Benedict Anderson

Exploration and Irony in Studies of Siam over Forty Years. Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, 180 pp. ISBN: 9780877277637. Price: USD 23.95 (paperback).

Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program has long loomed large over the field of Southeast Asian studies. Of all the scholars who have been associated with that Program, none have been more influential than Benedict R. O'G. Anderson. Indeed, Anderson is one of the few scholars of Southeast Asia whose influence extends beyond the field of Southeast Asian studies. His 1983 book, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, while dated now, remains a standard text in the theoretical literature on nationalism, which academics and graduate students who work on this subject are expected to consult. While preparing this review the sad news arrived that Anderson had passed away in Surabaya, Indonesia, days after speaking at a conference. Up until the end of his life Anderson had continued to be active in Southeast Asia's academic scene. In recent years, his work had appeared in the Thai language for a Thai readership, continuing a pattern in Anderson's career where his scholarly work reflected his immediate surroundings. For many years he had resided for part of the year in Bangkok and was a regular speaker at seminars and conferences there. Anderson's association with Thailand dated back to the 1970s. After being refused entry to Indonesia following his analysis of the events surrounding the 1965 failed coup, he famously changed the focus of his research to two other Southeast Asian countries, first Thailand and later the Philippines. Unlike many who have switched fields, Anderson took the time to learn the languages of these new research fields, enabling him to access the academic literature produced by the scholars of the countries he studied, in their own languages. As with his work on Indonesia, Anderson has had a significant impact on the study of the politics and history of Thailand and the Philippines—making him perhaps the only scholar of the modern era to have had such an influence on the scholarly fields of three different Southeast Asian countries.

Exploration and Irony gathers together in one volume Anderson's work on Thailand. The volume reprints five of his most famous essays from the late 1970s to the early 1990s on Thai politics: 'Studies of the Thai State, the State of Thai Studies', 'Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup', 'Murder and Progress in Modern Siam', his long Introduction to the well-known collection of translated short stories (with Ruchira Mendiones), *In the Mirror. Literature and Politics in Siam in the American Era*, and 'Radicalism after Communism in Indonesia and Thailand'. These texts, which are reprinted in

this volume virtually unchanged, remain almost canonical for anyone studying modern Thai history and politics. It is a statement both of the quality and pioneering nature of his work, as well as, perhaps, the unfortunate state of Thailand's politics today, that Anderson's arguments and insights still seem so fresh. The problems that he identified in this period, in particular the domination of the political scene by the monarchy and the military, remain, and if anything in recent years have become worse. Thailand's chronic political crisis, which erupted in 2005 and shows no sign of ending, makes his work timely. Yet perhaps it also demonstrates the extent to which the study of Thailand's political history has yet to really move beyond Anderson's famous four 'scandalous hypotheses' (p. 20) laid out in his 'Studies of the Thai State' article of almost four decades ago.

Anderson's later work on Thailand moved away from his earlier focus on politics. This collection includes four of Anderson's more recent articles, translated from the Thai in which they were originally published, which explore Thai film, religion, 'culture', the Thai 'bourgeoisie', and issues of gender and sexuality—Thai masculinity in particular. The diversity of topics Anderson covers demonstrates the breadth of his interests and curiosity. Even at the end of his career Anderson continued to be provocative, for example in his critique of the way that the films of the internationally famous Thai director, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, have been received—and largely ignored—in his home country Thailand (pp. 131–46).

All of the pieces are written in Anderson's fluent and sometimes playful style (hence the "irony" in the title of this book), which make them a pleasure to read. The volume is ably introduced by another Cornell scholar, Tamara Loos, who provides a biographical summary of Anderson's career. If the republication of his work on Thailand introduces Anderson to a new generation of scholars, and reminds us all of what is possible for a scholar of Southeast Asia at the peak of their craft, the project will have been worthwhile.

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