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#### **Review Article**

# Social Movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America

Iqra Anugrah

Ford, Michele (ed.) (2013), *Social Activism in Southeast Asia* (= Series: Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia), London, New York: Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-63059-7, 224 pages

Petras, James, and Henry Veltmeyer (2013), Social Movements in Latin America: Neoliberalism and Popular Resistance (= Series: Social Movements and Transformation), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, ISBN 978-0-230-10411-2, 286 pages

Waibel, Gabi, Judith Ehlert, and Hart N. Feuer (eds) (2014), Southeast Asia and the Civil Society Gaze: Scoping a Contested Concept in Cambodia and Vietnam (= Series: Routledge Studies on Civil Society in Asia), London, New York: Routledge, ISBN 978-0-415-70966-8, 287 pages

Abstract: Three recent works – Social Activism in Southeast Asia, Social Movements in Latin America: Neoliberalism and Popular Resistance, and Southeast Asia and the Civil Society Gaze: Scoping a Contested Concept in Cambodia and Vietnam – provide a timely update on the contemporary landscape of social movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America. These works are also relevant for broader theoretical discussions on social movements and provide a basis for future interregional comparative studies.

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**Keywords**: Southeast Asia, Latin America, social movements, civil society, neoliberalism

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#### Introduction

Although Southeast Asian and Latin American specialists are not necessarily close in academic terms, one might be surprised to see parallels between the two regions. In the midst of rapid structural transformations in the era of neoliberalism, the three books reviewed here provide timely accounts on the state of social movements in each region. Their publications also have broader ramifications for studies of social movements and contentious politics in the broader context and suggest the possibility and need for inter-regional comparative research in the future.

#### New Activism in the Age of Post-Authoritarianism

The volume edited by Michele Ford (2013) covers a wide range of topics, from labour and anti-globalisation activisms to organic agriculture and sexual rights movements. In the introduction, Michele Ford provides a broad overview of the major theoretical approaches to studying social activism (social movement, civil society and democratisation) and their relevance in the Southeast Asian context. More specifically, she points out a number of theoretical approaches commonly used in studying social activism and civil society in Southeast Asia, such as Resource Mobilisation Theory, New Social Movement Theory and theories on civil society mobilisation in the context of democratisation (pp. 2–11). In the second chapter, Garry Rodan continues this theme by discussing the space for independent civil society mobilisation in Southeast Asia. He contends that the different contexts in which civil society operates and the legacy of authoritarianism in the region will require social forces in the region to adopt strategies that are different from those of their Western counterparts (pp. 35-36). In the third essay, Edward Aspinall, a longtime observer of Aceh politics, discusses the transformation of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) from an ethnic separatist rebel group into a political movement.

Vincent Boudreau, another veteran of Southeast Asian politics, comprehensively reviews the trajectory of Philippine social movements in a series of democratic transitions in different periods. Nicola Edwards then highlights the growing landscape of Indonesia's organic agriculture movements and their different ideological tendencies. Chapters six, seven and eight, by Dennis Arnold on Burma, Andrew Brown and Sakdina Ayudhya on Thailand, and Dominique Caouette and Tersa Tadem on the Philippines, respectively, deliver updates on labour and anti-global-

isation activism and its connection with democratisation, contemporary politics and globalisation. Thushara Dibley then reviews the impact that international aid has had on the newly-emerging peace movement in Timor-Leste. The last three chapters of the book are by Larissa Sandy, on the movement of Cambodian sex workers, Julian Lee on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) activism in Malaysia, and Lenore Lyons on the tension between the Christian Right and the Feminist movement in Singapore. These chapters deal with different facets of gender identity movements in the region.

#### Latin American Social Movements: Old or New?

James Petras and Henry Veltmeyer's (2013) new book presents a different approach and focus from the above edited volume on Southeast Asia. In this joint effort, they strive to maintain their self-conscious Marxist perspective while analysing the trajectory of Latin American social movements in the context of capitalist development. Hence, one can understand their criticisms of the postmodern-leaning New Social Movement approach, as well as liberal civil society understanding of social movements in Latin America, many of which are peasant-based movements, as being devoid of any class context (pp. 119–144). Indeed, the authors put social movements in Latin America in the broader history of class struggle in the region. The book's first two chapters are dedicated to a historical-structural underpinning of the US-backed, urban-bias capitalist development that has, at times, been backed by repressive regimes in various Latin American countries such as Chile and El Salvador.

