

Liberating Thai History: The Thai Past in an Asian Century

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Abstract

The nationalist plot of modern Thai history stresses the kingdom's exceptionalism as the only un-colonized state in Southeast Asia and highlights the steadiness of unbroken monarchy. Critics of the established narrative by contrast argue that Siam/Thailand bore many similarities to neighboring satellites of the Western powers that subordinated traditional authority and hence was a “semi-colony” of the West rather than a truly independent state. This paper argues that the semi-colonial view remains a better frame to study modern Thai history and that semi-coloniality produced a hybrid political culture among an educated new generation born around 1900. The young generation forged the popular struggles that after the 1932 end of the absolute monarchy sought to build a more fair and equitable society. These aspirations and the hybrid political culture of the time are a crucial but often overlooked part of modern Thai history.

Keywords

Thai democracy – 1932 revolution – Thai historiography – modern colonialism – Southeast Asia

In a 1927 newspaper article a Bangkok journalist labelled the Thai absolute monarchy an anachronism. He wrote that it was time to jettison this relic and claimed that in any case there was nothing particularly Thai about an absolute

monarchy. Five years later, in their manifesto issued on the day that they staged an overthrow of the absolute monarchy, the People's Party justified their move against the king on similar grounds. The manifesto explained that no other absolute monarchy still existed, and that the Thai institution blocked progress and freedom.¹ These two pieces of writing – one an op-ed and the other a political broadside aimed at the establishment – appeared before and after the Great Depression that brought to a head a crisis of faith in the Thai government. Public criticism of the establishment at the time was acute and sprang from not only the government's inability to meet the challenges of the day but also from a longer-term social divide between the haves and the have nots, the city and the country, the protected and the abandoned, which ran like a jagged scar right through the forty years of the absolute monarchy.²

The spirit and substance of these polemics echoed the anti-colonial rumblings in neighboring Southeast Asian states where populations lived under some form of Western colonialism. Literate society across the region spoke in similar ways about the social and political conflicts they faced – using vivid metaphors of oppression, for example in the Thai case that the elite were “farming on the backs of the people” – and they attributed their struggles as to the inequalities of the global political economy. That literate society in the colonized world identified their crises as universal in scope – should be an obvious point to make in understanding colonial and twentieth century history. But astoundingly after 170 years of globalization in Siam/Thailand it is frequently disbelieved that the country's path to modernity bears much resemblance to anyone else's. Scholars and schoolchildren are well familiar with the elements of the master narrative of Thai history that is advanced by the state culture industry and in the classroom: in a nutshell, the master narrative asserts that age old “national” traits of tolerance, assimilation and love of freedom – all allowed to persist and flourish because of a beneficent monarchy's unbroken power – show Thai people's moral superiority when compared to their neighbors.

One of the ironies of this view is that it was born as a Thai elite reaction against the plain weakness of the modern state – and especially from the turn of the twentieth century crises of the high imperialist era that shook the

1 Journalist cited in Matthew Copeland, “Contested Nationalism and the Overthrow of the Thai Absolute Monarchy,” (Phd diss., Australian National University, 1993), 152; “Announcement of the People Party No. 1 (1932),” in Pridi Banomyong, *Pridi by Pridi: Selected Writings on Life, Politics, and Economy*, trans. Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2000), 70–72.

2 Absolute monarchy in this article refers to the government system in the period between King Chulalongkorn's reforms of 1892 until the revolution of 1932.

elite (Winichakul, 2011). French aggression in the 1890s that resulted in the Thai surrender of border provinces along the Mekong river that the Bangkok monarchy had claimed as theirs gave King Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) a near nervous breakdown. And as an intelligent and capable man he well realized what later generations indoctrinated by the state would forget: that making a modern, independent nation in the colonial world required more than a heroic king; it required good geographical luck, a valuable export economy, and some cultural alchemy. In the wake of the political crises that faced the monarchy, Chulalongkorn's half-brother Prince Damrong Rajanuphap became the authoritative historian of the monarchic master narrative, and Chulalongkorn's sons Vajiravudh (r. 1910–1925) and then Prajadhipok (r. 1925–1935) further advanced the nationalist narrative of Thai history.³ Another irony of the master narrative is that its post-World War II entrenchment was abetted by Western scholars who in many cases were suspicious of state power and sympathized with popular freedom struggles. During the Cold War heyday of area studies, many international scholars highlighted local agency and adopted the vantage point of native observers in a Western dominated world.⁴ But in the Thai case, the best-placed native observer of the Western colonial period was not an embattled subaltern but a member of the Thai elite. Most foreign scholars know and have studied David Wyatt's *A Short History of Thailand*, which for a long time was the standard English-language textbook on Thai history. The book came out in 1984 and reflected a mature scholar's work over the prior two decades. His voice strongly echoed contemporary Thai nationalist history.⁵ Wyatt advanced an autonomous history of Thailand that foregrounded Thai elite agency in making the modern Thai political economy. In Wyatt's narrative, the Thai kings made the country modern – and acted with moral righteousness and of their own free will – although in imposed circumstances. While Thailand may have been forced to respond to the West,

