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Haberkorn, Tyrell (2011), *Revolution Interrupted: Farmers, Students, Law and Violence in Northern Thailand*

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During the scorching months of April and May 2010, at the pinnacle of Thailand's contemporary socio-political crisis, one could frequently hear the catchword 'revolution' echoing through the Red Shirt protest sites of Bangkok and the villages of the North and Northeast. The term, to some observers, may seem less outdated in the Thai context in light of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. But it remains a largely ill-defined or doctrine saturated concept in the Thai discourse about societal and political change. A year after the Thai state's dispersal of the Red Shirt protesters, Tyrell Haberkorn presents a study about rural politics in northern Thailand in the 1970s using a highly welcomed revisionist approach for the concept of revolution. Haberkorn traces the struggle of northern Thai tenant farmers and their student allies for land reform, recognition of rights and inclusion in the political decision-making process from 1973 to 1976. By reinterpreting the farmers' struggle as an 'interrupted revolution', she addresses the decade-long silence about the state's violent backlash that accusingly led to the assassination of 33 activist leaders – a precursor of a national crisis that, on 6 October 1976, tragically ended Thailand's short-lived democratic experiment. This study transcends the relatively short period of the mid-1970s, widening the context to the early 1950s and occasionally linking it to recent events and the contemporary political situation. Based on field research in Bangkok and Chiang Mai between 2001 and 2008, the author founds her work on an impressive body of textual sources from Thai newspaper articles, journals, and cremation volumes, to state and activist archival materials, supplemented by oral history interviews and informal talks with former activists.

In the preface, Haberkorn outlines her argument, with reference to feminist poet Adrienne Rich's poem "Cartographies of Silence" and proposes the thesis that, since 1932, "governance in Thailand has depended on the silence of marginalized people" (xi). Political exclusion, denial of legal subjecthood and limitation of access to resources of development and progress, is understood by her as constitutive of the Thai political system. She stresses the importance for activists and scholars alike to address the silenced voices of Thailand's political and social life and to reveal the conditions of this exclusion and how it has been challenged. The introduction consequently calls for a "radical opening of studies of politics to include subjects, actions, and sources not always considered as falling within its sphere" (14). This seems slightly puzzling given that anthropology, or political anthropology for this matter, has traditionally employed a rather broad and inclusive ap-

proach to political phenomena, which always stood in contrast to political science's and sociology's minimalist understanding of politics, a view that resonates with Haberkorn's quoted definition of politics from the *Royal Institute Dictionary* (13).

Drawing on Eugen Weber's call for the "multiplication of new categories of revolution" (16), Haberkorn argues for a more nuanced understanding of movements for social and political change. Her interest lies in the character of the revolution which the Northern farmers ignited and she offers answers by examining the political, historical and geographical setting of the mid-1970s. Haberkorn argues that the Farmers' Federation of Thailand (FFT) in alliance with students and other activists became revolutionaries by choosing the law, namely the 1974 Land Rent Control Act (LRCA), as their terrain for struggle to act as new legal-political subjects. Consequently they challenged existing power structure by questioning "the landlord-tenant and state-citizen relations structuring Thai society" (18). While at first it may appear paradoxical to identify a law as a "site and tool of revolution" (20), Haberkorn convincingly argues that, against the backdrop of the long-established elitist control over the law, multiple legal orders and mid-1970s Thailand's constant fear of a communist revolt, the farmers' strategy to employ the law to challenge the established order, proves indeed a revolutionary act.

