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The Owners of the Map

Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok.

A dissertation presented

by

Claudio Sopranzetti

The Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of Social Anthropology

Harvard University

Cambridge, MA

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Professor Michael Herzfeld Claudio Sopranzetti

The Owners of the Map:

Motorcycle Taxi Drivers, Mobility, and Politics in Bangkok.

Abstract

This dissertation offers an ethnography of motorcycle taxi drivers: Bangkok's most important and informal network of everyday mobility. Drawing on over eight years of experience in the region, six months of archival research, and 24 months of fieldwork, I analyze how the drivers, mostly male rural migrants, negotiate their presence in the city through spatial expertise, bodily practices, and social relations. Their physical mobility through traffic, I argue, shapes their ability to find unexplored routes in the social, economic, and political landscapes of the city and to create paths for action where other urban dwellers see a traffic jam or a political gridlock. My narrative builds up to the role of these drivers in the Red Shirt protests that culminated in May 2010 and analyzes how their practices as transportation and delivery providers shape their role in political uprisings and urban guerilla confrontations. My main finding is that when the everyday life of the city breaks down the drivers take advantage of their position in urban circuits of exchange to emerge as central political actors in contemporary Bangkok by blocking, slowing down, or filtering the circulation of people, goods, and information which they normally facilitate. *Owners of the Map* proposes an alternative view of contemporary urbanism in which the city is constructed day after day through the work of connection and mediation, its frictions and failures, the tactics adopted to resist them, as well as the political tensions that emerge from these struggles.

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Note on Transliteration.

The transliteration of the Thai word in this text follow the Romanization scheme of the American Library Association – Library of Congress (ALA-LC), unless another transliteration has become the standard, as in the case of public figures or the Thai currency.

Introduction

When I was a kid I used to cheer every time a mercury thermometer would break in my house. Away from the eyes of my parents I would put the spilled quicksilver on a table, kneel down, eyes close to the board and move the mercury through small objects watching the stream cluster, divide, aggregate, and take part as it filled the tiny spaces between the static pieces. The first time I crossed a four lane street in Bangkok I stopped, middle way, to watch the flow of thousands of motorbikes swirling, zigzagging, sinuously moving through the static lanes of cars at a traffic light, feeling like a baby. After that, almost every day I walked up to one of the thousand pedestrian overpasses, built during the expansion years of Bangkok to reduce to its minimum the frictions and stoppages to the flow of traffic and business, and watched the dance of thousands of motorcycles, making routes and inventing passages where automobiles and bus waited, frozen. I stand there observing the mass of motorbikes arriving from behind, making their ways to the front of the line, and clustering in a dense cloud few meters away from the first cars. From above I stared, entranced, waiting for the traffic light to turn green, the flow restored until the next red light, car queue, and motorcycles dance.

Mobility and traffic, street-level and elevation were my first introduction to the enormous Thai metropolis. As I spend more time in the city it became clear that most residents lived their lives continuously activating and discussing knowledge and experiences of movement, detecting the best way to move from point A to point B, depending on time of the day, available cash, rush, and disposition or willingness to be exposed to heat, smell, and toxic fumes of the city. In a megalopolis of 15 million people (Thailand Census 2010), infamous for its traffic gridlocks and environmental hazard, having this knowledge and sensing when to switch modes of transportation makes the difference between being in time for work, a meeting, or a show and remaining stuck for hours in the tropical heat. Bus, taxis, cars, tuk-tuk, skytrain, subway, canal boats, river boats, vans, *song teaw*, bikes, motorbikes, motorcycle taxis, all of these possibilities present themselves to the dweller on the move, according to location and income. Only the two most recent entries into this mobility puzzle, sky-train and subway, offer predictable and regular schedules—outside malfunctions—but cover a

minimal portion of the city. For the rest, managing time and space requires a high degree of expertise. The new resident, be that person a foreign anthropologist or one of the internal migrants that populate the city, starts building this knowledge quickly, out of experiences, nerve-wrecking failures, and innumerable hours spent moving through the city or getting stuck in it. The new comer learns that the affordable busses are slow-moving from 8 to 9 am, from 12 to 1.30, and then again after 4.30pm, and that, in contrast to Europe and similarly to the US, are almost uniquely the transport system of the poor; that taxis, sheltered in an air conditioned environment, are never worth their price during peak hours when a short ride may add up to a day of income but can be otherwise convenient for long detour and often offer some of the best occasional conversations in town; that water transportation never experiences gridlock, and in their regular slowness can often save the day, if you are willing to take a smelly ride on the polluted canals.

With time, the newcomer learns that moving in Bangkok is a matter of navigating the city, its landmarks and rhythms with prompt reactions and creativity. During traffic hours, he readily discover that mixing and switching is the way to go: a section on a bus and then be ready to get off once it blocks in traffic, a short ride to the canal, another tract on boat and a final ride on a bus after you get out of the congested area. One of the main discoveries, however, it is that when the traffic blocks, subway and skytrain are too far away, boats do not reach, and buses are stuck, if you want to get somewhere fast hopping on the back of one of the omnipresent motorcycle taxis is your only choice. Tuck in your knees, and more or less smoothly zigzag through the halted city to your destination, or to the closest station of the two predictable transportation systems.

As I start talking to people about this technology of mobility stories started pouring out, almost often preceded by laughter at the thought of an international PhD student coming a long way to spend time with *motorcy rapjang* (motorcycle for hire). Laughter, Mary Douglas would say, comes from discomfort and the uneasiness of matter out of place (Douglas 1975). A Harvard student coming to Thailand to hang out with what is often presented by Bangkok urbanites and popular media as a dangerous, lazy, and motley bunch was definitely, to most people, matter out of place. "This is what my son will become, if he doesn't work hard," a

young mother who migrated from the urban hinterland to work in a small office in Central Bangkok tells me with concern. If, when she was young, tending buffalos (*liang khwai*) was the fate rhetorically reserved for disobedient and lazy youngsters, now that the country is urbanized and buffalo sparse, becoming a motorcycle taxi driver has taken the place of looking after buffalos as the epitome of the urban middle class' undesirable job for good-to-nothing.

The protagonists of this dissertation, young and for the most part males from the provinces of Thailand are these good-to-nothing who make the city function and allow circulation of people, goods, as well as ideas through the urban landscape and into the larger landscape of the country. This dissertation explores and navigates the paradox between the drivers' marginality and absolute necessity for the operation of Thai capital, and its capital city. As the laughter faded away and the person realized I was not joking, stories started to take the place of puzzlement. Everybody seemed to have something to say, an event to recount, a driver they knew or they regularly used. The first story was always about an accident, a narrative of an insane drive into clogged traffic, or a recounting of knees hitting blocked cars, while zigzagging through traffic. Soon to follow were stories of thefts, drug dealing, and occasional sexual assaults. These stories, however common in the actual experiences of riding motortaxis, often acquired the rhetorical marks of urban legend. They always happened to a friend of a friend, somebody they knew, a slightly too removed acquaintance. Rather than presenting actual experiences they strengthen diffuse perceptions of the drivers as unsafe, unreliable, and hyper-masculine. These stories were often topped with a concerned admonition on their dangerous nature.

"So you don't use them?" I would ask watching a common smile opening in the person's face. Another flood of stories would release, this time not about the generalized stereotype of *the* driver but about *a* particular driver, the one that the specific person used daily: some to go to work, some to send their kids back and forth to school, some to send documents, to deliver goods, to pay bills, to pick food up, to fix a broken pipe in their house, and some to get their regular stash of drugs. Everybody I met seemed to be connected to and through a motorcycle taxi driver. Utilities and post offices in Bangkok are for the most part populated by

drivers, waiting to pay bills, deliver packages, or turn in documents. Banks are peppered by their colorful vests, standing in line to deposit a check or collect a stipend for their regular clients. Offices rely on them to deliver documents and packages. At late parties, where the buzz started to run low or ice had melted away a phone number of a driver who works at night would pop up and the party would be extended after a fast delivery. Even e-commerce businesses offer motorcycle taxi delivery services, at the most expensive rate. Fascinated by the 200,000 drivers operating in Bangkok, their omnipresence and multiple roles in the daily functioning of the city as well as radical marginality and invisibility I set out to explore the functioning of these almost invisible movers of the city, erased in transportation studies, away from government recognition, occasionally noticed by popular press and culture but largely overlooked by academic studies. How did these internal migrant come to be the mediators of the city? What role do they play in the daily life of million dwellers? How did they organize their mobility? What happened to them as they moved, and to the city around them? What political consciousness emerges on the move, and how do they act upon it? With these questions in mind I set to my investigation and navigation of mobility in Bangkok, ready to move with the flow, and getting stuck with it.

This dissertation explores the dynamics of mobility, immobility, and political mobilization in post-1997 crisis Thailand through an ethnographic study of some of the 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers operating quasi-legally in Bangkok. It follows the historical emergence and present trajectories of these drivers—most of whom are men from the impoverished northeastern Isan region of Thailand—as mediators of goods, images, ideas, and desires through the landscapes of Bangkok and into the larger geography of the Thai countryside. Through the analysis of these transportation operators, their internal organization, and their rise as central political actors in contemporary Thailand, I strive to answer these questions and to recover links among people, commodities, and spaces that anthropology has too often neglected. In their trajectories through Bangkok and beyond, the drivers re-define what urban life is, what spaces are reachable and unreachable, as well as restructure the economic, social, legal, and political relations among its dwellers. Their

lives on the move, in other words, retain a transformative potential, not just for the city around them but also for the drivers themselves who, a trip at a time, get accustomed to urban life, its marvel and its sorrows, its excitements and its crushing oppression. Situated at the intersection between (spatial) mobility and (political) mobilization, this dissertation investigates the multiple roles that the motorcycle taxi drivers play in constituting and re-configuring the physical, social, economic, and political landscapes of the metropolis for millions of Bangkok residents.

Mobility constitutes and shapes the birth, growth, and functioning of the modern metropolis. The circulation of people and objects establishes infrastructures (Larkin 2008), whether material or immaterial, that outlive their circulation and stratify to constitute a city (Lefebvre 1991). The study of this generative process, however, has historically suffered from a disconnect between social theory and empirical analysis. Scholars of urban sociology, critical theory, and urban studies have illuminated the roles of fragmentation (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999; Sennett 1969) speed (Schivelbusch 1986; Urry 2007; Virilio 1986), and mobility (Sassen 1991; Simone 2004) in producing spaces and experiences of the city (de Certeau 1984). Aside from some notable exceptions (Ho 2006; Malkki 1995; Tsing 2005), mostly outside urban settings, few works have connected these theoretical preoccupations with ethnographic analysis.

In order to address the accusation of being more interested in roots than in routes (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997), recent anthropological studies in urban contexts have emphasized "interrelations and linkages between local settings and larger regional or global structures and processes" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 7), as their focus on neighborhoods (Askew 2002, Herzfeld 2009), market places (Bestor 2004, Stoller 2003), and enclaves (Caldeira 2000; Low 2003) demonstrates. Although informative in unraveling the social complexities of localized social worlds and interactions, these bodies of literature ignore the role of mobility in structuring the city, its spaces, as well as its social relations. How are we to understand the social lives of mobile subjects, such as the drivers, if we are bound to analyze them through the lens of a local?

Like the quicksilver that so deeply fascinated me as a kid, the system of motorcycle taxi drivers proved hard to confine and difficult to grasp, especially to the tool of traditional anthropological research, accustomed to relatively stable groups, in which often territoriality and spatiality corresponded. This proved time and again during my research a source of frustrations, as well as its main methodological challenge and stimulus. This conundrum, I realized, has mostly been a result of traditional anthropological methods. As Ulf Hannerz argued, a certain degree of disciplinary orthodoxy and methodological conservatism "tended to bring the anthropologist to the ethnic enclaves, the ghetto, which had cultural and organizational characteristics with which he [sic] could—in his own curious way—feel comfortable" (1980:3). I propose instead to bend the disciplinary framework by pushing conventional ethnography to a position of "productive discomfort" (Herzfeld 1992:16), faced with a study of urban mobility. I put anthropology in conversation with a growing sociological and geographic literature, often referred to as the "mobility paradigm" (Urry 2006, Cresswell 2006, Adey 2010), that rescues mobility from the black box in which the social sciences has often secluded it. In this sense my research brings their proposals to the test of ethnographic analysis by developing a methodology that "also move along with people, images, or objects that are moving and being studied" (Urry 2007:6) and shifts between different disciplinary methods—from spatial analysis to participant observation, from archival research to cartographic mapping, from social history to visual analysis. Mobility, therefore, becomes not only the object of my analysis but structures its methodology.

This work is based on twenty-two months of fieldwork between July 2009 and May 2011. During this time my physical and conceptual trajectories, mediated by the drivers' paths, intersected with their multiple roles in Bangkok and multi-directional migration between the city and villages in the Thai countryside. My fieldwork, however, did not start by following the drivers but rather arrived at them by tracing the circulation of objects, documents, and commodities around the city. It was these objects, and a multitude of senders and receivers for which the motor-taxi operate as mediators, that directed me to some of the drivers in my neighborhood. While I worked as a motorcycle taxi driver in their group, the physical geography of the

area—and its landmarks—started to became familiar. During this period of my research, I also traveled to many of the drivers' villages, following the convoluted paths that connect the city and the countryside as well as the ideas, bodies, and commodities that travel along them.

This physical space was just one of the landscapes that the drivers traversed and operated on. As my research progressed, a complex geography of organizational structures, illegal economies, historical events, and political figures started to become visible. This geography was suddenly reshuffled when the Red Shirts protesters descended into Bangkok and took hold of the city with the help of motorcycle taxi drivers. In the weeks that preceded and followed the protest I found myself in the midst of the biggest political mobilization in modern Thai history, with a unique set of connections in place to make sense of the rapidly evolving events. This epochal uprising, and the central roles that the drivers played in it, demonstrated that "mobility means nothing without mobilization" (Tsing 2005:215) and that operators of mobility retain a potential to sever and filter the very connections they contribute in creating. During the protest this potential was materialized and the drivers brought the mobility of central Bangkok to a halt.

As a consequence, my mobile research became static. Over the next few months, my investigation resembled more traditional anthropological fieldwork, bounded in the protest area which drivers referred to as their "village in the middle of the city," tucked in between shopping malls, up-scale hotels, and a futuristic elevated train. It was in this reclaimed space, which they allowed to function, that I met the newly formed Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) and its competing leaders. When the street protest was suppressed, my research was again set in motion, plugged into an extensive landscape of drivers, labor organizers, police officers, army personnel, and politicians in which the motorcycle taxi association operates.

Following the different paces and paths of my fieldwork, this dissertation is composed of two interlocked trajectories, both organized around four chapters. This narrative movement starts with the creation of the conditions of possibility—material, technological, economic, and social—for the emergence in the early 1980s of the motorcycle taxi as a technology of transportation in traffic-ridden Bangkok. I focus on tight connections between processes of urbanization, privatized land development, industrial expansion and new

illegal economies. The text progresses by exploring the daily lives of the drivers as interstitial subjects, mediating between urban spaces and classes. I analyze the ways in which riding a motorbike shapes perceptions and practices of urban space as well as their presence in the city and in larger national imaginaries of Bangkok. Then, this trajectory branches out from the city into a larger rural geography that the drivers help shape and connect, through labor and movement. Finally, I explore the driver positioning into post-1997 crisis capitalist restructuring in Thailand and their formalization by Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003.

While Part I focuses on the drivers' everyday mobilities, the second half of the thesis examines how their mobility morphs into—and shapes—their political mobilization. These four chapters follow the Thai state officials' realization of the drivers' presence and strength in the city, their attempts to formalize and control their operations, and the emergence of the drivers as central power brokers in Bangkok. I explore how mobility not only defines their political subjectivities but also their strategies during protest and their bargaining power vis-à-vis the state. Finally, I examine the forms of organization that the drivers adopted, under conflicting leaders and conceptions of power, during and after the red-shirt uprisings of 2009 and 2010. On the overall, I follow the narrative movement from mobility to political mobilization and, in so doing, I explore the emergence—in late capitalist Thailand—of mobility, its spaces, and its operators, as quintessential political strategies, arenas, and actors.

PART I

Prologue

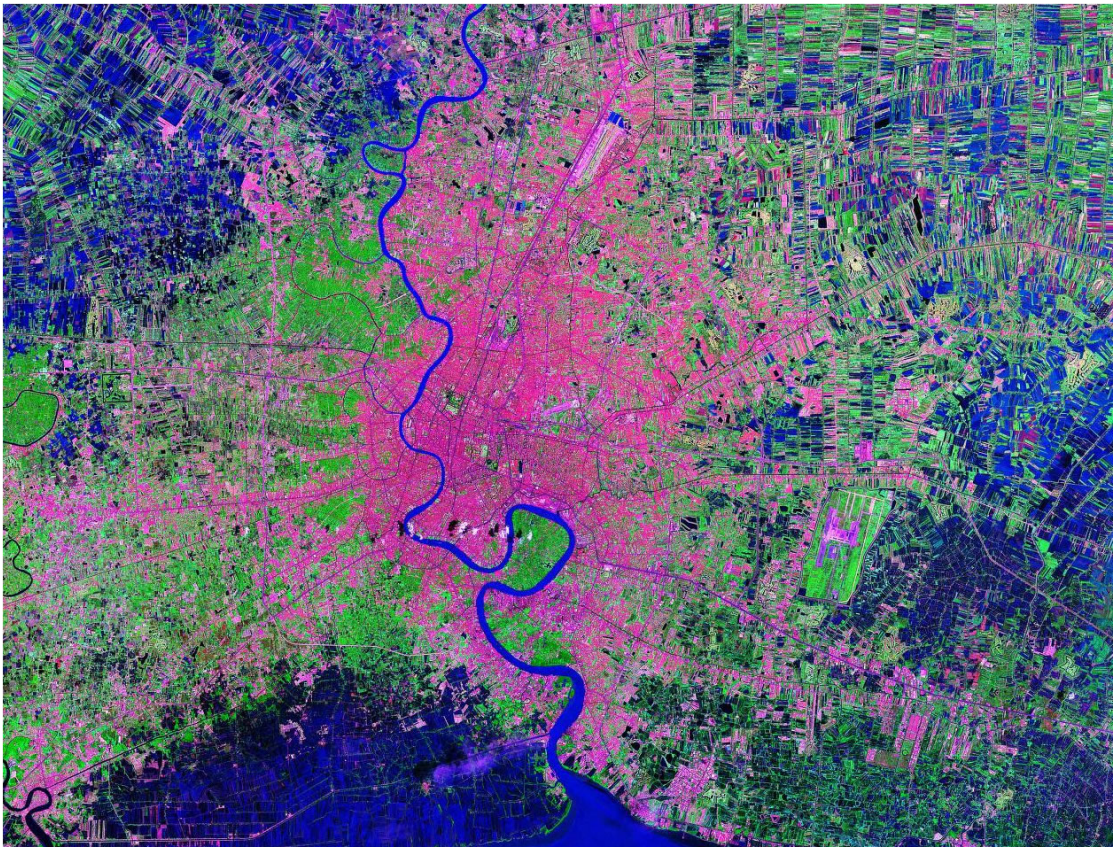


Figure 1: Bangkok from above

Seen from above, Bangkok resembles an octopus, scarred on its left side by the sinuous bends of the Chao Praya River and squeezed in the middle, with its tentacles distending sideways. As you get closer, the urban structure reveals the same tentacular shapes. Large multi-lanes roads spread radially, departing from the Central Business District that clusters around Siam Square, where the city's elevated railway lines converge. It is at the next closer look that the structure of the city starts to break down and the octopus contorts into cramped and convoluted patterns. Long and narrow streets branch out of the major roads and conquer the space between them, without connecting one to the other. Perpendicular alleys depart on an angle and almost collide with one another. At this scale, the street network suggests the shape of multiple trees, result of the

streets' past lives as canals. Trees, however, remain a hint more than a texture: long boulevards suddenly hit a small maze of road; cyclical roundabouts and centrifugal roads shatter against grids of streets, extending for miles into straight narrow alleys which end in a fence, a wall, or a drowsy parking lot. A few meters away, beyond these voids, runs an identical road, unreachable. The result is a confusing chaos of alleys that keep breaking up, reaching from one another and then suddenly stopping, a few meters before connecting, fractured by buildings and gardens.

A history of the multiple attempts to plan, reorganize, and remake the city discloses, in these alley, their doomed audacity. All these plans left behind is a chaotic and fragmented overlay that composes the landscape of the Thai capital: a palimpsest that has been written and re-written so many times that no-hand can claim complete ownership over it. The aquatic city, the colonial city, the monarchic city, the car-based city: each failed vision of planners' domination over the organic and unruly urban expansion left traces that now compose the infuriating topography of Bangkok.

The same bricolage dominates the architecture of the city. Sino-Portuguese shop houses modeled after Singaporean counterparts, neo-classic cement buildings where the new-rich live, shanty apartment buildings, low-rise villas with vistas onto fake Greek and Roman sculptures, dilapidated four-story buildings covered with rusty iron grating, small corner shops, glassy skyscrapers just beside moldering wooden houses on stilts and mono-family homes dressed up as Gothic churches. Bangkok's residential architecture mixes with both religious and profane buildings. Ubiquitous Buddhist temples sit next to Dutch-looking palaces providing all the thrills and pleasures of the red-light district of Amsterdam, small mosques along sleepy canals built by Thai Muslims and giant mosques sponsored by Middle-Eastern tycoons along busy highways. Portuguese churches neighbors shopping centers, Chinese shrines, Hindu temples, and massage parlors. At the outskirts of the city, up-scale residential complexes, copies of international neighborhood around the world, carry the name of their originals: London, Paris, all the way to the "Grand Canal"—a Venetian-themed neighborhood that screams Las Vegas more than Bangkok. At the verge of the city, these gated communities mix with the unfinished town-houses left behind by the 1997 economic crisis, lush waterways, and swampy

rice fields. A crossroads since its origin, Bangkok still preserves the "thrown together" feeling of a harbor city, even if its center is now far away from water.

The dispersed architectural diversity that animates the periphery of Bangkok becomes denser, taller, and more crowded as you get closer to the Central Business District. Land-use and social segregation typical of European or American cities, however, never take over, even in the urban commercial core. Along the convoluted and narrow alleys (*soi*) multiple architectural structures mix according to complex histories of booms and busts, which left untamed shrubs next to upscale residences, crumbling shop houses next to international shopping malls, small slums in the shadow of skyscrapers. Behind the elevated square of Bangkok's most glamorous shopping mall—Siam Paragon—and the nearby Princess Palace, two small slums survive, next to condominiums and small garment factories. From there a long six lanes street, towered by the concrete rail of Bangkok's Skytrain, connects the commercial core of the city to its financial district, extending along Silom and Sathorn road. Even in this area, where land reaches prices comparable to New York or London and new skyscrapers appear continuously, the urban structure remains fractured by small soi and the streets still populated by informal vendors, prostitutes, local dwellers, and office workers.

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In the morning Bangkok wakes up slowly. The octopus starts moving from the tips of its tentacles. Workers and their children flow into the city, where most of them work but cannot afford to live. Small vans, collective taxis, and buses ferry the working class through the complex maze of radial roads and branching streets, all the way to their workplaces. Those who can afford to save time, ride taxis or their own personal cars to the underground or elevated mass transit terminus, and continue their commutes inside air-conditioned trains. Soon the parking lots at the terminus fill up as modern trains speed through the elevated urban corridors that cut through the Business District, or below ground, along the two lines of the recently constructed subway. The people living along the few left navigable canals jump on slim longboats and endure the pungent smell of the waterways in exchange for bypassing traffic. Even if the city provides for different locations, wallets, and urgencies with multiple forms of transportation, few of them are able to reach deep

into the maze of *soi* where most of Bangkok city dwellers reside. Mobility inside soi, too narrow for buses and vans, subway and skytrain, and often clogged with cars, remain largely in the hands of motorcycle taxi drivers (*mɔ̄tœ̄sai rap čhang)* who arrive at their street corners just before the city revives every morning.

Before the daily exodus begins, these drivers leave a myriad of small cramped apartments and rooms across the urban landscape to anticipate the arrival of city dwellers. As a result, when the human tide starts pouring into the arteries of the city, the drivers are already in place in their local stations (*win*), ready to pick up passengers. Thousands of these drivers traverse the still empty and silent roads atop their scoters, converging on the areas where their group operates. Their work day begins around 5 am by bringing home the nocturnal dwellers: the drunken party goers, the prostitutes at the end of their labor day, the night-shift workers. Soon the streets start to revive and the omnipresent food vendors set up their carts, light the grills, and bag commodities into one-portion plastic bundles. By 6.30 am the city is in full motion. Roller shutters go up, office buildings open their glass doors, factories activate their machinery, and schools unlock their gates. Suddenly the urban motion picks up and the roads get crowded, as the noise and smell of traffic intensify, to die out again only after lunch hours. Motorcycle taxi drivers, sitting at more than 5000 stations around the city, wait, chin in the air, for customers. It is at one of these stations that this dissertation begins.

It is a quiet afternoon in Bangkok. At the entrance of a *soi* off Sathorn Road—a major artery in the financial center—a group of twenty motorcycle taxi drivers in colorful vests lounge in the heat of the day, waiting for clients. Tucked between a four-story shopping center, the parking lot of an upscale spa, and the heavy concrete shafts of Bangkok's elevated train, the drivers fight the boredom of the off-peak hours. An occasional car drives past their group, filling with its roar the almost empty six-lane street. Above us, the elevated train regularly speeds through, before slowing down into the opposite stations of Surasak and Chong Nonsi a few hundred meters away, indifferent to the complex rhythms of the urban fluxes below. A sleepy dog roams among the drivers before lying down on the stairs of the shopping center. Once in a while, a customer passes through the automated doors of the shop, releasing a momentary blast of freezing air and a few notes of mellow music that quickly dissipate as they roll down the concrete stairs in front of twenty angle

parked motorbikes. A few steps away the humid sultriness and the enervating echo of traffic remain untouched, revealing the ingenuity of the group's location.

A young driver sits on his bike, staring in the rear mirrors as he plucks rare facial hairs by pinching 5 baht coins together as tweezers. Next to him another driver lies on his bike, arms crossed behind his head. Years of practice taught his body and conform to the machine. The seat transforms into a mat for the driver's back. The handlebar becomes a pillow and the two rearview mirrors are bent inside out to hold the back of his head, as earplugs channel music from his cellphone. One leg hangs from the bike tail, a few inches away from the burning hot exhaustion pipe. The other leg is crossed, foot against the knee over the tail light. Embodiment, among drivers, extends beyond their physical extremities, into a cybernetic symbiosis with their bikes. A couple of drivers squat on the sidewalk, immersed in multiple newspapers' sport sections that surround them. Smoking avidly, they compile illegal soccer betting slips that a man will later come to pick up and deliver to the local underground bookie. One of them stands up, folds his slips and hides them secretively, away from the eyes of local police, inside the metal frame of a public phone booth that the group has transformed into their transparent storage room. The heat inside the booth is unbearable. Colorful helmets dangle from a wire that used to connect the phone to the electricity post. A few jackets with embroidered logos of companies where some of the drivers work part-time as messengers pile up on top of the old machine. Other wires have been unplugged from the phone and bent into metallic hooks to hang up the drivers' bags, to which I add mine.

I came here to see Hong, a charming thirty year old man with long hair and a widening bald spot that he always hides below a hat. Hong was born in a small village in the northeastern province of Nong Bua Lamphu, and migrated to Bangkok—like most of his colleagues—attracted by the prospective of better professional opportunities and a more exciting life. Following his dreams, Hong moved when he was fifteen to attend high school in the city, joining two siblings who worked in a local garment factory. After finishing school, unable to afford university training, Hong ventured into the tortuous circle of low-paid occupations and exploitative bosses that many of the drivers describe as their experience in the formal economy of the

city. Adapting to the industrial discipline of labor and forms of workplace hierarchy, as well as to the urban bias against northeastern "hillbillies" (*k̄hon bānnǭ̄k̄*), proved difficult for Hong. In 2001 he began to work in a Korean-owned factory a few blocks away from where he now operates as a driver.

"Two years in there were enough to make me decide I will not work in a factory ever again," he tells me, remembering with acrimony and disgust his belligerent and imposing Korean boss. In 2006, three years after motorcycle taxis were formalized and registered by the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, fed up with "being insulted all the time and considered a stupid water buffalo *(k̄hwāi ngō)* from the countryside," Hong bought a vest for 25,000 baht (830 $) All of his savings were invested in the illegal purchase of the vest from a friend who had decided to abandon his profession: he was now a motorcycle taxi driver. Since then Hong has been working on the corner of Sathorn soi 12, delivering newspapers in the early morning before shifting to passengers, goods, and documents. Every day he moves confidently through a concrete landscape he has come to know as his own. "Even better than my own village," he tells me, smiling. The village, however, has never faded from his mind, both as an imagined place of nostalgia and as a future prize for his sacrifices. As he mediates and mobilizes social, economic, and conceptual transactions in the city and between the city and his village, Hong is saving money to build a house for himself "back home," where he hopes someday to return with the economic and social capital to marry and start a small farm.

Daily wages, much higher than those of other unspecialized jobs available to the drivers in Bangkok, brought Hong to this job in the first place, *`itsaraphāp* (freedom, independence)—as he likes to repeat—is what keep him in this hectic, stressful, and health threatening job. While job insecurity, risk of road accidents, and constant inhalation of poisonous fumes of traffic are left to the protection of amulets and magic tattoos, freedom and independence enjoy a central place in the drivers' self-construction as autonomous urban dwellers. As Yai, the vice-president of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) told me, staring right into my eyes, "motorcycle taxis die young, but live free." Freedom from Fordist organization of labor and from bosses who "look down" (*dū thūk̄*) on them, freedom to go home to their villages whenever productive and social life require their presence, or simply to take a break from work whenever they feel like

it: all these multiple forms of freedom animate—at least discursively—the drivers' decision to enter and remain in this profession.

Taking advantage of this freedom, Hong sits with six other drivers next to the phone booth on makeshift wooden benches that they store overnight inside a small shop down the road. He loudly shakes dominoes in a reused plastic detergent bottle, before starting a new game, with the usual 5 Baht stake. "Are you playing?" he asks as he drops seven pieces in my hand. A few steps away, one of the drivers helps the older woman who runs a noodle cart next to their *win* to tide up the pile of dirty plastic bowls that have accumulated during the recent lunch rush. At the entrance of the street Adun—another driver—sits alone, immersed in a newspaper's political editorial. On his side, hanging from one of the trees that shade the motorcycle taxis' station, a plastic board with a local business advertisement helps the drivers keep track of their queuing system. The board is lined with numbered tiles—12, 7, 15, 2—corresponding to the number each driver has on his vest. Down the road a young woman waves at the group. Adun raises his eyes to the board, "twelve" he shouts at the colleagues playing dominos. Hong, whose vest bears the number 12, drops his pieces and jumps on a bike, puts on his helmet without bringing one for the passenger, and kick-starts the engine, speeding away in the small alley. His tile is moved at the end of the board and Adun distractedly takes Hong's place next to me at the domino table.

A few minutes later Hong is back to the typically slow rhythm of early afternoons: sporadic passengers, an occasional delivery of documents to far away offices, a cigarette, some money lost and gained playing dominoes, and an endless search for distractions. In these hours waiting becomes a skill, a virtue, and a form of engagement in the social life of the neighborhood, as important as their roles as movers of its dwellers and objects. It is, in fact, during this apparently dead time that much of the social relations between the drivers, other street workers, and local dwellers are forged and sustained. As the life of the street unravels in front of their bored yet vigilant eyes, the drivers engage in a sociality of proximity with the local street vendors, office workers, and urban dwellers. It is physical presence and boredom, not just speed and movement, that transform the drivers into central characters in the theater of life at a street corner. In this

social environment they become not just vessels of mobility but also observers and guardians of movement in and out of the area, as well as readily available cheap labor for moving furniture and performing minor house repairs: side characters by all means, yet always on stage.

A witty remark to a good-looking woman who works nearby, a short chat with the older man who stops every time he comes home from his afternoon walk, a hand to a vendor pushing the cart along the road: through these repeated everyday interactions Hong, Adun, and the other drivers solidify their subjectivities, forms of masculinity, and presence in the physical, social, and economic landscape of the neighborhood. Such processes occur as they wait for the rhythm of the city to pick up again, driven first by the end of the schooling day and later by workers leaving their work places. Drivers' lives, in this sense, are structured and paced according to a complex relation with the rhythms of their mobility and that of the city. The multiple paces of a ride, with its accelerations, braking, traffic lights, and meandering in between cars provide a base line, always different in its destination but always the same in its return to the station. Over and below it flow the circular rhythms of nature and the city. Sun up, morning peak hours, slow mid-morning, lunch rush, slow afternoon, after-job peak hours, sun down: the long days are ever identical yet constantly different, depending on the period of the year, day of the week, location, weather conditions. During the fast segments of these circular rhythms the drivers make most of their daily income as the city revives. Every day at a familiar time, different depending on the location, the landscape around the group suddenly undergoes a rapid change, traversed by an electric frenzy. The sleepy vendors wake up and move their carts to accommodate the after-work fluxes. Tables are replenished with goods. The drivers put their pastime of choice away and jump on their bikes, ready to ferry clients to Skytrain or bus stops or—when and if the traffic gets really bad—all the way to their homes. Then, as if responding to an unspoken call, the corners revive, dense with physical and economic circulation.

Children run around looking for after school snacks. Office workers speed out to avoid the worst traffic. Young workers stand in small groups deciding what to do next. Mothers pick up food, neatly packed in plastic bags, and head home. All around, smoke comes out of food carts. Slowly simmered meat hits the

grill. Stuffed fish rolls on charcoal. Individual portions of rice are spooned out of enormous steaming pots. In this mixture of fumes, vegetables are pan-fried, stir-fried, deep-fried. Seafood is mixed with vegetable, with egg, with noodles, with curry, with soup. A thick paste of chili and garlic is thrown in sizzling woks. A few other ingredients are added in and rapidly stirred. Wok emptied into a rice box. Water thrown in the pan and rapidly discarded into a big plastic bucket. Again chili and garlic paste: a new cycle begins.

The drivers overlook the scene atop their bikes, one hand in the air to attract clients, peering at potential customers, scrutinizing their faces for a movement of eyebrows, an elevation of chin, or the hint of a hand sign to indicate interest in their service. Beside them, the streets are specked with cars, pick-up trucks, vans, and buses. For a while the density grows, without affecting the speed of motion. Then, slowly the rhythm of the traffic lights becomes visible from the entrance of the soi, hundreds of meters away. Simultaneously with the red light, a line of vehicles accumulates past the alley where the *win* is located, filling the air with pestilent fumes. For some time, the rhythms become syncopated, directed by the 140 seconds between a red light and the next one. Green light: slow but steady movement of vehicles, people accumulating on the sidewalks, chatting and buying from vendors. 120 seconds. Yellow light: the pace of cars gets faster, more nervous. People on the sidewalk walk away from vendors and concentrate at the pedestrian crossing. Red light: again the winding line of vehicles stretch past the motorcycle taxi group while people cross the street. This cyclical routine repeats with minor variations for about an hour. Then, in a few minutes, the traffic comes to a halt.

Now the traffic lights change color but no perceptible movement results. Cars and buses rest, engines on, in the middle of intersections, attempting in vain to move a few feet backward or forward while pedestrians cross the street, moving through halted vehicles. In these slow-moving, smoke-smelling, nerve-wrecking gridlocks the meandering mobility of motorbikes conquers the city, occupying and finding paths in the empty gaps between motor vehicles. If seen from a car or bus the street looks blocked; from atop a motorbike small whiling highways become visible in this metal maze. As cars slowly move, trying

unsuccessfully to shift to another lane, these paths rapidly emerge and disappear, open and close, framed by rearview mirrors and back lights. In these morphing interstitial spaces motorcycle taxis find their ideal habitat, spaces of flow invisible and impervious to any other mechanical technology of mobility.

Eyes glued to the street, the motorcycle drivers read these emerging spaces, constantly looking for a path that will open up next and guessing which one will close. In this situation all the drivers' skills are summoned. Getting to their destination rapidly means arriving back to the *win* faster and getting another client sooner. Speed and money, in traffic, become synonyms for the drivers, in ways they do not for cabs. When facing a yellow traffic light, the taxi driver breaks, happily leaving the meter running. The motorcycle taxi, on the contrary, rushes through at full speed: right hand on the accelerator, twisting all the way to get as far as possible in between the two rows of cars, swinging mildly to dodge the driving mirrors. A car moves to a side, a few meters away, suggesting it will change lanes. Right hand pulls the front break lever. Simultaneously the right foot pushes down the pedal, applying the rear break. Left heel pushes on the gear selector to lower the gear. Knees move in. Left arm extends. Harsh turn behind the taxi, crossing between two cars to find another space that opened on the right lane: a new limited window of street pavement in front. Left foot presses down, gear up. Right hand twists the grip, accelerate. The whole drivers' body adjusts to the rhythms and the mercurial morphing of traffic. Eyes, hands, head, feet, knees the drivers read and react to the pace of moving traffic, deploying complex embodied, trained, and refined skills, sedimented in to the point of becoming automatisms.

All of this occurs in a relative silence. Different in this regard from other world cities when traffic comes to a halt Bangkok quiets down: no honking or screaming and no vehicles speeding down the road, just the baritone roar of thousands of trapped engines and their toxic fumes mixing with the smell of food and rotting trash, locked in by the concrete Skytrain rail above us. In this grey urban corridor the temperature starts to rise, emanating from the mechanical flock of vehicles clogging the street. Trapped inside the air-conditioned cars most people ignore this increase. Yet for motorcycle taxi drivers and their passengers,

zigzagging through the maze of cars, the heat marks the body. It condenses behind the neck, down the spine, and behind the ears, providing unbearable discomfort in most days and welcome warmth on chilly rainy days.

During the evening rush, the drivers' queuing system becomes whirling, their movements hectic, their conversations sporadic. At times the *win* remains empty, all the drivers on the move and clients waiting for them to come back. As the city experiences its infamous traffic blockades, motorcycle become the only way to navigate the complex maze of Bangkok *soi* without getting stuck in line. At peak-hours, housewives, businessmen, schoolchildren, office workers, vendors—regardless of class, age, and gender—all sit on the back of a bike driven mostly by a young man from the provinces. In the uncommon physical proximity of the bike, the passengers tuck in their knees to avoid hitting cars and dive into the intricate traffic of Bangkok, carried through the jigsaw puzzle of cars, taxis, *tuk tuk* (auto rickshaw), trucks, buses, and pick-ups, by drivers in a bright vests, eyes on the street, ready to see any small opening in between this slowly moving river of metal. As the drivers' wallets fill up, fatigue and pain gradually conquer their bodies. It starts from the hands: stiffened by the grip on the handlebar. At the point when the knuckles start hurting, it spreads up the arms, tense from a long day of rapid zigzagging with the weight of a passenger in the back seat. The calves are next, cramped by the continuous breaking and changes of gear. Then the tension moves to the neck and from there down the back, curved on the bike. By the end of the day the whole body is unbalanced, under the stress of regular accelerations and breaking. Above this theater of movement and stasis, the Skytrain progresses regularly, dense with passengers and largely indifferent to the altered urban rhythms below.

On these interlocking rhythms the drivers—as well as other street-workers—become experts. Out of repetition and habit the urban cadence comes to punctuate and dominate their lives. Aligning their bodies to the rhythms of the city becomes a daily struggle, a challenge not without difficulties and consequences. They wake up before the people start leaving their homes, have lunch just before offices release their workers for the break, rest after the flow of urban workers recedes into their workplaces, carry out their physical functions before peak hours, sleep when the rhythm of the city significantly slows down. The failure to organize the individual bodily rhythms with the urban off-beat results in lower income and a reputation in

one's group and neighborhood of being unreliable, lazy, or a drunk. The drivers, in this sense, predict, adjust, act and are acted upon by the rhythm of urban flows, which determine their economic and social standing both in the *win* and in the neighborhood. Every day, at street corners, transportation nodes, parking lots, and housing complex entrances all around Bangkok, 200,000 drivers like Hong and Adun—organized in 5000 *win*—go through the same motions, earning a living and allowing the city to move according to its cyclical repetition of peaks and drops, until it finally slows down—after sunset—leaving the drivers exhausted on the side of the street, ready for their last ride, all the way back to their cramped small rooms in the urban periphery.

Chapter 1: Unsettled Layers

It was not until the early 1980s that Bangkokians became accustomed to motorcycle taxi drivers sitting, in colorful vests, at the entrance of their roads waiting to pick up clients. As the city expanded and filled with cars and buses, the drivers became a familiar sight and their back seats provided usual vessels for school children, office workers, and local residents through the heat of days in narrow roads or the darkness of nights in poorly lit soi. For few coins, a long walk into the narrow and smoky alley could be replaced by a short ride. Suddenly, the neighborhood seemed to shrink for dwellers who previously could not afford a taxi or did not own cars. Not just mobility and distance but also bodies were re-organized by this new form of transportation. The adrenaline thrill of a motorcycle ride accelerating through the static maze of traffic jams, the cramped posture to prevent knees from hitting the cars through which the driver zigzag, as well as the uncommon proximity to a stranger's body, configured new forms of bodily engagement with the city, dense with danger and excitement, speed and fear.[1]

This new technology of mobility did not just catch the eyes of the city's residents but also posed a challenge to urban law enforcement and transportation management while offering an opportunity to local businesses and investors (Jetsada 2004). The system, in fact, spread so fast that Thailand Business, a bi-lingual economic magazine, reported on its emergence in October 1983. "Living in Bangkok nowadays" the article begun, "you must have seen many different groups of motorcyclists wearing different uniforms, gathering in front of various soi […] operating a new kind of business by picking up passengers and taking them to their destination" (Thailand Business 1983). Harnessing popular curiosity and economic interests, the magazine provided, in a five pages article entitled *"Soi Bikes,"* answers to questions that were circulating around the city regarding "who they are, when it first started, where the idea come from, how they operate the business, and whether is illegal or not to earn money by using motorcycles for public hire?" (Thailand Business 1983). The article reconstructed the growth of the system out of Navy Housing in Soi Ngam Duphli, few roads away

[1] This phenomenology of riding and organization of bodies in movement will be explored in next chapter.

from where Hong operates today, and reported on the daily lives of the migrant drivers who manned the system, the internal rules of their groups' queuing, the cost of vest rentals and operations, and the high income for both its drivers and "administrators." Noting their rapid diffusion across the city, the author concluded by questioning the relations between the drivers and local police officers, who both control the operations and use the drivers as "assistants looking for any robberies [in the neighborhood]" (Thailand Business 1983).

While public opinion was constructing a popular narrative of the emergence of motortaxis in the city, a legal diatribe over their use for public transportation was taking place in a much drier language. The Ministry of Land Transportation, which had banned *samlor* (three- wheeled rickshaws) from Bangkok in 1960, was attempting to outlaw this new system of transportation by producing a wealth of statistical data on motorcycle accidents. Such a dangerous "un-developed" (*mai phatthanā*) mode of transportation, they argued, had to be stopped. In the Ministerial official vision, the two-wheeled taxis had no space in the future of Bangkok's mobility. As they argued for the ban of motortaxis on the ground of safety concerns another Ministry, across town, was also directing its attention toward the new system of transportation. In June 1983, a committee headed by the Interior Minister Sitthi Jirarote and the director of the Office of Policy and Planning, Sanan Vongpuapan, began considering the legality of these "motorcycles for hire" (*mō̜tœ̄sai rap čhāng*). According to Thai law at the time, in fact, vehicles could either be registered for personal use, and be given a white plate, or for public use, and receive a yellow plate. Vehicles for public use, the law specified, could be either three or four wheeled, such as buses, taxis, tuk-tuk, or the recently banned *samlor* (Textor 1961).[2] Motorcycles, a wheel short, could not obtain this status. Should the limits of the law be expanded to incorporate this new technology of mobility as well? Should police officers, at least for the time being, arrest the drivers? What about their supervisors and group leaders?

While the bureaucratic machine was interrogating itself on the legal minutiae of the driving code and the number of wheels allowed to a vehicle for public use, police officers and army officials at the street level

[2] Textor's book provides an antecedent of sort for this study. He in fact explored the lives of *samlor* drivers in Bangkok in the 1960s. Similar to motorcycle taxi drivers they were for the most part male Isan migrants who struggled to participate in both the urban and rural life of the country.

were thriving in this legal grey area. Keeping an eye on the drivers who operated around their stations, they often acquired control over the motorcyclists' groups, becoming supervisors, or demanding money to direct their gaze elsewhere. Liutenant Somboon Boonsuckdi, a navy officer and administrator of the Ngam Duphli motorcycle transport service—often named as the first group of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok—told the reporter from *Thailand Business* that "although the police refused us when I first asked the permission to operate our service […] I started and nothing happened to me… maybe because I'm also a government official" (Thailand Business 1983). State officials (*khā rātchakān)* such as Somboon were expanding their hold over this new business and supplementing their meager official income with less transparent enterprises. In what Thai scholars describe as "*chai`amnāt pen`itthiphon*"—literally use power/authority to make influence—these officials were transforming formal authority (*amnāt)*, their proximity to the state apparatus, and personal relations to its enforcers, into "influence" (*`itthiphon*) over the operations of the informal economy (Sangsit 2548).[3]

Underneath these multiple interests, more and more young migrants were buying motorcycles and transforming them into a source of income, often unaware of the actors and institutions who were scrutinizing, controlling, fostering, or ostracizing their operations. Looking at these multiple levels, one cannot fail to realize that the emergence of this system did not just entail the introduction of a new technology of mobility into a traffic-ridden metropolis. The drivers did indeed fill a niche that had emerged in a rapidly expanding city, a niche that guaranteed the profitability of their operations and their rapid spread over the urban landscape. Yet their presence raised questions well beyond transportation policy and economic profit: questions about urban space and its legitimate holders; questions about risks, freedom, ideas of progress, migration; questions about legal structures and political economic relations. While the larger dissertation analyzes these questions and the answers the drivers provide, in this chapter I focus on the genesis of this system of transportation. In so doing, I reconstruct their emergence as the coming together of a complex set of conditions in the early 1980s that were the result of a much longer series of attempts to

[3] The term *`itthiphon* is most commonly used to refer to people involved in racketeering activities. Local mafiosi, in this sense are called *phuu mi`itthiphon*

redraw and reorganize the social, economic, political, and material landscapes of the Thai capital, attempts that were met with failures, contingencies, and contradictions.

I focus on four conditions of possibility for the appearance of motorcycle taxis. The first condition was a physical setting: the maze of long and narrow alleys, known as soi, which rendered far-reaching mass public transportation in Bangkok virtually impossible. The second was provided by a technological tool: affordable and available motorcycles both in urban and rural areas. The third condition is defined by a group of actors: the hundreds of thousands of young, and relatively unspecialized, laborers from rural Thailand, especially the northeast region, who migrate to Bangkok and provided cheap labor force for the expansion of this system of mobility. Finally, the forth condition was a specific social relation: a set of formalized—yet often informal—practices and interactions between state officials, local underworld and new migrants which allowed the emergence and regulation of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok in the 1980s.

Understanding the appearance of motorcycle taxis as the conjuncture of spatial, technological, epistemological, political-economic, and social conditions pushes us to examine the city as an ever-changing palimpsest onto which new configurations were—and still are—constantly scripted over previous forms. Even if the new scripts aim at erasing the past, dominating the present, and configuring the future, the previous ones remain visible to the attentive eyes and leave traces (Cancellieri and Scandurra 2012), especially in a city like Bangkok where informality and extemporaneous responses dominate. After all, as AbdouMaliq Simone has shown:

> No matter how hard analysts and policymakers might try, practices of inhabiting the city are so diverse and change so quickly that they cannot easily be channeled into clearly defined uses of space and resources or patterns of social interchange. In other words, at the heart of city life is the capacity for its different people, spaces, activities, and things to interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them. (Simone 2010: 3)

This chapter recovers the fragile history of these excesses in the Thai capital, materialized into the apparently solid physical forms, technological tolls, migrant bodies, and institutions that sustained the birth of motorcycle taxis. Always incomplete, always the fleeing product of failed anticipations, unsuccessful attempts,

and pragmatic engagements, such a history of the present, as Rabinow and Bennet have argued, "provide a means of showing the contingency of the present and thereby contribute to making a more open future" (Rabinow and Bennett 2010). This chapter aims at exactly this objective, at revealing some of the cracks, a word dear to Foucault (Foucault 1970; Foucault 1972), into the material sturdiness of the present in the Thai capital.[4] To do so, I start from the 1960s, a period of rapid economic and urban change in Thailand under the growing global ideology of development (Ferguson 1990), which translated in the Thai context as *phatthanā* (Chairat 2542).

The future is industrial and Bangkok is its master: *phatthanā*, planning, and the car-based city (1958-1980)

On October 20th 1958, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat lead a coup d'état against a military government that he himself had installed just a year before. Sarit, a charming officer born in Bangkok but raised in the northeastern town of Khon Kaen, presented his new seizure of power as a radical turn, or as he declared, a *patiwat* (revolution). While the previous *patiwat* in Siam had removed the absolute monarchy in 1932, projecting the country into the "modern" world of constitutional polities, Sarit's revolution was faithful to the astronomical origins of the word and entailed a return, a revolving to a "[political system] that could be described as more 'Thai' in nature" (Thak 2007: 92). Although his revolution aimed at reversing the

[4] In this sense, I follow the methodological proposal developed by Michel Foucault in order to build a history of the present which "is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility" (Foucault 1970: xi). However methodologically similar to his explorations, this chapter operates outside the limits of the "particular fields [of] the history of ideas, or of thought, or of science, or of knowledge" (Foucault 1970: xii) to which the French theorist constrained it. In so doing it differs both from Foucault's project and from Kant's quest for 'conditions of possibility', to which Foucaltian analysis was a reaction. My investigation, in fact, does not rest either on the idealistic dimension of Kantian anthropology—a research of the conditions for the "regulative principle that can lead us from an initial condition of 'a folly and childish vanity' to 'our destiny' as a cosmopolitan society" (Harvey 2007: 44)– nor on the discursive analysis that animates Foucaultian archeology of knowledge—an illumination of the "epistemological field, the episteme in which knowledge […] grounds its positivity" (Foucault 1972: xxii). Rather this chapter operates on the material, social, and political-economic fields in order to explore the conditions of possibility in which a specific technology of mobility grounds its existence and continuous expansion. In this enterprise, tracing shifts in the episteme, what Foucault called the "historical a priori" (Foucault 1970: 10), becomes part of the process as a way to identify and delineate the discursive paradigms and ideologies that sustained material, social, and political-economic transformations. Not the privileged locus for such a history, discursive shifts represent part of the fields in which these larger transformations occur. The focus of this chapter, on the contrary, remains the material construction of the urban landscape, the actors who traverse it and the tolls that organized their navigations through a study of the political-economic (re)configuration of relations of production, center-periphery interaction, and (inter)national markets.

democratic turn of the 1930s, it faced the same challenges encountered by its predecessor: a new episteme was needed to support the emerging political system and endorse its radical changes. *Phatthanā*, or development, was the answer. Sarit himself stated as much in a brief piece he penned in 1960: "our important task in this revolutionary era is," he declared, "development [*phatthanā*] which includes economic development, educational development, administrative development" (Thak 2007: 151).

As Thak has argued, the core of Sarit's *phatthanā* was constituted by economic progress, orderly appearances (*khwāmrīaprṓi*), and political obedience (Thak 2007: 149). This development was implemented through new technologies and practices of planning that fitted perfectly both into Sarit's discourse and echoed dominant international economic theory (Kayes 1989, Ingram 1971). This ideology of development, which dominated Thailand well after Sarit's death in 1963, [5] while reiterating global discourses of "modernization," endorsed only its social and economic components, without adopting its political narrative of democratization. Cleaned from the language of democracy, the first World Bank economic research in Thailand, carried out in 1957, became the model for much of Sarit's economic policies that advocated for a boost to industrial development through private investments directed by state planning.[6] The effects were stark, both for the national economy and for the development of Bangkok. Under the NEBD (National Economic Development Board), later renamed NESBD (National Economic and Social Development Board), the first national plan came into action in 1961, supported by United States money and expertise.[7] Its objectives were double: upgrading national infrastructure—e.g. roads, water, and electricity—and promoting private industrial development. Sarit's government—following the advice of the World Bank—virtually

[5] The dominance of military governments over Thailand, as well as the developmentalist policies initiated by Sarit were, in fact, inherited by his deputy general and successor Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who remained in power until the student revolution of October 14th 1973. Beside the three year period of liberal government between his removal from power and the student massacre of October 6th 1976, Sarit's political, economic, and social shadow marked the development of the nation well into the 1980s and, some argue, still informs contemporary Thai polity.

[6] It is in fact in this period that referring to the development of the Thai capital and economy in term of planning start to make sense. The new concept, moreover, was just transliterated into Thai and the words for plan and planning in Thai – *phang* – remain very close to the English term. For a discussion on this concept in the Thai context see (Herzfeld 2013).

[7] In the period between 1962 and 1970, under the umbrella of USOM (United States Operative Mission) American funds to Thailand averaged 14.2 billion baht a year, roughly the 12% of the total national earning from exports. In other words, support against communist expansion was one of the major exports of Thailand. Not only money, however, was offered to Thailand. Engineers, security experts, military personnel, agricultural and irrigation experts, urban planners: a whole transfer of expertise supported the alliance between the two nations.

prohibited state investments in emerging commercial and industrial activities (Suehiro 1989), which had dominated the previous two decades of Thai economy. In his vision, state enterprises should focus on infrastructural development while manufacturing should be left to domestic and foreign private capital. In order to attract international capital, labor markets were de-regulated and unions outlawed. Four decades of labor organizing, which had started with the tram workers' strike in January 1923 that I will later explore, were erased overnight.[8] Not only were labor organizations and regulations suppressed but investment incentives were provided to subsidize industries considered essential for the national economy.[9] About a third of the capital invested in these industries was of foreign provenience. As Akira has shown, "between 1960 and 1972, foreign investments [in these industries] amounted to 2,570 million baht, representing the 32% of the total registered capital. Japan was the largest investor, accounting for 38% of the total, followed by Taiwan (16%) and the United States (14%)" (Suehiro 1989: 187).

The spread of motorcycles

The emerging automotive industry in Thailand attracted a significant percentage of these direct investments, particularly of Japanese provenience. In the following years the major international automobile industries opened production lines in Thailand. Nissan Motors paved the way in 1962 and was followed by Toyota Motors (1963), Honda Motors (1964), Ford Motor (1970), and General Motors (1972), slowly transforming the industrial outskirts of Bangkok in what came to be known as the "Detroit of Asia." Inside the automotive industry, motorcycles played a central role both as an area of investment and as a tool for restructuring everyday mobility in the country. In 1964 Honda—which still today dominated the Thai market—opened its first out-of-Japan motorcycle production line outside Bangkok. The other main Japanese

[8] Revolutionary Party Resolution No.19 of 30 October 1958 abolished the Labor Act which guaranteed fundamental workers' rights. Few months later, Resolution No. 30, offered tax cuts and exemption from import and export duties to selected industrial sectors

[9] The Board of Investments (BOI), established in 1959, classified these essential industries in three groups: Group A included agricultural machinery, metal products, and basic chemical and was granted complete exemption from import taxes on raw material and machinery as well as corporation taxes for up to five years; Group B, which included auto-assembling and electrical appliances received a 50% reduction in duties and taxes; Group C, which covered labor-intensive industries such as textile, was granted a one-third tax reduction

motorcycle producers, the so called "four sisters,"[10] followed the lead of Honda. Yamaha opened a factory in 1966, followed by Suzuki in 1968 and Kawasaki in 1976 (Alexander 2009). Once cheap motorcycles started to be produced in Thailand, the new tools of transportation rapidly spread across its rural and urban landscapes.

A main condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis was in place: affordable motorcycles started to populate the Thai landscape, becoming the preferred tool of mobility for its underclass. When Sarit's first seized power in 1957, Thailand had 1,617 motorcycles—owned by elite families and imported mostly from the United Kingdom—by 1981, the number of motorcycles skyrocketed to 307,168, of which 99% were produced nationally.[11] The largest portion of this expansion did not happened in Bangkok but rather in the Thai countryside, where unpaved streets and limited income made scooters the only viable mean of mechanical transportation.

If the two-wheeled transport dominated the regional centers and villages, cars crowded the streets of Bangkok, under the pressure of a new urban model that traveled from the United States, together with funds, expertise, and urban planning techniques. In the 1960s, the emerging model of the "car-based city," most famously realized in Los Angeles, structured Sarit's vision of *phatthanā* in Bangkok. In 1958, a group of urban planners from MIT was sent to Thailand to devise the first master plan for its rapidly expanding capital. The resulting document—entitled Greater Bangkok Plan 1990, but most commonly known as the Litchfield Plan(Litchfield Whiting Bowne and Associates., et al. 2503)—was presented to the Thai government in 1960 and, even if never officially ratified, provided a framework for the development of Bangkok in the next three decades. Two main proposals, consistent with dominant modernist city planning (Holston 1989), emerged from this document: building new highways connecting the Central Business District directly to outer ring roads while upgrading the quality of secondary roads; and introducing zoning practices to allocate different areas of the city to different functions—commercial, industrial, residential. Both proposals demanded a departure from the urban structures and life-styles that had dominated the city since its previous urban

[10] The history of the post-war conversion of aviation and war-supplies Japanese companies such as Honda and Suzuki in motorcycles and automobiles producers has been masterfully explored by Jeffrey Alexander (Alexander 2009).

[11] By 1990 the number jumped up to 719,158, five years later it arrived to 1,500,857 (Jetsada 2004).

restructuring during the reign of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). Canals, which played a secondary yet important role in the previous urban texture, were now to be eliminated, and filled in, to leave space for new roads. Public transportation, such as trams and buses, which between the 1910s and the 1960s had driven the growth of Bangkok and presented the flagship of the new "civilized" city, were to be replaced by cars, the ultimate private tools of mobility. The established mixture of residential, commercial, and industrial functions, most notably condensed by the dominant architectural features of the shop-house—which mixed residential use on the upper level with commercial or productive space on the road level—were to be disentangled and relocated. Technologies of planning, mobility, and dwelling were to be transformed, together with social practices associated with them. In other words, the city itself was to become a laboratory and a trial ground for the implementation of the ideology of *phatthanā*.

The soi system: the failure of the developed city.

If Parisian boulevards and collective modes of transportation inspired by European cities—such as buses and trams—had directed the reorganization of nineteen century Bangkok, the new *muang phatthana (*developed city) was to be dominated by American-modeled fast running highways and private cars. If the shop-houses, imported from Singapore by Chulalongkorn, had shaped Bangkok according to the model of a civilized Southeast Asian colonial city, in the new Bangkok their place was to be taken by apartment buildings, removed from central commercial areas and peripheral industrial production. These grand plans, however, if coherent and definitive in the pages of the Litchfield Plan, crashed against the messiness, contingency, and contradictions of daily practices in the city and the fragile and fragmentary state apparatus that was supposed to control and implement them. The abstract idea of re-writing the city looked, in practice, more like a confused entanglement of scribbles than a tidy overlay. Although the Master Plan presented a first holistic attempt to plan the Thai capital, the proposals were only partially adopted and large portions of its realization were left to private developers, who implemented only selected measures and left untouched significant previous urban forms and practices.

Shop-houses, for instance, did lose their centrality to concrete residential buildings, increasingly taller and spread out, [12] but without disappearing from the urban landscape. New shop-houses continued to be built both in the core of the city and in its newly formed suburbs, often introducing commercial and industrial activities on their ground-floors and, in so doing, displacing the suburban dreams of these new neighborhoods and defying zoning principles introduced by the American planners. As the city sprawled, investments in buses were cut to the bone and no new routes were added in the following two decades while other forms of public transportation were eliminated (*samlor* were banned in 1960, tramways in 1968). However, their presence—or rather their absence—remained engrained both in the collective memory and in the material features of the city. Not only did the nostalgic remembrances of the trams' quiet pace and whistling sounds survived, but the very tracks on which the carriages moved remained—and still remain today—mounted on the road surface of central Bangkok. As every driver knows, these left-behind tracks put at risk the smooth flow of new private means of transportation, causing drivers to swerve in their cars and motorcyclists to incur more serious accidents. In all of these ways, the traces of Bangkok's past did not just survive as nostalgic memories but actively structured, mined, or challenged the next urban layer.

The urban structure of the new *muang phatthana* was deeply shaped, and often impinged on, by its previous aquatic life, largely revolving around canals. Nowhere was this more evident than in the establishment of the new road network, the soi system that constitutes the second condition of possibility for the presence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok.[13] Road and land development—which until that point had been in the hands of the royal family and the Ministry of Public Works—emerged in the mid-1960s as a viable sphere of economic activity for private enterprises. The new figure of the land developer came to dominate the city. In this period, business people started to buy big portions of land, mostly rural land at the outskirt of the city, and transforming it into residential areas. As Durand-Lasserve has shown, "colonization of rural suburban areas by new forms of urban spatial organization characterized this period. These forms were: small

[12] Bangkok is presently often referred to as a "vertical ribbon city" precisely for this reason. Vertical growth was in fact accompanied by land development along major highways that run east-ward and west-ward from the core of the city, which gives it a ribbon-like shape.

[13] The word *soi*, before being used for roads, was used to refer to small waterways. Such shifting in meaning was indicative of a shift in the orientation of the city away from water and toward land.

plots of land, minimum land improvement and public utilities, substandard access roads" (Durand-Lasserve 1980: 2). This process progressed in various stages. First, the developers acquired land and concluded essential land improvements and reclamations. Second, basic infrastructures, such as roads, water, electricity, and sewerage, were put in place, at the developers' expenses. Then, the developers divided land into smaller plots, to be sold to house developers or directly contracted to house builders. Once the construction was completed, the houses would be sold to individual buyers.

While the reliance on private investors, together with lack of regulation on infrastructural provisions, saved the Thai government heavy investments in road and land improvement, it also left the developers free to maximize land transformed into housing plots, effectively minimizing the amount of space and money allocated to infrastructures. As a consequence, the city grew without centralized services, such as a city-wide sewage system or gas grid.[14] The same atrophic infrastructure was evident in the new streets that remained the only section of land which the developers could not sell. The road surface was kept to a minimum size and often obtained by filling in pre-existing of small canals, also called *soi*.[15] These long, narrow and often dead-end waterways were already present in the agricultural land purchased by the developers and provided, both materially and linguistically, the base for the secondary road system of contemporary Bangkok. These canals, however, followed a different logic from roads and diffused like slender branches into the agricultural landscape without connecting one to the other. As these canals were transformed into roads and connected to larger streets, the resulting network remained atrophic, more fit to be traversed by boats than by cars. Once again, previous layers of the urban palimpsest lingered into its present, and oriented its future.

While the road network remained scant and disconnected, the number of vehicles rapidly grew in the city. As a result, traffic jams emerged as a central feature of everyday life in the Thai capital and mined the ideal of a car-based developed Bangkok. This form of land development "[gave] birth to a specific form of organization and land-use: an urban web that is extremely chaotic, defective equipment, and a general sub-

[14] Individual septic and gasoline tanks still provide a lingering trace of this period of urban growth.

[15] Between 1961 and 1967 the population of Bangkok grew by 40%, the number of vehicles by 125%, while the road surface only extended by 5.4% (Sternstein 1971: 214).

occupation of plots. [This] created a situation that is all the more serious since it is irreversible. The equipping and improvement of these areas is compromised in the long run" (Durand-Lasserve 1980: 8). This irreversible result was the present-day urban texture of Bangkok: a functional web of large streets that cross the city centrifugally before clashing into a confusing and dysfunctional maze of long, narrow, and often dead-end soi. Such a convoluted network of roads provided the second condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis, which emerged as a solution to the excruciating traffic jam that this network created.

By the late 1970s, in fact, Bangkok was known around the world as the city of traffic disaster. The small soi operated as bottlenecks for traffic along larger roads. Private cars lined up in long winding queues at the entrance of these alleys. Busses and vans often did not even fit into the soi, which could hardly accommodate two cars going opposite ways. Hours and hours were lost every day walking along these long roads to reach the bus stops or waiting in line inside cars and buses. It was during these stalemates, which came to characterize the life of Bangkok, that the fragility and contingencies of city planning in the era of *phatthana* were most evident. It was in these moments of crisis, when the city came to a halt, that the previous layers of the urban palimpsest—specifically of Bangkok as a water-based city—resurfaced not to only haunt the city, as it did by providing the blueprint for the construction of the new and chaotic road network, but to rescue some of its dwellers from the traffic gridlock. When the traffic blocked the "developed city," urban dwellers would fall back on water transportation and float through the immobile lines of auto vehicles along the river and the few left navigable canals.

If the daily failures of the new systems of mobility hinted at Bangkok's aquatic past, natural forces cyclically threw the city back into it. Floods, in particular, marked the history of the Thai capital and provided, and still provide, a reminder of Bangkok's complex relation with water. If in more recent years new infrastructures have diverted flood toward other parts of the country to shield the city,[16] up until the late 1990s inundations submerged the streets of the Thai capital, erasing decades of land-based development. The

[16] In particular the 2011 flood showed the effects of this infrastructure built to protect Bangkok by inundating the nearby areas.

great floods of 1942 and 1983, in particular, transformed major urban roads back into waterways, crisscrossed by thousands of small boats. The lingering of previous urban structures and practices and their re-surfacing along the cracks of the present, as in the case of traffic jams or floods, show the city's multilayered history (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999) and reveal the fragility of Bangkok's present, always haunted by its past. These cracks expose traces of a past as an aquatic city and here guide my exploration of its urban history, back to the shift from water-based to land-based city and the ambiguous time in between them under the reign of King Chulalongkorn, during which a third condition of possibility for the presence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok emerged.

The amphibious shift: *siwilai,* nation-building, and urban centralization (1890-1910)

A fascinating letter from 1861 is preserved in the Thai National Archives. A group of foreign consuls living in Bangkok wrote to King Rama IV—Chulalongkorn's father—complaining of ill health due to the lack of leisure activities in the city and humbly requesting the construction of a proper road on which to drive their horse-drawn coaches. The king immediately acted upon this request and ordered the construction of the first paved street in Bangkok.[17] In 1863, Charoen Krung—literally "progress of the city"—was opened to traffic.[18] The new road connected the royal palace to the southern section of the city and extended the urban area through Samphaeng, where the economically dominant Chinese population had been previously relocated. This street quickly became the main commercial thoroughfare in Bangkok and remained so until the 1950s. Soon after, a few streets were built around the royal palace to support the existing waterways

[17] Up until that point the only walk-ways were small and murky paths around the palace.

[18] For a treatment of the word *"charoen"* see Thongchai Winichakul. In this seminal piece he reports: "etymologically a Khmer word, it can be found in the fourteenth century and probably earlier. In the older sense, it means cultivating, growing, increasing, building up or expanding until complete in a positive sense. It is applied mostly to non-material matters, such as cultivating merit and Buddhist awakening, making (someone) happier, growing up, increasing maturity, and so on. This older meaning of *charoen* gave way in the nineteenth century to connoting secular or worldly development, material progress, and technological advance." (Thongchai 2000: 260)

network, while new canals were also dug.[19] This period of road construction was the beginning of a rather slow,[20] yet epochal, shift in the orientation of the city away from water.

For the rest of the reign of Rama IV (1851-1868) and his son Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) the city conducted an amphibious life, still populated by floating houses—a middle way between a barge and a house—and crisscrossed by boats yet increasingly oriented toward land. The toponymy of the new streets, in fact, revealed what terrain the makers of the city saw as the way of the future. The names of the three new main street—Charoen Krung (progress of the capital), Fuang Nakhorn (diffusion of the city), Bumrung Muang (nourishment of the urban)—showed how progress and expansion came to be discursively and spatially tied to land and roads.

As the urban setting transformed, new tools of mobility emerged. Soon the first affordable land-based transportation for the public appeared in Bangkok. Praya Choduek, a wealthy nobleman, imported the first rickshaws from Japan in 1872 (Radom 2503: 128). A decade after bicycles appeared in Bangkok, which at this point was a small city of about 170,000 souls (Sternstein 1982). The introduction of new technologies of transportation, contemporary to the expansion of the city outside its walls, was a success. Rickshaws spread across the urban landscape pushed by Chinese coolies, who constituted the majority of labor in Bangkok, whose lower incomes failed to attract Thai migrants from the countryside. The diffusion of this mode of transportation was so significant that it required the introduction of the first traffic legislation in 1903, the so-called Rickshaw Act.[21] All of these changes showed that the shift toward land was not just discursive but also entailed new material practices and economic opportunities.

Since the 1890s it became clear that land had become the dominant space of economic growth and as a channel for economic circulation, in and beyond the city. This required a readjustment of technique of governance in Siam, which allowed the monarch to extend his control over land. This became all the more pressing as European powers, especially France and England, extended their colonial presence in the region,

[19] Most notably the Phrachakor (1869), Nakhorn Muang Khet (1878), Pravet Burirom (1878), and Sathorn (1895) canals.

[20] As Porphant reports, in the period up to 1880s, in fact, only five streets were built in the city (Porphant 1999).

[21] This act regulated the use of street pavement and sidewalks by rickshaws, as well as their numbers and operational costs.

closer and closer to Siam.[22] Under the threat of colonial expansion and in response to a desire for stronger political control over its territory, King Chulalongkorn initiated a restructuring of the reign's administrative apparatus. This was part of a new local episteme of "*siwilai*" (civilization) that reorganized the spatial, temporal, and political landscape of Thailand (Thongchai 2000). Through the discourse of *siwilai* local elites conceptualized Siam as part of a world system where Europe sat at the top of the pyramid and forests and their inhabitants, or *chāopā*, rested at the very bottom.[23] According to this hierarchy, the rural villages (*bān nǭ̄k)* followed the forest, themselves followed by Bangkok, which in turn was topped by European cities. A new spatial and social hierarchy reorganized the city and its relation to the countryside. The rural village, along with its inhabitants, became a second class space, an urban backwater, the stage for backward ways of life. Similarly, water became the way of the past, while land that of the future. This shift was not just spatial but also reorganized the temporal landscape of Siam: the village was thrown in the past as the city was reciprocally projected into the civilized future.[24] As the spatial and temporal organization of the nation changed, Siam also experienced a shift in the basis and loci of capital accumulation and claims to sovereignty that went hand in hand with the emergence of a territorial, and increasingly national, organization of power. The objective was transforming Bangkok from an aquatic city into a land-based *siwilai* city similar to Paris or London, a metropolis at the center of an organized, disciplined, and controlled national territory became a central piece for this project. Building *siwilai* required, as Mark Askew has argued (Askew 1994), a swift centralization of state power, a rapid commodification of land, and the introduction of new technologies, both at the urban and national level (Povatong 2011).

On the national scale, the first priority became exercising more effective control and tax collection over formerly semi-autonomous tributary principalities that were reorganized as parts of the Siamese nation-state. Paraphrasing Thongchai Winichakul, a new geo-body—a spatially defined national entity with its own

[22] The British first occupied sections of Southeast Asia (Singapore 1818, Malacca 1824, Burma 1826). Later also French forces entered the area (Vietnam 1887 and Laos 1893).

[23] In this model "many desirable conditions were attributed to 'Europe', no matter whether they were really true in Europe" (Thongchai 2000: 538). From etiquette to economic practices, from legal codes to administrative systems, from architecture to urban planning and transportation technologies, "European" models traveled to Siam and inspired Chulalongkorn's reforms.

[24] This temporal restructuring, as I will show in Chapter 3, survived well beyond the historical phase dominated by the episteme of *siwilai*, and still colors the relations between city and countryside in Thailand.

territoriality—was imagined for the nation (Thongchai 1994). The challenge was how to control and administer it. A new infrastructure was needed to expand military and administrative control and to allow state penetration into its territory as well as the extraction of resources, both agricultural and human. And King Chulalongkorn was well aware of it.[25]

While previous monarchs had opted for canals and water transportation as their main infrastructural investments, King Chulalongkorn decided, in correspondence with the amphibious shift in the capital, that railways would provide the new channels into the geo-body of the nation and the future of Siam.[26] Faster than canals and more easily controlled than roads,[27] the first railway line was built in 1893 and connected Bangkok to *Pak Nam* (mouth of water), a commercial and military harbor on the delta of the Chao Praya River. In 1899 another line was initiated with the purpose of connecting Bangkok with the northeastern region, which risked becoming the next frontier for French colonial expansion in Indochina after the invasion of Vietnam in 1887 and their blockade of Bangkok's harbor in 1893.[28]

The new infrastructure of mobility had not only political and social consequences but also economic ones.[29] As the circulation of rice and, to a lesser degree, other forest and agricultural commodities became

[25] King Chulalonkorn was reported to have stated: "we are convinced that, to a very large and important degree, the material progress and prosperity of a people usually depends upon its means of transport. When there are good means of transport, people can travel easily and quickly over long distances. The population will be enlarged. Commerce, the foundation of the country's wealth will prosper. We have therefore been diligently striving to build a railroad befitting the strength of our country" (Holm 1977: 61-62).

[26] European models of *siwilai* and the King's visits to colonies in South and Southeast Asia (Java and Singapore in 1870 and British India in 1872) as well as to Europe (1897) inspired his decisions.

[27] As Elinoff has shown: "roadways were intentionally underdeveloped because the royal government was concerned about potential challenges to the railway that might be associated with increasing automobile traffic, which was unprofitable to the state. This decision remained the standard until the end of World War II, when no road reached more than 20 miles out of Bangkok" (Elinoff 2013: 86).