The third and fourth chapters extensively discuss how agrarian transformation through "primitive accumulation" and proletarianisation of the peasantry has shaped the contour of resistance in the region. The authors then elaborate on their criticisms of the current trend of civil society, underlining its role as a Trojan horse for neoliberal agendas and the gap between career-oriented civil society workers and "ordinary folks" of peasants and citizens. In the final three chapters of the book, the authors explain the rise of peasant-based social movements and their future trajectory, especially with regard to Latin America's "Left Turn". They also discuss the role of these peasant movements in the wake of the moderation and neoliberal turn of some centre-left governments in the region, such as the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT)

<sup>1</sup> Also known as, or sometimes conflated with, the notion of "accumulation by dispossession".

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administration in Brazil. In their concluding remarks, reflecting on their extensive research and direct involvement with many Latin American social movements, most notably the Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, MST), the authors offer a vision of cautious optimism: despite neoliberal intrusion, autonomous, class-based and extra-parliamentary social movements are still the best hope for people-centred development in the region.

### Civil Society Mobilisation in Cambodia and Vietnam

In contrast to the works mentioned above, the volume edited by Gabi Waibel, Judith Ehlert, and Hart N. Feuer focuses on only two countries: Cambodia and Vietnam. However, the volume's more focused scope of discussion does not detract from its rich narratives on the current landscape of civil society and social movement mobilisation in the two countries and its engaging attempt to converse with broader theoretical issues pertaining to civil society. The book is divided into fifteen chapters and revolves around three main issues: (1) the continuing relevance of contemporary theories of civil society for the Cambodian and Vietnamese case studies, (2) detailed narratives of the state of civil society in the two countries, and (3) the indigenous perspective on civil society and social movements. The third issue is particularly interesting because it is not covered by the other two books.

Gabi Waibel, Joakim Öjendal, and Bach Tan Sinh address the first of these issues in the first three chapters of the book. They aim to situate the Cambodian and Vietnamese case in larger theoretical debates on civil society, social movements, and state-society relations. The three authors discuss contending perspectives on civil society (especially between pluralist versus New Left theories), the legacy of contentious politics and authoritarianism and the influence of neoliberalism in the two countries, and their relevance for the two countries, which is underlined again in the concluding chapter of the book by Hart N. Feuer, Phuong Le Trong, and Judith Ehlert. In the second part of the volume, a number of authors discuss different networks of civil society and social movements in the two countries. Andrew Wells-Dang highlights the rise of community advocacy activism and networks in Cambodia and Vietnam, while Nadine Reis writes about civil society and political culture in Vietnam. Chapters six to nine address the second main attention of the book by drawing attention to the role of civil society and social movements. Nora Pistor and Le Thi Quy investigate the promotion of gender equality in Vietnam, Frédéric Bourdier looks at the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Cambodia, Ayako Hiwasa addresses women's issues in Cambodia, and Ly Thim deals with social mobilisation against hydropower projects in both countries. The final part of the book deals with the third issue – the indigenous Cambodian and Vietnamese views on civil society – as discussed extensively by Phuong Le Trong, Sivhuoch Ou and Sedara Kim, Judith Ehlert, Gabi Waibel and Simon Benedikter, and Hart Feuer in chapters 10 to 14.

# Social Movement, Conceptual Muddle and Analytical Bridge

The three works reviewed here deserve appreciation for a number of reasons. First, they provide a timely update regarding recent social movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Second, they are able to link regional narratives with larger theoretical debates. Third, they cover a wide range of countries and various social movements in each region. In these respects, the three works make a valuable contribution to studies on social movements in the global South.