In Haberkorn's analysis, the counterrevolution to the farmers' struggle for justice accumulates in the looting and vandalism of prime minister Kukrit Pramoj's house by police officers that demanded the return to, what they understood as, the rule of law. In this vein the unfolding national crisis revolved around the control and interpretive sovereignty over the law and its meaning. The Thai state's fragmentation is understood by Haberkorn not as an anomaly of the mid-1970s, but as an essential component of the state and its repressive form of rule. Her critical analysis of the state echoes Michael K. Connors' notion of the 'ambivalent state' (a reference to Schmitter and Karl's (1991) 'contingent consent'), described as a cardinal lack of agreement on the political system among elite networks. This is understood by Connors (2009) as the "fundamental condition for human rights abuse in Thailand" today and he locates its origin in the very period with which Haberkorn is concerned. Even though the farmers' fomented revolution was interrupted, Haberkorn sees its legacies persist in Thai civil society and social movements, like the Assembly of the Poor in the 1990s. Yet she rightly draws attention to the ongoing counterrevolution and "the repeated confluence of violence and unspeakability in Thailand [...]" (155) by referring to the human rights violation under prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and later administrations. In particular Haberkorn cites the disappearance case of Muslim lawyer Somchai Neelaphaichit as crucial to the question of impunity

and the case of lèse-majesté victim Daranee “Da Torpedo” Charncherngsilpakul as most relevant to freedom of speech and censorship in Thailand. Since the assassinations of the 33 FFT leaders, Thailand’s justice system remains racked by a selective use of the law and impunity for extra-judicial violence.

The book’s strength lies in Haberkorn’s thorough and astute analysis of the textual sources, based on which she contextualizes the farmers’ struggle evolving from local politics about land reform to become entangled in a national crisis that shook the very foundations of Thai society in the mid-1970s. She writes with passion and commitment, well aware of the responsibility inherent to a book that breaks 30 years of silence about political violence and its victims. Apart from Haberkorn’s intriguing examination of various textual sources, she employs direct quotes, taken from oral history interviews to underpin the emic perspective and to invigorate the book’s narrative thread. A higher number of quotes, especially from farmer activists, would have possibly contributed to answer some remaining questions, like the nature of the emerging political consciousness of farmers. This could have been beneficial concerning the significance of the tenant farmers’ political struggle for succeeding grassroots movements, like the early 1990s Small Scale Farmers’ Assembly of Isan. But the author’s decision not to audio-record any interviews, and her careful approach to information gained through interviewing, is owed to the subject’s prolonged contentious and unsettled character.

Haberkorn produces a compelling and nuanced study about rural politics in the North and its implications for Thai society and history beyond the turbulent 1970s. By highlighting the historical significance of the farmer’s political struggle, *Revolution Interrupted* contributes to the writing of a counter-history to the official Thai historiography. This “saga of the unity of Thai people under benevolent rulers [...]” (Thongchai 2002) for the most part ignores or downplays the role of popular movements in the country’s social and political genesis. Despite the different socio-economic and political conditions, Thailand’s ruling elite in the 1950s and mid-1970s reacted in a similar manner to the northern tenant farmers’ struggle as it did to the contemporary protests of the Red Shirts, led by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). Through widespread defamation in the media, refusal to recognise the protest’s legitimacy and finally violent repression that left over 90 people dead and many injured, the Red Shirt protests of April and May 2010 were brought to a fatal end. As Thongchai (2012) repeatedly stressed, most recently in his committed letter to the International Criminal Court, a culture of impunity has left most incidents of extra-judicial violence in Thailand unresolved in the name of reconciliation and

social harmony. The perpetrators of the atrocities of 1973, 1976 and 1992 were assured impunity by this institutionalized unaccountability.

Meanwhile the investigations of the political violence in 2010 by two separate government agencies have been slow, repeatedly delayed and so far only produced preliminary findings. Remarkably, after the violent dispersal of their protest, the Red Shirt movement re-organised and collectively refused to forget the tragic events. As part of an emerging movement culture, the Red Shirts held several commemoration events circulating the slogan “We don’t forget” (*rao mai leum*). They petitioned for the prosecution of those responsible for the May 2010 violence and protested for the release of political prisoners. Their consistent demand for the ‘truth’ to be revealed can be understood as a challenge to Thai society’s culture of impunity – a challenge that civil society of former periods lacked the resources for. Haberkorn correctly identifies the struggle’s underlying leitmotif of both the northern tenant farmers and the Red Shirts as one for political participation and the recognition of rights. As she notes in the preface, this conflict has “the potential to become more pronounced and disruptive politically, socially, and economically, unless those with power are willing to share it with the majority of citizens who are excluded from political life” (xii).

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