[28] A few years before, in fact, the threat of French expansion had materialized in Bangkok. Following a dispute over the control of the territory of the Laotian Kingdom, on July 13th 1893, two French gunboats blockaded Bangkok´s harbor, forcing the Siamese government to accept a new territorial order. Even if the French retracted after signing a treaty it became clear that Siam ran the concrete risk of falling under colonial domination (Thongchai 1994). The Siamese response was twofold. On one hand, Siam played a delicate international game of equilibrium between England and France, which culminated in the 1896 Franco-British agreement to keep Siam as a buffer zone. On the other hand, the monarchs adopted forms of governance from colonial powers and applied them to the Siamese provinces. Among them, railways, figured prominently, as was the case in colonial India (Prakash 1999) and Egypt (Mitchell 1988), "envisioned as both a technology of governance and social improvement"(Elinoff 2013: 92).

[29] By 1926, the whole geo-body of the nation was imagined as plugged into a capillary system of tracks, departing from Bangkok and connecting its outer regions to reach even beyond the nation's boundaries. Again the language of *siwilai* resonated in the Siamese celebrations of this shift. In 1926, Prince Khamphaengphet declared: "The Siamese railway system will bring Siam out of the backwaters of international relations and give she [sic] a greater measure of importance" (Kakizaki 2012: 126). Not only Siamese international standing, but also internal political control was solidified through the railroad.

faster and less costly, Siamese products entered prominently global agricultural markets. Agricultural land became, for the first time in Siamese history, a desirable commodity and a locus of capitalist accumulation.[30] With the countryside becoming a space of production, land prices increased sharply, fostering the penetration of Bangkok-based forces into the territory of the nation, through land. Once more and more area entered into the political and economic sphere of the Siamese state a new class of administrators, faithful to the centralized state and able to manage the smooth flow of capital, became necessary. From 1892, the monarch begun to restructure the Siamese administrative apparatus by organizing the national outland in provinces, districts, and villages (Tej 1977), and creating a new class of bureaucrats, known as *khā rātchakān* (servants of the monarch). The emergence of this class, produced and selected through a new education system, configured a new set of relations between bureaucrats, their posts, and citizens, which were central to state officials' roles in the operations of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok.

Power and Influence

The reform of King Chulalongkorn assigned for the first time regular salaries to his envoys, instead of leaving them the freedom to withhold money from their official services and from local population according to their will (Siffin 1966). The reform aimed at controlling the degree to which local bureaucrats were allowed to extract wealth from their subjects,[31] at formalizing these relations, and at making the bureaucrats politically and economically dependent on Bangkok, rather than on their ability to mobilize local resources. The implementation of these reforms, however, encountered more difficulties and resistance than classic Siamese historiography has led us to believe. In the period between 1898 and 1905, multiple revolts

[30] Differently from European feudalism the *sakdina* system, which precede the administrative reform in Siam, was not predicated on controlling territory but rather human power. Land was not considered a scarce resource, labor was. As an effect land was hardly desirable and rarely part of economic transactions (Peleggi 2007). In 1892 a new property law was introduced and the concept of private ownership of land was formalized, precisely to adapt to the growing value that agricultural land was acquiring as an effect of intensive cultivation (Askew 1993).

[31] Before the reform the concept of "*kin muang*" -framed the relation between administrators and their subjects. As Saffin has shown: "the king was entitled to eat the kingdom. It was his. Officials, who obtained authority and status from the king, acquired the privilege of *kin muang* within their particular jurisdiction" (Siffin 1966: 32).

exploded in provincial towns both in the North and the Northeastern regions of Siam (Ji 2003). These revolts, especially in the northern capital of Chiang Mai, were often instigated by the very same local powerful men (*chao*) who were supposed to become the backbone of the Siamese state but were instead resisting its expansion. Although these forms of resistance were often suffocated in blood and the reform largely succeeded in creating the unified geo-body of the nation, the centralized control over bureaucrats remained partial and often fecund with contingencies and contradictions, leaving state officials with a broad space for maneuvering and establishing themselves as local influential people.

The new official posts became, as Wyatt has argued, "the single most socially acceptable source of wealth and power" (Wyatt 1969: 112). What was introduced to cut-off local forms of patronage ended up solidifying them. It was through access to these posts that patron-client relations were reorganized. In this system, official authority (*amnāt*) went hand in hand with personal political, economic, and social gains, as well as influence (*`itthiphon)* over local subjects. If before power was located outside the state and depended on the ability to mobilize local manpower and resources, now its source was the state, and official authority guaranteed control over local resources. This new relation among bureaucrats, population, and influence outlived this period,[32] and provided, a century later, the third condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: the bureaucrats' ability to transform authority into influence and to initiate this business without fearing legal repercussions. This capacity guaranteed the birth of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok and their immunity from legal scrutiny.

This period, moreover, did not just reconfigure the administration of the reign but also brought deep reconfigurations in its capital. This urban transformation followed the same tripartite shape that it took in its outer territories: centralization of state power, commodification of land, and introduction of new technologies. In Bangkok, two main administrative entities oversaw the shift of the urban center of gravity

[32] As Siffin had argued: "The new and the old had more in common than appearances would suggest: the bureaucracy continued to serve as the chief source of status, security, and identity for Thais above the level of villages" (Siffin 1966: 148). Even with the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy, "the reformation ended. The King was toppled. Control of the government passed to a shifting succession of cliques, nominally operating within a constitutional framework but in reality depending upon control of military forces. The bureaucracy continued" (Siffin 1966: 149). It was in fact after the 1932 revolution that the bureaucracy became the main power broker in Thailand. The concept of "bureaucratic polity" was develop to describe this primacy of the apparatus from whose ranks, and not from democratic elections, emerged most of the leaders of the country until the 1990s.

away from water. First, the Privy Purse Bureau (PPB)—renamed Crown Property Bureau (CPB) after the 1932 revolution—was created in 1890 to administer the monarchy's private possessions and direct investments, which mostly revolved around land development and construction. Second, a new administrative body, the Ministry of the Capital, was created in 1892 to oversee the government of Bangkok. Such centralization of power went hand in hand with an increase commodification of land.

A web of new roads departing from the palace was built, increasingly away from the Chao Praya River, with funds from the Ministry of the Capital. Along them a new architectural form, the shop-house, spread throughout the city, under the direct investment of the PPB which became the main builder and renter in Bangkok. The new structure, which was observed and imported from Singapore after King Chulalongkorn's visit in 1870, became the dominant architectural model for Bangkok and a source of immense wealth for the Siamese monarchs, making land development into an attractive business. Nowhere was this more evident than in the center of the city. In 1899, King Chulalongkorn ordered the construction of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, literally "royal procession," a name inspired by Kingsway in London. If its toponymy was of British inspiration, and the shop-houses that were built along it were modeled after Singaporean architecture, the street was instead modeled after Baron Haussmann's urban transformation of the French capital and came to be known as the "Champs-Élysées of Asia." Such new design opened a breach into the previous urban structure of Bangkok. The mandalic structure of the city, revolving around the royal palace and narrow radial canals, started to break down with the axial expansion of Ratchadamnoen. The French-inspired boulevard directed the city away from the river front, into the Western-looking and grid-based development of the Dusit area, where Italian architects were designing a neoclassic throne hall and Royal palace (Filippi 2008).[33] Siamese elites' quest for a *siwilai* capital city was not predicated only upon administrative structures and land markets, but also new technologies of mobility.

By the end of the century the first cars, which would become the dominant mode of transportation in post-1960s Bangkok, traveled the newly created roads of the capital. In 1907, internal combustion engine

[33] Dusit remains today the only area of Bangkok with a grid-based urban structure and, as an effect, the district with the lowest number of motorcycle taxis per inhabitants.

buses appeared in the Siamese capital, only thirteen years after Karl Benz—the founder of Mercedes Benz—had built the world´s first prototype. Land-based tools of mobility, in the early life of the Siamese capital, followed closely new developments occurring in European cities, and projected Bangkok into the splendor of a *siwilai* metropolis. As King Chulalongkorn declared in 1907, on his way back from his second tour of Europe, "it has always been my endeavor that Siam should share in the progressive movement which is the distinguishing characteristics of the age in which we live" (Kannikā 2004: 113). Nothing could materialize this progressive movement and Bangkok's dreams of *siwilai* more than the tram. The first electrified systems of mobility in Asia appeared in Bangkok in 1893—only thirteen years after the first line in the world was established in Saint Petersburg—and, in the elite imaginary, drove Siam into the age of civilization.

By 1910, when Rama V died, Bangkok had changed its appearance and initiated an expansion that would continue well after this period. Away from the water-based capital, the city was now dominated by a French structure, filled with Italianate monumental buildings and Singaporean-looking shop-houses. In the years between 1890 and 1910, under a new system of local administration, more than 120 roads and 30 bridges were built, new patterns of land development, rent, and speculation had emerged, and new transportation technologies (trains, bicycles, trams, bus, and cars) were conquering the city and the nation. All of these changes solidified the *siwilai* image of Bangkok: a modern capital firmly based on land, kept in rhythm by the mechanical time of buses and trams and embellished by the "broad and well-kept roads, the row of new-built houses and rapidly spreading shops, with the stuccoed walls of palaces and prisons, of barracks and offices, displaying the Haussmann-like changes that King Chulalongkorn I (Rama V) has effected in the outward appearance of his capital" (Norman 1900: 124).

Envisioning the Future City: Thai Tram Workers Mobilization in 1923

Until now, I have analyzed the history of Bangkok as a palimpsest and reconstructed the emergence of three of the four conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in the Thai capital: cheap

available motorcycles; the soi system; and a specific relation among bureaucrats and citizens. One last condition is left for us to explore: the presence of a multitude of internal migrants who composed the working force that populates the seats of motorcycle taxis. Once again looking for cracks into the apparent sturdiness of Bangkok's layers helps us locating the emergence of this last condition.

Chulalongkorn's civilized city, when seen from the street level, was less magnificent than traditional Thai historiography has led us to believe and was marked by contingencies and contradictions, failure and fragility. As Peter Soppelsa has shown, even Haussmann's interventions in Paris—which were the model for the Siamese capital—hardly fit the magniloquent epoch-changing rupture that traditional historiography was depicted, but rather remained an incomplete project, ridden by contradictions and failures (Soppelsa 2009). Thousands of miles away from Paris, modernity in Bangkok remained an equally fragile project, haunted by the contingency of the amphibious shift, its fragility, as well as the incompleteness of the epochal transformations envisioned by its proponents. The dreams of *siwilai,* when seen at street level, went hand in hand with less pompous everyday realities. The trams in particular, flagships of the new era, condensed the contingencies and contradictions of this urban transformations.

When in 1893 the Siam Electricity Company Co. Ltd. (an electric utility company founded by two Danish businessmen) acquired and electrified the failing horse-drawn tram, Bangkokians' response was less than enthusiastic. The marvel and terror of electricity, what Larkin has defined in Nigeria as the "colonial sublime" (Larkin 2008), almost brought the tram's operations to bankruptcy. Faced with popular fear of electrocution, strengthen by two such accidents in the first days of operation, Siam Electricity decided to offer tram rides free of charge for the first four months of operations to attract customers and get them accustom to the new system. Although after few months the new mode of transportation increased its popularity, Bangkokians remained wary of the *siwilai* nature of the trams and nicknamed the new cars after their not-so-civilized characteristics. The tram, formally known as *rot rang* (cars on rail), was soon known around the city as *rot ai* (smelly car) to describe the new experience, introduced with forms of mass transportation, of being packed next to strangers inside a steamy and sweat-smelling box in the tropical heat.

Beside its name, the smelly car constantly experienced problems, electricity shortages, and accidents that—as much as traffic jams would do in the 1970s—forced riders back to the canals in order to move through the urban landscape. Not all of trams' stoppages, however, were due to infrastructural failures or accidents. Occasionally stoppages were the result of political mobilization and, instead of recalling a past, envisioned a future, a future in which Thai urban economy, up to this point largely dominated by Chinese migrants, would be populated by collectively organized Thai workers. A prolonged strike of tram workers in 1923 revealed the emergence of a Thai urban working class armed with a nationalist discourse and a refusal of the Chinese domination of Bangkok's labor market. This tension preconfigured the fourth condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: an available labor force composed by migrants from the Thai provinces.

The strike, often referred to as the beginning of labor politics in Siam, started in December 1922 and was the product of mounting tension among the trams' European administration, Chinese middlemen, and Thai low level workers. It all started with the sacking of a Thai tram-worker by Hui, a Chinese foreman. The Thai employees appealed to the Danish owners of Siam Electricity, arguing that the worker had been fired without reasonable cause. When the European owners backed Hui's decision, Thai newspapers reported the Chinese executive saying to its Danish superior: "Sir, you should not take care of Thai workers since they were just like a bunch of dogs, running back to our company after hearing the knocking of coconut shells with dog food. Therefore, you can get Thai workers as much as you want to replace those who got a pink slip" (Brown 2004: 148). These words, or the rumors of their utterance, inflamed the workers' opposition to exploitative labor practices and the growing tensions between Thai and Chinese workers in Siam: on December 31st 1922 the Thai tram-workers went on strike. They gathered in front of Bangkok municipal offices to demand fair stipends, a clear set of rules to govern their working activities, as well as the removal of Hui, his assistant Phin, and Ericson, the Danish traffic manager, for cruel and exploitative practices. Faced with the company refusal to accept these conditions and the urban bureaucracy's refusal to mediate, the workers return to strike. This time they brought their demands to the Minister of Interior, Chaopraya

Yomarat. To the tram workers' disappointment, the Ministry failed to intervene in the situation and on January 13th the workers decided to go on strike again, for the third time in a month.

The tension grew violent. On one side, groups of hooligans and Thai boxers were recruited to break the strike. On the other, the workers who did not join in the strike became victims of violent attacks and accusations of being anti-Siamese and supporting Chinese domination of labor markets. As the company continued to ignore the workers' demands and hired substitutes, the attacks on trams stepped up. Beatings and bombings became more concrete risks on the smelly train than bad odors and electrocutions. By the end of January 1923, newspapers reported the interruption to trams owing to bomb attacks that had damaged multiple tracks, the shooting of a passenger, and the appearance of barricades across the tramlines. Although disruption of service and protests continued until the end of February 1923, by the beginning of March the struggle died out and most of its participants were replaced by new workers.

Beside the historical importance of this strike for the emergence of labor politics in Siam (Brown 2004), the mobilization revealed the tensions mounting around the composition of Bangkok's labor force in the first decades of the twentieth century. The 1923 mobilization, in fact, even if provoked by exploitative labor practices, adopted the language of national belonging, ethnic inequality, and xenophobia.[34] The tramway workers' demands were often framed as attacks to Chinese control and domination over the urban labor market. The strike not only revealed the fragility of Bangkok present and its dreams of *siwilai,* but also prefigured a different future for the city, a future populated by a largely Thai labor force, a force composed by millions migrants from the Thai country side, who were to replace the Chinese in the underbelly of the city. In this sense, the strike foreshadowed a restructuring of urban labor markets that would be completed three decades later with the limitation of the numbers of Chinese migrant workers in Bangkok, which drove large

[34] Workers who refused to strike or who were hired in place of the ones that were protesting were faced with a serious questioning to their national loyalties. "How are you feeling? Well. I hope? You are Thai, aren't you" A striker was reported shouting inside at a tram before being attacked by one if its passengers (Siam Ratsadon 17/1/1923). "Thai should help their fellow countrymen" a man argued before punching repeatedly a ticket seller who "was working as a replacement [and] this was thought not the action of someone who loved his nation" (Siam Ratsadon 16/1/1923) The Minister of Interior understood the relevance of the emerging nationalism and distrust for foreigners, especially Chinese, for these strikes. In the thick on the negotiations in fact, its personal assistant Phraya Phetphani, was reported telling the crowd of tramway workers: "The Minister wished it to be known that he is a real Thai, as are [you] workers. Therefore the Minister fully intends to help you to the best of its ability and he will not show any favoritism to foreigners." The crowd cheered heartily in response, the report noticed (Yamato 17/1/1923).

numbers of migrants from the Thai hinterland and provided the fourth, and last, condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok.

"Thailand to Thais": *Chatnyom,* the restructuring of labor force, and the Thai city. (1932- 1957)

On June 24th 1939 the Siamese National Assembly, instituted after the deposition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, decreed to change the country´s name from Siam to Thailand (*Prathet Thai*). This decision was pushed vehemently by the Prime Minister Plaek Phibun Songkhram and his loyal director of the Department of Fine Arts, head of the State Convention Committee *(rathaniyom*), and propaganda mastermind Luang Wichit Watthakan.[35] The change of name was part of a larger Thai-fication of the national economy, cultural industry, and urban labor markets.

On June 24th 1932, the People Party—of which the two men were prominent leaders—had staged a bloodless coup that forced the King Rama VII to accept a constitution.. With the abolition of absolute monarchy, the country required—as happened three decades later with Sarit's *patiwat*—a new hegemonic episteme, to substitute the royal paradigm. While for Sarit the answer was *phatthanā,* for post-absolute monarchy Siam *chātniyom* (nationalism) filled the gap. The discourse of nationalism had emerged inside royal circles, most notably through the writings of King Rama VI. Yet it was not until the demise of absolute monarchy that this episteme became dominant. Starting with the government of Phanom Phongphayuhasena (1932-1938), nationalism became a driving force, both material and discursive, behind the state's economic and social policies. It was not until the election of Phibun as prime minister in 1938, however, that it became the undisputable center of the national ideological apparatus. Soon after his rise to power a new four-men committee headed by Luang Wichit was created to "find a way of removing some of the 'flaws' from Thai

[35] Descendants of Chinese immigrants, the two men had met in Paris, where Luang Wichit was working in the Royal Siamese delegation as well as studying law and political science. Phibun, a young military officer, was also studying there and was part of group of young Siamese who were later to become the main actors behind the 1932 constitutional revolution and the deposition of the absolute monarchy. Among them, another Chinese descendant figured prominently: a law student named Pridi Banomyong, whose collaboration with, and later opposition to, Phibun would come to dominate Thai politics for the following three decades. The operations of these three political figures had a central role in shifting the composition of urban labor force from Chinese coolies to Thai internal migrants.

society which hampered the country´s progress" (Barmé 1993: 144). The committee responded by redacting State Conventions (*rathaniyom*)—also known as Cultural Mandates. In a series of radio broadcasts and printed articles that succeeded the creation of this committee Luang Wichit declared that

> The idea of the Conventions had originated with Phibun who felt that the problems of the country could be overcome by 'making the Thai people truly Thai' (*tham khon Thai hai pen Thai ching*). This meant two things: helping the Thais take control of the country by becoming independent from 'those people' who exploited then, and 'reviving Thai culture' in order that the country could be recognized to be as progressive and great as it has been in the past. (Barmé 1993: 145)

Luang Wichit´s presentation of the Cultural Mandates condensed three main tracts of the new fascist-influenced nationalist episteme:[36] the personalization of the state around the figure of a strong leader, in this case Phibun ("who felt that"); a new oppositional and homogenous understanding of the Siamese nation ("independent from 'those people'); and an direct involvement of state forces in regulating and disciplining its population everyday practices ("reviving Thai culture"). While these transformations have been elsewhere analyzed in great detail (Hewison 1989; Thak 2007; Thinapan 2533; Wyatt 1984), I will focus only on the second aspect—the creation of a homogenous nation—and its effects on Bangkok labor force.

The first of the Cultural Mandates was, as we saw, the renaming of Siam. The decision to connect the nation to a specific ethnic group, namely the Tai,[37] built a direct and unidirectional relation between the dominant, but by no means sole, population in Siam and the citizens of the Thai nation. Highland tribes, southern Malees, Chinese migrants, and other ethnic minorities were to adapt, and adopt, Thainess (*khwām pen thai*) if they wanted to remain members of the nation. This was not just a way to promote cultural

[36] Phibun had voiced multiple times his sympathies and admirations for the fascist leaders of Italy and Germany.

[37] As Thongchai Winichakul has argued, "in contemporary Thai, the word that connotes the Tai/Thai ethnicity is spelled in two ways. With exactly the same pronunciation—'thai'—one is spelled with a y at the end and the other without, respectively as 'thaiy' and 'thai'. When spelled 'thaiy' the word denotes the modern nation-state and its citizens, although in its Romanisation as 'Thai(land)', the letter 'y' is dispensed with. When spelled without the y ending, it is a looser term denoting the ethnic peoples whose languages belong to the same Tai/Thai linguistic family. This 'Thai' (without a y ending) includes the Shan of Burma, the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong, and people speaking various Tai/Thai dialects in Thailand today, including the Muang people of former Lanna (Chiang Mai), the Tai Lue, the Tai Maung, the Tai Khoen in the border areas between China, Burma and Laos, the Black and White Tai in Vietnam, and others. In this meaning, the word has recently come to be commonly written in Thai with the unaspirated letter 't'. It is Romanised as 'Tai', in order to mark it off even more clearly from Thaiy, both in writing and pronunciation" (Thongchai 2008: 576). In the writing of Luang Wichit the two terms were conflated into one, which included both 'Tai,' the larger ethnic and linguistic groups, and 'Thai,' the modern citizens of Thailand.

homogenization but also, according to the reasons behind the Cultural Mandates, to expel "those people" (i.e. exploiters) from the national body, united under the slogan "Thailand to the Thais." Among the groups framed as exploiters, as Wyatt has argued (Wyatt 1983: 343), the economically dominant Chinese population figured prominently.

Anti-Chinese sentiments had been mounting in Siam since the early twentieth century and had been most famously voiced in 1914 by King Rama VI. In one of his many interventions in the thriving popular press of early twentieth century Siam, titled the "The Jews of the Orient," the King—under the pseudonym of Asavabahu—responded to the mounting European and North American discourse of the "Yellow Peril" by stressing the difference between Siamese and Chinese and adopting the European rhetoric of anti-Semitism to describe the latter.[38] Chinese population, regardless how long they have lived in Siam, were referred to as "aliens by birth, by nature, by sympathy, by language, and finally by choice, […] utterly without morals, conscience, mercy, pity … [a population that] where money is concerned, […] like chameleon, change their color to suit their surroundings" (Vajiravudh 1914). In short, they were seen as a potential threat to the Siamese nation to be monitored and kept under control (Skinner 1957: 164-5).

The distrust for Thai-Chinese national loyalties, which had directed the 1923 tram strike, reemerged under the government of Phibun, also a result of an unfortunate international conjecture. At a time when Thailand was building closer relations with Japan, China was fighting a war with the emerging Asian power. In 1937, the second Sino-Japanese War had broken out, following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. In 1938, Japanese forces blockaded the main Southern Chinese ports and Chinese merchants throughout Southeast Asia initiated a boycott of Japanese commodities. This put the Chinese population in Thailand—regardless of their participation to the boycott—in a tight spot, seen as collecting money to finance the Chinese war efforts and organizing a boycott of Japanese goods while the Thai state was allying with Japan. In a period of nationalist zeal, their double loyalties toward both China and Thailand were considered

[38] The discourse of the Yellow Peril originated in the late nineteenth century with the migration of Chinese population to Europe and the United States. The term was used to express the fear that the mass immigration of Asians threatened white wages and standards of living and that they would eventually take over and destroy western civilization, their ways of life and values.

unacceptable and bordering on treason. Again, Luang Wichit, the mastermind of the Cultural Mandates, became the mouthpiece of these concerns. In July 1938, during a public lecture at Chualongkorn University on the Nazi annexation of Austria, Wichit resuscitated the language of Rama VI and mixed it with the growing tide of German National Socialism. In his words Chinese were "worse than the Jews" and he suggested the time had arrived for Siam to deal with its own Jews, following the model of German racial campaigns (Barmé 1993: 129).[39]

While an annihilation of the local Chinese population was never really contemplated, under the State Conventions Committee a number of decisions directed to the "Thai-fication" of the country affected, and at times seemed directly addressed to, what came to be seen as the "restive, disgruntled elements in society, such as the laboring nationalist section of the Chinese community" (Barmé 1993: 144). Ethnic dress and surnames were forbidden, education in languages other than Central Thai prohibited, and the population was invited to support Thai products and restrain from buying Chinese goods. All of these measures had a direct effect on the Chinese communities, which controlled both the commerce and labor markets in the capital. Thai-fication of the national economy, and in particular its manual labor, became a central objective of this period, supported—differently from other aspects of the Cultural Mandates[40]—not just by Phibun but also by his liberal alter-ego, the then Minister of Finance Pridi Banomyong. Such consensus initiated an epochal shift in the economic structure and labor markets of Bangkok that started to drift away from the hands of Chinese coolies toward Thai bodies.

New legislation was passed to create national companies and to restrict the access of non-Thais to the production and distribution of important commodities such as petroleum, tobacco, salt, and livestock.[41] Interestingly among the markets reserved to Thai nationals were taxis and *samlor* (three-wheels rickshaws),

[39] Thankfully, Phibun's government limited its campaigns to cultural and economic interventions without adopting violence and assassinations. Nonetheless, "schools and printing presses, newspaper offices and Chinese associations were searched, pamphlets and document seized, and several hundred arrests made." (Skinner 1957: 267)

[40] The decision to change the name of the country to Thailand, in particular, was strongly opposed by Pridi who supported the brief renaming of the country to Siam between the end of the Second World War and Phibun's return to power with the 1948 coup.

[41] The Thai-Chinese population responded to this measure by changing their surnames to "sound" Thai, and in so doing claiming a strong affiliation to the nation. Big economic groups in Thailand today are dominated by people with Thai-sounding Chinese family names.

which had appeared in the city a decade before, and were now rapidly diffusing (Textor 1961). Until this moment transportation in Bangkok has been in the hands, feet, and shoulders of Chinese coolies. Now the government was resolute in giving it to the control of Thai nationals (Landon 1941).

These legislations, Pridi was aware, would not pay off without a change of attitudes among Thais, who were perceived as disdaining manual labor. Again Luang Wichit offered his contribution. In a lecture at the Ministry of Defense on November 16th 1939 he credited such an attitude to a royalist elitism that was a product of Khmer influences and not Thai culture (*watthanatham Thai).*[42] Luang Wichit called for the necessity of a "human revolution" (*patiwat manut*) to "recognize work as a source of joy, life, and honor" (Barmé 1993: 154). Even if the shifts in attitudes and policies regarding urban labor were side-tracked by the Second World War—which saw Thailand allied with the Axis first and then invaded by the Japanese in December 1941—the idea that Chinese prominence over the Thai economy needed to be limited survived the disastrous world conflict. In 1947, during the short-lived premiership of anti-Japanese hero Thamrong Navaswadhi, a major policy decision—too often overlooked in Thai historiography—came into being.

On May 1st 1947, the Prime Minister signed a decree limiting the annual legal migration from China. The quota was established to 10,000 per year and reduced to 200 people in 1949, after decades of Chinese migration to Thailand in the order of hundreds of thousands (Skinner 1957).[43] The numbers of Chinese migrants to Thailand dropped rapidly, not just effect of the quota but also the result of Mao's victory in China, which blocked the outward mobility of its population. This conjuncture radically shifted the composition of Bangkok's labor force and restructured the social and economic geography of the Thai nation around the capital, reorienting the hinterland as a labor reserve for Bangkok. The importance of this change cannot be overstated. In the decades before 1949, the demographic growth in Bangkok had been driven by Chinese migrants who populated the local labor force in construction, commerce, industrial labor, service, as well as transportation (Porphant 1998). Before 1950 if you were to interact with workers in the city, you

[42] The concept of culture (*watthanatam*) was one of Luang Wichit's major, and most successful, contributions to modern Thai dictionary. For a treatment of this see (Barmé 1993)

[43] In 1910, 145,100 Chinese migrants entered Thailand; in 1920 the number raised to 408,100; by 1930 it went down again to 124,100 before growing once again by 1940 to 157,000 (Skinner 1957: 177).

would be dealing, with all probability, with a first-generation Chinese immigrant. After all, as Porphant has showed, rural wages had been, before this period, higher than urban wages, making migration from the provinces unattractive, except for members of the regional elites looking for an entry into the growing state bureaucracy (Porphant 1998: 98).

After the introduction of a quota for Chinese migrants and the Maoist victory in China, businesses in Bangkok started to look for labor inside the national territory. Migration, however, could not be motivated just by a law. Migrants had to be convinced, or forced, to move to the city. A new set of political-economic and infrastructural conditions needed to be in place for people to start needing, imagining, desiring, and planning to move to the city and engage in its labor markets. These conditions emerged during the second Phibun's premiership (1948-1957), this time not as an elected politician but as the leader of the March 1st 1948 military coup. During his second term the economic relations between the Thai capital and the countryside were rearranged by the creation of a geography of unequal development that has dominated Thailand ever since. One tax in particular became symptomatic of the new approach.

The "rice premium," a tax on rice export, was introduced in 1955 with the objective of limiting rice subtracted from the national market, producing revenues, and fostering the growing industrial sector.[44] On one hand, the government aimed at discouraging the rice exports so to contain the internal price of rice, the main staple food in Thailand, and therefore the cost of labor in urban areas, providing the Thai industrial sector with cheap and competitive working force. On the other hand, the rice premium became a significant component of national revenues that were used to fuel the industrial growth of Bangkok (Feeny 2003; Parnwell 1996). In this sense, the rice premium represented a major step toward privileging the economic position of Bangkok, and its industrial sector, over the Thai countryside, conceived as a territory for the extraction of resources, natural and human. In particular, this tax pushed rural workers, impoverished by the burden of taxation of their main agricultural product, to enter the urban labor force, recently purged of its Chinese domination. As Porpora and Lim have argued:

[44] The rice premium was actually collected since 1951 as a special levy; it was not however until 1955 that it became a stable tax.

> The monopoly capitalists now could take surplus from both ends. At first they could suppress the price of food so that they could keep the cost of labour-power, the maintenance and reproduction of labour-power and the wage rate at a low level. Now they forced under-employed and underfeed people to migrate to compete for wage-labour work in the urban areas so that they have cheap supply of labour and at the same time these young wage-labourers from rural areas could also send some remittance to help the small agricultural producers survive and continue producing cheap food. (Lim and Porpora 1987: 79)

Wealth was extracted from rural area and its workers three times. First, their agricultural production, through the rice premium, was undervalued and underpaid, forcing many farmers to move to the city in search for more remunerative jobs. Second, once in the city, their wages were kept low by artificially controlling the price of reproduction of labor—the cost of daily reproduction of labor power—through low price of rice. And third, the revenues coming from rice taxes were not reinvested in agricultural areas but fueled into the capital's industrial growth. A national geography of uneven development was entrenched, through a prime example of what David Harvey has called accumulation through dispossession (Harvey 2003). It was this dispossession to motivate the migration of millions of agriculture workers who could not cope with the rapidly decreasing margins of their activities in the countryside. Bangkok's labor market was flooded by internal migrants who populated the mass of unspecialized labor force that animates the street economy of the Thai capital, then as in the present. While for the first decades after this shift most of the migrants were farmers from the Central Region, the construction of new infrastructures of mobility connecting Bangkok to the northeastern region of Thailand, shifted the balance.[45]

This infrastructure, if central in reorganizing the extraction of resources, natural and human, from the outer provinces, was actually put in place with the opposite dynamic in mind. Starting with the Korean War (1950-1953), Thailand emerged as the primary USA's ally in a region seen as the forefront of communist expansion.[46] After the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, and the beginning of the Vietnam War,

[45] In 1960, 61% of migrants in Bangkok were coming from the central region and only 20% from the Northeast. By 1980 northeastern migrants composed more than 50% of Bangkok's labor force.

[46] Phibun, as he had done a decade before with Japan, broke the traditional Siamese international policy of neutrality and allied the country to the United States, offering troops and rice for the Korea War. This decision, together with a refashioning of Thailand as an anti-communist bastion became an immensely remunerative foreign policy. As Thak has argued "From 1950 to 195, the Thai

the American presence in the region grew exponentially. Security concerns for the expansion of communist forces drove US funds into the country. This economic support materialized, among other things, through a capillary system of roads built to guarantee easy access to areas of potential risk, particularly in the northeastern region. In particular, the Friendship Highway was built in 1955 to connect Bangkok to the Isan city of Korat. Along these roads and previously built railways, internal migrants from the Northeastern region started to flood into Bangkok and emerged as central actors in the everyday life of the rapidly-expanding Thai capital. It was during this period, as Paritta has argued, that "the magic spell of Bangkok was cast" (Paritta and Askew 1994: 31).

In the decade between the introduction of a cap to Chinese immigration in 1947 and the end of Phibun's dictatorship in 1957, Bangkok's population doubled from 604,530 to 1,204,894 and the city established its primacy over the country. Most of this growth was driven by young internal migrants who moved to Bangkok and would eventually become the central actors behind the emergence of motorcycle taxis. Arriving in the city, many of them started looking for jobs, joining the available, underpaid, and often unspecialized labor force that sustained the development of its industrial sector. It took, however, another drift in the orientations of the Thai political-economy away from agriculture toward manufacturing to provide the tools needed for the emergence of motorcycle taxis: affordable motorcycles. That shift, as we saw, occurred in the late 60s and early 70s, under Sarit's *phatthanā* (development).

A solution to traffic: motorcycle taxis.

In the era of *phatthanā,* as we have seen, Bangkok grew exponentially. Its area almost tripled from 125 km^2 in 1955 to 330 km^2 in 1981. The urban population expanded even faster from over a million in 1957 to over five millions in 1981, due to increased birth rates, life expectancy, and internal migration. By the early 1980s, more than 50% of the migrants who were flowing into the Thai capital came from the northeast

government learned that it could play upon the fears of its wealthy partner, using the line that native communists were plotting to overthrow the friendly Phibun regime and establish a leftist regime in Thailand" (Thak 1979: 156).

regions. In 1983, when the first article reporting on motorcycle taxis came out, 11% of the national population lived in Bangkok, 55 times the population of Chiang Mai—the second biggest city in the country. 75% of the phones in the nation were in Bangkok, 32% of its GDP was produced in this area, and 61% of the national electricity consumed here. More than 50% of country motor vehicles were in the capital with more than 400,000 motorcycles and around a million cars. In this period, Bangkok emerged beyond doubt as the urban heart of the Thai nation. A powerful heart threatened by traffic, increasingly clogging its arteries. Its gridlocks were becoming world famous as millions of dollars were poured into the pockets of foreign consultants to create documents titled "traffic disaster" and "Bangkok chaos." As public transport remained hindered by the lack of investment, the elimination of trams and *samlor,* and the impenetrable soi system, international firms struggled to find a solution for the everyday mobility of a city with the highest car ownership per capita in Asia and with the lowest road pavement per car. By the early 1980s, in the confused palimpsest of Bangkok, traffic had become unbearable. A response started to emerge, a new informal solution that allowed people to cut through the traffic jams characteristic of life in Bangkok. This solution was motorcycle taxis.

Chapter 2: Riding the city

Since their first appearance motorcycle taxis spread around Bangkok like wildfire, growing from a few hundred in 1983 to around 40,000 a decade later, all the way to 200,000 by the time I began my fieldwork in 2009. During the time of my research the drivers—for the most part young male urban migrant men[47]—collectively operated a total of four to five millions daily trips, more than ten times the volume of people moved by Bangkok's subway and elevated Skytrain combined.[48] The magnitude of their movements and their presence at every street corner was predicated upon the drivers' ability to read the urban landscape, not over time as I did in last chapter, but synchronically, in the present of their movements through it.

Unlike the geologist or the urban historian interested in layering, the driver experiences the city as the speleologist, less concerned with the genesis and more attuned to the modalities of navigating gaps, traces, and fault lines left open in the surrounding landscape. If in the former chapter I interrogated time and space of the city as a contingent, contradictory, and ultimately fragile flow, in the drivers' everyday life, the two elements acquire a more concrete dimension, less concerned progression and more focused on practices and experiences. In other words, seen atop a bike, the historical layers of the urban palimpsest flatten into a landscape and "transform the temporal articulation of place into a spatial sequence of points" (de Certeau 1984: 35) that compose the urban landscape in which the drivers move.[49]

Following their navigations, I move between the logic of the theorist and the planner—to whom the city may often appear as a text to be analyzed or a map to be organized—and the practical logic of the drivers

[47] The drivers are for the largest majority males between the age of 20 and 40, mostly with primary, and in few cases secondary education. About 90% of them were not born to Bangkok, with Isan being by far the most common region of provenience. Even though male represent about the 95% of the drivers, the number of women is however slightly expanding since 1997, as often women fared worst in the lay-offs.

[48] In 2012 they were an estimated of 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers operating in around 4000 wins, of which 120,000 regularly registered and 80,000 operating illegally. I have surveyed about 500 drivers over the course of my research coming from about 300 different wins. The drivers averaged between 20 and 30 trips per day, which would put the whole system to about 4 to 6 million trips per day.

[49] In other words, for the urban historian, interested in a history of the present, the objective is, as Nikolas Rose explains, "to reveal the historicity and the contingency of the truths that have come to define the limits of our contemporary ways of being" (Rose 1999: 276). For the driver, interested in the practices of the present, past and present morph into a coherent unity in which they can devise ways of acting in and on the city.

and the city dwellers—who move through the palimpsest as pens, tracing trajectories and connections that engage and disrupt that text. These logics, however, are not to be seen as diametrically opposite but rather as two complementary modalities of relation to the city which sustain and constitute one another. While in the historians' exploration of the urban palimpsest, traces of the past direct trajectories, in the drivers' daily navigations, the fragile history analyzed in the last chapter comes to life below the wheels and in their paths. In them, urban traces—the soi system, the tram's tracks, the local influential people or the forms of labor that dominate Bangkok—stand still and orient mobility, in the 'here and now' of a trip. Bangkok is, after all, the result of both logics and trajectories. The conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis, themselves fragile and opened to subversion, did not just determine and shape the drivers' presence and paths, but are actively challenged, adopted, or refused through the practical reasoning that underlies their everyday life. In last chapter I analyzed the former dynamic; here I focus on the latter. In this sense, I follow Bourdieu's critique of the dogmatic and normative nature of structuralist thinking and analyze the different experiences at play in the everyday practice of motorcycle taxi drivers' in the city. Quoting Bourdieu:

> The logical relationships constructed by the anthropologist are opposed to 'practical' relationships—practical because continuously practiced, kept up, and cultivated—in the same way as the geometrical space of a map, an imaginary representation of all theoretical roads and routes, is opposed to the network of 'beaten tracks', of paths made even more practicable by constant use (Bourdieu 1977: 37)

This chapter analyzes the drivers' as producers of these spatial, economic, and social paths. I start from an exploration of the drivers' daily delivery of newspapers, central tools for the creation of a Thai national "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). I use their role in this circulation to explore the drivers as connectors and mediators of physical and social landscape of the city. From there, I explore the phenomenological dimension of their labor, both in transit and during their waiting time at their stations. I analyze the first component, that of transit, through an analysis of the drivers' bodily practices, adjustments to urban rhythms, and convoluted mobility based on detours and continuous path-seeking. I then focus on the less-mobile aspect of their labor: the long waiting times at their stations. I show how, during this time, the

drivers create channels in the social landscape of their neighborhood, channels through which they attempt to enhance economic mobility for themselves and their families.

This channel-making labor had, as the urban palimpsest in which it takes place, its pitfalls: risks, contingencies, and failures that threaten the drivers' physical, social, and economic mobility. If, on one side, mobility and stasis defines the phenomenology of their labor and economic success, on the other, the danger of failures and accidents constantly faces both them and their passengers, undermining their mobility, their life, and their economic and social standing. Investigating both aspects, therefore, reveals the contingency and contradiction not just in the urban palimpsest in which the drivers operate but also in their everyday lives as well as their ability to adjust, challenge, and activate existing relations between their bodies, the city, and capitalism in contemporary Thailand.

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A journey through the city: building channels

It is Friday, full night. Hong sleeps next to me on a thin mattress thrown in a cramped wooden room in a narrow alley on Thomburi side of Bangkok, across the river from the Central Business District and his motortaxi station. Only the static noise of his mini-fridge and the occasional barking dog down the road break the silence. A small alarm clock with a sticker of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD)—the political group protesting the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva—projects the time as a red LED glow on the pavement. I grope for my glasses on the floor. 2:49. Next to me Hong snores soundly, taking advantage of the few hours of sleep that his role as invisible mover of the city allows. A few objects adorn the musty walls of his shack. A poster of Carabao, a country music star who narrates the stories of migrants like him, a small radio, a water heater, few boxes of instant noodles, and a couple of Buddhist protective amulets that he takes off and attaches to a nail every night before going to sleep. In a few minutes the alarm will go off and, as every morning, he will wake up, run across the tiny courtyard into the small wooden toilette in front of his room and shower, scooping buckets of cold water from a big cement tub. Back in the room

Hong will put on mentholated powder to fight the daily sweat and get dressed, before walking silently out of the small courtyard, a big leather saddle bag on his shoulder, and drive into the unusually quiet city.

BUZZZZZ …the alarm goes off.

The scene plays out in front of me but, differently from what I imagined, Hong does not kickstart the bike in the courtyard. Rather we walk the bikes out of the alley, so as not to wake up his sister and her family sleeping in the house next to his shack, start our Japanese bikes and drive away, into the night.

A few people sit in the street, placidly enjoying their last drink of the night as a street vendor prepares northeastern food for a couple of aging prostitutes courted by a taxi driver. In a few minutes we are merging into a major highway, speeding our way across the city, head tucked down to fight the chill of the night. Occasionally a car overtakes us as we make our way towards the eastern side of the city, where Hong works next to Bangkok's commercial and financial centers. As every weekday morning, before crossing the river Hong takes a detour into an industrial area. Here the day is fully in operation: the sound of machinery and diesel trucks covers the whine of our bikes.

We stop in front of a large iron door that opens into a warehouse, with the usual elevated floor to facilitate the movement of big loads directly from and into delivery trucks: printing press reveals the smell of ink and the rhythmical sound of cylinder printing machines. An older man drops a bundle of magazine Hong's arms without saying a word. From the covers a picture of a Red Shirts protesters change hands, as a few other motorcycle taxi drivers arrive to collect their share of papers. Hong proceeds to divide the bundle in two parts and sticks them into the saddle bags across his bike. "Let's go," he tells me as he puts his helmet back on. We leave behind the din of mechanical production and go back to the quietness of the pre-dawn city.

We ride across the Chao Praya River over Taksin Bridge and enter the nearly empty streets of Bangkok's financial district. During the day, Silom Road presents a crowded scene, nearly indistinguishable from other global business districts. Late at night, instead, the area reveals its peculiar double life as a

prostitution hub. Here the city is still in motion, dancing to the off-beat of loud music drifting out of the red light districts of Patpong and Thanniya, catering to a mix of Thai and international clientele. Hong stops at a motortaxi group, busy with the continuous flux of clients and prostitutes.

We eat a quick bowl of noodle soup with a young driver from Hong's village while they chat, filling each other in with news from their hometown: weddings, deaths, and the construction of new houses: news that travel from the provinces to the urban landscape through the drivers' daily mobility through the city and regular trips back to the countryside. As we take our leave, Hong agrees to call the other driver next time he plans to visit home.

In silence, we ride through back roads and parking lots, against the direction of traffic and across four-lane roads following a mental map that Hong activates every day, a sequence of landmarks that he has internalized but that means almost nothing to anyone but him. At every stop he pulls out a small stack of magazines that he gently leaves on newsstands and doorsteps before driving to the next shop, in a regular sequence. He stops only to put on a balaclava, oblivious of the growing heat, to protect his bald spot and his skin from tanning, a small sacrifice to the altar of urban living. "I already have dark skin," he tells me with a mix of irony and affliction. "No matter what I do I look like a *khon bānnōk (*country bumpkin). I always look like I work in the field. Women do not like that. It may work with *farang*.[50] You like dark people but I cannot speak English so I am left with Thais and us Thai prefer white skin." With the sun up race, class, and regional provenance are marked also through skin care and sun exposure.[51]

As we progress along Hong's usual circuit, the city around us starts to awaken. Vendors push lonely carts to street corners, the first buses start to move, and more cars fill the streets. Continuing along his path we deposit the last bundle of magazines and head finally to his station in Sathorn soi 12. On the way we stop at one of the omnipresent 7/11 shop—the American multinational bought by a Japanese company in 1991

[50] *Farang* is the word used to refer to foreigners, particularly Caucasians.

[51] This complex politics of skin-color is marked in Thailand by ethnic and class belonging. Whiter skin, in fact, besides pointing to Chinese origins also indexes a life of privilege, away from the rice fields. For this reasons, skin whiteners are very popular cosmetics in the country, advertised by famous actors or models.

and since operating more than 3000 shops in Bangkok—for the first of many energy drinks that keep Hong awake and alert during his interminable days of work. "When I worked in construction it was *yā bā* (methamphetamine)." Hong remembers. "The boss used to put it into the water we were given to drink. All of us, we worked high, we never stopped working. You feel like you have interminable energy, until you come back home and your whole body hurts." Although nowadays no one is drugging drivers like Hong, a circuit of exploitation, operating primarily onto their *bān nǭ̄k* bodies, still structures their lives in the city and leaves them exhausted and poisoned by fumes at the end of the day, with few hundred baht in their pocket.

Hong's newspaper delivery provides a remarkable instance of the drivers' roles in creating the channels through which the Thai urban and national communities are constituted and preserved. In this sense, it helps us understand the communicative, social, and political-economic relevance of their labor as connectors of the Thai metropolis and the Thai state. Newspapers, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, play a central role in the creation of the imagined community that is pivotal for the operations of modern nation-states. Every day around the nation, citizens engage in the simultaneous mass ceremony of reading the news, which create and solidities an anonymous imagined community rooted in everyday life.[52]

While scholars of nationalism agree on the roles of print capitalism in the creation of a unified nation, few have focused on the people who allow the circulation of its products. Seen from this light, the daily round of delivery performed by drivers like Hong takes on a new significance. The drivers occupy an often invisible yet crucial position as mediators and producers of the channels through which such communities are formed and connected. People like Hong do not just participate in the "imagined community," they also keep it alive by creating and sustaining the channels through which such imagination occur. It is through their labor, along with that of other workers, that newspapers circulate across the urban and national landscape and are made available for daily consumption, allowing the maintenance of a unified

[52] As he showed, newspapers "create this extraordinary mass ceremony […] The significance of [which] is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. […] At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. [It] seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modem nations." (Anderson 1983: 36)

national community. The delivery of newspapers offers just one instance of the drivers' larger role as creators and gate-keepers of communicative channel or, to use the words of Julia Elyachar "phatic labor," workers who "produces communicative channels that can transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value" (Elyachar 2010: 253).

The concept of phatic communion, first used by Malinowski in his study of the Trobriand Island, was developed to analyze how linguistic interactions, such as gossip, salutes, and chit-chatting, play a role in creating and sustaining social ties, what he called "ties of union" (Malinowski 1936). For Malinowski phatic communion referred to "aimless" linguistic utterances which operate as an "act binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. [And configures communication] not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action" (Malinowski 1936: 468), of a community-making action. Roman Jakobson later used this concept to refer to the linguistic function which focuses on the preservation of channels of communication (Jakobson and Rudy 1962). Just to give an example, the humming or nodding that you hear and see in classrooms around the world accomplish a phatic function. In other words, it tells nothing about the process of signification but rather it marks that the channel of communication is still open and the public is not completely tuned off. Such function, Elyachar has argued, can go beyond the communicative dimension and produce channels for both economic transactions and political mobilizations. In this sense, it can be configured as labor in Marxist terms, a "formative activity" which produces value (Marx, et al. 1906 Vol. 2). Elyachar has taken up this concept and intersected with Marxist analysis of labor in order to talk about the economic and social significance of daily interactions in constituting the channels through which Egyptian workshops operate (Elyachar 2010). Expanding from purely linguistic practices, she analyzed how daily mobility in the city, house visits, and food-making constitute a phatic labor through which the channel necessary for the operations of workshops in Cairo are created and preserved.

Hong, and many others like him, perform the same labor every day in Bangkok, silently and invisibly weaving the threads of multiple imagined communities. Motorcycle taxis, in this sense, constitute one trip at a time the channels through which urban and national social, economic, and political communities are created and sustained. The delivery of newspapers, if symptomatic of their roles, is only a minimal part of the drivers'

participation in creating channels through which people, commodities, and ideas travel around the city, as well as across the larger national sphere. Hong, in fact, after quietly performing his newspaper round, will head back to his station and, together with other 200,000 drivers, will start ferrying bodies, documents, and commodities creating multiple channels—communicative, economic, and aspirational—that weave together the city, its dwellers, and economic circulation.

All around the city, motorcycle taxi stations (*win*)—a few meters of road pavement confined by two crash barriers borrowed from the local police station where a lines of bikes angle parked—start to thicken with drivers, who converge from small and cramped apartments in the urban periphery, where growing land prices and the sprouting condos are slowly displacing them. Each driver arrives, parks his bike, drops his stuff somewhere and rapidly gets his first client, as the morning traffic picks up. Drowsily they start weaving together Bangkok's social and spatial landscapes, one trip at a time, allowing the city to move, commodities to circulate, and urban dwellers to reach their destinations. Through their mobility, millions of people, as well as documents and commodities, are moved around the city, creating channels that define, especially during traffic jams, the difference between reachable and unreachable locations, markets, and meetings.

Hong and his colleagues, mostly males from rural villages, with their swerving mobility provide a functional system of transportation and delivery for a city that state-run mass transportation systems have failed to connect, both spatially and socially. In other words, they create not just immaterial communicative channels but also render viable the concrete infrastructural channels of mass transportation and economic circulation, which would otherwise be blocked. The importance of their phatic labor for the city is nowhere more evident than in the significance of motorcycle taxis to the operations of Bangkok ultra-modern elevated Skytrain.

The invisible creators of channels.

The elevated Bangkok Transportation System (BTS) opened in 1999, after decades of failed attempts. Its birth was one of the responses to the 1997 economic crisis, an economic collapse that set Thailand's

dreams of becoming a global economic power back a few years. The early 1990s, in fact, had been the years of Asian Tigers, with Thai GDP growing 10% yearly and Bangkok increasing its political, economic, and cultural primacy over the nation. The future was bright, both national government and International Financial Institutions (IFI) reassured (Stiglitz and Yusuf 2001). This massive growth, however, harbored unspoken fears of a burst, which were dramatically fulfilled in 1997.

On 14 May and 15 May of that year, the Thai baht was hit by massive speculative attacks. Driven by the easiness of moving capitals in and out of Thailand and the increasing instability of its economy, this speculation became the spark that ignited the Asian financial crisis. After some resistance from the Thai government to devaluate the baht, the currency was left free to fluctuate and lost more than half of its value in a few days in July 1997. Suddenly most Thai companies, which had borrowed in foreign currencies, saw their debt burden duplicate. In a few days, a significant number of these economic players went into bankruptcy. Thailand's booming economy came to a halt amid extensive layoffs in finance, real estate, industry, and construction resulted in huge numbers of workers returning to their villages in the countryside and 600,000 foreign workers being sent back to their home countries. [53] Financial markets, industrial production, urban change, internal migration, consumerism: everything seemed to stop (Bello, et al. 1998; Kasian 2002; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Warr 2005). These halting consequences were caustically represented by the photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom in his notorious exposition *Dreams Interruptus*, which presented desolated images of deserted buildings, incomplete skyscrapers, and abandoned tools.

[53] The number of general unemployed grew from 697,900 during the dry season of 1997 to 1,479,300 in the dry season of 1998 (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 7)

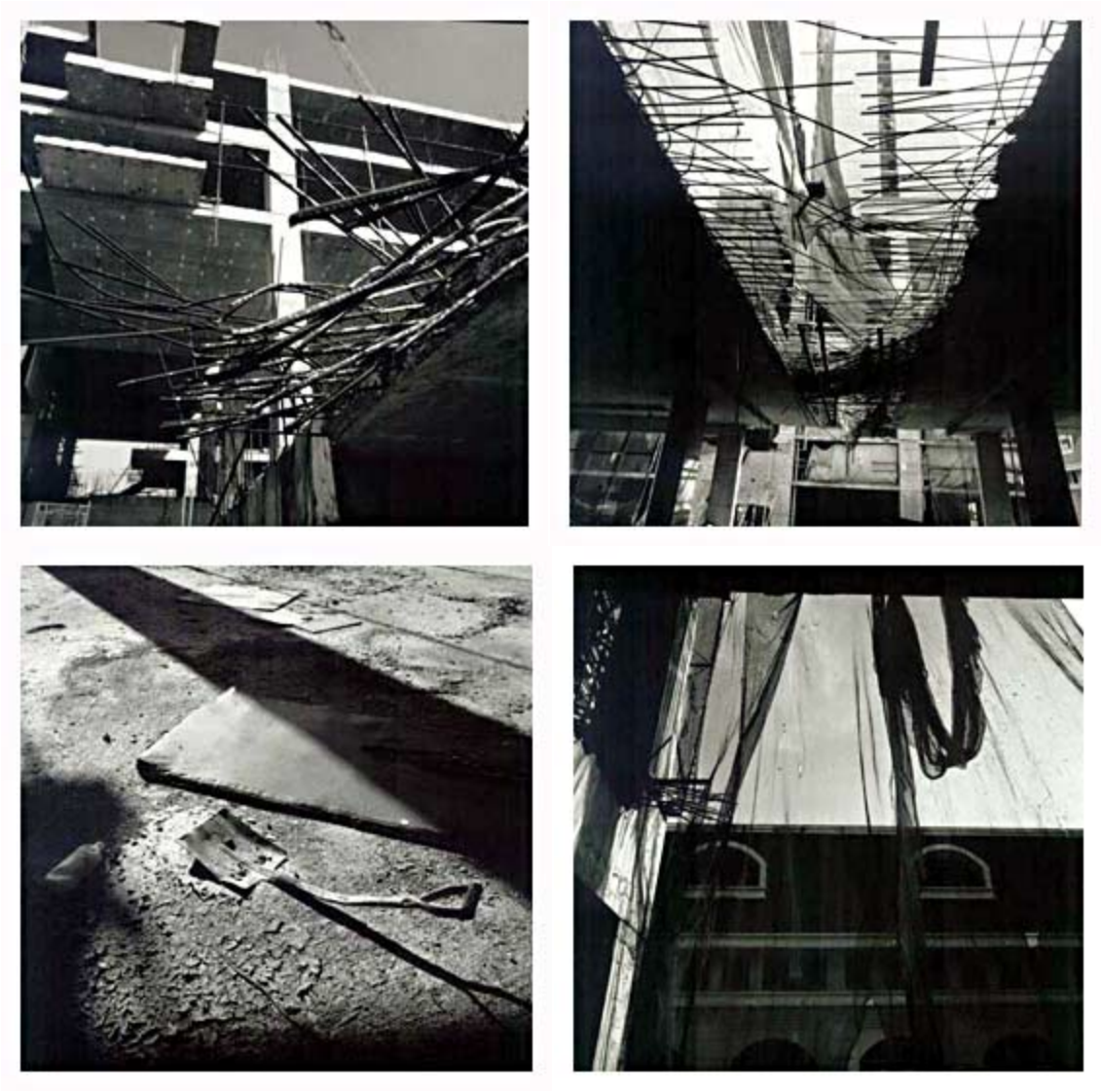


Figure 2: Four pictures from Manit Sriwanichpoom's "dreams interruptus"

The post-crisis governments of Chuan Leekpai responded to the economic slow-down with interventions that aimed at fostering physical mobility and economic circulation. In the following years, financial markets were deregulated, capital flows rendered more fluid, and international companies were granted unprecedented access to the Thai economy (Pasuk and Baker 2008). In Bangkok, shopping malls increased in number and size to foster consumption,[54] while new infrastructures of mass transportation, such as the Skytrain, were put

[54] Interestingly even street vendors reconfigured new and highly formalized—yet illegal—organizational strategies, such as franchising carts, sold informally to vendors and spread around the city (Paisarn 2006).

into place with the idea of injecting new blood into the stagnant circulation of its Central Business District and force-restart the dream of becoming a global economic power (Bengtsson 2006; Peeradorn 2007). The Skytrain, in particular, was to be the symbol of the renewed metropolis, where well-dressed middle class clients (as the poster shows) would travel comfortably to their shopping malls in air conditioned cars, above the chaos of street-level traffic.



Figure 3: Poster from the walls of the Skytrain

This plan, however, encountered a number of problems that challenged the sustainability and economic viability of the proposed solution. The elevated railway that was supposed to conduct Bangkok out of the crisis failed to deliver its promises. In the first years of operations, in fact, the Skytrain struggled to fit into the existing urban structure and to become part of the everyday life of the city. First, the new system of transportation did not tap into the main residential areas, located far away from the Central Business District. Second, the overlaying of an elevated train on the fractured and maze-like structure of Bangkok allowed only for a highly condensed system that run along major through-fares, miles away from the deep soi where the majority of urban dwellers live. In other words, the problem of the soi system, which had burdened previous

forms of transportation such as trams and buses, remained in place, often positioning the Skytrain station well beyond the reach of the majority of urban dwellers. The new elevated railway turned out to be, at least for the first years of operation, an economic failure. Only with the expansion of motorcycle taxis, itself a consequence of the massive lay-off following the 1997 crisis, the Skytrain became viable.

The numbers of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, in fact, expanded rapidly after the crisis, as many laid-off factory workers entered the informal economy and took up this occupation. As a consequence, more motorcycle taxi stations appeared, often located next to the ramps connecting the elevated rail stations to the pavement below. These drivers operated the final or initial legs of a skytrain trip, those which connect the station to the travelers' homes, workplaces, or offices. In other words, they operated as what transportation studies call "feeders", systems of mobility that feed passengers to other forms of mass transportation. Although depicted as backward and unruly, these taxis soon became essential for the survival and economic viability of the Skytrain, allowing its passengers to reach the mass transportation to and from their homes, located deep within Bangkok's dysfunctional urban texture. In other words, the "modern" train needed the "backward" drivers to attract its middle-class passengers: it simply could not function without them. [55]

This relation is symptomatic of the drivers' contradictory position between indispensability, marginality, and invisibility in Bangkok. On one side, they create channels that allow for the circulation of passengers from their homes to the systems of mass transportation, and in so doing perform labor, phatic or not, which is absolutely necessary for the everyday life of the city. On the other side, they do so by remaining largely invisible, both spatially and socially.[56] The drivers often disappear into the landscape of the city and become invisible to its dwellers who rarely reflect on the roles that those drivers play in connecting and mediating the movement of the metropolis as well as millions of daily trajectories within it. While invisibility has been a characteristic of workers in capitalist cities across the globe (Holston 1989; Scott 1998), with the

[55] The same has been true for Bangkok's subway, opened in 2004, as well as the recently inaugurated Airport Link, which opened during my fieldwork. In this case the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), which controls the operation of the system, contacted motorcycle taxi drivers to establish new stations even before the train started to ferry costumers, to make sure no initial inconvenience would limit the access to the Airport Link. All of this questions easy distinctions between "formal" and "informal" economies which has dominated Thai studies but rather suggest a vision in which highly formalized not-taxed economies support the functioning of "formal economies"

[56] Their stations often fill "dead-space" in between buildings or transitional spaces next to Skytrain ramps, bus stations, or boat piers.

rise of post-Fordism, with its flexible labor and post-industrial organization—which have dominated Thai capitalism after the 1997 crisis—new forms of invisibility have emerged. As Giuliana Commisso has argued, this shift has brought the destruction of

> the urban geography of the city-dormitory, of the city-barracks, in which compact masses and uniform individuals move according to predefined runs, rhythms and times regulated by the time of the factory around which everything swarmed. The new factory designs a different architecture, a different human geography. The compact mass of the Fordist city is replaced by an unstable aggregate of bodies. The spatial separation of the factory from the city determines a kind of 'immaterialisation' of the labour force, here meant in the sense of the social invisibility of the worker's job. (Commisso 2006: 183)

The new invisibility, in other words, relies on the destruction of collective daily routine of factory work and the emergence of industrial outskirts, which erased the urban working class from the city center. This transformation, as Michael Herzfeld pointed out, has had a deep effect in the spatial organization of Bangkok, in which economic inequality has been managed through "spatial cleansing," by which working class population has been evicted from the center of the city (Herzfeld 2006). Such removal, however, does not just take the form of material relocation but also of social, political, and discursive invisibility. The drivers, blending into the landscape of Bangkok, have in fact disappeared from the eyes of city dwellers, administrators, and planners, who take them for granted. Only when, on extremely busy hours such as Friday afternoons, it becomes hard to find an available driver, suddenly city dwellers realize the drivers' centrality to urban life. As a Thai upper class friend told me, "when the drivers are too busy and there is not enough of them at the station in my soi I realize that without them I remain stuck, with no channels (*nāo thāng*) for me to move. Only when a driver comes back to the station, can I again get in motion and go back to my normal life and activities." It is precisely in this conundrum that the drivers operate: invisible as long as they carry out their work proficiently, visible and recognized in case of failures, accidents, or absence.[57]

This complex relation between indispensability and marginality, as well as between visibility and invisibility play a central role in the everyday operations of the drivers, as much as in their political

[57] This (in)visibility which, similarly to the infrastructures studied in Brian Larkin's ethnography of Nigeria (Larkin 2008), disappears only in case of failures contributes to the negative image that motorcycle taxis hold in Thai society as unreliable and untrustworthy.

participation and role in street protest, which I will explore in the second part of this dissertation. For now, let us just state that this tension does not emerge just in relation to their clients but also vis-à-vis the state and political movements. Their invisibility, in fact, operates on multiple levels. As young migrants who mostly officially reside in their villages, they remain largely invisible to the statistical eye of the state and the municipal administration, as well as to the urban electoral apparatus as their official "housing registrations" (*thabīan bān*) place them far from where they actually live and work.[58] As formally self-employed service workers, with a murky legal status, they remain mostly unnoticed by tax collectors. As semi-visible "urban infrastructure" they remain under the radar of the state apparatus of intelligibility but also from its social provisions. And, as marginal yet essential feeders to systems of mass transportation, they remain largely invisible to both urban planners and scholars.

In this sense, people like Hong may seem like pawns in this game of mobility, capitalism, and urban politics. However, when we depart from the distracted presence that organizes our daily experiences of urban setting and fight the veil of invisibility that often falls over service workers, a new understanding of their roles and of the city around them emerges. These workers, we discover, are much more than mere vessels for the flows of people, objects, ideas, and life styles. Rather they operate a pivotal phatic labor for the city and the nation. In so doing, the drivers re-define what urban life is, what spaces are reachable and unreachable as well as restructure the economic, social, legal, and political relations among its dwellers. Their lives on the move, in other words, retain a transformative potential, not just for the city around them but also for the drivers themselves who, a trip at a time, get accustomed to urban life, its marvel and its sorrows, its excitements and its crushing oppression.

A phenomenology of riding

[58] Similar dynamics, by which internal migrants remain registered in their place of origin, are typical of a variety of countries around the world, most notably in China migrants formally face a restriction on registering in the cities thanks to the very similar (and notorious) *hukou* registration system with deep effects on the social, political, and educational trajectories of these migrants and their families (Fong and Murphy 2006).

As the brief history of the Skytrain and the 1997 economic crisis demonstrates, the drivers' labor is organized in relation to complex histories of Thai capitalism, its booms and busts. Their embodied practices and experiences, in this sense, are situated within a particular configuration of capital and labor, which structures their everyday lives according to the complex rhythms of urban flows, economic production, and nature. Conversely, the drivers' everyday practices also structure such configurations, allowing people and commodities to flow across the city but also retaining the potential of stopping them, as the Part II of this dissertation analyzes. Their labor, in other words, can both interrupt and reinforce the operations of Thai capitalism as well as of urban modes of production by adapting or challenging its rhythms.

Organizing and policing this complex relation between rhythms and worker's bodies has been a central concern of capitalism since its origins, and even more clearly since its Taylorist turn. Labor struggles, in fact, have often revolved around attempts and resistances to organizing the workers' bodies in specific paces and rhythms, be them the despotic mechanical repetition of Fordist assembly lines or the unexpected fluctuations and vulnerabilities of flexible production in post-Fordism. In this sense, rhythms—so central to Engels' analysis of the British working class (Engels 1968)—are where structural political-economic conditions and the workers' everyday practices face each other in the territory of the present. For the drivers, rhythms are where the wheel of everyday life meets the road of political economy.

As I have shown their labor forces them to wake up before the people start leaving their homes, have lunch just before offices release their workers for the break, rest after the flow of urban workers recedes into their workplaces, carry out their physical functions before peak hours, and sleep when the rhythm of the city significantly slows down. All of these phases organize the rhythms of their labor and the practices of their mobility, as Hong's early navigation of the city revealed. Engaged in a complex and convoluted waltz with the rhythms of capital, labor forces, and urban nature, the drivers weave the city, its space, markets, and dwellers together. It is precisely the ability to read these rhythms and to keep a pace of mobility, especially when the whole city gets blocked in a traffic jam, which allows the drivers to produce and keep the city in motion, forging channels indispensable for the daily lives, economic practices, and mobilities of millions of Bangkok's residents. Hong's newspaper delivery is just one example of this: structured by the rhythms of print capitalism

and office work yet deeply engrained into bodily practices and everyday life. More largely, the driver's ability to adjust to multiple rhythms of capitalist production and consumption, of urban life, and of human bodies is where the specific experience of "riding the city" becomes clear.

During the day most of their rides are short and regular, ferrying clients to the near-by Skytrain or bus stations, shopping areas, or offices. Occasionally some of the drivers get a phone call from offices or shops in the area and take longer ride around the city, delivering goods and documents and filling in for the state's unreliable postal system. As the day progresses, their mobility takes on the serpentine and winding features described in the prologue. In the midst of thickening traffic the drivers call upon their skills and knowledge of the landscape, its shortcuts and hidden passages, to find paths through the maze of cars, buses, pickups and tuk-tuks. Especially in the morning and late-afternoon gridlocks this knowledge and skills become central to their work and allow the driver to find routes through spaces that seem to preclude any other form of mobility. If seen from a car or a bus the street looks blocked; from atop a motorbike small meandering highways become visible in this metal maze. As cars slowly move, trying in vain to shift to another lane, these paths rapidly emerge and disappear, open and close, framed by rearview mirrors and tail lights. In these morphing interstitial spaces motorcycle taxis find their ideal habitat, spaces of flow invisible and impervious to any other mechanical technology of mobility. Squeezed in these interstices, the drivers see a path and a shortcut when most people see a dead end.

Eyes glued to the street and body crooked to the bike, the motorcycle drivers read these movements and emerging spaces, constantly looking for a path that will open up and guessing which one will close next. The city, atop a bike, becomes a moving entity, an ever-changing maze of vehicles, traffic lights, road signs and traffic rules that can, at times, be ignored or manipulated to forge a path. When driving a motorbike in traffic the street is in front of you, ready to be taken. That street, however, is often blocked, clogged, occupied. New paths, therefore, need to be continuously found, on the spot, in order to progress. A mile ahead may take you through a back road with just enough space to squeeze ahead, against the regular flow of traffic, or through a parking lot that links back into the street. These detours become a source of wealth for

the drivers as their income is directly proportional to their ability to deliver clients faster, so to pick new ones from the station sooner. This form of meandering mobility, however, has not just economic effects. The detour, a word dear to the situationists (Debord and situationniste 1970) and to Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953) , becomes also a form of life, a modality of engagement with the city that orients their mobility in its phenomenological, discursive, and political-economic dimensions.

Such mobility, however, follow different configurations that the pedestrian meandering presented in De Certeau's famous essay "*Walking the city*" (de Certeau 1984). In this often quoted text, De Certeau starts from atop the World Trade Center in New York. Away from the roar of traffic the city appears to him as a panoramic text, open to reading because "removed from the obscure interlacings of everyday behavior" (de Certeau 1984: 102). On the ground, he notices, a different kind of activity is engaged by millions of walkers:

> *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the cursives and strokes of an urban 'text' they write without reading. […] The paths that interconnect in this network, strange poems of which each body is an element down by and among many others, elude being read. […] Such spatial practices refer to a specific form of *operations* (ways of doing); they reflect 'another spatiality' (an anthropological, *poietik* and mystical spatial experiment); they send us to an opaque, blind domain of the inhabited city, or to a *transhuman city*, one that insinuates itself into the clear text of the planned, readable city. (de Certeau 1984: 102-3)

Focusing on parallelism between walking and speech acts, de Certeau sees the city—both the planned city and the inhabited city—as a text, a text composed by the act of planning and walking. Such reading, however, is problematic in at least two ways and does not help us understand the phenomenology of riding the city.

First, as Henri Lefebvre has sensed without fully developing this intuition, "a book signifies, whereas towns and rural areas 'are' what they signify" (Lefebvre 2008, Vol I: 233). In other words, if the materiality of a text becomes a form, which signify something other than itself, the materiality of the city is both its signifiers and signified. A text is present in front of us, outside from us, and therefore its existence in our lives as well as our *presence in it* is structured by our *presence to it* (we can always close a book and walk away). Physical space, however, is around us and structures our presence in the world as well as ourselves. Equating cities to text, therefore, fail to account for this central difference and to understand the material nature of

semiotic analysis. Second, as Solnit has argued, De Certeau's analysis "suggests a frightening possibility: that if the city is a language spoken by walkers, then a post-pedestrian city not only has fallen silent but risks becoming a dead language, one whose colloquial phrases, jokes, and curses will vanish, even if its formal grammar survives" (Solnit 2000: 213). Such alarmist tones, as Thrift has showed, "may be missing other languages which also have something to say" (Thrift 2004: 44). From there he continues:

> That is particularly the case if we are willing to travel off the path of language as the only form of communication (or at least models of language as the only means of framing that communication) and understand driving (and passengering) as both profoundly embodied and sensuous experiences, though of a particular kind, which 'requires and occasions a metaphysical merger, an intertwining of the identities of the driver and car that generates a distinctive ontology in the form of a person-thing, a humanized car or, alternatively, an automobilized person' (Katz, 2000: 33) in which the identity of person and car kinaesthetically intertwine. (Thrift 2004: 46)

If we accept to take this route and question the drivers' experience of riding the city as a "profoundly embodied sensuous experience" that entails a fusion between drivers and bike, than this form of engagement with the city may have much to say on the contemporary urban condition. The motorcycles' meandering yet mediated mobility, with its risks and failures, its tentative nature, and ever-failing attempts to control them provides a different narrative of urban experience, a narrative more consistent with cities like Bangkok that have not been planned by a centralize demiurge who organized the city and retain the institutional potency to provide solutions to its dwellers' everyday problems.

This alternative narrative is uttered in ways that profoundly differs from that of walking the city presented by de Certeau and that are dominant in cities like Bangkok, made un-walkable by their smoggy air and tropical heat. These cities invite an interaction between machine and human body which is not present in walking and that de Certeau condemned in his essay on train riding as a form of incarceration and distance (de Certeau 1984). Atop a bike, on the contrary, this interaction creates a heightened sensitivity to the relation among body, machine, the terrain, and the city around them. Such closeness experienced while riding has been masterfully described by the British novelist John Berger.

> Except for the protective gear you're wearing, there's nothing between you and the rest and the world. The air and the wind press directly on you. You are *in* the space through which

> you are travelling. There is no vessel around you. But also, because you are on two wheels and not four, you are much closer to the ground. By closer I mean more intimate with the surface of the road, for instance. You are conscious of all its possible variations, whether it offers grip or is smooth, whether it's new or used, wet, damp or dry, where there's mud or gravel, where it's painted white (painted surface is always more slippery), where there's metal, where the wind blows dust, where ruts are being worn—all the while you are aware of the hold of the tyres or their lack of it on the varying surfaces, and you drive accordingly. (Berger 1991: 194-5)

In this paradoxical tension between mechanical mediation and heightened consciousness of one's surroundings lies one of the main phenomenological features of riding a motorbike: an act that entails both material and communicative components; an act that "is never a merely verbal operation but is embedded in material practices" (Laclau 2005). Riding on top of a machine in a city ridden by traffic, as the motorcycle taxi drivers do every day, gives a particular form to this act, which marks another pivotal difference between walking the city and riding it.

If, as Naor Ben-Yehoyada has shown (Ben-Yehoyada 2011), for de Certeau's walking the city resembles the performative linguistic act described by J.L. Austin (Austin 1962), riding the city—and the channels created through it—lacks the linear and predictable nature of Austin's performative acts. Riding winds, diverges, reinstates, deviates and swerves, making the felicitousness of such navigation less subjected to a series of discernable criteria and requisites. Riding retains a wandering mode, a tentative and always incomplete nature. In this sense the pragmatics of riding resemble less the one described by Austin, and taken up by de Certeau, and more the path-seeking and tentative pragmatics presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein and adopted by Tim Ingold in his work on way finding (Ingold 2000). As the Austrian philosopher showed, "we make detours, we go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it because is permanently closed" (Wittgenstein 1953: 25). Similar detours, as I have shown in the prologue, organize the drivers' phatic labor in the city, an engagement that always creates channels by *going by side roads*. Through these detours and a mastery over side roads when the highway in front of them, clogged by traffic, is closed, the drivers find their strength and relevance for the city as channels makers.[59] Although constantly

[59] In this sense riding the city and producing channels through it, as experienced by motorcycle taxi drivers, resembles Wittgenstein's language-games, which lack the predictability and ontological reality of Austin's pragmatics. Language-game, he showed, "is so to say something unpredictable. I mean; it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there--like our life" (Wittgenstein, et al. 1969: 559). Equally the drivers' engagement with the city is not based on a pre-existing reasoning or logos, but

confronted with new and emerging barriers and dead-ends that are the product of urban activities, purposes, and contexts they retain the ability to traverse them. To these barriers the drivers respond by constantly and contextually devising new activities and discovering new paths, which solidify over time into 'beaten tracks' and established routes.

