

A Neo-Marxist Anthropology of Urban Workers and Peasant Farmers in Thailand

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Abstract. This article is an original cultural anthropological study that is based on fieldwork done by the principal investigator, Antonio L. Rappa, on groups of urban workers and peasant farmers of Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Pattaya from 1998 to 2016. The focus of this article is on how these workers survive late modernity within the neoliberal capitalist world scenario. The fieldwork also showed the importance of materialism among Thai workers and how they remain trapped in giving up the surplus labor value of their work to the bourgeoisie (Marxian Theory). Since 1932 (the Siamese and since 1946), the Thai workers have been suppressed and exploited by the ruling elite (Power Elite Theory). Whether we use a Cultural Anthropological/Marxian, neo-Marxist Anthropological, or Power Elite theory (C. Wright Mills' Theory) approach, it remains clear in 2022 that the Thai people still continue to be imprisoned by a desire for luxury goods and services (Thorstein Veblen). Then, there is the complication of religion. At least 93% of all Thai people are Theravada Buddhists and staunchly believe in worshipping the Buddha as well as in various superstitions. The remaining 5–7% are Muslims and Christians. It is only the Muslims who have consistently given political trouble to the Bangkok capitalists but the Muslims are not socialists or communists since they believe in the god known as Allah. Ever since the 1970s, Thailand came under serious threat from communism like many Southeast Asian states. King Bhumiphon Adulyadej (Rama IX) was already a deeply respected monarch and a virtual demi-God to the superstitious and animistic Thai Buddhists. Few Thais realized at that time that the King was also a well-read scientist knowledgeable in urban planning and agriculture. Rama IX applied the knowledge that he garnered from Switzerland and Cambridge, Massachusetts, toward building a new kind of thinking, called Self-Sufficiency Economy (SSE). Rama IX's SSE was not unique to Thailand and commonly practiced to various effects in South Asia, the Far East, and Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, the king thought that the SSE would be a good way out for his people. He believed that if each *Tambon* or village could cooperate using existing resources, provincial assistance in agricultural knowledge, and the model-village concept, then the Thai people would be self-sufficient in many aspects. This was also known as the One-Thambon, One-Product (OTOP) policy. This is itself a manifestation of the materialist cultural anthropologic of Thai culture itself. The article concludes with an analysis of the dual pricing system or two-tier pricing system, and why the Thai people appear to support Thorstein Veblen's Theory and C. Wright Mills' Theory rather than any neo-Marxist theory of land distribution and property ownership.

Keywords: Urban Workers, Peasant Farmers, Class-in-Itself, Social Class, neo-Marxist Anthropology, Self-Sufficiency Economy, Veblen's Theory.

SUMMARY

This article uses a neo-Marxist Anthropological framework to analyze the nature of urban workers and peasant farmers with a focus on the Self-Sufficiency Economy (SSE) of Rama IX. Since the bloodless coup of 1932,

Siam and modern Thailand (since 1946) have experienced a significant amount of social, cultural, and political change. Several overarching questions guided the writing of this article. These included the following: (1) What are the basic values of Thai people? (2) How does one measure the attitudes and norms of modern Thai

urban workers and peasant farmers? (3) What makes these values, attitudes, and norms “political”? The article provides many illustrations of how the state exploits its workers for the benefit of the bourgeoisie that is supported by strident attacks against the discursive formations of Linguistic neo-Marxism and its possibilities in Thailand. It should be noted that the article does not analyze the deep historical systemic corruption that continues to exist in Thailand. There are also clear manifestations of the materialist cultural anthropologic of Thai culture itself. The conclusion shows why modern Thai culture tends to lend support to T. Veblen’s Theory and C. Wright Mills’ Theory rather than any neo-Marxist Anthropological Theory of land distribution and property ownership.

METHOD

This article refers to original fieldwork done by the author in *Krung Thep Maha Nakorn* (Bangkok), Chiangmai, and Pattaya from 1998 to 2016. The neo-Marxist cultural anthropological fieldwork consisted of non-participatory, focus group surveys of about 5 to 7 people per group. A total of 10 such focus groups were held between 2001 and 2016, about two per year. In addition, 10 attitudinal surveys were conducted, while the principal investigator (PI) was attached as a researcher at the Faculty of Political Science of Chulalongkorn University between 2012 and 2021. Interviews with *farang* experts at Thai conferences held in Chiangmai, Kohn Kaen, and Bangkok supplemented expert interviews with local Thai political scientists from Thammasat University, King Naresuan University (Phitsanulok), Northern Chiangmai University, and the Prince of Songkhla University in the Deep South. The neo-Marxist Anthropological framework is based on the following premises: (a) the world is divided into the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in all modern societies; (b) the neoliberal capitalist world order involves the exploitation of developing nations by industrialized and post-industrial nations; (c) in Thailand, the urban workers and peasant farmers are divided among themselves in terms of a class in itself rather than a class for itself; and (d) deep-seated divisions within Thai society have emerged since the 1932 coup that has led to the exploitation of the Thai urban workers and peasant farmers (who are in the majority) and the bourgeoisie elite (who form a small minority of 6% to 8% of the population).

