

With the single exception of Huynh-Beattie's review of the Saigon art scene, the strategy of every article is to go deep rather than broad. As readers, what are we to make of conclusions drawn from one film auteur, a handful of films, a few local theatre groups, one festival, a single magazine, four writers, or the career of a single actor? Although some of the essayists (especially Bo Bo and Harrison) spend time putting their study into a broader context, others expect the case study to speak for itself.

In his introduction, Tony Day summarizes the articles rather than drawing out a number of themes running across the collection. Although he bounces some articles against one another and against some other published work, his generalization moves little beyond his initial point about the intertwining of global ideological conflict on the one hand with local concerns about independence, nation, and identity on the other. After reading the essays, I felt that the variety of *political* experience of different countries in the Cold War (American tutelage in Thailand, war in Vietnam, military-backed dictatorship in Indonesia, etc) overrode any similarity in the *cultural* experience of the era.

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*The Sociology of Southeast Asia: Transformations in a Developing Region* by VICTOR T. KING. NIAS Reference Library #3 (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008). ISBN 978 87 91114 59 5 (hard), 978 87 91114 60 1 (soft)

Reading through King's text, the *bon mot* about the one-handed planner from my UN-ESCAP days inevitably came to mind. As planners, we were expected to advise our patrons the course of action to take, even though experience had taught us that most of them were loath of counsel that ran, 'on the one hand..., yet, on the other...'. If, at the time, we were two-handed planners, Victor King strikes me as an eight-handed octopus. To illustrate this straight away, I quote from the conclusion of the eighth chapter on Asian Values and Social Action, "Nevertheless, provided one makes a distinction between doctrine and practice and recognizes that religious values are malleable, it is clear that values have motivational force, but their influence and effects are complex, they may work directly or indirectly, and at times they may have no consequence at all" (195).

In spite of such non-committal conclusions that pepper the narrative, the author is highly committed to introduce the reader to the sociological tools and theories available to make sense of transformations or macro-sociological dynamics in a strikingly complex region, and so, both tools and Southeast Asia stand in need of explanation. Since King's focus is on dynamics, he needs, like the fathers of modern social

thought—Marx, Weber, Durkheim—comparative and historical methods, and so the historical-sociological approach, prominently developed by Wertheim, becomes his guiding light.

In a way, the Southeast Asian Region fits the challenge, because on almost any count—geographical, ethnical, economical, high-cultural/civilisational, religious, colonial-historical, linguistic, and even post- and neo-colonial—the region is a patchwork of such mind-boggling diversity that it is well nigh impossible to come to any Southeast Asia-centric conclusions. What remains, is to apply historical-sociological analysis and to look for parallels in patterns of process and change. And this is precisely what the author does, without escaping from the fact—even as on occasion he tries to do—that sociology—its theories, paradigms, methods, and fashions—is a western invention and a western way of looking at things that thus invite to work with farfetched, extraneous, and inescapably comparative measures.

The study opens on a short programmatic introduction, in which the author promises to offer a ‘sociological perspective’ on the social dimensions of inequality, urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation, and relationships based on the social organisational principles of ethnicity, gender, class, power, status, and patronage (1). This is followed by a discussion of the inner diversity and consequential fuzziness (19) of the Southeast Asian Region. From then on, we plunge into sociological analysis and its history in

the countries of the Region.

Chapter two, *The Sociological Context*, discusses “the underdevelopment of Southeast Asian sociology”, which is to be expected, considering that the Region as a distinct geographical or cultural area is a relatively recent invention. When the concerned countries achieved their political independence, there were few indigenous academics. Of them, the few who were subsequently trained, parroted the post-war, overwhelmingly American fashions of behaviourism, structural-functionalism and positivism. In King’s discussion, these are contrasted with the dynamic historical-sociological approach. This contrast found its parallel in the competing paradigms of modernisation versus underdevelopment or dependency theory that are considered in the third and fourth chapters.

Under *Modernisation and Post-War Social Change*, we are again reminded of the diversity of local or national experiences in the era of decolonisation, and thus the hazards of generalisations. Even so, the vague yet much encompassing concept of modernisation did the trick as scholars were concerned in understanding how stability and structure could be sustained in periods of transition. Importantly, they did this against the background of the western and particularly the American experience of triumphant capitalism; in brief, modernity and rapid economic growth would inexorably lead to the good life. It was the days that an aspiring student seeking funds for research in the Region would be foolish, indeed, not put the relation of

‘development’ to, for instances, religion, personality, or ethnicity, prominently in his proposal.

Be this as it may, from then on the chapter will consider research findings on and interpretations of such relations in Burma, Java and Bali, Thailand, and the Philippines. Comparing these demonstrates that high-flown theoretical ideas hold little value in explaining the historically diverse trajectories of these countries; what seemed to be plausible relationships in the one case are no more than chimeras in that of the neighbour. Consequently, the very idea of ‘modernisation’ needs to be re-conceptualised, at the same time that speculations about values and institutions aiding or hindering the advent of modernity continue to this day.

The chapter on Underdevelopment and Dependency takes us out of the American modernisation orbit and brings us back to, to my taste, more solid European perspectives, such as those of Marx, Lenin, Hobsbawn, Baran, Gunder Frank, Wallerstein, etc. These are made specific in short discussions of European mercantilism, and industrial and monopoly capitalism that precede historical country case studies on British Burma, the Netherlands East Indies, and the Spanish and American Philippines that bring to light an impressive range of different experiences and trajectories, resistant to be caught in any consistent theoretical frame.