Sensuous Riding: Freedom and Danger

This ability to create new spaces and routes, however, is not just predicated upon mental calculations but rather rooted in bodily sensuous experiences that alert the body to its relations to the bike and the terrain upon which it is moving. A phenomenology of "riding the city," therefore, needs to explore this bodily attunement to the space traversed as well as its sensual dimensions. As Philip Pinch and Suzanne Reimer have argued,

> motorcycles because of their speed, acceleration and regulations relating to road use, are involved in driving manoeuvres and strategies of negotiation with cars across all highway landscapes, from congested cities to main roads and motorways. Consequently, motorcyclist practices, such as queue jumping, filtering between slow moving or stationary traffic and lane splitting fast moving traffic, can be perceived by car drivers to be particularly transgressive acts (Taylor and Marquez 2000)[which] evoke feelings of s*chadenfreude*, freedom and liberation. (Pinch 2010: 7)

Since their diffusion as a mass commodity, in fact, motorcycles have been presented as objects of transgression that provide freedom through speed, freedom available to workers at a moderate price.[60] Such

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rather is centered around constantly shifting and dynamic "forms of life," in which their practical reasoning become a form of "finding one's way" through the urban reality.

[60] Maxwell analyzing the diffusion of motorbikes in 1960s and 1970s America showed that, "in the 60s, the motorcycle was cast as an object for escaping society, not confronting it. […] The older cyclists and movies created a cultural image that the motorcycle was an object with which to express individuality, freedom, and rebellion […] Honda, more than any other company, played an instrumental role in channeling the image of the motorcycle away from the hipster to the factory worker and office employee. […]But while it associated itself with respectability ("You Meet the Nicest People on Hondas"), Honda made no effort to conceal the traditional forbidden and freedom image of the motorcycle" (Maxwell 1989: 18). Similar dynamics occurred in Thailand—again with Honda being a main proponent of the equivalence between motorcycles and freedom.

vision colors the representation of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok as masculine riders,[61] skillfully dominating the speed and dangers of riding through traffic, flirting with death on a battered bike. Danger and risks, in this sense, provide a counterpoint to freedom experienced atop a bike, a counterpoint which simultaneously strengthen its transgressive nature and potentially mine its enjoyment. Such transgressive acts of path-seeking are in fact constantly confronted by the all too real possibility of a failure or an accident, of injury or death, both for the driver and for his passengers. Danger and freedom, often seen as two connected constructs,[62] become continuous experiential realities for the drivers and color their self-representation. On one side, as Hong described to me many times, speeding through traffic and taking over cars, cutting through traffic and seeing wealthier travelers stuck in their cars, provides the drivers with a sense of freedom and of self-worth. On the other, this freedom always carries with it the possibility of accidents. This dichotomy is central to the drivers' experiences and drivers try to minimize the indeterminacy of this dualism with technical skill, attentive care towards their work, and through magic, using amulets or magic tattoos to protect themselves from accidents and take control over the potentially deadly contingencies of their job.[63]

Adun, a handsome driver in his forties, dark skinned and with a broad smile that ripples against meaty cheekbones almost contradicting his deep laconic eyes, often told stories about his accidents and how the small object hanging from his neck saved his life:

> My first accident wasn't too bad. I crashed with the car, but my hand was still holding the motorcycle, when I was down on the pavement. I got hurt just a little, my leg crashed with the handle of my motorcycle.
>
> Did you have any amulets with you?
>
> Yes, this is my belief. I wear them every day. Buddhists believe in Buddha amulets. I think they saved my life twice.
>
> How did they save your life?

[61] As Halnon and Cohen have explored "lower-class men have sought alternative means of status enhancement" by "mastering a wild, screaming motorcycle." In this sense, they see bike riding as a mean through which working-class masculinity is reinforced (Halnon and Cohen 2006).

[62] For an extensive treatment of the ambivalent way in which speed, as a cultural and social construct, operates in relation to danger see (Tomlinson 2007).

[63] On the use of amulets among northeastern population see (Tambiah 1984).

> Again it is my belief. I had two big accidents. The second one was really bad. The incident took place while I was driving in Korat at 180 km/hr. A car changed lanes and I crashed. I did a 360 flip. I had no passenger. I was on my way to my home town. I flipped over the car and slide for 20 meters. My wind jacket was torn. I thought either my leg or my arm must have broken. But no, I held up my motorcycle, and rode back home. I really respect amulets. Our job is dangerous. We may even ride well and carefully but sometimes the other side doesn't ride well, the accident can happen. It is not only us alone; it has to do with the other party as well. Sometime being a careful driver is not enough; it does not depend on you.

Even if drivers like Adun take every possible measure, technical and magical, to limit their risks, riding the city remains a dangerous game, and not just for accidents. Their very presence at street corners, immersed in the chemical and sonic pollution of a city as well as their posture takes a toll on drivers' bodies and well-being. Drivers condensed this sentiment into a well-worn phrase, "motorcycle taxi drivers die young but leave free" (*mō̱tǣsai rap čhāng tāi reo tǣ mī̄ chī̄wit `itsara*). In this sense, freedom and danger both shape their relation to the city and to specific conditions of labor that, in turn, shape their bodies, well-being, and perceptions. This combination of freedom and danger—both in terms of physical and economic insecurity—has deep sensual implications, not just the driver but also his passengers and simultaneously ties together and pulls them apart.

The bond of physical proximity between the driver and the passenger, for instance, offers freedom from the alienation and *anomie* of urban life, as well as from the blockages of urban mobility on other means of transport, by putting them close to each other and immersing them in the thick of the city, its shortcuts, and traffic mazes. Yet, at the same time, this freedom always runs the risk of ending against a car or on the street pavement and pulls drivers and passengers apart, as the bonds of physical proximity established on the bike is experienced as a material and social danger.[64] Nowhere is this more evident that in the embodied, and gendered, practices of riding. Women passengers, in fact, are supposed to ride on motorcycle taxis seated with legs on one side, crossed one on top of the other and gracefully rested on the exhaustion tube. Such a posture, passively learned from other women passengers and actively discussed among them, it is one way in which the proximity of a ride is mediated through a position that shows distance, both physical and inter-personal. It is just for lovers and close friends, in fact, to ride astride, one behind the other. Even male

[64] This is especially true when the passengers are women, as urban dwellers recount stories of passengers being sexually assaulted or harassed.

passengers, to whom is socially permitted to ride astride, negotiate the discomfort of proximity by holding on to the tail of the bike, and not to the driver in front of them. The complexity of the postures devised to resolve the tension inscribed in the driver/passenger relation, give us a sense of the duplicity of "freedom of movement" as experienced on a motorcycle taxi.

The Motorcycle Gangstress, a short story penned by nationally re-known author Chamaiporn Saengkrachang,[65] offers a striking rendition of the complex physical and social dimension of this freedom and its connection to unruliness, defiance of social norms, danger, and speed. The plot is quite simple. Glangjai, a middle class woman, after years of looking down on motorcycle taxi drivers as loud, dirty, and dangerous presences in the street gives in to the growing traffic in her soi and boards one. Her first ride expresses all the complexity of riding on motorcycle taxis: on a side, she does know how to sit, how to tuck her long skirt, and how to react to the dangerous speed of the ride; on the other, a strange excitement conquers her, as she feels carried away with the speed. Her first reaction is fear and a promise to herself to never risk her life on a bike again. Soon however she find herself longing for the frightening yet exciting experience of speeding through traffic, inches away from cars and buses. While her middle-class co-workers and husband ridicule her and try to dissuade her from boarding such a dangerous and "low" form of transportation, the next time she is late for a meeting and stuck in traffic in a bus she jumps on a bike and quickly makes her way to the destinations. This makes her realize that her middle-class status has blocked her in traffic, unable to afford upper-class transportation yet avoiding the dangerous yet effective mobility of motorcycle taxis. Glangjai decides to not make the same mistake again.

> All of a sudden, a motorcycle taxi driver wearing a bright orange vest wove through the traffic and stopped in front of their taxi. The driver was about to squeeze his motorcycle in the space between two cars when Glangjai grabbed a twenty baht bill, thrust it at the taxi driver, and dashed out of the car. 'To Sanam Luang, on the Thammasat Side!' she said, pulling herself up onto the motorcycle as she had before. (Boccuzzi 2012)

On top of this bike Glangjai realizes the "terrifying stasis that underlies middle class life—that of being pinned down, fixed into categories, and ruled by social conventions" (Boccuzzi 2012: 98). Glangjai is now definitely addicted to the speed and freedom of motorcycle taxis. In the final scene she boards a bike,

[65] I thank Elle Bocuzzi for pointing out to me this short story and for here fascinating analysis of it in her book on migration and literature in Thailand (Boccuzzi 2012).

insisting to dress in a long skirt, symbol of her middle-class status, and holding an umbrella to cover her skin from the sun. Soon, however, the driver loses balance and they crash. Worried that she has been hurt the driver brings her home. Two hours later she emerges again from her house, this time fitted in clothes more suitable to ride a bike. Limping, she catches a motorcycle taxi to the hospital.

This story, the humorous tale of a middle-class woman who gets allured by the speed and freedom of movement on a motorcycle taxi, questions her class status and physical composure, and accepts the risk of an accident, condenses the tensions inscribed into the phenomenology of riding the city with its speed and dangerous freedom. Not every aspect of the drivers' operations in the city, however, is as exciting and nerve-racking as their fast zigzagging through traffic. Their presence, in fact, is not predicated exclusively upon such swift slalom through traffic but also upon long hours of waiting and sitting at their stations.

Waiting and boredom

Until now I have focused on the drivers' movement and its complex phenomenology of attempt, failed routes, and convoluted paths. This meandering progression positions them as phatic laborers and mediators of commodities and bodies. Their double role as phatic laborers and mediators, however, does not only play out in movement. Even if the drivers deliver people and objects around the city in a capacity unmatched in volume, presence, and spatial precision by any other transportation system, mobility is not their only form of engagement, especially at the smaller scale of their district. Sitting at street corners the drivers become privileged sources of local knowledge about territory, relevant landmarks, and shops in the area where they operate, but also provide a constant presence in the neighborhood. From good food to directions, from friend's houses to shortcuts, from a hand to move furniture to someone to keep an eye on their houses while they are gone, city dwellers turn to them whenever they need something at their doorsteps. As a consequence, a complex relation between movement and stasis orients the drivers' phatic labor in their specific urban neighborhoods, creating channels that connect and weave together local dwellers, shops owners, street-vendors, office workers, and police officers. Clearly, the movement of people, goods and

documents between all of these actors is central for the creation of these channels. Yet, for the drivers' presence in the local district, movement becomes less important and stasis, waiting, and boredom become forms of engagement as important as their flow, if less clearly oriented and intentional.

The drivers' phatic labor, as other forms of phatic function (Jakobson and Rudy 1962)—such as unconsciously nodding as a person speaks and humming "yes, yes" during a phone call—do not happen only through directed and pointed action, such as mobilizing commodities and people across the urban landscape from A to B. On the contrary, most of the times these actions occur with no specific goal in mind. In this sense, for the drivers, waiting becomes a skill, a virtue, and a form of engagement in the social life of the neighborhood, as important to the creation of its channels as their roles as movers of its dwellers and objects. This waiting—much like the productive boredom analyzed by Michael Herzfeld in his study of Cretan artisans (Herzfeld 2004)—is fecund with expectations and interactions, as well as with learning and discussions. If for the artisan's apprentice described by Herzfeld waiting became a time for "stealing with the eyes" the craftsman's skills, for the drivers waiting is a time for "mapping with the eyes" the neighborhood around them, as well as larger publics. Given the rhythm of the drivers' life on the side-walks, for instance, reading newspapers and magazines, as well as chatting with colleagues, play a central role in their daily life. This configures them, in relation to other service workers, as well-informed and eager readers of anything that comes into their hands and therefore often closely involved in the "public" that these newspapers create, and often active and vocal political commentators. While their political participation to these larger publics will be analyzed in the second part of this dissertation, for now I want to focus on another aspect of their apparently dead time at their station, one which has to do with the creation of channels through which social relations between the drivers, local state officials, street workers, and dwellers are forged and sustained.

As the life of the street unravels in front of their bored yet vigilant eyes, the drivers engage in a sociality of proximity central to their operations and significance for the city. It is physical presence and boredom, not just speed and movement that transforms the drivers into central characters in the theater of life at a street corner. A witty remark to a good-looking woman who works nearby, a short chat with the older

man who stops every time he comes home from his afternoon walk, a hand to a vendor pushing the cart along the road, and a quick repair for an older woman in the neighborhood: through these repeated everyday interactions the drivers preserve and create channels through which they attempt to enable their physical, social, and economic mobility. Such attempts to transform physical mobility and stasis into other forms of mobility are, however, a gamble,[66] one which can project the drivers into another life or keep them stuck in their place.

Converting forms of mobilities: Kong, Boon, and Adun.

Kong is a middle-aged driver who operates in Bang Sue district, inside one of the many new developments (*mū bān mai*) mushrooming at the outskirt of Bangkok. Hidden away from the main road and framed by a cement arch that delimits its border, the neighborhood preserves the enclosed feeling of older urban communities shaded by mango trees. A few steps beyond the arch, however, open the view to two rows of modern concrete townhouses with adjacent garages, clustered around an L-shaped dead-end road. Right where the street bends, underneath a wooden gazebo, sits a group of five drivers, the only not private means of transportation available in the neighborhood. While their secluded location and few potential costumers limit trips with passengers to sporadic short rides to the main road, Kong and the other drivers make a good income, up to 1000 baht (30$) in a day, by delivering documents and paying bills for the middle-class residents. Even more important, and potentially remunerative, during their waiting time they create and sustain channels with local dwellers that can open unexpected routes of social and economic mobility.

The first time I visited Kong, he was sitting on his bike drinking a beer that an older woman in the neighborhood had offered to the *win* to thank them for watching her house while she was away, visiting her son and grandchildren in the northern city of Chiang Mai. As we start chatting, Kong's astute eyes, framed into an aging chubby face, kept looking away from me, checking on two local children who biked on the road

[66] Gambling in this sense provided a model for the relation between risk-taking and masculinity among the drivers. For a treatment of their interplay in gambling culture see (Malaby 2003).

beside us to make sure they did not get into the main road, few meters away. It was clear, since this meeting, that Kong was immersed into a bundle of daily interactions predicated upon his reliable and consistent presence at the corner, which guaranteed him regular offerings of food and drinks—such as the beer we shared—as well as more significant and empowering forms of access, such as better jobs perspectives for his family, financing opportunities, and powerful patronage.

This mesh of social relations, however, was not built overnight but rather the product of sustained and long-term interactions that occurred mostly in the long waiting time between a ride and another. It was not by chance, after all, that drivers who operate in larger and more crowded roads could rarely claim the same immersion in the life of their neighborhood. Kong, on the contrary, has established his presence as a mediator of local dwellers' relations with post offices, utilities companies, and banks as well as an informal local security guard over his ten years of operations in the area. As a result of the relations of reciprocal trust that he has been able to build with local dwellers a continuous flow of money, bills, and checks traveled on his wheels in and out of the community. "They see me here every day. I saw their kids being born, their parents die. We are a community and we help each other. If they need something they know they can find me here, sitting on my bike. I help the neighbor take care of their gardens; I look after their houses, or give a hand to move furniture. They know they can trust me. Sometime they even trust me more than I would like" Kong told me during my first visit.

Puzzled by his allusion to this excessive trust and attracted to the calm of his neighborhood, I kept coming back to see Kong throughout my fieldwork, whenever I needed a rest from the chaos of the city and wanted to drink with him. During these visits I saw him managing the complex sociality of proximity that defined its daily presence and social standing in the neighborhood. One day, passing by, I stopped at his station but Kong was not there. The other drivers directed me to a small apartment in a crumbling construction building right outside the arch. Kong was sitting outside with a group of friends, without his vest and visibly drunk. "What happened?" I asked. "I am celebrating; my daughter has been admitted into a private school of accountancy. We fought but now finally she can have a better future, not like her father

working all day in the street." He laughed. "Does she have a scholarship?" I inquired, curious to how he could afford the school tuitions. "No, Mr. Pong will pay." He said raising his chin toward the biggest house in the neighborhood, at the end of the road.

Kong had talked to me before about Pong and their shady business deal. After years of using Kong to deliver documents around the city and keep an eye on his house when he left Pong, a wealthy businessmen involved in construction, had started to ask him to deliver envelopes with money around the city, in exchange for a generous fee. Over time, the amounts inside those envelopes grew from few thousand baht to hundreds of thousands, well beyond Kong's monthly and, at times, even yearly income. Kong diligently carried the money to their destinations without asking questions about their provenience and keeping to himself his fear of being caught by local police or by criminals with these piles of cash. "At the beginning, I was so scared when I had to carry this money." He told me. "What if I get attacked? I thought all the time. What if I get stopped? I used to tuck the envelope inside my pants, on the back and, cover it with my shirt and vest, then I found a better method. I parked my motorbike inside Mr. Pong's garage and unscrewed the front part of my scooter. I put the money in and then close everything so no one knows that I have money and where the money is."

As Kong's deliveries continued without glitches, the sums kept growing to a one-time peak of three million baht (100,000 $). "I was so scared," he recounts. "I had never seen so much money. I had no idea where to put them, the whole bike was full of money, in the front, in the back, behind the lights, I was a moving bank." He laughs. As an effect of this sustained relation, Kong and Mr. Pong created an increasing tight circuit of reciprocal favors in which the former became a mediator for the businessmen, as well as a handy-man in his house while the latter sponsored Kong son's ordination ceremony. This exchange of favors solidified over the years and culminated the day before. Kong's daughter had taken the admission exam to a local private accountant school and passed it, leaving him to find money to fulfill her dreams and activate new forms of social mobility for his family. During a chat with Mr. Pong outside his house, Kong had mentioned

his financial conundrum and the businessman had offered to pay his daughter's tuitions, opening up a new channel for social and economic mobility.

Through his sustained and regular presence in the neighborhood, the establishment of reciprocal trust and a circuit of favors, Kong was able not only to create new channels through which Pong's cash traveled around the city in exchange for a payment but also channels between him and the businessmen that allowed his daughter to enter a prestigious and expensive college in Bangkok, a school well beyond Kong's financial reach. He was able, in other words, to convert the presence in the neighborhood, both in terms of movement and stasis, into other forms of economic and social mobility for his family. Being able to navigate successfully the sociality of proximity in his neighborhood allowed Kong to transform repeated interactions into more concrete and empowering forms of access as well as establishing unexpected forms of social mobility that could be set in motion through his phatic labor.

A similar successful transformation of forms of mobility was performed by Boon, another driver who operated inly a small soi along Sukhumvit Road, which houses a mix of office workers, local elites, and expatriates. In the neighborhood Boon was renowned as a reckless driver, ideal if you had to get to your destination in a record time but otherwise to be avoided. Such a taste for speed was inscribed into his upper-body, scarred by the signs of multiple accidents, the most serious of which shattered his forearm's bones and left his right arm slightly bent, unable to distend fully. Speed atop a bike, however, was not Boon's only celerity. His fast tongue and taste for local gossip was another trait which made him a mediator of information in the neighborhood.

In March of 2010, right after the end of the school year, the story of the son of a local wealthy family was on everybody's lips. The boy, the talk on the street went, failed his primary school final exams and, in so doing, jeopardized his chances for a good education. The gossip, mixed with the sadistic pleasure of seeing a well-to-do family put to shame, spread like wildfire around the soi and arrived to Boon's ears. Waiting at his station, he listened carefully to this story and the half-muttered jokes that the local street-vendors repeated to each other every time the kid's parents drove past them. Soon Boon became himself a

teller of this story to other local residents, who stopped to chat with him on their way home, as he sat at the street corner waiting for clients. One of them, who often used Boon as a messenger, told him that he knew a school headmaster who could—for an appropriate remuneration—find a way to get the kid into a good school, regardless of his academic results. After a few days of reflection, Boon decided to pay a visit to the family and offer his services as go-between to put the family in contact with the headmaster. After they worked out a deal, which probably entailed a conspicuous bribe, Boon received a generous fee of 30,000 baht that he invested to finish the ground floor of his house back in the village, solidifying his local status as a successful urban migrant.

Boon's social mobility, in other words, was enhanced through a dense mesh of social relations with local street vendors and dwellers that he established over time and allowed for the creation of channels for social and economic mobility, both for him and for the young boy. Through them the child entered a good school and Boon created a debt of gratitude toward him, as well as an actual payment, which in turn solidified his position in the neighborhood, and his economic and social standing in the village. In this sense, the phenomenological dimension of Boon's labor in the city, made of movement and stasis, allowed him to transform his political-economic standing, both in the city and the countryside.

Through a complex relation between movement and stasis in their neighborhoods and an ability to create new channels as well as to move along existing ones, both Boon and Kong were able to transform and activate social relationships that, in turn, allowed for multiple forms of economic and social mobility. As in Bourdieu's theorization of the convertibility of economic, social, and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986), the drivers attempt to convert different forms of mobility—physical, social, and economic—one into the other. Such conversions are possible precisely because these different forms of mobility retain some similarities that allow for their exchange. As Kauffman, Bergman and Joye argued, referring to the correspondences between physical and social mobility:

> First, both forms of mobility are concerned with structural change and social transformation. Second, both are concerned with preconditions and consequences of movement; spatial mobility includes transport and communication systems as reactants to, or moderators of,

> time and space, while social mobility proposes reciprocities between social background, institutional arrangements, inheritance and achievement. Third, both emphasize the importance of space (social vs. geographic) and time (temporal effects on social position and structure vs. speed of displacement of goods, information and people). (Kaufmann, et al. 2004: 748)

These parallelisms, I argue, can be expanded also to economic mobility that, in the same way, is concerned with structural transformations, is an effect of movement (of capitals and resources), and operates through a displacement of capitals, commodities, and labor over time and space. The exchanges of economic, social, and physical mobility, therefore, as Bourdieu has argued for capitals, can occur but "in contrast to the cynical but also economical transparency of economic exchange, in which equivalents change hands in the same instant, […] presupposes misrecognition, in other words, a form of faith and of bad faith (in the sense of self-deception), presupposes a much more subtle economy of time" (Bourdieu 1986: 54). This attunement to an economy of time, both in their physical and social mobility, makes the drivers' attempts to convert mobilities a gamble that requires patience and endurance

In other words, the phenomenology of the drivers' everyday labor—with its long waits at the street corner and speed of movement through the city traffic—requires them to adjust to urban rhythms in order to become mediators of movement in their neighborhood as well as reliable presence and trusted helpers. While adapting rhythms and striking a balance between movement and stasis insure their success as drivers, it does not, however, guarantee the success of their conversions of forms of mobility. This secondary mobility, on the contrary, requires a longer game, one that does not play out in the daily routines of rides but over years, in the time between rides. As we saw, Kong created the connections that allowed for his daughter to enter the private school over years of long waiting times at the neighborhood during which he established a close relation to Mr. Pong. Similarly Boon heard about the kid's difficulty and the headmaster through connections built over years of services in the neighborhood. The conversion of mobilities, in other words, happened over a much longer temporality in which particular relations, such as the one between Kong and Mr. Pong, are developed, nurtured, and solidified, before they can allow for the transformation of physical mobility into

more empowering forms of economic or social mobility. Such transformation, as Bourdieu has argued in the case of capitals:

> presupposes a specific labor, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which, as is seen in the endeavor to personalize a gift, has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange. From a narrowly economic standpoint, this effort is bound to be seen as pure wastage, but in the terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment, the profits of which will appear. (Bourdieu 1986: 54)

As Bourdieu acknowledged, however, not every investment is successful. Similarly, not every driver's navigation is as felicitous as Boon's and Kong's in securing strong connections and converting forms of mobility. Similarly to their physical movement, other forms of mobility are also ridden with risks and contingencies, less concerned with accidents and more dealing with the uncertainty of the future. In most cases, in fact, being able to traverse social and physical spaces, and to spend time in them, does not create new paths and mobilities but rather reveals the contingencies and fragilities of the drivers' attempts. Adun, whose life had been saved by his amulets, did not have the same protection from the contingencies of daily life in his neighborhood.

Adun's daughter, Nam, was at the time of my fieldwork finishing school in the countryside and hoped, and increasingly expected, to move to Bangkok after graduation. Her father's plans, however, were not to see his daughter swell the ranks of the urban working class but rather to find a way to get her into Saint Louis College, a prestigious school nearby his station, where she could study as a nurse. Adun's predilection for this college was not only derived from its reputation but also from personal channels that he had built over time with an older French priest who had been appointed to the school's church a decade before, as a form of retirement from his previous three decades of missionary life in remotes parts of northern Thailand. Carrying local clients to the church or the adjacent school, Adun had met the priest multiple times and started to run errands for him. Over time a solid friendship developed, a friendship that played into inter-generational relations and made Adun proud of displaying care for the elder priest, to whom he referred as *phɔ̄*, father. "He reminds me of my father," Adun told me one time. "You know we respect elders here in

Thailand so I take care of him." Especially since the priest's health had taken a turn for the worst, Adun visited him every day, spent some time with him, and brought him some groceries that the congregation would not provide, such as cigarettes and a regular bottle of Cointreau, the expensive French orange-flavored liqueur for which Adun developed a taste. These visits, dense with care, attention, and concern, became a regular part of the two men's daily routines, slow hours in which Adun would take down his vest and sit at the priest's bedside. Over time, this sustained relation started to be envisioned by Adun as a potential channel for the realization of his dreams for Nam's physical and economic mobility. In their conversations he increasingly talked about her, her aspirations, and hopes. Slowly the priest became sympathetic to Adun's struggles and eventually promised to take care of her, once she would be done with school. For the biggest part of my fieldwork this seemed a successful story of Adun's ability to convert forms of mobility and provide new access to his older daughter, who was waiting in the village to move to Bangkok and get on to her aspiration as a urban dweller. Few weeks before I left Thailand at the end of 2011, however, the old priest unexpectedly died, leaving nothing written about his promises to Adun and revealing the fragility and contingency of his aspirations. Adun never spoke to me again about the priest's promises or bad-mouthed him for empty promises but it was clear that this occurrence set him years back in his search of a better future for his daughter and meanwhile forced him in the to send her to a high-school in the district capital instead of a cushy private nursing school in Bangkok.

As this failure reveals, the drivers' everyday lives, either in movement or in stasis, are ridden with danger and contingencies, threats to their spatial, social, and economic mobilities that amulets are not always able to control. These mobilities are constantly challenged by their own fragilities, the same fragility I showed in Bangkok's urban configuration and in the drivers' movements across the city. Like the drivers' lives, constantly balanced on few inches of rubbers tires and prone to accidents, their aspirations require adjustment to an economy of time and the establishment of sustained relations that can disappear in a moment, carried away from an external occurrence, a wrong move, or a death.

Adun: a life in between worlds

In this chapter I have analyzed the drivers' role in the city using the concept of phatic labor. I showed what types of communicative, social, and economic channels are constituted through this labor and analyzed the phenomenology of the drivers' navigations, their sensual components and risks. Moreover, I explored their attempts to transform them into path for social and economic mobility. Most of this analysis, however, has used Bangkok as the scale of operations. Yet the drivers' phatic labor is not limited to Bangkok, quite the contrary. Many of them, in fact, decided to take up this occupation precisely because it allowed them to go back to their provinces regularly, without having to request vacations or negotiate payments. Adun's personal history is emblematic of this professional decision and double life.

Born in a small village in Udon province, a few miles away from the Laotian border, he arrived for the first time in Bangkok in 1979, at the age of 15—or, as he punctuates time, "as soon as I got my ID." He came to the city and spent his first month walking to his job in a small shoe shop because he did not know how to jump onto a bus that stopped only for few seconds in front of his door—he told me one day, sitting on his newly purchased Honda. He was paid 50 Baht a week.[67] As soon as he accumulated a few hundred baht he went back to the village, home-sick. Soon desires for a stable income and a different life brought him back to Bangkok. He worked in jewelry-polishing, construction, and furniture-making, only to land finally in a small chemical factory. In his seasonal trips back to his village he got married, had children, but never managed to move his family to Bangkok, owing to the high material and emotional costs of raising his kids away from land, family, and the village school.

After a few years in Bangkok, Adun got to know a group of motorcycle taxis from his province operating close to his factory. Saving up a little money he bought a battered motorcycle,[68] and started to work

[67] The official minimum wage in 1979 was of 45 baht per day.

[68] The drivers ride a variety of motorcycles and scoters, with the latter dominating the business given their manageability in traffic. The majority of them are of Japanese brands, mostly Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki. Given the local production of bikes as we saw in Chapter One, the costs remain relatively affordable. About a month of income as a driver –normally between 12000 (400$) and 30000 (1000$) depending on locations –buys a second-hand bike, in a decent state.

with them as an after-hours driver. Soon Adun realized that this job offered him a renewed freedom.[69] He had no boss who ordered him around, a better income, and the opportunity to go back home, whenever he had the money to do so, without having to ask anyone or lose face with a refusal. It was not, however, until 1998, right after he lost his job as a result of the financial crisis, that Adun became a full-time motorcycle taxi driver. After some harsh years of economic stagnation, the new job allowed him to bring home a better salary and to go freely back to his village for rice plowing, sowing, transplanting and harvest. In the next chapter I explore one of these trips and analyze the phatic labor that Adun, as many other drivers, performs between Bangkok and his village. In these trips they create channels connecting the two realities, move commodities and desires through them, and reclaim their central roles in the economic and social life of rural families and villages, either as farmers or as financial backers, as sponsors for ceremonies or just as guests.[70]

[69] A new body of scholarship is emerging in Vietnam on the relation between motorcycles as technologies of transportation and personal freedom among urban middle class (Sidel 2008; Truitt 2008). While profoundly relevant for my larger work, in Thailand motorbikes remain largely a working class commodity and therefore respond to different logics and dynamics.

[70] Interestingly the previous transportation providers in Bangkok, the *samlor* drivers studied by Robert Textor, had a similar regional composition, adopted a parallel language of freedom, and played similar multiple social roles in the life of the Thai countryside and its capital in the 1950s (Textor 1961).

Chapter 3: A Train Called Desire

It is getting dark. The sulfurous lights of the city fill the crisp air of winter dusk and reflect, through the large entrance, on the pavement of the train station hall, through dozens of moving legs. The Italianate barrel vault steel roof reveals the hands of the architect Mario Tamagno who designed the station at the turn of the twentieth century. Two blocks of plastic chairs, on both sides of the room, teem with people, mostly internal migrants taking advantage of the long weekend to visit their homes. The crowd is peppered with foreign travelers wearing big backpacks and Thai fisherman pants that none of the locals would wear in a public space. Above, on the balcony around the hall, wealthier travelers sit outside small restaurants and coffee shops serving western food and drinks, pastries, and donuts. The smell of wheat dough mixes with that of grilled chicken consumed downstairs.

As I step inside the station the crowd comes to a halt, called to a pause by the national anthem broadcasting from the station's speakers. It is 6 pm and the Thai nation-state synchronizes its citizens. Everybody stands still, head up, in front of the giant framed portrait of King Chulalongkorn, the "great modernizer" who overlooks the scene from a neoclassical arch connecting the hall to the tracks. A few tourists sit on the ground, puzzled by the sudden generalized immobility, indifferent to the state's interpellation. "Hail the nation of Thailand, long last the victory, Hurrah" concludes the crackling broadcast, snapping everybody out of their stasis.

I walk to the ticket box and get a third class ticket to Udon Thani, capital of one of the northernmost provinces of Isan, a few miles from the Laotian border. I pay 265 baht (9 $) for a ride that is free to Thai nationals, one of the many "populist" policies introduced by the former government of Thaksin Shinawatra and taken over by the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva who came to power in 2009 through a combination of conservative activism, parliamentarian maneuvering, and judicial coups justified by a condemnation of these very "hand-outs" policies.

No sign of Adun. Conscious of the drivers' slow descent into alcoholic inebriation on Friday evenings, I begin to worry he will not show up. He calls me an hour and a half later. "I'm already in the train," he says with his thick northeastern accent, enhanced by alcohol. "I have kept a spot for you, come in." The platform overflows with people. Sellers run up and down replenishing the travelers with food and drinks. Bags are passed to hands sticking out of the trains' windows behind which passengers take their seats, according to their tickets and class. I get into the carriage and walk down a narrow corridor surrounded by wooden benches covered by thin greasy grey plastic stuffing. Adun sits, slightly bent, on a bench he reserved for us. He wears dark blue jeans and a clean black T-shirt, a small backpack and his omnipresent purple belt bag with his documents and a few thousand baht. "Already drunk," he smiles. He takes a small bottle of *lao khāo* (rice whiskey) out of his backpack and passes it to me. "Get used to this," he tells me behind shaking eyelids that he struggles to keep open. "No whiskey and soda at home. And no ice too. In the village, we are not developed yet (*yang mai phatthanā*)." In the next few days the rhetoric of the city as a space of development and modernity as opposed to the village as the space of "not yet," will often come up in our conversation.

Adun's inscription of development to a specific location and consequent reframing of other locales as spaces of "not yet" resonate with a long history of dominant epistemes in Thailand, such as those of *phatthanā* and of *siwilai*. Such historicisms—developmentalist narratives that create modernity, urban and Western, by posing it at the top of an evolutionary ladder—have been outlined in the context of colonial relations by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe*. This narrative, he showed, "made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather something that became global *over time* by originating in one place (Europe) and spreading outside it" (Chakrabarty 2000: 9). Similar historicist and diffusionist models, he continues, have been adopted by nations outside the West that produced local versions of the same narrative, replacing Europe with some locally constructed center. The Thai national discourse of urbanity and modernity, here voiced by Adun, is but one of such adoptions, part of a regime of internal colonialism that has shaped and still shapes the relation between Bangkok and its provinces, and Isan in particular.[71]

[71] This relation—analogous to what Gramsci has described in the Italian South—started during the reign of King Rama V. A completely new set of techniques of governance, modeled around colonial administrations in the region, was introduced by the Siamese absolute monarchy and actively implemented well after the fall of absolutism in 1932, into the Cold War period, by the Thai

In this spatial imaginary, Bangkok is framed as the ultimate space of modernity defined by its distance—both spatial and temporal—from the village, reframed as the quintessential space of backwardness, a space of the past.[72] The rice whiskey Adun is handing me is, in his vision, a sign of such temporal distancing of the village in the realm of "not yet"—not yet developed (*yang mai phatthanā)* to use his words. This distancing, however, does not only project the village into the past, but also prefigure a hailing for the present, imagined as urban. Colonial relations, such the ones evidenced by such historicism, in fact do not just restructure temporal sequence, but also create new desires among its subjects for participation into the present. As Talal Asad has shown, European power operated in colonial settings "not as a temporary repression of subject population but as an irrevocable process of transmutation, in which old desires and ways of life were destroyed and new ones took their place" (Asad 1991: 314). As the drivers move between Bangkok and their villages, this tension between the evolutionary temporalities of internal colonialism and the new desires produced by them become central for their lives.

This chapter explores the relation between desires and spatio-temporal imaginaries and focuses on the drivers' roles in mediating and diffusing both of them across the rural landscape of Thailand. In so doing, I expand the analysis of the drivers' phatic labor initiated in the previous chapter beyond the city and into the Thai countryside. I reflect on the mutual production and of urban and rural spatial imaginaries and the drivers' roles in it, whether materially or discursively. The drivers, I argue, do not just produce and sustain the

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developmentalist state, as I showed in Chapter 1. These new techniques ranged from territorial constitution and penetration to forms of governance and administration, from religious conversion and proselytism to racial politics and resources extraction The persistence of such regime has been showed by a number of scholars (Reynolds 1987; Reynolds 2002; Thongchai 2000), and most prominently voice by Peter Jackson and Rachel Harrison (Harrison and Jackson 2011). Paradoxically, this recognition of colonial structures operating in Thailand and specifically in Isan, has not just been voiced by critical intellectuals. One of the most public contemporary formulations of internal colonialism in Thailand has been voiced, in fact, by Gen. Sayud Kerbphol, echoing Marxist voices that he has personally contributed to suffocate during the Cold War. An ultra-royalist military official, first director of the CSOC (Communist Suppression Operations Command) and central figure in the later renamed ISOC (Internal Security Operations Command) between 1966 and 1983, Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Army between 1981 and 1983, vocal member of the conservative yellow shirted PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy), and actual president of the People Network for Election and the Bangkok Vegetarian Society, Gen. Sayud Kerbphol was quoted saying: "Avoiding colonization by Europe simply meant that we colonized our own people. This internal colonialism in which officials appointed by the metropolis rule and drain the country-side like conquered provinces has led to obvious differences among the Thai." (Bangkok Post, January 4th, 1976)

[72] As Eli Elinoff and I have analyzed, such historicism is "critical to the production of temporal politics and policies that position Bangkok as a developed and modern core and the Thai hinterlands as the quintessential spaces of 'not yet'. Isan [Thai northeast], in particular, has long been conceptualized and represented in these terms: not yet developed, not yet disrupted by modernity, not yet educated, not yet capitalist, not yet ready to partake in democratic electoral politics. The depictions of Isan as a region of the 'not yet' extend on both sides of the Thai political spectrum and populate the national imaginary. While its residents and citizens have been pivotal in the production of Bangkok's hegemony—its urbanization, its industrial capacity and its economic dominance over the country—they often remain stuck, by Bangkok-centric discourses, in the realm of the 'not yet" (Elinoff and Sopranzetti 2012: 301).

channels that connect these spaces, they also move and mediate commodities, life-styles, and ideas through and between them. In so doing, they recreate contradictory temporal narratives about Bangkok and the countryside that, whether grounded in experience or not, sustain desires for urban commodities and life-styles to which the drivers become both re-producers and victims.

In the first part of the chapter, I focus on the discursive production of Bangkok as a space of development and migration, a space of a glamorous and exciting future. I show how such depictions, created by capitalist cultural production and reinforced by the drivers' mobility between the city and the countryside, produce opposing and complementary imaginaries that position Bangkok as a place of progress while pushing the village away from the capital city. Such banishment involves both spatial and temporal components and frames the rural an unexciting yet pristine place of calm and relaxation, both *before* and *away* from the city and its urban modernity. After all, as Michael Herzfeld has argued for the relation between tradition and modernist, "the rhetoric of tradition and modernity is not only the epiphenomenal expression but one of the most critical instruments of hierarchy" (Herzfeld 2004: 30). The same is true in Thailand and, as a result, specific commodities and life-styles, which come to be seen as modern and urban, become tools to pull rural subjects out of their "backwardness" and project them into the future. I analyze desires for those commodities and I show how drivers mobilize them across the landscape of Thailand. In this process, however, the drivers uphold and confirm the temporal distancing of city and village, a distancing that produce and sclerotize their reciprocal relations. In this sense, the drivers remain caught in this mesh of distinct temporalities that compel them to shift regularly from the pace of the city to the pace of the village and vice versa but never allow them to fully participate in any of the two. Stuck in this complex conundrum between spatio-temporal imaginaries and desires the drivers are constantly struggling to reconcile their position yet often participate in reproducing the conditions which keeps them torn between these two realities.

This dilemma brings me to the second part of the chapter, in which I analyze another opposite, yet equally dominating spatio-temporal imaginaries among the drivers: one that positions the village as a space of return, the ultimate space of their personal futures. To this future, and the desires that it configures, the city

operates as an interim space, a space only functional to that return. In paving the way to their move back to the village, however, the drivers' experience of the city undermines their ability to get re-accustomed to life in the countryside and, once again, threatens the viability of their imagined returns. Exploring this conundrum in which the drivers are often stuck—pulled between these different temporal sequences and desires—this chapter aims at expanding the idea of phatic labor outbound from Bangkok not just spatially but also temporally. In so doing, I start to reflect on the drivers' multiple forms of mobility, the channels created through them, and their roles in pre-figuring and diffusing desires for urban consumption and life-style. Such mobilities and desires, however, remain ridden with contradictions and contingencies that generate expectations for a different life while, at the same time, undermining their full realization and fulfillment.

A train named desire

We are back with Adun. The train slowly moves out of Hualampong station, a few minutes after 8pm. In the crowded car, people start settling themselves in, cradled by the rocking progression of the locomotive. Some put luggage on the racks, some set up for the night, other pass around small food packages. A few curious people stare at us, puzzled by our odd pairing. As the train moves through the city Adun loudly enumerates infrastructural projects started by the former Thaksin government and left unfinished since the military coup that removed him in 2006.

His opinionated tirades contain criticisms for everyone: the Oxford-educated prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva who does not even know how to grow rice, the numerous Bangkok governors who declared that they would solve the traffic problem but let cars park everywhere, the local police officers who are paid by his taxes yet constantly demand bribes to let him pick up passengers or to close an eye on his occupation of public land or on not wearing a helmet. "Bureaucrats, civil servants, they are the problem of this country," he says as he takes another long sip of whiskey. "Their salaries are paid with our taxes and yet they treat us as if they were the owners. They order us around. They eat on our work. It is like Thaksin said, when we go into an office in the district or our province it should not be us to *wai* (salute) the officers, it should be them who

wai us.[73] We pay for their salaries, for their desks, and for their computers; we are the owners. Instead, Thai people always feel like we are asking them a favor and we need to be nice to them."

For Adun, as for many other drivers who still support the ousted Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra was the first national politician to reconfigure—during his premiership—the engagement between citizens and state officials, reversing established relations of power. While traditionally citizens had to approach bureaucrats with the attitude of a subject, Thaksin—adopting the capitalist language of clients and services rather than the democratic language of citizens and rights—advocated for an opposite dynamic, one in which the bureaucrats must address citizens-clients with respect and deference. This inversion, condensed in the idea of "I don't have to *wai* an official, is the official who has to *wai* me," stuck a chord with migrant workers like Adun, who in their lives, both in the countryside and in the city, experience every day the categorical oppression and indifference of state bureaucracy (Herzfeld 1992). As Herzfeld has shown, state bureaucracy operate by "treating the clients like dirt" (Herzfeld 1992: 167) and professing indifference to the citizen's requests by "petty harassment and especially the often repeated advice to 'come back tomorrow,' the endless sets of more and less identical forms, the bureaucrat's professed inability to predict outcome and duration" (Herzfeld 1992: 161). Adun confirmed this vision when talking about his experiences of being sent away and treated badly by bureaucrats both in the city and in his village. As a consequence, he—as many other drivers—saw in Thaksin's discourse a recognition of their struggles and an attempt to question this bureaucratic indifference, whether or not it actually succeeded in reorganizing the relation between bureaucrats and citizens.

As Adun continues with his alcohol-fueled invective, increasingly more rambling and blunt, the train moves through industrial compounds toward the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, before making its way east into pitch-black rice fields and bustling provincial cities of the Isan plateau. We quickly go through the first bottle of rice whiskey and our conversation increasingly follows meandering routes. I give the empty bottle back to Adun and I see a Kentucky Fried Chicken box coming out of his bag. "What the hell is that?" I ask with a

[73] On the social significance of the *wai* see (Aulino 2012)

tone only reserved to conversations among friends. Adun suddenly revives. "This is all my kids want from Bangkok." "What?" I ask, puzzled. "Yeah, all they want from the city is KFC and pizza. They must have seen it on TV and they cannot shut up about it." "Isn't that just very expensive fried chicken?" I ask. "I know and I don't even think it is good. It is greasy, tasteless and costs me five times the price of a piece of normal fried chicken but they want this from the city so I buy it. I have no fucking idea why they want this."

These pieces of KFC chicken provide one small example of the drivers' phatic labor, not just in the city, but between Bangkok and the Thai countryside, enfolded within—to use the words of Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991, Vol I : 134)—a banal everyday object: a "modern" commodity whose experience and imagination traveled to Adun's kids through multiple circuits of media-produced desires for consumption. Through these circuits fried chicken, a very common food available at any corner in Thailand, has been rebranded—and re-priced—as a new and better commodity, a sign of more advanced desires that only the city can feed and satisfy. Mobilizing and transmitting such commodities, and the spatio-temporal imaginaries and desires enfolded within them, is another dimension of the drivers' phatic labor, defined, as we saw, as labor which "produce[s] communicative channels that can transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value" (Elyachar 2010: 453). Through them, urban commodities (e.g. iced whiskey, KFC), lifestyles, as well as discourses (e.g. modern commodities, developed tastes) circulate and transform the social, economic, and aspirational landscapes of Thai villages.

The trains and buses that day after day connect Bangkok to villages across the Thai countryside do not simply carry migrant laborers, but also commodities, tastes, and imagined temporalities that configure new desires. While these imaginaries are largely mediated by tools of informational flows, such as TVs, radio, magazines, or transportation systems, such as buses or trains, what is often forgotten is the role of people like Adun, who make their way back to their villages and provide a personal and experiential immediacy to those mediated imaginaries. In this context, motorcycle taxi drivers, autonomous workers who enjoy unmatched freedom to move frequently back and forth between the city and their villages, occupy a unique position in

this mediation. Adun's frequent trips demonstrate precisely this point, bringing new imaginaries of the city and new possible futures, in this case enfolded in a greasy box of fried chicken.

The silence descends slowly on the train, as the darkness outside the windows thickens. We fall asleep. At the break of dawn, after ten plus hours of rocking movement in third class, we approach Udon Thani. Adun dozes on the hard grey bench, as people around us start to move, getting ready to disembark. We get off the crowded platform and walk in the direction of the nearby market. Adun, two pieces of greasy deep fried chicken, and myself: all three equally melting in the morning heat. The town is very different from what I expected and seemed to contradict the discourse of Isan as a backward space of "not yet." Shopping malls occupy the roads around the station and the local market is filled with *farang* commodities. The smell of hamburgers, frying bacon, and strawberries mixes with the usual local food stalls, catering to the older foreign men who live in Udon, brought here by the former American military base or by their Thai wives, often met in go-go bars in Bangkok or in the sex trade hub of Pattaya.[74] "There are many *farang* here," Adun tells me noticing my eyes lingering on the large piles of strawberries. "There is a Swiss man even in my village, he does not speak Thai but he lives in the village three or four months a year. He has the biggest house. You will see." He precedes me in the narrow lanes of the market outside the train station. Soon we embark on an auto rickshaw headed to the nearby bus station, a large ground surrounded by small shops and street vendors clustering around a concrete roof. Adun walks to a small shop. "Do you want a beer?" He offers. "I am ok," I reply, wary of pre-10 am drinks. "*Tong thǭn*" Aduns tells me, humming the tones of a catchy Isan song that praises the virtues of the "hair of the dog."[75] We sing for a minute, laughing together. He buys a couple of pens and a big jar of biscuits—other 'developed" items that go into his backpack to add to the KFC box he is bringing home to his children. Soon we get on a local bus in the direction of Bandung, his district's capital, another hour away.

[74] This town is another effect of American counter-insurgency presence in Thailand. Pattaya, in fact, flourished during the Vietnam War thanks to the proximity to an American Military Base, and solidified in the years as a destination for older foreign men. What is interesting here is that the dominant discourse of Isan as a space of the "not yet" erases this long history of international connections between the region and the world, a history that often bypassed even Bangkok. Passport ownership, for instance, is higher in Isan than in Bangkok due to international emigration (Keyes 2010).

[75] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWB4qs3tGQY.

This time Adun does not sit next to me but two rows in front. From my seat I can see him savoring the air of home as we slowly get deeper into the countryside. Dry rice fields pass by as the street gets less crowded and well-kept. His eyes examine the familiar landscape with a new light, the light that you can see on people who return home, people whose gaze moves across the familiar landscape, counting landmarks as a rosary. As for many returnees, the familiar vision carries silence. Adun does not speak a word, his eyes locked on the landscape and his chin high in the air. We get off at a small intersection, a few miles before arriving in the town, and walk to a small shop nearby: Adun is home.

The shop owner comes out to greet him and fill him in on the events of the village. Someone has died, someone got married, a new cohort of teenagers moved to Bangkok, after completing primary education. Above our heads Thaksin Shinawatra, who still retains tremendous support among the motorcycle taxi drivers and in the northeastern region at large, looks over the scene from a big banner, sitting, elbows up, on a large wooden desk. "We love Thaksin," the old seller tells me. "He did so much for us. He brought money and development to our region, he…" Adun interrupts him. "He knows, you don't have to explain." The shop owner laughs, "good."

A battered Yamaha motorbike slowly makes its way toward us, driven by a woman with a small child sitting on the bike's tank, between her mother and the handle. "This is my old bike, the one I had my big accident on." Adun tells me. "I used to drive this before, in Bangkok. It is a good bike. I could come back home in less than eight hours but it is uncomfortable to maneuver in traffic, too big. So I left it here for my wife and bought the small scooter, but I really like driving this bike." The bike, without a license plate, stops before us and the small girl runs toward Adun and jumps in his arms, in a display of affection rare in the city. A few minutes later, all crammed onto the bike, we drive on the asphalted street, built in 2004 with money from the village funds opened by the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. "This is all that the state has given

us," Adun shouts to me turning his head, "this and the village school which was built by students from Bangkok forty years ago."[76] We drive toward the small village, slowly, greeting everyone we meet.

The village coalesces around the grey street, scattered houses covered by red dust that spreads over everything: buildings, motorbikes, fields, people. Small groups of kids run around or sit outside their wooden houses. Most adults and young adults seem to have disappeared from the village, moved away to join the ranks of Bangkok's workforce. We pass an unfinished temple, a small concrete school and an empty square where middlemen come seasonally to collect rice, before arriving at Adun's home.

Incomplete homes, incomplete presents.

The compound, like most houses in the Thai countryside, comprises multiple housing units. At the entrance, behind a rudimentary arch, stands a small *salā*, a traditional wooden gazebo on stilts, under which two dogs lie drowsily. On the right, small vegetable plots provide for basic daily consumption. On the left, a small shack houses Adun's sister on the rare occasions when her family visits from Rayong, a regional center in eastern Thailand where her husband works as a doctor. A few meters away, in front of us, is Adun's home.

Originally a wooden structure on stilts, the house, as many in this village, shows the material effects of urban remittances, life-style, and architectural taste. The ground floor, traditionally left open to ensure air circulation, protection from floods, shelter for cattle, has been enclosed in cement walls, interrupted by two doors and four wooden windows. "See," Adun tells me, "we just finished the house a few years ago. I had to save money for many years but now the house is beautiful." The concrete walls cost the family 70,000 baht ($2,300) and were built, differently from the upper part of the house, by hired skilled workers.

Outward migration has not just changed the materiality of Isan houses and their architectural styles, but it has also revolutionized labor practices in the village. Hiring labor is increasingly common throughout

[76] The realization of this school was part of a program of education and development, which I analyze in Chapter 6, which was sponsored by the Thai government between 1974 and 1976 and sent university students from Bangkok around the country.

Isan. House renovations, which now necessitate specific skills, and the peak of agricultural seasons when urban workers, especially the ones who do not enjoy the drivers' freedom to leave their work whenever they want, rely now on hiring daily labor—often landless laborers from slums in the regions' growing cities (Elinoff 2013)—to carry out the jobs formerly executed by household members.

Adun walks proudly into his enclosed home with an upright posture, adjusting his body from the marginal existence of a motorcycle taxi driver on the streets of Bangkok to his rural status as a relatively successful man who works in the city. The interior space of the house, organized around six concrete pillars is sober but peppered by commodities that display Adun's urbanized tastes and economic potential to support them. Beside the entrance, on the right, two sewing machines sit idle underneath a window, surrounded by small colorful dresses that his wife is preparing for the upcoming temple fair. Next to them, a big sofa fills the space, towered by a picture of the King of Thailand. In front of the sofa, a TV dominates the room from a small table. It broadcasts images of a wealthy household somewhere in the suburbs of Bangkok where a family drama unravels before the attentive eyes of Nam, Adun's older daughter. She sits on the ground, ignoring the sofa behind her, as everybody in the family seems to do. Her eyes are glued to the screen, lost in a faraway reality, not just spatially and temporally but also economically, which she is learning to desire and yearn for and whose language, demeanors, and intricacies she is determined to grasp. As Mary Beth Mills has observed:

> Widespread images of Bangkok (particularly on television which is widely available in rural areas) highlight the city as the focal center of modern Thai life, the pinnacle of 'national development' and 'progress'. By contrast media images, as well as most attitudes fostered by the centralized Thai state, commonly identify rural agriculturalists with the national periphery; they are *khon baan nohk*, literally people of 'outlying' communities, located on the nation's social and cultural margins. As such they hold significantly lower status and power than their better educated and more sophisticated urban compatriots. Consequently many young men and women in the countryside are drawn to Bangkok in part out of desires to enhance their own knowledge and status. (Mills 1999b: 35)

One of these young women, Nam quickly *wai*s (salute) her father before sinking her teeth into the spongy piece of KFC that Adun handles to her, completing her imagination of a different life, one that express itself in a temporal sequence where the future has urban locations, life-styles, and taste bud stimulation.

Around us, the cement walls make the house stuffy, blocking the free circulation of air and light. As a result, other appliances had to be introduced to keep this more urbanized place livable: two florescent tubes, constantly on, hang from the roof lighting the room; on a side of the sofa, next to the television, a fan rotates, taking advantage of the sole electric plug in the house. Its mechanical sound mixes with the low buzz of the neon and masks the sounds of the country outside—neighbors chatting, the grind of a tire-less tractor's wheels across the pavement, the bells of buffalos being herded from field to field, and the occasional passing motorbike or truck. Both the soundscape and the objects inside this space overcome the village outside it, adding a layer to the experience of urbanized villagers (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011). This system of objects, as Baudrillard has called the carefully manufactured composition of commodities in interior design (Baudrillard 1996), project the house into a "developed" future, a future that resemble the urban household on TV, a future desired yet always beyond complete reach.

As the discourses of development analyzed by Tania Li, this carefully assembled system of objects is "punctured by the challenge it cannot contain" (Li 2007: 11) and it reveals all the contradictions of Adun family's attempt to emulate urban living: their TV set will never be fully up-to-date; the fans remain a step behind the air-conditioners dominating the city. Lacking sufficient resources and consistent access to emerging consumer technologies, what Adun's family has managed to obtain will soon be outdated and signal not their development, but rather their inability to keep up with new trends. Their attempts are always condemned to be incomplete not just for the relative poverty of Isan but, more largely, because the gap between the city and the village is essential to a dominant national narrative that produces Bangkok in opposition to the "not yet" developed Thai country side. In this sense, this whole temporal, spatial, and economic imaginary of the nation is predicated precisely on the distancing between the two spaces through which urban modernity and rural backwardness are mutually produced. For Bangkok to remain a modern center, it is therefore necessary that the village remains in the past, both a pristine past of tradition and a past of backward living.

Adun's daughter's desires to move to Bangkok are grounded in, grow from, and are limited by these imaginaries. She is, Adun tells me, increasingly voicing her intentions to migrate to the city. Nam's desires have been—consciously or unconsciously—cultivated not just by exposure to a variety of media but also through Adun's mediation of urban imaginaries and commodities between the city and his home. Both flows, in fact, have contributed to orienting her future towards Bangkok, ultimate location of development. These, in turn, have made her only more conscious of her exclusion from that future. Consciousness of such forms of everyday exclusion, Henri Lefebvre has argued in his *Critique of Everyday Life*,

> becomes transformed and loses its triviality and banality, since in each thing we see more than itself—something else *which is there* in everyday objects, not an abstract lining but something enfolded within which hitherto we have been unable to see. In fact if the harshness of peasant life and the squalor of the farmyard, or the sadness of life in a proletarian neighborhood, appear intolerable, they seem even more so once we become aware of the magnificent, grandiose character of the works they have produced with their labor. Our awareness of this contradiction becomes more acute, and we find ourselves faced necessarily with a new imperative: the practical, effective transformation of things as they are. (Lefebvre 1991, Vol I: 134)

In front of the TV with a piece of KFC in her hands, this young lady sees this imperative solidifying and the awareness of her situation growing, as she dreams of the city and its glamorous living. A dream that, unfortunately, will not be realized.

Behind the cathode ray tube, a big picture of Adun's colleagues at his *win* hangs from a cement pillar: five northeastern men in cowboy hats at a bar in Bangkok, standing in front of a fake background with an image of the American Wild West. As I stop to look at the picture, Adun proudly points out to me a member name-tag of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), a political organization, part of the Red Shirts, which is gaining momentum around the country, demanding democratic election and an end to political and economic double-standards (*sǭng māttrathān*). Behind the hanging laminated card, a curtain separates a small corner area where the family sleeps on thin mattresses, next to the wooden stairs that lead to the second floor. What used to be the central place of the house—the upper floor—is left empty and rarely used, abandoned as a space of the past, of wooden rural life unfit for the modern, concrete-framed present. If in the city past and present maintained the porous relations of a palimpsest, here the past is put away and

abandoned in the frantic—yet always incomplete—pursuit of an urban modernity, a pursuit that, as I showed, will not be fulfilled. Opposite the entrance a small door opens to an open-air canopy where the family cooks. Chickens run freely in the farmyard, kept out by a bamboo fence that surrounds the kitchen.

Adun's parents live beyond the yard, in a larger wooden house with small decorative engravings on the roof. Contrary to my unspoken romantic appreciation of this structure, Adun tells me: "That house is not finished yet." "What do you mean?" I ask confused. "You see the lower floor, it doesn't have concrete. I promised them I will finish it but I don't have money. Besides, my father almost never sleeps there. We built a raft, and he lives on the river, fishes… He likes being alone there, it is calmer." I notice all around us other houses, already *finished* or in the process of being retrofitted to include a concrete ground floor. Old traditional wooden houses, perfectly functional, have been transformed in the last years into *incomplete* houses ready to be transformed, whenever money comes in, into a *complete* residence. Regardless the resulting erosion of the area below the elevated floor and the destruction of traditional systems of air circulation, all around the Thai countryside people are investing in concrete ground floors, to complete their houses.

These work-in-progress houses, with only one wall up and unfinished pavement, reveal the material effects of the historicist ideology that Adun voiced on the train. In them, rural tradition gets reframed as unfinished, and waves of modern necessities and desires arrive to fulfill and complete it, reconfiguring both its spatial and temporal locations. It is in this rural setting, in fact, that the material effects of this ideology are more evident. Everywhere around the rural landscape of Thailand, things that have been accepted in the past are now seen as unfinished, incomplete, to be rethought and updated. These unfinished houses, however, also offer evidence of another aspect of this wave of urban modernity. They remind the impossibility for rural migrants and their families to keep up with its progression, both materially and discursively. They remain always condemned to move too slowly, to progress too irregularly, to remain too backlogged when compared with the rapid march of urban modernity. Every step forward is followed by long pause, before the next remittance, the next rice harvest, the next buffalo sold.

Spatio-temporal imaginaries, together with architecture, lifestyles, and commodities, are one of the fields in which the drivers' phatic labor transforms relations between city and countryside. In this field, as much as in that of spatial mobility and circulation of urban commodities, lifestyles, and aspirations, the drivers operate as double actors: on one side, they become mediators and reproducers of these historicist narratives; on the other they create some of the very channels that allow their circulation. Movement is, after all, always defined by a relation between space and time and the drivers create channels that are not just carved in the physical, social, and economic landscapes but also in the temporal one. The drivers are, in this sense, engaged and suspended between the multiple temporalities of the city and the village and the representations of their distinct social times, daily rhythms, and aspirational futures. While these two locations are presented as two discrete social, spatial, and temporal realities they are, on the contrary, two side of the same coin, configuring in each other by opposition. It is only by reframing the village, and its architectural tradition and social practices, as a thing of the past, incomplete and unfinished, that the city becomes the space of the present, developed and in continuous evolution. Such discourse, however, is not just a narrative construct but is also grounded in concrete rhythms that distance the city from the village. Moving between the two spaces, therefore, require the drivers, as well as other urban migrants, to adjust both practically and discursively to their distinct daily rhythms every time they change their location. A trip back to his village with Hong, the young driver we met in last chapter, revealed the difficulties and contradictions that the many of them experienced in switching between these multiple temporalities.

Troubled temporalities: Slow motion as adjusting to the past or adjusting to the future?

The mid-day August sun blazes down on us, unforgiving.[77] The fields in Isan are filled with lush rice plants ready to be transplanted. Hong and I spent the last ten hours on an interminable bus ride, punctuated by multiple breakdowns and Hong's repeated proposal to abandon the trip and make our way back to Bangkok. Resisting to his frustration with our arrested movement, we remained on the bus that, forty minutes

[77]I have purposefully chosen to use the present tense in this chapter to oppose the spatio-temporal imaginary which positions the city and the country-side in two distinct spaces.

after passing through the provincial town of Nong Bua Lamphu, leaves us at a street corner, at the entrance of a county road that leads to Hong's village. There, we hop on a tuk-tuk and head down a small asphalt road, past the roundabout, toward Hong's house. The village looks relatively affluent, filled with *complete* houses. Almost all of the lower open spaces have been walled in concrete and made into large living rooms.

The front of Hong's family house has been transformed into a small shop, a tiny corner store to which the family refers to as "Family Mart," the name of the chain shop that, together with 7-Eleven, dominates the streets of Thai towns. Hong's sister, who has recently moved back to the village from Bangkok for health reasons, runs the shop. Outside, a large wooden table occupies a shaded area, where patrons sit for a cigarette or a few glasses of *lao khāo*, after a day of work in the fields. Once in a while somebody stops by, mostly on a motorcycle but occasionally on bicycle, and orders something, the top sellers being petrol, coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol.

Life repeats as a regular cycle synchronized with the rhythms of nature, both in the shop and in the fields where the rest of Hong's family work plugging their way through the season. They wake up at 5 am, shower, drink a coffee and directly head to the field to transplant rice. Rice is pulled out in the dry field, rice is plugged in the wet field. Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut; Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut; Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut. Small bunches of rice plants pile up at the side of the dry field. When a couple of dozen are ready, they gather them up one by one, split them in the middle and lay them down on a long bamboo stick, to carry them all in one trip: up the bamboo over the shoulder for the few steps over to the wet lot. One by one, bunches are transplanted in organized, straight rows into a plot of land covered with water. Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground; Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground; Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground. This circuit of operation repeats over and over again until a break for morning food, undistinguishable from lunch food.

Hong's mother walks into the bushes for spices or vegetables that make up the daily meals. "We don't have to buy anything here," everybody repeats, especially Hong. As Thai urban migrants often do,

Hong stresses the communitarian and pre-capitalist nature of the village, again mixing different life-styles with the temporal distancing between the city and the village, dense with the idealization of an imagined past, probably never existed, and a nostalgia for a life that he does not have any more and to which he would have a very difficult time adjusting, after being taken in by the frenzied pace of the city. It is his mother who brings this point home during one of the continuous breaks Hongs takes from work in the field. "Hong is having more problems getting used to this and working with me," she tells me. "He has been in the city too long, he cannot do anything with his hands anymore and he doesn't want to. He gets bored so fast. He cannot adjust to the way of life in the village. He is used to a fast life. Here every day is the same, slow. It is hard for him."

After lunch, the family goes back to work while Hong and I fall asleep, overloaded by food, boredom, and physical work—insignificant compared to what 70 year-old farmers around us sustain. "It is in our body already," Hong's grandfather tells me with an encouraging voice. "Sit down and take rest, otherwise tomorrow your back will be hurting a lot." Hong also cannot endure this work for too long, more limited by boredom than by physical exhaustion.

After the nap, I wake up and walk into the field where Hong's older brother is working in silence. The skinny forty year-old man entered monkhood when he was a child and came out twenty years later a religious scholar, a former abbot in the local forest temple where all of the boys of the family ordained, and a student in religious schools around the country. Fed up with religious knowledge and ready to settle down with a woman, he went back home, disrobed, and lodged in a small shack in the field, where he takes full pleasure in rural silence and calm. From there, he works alone, eats small amounts of food, and is treated by the family with a mixture of distance and respect typical of their relation with monks. I walk to him and start plugging in rice plants by his side, water to our knees. After few minutes of silence he raises his head, stares for a moment at Hong, still sleeping at the side of the field, and begins to talk.

"This is Hong," he says with a soft voice, interrupted by deep long pauses. "Living in speed and making a living out of it makes it really hard to go back to slowness." Long silence. Bent over the rice field he continues. "Especially if you have less than 30 years and 15 of them have been in the city." He pauses

reflexively, while slowly pulling another bunch of rice plants into the inundated field. "Hong needs to go, to change activity, to feel like something is happening. Maybe someday he will find calm again."

If not as eloquently, Hong also voiced his hopes to find that calm someday, a dream that orients his present life in the city and his future plans to come back to the village. The different rhythms of everyday life between these two spaces, however, will require him to make deep adjustments that seem hardly manageable. Used to the fast pace of urban life, and to a job that values speed and uninterrupted mobility, Hong is frustrated, and jaded, by everyday life in the village. Like during the bus ride from Bangkok, with its failures and interruptions, slowness grates on Hong's nerves. Even if used to waiting for clients in the city, he struggle to adjust to the slow pace of the village. Waiting in the city is fecund with expectations and interactions, here in the countryside waiting means to Hong having nothing to do and nothing to expect.

A marvelous condensation of this feeling is offered in Citizen Dog (*Maa Nakorn*), a film directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, one of the main representatives of the Thai "New Wave" cinema. The Thai box-office hit and international sensation, produced in 2004, narrates the story of Bod, a young Isan migrant who moves to Bangkok and falls in love with another migrant worker, Jin. Through a surreal mix of cryptic discussion of urban class relations and classic boy-meets-girl narrative, the story follows Bod's failed attempts to get closer to Jin. Halfway through the movie Bod, ignored by Jin, finds no other ways to get her out of his head than to go back to his native village, an unwilling returnee from Bangkok. The return begins with a bucolic scene in which Bod's mother sifts rice in slow motion. For the whole time of his permanence in the village everybody goes through their daily occupations in slow motion, while Bod moves at a normal pace, confused by the different temporality of life in the countryside. The narrator explains:

> Bod notices that everything moves more slowly in the country. His Dad said that the reason it was like this was that Bod had been in Bangkok. Time in Bangkok must move faster than in the country. His Dad said he had just got there, but he'll get used to it. Many days passed by, but Bod didn't get used to it. Time passed slowly, making him hurt even more. Every breath, when thinking of Jin, took half the day. Bod decided to return to Bangkok. (Wisit 2004)

Both Hong and Adun expressed the same feeling, without Bod's lovelorn yearning. They both commented on the slow pace of life in the village and the temporal discontinuity between life in the city, with its fast pace, and life in the village, lived in slow motion, to which they grew unaccustomed during their years in Bangkok.

Even if the rhythm of village life appears to Hong, Adun, and Bod as a thing of the past, both collective and personal past, another less corporal and more aspirational temporal sequence connects Bangkok to their villages as spaces of their future. As we have seen, in fact, many drivers endure life in the city with the explicit aim of saving money to go "back home," where they hope someday to return with the economic and social capital to marry, buy a house, or start a small farm. Hong—young and accustomed to life in the city for half of his life—when confronted with the reality of his nostalgic dream of a return to rural life, struggles with the contradiction between this dream and its concrete practices. Such contradictions are, of course, not unique to Hong, but endemic to the lives of millions of rural migrants from all around the world. Rural migrants, including myself, are stuck in this temporal contradiction between, on one side, the village as a discursive space of the past and a phenomenological site of slow pace and social interactions, and on the other side the village as the location of their aspirational future—a future whose realization requires a productive time in the city that, in turn, erodes that future through the adoption of faster rhythms.

Motorcycle taxi drivers' mobilities between Bangkok and their villages are ridden with these contradictions. On one hand, most of them moved to city to follow desires for both modern life and a future return, with increase status, to their village. On the other, the drivers run the risk of losing their ability to adjust to rural life in the process, thus eroding the very thing they long for. This erosion is not just the result of the challenging adjustment to the distinct rhythms required by these spaces but also the active transformations that take place through their phatic labor. It is through their mediations, among those of other migrants, that these two spaces remain connected. It is through their phatic labor that commodities, lifestyles, and desires travel through this landscape and bridge the city and the village. It is through their mediations that such temporalities come to exist in simultaneity. Stuck in this complex relation between

spatio-temporal imaginaries, commodities, and desires, the drivers are constantly struggling to reconcile their position, often reproducing the very conundrum that their lives in multiple spaces are aimed at reconciling.

Nak and the haunted dreams of return.

A prime example of the driver's participation in bridging city and country side and diffusing multiple temporal imaginaries of the village was packed in Adun's bag during our train ride from Bangkok. Wedged between the money that sustained his family and the KFC box that gave materiality to his daughter's dreams of urban life, he carried a CD containing a cartoon titled *Nak*, one of the many Thai cultural products that contribute to locating the city and the countryside in two different, and contradictory, spatio-temporal imaginaries. While studies of migration in Thailand have often focused on cultural production to explore the complexities of the representations of migrants' experiences (Boccuzzi 2012; Mills 1999c), when dealing with the imagined temporality of their mobilities scholars have mostly focused on the discursive construction of the village as the space of the past, whether pristine or backward. Although this analysis is of critical importance, few scholars have highlighted how the village is also an imagined space of return. For instance Mary Beth Mills, in her article *Enacting Solidarity*, stressed that:

> National-level media and other forms of dominant cultural discourse in Thailand—which are widely accessible to both urban and rural audiences—tend to portray rural communities, at best, as nostalgic bastions of Thai 'tradition', at worst, as culturally outdated, materially (and sometimes mentally) impoverished pockets on the nation's periphery. Such images contrast sharply with the highly commodified and glamorous portraits of modern urban life that dominate the popular Thai media and that focus most closely on the capital city, Bangkok. (Mills 1999a: 184)

This depiction, which I have also analyzed so far, is just a part of the picture. In addition, national-level media and other forms of dominant discourses in Thailand—such as that of sufficiency economy which I will later analyze—also present the village as a place of return, a space of moral and ethical equilibrium to go back to. In this sense, as Michael Herzfeld has argued in his discussion of tradition among Cretan artisans (Herzfeld 2004) , the village is depicted both as a pedestal, posing its life on a higher moral ground, and a tethering post,

trapping its dwellers into backwardness. The cartoon Adun was carrying in the train ride is an example of both depictions.

The anime was produced in 2008 by the Thai Bboydcg studio and narrates the struggle between a group of village ghosts of the Thai popular tradition, headed by Mae Nak,[78] and powerful evil spirits that threaten mankind. The evil spirits, located in Bangkok, kidnapped a child from the village and the rural ghosts embark on an adventure to recover him from the dangerous city and bring him back to balanced life of the Thai countryside. The psychedelic cartoon offers what Kong Rithdee, the *Bangkok Post* film critic, unceremoniously called "a clumsy clash of civilisations: rustic postcards of old Siam vs LCD-billboarded mega-capital; Japanese anime pop-aesthetics vs sci-fi mytho-babble; liberal swagger (the legendary Nak is depicted here as a sexy, single-mum ghost) vs conservative reassurance (the ghosts cup their hands to pray when facing the film's monster-in-chief, a lava-breathing iron buffalo)" (Kong 2008).

It was not until the third day of our visit, during the preparation for a wedding that Adun went back home to participate in, that he took out the CD and slammed it into a player to distract village's children while the adults took care of business. As Mary-Beth Mills has argued for participation and organization of merit-making ceremonies in rural temples, weddings, and other celebrations "are crucial opportunities to express an ongoing commitment to rural family and community, as well as claims to 'success' in urban employment" (Mills 1999b: 185). Adun was similarly expressing both commitment to local solidarity and his individual success by being present and bringing a present, an original copy of a cartoon that he gifted to the local children. As soon as the initial film credits ended, a narration of the multiple temporalities and moralities of migration in Thailand started to flow on screen, both presented and reproduced before the children's enchanted eyes.

[78] The story of Mae Nak is one of the most well-known and popular Thai ghost stories. In it, a young woman, Nak, dies of child birth while her husband, Mak, is away fighting a war. When Mak returns home, however, he finds his loving wife and child waiting for him and they go back to their life. Each neighbor who try to warn him that he is living with a ghost is killed by Nak, who wants to remain in this world with her husband. One day, as Nak is preparing *nam phrik*, she drops a lime off of the porch. In her haste, she stretches her arm to pick it up from the ground below. Mak sees it and at last realizes his wife is a ghost. Terrified, he runs away. In her grief, Nak roams around terrorizing people who, she believes, caused Mak to leave her.

The cartoon begins with a serene scene of the Thai rural past, when ghosts and human lived harmoniously, taking care and helping each other. This equilibrium between the spirit and human worlds was broken by the arrival of modernity, represented in the cartoon by Bangkok with its tall buildings, Skytrain, and tuk-tuk. After this contextualization, the screen fills with peaceful music and images of a stereotypical Thai village, with its canals and wooden houses. In this idyllic environment, Tee, the seven-year old protagonist, is growing up under the protection of local ghosts: Mae Nak, Keaw, a headless ghost, Thong, a doggy ghost, and Eud, a tall demon. The story comes to a turn at a temple fair, during the broadcasting of the Japanese horror movie *The Ring* on a large screen. As villagers enjoy the film, a sign of technological change, a Japanese-looking replica of the movie's evil ghost comes out of the screen, spreads panic among the audience, and pulls young Tee inside the screen all the way to Bangkok: a city dominated by evil spirits headed by an evil King.

After much discussion, the band of local ghosts is convinced by Gam, Tee's stubborn sister, to embark in a train ride from a station named *bān nǭk* (countryside) to Bangkok, with the purpose of rescuing Tee. Meanwhile, the young boy is brought before the King of spirits, a floating fireball, who explains that Tee is to be a central piece for their plan to take over the human world. The skeletons in military hats that surround the King launch into this song:

We had enough of awajee[79], we want, we want BigC[80]
Throw away the same old menu, boiled chicken and pig head only
We want pizza, sushi, we want KFC
Wait for mid-day, we will possess the world
We are modern ghosts, we will be the rulers of the world
We do not have coconut shell as heads, mankind will soon find out
We will control everything that exists on earth, soon we will be kings
We shall capture, we shall enslave mankind, who will have the nerve to die?

