

SIXTH BIELEFELD COLLOQUIUM ON SOUTHEAST ASIA:
"SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THAI SOCIETY"

Bielefeld, 10th June 1985

Social transformation in Thai society was the subject of the Sixth Bielefeld Colloquium on Southeast Asia that convened on Monday, 10th June 1985 at the Sociology of Development Research Centre, University of Bielefeld. Planned to be an international colloquium, it drew participants from the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Berlin, and from all over the Federal Republic of Germany, making for a total of 22 Thais and eleven non-Thai participants.

While many had already come to Bielefeld in order to participate in the gigantic conference on Contemporary Research on Southeast Asia on the 7th and 8th June, quite a few of the Thai participants came for the day only, the presence of Thirayut Boonmi apparently justifying the journey. Whereas the fame of Thirayut is to be attributed to his being a prominent student leader during and in between the revolutions of 1973 and 1976, when he decided that he had better exile himself to the jungle, he is now emerging as a thoughtful social analyst who rejects facile global approaches to complicated societal processes.

In his rejection of the political economy approach as an "explain-all" he concurred with Prof. Dr. Hans-Dieter Evers' introductory statement that emphasized the considerable theoretical sophistication gained in recent years, compelling us to develop more subtle paradigms and consequently revise historical periodization if we are to understand the process of increasingly rapid change.

To Thirayut this meant that cultural, cognitive changes should at the very least be incorporated in any modern paradigm. He even criticized earlier explanatory schemes, such as bureaucratic polity, access to and competition for resources, and modes of production, as ethnocentric (Western) and overlooking indigenous reasoning and the self-perception of the actors.

While this approach was perhaps disappointing to some of the Thai student participants who may have hoped for the message of a revolutionary solution to the problems of Thai society⁺, it was very stimulating to all familiar with

⁺) This became especially apparent in the discussion afterwards when Thai was spoken and when Thirayut was confronted with the current generation of young students.

the Thai social science scene to finally note Thai interest in the cultural analysis of things Thai. To test and demonstrate his ideas Thirayut proposed a historical analysis of the changing world of thought of his erstwhile adversary under the title "The Rise of Military Rule in Thailand". Chaired by Dr. Chaya-choke Chulasiriwongs of Chulalongkorn University, who is currently a visiting lecturer on Southeast Asian Studies in Bielefeld, Thirayut traced cardinal changes in the Thai Weltanschauung, in the practical world view ("methodology") of everyday reasoning, and showed how these two gradually gave rise to the "ideology of intervention by the army".

Bearing in mind that the history of ideas can only explain an undetermined part of the phenomena that we recognize as social change, Thirayut's arguments about the changing academic conceptions of the nature of man, the Thai nation, the relationship between king and nation, and the meaning of "democracy" as building blocks of the "ideology of the interventionist army", were persuasive and refreshing in the sense of pioneering a field of studies where so far few Thai have dared to tread.

After lunch Han ten Brummelhuis from the Antropologisch-Sociologisch Centre of the University of Amsterdam broached the touchy subject of the relationship between Thai and Western scholarship in Thai studies. He noted that there is an urgent need to learn from each other because at present communications seem to be coloured by prejudice, suspicion, and personal advantage more than by cooperation in the pursuit of a common scholarly interest. This impressionistic thesis was then underlined by a sociological view of the Thai scholarly establishment and the selective motivations to enter Thai studies. The subsequent discussion clearly showed that one indeed needs some temerity to talk about these things, and it is perhaps no coincidence that ten Brummelhuis' name means "courageous" in Thai. At any rate, the somewhat vehement discussion put some aspects of the thesis into cultural perspective, also stimulating self-reflection on the parts of Thais and Europeans.

The last introduction was from Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, a Ph.D. student from the University of Leicester, who is working on the analysis of the ideological content of radio programs in Thailand. Whereas the field research for this study still needs to be done, the audience could profit from a thorough analysis of radio as a medium in the Thai polity and the manipulation of its potential by various interest groups. Especially the role of censorship that emerged during the discussion shed an interesting light on aspects of the dynamics of modern Thai culture.

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