichakul noted,[13] through discussions of 'Thainess' where one is more or less 'Thai' depending on how effectively one emulates that central Thai aristocratic culture,[14] by the nationalistic ideology, jingoistically stated in the motto 'Nation-Religion-King' with the ancien régime at its core, and through various public relations arms of the government and the monarchy. Economic resources and networks are also important, of course, but at a secondary level. 'Ancien régime' effectively captures all these dimensions of power, and emphasises the importance of informal power through ongoing cultural domination.

Taken in this light, we can see a shift in focus in Anderson's agenda in 1993, when he published 'Radicalism after communism', comparing Indonesia and Siam. After noting that the Communist Party in Indonesia had ended in a massacre, so that it had ghosts to exorcise, while the Communist Party in Siam had faded away, so that it had ghosts to invoke, Anderson summarises the work of two Indonesians and three Thais. The common links include, he argues, nationalism, history, and print — perhaps not surprising since the expanded edition of *Imagined communities* was published about that same time. And yet what comes through more clearly as a common theme is radical culture. The Indonesians include a writer and a filmmaker, and while the Thais are all academics,[15] they share a common theme when it comes to culture. In the summary of Seksan Prasertkul's thesis, Anderson points to Seksan's argument that the Communist Party had essentially ceded nationalism to conservative forces, yet the local bourgeoise had not been able to overturn the ancien régime, which consequently survived into contemporary Siam, based, in part, on an inaccurate representation of Siamese history with kings as national heroes (something Anderson had noted earlier in 'Studies of the Thai state'). Thongchai Winichakul, in depicting the invention of the nation through mapping, Anderson explained, had opened up space for the exploration of other inventions, for deconstructing the history and culture of that same ancien régime, and for establishing alternative decentralised and egalitarian histories and cultures. From the work of Kasian Tejapira, Anderson provides the following quote:

> There still exist in Thailand the residual nuts and bolts of cultural resistance that had been tempered and moulded by the long-endeavoured frictional combination of communism and Thai culture. And so long as the modern ravages of dictatorship and capitalism are still visited upon the Thais, there will be enough new radicals to reassemble them into powerful cultural weapons in the fight for their own and humanity's survival and dignity (p. 127).

In effect, Anderson had set out a revised agenda, this one focused on examining and questioning the ideo-cultural foundations of the ancien régime, restoring the positive

behaviour of the future monarch does not. And if the future monarch does not exemplify Thainess, it becomes more difficult for the middle class to assert its cultural superiority over other classes.

13 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: A history of the geo-body of the nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), chap. 1.

14 Defining and even measuring Thainess (*khwampenthai*) has been the central preoccupation of Thai Studies in Siam, so that it has been complicit in this prioritisation of central Thai aristocratic culture over other Siamese cultures.

15 Seksan and Kasian were Anderson's students; Thongchai was Craig Reynolds' student at the Australian National University. All three were student activists in the 1970s, with Seksan and Kasian escaping to the jungle, while Thongchai chose to stay in Bangkok to face arrest and lese majeste charges.

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aspects of radical culture, and exploring and propagating alternative historical and cultural traditions. This is, perhaps, the more important reason for the shift in Anderson's writing, from the focus on politics to the focus on culture, from English language work to Thai language work, from academic publications to cultural journals aimed at 'the intelligent public'.[16] By focusing on the wider intellectual community, and writing in Thai, the work can reach those Thais most likely to be sympathetic, many of whom work in the cultural arena, and may help to shape Thainess in more inclusive and less hierarchical ways. It is, of course, a political agenda, with culture at its centre.

The link between politics and culture in Anderson's recent work is made most explicitly in 'The strange story of a strange beast', which discusses *Sat Pralat* (*Tropical malady*), a film that won several international prizes, including a Special Jury Prize at Cannes in 2004. Despite this success the film did not play well with Bangkok's middle-class audiences, who found it difficult to understand; Anderson informs us that the meaning is quite clear to '*chaoban*' (village) audiences, however. It is this difference that intrigues him, a film that resonates internationally and in villages, but not in Bangkok. He argues that the film was made from a *chaoban* point of view, entirely unfamiliar to Bangkok middle-class audiences who expect to go to Thai films and see characters that look and act like they do. Even in films such as *Thongpoon khokpo ratsadorn tem khan*, about a poor boy from the Isan, the main character was 'played by a fair-skinned utterly Bangkokian pretty-boy' (p. 138). Furthermore, he argues, this middle class in Bangkok is twice removed from 'chaobanness', once by their class culture, once by their Chineseness ('lukjekness'), Bangkok having been a largely Chinese city until the relatively recent arrival of Isan migrants. The Sino-Thai have been quite willing to assimilate upwards over the years, and so they have been strongly attracted to royal decorations and titles, and to Thai official nationalism. The Thai culture in *Sat Pralat*, coming from chaobanness, is not only alien to them, he argues, it is beneath them, and so they can generate no understanding or even interest in it. That the international community has awarded prizes to a film with a popular culture that is beneath the Bangkok middle class leads to dismissals, suggesting that it is 'meant for Westerners' (p. 140) and thus not really Thai. Similarly, film critics, who are members of the Bangkok intellectual strata and speak for Thainess, say they like its aesthetics, but claim they do not understand it. They also are seemingly frustrated that such a film can do well internationally, while *Suriyothai*, emblematic of official nationalism and an attempt to portray Thainess, has done poorly overseas, despite editing by Francis Ford Coppola. Anderson's political take here is quite clear: while *sakdina* culture may have become Thainess for the middle classes, from an international as well as a village perspective, *chaoban* culture is also Thainess — and a more interesting Thainess at that.