[79] Buddhist hell

[80] Popular department store in Thailand

We are modern ghosts, we do not fear sunlight

moisturizer SPF60[81]

Will protect us from sun light

Let's cover each other with protective cream, spray each other abundantly

We have to practice regularly

Sunrays are no problem, just cheerful complexion

Oh! Sun bathes

Altogether, helping each other, until we control the world

Continue on this road, we will be the rulers of the world

Catch, imprison, enslave mankind to control the world

Who resist us must die.

After the skeletons have explained that their desires for modern commodities and comforts—among which KFC figures once again—motivate their plans, our heroes arrive in Bangkok's chaotic central train station, the same train station where Adun's trip back home began and through which many migrants enter Bangkok. Immediately Gam gets lost, confused by the unfriendly and indifferent spirits that populate the city. Once they find each other, the ghosts and Gam jump on a tuk-tuk whose driver rides crazily through the main landmarks of the city before bringing them to a skyscraper where the King of evil spirits resides. Leaving behind the driver, who cheats them on the price, the group poses as FedEx carriers and enter the building. Meanwhile, humans in Bangkok start to be subsumed by evil spirits that emerge from the streets' asphalt, another symbol of hunted modernity. The cartoon builds up to the final confrontation between the village ghosts and the urban spirits. After a number of transformations and plot twists the ghosts succeed in blocking the evil plan, rescuing Tee, and saving the whole human world. The cartoon ends with a glorious return to the village where the balance between the human world and the spirit world is restored, away from the insanity of the city.

[81] Whitening and protective cream popular among Thai urban middle-classes.

As much as the drivers did in many conversations, the cartoon presents an image of the city as a space of unbalanced sociality, selfishness, and indifference but also a place of desires and commodities, toward which urban youth are allured by media. In the cartoon, it is a movie that literally brings Tee to the city and for Nam, Adun's daughter, it is television and its images of urban modernity. The city, in both representations, is a space of glamour and conspicuous consumption, on one side, and a bedeviled space of perdition, on the other. Conversely, the village becomes a space of simplicity and pristine harmony, but also a place of return, of an imagined and conclusive future. Similar double representations dominated the drivers' mobility between city and villages. Their mediation between Bangkok and the countryside, however, is not just embedded in this contradictory location of the village in a collective past and an individual future, but also reproduce both narratives while flooding the village with new commodities and desires that question the declared pristine and pre-capitalist nature of village life. In this sense, the driver connect city and villages by circulating commodities, desires, and experiences that belie and undo the neat distinction between these two spaces while, at the same time, contribute to reproducing discursively the village and the city as spaces apart, operating according to different rhythms and logics. Motorcycle taxi drivers, in their oscillatory mobility, become vessels, proponents, and mediators of these ideas of urban dystopia that strengthen the temporal location of the village as a space of the future, and not just a nostalgic relic of the past. Yet, at the same time, much like the Japanese ghost in the cartoon, they lure villagers, including their own family members, into modern urban living, by circulating commodities and desires that frame Bangkok as a utopian space of enjoyment and grandeur.

Such double depictions, both by the drivers as mediators and by actual media, only solidify and strengthen the stories of everyday life that the drivers carry with them to their village, both in their bags and on their bodies. Sitting in poorly lighted houses in the northeastern countryside, where traditional wooden architecture mixes with the expanding presence of concrete, I had the chance to observe their role as cultural brokers and mediators between the urban life of the metropolis and its goods, from cellphones to KFC chicken, from biscuits to nosy guest anthropologists, and the changing and complex realities of rural Thailand. Sitting silently around a mat on the floor overflowing with food, kids and older men listened with

widened eyes and ears to the tales of the city, its social, economic, and political attractions and injustices. These stories, if not materially creating connections, create desires and imaginations of urban life among rural dwellers, imaginations that oscillate between the celebration of urban life and its advantages, and dismissal of urban experience, its perils, and struggles.

Moving in Time: creating channels for migration

Until now I have focused mostly on desires and spatio-temporal imaginaries that travel through the channels created by the drivers' phatic labor between the city and the countryside. Through them migrants begin to desire Bangkok and to plot their movement though individual connections and networks. The desires and imagination for a life in the city that get configured through the drivers' phatic labor, as we saw in the small case of KFC, the cartoon Nak, or in the personal stories of urban life that the drivers tell, are only a part of the channels constituted by such labor. Other more social and personal channels are created and solidified over time into full-fledged infrastructure, an infrastructure of migration. New migrants, in fact, almost always move to the city through existing social networks of fellow villagers who relocated to Bangkok before them, as was the case for both Hong and Adun. In this infrastructure motorcycle taxi drivers, through their mobility and connections with local dwellers, office workers, and factory owners, often become privileged nodes, able to harness a multiplicity of connections, and potential job opportunities. It is their phatic labor, in other words, that transforms them into prominent bridgeheads for the mobility of new migrants and guides to their adjustment to the city. As a consequence, it is not uncommon during the low-agricultural season in Isan, to meet young men from their districts hanging out at motorcycle taxi stations around Bangkok, scouting for the possibility of moving to the city.

Nok, a nineteen year old from Adun's village, arrived in Bangkok in mid-March, taking advantage of Adun's network to check out the city, explore its labor market, and enjoy a few days of urban living. During his trip, Nok slept on Adun's floor. He often woke up late and when he came to the *win*, sat at a small iron table on the other side of the *soi* from the drivers. There, he was fed by Adun and local street-vendors who

shared a bond of solidarity by caring for this new-comer. His presence at Adun's *win*, complemented by Adun's continuous inquiries in the neighborhood about available jobs as a security guard, revealed the multiple desires, risks, and temptations enfolded within the mobility of rural migrants, as well as the transformations that years of urbanization have brought to motorcycle taxi drivers.

Reclining on a plastic chair in the heat of midday, Nok showed the toll that the city was taking on his body, nerves, and liver. "The city is getting to his head," Adun tells me with a knowing smile. "We all lived this during our first years here. Drinking too much, going to have fun with women (*paithēo phūying*), staying up very late. He always comes back home in the morning and sleeps until late. There are not many occasions to have fun in the countryside and here in the city there are too many. But he needs to understand that he will never find a job like this. I try to help, asking around for work, as other people have helped me when I arrived and I was drunk on life (*mao chīwit*)." This idea of the city as inebriating to the mind and the body of young migrants resonated with the depiction of Bangkok that the cartoon presented and with larger visions of the city as a space of perdition. Such a discourse, however, proceeds hand in hand with an alternative narrative, one that characterizes the city as a place of refinement and progress.

The discussion around Nok's presence in the group, encapsulated also this other side of urban modernity. "Look at him, you could see from far away he is a county bumpkin (*khon bān nǭk*). His clothes don't fit right." Id, another driver, mutters. "And look at what he is drinking." He laughs. "*Lao khāo* (rice whiskey)." In these jokes, the drivers demonstrated both their incorporation of common urban bias toward villagers and their discomfort, masked behind irony, in looking at a person who could be a younger version of themselves. In Nok, the drivers saw with a mixture of derision and nostalgia, what all of them once were. Moved by this identification, all of the drivers, and Adun in particular, tried to activate their networks to find Nok a job, a place to stay a bit longer, as well as directing him through the city. One after the other, in their breaks from ferrying clients, the drivers in the group sit down with him and give him advice, cautionary stories, or simple reassurances that life in Bangkok was indeed livable. They related their own difficulties in finding a job and their experiences with the unlimited fun that the city can offer to a young good-looking

man. In this sense, the drivers not only provided a solid infrastructure of migration, through which Nok could envision moving to Bangkok, but also created channels that could provide him an income, a home, or just human support. This work too was another aspect of the driver's phatic labor between Bangkok and a myriad of villages across the rural landscape of Thailand, one that perpetuates the contingent and contradictory cyclical mobility between them.

Following this circular mobility, in next chapter I move back to the city and explores the legal and discursive dimensions of the drivers' presence in the streets of Bangkok, the personal motivations behind their decision to take up this job, and the forms of labor and political organizing that emerged over time among them. It is through the tension among motivations, desires, and organizing that the contradictions, contingencies, and fragilities of the drivers' lives got reframed as political demands that took the form of struggles for increased job security since 2003 and participation in the Red Shirts mobilization since 2009.

Chapter 4: Freedom and Control

Until now, I have analyzed the spatial, political-economic, and phenomenological configurations of the drivers' complex relation between mobility and stasis both in the city and in the countryside, as well as their roles in circulating and mediating people, commodities, temporal narratives, and desires across those landscapes. All of these explorations have positioned the drivers in a configuration of structural conditions and dominant discourses that they contribute in reproducing and circulating but which, in turn, both allow the drivers to prosper and keep them entrapped. This approach, dear to both Marxist theory and Foucaultian post-structuralism, while invaluable in positioning subjects in relation to capitalism, disciplinary rhythms, and discursive imaginaries misses, however, the personal dimension of the drivers' inclusion in these structures, their decisions to partake in them, or their refusals to do so. In other words, as Alain Touraine has argued in his critique of Marxist and post-structuralist thinking, such visions "dissolve agency into categories, levels, structures and the signifiers of order" (Touraine 1988: xiii), and in so doing kill the "actor" as a sociological category.

Following Touraine's reflections, this chapter moves in another direction and proclaims a "return to the actor," offering the other side of my exploration. In it, I ask: why did these migrant workers decide to take up this occupation, which provides them both with opportunities and dangers, risks and paths for mobility? How do they make sense of their decision and inclusion in the structural constrictions that come with it? How do they adopt, accept, resist, and oppose these structural conditions, be they hegemonic discourses or state officials' meddling in their activities?

In order to answer these questions, I first explore the drivers' adoption of a discourse of freedom (*`itsara phāp)* to motivate their decision to take up this occupation. I analyze how their work provides them with liberty of movement, both in the city and between Bangkok and their villages in the countryside, as well as independence from urban discipline of labor. Yet at the same time I reveal how such an occupation take

away from the job security and collective bargaining by inscribing them into the post-Fordist flexibilization of labor markets that has dominated Thailand since the 1997 economic crisis. In this sense, I do not celebrate the drivers as free agents and, following Lila Abu-Lughod, I refuse to romanticize any form of resistance "as sign of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 42). Rather I reflect and reconstruct the dialectic relation between structures and actors, power and resistance, by stressing the contradictions, contingencies, and fragilities of such dialectics. In so doing, I follows Touraine's reminder to "turn away from the tempting illusions of analyzing actors without any reference to the social system, on the one hand, and of describing a system without actors, on the other" (Touraine 1988: xxiii).

With the risks of this double temptation in mind, I situate the drivers' "freedom" in relation to state officials and local "influential people" (*phū mī̂ `itthiphon*)—who control and extort profit from the drivers' activities—while exploring the drivers' struggle against them. I reconstruct the attempt to formalize the operations of motorcycle taxis by the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003, the drivers' participation to this attempt, and its effects on solidifying bonds of solidarity and collective struggle among the drivers as well as between them and the former prime minister, well after the 2006 coup that removed him from power. Understanding such struggles, I argue, requires us to develop and approach that does not separate and oppose structural and political economic relations to actor's practices and experiences but rather explore their interactions and constant reciprocal production, without declaring a definitive primacy of one over the other.

Emancipatory freedom: riding as *āchīp `itsara* (free career)

Adun, as many of the informants I met during my fieldwork, became a motorcycle taxi driver as a result of a national and international economic restructuring: being laid-off as an effect of the 1997 crisis brought them to become drivers, freedom kept them in the job. Adun was particularly outspoken and articulate about the importance of freedom to his personal choices. Sitting at his street corner, he told me:

My family and I are happy with this job. It is a free life *(chīwit `itsara)* in the sense that you can come and go from home anytime; you can get money fast, every day, without waiting for the salary and you can go home if need to. I have *`itsara phāp* (freedom, independence).

What is this *`itsara phāp*?

I can go home whenever I want. I don't have to take leave. Don't have to ask anyone. I don't have to come to work. I can remain home if I get sick or get drunk. If I earn 200 or 500 and I want to go home to sleep, I can do that. This is freedom. I like it. I used to work for a company, I went home often and I was never promoted. This job is free for me as I have to go back home to the village very often: my family is there, my farm is there. This is an advantage for people like me, who still have land and family back in the countryside. This is why I drive a motorcycle and not a taxi or a tuk-tuk. If I were to drive those I would have to pay daily rent. You have to pay for rent, gasoline: no, I don't like that. I like my job because it is a free job.

So is this why you don't go back to work in a company?

Yes. Work in a company in Bangkok is bad for a countryman (*khon bānnǭk)* like me. The boss always looks down on you (*dū thūk*), always orders you around, always insults you. I liked working with furniture because we would work in different places, just people from Isan, but in a company you will have a boss who orders you around all the time. The last place I worked the boss' son kept insulting me, shouting at me. A twenty year old kid with no experience, just gotten out of university, I could not accept that. So I am happy now, I am my own boss. It is a free profession *(`ākhīp `itsara*)

Similar exchanges repeated, with minimal variations, hundreds of times over the course of my research and constituted one of the most prominent and consistent discourses among the drivers. Through the idiom of *`itsara phāp* (freedom, independence), the drivers claimed their human and economic independence from the crushing machine of contemporary capitalism, and its organization of labor. In order to understand this claim, therefore, it is fundamental to dissect what freedom means to them and what role this concept plays in sustaining the driver's professional decisions and their inscription in the logic of Thai post-Fordist capitalism.

Let us start with the first dimension, and analyze how *`itsara phāp* operates both as a motivation for the drivers to remain in this line of work and as a source of pride and personal dignity. Adun's depiction of *`itsara phāp* is twofold. On one hand, he conceives this freedom as a form of autonomy *from* the factory discipline of labor that infantilized him, dehumanized him, and forced him to subdue his desires to participate in his family and agricultural life to the wish of his boss. On the other hand, he conceptualizes *`itsara phāp* as freedom *to* go back home whenever he wants, to organize his own schedule, and ultimately to be "his own

boss." This duality is pivotal in the driver's depiction of being *itsara*. In this sense, their conception of freedom echoes that of the British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who has argued for a double understanding of freedom as a political category:

> The first of these political senses of freedom […] which I shall call the 'negative' sense, is involved in the answer to the question 'What is the area within which the subject—a person or group of persons—is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?' The second, which I shall call the 'positive' sense, is involved in the answer to the question 'What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?' The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap. […] It is in this difference that the great contrast between the two concepts of negative and positive liberty, in the end, consists. For the 'positive' sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not 'What am I free to do or be?', but 'By whom am I ruled?' or 'Who is to say what I am, and what I am not, to be or do?' (Berlin 1969: 7)

Adun's definition of freedom addresses both questions. To the question "what am I free to do or be?" he responds "[to] get the money fast," "[to] go home whenever I want," "[to] remain home if I get sick or drunk," and "[to] work or not work whenever I choose." To the query "by whom am I ruled?" he replies "[by] the boss [who] always looks down on you, always orders you around, always insults you." It is in this double territory of positive freedom (*freedom to*) and negative freedom (*freedom from*) that the "Thai discourse of *`itsara*,"—as Maureen Hickney has called the similar reference to freedom among cab drivers in Bangkok (Hickey 2011)—strengthens the drivers' commitment to their life and occupation. In order to understand what this commitment entails in both the drivers' everyday life and in their political-economic position in Thai society I will start with the second concept, that of 'negative freedom', or 'freedom from'.

Adun, as many other drivers, moved to Bangkok from an agricultural village where occasional and sporadic wage labor complemented the more regular, yet seasonal, work in the fields. In both of these spheres—that of wage and agricultural labor—his activities in the village were organized according to social hierarchies and relations, that went beyond classic factory-floor division of labor. Back home, age, family relations, acquired expertise and status, as well as local influence, provides a social hierarchy, in and beyond labor processes, which appeared more transparent, and navigable, compared to the division of labor in the urban factories where these migrants often land once in the city. This does not mean that the village offered

some mythological and pre-capitalist space of free and equitable production—as the drivers, as well as the larger dominant discourses in Thai society, seem to imply.[82] Nor does it mean that economic class, bureaucratic titles, and administrative ranks played no role in the village. Rather, and more concretely, all of these social relations and interactions in the village tended to precede and extend beyond the labor transaction. In other words, disciplining labor in the village could not take the form of direct and frontal dismissal, attack, or scolding, if not at the risk of jeopardizing social standing, both for the employer and the employee.[83]

Very different is the matter in the anonymity and vastness of post-Fordist urban production. Here both of the actors involved have nothing at stake in the preservation of good relationship with the specific worker or employer, beyond keeping their working arrangement. While this configuration offer a respite from the expectations of the localized and intimate social hierarchies that orients labor in the village, it also creates a space in which disdain, scorn, and open derision come to color the relation between workers and employers. To make things worse for rural migrants, a deeply rooted bias against them among Bangkokians often orients these already uneven interactions in urban factories. In particular the discourses of the backward and stupid villager (*chāo bān)* (Elinoff 2013), as well as that of the *k̄hon bānnō̄k (*countryman, yet often used to mean country bumpkin), provide a framework into which the relation between urban employers and rural employees is understood and experienced. A failure to adjust to factory's organization of labor is accepted, justified, or exacerbated through this lens by both the migrant worker and the urban employer. This failure, when it occurs, is often framed in a de-humanizing language, which compares migrants, especially males, to water buffalo, or *k̄hwāi*, the quintessentially rural, stubborn, and stupid animal.[84]

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[82] John and Jean Comaroff have defined these representations, in which local communities mobilize traditional or pre-capitalist symbols and practices in response to new forces of material and ideological domination, "poetics of contrast" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 175-176).

[83] At the same time, however, these more localized, intimate social hierarchies also bond the rural worker into social and cultural expectation from which formal contractual labor and urban anonymity can offer a respite. Many of the drivers moved out of the village also to move away from these bonds and in this sense urban occupation provided, at least at time of their migration, freedom from this organization of labor.

[84] Interestingly this same language was adopted to describe the descent of rural protesters during the Red Shirt protests, as we will see in chapter 6. For a larger treatment of the use of animal categories in Thailand see (Tambiah 1969)

In this sense, their occupation as motorcycle taxi, even if taken up as a result of convoluted professional trajectories or lay-offs, offers a step away from the system of control and discrimination experienced on the factory floor. In Adun's words, being a motorcycle taxi driver provides relative freedom *from* such forms of discipline and stigma. Through their work, the driver acquires *`itsara phāp,* a form of independence that resonates with classic liberal philosophers: freedom from oppression. Adun, in this sense, echoes Hobbes and his understanding of a free man as "he that is not hindered to do what he has a will to" (Hobbes, et al. 1651: 146). The question however remains: what is that drivers like Adun "[have] a will to do"?

This brings us to the second aspect of freedom voiced by both Adun and Berlin: positive freedom or *freedom to*. As we saw, Adun frames *`itsara phāp* in two large spheres: first, the freedom to decide if and when to go to work, and therefore to claim ownership over his own life, income, and daily rhythms; second, the freedom to leave the city and go back to his village, where his family resides and where their fields are, whenever he wants or needs to. Both of these forms of freedom, in other words, could be seen as a demand to live a less alienated life under self-controlled labor conditions. In the first case, a refusal of the alienated labor on the factory floor and a reclaiming of control over his own body and time; in the second, a demand of participation in his family and village, that has been threatened by regional migration and capitalist organization of labor.

The alienation that Adun and many other drivers are resisting is not the estrangement proposed by classical political economy, namely the estrangement of the worker from the product of his labor. Rather they react to another aspect of alienation, that Marx analyzed in his *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*: alienation from the worker himself. Such estrangement, quoting Marx, is "manifested not only in the result but in the *act of production*—within the *producing activity* itself" (Marx 1961: 72). This form of alienation, as Marx has shown and Adun confirms, is double and pertains to both the processes of labor and the worker's larger social standing. Using Marx's words, this alienation affects

> the relation of labour to the act of production within the labor process. This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life or what is life other than activity –as an activity which is turned against him, neither depends on nor belong to him. Here we have self-estrangement. (Marx 1961: 106)

Hong, the other young driver who has accompanied us in this journey so far, confirms such vision of driving a motorcycle taxi as a way out both forms of alienation. This occupation, he told me, offers "a free career (*`ākhīp `itsara)* in the sense that you can come and go home anytime; you can get money fast, every day, without waiting for the salary and you can go home if need to. […] I can go home whenever I want. I don't have to take leave. Don't have to ask anyone. I don't have to come to work. I can remain home if I get sick or get drunk."[85]

The augmented freedom to take decision and to move freely both in the city and between the city and the village, as I have shown in the previous two chapters, positions motorcycle taxi drivers as unique and pivotal phatic laborers and connectors. These multiple forms and scales of mobility, in other words, put them in a peculiar position in the physical, social, and political landscape of Thailand, which in turn constitute them as emerging political actors in the country, as part II of this dissertation will show. Suffice to say for now that the physical mobility obtained in this occupation not only provides larger freedom from alienation but also structures demands and dreams of mobility, both physical and economic, which become the soil for their political mobilization. This dynamic is particularly evident in relation to life in the countryside, from where most of the drivers migrated and where most of their families and children live. It is through their freedom of

[85] A similar discourse, Maureen Hickney has shown, is at play among cab drivers in Bangkok. As she reports, "one positive aspect of taxi driving was that one's wages were dependent on one's own individual efforts. In other words, unlike fixed-waged work, a driver's income is, at least in theory, only limited by the time and effort that he is willing to put into his work. In this way, then, drivers have, or perceive that they have, a greater degree of control over their earnings than they would in other forms of work available to them. As one driver said, "If I want to work hard one day – don't take a break, eat and drive – I can. If I want to pull over and take a nap in the taxi the next day, I can. It is up to me. I won't make as much money, but it is my decision" (Hickey 2011). This first aspect of control over the labor process, its rhythms, and outcomes is shared by both motorcycle taxi and cab drivers, as well as other self-employed workers; the second aspect, that of freedom of movement between the city and the country side, seems instead to remain almost exclusively available to the motorcycle taxi drivers. While taxi drivers, as Adun hinted and Maureen Hickey has analyzed (Hickey 2011), seldom live up to this ideal of *`itsara phāp*, crushed by the high daily rent for their cabs, the motorcycle drivers, instead, experience this freedom of movement between city and country side quite extensively although not completely, given the system of local mafia control over their jobs which I will analyze later in this chapter.

movement that the drivers manage to remain central social figures in the social, economic, and political life of their villages.

To conclude this exploration of the drivers' discourse of *`itsara phāp*, the two distinct yet often overlapping meaning of freedom as *freedom from* and *freedom to* provide a justification of professional decisions as moves toward higher forms of fulfillment and dignity in self-employment. Freedom, as described by Adun, operates on a personal level as a social and cultural construct that helps the drivers making sense of their labor trajectories as well as claiming agency over their lives. All that glitters, unfortunately, is not gold. If, as I showed in the phenomenological analysis of the drivers' mobility, freedom experienced atop a bike is continuously challenged and destabilized by the dangers of accidents, similarly this discourse of freedom, while offering emancipatory opportunities, also lures the driver into consenting to the post-crisis restructuring of Thai capitalist toward increasingly flexible and insecure forms of labor.

Hegemonic Freedom: consent and post-Fordism

The discourse of freedom, in fact, does not only operate on such personal and emancipatory level. A parallel political-economic and potentially oppressive discourse of "free" and "flexible" labor spread—especially since the 1997 economic crisis—across Thailand. In this sense, the discourse of *`itsara phāp* became a way to push an increasing number of unnecessary industrial laborers toward more "free" and less protected forms of employment, such as those of motorcycle taxi drivers. This restructuring, as Giuliana Commiso has argued,

> is entirely realised as a process of restructuring-reorganization, not simply of the manufacturing process, but of the whole mode of production. In this new order, the bio-powers invest the body in its totality; they intervene on the living body of the worker, not only as a bearer of nerves and muscles, but also of more general social attitudes, intellectual abilities and powers, eg: thought, language, ability of reflection, learning ability. Self-activation, problem solving, continuous formation, flexibility, mobility are the new *mots de passe* of the post-Fordist labour force. No longer nerves and muscles, the meat and the blood of living labour, but the whole life. (Commisso 2006: 163)

In order to fully understand this shift, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the significance of *`itsara phāp* to the drivers as an experiential emancipatory force and to position it in dialectic tension with a larger political-economic analysis of its role as a hegemonic construct. Failing to do so would mean, as Henry Lefebvre has argued, "tak[ing] experience *partes extra partes*; it would shed light on small areas of it, appropriating them for its own devices and transforming them into private plots of land, rather than grasping the landscape and the horizon as an ensemble" (Lefebvre 2008, Vol II: 298). It is only by analyzing all three scales—plots, landscapes, and horizons—and their mutual interaction, that any observation can be complete. While until now I have analyzed Adun's plot of land, I will attempt to grasp the landscape in which such plot exist, before focusing on the horizon of drivers' political demands and mobilization.

In order to explore the larger structural and political-economic landscape in which the language of *`itsara phāp* spread among workers in Thailand, we need to put this diffusion in conjuncture with the major restructuring of Thai economy since the 1997 crisis away from industrial production, unionized labor, and collective bargaining toward flexible and informal labor (Sauwalak 2002; Tamaki 2005).[86] In the aftermath of the crisis, which produced a wave of lay-offs in the industrial sector,[87] migrant labor reacted either by returning to agricultural land, which always offered a security net in times of economic recession, or by inducing a massive informalization of labor. As we saw, many of these migrant workers drifted away from manufacturing jobs toward more informal and service oriented occupations. Motorcycle taxis were one of the markets that received these laid off workers. The growth in their ranks was stark. In 1994 Bangkok was traversed by an estimate of 37,500 drivers. By 2003 their numbers had expanded almost threefold, to 109,056.[88]

Beyond motorcycle taxi drivers, the 1997 crisis restructured Thai labor markets and forms of capitalist accumulation, that shifted from a Fordist model that privileged direct control over industrial and

[86] Between 1997 and 1998, while every other sector lost numbers of employed between 1,3% (Agriculture) and 36% (Construction), the service sector grew by 3.3% (Sauwalak 2002: 11)

[87] The number of general unemployed grew from 697,900 during the dry season of 1997 to 1,479,300 in the dry season of 1998. (Sauwalak: 7)

[88] Note that the numbers for 2003 are so precise because the formalization of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok took place in that year.

labor-intensive mass production to a post-Fordist phase dominated by flexible labor and self-employment (Behrman 2000; Jackson 1999; Kasian 2002; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Pasuk and Baker 2008; Sauwalak 2002; Siamwalla 2000; Warr 2005). This shift revolved around the establishment of what David Harvey has called "flexible accumulation", a regime

> marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on a startling flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption. It is characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial and business services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological and organizational innovation. (Harvey 1989: 1)

This transformation had deep effects on the everyday lives of workers as well as their configuration as citizens. As Commiso has argued:

> The Fordist disciplinary matrix that saw in salary and in access to the means to consume the original statute of the citizenship, ceases to expand its own effects. In the ontological mutation of the labour statute that is inherent in post-Fordism, the dynamics for which access to a salary is an indissoluble element of social inclusion ceases to work. In its place, the precariousness of employment, flexibility of performance, capacity of productive performances configure themselves as a new statute. (Commisso 2006: 172)

In this shift the discourse of freedom voiced by Adun played a central role in provided an ideology that justified the flexibilization of labor, self-employment, and its growing insecurity, making it acceptable and bearable to workers, including motorcycle taxi drivers. This does not mean that this discourse was solely an echo of post-Fordist ideology, but rather that an already available discourse of independence and self-employment came to justify a capitalist restructuring. Maureen Hickney, in her study of cab drivers in Bangkok, has pointed out how the discourse of freedom was coopted by neo-liberal restructuring of their presence in the city. She argues that the "traditional" Thai discourse of *`itsara*, "stressing free will and responsibility for one's actions, has been reworked to reflect the neoliberal ideals of the autonomous individual and rational economic actor" (Hickey 2011).

Even if lauding her attempt to connect personal freedom with larger economic, social, and political restructurings, I disagree with her reading, both ethnographically and conceptually. My critique is two-fold:

First I argue that post-Fordism, and not neo-liberalism, best describes the transformation happening in the Thailand after the 1997 crisis. Such crisis, often referred to as the *wikrit IMF* (IMF crisis), came to be understood in Thailand as a neo-liberal crisis and therefore called for solutions that took distance from a classic neo-liberal agenda, especially after the post-crisis government of Chuan Leekpai failed to deliver economic recovery following the ineffective advices of the IMF. The departure from this approach entailed a restructuring and flexibilization of labor in Thailand together with an expansion—not the shrinking theorized by neo-liberalist discourse—of state interventions in the national economy; Second, I argue that the "traditional" discourse of *`itsara*, which Adun voiced, has not been "reworked to reflect" new hegemonic discourses, but rather both the *emancipating* discourse of personal freedom and the *hegemonic* discourse of freedom as a justification for labor restructuring survived and operated in dialectical tension. An analysis of the survival and struggle between these two discourses, therefore, offers a prime diagnostics for personal, social, economic, and political tensions at play in contemporary Thailand and, I will show, demonstrates the importance of understanding contemporary Thai capitalism under the aegis of post-Fordism, and not neo-liberalism.

Interestingly, much of the international traditional left refused the language of post-Fordism precisely because its emphasis on freedom from the strict work discipline seemed to present this shift in a positive light, obscuring the heightened system of exploitation that it engrained (Amin 1994). This paradox, stressed by leftist readings of capitalism, resonates in the discourse of *`itsara* among the drivers. Precisely when we reflect on its double edge as both emancipatory and oppressing we start to realize the relevance of the language of post-Fordism in analyzing contemporary capitalism, especially in South and Southeast Asia.

A similar analysis of the discourse of freedom had been conducted by Nikolas Rose (Rose 1999). In his work, however, he connected this duality to neo-liberalism and not post-Fordism. Such reading seems to be highly problematic when applied to Thailand. While neo-liberalism has wrongly become an umbrella term to talk about contemporary capitalism (Ferguson 2009), its specific economic discipline emerged to find a middle path between Keynesian state planning and Adam Smith's liberal market (Burgin 2012). In this sense,

since its origins around the Mount Pèlerin School, neo-liberalism was concerned with restructuring the relations among capital, state, and its citizens—and not with proposing new organization of labor. As a dominant political project—one that advocated for market liberalization, cuts in labor rights, and retreat of the welfare state—neoliberalism emerged in the 1980s and was most clearly found under the governments of Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom. Even if the product of a specific historical moment and the Euro-American political-economic ecology of the post-Breton Woods world, neo-liberalism has been projected it onto the rest of the world, often with little analytical rigor. In this reading, any restructuring of relations of production, labor practices, and national policies is seen as a sign of neo-liberalism, even in countries like Thailand, Singapore, or India, in which the state is, at the same time, expanding its presence in society and introducing unprecedented welfare schemes.

I argue, on the contrary, that it is necessary to interrogate critically the very language of neo-liberalism as a global phenomenon, especially when, as here, the focus is not just on shifting relation between capital and the state, but rather on restructuring of labor processes, labor security, and labor (or capital) distribution. Are we then to dismiss the idea that new forms of capitalism are emerging globally *tout court*? I think not. Rather, the language of post-Fordism, which deals less with the specific and contextual relations between states and capital and more on how production and circulation are being restructured globally by equally global actors, provides a space for considering emerging capitalist reorganization, without assuming a uniform and flat response to global capital by national forces.

Starting from this shift in our analytical lenses and language, and accepting that post-Fordist capitalism moves toward forms of "flexible labor" and "free employment", such as the one in which motorcycle taxi drivers are involved, I claim that the language of freedom among the drivers has not been "reworked," as Hickey argues, into the neoliberal values. Instead, the two definitions of freedom—as personally emancipating and a structurally oppressive—remain alive, side by side, in the minds and everyday lives of the drivers and in so doing configure a struggle over the hegemonic value of this concept. After all, as William Roseberry has argued, hegemony is an ever-changing modality of domination, always engrained in

contestations that are never completely settled (Joseph and Nugent 1994). As a result, motorcycle taxi drivers navigate between binds, claiming personal freedom whileaccepting to participate in post-Fordist notions of flexible labor. In other words, the drivers' freedom *from* alienation and *to* participate in the social life of their village also puts their lives at risk for little money and close to null job security. Following this dialectical tension, I understand freedom *both* as an emancipating demand for activities outside the dictates of capital *and* as a form of governmentality, a mode of exercising power through which governments and capitalist forces produce the citizen best suited to fulfill their policies—in this case policies that promote unsafe and flexible labor. As Rose has argued, analyzing this second aspect of freedom:

> Values and presuppositions given the name of freedom and liberty have come to provide the grounds upon which government must enact its practices for the conduct of conduct. […] As the twenty-first century begins, the ethics of freedom have come to underpin our conceptions of how we should be ruled, how our practices of everyday life should be organized, how we should understand ourselves and our predicament. (Rose 1999: 61)

The idea, as Rose himself stated, is paradoxical. After all, we are used to understanding freedom as the opposite of control, its arch-enemy. Here Gramsci can come to our rescue by clarifying how freedom and control can sustain each other, and how an emancipating personal discourse of freedom, such as the one voiced by Adun, can also be an exploitative form of governmentality that makes drivers like him willingly accept reduced job security and limited social services.

In his prison writings on Italian history, Gramsci elucidates how control over social groups could take two forms: domination and hegemony. While the first one is obtained through the coercive organs of the state the second, in his words, entails an "intellectual and moral leadership" that is exercised through civil society—a composition of educational, religious and associational institutions. This second form of submission, according to Gramsci, operates through a "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group, consent 'historically' caused by the prestige (and therefore by the trust) accruing to the dominant group because of its position and function in the world of production" (Gramsci 1949: 9).

The discourse of *`itsara* is clearly opposed to forms of domination, as defined by Gramsci, such as the ones perpetuated in the factory Adun used to work in. Yet this discourse, not despite its emancipatory potential but precisely because of it, can become an hegemonic construct, the disjointed and contradictory product of historical sediments that include practical experiences and pre-existing cultural values (Hall 1986). The discourse of *`itsara phāp*, in this sense, makes flexible and insecure labor not only acceptable but desirable to the drivers: a form of labor that resembles more closely work in the countryside and defines itself in opposition from the factory labor they experienced before the 1997 economic crisis. Behind such hegemonic discourse, however, lies a capitalist restructuring that is spreading through Thailand, as much as throughout the globe, and eroding hard-fought job security and rights.

Many people around the globe, including in the European Union, have accepted self-employment and "flexible labor" as a recovered independence from the tyranny and dullness of fixed-schedule jobs, only to find themselves outside the protective net of the welfare state, retirement schemes, and permanent labor. Have we acquired renewed freedom by becoming our own bosses and being able to mold our working hours to family arrangement or personal preferences? Most definitely so. Have we, at the same time, accepted a retreat of both governments and our employers from providing basic services and securities? Absolutely. Yet, at the same time, we have yearned for changes that provided these institutions with the opportunity to cancel rights long-fought for by workers.

For all of these reasons, to understand the acceptance of capitalist restructuring in Thailand and beyond, we need to clarify how freedom operates as a double-edge sword in post-Fordism capitalism: its emancipatory discourse of independence from tyranny luring us into acceptance of capitalist forces. Freedom, again paraphrasing Rose, is operating as "an artifact of government, but not thereby an illusion" (Rose 1999). In the specific case of motorcycle taxi drivers, the personal freedoms obtained by moving toward self-employment are not illusory and surely make a difference in their lives, allowing them to work in the city without cutting themselves off from life in their villages. Equally, however, this discourse of *`itsara* freedom makes the overwhelming insecurity of the post-Fordist Thai labor market, especially for low-skilled migrant workers, acceptable. Freedom, in other words, operates simultaneously as an emic emancipatory concept, by

which the drivers motivate and confirm to themselves the decision to remain in this occupation—seen as providing professional dignity and personal mobility—and a hegemonic technique of governmentality that makes them accept deep capitalist restructuring and keeps them in a circuit of exploitation, dangerous occupation, and informal labor outside the social security apparatus.

Hegemony, however—as Gramsci argued yet careless adopters of this concept often forget—is never stable, but always remains an incomplete and fragile field of struggle and contestation, not of unified consent (Gramsci and Forgacs 1988). As Stuart Hall has argued, in Gramsci "what we are looking for is not the absolute victory of this side over that, nor the total incorporation of one set of forces into another. Rather, the analysis is a relational matter—i.e., a question to be resolved relationally, using the idea of 'unstable balance' or 'he continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria'" (Hall 1986: 14). Hegemony, in this sense, is better understood as a project, rather than an achievement. The practical experiences and pre-existing cultural values that sustain this hegemony, in other words, can both facilitate and potentially undercut its hold, revealing the profound fragility of its power. "What hegemony constructs, then, is not a shared ideology but a common material and meaningful framework for living through, talking about, and acting upon social orders characterized by domination,[…] a common language or way of talking about social relationships that sets out the central terms around which and in terms of which contestation and struggle can occur" (Joseph and Nugent 1994: 361).

In the specific context of motorcycle taxi drivers, the contested field of *`itsara* as both liberty from alienation and hegemonic governamentality provides such a framework. A framework that lures the drivers to flexible post-Fordist capitalism, propels them in a space of resistance from capitalist organization of labor in the factory, and orients their struggles against local mafia and control over their occupation, as well as their larger political demands. While the second part of this dissertation will focus on these larger political struggles under the umbrella of the Red Shirts movement, I here focus on the drivers' oppression by local mafia, and their ongoing resistance to it, to show the drivers' potential to manipulate this framework and transform it into a language of struggle. In order to do that, I go back to the very beginning of my fieldwork.

Power and Influence: the formalization of motorcycle taxi drivers.

When I arrived in Thailand with the idea of studying motorcycle taxi drivers, the first place to go was where the system originated, along the Navy Housing in soi Ngam Duphli. Conveniently enough I found an apartment few blocks away from this street, along Suan Phlu road. Suan Phlu, as the name suggests, was until 1960s renowned for its betel gardens (*suan phlu*). As the city expanded, the area lost its agricultural production and became a residential neighborhood off Sathorn road, one of the major thoroughfares of the Central Business District. Cities like Bangkok, which expanded drastically in the recent five decades, play these historical tricks, where the busiest and most hectic streets and neighborhoods carry paradoxical names from their agrarian past, reminders of the rapid changes on their palimpsests. So does Suan Phlu and so do the areas around it: Chitlom (blow of wind) and Ploenchit (wind of the country).

The neighborhood of Suan Phlu, shadowed by high-end offices and residential skyscrapers, extends from the homonymous road into narrow dead ends soi branching off on both sides. At the entrances of each soi vendors cluster, going through a daily rotation that makes their presence predictable and their products desirable. In soi 6, where I lived, the rotation started with hot soy milk and fried dough in the early morning, continued with noodle soup, fried chicken, and papaya salad at lunch time, tea and roti in the afternoon, barbequed pork and Isan sausages just before dark, to end with knotted noodle soup and northeastern food at night. Routine and rhythm are the strength of street economy and the neighbors respond, timing their meals with the shifts of vendors. Mostly at night, however, the composite mix of local dwellers, office workers, university students, migrant workers and foreigners who populate the area adventures outside the alleys, into Suan Phlu road, the central artery of the neighborhood that teams with vendors, shops, and small markets, clustered underneath a mesh of hanging electric cables. The relatively affordable prices and proximity to the commercial and financial districts make the area a prime location for housing office workers, university students, and businessmen's young mistresses whose clapping heels echo along the alleys.

My house was on a small soi of uncommonly low buildings which ended into the gate of an eight-stories housing complex, mostly populated by students of two nearby universities. Entering the soi was like taking a step into a quieter and less urban Bangkok, dominated by large concrete villas from the 1960s, small wooden houses, and low rise apartment buildings. The alley, too narrow to fill two cars, was constantly crossed by youngsters in white shirts and black trousers or skirts (students' uniform) and a continual coming and going of motortaxis. Along Suan Phlu road, in front of each soi, a small group of motorcycle taxi drivers sat all day long, watching the traffic go by, chatting with street vendors and shop keepers, reading newspapers, and waiting for clients.

In neighborhoods like Suan Phlu, a bit removed from the hectic core of the city and its mass transportation, clients are for the most part regulars who in the morning greet the driver distractedly and hop up, often without saying a single word, to be driven to their work or school. The biggest of these groups, located at the eastern side of soi Ngam Duphli right in front of an army housing compound, is a splinter of the first *win* in Bangkok. Since the first appearance of the motorcycle taxi system in this area, in fact, the group has stretched along the narrow road that departs from Suan Phlu and extends past a former slum now converted in social housing toward Rama IV, a major urban east-west thoroughfare. Hundreds of drivers populate this long street with no sidewalks, scattered in small crews, visible every few hundred meters. The group has morphed to adapt to the terrain and its population density and has intervened onto urban corners to tailor them to their needs. Trees, casting a shadow at the corner, provide a natural roof for the *win*. Public benches have been taken over and are filled by the drivers and their colorful vests. Phone booths, fallen in disarray with the diffusion of cellphones, have been transformed into dressing rooms and deposits.

While the initial *win* has frayed along Ngam Duphli, the larger group of drivers, more than a hundred, clusters around an end of the street, toward Rama IV. At this corner, the drivers line up in two rows, sitting on their bikes and slowly moving forward as a continuous flux of clients hop onto the head of the lines. Differently from most other groups around the city, the drivers here do not experience long waiting times, making their connections to the neighborhood scant and the life of the ethnographer hard. I spent the first

weeks of my fieldwork trying in vain to get to know the drivers in this group, walking along the moving lines to have conversations, a few minutes at a time, before the driver would arrive at the top of the line, get a client, and pour into traffic. After delivering the passenger, he will be back and, from the end of the long line, the conversation would restart, again along the moving line.

As I became a regular presence at the corner an older woman, owner of a tailor shop next to the bikes' lines, asked me who was I and why was I asking questions. Unsatisfied by my answers she walked into the shop and made a phone call. A few minutes later a couple of tough guys showed up to carry out an ill-mannered enquiry about my intentions. After a short conversation the two guys rudely told me that I could not hang around the group. Clearly, however, I was not the only one being told: from there on talking to the drivers became almost impossible. And the murky side of the motorcycle taxi business and their connection with local influential people was revealed.

Every bit of conversation was now dotted by impatient gazes into the tailor shop, raised eyebrows, and half murmured sentences. A few days later saw Nit, one of the drivers in the group, in Suan Phlu eating a beef salad, local delicacy from his native northeastern region. Curious to understand what had happened I stopped and asked him who those people were.

> You have to understand that we cannot speak there. Those people are *nak lēng* (thugs) and they are sent by the group's owner to make sure we pay our rent (*khā chao*) regularly and create no problems.
>
> Rent?
>
> Yes, rent for our vests and for our right to work. Only a few drivers in the group own their vests. Look at me you see the name written on this vest, right below the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) logo? This is not my name. The owner of our group is the owner of the vests too. Five or six years ago, when the motorcycle taxis were formalized (*khao sū rabop*, entered the system*)* every driver was given a vest for free. Soon they started to sell them for money, often back to the same people who controlled the *win* before the new policy. Since the coup [which removed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006] nobody is limiting their control over motorcycle taxis. So now we are back to buying the vest if you have enough money, or renting it from the group owner.
>
> How much is a vest?

It is very expensive, up to 100,000 baht (3300$). If I had that money I would have never come to Bangkok, I could stay in the countryside (*bān nɔ̄k*) very comfortably. No need to come here.

And rent?

It depends. Some people pay 500 baht (16$) a day some people less. Some people up to 1000. It depends on your connections.

Connections to whom?

To influential people (*phū mī̂ `itthi phon*), to the owners.

Who are these people?

Everybody knows. They are state officials (*čhao nāthī̂ rat*): police, metropolitan police, soldiers, sometimes business people.

And here in the neighborhood?

I cannot speak about this, I have to keep working. Let's talk about something else. Sit down and eat.

Half conversations like this populated the first months my research, gazes into a reality of daily interaction with a system of racketeering, exploitation, and local control in the hands of the bureaucracy and framed in the language of "influence" (*`itthiphon*).[89] Drivers like Nit used this idiom to talk about a general system or other groups but rarely admitted to be themselves connected double ways to forms of corruption, illegal payments, and influence. A similar attitude was evident among state officials, army personnel, as well as state and municipal police officers. While all of them were willing to admit that influence dominates the inner working of street economy in Thailand and quick to offer stories and complaints on the dominant corruption, such stories always pertained the other force, the next police station, the neighboring district. It was always another official to be corrupt, the other police to squeeze motorcycle taxis with requests of money. As a consequence, even if the specific actors were often obscured—at least at the beginning of my fieldwork—the operation of the system of influence over the motorcycle taxis was clearly delineated.

Before 2003, when the government of Thaksin Shinawatra initiated a formalization of motorcycle taxi operations, every group was organized around a "head" (*hūa nâ*) who was him/herself a driver. This head

[89] As we saw at the beginning of this dissertation, state officials often become the local influential people who operate and own motorcycle taxi groups, or at least demand money for protecting their operations or directing their gaze away from them.

collected money among the other members of the *win* and operated as a middle-man between them and the various local officials and bureaucratic mechanisms that needed to be oiled with money in order for the group to operate smoothly. The main recipient of this money was the *win* owner (*čhao khǭ̄ng win*). In exchange for the payment the owner guaranteed a station, often nothing more than stretch of road used as a parking space, minimal disturbance from state authorities in terms of fines and controls, as well as exclusive ownership over their area of operations. This last element, in particular, determined—and still determines—the features of this system of transportation as well as the phenomenology of riding the city. Speed and quick returns, in fact, are an economic necessity as the drivers can pick clients only from their station and not in the middle of the street, where they would impinge on routes controlled by another *win* and risk a fight with local drivers and influential people.

To guarantee smooth operations the owner would pay local and metropolitan police to close their eyes to various illegal aspects of the drivers' practices, from use of public land to unauthorized parking, from lack of helmets to driving against the flow of traffic. Since the origins of the system, therefore, there were incentives for the owner to be a state official, particularly a police or army officer, a local politician, or a powerful civil servant whose legal authority could be transformed into influence and spare them from actually paying local police or from fearing any repercussion. At the same time, their authority would also make the drivers less likely to develop a sustained struggle against their illicit meddling, as there would be no other jury available to them than the very same who illegally extolled control over the system. As in other sectors of the informal, illegal, and illicit economy in Thailand, people who have *amnāt*—"authority which derives from any official position or is sanctioned by law" (Tamada 1991: 455)—are in a position to transform this power into *`itthiphon*—"power which a man in authority exerts beyond his authority or which a man without an official position exerts" (ibid.). The motorcycle taxi business was just another example of this dynamic: the resulting system is represented here.

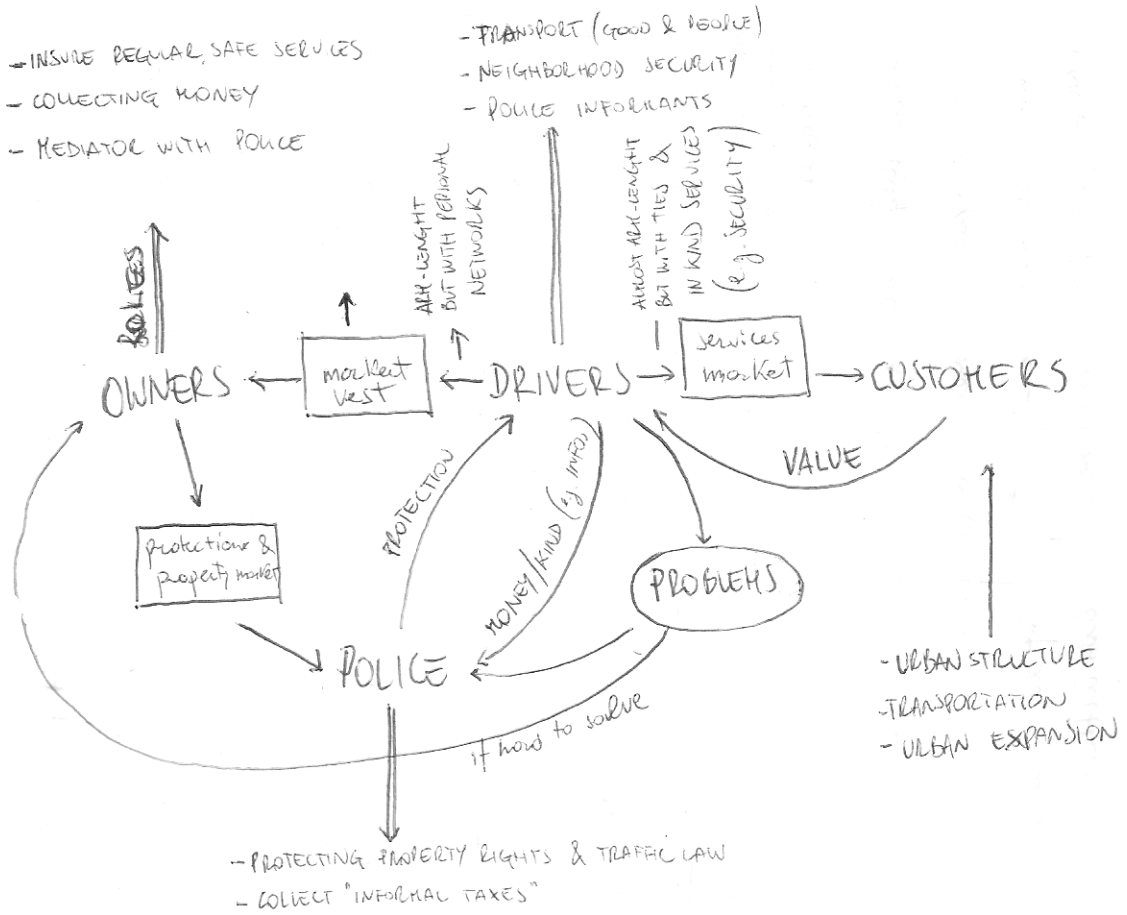


Figure 4: Scheme of the motorcycle taxis operations

In this system, which resembles other forms of racketeering around the globe, the driver's vest, as Nit revealed, played a central role as the main connector between drivers and group's owners. Such centrality was manifested both materially and symbolically, and oriented the drivers' navigations of the motorcycle taxi business and their relations to state bureaucracy and local officers. The history of these vests, understood as dense semiotic object (Ho 2006), therefore illuminates the evolution of the system since its early appearance, its formalization under the government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003, and the drivers' struggles to claim *`itsara phāp* (freedom, independence) from influential people and the recognition of their importance for the city.

Vests were introduced early on in the history of motorcycle taxis to differentiate taxi drivers from other motorists and to mark ownership over the specific group. The "influential person" (*phū mī̄ `itthiphon*) who owned the *win* created his or her own vests and distributed them to drivers in exchange for monthly rental and daily operation fees. In this sense, as an article in the Bangkok Post declared, the jackets became a "symbol of mafia control" and their value grew exponentially to the point that "a glamorous evening gown may be worth less than the weather-beaten rag of a jacket worn by Bangkok motorcycle taxi drivers" (Wassayos and Manop 2003). In other words, the vest acquired an increasing economic and symbolic value as a metonym for a whole system of corruption and racketeering that was enfolded within them. In this sense, much like the discourse of *`itsara,* the vest was a double edged sword and both "gave drivers a jealously guarded right to be there" (Wassayos and Manop 2003), and symbolized their imprisonment in this system of influence and racket. This was soon to change, during Thaksin Shinawatra's first premiership.

Thaksin Shinawatra: formalizing informal economies and controlling the state.

Thaksin was elected prime minister of Thailand in the January of 2001 with a large majority, among which Isan voters and urban poor figured prominently. The drivers, incarnation of both constituencies, played a role both in Thaksin's electoral machine and support. Their contribution was acknowledged multiple times by the prime minister, who referred to them as his personal friends.[90] Once elected, he did not forget them and, in May of 2003, Thaksin decided to formalize the operation of motorcycle taxis. While occasional protests against the roles of specific reckless owners had previously erupted around the city, the driver's discontent had never coagulated into a collective attack to the system of exploitation and racketeering under which they operated. It was not until Thaksin's formalization that the drivers' vocalize their pledges city-wide and created a network to sustain those pledges. This, however, was not just Thaksin's doing. On one side, the driver's collective organization was indeed an effect of the new policy. On the other, however, without their support and continuous demands for full implementation, Thaksin's plans would have had a very limited

[90] In a very famous summary of Thaksin's autobiography that was posted as an electoral manifesto around the country, Thaksin stated: "Even today, my friends range from hired motorcycle drivers to the presidents of great countries" (Pasuk and Baker 2009)

impact and, in so doing, would have undermined his emerging vision of a government-protected thriving street economy, as well as his leadership.

The formalization of motorcycle taxis, in fact, was a central piece in a larger government campaign, known as "war on dark influence" (*`itthiphon mūt*).[91] This star-wars definition was adopted to refer to a variety of interventions which attempted to bring different sectors of the illegal economy—from logging to prostitution, from underground lotto to motorcycle taxi operations—under the administrative and economic control of the government, include them in the formal market, and provide assistance to its entrepreneurs. More largely, this campaign represented a litmus test for the new approach to low-income economic actors proposed by Thaksin. In his vision, their entrepreneurship had been constrained by structural conditions for too long. It was now time to expand capitalism through its promotion and protection under the umbrella of a strong state, a model that resembled more Singaporean state capitalism than Western neoliberal democracies.[92] The new doctrine was a mixture of economic nationalism (Kasian 2002), welfare state tendencies (Hewison 2008) and market advocacy (Pasuk and Baker 2004), which Thaksin called "dual track." In a speech to police officers he explained: "capitalism has targets but no ideals, while socialism has ideals but no targets [therefore] we need to combine the best of each […] I'm applying socialism in the lower economy, and capitalism in the upper economy" (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 342). This vision, soon dubbed Thaksinomics, predicated a significant expansion of the government's role in promoting economic growth and managing its social consequences.[93] Thaksin, in other words, was not to leave the market operating freely but rather it

[91] On Sarit model and larger parallelisms between Sarit and Thaksin (Sopranzetti, forthcoming)- definition of dark influence

[92] This new configuration of the relation between state and capital is expanding throughout East and Southeast Asia, driven by the success of the Chinese economy. Ian Bremmer's book "The End of Free Market" provides an analysis of the expansion of this model, intrinsically alternative to Western neoliberalism (Bremmer 2010).

[93] The system revolved around five main policies, which were all implemented during the first six months of his premiership and created the contour of Thai post-crisis welfare state: a rural debt moratorium, a Village and Urban Community revolving Fund (VUCF), the creation of the People Bank, the One Tambon (district) One Product (OTOP) scheme, and a Universal Healthcare Coverage (UC). On the overall, this system aimed at fostering universal participation in capitalism by protecting small businesses and low-income entrepreneurs from unexpected difficulties, such as outstanding debts, lack of credit, and health expenses. The first three policies focused on providing credit to foster entrepreneurship among low-income groups. The debt moratorium allowed farmers to postpone their repayments to the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) while the VUCF created a revolving fund for each village or urban community with the objective of providing cheap loans, promoting local community-building, and stimulating the entry of farmers and urban poor into the capitalist economy. More largely, the People Bank funded low-income people to invest in micro-business, while The One Tambon One Product (OTOP) provided government-led guidance to such micro-businesses. Under this policy, the state offered local districts technical support to choose a specific product or service typical of their area and develop it, both in the production and the marketing side, with the purpose of making it attractive to the international

would promote economic growth by fostering consumption, providing easy access to credit, and protecting national businesses (Pasuk and Baker 2008), once again breaching neo-liberal orthodoxy.

This idea of extending the scope of capitalism in Thailand by formalizing the underground economy and protecting its entrepreneurial pushes was predicated upon the theories of Peruvian economist Hernando De Soto that were introduced to Thaksin by the US President Bill Clinton.

> During a visit in mid-2002, Bill Clinton told Thaksin about the ideas of the Peruvian economist, Hernando de Soto, on deepening and extending the capitalist economy. In *The Mystery of Capital*, De Soto argued that Western economies were more advanced than others because their states established a uniformed system of property rights the allowed everyone to use their assets to raise capital. De Soto was invited to Bangkok in November 2002 and feted. (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 117)

The "war on dark influence" and the formalization of thriving informal economies were central pieces of this mosaic. First, they represented an attempt to include the informal economy in the formal market; Second, they marked a fight over visibility, control, and ultimately taxability between the Thai government,[94] envisioned as a patron of individual economic development, and the existing Thai bureaucracy, which thrived in its ability to transform formal authority into influence and to ignore the pressure of elected government (Pasuk & Sangsit 1994; Sangsit 2005). These reforms, in other words, were an attempt by the new government of Thaksin to subordinate this pre-existing bureaucratic power, which has often been described as a "bureaucratic polity" (Riggs 1966) or as a "state in the state" (Pasuk and Sangsit 1994), by taking away its domination over the street economy and a chunk of its internal financing.

As Nipon Poapongsakorn, the director of the Thai Development Research Institute (TDRI), told me, "state officials, and especially police officers, operate as a parallel state. They give permission, protect property rights, and collect taxes." What do you mean? I asked "Yes taxes, that's what this corruption is," he declared diving into a story. "Some years ago I was conducting research on informal and illegal economies in Bangkok, I was interviewing a police officer, high official. In the middle of the interview he called another

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markets. Finally, and most successfully, the Universal Health care system, popularly known as the 30-bath scheme, provided lower-income citizens with affordable health assistance.

[94] As James Scott has argued (Scott 1998), legibility is central for the operation of the state that relies on its ability to categorize, organize, and manage its population and its resources. This was understood clear by one of the drivers I met in my fieldwork who refused to get a free vest and formalize its operation in order to remain invisible to the state apparatus.

policeman and asked him to bring the register. The guy came back with a big book. 'Not that, the other one.' The officer told him. The next book arrived at the desk and it was a full registry of every prostitute in the area, where they worked, their ID numbers and pictures. It was an informal police registry, their tax registry." A grim spread on him face as he masterfully let the story simmer the air. "And he said this book wasn't the first one, so you can imagine they do this systematically."

Such vision of the police as a parallel state questions traditional theories of the state that see police or military as central actors in the state repressive apparatus and its voice in interpellating citizens (Althusser 1984). While this is partially true also in Thailand, here state officials, and police in particular, also operate as something else, a parallel state with its own registers, its own taxes, and its own protection of property rights. Thai police, in particular, lives in the space between these two roles and receives its strength precisely from this duality, by transforming state authority (*amnāt)* into influence (*`itthiphon)*, to be exerted outside the formal system (*nǭ̀k rabop*), all the way from national politics to street economy. If such a dynamic is specific to Thailand, internal fractures and contradictions are characteristic of states world-wide, although often overlooked. As Philip Abrams has argued:

> The state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity. This is not just a disunity between the political and the economic but equally a profound disunity within the political. Political institutions […] conspicuously fail to display a unity of practice –just as they constantly discover their inability to function as a more general factor of cohesion. Manifestly they are divided against one another, volatile and confused. What is constituted out of their collective practice is a series of ephemerally unified postures in relation to transient issues with no sustained consistency of purpose. (Abrams 1988: 79)

This fragmented nature of the state is particularly evident in Thailand (Haberkorn 2011), a country which has experienced 10 successful coup d'état and 7 failed attempts since 1932 and in which the armed forces have consistently reiterated that they do not respond to elected officials but exclusively to the King. As Tyrell Haberkorn has showed, "the Thai state' [is] a collection of competing actors and agencies and their actions, as well as the ideas and action that citizens, critics, and those actors and agencies attribute to it. […] The state [is] a site, not only an actor, of struggle" (Haberkorn 2011: 131-132).

The "war on dark influence" was an attempt—among many others which we will analyze in the next chapters—by Thaksin Shinawatra to extend his control, and that of elected politicians, over this site to the detriment of other state and non-state factions. Such an attempt, moreover, provided the drivers with unprecedented visibility as local political actors and an opportunity to develop forms of internal organization that would become central to their operations in the Red Shirts protests of 2010. Understanding this configuration of conflicts among state forces in Thailand is therefore central to understand the drivers' struggles against local influential people and other state officials, their alliance with Thaksin Shinawatra and their participation in the Red Shirts movement after the 2006 coup that removed the prime minister from power.

This internal conflict was initiated, under the guidance of General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh,[95] with the controversial "war on drugs," during which almost 3000 people were killed (Haanstad 2008) and continued with the "war on dark influence," again under the leadership of Chavalit. The two wars, even if headed by the same person, had very different objectives. As Eric Haanstad has argued:

> In the war on drugs, the state used performances of violence to threaten Thai citizens with its capacity for coercive force. In the war on dark influences that immediately followed these performances, the threats were turned more inward still, and were increasingly leveled on state agents themselves. Using coercive rhetoric, Thaksin threatened to 'slash' thousands of positions, sack officers, and transfer underperforming police generals. Speaking at the annual meeting of the police association, Thaksin told his fellow police colleagues, 'Police are like doctors who do not know how to protect themselves from infection. Ethics are important.' (Haanstad 2008: 264)

Thakin's struggle over the state was framed—as much as the bureaucratic push back with the 2006 coup—as a moral fight, one in which one side was the upholder of this ethical conception of bureaucracy while the other as dirtied by immorality. Such fight, therefore, needed to be public. The "war on dark influence" was conceived as a spectacle of efficiency and anti-corruption which relied on filling the media-scape with statements regarding the relevance of these dark influences and the roles of bureaucrats, police officers, and

[95] Pasuk and Baker have shown that "a central piece of Thaksin relationship with the military was General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who had been army commander in 1987–89, before resigning to form the New Aspiration Party. As prime minister in 1996–97, Chavalit had revived the political use of the security apparatus, and had floated schemes for the military to benefit from the economic boom. In 2002, he merged his party into TRT, admitting that he no longer commanded the funds required for party leadership after Thaksin's entry into the political market had changed the price levels. Thaksin appointed him first as defence minister, and later as a deputy prime minister overseeing projects involving cooperation with the military" (Pasuk and Baker 2004: 12).

military officials. As an effect, motorcycle taxis became the showcase of this new approach, given their centrality to the daily lives of urban dwellers as well as the relative ease of regulating this business.[96]

The first step was a media campaign to publicize the drivers' hardships and prompt a collective "obsession with a particular and easily-identifiable costume, the ubiquitous taxi vests" (Haanstad 2008: 275). In the months of April and May 2003 Thai newspapers were flooded with articles denouncing the role of local mafia in the omnipresent system of transportation, interviewing drivers, voicing their pleas, and attempting to quantify the value of this racket. While the larger Thai public was informed of the material, economic, and symbolic importance of the sleeveless shirt, the government promised to distribute new "legal" vests for free to the oppressed drivers. In so doing, the government argued, the drivers would enhance their full entrepreneurial potential, away from the clutches of "dark influences" that—the government estimated—were extorting a total of 1.2 billion baht (40,000,000$) per year from this business. As Eric Haanstad has shown:

> The war on dark influence's ritual display mobilized highly visible actors, motorcycle taxi drivers who literally wore the mark of the extortion schemes they labored under, to create a dramatic site of state intervention. By asserting economic dominance on this relatively minor site of the illegal economy, Thai state-makers hoped to create the appearance of a broad 'war on crime' that claimed to attempt to eliminate the networks of favoritism, protection, and extortion endemic to the Thai state. Thus, the campaign was an attempted assertion of economic dominance and informational control. (Haanstad 2008: 294)

The government moved quickly to stage the campaign. Less than a year after De Soto had visited Thailand and proposed a regularization of its informal economies, Thaksin initiated a registration of operating drivers with their district offices on May 20th 2003. By late August, the government decided to give new yellow license plates to bikes for public use and district offices in Bangkok distributed new vests to the drivers,[97] vests which would operate as personal licenses and, at least in theory, provide legalized assets to be

[96] This decision was criticized as "a catalyzing distraction event, which usefully shifted public interest away from the high level corruption known to affect all branches of Thai government and business" (Haanstad 2008: 274).

[97] Interestingly these vests were paid with money from the General Lottery Office (GLO) which during Thaksin's government was entrusted to a former police and his classmate. The GLO was used as a sort of cash bank for Thaksin social agenda and credit policies. Thaksin, in fact, had brought part of Thailand's massive underground lottery system into the legal fold by operating a frequent national lottery run by the Government Lottery Office. Lottery sales of approx. 70 billion THB (2 billion USD) were used for social projects, including the "One District, One Scholarship" program, the village fund, the formalization of motorcycle taxis (Pasuk 2004).

transformed into capital and used as collaterals for loans. Once again the vest was used as a metonym for much larger processes and configurations. The sleeveless shirt were re-conceptualized as a symbol of this war and transformed from a sign of the power of influential people and corrupted state officials into a sign of the government patronage of their activities, its recognition of the drivers as important forces and legitimate entrepreneurs, and the new approach to the relations between state forces, informal economy, and capitalism.

This focus on vests and their distribution, however, limited the effects of this formalization. Without reforming the organization of motorcycle taxis and legislating over their use of road pavement as stations, in fact, the formalization revolved exclusively around the distribution of a limited amount of free vests (109,056) to already operating drivers. The short-comings of this approach were soon evident. After the distribution many of the drivers sold the vests to the higher bitter, who often was the person who previously controlled their group. After all, given that few banks, as predictable, accepted a torn motorcycle taxi driver vest as collateral, selling them was the best way to transform this "assets into capital." Even the drivers who refused to sell their new vests often ended up still paying local influential people, not anymore for their vests but for their parking spaces.

With all its shortcomings, however, the formalization did provide a push toward the liberation from the direct control of local mafia and toward the recognition of the drivers' business acumen. By reframing the drivers as entrepreneur, Thaksin's reform offered them protection and conceptualized them as independent actors who needed to "mobilize their dormant assets" rather than as workers in need for government support. In this sense, this policy contributed to build up both the idea and the practice of motorcycle taxis as *āchīp`itsara* (free career) while, by framing them as entrepreneurs,

> encouraged to understand one's life, actually or potentially, not in terms of fate or social status, but in terms of one's success or failure acquiring the skills and making the choices to actualize oneself. As this new ethic of self-conduct disseminates across diverse problems and practices, […] a new relation of individuals to expertise is established, based not upon welfare bureaucracies, social obligations and the inculcation of authoritatively established norms, but upon the mechanisms of the market and the imperatives of self-realization. (Rose 1999: 87)

While the first part of Rose's argument seems to describe quite accurately the situation in Thailand and the conundrum that these reforms left the drivers in, the second part, on the retreat of the welfare and expansion of mechanisms of the market, seem to fit less with Thaksin's reforms, and in so doing helps us to question the validity of neo-liberalism as a analytics for Thaksin's agenda and the contemporary relation between Thai state and capital. Even in the implementation of De Soto's theories, which have been analyzed as fully neo-liberal ideas advocating the expansion of capitalism at the expense of state presence (Gilbert 2001),[98] Thaksin's government had no intention of leaving the market to operate freely. He balanced these policies with a variety of other social services programs that he presented as the socialist dimension of its state capitalism. This aspect included a rural debt moratorium, a million baht village and community fund, the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) plan, and the 30-baht health scheme, largely regarded as the most successful of Thaksin's programs.[99]

Such framing of the drivers as entrepreneurs and inclusion into a new system of social service, similarly to the discourse *`itsara*, reveals the complex relation in post-Fordist Thailand between emancipatory impulses and hegemonic control. On one side, the vision of drivers as entrepreneurs depoliticized exploitation and social inequality by reframing them as individual success or failure to take effective decisions. On the other side, it provided the drivers with personal stakes in the full enforcement of these policies. Moved by personal motivations, the drivers organized their first collective struggle demanding the fulfillment of the government promises and a "true" *ākhēp`itsara*. In other words, as Gramsci has showed in his analysis of the Piedmonts' hegemony over the Italian state, hegemony—in this case the discourse of *`itsara* that atomized the drivers as self-directed individual entrepreneurs—both controls and provides the basis for struggles that potentially undercut its hold and contributed to its own subversion.

[98] He has in fact argued that "the danger inherent in his myth is that it will persuade policy makers that they need to do little more than offer title deeds and then leave the market to do everything else. The market will provide services and infrastructure, offer formal credit and administer the booming property market. In the process every household will get to own their own home and even make money from it. A form of utopia is nigh."

[99] The programs focused on providing affordable universal health care, individual access to credit, and collective micro-financing for production of 'traditional' products. For a more detailed analysis of the functioning of these policies see (Pasuk and Baker 2009; Worawan 2003)

The "return of the actor": drivers' organizing under Thaksin

The drivers, in fact, did not attend inactive to this shift in government's policies. Since its very beginning, they claimed a central role in the formalization. On May 22nd 2003, two days after the formal launching of the new policy, one hundred motorcycle taxi drivers drove to parliament to show their support for the campaign and to reveal the full extent of their exploitation. They delivered documentation proving information on the racket over their operations and left the parliament only when a senior police officer agreed to take their pledge seriously (Wassayos and Manop 2003). This was the beginning of a mobilization that animated the summer of 2003 in Bangkok and gave birth to a city-wide network of motorcycle taxi drivers that would become central to the Red Shirts protest in 2010. Supportive of the policy but unsatisfied with its details and implementations, the drivers grew increasingly frustrated with the gap between Thaksin's promises and the reality of continual treats and exploitation of their labor. As a result, hundreds of drivers rallied at the Crime Suppression Division, Bangkok Municipal Administration, as well as Government House, demanding for a swift and total crack down on influential people's and denouncing the role of police and military officers both in the exploitative system and in ostracizing its formalization.

Although these mobilizations remained often at a district level and rarely involved more than a few hundreds drivers at a time, over the course of the year, a network of vocal drivers emerged across Bangkok, under a dozen leaders who organized and assisted *wins* in their fight with local influential people and district bureaucrats. Among the leaders who organized this first wave of protests were Yai and Lek, two twin brothers, ninth and tenth sons of an Isan migrant family, who grew up in a small slum in Bangkok and had, over time, made a name for themselves in the urban underworlds as local thugs, vote canvassers, and street-level political mobilizers establishing solid connections with army officers and politicians on both sides of the political spectrum. These two brothers, central to drivers' participation in political protests both in 1992 and 2010—as following chapters will analyze—had a central role in mobilizing drivers both to support Thaksin's reform and to denounce its short-comings. As Yai remembered,

> 2003 was a busy year. Lek and I almost had no time to work as drivers. We were making no money. Every week we organized a rally, rent a truck and speakers, and headed out to some district police station or district office to collect information on the amount of money being

> paid to influential people and protest against the limited implementation of the new policy. It was hard, we received threats and drivers who were collecting these data (*khō mūn*)[100] were attacked by thugs sent by local mafia. And back home our wives were not happy that we were not bringing back any money. But we started to meet with other drivers in every district who also were being oppressed, who also had state officials come to eat on their lives. We started to fight together (*sū rūamkan*).

Soon, in fact, more and more local protests were organized around the city and other drivers joined in, not only as protesters against the specific mobilization in their districts, but also as city-wide organizers. Pin and Samart, who would become central actors in the future organization of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok during the time of my research, joined in a second batch of organizers. After them, two new organizers joined in by the end of 2003: Lerm, a migrant from the eastern province of Buriram, who had a past as a labor organizer in local factories; and Oboto, an Isan migrant who had previously worked in a Bangkok hospital and become a political organizer in Klong Toey, the biggest slum in the city.

This core group extended its web of contacts throughout the city. As Samart told me, "we were a team, we worked together and know each other since the time of Thaksin premiership. During that time we exchange numbers and we started collaborating. In this period we met a lot of other drivers. We knew who was where, who knew whom. From then on any time somebody had a problem we would call each other, meet up, and organize together."

Such organization, and the resulting wave of protests around the city, heavily covered by national media, embarrassed Thaksin, who had presented the formalization of motorcycle taxi as a central piece and a litmus test for his fight against established privileged, bureaucratic meddling, and his support to low-income population. As Yai narrated:

> At first we supported Thaksin for the vest policy but influential people drove us away and attacked us because there were no legal argument and the police could not press any charge so I started to protest against Thaksin. I went to a TV program and I explained why I protested against him, even if he was a good person. He was good but the policy had no legal basis. The police who was supposed to check the registration did not enforce it. Why didn't he think about this? Make a final decision and then enact the law, that is all we asked. If we didn't protest, no one would have intervened. When we got the new vests, the influential people came back and we still had to pay them as before. The police took their side. Many people said I chased Thaksin out. I gathered the people and attacked him. I could not eliminate the problems otherwise. Whatever problem motorcycle taxi had they came to talk to me and the other leaders. We were stuck there: we needed registration and a law that

[100] On the use of this terminology in Thailand see (Herzfeld 2013)

> eliminated the problem of influential people. So we went out and distributed flyers explaining our problems. In ten days I distributed 6-7 thousand flyers around the city. From there on every 10-15 days we staged a rally to attack Thaksin and protested him. Thaksin himself meet with us at the Thai Rak Thai party office, listened to our requests and decided to intervene. He said that he could do it and he did. In three months he was done. Within three months the law governing the motorcycle taxis was passed and he had won over the drivers' heart. Once he intervened he won everything: first he won the drivers' hearts, second he gained taxation, and third he cut down the influential figures.