INTRODUCTION

Modern Thai workers are interested in all the same trappings that other capitalist countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and the west desire. The American economist Thorstein Veblen argued in *The Leisure Class* (1899) that

wealthy people consume conspicuously expensive (luxury) goods and services that promote wasteful displays of wealth by spending more money on goods than the worth of those goods in order to attract attention to their high social status and to impress the public with consuming (worthlessly) rather than producing (valuably). Sometimes known as the *nouveau riche* theirs was about accumulating more wealth than most individual consumers would consume in several lifetimes. Veblen’s intention was to satirize the avaricious nature of the elites at the apex of capitalist societies. As the capitalist elites distanced themselves from productive work while in effect extracting more surplus value from the lumpenproletariat by forcing the latter to direct their limited energy toward the production of useless goods, white elephants that were costly to produce. This resulted in the production of unnecessary goods that were simultaneously expensive to maintain. After a while, the workers themselves did not know what or why they were producing.

The Thai leisure class makes up about 5% of the Thai population of 69 million people, while the Thai elite, including the royalty, make up another 1% of the total population. A total of 6–8% of these bourgeoisie capitalists own 100% of the wealth in Thailand today. The gender division between Thai males and females is about equal for ages between 15 and 65 years, or about 34% males and 35.7% females; 20% of Thai population are aged below 15 years and about 9% of Thai population are aged above 65 years. The age range between 15 years and 65 years is important because that is when most Thai people are economically productive. This is also the target age range of the urban Thai workers and peasant farmers in this article. The age group/range of 15–65 years is when Thai workers are most productive, and hence, sufficient surplus value is extracted from their work by the bourgeoisie and elite capitalist classes.

This would be in line with Veblen’s own measurement of the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class that is identified by its proxies: (1) consuming luxury goods and services as a wasteful display of wealth, (2) spending money on goods and serves that are significantly worth much more than their actual value, and (3) impressing all and sundry with worthless expenditure on white elephants rather than saving and producing valuable goods and services.

NON-MARXIST SCHOLARS

Some scholars argue that Marxist anthropology is theoretically incompatible with Marxian Theory and Marxist Thought and hence not applicable to contemporary or even primitive hunter-gatherer societies. This is not true. Individuals in modern societies are very much interested in securing and expanding their ownership of private property even before the post-Cold War era began and exist

comfortably within the industrial stage of historical materialism. Apart from Veblen's work, there are other scholars' works that are useful for our understanding of Thai capital and labor through a neo-Marxist anthropological lens.

Althusser, for example, invited us to consider what scholars like Carnoy, Boswell, Bergersen, Anderson and others refer to as the four stages of Semiotic Marxism but which Rappa refers to as Linguistic neo-Marxism. These are as follows: (1) Louis Althusser's political logic; (2) the inversion of the logic of the base and the superstructure that Gramsci innovated from Hegel; (3) conversely in Poulantzas' fantasy, he dismissed the "class-in-itself"/"class-for-itself" distinction as a residue of Hegelian Thought hence making it not Marxist; but Poulantzas had to make that logic as a step before the absorption of the economic sphere by a melded ideological and political sphere; and (4) the notion of a linguistic/semiotic displacement of the Marxian social formation and relations of production.

Any attempt to understand a linguistic neo-Marxist approach *a la* Michel Foucault would entail a confused bundle of data and knowledge put together as discursive formations that there is something embedded in the discourse itself, that is to say, the discourse of linguistic pragmatism (Rappa and Wee, 2013) and the advent of knowledge. Of course, we should note that Foucault was not a neo-Marxist anthropologist and that he was stridently against all forms and interpretations of Marx's works.¹ Foucault ought to have persisted with the thought of a discursive formation as a series of linguistic relations based on Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of existentialism, or Ernesto Laclau and his wife Chantal Mouffe's notion of competing subjectivities and competing subject identities falls short of revolution. They would rather restrict themselves to resisting. And this is why their work about pluralist democracy as well as radical democracy in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) remained atypically stymied. Rather than discussing these four stages which are not the intention of this work, we proceeded to explain why the various theoreticians got stuck on their virtual chessboard. The point being made here is that Levi-Strauss' structuralism is in fact the other half of linguistic neo-Marxism. Therefore, the Bangkok worker has been hard at his job or her job while the entire capitalist machinery gets more welded into the hegemonic state with its ideological adaptation of the instructions of the King and mainly Prayuth. The self-appointed prime minister (PM) of Thailand uses the cloak of democracy to mask and disguise the authoritarianism and military bureaucracy. It is now that the emperor's new clothes are revealed, but only through a neo-Marxist anthropological lens. Recall that we do not think too highly of Gramsci's rejection of the class-in-itself/class-for-itself distinction as a reminder of Hegel's dichotomies.

¹ This was why Foucault could not proceed beyond discursive formations while Jacques Derrida was able to do so.