Nevertheless, the three volumes leave some important empirical references and theoretical debates untouched. For instance, Edwards's essay on Indonesia's organic agriculture movement would benefit from linking the discussion with larger issues of agrarian transformation and rural resistance in contemporary Southeast Asia,<sup>2</sup> as Caouette and Tadem did in their chapter on Philippine anti-globalisation movement.<sup>3</sup> The same applies to the last three chapters of that volume. While the authors' attention to gender issues especially in relation to Southeast Asian states and their efforts to bring up such discourses are appreciated, their works could actually discuss other important dimensions of gender issues more explicitly, such as how different class identities and gender discourses shapes the framing of sex workers', LGBT and feminist movements in Cambodia, Malaysia and Singapore, respectively. This is important because different class backgrounds and movement ideologies seem to influence the way each movement organises and mobilises - something that the authors only touch upon in their chapters.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see the works of Caouette and Turner (2009a), Hall, Hirsch, and Li (2011), Rigg and Vandergeest (2012) and Lucas and Warren (2013) for some of the most recent literature on this topic.

<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, the authors cite Caouette's (2009) own earlier work on rural resistance in the Philippines.

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Similarly, in Petras and Veltmeyer's book, although the authors rightly point out the role and rhetoric of foreign aid-dependent factions of civil society in Latin America as a masked justification for deeper penetration of neoliberal agendas, they could have linked the mechanisms through which the neoliberal intrusion via civil society operates with the burgeoning literature on the role of external factors in democratisation.4 In particular, the most recent literature points out the role of Western-backed civil society<sup>5</sup> and connections to Western interests<sup>6</sup> as important factors that influence the possibility of regime change and changes in class relations in the developing world, including Latin America. The authors could further enrich their discussion on the Trojan horse role of civil society discourse as a neoliberal agenda by connecting their elaboration with the said theoretical references. This book is also missing a thorough discussion of how agricultural transformation, specifically how different types of agricultural commodities, shape the trajectory of peasant-based social movements in the region and its relations with the state. Historically, types of commodities matter in the development of mass pressure for greater political, economic and social inclusions, as we can see in the case of working-class support for democratisation in Latin America (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992: 155–225). The authors' account would be more interesting if it applied such perspectives in looking at peasant-based social movements in the region.

Likewise, some chapters in the edited volume on Cambodian and Vietnamese civil society could have made their presentation stronger by addressing other important empirical and theoretical references. For example, Reis could have made her chapter on the impact that political culture has had on civil society mobilisation in Vietnam more convincing by showing why her preference for Almondian–Putnamian theoretical framework of political culture is more relevant and compelling than, say,

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Greene (2007), Levitsky and Way (2010) and Pepinsky (2009).

For instance, Marina Ottaway (2003), a Senior Scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center who used to be affiliated with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, in her work admits that during the 2002 coup attempt against the late President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Western institutions like the International Republican Institute (IRI) glossed over the coup attempt (p. 88) whereas the National Endowment for Democracy's reputation "has become somewhat tainted by questions about ties of some of the grantees to the plotters of the April 2002 coup attempt" (p. 247).

<sup>6</sup> Levitsky and Way (2010) provide one of the most comprehensive accounts on how connections to Western interests, which they term as "Western leverage" and "linkages to the West", influence regime trajectory of competitive authoritarian regimes.

Gainsborough's (2002) structuralist–elitist account of Vietnamese politics, which emphasizes the role of societal forces and party–state elites in explaining factors that influence the level of civil society mobilisation in Vietnam.

These three books also show that scholars working on different regions sometimes use different conceptual and theoretical references to discuss similar issues, a practice that may cause some conceptual muddle. In practice, although terms such as "civil society", "social movements", "social activism" and "people's movements" can be used quite interchangeably, one should be aware of the differences between these terms. Petras and Veltmeyer correctly points out the three major traditions in the use of the term civil society discourse, namely (a) the Anglo-American liberal-democratic tradition within mainstream strands of political science and economics, (b) the New Left Gramscian conception of civil society as a counterhegemonic bloc of subordinated social forces vis-avis state power in the context of class conflicts, and (c) the developmentalist paradigm of civil society dominant within international development agencies such as the World Bank (p. 120); this categorisation is also echoed by various authors in the volume edited by Waibel, Ehlert and Feuer. Unfortunately, Ford's edited volume seems to lack this clear analytical distinction, especially because, in the book's first chapter, Ford herself tends to confine the theoretical framing within the limit of the North American social movement theories – that is, Political Process Theory, Resource Mobilisation Theory and New Social Movement Theory (p. 4) – despite the fact that other scholars on civil society in Asia have formulated their theoretical preferences based on the distinction between liberal-pluralist and New Left notions of civil society.<sup>7</sup>

