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EXPLORATION
AND IRONY
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OVER FORTY YEARS

BENEDICT R. O’G. ANDERSON



CORNELL SOUTHEAST ASIA PROGRAM PUBLICATIONS

Between 1977 and 1985, Ben Anderson published three essays which remain among the most read and most referenced studies of modern Thailand. All three focus in different ways on the extraordinary period from the student uprising of October 1973 to the bloody coup and massacre of 6 October 1976. All three are fascinated by the political role and cultural stance of the Bangkok middle class, and the position of the Thai monarchy. In “Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup,” Anderson examines the interplay between the American impact on Thailand, the power of the Thai military, and the political stance of the middle class. The essay ends, rather prophetically, by flagging “the process whereby the right gradually concedes, almost without being

aware of it, that it is engaged in civil war.” In “Introduction to *In the Mirror*,” a collection of short stories in translation, he delves deeper into the rapid creation of a new middle class in the “American era,” and the appearance of radicalized cultural vanguard. In “Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies,” Anderson takes Siam’s proud claim of evading colonialism and turns it on its head—finding this “success” responsible for the parochialism and pervasive conservatism in Thai politics and its study.

At the time of these essays, Anderson was best known as an expert on Indonesia. Over the same span of their publication he also published the book, *Imagined Communities*, which gave him a worldwide reputation. In 1990, he added a fourth stellar article on Thailand, “Murder and Progress in Modern Siam,” which argued that the rise of political violence, especially over elections, signaled that democracy had at last caught the attention of a larger constituency than the students and intellectuals, and “something really new is now in place.”

In the introduction to this collection of Anderson’s writings on Siam, Tamara Loos traces the author’s intellectual biography, starting with a peripatetic childhood, an Eton-Cambridge education in the classics, and a somewhat chance transition to Cornell University and the study of Southeast Asia in 1958. Between 1993 and

2006, when Anderson's interests returned to Indonesia, and ranged further to the Philippines, he wrote nothing on Thailand. The latter part of this collection contains essays and fragments that appeared between 2006 and 2013. Where the 1976 coup was inspiration for the first set of essays, the 2006 coup hovers in the background of this second set. The middle class and the monarchy are again in the center of the frame. And, depressingly, many of Anderson's themes still work despite 30 years of extraordinary change in Thailand's society.

This second batch of essays is not overtly about politics. There are two articles on film, particularly a long discourse on the reception of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's *Sat pralaat*, an essay on public iconography from statues to billboards, and some shorter squibs. As Loos notes in her introduction, and Anderson in a bridging essay, the radicals that fascinated Anderson in the 1970s had grown up and calmed down by the 2000s. The spirit of defiance was now to be found amongst women overthrowing male bias, gays cheerfully upending cultural stereotypes, and cultural radicals bamboozling the guardians of middle-class values. These essays appeared first in Thai, mostly in the cultural journal, *An*, and only later in English translation.

This is a very useful publication. The original essays have been slightly corrected but not updated in any way. The introduction to *In the Mirror* contains only the general background, not the appreciation of each of the stories in the collection and their authors (I think this exclusion is a pity). The later pieces may be a surprise to some who know only Anderson's early work. The introduction by Loos provides a lot of background little known outside the ranks of the Cornell mafia, and steers a fine line between eulogy and critical appreciation. In the current context, this collection should be read by anyone moved to ask, "What went wrong?"

Chris Baker