Moving forward, we see that archeologists, political scientists, and agriculturalists have long documented the barriers to farming through collective decision-making and common property rights [4, 6, 9]. These various arguments over rights include direct or open access to group resources' conventional property by individual members of the group. The economic viability and stability of this natural rights arrangement was demonstrated by various modern scholars [4].

This is easily illustrated in a small community of Thai people known as the Sakai in the Deep South. Some are Muslim, some are Christian, some are Hindu, some are Buddhist, but all are superstitious and animists.² However, the *Sakai/Orang Batin* (rather than the racist Malay *bumiputera* Orang Asli term) were so specialized that they managed to organize a mobile form of common property rights and membership access to common resources.

THAI WORKERS: A LACK OF A CLASS-FOR-ITSELF

The reason for the absence of a worker's revolution in Thailand is that the lumpenproletariat remains as such, a class-in-itself rather than a class-for-itself. This has been the case since the 1932 coup until today in August 2022.

Why have the Bangkok urban workers not organized themselves to revolt against the bourgeois government of PM Chan-o-Cha? There are several reasons. These include a lack of knowledge and information about organizing and articulating interests; a general rejection of neo-Marxist anthropological theory since the failure of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989; and the political behavior of Thai people for varied reasons such as the humidity and heat (in Thai it is known as blaming the weather). Another reason is a unique attitude that has existed for the past two centuries. This attitude is known as *mai pen rai* or "let it be, never mind, forget about it, it doesn't matter." This has led to creating general laziness and slothful attitude in life. Or perhaps, it is just plain stupidity that causes their failure to organize themselves into politically meaningful ways.

Another reason is the Thai people's consistent failure to overthrow their neoliberal capitalist government. This does not mean that they have not tried. Every few years, they try to overthrow the military dictatorship except for the so-called democratic period in 1996–1998 and 1999–2006. The so-called polity has attempted violent political

² There are also *Sakai* people in other parts of *Semenanjung* (East Malaysia) and Sabah and Sarawak (West Malaysia). The East/West divide arising from British colonial times no longer exists but is a useful geographical way for mapping and locating their villages. They were basically displaced by the Malays centuries ago and moved to other parts of the region including Labuan, Sulawesi, Riau, and South Thailand. See, for example, Porath, Nathan. "The *Orang Batin/Orang Sakai* in the Malay Kingdom of *Siak Sri Indrapura*." *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 77, no. 1/2, 2018, pp. 285–306.

change in the 1973 student revolts at Thammasat University, Tha Prajan Campus; the 6th October massacre in 1976; Black October uprising of May 1992; the 2010 Rajphrasong Siege; the failed revolution of 2012 and 2014; and all other Black Days (พฤษภาทมิฬ). The failure of these mini revolts and tiny revolutions can be easily explained. The current neoliberal capitalist King Rama X's father Bhumiphon Adulyadej was in cahoots with the Royal Thai Police (RTP) and the Royal Thai Armed Forces (RTAF). He gave his royal assent, which is compulsory for any coup to take place, over 20 times. He survived 21 coups and 12 prime ministers to retain his seat as the wealthiest monarch in the world. At the time of his death, he was worth US\$56 billion. So far, his son has spent over US\$10 billion on conspicuous consumption goods and services.

The closest that the Thai people have come to political change in recent years was when we were in Bangkok conducting an attitudinal survey of sex workers and the absence of human rights in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiangmai. From March to June 2021, Bangkokians took to the streets to protest against the illegitimate government of Prayuth Chan-o-Cha, the self-appointed prime minister of Thailand. There was a parallel and unprecedented move that saw widespread demands for the monarch, Rama X himself to step down. They demanded that the PM and the King both resign. But the King tricked the Bangkokian protesters by using a charm offensive as well as the long arm of the RTP and RTAF to arrest and incarcerate student leaders and political revolutionaries. It is not that easy for urban workers in Thailand to reorganize their political behavior and lumpenproletarian manners because the Palace and the coercive police and army have all the guns and ammunition. This is also why the people have not managed to revolt against the state in a meaningful neo-Marxist anthropological manner. Besides, no one has challenged the fact that the king continues to own all the land in Thailand.

BOURGEOISE CITY LIFE

This situation spreads automatically in all capitalist societies thereby making city life about the ostentatious display of status, wealth, and power. It makes it appear as if the leisure class possesses such great wealth that they are unable to spend it all in several lifetimes. As a result of this, Thai cultural oddity and their *mai pen rai attitude*, all the same trappings advertised on gigantic billboards, advertisements and neon lights of Chanel, Valentino, Versace, Ferragamo, Porsche, Mercedes Benz, and the like can be easily found in Bangkok, Singapore, London, New York, or Paris. This is seen in the lifestyles of the rich and famous Thai superstars and *lakorn* Thai actors that are icons to be emulated by ordinary Thai people. Why would anyone aspire to own a leather bag that is so costly; it would take an urban office worker

