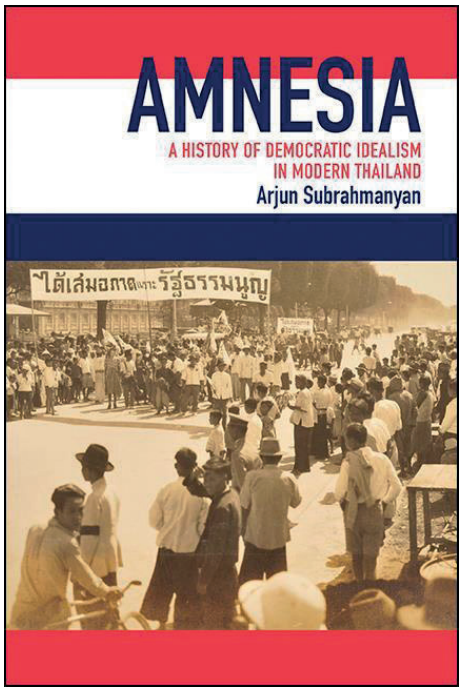
Amnesia: A History of Democratic Idealism in Modern Thailand by Arjun Subrahmanyan (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2021) ISBN: 9781438486512 (hardcover). US$95. ISBN: 9781438486505 (paperback). US$32.95.



Arjun Subrahmanyan's new book, *Amnesia: A history of democratic idealism in modern Thailand*, is a wonderfully crafted and original history of the struggles to extend the democratic nature of the 1932 revolution that overthrew the absolute monarchy. By his telling, this history ends in 1949 with the poorly organised "palace coup". That coup pitted Pridi Banomyong, the civilian leader of the People's Party, that led the 1932 revolution, against the regime headed by the militarist, Phibun Songkram, a former People's Party comrade. In 1947, Phibun joined with other militarists and some royalists to end decisively leftist currents in politics. Phibun won the battle in 1949 and secured nearly a decade of dictatorship, repression and the murder of democratic idealists.

After 1949, amnesia about the revolution sets in like a retrospective condescension, as E.P Thompson might have said. It is willed amnesia by those who trust no one will much care for historical truth and lives prematurely lost. It is also lazy amnesia, even in scholarship. When 1932 is invoked sympathetically, the revolutionaries come to mind, not the people, as the body invested in its outcome. For those unsympathetic to 1932, the revolution is portrayed as oppressive, nepotistic and chaotic, and as an event which pre-empted a more orderly democratic transition purportedly planned by the old regime.

Amnesia offers recovery of past democratic aspirations and restores the memory of those who died for their beliefs. On this, Subrahmanyan writes, "remembering also summons the contingency and fleetingness of people's lives, the real subject of history. A gesture, a plea, the moments of pain and fear before the abrupt loss of the living…" (p. 211). The specific loss here refers to the murder of four Northeastern MPs (three in 1949 and one in 1952), who had been a constant democratic thorn in the side of the People's Party regime for wanting to push the revolution further. The four are revered in the North-east as the Isan Tigers. Subrahmanyan provincialises Bangkok centric history by illustrating how such provincial elected MPs used parliament to clamour for local budgets, questioned military budgets, sought free political association and wanted—against the People's Party's wishes—a fully elected house of representatives. Tales of their struggles animate *Amnesia*, and the book would not be so compelling had their brave lives not been lived.

And to live is to breathe.

If revolutions are "history breathing in and out", as Enzo Traverso writes (2021, p. 16) in his *Revolution: an intellectual history*, then *Amnesia* captures the breath of democratic Siamese modernity when all the old regime alignments of how to relate, how to act, how to think were abolished, even if residues lingered like nasal congestion. A new politics was born that no one could control. Indeed, anyone who doubts 1932 was a revolution and wishes to characterise the period as an act of simple oligarchic transplantation will have to contend with this book. Its many new insights draw from new revisionist Thai scholarship on the period and original archival research.

Subrahmanyan's treatment of the revolution's aftermath and its protagonists is not hagiography, nor does it offer an over-rationalisation of the People's Party's authoritarianism, which is a tendency of much revisionist history. He eschews that abstract theoretical mode of revolutionary history that rejects critics as too fact-bound, who haggle over trivial incidents of repression and cannot see History in motion. Rather, *Amnesia* is a work that is resolutely concrete. It catalogues the People's Party's authoritarian slide and their democratic restraint—even if too much rationalisation of their actions relates to compromise with the old regime. It should be remembered that the authoritarian slide occurred well after the royalists had been dealt with in 1933, and the People's Party effectively held the state until 1944. However, this is not to name totalitarian tendencies despite fascist sympathisers in the party's ranks. Subrahmanyan tells in comic detail how the new regime was flummoxed by religious institutions, their leaders and finances (temples refused to give information), and how to relate to them. Ignorance prevailed. They commissioned a report on the topic, but largely ignored it—but they did respond legislatively, in 1941, to a democratic movement in the Sangha to equalise relations between the royal and commoner orders.

In its concreteness, the book covers how the "insiders" of the new regime disciplined the people in whose name they ruled—politics was censored on national radio and in local municipal assemblies. The insiders committed to the making of democratic citizens through propaganda and education, including Phibun's and the People's Party-endorsed 'human revolution'. But they also extended education, redirected budgets from the palace to public goods and began the work of planning a national economy. But these statist moments are set against wider struggles waged by "outsiders", who wanted to push the revolution along. In telling this story, the book excels, offering a new history of the revolution by exploring a dialectic (not named as such) between the new regime 'insiders' and inspired 'outsiders'.