Faced with the criticism that he was just distributing new vests without dealing with the influence behind the extortion or providing a law under which to voice the drivers' complains, Thaksin decided to take matters into his hands and, in perfect populist style, set up a direct channel between him and the drivers. First, he acknowledged that ending long-standing vested interests may take some time and invited drivers to bypass local police and send their complaints directly to him, either at the Government House or to PO Box 1234, which he set up explicitly for them. Second, he incorporated the growing network of drivers' leaders into its team. Yai was hired as a consultant on the policy implementation and had a series of meetings with the prime minister's team to discuss the drivers' problems, report high-profile officers involved in extortion, and suggest potential interventions. These meetings, immortalized in a big framed picture that dominates Yai's living room, went a long way in solidifying the relation between the prime minister and motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok. In occasion of his second run for office in 2005, in fact, the drivers figured prominently as vote canvassers and organizers of rallies in support of Thaksin, whenever the prime minister was criticized by opposing parties.

The personal connection between the prime minister and these new leaders, however, was not only advantageous for Thaksin. Now inscribed into an institutional setting, the leaders developed an extensive web of connections and personal relations with state officials, whether in the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, high-ranking police officers, or army personnel, which would guarantee them new channels for future negotiations and demands. In other word, the same meandering and path-seeking phatic labor that they operated in the streets of Bangkok was brought to the corridors of its administration.

This path-making potential, however, still relied heavily on their personal affiliation with the prime minister. As a result, even if these drivers were more important than Thaksin in pushing themselves out of the control and domination of local influential people, when a military coup removed the prime minister from power in September 19th 2006, the process of their formalization received a significant drawback. During his premiership, in fact, the drivers had obtained significant successes though their connections to Thaksin. First, even in cases in which drivers had continued to pay money to influential people, the amount was significantly reduced and their negotiating power increased, together with their job security as well as their legal status. Second, for the first time they acquired visibility and formal recognition as significant actors in the life of the city, stake-holders in the urban system and in the Thai state, as well as free legitimate entrepreneurs, rather than good-to-nothing lazy country bumpkins, as many Bangkokians perceive them. Now with his removal, these successes seemed to come under question and the system largely went back under the control of influential people. When I started my research in 2009, as a result, the industry was in a process of de-formalization.

The "return of the actor": drivers' organizing after Thaksin

Although the removal of Thaksin Shinawatra signaled a return to power of the same state bureaucracy that he had tried to control and cut off from the informal economy, the network of drivers created around their formalization, and its organizing capacity, remained very much in place, and oriented the drivers' collective bargaining power and political presence in the city after 2006. Similarly, the new collective consciousness among the drivers as stake-holders and "free" entrepreneurs did not go away with the former prime minister.

Once again, these shifts were condensed around the drivers' attitude toward their vests. What had once been a symbol of oppression and exploitation, and then a symbol of government's patronage, turned into a symbol of the drivers'`*itsara phāp*, personal pride, and collective resistance against influential people and urban bias. During the course of my fieldwork, in fact, it became clear that many of the drivers' clients,

particularly fancy offices and entertainment venues, took advantages of their services yet preferred not to see the bright vests in their confines. Most striking was the case of the administrative bodies of Bangkok Art and Culture Center (BACC). While they sponsored a collaboration between a group of Thai artists and the motorcycle taxi drivers operating outside the building to diffuse artworks around the city by attaching them to the drivers' vests and bikes, they nonetheless required drivers to take down their vests when using the toilette inside the museum, arguing that the cultural space was no place for motorcycle taxi drivers. Many of the drivers involved in the project complained about this and referred to their vest as a symbol of who they were, a symbol they were ready to protect.[101]

Pin, one of the drivers' leaders, an older man with thick white hair and the crude charm of a former thug, was particularly adamant in his defense of his right to wear with pride the sleeveless shirt, even at the cost of losing money. Like many other drivers before picking up this profession he had worked in construction, and a series of factories and restaurants jobs. Differently from most drivers of his generation, however, Pin received a high-school education that granted him a prominent role as the penman and secretary of the Motorcycle Taxi Association of Thailand (AMTT), which emerged in 2010 to formalize their collective organization initiated in the summer of 2003. Pin has operated for almost 20 years in a station next to the parking lot of the Asoke subway station, a major node of urban transportation. Pin lived for two decades where the parking lot is today, in a slum that was demolished in the early 1990s, when the value of this land became too attractive to house urban poor. Since then, even if he moved outside the city contours, Pin kept coming back to this spot, every day, to take advantage of the same economic flows that cost him his house a decade before. Here he carries clients, for the most part, from the subway to their offices, homes, or schools.

In his *win*, however, most of the drivers' income comes from documents' deliveries for offices located in the glassy skyscrapers around the area, a service in which Pin refuses to participate. "I don't take a

[101] For instance, after the 2006 coup, Bangkok governor decided to change the color of the drivers vests from a unified orange, which the drivers perceived as the color given to them by Thaksin, to a different color for each district. Many of the drivers, however, resisted to this change and by the time of my research in 2010 only wear their not-orange vests when the other vest was in the laundry.

messenger job," he explained to me, "because when I get into the building, they ask me to take off my vest. They don't respect my career. Why do I have to take off my vest? I'm sure my shirt is way more expensive than the ones they wear in the office." "Why do they want you to take off your shirt?" I asked. Pin answered:

> I used to ask them but the answer always turned out to be nothing. They said it's a requirement. If that's so than I'm not gonna do this job. I tell my customer to piss off wherever they ask me to take off my shirt. I don't care, you can hire someone else who don't mind to take it off. I take this as an insult to my career. This is one point that we are gonna fight for. We are not gonna take our shirts off. We are proud of what we do. If we don't work for a day, thousands of people would go to work late. Thai transportation system is not good enough but with the motor taxi people can go everywhere and at every time. For example, to travel 5 km if you take the bus or taxi you'll need 30 minutes but if you take motor taxi you need only 10 minutes. This is an honorable job (*`āchīp nī man mīkīat)*. It is a free profession (*āchīp`itsara*). We have nothing to be ashamed (*kradāk čhai*) of. I do not accept to take the vest down just to make some money, I am tired of people in Bangkok looking down on us (*dū thūk*).

Such pride in their job as a free profession (*`āchīp `itsara*) and an honorable job (*`āchīp mīkīat)* was another consequence of the formalization that, if not directly intended, provided the drivers with a sense of shared identity in the face of attacks from other urban dwellers and strengthen their organizational cohesion. Over time, pushed by this new forms of self-identification and pride, the leaders of drivers' mobilizations—in particular Yai, Lek, Lerm, and Oboto—established themselves, according to different skills and personalities,[102] as public figures among the drivers in Bangkok and central power-brokers of street politics, negotiating relations with national political parties, Thai governments, local police, and army personnel. This position projected them into a potential future of political negotiations over their participation in a social welfare system, as well as into an insurance scheme that would cover both them and their passengers in case of accident.

The realization of such future was an unintended consequence of Thaksin's formalization that allowed the emergence of motorcycle taxi drivers as legitimate political actors in Thailand. The struggle for the correct implementation of this policy, in fact, saw the emergence of a city-wide network of drivers which started to organize more consistently, and eventually became a formal association. In February of 2010, Yai,

[102] Yai in particular, due to its eloquence, became a bit of a public figure even beyond the drivers early on. In 2003 and 2004, in fact, a number of interviews with him were published in the press, both in newspaper and in popular magazines.

Lek, Lerm, Oboto, Samart, and Pin decided to formalize the city-wide network of drivers by founding a labor organization called the Association of Motorcycle Taxi of Thailand (AMTT). This association, as we will see in the next chapters, played a central role in solidifying the drivers' political role, increasing their negotiating power vis-à-vis state forces, and augmenting the drivers' collective power and public visibility in their neighborhoods, the city, and the country at large. Moreover, this association, during the time of my research emerged as a central actor in the operation of the Red Shirts, a growing social movement that was sweeping the country.

The politics of everyday life and the everydayness of politics

This chapter has analyzed the centrality of the discourse of *`itsara* to the drivers decisions' to take up this occupation, their participation to form of post-Fordism capitalism in Thailand, and their struggles against the domination of local influential people and state bureaucracy over their activities. I have shown how this discourse provides both emancipatory force and hegemonic control over their lives. Both components, however, are not without its challenges, contingencies, contradictions, and failures that often generate discontent and frustration among the drivers. Their struggles, in this sense, are not just individual attempts to enhance different forms of mobility but also collective resistances to influential people and police officers' control over their livelihood that reveal the fractured nature of the Thai state and configure the drivers as political actors not just in their neighborhood but also in the larger national sphere. After all, as we saw, their connections with Thaksin Shinawatra did not just end with the 2006 coup.

The rest of this dissertation will explore the mobilization of motorcycle taxi drivers against the removal of Thaksin first and them, since 2009, in support of the Red Shirts movement, which took over Bangkok's street demanding for equality and social justice in Thailand. In other words, while Part I mostly showed how everyday life orients the drivers' political-economic positions in the city, next section analyzes how their political mobilization shaped and restructured everyday life in Bangkok during the Red Shirts protests in 2010. In this sense, the second part of my work focuses on the emergence of this social movement

and reconstructs the emergence of the drivers' political consciousness and their adoption of mobility as a technique of political mobilization.

PART II

Interlude

March dusks in Bangkok last only a moment. The sun rapidly disappears behind buildings leaving a lingering light that sharpens the shadows and gives depth to the otherwise flat surface of Singaporean looking shop-houses. In the old section of Bangkok, streets that during the day have the dowdy look of chaotic comings and goings underneath a convoluted mesh of electric wires, suddenly reacquire the aristocratic look celebrated in the pompous and lengthy Thai name of the city: Krungthep, the city of angels, the great city, the eternal jewel city, the impregnable city of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous Royal Palace that resembles the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarmahe.[103] A tone of ochre accentuated by the incandescence street-lights, that only in this part of town substitute the otherwise omnipresent neon, yellows the dusk, flavored by the smell of food carts and their mouth-watering smoke.

Imagine walking along these streets on such an evening, your palms sweating and your shirt adhering to your body. A few hundred meters from you, the sound of huge speakers winds though the small alleys, reaching your ears, syncopated, as you move thought the static traffic, trying to cross the street. "Brother and sisters, it is time for this government to step down, for too long Thailand has been controlled by an aristocracy (*ammat*)" Crackling speakers' sound mixes with car engines. "The time for democracy has arrived." Around you small groups of people dressed in red shirts walk through the stopped cars as they head toward Racthadamnoen, the large French-styled boulevard where a huge Red Shirts protest is taking place. Around you, drivers are trying to U-turn their cars, discouraged by the immobility that has captured them. On your right, a long orderly line of cars fills the street, framed by equally ordered rows of shop-houses. Behind you, the same scene. In front, crowd control barriers block the street. Behind them three lines of motorcycle taxi drivers wait for you, fingers in the air, ready to utter their usual first sentence: *pai nai?* Where to?

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[103] The name in Thai is *krung thēp mahā nakhǭn `omraratnakōsin mahintharāyutyā mahādinkaphop nopratnarātthānībūrīram `udomrātniwasēmhātthān `omraphimān`awatānsathit sakkathattiyawitnukamprasit.*

The first line of drivers, further away from you and closer to the protesters, sit astride, bikes slightly transversal, and one foot on the ground, ready for you to jump on their back seats. The second line, less interested in clients, sits with both feet up, resting on the foot pegs, or stands, one knee bent on the seat. In the third row, right in front of you, drivers chat distractedly sitting on their bikes or standing, giving you their backs. All of them wear the orange sleeveless vest distributed by Thaksin's government in 2003, embroiled with a number printed on their chests on the left and the Bangkok insignia—the god Indra riding a white elephant—on their right. A few hundred meters away from the drivers the crowd of protesters starts to thicken, soon becoming a uniform sea of red. Through this sea of protesters who flooded here to voice a multiplicity of demands only motorcycle taxis can navigate, finding routes where all other modes of transportation see a wall. Regularly a motorbike emerges from the crowd and drives back to the pack, parking at the end of the third row, as everybody moves a position up. "*Pai nai*? Where to?" repeats the first driver in the front row. "Democracy Monument" you shout as you jump on the bike and slide into the crowd, directed to the heart of the protest.

The ride proceeds slowly through the periphery of the rally, zigzagging though protesters, parked cars, and scattered vendors selling Red Shirts' paraphernalia: T-shirts and jackets, books and posters, wristbands, armbands, music from protesters' bands. As you get closer to the crowds, food and drinks take over the stands, providing for the multiple tastes of the thicker crowd of Red Shirts around you. Money change hands all around, fueling the economy of a protest that attracts a multitude of street-vendors, motorcycle taxi drivers, and other service providers toward the protest and gives it the feeling of a street fair. Thousands of people dressed in red fill the street pavement, while the broad side-walks are taken over by large tents. Most of them are towered by banners with the name of the province their occupants come from. Some function as mobile hospitals or registrations booths for the UDD (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship), the most organized section of the Red Shirts; others as massage parlors, resting areas for monks, or small radio and TV stations. Protesters move from tent to tent, chat a bit, buy something to eat, and make their way back toward the monument where the whole ground is covered by plastic tarpaulins and portable chairs. Sitting on the asphalt, the crowd becomes impossible to penetrate, even by a motorcycle

taxi driver. Your driver stops, tells you he cannot go any further, gets his 10 baht coin, and makes his way back to his line.

Around you, everybody is facing toward Democracy Monument, which stands in the middle of a roundabout which breaks in two sections the huge boulevard. Originally commissioned in 1939 to commemorate the 1932 coup that posed an end to absolute monarchy in Siam, the monument was supposed to fulfill Ratchadamnoen's fate as the Champs-Élysées of Asia by providing its *Arc de Triomphe*. What the monument did provide, however, was a center of gravity for mass political mobilizations in Thailand since the 1970s and a symbol to the struggle for democracy that begun with that coup and, according to the Red Shirts, still remains incomplete. To crystalize the unfulfilled nature of this dream the protesters have wrapped up the monument's centerpiece, a representation of a palm-leaf manuscript box containing the 1932 Constitution on top of two offering bowls, and surrounded it with a red cloth with written "return power to the people" (*khuen`amnāt hai prachāchon*). Around the monument, in front of each of the four wings that surround the dome, large screens broadcast a phone-in video by Thaksin Shinawatra. From his studio in Dubai, he charges up the crowd, criticizing the injustice of the present government and its refusal to give people real access to opportunities. Some protesters sit on the ground, staring enchanted at their exiled hero. Others walk around distractedly, uninterested in the words of somebody they see as tangential to their struggle. Peppered among them are hundreds of motorcycle taxi drivers, many still wearing in their vests. Since thousands of Red Shirts descended upon Bangkok on March 12th, these drivers have acquired a central role in the internal functioning of street protests as transportation providers, political mobilizers, leaders' personal guards, collectors of information, as well as generic supporters. Obviously not every motorcycle taxi driver in Bangkok agrees with the Red Shirts, nor all of the supporters visit the protest sites, but the large majority of them sympathized with the movement and thousands actively participated in it.

It was during this early stage of the protest, which alternated between gatherings in Ratchadamnoen and daily caravans of protesters around the city, that I met Oboto, one of the drivers who organized their anti-influential people mobilizations since 2003 and now led their participation in the Red Shirts. A charming

man in his forties, Oboto was born in a village in outside Ubon Ratchathani, in northeastern Thailand. As a teenager, he moved to Bangkok and became a political organizer in the slum of Klong Toey where he still lives and works. After the 1997 crisis Oboto was laid off from his job as a hospital porter and started working as a motorcycle taxi driver. By 2003, when the government of Thaksin Shinawatra began to draft the formalization of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, Oboto had already become a local figure among Klong Toey's drivers.

As the formalization brought together disgruntled drivers, he met other leaders of motorcycle taxi groups across the city who, like him, had been fighting against the meddling of influential people—mostly government officials—in their activities. Fostered by the sudden media attention to their pledges, these leaders became increasingly visible in Thai public sphere and street politics, and progressively connected to the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who used their expertise in drafting and implementing the formalization of motorcycle taxis. Even after his fall, this alliance was not forgotten. Since the 2006 coup, the group started to mobilize support in favor of the ousted prime minister and against the military government which had taken his place. It was not until a month before the beginning of the Red Shirts protest, in February of 2010, that Oboto and the other leaders decided to formalize their collective organization and established the association of motorcycle taxis of Thailand (AMTT), an informal trade union, with the purpose of protecting drivers from racketeering and incrementing their collective visibility and negotiating power.

Coherently with their political history and alliances, the association immediately entered the orbit of the Red Shirts movement. Such collaboration, however, was not without its risks and difficulties. On a personal level, their support to the movement put their livelihood in danger, because of repeated threats from the post-Thaksin government of Abhisit Vejjajiva to revoke their licenses if they took part in the protest. On a collective level, becoming closely affiliated with one side of the political spectrum could potentially jeopardize their ability to negotiate with opposing governments, both present and future, on issues of social welfare, job security, and incorporation into the state apparatus. Regardless of this double risk the Association of Motorcycle Taxi drivers of Thailand (AMTT) decided to get on the Red Shirts stage in Ratchadamnoen on

April 3rd and show its support for and alliance with the Red Shirts. Even if united in front of the masses in their pledge, as the protest progressed it became clear that the main leaders of the association saw this "going on stage" (*khɯn wētht̄*) under different, and ultimately incompatible, agendas. While the most of the leaders of the association, personally supporting the Red Shirts, saw the union's participation to the protest as part of a bargaining game with the government and the army, Oboto and few others leaders refused to see the protest just as a means to this end.

As a result, Oboto slowly drifted away from the association and became the main liaison for the Red Shirts among the drivers. This separation revealed the division of politicized drivers into two factions, one that followed the association, and therefore saw the protest as a way to acquire stronger negotiating power vis-à-vis the Thai state and its military forces, and another that saw itself as first-and-foremost a group of Red Shirts supporters, uninterested in any negotiation with existing forces. When I met Oboto, on March 15th 2010, three days after the beginning of the march that brought thousands of protesters into Bangkok, this conflict had not yet emerged but Oboto had already raised to a prominent position among Red Shirts drivers, as our first meeting revealed.

Oboto was standing in the middle of Rachadamnoen Road. This avenue, contrary to the planners' intentions to make it into a space of beautification and consumption, developed historically as the quintessential political space in the city, tucked in between the old Royal Palace and the new one or—for the people who prefer a more democratic version of its history—in between the Parliament and Sanam Luang, the Royal Ground where major national ceremonies are staged. In the middle of this road Oboto stands, a few hundred meters away from the Italianate Democracy Monument embellished with bas-reliefs of soldiers. Tidy black hair, a medical mask on his face, and aviators' sunglasses, Oboto perfectly embodies his role as a masculine and distant leader. He wears the orange vest distributed by the metropolitan police to licensed drivers, but he has made it his own. On his chest, instead of the usual number, is a big promotional ad for the opposition party. On his back, rather than the name of the district where he operates, a sticker declares "*santi withī*" (peaceful means), surrounded by two sentences: "*rao rak nai lūang* (We love the King) and "*thai rak thai. Khit tāktāng tǣ mai tākyæk*" (Thai love Thai. We think differently but we are not divided.). Not just a political

mobilizer, Oboto, like many other drivers, transformed their uniforms into mobile political boards, calling for unity in a time of great political division.

His eyes move frantically, following the movements of half a dozen motorcycle taxi drivers who are organizing and directing other bikers into long parallel rows. People around him guide the staging, shouting and honking and gesticulating to direct the crowd's movement. Surrounded by the fumes of motorcycles and cars, Oboto watches, silent. Behind, his red motorbike glimmers in the sun, enfolded by a giant Thai flag, attached to the bike with rolls of large brown tape, flapping in the wind. Further behind thousands of other bikers are scattered. Monks, street-vendors, youngsters, older women, middle-age men, small families tucked on the short seats, young lovers tied together in a hug, thousands of people dressed in red all wait for Oboto to start moving, sitting on their bikes or roaming in the labyrinth of wheels spreading across the boulevard. The rumble of engines builds up, reverberating on the surrounding neoclassic architecture: the loud roar of cheap copies of Harley Davidson, the baritone screams of used-up sporting Yamaha; the popping dialogue of the few Vespas mix with the larger chorus of new Japanese scooters, dominated by the mechanical regularity of Hondas and Yamahas and peppered with the high-pitched sounds of Kawasakis and Suzukis. A few hundred meters behind them cars are parked, blasting Thai country music from their audio sets. City vehicles and pick-ups descended from the provinces, vans, auto-rickshaws, trucks, taxis. The odd caravan crowds around a big truck, deck opened, filled by huge black speakers beneath a small makeshift stage from where a young woman harangues the protesters.

On the right side of the street, a couple of motorcycle taxi drivers in their vests ride up and down bringing information and orders back and forward between the protest's main stage and Oboto. I start talking to him explaining what I am doing in Thailand. "Call me later," he tells me hastily, "here is my number." I put the small piece of paper somewhere, never to be found. I see the motorcycle taxi drivers' orange vests disappearing around me, carefully folded away, as people cover their license plates with boards or plastic bags. "This way they will not know who is who," Oboto tells me without taking off his vest, conscious of the Prime Minister's threat to take license away from drivers who were recognized in the protest. Soon he jumps on his bike, and the huge caravan starts moving, compact, through the streets of Bangkok. I get on my

motorcycle and follow them. The heat is merciless as the procession keeps halting to remain in lockstep, moving in the direction of Din Daeng, a lower income neighborhood in the Northern section of the city. The bikes cross the Central Business District and passersby look rather confused, often meeting the moving convoy with scared gazes and perplexed eyes. Only a few people in the street cheer the protesters, offer drinks, or greet members of the moving convoy. The situation changes suddenly as soon as the procession passes an invisible line that divides the commercial area from the social housing complexes in Din Daeng. From here on, hordes of people flood in the street to cheer, support, or just salute the convoy that grows at every corner as other bikes, cars, and pick-ups join in.

In the two weeks that followed caravans like this crossed the urban landscape of Bangkok almost daily bringing usual traffic to a halt, re-defining streets and spaces of transit as a pivotal political arenas in the city, and challenging the state forces to control and contain a truly mobile protest. Heading these caravans at all times was a thick crowd of motorcycle taxis working as scouting vanguards, collectors of information on the army's and police's movements, and feeders of directives between the front-lines and the leaders' truck. In this phase of the protest, the drivers not only operated as political mobilizers, inciting city dwellers to come out, join the protesters, or just show their support, and as mobile political messages, transforming their vests, bodies, and bikes into itinerant boards, but also as physical and informational mobilizers, literally making the protest mobile.

The second time I met Oboto, after I tried in vain to look for his number in every jacket, bag, and pair of slacks I owned, was on April 26th 2010, more than a month later. Since last time we had seen each other the Red Shirts' mobilization had changed. The protesters had abandoned their mobile strategies and, after a violent confrontation with soldiers on April 10th, they had taken over the commercial heart of the city. If movement had been the central strategy for the first month of protest, now it was barricades and blockages that filtered and modulated the circulation of people, goods, and information. An area of four square kilometers had been sealed off by the Red Shirts, protected by intricate bamboo barricades patrolled by hordes of motorcycle taxi drivers and fierce-looking protesters. On April 26th, the asphalt underneath the

barricades was sticky, covered in petrol that leaked from the car and truck tires speared onto bamboo sticks, ready to be ignited in case of an attack. From the holes in this amateur barricade protesters stared at the other side of the street, trying to read the army's movements. Outside the area, motorcycle taxi drivers rode around and regularly reported to the barricades on soldiers' activities.

The barricades, which sealed the area occupied by the Red Shirts, gave materiality to the limits of the protest area, where alternative spatial practices had taken the place of urban transit, reshaping the rhythms of urban life in Bangkok. People walked in the middle a major traffic artery, slowly moving toward Bangkok's main commercial hub. It now took half an hour to reach the center of the protest, stretching the usual transportation time tenfold. The atmosphere was calm and joyful, with food being cooked, and the usual protesters clapping to leaders' speeches. I passed small stalls selling food, books, slippers, CDs. While street-vendors are normally present in this area negotiating their presence in the rare and heavy policed interstitial spaces between retail shops and transportation routes, their carts were now conquering the street, entering the road pavement, becoming its foci instead of carefully occupying left-over niches. Motorcycle taxi drivers were also reclaiming a similar centrality in the area, now operating not only as unique transportation providers but also directing traffic, taking over the roles of traffic police officers with whom their life is in constant negotiation. Physical and economic mobility was not stopped in the area, but its pace had been taken over and modulated by the very people who otherwise invisibly mediate them.

At the core of this reclaimed area was the Ratchaprasong intersection, a neuralgic node of capitalist circulation, iconic space of transit and middle-class consumption in Bangkok. The intersection featured the biggest shopping mall in the country, up-scale hotels, the largest clothing whole-sale market in the city, and a prime open air shopping and entertainment plaza. Since the protesters had occupied the area, all of them shut down, marking an epochal disruption of capitalist flows in the city. Above it sat the nexus of Bangkok's Skytrain—Siam Square station—the only cross-platform interchange of the whole elevated transportation network, normally serving between forty and fifty thousand passengers each day. Now the platform was empty as the Skytrain had been blocked, following the protesters' threat to occupy it.

A disorienting stillness occupied a space where continuous flow is the norm. In the middle of the intersection, normally traversed by traffic, a huge stage rested, broadcasting its sounds into crowded four-lane streets where human voices could rarely be heard before the protest. On top of the stage a large banner declared, in English, "Protesters Not Terrorists." Underneath, a larger squared banner showed a fighter with open hands, similar to Zapatista's stencil art, topped by a white inscription, "*phrai"* (commoners, serf). On the grounds in front of nearby shopping malls the crowd was instead more dispersed. People sat on the pavement and listened distractedly. Others moved around searching for a space for the night, in an endless motion. Some walked with chairs, some laid down mats, stopped their carts, and renegotiated space with the protesters who had been here all day long. A few meters away from them wet laundry dried in the sun on the handrails of the Skytrain stairs, in front of a small plastic shack adorned by beef jerky, hanging from a rope tied between an advertisement board and a street light. On the other side of the street, three young models overlooked the crowd from huge advertisement boards. The three graces carried the names Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Versace.

As dusk approached, I strolled through the sea of protesters who came to join the movement after their working hours. As I walked in the crowd I saw Oboto's face broadcasted through the half dozen big screens scattered around the newly formed plaza. "The 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok are here to help and support the Red Shirts," he reassured the crowd, standing straight in the middle of the stage. I walked to the backstage and saw him stepping down small iron stairs. Oboto was wearing his usual vest, but no sunglasses and mask this time. As he was juggling conversation between protest leaders and two other drivers, Oboto greeted me and introduced me to them. "They work as personal guards to the Red Shirts leaders. You know," he stared at me. "If you want to get out fast, motorcycle taxi drivers are your best choice." The drivers' mobility and knowledge of the city, which they have acquired over years of operations, make them central to the internal functioning of the protest, and its invaluable allies. "Everybody wants us to be on our side" he added "we know how to move, how to get out nobody has our knowledge of the city. We are the owners of the map." He laughed, raising his eyebrows.

Chapter 5: Infrastructures of mobilization

The Red Shirts, since their emergence after the coup of 2006, have posed a conundrum to observers. Nowhere has this puzzle been more evident and entangled than on the bodies of the thousands of protesters who occupied the streets of Bangkok between March and May 2010: on their heads, red star emblazoned Maoist hats; on their chests, shirts with the face of the former Prime Minister and capitalist tycoon, Thaksin Shinawatra; and underneath their feet, on their flip-flops, the face of Prem Tinsulanonda, the most powerful member of the Privy Council which advises King Bhumibol Adulyadej. This mixture of communist symbols, capitalist references, and anti-aristocratic feelings has been met with puzzlement and seen as contradictory. This chapter aims at resolving this contradiction by historicizing the Red Shirts movement and exploring its "infrastructure of mobilization",[104] a historically constructed template for political alliances, strategies, and discourses among the Red Shirts have come into existence.[105] Through this infrastructure, in fact, the Red Shirts established their pathways for action, along which certain discursive, organizational, spatial, and strategic practices were streamlined while others were blocked.

In reconstructing this infrastructure, I aim not only at exploring the conditions of possibility for the emergence of this movement but, more broadly, I attempt to resolve a shortcoming in classical anthropological analysis of social movements. As Marc Edelman has argued:

> Although ethnographers have often provided compelling, fine-grained accounts of collective action, they have been less consistent when it comes to developing dynamic analyses of either the larger political contexts in which mobilizations occur or the preexisting militant traditions and the organizing processes that constitute movements' proximate and remote roots. (Edelman 2001: 309)

[104] The concept of infrastructure of mobilization has been proposed by Anand Vaidya in his dissertation on the Forest Act in India. Similarly to the technological infrastructures analyzed by Brian Larkin in Nigeria (Larkin 2008), these political infrastructures of mobilization are composed by material and spatial dimensions as well as a larger ensemble of organizational, discursive, and strategic features.

[105] A similar study has been carried out by Flacks (Flacks 1988), who analyzed the role of broad cultural transformations, activists' life trajectories, institutions and organizations, and the reinvention of musical and other traditions in the wave of protest in the United States in the late 1960s.

Similarly, the two dominant theories of social movements—the New Social Movement (NSM) school (Castells 1983; Touraine 1981) and the Resource Mobilization/Political Opportunity (RM/PO) approach (McAdam, et al. 1996; Tilly 1978; Tilly and Wood 2009)—have either focused on the discursive and identity-making aspects of mobilization or on the strategic and organizational dimensions of social movements. In order to understand the motorcycle taxi drivers' participation in the Red Shirts protest, on the contrary, I propose to project and align these separated investigations against the backdrop of history in order to explore how solidified discourses, organizations, and strategies provide social movements with an infrastructure of mobilization that both offers them established paths and prevents them from taking other routes.

Red Shirts composition and social imaginaries

Before analyzing the infrastructure that sustained the emergence of the Red Shirts movement, however, I need to clarify a few aspects of the Red Shirts' supporters and of their political imaginaries. As Nancy Abelmann has argued, "if we are to historicize the social movements we study, we need to first situate them discursively to understand the reigning social imaginaries on social movements and activisms, their vocabularies, their grammars, their aesthetics, and their historical consciousness" (Abelmann 1996: 6). Following her lead, I briefly explore the Red Shirts' complex social imaginaries about themselves, their enemies, and society around them. Such an enterprise, however, is not without its challenges. The protesters, in fact, articulated quite clearly the necessity to change established relations of power, put an end to the military interference into democratic politics and to political-economic inequality in Thailand. Yet their visions diverged and lost clarity as to how these changes should be brought to be. Indeed it seemed that a vague political agenda was strategic and fundamental in allowing collective action among a wide range of factions and actors who had often been in open conflict during the governments of Thaksin Shinawatra and, even once unified in the Red Shirts, have operated under diverging political trajectories. While functional in offering a common arena to diverse actors and groups, this vagueness has posed a challenge for observers,

both Thai and international, as well as for the movement itself, which has struggled to keep its different currents unified and to present itself to the press in a consistent and coherent way.[106]

For the purpose of analytical clarity, therefore, I divide the multiplicity of actors, motivations, and objectives that came together under the umbrella of the Red Shirts, in three streams, each with its own histories, discourses, and strategies. I do so with the awareness that this is just one of many possible artificial sectioning of a movement that has retained a fluid and multidimensional nature.

The first stream, which I call the "Thaksintes," was largely composed of Thaksin Shinawatra's acolytes, former allies, and voters of the Thai Rak Thai party. Its main exponents were former politicians in this party who were banned from electoral politics following the 2006 coup. The Thaksintes' objectives, with significant internal variations, revolved around the erasure of the political changes brought by the military coup, the return of Thaksin Shinawatra to Thailand, and the revocation of the 2007 constitution drafted by the military junta.

The second stream, the "democracy activists," gathered people who had often opposed the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, its policies, and authoritarianism, yet considered unacceptable any political change brought about by military, judicial, or bureaucratic interventions. Its ultimate goal was the establishment of liberal democracy in Thailand, with a system of checks and balances and a control over military intromissions in the political sphere. Its main exponents tended to be established personalities in street politics, former student activists, and community organizers, who saw the Red Shirts as a new phase in a history of Thai democratic struggles that date back to the end of absolute monarchy in 1932, the students' mobilization of the 1970s, and the overthrow of the military government of General Suchinda Kraprayun by street protests in May 1992.

The third stream was that of "radicals." Their significance was difficult to estimate given the potential legal consequences of voicing their opinions in public.[107] The radicals' agenda coalesced around a call for the

[106] The multiplicity of representations was particularly evident in international media—especially BBC and CNN—which covered the Red Shirts alternatively as a peasant movement, a rented mob under the control of the media Tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra, or a socialist uprising, depending on their sources in Thailand.

restructuring of political-economic relations between traditional elites and citizens, and the creation of a republic, or at least the withdrawal of the monarchy and the military from an active role in politics. In their vision, the Red Shirts needed to move beyond their connections to the ousted prime minister and traditional representative democracy, toward becoming a truly revolutionary movement.

Among the Red motorcycle taxi drivers I met, all three streams were present and often mixed. In this sense, these three streams are to be understood as currents rather than as clearly established and discrete groups or organizations, as analytical more than empirical categories. In the progression of protest, in fact, the three currents often have flowed into one another, mixed and condensed, diffused and parted. Most of the protesters I encountered voiced an idiosyncratic and at times contradictory mixture of them. Similarly, the protest leaders and most visible political actors sat at the confluence of these streams, often riding multiple currents at the same time or drifting toward a different stream as the protest evolved. What unified them, however, was both a critique of the existing situation and participation in the struggle over the creation of the Red Shirt's "social imaginary" (Abelmann 1996) of their collective identity, contemporary Thai society, and their mutual relations.[108] As John Hannigan showed, Alain Touraine argued that "social movements have three dimensions: (a) Identity, the definition which the social movement actor gives himself; (b) Opposition, the definition of his adversary; and (c) Totality, the stakes over which the movement and its adversary are in conflict" (Hannigan 1985: 445). In order to understand this movement, therefore, is essential to explore how it has defined itself and its enemies, as well as the totality of social relations in Thai society. After all, as Manuel Castells has argued, the formulation and articulation of collective identity are always involved when

[107] Thai political discourse is in fact conditioned by a strict censorship and particularly a lese-majesty law, which punishes with a penalty of 5 to 15 years of reclusion. Especially since the coup in 2006 this law has been used with increasing frequency, making any reference to the political role of the monarchy virtually against the law. For a treatment of the lese-majesty legislation in Thailand, and its effects on the national political discourse see David Streckfuss' Truth on Trial in Thailand (Streckfuss 2011)

[108] As Marc Edelman has summarized: "For Touraine (1988) […] the issue of social movements has two dimensions […]. The first is the notion of a central conflict in society; for Marx, this was the struggle between labor and capital in industrial society. But, Touraine argues, with the passage to a "postindustrial" society, labor capital conflict subsides, other social cleavages become more salient and generate new identities, and the exercise of power is less in the realm of work and more in "the setting of a way of life, forms of behavior, and needs. [The second] is the concept of "the actor" as key protagonist of "social action." In postindustrial society, diverse collectivities have a growing capacity to act on themselves and to struggle for "historicity"-"the set of cultural, cognitive, economic, and ethical models ... through which social practices are constituted" (1988, pp. 40-41). Touraine thus posits the "way of life" as the focus of contention; struggles that seek to affect the relations of domination characteristic of the "way of life" (with its forms of knowledge, mores, and investment) are "social movements" (Edelman 2001: 288). In this sense, the Red Shirts are a social movement which revolves around the restructuring of everyday life and the fulfillment of their desires for full participation in the economic and political system of Thailand as well as around the construction of its supporters as political actors.

subordinated people attempt to redefine their position in the social order (Hannigan 1985). And the Red Shirts were no exception.

The first step the Red Shirts national leaders—coalescing around the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD)—took was resuscitating the discourse of *phrai* (commoners, serf) and *ammat* (aristocracy) that had dominated feudal relations in Siamese society until King Chulalongkorn's administrative reform. Such terminology was recovered to create an identity among the Red Shirts as well as define their opposition. The on-going political struggles have been conceptualized, especially during the 2010 protests, as a fight between the *phrai*, represented by the Red Shirts supporters, and the *ammat*, composed of the military, bureaucratic and aristocratic elites, and the governing party led by the Oxford-educated Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. As Thongchai Winichakul has argued:

> The UDD discourse of their struggles as the '*phrai*' against the '*ammat*' reveals as much as belies the configuration of class and hierarchy in Thai context. Many Thais and foreign reporters translate the word '*phrai*' as serf, or bonded subject in the Thai feudal society. The pro-government scholars argue correctly that such a feudal social order no longer exists. But the '*phrai*' in the Reds discourse does not mean the historical bonded subjects. '*Phrai'* and its opposite, '*ammat*' (the noble, the lords) in the UDD discourse targets the oppression and injustice due to social class and hierarchy such as the one in Thai political culture. The struggle of the Reds is a class war in this sense of the revolt of the downtrodden rural folks against the privileged social and political class, the '*ammat*.' (Thongchai 2010)

This war, however, was predicated upon a very specific notion of class, not defined by relations of production (Marx, et al. 1906), distinctions (Bourdieu 1984), or wealth, but rather by access to political power. When talking about *phrai*, in fact, the Red Shirts have tended not to refer to themselves only as the poor, the peasantry, or the working class but rather as a new category, one defined by exclusion from services, such as education or access to credit, consumption, and fair legal and political treatment. As Voranai Vanijaka has shown, with anti-Red Shirts sarcasm, "*phrai* need not be poor, they say. *Phrai* can have money, they insist. *Phrai* are only *phrai* in that they don't have the power, they say" (Post 2011). Although intended at dismissing the Red Shirts' discourse, this observation actually remains one of the most perceptive analyses of the movement to appear in Thai main stream media.

When see in this light, a movement of *phrai* led by a billionaire was not a contradiction, but rather it confirmed the oppressive nature of the *ammat* that, through the removal of the democratically elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in 2006, disenfranchised and oppressed the majority of the national population, regardless their economic status.[109] This discursive shift has had a double effect: first, it transformed a rarely used derogatory term (*phrai*) into a source of pride and a self-representation, which condensed the oppressive nature of hierarchical relations in Thailand; second, it bound the movement together around a shared sense of injustice and unfairness that equated very different groups—from rural poor to economic elites, from former politicians to rural organizers, from urban working classes to radical intellectuals. Their unity was predicated upon being under the same structural relations of exclusion to the *ammat*, an equally generic term that stood for everything and everybody which has oppressed the Thai population and constrained its full democratic potential—from the military to the government, from the Privy Council to the palace.

This marked a major change in Thai political discourse. As Isan anthropologist Bunthawat Weemoktanondha has reported to Inter Press Service News, the Red Shirts "[were] breaking a cultural taboo by using this word so openly to describe themselves without feeling ashamed of being *phrai*. It is well known that this word indicates class discrimination. [The word] *'phrai'* is so sensitive that its use to describe a person could lead to serious consequences, even physical attack. This word is not used frequently because it means the speaker is calling a person low-class, ignorant, stupid" (Macan-Markar 2010). The Red Shirts, in a manner similar to African-Americans' appropriation of the word "nigger" or LGBT activists' uses of the word "queer," turned this terminology on its head and transformed it into a form of pride and a challenge to established forms of oppression and unfair treatment equated to the ones *phrai* experienced in feudal Siam. This clever inversion accomplished all three objectives of a social movement, as previously presented by Alain Touraine: the Red Shirts defined an identity for themselves as *phrai*, construed their adversary as *ammat*, and

[109] As Weng Tojirakarn, one of the key leaders of the Red Shirts explained: "*Phrai* simply explains everything. We are *phrai*. Nobody wants to be treated like a dog. Everybody must be treated equally as a human being. For the *phrai*, they only fight to let society accept that they are human. This society dehumanizes people, so that is why the majority of the people now understand what the red shirts are fighting for, it is just only the elite class that is fighting against this."

traced the stakes of the conflict as the end of this system of oppression and exclusion, condensed around a discourse of *sǭng māttrathān* (double standards).

The terminology of "double standards" entered the Thai political discourse in 2001 when it was used, in English, to criticize a court decision to acquit the newly elected Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from proven accusations of failing to declare the full extent of his assets when entering politics.[110] Few would have guessed that this term would become so central to a movement that came together as an effect of Thaksin's removal by a military coup in 2006. The use of "double standards" became popular in its Thai version, *sǭng māttrathān*, in 2008 when Red Shirts adopted it to denounce their legal persecution while the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts seemed to be able to break any law or oppose any elected government with total impunity. By the end of 2008, however, this discourse had extended beyond a denunciation of judicial bias, toward a larger critique of inequality in Thai society (Chiang Noi 2010).[111] As Thongchai has shown, "the alleged 'double standard' by the urban elite and media is strikingly consistent. It is in fact a single set of standards that laws, reasons, rights, rewards and punishments, and other value judgments should be applied to people according to their different hierarchy" (Thongchai 2010). It was around this shared injustice that the three streams which composed the Red Shirts came together and mobilized.

[110] Immediately after his election as prime minister in 2001, Thaksin was charged with illegal concealing the full amount of his assets while deputy prime minister in 1997. The Thai constitutional court, with a ruling which seemed to rely more on Thaksin' vast electoral support than on firm legal ground, dismissed these accusation without explaining in details the reasons behind their decision. As a result the National Counter Corruption Commission (NCCC) pointed to a 'double standard' in the ruling when compared to similar cases against other public officeholders.

[111] Interestingly, however, the legal origins of this phrase, *sǭng māttrathān*, evidence the centrality of the relation between power and illegality to inequality in Thai society. As Chiang Noi argued: "In Thailand there is a close connection between power and illegality, between social status and defiance of the law. Often, laws seem to exist precisely to allow certain people the very special privilege of being able to flout them. If you have a big enough car, you need not worry too much about traffic regulations. If you have the right background and position, you can carry as much excess luggage as you like. With good political connections, even if you are accused of corruption in an overseas country, nobody investigates, lays charges or takes steps to prevent you doing a bunk. Soldiers are protected from the normal operation of the judicial system. When generals openly flout the law, we are told they are immune to anything more serious than a reprimand. In case after case when massive land encroachment has come to light, the issue has faded once it emerged that senior officials were involved. […] The political system as it currently operates only helps to adjust the realities of wealth and power within a very narrow range. […]The growing political significance of the judiciary over the last few years has given this trend a new twist. While the judicial system may not in fact perform in the service of equity, the justification for the importance of the judiciary is that there really is a rule of law that applies to all. […] The idea of equity under the law is now very prominent in public debate, yet the political structure still in place is designed precisely to preserve privileges by the evasion or manipulation of the law. […] Nothing seems sacred any more. Illustrious institutions. The power of a big surname and an exalted position. The importance of economic growth over the health and well-being of ordinary people"(Chiang Noi 2010).

Political discourses—including that of double standards—are not, as theorist of New Social Movements have pointed out (Castells 1983; Hannigan 1985), the premise of a political mobilization but rather they result from it, a process which is still ongoing in Thailand. Over the course of the 2010 protest, in fact, the movement's identity, opposition, and relations were negotiated and solidified while remaining open to new transformations. Not only political discourses, however, retained this morphing quality. Similarly, as the rest of the chapter analyzes, the infrastructure of the Red Shirts mobilization, which oriented its political actions, was the evolving product of a longer history of street protests in Thailand that begun in the early 1970s.[112]

The 1970s: Laying down the foundations for an infrastructure of mobilization.

The 1960s marked the heyday of the era of *phatthanā* (development), a mixture of industrial expansion and social conservatism that delivered two decades of rapid economic growth, mostly concentrated around Bangkok. Such growth was maneuvered by a sequence of oppressive military governments backed by the United States, who saw in Thailand an invaluable ally in a region that was increasingly entering the political orbit of the communist block. One of the effects of this growth was a significant rise in access to higher education, not just among emerging urban and provincial middle classes but also among the working classes. The number of students enrolled in university expanded rapidly from 18,000 to 100,000 in the period between 1961 and 1972 (Baker 2009: 185). These new students, who often found in education a route to social mobility, became increasingly daring in their intellectual and political reflections, also sustained by student's mobilization in the United States, Europe, and Japan. In a few years they became the most vocal proponents of new political ideologies that would color Thai politics and pro-democracy struggles for decades to come.

[112] I choose the 1970s as a point of departure for three reasons: First, the protests in this period represented the first political events in Thai history that resulted from mass mobilization—in which "the middle class, students, workers or organized peasants, emerged as powerful political actors" (Thongchai 1995: 101) —rather than from the machination of a small group of westernized bureaucrats, as was the case for the 1932 'revolution' which put an end to absolute monarchy; Second, many of the Red Shirts are connected, either through their personal histories, ideological affiliations, or strategies to the protests of the 1970s and see these protests as the beginning of their struggle; Third, the approach of "new Thai history"—a historiography that does not follow elites, as traditional Thai historians have done and continue to do, but rather follows the "masses," their political organizations, strategies, and discourses was itself an intellectual outcome of this period and is the approach I adopt in this analysis as well.

In this period, a group of students at Thammasat University (Moral and Political Science), [113] began to voice their discontent from the pages of the journal *Sanghkomsat Parithat* (Social Science Review). Inspired by the teaching of the politically engaged progressive Thai monk Buddhadasa,[114] the group clustered around Sulak Sivaraksa, a activist scholar of Buddhism, and proposed a fusion of Buddhism and socialism as the way forward for Thailand, a future based on traditional Thai culture, anti-consumerism, and anti-Americanism. At the same time, fellow students started to translate texts from European and American New Left, from Louis Althusser to Antonio Gramsci. The works of Thai thinkers which had been banned were republished, most prominently those of Jit Phumisak—a Marxist theorist who had joined the Communist Party of Thailand's armed struggle and criticized exploitation in Thailand and the relations between *phrai* and *ammat* in the Siamese feudal system (*sakdina)* (Reynolds 1987).[115] While these radical texts were shifting the political discourse leftward, nationalist and anti-imperialist feelings were also diffusing among the students. In 1972, a pamphlet titled *Phai Khao* (White Peril) was published in Thammasat criticizing US imperialism and military presence in Thailand while students organized protests and boycotts against Japanese goods, including motorcycles, which were flooding the country.[116] As these different groups were working out their ideological stance and course of actions, a larger call to democratic transformation in the country seemed to diffuse among and beyond the students.

The new activists, in other words, were championing a variety of national political discourses that revolved around four core ideologies, which often mixed in their views: leftist ideas, mostly inspired by both Maoism and Western Marxism; democratic liberalism, which called for an end to military dictatorship; Buddhist notions of justice and localism, which saw in tradition a way forward; and nationalist opposition to foreign imperialism, adopting at times the language of xenophobia. In one way or another, with significant variations, these core ideologies, their relations, and problematic coexistence established the discursive

[113] The university was founded in 1934 by Pridi Banomyong, one of the main figures of the 1932 'revolution', which we have met in Chapter 1.

[114] On Buddhadasa see (Jackson 1988).

[115] Such relations with the work of Jit Phumisak became central to the Red Shirts movement, under the leadership of the very same people who had adopted these theories in the 1970s.

[116] This was an inversion of the discourse of the yellow peril which had dominated Western imaginaries both in the early twentieth century and after Maoist victories in China.

infrastructure of mobilization in the country and provided a discursive framework for Thai political debates until the present, especially in the political turmoil of the first decade of the 2000s (Kanokrat 2013).

Even though these ideologies, and the tension between them, were to create deep rifts in the Thai political sphere, at the beginning of the 1970s they cohabited quite successfully among groups of political activists. Such cohabitation, moreover, was not just between political discourses and ideologies but also among the social groups and organizations who proposed them. What was truly striking about this period, in fact, was the coalescence of student activists, intellectuals, Bangkok-based labor groups, and agrarian farmer leaders (Glassman 2010: 1305), which brought to existence an unprecedented, yet fleeting, democratic opening in Thai society. The environment in which such an opening occurred, however, was not initially the most conducive for progressive politics.

In November 1971, General Thanom Kittikachorn adopted an established strategy among military politicians and staged a coup against his own government, dissolving parliament and revoking the constitution. The response by students, workers, and farmers was forceful, if not immediate. Their unrest mounted, finding timid support in the press, toward a protest of half a million people along Ratchadamnoen Avenue on October 13th 1973. The mobilization solidified these four ideologies enumerated above and, in so doing, transformed the "landscape of the discourses on democracy" (Thongchai 2008a: 583). The discursive landscape, however, was not the only one transformed by this protest: the physical landscape of protest was reshaped as deeply. Ratchadamnoen emerged in 1973 as a new space of protest, one that remains the standard theater for Thai mass mobilizations. Along this boulevard, which also provided a location for the Red Shirts protest in March of 2010, a strategic infrastructure started to emerge at this time, made up of marches, stages, and political tirades that would shape following street protests in the country, including those of the Red Shirts.

In the October of 1973, for the first time in Thai history, protesters showed their strength by taking over the major thoroughfare of the city, a highly symbolic road that connected the Royal Palace and Sanam Luang—the ground of state and monarchic ceremonies—to the Thai Parliament and the Throne Hall. The route passed through Democracy Monument, a monumental reminder of the abolition of absolute monarchy

in 1932. From this symbolic node, the 1973 protesters demanded the release of their leaders, who had been arrested in the previous days, and appealed to the King to intervene and remove the dictator. The following morning, after the students met with the monarch, soldiers moved in and dispersed the protest with shameful violence. After several small clashes, military officers opened fire on the crowd, killing 77 people and injuring 857 (Baker 2009: 188).

This bloody repression enraged the public and forced the King to step in. By that same night, the military leaders were sent into exile and a new prime minister was appointed. It was the 14th of October 1973 and, paying a high price in blood, a popular movement had radically influenced national politics, for the first time in Thai history.

These events initiated an unprecedented period of progressive political debates, experimentations, and possibilities in Thailand. New forces seemed to take control of the country. Labor rights were expanded, regulations of land rents were drafted, and unions were legalized. The first farmers' organization in Thai history—the Peasant Federation of Thailand—was founded and rapidly expanded across the country while universities became political laboratories, increasingly under the influence of leftist ideas and the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). The new government of Sanya Thammasak decided to send students to the countryside with the alleged purpose of "propagating democracy."[117] The resulting democracy schools, a tactic that the Red Shirts would resuscitate four decades later to educate and train its followers,[118] had the unintended effect of spreading Marxism, and not liberal democracy, around the country and solidifying the alliances among progressive students, workers, and farmers.

The heightening of political activities in this period, however, was not just among progressive forces. On the other side of the spectrum, right-wing forces were also expanding their reach, harnessing the support of rural middle-classes and urban elites. May 1975 marked the peak of this growing polarization. On one side, the confluence between students, workers, and farmers was formalized under the name of the "tripartite

[117] It was under this program that the school in Adun's village, which we visited in Chapter 3, was built.

[118] "In September 2009, the movement adopted new tactics. It openly launched a "UDD political school" to educate its followers to support its objectives. […] Training sessions lasting one or two days were conducted in several provinces in the Central, North and North East. Teachers were UDD leaders who focused their lessons on democracy, organising techniques, nonviolent struggle, team work and political analysis. At least 16,700 activists attended these training sessions" (Brossel 2010: 14).

alliance." On the other, right-wing paramilitary groups increasingly competed with the tripartite alliance for the control of the Thai state and its population (Bowie 1997). With the fall of Saigon and the American forces' withdrawal from Vietnam, the number of political assassinations and disappearances of farmer leaders reached an all-time high, supported by an anti-communist discourse (Haberkorn 2011). The American defeat sent shockwaves around the region and the paramilitary groups raised the stakes. With the fall of the Laotian monarchy in December of 1975, ultra-royalist and ultra-nationalist forces, which until this point were mostly composed of rural middle and upper classes, gained national prominence and expanded into "an urban-based movement funded by economically and politically nervous factions of the middle and upper classes [and] increasingly took on a fascist character" (Bowie 1997: 283). Intimidation, violence, disappearances, and targeted assassinations became more and more common (Anderson 1977). A large portion of the Thai public started, as it was happening in other countries in the capitalist block,[119] to take distance from the leftist activists and, under the boogeyman of Communist attack to Thailand which would bring the fall of the Thai monarchy and the dismissal of Buddhism, any advocate of political or social change became increasingly labeled as a communist, un-Thai, and an enemy of the state.

The situation was incendiary, and the return of Thanom—the dictator who was sent into exile in 1973—set the country on fire. On September 19th 1976, Thanom entered the country wearing monk's robes and was ordained—ostensibly to make merit for his recently deceased mother—at Wat Bowoniwet, a temple associated with the palace. He was there visited by the King and Queen. Students raged in protest and many of them were attacked or lynched. On October 5th, newspapers reported that students were organizing a mock hanging of a figure that resembled the crown prince. In response, right-wing radios invited their listeners to take to the streets and attack students who were organizing inside Thammasat University, a few hundred meters away from the Royal Palace. Border Police and paramilitary groups moved into Bangkok and on October 6th, protected by the police and the military officers who sealed off campus, entered the university and went on a rampage killing, wounding, raping, and mutilating hundreds of unarmed students.

[119] As Michael Herzfeld pointed out in a personal communication, "In Greece, too, communism was seen as a "foreign [or Slavic] doctrine" and associated with the danger of losing a "beloved" monarchy and with the demise of religion (Christianity in this case)."

That evening, the military took power and installed Thanin Kraivichien as Prime Minister, bringing to an end the three-year-long experiment in progressive politics. Thousands of students and political activists were arrested. Those who could fled the city, hoping to find refuge from state repression in the jungle. Many joined the insurgency headed by the Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), particularly in the north and northeastern (Isan) regions, the same areas where now the Red Shirts derive most of their support.

Isan, as it had previously done throughout Siamese and early Thai history (Somchai 2006), became the undisputed center of radical struggles in Thailand. The region, given its increasing poverty and uneven development (Brown 1994; Somchai 2006),[120] proximity to Laos and Vietnam, as well as mounting state repression on radical politics, was chosen in the 1960s as a laboratory for CPT armed struggle. With the arrival of urban political activists after the massacre, Isan became the main theater of the Communist insurrection closely resembling the Maoist struggle in China. As rural activism became increasingly detached from the workers' fights in Bangkok (Ji 2003: 46), the tripartite alliance between students, workers, and farmers fell into pieces and the CPT reframed the Isan jungle as the only legitimate space of politics, away from the bourgeoisie machinations in Bangkok.

Life in the jungle, however, had its own conflicts, challenges, and let-downs. Everyday life under the Maoist CPT turned out to be trying for the newcomers: heavily hierarchical, de-sexualized and de-humanizing, as well as ridden with reciprocal suspicion among exiled students, party leaders, and local farmers. On one side, farmers became more disenfranchised from the party as the "influx [of students] meant that the cadre positions either in leadership or village level were manned by recently arrived Central Thai youths who did not recognize the legitimacy of Isan identity and aspirations" (Ji 2003: 162). On the other, the newcomers struggled to adapt to the new environment. According to Comrade Sung, a young woman who joined the armed struggle:

> In such a camp society, where the local leaders were peasants, the role of intellectuals carried no honour. Being a peasant was honorable. Sometime we could not tell the difference

[120] In 1969 73.2 % of Isan household lived under the poverty line, while their number in the Central region was 25.1% (Luther 1978: 93)

> between being revolutionaries and being priests, the difference between peasant narrow-mindlessness and Marxism. (Ji 2003: 176)

The jungle brought into daily contact the urban radical intelligentsia and the peasantry. Such encounters, if glorified in the mind of the young Marxist activists, revealed themselves to be conflictive and problematic. As James Scott has argued,

> The peasantry [was] able to resist indoctrination and socialization by the elites and to retain at least a small degree of cultural autonomy. And it should be added that they [were] able to resist both the indoctrination by the radical intelligentsia which would like to lead them in revolution. They [were] just as suspicious of radicals coming from the city often as they [were] suspicious of officers coming from the city. (Scott 1979: 111)

This suspicion and refusal to submit to the doctrine proposed by students and party leaders started a long-lasting reciprocal distrust between urban intelligentsia and politicized peasantry, which still colors Thai politics. Such s distrust oriented the discourse around the Red Shirts mobilization, which has been wrongly represented as largely composed by rural villagers, portrayed in Bangkok-based media as corrupt, stubborn, and narrow-minded. Many of these fugitive activists, in fact, were to become the new generation of activists, politicians, and scholars who have dominated the Thai public sphere from the 1990s to the present, often in opposition to Thaksin Shinawatra. As the Red Shirts emerged as a movement perceived to support Thaksin and represent the rural masses, many of them continue to see Thai villagers as "narrow-minded," dull, and politically backward.[121]

In sum, the 1970s, laid out the discursive, spatial, strategic, and organizational foundations for later political mobilizations in Thailand. First, four new political ideologies—leftist, Buddhist, nationalist, and liberal-democratic—came to dominate Thai political discourse. Second, new spaces and strategies of protests solidified, revolving around Ratchadamnoen Avenue. Third, a tension between urban intelligentsia and rural activists emerged. All three of these foundations—ideological, spatial, and social—were of course reworked

[121] Similarly to what I have analyzed as the reciprocal production of city as the space of development and the village as the spaces of backwardness, here urban radicalism and rural conservatism are similarly co-produced through political engagements and interaction, not out of separation.

in the following decades, but nonetheless set up the conditions for the political turmoil of the early 2000s, the emergence of the Red Shirts, and the patterning of their political actions.

The 1980s: the end of the left and the rise of NGOs and "Thai-style democracy"

By the end of the 1970s, the dissatisfaction with life in the jungles, the bloody failure of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the internal struggle between the Chinese and Vietnamese factions of the CPT weakened the insurgents' convictions and opened the space for their withdrawal. This disillusionment with the effectiveness of the strategies adopted, however, was not just growing among leftist forces. On the other side of the political spectrum, Thai military governments were not having a much easier time. The previous three years had seen internal power struggles that generated three coups, increased political repression, and fostered the swelling of armed guerrillas, political instability, and popular dissatisfaction: "in these circumstances, the centrist agenda, which had failed in 1974-76, re-emerged with both civilian and military support" (Baker 2009: 196).

The champion of this centrist agenda was Prem Tinsulanonda, a military officer with strong connections to the crown who had been the head of the army counter-insurgency in Isan and advocated for a mix of military and political strategies to fight CPT. In 1980 Prem was appointed Prime Minister and applied the same approach to conflict in national politics. Soon after rising to power, he disseminated an invitation for insurgents to demobilize and, in 1982, announced a country-wide amnesty for former CPT combatants. Large numbers of insurgents, especially the young activists who had joined the party after the 1976 massacre, abandoned the jungle and went back to their former lives. As Pasuk and Baker have shown, "after fleeing a dictatorship and taking part in a guerrilla war, they were neither victorious not annihilated, but allowed to return to the mainstream and resume their ascent to elite positions throughout society" (Baker 2009: 198).

With the period of economic growth and relative social peace initiated in the 1980s, along with the disbanding of the Communist Party of Thailand and the increasing conflict between the Soviet Union and

China, many of these activists refuted their communist past and shifted their political objectives to liberal notions of democratization and social justice. Among the four ideologies that dominated the discursive infrastructure of mobilization in the 1970s, the leftist ideals started to fall into despair, while the other elements—Buddhist moral politics, nationalism, and liberal democracy—solidified, not just among the former activists but also among state forces.

Prem, who presented himself as an incorruptible moral leader, launched into a battle for the "minds and souls" of its citizens. The strategy was twofold. First, the government intervened through social and economic projects in the countryside with the alleged objective of "eliminating social injustice" (Chai'anan, et al. 1990: 198). Second, the King, whom the newly founded National Identity Office (NIO) had found to be the most respected figure in the country at the time, became more directly involved in politics. The monarch, who had come out of the 1970s political turmoil head-high, was reframed, through powerful propaganda machine, as a moral sovereign, the "Developer King" close to his people, and a patron of orthodox Buddhism. In other words, he emerged as the protector and guarantor of the Buddhist moral order, nationalism, and liberal democracy, which became dominant ideologies both among former activists and state bureaucracy.

All of these transformations condensed around the discourse of "Thai-style democracy," adopted by the National Identity Office to describe the ideal political structure for the country. This system represented a moralized version of democracy under the Buddhist King predicated upon the selection of "good people rather than representative institutions" (Baker 2009: 231), an adaptation of Western democracy to the educational gap in Thailand that was seen as antithetical to a one-person one-vote approach (Hewison and Kitirianglarp 2010). This configuration proposed "a form bourgeois parliamentarian democracy which did not challenge the interests of the elite" (Ji 2003: 16) and allowed unprecedented space to urban capitalist groups in the political sphere, initiating a period characterized by governments that were the products of alliances between military and business elites.

While parliamentarian politics was being reorganized, a restructuring was also taking place in the organizational infrastructure of political activism. Many of the former insurgents abandoned Marxist struggle and entered the ranks of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and shifted toward seeing "civil society" (*prachā sangkhom*) and the "grassroots," rather than the working class, as the main actors of politics.[122] As Thongchai Winichakul—himself a student leader in the 1970s—has argued, saw the emergence of radical conservatism among the former leftist radicals under the aegis of NGOs (Thongchai 2008a). This conservatism—understood as "a complex balancing act between a libertarian celebration of individualism, economic freedom, and capitalism, and a traditionalist emphasis on community, moral order, and the like" (Ginsburg 1998: 47-48)—was animated by anti-capitalists interpretation of Buddhism, nationalist feelings, monarchic tendencies, and romantic visions of a return to an imagined communitarian and pre-capitalist past of Thai villages (Thongchai 2008a).[123]

Once again, this shift affected not just the discursive and organizational infrastructure of mobilization, but also its spatial and strategic components. The former leftists, disillusioned by the possibility of mobilizing the countryside, realigned with traditional elites and military in seeing, both practically and discursively, Bangkok as the main site of politics, progressive or otherwise. This shift, however, did not mean that political mobilization in the countryside, especially in Isan, came to an end (Myers 2005; Somchai 2006). Rather, regional struggles lost their centrality to national politics and were co-opted by NGOs, who often saw themselves as "educating" the villagers (*chāo bān*) who were not only imagined as a stubborn, corrupted, and backward mass but also as pristine, simple, and truly Buddhist.

This double depiction, as we saw, dominated national imaginaries well beyond the 1980s and colored the drivers' mobility between the city and the countryside. However, at the end of the 1980s, with Thailand heading the group of rapidly growing Asian economies and the country experiencing a growing anxiety over

[122] For a treatment of Thai civil society see (Reynolds 2002; Somchai 2006)

[123] This conception was proposed in the works of Chattip Nartsupha and in the resulting "community village" school (Chatthip 1999). The relevance of this school of thought for contemporary Thailand cannot be overstated. Their vision of the village as a happy space of pre-capitalist relations, as we saw in chapter 3, have become dominant not just among political activists and intellectuals but in the Thai public sphere across regional provenience and class.

globalization and cultural changes, this second vision of the villagers as "truly Thai" became prominent among local academics and NGOs. Political discourse, under their lead, shifted toward the preservation of local ways of life, identity politics, and Thainess (*khwām pen thai*) along with a parallel push for educating villagers endorse democratic politics, oppose corruption, and avoid vote-buying. As Somchai has shown, rural political struggles for equality and participation in the country's economic growth were virtually ignored and dismissed as destructive to the "Thai life" of the village. All the attention focused, especially in Isan, on "political corruption in the form of vote-buying [and] overlooked the significant and continuous struggles waged by the people of Isan which have been based on political ideals" (Ji 2003: 166).

As an effect, Bangkok was reframed as the only space for true democracy and social change. Even if orthodox Marxism had lost its centrality, its arrogant vision that an intellectual vanguard, in this case urban, was necessary to "educate" the backward farmers in "proper politics" remained very much in the minds of urban activists, intellectuals, and NGO workers. The Thai countryside, Isan in particular, was seen as a space of ignorance, backwardness, and corruption unfit to participate fully in democratic politics. Once again, as Michael Herzfeld has shown in Greece (Herzfeld 2004), tradition became both a pedestal and a tethering pole for Thai villagers. On one side, this view confirmed the experience that students had in the jungle in the 1970s. On the other, it solidified the historicist vision of rural Thailand as a space of the "not yet", a vision which positioned villages on a previous stage of development, in this case of democratic development.

To summarize, over the 1980s the discursive and organizational infrastructure of mobilization was upgraded to include Thai NGOs that channeled the leftist radicals toward an agenda of radical conservatism, with its language of "moral politics" and "civil society." This shift solidified the discursive divide between politics in an urban setting, seen as a space of democratic politics, and a rural environment, imagined as a place of tradition and backwardness. Such a vision was only entrenched by the next democratic mass mobilization in 1992 that was presented as an urban middle-class protest and thus seemed to confirm that true democratic politics was situated exclusively in Bangkok.

Early 1990s: A tale of two democracies?

The new political-economic configuration that emerged in the 1980s opened, as we saw, a new space for business groups in national politics (Anek 1992). With increased economic power, these groups claimed a more significant presence in the political system. In 1988, after almost a decade of Prem's appointed premiership, elections were once again held in Thailand. As a result, Chatichai Choonhavan rose to power as a candidate of the business elite. As a prime minister, Chatichai cut down the military budget and created a new think-tank called *Ban Phitsanulok*.[124] Chatichai stuffed this group with former student activists and young academics and gave them the objective of removing policy-making from the hands of ministerial technocrats. The new think-tank came up with one main proposal: abandon the militaristic approach to regional policies, re-direct it toward "turning battlefields into marketplaces"(Baker 2009: 241) by opening up economic relations with Thailand's communist neighbors. State forces, in particular the military, were enraged by this proposal and by Chatichai's blunt attack to their established roles and privileges. Their response adopted the language of moral and economic corruption, which had already been emerging among urban middle-classes and NGOs, to delegitimize the new government—the same technique that bureaucratic elites would adopt fifteen years later to delegitimize Thaksin Shinawatra. As in the case of Thaksin, the accusations to Chatichai's cabinet were well-grounded, yet the sudden military concern about corruption was highly instrumental. Bribes, nepotism, and under-the-table transactions had been a characteristic of Thai politics, both under military dictatorships and during the period of parliamentarian democracy under Prem (Pasuk, et al. 1998), yet they were now used as ground to undermine popular support to Chatichai's government. Once the Prime Minister lost his popular legitimacy, General Suchinda Kraprayun staged a coup and took power on February 23rd 1991, with the blessing of the anti-corruption voters.

This coup, much like the 2006 coup against Thaksin, was supported by two conflicting pushes. On one side, it was an outcome of the bureaucracy's attempt to protect its privileges and limit access to the political process. On the other, it resulted from a demand to put an end to political corruption and "money

[124] The advisers who composed this think-tank would come to play a central role again in the premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra between 2001 and 2006. The name was taken from the Prime Minister residence, located in the Phitsanulok Mansion in Bangkok.

politics" (Laird 2000), mostly voiced by urban middle and upper classes as well as NGOs activists. The unsolvable tension between these two groups was revealed when the military proposed a new constitution and withdrew all corruption proceedings against the previous government. The anti-corruption supporters of the coup started to grow unsatisfied. In the chaos following this proposal, General Suchinda stepped in and, against his promises after the coup, became the new Thai prime minister on April 7th 1992. Popular reactions, once again, mounted fast.

On May 4th, Chamlong Srimuang, a former military officer, leader of the Palang Dhamma (energy of the Dharma) party, and governor of Bangkok, went on hunger strike to protest Suchinda's premiership. Soon thousands of people took to the street to support his strike. For the first time, the politicized Buddhist stream, which had been a section of the infrastructure of mobilization since the 1970s, became the core of a popular movement, as it would do again with the Yellow Shirts' anti-Thaksin mobilizations of 2005. Both mobilizations—in 1992 and 2005—revolved around Chamlong Srimuang, a champion of anti-consumerist and anti-corruption politics and a member of the Santi Asoke sect, a marginally radical Buddhist group that advocated for non-violent activism and a return to moral politics (McCargo 1997). In 1992, Chamlong was able to establish himself as "a spiritual leader of the people of Bangkok" (Khīan, et al. 1997: 30), a moral actor, and a Buddhist lay monk who endorsed non-violence, refuted material goods, and fought a peaceful battle through hunger strikes (Callahan 1998: 8). His protest was soon joined by other activists, including religious followers, politicians, and slum leaders. On May 10th, a large crowd convened around Chamlong to voice their opposition to Suchinda's government. After much protest they convinced him to abandon the hunger strike and decided to rejoin in protest a week later. It was during this protest that the organizational infrastructure of mobilization, which supported both the Red Shirts and the opposing anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts movement in the 2000s, emerged together with new spatial strategies that decentralized protests and introduced motorcycle taxis as a valuable political tool.

The protesters in 1992 were largely composed of four groups, each of them with significant middle-class components but also with support among workers and the urban poor. The first was composed of

politicians. Most prominent among them were Chamlong Srimuang, leader of the Palang Dhamma party, future political patron of Thaksin Shinawatra, and later his critic and a leader of the anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts, and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, head of the New Aspiration party, future ally of Thaksin and, as we saw, head of the formalization of motorcycle taxi drivers in 2003. This group also included Veera Musikapong, the former Interior Minister in Prem's government and a future leader of the Red Shirts. All three of them controlled significant popular and electoral support and saw Suchinda's premiership as a usurpation of power from elected politicians. The second group condensed around the Santi Asoke Buddhist sect, of which Chamlong was a prominent member. For them, Thailand was experiencing a moral rather than a political crisis. They saw the constitution as anti-democratic and Suchinda as a liar, and not one of the "good people" who should govern a Buddhist country. The third group consisted of democracy activists. Among whom figured prominently Weeng Tojirakarn, a doctor who fled to the jungle after 1976 and would become a future leader of the Red Shirts, Jatuporn Prompan, a student leader in Ramkhamhaeng University in Bangkok and also a future leader of the Red Shirts, as well as Pipob Dongchai and Somkiat Pongpaiboon, two NGO activists who, together with Chamlong, would become the leaders of the ultra-nationalist anti-Thaksin Yellow Shirts. This group of activists saw the previous decades as a slow move toward democratization and the 1991 coup as a step back along that path. The fourth group represented people—be they members of the middle-classes, business owners, workers, or farmers—who had enjoyed and taken advantage of the political space and economic growth experienced under the period of parliamentary democracy under Prem and Chatichai, and saw the return to direct military control as a challenge to their well-being.

As the description of these four groups should make clear, their leaders would emerge again as main characters and opposing agitators in the political turmoil that took over Thailand after 2005. While in 1992 they marched on Ratchadamnoen Road united, by 2005 they sat on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Before exploring the destruction of this unified pro-democracy front in the 2000s, and its role in the 2006 military coup which ousted Thaksin Shinawatra and in the following Red Shirts mobilization, let us linger here with the protest of May 1992, and analyze its contribution to a reconfiguration of the spatial, strategic, discursive, and organization infrastructures of mobilization in Thailand.

On May 17th 1992, 200,000 people took over Ratchadamnoen Road, solidifying the boulevard as the quintessential space of popular protest in the country. Even if this movement shared with the mobilization of 1973 the same spatial strategy, its agenda was much less radical. This was largely a protest for liberal democracy, a moral struggle over the legitimacy of Suchinda's government and of non-elected governments in general. Ideologically, this was a "moral" crowd with liberal demands, royalist overtones, and Buddhist ethics that demanded democratization, an end to corruption, and "clean politics"(Choi 2002). In this sense, of the four ideologies that emerged in the 1970s—leftist, Buddhist, nationalist, and liberal-democratic—the 1992 protest revolved around the Buddhist and the liberal democratic components and adopted a language of non-violence.

In the early afternoon of May 17th the protesters started to move toward Government House to demand Suchinda's resignation. Halfway there they clashed with the police. After some light brawls, during which the protesters used motorbikes to fumigate the officers, the police retreated and the army was called upon to intervene. The conflict grew. The rest of the day was a chaotic and frenzied sequence of confrontations between state forces and protesters. Tear gas, batons, and bullets were used on one side, Molotov cocktails and stones on the other. By the night the situation was spiraling out of control, the number of injured on both sides was growing, and four protesters were reported killed by live ammunition. In the afternoon of May 18th, the army advanced in the heart of the protest to arrest Chamlong, leaving a wake of dead and injured people. They hoped that taking out his main leader would bring the protest to an end. The result was the opposite. While the situation along Ratchadamnoen became increasingly tense, the protesters started to gather in other spaces across the city: the strategy of concentrated protest that had dominated the strategic infrastructure of street mobilizations in the previous two decades was altered and the movement expanded its reach and morphed into a multi-centered dispersed protest, a form much harder to control. A new decentralized and mobile modality of protest was added to the strategic infrastructure of mobilization and would be adopted again by the Red Shirts in 2010, as we saw in the interlude.

After Chamlong was arrested, the mobilization "did not fragment […] it multiplied. […] Whenever the army would disperse the crowd in one spot, another would appear elsewhere" (Callahan 1998: 86). Once the protest became more flexible and mobile, motorcycle taxis, which had appeared in Bangkok only a decade before, acquired an unexpected role in street politics. Groups of drivers were mobilized through personal connections by Veera Musikapong and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh and used to spread the mayhem across the city. These drivers rode through Bangkok attacking traffic lights, police booths, and other symbols of state authority as well as setting government buildings on fire. The result was a popular realization that Suchinda's forces could not control Bangkok and that their fragile hold on the city was losing grip, ridden by fires and traffic jams that brought the city to its knees, well beyond the sites of protest.