in Bangkok 10 years to buy it. This all happens in a country where most people live on less than US\$1 a day. As Veblen criticized the so-called leisure class elites, so should we although he was not a Marxist. Although he was neither a Marxist or neo-Marxist, his thoughts were mostly compatible with modern neo-Marxism. This is a worry for neo-Marxists anthropology because it begs the question of whether there is still a need for neo-Marxism anthropology if a macro-economist can come up with compatible ideas that not only criticize bourgeoisie capitalism but also replace neo-Marxist anthropological theory itself. So where then is the place for neo-Marxist scholarship in such a case? The place for neo-Marxist scholars is in fact in the middle of modernity. This is because the immoral ideological products of social capital and bourgeoisie societies continuously generate new ways of dominating oppressed workers in Bangkok and other world cities. There remains much value in neo-Marxist anthropological theory even though Veblen's Leisure Class is now over 120 years old.

One way that Bangkok workers are suppressed is through the distribution and dispensation of anti-COVID drugs between 2000 and early 2022. It was not that these drugs were expensive or in short supply. These drugs were limited by the military government, and hence, only they benefitted alongside the Big Pharma Corporations. Then, the government did what other states did and that was to introduce alternatives to the anti-viral drugs, and hence, there was even more confusion and competition over which one to use and which one not and what were the better alternatives. More corruption set in as the Prayuth government turned away from American antiviral drugs to Chinese antiviral drugs. When that was relatively resolved, they introduced jumbo packs and booster shots. The boosters were not immediately compatible with the existing medicines.

It would appear that the entire Kingdom was being used by the Prayuth Chan-o-Cha government as a colossal testing facility, an enormous social laboratory, with the population being compared to experiments done on mice in a scientific laboratory. To be sure, the science behind these antiviral drugs was then still in its infancy. And so, the state and the "big pharma" corporations took advantage of all the hubris. When it was deemed that these two immoral entities could no longer bring in the big money for the two immoral bourgeoisie institutions, Prayuth and his political cronies decided to open it up a little for tourism. That is still backfiring because the *farang* tourists themselves were the lab rats in their own states and were hesitant to travel out of the *farang* land.

The problem of wearing or not wearing masks has also not been solved since the greedy *petit bourgeoisie* overstocked the supply. For example, a pack of 50 pieces of mainly China-made masks that used to sell for US\$5 now sells for less than US\$1. The Russian invasion of the Ukraine was a separate issue but the "big oil" corporations

in Bangkok and other Southeast Asian states decided to make use of the tragedy as an excuse to raise petrol and diesel prices. This is part of a regional petroleum oligopoly that has existed since the formation of OPEC. Green cars and alternative fuels that were always 20% more expensive were now touted in Bangkok and other Southeast Asian states as the future of their motorways.

Indeed, there is significant pressure for motor vehicle owners to switch to less-petrol-dependent cars in order to recoup the money invested by these governments over the past 5 years since 2017. By August 2022, this became another excuse for these states to collude with “big oil” to raise fuel prices that would eat into the disposable incomes of ordinary urban workers and peasant farmers in Thailand and across the Kingdom. Behind it, all were the means of production, hidden but invaluable to the neoliberal capitalist machinery. Therefore, at the bottom-end of neoliberal economic supply chains in Thailand are “use once, and throw away” or disposable goods and services – such as plastic wrapping, glass bottles, Styrofoam boxes, and plastics. At the top-end are expensive vehicles and fuels needed for travel to and from daily work. Thailand, like Singapore, has become a “use-and-abuse” society where millions of tons of garbage are disposed every day.

A NEO-MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LAND VALUES AND PROPERTY RIGHTS IN SIAM/THAILAND

Turning to the Siamese/Thai case, it is clear that the organization of property rights and land values never rose to a critical level where the ownership of property was ever in question. This is because, for over 700 years, all property in the Kingdom of Ayutthaya/Siam and Thailand traditionally belong to the monarch. The exception to this rule came in the form of competing dynastic families who owned and occupied lands inherited from the times when their families held political power.

Any neo-Marxist anthropological view of land values and property rights must include a discussion of three institutions, viz., the monarchy and royal houses, the nobility, and the military. There are several issues that a neo-Marxist anthropological lens reveals in Thailand.

First, there is a seemingly inalienable right of the king to the land. The king owns all the land in the Kingdom.³ This is discussed later. The king is revered as a monarch as well as a deity or a demi-god at worst. This deity business is much more serious than it sounds. It is not some people believing in a God that does not exist. Rather, it is 68 million people believing that the king is part of God. Second, since the dawn of the 1932 revolution, the monarch’s status has

³ Always a King and never a queen owns all the land in Thailand. This is because by Thai custom and civil law, there are no female monarchs and no women are allowed to be the Head of the Kingdom for the past 700 years.

only been a legally Constitutional one, with no *de facto* political power. Rama IX was thus forced to change his *de facto* role because of his *de jure* function. He changed his *de facto* role by cooperating with the capitalist United States of America (US) and the military. Third, a new kind of capitalist-based institution was created. Political scientists refer to this as a triumvirate. But, neo-Marxist anthropological scholars prefer to think of it as a tripartite union, a combination of three bourgeoisie institutions. The fourth reason is that Thailand is firmly within the industrial phase or what neoliberal capitalist political scientists refer to as a developmental state or a newly industrializing country (NIC).