3 Prajadhipok – who lost his absolute power to the People's Party and their revolution in 1932 – avoided the messiness of contingency when he argued that Chulalongkorn defied the odds and with his state reforms accomplished the real revolution in Thai history. Nattapoll Chaiching, *Khofan fai nai fan an luea chuea: Khwam khluenwai khong khabuan kan patipaks pati wat Siam* (pho. so. 2475–2500) [An Unbelievable Dream: The Resistance Movement against the Siamese Revolution, 1932–1957] (Bangkok: Fadiokan, 2013), 9.

4 A classic statement of the method is John R.W. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2, no. 2 (July 1961): 72–102.

5 For the tenor of Thai nationalist history works during the Cold War, see Winichakul, Thongchai. *Siam Mapped* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 143–150.

they did so freely and with national independence and the people's welfare as their motivations.⁶

Also beginning within area studies and during the cold war, but from the other end of the political spectrum, emerged critical history studies that saw the modern Thai political economy as comparable to indirectly held colonies of the Western powers rather than to other independent states. Radical scholars viewed the apt comparison as somewhere like Johore – a semi-independent kingdom materially exploited by the British and ruled by a British-backed Sultan – rather than independent and powerful Japan (Anderson 2014). “Semi-colonialism” was first used in Thailand in the 1950s to buttress Marxist arguments that Thailand was not unique but instead was a microcosm of universal revolutionary history (Reynolds and Hong 1983).⁷ Studies that highlight Thailand/Siam's colony-like history have had a major impact within Thai critical studies (Jackson 2010, 40). In the age of European empires, the kingdom was exposed to the same forces of the new international political economy as all its neighbors, and the results resembled others in the world system. Critical scholars have outlined the main features of the commonality: limited fiscal autonomy, stunted industry, the primacy of farm exports, imposed borders, the marked influence of highly placed foreign advisors, poor infrastructure, poor education for most and a Western or Western-style education for a few. Still, as Peter Jackson has noted, producing mountains of empirical data and finely detailed studies of Thailand/Siam's semi-colonial history has not broken the conservative hegemony of claims to Thai uniqueness. Indeed, it may have reinforced a Wyatt-like position, albeit from the perspective of critical politics. For in using the semi-colonial frame scholars have asserted local elite autonomy within a Western-dominated world (Jackson 2010, 51). Which is more important – external, Western pressure or internal, Thai elite initiative – is a source of continued argument. In the

6 During the Cold War Western anthropologists arguably worked from a socially broader empirical foundation and hence had a broader social vision than historians. Charles Keyes – one of America's pioneering anthropologists of Thailand during the Cold War – has argued that his disciplinary colleagues “began to contribute to an understanding that Thai society consisted of more than the monarchy, the military and those living in Bangkok”. He also notes however that the study among his peers of social conflict rather than integration did not really begin until the political violence of the 1970s, and that a major attack on the profession's complicity in United States government aid to a repressive regime accompanied the anthropologists' work. Charles F. Keyes, “Thai Studies in the United States,” *Sangkhomsat* 29, no. 1 (2017): 19–63.

7 Among the most widely known first uses of the “semi-colonial” trope was in Aran Phromchomphu (pseud.), *Thai keung mueang kheun* [Thailand: A Semi-Colony] (Bangkok: Mahachon, 1950).

former view, the international economy and Western-derived legal regimes take precedence, for in both cases Siam/Thailand looks like a colony. In the latter view, the authoritarianism of the Thai state over its subject population is the central issue and the state appears independent (Jackson 2010, 54). Nonetheless, despite a continued focus on the elite in both perspectives, applying notions of semi-coloniality tempers absolute claims. For the former view, leaving open room for some ambiguity undermines a colonialism “all the way down” approach; the latter view, while challenging royalist historiography and its assertion of the rulers’ benevolent paternalism, also can open space to explain the country’s different trajectory in comparison to, say, French Indochina or British India.