The insiders, grouped mostly around the People's Party—and whose leadership more or less dominated the state until 1944 after they quashed a conservative counter-revolution in 1933—were a mixed bunch of civil servant reformers and authoritarian military figures. Their internal struggles and turf wars were glued over by a common attachment to what Subrahmanyan terms "democratic paternalism"—the need for an enlightened elite to guide the people into democratic ways of being. As Subrahmanyan explains, "it is democratic because its makers justified the revolution on the grounds of popular rule, individual rights and legal equality, and paternalist because they restricted, and at times outright excluded, the political role and responsibility of ordinary people. Hence the new regime often withheld freedom from the people who supposedly enjoyed

it" (p. 8). Indeed, the dialectic emerges when "outsiders" reject such limits.

The 'outsiders' were drawn from the approximately 100,000 people the author deems a broadly nationalistic middle class, educated and mobile and centred in the cities or provincial urban centres. They, too, often saw themselves as potentially part of a vanguard state, for they sought entry. They made concrete demands for widening access to jobs in the educational hierarchy, democratising the school curriculum, workers' rights and wages and land questions and welfare. The pro-democratic outsiders were the thousands of teachers, lawyers, monks, writers, civil servants, and professional classes, who were overwhelmed by a nation of illiterate peasants and sought the modernisation of their country. The 1932 revolution offered a chance for progress and a role for themselves in making their compatriots—millions of illiterate peasants—national citizens. As recounted in *Amnesia,* outsiders as elected MPs in parliament raised local grievances and issues, opposed military budgets, sought welfare provisions, and demanded greater educational resources. At times, outsiders co-ordinated with Pridi (the elevated insider in this book) on questions of labour rights and the Buddhist Sangha, for example.

Subrahmanyan expertly weaves these disparate struggles into the theme of a recurrent democratic idealism—never substantively defined other than a hankering for fairness and justice—that the 1932 revolution inspired. But perhaps these concrete claims—often in excess of state capacity or ideology—serve as the best definition of idealism uttered in various idioms. It is idealism because of its reach and its moral demand for fairness in the face of the muckiness of patronage politics, vanity, backstabbing and structural realities of a deeply uneven and hierarchical society.

It is not always clear whether possessing idealism is sometimes a political failing in this account. There is a curious moment in the book when the author's otherwise sympathetic portrayal of idealism and "outsiders" turns sceptical regarding their attempt to limit the People's Party's power in parliament. The moment occurs in the final chapter, *Revolution Betrayed*. It is August 1940, eight years after the People's Party overthrew the absolute monarchy and nearly seven years since it defeated a counter-revolution and established itself as an informal party of the state, buttressed by appointed MPs, who constitute half of the unicameral parliament. Subrahmanyan recounts how the young assembly is debating a constitutional amendment to a transitory article that would extend the presence of appointed MPs (in place since 1932) from 1942 to 1952, premised on the people not yet being ready for full democracy. The record shows that Pridi Banomyong, now Minister of Finance and an appointed MP, and still the civilian leader of the People's Party, casts his vote in favour of the amendment, as do other intellectual luminaries of the grouping with appointee status. Appointed MP Phibun Songkram, the military strongman of the People's Party and prime minister since 1938, votes in favour. He is at the peak of his power, having eliminated opposition in a purge in 1939, including executions and imprisonment of dissident elected members of parliament—all well told in *Amnesia*.

Phibun (*Raingnan* 1940, pp. 433-447), an admirer and imitator of fascism, closes the 1940 debate inferring that abolishing appointed MPs would allow royalists to use elections as a counter-revolution. Only eighteen executions weighed on his conscience, he told the assembly, but French-like revolutionary violence might occur if the parliament

did not, in loyalty to the 1932 revolution, extend the article. The speech does not appear in *Amnesia,* but it helps explain why only a handful of outsider MPs voted against the extension. One of the brave dissenters was an Isan tiger, Thong-in Phuriphat, whose opposition is curiously painted as naïve and idealistic, if not hubristic, by Subrahmanyan.

The collapse of democratic idealism in parliament on this fundamental issue was perhaps neither self-abasement of the elected MPs in the face of appointed guardians nor was it necessarily a sign of ideological unity about democratic paternalism. From the nature of Phibun's rant, we can also infer that fear had set in. Phibun was adept at reminding elected MPs of the possible consequences of challenging the 1932 revolution. When Phibun fell in 1944, a new politics emerged. A pluralistic cacophony informed the post-Phibun period and shaped the 1946 liberal democratic constitution. This was a new period in which it is possible to see the beginnings of mass politics and parties that deliver real political power in parliament connected to electoral franchises—something Pridi had rejected in 1940. The horse-trading of democratic politicking replace democratic idealism. Outsiders moved into the cabinet. *Amnesia* tells us that many provincial outsiders were educated at Thammasat, which provided correspondence courses, set up in 1934 by the People's Party—with a remarkable third of lawmakers in the late 1940s having Thammasat degrees. This great social mobility was another indicator that a revolution was underway, with a new class of rulers and representatives nurtured. However, the rest is history. By 1947, the pro-Pridi government fell to a coup.

The virtue of Subrahmanyan's focus on "outsiders" is that it moves outside that form of revisionist history that overly dwells on the People's Party and its battles with the monarchy. *Amnesia's* narrative underlines that a new revolution beckoned in the mid-1940s. That the prospective revolution was thwarted in 1947 and 1949 by an amalgam of political forces, that imposed democratic paternalism in a new costume, gives all the more reason to celebrate Subrahmanyan's achievement: the historical recovery of broader social forces shaping democracy. The book restores complexity to a tired narrative of "the people" versus the "monarchy" and restores agency to those outsiders who intended to make a democratic revolution.

This is a landmark study that should shape future scholarship on the period. Remarkably, given the centrality of debates about 1932, it was not written a generation ago. Public and scholarly understandings of the period are now no longer malnourished.

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