Returning to the first reason about land ownership and property rights, the king remains the biggest property owner, and the Crown Property Bureau (*sammak ngan sap sin phra maha kasat*), created by King Chulalongkorn the Great (Rama V) founded in 1890, is the governmental department that takes charge of all issues and matters arising about property.⁴

Therefore, Thailand is unique because it is virtually impossible to divide all the land into tiny parcels for individual peasant farmers. The political reality, however, is quite different. The non-Chakri royals own their own property. Most Thai people live in their own homes or own their own parcels of land, be it 1 *rai* or 1,000 *rai* in size. A portion of the Thai population continue to remain squatters at the king’s pleasure. One example is the Pathumwan District in central *Krung Thep Maha Nakorn*. Under an archaic and strange Thai property acquisition law, squatters who have continuously occupied another person’s land without permission can eventually claim ownership of the land parcels if the land’s rightful owner was not able to evict them in a certain period of time. Therefore, the inalienable right of the kings of Siam/Thailand has been passed down over the centuries regardless of revolutions, coups, or changes in constitutions.

IGNOBLE HIERARCHY?

The Thai nobility has a clear and distinctive hierarchy. Noble ranks were not necessarily hereditary. You could not inherit your father’s rank, and in fact, your rank would be one step lower than his rank. The class structure of the nobility is a situation within the superstructure lying over a base of peasant farmers, artisans, soldiers, and, before 1915, slaves.

Each successive generation fell by one rank, and the reason is to prevent regicide and usurpers. Ramathibodi I defined the Palace Law to determine the ranks and titles of the king’s children and immediate family relatives based on whom their mother was. This maternal bloodline condition was effective in spite of the modern global preference

⁴ However, this is all according to the Crown Property Bureau’s website in 2022.

for paternalistic inheritance laws. The maternal bloodline is more accurate because the child definitely carries the mother's blood (which can be documented from the onset) but the father could be anyone. A royal or commoner. For over 700 years, the kings of Siam had many minor wives and concubines but only one was allowed to be the queen, if indeed the king desired having a queen.⁵ Therefore, the hierarchical nature of the noble rank system tended to weaken those formerly in power while strengthening those currently in power.

SOCIAL CLASS

There is no prospect for a classless society in Thailand. The peasants and slaves as well as slave farmers and ordinary soldiers have been unable to escape the capitalist clutches of their own social classes. It was in the character of ancient Siamese social class for ordinary folk to remain in their own class. This was a result of the ancient Hindu tradition of *dharma*. The law of the *dharma* was a universal law that acted as the cement or glue that kept society together. People were not allowed to marry outside their class and hence could not move out of it as it was a universal principle. There was no social mobility, and hence, occupational mobility was out of the question. The natural law meant that the royal houses, noble houses, peasant farmers, soldiers, and slaves would all remain within their own separate social classes. To move out or attempt to move out of one's social class was against the Pali Canon; to move out of one's class would be to invoke negative destiny and bad karma. The only way out was to remain faithful to one's class till death and hope that one would be reborn into a higher class than a lower one. Worst of all, if one performed badly or immorally in one's social class, one might be relegated out of human society. This would mean being reborn as an animal, insect, or, as some believe, a plant. Having understood these three premises in detail, we are now able to analyze ancient Siamese/Thai society.

⁵ This is why Rama X, the son of Bhumiphon Adulyadej (Rama IX) has many girlfriends or concubines but no wives or queens. Rama X had 3 wives and 7 children (so far), the first being from his first wife, who was his first cousin. The other children were sometimes from his wives but all his children are now based overseas and the first 4 children have been disowned and are no longer Thai royalty. This is a wise move since having a male child from a wife who is a queen indicates that the child is the Crown Prince and the first in line to the throne. But of course his father, Rama IX had named him the Crown Prince when he was still very young. Rama IX did not feel threatened for three reasons. Rama IX did not have the time as he was fighting the Communists and trying to get his ideas implemented; and secondly, none of the generals dared to make use of the Crown Prince to usurp the monarchy with the aid of the military. The third reason was that Queen Sirikit Kitiyakara had full control over her children. She was not highly, and a commoner who was educated although her father was the Siamese ambassador to France. It was in Paris with her ambassador father that she met and fell in love with Rama IX who made her his consort before they were married in 1950.

ANALYSIS: TOWARDS A CLASSLESS SOCIETY?