Using the semi-colonial approach to Thai history allows us to insert the country in the region more accurately. Across the colonial and semi-colonial world socio-political conflicts ruptured societies’ ideational links with their own pasts and forged new identities as part of a worldwide reaction against high imperial power. What to name these societies in transition – and hence digging deeper into colonial and semi-colonial comparisons – entails understanding the nature of their novelty. One approach makes comparisons to historically distant or geographically remote events – often in the colonial case with reference to the great states of Europe. Many Thai and Southeast Asian nationalists in the early twentieth century made such comparisons, often in a wooden and programmatic telos that stemmed less from naivete than from passionate activism. At the same time, we can identify more than ardent idealism in Asian popular movements. Dipesh Chakrabarty has offered a brief commentary on Thai history from a South Asian perspective in which he proposes that the novelty of third world popular movements occurred through “displacement” of the European revolutions that inspired them. The newness confounds judgment – even of open-minded critical historians – because judgment tends to see the new as repetition and therefore as impotent and merely imitative (Chakrabarty 2010). Repetition in fact has the power to transgress both the historical precedent and the contemporary status quo. While resembling each other and the examples from the past, colonial movements nonetheless showed the novelty of an “eagerness to liberate and to build a new house where freedom can dwell” (Arendt 1973, 35).

Political action as creative repetition, or as a political displacement of the West and of native elites, occurred within a hybrid political culture that challenged Western imperialism and traditional society simultaneously. The notion of hybridity has not gained much traction in Thai studies because it is associated with post-colonialism, an academic research area largely ignored

in a country without a Western colonial history. Hybridity can refer either to a subaltern resistance strategy or an aspect of forced submission in which an elite assimilates tradition to modern projects of control. Homi Bhabha popularized the former with his notion of mimicry, whereby imitation is always inherently an aspect of the direct colonial condition and is used by ordinary people to undermine the dominant power. The elite strategy of hybridity by contrast is common to many indirectly held colonies. Latin America gives some historical comparisons where Europeanized elites used their civilizing culture to control poor and black populations (Jackson 2010, 187). Modern Thai political history shows both dimensions of hybridity at work – as a method of subaltern resistance and as one of elite control. “Young Siam,” the modernizing cohort around Chulalongkorn, attacked the provincial lords who opposed their centralizing work as hidebound, old fashioned and out of step with the modern world. In their turn, the Promoters of the 1932 revolution used the “West” as a measure of the absolute monarchy’s backwardness, and later supporters of the revolution used Western-derived ideas to argue against the limits that the People’s Party imposed on the revolt’s popular dimension.

Hybridity – a fusion culture – structured semi-colonial politics as a paradox: a new repetition, or a first time “already” history that worked for freedom. The composites of the structure depended on the generational context and the experience of young people. The novelty of radical political action across Asia was tied to a generational bond in the high imperialist era. Karl Mannheim, coincidentally writing in the same years as the Thai revolution, was the first theorist to posit “generation” as a group with a common identity born of a shared experience. For the Eurocentric historian, the focus was the Front Generation that served in the trenches of Europe. After the war, the European generation split apart and its bitter conflicts – based on differing access to power and cultural contexts – plunged the world into chaos (Traverso 2016, 204). The generational conflict that ignited the European inferno encouraged anti-colonial nationalists who sensed an opportunity. But the trauma of the Great War was not the only source of common generational experience or common feeling during this age in motion of the early twentieth century. In Europe the common feelings were loss and fear of violent death coupled with deep pessimism that social progress was possible (Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker 2003). The anarchy of the international system in the colonial world too produced a social Darwinist-inspired hopelessness. Colonized people, however, also drew inspiration from modernity’s accomplishments, especially as shown by an industrial power largely remote from the European collapse. The United States had the largest economy in the world at the time, the largest industrial base and came behind only Great Britain in the volume of its imports from the

rest of the world (Hobsbawm 1996, 97–98). Beginning in the latter nineteenth century and gaining tremendous pace in the twentieth, the American dynamo forged a new consumer economy that changed American life. It produced a unique generational culture founded on materialism and new social freedoms for young people (Edwards 2011, Leach 1994, Oakes 2013). In Southeast Asia, American democracy, industry, film and radio, sports, cars and music all produced a consumer-driven infatuation with the West. A generation of young Southeast Asians born around 1900 privileged enough to have some access to modern education had a conflicted sense of social pessimism, burdened in part by the destructiveness of great power conflict and in part by the weight of their own traditions, and an American-inspired optimism that the future would be better than the past.⁸