However, Ford's theoretical framework is understandable given the wide scope of activisms covered in the edited book, ranging from contemporary labour and anti-globalisation movements to diverse activisms on gender issues. To be fair, a clearer analytical distinction in Petras and Veltmeyer's book, as well as in the volume edited by Waibel, Ehlert, and Feuer, does have some weaknesses. In the former work, the term *social movement* that the authors use throughout the book clearly refers to *class-based* social movements, particularly peasant movements. It would be better if the authors explicitly mentioned the class character of their definition of social movements in the beginning of the book in order to

<sup>7</sup> To be more exact, these scholars use the broad term "Neo-Tocquevillean" to refer to liberal-democratic, pluralist and Anglo-American notions of civil society. See Alagappa (2004a, 2004b) for a more extensive theoretical elaboration of this distinction and its application in various country case studies in Asia.

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guide the readers better. Although the latter work supposedly focuses on formally organized civil society such as donor-funded non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the book actually also discusses quite extensively the connection between social movements and community activism on the one hand and various types of organized civil society on the other. All in all, this conceptual confusion regarding civil society discourse indicates that area studies scholars should probably pay more attention to conceptual clarity, not only for intra-regional but also more importantly for inter-regional comparison.<sup>8</sup>

The good news is the lacunae that remains uncovered in these three works actually opens up the possibility to promote more inter-regional comparative studies and situate research on social movements in broader disciplinary and theoretical debates. The former may sound somewhat over-ambitious and may be prone to context-less analyses of different regions, particularly between Southeast Asia and Latin America. However, this does not mean such a comparison is impossible, as exemplified in the recent work of Slater and Simmons (2012) on promiscuous powersharing in Indonesia and Bolivia. The latter possibility is even more important. In the three books under review, various case studies in Southeast Asia and Latin America have shown how the issue of social activisms and movements are related to a number of broader disciplinary topics, ranging from democratisation and class relations to agricultural transformation and identity politics. In that sense, disciplinary and thematic divisions look more artificial than natural. While the authors of the three books manage to start bridging regional and theoretical gaps between research on social movements in the two regions, their efforts would be more successful if they could broaden their regional and analytical coverage; for instance, by providing a chapter on how their arguments extend or travel to other regional and theoretical contexts.

Furthermore, the publication of these three works also leads us back to an old but still relevant question on social movements: What kind of theoretical approaches best explain social movements in the developing world? This issue always generates tension between area studies and disciplinary-oriented scholars, but it is possible to take regional differences and variances seriously and still engage in theoretical debates at the same time. In fact, authors such as Vivek Chibber (2013) and Barrington Moore, Jr. (1966) have eloquently presented such an argument and warned against the excessive attention given to semantic

<sup>8</sup> For a classic argument for analytical clarity in comparative research, see Przeworski and Teune (1970).

debates about whether one should use Western disciplinary terms in the non-Western context. In response, it is worth quoting Moore's argument at length:

At this moment it is not necessary to take a position on the general question of whether or not it is possible to transfer historical terms from one context and country to another beyond remarking that, without some degree of transferability, historical discussion breaks down into meaningless description of unrelated episodes. On a strictly philosophical plane these questions are sterile and insoluble, **leading only to tiresome word games** as a substitute for the effort to see what really happened (p. 160, my emphasis).

Therefore, the attempt of Ford as the editor, Petras and Veltmeyer as coauthors, as well as Waibel, Ehlert, and Feuer as co-editors to locate their assessment of the state of grassroots politics in Southeast Asia and Latin America in connection to social movement theories, Marxist perspective, and civil society theories respectively is an invaluable intellectual breakthrough.