Class distinctions were critical for Marx, and he believed that if the workers could organize, unite, and articulate their group interests, they could throw off the yoke of bourgeois oppression. In spite of Veblen's criticism that we discussed previously in this article, urban workers had to be a *class-for-itself* rather than just a class-in-itself. A *class-in-itself* means that a group of workers could be identified as one class, e.g., a class of artisans in a particular industry. However, a class-in-itself also meant that they were simple workers who did not recognize their own power and were stymied in petty bickering and following instructions from the petty bourgeoisie till death. All their surplus value or energy would be extracted from them by the bourgeoisie till death. On the contrary, a *class-for-itself* meant that they were capable of organizing themselves and articulating their own interests. They would not be deluded or misled by unionization or union leaders as Gramsci observed. The urban workers of Siam are therefore often met with different choices and options at the *Rajphrasong* intersection as it were. Ideally, Resnick and Wolff's work is suitable, more suited to the Thai case because of the former's occupation with their interpretation of the base and superstructure. Their basic and subsumed classes act as a continuously connected discourse, otherwise known as linguistic neo-Marxism as discussed earlier. This event is manifested through surplus production, capitalist accumulation, and circulation of surpluses. Class is the causal determinant for all social, economic, political, and cultural cases. Resnick and Wolff are consistent with a surplus theory of class that demarcates multiple class processes as truth. Their notion of a proletarian organization must pass through a constitutional crisis before the state can weaken and wither away (after Marx). Within the neoliberal capitalist framework, such subsumed classes lead to greater profits and heightened conspicuous consumption. Therefore, within our understanding of the neo-Marxist anthropological framework, Thai society is not merely divided into the base and superstructure but also historically and indelibly tied to subsumed classes as seen in Resnick and Wolff's works. Slaves (pre-1915), peasants, farmers, peasant-farmers, and the *petit bourgeoisie* are continuously exploited right through the neofeudal and preindustrial phases. In all such events, the base remains as a container for all modes of production which includes the forces and relations of production (e.g., employer-employee work conditions, the technical division of labor, and property relations) into which people enter to produce the necessities and amenities of life. The superstructure becomes home to all those ideational categories not directly relating to production, including its culture, institutions, political power structures, roles, rituals, religion, media, and state. The relation between the two parts is not strictly

unidirectional. While the superstructure can affect the base in Resnick and Wolff's interpretation, the base remains precariously predominant.

THAI WORKERS AND THE SELF-SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY

King Bhumiphon Adulyadej was visionary when he first proposed the Self-Sufficiency Economy (SSE).⁶ Although Rama IX promoted self-reliance and sustainable farming since the 1950s, most Thai people accept that the idea of sufficiency economy was first mooted in an early 1970s King's Birthday Speech. The SSE is a philosophy based on the fundamental principle that had already existed in Thai culture. SSE is embedded in Thai cultural values of "moderation, prudence, and social immunity" as life-long guidelines. Farang people must understand that there must be logic and perseverance to attain happiness and to avoid suffering. It is clear now in this elaboration that the SSE is itself based on Buddhist principles found in the Pali Canon. Let us examine two of the King's Birthday Speeches, one in 1974 and the other in 1998, for inspiration and understanding, "...I ask all of you to aim for moderation and peace, and work to achieve this goal. We do not have to be extremely prosperous... If we can maintain this moderation, then we can be excellent..." His Majesty the King's birthday speech on 4 December 1974 ... "I may add that full sufficiency is impossible. If a family or even a village wants to employ a full sufficiency economy, it would be like returning to the Stone Age... This sufficiency means to have enough to live on. Sufficiency means to lead a reasonably comfortable life, without excess, or overindulgence in luxury, but enough. Some things may seem to be extravagant, but if it brings happiness, it is permissible as long as it is within the means of the individual..." (His Majesty's birthday speech on 4 December 1998).

His Majesty's Philosophy is therefore a moral philosophy that is anti-materialistic and based on the genuine virtues of Theravada Buddhism as practiced by the Chakri kings and the people of Siam and modern Thailand since the time of the first Rama over 700 years ago.

In SSE, the emphasis is on the producers to create useful or functional (or both) consumables within their own income limit and hence their own resource limits. In SSE, consumers should only consume consumables that exist within their disposable income limit. This is known in SSE as the risk-limitation principle. It is meant to reduce risk and increase the efficacy of a consumer's or producer's resources. The risk-limitation principle only has an indirect impact on the market in that it makes individuals conserve what little they might have and avoid committing what they do not have. In other words, consumers in a market-driven economy will not be willing to risk unearned

future income. This also means that in the Kingdom of Thailand, urban workers and peasant farmers should not have any credit cards, and if they do need one in this technologically advanced age, then they should limit their credit card ownership to one card per person, with no supplementary cards. The Royal Committee to facilitate SSE initially urged urban workers and peasant farmers to have a debit card instead of a credit card. This was so that an individual Thai worker spends what he has, rather than what he does not have. It limits the expenditure to the current pay month. But soon after, the Royal Committee's influence waned because there was no way to police it apart from serving as a public guideline. And the attractiveness of credit card sign ups, and marketing ploys were by the 1980s a huge industry on its own. The SSE was designed to be applied to all sectors and industries of the Thai economy. SSE was not limited to the agricultural or the rural sectors as it might have been perceived at firsthand. But was the SSE only about thriftiness and frugality?