British Marxists who pioneered cultural materialist history argued for collective experience as a vital force in the story of the have-nots in modern times (Thomson 1966 and 1993, Williams 1973, 1983 and 2005). In their histories, collective experience had a truthfulness that was more urgently felt than structural explanations. Experience was not mere common sense or low-level knowledge in need of scientific understanding to make it intelligible and meaningful. Experience – of poverty, violence or prejudice – created an ethical community. Here, pursuit of a common aim joined raw experience with reason. Moreover, it was only the “lived experience” that could transform a structure into a process (Jay 2004). Reflections on agency in history are not unique to the left. Political and cultural conservatives have posed a range of defenses of tradition that similarly stress the emotional, rhetorical and physical aspects of experience as resistant to theorizing or to instrumental reason. But unlike the left, which has seen experience of conflict or poverty as forging a common outlook and motivating people to change their world, conservatives have valorized experience as a passive acceptance of the status quo and the approved lessons to be learned from the past. Inevitably, this view – from the Rockingham Whig Edmund Burke to the Bangkok Prince Pitayalongkorn – condemns generational reaction against traditional politics as unthinking, emotional, derivative and politically illegitimate (Burke 1969, Pitayalongkorn 1970).

8 Thai newspapers of the interwar years frequently ran opinion columns that conveyed a mixture of political hope and despair. French Indochina gives an interesting parallel. See David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 252–326. The stereotypical image of America as progressive and free of course ignores the structural racism on which American capitalism and the political system relied. Colonial criticism of American inequality is an interesting part of period intellectual history, but is outside the scope of this article.

Now I can offer a historical case that integrates the themes I have raised. The aftermath of the 1932 revolution was a time of transition when a young generation experienced rapid change. They made a new beginning that combined an excitement over Western-derived ideas with an awareness that they would meet active political and latent mental resistance. To carry out their dramatic plans, young activists had to culturally localize their message.

The People's Party – a small, secretive cohort of mainly justice and military professionals from the bureaucracy – carried out a successful bluff on the early morning of June 24, 1932. They seized important administrative and communications centers in Bangkok, imprisoned high-level royals, and curtailed the power of the absolute monarchy. The radicals wrote a constitution that guaranteed the equality of all before the law, promised elections and replacement of the prime social value from hierarchy to equality. Thereafter, the revolution expanded and became a complex tangle in which two main groups collaborated and vied for influence. “Insiders” to the bureaucracy, largely comprised of the People's Party and their official allies, and “outsiders” – a welter of loosely related middle-class people across the country – made the revolution. I have offered this frame to understand the importance of 1932 as a counter to a long-established view that only one group of insular politicians made the revolution and that they wanted to take power in a coup, not stage a revolution (Subrahmanyam 2021). The argument also stands against the view that the political activists suffered from an inferiority complex and were mere imitators of Western radicals. A conservative argument contends that the People's Party and their backers were misfits from within a system of patronage and power they tried to join but could not, and that in any case they belonged to a class of third world imitators who were dutifully following a bureaucratic path to modernity that had already been pioneered elsewhere.

Insiders and outsiders – nouns of space – refer to the groups' distance from the center of political power. People's Party insiders staged the revolt and they moved to the center of power after 1932. They had close ties to the old regime, and all were bound in the patrimonial and patronage networks that gave commoners avenues to career advancement. The old regime rewarded many of them with titles of nobility, which in Thailand did not refer to family lineage but to service in the king's administration. The outsiders who enthusiastically supported the new politics of electoral democracy and vested their hopes in a promise of social democracy did not stage the revolt. Initially they had no link to power, and most came from upcountry provinces far from Bangkok. Few were ennobled.

The young generation that changed Thai politics were born around 1900, just a few years after Chulalongkorn and Young Siam faced a crisis with France