The edited volume on Cambodian and Vietnamese civil society deserves appreciation for discussing the "indigenous" Cambodian and Vietnamese perspectives on civil society and social movements quite extensively – something that is absent in the other two books. Specifically, the essays by Ly Thim, Phuong Le Trong, and Hart N. provide valuable insights on "views from below" on civil society and social movements from within the two countries. Thim's essay shows the possibility of transnational collaboration for grassroots-level community organising and social resistance against state-sponsored hydropower projects; Trong's chapter calls attention to alternative civil society discourses other than the official discourse of the party-state in Vietnam; and Feuer's contribution discusses the competition between mainstream technocratic-"productivist" vis-à-vis alternative participatory and sustainable platforms on agricultural development in Cambodia. The other two books could have discussed the local perspective on social movements in a more detailed manner in order to enrich their overall explanations on the current state of social movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America, especially given the increasing number of works published in English by local authors, activists, and intellectuals of social movements in the two regions.9

<sup>9</sup> Recent books on Islamic activism in Indonesia (Künkler and Stepan 2013; Ota, Okamoto, and Suaedy 2010; van Bruinessen 2013) and the works of leading Latin American intellectuals and scholars such as Álvaro García Linera, the

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Another implication from the above question is the apparent divide among different theories on social movements, including liberal, North American, Marxist and postmodern<sup>10</sup> theories. It is certainly difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile some aspects of these theories with other rival theories. However, this does not necessarily mean that they do not share some basic assumptions. For example, both neo-Tocquevillean and neo-Gramscian theories view civil society as a necessary space in which citizens can protect themselves against the arbitrary power of the state and as a democratising force (Alagappa 2004b: 25–57).

This claim of parallels or similarities between these different theories may clearly overlook their conflicting stances on conceptualising social movements. Even so, it is no exaggeration to say that if there is anything that links the various cases discussed in the two books under review, it is how social movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America struggle against the violation of their rights committed by state and corporate authorities and elites. In light of that assessment, Caouette and Turner's (2009) suggestion to use Tarrow's (1994) concept of Political Opportunity Structure (POS), which emphasises new political openings originating from structural changes especially state regime change, is highly relevant. Evidence from both works under review seems to confirm the POS hypothesis of the level of internal organisational consolidation and outward mobilisation in the aftermath of regime change in both regions. This does not suggest that class dynamics, 11 social cleavages and contentious identity politics are not important. In fact, as suggested by Yavuz (2004), the impact of POS is connected to and mediated by broader political economy configurations. Thus, one should look at how such factors, as well as how the interaction between those factors and elite dynamics, shape the mobilisation and influence of social movements in both regions, simply because relations between elite dynamics and "pressure from below" is a two-way dialectic, rather than a one-way street.

incumbent vice president of Bolivia, are some examples of local Southeast Asian and Latin American perspectives on social movements.

Although these three books do not formulate their theoretical stances in a postmodern fashion, they do make some references to, sometimes in opposition to, postmodern accounts on social movements. In particular, Petras and Veltmeyer make reference to the work of Escobar and Alvarez (1992) as an example of postmodern explanation of social movements in Latin America.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, both Caouette and Turner (2009b) in their edited volume do not deny the importance of class dynamics and rural resistance to neoliberal agricultural transformation mediated in domestic state intrusion and transnational globalisation.

Lastly, aside from concerns over its contents, a technical issue regarding Ford's edited volume is the absence of a concluding chapter in the book. Even though Ford provides a good introduction to the other chapters in the book, an edited volume that covers a wide variety of themes requires a concluding chapter to tie in different features of activism covered in the book and their relations with theoretical debates on social movements elaborated in the introduction, especially for readers who are not familiar with Southeast Asia. This is important to give the readers, particularly for first-time readers of Southeast Asian landscape of activism, a clearer picture on what has been going on in the region so far.

### Closer Connection between Southeast Asia and Latin America?

The community of academics, scholars, activists and concerned citizens should welcome the publication of these three books as a timely contribution to our understanding on the state of social movements in Southeast Asia and Latin America and the various theoretical debates that surround them. Again, there are at least two take-away points from these three works. Firstly, Southeast Asia and Latin America might be more similar than is commonly believed. Secondly and more importantly, both volumes suggest that their discussion on numerous cases and evidences have broader disciplinary and theoretical ramifications beyond their area studies scopes. Considering the advancement of neoliberalism and the accumulation of knowledge - in a loose sense of the word - in studies on social movements, agricultural transformation, state formation and identity politics in both regions, the three works can help us to better understand the historical formation of popular agency in the developing world in the age of globalisation. I look forward to reading more works like these in the future.

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