Among these drivers was Yai, one of the early motorcycle taxi organizers and a main leader of the Association of Motorcycle Taxi of Thailand (AMTT). "During the 1992 events," he told me, "we were called up by Chavalit, who had close connection to street-level organizers and motorcycle taxi drivers (hired motorcycle - *mɔ̄tǣsai rapčhāng*). That time we were truly hired (*pen rapčhāng čhing čhing*), not like with the Red Shirts. It was money that brought us in the streets in 1992, not ideology." Whether directed by money or ideals, the motorcycle taxi appeared for the first time on the political scene and contributed, with their speed, flexibility, and invisibility to disperse the army offensive over the city, to sustain urban guerrilla tactics, and to disrupt urban circulation. Knowing the city back roads and short-cuts better than anybody else, and certainly far better than army officers who were often brought in from border provinces, the drivers were able to hit and run, smash windows and traffic lights, and block traffic before disappearing in the urban mesh, impossible to distinguish from other motorcycle taxis who were ferrying clients. The results were remarkable and the *gang-motorcy* (gang of motorcycle taxi drivers) stuck in the collective memory of the 1992 events. The image of the drivers as unruly agents of chaos started to circulate around the city, reproduced on the front pages of national newspapers. Even General Issarapong, the army commander in chief, playing on the

homophony between *čharāčhǭn* (traffic) and *čhalāčhon* (riot), referred to the traffic/riots created in the city by the gangs as a reason to intervene to restore order.[125] And intervene they did.

Regardless of the attempts to decentralize the protest and diffuse it through the use of motorcycle taxis and the creation of multiple stages across the city, the army decided to concentrate its forces on Ratchadamnoen road and disperse the crowd that had amassed there. The dispersal, as happened in 1976 and was to happen again in 2010 with the Red Shirts, left behind dozens of dead bodies and thousands of injured. Suchinda had responded to the popular protest with a strategic plan that had been envisioned for a potential communist insurrection. Army officers were moved to Bangkok from borders areas and sent to combat the protesters with war weapons. As in 1976 and in 2010, the result was a bloodbath. Officially 52 people were reported killed on May 18th, yet hundreds disappeared, and more than 3,000 people were arrested and many tortured once in detention (Jackson 1993; Ockey 2004).

The protesters, however, did not give in. The following day, 50,000 protesters gathered at Ramkhamhaeng University, in eastern Bangkok, set up barricade, and declared a "non-violent" commune, isolated from the rest of the city, by now largely under the control of the army. The following day, as had happened in 1973, the Royal family stepped in. First the Princess, then the Crown Prince, called for a stop to violence. In the afternoon Suchinda and Chamlong were summoned by the King and softly ordered to stop the confrontations and step aside. The protest was brought to an end. Chamlong was freed from prison, Suchinda resigned a few days later, and the King reached his peak both in popular support and political prominence. Once again, a popular mobilization had ended in the removal, through a royal intervention, of a military government. Once again, a period of democratization was initiated by a street protest.

The 1992 mobilization, if successful in reinstating the democratic process, actually contributed in discursively excluding large portion from democratic struggle. This protest, in fact, solidified the popular perception that this was an intrinsically urban process and based on the middle-class mobilizations (Anek 1997; Ockey 2004; Somchai 2006). Even if such a reading has been questioned and effectively taken apart by

[125] Issarapong was reported stating that "If there are demonstrations that create traffic (riot) and disrupt people's lives, I, in my capacity as commander of the Internal Peace-Keeping Command, will order a stop to such activities" (Callahan 1998: 48).

Yoshifumi Tamada, who showed the historical centrality of forces other than the middle-class to democratization in Thailand (Tamada 2008), the large presence of slum dwellers, urban workers, and members of the service economy—among which motorcycle taxi drivers figured prominently—was erased in this narrative of a middle-class protest, which was compared to mobilizations taking place at the same time in Indonesia and the Philippines (Anek 1997; Rafael 2003; Sidel 1998). A new force—this regional narrative went—was taking control over politics in Southeast Asia: a politicized middle-class demanding democracy, whether in its Western sense or in the Thai-style understanding of it. Such a vision was most prominently voiced in Thailand by Anek Laothamatas, possibly the most influential national public intellectual of the 1990s. One text in particular, titled *Tales of Two Democracies* (Anek 2543; Taylor 1996), crystalized this political discourse that portrayed the urban middle class on the road to liberal democracy while the un-educated rural villagers remained "not yet" ready for representative democracy, easily duped by cunning politicians, and stuck in the previous phase of corrupted "money politics." The way out, Anek argued, was a Thai-style democracy that did not select its representative through elections, which always favored the uneducated masses, but through appointments. The relevance of this idea to discursive and organizational infrastructures of mobilization after 1992 cannot be overstated. As Jim Glassman (Glassman 2010) has argued:

> After several decades of oscillating popular struggles, the establishment of comparatively stable parliamentary democracy after 1992 led to an effusion of writings on the role of the Thai middle class, especially in Bangkok, in the establishment of democracy. The counterpart to these narratives of urban-based modernisation and democratisation was an explosion of writings on the corruption and anti-democratic characteristics of Thai rural and 'up-country' regions, seen as socially backward, steeped in illegal activities, dominated by local mafia-like political bosses and using their democratic majorities in parliament to flout basic principles of 'good governance' through cronyist practices. (Glassman 2010: 1302)

The solidification of this discourse that envisioned progressive urbanites by distancing them from backward rural populations, set the stage for the complex, and often contradictory, temporal narrative of the relations between city and country side that I have previously analyzed. The political equivalent of that historicist narrative—a vision of the "not yet" fully democratic villagers endorsed by urban intelligentsia and NGOs activists alike—was to play a central role in the dismissal of rural electoral support to Thaksin Shinawatra and,

after his removal by another military coup in 2006, of their mobilization as the effect of corruption and political manipulations, as the next chapter will explore. But, not surprisingly, the trajectory from the 1992 to 2006 was not straightforward. Even if the end of the 1990s marked the solidification of this "tale of two democracies,"

> accompanying and even to some extent preceding this discursive development, a counter geographical imaginary also emerged in which rural Thailand was pictured, at least in its ideal form, as a repository of positive social values being lost in the scramble towards urban modernity, these values including respect for traditional authorities such as local Buddhist monks, as well as the extended family and village community (Chatthip 1999). As environmental activism blossomed into a significant political force by the 1990s, these narratives also came to include references to the environmental virtues of various village practices and forms of 'local knowledge', a geographical imaginary especially popular with non-governmental organisations, or NGOs. (Glassman 2010: 1304)

This shift provoked another restructuring of the organizational infrastructure of mobilization in the 1990s by creating an alliance between farmers and NGOs. Most times the struggles of NGO activists and local farmer aligned, especially around environmental campaign against infrastructural projects, such as dams and power plants, and resistance to privatization and capitalist expansion in the Thai countryside. When, however, the objectives of activists and villagers diverged, NGOs activists took the role of educating villagers, this time on their own "local knowledge" and the necessity to abandon their senseless pursue of "urban modernity." When conflict emerged, in other words, the discourse of the "stubborn" villager, which had emerged in the jungle encounter between farmers and urban exiles, re-surfaced and colored the relations in this alliance. While this fracture will became irreparable by the early 2000s, in the mid-1990s the alliance between NGO activists and farmers was growing stronger (Somchai 2006), to the point of instituting a new collective political subject in 1995, under the name of Assembly of the Poor (Missingham 1999).

Late 1990s: the Assembly of the Poor and new strategies of mobilization.

The democratic period following the 1992 protest was characterized by unprecedented economic growth under the aegis of economic liberalization (Pasuk and Baker 1997): an unconstrained expansion of

capitalism, characterized by a retreat of state interventions in the markets, a decrease in labor regulations and a wave of privatizations, land expropriations, deforestation, and huge developmentalist schemes (Kasian 2002). New organizations and links, such as the Small Scale Farmers Assembly of Isan (SSFAI) and the Assembly of the Poor (AOP), were created to respond and mobilize peasants' participation (Kanoksak 1997; Praphat 1998). In the early period of these farmers' mobilizations, from 1992 to the Assembly of the Poor descent into Bangkok in January of 1997, the protests remained largely confined to rural areas. Yet farmers and local NGOs brought remarkable upgrading of the organizational and strategic infrastructure of protests in Thailand. Among the new strategies, one in particular proved very successful and enduring: the blockage and takeover of regional highways, in particular the Friendship Highway that connects Bangkok to the northeastern region,[126] the same road the Red Shirts supporters used to move into the city in March of 2010.

The highway was first blocked by farmers protesting a land resettlement scheme in June of 1992, a few weeks after the end of protests in Bangkok. The halting of such a crucial artery of the national transportation system brought, if just for a few days, national attention to the demands of Isan farmers. Eager to re-establish the usual circulation of people and commodities along the major corridor between the capital and the northeastern region, as well as to show its response to a popular mobilization, the government of Meechai Panyarachun, who had taken the place of Suchinda, reacted rapidly and in three days accepted the farmers' requests to discard the scheme.

This was not just a historic victory for a local peasant protest; it also reorganized the Thai infrastructure of mobilization. First of all, it demonstrated the possibility of setting the national political agenda away from the capital (Somchai 2006: 84). Second, it established a new strategy of protest which claimed control of mobility and its infrastructures not only as spaces for capitalist expansion but also for popular struggles, a strategy that soon became a template for farmers' protests and would direct, two decades

[126] This highway was built in 1955, at the height of the Cold War, with American dollars and the explicit purpose of extending Bangkok's political control over the "communism-prone" Isan. Constructed to constrain communism, the highway turned in the 1980s into a key piece of infrastructure for the expansion of capitalism and soon become a major channel for the extraction of human and natural resources from the agricultural highlands of Isan. Together with the national railway network, the Friendship Highway represented a major infrastructural step toward easier circulation across the nation, needed by both state and capital to expand their reach. Through them, as we saw in Chapter 3, commodities, labor, life-styles, and desires traveled to and from the city with unprecedented speed and ease.

after, the 2010 Red Shirts protest. Over and over again for the next few years pig farmers, cassava farmers, and the SSFAI (Small Scale Farmers Assembly of Isan) deployed this same strategy: they convened on the highway and if their demands were not met, they announced, they were prepared to march on Bangkok (Baker 2001: 20).[127] Either for local blockages or for marches on Bangkok, the highway, an artery for regional resource extraction and state penetration, was suddenly redefined as an invaluable political arena, an infrastructure of both mobility and mobilization.

The next major political mobilization in Thailand, organized by the Assembly of the Poor between January and March of 1997, adopted the highway, once again, as both a corridor between rural and urban Thailand and an arena of political protests. On January 25th 1997, 25,000 farmers descended along this highway en route to the capital to set up a "village of the poor" in front of Government House. In other words, marching along this road the protesters brought the village to the city and in so doing questioned the relationship between city and countryside while creating a reclaimed space in which new forms of sociality could emerge (Missingham 2002). The Assembly's village remained in the middle of the city for 99 days until most of the protester's demands, which revolved around land, dams, infrastructural projects, and forest management,[128] were accepted by the government of Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, leader of the New Aspiration party and former leader of the May 1992 protest.

This protest, however, did not just successfully upgrade the infrastructure of mobilization in Thailand but also plugged itself into the pre-existing one and applied the experience that many of the NGO activists had in street demonstrations in 1973 and 1992 while expanding its repertoire of actions. First, they "tried to link the movement to the recent history of mass popular demonstrations against military rule by visiting the symbolic landmarks associated with those events" (Missingham 2002: 1650) and distributing printed material which connected the Assembly to these previous pro-democracy mobilizations. Second, the Assembly of the

[127] Interestingly, Chris Baker pointed out to me that "this article was written solely because a large panel on 'civil society' had been created at the International Thai Studies Conference, but the rubric for the panel and all the papers were totally urban, so I wrote the paper for the panel as an act of disruption."

[128] The 125 'problems' presented to government at the start of the 1997 protest broke down as follows: land and forests, 93; government schemes, 5; dams, 16; slums, 8; and one each on alternative agriculture, health and safety in the workplace, and small-scale fishing (Praphat 1998: 73).

Poor adopted a new temporal frame of protest: rather than condensing large masses of supporters for a few days of demonstration, the leaders focused on keeping a smaller number of protesters over an extended period of time. One thing, they all agreed on, needed to be made sure: the activities in the village, which reproduced and cashed on the discourse of the communal pre-capitalist life in the Thai countryside, needed to remain orderly and non-violent to fend off possible repression from state forces and create a peaceful image of the movement in the media. These two strategies—the creation of a peaceful village in the city and the symbolic and spatial link to previous pro-democracy struggles—became templates for future protests and were adopted by the Red Shirts in 2010 who, similarly to the Assembly of the Poor, stressed the coming together of urban and rural politics in their mobilization. The Assembly's village in the middle of the city, as the one created by the Red Shirts, represented and spatialized this confluence. As Bruce Missingham has shown:

> The Village of the Poor created both a real and a symbolic common ground on which the diverse groups making up the movement could join to assert a united political identity and advance their petition to the state. Like an 'actual' village, it also provided a space in which the protesters built an orderly and co-operative community in order to sustain their protest, but also to undermine the label of 'mob' leveled at them in the media. (Missingham 2002)

Such coming together of the rural and the urban, although with a clear rural center of gravity, was evident not only in the Assembly's spatial strategies but also in its composition. In the 1970s mass mobilization had been a result of the alliance between students, urban workers, and farmer leaders. In the 1992 protest mobilization occurred via a confluence of urban white and blue-collar workers, NGOs activists, and slum dwellers. Now, the Assembly of the Poor represented a new subject in Thai politics, an unprecedented collaboration along class lines between farmers, mostly based in north and northeastern regions, fishermen, industrial workers, and slum dwellers, under the guidance of NGO activists, among whom "leaders with a rural origin and urban experience took over the key roles" (Baker 2001: 11).

Such an alliance coalesced around a political discourses, solidified particularly since the late 1980s among urban intelligentsia and NGOs activists, which equated poverty with rurality. In this vision both Thai villagers and urban poor represent "truly Thai local wisdom" and are intrinsic forces of resistance to capitalism, living in a communal pre-capitalist environment threatened, environmentally above all, by the

expansion of capitalism—seen as coming from outside. This discourse, and the alliance behind the Assembly's struggles that it sustained, would come into question during Thaksin Shinawatra's premierships. The period between 2001 and 2006, as we saw, was characterized by a reconceptualization of poverty among rural and urban masses as a failure of entrepreneurship and exclusion, not as moral refusal of capitalism.[129] Together with these masses increasingly vocal unwillingness by to be framed, and kept, outside access to capitalist life-styles and services, this shift made the alliance behind the Assembly of the Poor crumble.

The first cracks in the convergence behind the Assembly of the Poor mobilization, however, began before the rise of Thaksin Shinawatra as an effect of the 1997 economic crisis that hit Thailand a few months after the triumphant end of their protest. When economic growth seemed to come to a halt and the Thai baht lost half of its value, driving into bankruptcy a large portion of the national companies that had heavily borrowed internationally, the Assembly's pledges, which had been supported by public opinion, lost their relevance and the mobilizations quickly fell out of the spotlight. After the resignation of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, unable to contain the devaluation of the Thai currency, a new government headed by Chuan Leekpai took office in early 1998, with no intention of keeping the promises made by its predecessor and a plan to deepen neo-liberal capitalism in Thailand. Chuan was the candidate of the Democrat Party, a party which,

> over the 1980s and early 1990s, [had] evolved from a royalist, conservative party into a party of small and medium businessmen and urban middle class. It adopted a modernist vision of Thailand developing as a prosperous, urbanized society. The continued existence of a large rural society is an embarrassment to this vision. […] The Democrats are aware that their urban supporters are reluctant to see rural people gaining more control over resources and more political power which might threaten the urban vision of modernization. (Baker 2001: 25)

In less than six months, the new government took away all the concessions the Assembly of the Poor had obtained in 99 days of protests. Importantly, even though its results were nullified, the movement had succeeded in reorganizing permanently the strategic infrastructure of mobilization. The Assembly added regional highways and blockades to spaces and strategies of protest in Thailand and bridged the divide between urban and rural politics by establishing the "village in the middle of the city" as a new form of

[129] Chris Baker has pointed out to me that "although Thaksin made this mainstream, the thought was there beforehand. He just picked it up."

protest. Ideologically, however, the Assembly of the Poor suffered a sour defeat. The post-crisis economic agenda, in fact, swept away their resistance to capitalist expansion in the country. The new government adopted an IMF-led acceleration of the retreat of the state from the markets, privatization, and the expansion of neo-liberal capitalism. As Glassman has analyzed:

> The government in power from 1997 to 2001, the Democrat Party government of Chuan Leekpai, adopted a fiscally neo-liberal policy orientation, following closely the IMF and US Treasury Department script for structural adjustment […] When this contributed to further economic decline, popular opposition to neo-liberalism crystallised, bringing together a heterogeneous array of forces ranging from groups such as the AOP (opposed to specific government development policies) and state enterprise employees (opposed to privatisation) to business leaders (opposed to forced closure and restructuring of firms) and some government officials. (Glassman 2010: 1311)

This array of forces became the electoral base for Thaksin Shinawatra's first election as Prime Minister in 2001.[130]

The 2000s: Divided over Thaksin

Thaksin's electoral success was predicated on an ambitious platform that opposed the orthodox neo-liberal agenda advanced by Chuan Leekpai and proposed a restructuring of Thai political-economic agenda.

> Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (Thai Love Thai) Party (TRT), opposed neo-liberal orthodoxy on state spending, favored modest Keynesian and neo-mercantilist policies to reflate the economy and boost the competitiveness of Thai businesses, and held the motley assemblage of social forces together through extensive 'populist' spending programmes. It is crucial to note that Thaksin's policies were anti-neo-liberal precisely in that they challenged neo-liberal preferences for minimal state spending on domestic business and the poor. They were not antagonistic to trade liberalisation and the like—which, in any event, is not a distinctively neo-liberal policy preference, given the active participation of Asian 'developmental states' in such liberalization. While much reviled by neo-liberals, Thaksin's populist programmes constituted some of the post-Cold-War Thai state's first major—and, arguably, long overdue—ventures into the provision of basic forms of social welfare appropriate to an industrial society, such as national health insurance. (Glassman 2010: 1312)

[130] To be noted, in fact, that Thaksin set aside a lunch meeting with the Assembly of the Poor leaders at the Pak Mun Dam his first day in office.

Such motley alliances, however, seldom last long. Thaksin proved quite efficient in delivering economic stability and social provisions. Nonetheless his decisive and often authoritarian mode of government mixed with capitalist pro-poor policies—such as debt moratoriums, village funds, and universal health care—enraged some of his former supporters among the urban middle class, NGOs, and intellectuals, especially those who saw themselves as the defenders of Buddhist moralities, traditional Thai culture, or human rights. Over time Thaksin managed to disenfranchise many of the proponents of the four ideologies that had dominated Thai political discourse since the 1970s—leftist, liberal democratic, Buddhist, nationalist. And this was just the beginning.

The first significant opposition to Thaksin mounted in 2003. In that year, he started the bloody "war on drugs," which adopted the language of anti-terrorism and its extrajudicial methods to tackle drug trafficking.[131] Almost 3,000 people were killed in the course of this war, often in murky circumstances and outright violations of basic civil and human rights. Soon after the government declared the victorious end of this war, the same iron fist and violent repression were applied to the ongoing insurgency in Southern Thailand. Once again hundreds of dead bodies started to drop. The effects on the stability of this region were disastrous, local population grew increasingly disenfranchised from Bangkok, and the numbers of attacks in the region rose steadily. NGOs, academics, and activists denounced the government's approach to both of this issues, its violence, and disrespect for basic human rights; meanwhile, a large portion of the population, including the palace, praised Thaksin's iron fist (Haanstad 2008).

Thaksin's authoritarianism, however, was just one of the reasons behind the mounting tide of opposition. The Prime Minister's capitalist agenda, which next chapter explores more carefully, became a second element of contention. Thaksin's pro-poor social policies, from the expansion of the welfare state to the provision of credit, aimed at expanding lower class entrepreneurial participation in capitalism. As an effect, the desires for commodities and services among rural and urban masses, which had been seen in the 1990s as moral corruption and deleterious to the preservation of Thai "local knowledge," were unleashed and

[131]Thaksin's language here echoes former US President George W. Bush's policies and statements, including labeling drug dealers as part of the "axis of evil" and mounting a war on them.

sheltered as legitimate founts of entrepreneurship. This reframing directly opposed the romantic depiction of the poor as exemplars of pre-capitalist communal life, a discourse that dominated the monarchic and non-governmental imagination of poverty in Thailand.[132] Such a shift disenfranchised NGOs, monarchists, and urban elites who saw Thaksin as an agent of capitalist corruption of the pristine villagers (Anek 2549).

Thaksin's style of government, in addition, antagonized both media and academics by attacking everyone who dared to criticize him or mention the fact that his personal wealth was growing exponentially, to the point that his main business endeavor—Shin Corporation—tripled its value during the course of his first premiership. He also managed to enrage traditional elites with bureaucratic power. Just as Chatichai had done in the early 1990s, the new Prime Minister attempted to reform the national bureaucracy by cutting bureaucrats off their shares in the informal economy and appointing people close to him to high-level positions in the military, police, and ministries. The same traditional bureaucracy that had staged the 1991 coup, grew increasingly irritated with the new prime minister (Chareonwongsak 2006; Pasuk and Baker 2004). As Thaksin was attempting to take control over other state forces and civil society, it became clear—by the end of his first premiership—that these forces were fighting back. They, however, remained a minority: Thaksin's popular support continued to rise.

Although his government was marked by authoritarianism, blunt disregard for human rights, and murky business deals, his first premiership had delivered the first universal health care program in the history of the country, instituted new crop subsidies, boosted access to credit—both personal and collective—and led Thailand back to the economic prosperity experienced before the crisis while keeping national debt under control. As a result, Thaksin's popularity grew massively, both in the country and in its capital city. Unprecedentedly, the Prime Minister was re-elected on February 6th 2005 with almost 60% of the parliament seats, marking the first one-party majority in the history of Thailand.

[132] Moreover, Thaksin enraged NGOs by co-opting part of their agenda (including CODI, the public health volunteer service, etc.) and waging a frontal assault on them through funneling their funding through the state under a pro-capitalist agenda.

Soon after his re-election, however, the political tide that had opposed Thaksin during his first term rose exponentially. In September of 2005, Sondhi Limthongkul, a former business associate of Thaksin who was refused a large loan by the Prime Minister, started an anti-Thaksin TV program and a small protest group. Shortly thereafter, in January of 2006, Thaksin announced that his company—Shin Corporation—would be sold to the Singaporean-owned Tamasek. Not only was a national company, a leader of communication industry, to fall into foreign hands but, through a holding company based in the Virgin Islands, Thaksin's family avoided paying 2 billion dollar in taxes on the transaction (Funston 2009). This deal was met with unprecedented popular criticism that adopted the language offered by existing discursive infrastructures of mobilization. The attacks on Thaksin, in fact, adopted two of the four discourses that had emerged in Thailand since the 1960s: a nationalist rhetoric, dominant among Thais, which rebelled to foreign ownership of national telecommunication; and a Buddhist moral discourse, which questioned Thaksin's moral character and suitability to be a national leader.

The anti-Thaksin movement gained tremendous momentum. Sondhi was joined by prominent leaders, including: Chamlong Srimuang (the former leader of the 1992 protests and of the first party with which Thaksin had run for office); NGOs activists, such as Pipob Dongchai and Somsak Kosaisuuk, who had been active in the 1992 protests; as well as public intellectuals and academics, such as Somkiat Pongpaiboon. Together they founded in 2005 the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), also known as the Yellow Shirts, and organized popular protests calling for a royal intervention to remove Thaksin as prime minister. The people who took to the streets were an agglomeration of civil servants, state enterprise labor unions, urban middle-classes, conservative Buddhist groups, Southerners, and monarchic elites. Together these groups voiced a political discontent that came to justify the military coup that removed Thaksin in 2006.

While the prime minister, as a populist, invoked his electoral mandate as guarantee for his actions, the PAD saw his popular support as a sign of the masses' corrupted morals and vote-buying practices, especially among the rural voters who, in their vision, had either been bought or brain-washed by Thaksin. The Yellow Shirts' discourse latched on to decades of distrust and bias by the urban intelligentsia, political

activists, and elites toward the Thai rural masses, their political struggles, and electoral choices. This established narrative, together with the discourse of "Thai-style democracy," offered a pathway for their discontent. Many observers have attributed the Yellow Shirts' blunt dismissal of these masses' electoral rights to their blinding hatred for Thaksin Shinawatra (Funston 2009; Thongchai 2008b). I argue instead that their disregard and disrespect for the demands of rural and urban poor, if exacerbated by opposition to Thaksin Shinawatra, go well beyond this conflict and have to do with a discursive infrastructure that, as I have shown, oriented the political analyses of large sections of the Thai intelligentsia and political activists since the 1970s, an infrastructure that see the masses as corrupt and backward.

Many of the groups that joined in the Yellow Shirts have had a long history of seeing the masses either as "narrow-minded"—as Comrade Sung has said about the encounter with farmers in the 1970s—or as intrinsically anti-state and pre-capitalist—as both NGOs activists and Buddhist conservatives claim. In this sense, the popular subscription to the capitalist agenda proposed by Thaksin and the support for a deeper involvement of elected state officials in citizens' lives was explained in three ways: as a lack of understanding, which confirmed their idea of the masses' dumb and easily duped character; as an openness to receive hand-outs, which confirmed their corrupt and opportunistic nature; or as the effects of the allure of capitalist dreams and desires presented by an immoral leader.

Whatever the cause, these masses were always presented as objects of politics and never subjects, either innocent or complicit depending on the specific faction of the Yellow Shirts. In other words, "the possibility that the pro-TRT poor did indeed understand the objective conditions that they themselves faced, that they saw in Thaksin's party the most appropriate recipient of their vote, seemed not to dawn on the majority of the prime minister's Bangkok enemies" (Funston 2009: 10). After all, if these groups, especially NGOs, had been educating the masses to organize and fight against the advance of capitalism, how could they now support Thaksin and give in to his capitalist rhetoric? Such electoral support was lived as a betrayal by many among conservative Buddhists, former leftist activists, intellectuals, and NGO workers. Such

betrayal guaranteed the necessity of an extra-parliamentarian intervention to limit the potential for these masses to determine the political future of Thailand.

Pressured by mounting PAD protests, on February 24th 2006, Thaksin, with his usual decisive hand, dissolved Parliament and called for new elections, which he envisioned as a plebiscite on his premiership. All opposing parties announced their plans to boycott the upcoming elections. In the polarized situation a pro-Thaksin demonstration was organized in Sanam Luang on March 3rd. Among the 200,000 protesters figured prominently thousands motorcycle taxi drivers, headed by Yai, the drivers' leader who had been involved in the 1992 protests, and Oboto, the future liaison between the drivers and the Red Shirts. Once again the drivers were acquiring, as in 1992, a prominent role in street politics, revealing their potential as political mobilizers, a potential that Thaksin understood and attempted to control.[133]

While Thaksin was organizing its supporters, on the other side of the spectrum, the PAD continued to protest and on March 25th mobilized 300,000 people in a counter demonstration along Ratchadamnoen Avenue that called on the King to appoint a new prime minister. Behind these requests, the royalist, nationalist, and anti-democratic agenda of the Yellow Shirts started to reveal itself. The PAD reiterated that they were defenders of the monarchy, hence the decision to dress in yellow,[134] and accused Thaksin of trying to undermine the King's authority and of selling out the country to foreigners. Furthermore, while the movement advocated for democracy, what they meant was "Thai-style democracy," based on "good people" largely hand-picked by the palace, the army, and NGOs rather than on popularly elected representation and opposed to one-person one-vote democracy that, in their view, only favored the election of corrupt and populist politicians.

[133] As Yai told me, "on March 3rd we brought 30,000 motorcycle taxis. Thaksin himself was surprised and asked us: how could you mobilize the people to help? We talked at Thai Rak Thai party and he asked: when you bring them, what would you want? We requested only things we could use: food and water. During that period we met various time with Thaksin. On time I was seated on a table and talked to him at the election campaign back stage. I said if you wanted to step down as a PM, please informed the motorcycle taxis a day in advance and we would create chaos around the city against the yellow shirts. He didn't tell me. I told him about it. But he understood the role of the motorcycle taxis, he knew we can bring the country into turmoil and bankruptcy."

[134] Yellow is the color associated with Monday, day of the week in which the King was born. As a consequence yellow has closely associated with the monarchy.

Despite mounting protests, new elections were held on April 2nd 2006. Thai Rak Thai won, running unopposed in many constituencies. In Bangkok, however, the "no votes"—basically an anti-Thaksin vote—outnumbered those in his favor. This election shattered the alliance between urban elites, middle-class, and the rural population that had emerged in 2001 against the IMF-driven policies of Chuan Leekpai and sustained Thaksin's rise to power. It became clear that urban middle and upper classes, NGOs activists, and the urban intelligentsia were done with Thaksin, while in the countryside—especially the north and the northeast—and in the urban lower classes, large portions of the population continued to support the prime minister. The fracture, both geographical and class-based, created the conditions of possibility for the 2006 coup (Ji 2007).

The period after the election, in fact, was one of deep uncertainty and polarization. The Yellow Shirts continued in their request for a royal intervention while Thaksin—elected but under popular and judicial pressure—took an unprecedented leave of absence as prime minister. The courts became the main arbiters of the political dispute, under pressure from the palace to take up this role. On May 8th 2006, the three highest courts in Thailand—administrative, constitutional, and supreme—decided to null the previous election and schedule a new vote for October of that year. Thaksin declared "that his authority and Thai democracy were threatened by *phu mi barami nok ratthathammanun,* a "charismatic individual outside the constitution." In its (sic) blunt reference either to the royal institution or to a figure closely associated to it, Thaksin's outburst re-drew the openly acknowledged line of the of the year's political conflict dramatically and unambiguously" (Funston 2009: 7).

The effects of this outburst were disastrous. Whether Thaksin's words should be interpreted as referring to the King himself or to the network condensed around the monarchy, as McCargo has argued (McCargo 2005), the level of the conflict soon stepped up. Over the course of July and August of 2006, Prem Tinsulanonda, former prime minister and head of the King's privy council, was reported reminding soldiers that the "the military's alliance belonged to the king and the country rather than to the government of the day, that leaders must be moral and ethical people, and that wealth—especially if gained through improper

means—was an inappropriate basis for political power" (Funston 2009: 8). It did not take long for the army to receive the message. On September 19th 2006, while Thaksin was in New York preparing to address the United Nations assembly, military tanks rolled into Bangkok, largely welcomed by the urban population. The army took power and was soon endorsed on national television by the monarch.

The period of democratic politics, which had started with the 1992 protest, was brought to an end by a military intervention that was paradoxically welcomed by the same leftists, academics, and activists who has risked their lives, a few decades before, to demand the army's withdrawal from politics.[135] The monarchy, which until this point had managed to observe political struggles from afar and intervening with an aura of neutrality, was brought into the mayhem and was seen as clearly associated with the anti-Thaksin's side of the conflict (Askew and Pokklao 2011). Such polarization was unprecedented and initiated a turbulent period of Thai history that lasted until the election of Yingluck Shinawatra, Thaksin's younger sister, as prime minister in 2011. Between 2006 and 2010, when the three-month-long Red Shirts protest took place, time and again popularly elected governments representing parties with strong affiliations with Thaksin Shinawatra were dismissed or dismantled by bureaucratic elites through military or judiciary interventions. After each election, the Red Shirt protests calmed down and the Yellow Shirts took over the streets, using existing discursive, organizational, spatial, and strategic infrastructures of mobilization to demand the removal of the new government on the grounds of Thaksin's involvement, vote-buying, immorality, and corruption. Following the protests, the constitutional court dismissed the elected government and the PAD mobilization winded down, while the Red Shirts rejoined in protest. This grotesque skit happened twice before the rise to power of Abhisit Vejjajiva in December of 2008, through a change of parliamentarian sides by one faction of the pro-Thaksin ruling party.

[135] As Thongchai has argued, "apparently corruption scandals and abuses of power doomed the government. But the popular movement that ousted Thaksin was overtly royalist, with overwhelming support from the former leftwing and conservative intelligentsia who considered the fight against Thaksin a battle against a dictatorship that was a proxy of global capitalism and its designs on Thailand. Leftist rhetoric worked side by side with the royalists in the mass media and at the demonstrations. Radical songs against capitalism and imperialism were sung next to the royal anthem. […] Many former leftist intellectuals endorsed the 'Thai-style democracy' that would keep an elected regime in check, and justify the constitutional right of the monarchy and the military to guide and steer the country's democracy" (Thongchai 2008a: 587).

The first election after the coup, in December of 2007, was won by Samak Sundaravej, largely consider a proxy candidate for Thaksin, who remained in exile. PAD revived protests and a series of complaints were submitted to the Constitutional Court who, in September of 2008, forced Samak to resign due to a conflict of interest between his premiership and his participation to a TV cooking show. The premiership was given to Somchai Wongsawat, an uncharismatic bureaucrat and Thaksin's brother-in-law. His rise to power was countered with extensive mobilization among the Yellow Shirts, who saw in him a puppet guided by their archenemy (Nostitz 2009).

On October 6th PAD protesters, after marching in Rachadamnoen road, blocked the parliament and Government House demanding the resignation of the democratically elected yet, in their eyes, illegitimate prime minister. On November 25th 2008 a few thousand Yellow Shirts supporters marched toward Suvarnabhumi International Airport with the declared objective of preventing the prime minister from returning to Thailand after an international forum. A convoy of hundreds of PAD members dressed in yellow blocked the two ends of the road in front of the terminal building and occupied the airport. Boosted by the army's rejection of the government's request to intervene and clear the airport, two days later the Yellow Shirts' protesters moved to occupy Don Muang, the other international airport, effectively stopping air-based transportation in and through Bangkok. The strategy of transforming spaces of mobility into spaces of mobilization, which was initiated by farmers' protests in the early 1990s, solidified the blockage of mobility as an effective strategy of mobilization and provided a pathway for the Yellow Shirts' mobilization that succeeded in blocking and taking control over the 11th busiest airport in the world

Even though these actions did not open official negotiations with the government, they cornered the executive power as well as other Thai institutions, pressuring them to take actions to accommodate the PAD's demands. On December 2nd 2008 the constitutional court dissolved all three parties of the government coalition on questionable charges of electoral fraud, leading to suspicion of special pledging (Funston 2009). The next day the Yellow Shirts' protesters, satisfied with the outcomes of their actions, left the airports having, once again, obtained the removal of an elected government.

This charade, which Jim Glassman has dubbed "provinces elect, Bangkok overturns" (Glassman 2010), ended with the creation of a government of the opposing Democrat Party, under the lead of Abhisit Vejjajiva—himself a former May of 1992 protester—in December of the same year. This solution revamped the Red Shirts' mobilization, which demanded the resignation of a government that had never received a popular majority but was the result of a complex game of military and judicial pressures, elite alliances, and side-swapping in parliament. From there on, the Red Shirts initiated a country-wide extended mobilizations that blocked the ASEAN meeting in Pattaya in 2009 and culminated in the three-months long take over of Bangkok between March and May of 2010, in which motorcycle taxi drivers played a central role. This protest, the product of a complex history of political protest in Thailand, adopted the existing organizational, discursive, spatial, and strategic infrastructure of mobilization—which this chapter has detailed—as a roadmap to established their alliances, demands, locations, and actions.

From material conditions to personal desires

The historical reconstruction of the infrastructure of mobilization that provided foundations and templates for the emergence of the Red Shirt movement has provided a necessary framework through which to understand this political group, as well as the operations of motorcycle taxi drivers in the protest of 2010. Yet, this reading missed altogether to explain the rise of individual and collective political consciousness among the drivers and the protesters at large. After all, as Lefebvre has remarked:

> [If] to overestimate the 'motivations' of desire and desires themselves is to fall into subjectivism, psychologism and classic idealism […] to disregard them is to fall into simplified and vulgar materialism and determinism, in which we forget man's obscure depth and his development. (Lefebvre 2008, Vol II: 7)

If until now I have reconstructed the materialist dimensions of the Red Shirts mobilization, in the next chapter I explore the depths of its supporters political consciousness. In particular, I investigate the drivers' motivations for participating in the Red Shirts protests and the role of desires in fueling their support for the movement.

Chapter 6: Burning Red Desires

On May 19th 2010, deploying tanks and war weapons, the Royal Thai Army dispersed thousands of Red Shirt protesters who had taken over the commercial center of Bangkok demanding democratic elections and an end to political and economic double-standards in Thailand. In the previous two months, these protesters had effectively transformed the Ratchaprasong intersection from a space of elite conspicuous consumption into a national political arena. By May 20th, when the violence stopped, at least 92 people had been killed and more than 2000 injured filled Bangkok's hospitals. 7-Eleven shops, bank branches, the Stock Exchange of Thailand, as well as Central World, the biggest shopping mall in the country, were set on fire, filling the air with a pungent smell of burned plastic and stagnant water. The intersection, theater of the violence and location of the protest camp for the previous month, was empty.

After weeks of occupying these streets and being the only form of transportation through them, motorcycle taxi drivers had left the area, taking advantage of their mobility and profound knowledge of the city's shortcuts and backdoors to disappear before fist of the military clenched around the protesters. A few meters away from the burning shopping complex a crowd of Red Shirts, driven to Bangkok by a multitude of different aspirations and demands, sat in silence in the National Police compound, waiting to be recorded and sent back home with special trains and buses.

In the late afternoon, after an endless night and day expecting to find out what their destiny would be, the remaining protesters were moved by police officers to bus and train stations and finally allowed to return home to their villages. I boarded one of these trains directed to the northeastern province of Udon Thani.[136] There, after spending some days with the defeated protesters, I planned to meet Adun, who had gone back to his village a few days before, giving in to his wife's pleas to get away from the explosive situation in Bangkok.

[136] For a more detailed treatment of this train ride see (Sopranzetti 2012)

On the train I met Id. A man in his fifties from the northeastern province of Korat,[137] Id sat in third class, surrounded by other Red Shirts trying to come to terms with what had happened in the past months of protest and with the situation in which the last dramatic days had left them. As the train left the station, cutting through a dark city emptied by the curfew imposed by the government, Id broke the silence. Explaining his reasons for leaving his small barbershop to join the protest in Bangkok, he told me: "Democracy is justice (*prachāthippatai khū̄ khwāmyuttitham*). For the most part we don't have legal, political and educational justice. It is a matter of opportunity (*`ōkāt*), and double standards (*sǭ̄ng māttrathān*). As a consequence" he continued "we have to come and fight for our kids, for our nephews, for the population at large." I asked him about life in the Isan he grew up in, before the 1997 economic crisis and the following accelerated neoliberal transformation (Bello, et al. 1998: 261; Jackson 1999; Pasuk and Baker 2000). "Compared with when I was a kid, [now] we have everything in the countryside. We have motorcycles, TV, cell phones. Now things are better than 20 years ago. We have asphalted streets; we have electricity, everything…" He falls silent for a second. "Life today, however, is harder." I ask for clarifications, puzzled. He continues: "The whole world has developed and Isan too. But we are slower than Bangkok so we remain behind. We know in which direction the world is going, we just can't follow it. My father did not study at all yet he still had a job, my nephew finished high school and cannot find anything to do. We have new needs, new things we want. The whole world is developing, we must follow that development. Cell-phones for instance, we never had them 20 years ago, but now you cannot work without them. The government is slowing us down. They call us stupid and as a result they take whatever they want, it is their mind-set (*withī khit*)."

In Id's words, as in those of many others I encountered during my fieldwork in Bangkok and in Isan villages, a quest for democracy, access, and fairness is conceptualized through a language of needs and desires for both capitalist consumption and access to resources and services. In this view, the present government of

[137] The city of Korat, officially known as Nakhon Ratchasima, traditionally marked the fuzzy boundary between the Lao and Siamese territories. The city is often referred to as the "gateway to Isan" for its strategic geographic position along transportation routes, both streets and railways, ascending to the northeastern plateau.

Abhisit Vejjajiva is trying to hamper and slow down these desires, reframing them as the result of the populist "handouts" and capitalist greed diffused among rural and urban lower classes by the ousted prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra. What Id sees as necessities, however, are not just gifts of a patron or objects of mindless consumption. The commodities he refers to—motorcycles, TVs, and cell phones that are rapidly saturating villages in Isan— as well the services he demands are not just dreams of participating in capitalist voracity but also tools of connection, technologies of economic, physical, and informational mobility needed to keep up with contemporary life in Thailand. In other words, they become necessary tools to create and preserve channels through which forms of physical, social, and economic mobility, necessary to keep up with Thai capital and of its capital city, can occur.

In the first part of this dissertation I have explored the importance of the drivers' phatic labor in creating and diffusing desires and spatio-temporal imaginaries both for themselves and for their families. This chapter moves a step forward and focuses on how these desires shape the driver's vision of the world and structure their political subjectivities. In order to do so, I position such desires in relation to capitalist restructuring, in and beyond Thailand, first toward Fordist mass production and then along post-Fordist lines.

Cashing on desires

Fordist capitalism, as the marvelous documentary *the Century of the Self* carefully reconstructs (Curtis 2002), was predicated upon a restructuring of the relation between needs and desires. The objective was clear, and so stated. As Paul Mazur, one of the first non-family employee to work for Lehman-Brothers, declared after the 1929 crisis, the plan was to "shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old have been consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America, man's desire should overshadow his needs" (Curtis 2002). And training they did, not just in the USA. The creation of a society of ever-desiring mass consumers developed increasingly under Fordism. Everyday life became the new frontier of capitalist expansion, a territory to be colonized through mass

production and advertisement (Debord 1970). Such colonized reality as Henry Lefebvre has described in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, revolves around a consumer society that is

> allegedly based upon mass consumption and massive production of needs. [In this system] the manufacturers of consumer goods do all they can to manufacture consumers. […] The consumer does not desire. He submits. He has 'strangely' motivated 'behavior patterns'. He obeys the suggestions and the orders given to him by advertising, sales agency or the demands of social prestige […] The circuit from need to desires and from desires to need is constantly being interrupted or distorted. These 'orders' from outside become subtly abstract fragments or absurdly concrete 'motivations'. Desires no longer correspond to genuine needs; they are artificial. (Lefebvre 2008, Vol III: 24)

This manufacturing of consumers becomes only more prominent in post-Fordist capitalism that aims at controlling "the living body of the worker, not only as a bearer of nerves and muscles, but also of more general social attitudes, intellectual abilities and powers" (Commisso 2006: 171). Such control is performed among the drivers, as I showed, by the introduction of a language of "freedom" and "entrepreneurship," which both emancipates the workers and lures them into accepting reduced rights and personalizing their relations of production. This personalization of capitalist practices, however, did not occur only on the side of labor. A parallel shift, in fact, has characterized post-Fordist consumption. The standardized mass consumer, central to Fordist economies, has been substituted by individualized consumers (Amin 1994), who are provided with products that do not just fulfill generalized desires but are supposed to express the owners' identities, to represent them.[138] The result has been the continuous and unlimited creation of new desires and artificial needs that granted the end of crisis of overproduction, which had dominated Fordist capitalism.

This creation and restructuring of desires has defined the diffusion of capitalism, at least since its turn toward mass consumption. Regardless of this centrality, the significance of desires for commodities and services to political mobilizations—as voiced by Id—has been largely ignored. Desires, on the contrary, have been often dismissed, in and beyond Thailand, by both conservative and radical thinkers on the bases of their "artificial nature." Self-righteous Bangkok elites, as well as a number of Thai public intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Prawase Wasi, have referred to these desires as effects of "globalization," emblems of the "un-

[138] Apple has managed, maybe better than any other corporation, this post-Fordist consumption modality, making its product into a status symbol and a way to declare the owners is, indeed, "a Mac person".

genuine" nature of rural and urban poor' political demands, or disruptions to the "traditional self-reliance" of village life. Thai Marxist scholars have also been quick to reject desires for commodities and services as oppressive forms of false-consciousness or ill-informed market practices of the uneducated *chāo bān* (villagers). Both groups, in other words, have agreed that such desires were illegitimate because unauthentic and artificial.

The "artificiality" of these desires—as opposed to an abstract and romantic idea of "authenticity" that often sips into both Thai conservative and radical discourses—provides an extremely problematic ground on which to dismiss their potential political significance. As Benedict Anderson has showed for national imagined communities, in fact, the artificial and imagined nature of nationalist passions does not make them less real, significant, and effective in rallying political passion and participation (Anderson 1983). The same, I argue, is true in the case of desires. After all, as Marx himself stated in opening *Capital*, "the commodity is, first of all, […] a thing […] which satisfies human need of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach or from the imagination, makes no difference." (Marx, et al. 1906, Vol I: 1)

Even if we accept with dominant Thai discourses—and I do not—that these desires are artificial, and without material basis, they can still have very real and politically significant effects. Therefore, instead of judging the "real" nature of these desires and dismissing them as false consciousness or celebrating them as a form of empowerment, I analyze their historical emergences in a complex web of conflicting and overlapping claims about capitalism, class mobility, and morality in contemporary Thailand. The chapter starts from an analysis of specific desires for commodities and services among the drivers to show how the impossibility to fulfill them offers a language to describe and articulate the system of economic exclusion in which they operate. I then put this system into historical context and explore how different Thai governments since Thaksin Shinawatra's premiership have legitimized and fostered, condemned and limited such desires. By doing this I show the concrete significance of these desires to political consciousness and mobilization in post-2006 coup Thailand. Once we take such an approach, I argue, unfulfilled desires morph into political

demands among Red Shirt drivers and provide them with a language, as well as a medium, to articulate struggles for social justice and equality.

Mediation and Desires among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers.

Motorcycle taxi drivers occupy a peculiar position in relation to desires, access, and exclusion in the city. As we saw, their phatic labor mediates and creates channels between a multiplicity of spaces, commodities, and people across the economic and spatial landscape of the city. Balancing between long waiting times in their neighborhood, rushed slaloms through the smoky traffic of Bangkok, and regular returns to their village, the drivers find strength precisely in their ability to create channels and find routes that seem precluded, both physically and socially, to most other city dwellers. As an effect, they are frequently allowed to access spaces of privilege and wealth from which other lower class urban workers are excluded.[139] Wealthy private houses, glamorous offices, and high-end shops figure in the landscape of their mobility as much as slums, tiny rooms, rural villages and Isan bars. Perceived as marginal yet absolutely central to weaving together both the urban and rural landscapes of Thailand, many of the drivers are exposed to a variety of commodities, tastes, and lifestyles that configure new aspirations, dissatisfactions, and desires, which they often help to mediate and spread. The drivers' labor, however, does not leave them untouched and often allows them to develop familiarity and desires for commodities well beyond their economic reach.[140]

Adun talked to me at length about a remunerative transaction in which his group was involved, when the I-Phone 3 was first released in Thailand. A shop had received a large shipment of the phones and was selling a limited quantity of 30 pieces a day. Each buyer was allowed to purchase only one unit, priced at 20,000 baht (660 $). A shop owner from Adun's neighborhood, for whom the local drivers operate as

[139] Even if other workers in the urban service industry, such as cleaning people, security guards or maids, are also allowed into private spaces of privilege none of them covers the variety and spectrum of spaces that the drivers traverse during a day of work. Moreover, due to the nature of their presence in the street none seems to be in the position, as the drivers, to observe the daily lives not just of a family but of a whole street, its dwellers, workers, and visitors, their lifestyles and interactions.

[140] In chapter 4, for instance, I mentioned Adun's taste for Cointreau as an example of their attunement to consumption beyond their reach.

messengers, asked them to queue every morning for the phones and to buy as many as they could so he could sell them in his shop for 25,000 baht. Every driver who brought back a phone received 500 baht (16$) for the transaction. This dynamic not only made the drivers some money, solidified their relations with a local merchant, and showcased their role as phatic labor in the city, but also sparked long discussions among them regarding their phones.

Chatting on the sidewalk, the drivers reflected on the multiple functions that were not included in their outdated machines, their exclusion from the Internet sphere and its consequences, as well as the unequal distribution of wealth that makes a month of their income insufficient to buy one single phone. A few weeks later, as we sat with some friends outside Adun's village waiting for a fish to nibble at our bait, the same conversations travelled with us to the countryside, now tinged with a sense of personal pride that came with knowledge of and contact with the new phone. The expressed desires for the new product went clearly beyond the necessity of mobile phones as tools of connection into a larger desire to partake in conspicuous consumption. Yet it also offered Adun a material language to articulate perceptions of inequality and differentiated access. In other words, desires for equal access to commodities and services, and the impossibility of fulfilling them, became a material reminder of larger systems of exclusion and exploitation.

Discussions of this sort are extremely common in the daily life of the groups of motorcycle taxi drivers I worked with, given their specific position in between urban classes and spaces, but also in between the city and the Isan countryside. It is precisely their physical and social interstitiality, and the stark perception of class and regional inequalities that derives from it, that offered them both a daily experience of inequality and a chance to conceptualize it in relation to spaces and objects of privilege that they contribute, together with other migrants and media imaginaries, to mediate and diffuse into the landscape of Bangkok and the Thai countryside. Mediation, however, is never a frictionless process. As goods, documents, or spaces pass through the drivers' hands and wheels they become objects of desires and revealed themselves as unobtainable, providing material reminders of larger structural restrictions on the drivers' full access and enjoyment of services and commodities available to their clients. When these desires circulated, became

interiorized, and the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva came to be seen as the actor that "slows us down"—as Id said during the train ride—these desires provided, together with their failures, a material language for the drivers to articulate new forms of political subjectivity. In other words, the phenomenology of their phatic labor in the city, with its winding progression, access to a multiplicity of spaces, and mediation of unobtainable commodities did not just help drivers in their daily navigations of the urban landscapes and the conversions of different mobilities, but also shaped their political subjectivities and their emergence as central actors in urban politics.

In this sense, once commodities, such as the IPhone, became familiar yet remained unattainable, they pushed the drivers toward a reflection on their political-economic position, initiating a process opposite to the one famously described by Karl Marx as commodity fetishism. The German philosopher showed how commodities conceal and mystify social relations by substituting "definite social relation between men themselves [with] the fantastic relation between things" (Marx, et al. 1906, Vol I: 165). Here, on the contrary, the drivers' limitations to full enjoyment of commodities revealed and demystified relations of exclusion and exploitation—on the side of consumption and not of production—under which the drivers operate, relations that are otherwise congealed in their unobtainable desires. In other words, if for Marx commodities become "products of the human brain [which] appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (ibid.), for the drivers unobtainable commodities provided a diagnostics of social relations that marginalize and cast them away from full enjoyment of the promises of both capitalism and democratic politics. In other words, as Lefebvre has argued:

> The sadnesses of life in a proletarian neighborhood, appear intolerable, they seem even more so once we become aware of the magnificent, grandiose character of the works they have produced [or circulated] with their labor. Our awareness of this contradiction becomes more acute, and we find ourselves faced necessarily with a new imperative: the practical, effective transformation of things as they are." (Lefebvre 2008, Vol II: 138)

Everyday realizations, such as the fact that one single phone is more valuable than a month of your labor, I found, go a long way in raising such awareness among the drivers and claiming the political significance of these unfulfilled desires.

In this sense, their experiences of exclusion, both from conspicuous consumption and from access to services reveal their larger exclusion from social and political participation. After all, as Andrew Metcalfe has argued, these revelations need to be taken into account to reclaim the personal and mundane nature of political conflict:

> Working class people are often mythologised as Prometheans, but Hamlet would equally serve as a model. People's midnight ruminations about a daily humiliation they suffer, about the shame they feel, about the claims to honour they would like to make: these too are struggles about class. Whatever people's long term interests, however economically exploited they are, there are personal matters of dignity and identity that demand people's attention on a daily basis, and anyone who does not understand the character of these private class struggles will not be able to understand those carried out in public places. (Metcalfe 1980: 56)

An indisposition to conceive of political struggle outside the unified category of class consciousness has been one of the conceptual shortcomings of both orthodox and critical Marxism. This reluctance has produced an easy dismissal of the myriad personal struggles that claim personal dignity by negotiating demands into existing discursive and material fields (Metcalfe 1988; Thompson 1971), in this case of everyday desires. Actions that seem to go against a rationalistic and organic vision of class interests are, in this tradition, easily rejected as illegitimate and products of false consciousness. However, as Lefebvre has argued:

> Dogmatism has no right to reduce the working-class social and human being to a single dimension, labour (on the pretext of saving the working class from reformism and of preserving an abstractly revolutionary process). (Lefebvre 2008, Vol II: 55)

Countering this reduction, I argue that legitimate political struggles, much as class in the previous quotation, do not operate just in the abstract world of unified entities but also in the world of people who lead everyday contextual struggles to make ends meet. They pertain to people who work and save to send money back to their families, send their children to decent schools, provide them with tools of physical and informational

mobility, and have some extra cash to drink and bet on sports during the weekend. After all, "men do not fight or die for tons of steel, or for tanks and atomic bombs. They aspire to be happy, not to produce" (Lefebvre 2008, Vol I: 48). Such aspirational struggles need to be acknowledged and explored, in order to consider their actors not just as faceless members of a class, but as full humans, directed both by collective aspirations and personal desires. Once we question this dogmatic reading, desires for commodities and service and the impossibility to fulfill them—which Id, Adun, and many other drivers and Red Shirts supporters voiced—can provide a concrete language to challenge existing social inequality, economic exploitation, and political oppression.

Such configuration, however, is not necessary or intrinsic to the logics of capital or to post-Fordist capitalism. Rather it is a product of a specific contradictory and contingent history, which positioned desires for capitalist commodities and services as a field of economic and political struggle in contemporary Thailand. As I have previously shown, in fact, a historicist narrative that positioned the village in a pre-capitalist yet backward past and the city in a capitalist modern present has played a central role in structuring and justifying economic, social, and political inequality in Thailand. In this narrative, commodities and services became urban phenomenon, while pre-capitalist collective living defined pristine rural experience as well as an idealized conception of poverty. The implications of this discourse, however, are deeply contradictory: on one side by celebrating poverty and rurality as a moral position of refusal of capitalism it sees popular desires for commodities and services as immoral and illegitimate; on the other, by positioning poverty and rurality in the space of the 'not yet' it reframes the fulfillment of those desires as a step toward the present and out of a long history of spatial, social, and political marginalization.

In order to reconstruct these two different implications and understand the emergence of desires as central to political struggles in contemporary Thailand, I start the extreme electoral success and enduring resilience of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's policies and discourses among his supporters and in particular among motorcycle taxi drivers, whom the former prime minister referred to on multiple occasions

as key beneficiaries of his policies as well as his personal friends (Pasuk and Baker 2009).[141] Once I have explored his role in sheltering popular desires for commodities and services, I move on to explore how, after the 2006 coup, the same desires were reframed as illegitimate and immoral. Such conflict over personal desires opened a space in which they could transform into political demands. It was in this space between unleashed, tamed, and unfulfilled desires that the drivers' political subjectivities emerged.

Unleashing Desires: the Shinawatra legacy.

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister of Thailand in January of 2001 with a solid majority and an ambitious plan to radically reform Thai politics and society. Son of a politically connected middle-class family in Chiang Mai,[142] Thaksin had entered the business world in the late 1980s, acquiring a large portion of the national mobile communication sector through personal connections and state contracts. The 1997 economic crisis left his businesses largely untouched, with less liquidity but in a stronger market position. The crisis, besides strengthening his domination over telecommunications, marked a major turning point in Thaksin's political career. On July 14th 1998, after a series of unimpressive performances in ministerial positions (McCargo and Ukrist 2005), [143] he founded the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, which would make him the first ever prime minister in Thailand to serve a full term, be reelected, and obtain an unprecedented one-party electoral victory. The new party, under the bombastic slogan "Think New, Act New, for all Thais," ran for the first time in Thai history, even by his opponents' estimations, an election based on a clear political platform. Soon renamed "Thaksinomics" (Looney 2004), this platform emerged in opposition to the neo-liberal policies that Chuan Leekpai had adopted after the 1997 crisis.

[141] In a very famous summary of Thaksin's autobiography that was posted as an electoral manifesto around the country, Thaksin stated: "Even today, my friends range from hired motorcycle drivers to the presidents of great countries."

[142] His family background has been carefully bent by Thaksin and often transformed in his self-narration into a struggling lower class environment.

[143] Thaksin had unimpressively held three short ministerial positions, once as minister of foreign affairs and twice as deputy prime minister, between 1994 and 1997 and destroyed his first party, Chamlong Srimuang's Phalang Dhamma.

Central to Thaksinomics was a significant expansion of the government's role in promoting economic growth and managing its social consequences (Pasuk 2004). Taking distance from the previous deflationary and neo-liberal policies sponsored by the IMF, which had failed to fix the after-effects of the 1997 crisis, Thaksin understood economic growth as fostering consumption, providing easy access to credit, and protecting national businesses (Pasuk and Baker 2008). This new agenda, at least for most of Thaksin's first term as prime minister, seemed to satisfy both domestic capitalist forces—scared by the "opening" of the Thai markets to global capitals advocated by the IMF—and the large rural and urban masses—concerned about the decline of state services since the crisis and growing economic difficulties.

After a largely successful first term, in which the Thai Rak Thai absorbed all its allied parties, Thaksin was re-elected in 2005 by a landslide, with a new slogan—"The heart of TRT is the people"—and a platform even more oriented toward the rural constituencies and poverty-reduction schemes. His second mandate, however, was short lived and, after the boycotted elections of 2006, the Royal Thai Army, under the command of royalist Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratklin,[144] rolled tanks into Bangkok on September 19th 2006 while Thaksin was in New York. The ousted Prime Minister remained in exile and the democratic phase that had started in Thailand with the May 1992 protests was brought to a halt by the tenth successful coup since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Justifying "toppling democracy" (Thongchai 2008) with "toppling Thaksin"(Kasian 2006), the coup-makers effectively offered Thaksin a new political life, transforming the ousted authoritarian prime minister into the most grotesque of democratic heroes.

During his premierships, in fact, Thaksin had shown a tendency to authoritarianism, poor human rights record, and a low tolerance for criticism. Thaksin violently dismissed and often silenced any form of dissent, coming from journalist, NGOs activists, or public intellectual. In the social contract devised by his government any criticism was seen as illegitimate, anti-national, and potentially "a betrayal of our social contract to people." In this sense Thaksin was a truly populist leader, for whom every action taken, even if illegal or questionable, had to be accepted and could not be scrutinized given his enormous popular and

[144] The appointment of Sonthi to army chief in 2005, under the pressure of director of Privy Council Prem, has been retrospectively individuated multiple times by Thaksin as the biggest mistake in his life.

electoral support.[145] Once this popular support was silenced by the coup, however, Thaksin became a symbol of the military suppression of popular democratic politics.

The figure of Thaksin Shinawatra has generated unprecedented debates and divisions both in Thai society and among scholars of Thailand. Over the course of his two premierships, former friends and patrons became his archenemies, harsh critics marched in streets around the country dressed in red shirts as his face towered form posters and screens around them. Journalists, public intellectuals, opponents and supporters described him alternately, or simultaneously, as a populist handing money to the poor, a commoner from the countryside vindicating centuries of Bangkok's domination, a neoliberal media tycoon protecting the interests of big businesses, or a developmentalist leader with a proclivity for authoritarianism. Other observers defined him as a breath of fresh air in the Thai democratization process, a republican at heart, a main factor behind the re-politicization of the Thai army, the first Thai politician to develop and implement holistic policies for the poor, or a profit-minded capitalist who turned to politics only to enlarge his wealth and power (Chareonwongsak 2006; Funston 2009; Thitinan 2005). Thaksin himself has contributed to this confusion with chameleonic policies and speeches. As Pasuk and Baker have summarized:

> In 1999 he presented himself as a spearhead of pro-business modernization. By 2004, he had espoused a one-party populism in opposition to liberal democracy. In 2009, he called for a revolution against the privileged. […] He has been surrounded by advisers putting ideas and words in his mouth. He has been open to the forces of a society undergoing jolting change. As a man of no real principles, ethical and political, he has reflected the forces swirling around him. (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 354)

Attentive receptor of the forces around him, Thaksin leaned heavily on his expertise and advisors to crack electoral politics by balancing a strong leadership with an almost obsessive reliance on marketing techniques. As a shrewd businessman, Thaksin knew that mapping and satisfying people's desires would be the central pillar of his governments, his business success, and his personal political endurance, well after his deposition by the military Council for Democratic Reform (CDR).

[145] This became clear since the first days of his premiership during his trial for hiding assets only to become more evident and vocalized in the case of the extra judiciary killings during the controversial "war on drugs" or the bloody handling of the southern insurgency.

It was precisely on these demands and desires, which he unleashed and legitimatized, that Thaksin cashed, both as a businessman and as a politician. Two years before his first premiership, he told his party assembly that their "party members roamed the countryside and villages to listen to the needs and desires of the people" before outlining their platform. As Nidhi Eoseewong has argued, "'Think new, act new' [the Thai Rak Thai slogan] is just somebody taking the dreams of Thai society and making them into policy" (Choi 2002: 9), and no one better than Thaksin knew how to sense the "unfulfilled demands among the mass of the population for more goods and services from government, and for a more understanding political leadership" (Choi 2002: 45). Under this leadership capitalism thrived and consumption levels went back to pre-1997 crisis two years into Thaksin's first premiership only to grow in the next two.

At the core of Thaksin's vision was the expansion of capitalism through the promotion of national capital and protection of social masses, a model that resembled the Singaporean model of state capitalism more than Western neo-liberal democracies.[146] In a speech to police officers he explained: "capitalism has targets but no ideals, while socialism has ideals but no targets [therefore] we need to combine the best of each […] I'm applying socialism in the lower economy, and capitalism in the upper economy" (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 342). In other words, Thaksin's social capitalism understood the market to operate freely only under the strict control of the state, not outside it, as traditionally presented by neo-liberal discourse.[147] Thai Rak Thai's agenda shared with neoliberalism the discourse of free markets, the use of the language of business to understand the operations of public administration, and the reframing of citizens as consumers and entrepreneurs but, differently from classical neo-liberals, Thaksin believed that the responsibility for making entrepreneurs thrive and clients satisfied was not in the invisible hand of the market but in the strong hands of the state. Under this protective umbrella, Thaksin unleashed domestic capitalist desires, particularly those voiced by classes that were traditionally excluded from the capitalist feast: the rural masses and the urban

[146] Largely this new configuration of the relation between state and capital is expanding throughout East and Southeast Asia, driven by the success of the Chinese economy. Ian Bremmer's book "The End of Free Market" provides an analysis of the expansion of this model, intrinsically alternative to Western neoliberalism (Bremmer 2010).

[147] I here refer to the neo-liberal discourse because, as many others have shown (Ferguson 2009; Graeber 2007), in practice neo-liberal "free markets" are often controlled by the state, in a way or the other, yet are discursively presented as operating according to their own rules and dynamics.

poor. If for Thaksin these desires were nothing more than a way to restart the stagnant Thai economy after the 1997 crisis by expanding the reach of capitalism, for the recipients of his policies, however, they provided a language in which to articulate their demands for full inclusion in the national economic, social, and political system.

The motorcycle taxi drivers were among the groups who were targeted by Thaksin's policies and who transformed the prime minister's sheltering of their entrepreneurial forces and the unleashing of their desires into larger demands for economic and political equality. According to the drivers I have talked to, two sets of reforms were central to Thaksin's platform: a reform of the relationship between them and bureaucrats; and a deeper inclusion of the drivers in capitalist economic activities. Even if these interventions had the declared purpose of reframing the drivers as consumers of bureaucratic services and economic entrepreneurs, they also had unintended consequences over time and provided the drivers with a language to discuss bureaucratic oppression and economic exclusion.

The first reform, has I have analyzed in Chapter 4, reconfigured the relationship between citizens and state officials, reversing traditional relations of power. While traditionally citizens had to approach bureaucrats with the begging attitude of a subject, Thaksin—using the capitalist language of providers, clients, and ownership—advocated for an opposite dynamic, one in which the bureaucrats have to refer to citizens with respect and deference. As Pin, one of the drivers' political organizers, told me:

> In the past, when a sheriff walked into a house, we have to give him a *wai* first, when you go to apply for an ID, we have to *wai* from a clerk. But when Thaksin came, he changed this: a clerk has to *wai* first because a clerk's salary is paid by people's tax. Government official's salaries are paid by people. Government officials are not our bosses; in fact they are our employees. Thaksin told us about this.

Thaksin, pushing for a conception of citizens as stakeholders and consumers, advocated for a new form of engagement between bureaucrats and citizens but framed this reversal in the populist language of consumption, rather than that of rights. As McCargo and Ukrist have shown, "popular participation was limited to a 'consumption' mode: voters and citizens would be the end users of products developed by a

technocratic and entrepreneurial elite" (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 14). Self-evidently to a mobile phone tycoon, consumers' desires need to be properly and respectfully attended by the sales person and clients' satisfaction needs to be guaranteed, or at least carefully pursued. To the drivers' ears, however, Thaksin spoke of inclusion in the Thai state and respect from its officials; he spoke of an end to bureaucratic indifference and oppression.

The second intervention, under the label of a "war on dark influence," formalized and regularized the operations of the informal economy, in particular motorcycle taxis. In this policy, rather than romanticizing poverty, Thai Rak Thai rephrased it as a lack of state support for the economic activities of low-income entrepreneurs and a constraint on their innate economic dynamism. To unleash this potential meant, in Thaksin's vocabulary, recognizing the motorcycle taxi drivers as capable economic actors to whom the state had to offer a structure of inclusion—namely registration, formalization, and access to a system of credit, taxes, and goods—by expanding the scope of capitalism under De Soto's controversial formula of "turning assets into capital" (Soto 2000). As I showed in my previous analysis of this formalization, the policy conceptualized the drivers' activities as a fount of entrepreneurship, with all the contradictory political significance of this label. Once again, for the drivers this reform meant something different from what Thaksin expected. The formalization, as I analyzed in Chapter 4, provided them with a collective identity that was central to their mobilization in favor of this reform and, later on, to their participation in the Red Shirts protests.

Through these two reforms Thaksin provided a taste of the possibilities that a friendly government could bring to their lives, even if just as unleashed aspirations framed in the language of consumption and entrepreneurship. Whether or not part of the prime minister's intention, these polices meant for the drivers to see their desires for social, economic, and political equality and participation heard and reframed as valuable social, economic, and political forces. Once Thaksin was removed from his position in September 19th 2006 by the hands of a military clique fed up with his attacks to traditional bureaucracy, the desires that his policies and discourses had contributed to unleash did not just disappear but rather gained momentum.

Taming Desires: the post-coup unelected governments.

While the political significance of these desires have been largely under-theorized and dismissed by scholars in and beyond Thailand, their potential did not pass unnoticed by the royal and military establishment that removed Thaksin and took power after him. Since Thaksin's first mandate, in fact, the two groups had been developing a discourse that condemned popular desires for commodities and services as deleterious greed and opposed them to moderation and sufficiency, advocated by army officials, Bangkok elites, and multi-millionaire royalty. The popular book "*Phrarāchā phū pen nưng nai lōk*" (The King who is Number One in the World), printed for the sixtieth anniversary of the King's reign, offered a fairytale-styled popularization of this discourse. The cartoon narrates:

> In a far off place, the king came across a village that had almost no one living there. "Where has everyone gone?" the king asked the small group of remaining villagers. The villagers answered their king: "A demon of the dark called Greed came and visited and asked the people to leave the village. Most of the villagers abandoned the village and went to live in the City of Extravagance". The king thought for a moment and then gave the villagers a radiant seed. The villagers took the seed and planted it and it grew into a radiant tree that grew large branches and spread its radiance in all directions. The king told the villagers that the radiant tree is called Sufficiency. The radiance of the tree shone to far off places, as far as the City of Extravagance. And many of those who saw it travelled back to return to their village. (Hewison and Kitirianglarp 2010: 241)

In a single paragraph, decades of rural migrations and personal struggles to obtain better access to resources, education, and commodities, were reduced to a call by the "dark demon of Greed' who attracted the passive villagers into the City of Extravagance, which stands for Bangkok where the writers, as well as many of their readers, comfortably sit. It took the glorious King's intervention, bringing the seed of sufficiency, to convince the villagers lost in the City of Extravagance to start flocking back home.[148]

[148] This fable is also a prime example of the duplicity of the national discourse I analyzed in chapter 3 that framed the countryside both as a place of backwardness and corruption and as a place of harmonious returns.

Once rural aspirations and desires were rephrased as greed and movement to the city as extravagance, state propaganda set out to tame them. On October 24th 2006, thirty-five days after the coup, the new interim government headed by Gen. Surayud Chulanont formally endorsed "sufficiency economy" (sētthakit *phǭ phīang*), an economic philosophy formulated by the King in a famous speech immediately following the 1997 economic crisis. Advocating a scaled-down, moralized economy of "being happy with whatever little we have", sufficiency economy represents a conjuncture between Buddhist metaphysical repression of desire and nationalist nostalgia for a village past of self-reliance and communal living, that—I have shown previously—has dominated post-1970s Thailand (Chatthip, et al. 1999).

Revolving around the concepts of moderation, immunity, and ethics, this mixture of Buddhist philosophy and romanticization of the land offered an alternative view of economic processes, which took some distance both from Thaksin's state capitalism and from the deregulated capitalism that led Thailand into an unprecedented economic crisis in 1997.[149] Resonating with the call by Bhutan's monarchy to consider gross national happiness (GNH) above gross national product (GNP), sufficiency economics offered a radical corrective to market-driven economic theories in its proposal to forego economic growth for the psychological and moral well-being of the nation and its people.

Behind this widely appealing language, a number of scholars have pointed out, sufficiency economy provided national elites with a powerful tool for class preservation (Hewison 2008), disciplining dissent (Wah 2004), state withdrawal from providing resources and access (Ivarsson and Isager 2010), and political conservatism (Glassman 2010). Following their lead, I argue that the sufficiency economy theory, as adopted after 2006, operated by rephrasing desires and expectations—unleashed under Thaksin as emblems of economic and social dynamism—as intrinsically un-Buddhist, and ultimately un-Thai. By dismissing these desires for commodities and services, the military government also implicitly dismissed other forms of demands voiced by the rural and urban masses as extravagant, greedy, and against harmonious social living.

[149] As reported in a booklet published by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB): "Sufficiency means moderation, reasonableness, and the need of self-immunity for sufficient protection from impact arising from internal and external changes. […]In addition, a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence is indispensable to create balance and be able to cope appropriately with critical challenges, arising from extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes in the world."

Once again, as during Thaksin's premiership, capitalist desires and their repression came to stand in for larger economic, social, and political struggles.

Behind a rosy and agreeable language of more equitable and sustainable economic practices, an ultra-conservative agenda was making its way into the Thai political arena and its government's actions, as we have seen in the previous chapter. As Andrew Walker has argued, "not only were the rural people to be shielded (or excluded) from full and active participation in the national economy but their participation in electoral democracy was delegitimized and the power of their elected representatives was constrained" (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 261).

In this project the formulation of sufficiency economy developed by Peter Calkins, an economist at Chiang Mai University, former Harvard student and Cornell PhD, and collaborator to the NESDB in sketching out the core of this new theory, represented only the first step toward the political dismissal of mass desires. In an essay called *The Sufficiency Economy at the Edge of Capitalism*—endorsed by the NESDB as a central reference in understanding the new economic philosophy—Calkins argued:

> Moderation challenges the very first sentence in the Parkin and Bade book—["all economic questions arise because we want more than we can get"]—by saying that wants are not unlimited, they can be satisfied. In fact, one will be happier if one can control one's desires. 2500 years ago at Mrigadava Forest in Vanarasi[sic], the Buddha explained that life is full of suffering precisely because we are tempted by the unlimited desires now enshrined in the Western definition of economics; and that the only way to avoid suffering is to avoid greed for things and situations we don't need. (Calkins 2007: 5)

Professor Calkins, refusing the dominant discourse of Western capitalism, bridged Buddhist teachings with moderate economics to advocate for the economic viability and the unquestionable moral superiority of this model that reconfigured desire for commodities and services as an external temptation, much like the one voiced by the "demon of the dark called Greed." Whatever Calkins' intentions may have been, the suppression of desires, hidden behind an appealing yet vague call for more considerate economic practices, became pivotal for the suppression of political and economic forces unleashed during Thaksin's premierships.

Once these desires were effectively rephrased, and their legitimacy questioned, the next step taken by the interim government and the military forces behind supporting it was to defuse their political potential.

First, the military junta endorsed the discourse of the sufficiency economy as a way to legitimize its own actions. After his speech declaring the adoption of the sufficiency economy, Gen. Surayud specifically referred to Thaksin's "populist" policies as being directed to "undermine the morality of local economic and political systems" (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 261). By opposing the former Prime Minister's policies through an appeal to a higher order of morality represented by the king and his sufficiency economy, Surayud retrospectively legitimized the action of the junta, as the virtuous act of removing an immoral leader.[150]

Second, one of the main institutions deployed to promote the philosophy of sufficiency economy was not an economic body but rather the ISOC (Internal Security Operation Command), a military division infamous for its violent repression of leftist politics and counter-insurgency propaganda during the Cold War. The ISOC was revived after the 2006 coup with similar political objectives, given a "reward" of 84.3 million baht by the Surayud government, and transformed into a central instrument of the re-established military apparatus, an instrument that—I will show—played a central role in negotiating the drivers' relation to other state forces and limiting the drivers' participation in the Red Shirts protest. As Krittian has argued, "in the initial process to win back the people's support, the army's focus is on businesses and the middle class. The regional and provincial units of ISOC play a crucial role in mustering support from people at the grassroots level" (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 208). With this in mind, the Center for Poverty Eradication and Rural Development under the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy was set up in 2007 under the supervision of the ISOC, which renewed its tactics of intimidation and psychological warfare. This was once again, as during the

[150] Moreover, at the same time he was endorsing this rhetoric of a scaled-down economy and "being happy with what you have", the junta behind his government, which went under the name of Council for National Security (CNS), was receiving salary payments totaling 38 million baht a month, six times higher than the payment of the corresponding bodies after the 1991 coup. Moreover, the new "sufficient" government raised the military budget, which had been stable since 1999, by 35% in 2007 and by another 24% in 2008.