over the Mekong provinces. These young men grew to maturity in the auto-modernizing state, which David Wyatt and Thai nationalist historians have valorized as an autonomous and strong Southeast Asian state under the monarchy, and which radical historians have critiqued as a Bangkok-centric, chauvinistic central Thai kingly despotism that imitated colonial forms of power to centralize its control over an ethnically and linguistically diverse country. A privileged elite of very few men – as in neighboring colonial societies – exercised an extraordinary degree of power in the interwar kingdom. Out of a total population of roughly 12 million people in the early 1930s, around 1,000 senior bureaucrats held sway. A much smaller circle around the palace set the political agenda, and the senior bureaucrats outlined the administrative agenda that would fulfil the monarchy's policies and that would be instituted by around 70,000 civil servants (Mektrairat 2010, 80–82). The political economy of a tropical Asian semi-colony produced a broadly similar generational experience among young, educated people. A common structure of feeling bred in them loyalty to the state, enthusiasm for progress and science, idealization of Western-derived political liberalism and modern education as keys to a more enlightened society, and a strong commitment to rational Buddhism. Insiders and outsiders alike were idealistic. Their idealism was a mode of thinking that used notions of a better or fairer society to judge conduct and to act. Their contest for hegemony, for a moral and intellectual leadership that resonated widely, was anchored by their shared idealism. The struggle was joined on the high ground of ideas that married West and East to create a new Thai-ness that undermined the old elite's claims to be the sole spokespeople for the nation.

Still, stark differences in proximity to wealth and power and in regional and ethnic cultures complexified the 1900 generation's common participation in the social life of the auto-modernizing kingdom. The internal economic unevenness of a poor country, what Trotsky in his great saga of the Russian revolution termed "combined development," produced social differentiation that in turn bred different demands among the country's small intelligentsia. At one extreme were the core of the People's Party insiders, typified by Pridi Banomyong. Thirty-two years old at the time of the June revolution, Pridi came from Ayutthaya province in the central plains, near the site of the old kingdom's capital. Pridi's family were Thai-Chinese small merchants, upper peasants and landowners. Pridi's wife Poonsuk, to whom he was related through their great-great-grandparents, hailed from a well-connected family. Her grandfather – at the time an attaché in the Thai legation in London – had been among a group of aristocrats who petitioned King Chulalongkorn in 1885 to introduce a constitution to the kingdom. Pridi himself won a prestigious government

scholarship and studied for a doctorate in law in Paris that he finished in 1927. Long enamored of France and its revolutionary history, he borrowed much of his political idealism from the Third Republic (Banomjong 2000).

At the other end of the spectrum of the intelligentsia were men from much more modest backgrounds. Chamlong Daoruang, born in 1910 to a poor Lao-speaking family in the northeastern province of Mahasarakham, was one among a cohort of regional activists inspired by the People's Party revolution. He entered the parliament and campaigned for rural welfare and citizens' rights. Pridi was a fair skinned, central Thai petty bourgeois; Chamlong was nicknamed "ai khaek" (the Indian) as a child for his dark skin, the genetic product of outdoor farm labor among generations of poor hardscrabble peasants. Chamlong won no foreign scholarship and exhausted the provincial education at the high school level. Thereafter, he worked as an auto mechanic and chauffeur. He owned an automobile for his chauffeur business but gave it up when the car broke down and was too expensive to repair. He also roamed the Mekong region boxing for money and gaining a reputation as a tough fighter. Working in French Indochina as well as Siam, Chamlong became conversant in French and Khmer as well as Thai and Lao and gained the unwelcome attention of the Indochinese police who thought he may be a rebel (Daoruang 1965, 123–144).

In the middle of this spectrum that spanned the foreign-schooled and self-taught, the privileged and poor, were people from the Thai-Chinese community who fit securely in neither bureaucratic nor peasant communities. Many politically active Thai-Chinese came from hardworking petty bourgeois families. They were ambitious but found their aspirations blocked by the racism of both the old and new regimes. Visit Sripatra was a labor organizer and democracy activist born in 1911 to an alcoholic, serial gambling and opium addicted father. Visit's varied career included time as a hired gun for a wealthy Chinese rice mill owner. Much of his schooling took place in an opium den, where he worked as a youth and where he learned from the books and magazines that addicts would bring into the den with them and browse as they relaxed (Piriyaangsan 1986, 190–193). Si Anothai – one of the founders of the Thai communist party in 1942 – was born into a mixed Chinese and Tai minority family in northern Siam, studied at an American missionary-established high school in Bangkok and on his own read Marx, Engels and Lu Xun among other inspiring critics of Western and Asian modernity (Piriyaangsan 1986, 149–152). Another founder of the communist movement, Jit Lehwat, was the son of a central Thai-established Teochiu commercial apothecary father and ethnic Mon mother. Jit, born in 1910, spent time in Thai and French Indochinese jails for his radicalism. Much of his childhood and teens were spent in China, where he joined the communist movement. Like Si Anothai, Jit became a prominent

anti-Japanese Thai patriot during World War II (Ruangsutham 2001, 95–96 and Murashima 1996, 122–123).