Much of Anderson's recent work is in this same vein, seeking to desacralise the notion of Thainess, while espousing other elements of the diverse cultures of Siam. In 'Two unsendable letters', Anderson suggests that the arrogance often associated with

16 Aguilar et. al.: 117. Anderson is writing specifically here of *Fa Diaw Kan* and *Aan* journals, calling them direct descendants of *Sangkhomsat Borithat*, and noting that there are no similar journals in Indonesia or the Philippines. Since Anderson was close to the editors and writers of *Sangkhomsat Borithat* it is not surprising that he now writes for their descendants.

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Thainess has made it unthinkable to apologise to Thailand's neighbours for past wrongs, despite the precedent set by an apology to Thailand from U Nu. He also observes that, in the rush to identify World Heritage sites, those designated so far are identified with Thainess (Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, Ban Chiang), while two more, one prehistoric and thus by unidentifiable artists (Phuprabat), the other built by the Khmer empire (Phimai/Phnomrung/Meung Tam), both in the Isan, were under review. Meanwhile, he noted, Bangkok was passed over by UNESCO, to the chagrin of those who propagate Thainess. He also suggests insecure Thais are seeking to claim Phreah Vihara by conquest rather than by creativity. In *Ni Siam Kuk*,[17] edited by his long-time colleague Charnvit Kasetsiri, Anderson translates the work of Bernard-Philippe Groslier, which indicates that the 'Siamese' preceded the Thai in the region, and may have originated from an indigenous Surin people. Anderson translated Groslier's conclusion thus: 'Other peoples of Indochina have had a destiny no less remarkable than the destinies of those peoples who have "emerged" into history by their writing and their temples.'[18] Anderson's short book, *The fate of rural hell: Ascetism and desire in Buddhist Thailand*,[19] originally published in Thai in *Aan* magazine, focuses on a kind of vulgar temple culture. Here Anderson describes, with many photos, a temple in Suphanburi with its garden of graphic sculptures depicting various types of sinners and their suffering in hell, all unclothed to expose their shame. The book records the history of the temple and speculates on the future, in the process placing a rather unusual type of rural Buddhist temple and its monks at the centre of twentieth-century history while Bangkok politicians and politics linger, mentioned but largely unanalysed, in the background.

Anderson returns to the impact of the narrowing of 'Thai' culture in his comparison of statues, T-shirts and billboards in Siam, Japan, and the Philippines (titled, "Billboards, Statues, T-Shirts: Revolving Ironies"). He argues that where the Philippines has statues of a pantheon of national political heroes, Japan has relegated them to T-shirts, while Thailand has only local statues for its prominent political figures of all stripes and reputations, whether Prime Minister Phahon Phonphayuhasena, who retired having offended no one; Prime Minister Pridi Bhanomyong who, accused of communism, died in exile; Prime Minister Plaek Phibunsongkhram, accused of Fascism; or police chief and army general Phao Sriyanon, accused of corruption. All have statues, but not in places of national prominence. The Philippines has racy billboards advertising international brand names, as does Japan, while Thailand has billboards with members of the royal family, amulets, and real estate. Anderson explains these differences by arguing that Japan with its emperor cannot allow public space for national heroes, as it might be considered 'a kind of gentle lese majeste' (p. 151). However, in Japan, the emperor does not appear on billboards, which then are a public space open to racy images. In Thailand, billboards depicting members of the royal family are quite common. Thus billboards, he argues, tend to be conservative, with Buddhist amulets and inoffensive real estate

17 Charnvit Kasetsiri, ed., *Ni Siam Kuk* (Bangkok: Foundation for the Promotion of Social Sciences and Humanities Textbook Project, 2002).