Cold War, inoffensively presented by ISOC as an attempt to "educate the population," this time on the principles of sufficiency.[151]

Third, to seal the progressive re-articulation of these popular desires, the sufficiency economy was included in the new 2007 constitution that require future governments to organize state administration and economic policy around its principles, an unprecedented move for an economic doctrine. Even before the constitutional draft was completed, the ISOC was ordered by the coup-maker Gen. Sonthi to use its 700,000 nationwide staff to "promote proper understanding of the constitution" among rural people and to use door-to-door tactics in their campaign to "educate" people, so they would not be "tricked" into rejecting the draft. Despite the military's "educational" campaign, the rural masses of Isan refused to "learn" and rejected the constitutional draft by 62.8%, though it was approved nationally (Nelson 2008).

All of this demonstrates how the adoption of the sufficiency economy rhetoric was conceived not only as legitimization of the newly established military government but, more largely, as a step toward the militarized and institutionalized suppression of rural and urban demands. Taming the emerging desires and aspirations that had been so central to Thaksin's unprecedented electoral success was essential for the repression of the political forces that had brought him to power. The existence of such a scheme emerges clearly from leaked documents from a meeting marking Gen Sonthi's retirement in September 2007. In this meeting Sonthi spoke of a deliberate scheme to fight what he called "the war for the people," a struggle parallel to the one undertaken during the Cold War but now opposing the military and the palace, on one side, and successful elected politicians on the other. In Sonthi's words:

> Whether in the pre-war era, the Cold War era, or the era of capitalist democracy, their activist struggle to win over the people has not changed at all […] They have not lost their inclinations or ideology […] They win over the people through elections in order to take state power and have the ability to make changes they want at an appropriate time. One party, that was founded in 14th July 1998, with a secret organization of this group in the background, is a mix of capitalism and populism […] It is our duty, as soldiers of the King, to understand these matters, to understand the war for the people, both in the era of Cold War and in the era of populism […] So all of us must contest with them to win the

[151] For a longer discussion of the new structure and roles of the ISOC see Krittian's chapter in Saying the Unsayable (Ivarsson 2010)

> grassroots back for the King […] Our most important aim is that all the masses in the territory must be ours.[152]

In this war both sides unsheathed their best weapons: for Thaksin, capitalist desires and pro-poor policies; and for the army, a combination of the monarchy's charisma and its repressive politics of fear.[153] Both of them, however, underestimated the ability of the people they were battling over to absorb the impact of these weapons and deflect it toward their social, economic, and political objectives.

The motorcycle taxi drivers with whom I conducted my research, as well as their families back in the villages and many other Red Shirts supporters, responded to the army's offensive in complex and varied ways, ranging from ironic dismissal to tepid adoption. For the most part, however, the discourse of sufficiency contributed to the isolation of the rural electorate and the urban poor from the new unelected governments of Gen. Surayud first and Abhisit Vejjajiva after December 2008. Both governments were perceived as a step back from the changes initiated by Thaksin. Almost nobody I met saw the sufficiency economy as having much to do with their life-experiences, aspirations, and desires for the future. Some more critical drivers saw it specifically as intended to limit their potential, though these individuals were careful to voice their opinions only in private and confidential settings.

Adun, sitting in a small *sālā* (pavilion) in his village, echoed the voices of the large majority of the drivers I talked to: "What can we do? We went to Bangkok to support our families, to send our kids to school and now they tell us that we should accept our situation, we should accept double standards (*sǭng māttrathan*), we should accept people looking down on us (*dū thūk*) or we should come back here, to the countryside. If I want to stay in the countryside what could I live on? See, everybody is sitting in front of their houses. There is no water in the field. There is nothing to do. I need to save first to give a good education to my children. I

[152] This document was leaked in the Pro-Thaksin website www.hi-thaksin.com, as report 0402/513 of the army's Policy and Planning Department in date 26th September 2007. The legitimacy of this document was discussed for a while until General Sonthi himself admitted the validity of the document declaring to the Bangkok Post that the plans were intended to guide the public down the 'proper' path to democracy.

[153] In reference to this war, Andrew Walker has argued: "In General Sonthi's more militaristic vision, there was a 'war for the people' going on, and the sufficiency economy philosophy had to be used by the army to win the population back from the populist appeal of 'Thaksinomics'" (Ivarsson 2010: 261)

have to buy them shoes, uniforms for school, to have them study English, to buy a computer. With what money? Should I just give them the same life I had, working in a field for no profit, without the opportunity to study? What should I do?" After a long conversation Adun added "We struggle every day, we fought all of our lives. Now we fight the government because we don't want to accept double standards anymore. We've had enough of people ordering us around. We want democracy and we want the opportunity to choose (*`ōkāt hītak*) who governs us."

The desires that Adun sees as dismissed by the sufficiency economy agenda are not the capitalist desires advocated by Thaksin, but rather larger desires for social, economic, and political participation, be they through formal education, English fluency, access to the Internet, or democratic representation. These everyday struggles and forms of exclusion fueled much of the political mobilization among the Red Shirts motorcycle taxi drivers. Caught in the dilemma I previously analyzed between dreams of a return to an idealized communal living and the desires for economic, social, and political advancement, yet suddenly thrown back to face the impossibility of fulfilling either of the two fairy tales, the drivers, like many other people in Isan and in the rest of the country, turned to the Red Shirt movement. For many of my informants, participation in the movement was a way not only to request access to resources but also to reclaim their rights to inclusion and to demand change, transcending Thaksin's discourse and ideology that only saw them as consumers or entrepreneurs.

The desires for consumption and access unleashed and legitimized by Thaksin's premierships had unintended effects. More prominently they put people who had been largely excluded by the Thai political system in the position to experience the aspirational and material consequences of a government elected by them, and therefore forced to notice and, at least discursively, satisfy their desires. When these desires were crushed by military tanks and larger structures of exclusion, a rosy call to a romanticized past of self-reliance and social harmony could not bring the masses back to the previous status quo and their former political consciousness. On the contrary, as fiercely stated by many Red Shirt protesters, this repression "opened their eyes" (*tham hai k̄oet tā sawāng*).

As I started to show at the beginning of the chapter, it was not capitalist desires for commodities themselves that politicized the drivers, and many more among rural masses and urban poor. It was rather the realization of being trapped in a system that dismisses those desires as immoral and irresponsible, and makes their fulfillment impossible. In other words, it was not the desire to own an IPhone that made Adun reflect on his exclusion, but rather the impossibility of ever owning one given his socio-economic position that made him aware of such structural limitations. After all, as Deleuze and Guattari have stated:

> If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society; not that desire is asocial; on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors. (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 5)

This desire-machine, as the two philosophers showed, works only through continuous break-downs, and in those they reveal their explosive potential, as the Thai government of Abhisit Vijajjiva would quickly learn. In this sense, the desiring-machine, or more accurately its break-downs, experienced as an impossibility to fulfill those desires, became a force that called for the demolishing of an existing political system. A system of *phrai*, *ammat*, and double standards came to be seen as constraining and slowing down the advancement of Red Shirts supporters and the satisfaction of their desires. What pushed people to question this established order, in other words, was not desires themselves but their repression. And desires, when repressed or unfulfilled, can heat up, slowly burning inside, eroding their own foundations and even destroying the very objects they long for, along with anyone standing in the way. The Red Shirts protest in 2010 was an example of such an "explosion," to use a word dear to Lefebvre, Deleuze, and Guattari. Before analyzing the relevance of desires and the inversion of Marxist commodity fetishism for the protest, however, let me go back in time and reconstruct the evolution of this political movement.

Burning Red Desires

Between April and May 2010, hundreds of thousands of protesters blocked and transformed a unique space of ultra-consumption in central Bangkok into a new national political arena. Amidst shopping malls and high-end hotels, two months of political passion were consumed, a modern army deployed heavy weapons and killed dozens of protesters, and multiple icons of Thai capitalism, such as Central World, the third biggest shopping mall in the world, and the Stock Exchange were set on fire. Here, I retrace the evolution of the Red Shirt movement, its actions, locations, and the dramatic ending of its mass protests to show not only the political centrality of capitalist desires, their suppression and betrayal, but also their role in reshaping the political geography of Bangkok, and of the whole nation. This will provide a background to the next chapter that analyzes in greater detail the roles of motorcycle taxi drivers in them, and the negotiations between Thai state actors and the drivers after the military dispersal of the protest.

On November 1st 2006, one-and-a-half months after the military coup and a week after sufficiency economy was endorsed as a policy by the new military government, a lonely protest against the new political order took place. Praiwal Nuamthong, a taxi driver who had previously driven his car into a military tank at Royal Plaza, hanged himself under a pedestrian flyover on the Vibhavadi-Rangsit Highway, leaving a note opposing the coup. A few weeks later three anti-coup groups commenced a series of protests around the old city, peaking on December 10th (Constitution Day) in Sanam Luang, the expansive ground in front of the Royal Palace. It was not, however, until June 15th 2007 that the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was created, merging Thaksin's supporters, pro-democracy activists, and radicals. Tellingly, its offices were located in the Imperial World working-class shopping mall, along Lad Phrao road, a space of reachable desires for the people who were to be the urban supporters of this movement.

The new group, at this point still not associated with the red color, after a violent confrontation with the PAD on September 2nd at the Makkhawan Bridge along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, halted its rallies before the December 2007 election. Protests, however, were revived in May 2008, to defend the right of the pro-Thaksin government of Samak Sundaravej to stay in power despite the mounting protests at Government House by the yellow-shirted PAD. The protest continued as the political instability progressed toward the

installation, in December 2008, of a new un-elected government headed by Abhisit Vejjajiva, thanks to the defection of twenty-two MPs from Samak's party. The UDD, now identified with the red shirts, reacted to the new political landscape by stepping up the conflict.

On March 26th 2009 the Red Shirts set up a permanent protest camp in front of Government House, similar to the one previously established by PAD to remove the elected governments, and demanded Abhisit's resignation. On April 8th more than 100,000 people participated in the Red Shirt rally in front of Government House and at the adjacent Royal Plaza, as parallel rallies were held in a dozen provincial centers. Overnight, mobility in Bangkok was brought to a halt by a crowd of taxi and motorcycle taxi drivers, who took over the transportation hub of the Victory Monument, adopting a strategy previously used both by farmers and the Yellow Shirts. Circulation, the quintessential characteristic of capitalist systems, was blocked by the very people who were supposed to operate it. On April 11th, a group of Red Shirts broke into the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) summit that was being held in Pattaya, effectively bringing the meeting to an end and forcing the Thai and foreign state officials to flee. On April 13th, ten thousand military troops were moved into Bangkok to "clean" the streets and reestablish urban flows. Symptomatic of the importance of motorcycle taxis to these protests were the threats, launched first in 2007 by the chief of the metropolitan police Adisorn Nonsi and then in 2008 by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, to revoke the licenses of those drivers who were seen protesting against the coup or with the Red Shirts. These threats, however, did not obtain the intended effect. The drivers remained in the protests. In the first serious clash between state forces and Red Shirts, at least 70 people were injured and the army seemed to have won the confrontation: the protest at Government House dispersed and many observers thought that to be the end of the Red Shirts.

Contrary to the government's hopes, the UDD went into deep reorganization to rebuild its local branches, extend its presence in rural Thailand, and train its members. More than 450 "Red Shirts schools", a tactic developed by activists in the 1970s as we saw in the previous chapter, were opened all around the country to develop and foster the three streams that composed the Red Shirts in 2010: the Thaksinites, the

democracy activists, and the radicals. Such streams were directed by feelings that mixed in these schools: "a feeling of sympathy for Thaksin; a feeling of dissatisfaction with the system of double standards; and a feeling of dissatisfaction with democracy bestowed by the powers that be" (Matichon, 23 April 2009).

Early in 2010 several protests were held in big cities in Isan, drawing thousands of people yet remaining almost completely unreported in the national and international news. On March 12th 2010 the "Million Red Shirts March" was declared by the Red Shirts. Thousands of protesters from across the nation converged on Bangkok and united with local Red Shirts. A stage was erected at the end of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the historical avenue of political protest that connects Sanam Luang to Royal Plaza, the location of the Royal Throne Hall and the Thai Parliament. On April 3rd 2010, a second stage was established at the core of Bangkok central business district, a paradigmatic space of inequality: the Ratchaprasong intersection. The political geography of mobilization in the city was starting to move away from the old politics of the palace, the military, and the bureaucracy toward spaces of consumption, desires, and stark inequality.

On April 10th, the Thai Royal Army attempted to disperse the protesters from the Ratchadamnoen area. Their failure left behind 26 dead bodies, including soldiers. On April 14th the protesters left the area and moved to Ratchaprasong, migrating with them the political geography of Bangkok. Established political arenas, such as Sanam Luang and Ratchadamnoen road, though initially adopted by the Red Shirts, were abandoned after the first military attack on April 10th and the consumption hub around the Ratchaprasong intersection was transformed into a new political arena. Spaces of consumption and desire, from which many protesters felt excluded, were appropriated and became places of discussion and dwelling. As Veera Musikhapong, one of the leaders of the democratic protest of 1992 and of the Red Shirts told me, "Ratchaprasong is not just a space of shopping malls, it is a symbol. A symbol of inequality and double standards, a symbol of the relation between aristocracy (*`ammāt*) and commoners (*phrai*) and now we are taking over this space to show that commoners can decide for themselves."

At stake, however, was not only a symbolic fight over sites of privilege and exclusion, their blockade and reappropriation, but also a faith in the army's reluctance to destroy capitalist commodities. Disoriented by

the violence that had just occurred, many protesters turned to these fetishized commodities, and their power to fend off military offense, for protection. As a young bookseller always present at the protest told me, "the owners of these shopping malls are the people behind this government and the aristocracy. They don't want the army to engage in fighting here. They will damage their property. We are safe here, protected by Louis Vuitton's bags."

In this sense, commodities, such as Louis Vuitton's bags, instead of mystifying social relations, as in classic Marxist commodity fetishism, revealed them and informed the protesters' spatial strategies. It was precisely the relation between the owners of such commodities and the Thai army to turn them, at least according to the book seller, into a useful shield from military intervention. His analysis, if accurate for the month following the Red Shirts' move to Ratchaprasong, in the long run proved to overestimate the protective power of these commodities.

On May 19th 2010, the hopes of the young bookseller and many others around him were dashed and the commodities' protective spell revealed itself as a chimera. After five days of fierce fighting around the city, early in the morning of May 19th tanks rolled into the protest area and continued their deadly march well into the evening, leaving 52 bodies on the street, none of which army personnel. Faith in the commodities' protective power unfortunately had not saved the protesters from the army's violence. When the objects of desire, condensed in this space of consumption and its shopping malls, revealed their powerlessness to protect the protesters from the army, the inflammatory potential of those desires broke free.

Throughout the afternoon of May 19th arsonist attacks took place around the Central Business District. What were supposed to be shields for the protesters became the objects of their rage and furious, yet lucid, frustration. The shopping mall, the convenience stores, the bank branches, and only those buildings, were set on fire, carefully selected as symbols of unfulfilled expectations and betrayed desires. Once their appeals [were] not heard, then the urban movement […] return[ed], but this time as urban shadow eager to destroy the closed walls of their captivity" (Castells 1983: 376).

From unfulfilled desires to effective tactics

This selection of targets, as well as the multiplicity of symbols and discourses blended in the protest movement, posed and continue to pose two very basic questions to collective understandings of the Red Shirts movement: Are we dealing with a fully coherent movement, with clear visions and established objectives? And if so, are we in front of revolutionary movement questioning established power relations? My answers are no and no, or at least not yet. The Red-Shirt protesters', whether motorcycle taxi drivers or not, do not propose a radical or even a necessarily democratic solution but rather, for the most part, are demanding a system in which they can more easily realize their desires for access to a more equal economic and political system. The shape such a system should take remains to be seen and the protesters themselves have a diverse range of answers. Whether this transformation entails democratic elections or larger social, economic, or political transformations, whether the demands would be satisfied by the removal of Abhisit, a reinstating of Thaksin, or even taking down the monarchy and the aristocracy around it will depend on the specific portion of the movement, its leaders, ideologies, and supporters. What connected them all was a demand for equal access to economic, political, and legal resources, often, yet not always, framed in the language of fulfilling desires for commodities, services, and political representation. It is precisely by focusing on these desires as diagnostic of both political-economic relations in contemporary Thailand and protester's demands that we can overcome the difficulty, for both commentators and protesters themselves, of pinpointing the specific nature of the movement's demands and the Red Shirts' complex relations with the ousted prime minister.

In this chapter I analyzed the emergence and transformation of a "politics of desire" in Thailand, as seen from the perspective of politically active Isan motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok. Such a form of political engagement, which begins with unfulfilled capitalist desires and transforms into materialized experiences of inequality, has dominated the Thai political scene in the last decade, yet it has been largely underestimated. From the first premiership of Thaksin Shinawatra to his removal in 2006 and the Red Shirt protests in 2010, fostering, unleashing, and taming capitalist desires provided, as I have reconstructed, a

central field of political struggles in Thailand. It is around this field that the drivers' participation in the Red Shirts mobilization took place and transformed these marginal phatic workers into central political actors in Bangkok. It is around this field that the drivers took a multiplicity of role in the 2010 Red Shits protest, roles that next chapter analyzes.

Chapter 7: The Owners of the Map

The last two chapters have progressed from a study of the historical emergence of discursive, spatial, organizational, and strategic infrastructures of mobilization that provided both the conditions of possibility and a framework of action for the Red Shirts as a whole to an investigation of desires and political consciousness among Red Shirts' motorcycle taxi drivers. In this chapter I continue this exploration and focus on their specific roles in the 2010 protest. Until now, I have argued that the drivers' political consciousness emerged out of the mobile and interstitial nature of their phatic labor and the unfulfilled desires that their position configures. This chapter provides the other side of this dynamic: namely the drivers' adoption of mobility and immobility as tactics to challenge existing forms of social inequality, economic exploitation, and political oppression in Thailand.

Following Anna Tsing's reminder that "mobility means nothing without mobilization" and her question "how does political agency grow in a time of flow?" (Tsing 2005: 215), I investigate how the connections between spatial movement, social mobility, and political mobilization shaped the drivers' activities in political protest. Once the protesters took over the center of Bangkok the drivers blocked, slowed down, or filtered the circulation of people, goods, and information that they normally facilitate. In so doing, they posed a significant challenge to urban and national power brokers and to state forces' control over the city and its fluxes. To use the words of Oboto—the Red Shirt drivers' leader—the drivers used their role as "owners of the map," holders of an unmatched knowledge of the urban terrain to emerge as intractable political actors. As "owners of the map," the drivers were able to chart the terrain of the protest better than anybody else and to move through it, making it readable and permeable for their allies or uncontrollable and opaque for their enemies. They deployed their potential to share or withhold knowledge and their invisibility to the state apparatus as tools of struggle, tools that made them into invaluable allies and dreaded enemies.

Although this potential pre-dated the Red Shirts' protest, the drivers' strategic significance was recognized by both sides of the conflict over the course of their three-month long occupation of Bangkok.[154] I reconstruct this recognition by breaking down the 2010 protest into four different phases and exploring, in each of them, the drivers' participation and tactics.[155] These phases were not discrete partitions of the flow of events, but rather I use them as an analytic device to illustrate how the tactics drivers adopted in one phase did not disappear in the following one, but rather remained in place, enriched by a new arsenal of tactics. As a result of this accumulation of tactics the drivers gained, over the course of the protest, increasing centrality and visibility both inside the movement and on national media, a visibility that was central to their negotiations with state forces after the May 19th 2010 military crackdown on the Red Shirts protest.

Phase 1: Movers of politics (March 13th to April 10th)

On March 12th 2010, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) declared a "Million People March." Hundreds of thousands Red Shirts started descend toward Bangkok from their regional centers, mostly in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, while urban supporters took the streets, demanding the resignation of Abhisit's government and an end to double standards in the country's legal, economic, and political system. Nationwide caravans converged on Bangkok and mixed with local residents to stage the largest popular protest in Thai history to date, a protest that would last for sixty eight days, failing to remove the un-elected government but succeeding in reorganizing the discursive and political landscapes of Thailand. A central stage was erected along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the historical avenue of political protest around which protesters started to build shelters and tents. As the protest camp grew with the arrival of regional supporters, workers in the street economy moved in to satisfy Red Shirts' needs for food, drink,

[154] Other significant protests and political actions took place outside Bangkok, particularly in the cities of Chiang Mai, Nong Khai, and Khon Kaen. However, I here focus mostly on a Bangkok-centered reading of the Red Shirts protests as my fieldwork was for the most part based in the Thai capital at the time of the mobilization.

[155] For a more detailed analysis of the Red Shirts' protest events see (Sopranzetti 2012)

transportation, and commodities. Among them were thousands of motorcycle taxi drivers, who mixed political participation with labor. As Yai, one of their political leaders, told me

> Motorcycle taxi drivers were part of the Red Shirts in different ways. One group took benefit from the protest. This small group worked at the protest as taxis and made an income transporting Red Shirts supporters. They came to make money. The protest was good for their livelihood. 'The longer it lasts, the better for me,' they thought. But there was another group of motorcycle taxi, a larger group of drivers who had a Red heart. They went because they wanted democracy and justice. Another group was composed by drivers who are relatives of the Red Shirts from rural areas. The Isan folks came to Bangkok, they came. 'The Isan people love Thaksin, I love Thaksin, and I go, too.' The motorcycle drivers had different segments but everyone joined the Red Shirt because by supporting them the drivers would have the power to negotiate with anyone, the way it was with Thaksin. Since the coup state authorities and Abhisit government did not see the drivers, they chased the people we loved out of power, they destroyed justice. When they became the government, they oppressed the motorcycle taxis, they blocked out development and they wanted to take over the business and give it to their party's friends and influential people. Motorcycle folks had to decided, and they decided to join the Red Shirts.

Whichever their reason to be in the area, thousands of drivers joined the protest and played a central role in its operations, in and outside its camp. Inside it, they became the only viable mean of mechanical transportation able to move through the thick of crowds. Outside it, they helped the protest remain mobile. Although the Red Shirts established a camp, for the first three weeks of the protest caravans of Red Shirts—always headed by motorcycle taxi drivers—drove through the city, inciting local dwellers to join in protest and showing their support for a movement that national media incorrectly portrayed as largely rural. Almost daily caravans of cars, trucks, and motorcycles traversed the urban landscape of Bangkok, transforming the rhythms of the city and capital, the same rhythms that structured the drivers' everyday life and their struggle to operate as phatic laborers. While, as I showed in Part I of this dissertation, the drivers needed to adjust to the rhythms of capital, labor forces, and urban cycles for their profession, they now intervened and challenged those rhythms by taking over and filtering the same channels they normally contribute to build. The weavers of the city became, for once, its blockers.

The drivers, however, did not just filter and break up urban rhythms, but also organized and modulated the rhythms of the Red Shirts caravans. Such careful management of the pace of the parade's movement was necessary to bring urban circulation to a halt, create widespread traffic congestion around the

city, and challenge state forces to control and contain a truly mobile protest. Such work was largely performed by the drivers. On the one hand, they rode in front of the caravan, directing its movement, and pacing its rhythm and speed to make sure that it remained united and compact. On the other, taking advantage of their ease in flowing in and out of the protest and their familiarity with the city's back-roads, taxi drivers also became scouting vanguards, making sure the caravans' path was clear of anti-riot police, creating a buffer zone between the front of the mobile protest and the leaders' truck, and collecting of information on the army's and police's movements. In each of these caravans, drivers rode up and down the moving protest, feeding information and directives between the front-lines and the leaders' truck.



Figure 5: Red Shirts' caravans

In all of these senses, the drivers operated as movers of politics, not just by literally making the protest mobile, modulating its rhythms, and allowing the flows of information in it, but also by circulating its discourses around the city. In their daily lives, the drivers became political mobilizers, talked to people in their neighborhoods about Red Shirts' pledges, and transformed their vests, bodies, and bikes into itinerant

political boards.[156] Many of them circulated political slogans—including "stop double standards" (*yut sǭng māttrathān*), "dissolve parliament" (*yup saphā*); "I come for myself" (*kū mā`ēng*)[157]—while riding across the city, in or outside the protest. Such circulation, however, was not without its risks and challenges.

Since the beginning of the protest, a new spatial organization had emerged in Bangkok. "Red areas" and "Yellow areas" were becoming a new way of organizing space in the city. These spatial divisions determined levels of comfort or danger for the drivers, who frequently traversed the invisible borders between those zones. A failure to recognize them and to act accordingly (for instance, by hiding political messages when entering a hostile area) could endanger these drivers and provoke a fight because of the signs of their political affiliations.[158]

Overall, in this phase the drivers carried out multiple roles as movers of politics yet remained, as in their daily life in the city, little more than service-workers, part of the logistical infrastructure necessary to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people but largely unrecognized either for their contribution or as significant political actors in the protest. This was soon to change as the Red Shirts changed their strategies, after a series of media-driven protests around the city, including the symbolic pouring of huge quantities of human blood in front of Government House (Taylor 2012), and an unproductive round of televised negotiations between the protest leaders and the government. On April 3rd 2010, the Red Shirts' leaders decided to make the protest less mobile while keeping its multiple fronts. As in the pro-democracy protest in 1992, they established multiple protest camps around the city. On that day, thousands of protesters moved from Ratchadamnoen Avenue to the city's upscale commercial center, the Ratchaprasong intersection, despite the government's declaration that such a move would be considered against the law. The Red Shirts had decided to change strategy. The caravans, which until that point had been largely successful in revealing the

[156] This was not the first time that political groups had used the drivers as mobile boards. Politicians running both for national and city elections, in fact, have used the vest as mobile advertisement since the early 2000s (Wassayos and Manop 2003).

[157] For a more detailed analysis of the discourse of *kū mā`ēng* as a response to the accusation to the Red Shirts of being a rented mob paid by Thaksin Shinawatra see (Tausig 2013)

[158] While some of the drivers I met refuted to adjust their bodies and gadgets to this political geography, many of them wear easily-removable signs of political affiliation, such as foulards and wrist-bands, which they can keep when in their *win* or in the protest area and take down when carrying clients outside their soi, or whenever they enter "yellow areas." It was not long, however, before the larger Bangkok public started to identify motorcycle taxi drivers with the protest, regardless of the symbols they carried.

government's inability to limit and control a mobile protest as well as harnessing large urban support for the movement, were abandoned as a main strategy.



Figure 6: Location of the two protest areas

While this change could have reduced the role of the drivers, quite the contrary happened. On the evening of April 3rd, the leaders of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) went on the Red Shirts' stage in Ratchadamnoen. Ignoring the threats voiced by Abhisit and Bangkok's governor to withdraw the licenses of drivers who participated in the protest, Yai, Lek, Lerm, Pin, and Oboto, together with sixteen other motorcycle taxi organizers, pledged the association's support to and alliance with the Red Shirt movement in front of a sea of people. This event marked a radical shift in the history of motorcycle taxi drivers' political participation. After having taken part in street protests in 1992 and having played a role in the pro-Thaksin networks since the coup of 2006, they were now recognized as a legitimate section of the movement. They no longer composed a "rented mob" operating as unruly gangs to whom no protest leader was willing to admit connections as in 1992. The drivers were now legitimate political actors, standing proud on the Red Shirts' stage. As a result, more drivers around the city joined in the protest, galvanized by this recognition of their contribution.

Meanwhile in the Ratchaprasong area, the Red Shirts were establishing a consistent presence. A new stage was set up underneath the elevated Skytrain rails, facing the ground in front of Central World, the third biggest shopping mall in Asia that Jim Taylor has described as "a one-stop shopping and amusement park of hyper-consumption, of pleasure and unlimited desires in reproduced bourgeois play-space" (Taylor 2011: 6). The middle-class conspicuous consumption was brought to a halt by the protest as up-scale hotels, shopping malls, and retail shops shut down, frightened by the rising sea of protesters. What was supposed to be the location for a one-day demonstration became a second front of conflict. For the next eleven days the protesters and their leaders juggled between the traditional space of politics, around the Sanam Luang-Ratchadamnoen-Royal Plaza axis, and the new political arena in the city, the Ratchaprasong intersection.

On April 7th, with both Bangkok's historical center and its business district solidly in the hands of the Red Shirts, a group of protesters attempted to raise the stakes and stormed the Thai parliament. That night, the government declared a State of Emergency in Bangkok and surrounding areas, outlawing any gathering of more than five people and giving unprecedented powers to the newly formed Center for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), a committee of senior military officers, security officials and government ministers headed by Suthep Thaugsuban. From there to the army dispersal of the Red Shirts on May 19th, CRES operated as a shadow government, often wielding more power than the prime minister himself.[159] The first CRES action was to issue arrest warrants against the main Red Shirts' leaders, who remained on the loose. Two days after, on April 10th, the CRES ordered a military intervention to disperse the protest at Ratchadamnoen Avenue. The results were disastrous. The Thai Royal Army clumsily attempted to disperse the protest from the area, losing heavy weaponry to the crowd as well as three tanks that were taken apart, covered in anti-government and anti-military graffiti, and left dismantled next to Democracy Monument.

[159] These provisions, if largely ineffective in preventing the Red Shirt mobilization, would remain in place for the following eight months, to be lifted only in December of 2010.

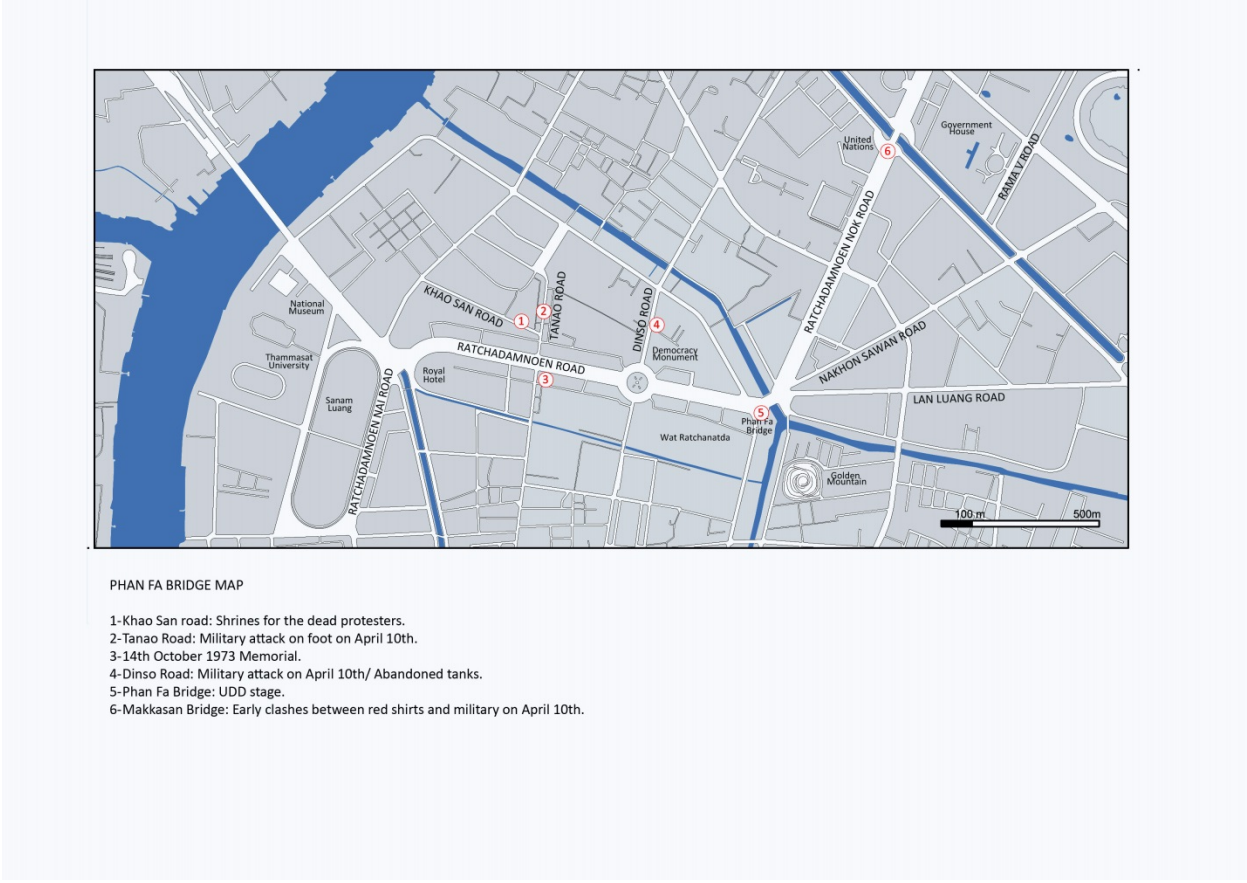


Figure 7: Map of the Ratchadamnoen area with events

The clashes culminated in after-dark shootings. Twenty-six people were killed—including five high-ranking military officials hit by an M-79 grenade—and 860 people injured. During this violent confrontation, local drivers, with their unmatched knowledge of the urban terrain, provided invaluable assistance to the protesters, guiding them through the mesh of local small soi and helping them to surround and ward off the army. In the following days, a mixture of excitement and fear permeated the protest. During the clashes, they succeeded in pushing back the military, but only at the cost of nineteen supporters' lives. Keeping up this defensive strategy on two fronts—it became clear—was unfeasible.



Figure 8: Protesters stand on military tanks in front of Democracy Monument

Phase 2: invisible movers and mobile guards (April 14th – April 22nd)

On April 14th, the protesters left the Ratchadamnoen area and relocated completely in Ratchaprasong. Nattawut Saikua, one of the Red Shirts leaders who had also been active in the mobilizations of 1992, was reported as stating: "We will use the Ratchaprasong areas as the final battleground to remove the government" (Asia Times, April 15 2010). The choice was symptomatic of an emerging political geography of mobilization that revolved around spaces of capitalist consumption and circulation and identified this area as a symbol of inequality and unfulfilled desires. The decision, however, was also tactical. The protesters believed that the army would not lead an attack with the risk of damaging property that belonged to the *ammat*, whom the Red Shirts saw as the enemy. As a protester told me, "The army has no problem with

destroying lives but they don't want to destroy goods." A place of exclusion and unequal access, they argued, would therefore provide them with a shield of jewels, handbags, and luxury goods.

Whether the change of location had any actual effect on preventing another immediate dispersal remains unclear. In any case, the CRES temporarily abandoned its violent dispersal strategy but kept pressure on the protesters by issuing new arrest warrants. On the morning of April 16th, police officers attempted, and failed, to arrest some of the most confrontational Red Shirts' leaders, including Arisman Pongruangrong, a pop-singer turned activist. Once again, the drivers played a central role in neutralizing the offensive.

Early that morning, I received a call from Sun, a driver who worked as personal guard to a prominent Red Shirts leader, inviting me to accompany him to the hotel where Arisman was staying. "I need to go with some other drivers to get him out of there," he told me with excitement. "The police are coming to arrest him, but first they called me," he laughed. Since April 10th, a number of drivers I knew were hired by Red Shirts leaders as personal guards, selected precisely for their knowledge of the urban terrain, familiarity with escape routes, and ability to disappear into the confusing landscape of Bangkok, in case of an army attack. Sun was one of them. This time, however, it was not his ability to move through the city that made Sun into an invaluable ally but rather his long-standing personal connections to local police officers, also acquired in his daily presence in the city. As the police were gearing up for the arrest, a lower level officer, Sun's personal friend and fellow Isan migrant, tipped him off. The news ran fast among the Red Shirt chain of leadership and a rescue team was rapidly organized. In the escape—as incredible as it was clumsy—chubby Arisman climbed down from his hotel room balcony with a rope made of electric cords, to be greeted by a crowd of Red Shirts and journalists and then disappear from the scene, leaving the police empty handed. The escape was broadcasted around the country.[160]

This highly visible failure was yet another embarrassment for the CRES and the government, one that they refused to repeat. The pressure on the protesters and on political mobilizers around the city was immediately stepped up. In the afternoon of the same day, the 21 drivers' leaders who had gone on stage to support the Red Shirts found police officers waiting for them at their houses. The CRES summoned and

[160] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1qo2PTcp8w

questioned them, together with community leaders and managers of local radio stations, on their involvement in the protest and intimidated them into abandoning the Red Shirts. The drivers, in particular, were threatened that, if seen again at the rallies, they would be arrested and banned from their profession. If, on the contrary, they left the protest and joined the government side, CRES officers promised them large concessions, including help fighting influential people.

While the threats fell onto deaf ears, the promises opened a breach in the drivers' leadership. The members of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) started to discuss internally what their priorities should be. Everybody agreed that Thaksin had done a lot for them, and personally supported the Red Shirts movement. As a collective organization, however, the majority of them believed that their purpose should be to gain concessions for the drivers as a professional group, and not for the social movement that they supported. As Lerm, the AMTT president, told me, "we are Red at heart, but our vest is orange and we need to stand united as Orange Shirts. Our duty is to the drivers not toward the Red Shirts." The decision, however, tore apart the leaders who had organized the drivers since their fight with local influential people in 2003. While all of them continued to provide assistance, and to support the movement personally, the association formally exited the scene and stopped providing direct support to the protest. Oboto, together with other lower level organizers, left the association and rapidly emerged as the sole leader of the Red Shirts' drivers, and main liaison between the movement and the motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok.

This fracture among the drivers, if significant in terms of street-level organizing, was only a minor side-effect of the CRES's new strategy. More significantly, the humiliation of Arisman's escape induced a change in its leadership. Even if Suthep formally remained in charge, the actual decision-making shifted toward military personnel and General Anupong Paochinda, the army Commander-in-Chief, became the de-

facto head of CRES, now authorized by the prime minister to use force to ensure peace and order. The time for a civilian running the operations was over, it was now time for the army to lead.[161]

The CRES immediately declared Ratchaprasong a dangerous area and sidelined the police, whom they perceived as sympathetic to the protesters' pledges. The protesters responded by declaring their intention to extend the occupied area toward Silom road, the core of Bangkok's financial center, a few roads away from where Adun and Hong operated. The Red Shirts, after having occupied and brought to a halt the main node of commercial exchange in the city, were now threatening to take over the core of its financial circulation as well. Anupong forcefully refused to let this extension happen and to allow the protesters to move the protest around the Ratchaprasong area. On April 18th, a significant military contingent marched into Silom Road, taking control of the area and setting up army checkpoints throughout the city, with the purpose of limiting the spill-over of the protest and putting pressure on the occupation of Ratchaprasong. Even if the mobile protests headed by the drivers were over, the Red Shirts drivers retained their ability to move through check-points—by taking up fake clients and becoming indistinguishable from other drivers—or to dodge them—by taking side-roads and circumvent them. The rest of the protesters, however, were immobilized in the two square miles area they occupied and blocked. Day after day, they fortified the area by raising intricate bamboo barricades. Such make-shift barriers grew taller and wider, soon to enclose the whole protest site. On one side of the barricades, crowds of protesters armed with bamboo sticks and sling-shots waited for an attack. On the other, thousands of menacing heavily armed soldiers surrounded the area, ready to move in. In this stalemate, tension became palpable and grew by the day, locked into an asymmetrical spatial war.

[161] An anonymous source told a reporter from the Nation, a filo-governative newspaper, "Deputy Prime Minister Suthep is a civilian, and the situation has changed. He will still play an important role […] but to keep things moving fast and effectively, the line of command must be concise" (Nation, April 17 2010)



Figure 9: Barricades in front of Silom Road

Phase 3: modulators of mobility and mobile informants (April 22nd – May 13th)

On April 22nd four grenades exploded in the middle of Silom road, where a small crowd of anti-Red Shirts protesters had accumulated, sheltered behind the army lines. A person was killed and 75 injured. As the whole country speculated about who the culprits were, security was elevated on both sides of the barricades. On the red side, a band of security forces and guards, manned by a significant number of motorcycle taxi drivers, was established and operated behind the convoluted mesh of bamboos and barbwire that sealed off the whole area, now covered by car tires soaked in petrol and ready to be set on fire in case of a military offensive. On the army side, camouflage clothes were laid out to cover the soldiers' movements, their growing stacks of weapons, and half-a-dozen *Humvees*. As the army established more and more checkpoints around the city, the Red Shirts also filtered movement in and out their occupied area. Getting in with a

motorbike now meant having to stop at the entrance and get off, while the bike compartment and your body were checked by the security forces who lingered at the periphery of protest. If until now the drivers had kept the protest mobile, in this new stationary phase they became guards, controllers, and operators of mobility inside the occupied area. As in their everyday presence in the city, these roles were performed both in movement and in stasis.

Drivers became omnipresent at the barricades and controlled flows in and out of the protest area, acting as traffic control officers, guarding the entrances, and operating as the only form of transportation inside the occupied areas. Many of these drivers talked to me about the feeling of having reclaimed the city that had been taking their lives and sweat. "I come here every day to send passengers" Tob—a motorcycle taxi driver operating in the Ratchaprasong area—told me, referring to the adjacent Skytrain station, "now I come to meet my friends from my village, I sit where normally cars run, I sleep where I normally I can stop only for a moment to get the money from my clients. I feel like I own this city (*čhao kh*o̱*ng m*ūa*ng*). I come back every day to my village, my village in the middle of the city (*mūbān klāng m*ūa*ng).*"

Again, as in the words of Oboto, control over mobility in the city and ownership of its spaces emerged in the driver's discourses and practices in dialectical tension, a tension that revolved around different speeds, paces, and activities. In this phase, in fact, the drivers were not only claiming their role as "owners of the map," privileged holders and connoisseurs of its symbolic representations and hidden paths. Through modulating mobility, they reclaimed their centrality as owners, transformers, and gate-keepers of the physical spaces to which they normally operate as invisible connectors. Through their actions, these spaces were adjusted to a different rhythm that resembled—in Tob's words—that of a village (*mūbān*). The tension between multiple rhythms of lives that haunted the drivers' mobility between the city and the countryside, were solved—if just for a short period—by transforming the most fast-paced section of the city into a slow paced village, a village in the middle of the city.

Adun offered a poignant example of the drivers' enjoyment of these reclaimed spaces and rhythms and their significance to popular participation to the protest. Every night, after a long day's work on the streets or sitting on his bike waiting for clients, Adun stretched his back, took off his vest, and rode into the

protest area. On one of those nights, we decided to go together and, after a few drinks at his station, we headed toward Ratchaprasong. Adun, three other drivers, and I entered the protest area on bikes, waving to two other motorcycle taxis who patrolled the barricade. We rode slowly through the protest, enjoying the feeling of being in a small convoy, getting close to each other to talk. A stencil, a few hundred meters inside the protest area, declared in English: "Red Land." As the crowd thickened around us, we parked and walked to a large white gazebo, which hosted Adun's fellow villagers who had joined the protest. Mats covered the ground where a group of older men and women sat in circle, shoeless.[162] Younger protesters lingered outside the circle, occasionally passing food and iced water to the elders. As if inside a house, everybody took off their shoes before entering the gazebo and bowed slightly at the elders before greeting the person they came to see.

At one corner of the tent, a small crowd gathered around a large TV screen, broadcasting still pictures of bullets and bullet wounds. A well-dressed man in his fifties talked into a microphone, describing each bullet type, its range and deadly potential, and showing pictures of the damage it can cause. Like a vocal vendor at a village fair, he sensed the feelings of the crowd with great empathy and alternated information and pictures, passing around real bullets, sealed in hermetic plastic bags. At the stall in front, a small projector showed soundless images of the violent confrontation between the Red Shirts and the army on April 10th. On the other corner of the Bandung gazebo, an aluminum saucepan sizzled over a small fire burning inside a clay pot, spreading a strong smell of wild herbs. Next to the fire, large plastic bags full of papayas, nuts, and an enormous quantity of chilies accumulated on the floor. An older woman, sitting among these bags, prepared papaya salad, holding a pealed green papaya in her left hand, rhythmically plunging a knife onto it with her right, cutting narrow strips. As the knife found its way into the fruit, just after being raised again, her left hand slowly turned the papaya around, while she chatted with her nephew, a taxi driver in Bangkok.

Adun and I sat down, at a corner of the gazebo. Immediately, grilled chicken and hot sticky rice were brought to us. A young man handed us some cans of beer, hidden in small plastic bags. "Drink," he told me,

[162] In Thailand when entering houses and other enclosed spaces is usual to take off shoes, here this meant personalizing a piece of road pavement into a collective space.

"but keep it in the bag. The guards don't want us to get drunk." Adun looked at him with a mixture of respect and derision. "I have known him since he was a kid," he told me with half a smile. "We just arrived yesterday," an older woman shouted over the noise from large speakers that broadcasted speeches on stage. "Somebody came around to the village and told us that they needed people at the protest and our tent was getting emptier. So we decided to come to Bangkok. They organized a car from the village and brought us here." "I have been back and forth three times already," another woman in a *sarong* added. "The first time I was at Ratchadamnoen and the other two here. I stay for some time and then go back when I miss home or I get bored. There is not much to do here."

A constant refill of people was organized from the countryside, where the slow agricultural cycle of April allows most people to leave their fields. A phone call came from someone at the protest, or some organizer spread the word that new people were needed in Bangkok. Volunteers stepped forward and the crowd was kept constant. "We came on behalf the many others who cannot, who have a job, or have to look after children. We are old so we can come but we are here for our children and nephews too." the older woman pointed out to me. Mobility, in other words, was not just a strategy of this protest, it was also necessary to the protest's survival. "Is this your first time in Bangkok?" I asked her. "No, I have been here before. My daughter works here, but I don't like the city. I came to support the Red Shirts." I turn to the larger group. "So do you like being here?" A moment of silence. "It's boring," a woman broke the silence and they all laughed with embarrassment.

Bored by the long day of political uneventful political tirades at the protest, many of the Red Shirts from the countryside used part of their day to visit family friends, famous city landmarks, or experience some of the thrills of Bangkok. To these explorations drivers like Adun operated as guides, directing the rural protesters around the city to good affordable restaurants, convenient markets, or nightclubs. For the drivers, on the contrary, the protest site became the attraction, an urban village to go back to see friends from the village, eat with them, and sit, chain-smoking cigarettes, with the background of inflamed political speeches, barely distinguishable under the chit-chatting. "I have heard them before," Adun told me, smiling. "They always say the same thing. I agree with them but I'd rather talk to people from home, hear news of what is

going on back there, and have nice food. I am here anyway and I am ready to help if something happens." Many like Adun have supported the Red Shirts for a long time, both ideologically and by becoming members of the UDD, but seldom joined them in protests before the arrival of their fellow villagers. Now that the Red Shirts have taken over this space, and morphed its rhythms into those of a village, the gravitational force of acquaintances has brought them here to swell the ranks of the movement.

At times, all that is needed for active participation in a political protest is a friend you have not seen for a while, a distant aunt who is sleeping at the protest, or the longing for a homemade papaya salad. After all, how many people marched to the Bastille because their neighbors invited them to come along? Or how many people participated in the anti-Vietnam-War protests hoping to get laid? Similarly mundane, yet by no mean insignificant, reasons laid behind the presence of many drivers and other internal migrant workers in the protest. Political ideals, democracy, equality, and unfulfilled desires, in other words, brought them to the protest as much as a free bowl of food, the desire to be part of history, influence, or just witness it, the chance to take the girl from the shop next door to somewhere different on a date, or the possibility to "go home," as Adun said, without having to take a twelve hours train ride. Such everyday personal dimensions of political struggles, as I showed in the previous chapter, do not detract from the significance of political movements but rather provide them with a texture of life that composes the soil on which political passions grow. As we discussed these motivations, sitting on mats, the tent slowly fell quiet as one after other the elders went to sleep. Adun, tired by his day of work, fell asleep shortly after as I lay down not far from him, cradled by a soft Isan song and by the whirring of a fan.

A few hours later, Adun woke me up. "It is time to go back to work," he told me at daybreak, ready to return to his usual urban frenzy. The protest site was at its emptiest. A few other urban workers moved silently in the middle of sleeping bodies scattered anywhere, getting ready to go to work and open the windows and shops of the city, prepare its breakfasts, and deliver its people and commodities. Around us other regional migrants were leaving the protest to service a city that is slowly eating their lives, only to come back here after their shift, creating a cyclical compression and swelling of the protest size. The smell of

burning charcoal, breakfast soup, and steaming sticky rice filled the road underneath the immobile Skytrain. As we rode out of the Red Shirts' area, Adun stopped in a small parking lot, few hundred meters away from the army check-point that divided the protest area from his station. He put back his vest and, once again an innocuous motorcycle taxi driver and not a Red Shirts supporter, he passed through the soldiers' line unnoticed, making his way toward a long day of waiting and weaving through traffic.

The bored calm at the village in the middle of the city would not last. In the following days, rumors of an imminent violent dispersal started to circulate: national media increasingly presented the protesters as infiltrated by terrorists and demanded an end to their occupation; business leaders lamented the economic disaster that the mobilization was bringing to the country, both by blocking its commercial core and by hurting the country's image and flourishing tourist industry. Significant military and police contingents started to move toward Bangkok. It became evident both to the protesters and to the Thai public idiom at large that state forces were closing in on the protest. Once again the Red Shirts were compelled to change their strategy. Once again the roles of motorcycle taxi drivers would change with it.

On April 26th, the Red Shirts declared they would organize a new caravan the following day, an attempt to reinvigorate their protest and expand it beyond the confines of the Ratchaprasong area. Abhisit immediately replied that the government would not allow red-shirt protesters to leave their protest site to cause confusion in the city. Anupong echoed him. The following day, ignoring these intimidations, thousands of motorcycles and cars converged on the eastern side of the protest camp, potentially safer because of its proximity to the US embassy. Once again Oboto, recognizable from afar by the large Thai flag attached to his bike, was heading the mobile protest. The caravan left in the late morning, directed toward Talad Thai, a large wholesale market about 30 miles away in the industrial outskirt of northern Bangkok. The purpose, as it had been with previous caravans, was to rally support for the Red Shirts around the city and incite their supporters to join the protesters. Proceeding under a merciless heat, the parade grew in size along the way as more and more bikes and cars joined in. Motorcycle taxi drivers, as usual, took care of keeping the group compact and informing the protesters about the best routes to take. As the convoy entered Vibhavadi Rangsit

Road, a four-lane highway that leads to the market, it enveloped usual traffic, without disrupting it. Just beyond the old international airport of Don Muang, however, a traffic jam blocked the road, right underneath a flyover.

The red convoy stopped and a few drivers were sent out of the caravan to check what the problem was. The bikes spread radially, zigzagging through the cars in the front to see what had blocked the traffic and driving off into side-roads to check for possible exit routes. A few minutes later the scouting vanguards came back with bad news: less than a mile ahead, a line of soldiers, in anti-riot gear, blocked the road, determined to force the caravan back into the protest area; above us other soldiers were moving on roofs and on the flyover; behind us police forces also moved in, leaving no way out. Fear traversed the caravan, as people snapped tree branches and advertisement boards to set up makeshift barricades. A round of tear gas canisters broke the standstill, filling the air with its pungent smell, yet too far away to make breathing painful. Oboto, too important a mobilizer to be left in the thick of conflict, took down his vest, which made him recognizable, and disappeared into a small soi on the back of a local motorcycle taxi driver.

Not realizing the seriousness of the danger, I rode though the traffic jam, toward the army line. I barely made it to the top when the army opened fire. The first rounds of rubber bullets were shot into the air while everybody ran away, bullets falling on the street as loud rain and bouncing off the flyover before hitting the ground. Soon after the first rounds, the soldiers started to advance, this time shooting at eye level. Confusion took over as the soldiers moved in our direction, covered by shots coming from the overpass, where the other soldiers had taken up positions. I rode into a small soi with other protesters, looking for a way out. Local dwellers told us that there was no exit from this soi, urging everyone to move away before the army advanced, closing the only exit route. Scared by the army progression we rode back toward the Red Shirts crowd, rubber bullets whistling around us. Three hundred meters further away, a large group of Red Shirts was setting up defenses, creating small barricades in the middle of the street and breaking off anything that could be used as a weapon, including bamboo sticks and iron bars. A second round of tear gas reached us, this time hitting the crowd with its full effect. Some groups of protesters hid behind the barricades, using

them as giant shields to push the military back. Suddenly, the sound of army shoots changed: as on April 10th the soldiers had started to use live bullets.

The first injured protesters—mostly shot in their legs—started to flow from the front lines and were rapidly put into ambulances that ran off, passing through the line of police officers who blocked the road behind us without intervening in the fight. Above us a few soldiers moved furtively on roofs, confirming the rumors of the army deployment of snipers.[163] Blocked between army and police, we were terrified envisioning a massacre. Then, suddenly, as a saving grace, heavy rain started falling, cooling the spirits and stopping the fight.

We remained under the pouring rain for another hour, waiting to figure out what would happen next. A few protesters negotiated with the anti-riot police, while the others looked around with anxiety. Time seemed to slow down, dripping like rain under the flyover. Then hordes of police officers in normal uniform, without weapons or protections, came out of vans and passed the anti-riot police, cheered by the locals and the protesters. For some time these police officers and the protesters engaged in a strange dance, advancing and retreating as if in a collective courting ritual. After some time, the police officers in uniform, as if taking courage, started to walk, unarmed, toward the protesters and passed us, taking up a position between the Red Shirts and the army, effectively shielding the protesters and offering an exit route. The crowd in the street cheered and applauded the police officers as the procession slowly made its way back to the Ratchaprasong area, still headed by a small vanguard of motorcycle taxi drivers who controlled the road and directed the convoy through flooded side roads. Mobile protests, it became evident, would not be tolerated by the army, which had demonstrated its willingness to use live ammunition to keep the protesters at bay. A violent dispersal of the protest camp, everybody seemed to agree, was just a matter of time.[164]

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[163] The only victim of this confrontation was a soldier who was killed in friendly fire, most probably by one of these snipers. He and a fellow private were riding at full speed back from the front toward the army line and were shot down, confused for Red Shirts protesters.

[164] On April 29th, the Yellow Shirts gave an ultimatum to the government demanding a dispersal of the Red Shirt in a week time, before they would take matters into their hands. What was paradoxical about this was that two of their main leaders, Chamlong

The day after this confrontation, protests spread to major regional towns and Red Shirts there established roadblocks to prevent the movements of troops toward Bangkok. In the Thai capital, however, the protest was effectively contained. Security forces closed all roads around the rally site. Moving in and out the protest became more difficult. The only group untouched by this transformation was the motorcycle taxi drivers who, once again, became essential for the protest. Their ability to move through apparent blockades, which oriented the drivers' daily operations in the city and their ability to provide transportation in the midst of the protest, now allowed them to traverse military check-points that had theoretically been set up to limit the movement of Red Shirt protesters. Any of the Red Shirt drivers could get on their bike, take up a fake passenger, and move easily and unnoticed through the army checkpoints and behind the lines of the military forces, collecting information on the movement of state forces around the city and reporting inside the protest area.

Especially after the protest was sealed off on May 12th, and moving provisions necessary to sustain the tens of thousands Red Shirts who were living in the Ratchaprasong area became problematic, the drivers' knowledge of hidden paths, underground parking lots, and back roads were central to keep the protesters going. Once again, the "owners of the map" proved to be invaluable allies in this phase of static blockage, operating as connectors, diffusors of goods and commodities, and collectors of information. This ability, however, did not just catch the eyes of the Red Shirts' protesters. On the other side of the barricade, the army also understood that the drivers could be invaluable informants on the Red Shirts' operations. Since the soldiers moved into the Silom area, their headquarters—located in an abandoned building at the end of the road—had seen a regular flux of motorcycle taxi drivers who were also soldiers and reported on the movements inside the Red area, again taking advantage of their ability to pass through unnoticed through road-block and check-points. Such ability, whether to the service of the protesters or of the army, was predicated on the tactical use of the driver' vests as tools of struggle: taking down the vest—as Oboto said—made them anonymous in the crowd; putting it on when moving around the city—as Adun did after his daily

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Srimuang and Piphob Thongchai, who had risked their lives in 1992 to oppose military interventions in politics were now demanding a violent military dispersal against their opponents.

visits to the protest—made them invisible transportation providers to the eyes of the soldiers and protesters alike.

A similar dynamic has been described by Franz Fanon's analysis of the roles of women in the Algerian War and their uses of the veil as a tool of struggle (Fanon 1980). During the battle between liberation forces and French colonial officers, he reconstructed, wearing a veil in the Kasbah assured women invisibility to French soldiers, while not wearing one in the European city allowed "the unveiled Algerian woman [to] move like a fish in the Western waters" (Fanon 1980: 58). Much like the veil, the driver's vest "removed and reassumed again and again, […] has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a mean of struggle" (Fanon 1980: 60). Both groups played with the complex relation between visibility and invisibility that structured their presence in the city by manipulating the clothes, behind which they could become invisible or without which they would disappear in the crowd. Becoming invisible, in other words, allowed them to operate as unnoticed connectors and movers of objects and information through the army lines.

The drivers' daily invisibility to the state-apparatus that marginalized them in their daily operations in the city, also provided them in the protest with the potential of challenging state power, and its ability to control and manages its territory and people. After all, as both de Certeau (de Certeau 1984) and James Scott (Scott 1998) have argued, state power performs its mastery over places through sight, by making its subjects visible and legible. Such characteristic, however, does not only frame the hold of a state but also configured its weakness. After all, as de Certeau has argued, "power is bound by its very visibility" (de Certeau 1984: 37). Eluding its gaze, therefore, means posing a significant challenge to power by blinding it, by taking away its control over a "detailed 'map' of its terrain and its people" (Scott 1998: 24). In this sense the drivers posed a double challenge to this power: first, claiming their position as "owners of the map," they question its ability to hold and read such a map; second, by remaining invisible to the state apparatus, they revealed its inability to dominate its subjects. While this potential became clear during this phase of static protest, it only acquired more prominence once the stalemate broke and the protest turned into urban guerrilla confrontation.

Phase 4: mobile fighters (May 13th – May 19th)

On May 13th, a high-speed bullet tore apart the curtain of tension, uncertainty, and expectation that had descended over the protesters and the country at large. After two weeks of feverish negotiations, calls to dispersal, and failed resolutions, this bullet pierced the head of Major-General Khattiya, aka Seh Daeng, a renegade army specialist and main military strategist for the Red Shirts, leaving him in a puddle of blood on the pavement just after sunset. It did not take too long for the Red Shirts to understand that this was going to be the beginning of a military attack. Signs of the imminent dispersal had been accumulating: the previous day electricity, water, and phone services were cut off from the area. The protest was completely sealed off, leaving motorcycle taxi drivers as one of the few groups still able to find their way in and out of its heart. Once Seh Daeng was hit, the incubated tension broke open. Hordes of Red Shirts started to pour onto the streets around Ratchaprasong, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at soldiers, who responded with occasional rounds of bullets. The long night, filled with fast moving shadows, grenade attacks, and continuous shootings in the darkened Central Business District, completely reshaped the conflict, as protesters now openly adopted guerrilla warfare tactics (Sopranzetti 2012).



RACHAPRASONG MAP

1-Siam Cinema: Burnt to the ground after the dispersal on May 19th
2-Silom Road: Granade attack on April 22nd.
3-Wat Pathum: designated as a Safe Area came under attack on May 19th.
4-Suan Phlu: Area of conflict between May 14th and May 18th .
5-Chulalongkorn Hospital: raided various time by the red shirts looking for snipers.
6-Sala Daeng Intersection: Seh Daeng was shot here on May 13th/ Dusit Hotel was attacked by RPG in the night of May 17th.
7-Central World: Set on fire after the dispersal on May 19th
8-Ratchaprasong Intersection: UDD stage.
9-Big C: attempt arson on May 19th.
10-Lumpini Park: Area of heavy fighting since May 14th.
11-Sarasin Intersection: Area of heavy fighting since May 13th.
12-Bong Gai: Area of fighting since May 14th / Arsons attacks on May 19th to banks and 7/eleven shops.
13-Klong Toei: red shirts gathering area since May 15th.

Figure 10: Map of the Ratchaprasong area with events

The following day, Red Shirts created tires barricades outside the originally occupied area, effectively surrounding the soldiers, who remained stuck in between the Red Shirts in Ratchaprasong and the new barricades. To limit even more the army's movements the protesters set the new barricades on fire: a curtain

of black smoke enveloped the protesters, making harder for snipers to hit them, and for foot soldiers to control their actions.[165] From behind the smoke, protesters threw rocks, Molotov cocktails, and firework at the soldiers who replied with endless rounds of live bullets. They shot randomly, succeeding more in keeping the Red Shirts away than in hit them. The conflict had transformed into urban guerilla warfare (Sopranzetti 2012).

Day after day the barricades grew higher, the explosions louder, and the rifle rounds closer.



Figure 11: Tires barricade on Rama IV Road

[165] Nonetheless snipers continued to randomly kill Red Shirts in the following days. While images of army snipers were released daily and nobody in the state forces was hit by them, the government insisted, against all evidences, that they were not soldiers.



Figure 12: Protesters hiding behind tires barricades

Then, after the night descended, the conflict zone filled with fast moving shadows. Fires and grenades exploded both inside the protest area and close to army lines, echoing in the city, followed by rounds of soldiers' M-16 rifles.



Figure 13: A typical scene of after dark confrontations

The number of fatalities and injured grew, marking a macabre daily bulletin presented every morning in national media: 16 dead and 141 injured by May 15th; 24 dead and 198 injured by May 16th; 36 dead and 258 injured by May 17th. For the next several days, until the final army dispersal of May 19th, Bangkok Business Center resembled a war zone, with almost uninterrupted live ammunition shots, grenades attacks, sniper hits and guerrilla warfare tactics, from walls of burning tires to a game of cat and mouse between soldiers and protesters in the maze of Bangkok's soi. Building halls, small hidden gardens, and abandoned houses became invaluable hiding and moving places for the Red Shirt fighters, while big roads became the space of the army, which occupied them and unloaded round after round of live ammunition toward the burning barricades in the distance. The soi system, which has provided one of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, was now the best ally of their drivers.

Once again the motorcycle taxi drivers' knowledge of the territory, and ability to move through it, became fundamental to direct the protesters' the actions and to maintain the upper-hand in their mobility through the maze of the soi. Their roles were multiple. First of all, the drivers provided provisions, water, and fuel—necessary to keep the barricades burning and to fill Molotov cocktails—both inside the protest area and to the fighters behind barricades. Using their vests as a tool of struggle, able to make them "move like fishes in water," the drivers were able to move in and out of the areas and provide supplies. Second, the drivers become movers of the Red Shirts' military strategists who circulated from one front to the other distributing directives on where to establish new barricades, how to move through the soi, and how to prevent the soldiers from advancing or retreating. Third, they became inseparable from the Red Shirts' leaders who, blockaded inside the protest area, waited for an all-out army attack to the Ratchaprasong stage, knowing that their chances of getting out alive depended largely on their drivers' ability to move furtively out of the sealed protest area. Fourth, as the number of injured started to grow the drivers operated as rescuers and first aid workers, picking up injured protesters, mounting them on their bikes, and driving them out of the protest zone into nearby hospitals.[166]

[166] Interestingly in journalist pictures of injured a motorcycle taxi driver wearing his vest can often be noticed.



Figure 14: Motorcycle taxi driver helping protesters to organize defenses



Figure 15: Drivers operating as first aid personnel

This situation continued until the early morning of May 19th when, tired of the ongoing struggle, the army entered the protest area from Silom Road around 9 am. The bamboo barricades were quickly torn down by tanks and assault units conquering Lumpini Park. During the course of the day, the soldiers continued their progression toward the Ratchaprasong intersection, leaving behind a dozen of dead protesters. Motorcycle taxi drivers, central to the operation of the Red Shirt protest since its beginning, had already disappeared from the area, taking advantage of their ability to slip through the closing grip of the army.

Less than a mile away from the protest stage, the army advanced slowly, fearing the presence of bombs and significant armed resistance. This resistance, however, was scattered: a violent section of the Red Shirts attempted for a few hours to keep the soldiers away but soon gave up to the incommensurable power of the army, its tanks and snipers. The militarized protesters, more able than other Red Shirts to understand the army's operation fled the area, leaving the army's advance unopposed. The soldiers, now in charge, fired indiscriminately as the remaining protesters converged around the stage. At 1 pm, with the army now closing

into the Ratchaprasong intersection the protest leaders invited Red Shirts supporters in the area to surrender, preventing more useless casualties. The small crowd of 5000 hard-liners still present around the stage booed, voicing their willingness to lose their lives for the cause while the leaders left the area and walked to the nearby National Police headquarter to surrender, aware that the army would be much less kind to them.

Some of the remaining protesters, aware that nothing was left for them to do vent their frustration and rage against shopping malls and banks in the area, symbols of the system of inequality that they came to protest and that was now crushing their resistance. Looters entered the shopping malls at the Ratchaprasong intersection. Outside the buildings some of the remaining hard-liner protesters plastered the malls with rocks and Molotov cocktails, determined to bring the whole area down with them.[167] Similar arson attacks were taking place around the protest camp, targeting shopping malls, banks, and retail shops. In the following hours, while the army advanced toward the Red Shirt stage, 34 buildings, mostly were set on fire, both in the protest area and in the zones that had been controlled by Red Shirts for the previous days. Among them was Central World, the biggest shopping center in the country and a symbol of conspicuous consumption and inequality. With water being cut from the area by the government, there was nothing to be done to control the fire. The building became an oven and collapsed on itself, as if a giant spoon had gone through it.

[167] Jim Taylor has argued that the burning of Central World was not carried out by Red Shirts' sympathizers (Taylor 2011). While I was not personally present at Ratchaprasong intersection on the afternoon of May 19th—as it was not Taylor—the report of Thai and international journalists and observers who were in the area, as well as the repeated threat by Red Shirts leaders to burn the malls down in case of a dispersal (Sopranzetti 2012), are consistent with a small group of wild-dogs Red Shirts sympathizers as the culprits.



Figure 16: Central World the day after the army dispersal

Chaos diffused around the Ratchaprasong intersection. Many of the remaining protesters took refuge in Wat Pathum, a temple that the CRES had declared as a no-conflict zone. Soldiers moved into the area from the Skytrain rails. A cross-fire exchange broke open around the temple area and high-speed bullets were shot inside the temple from the rails, killing six people, including Kamolket Akahad, a 25 years old nurse who had joined the protesters to take care of injured.[168] The Red Shirts' protest was over and once again, as in previous political movements in Thailand, the army had brutally drowned the protesters' voice in blood. As the remaining protesters were rounded up inside the police headquarters nearby the stage, the soldiers' advance left behind a haunted human-less space where, for the first time, one could hear the twitter of birds in an area normally smothered by the noise of traffic and, for the last month, by the Red Shirts' political tirades. Emptied of the protesters, the area remained filled only by their objects: clothes, fans, TV sets, motorcycles, unfinished food, half-cooked rice, piles of vegetables, half-opened tents, monks' clothes, wallets, documents, bags, red paraphernalia, medicines, sealed water bottles still cold. Framed by the deafening sound of birds echoing in the emptiness, the three months long Red Shirt protest came an end, leaving behind 92 dead bodies and more than two thousands of injured.

[168] The Thai army maintains that this shoots were not fired by soldiers. Yet multiple photographic evidence shows army personnel moving and firing from the Skytrain railways nearby the temple.



Figure 17: What is left of the protest

Fragility of power

While the Red Shirts had failed to remove the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva and suffered significant losses, they had also revealed the fragility of Thai state's power and showed that a motivated group of protesters could take over the center of Bangkok, hold it for months, and keep Thai government, police, and army in check, forcing them into an internationally embarrassing use of force to clear them. In particular, the drivers' emergence as actors in the protests and as a political force to reckon with in the city revealed the centrality of mobility and its operators not just for the daily operation of Bangkok and of Thai capital, but also as spaces, tactics, and actors of political mobilization.

Such centrality, however, should not come as a surprise. Both in academic and larger public debates, the rhetoric of mobility has taken an increasingly central stage in the last twenty years. Studies of migration, transnationalism, media, and globalization have put mobility at the center of academic discussion as well as our daily conversations (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000; Friedman 2005; Stiglitz 2002). In particular, analyses of contemporary capitalism have noticed the decreased importance of Fordist modes of production in favor of more flexible economic practices, centered on relations of exchange and mobile capital (Hardt, et al. 2000; Harvey 2006; Lazzarato and Jordan). Financial markets, communication technology, global trade, migratory movement, and terrorism—among other phenomena—have forced us to rethink the way we look at space, time, economy, society, politics, and human relations at large. In this "mobile turn" (Urry 2007), however, the roles, demands, and struggles of the operators of mobility have been largely overlooked. These phatic labors, as I have shown, allow channels of economic, social, and conceptual exchange to remain open and, even if excluded from the effects of their labor, they retain, at least potentially, the ability to modulate and sever the connections that they participate in creating and mediating**.** Even if when most scholars talk about the people who "control" flows, those operators are seldom named, in the protest they had reclaimed their centrality and adopted their mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just as a form of labor.

The drivers' multiple roles in the protest, and their ability to bring the city to its knees, questions established understanding on how power and resistance operate. Two dominant theories have directed contemporary analysis of power. On one side, Michel Foucault has seen power as an ubiquitous, all-powerful apparatus of governance (Foucault 1977; Foucault, et al. 2007), operating through mechanisms that produce their own subjects as well as forms of resistance, which "can exist only on the strategic field of the relations of power" (Foucault 1977:126). After all, he argued, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978: 95-96). In this view, as Holloway has argued, "there are a whole host of resistances which are integral to power, but there is no possibility of emancipation. The only possibility is an endlessly shifting constellation of power-and-resistance" (Holloway 2005: 56). On the other side, James Scott has proposed a vision in which small everyday acts of resistance constitute, over time, emancipatory struggles and demonstrate the

subalterns' refusal to consent to hegemonic dominance (Scott 1985; Scott 1990). Power, in his view, is more effectively challenged by these forms of ordinary resistance than by open opposition and protest. Such vision is invaluable in revealing the importance of an analysis "that is *not* centered on the state, on formal organizations, on open protest, on national issues" (Scott 1985: xix). Yet, as Lila Abu-Lughod has argued (Abu-Lughod 1990), it also create a "romance of resistance" that over-estimate the relevance of this everyday acts.

Both theories, for opposite reasons, fail to account for the emergence of the drivers as significant political actors engaged both in forms of emancipatory politics and hegemonic dominance as well as for their ability to take the city center hostage and become important allies or significant enemies for the government, the army, and the Red Shirts alike. Their roles in protests, in other words, do not show power in Bangkok to be either an all-encompassing functional apparatus or opened to radical subversions through small acts of resistance. Rather they revealed power in the city—much like its urban structure, human expectations, and drivers' lives—as a fragile construct, intrinsically ridden by contradiction, contingencies, and failures. Such fragility, here revealed by the ability of operators of mobility to take over and filters urban flows and bringing state forces and capitalist circulation to their knees, opened possibilities for fractures, struggles, and take over. The Red Shirts' protest in 2010 was one such example, in which marginal operators of mobility and circulation took over the channels they create and in so doing challenged capitalist circulation and political legitimacy in the Thai nation. In this sense, I do not argue that forms of everyday resistance have intrinsically the potential to challenge and overturn domination, nor that these struggles are always inscribed into a disciplinary apparatus that does not allow for dissent. Rather I have shown that power—either as hegemony or as domination, either administered by Thai state forces or by the Red shirts' protesters—is always a frail apparatus, traversed by fault lines and weak spots. It is only when attacked on those spots, in other words, that this apparatus reveals its cracks, contradictions, and failures and opens itself to challenges. In this sense not every act of defiance or resistance retains the potential of questioning and unsettling power, as Scott's theory of power lead us to believe. Their ability to do so is rather the result of tactical considerations,

provisional coalitions, and timing—framed by a pre-existing discursive, spatial, organizational, and strategic infrastructure—that allows them to hit those specific spots.

Ratchaprasong, and the flow of people, commodities, and capital through this space, offered one such spot. In all four phases of the protest, the political mobilization entailed a radical restructuring of the everyday life of the city, particularly of its mobility, by the very people who were operating it. In them the drivers operated as transport providers, political mobilizers in their urban neighborhoods and rural villages, Red Shirts' leaders' personal guards, guards at barricades, collectors of information as well as generic supporters. If the phenomenology of their everyday practices had constituted the drivers as political subjects, during the protests of 2010 their political mobilization adopted such a phenomenology to restructure everyday life in the city. Through the multiplicity of their roles, the drivers showed their position as "owners of the map," privileged connoisseurs of the city's hidden paths and flows. By disrupting everyday life they reclaimed political centrality as owners, transformers, and gate-keepers of both social and physical channels in the city. Mobilizers and stoppers, operating mobility and operating onto mobility, the motorcycle taxi drivers reclaimed their role as both political actors and controllers of urban channels of communication, able to perform both phatic labor—by which the channels are built and sustained—and a-phatic labor—by which the same channels are filtered, slowed down, and, at times, cut off.