The new intelligentsia absorbed a range of conflicting and compatible foreign political ideas and merged them in a series of Thai cultural expressions. Soon after June 1932, Thai labor organizers spoke on behalf of largely anonymous, forgotten Chinese immigrants in the name of social justice. Thawatt Rittidej had been the chief advocate for labor during the interwar years and was strongly inspired by global working-class movements. Thawatt leveraged his cause partly by arguing that ensuring social welfare was a core aspect of Thai paternalism, but also that the British socialist movement and Labor party championed a new democratic spirit that had spread around the world (Sirot 2004 and Saichon 2015, 130). In 1933, a young parliamentarian from the northeastern region wrote a long election tract that envisioned ambitious rural modernization as a new social and environmental harmony that joined Danish dairy farming, ancient Greek ethics on the good life, Buddhist teachings on independence and a socialist agrarianism that combined Tolstoy with John Ruskin and monarchic support of cooperatives (Am 2000). Young provincial schoolteachers in the first year after the revolution challenged the educational establishment, whose guardians were old regime aristocrats and lifelong conservatives. The young teachers adopted a historicist position: they argued in their petitions to the government that the revolutionary age was one of youth, and that “old thinking” – embodied in the feudal relics who still ran education – was completely out of step with the times and harmful to the country’s youth and their democratic aspirations (Subrahmanyam 2021, 120–123).

Among the most interesting hybrid experiments of the time was a Buddhist democratic movement in the Sangha that emerged in force after the People’s Party revolution. A group of young Buddhist monks who termed themselves the *Khana Patisangkha Kanphrasatsana* (the Religious Restoration Party) sought equality between the royalist Thammayut group and the mass Mahanikai cohort that formed the two main orders of monks in the kingdom. The Religious Restoration Party differed from all the other cases here since it was explicitly religious. But they secularized and politicized the origins of the religion by stating as their campaign platform that Buddhism had always been a democratic religion in which its members governed themselves according to popular vote and consensual decision-making. Hence democracy was an Asian and a Thai system that historically predated ancient Athens (Subrahmanyam 2021, 153–175 and Chantrabutr 1985).

The intellectual work that fit Western political ideologies to post-1932 Thai social activism created a new beginning in Thai history. The hybrid culture ramified numerous passages loosely linked by the idealism of the young

generation. It also reflected comparable movements around the colonized world. Reconciling ancient religion and modern politics; feudal obedience and modern citizenship; the challenge of immigrant communities to traditional authority; and capitalism and community all were common aspects of the intellectual tumult of high imperialism.

The Thai movements of the 1930s and 1940s in the wake of the People's Party revolution emerged in a country that did not have a thoroughly repressive police state and that was remote from the frontlines of war. The People's Party in these decades supported popular movements depending on the balance of power in the government and the threat from the royalists. The frustration many outsiders felt with the pace of democratic change under People's Party tutelage stemmed from spasmodic support for their programs rather than avowed resistance. During the war the Japanese alliance with the Thai government was riven with conflict and the behavior of Japanese soldiers in-country rankled many ordinary people, but also removed Thailand from the coal face of the conflict. A mass movement did not emerge as part of the resistance to the royalist state and its traditions, or against the Japanese occupation. Many leftwing historians of Thailand have seen the absence of a Western colonial regime as obstructing rather than paving the way to a more modern society. As nostalgia for something that never was, or lament for a series of potential turning points in Thai history when Thai history failed to turn (in 1932, 1946, 1973 or 1997 as key examples), the Thai left's melancholia is understandable. And yet the Thai revolution was still dramatic and wrenching. A generation having the common experience of maturing in an absolutist state under the heel of the Western powers as a semi-colony forged a hybrid political culture. The logic of the 1900 generation's activism bears many similarities to the cosmopolitan influences and thinking of all third world societies in motion during the twentieth century. The Thai movements of mid-century displaced the revolutionary and historical examples that inspired them, as did all resistance movements, but the emerging political culture in the semi-colony melded new influences with Thai customs of power that, to my mind, produced a constant anxiety that the kingly state could not fully dismantle. There may have been nothing unique about the Thai monarchy and it may have been a throwback, as our newspaper writer from the 1920s claimed, but still the kingly shadow lay long over interwar society. Liberating Thai history from its royalist strictures means understanding the country's evolutionary fit with the histories of the Global South. It also means explaining why the popular struggle has been such a long simmering conflict. The reasons are enfolded in an explanation of the persistence of royalist reinvention – a topic for more

study – that tried to suppress the emancipatory potential of the People's Party revolution.

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