18 Charnvit, *Ni Siam Kuk*, pp. 96–7.

19 Benedict Anderson, *The fate of rural hell: Ascetism and desire in Buddhist Thailand* (Calcutta, New York, and London: Seagull Books, 2012).

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predominating. Writing in Thai, for a Thai audience, Anderson's argument is carefully phrased, and in some ways a bit strained. Billboards in Bangkok, as opposed to the provinces where he made his observations, are generally designed by large, often multinational advertising companies, and the content of many varies little from other countries; certainly there are the kinds of risqué billboards Anderson noted for the Philippines in Bangkok, though perhaps not as many as one might expect. Wacoal bra billboards famously elicited some brief controversy many years ago, since going unremarked, and for years Mekhong whisky calendars with seminude models shared the walls with photos of royals in many repair shops, until in 2005 the company decided to clean up its image. Similarly, images associated with Buddhism do not seem to stifle racy images. On the most recent *loy krathong* festival, I visited a famous old temple along the Mekong River, where young people were drinking openly in the temple grounds and a singer performed while young women in bikinis (or perhaps a cheap version of the risqué underwear of the Philippine billboards) danced before the *chedi* as the ancient Buddha image looked on in stony silence. Such dances in temple grounds are neither new nor uncommon. Of course this part of the argument and the comparison to the Japanese emperor allow the larger point on the monarchy to be made, in Thai, for a Thai audience: that the promotion of monarchs as national heroes leaves no room for other national heroes, who until recently could not literally stand in the presence of royalty, and still cannot, figuratively. Meanwhile, the military government has announced the construction of a new park at Hua Hin, with large statues of nine kings, like the park in Burma's new capital city, only more imposing (and more regal); of course, Thai kings must be more praiseworthy than Burmese heroes.[20]

We see this cautious approach again in 'Mundane history/*Jao Nok Krajok*', originally published in *Aan* magazine in 2013, where Anderson's point on the monarchy is again carefully made and couched in a different argument. We see this from the very beginning, where Anderson discusses every term in the title except '*jao*', a title for the higher ranks of the aristocracy, including, in combinations, the king, but also sometimes used for god (as in *jaopho*, godfather), or 'master' so that the second part of the title could be literally translated as lord sparrow or master sparrow. Anderson also notes that *nok krajok* is used between males as an insult, often familiarly — as in *ai nok krajok*, hopeless, useless, or good-for-nothing — with, we see but Anderson does not mention, the derogatory *ai* in place of *jao*. The movie under review is about a father, a stoic university professor (Thanin) who speaks seldom and spends his days in meetings at the university, his paralysed adult son, and the new male nurse hired to care for that son. The male nurse becomes a kind of surrogate mother for the son, which Anderson takes as an indication that men are now more comfortable in the presence of other men, less so in the presence of increasingly assertive Thai women. Anderson argues that the movie is about youthful angst among Thai men, who often seem to have limited and uncertain prospects in contemporary Thailand, especially when compared to young women, who now outnumber men in universities and seem to have better job prospects in a range of occupations —

20 *Bangkok Post*, 7 Nov. 2014, http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/general/441888/army-plans-monument-to-kings.

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including nursing, where the only usefully employed male in the movie works. The housekeeper (Somjai) and the cook (Kaew) are both women, while Thanin's wife has passed away at some much earlier point in time.

Although this theme of male angst dominates the review, Anderson also argues that the film can be seen as a generic allegory for a decaying bourgeoisie, with the professor and his son symbolising that decline. It can also, he argues, be seen in the Thai context as 'allegory for the decline of the Thai monarchy over the past decade' (p. 162), with, in this interpretation, the father, Thanin,[21] representing the monarch. Thanin never smiles (Handley's book title,[22] but not its content, is specifically referenced here), and his 'chilly, aloof, and expressionless face mirrors the flat photos on millions of royal billboards across the country' (p. 162). The son, Ake (lead, first), then can be seen to represent 'a younger generation of self-obsessed royals with nowhere to go as the popular movement for serious democratisation becomes a powerful political force' (p. 162). After setting out the discussion of male angst, Anderson returns to this theme, again cautiously, pointing out that around the world, monarchies became unstable in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, due to rapid economic and subsequent political change. He argues that the shift to secular schooling removed both future monarchs and members of the bourgeoisie from their homes, often sending them abroad, so that they no longer represented the same kind of asset as in the past, leading to smaller families. Second, he argued that these same schools, linked to modernity, created sons who were both different from, and in a modernising world, seen as superior to their fathers, who were associated with tradition. But youth is fleeting, and those once young settle into traditions of their own, eventually to be replaced by a new young generation, one now linked to computers and the Internet. This complicates relationships between fathers and sons, naturally. After this general discussion, Anderson writes:

> If one sets aside the idea that Thanin sits in allegorically for the monarch [!], one sees something deeper: pain. We will remember how Somjai begs Ake to understand that his father suffers too, though she doesn't say why. In the few scenes where the father and son are together, Ake is completely hostile, and humiliates Thanin — with rudeness and silence — in front of the servants. Thanin does not hit back, and stoically accepts his son's hatred, and then disappears from the melancholy home as often as he can. The pain is surely guilt for something undescribed, but it's also his complete failure to be a father. Stoicism is his only option. (pp. 165–6)

By interweaving it with other themes in the film, mentioning Handley's book in a vague way, and introducing general comparisons, Anderson thus is able to create (and send) yet another unsendable letter, as it were. And one sees again the insight that has marked Anderson's contributions to Siam Studies over the years, as we see in the angst and inability to adjust to contemporary Thai capitalism some possible reasons for the rise in violence, especially among young males, and some of the

21 Anderson does not discuss the choice of Thanin for the name of the father. Thanin Kraiwixien was the appointed prime minister after the October 6 massacre, and reportedly had the strong support of the king. Thanin was responsible for the violent suppression of the left.

22 Paul Handley, *The King never smiles: A biography of Thailand's Bhumibol Adulyadej* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); the book is banned in Siam, yet has circulated widely.

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implications of shifting gender roles, all while discussing in Thai for Thai audiences things that cannot be discussed.

While the collection ends here, Anderson's work and its influence will not, as he spends time each year in Siam, interacts with a wide range of scholars and public intellectuals, and continues to write. Anderson's early articles were hugely influential in the field of Thai Studies. They shook up the pre-existing consensus, set out a new research agenda, identified newly politically active social strata and outlined their influence on politics. Anderson, his students, and many others have since followed some of the directions he laid out, opening new areas of study along the way, creating multiple alternatives to the previous consensus he identified. At the same time, the list of topics Anderson has not addressed is rather curious: an expert on civil–military relations, he has never written about the military in a country plagued by frequent coups; a radical/progressive/left scholar, he has never written on the Siamese working class; he has never written comparatively on Islam, despite his work on Indonesia, nor has he written anything on the conflict in the South; and, as Loos noted in her introduction, he wrote little on gender, until recently, even though his career spans the period of rapid growth of Gender Studies, both in Siam and more generally. One cannot, of course, write about everything, but these seem rather odd topics to ignore, given his areas of expertise, his previous work, and the scope of his agenda.

We also see in 'The state of Thai Studies' a discussion of the future of Siam Studies, and of Area Studies in general. Anderson argued, perhaps rather presciently, that the disciplines would continue to crowd out Area Studies, and called on fellow practitioners to move to better define Area Studies as an alternative to disciplinary studies, rather than allow themselves to be marginalised within their disciplines. Sadly the structures of American academia have proved stronger than anticipated, as Southeast Asian Studies continues to struggle to find a place. While Anderson sought to find a way ahead for Area Studies throughout his career, in the end, while continuing to encourage fellow practitioners to expand their focus and create a new space, he simply followed his own path. In his academic work, he began his study of first Indonesia, then Siam, and last the Philippines with intensive language study. He also set out to read all the past work he could find, immersing himself in the work of academic predecessors, rather than relying on preconceptions based on his work on other countries. Only after he had a good knowledge of the language, the culture, and the academic literature did he begin writing, and only after developing his own ideas on a country did he commit to comparison.[23] It is an approach that is difficult if not impossible to follow in an age of overspecialisation, and in an age where every publication is counted (and often counted equally), so that one cannot easily spend several years retooling for a new country, or working out an entirely new and hugely ambitious paradigm, as he did in *Imagined communities*. After 1993, Anderson chose to address his work on Siam to a different audience, one in a position to shape Thai culture, especially Thai political culture, as he set out to expand the notion of 'Thainess'. Here, too, he has pursued Thai Studies, or what

23 Ironically the one time he did not take this approach, the result was his best-known work, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (1983), where the crucial section on Latin America is based on a limited number of English language sources.

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may better be called Siam Studies, working across disciplines, often on subjects where he lacked formal training, but consequently bringing a broader focus, as with his writings on literature and film. Due to this shift in his audience after 1993, from academics to the wider intellectual community, and due to the shift in language from English to Thai, much of his more recent work has gone undiscovered by academic audiences, even as he continued to advance the frontiers of our understanding of Thai politics, and especially the relationship of politics to Thainess and Siamese culture more generally. This collection should help remedy that deficit, and open more avenues for future study.

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