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The Political Development of Modern Thailand. By Federico Ferrara. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xvi+328 pp.

The Political Development of Modern Thailand is a brilliant accomplishment. Its depth and erudition, its historical perspective and interpretive vigor, its closely argued analysis and attention to the disciplinary concerns of comparative politics, its intellectual unity, and, yes, even the quality of its writing make it a monument of scholarship. The range of Thai-language sources and of secondary materials on Thailand and from the field of political science on which it draws is dazzling, and its synthesis of these materials marks it as a work of uncommon intelligence. Federico Ferrara's book gratifies, enlightens, inspires and above all challenges those of us in the Thailand field.

Ferrara's principal goal is to offer "an explanation for Thailand's decades-long history of political instability" (p. xiv). He centres his search for that explanation on "the fight over the content of Thailand's national identity — and, therefore, over the formal and informal institutions, constitutive of alternative political regimes, through which the nation exercises its sovereignty" (p. xiii). One might read this, groan, and ask, another study of Bangkok's long history of coups and instability? Another study of national identity in Thailand? Another book focused on the contest between "populist

(egalitarian) and royalist (hierarchical) world views” (ibid.) that has been the subject of so much writing on the country in the past decade? Yes, indeed, another such book — in fact, a book whose significance lies precisely in its success in addressing big questions of widely acknowledged importance, but doing so in a manner that quite simply outclasses what has come before.

Ferrara approaches those big questions through an examination of “critical antecedents” (p. 35) to modern Thai politics and of three major critical junctures in those politics. Taking a “not especially unorthodox” (p. 277) approach, he locates those antecedents in the transformation of the Siamese state during the putatively modernizing reigns of Chulalongkorn (r. 1868–1910) and Vajiravudh (r. 1910–25). But his detailed, artfully executed chapter on that transformation alerts readers to the originality of what will follow in later chapters in the volume. For that chapter roots what was essentially the invention of the “Thai nation” and the development of official nationalism during those reigns in the monarchy’s need to buttress its position in the face of challenges to which its administrative reforms had themselves given rise. Foremost among those challenges, Ferrara deftly argues, numbered the uprisings that broke out on the peripheries of the kingdom in the early years of the twentieth century and the impatience of new bureaucratic and urban elites with their subordinate role in the national political hierarchy. These uprisings and this impatience are of course well known. Their familiarity makes Ferrara’s shrewd argument concerning their place in the DNA of Thai nationalism all the more arresting.

The first critical juncture examined in *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* came in the period following the Promoters’ successful move against Siam’s absolute monarchy in June 1932. What interests Ferrara here is that group’s failure, first, effectively or aggressively to oppose royalist efforts to undermine its democratic project, efforts in which King Prajadhipok himself had a hand, or, second, to generate mass backing for that project. This failure led in due course to Phibunist authoritarianism and with it to the “revitalization of the official nationalism that had been formulated

in defense of royal absolutism” (p. 108) earlier in the century. Ferrara labels the Promoters’ failure “the ancestral sin of [Thailand’s] inveterately half-fledged democracy” (p. 108), and its inclusion among the book’s critical junctures sees him bring to his account the remarkable scholarship that marks so much of his book.

A second critical juncture followed the end of Field Marshal Po. Phibunsongkhram’s first premiership in 1944, when “the country had a realistic chance of consolidating a democratic regime” (p. 111). Ferrara tracks developments during this juncture with typically close attention to the political maneuvering of the 1945–47 period, which saw mounting royalist dissatisfaction with the will of the Thai electorate lead to cooperation with the military to undermine democracy and thus “set a precedent that would be repeated several times over in the six decades thereafter” (p. 127). Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat’s coup of 1957 opened the third and last of Ferrara’s important critical junctures. The developments of this period gave the country “Thainess” and the notion of “Thai-style democracy”. More concretely, they brought the “synthesis” of “royal nationalism” into a partisan-political doctrine that had,

in the eyes of millions of Thais, the kind of natural and self-evident quality that effectively turned it into the cultural norm it had been said to embody in the first place ... [and that] continues to inhibit open debate about the content of Thailand’s national identity, placing those who question the country’s hierarchy of power, status, and merit beyond the pale of true ‘Thainess’. (p. 148)

This doctrine served to give final and enduring shape to Thai royalists’ commitment to a hierarchical vision of society, a commitment that makes “Thai-style democracy” a form of “structural violence” (p. 181) and “Thainess” a form of “cultural violence” (ibid.).