One assumption often made by many urban anthropologists and economists was that when uneven wages are reported across the same industry in non-capital cities, then the likelihood of earned-income equity is lower than the national average.

As a result, the principal investigator (PI) decided to put this hypothesis to a pretest in Bangkok. While researching SSE, the author's 5 Singaporean research assistants and 2 Thai interpreters discovered in a pilot survey that many employers reported different salaries for Bangkok workers and many employees from the same firms reported different (and lower) salaries as well. As a result, the PI commissioned several surveys of workers in three cities (i.e., Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Pattaya) to determine what Thai workers were actually earning. The foregoing statistics were derived from 3 years of fieldwork by the PI in Bangkok, Chiangmai, and Pattaya between 2006 and 2010. The examples of the kinds of suitable gifts for urban workers and peasant farmers/rural workers were suggested in 5 focus groups that were made up of local workers. About 2% of these workers had *farang* spouses. So, one can ignore the *farang* influence within the focus groups.

Therefore, the SSE was not only to be about always being frugal. It was deemed important for a consumer to indulge in small luxuries, e.g., a Casio watch costing about 2,500 baht (US\$72). Another example of a small luxury could be a short 3-day holiday in Phuket costing 4,000 baht (US\$116).⁷ It should be noted that since the Vietnam War (1958–1975), the local Thai people used a two-tier pricing system that was widely adopted. One tier was for the locals and one for

⁶ See Antonio L Rappa "Sustainability and the Law: Thailand's Sufficiency Economy in Perspective." *Ecoforum*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2016.

⁷ See Rappa "Fieldwork Notes, 2005–2011." The average urban worker in Singapore at that point earned US\$16,000 or B550,000 per year. This was why many Singaporeans visited the Kingdom in the pre-COVID days because of the larger disposable incomes as well as the significantly lower cost of goods and services in the Kingdom.

farang. The *farang* tier was usually about 70–150% higher than the local tier prices. This means that if a bowl of boat noodles cost 40 baht in 1980 for locals, the same bowl would cost 120 baht for *farang*. The PI's research assistants discovered that even with our Thai interpreters, the prices charged for breakfast were of the *farang* tier. One research assistant noted that a regular *farang* customer may get a few more strands of noodles or a 5 baht discount for her boat noodles. Small luxuries were important in the SSE to help motivate himself or herself as well as to act as a reward for a goal that was accomplished or achieved. For the average salaried urban office worker in the big cities earning less than 24,000 baht (US\$700) per month, a small luxury was considered any consumable or keepsake or good/service worth 1,500 to 2,500 baht. For peasant farmers and rural workers earning less than 7,000 baht (US\$200) per month, a small luxury would be something that did not cost more than 500 baht. Examples of a small luxury gleaned from the same focus groups mentioned included a 500 baht (US\$14.50) for a lavish seafood meal at a local restaurant, a Casio watch costing 725 baht (US\$21), sending their school-going age children to school more than twice a week costing 345 baht (US\$10), or giving 250 baht to their parents (for the Thai-Chinese New Year). Therefore, it is not always a case that Thai peasant farmers are dirt poor or living on less than US\$1 per day. Some are relatively well off. But vast the majority of peasants remain impoverished, in the rural northeastern provinces for example, because of infertile soil, bad weather, drought, flooding, or bad harvests. There are always middlemen in the Thai economy, regardless of the efforts of the SSE supporters, who profiteer from the peasants. Without these middlemen, the peasant farmers would be unable to buy food, send their children to school, make merit, or even cremate the dead. The rural peasant economy is very often a mix of barter, borrowing, begging, and banter between the peasant farm worker and the middlemen.

Of course, the middlemen take bigger risks by going through cooperatives or borrowing from banks. This is partly why corruption is considered the lubricant of the economy. The average incomes earned in these cities were lower than previous years because of the political violence between the Red Shirts and the Yellow Shirts. This was the period when the democratically elected PM Thaksin was illegally overthrown by RTAF Supreme Commander Sondhi Boonyaratglin with the assent of Rama IX because Thaksin was becoming too powerful and more popular than Rama IX himself.

The modern urban Thai worker can therefore occasionally indulge in small luxuries provided she has the capacity to make those purchases within the monthly limit. Recall the monthly limit is a self-imposed limit that prevents the worker from overspending and from spending future income unearned. Unfortunately, the problem in Thailand is that most people get trapped in a vicious cycle of