The above chapter sets the format for the following three on Social Class, the State and Political Economy; Ethnicity and Society; and Patronage

and Corruption, which all begin with introductions of intra-regional diversity and theoretical approaches to the subject matter at hand, then to discuss a set of national case studies that invariably show tremendous variations. About this, parallel to how I began this review, the author observes, e.g., “The template of social class can only approximate the complexity and variety of unequal social relations which are constantly in a state of flux and transformation” (127).

The eighth chapter, on Asian Values and Social Action, shows that states propagate or mobilise certain values, including religious ones, to support political positions and policies. In my view, to which I shall return later, the chapter is totally divorced from any recognisable reality on the ground, other, of course, than instrumental political manipulation or so-called ‘reactionary modernism’, in which Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir’s ideas are privileged. The value of the chapter is not so much in the discussion of these ideas as in the exploration of the complexities of the relationships between religion and modernisation that follows the trail set out by Von der Mehden.

The penultimate chapter, on Transformations in the World of Work: Gender Issues, brings us back to *terra firma* in as far as that is possible in discussing the changes in the position of ‘women’ through changes in the economy, in their education, migration and commerce; while pondering whether, in this modern age, they are more than ever victims of oppression, marginalisation and invisibility if they stick to the domestic

realm and ‘traditional’ occupations. So such is clear: within the overall transformations and changing structure of opportunities, the position of women and the culture that surrounds it is in flux, at the same time that prevailing religious thinking, state ideology, factory work and sex tourism tend to retard their emancipation. In contrast to this depressing diagnosis stands the liberating experience of educated, middle-class women professionals who are in ascendancy in public life, where they may even become heads of state!

The last substantive chapter is on Transformations in the Urban Worlds where the issues to do with the state, class, ethnicity, gender, patronage, corruption and cultural values are thought to be at their most magnified and intense. To illustrate this claim, the historical context of cities in the Region is considered, together with the issue of migration, and a set of analytical concepts before these are applied to the examples of Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and their role in symbolising the nation and projecting images and identities of nationhood in a modernising and globalising world.

The work concludes with a section on Modernity, Globalisation and the Future, in which it is noted that the inexorable advance of modernity, and its destabilising potential, propels, in one way or other, the sociological and even anthropological research agendas. In this perspective, recent approaches are briefly reviewed, the discussion of which, predictably, leads to many instances of ‘not necessarily..., but

rather...’, or, “Overall, Asian modernity is ‘always an ambiguous mixture of local needs and global ambitions, national/communal aspirations and a desire for their transcendence’” (253).

Be this as it may, the interconnections between culture, economic development, democracy and class formation should drive the research agenda, and the resulting endeavour should be comparative within Southeast Asia and/or more wide-flung while tracing interconnections between China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and the Southeast Asian countries. Then, as a final reflection on his work, King concludes that in the historical-sociological and political economy approach taken, he largely left out the discussion on cultural identity (including the examination of religion, the arts, literature, media, consumerism, lifestyle, youth, gender and education) and that such a culturally focused companion volume is urgently required.

I couldn’t agree more with these last statements. If I were a teacher of sociology—a discipline concerned with the description and analysis of social organisation, relations and processes (1)—with a particular interest in macro-sociological dynamics, King’s text would provide me with an excellent outline for any course at the undergraduate level. Yet, concentrating on the conceptual mechanisms that underlie social dynamics does not elucidate the way(s) life is lived, a fact about which our students at Bielefeld, when involved in a pub brawl with somebody from the working class, quipped, ‘Look here, finally class struggle!’

Whereas sociological concepts, such as class, have become part of the western imagination and may approximate life on the ground in a somewhat recognisable manner, in Southeast Asia they remain at best latent tools, existing ‘in themselves’ (as against ‘for themselves’). In Southeast Asia, or at least in my experience of it with exponents of approximately half its population (Javanese, Thai, Filipinos), western sociology is not part of the emic imagination. They see the social arrangement as a moral edifice based on the essential inequality of individuals who are obliged (or not) to each other through ‘debts of gratitude’ that spell their concretely experienced life worlds that shade off into a not morally obliging space that appears as the property of others, be it the king, the politicians and other power-holders. That space may be seen as ‘public in itself’, but is not seen as ‘of the public’ or ‘for itself’, other than as the hunting ground where one vies for a prize.

This is not to say that there are no well-trained sociologists in the Region capable of all the tricks of western social analysis! Yet, in my experiences with them since 1965, I have always been amazed that many of them revert in our discussions to their indigenous moral view at the drop of an unwelcome hat. Perhaps this is the (unconscious) reason why King has sidestepped native principles of social construction, such as kinship, the ‘religious’ position of parents, hierarchy as the moral backbone, violence and competition for power—the highly admired social

good (177). All these principles are experience-near in the same way as a western labourer knows himself to be a member of the working class. In Southeast Asia, moral inequality exists ‘for itself’, which may explain the absence of a discussion of the concepts of civil society and democratisation that are repeatedly mentioned as the Godot-like saviours of civilisation.

In order to understand the Southeast Asian experience of social life, we need to urgently develop an action theory based on dominant indigenous perceptions. With these I mean the ideas found among those lowland populations that trace descent bilaterally and whose religious imagination mirrors their kinship organisation. As far as this goes, I did my share, for which I refer to the last chapters of my *Southeast Asian Images; Towards Civil Society?* These days, in retirement on Mt. Banáhaw in the Philippines, I have been looking back on how I gained my insights, from the time I was ‘doing Thailand’ as a *Young Dog* to when I became a *Professional Stranger*. As a professor at the University of Leeds, however, Terry is still at it and even promises us that he began a two to three year encounter with Culture and Identity in order to prepare for a complementary volume. No need to say that I am eagerly looking forward to the outcome of that engagement, with which I wish him godspeed.

Niels Mulder

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