His treatment of these three critical junctures complete, Ferrara turns to a narrative of their effect in shaping events in Thailand in the decades between the 1970s and the present. These sections of the book include perceptive and rewarding analyses of the Prem Tinsulanon and Chatchai Chunhawan eras — 1980–88 and 1988–91, respectively

— and the observation that “Thailand’s royalist establishment shoulders much of the responsibility for the historical context in which Thaksin [Shinawatra]’s ascent took place” (p. 220). Skillfully and carefully argued, they extend the foundation on which Ferrara builds his broad, rather charmingly Whiggish, reading of political development in modern Thailand. This reading accepts the reality that “successive failure[s] of democracy” have “elevat[ed] the monarchy above the country’s ever-changing, disposable constitutions” (p. 31). But it also contends that the futile efforts to turn the clock back that followed each of the crises, coups and newly drafted constitutions of the past half-century have in the end brought concessions — “in exchange for preserving prerogatives reserved for the monarchy, the military, and the bureaucracy” — to “disgruntled elites and newly mobilized groups” (p. 276). Throughout, and thanks to increasing material prosperity, growing social complexity and — indeed, quaintly — “modernization” (p. 31), “spells of non-democratic rule have grown shorter, while electoral democracy has grown more resilient” (p. 34). While Ferrara does not say so, the length of the spell of dictatorship in Thailand since 22 May 2014 may be due to the effective collapse of royalism as viable ideology and to the attempt to replace it with a fascinating and obscene experiment in praetorianism. The preordained failure of that experiment only buttresses Ferrara’s optimism about the eventual course of Thailand’s political order.

This unexpected optimism and the case that he so trenchantly develops notwithstanding, Ferrara’s mastery of the history and his determination thoroughly to explore the critical junctures that he has identified place a sensitivity to contingency at the core of *The Political Development of Modern Thailand*. This erudition and sensitivity make it impossible for Ferrara to subscribe to the easy parsimony of prevalent explanations for “the regime instability that Thailand has experienced since 1932” (p. 268). He demonstrates the ideological nature of culturalist arguments that “Western” political institutions are not appropriate to Thailand, that their ill-conceived introduction accounts for the country’s instability. He argues that

depictions of rural voters as “backward” (p. 272) fail to take the change that has come to provincial Thailand in the past half-century into account, and that “class conflict” (p. 274) also poorly explains what has long ailed the Thai political order.

As an alternative to these explanations, Ferrara advocates putting “identity conflict” (p. 274) and the importance of “the construction and mobilization of collective identities” (p. 252) at the centre of our understanding of Thai politics and its modern history. Issues of citizenship, “Thainess” and the use that royal-nationalists have for a very long time made of “socio-economic status, ethno-regional background, or anti-establishment ideas” (p. 23) to consign large numbers of their compatriots to subaltern status define these identities.

The discussion of political developments since the turn of the twenty-first century in which Ferrara illustrates the interpretive power of his stress on collective identity ranks as just one of a dozen sections of *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* that, published on their own, would make for classic journal articles. For present purposes, I would call attention to three points relevant to that discussion. First, Ferrara’s emphasis on collective identities turns “Thainess” on its head. Second, it is my firm expectation that — like Riggs’s “bureaucratic polity” in an earlier “critical juncture” in the study of Thailand — Ferrara’s “collective identities” and “identity conflict” will figure as paradigmatic foundations in that study during the scholarly juncture that will follow the recent demise of King Bhumibol and development of rational perspectives on the ninth Chakri reign and on the historical forces that defined it. For, third, while Ferrara makes a strong and convincing case for the importance of “collective identities” and “identity conflict”, his book nevertheless leaves room for considerable development and elaboration of these contributions to the study of Thailand.

Books like *The Political Development of Modern Thailand* do not appear very often. It is fair to ask whether those of us in the

Thailand field did not have to wait nearly half a century, since the appearance of Fred Riggs's *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* in 1966, for the publication of another work on the country's politics of such broad and fundamental importance. Whatever the answer, Ferrara's book will leave a good number of — both Thai and foreign — “political scientists” who have written on the country or treated it as one of their “cases” feeling naked and embarrassed. For the lack of serious learning, allergy to real research and relative analytical clumsiness characteristic of much of their work are now exposed. And the book should also cause discomfort to many historians, anthropologists, sociologists, students of religion and other scholars of modern Thailand.

What has already been published has, however, already been published: we do better to look ahead, to what we will publish in the future, than to beat ourselves up in shame about what we have published in the past. We need, that is, to ask ourselves, will we face up to the intellectual obligation explicitly to position our work relative to Ferrara's, to assimilate or address his arguments, interpretations and frameworks — not least those relating to identities? Or, in an age when “academics” publish too much, and when too much of what they publish is mediocre and forgettable, will some combination of sloth, vanity, cowardly determination to please the bean-counters and inertia result in a conspiracy to duck that obligation, to pretend that we are unaware of this book or do not need to take it into account in our work? The choice should be pretty clear.

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