capitalism that keeps them circulating in the poverty trap. The big picture shows that the SSE is about establishing overall economic stability. Because Thailand as an agricultural country is theoretically self-sufficient. Natural food is plenty but processed foods are expensive but desirable. Western consumers have tried to return to organic foods, but in Thailand and the rest of mainland Southeast Asia, consumers are awash with organic food. Ironically, they prefer what westerners have been trying to avoid. The King's SSE Committee also constructed new work-life expenditure savings' guidelines. This means that workers should (1) cut down on unnecessary expenses; (2) work hard at one's career with honesty and integrity; (3) control desires to overspend or blow the budget; (4) attain knowledge that is freely available from the SSE Information Centers to increase one's knowledge of sufficiency methods; (5) adhere to the Theravada teachings of leading a good and moral life; and (6) improve the Tambon's self-sufficiency as a whole. If these guidelines are adhered to, then hardships from epidemics, draught, famine, flooding, natural disasters, and death in the family can be avoided, overcome, or withstood. The SSE is about riding the waves of globalization without being pulled down into the undercurrents that hide below the waves. The land is divided into four parts with a ratio of 30:30:30:10. The problem for the Thai people was too complex to understand without explanation. And the SSE Committee did not have sufficient resources to police its public policies, neither did it possess any resources to explain these measures to them. The SSE was meant to be interpreted as follows: (1) The first 30% is designated for a pond to store rainwater during the rainy season, while during the dry season it serves to supply water to grow crops and raise aquatic animals and plants. (2) The second 30% is set aside for rice cultivation during the rainy season for the family's daily consumption throughout the year to cut down on expenses and allow the farmers to be self-reliant. (3) The third 30% is used for growing fruit and perennial trees, vegetables, field crops, and herbs for daily consumption. If there is any surplus, it will be sold. (4) The last 10% is set aside for accommodation, animal husbandry, roads, and other structures. The Thai People were aware that there were several phases in the SSE. The SSE guidelines and the new theory, for example, constituted the first phase. The next two phases involved making contacts with banks or private companies to obtain funds to assist with investment or developing their quality of life. In this way, (a) workers can sell their rice at a high price (since they are not forced to sell cheaply). (b) Banks or private companies can buy rice for consumption at a low cost. (c) Farmers can buy consumer products at a low cost since they buy them together in large quantities. (d) Banks or private companies are able to disperse their personnel to carry out various activities for better results. The complexity of these three phases and their confusing and

overtly detailed contents made everything more difficult to comprehend.

The case was especially true for uneducated farmers who tended to be animists and highly superstitious as well. They could not understand that there was a fundamental premise involved as well. The premise was that if a piece of land that was identified to be cultivated was 15 *rai*, the land had to be divided into 5 *rai* for the rice field; 5 *rai* for the field crops; 3 *rai* for the pond (4 meters deep with a 19,000 cubic meter capacity) so that the water stored in the pond would be enough for the annual dry season; and 2 *rai* for the farmhouse and animal pens. But, there were many limitations such as not all of the local geography could contain a pond. If the pond relied mainly on rainwater, then it needed contingencies for the annual dry season or a sudden draught. Farm workers work on the land. They don't make it a habit to listen to metrological updates. Farmers who followed the guidelines by the book would be so uncompromising that they would not know it was logical to have a shallower pond if there was a continuous supply of water or if the land was already irrigated by the Provincial government. One of the biggest drawbacks was that the note-takers for the king were more interested in currying favor with him through the accuracy of their notes of what he said. He often made off the cuff remarks that were also noted but not followed through because they were complicated, too scientific, or overtly confusing. For example, Rama IX believed that water had to be used all year round regularly. He invented a term for this which was "a regulator." By that term, he meant a process that had good control with a continual water circulation system for cultivation during normal times (such as the dry season) as well as during dry spells. He did not mean that farmers could grow off-season paddy when the amount of water in the pond was insufficient. Therefore, the currying of favor by his scribes and note-takers was another problem. The king himself was part of the problem. By trying to save everyone, every single worker, he failed to save most. He also did not realize that Thai workers, like workers everywhere else in the world, are basically lazy. If they could avoid work or take a shortcut, such as building a sub-standard well or pond that would leak or drain off its water, then they would do so. Thai men love alcohol more than they do themselves. While the women were off to work in the paddy fields or nurturing the children, Thai men, like their Ibo brothers in Africa, would gather under some trees to drink alcohol until they were totally inebriated.⁸ When asked why, they would reply to the research assistants that "in Thailand, men drink and women work." The only alternative for Thai women was for them to drink and entertain Thai men.

⁸ I am aware of the Ibo tribes' gender disparity because my supervisor at NUS did his Birmingham PhD on the Ibo and discovered this work-gender trait. See David Brown, *The State and Ethnic Politics in South East Asia*. Routledge, 1996.

CONCLUSION

In the end, we can see that there is a dual-pricing system or two-tier pricing system in Thailand because the farang are much wealthier and richer than most Thai workers. Therefore, it is part of Thai cultural logic to charge *farang* tourists and *farang* customers at least 30%–70% more. In Thailand, the top 6–8% of (69 million) Thais (about 4–5 million people) control 98% of the Kingdom's wealth, especially in terms of land distribution and property ownership. They are known as the Thai elite and include all those with royal blood. They are also known as the Power Elite. This is why the ground tends to support Veblen's Theory and Mills' Theory rather than any neo-Marxist anthropological theory of land distribution and property ownership.

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