Similarly to the 2006 migrants' protest in Chicago and Los Angeles analyzed by David Harvey, the Red Shirt protest offered "an impressive demonstration of the political and economic power […] to disrupt the flows of production as well as the flows of goods and services in major urban centers" (Harvey 2012: 118), and showed how marginal urban workers can take advantage of the fragility of power and reveled it as an illusion. Much like the Thai state in my analysis, and capitalism in John Holloway's critique (Holloway 2005),[169] power is unveiled as a shadow on the wall, which belies the fragility of the object that cast it and

[169] "Capitalism is two-faced. The very nature of its instability (the separating of done from doing) generates the appearance of stability (the separation of done from doing). The identity (is-ness) of capitalism is a real illusion: an effective illusion generated by the process of production (the process of separating done from doing). The separation of constitution from existence is a real illusion: an effective illusion generated by the process of production (the process of separating existence from constitution). The illusion is effective because it belies the fragility of capitalism. It appears that capitalism 'is': but capitalism never 'is', it is always a struggle to constitute itself. To treat capitalism as a mode of production that 'is' or, which is the same thing, to think of class struggle as struggle from below against the stability of capitalism, is to fall head-first into the filthiest mire of fetishism. Capital, by its nature, appears to 'be', but it

generates the appearance of stability and unity, an appearance that the Red Shirts were able to challenge. Once its fragility is revealed, however, the illusion of power becomes hard to reconstruct and a space for questioning and challenges opens up. In this sense, the Red Shirts' protest, as other moments of political mobilization in human history, marked a significant success precisely because of their ability to poke holes into this illusion, to unveil the intrinsic fragility of power and, as Red Shirts supporters liked to repeat, to "open the eyes" (*tham hai k̄oet tā sawāng*)of its subjects.

Such a revelation, however, does not necessarily configure a revolutionary moment or an overthrowing of a political system, as the Red Shirts' protest demonstrated. Much like other systems in unstable equilibrium, power is a fragile construct, relatively easy to challenge, yet—if able to survive the challenge—also malleable, prone to readjust and incorporate it to find a new equilibrium. The next chapter analyzes this readjustment after the 2010 protest, in particular in reference to the deeper incorporation of motorcycle taxi drivers and the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMMT) in the social security system and in the state's security apparatus.

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never 'is'. That is important, both to understand the violence of capital (the continued presence of what Marx called 'primitive accumulation') and to understand its fragility. The urgent impossibility of revolution begins to open towards an urgent possibility" (Holloway 2005: 74).

Chapter 8: We are not Reds, we are not Yellows, we are Orange Shirts.

The military dispersal, the death of almost one hundred people, and the burning of iconic buildings around Bangkok left the country in a state of suspension. Once again in the recent history of Thailand, a popular protest was drowned in blood. This time, however, there was no universally respected institution that could claim neutrality, bring the conflict to an end, and clean the mess—as the monarchy had done before. The Red Shirts repeated for the months after the military intervention that there would be no way back: the people's eyes were now opened on the illegitimacy and cruelty of the *ammat*'s power, never to be closed again. The opposing forces called for reconciliation but had no intention to allow an independent investigation of the violence. All around the country citizens held their breath, amidst talks of civil war and a crisis of legitimacy of Thailand's most revered institution as well as of its most well-armed one. The government and the CRES refused to recognize any responsibility in the killings, while the protesters started to talk about diffusing the struggle over the country and giving up the peaceful methods they had used so far. A tide of social, economic, and political resentment was on the rise, as the government tried to erase the memory of the recent bloodbath and kept the Emergency Decree in place in the Thai capital. In the following two months it seemed like Thailand was in for a long and bloody struggle between two factions, represented by the Red and Yellow Shirts, which seemed impossible to reconcile. This battle, it seemed, would bring down with it established hierarchy, political taboos, and a multitude of human lives. Then, in a few months, the tie started to recede.

Besides regular Red Shirts' memorials, people went back to their lives as if nothing had really happened. In this chapter I attempt to explain how this readjustment occurred and how state forces, after having revealed their fragility during the protest, started to readjust into a new, equally exclusionary, equilibrium that justified impunity and lack of accountability with a discourse of going back to "normalcy" (*khwāmthammada*). While a history of similar post-violence impunity in Thailand remains to be written, this project goes well beyond the purview of my work. Here, rather, I investigate how the power of state forces—

mostly the army and Abhisit's government—readjusted after the protest in order to fix the fragilities revealed by the Red Shirts mobilization. In particular I focus on the negotiation between these two institutions and Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) over the future of the drivers, who had posed a significant challenge to their ability to control the Red Shirts' mobilization. I analyze how these readjustments revolved around erasing the invisibility that had given them unprecedented edge against state forces during the protest. The objective after the dispersal, therefore, was to make the drivers visible once again by incorporating them, together with their unmatched knowledge of the city and its neighborhoods, into the post-protest surveillance apparatus and a new social security system. In other words, if the drivers had revealed the fragility of power through their mobility and invisibility, both the army and the government were determined to shed lights over the drivers' operations to reclaim control over them and secure their support.

First, I examine the strategy of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC), a Cold-War era organization specialized in psychological warfare that was resuscitated after the 2006 coup and entrusted with domestic security following the model of the US Department of Land Security (Ivarsson and Isager 2010). This military organization was the first to realize the drivers' relevance in the protest and to attempt to cut off the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) from the Red Shirts, since the CRES summoned the drivers' leaders on April 4rd 2010. While the ISOC wanted the drivers to become not only visible to them but also instruments of vision for their inflated surveillance apparatus, the leaders of the AMTT understood this negotiation as a "game," with its own rules, players, and risks, which they needed to play to insure a better working condition to the association's members.

From there, I analyzed how those leaders applied the same logic to a later attempt by Abhisit's governments—mostly carried out by his right hand and minister of the Office of the Prime Minister Sathit Wongnongtoey—to formalize and register once again the drivers in 2011. Similarly to the ISOC, the government tried to make the drivers visible and legible to the administration by offering inclusion in its apparatus. Such an inclusion was envisioned under a new social security scheme for workers of the informal economy, including the drivers, which was presented to them in January of 2011 as a "gift." Such framing, I

explore, was seen by many of the drivers as a sign of Abhisit's paternalistic approach to their demands and doomed his government's attempt to win over their support and solve the fragilities that were revealed by the Red Shirts' mobilization.

While both attempts succeeded in restoring, at least partially, the state forces' ability to control the urban territory and its citizens, they also configured new fragilities in the government's power, the ISOC's role in street politics, and the AMTT's relation to its members. While these fragilities have since marked the end of Abhisit's government, defeated by Yingluck Shinawatra in the election of May 2011, and questioned the AMTT's ability to expand significantly their support among the 200,000 drivers operating in Bangkok, they remain underneath the apparent calm of contemporary Thailand, ready to emerge, once again, in the next political mobilization. In order to show how this new unstable equilibrium came to be, however, I need to go back to the period of the protest and recover some events that were taking place while the Ratchaprasong intersection was occupied.

Retaking control over the territory: the ISOC.

May 4th 2010. While at the Ratchaprasong intersection the Red Shirts were still solidly in control of the area, on the other side of town, a large meeting was taking place in an army school. On the outside, this could seem like many other meetings between motorcycle taxi drivers, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration—trying to upgrade road safety in the city—the Police—interested in using the drivers for crime prevention and first aid—and Honda—hoping of strengthening its dominance over the motorcycle market in Thailand by building a relationship with the recently found AMTT. If the location—an army school—gave some leads on the unspoken agenda behind this meeting, the presence of Lt Gen Surasak Kanchanarat, the assistant army chief-of-staff, and Sun, a lower ranking ISOC officer, made clear that this gathering, in the middle of the Red Shirts mobilization, was part of a military strategy to win over the drivers' support and cut them off the protest.

I arrived at the meeting with Adun, who had asked me to put him in contact with the AMTT, of which he had heard but never encounter before. After parking our bikes we entered the school from the canteen: a big central space filled with formica tables and green plastic chairs, surrounded by small cements booths where normally vendors sell food. Neon lights hanging from the concrete ceiling gave a feeling of staleness to the deserted room. We walked through it and arrived to a smaller room where the registration process was being conducted by four young women who gave us a small brochure by BMA on the role of motortaxis in urban security, a larger booklet of maps of Bangkok—which many of the drivers were looking carefully to plot on paper locations that they know only from the street level—a document with the AMTT's charter, and a small green coupon that guaranteed to the participants a free helmet, offered by Honda, at the end of the meeting. A few drivers were hanging around this area, studying the maps and the BMA brochure, serving themselves coffee and biscuits that were laid out on a table, on the left of the registration booth. Adun and I moved upstairs, where the meeting had just started.

In a large room, ornate with convoluted fabrics and a few thousand plastic chairs, about 2000 drivers, delegates from all the 50 districts of Bangkok and part of the city-wide network of the AMMT, assisted to a long day of presentations, gift-giving, and pleasantries between the association's leaders and the envoys from BMA, Honda, Thai Police, and Royal Army. Of the twenty leaders who went on the Red Shirts' stage in Ratchadamnoen Avenue less than a month before, nineteen were present at this meeting, while the twentieth, Oboto, had recently left the association, become a liaison between drivers and the protest leaders, and refused to use the drivers' role in the protest as a bargaining chip.

The meeting had a conventional structure. One after the other the envoys went on stage and gave a 30-minutes talk on the importance of motorcycle taxi drivers for the city, their plans for regulating them more clearly, providing them with a social security scheme, insuring safety for them and their passengers, using their services for the "social good," and incorporating them in the state security apparatus. While the presence of Honda, and their willingness to provide for free a safe-riding certificate to the members of the AMMT as well as a discount on new bikes and the free helmet, attracted the drivers, most of the conversation

was directed by bureaucrats who talked about the project to turn the driver into the "eyes and ears" (*pen hū pen tā)* of the city and transformed them in security agents, for fires and accidents, crime-prevention and drug policing, as well as for collecting information. The language used by Thanom Onketpol and Wasan Meewong, the two envoys of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration,[170] to describe this collaboration was a familiar one, much like the collaboration it referred to.

Cooperation between police officers and local drivers had existed since the emergence of this system of transportation in the early 1980s. Drivers—who had a relation to state officials who often controlled their operations—kept an eye on traffic accidents, fires, and petty criminality and called up police officers in case of trouble. In August of 2003, few months after the driver's formalization, these collaborations become more systematic. The upcoming Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit was the occasion. As part of a larger clean-up of the Bangkok before the conference (Klima 2002), a few drivers from every *win* in the city were recruited as "volunteer informants" with the purpose of "help[ing] local forces to watch out for anything suspicious," Metropolitan Police Commissioner Lt-General Damrongsak Nilkuha declared (Prasad 2003). More than a thousand drivers were included in this plan and trained in bombs and weapons recognition ahead of the meeting.

This cooperation was upheld as a template for drivers' relations with the national and metropolitan police since 2004, under the umbrella of the "*pen hū pen tā*" policy that envisioned the drivers as an extension of the police's vision and hearing. This plan was predicated upon the same omnipresence and knowledge of territory that granted the drivers' role in the protest. The "owner of the map," in other words, could also become its vicarious vigilantes. As Royal Thai Police deputy commissioner-general Charnchit Bhiraleus declared, "motorcycle-taxi stands are located at almost every corner of every street in Bangkok. The riders outnumber traffic-police officers, with their help security in the city will be smoother" (Chanunya 2004). As a result, training sessions were conducted at police stations, fire departments, and hospitals on weapons recognition, chase and arrests, dealing with fires, as well as primary aid and traffic management. The meeting

[170] On thanom and role with taxis

of May 4th 2010 was just another step into formalizing this model and turning the drivers into instrument of vision for the police, under the direct involvement of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration. A step, however, that came at a very specific time, as the city was kept in check by the Red Shirts protests, in which the drivers figured prominently.

Police and BMA were not the only institution that had noticed the motorcycle taxi drivers' unmatched knowledge of the physical and human terrain of the city and their potential to become instruments for the expansion and diffusion of the state's security, and surveillance, apparatus; neither where they the only one participating in the meeting to push this agenda. In the large room, in fact, army envoys were also present. The Thai army, particularly the Internal Security Operation Command (ISOC), had started recruiting drivers as informants for counter-insurgency purposes a few years back. At first, this happened exclusively in the Southern provinces of Thailand, were a low intensity conflict had turned into a sustained and bloody insurgence in 2004. Since 2005, the Thai army recruited and paid motorcycle taxi drivers to "report on unusual and suspicious movements and to identify insurgent activity" (Wassayos 2005). It was not until the Red Shirts' mobilization in 2010, however, that the ISOC's attempt to coopt drivers as informants was formalized into a policy that extended over Bangkok, under the name of "*tā sapparot"* (pineapple eyes). This definition offered a tropical version of Bentham's *panopticon* (Foucault 1977), one in which the dots that surround a pineapple were replaced by observational devices, as posters like this one, which spread around the city after the dispersal, showed.



Figure 18: Poster with capitation "your security is in our eyes"

Tā sapparot relied heavily on workers of street economy—motorcycle taxi drivers in particular—to diffuse the military gaze over the territory and make them into potentially omnipresent observers and informants.

Similarly to the *pen hū pen tā* policy, the pineapple eyes attempted to invert the drivers' invisibility to state forces, which was fundamental to their participation in the Red Shirts' mobilization, and to transform them, quite literally, into instruments of vision, vicarious and omnipresent lenses through which the ISOC could collect intelligence. For the army officers, the meeting was a way to recruit more informants, vital in a time of political turmoil. After all, as Lt Gen Surasak Kanchanarat said during his presentation "if there are 100,000 motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, there will be 200,000 eyes for us, eyes who help us keep the city safe and the country stable." The Lieutenant forgot to say, however, that even preventing them from carrying out the same function for the Red Shirts would already be a success.

The ISOC—as Sun, the officer at the meeting, told me in an interview—knew that convincing the association to switch sides and snitch on their fellow protesters would never really be a possibility but they also understood that limiting their collective involvement in the protest could weakened the Red Shirts' in case of a violent confrontation and prevent the repetition of the city-wide attacks that the drivers had carried out after the 1992 protest. As Lek, one of association leaders, told me looking back at this meeting and on the ISOC's move:

> At the first military attack to the Red Shirts on April 10th, I was there. The CRES had told us we should not participate in the protest so the police were at my home and I was arrested but the Red Shirts leaders were not arrested. I knew that what would happen to all my members. It meant that the government agencies would look at our group as Red Shirts motorcycle taxi drivers who instigate violence at the rally. They need to arrest us before, to cut down the reaction. It was the same picture as in the 1992 protests, when the drivers contributed to the Chamlong's win and the defeat of Suchinda. The state thought that we would repeat the situation in 1992 and spread violence around the city. So what did the state do to prevent this? The state took Sun, who was close with a core group of motorcycle to pressure them to stop. At first the motorcycle did not stop. So they arrested us. This is our own limitation. We are working men. Breadwinner day in day out as head of the families and the households, we rent houses, buy bikes and pay for rice. Once we are arrested, we experience great changes in our families. But we did not stop anyway. So they offered us something to make our lives better, to make our families better. They were smart, smart enough to play this way. Even if many of us continued to go to the protest alone or with friends, they cut off our network from the rally.

The terms of this bargain were clear to the AMMT leadership, who was asked to stop pledging their collective support to the Red Shirts in exchange for the ISOC's assistance to the association and its struggles.[171] The offer on the table was double. First, as the big check of 100,000 baht (3400 $) that was given to the association at the end of the meeting demonstrated, the ISOC could provide economic support for a new born association that was struggling to pay rent in their remote office at the outskirts of the city and provide an income to the drivers who worked there fulltime. Second, the ISOC could become a useful friend to the association, a friend who could out-power and "out-influence," the *phū mī̀ `itthiphon* (influential people) who had come back to extort money from motorcycle taxi drivers since the 2006 coup.

While the first offer could be attractive in the short run, the second one—the leaders of the association believed—was pivotal for the growth of their organization. Being able to use such an alliance, they argued, would not just help the association's members to get rid of their exploiters but also attracts more drivers toward the growing association and guaranteeing its spread across the city. Such an alliance, which was signed with that check, opened up a new strategy for fighting influential people, a strategy that instead of demanding the implementation of existing laws and norms, as the drivers had done since 2003, was heavily reliant on playing different state forces and multiple forms of influence *(`itthiphon)* one against the other. Convinced by this perspective the AMTT decided to accept the ISOC's offer and took a step back from the protest, at least collectively.

While this agreement did not cut off motorcycle taxi drivers from the Red Shirts protests—even people who were present at the meeting and part of the leadership group that organized it continued to participate and work there—it succeeded in making this support individual and not collective and thus in limiting post-dispersal violent attacks. In this sense, while the positive effects for the ISOC were clear two weeks after this meeting, when the army moved into Ratchaprasong, the pay-off for the association in their fight against influential people became more visible in the months following the dispersal.

[171] The ISOC since the 1970s has been involved in labor politics by financing some factions of trade union with the purpose of fomenting "the break-up of the then strongest and progressive body of organized labour" (Brown 1997: 173)

A group of drivers located in Sukhumvit soi 101, in the industrial district of Samut Prakan, became a litmus test for the new approach. The *win*, composed by 36 members of the AMTT, had formalized its operations in 2003 and consequently refused to sell their vests and to give in to the continuous request for money by a high-raking local police officer, who previously owned their *win*. Two of the drivers had been part of the original network of drivers who had demanded the full implementation of the new policy and succeeded to get the officer off their back. The situation changed rapidly after the fall of Prime Minister and the officer came back to demand a payment. The drivers mobilized and resisted its requests, remaining united in their refusal to sell him their vests or pay any money. Unable to crack their resistance, the officer adopted another approach. Two new illegal groups were created in their same soi, one located at the entrance—where the road opened into Sukhumvit Street—and the other at the exit of a local market that provided most of the clients for the legal *win*. Surrounded by the new groups, and cut off from potential clients, the drivers tried to voice their discontent and to demand the removal of the two illegal *win*. Their plea, however, fell into deft ears. After all, no other tribunal was offered to them than the local police station, the same station in which their persecutor worked. The drivers found themselves literally squeezed under the clinch of the local police officer and unable to use the law to voice their discontent, as it had been the case during Thaksin's premierships.

A new route was now opening for the group, one that relied on their membership of the AMTT and its collaboration with the ISOC. The drivers and the AMTT leaders pledged with Sun, the ISOC officer who had presided over the meeting, to intervene. Day after day the local drivers quietly collected pictures, data, and details on the illegal *wins*, their relations to the police officer, and the value of his racket. This material was not presented as a formal complaint but rather hand-delivered to the ISOC officer who, in the next days, called the local police station and strongly suggested that the policeman left the drivers alone, before he reported to whole thing to his superior. What the law had been unable to fix in three years, this channel solved in a few days. Soon after, in fact, the other two illegal groups disappeared and the drivers went back to their business, undisturbed by the police officer who had been told to lay off them. The association could

count this as a victory on every front and present it as a model of their effectiveness. Not everybody, however, was comfortable with the new strategy.

"This is the only way we can fight. We cannot fight by using the law." Wud, a member of the association told me. "When Thaksin was here we could find a way to report officers to him and he would take care of it using the law (*chai kotmāi*). But now we are alone so we need to use connections (*chai seen*). We have only one way: fighting influence with influence (*sū `itthiphon kab `itthiphon*). I do not like this game (*kēm nī*), but it is the only one left to us to play. I am legal, I pay taxes, I own my vest, and I have registered my bike for public transportation so why do I have to ask for help from an important person (*phū yai*)? Why can't I just use the law?" He then concluded dishearten. "But this is Thailand. We do what we can but we continue to fight so that one day things will be different, better."

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Politics as game: building AMTT's power.

If Wud despised this game, the AMTT leaders—the two twin brothers Yai and Lek in particular—visibly enjoying playing it, and were remarkably good at it. Ninth and tenth children of a Central Thai family that emigrated in Bangkok in the late 1950s, the two twin brothers represent the most cunny and prepared leaders of the association. Raised in a small slum along Lad Phrao Road, they grew up as local thugs (*nak lēng*) and right hands to a local army officer, who they refer to as a pupil of Chavalit Yongchaiyudh—former head of ISOC, army commander in chief, leader of the 1992 protest, prime minister, and expert of mass mobilization, psychological warfare, and counterinsurgency. Their political affiliation, however, did not stop with Chavalit. Over the course of the last twenty years, Yai and Lek, had worked as vote canvassers for Chavalit's New Aspiration Party, the Democrat Party, and Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai, given their profound knowledge of their area. In the late 1980s, in fact, the two brothers had become motorcycle taxi drivers and got involved with a "local influential person" (*phū mī `itthiphon*) and managed his illegal motorcycle taxi groups in their neighborhood. Once the formalization was initiated in 2003, however, Yai and Lek switched side and

used their extensive network of soldiers, politicians, and drivers to become prominent figures in the struggle against local mafia as well as the post-2006 protests against the coup.

All of these experiences have taught them that power moves according to a complex game of alliances, negotiations, compromises, and side-switching. For this reason, when I asked Yai if he believed that the ISOC sudden interested in the motorcycle taxis had anything to do with the drivers' roles in the Red Shirts protest he laughed to my face, surprised by my naivety. "It has everything to do with it," he replied. "Politics is a game. The ISOC is helping us only for a reason, because we went on the Red Shirts' stage. They saw that we have power. They want to cut our power from the protest so they support us. Politics in Thailand is like this. In Thai we 'play' politics (*len kān mūang*), in English you do not 'play' politics, right? This is how it is, in Thailand politics is a game, and we can play it too."

When analyzing the motorcycle taxi drivers' mobilization, Yai individuates in this game, and a set of skills to play it properly, the field of contention. Even if his personal political sympathies, as well as those of the other motorcycle taxi leaders, solidly stand with the Red Shirts, in the game this movement, Abhisit's government, and the army are equal actors that can and should be courted, played one against the other, and never completely dismissed or disenfranchised. Of this game Yai and Leek are masters, and their personal masterpieces were getting the newly created association of motorcycle taxis on the Red Shirts' main stage in Ratchadamnoen on April 3rd 2010.

By going on stage the association, until then a barely known labor organization, entered the national political sphere with enough leverage to play a significant, if localized, role. Suddenly, state forces noticed their strength in term of mobilization and mobility, as well as feared the potential uprising of 200,000 omnipresent urban dwellers with unmatched knowledge of the urban territory. Suddenly Yai and Lek, and the association behind them, could start a complex dance of collaborating, opposing, negotiating and demanding contemporarily from the Red Shirts' leaders, the government, and the army. Never taking a side, yet always keeping an eye and an ear to all of them, this approach was perfectly synthetized by Lerm, the AMTT's president, who liked to repeat, both to other members and to journalists who suddenly started to contact him

after the Red Shirts protest, that in the association "we are not Reds, we are not Yellows, we are Orange Shirts"—the color of the drivers' vest.

With this clever play on color politics the association was claiming mid-ground in the political game but also acknowledging that their position was always defined by an external opposition. In this sense, the AMTT could operate only tactically by performing "calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. [Deployed] on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power" (de Certeau 1984: 36-37). The drivers' actions in the game, in other words, always played in the field of the other, in a space defined either by the state, the protest leaders', or the army. In these spaces, the drivers applied the same meandering path-seeking approach they characterized their everyday life in the city. Their mobility through traffic was predicated on their ability to find spaces in between cars, through parking lots, and small alleys, to find a path where there is no space by navigating, negotiating, and leveraging their presence, information, and skills. Similarly their engagement in this game was also based on their talent to adapt to the shifting political terrain, know its shortcuts and back-alleys, and being able to see a path where others see a blockage. Much like their mobility through traffic, however, playing this game was not without its demands, risks, and potential failures. [172]

After the army dispersal, a series of transformations were required in the association to play the "we are not Reds, we are not Yellows, we are Orange Shirts" game, and Lerm was the first to be affected by them. A vocal supporter of Thaksin and the Red Shirts, he had to change his vest, which was previously embroiled with the face of the former prime minister, and his long-sleeve AMMT jacket, which Seh Daeng—the Red Shirts general who was shoot by snipers—had autographed for him. In June of 2010, the office of the association, located in Lad Phrao soi 101, was also refashioned. The pictures of a protest against the post-coup constitution, which adorned the office until the end of the Red Shirts' protest, were taken down and

[172] A professed neutrality was central to the AMMT's game, which relied on their ability to play all the different forces involved by using not just skills but also *palang* (energy). For Yai, while the association was struggling to build up the necessary energy to make its position in the game stronger, the problem with the Red Shirts was totally opposite. In his words "the Red Shirts are playing the game until the end without having the possibility to win. Too much *palang* is used. It is acceptable for them because they will not be here in ten years but motorcycle taxi will. So we need to play a longer game, we cannot take the side of Red Shirts completely unless we are sure to win. Even if the Red Shirts win, what will happen to us when next government is in power? "

replaced by images of the King and the Queen.[173] Even if such transformations became the object of a number of jokes among the drivers, including Lerm himself, they showed nonetheless how this game required a certain degree of acceptance and collaboration with state powers, a collaboration that contributed in covering up the fragilities that those powers had showed during the protest and the drivers had contributed in revealing. Such collaborations, as Somchai has argued, always risk to "influence, neutralize, depoliticize, and manipulate [political] activities" (Somchai 2006: 92), and many of the drivers saw this risk materializing in the transformation of the AMTT.

Adun, for instance, after having seen the AMMT's leaders shaking hands with the ISOC officers while the Red Shirts were fencing off soldiers in the streets never went back to the association, considering just another untrustworthy player in Thai politics, more interested in personal gain than in political, economic, and social equality. Similarly, as the AMTT position became clearer, the Red Shirts leadership as well as many drivers who participated in the protest became wary and cold toward its leaders, who were framed as sell-outs. Oboto, the driver who left the association and became the Red Shirts organizer in charge of mobilizing motorcycle taxi drivers, was particularly adamant in his critique.

> After we went on stage with the Red Shirt, CRES officers came to talk to me too, they told me that if I would go back they would take my license but I did not accept this. If you see the whole picture Lerm and Yai decided to give in to these treats. They are with the army, with ISOC. I don't want this. I fight for myself […], if other drivers want to go in the street or leaders of Red Shirts organize something we go but I don't want to play politics.

The risks of this game for the association, however, were not just disenfranchising its present and potential future members, but also reside in the operation of politics itself. As Yai told me, in fact, "politics is a lie because they talk first, do later. It is said then maybe done. We have to believe them first. If it is done later, we picked the right one. If not, we chose the wrong person. Politics is a lie, a game in which you cannot trust anyone at all." In a game with no clear alliances, in other words, every collaboration was ridden with potential let-downs. Such impossibility to trust anybody in this game, moreover, did not affect only the AMTT, but

[173] For an analysis of the use of images of the King in political protest see (Herzfeld 2013).

also configured potential fragilities for the readjustment of the army's power over the city, which had been significantly challenged by the Red Shirts mobilization, and the drivers in particular.

The ISOC's plan to transform these strenuous enemies into "pineapple eyes," for instance, was often ridiculed by the same drivers who were, in theory, participating in it and who saw the project unfeasible, given the fractured nature of military power in Thailand. Yai himself liked to repeat that the pineapple eyes will not work because there was no pineapple to start with, no unified and structured core of the military surveillance in the country, but rather a variety of actors, each with their own agenda, that would, on the long run, break apart and crumble state power again and again. This instability and disunity, however, did not mean that collaborations, such as the ones proposed to the AMTT, could do bear fruits, quite the contrary. As Michael Herzfeld has shown, in fact, it is precisely the disunity of the nation-state that creates wide room for citizens' maneuver in it and ultimately grants its survival (Herzfeld 1997). This seemed to be the case for the post-protest cooperation between the AMTT and the ISOC that, with all its potential fragilities, succeeded in granting the army a less violent response to their dispersal and the association a powerful ally in their struggle with influential people. Different was the results of the collaboration between the association and Abhisit's government which played out on a longer time-frame and eventually revealed itself as a failure, both for the drivers and for the government.

Reconstructing Power and Legibility: the government's attempt.

Another meeting, even more striking than the one on May 4th, was held on July 7th 2010—a month and a half after the protest dispersal—at the Government House. If the ISOC had been one of the most farsighted state forces and understood the potential centrality of motorcycle taxi drivers in a situation of militarized confrontation, it did not take much longer for the government of Abhisit to realize that the desires that had brought the drivers, as well as many other urban workers, to participate in the Red Shirts' protest needed to be addressed if they wanted to remain in power and have a chance to win the next election. The estimated 24 million workers of the informal economy, who had a central role both in Thaksin's electoral

success in the early 200s and in the Red Shirts' mobilization, became the government's main objective and this meeting was a first attempt to listen to their demands and outline new policies to address them.

The AMTT leaders' day started at the ISOC offices where they convened to meet with Sun. The young officer welcomed us in an entertainment room at the basement of the military base, where a huge flat TV broadcasted British soccer. After a couple of hours lounging and drinking whisky—which revealed the familiarity which the leaders had developed with the ISOC—Sun went away to dress in full uniform and gave us an appointment at the Government House. There, after getting our IDs checked, we were conducted into a large meeting room with long wooden tables arranged at horseshoe. Once again, the caliber of the people present was surprising.

At the end of the table sat Sathit Wongnongtoey, a minister who had emerged since the protest as Abhisit's close aid and that many people saw as a rising star of the Democrat Party. On the right side, Thanom Onketpol, who had been present at the May 4th meeting as a representative of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and had since been transferred to the Government House and kept in charge of dealing with motortaxi drivers,[174] chatted with four assistants and the head of the Bangkok Metropolitan Police. On the left side, sat a group of 12 motorcycle taxis' leaders—among which Yai, Lek, and Lerm—and Sun, the ISOC officer who had accompanied them. While in the previous meeting the ISOC was the real host, in this one it was the government to reach out to the drivers with the purpose of reconstructing a façade of unity and popular support that the protest had smashed into pieces. If the Red Shirts revealed the army's inability to control its territory and citizens, they had hammered a bigger nail into the government coffin. Even if it had managed to survive the mobilization, Abhisit was seen as too weak-willed by the Yellow Shirts

[174] As we saw Thanom, who had been during Thaksin's government in charge of taxis and motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, was present also at the meeting with the ISOC. As Yai told me: "The government wanted the mass of motorcycle taxis to be on their side, so they brought Thanom. Not only Thanom, they took the BMA's projects that dealt with the motorcycle taxis and made it their own to make the motorcycle taxis belong to the government. It is like that. [He] was taken when the Red Shirt matters just ended and given a job in the Prime Minister's Office to work on solving the motorcycle issues."

and as bloodthirsty by the Red Shirts and largely unable to accommodate popular demands. With an election coming up in the following year, the government needed to rebuild a semblance of power and garner popular support. This meeting was a step in that direction and inaugurated a series of gathering between the government and members of social groups that had been, in Sathit own admission, previously neglected by the government.

Even if the objective was clearly stated at the beginning of the meeting, an unspoken tension in the room was clear in the paradoxical mix of people gathered: three of the drivers present, in fact, had been district organizers for the Red Shirts' protest, and extremely active during the violent final phase around the Klong Toey area; one other was the personal guard to Veera Musikapong, one of the Red Shirts' leaders who were now in prison; Sathit had been a vocal supporter of an armed resolution and, as Minister of Communication, had played a central role in the propaganda machine that presented the Red Shirts as terrorists; and finally Sun represented the very army that had dispersed and killed dozens of protesters. Less than two months after the dispersal they all sat in the same room, exchanging pleasantries and discussing the drivers' problems, demands, and expectations with surprising candor.

The meeting initiated with the introductions typical of formal reunions in Thailand but rapidly moved to the core of the discussion. Sathit opened the floor and talked about the government interest in creating a more comprehensive plan for the informal economy and referred to the present political instability as a consequence of difficulties among many groups in the country, including motorcycle taxi drivers. The government, he declared, wanted now to become more involved in solving their problems, from the registration of new drivers who had emerged since 2003 to setting up regular parking spaces for them, from protecting the drivers from influential people to controlling the price of the drivers' vests around the city. Lerm, the president of the AMTT, responded denouncing the involvement of state officials, be them police or army or local politicians, in their business and asking the government to intervene to control its own bureaucracy. Rapidly the discussion took off: the drivers voiced their concerns with the growth of influential people's interference in their activities, and the government voiced their preoccupation with the political

instability that had taken over the country. All was discussed around the idea of "rūam mū" (join hands) between the government and the AMTT, with the purpose of resolving the drivers' problems with influential people and showing the government's concern with their pleas.

Even if the meeting seemed to pose the bases for a close collaboration between the government and the drivers, immediately after the end of the meeting the drivers' leaders had no illusion that the government sudden interest in their wellbeing was other than cutting them off the Red Shirts. As months went by, in fact, it became increasingly clear that the Democrats were not interested in getting the drivers involved in the drafting of their new policies but rather believed that to win over the votes of the informal economy they needed to distribute 'hand-out,' as they claimed Thaksin had done before.

A think-tank, headed by Sangsid Phiriyarangsan, an expert of informal economy and corruption in Thailand, and a former member of the Yellow Shirts, was created to draft a new social security platform for members of the urban informal economy, which also included the drivers. While the committee contacted experts and researchers of informal economy, including me, they remain tepid toward involving the actual workers in the process and showed little interest toward allowing the leaders of the AMTT to collaborate in the drafting.[175] Nonetheless a full proposal was redacted in five weeks and submitted to the government for further consideration. In the following weeks the result were condensed around 9 measures that the government decided to put forward. These included: expansion of the social security system to 24 million Thais operating in the informal economy *(nok rabob)* which included the cost for health care, death insurance (which could be collected after a minimum of 15 years of payment), and a retirement scheme; easier access to credit for taxi drivers, motorcycle taxi drivers, and street vendors for a minimum loan of 5000 baht at low interest rate; new registration for motorcycle taxi drivers which first re-register the drivers who were formalizes in 2003 by Thaksin's government and then expand the process to the new drivers who have entered the system since; allocation of 20,000 new areas for street vendors in Bangkok with the purpose of making these places into tourist attractions; control of the cost of oil; free electricity to an estimated 9 million

[175] I proposed to the think-tank to include the drivers directly rather than using me as a go-between but this proposal was refused and they insisted to have me present the drivers' demands rather than listening to them directly. As a result, together with the AMTT drivers we drafted a proposal for the reform which I delivered but that was largely ignored in the final policy.

households who consume less than 90 units; reduction of the cost of animal feed; increased transparency in the trade of agricultural product; and increased security and crime control.

As discussions around the designed interventions spread in the public opinion, many of the drivers watched with interest the new reform that seemed, on paper, to mark a shift into Abhisit's attitude toward lower-income population, and the drivers in particular. Following the road traced by Thaksin seemed to give his government an opportunity to win over new votes. As Yai told me:

> Some part of the motorcycle taxis will switch side, if the government delivers what they have said. First, the loan. Second, organizing and providing better welfare such as the social security benefits. If the government provides such welfares, they will change their mind. Everyone wants good livelihood. Thaksin gave us the vests but he didn't give everything, he gave only the vest and we had to demand other things ourselves. When it comes to this government, they have to continue. When the project was good you have to build on it. If they do not continue, they will lose the elections. I tell you, if it is me, I will switch sides. It is true this policy already belongs to Thaksin. He was one of a pioneer. But many other projects do not exist yet. If this government carries on his work, we have to give credit to them.

This platform could provide a retirement scheme, easier access to loans, as well as registering once again the drivers operating and therefore offer a hand to the drivers in their fight with influential people. Yet, at the same time, it allowed the government to bring motorcycle taxi drivers, who had posed a significance challenge to their power during the protest because of their invisibility, back into a system of visibility and increasing their legibility to state forces. While AMTT leaders understood the double implications of this platform, they remained hopeful of its potential benefits.

Such hopes, and chances for Abhisit's government to gain support, were lost when the new policy was presented on January 9th 2011. Under the name of *Prachawiwat* (progress of the people), the new scheme was revealed to the public wrapped in a white box with a light blue ribbon: Abhisit's New Year "gift" to the

Thai population.[176] This rhetoric was received with scorn and disappointment by many of the drivers, and particularly the members of the AMTT. They all agreed that the package proposed by the Thai government did take a step toward addressing the problems of inequality and access in Thai society that were voiced by the Red Shirts' protesters, and pushed the struggle over labor security in Thailand a step forward and it pushes the on-going path toward. However, the conceptual framework in which these steps were taken confirmed the drivers' view that Abhisit government failed to understand their demands and to respect their participation in the political system and their ability to become actors of politics. While under Thaksin, social provisions were part of a larger plan to foster low-income economies, recognize their significance, and freeing their desires for commodities, services, and economic entrepreneurship, these interventions were devoid from any other discourse other than a gift from the government to its people. The government intervention, in this sense, was not presented as an extension of citizens' rights, or even as a protection of their economic activities—as Thaksin has done—but rather as a gift, delivered by a paternalistic boss to its pleading subjects.

Such approach was considered unacceptable by many of the drivers. A "gift," the drivers understood clearly, is always involved into a circuit of reciprocity that positions the giver as hierarchical superior to the receiver (Godelier 1999; Mauss 1954).[177] Such dynamic, by which the gift puts the received in debt and therefore calls for another gift to re-balance and further the social relationship, is very common in contemporary Thailand where small acts of gift-giving are an essential part of daily life, office work, and new acquaintances. Often, in fact, Thai friends have told me with puzzlement stories of foreigners who fail to fulfill this call to reciprocity and were therefore seen as "rude" or not "generous". In the context of the post-protest *Prachawiwat* scheme, this gave the government's "gift" an eerie tone. Framing this policy as a present took the functioning of a government out of the political arena. Withdrawing from an expanding discussion, especially during the Red Shirts' mobilization, over rights and demands such presentation put political action

[176] For a video of the presentation see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bgFHQuC7U9A

[177] An example of this dynamic in international politics that left many observers puzzled, was the refusal of India, after the 2004 tsunami, to receive "economic help" from Western powers, particularly the United States. Proudly, the Indian government, worried by the position that aid will put them in, not only declined the "gift" but also offered economic aid to other affected areas, especially Sri Lanka. Despite the destroyed homes of many citizens the Indian government refused to be put in the position of a receiver and showed its strength and autonomy, framing itself as a regional power, a giver.

back into the realm of paternalistic relation and established hierarchies, to which the Red Shirts and many of the drivers had revolted.

As Wud, a member of the AMTT put it: "Why should I be happy receiving a gift paid by my own taxes? Do they want me also thank them? Being part of the social security is our right. I am registered, I pay taxes and now I should receive a gift from the government? The same government that killed us few months ago? How should I thank them?" This ironic question illuminates the other aspect of gift-giving that made the drivers wary of this formulation: reciprocity. The drivers understood well that what was asked from them in exchange was electoral support, and regularly mock such a clumsy attempt. "Do they really think that we will now support them?" Adun laugh sitting at his station.

> This is just an example of the way this government thinks. They see us as stupid people who look only for hand-outs, they can't buy us but they still believe we are up for sale. […] The welfare state does not even cover our family, what should I do with my daughters? And it's not enough, the *prachawiwat* only looks at Bangkok. Yes, it can make our life better in the city but what about our village, what about agriculture. This are the Democrats, they think this country is just Bangkok. It is nothing new. These people have been convinced that the whole of Thailand is Bangkok for a long time. They thought always that we supported Thaksin because he was giving us something, as if we don't understand politics. But, wait, let's see what they can do at the election. They have no chance. They can keep their gift if they want.

Many other drivers agreed with Adun and saw in Abhisit's smiling gift a condensation of the problem with his government and the *ammat*: an inability to accept the political demands of the population; a blindness toward rural Thailand; and a dismissal of its political forces. While Adun's analysis was echoed by many drivers, his electoral previsions proved true a few months later when, toward the end of my fieldwork, Yingluck Shinawatra—Thaksin's sister—was elected the leader of the Peua Thai (for Thai) Party and, on July 3rd 2011, won the second one-party majority in the history of Thailand, under the unequivocal slogan "Thaksin Thinks, Peua Thai Does."

The fragility of Abhisit's power, which had emerged during the Red Shirts protest and he had tried to repair with the *Prachawiwat* scheme, was once again revealed. As an effect, a Shinawatra was back in power, five years after the coup that removed Thaksin in 2006. In these five years, both the perceived impartiality of

the royal institution and the unstoppable domination of the Thai army were put into question, living their power weaker than ever before. Once again, besides the attempt to readjust, power and the Thai state were revealed in its disunity and fragility. A fragility that called for another reconfiguration that has been dominating Thailand since 2011 and that entails an agreement among the Thai army, the monarchy, and the government of Yingluck to bring back the country to stability and erase, without assigning responsibilities, its tumultuous last years.

Rearranged the structure, found the weakness.

In this chapter, I have analyzed the attempts, by the ISOC, the AMTT, and Abhisit to reorganize and mend the fragilities of their power that were revealed by the protest and its turbulent aftermaths. All of these attempts however remained, in a way or another, incomplete and configured new fragilities, with which the country and its motorcycle taxi drivers will have to deal in the future years. With this analysis of the fragilities engrained into the readjustment of state power after the 2010 protest and the drivers adoption of the same meandering mobility that organized their presence in the city to zigzag through the Thai political system, this dissertation went full circle. In the first part I showed how the political-economic configuration of the Thai capital, its capitals, and labor organized the phenomenology of the drivers' presence in the city. In the second part I explored how their political mobilization was both a product of their everyday experiences and adopted them as a tactic of struggle, particularly adopting their mobility and invisibility as tools of mobilization. After showing how these two dimensions remain inter-locked and mutually created and challenge one another, in this chapter, to conclude, I have showed how power operate by attempting to control and dominate both dimensions of social life but remain condemned, in this process, to constantly produce its own potential fragilities. As ghostly shadow, power extends over everything without ever fully covering anything and wherever it does not reach lays the seeds of its dismissal. Much like the urban structure in which the drivers operate, much like their aspirations and the hegemonic project to control them through the discourse of freedom, the power game remain, even in its readjustments, intrinsically opened to contradictions and

contingencies, fragilities and dismissals, the same that challenged the drivers' everyday life in the city, driving through the urban maze balanced on two tiny pieces of rubber.

Conclusion: So What?

When I started my dissertation my advisor asked me why someone conducting research in Melanesia should be interested in my work. As a conclusion to my dissertation I go back to that query and pose a larger question that academic analysis, in my view, should always ask itself: we have learn something new about a specific context, so what? In attempting to answer this question, more than a conclusion I offer the incipit of a theory in the original sense of the term: a heuristic project larger than this dissertation, both conceptually and ethnographically, that emerged, as any theory should, from a concrete journey—in this case among motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok.

In each chapter I have attempted to analyze this ethnographic experience and a semi-organized theoretical reflection has taken shape as I progressed. It seems useful, therefore, to conclude my exploration by organizing the analysis in a more systematic form, one that emerges from the specific context yet engages with larger questions and processes that can easily be overlooked and reduced by a strictly ethnographic gaze. I decided to provide such analysis at the end of this text, and not at the beginning as most anthropological texts do, to render justice to the process through which such reflections emerge. It seemed therefore sensible to present it after the rest of the material as a way to reflect over it and push it into new conceptual and ethnographic investigations. In this sense, I do not aim at developing a formal theory, which would supposedly be applied outside this specific context, but rather after providing a general view of the interaction between logics of capital, everyday experiences, and political relations in the specific context of urban Thailand I propose to expand my observations to provide a starting point for future research that may investigate similar dynamics across the globe, eliciting or disproving such similarities.

These three lines of inquiry—logics of capital, everyday experience, and political relations—have dominated social sciences in the last decades yet have often remained separated and, at times, have generated opposing and conflicting theoretical reflections. Marxism has often reduced everyday life and political

relations to the logic of capitals and its contradictions; Phenomenology has elevated everyday life to the realm of an irreducible universal, frequently underestimating the other two aspects; post-structuralism has expanded the realm of political relations so widely to make every other consideration secondary and, in the process, leaving no space for political engagement. While many scholars have attempted and managed to live in between these three schools—and have generated invaluable products from this position—this has been largely done by dodging and resolving their contradictions rather than analyzing concretely how the logics capital, the demands and necessity of everyday life, and the desires of politics are closely entangled and in constant tension and reorganization. This is not to say that I am alone in this project. Rather I follow the road paved by Henri Lefebvre's trilogy of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, a road that, for a reason or the other, have fallen out of fashion but which departed from the orthodoxy of political-economic analysis and historical materialism by both questioning and incorporating aspects of phenomenological and post-structural analysis. Lefebvre, similarly to what I have done in this dissertation, proposes to develop such an approach by starting from an analysis and a critique of the everyday as the territory where structures, processes, and practices meet and question each other. In the first volume of this forgotten masterpiece, the French philosopher stated:

> The method of Marx and Engels consists precisely in a search for the link which exists between what men think, desire, say and believe for themselves and what they are, what they do. This link always exists. It can be explored in two directions. On the one hand, the historian or the man of action can proceed from ideas to men, from consciousness to being—i.e. toward practical, everyday reality—bringing the two into confrontation and thereby achieving *criticism of ideas by action and realities*. This is the direction, which Marx and Engels nearly always followed in everything they wrote; and it is the direction which critical and constructive method must follow initially if it is to take a demonstrable shape and achieve results. […] But it is equally possible to follow this link in another direction, taking real life as the point of departure in an investigation of how the ideas which express it and the forms of consciousness which reflect it emerge. The link, or rather the network of links between the two poles will prove to be complex. It must be unraveled, the thread must be carefully followed. In this way we can arrive at a *criticism of life by ideas* which in a sense extends and completes the first procedure. (Lefebvre 2008, Vol I: 145)

In this dissertation I attempted to unraveling this network of links among motorcycle taxi drivers in Thailand and by proposing a critique of ideas (such as urban development, freedom, neoliberalism, desires, and power)

through a focus on lived experience and a critique of lived experience through an analysis of the logics of capital and political economic relations. It is precisely in this double tension that political desires, consciousness, and mobilizations emerge and that power reveals all of its fragility and contradictions. The challenges of such an approach are multiple and analyzing everyday life, and in my specific case everyday urban mobility, as a bundle of practices and representations (Cresswell 2006),[178] entails—as Lefebvre acknowledged—a tiring and careful work of exploring multiple contradictions and contingencies in the relation among structures, processes, and practices.[179] Chapter after chapter I have attempted to reveal such predicaments: those that created Bangkok as a palimpsest onto which the drivers' everyday lives are inscribed; the contradiction and contingencies that animate their daily mobilities and its risks; those that are ingrained in their role of mediators between the city and the countryside; those ingrained in the discourse of freedom that motivates them to take up this job; the contradictions and contingencies that the drivers experience in their expectations, dreams, and desires that in turn build their political consciousness; and finally those inherent to power, whether in the form of state forces, their control over territory and citizens, or of social movements, political organizations, and their negotiations with those forces.

In order to follow this line of thought, however, an updating of the analysis of the logics of capitalism was necessary. As I have shown, in fact, contemporary capitalism is largely—with few significant exceptions—beyond the industrial era in which Marx based his theories. With this I do not mean that industrial production is irrelevant to today's capitalism or to deny a significant amount of political, economic, environmental, and social energies revolve around relations of production but rather than the locus of capitalist accumulation has shifted and that the creation of plus-value globally is now firmly away from industrial production and the factory floor. No statistic is clearer in marking this transformation than the evolution of the relation between financial turnover and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the United

[178]Tim Cresswell argued that "consider, then, these three aspects of mobility: the fact of physical movement: getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement. In practice these elements of mobility are unlikely to be easy to untangle. They are bound up with one another. The disentangling that follows is entirely analytical and its purpose is to aid theory construction." (Cresswell 2009: 19)

[179] I choose this terminology because it implies both internal tensions—that generate contradictions—and external predicaments—that configure continuous contingencies.

States. If in 1970 the trading in U.S. stock markets moved $136.0 billion, or 13.1 percent of U.S. GDP, in 1990 this market worth $1.671 trillion, or 28.8 percent of U.S. GDP in 1990 and by the year 2000, trading in U.S. equity markets was $14.222 trillion, becoming the 144.9 percent of GDP only to grow more until the 2008 crisis. In other words, financial capital is now bigger than the "real economy."

This shift has opened a new phase of global capitalism, which the crisis revealed in all its contingencies and contradictions. As David Harvey has argued, the global economic crisis of 1973 was solved with a "spatial fix," namely the inclusion of new territories into the capitalistic system by financializing growing economies and out-sourcing production around the globe, increasingly in China. Such a spatial fix seems now to be approaching its full extent as more and more production concentrates in few hot spots, most notably in East Asia and increasingly in China. Through this fix the cost of labor is being reduced, under unbearable job conditions, to a bare minimum. As an effect, the creation of plus-value out of the production processes, which has oriented Marxist readings of the organization of everyday life and political relations, has significantly decreased, as Marx had predicted: production offers few roads for more accumulation. This, however, did not bring capitalism to an end but rather as global production costs are approaching, and at times, surpassing the minimum cost of the reproduction of labor, capital accumulation has to move somewhere else and, as the growth of financial markets reveals, it is increasingly moving toward the financial and services sector and became more involved in exchange and circulation of "fictitious capital" than in the production of "real capital" (Harvey 2012; Marx, et al. 1906).

To describe this transformation, scholars have constructed the concept post-Fordism, a system defined—as I showed—precisely by the break out of lines of production and factory labor toward a service-oriented world, dominated by flexible labor and entrepreneurial forces. This change potentially has massive effects on our understanding of the logics of capital, its relation to everyday life and political relations. First of all the concept of class has experienced a deep questioning as its classical definition that individuates in relations of production its discriminating factor came under review. New definitions have emerged that see consumption, or larger dispositions, as determining aspects. Similarly, instead of the proletarianization of the

bourgeois expected by Marx we are assisting to the "entepreneuralization" of workers around the world, increasingly understood as "free" economic agents and the expansion of capitalist logic from the working hours into every aspect of our lives, from relationships to politics. The life trajectories of motorcycle taxis in Thailand offer concrete examples of this transition from the factory floor to the informal service economy, with all the perils and advantages of their "free" life. Plenty more examples are available both in Thailand and all around the globe, from the flexibilization of labor to the expansion of self-employment. While such implications have been noted, one aspect remains largely unexplored. If in industrial capitalism the location of politics was often individuated in relations of production, and specifically the factory floor where plus-value was extracted, where is politics moving in this new configuration? While studies of social movement have argued that identity politics has been the new issue, I add that mobility and its operators are also becoming significant sites, actors, and strategies of political mobilization. Before I analyze the hypothesis that emerged from the specific context of my dissertation, I need to reply to two more questions: if this transformation of capitalism away from production is happening globally, why is Thailand a significant angle from which to analyze it? And why is studying motorcycle taxi drivers useful for these explorations? The reason for both choices, I argue, is historical.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Southeast Asian economies lived through a period of unprecedented growth, led by a massive influx of foreign capital and a realignment of national economies toward export-oriented industrialization. GDP grew in Thailand, in the decade between 1986 and 1996, faster than in any other nation of the world. In these ten years, the country experienced an average growth rate of 9.5 percent per year, with the peak at 13.3 percent in 1988. Simultaneously, the volume of exported goods and services rose at a yearly average of 14.8 percent, with the peak at 26.1 percent in that same year (Pasuk and Baker 1996). Such growth was accompanied by a significant improvement in quality of life, life-expectancy, literacy rates, access to commodities, and services for the Thai population (Pasuk and Baker 2002). As Stiglitz has argued, until the economic downturn of 1997, "East Asia had not only grown faster and done better at reducing poverty than any other region of the world, developed or less developed, but it had also been more stable" (Stiglitz 2002: 90).While this celebratory tones forget the harsh inequality and exploitation behind this

economic expansion, it was remarkable how Thailand became the champion of a model of development that systematically ignored the suggestions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the recipes of the Washington Consensus to liberalize its economy and reduce state interventions.

Rather than adopting the market-driven and anti-state approach proposed by these institutions, the East Asian expansion was driven by strong states that regulated the relations between capital and citizens, advocated gradual liberalization of markets, and centrally planned industrial, social, and monetary policy. After 1993, however, Thailand started to follow the IMF suggestions and liberalized national capital market with the belief that this measure would help its economy grow even faster. Soon the country became a trial ground for the neo-liberal restructuring that has since been pushed around the globe by International Financial Institutions (IFI) and the US Treasury.

The effects in Thailand were tripartite: international capital flooded the country; national companies borrowed heavily from international markets; and the national banking system was de-regularized leaving its actors free to invest in whatever sector of the economy they wanted—particularly real estate—rather than having to follow government directives. Rapidly the Thai economy inflated, new capitals entered the country, and real estate became an enormously profitable market, apparently confirming the IMF's expectations. Inside this bubble, however, the conditions for a burst were emerging. The new international capital was highly volatile and could get out quickly if the country experienced economic stagnation; real estate could remain a profitable speculative investment even after the demand for its products withered; international loans in foreign currency could grew overnight as they remained subdued to changes in the baht's exchange rates. All of these potential risks became reality in 1997.

On May 14th and 15th 1997, following a stagnation in the housing market, the Thai baht was hit by massive speculative attacks. Driven by the facility of moving capitals in and out of Thailand and the increasing instability of the national economy, this speculation became the spark that ignited the Asian financial crisis. After some resistance from the Thai government, interest rates were increased drastically and the baht devalued rapidly. The currency, left free to fluctuate, lost more than half of its value in a week.

Suddenly most Thai companies that had borrowed in foreign currencies saw their debt burden double. In a few days, a significant number of these economic players went into bankruptcy. Thailand's booming economy came to a halt amid extensive layoffs in finance, real estate, industry, and construction.[180]

Financial markets, industrial production, urban change, internal migration, consumerism: everything seemed to stop (Bello, et al. 1998a; Kasian 2002; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Warr 2005). All around the country unfinished buildings, vacant structures, and foreclosed homes became the symbols of this crisis. At the same time, laid-off migrant workers reacted either by returning to agricultural land, which had always offered a security net in times of economic recession, or by inducing a massive informalization of labor (Amin 1994). Many Thai workers, in fact, drifted away from manufacturing jobs toward more insecure, informal, and service-oriented occupations. Among the occupations that received those workers was driving motorcycle taxis whose numbers expanded, as we saw, from 37,500 in 1994 to 109,056 in 2003 and became fundamental to the process of circulation of people and commodities so central to post-Fordism capitalism in the Thai capital.

While different from the recent global economic crisis in its monetary component, the 1997 crisis in Thailand followed an uncannily similar progression to the 2008 global financial crisis. First, the crisis was the product of liberalized and unregulated capital markets, particularly of the accumulation of toxic debt by companies and private citizens who over-leveraged their assets. Second, it revealed itself with a crash of the housing market that had received a large chunk of the monetary fluidity that had flooded the country. Third, the response to the crisis was a bailout of financial institutions and big corporate players who had caused the crisis, or at least ignored its signs, together with fiscal austerity measures that reduced employment, access to credit, job security, and established rights for citizens. Workers, then as now, had no choice but to de-regularize their labor, accept more flexible positions, and drift toward service economies. As in 2008, when pushed in front of the choice between supporting real earners or unscrupulous financial institutions, the state decided to support the latter, abandoning the former. As a consequence, the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand—much as happened in the 2008 financial meltdown in the United States with its bailouts and the

[180] The number of general unemployed grew from 697,900 during the dry season of 1997 to 1,479,300 in the dry season of 1998. (ibid: 7)

austerity measures forced by the BCE around Europe since 2009—strangled the country's productive economies and sacrificed them on the altar of financial stability. The crisis, in other words, provided in the short run an unprecedented opportunity—as it is happening today in Southern Europe—for the expansion of a neo-liberal agenda and a reduction of national economy sovereignty.

Even if the crisis was ostensibly brought to be by the US Treasury and the IMF's suggestion to liberalize capital markets, "the collapse of a number of East and Southeast Asian economies in 1997 was seen by many within the neoliberal camp as cutting the ground from under their opponents and signifying the superiority of markets over states" (Robison and Hewison 2005: 188). The same organizations that had praised the growth of East Asian economies suddenly started to "condemn them as 'failed' cases of 'crony capitalism" (Beeson 2005: 204). As Milton Friedman had theorized, economic crisis offered unprecedented opportunities for economic restructuring. "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs," he argued "the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable" (Friedman 1962: vii-ix). When the 1997 crisis hit, the neo-liberal ideas championed by Friedman were alive and well and this economic downturn provided an opportunity for apologists of market neoliberalism, principally the International Financial Institutions (IFI), to dismiss state-led capitalism and argue that state's interventions in the market were behind the down-turn. A turn toward free-markets, they argued, was now "politically inevitable" and the IMF started to push the sinking economies to conform to their credo. Thailand, where the crisis began, became the main trial ground for this free-market shock therapy (Klein 2007), the same therapy that is today being administered to Southern European economies. The results were disastrous.

Thailand entered the International Monetary Fund recovery program in August 1997. In the following months the country accumulated US$ 17 billion in loans from different sources,[181] and initiated a season of structural adjustments that involved a retreat of the state from direct investments, a push toward

[181] The lenders were Japan $4 billion; the central banks of Australia, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore $1 billion each; the central banks of South Korea and Indonesia $0.5 billion each; the World Bank $1.5 billion and the Asian Development Bank $1.2 billion. Since then, Japan has taken up the contributions of South Korea and Indonesia.

macro-economic prudence, deregulation, privatization and liberalization.[182] While the government headed by Chavalit Yongchaiyudh tried to react by introducing a mild form of capital control to prevent foreign capitals from abandoning the sinking Thai economy, the IMF strongly opposed such measures and cornered Chavalit into retracting them. International capital, free to leave, fled the country as the national economy sank under the weight of the money drain. While neighboring Malaysia refused the IMF's diktat and limited the out-flow of international capital, starting its road to recovery, the Thai economy sunk, carrying Chavalit with it. His government fell in October 1997 and Chuan Leekpai took office in early 1998, with every intention of facilitating the IMF's solutions to the crisis.

The new government was basically a vane, caught in the wind of the IMF, whose program involved sky-rocking interest rates, cutting government spending—in particular social services—and increasing taxes with the purpose of stabilizing the national financial markets, precisely the recipe being adopted today in Southern Europe. This approach included also "structural reforms" that entailed a retreat of the state from interventions in the economy and a further opening to foreign capital, which rapidly conquered the national banking system and significantly increased its shares in the Thai economy (Pasuk and Baker 2008). The plan guaranteed that foreign lenders would be repaid but it proved disastrous for the country and its economic sovereignty. As Stiglitz has shown, "the breadth of the conditions meant that the countries accepting Fund aids had to give up a large part of their economic sovereignty" (Stiglitz 2002: 96).

The loss of sovereignty experienced in Thailand and across Southeast Asia, however, provoked a strong reaction to the measures by national forces. Local public opinion started to claim that the crisis and these responses were the result of a purposeful plan by the United States to destabilize the growing Asian economies through capital speculation and IMF's interventions. Such discourse became dominant among the Thai public and the crisis, which initiated well before the IMF took over national economic policies, became popularly known as "*wikrit IMF"* (IMF crisis). In all truth, since the Fund's intervention the Thai economy did plunge at an unprecedented rate. The national GPD fell by 7.9 percent in 1997, l2.3 percent in 1998, and

[182] These solutions were outlined in "letters of intent," which were negotiated between the Thai government and the IMF, but over which the Fund retained veto-power (Siamwalla 2000). This power was applied forcefully to reject the introduction of forms of capital control to prevent foreign capitals to abandon the sinking Thai economy.

7 percent in the first half of 1999. By 2000, three years after the crisis, Malaysia, ignoring IMF's suggestions and strengthening capital control, had solidly recovered. On the contrary, Thailand had followed IMF prescription to the letter and "was still in recession, […] little corporate restructuring, and close to 40 percent of the loans still non-performing" (Stiglitz 2002:127). As a consequence, the post-1997 crisis political and economic landscape in Thailand started to move away from neoliberal orthodoxy and toward new forms of regulated economy that we have seen emerging in the last years around the globe, especially out of South America, and that scholars have analyzed as post-neoliberal (Macdonald and Ruckert 2009).

By the year 2000, it was clear that the government of Chuan Leekpai had lost its popular support, not only for its failure to deliver economic recovery but also for allowing and supporting policies that were largely perceived as an international attack to Thai political and economic self-determination. The attempt to deepen neoliberalism in Thailand had been a failure, both economically and socially. Neoliberalism and de-regulatory policies became a political rotting corpse and both sides of the Thai political spectrum tried to take distance from IMF policies and previous government that had endorsed them. As Friedrich Hayek, the first president of the Mount Pèlerin Society—the think-tank behind the formulation of neo-liberalism—had argued, the success of any economic theory is predicated upon the acceptance of a social philosophy that "would become persuasive to others only if [it was] connected to a worldview that they found compelling" (Burgin 2012: 51). In post-crisis Thailand a neoliberal world view of free markets and rational individual actors, was simply not compelling—economically, socially, and electorally. As Jim Glassman has shown,

> when this [vision] contributed to further economic decline, popular opposition to neoliberalism crystallised, bringing together a heterogeneous array of forces ranging from [social] groups (opposed to specific government development policies) and state enterprise employees (opposed to privatisation) to business leaders (opposed to forced closure and restructuring of firms) and some government officials (Glassman 2010: 1311).

This array of forces was the electoral base for Thaksin Shinawatra's first election as Prime Minister in 2001. Once in power, his government "opposed neoliberal orthodoxy […] and held the motley assemblage of social forces together through extensive 'populist' spending programmes. It is crucial to note that Thaksin's policies were anti-neoliberal precisely in that they challenged neoliberal preferences for minimal state spending on

domestic business and the poor. They were not antagonistic to trade liberalisation and the like […]. While much reviled by neoliberals, Thaksin's populist programmes constituted some of the post-Cold-War Thai state's first major—and, arguably, long overdue—ventures into the provision of basic forms of social welfare appropriate to an industrial society, such as national health insurance" (Glassman 2010: 1312). While Thaksin distanced himself from orthodox neo-liberalism, he also, as I showed, speeded up the expansion of post-Fordist capitalism, pushing for a capitalization and financialization of the low-income economy and a flexibilization of labor in the country, mostly in the service sectors.

In this sense, post-Thaksin Thailand, in which my fieldwork took place, provides an invaluable observational point from which to explore the effects of a neo-liberal economic crisis and the resulting restructuring of capital, everyday life, and political relations. Such case, in fact, offers an optic through which to observe this transformation and steal a glance into one of a potential future—whether utopic or dystopic—of post-neoliberal crisis capitalism, a future which may be emerging also in other contexts around the globe. If we want to study this configuration in a post-neoliberal crisis context—not just in macro-economic terms but also in the complex configuration between the emerging logics of contemporary capitalism and the restructuring of everyday life and political relations—Thailand offers an invaluable entry point, one that, with significant exceptions (Bello, et al. 1998b; Bello and Docena 2004; Stiglitz 2002), has been overlooked.

Why then focus on motorcycle taxi drivers, the phatic laborers who allow the city to move? My answer here is partial—as part of the reason was just my own interest—and mostly comes from the new centrality that circulation and exchange have assumed in academic analysis, public debate, and post-Fordist capitalism. As I have shown, the rhetoric of flows has taken an increasingly central stage in the last twenty years, pushing for a "mobile turn" (Urry 2007) that has questioned our understanding of social life, its structures, processes, and practices. Studies of migration, transnationalism, media, and globalization have put mobility at the center of academic discussion as well as our daily conversations (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000; Friedman 2005; Stiglitz 2002). Urban studies, in particular, have recognized its importance to the

historical development and everyday practices of capitalist cities that are the product of movement and fluxes (Castells and Pflieger 2008; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2006).

In this debate, however, three aspects have been largely overlooked. First, as the focus on mobility became more prominent, many observers tended to focus on flows as steady and unhampered processes (Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999). Categories like free market, open borders, smooth communication, or fluid movement dominated public discourses. In response, other scholars started noticing that, for the people and spaces that remain outside neuralgic links of global capital, markets are seldom free, borders are rarely fully open, communication is often interrupted (Massey 1993; Ferguson 1999), and movement, as people living in Bangkok experience every day, is rarely fluid but more often based on stop and go, friction, and stasis (Bird 1993; Caldeira 2000; Tsing 2005). Both reflections, whether with celebratory or condemnatory tones, have assumed a progressive narrative of capitalist expansion that pushes toward an incremental fluidity and speed of flows, at least for the "winners" of global capital. Such vision, however, have failed to reflect on the multiple and oscillating rhythms of these flows, defined as the patterns of movement through time. Once we focus on these rhythms, as I have done in the dissertation, a different picture emerges, one in which flows are revealed both in their significance and intrinsic fragility while mobility and immobility stand in dialectic tension, as they did during the Red Shirts protests in 2010.

The second largely understudied aspect has been an exploration of the roles, demands, and struggles of the people who operate this mobility and modulate its rhythms. For this reason, it is significant to study the "phatic laborers" who, as we saw, "produce communicative channels that can transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value" (Elyachar 2010: 453) but often remain cut off from the full enjoyment of these channels. Even if excluded from the effects of their labor, these operators retain, as the role of motorcycle taxi drivers in street protests demonstrated, an ability to filter and sever the connections that they participate in creating and mediating**.** Nonetheless, when most scholars talk about the people who "control" flows, those operators are seldom named. State bureaucracies, jet-setters, business people, international elites come under scrutiny but financial operators, software developers, secretaries, and

transportation providers are often overlooked. What is mobility doing to them? How do they engage and make sense of it? How is their political participation reshaping the landscapes they operate in? These are questions that my dissertation attempted to answer in the case of motorcycle taxi drivers but remain open to further explorations.

The third often overlooked aspect is the rise, suggested by the drivers' mobilization in Thailand, of forms of political participation that adopt mobility, and immobility, as an organizational strategy and a political arena, whether virtual or physical. Such centrality of circulation as both the constitutive strength and objective of late capitalism seems to be confirmed by the increasing adoption of "spaces of flow" (Castells 2000) as central political arenas precisely for their neuralgic importance for the operations of capitalism and capitalist institutions. Internet activism during the Arab Spring, terrorist attacks on "spaces of circulation, consumption and communication" (Augé 1995: 98), flash mobs inside consumption hubs, pirate seizures of oil tankers passing off the Horn of Africa, closure of highways and ports in Italy, and the Occupy Wall Street movement are just some of the most emblematic examples of this developing trend that still remains largely under-theorized.

For all of these reasons, therefore, studying motorcycle taxi drivers, their mobility and mobilization in Thailand, offers a useful entry point to shed light on these three blind spots and reflect on the emerging configuration between the logics of contemporary capitalism, everyday life, and political relations, with all the contingencies and contradictions among their structures, processes, and practices. A question, however, remains: What is the effect of such an approach on social theory and where do we go from here? The rest of this conclusion will attempt to answer this question, proposing new paths of investigation.

First of all, my dissertation offers a revision of Marxist theory, not just in pushing for an incorporation of phenomenological attention into everyday practices and post-structuralist focus on discourse, but also by updating its analysis of political consciousness and mobilization in relation to shifting configurations of global capitalism. Marxist analysis of politics, as I showed, relied heavily on the idea that production remained the center of accumulation and therefore the space in which the contradictions of

capital were more evident. For this reason—this theory went—relations of production represent the ultimate locus of politics. In classical Marxist theory, as well as in parties that based their operations on it, the factory floors and the proletariat that filled them were the spaces and actors of politics, the locations and the agents of history. Such vision, however, is heavily questionable in post-1997 Thailand where, as I showed, new regimes of accumulation have increasingly taken distance from production while labor politics has lost centrality—as the difficulties experienced by the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) to mobilize drivers through a labor union demonstrates. The same is increasingly true for a variety of world economies, maybe with the notable exception of China. As a consequence, if we accept that in post-industrial and post-Fordist societies, production no longer occupies such central stage for the capitalist extraction of plus-value, a question arises: where did accumulation go, and where will politics be located?

My speculation, which remains a hypothesis that would require further investigation, is that the locus of accumulation has increasingly moved away from the factory floor toward the "market," at the same time an imaginary space and ephemeral actor that has emerged as the ultimate space of capitalism.[183] While on the factory floor the focus was mostly on production, in the market circulation and exchange acquire a new centrality. In it most of the plus-value is created in exchange, through the movement, circulation, and marketing of goods and financial products, and not in the act of production. This has generated a shift from relations of production to "relation of exchange" as the core of both capitalist accumulation and political mobilization. Exploitation and alienation, in this new configuration, acquire new forms. If in production alienation took the form of estrangement of the worker from its products and from itself, in exchange alienation—as my dissertation showed—becomes also estrangement from the desires of mobility, whether physical, economic, or social that the capitalist system presents yet whose fulfillment remain constrained by its structural relation and everyday practices. In this new configuration, in other words, capitalism is not satisfied with the exploitation of workers' labor but also exploits their desires to fuel its progression yet keep them outside its benefits. It is in this unique position to experience such a conundrum and react to it context

[183] Such reading is confirmed by the post-1970s obsession, mostly directed by the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, with "letting the market operate freely" or "managing the market."

that motorcycle taxi drivers, operators of the circulation of people, commodities, and discourses around Thailand, as well as creators of the channels through which these circulate, have emerged as central political actors both in Bangkok and across the landscape of the country. After all, if we accept that circulation and flows are both a characteristic and an objective of capitalism, as first described by Marx and then developed by David Harvey in the context of late capitalism, and that contemporary capitalism is more and more making exchange, and not production, the locus of extraction of plus value, then it should not come as a surprise that mobility and its operators, such as motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, are emerging as loci, and actors of political mobilization, as the Red Shirt protest suggests. Is this just a characteristic of the contemporary social movements in Thailand or is this part of a larger trend of political mobilization world-wide, as movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring seem to suggest? Are we in front of a significant shift in the location and strategies of political struggle or just of an extension of modalities? These questions, which my dissertation raises, offer the ground for further ethnographic and comparative research as well as for a re-theorization of social movements, that this text has only begun to sketch out.

Asking this question, and exploring the relation between mobility and mobilization in post-Fordist capitalism, does not only pushes us to reconsider the location and strategies of contemporary politics, but also invite us to develop a new way of analyzing social movements, a way that reconciles political-economic analysis with the exploration of both discourses and everyday practices. As I showed in the case of motorcycle taxi drivers in Thailand, in fact, each of these dimensions taken separately would fail to account for their roles in allowing the city to function, mediating its bodies, commodities, imaginaries, and desires, creating a political consciousness of their exclusion, and finally acting upon it through filtering or severing the same mobility they normally facilitate. In this sense, studying social movements historically through an analysis of its "infrastructure of mobilization" with spatial, organizational, discursive, and strategic components, instead of focusing on each one of these aspects separately, as social theorists often do, has allowed me to deepen the observation raised by scholars of New Social Movements (NSM). NSM theorists, in fact, have shown that "power operates not only by obvious repression or through visible institutions but also and even more effectively through the production of human subjectivities through the spaces and grammar of everyday life […] that are particular to postindustrial capitalism" (Abelmann 1996: 3). In this sense, I position myself in the path opened by Alain Touraine and his student Manuel Castells and consider contemporary political struggles to be always over a claim for a way of life in which actors, and not just unified classes or overarching apparatuses, play a role. Such claims, however, necessitate merging into collective discourses, organizations, and actions to acquire historical significance and challenge the hold of power. While both orthodox and critical Marxists, including Gramsci, have retained that such processes occur mostly in the sphere of consciousness and awareness (Tuðal 2009), I follow Lefebvre in reclaiming the centrality of habits and everyday practices in the creation of both structural relations and political mobilization. In so doing I surpass both New Social Movement approaches, such as the one I analyzed, and

Political Opportunity (PO) currents, such as the one championed by Charles Tilly (Tilly 1978; Tilly and Wood 2009), and propose a holistic investigation of political mobilization which analyzes the interplay between political-economic conditions, political discourse, and existing frameworks of action.

Are the drivers' mobilization and the Red Shirts protest around them, a product of political economic structure? Are they the products of discursive formations and apparatuses of governamentality? Are they the product of everyday practice? Rather than attempting to provide an answer, I followed the lead of Francesca Polletta and James Jasper and proposed an analysis that "avoids a priori assumptions about causal mechanisms and allows for a number of different relationships between cultural and discursive practices on the one hand, and legal, political, economic, and social structures on the other" (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285) in the specificity of the ethnographic context. In this sense, I questioned the primacy of one of these aspects over the others and attempted to reconcile multiple schools of thought. In such an analysis, while I questioned the post-structuralist obsession with discourses and history over material practices, strategies, and organizational forms, I also recognized the relevance of these social imaginaries to the operation of social movements such as the Red Shirts. While I challenged the idea that political-economic structures pre-dates a superstructure and an ideology, I however analyzed how such structures shape everyday life and mold its practices. While I disputed the primacy of experience and perception to "being in the world," I accepted that everyday life is central field in which structures, processes, and practices are solidifies, experimented, and challenged. In other words, rather than questioning the primacy of one component over the other, I analyzed their interaction through an ethnographic engagement with everyday life, as experienced by motorcycle taxi drivers. If we accept such a vision, therefore, it becomes clear that both purely political-economic analysis and purely phenomenological inquiries fail to account for the complexities of social life.

Here resides, I believe, the biggest contribution and challenge posed by my work. On one side, my project explored the historically determined political economic relations in order to understand the life paths, daily experience, political participation and position of the drivers in the urban system that extends from the core of Bangkok to the remote villages from where the drivers arrive. On the other, I was confronted daily with the lived experience of operating in these circuits and all the ways in which the phenomenological experience of the drivers and their perception of the city conformed and challenged their political-economic

position while structuring their consciousness as human beings, migrant men, and political actors. The decision to divide the dissertation in two parts accounts for these two aspects. In the first section, the everyday mobility of motortaxis was the focus. I explored the phenomenological dimension of riding through the city from a motorcycle seat. I looked at the symbiosis between drivers, their bikes, and the city. By analyzing how drivers bring the city into being as they carve channels through it and are in turn molded by the city's rhythms, I reflected on how political economic relations of exploitation are inscribed onto the body of the drivers. In the second section, I showed how this everyday mobility structures political mobilization. I analyzed the mutually constitutive nature of phenomenology and political-economy by exploring how everyday mobility generates political consciousness among the drivers. Finally, I revealed how this consciousness of political-economic inequality, in turn, morphed into political struggle and a transformation of everyday life during the Red Shirt protests in 2010.

The two sections thus form two parts of the picture: while the first showed the drivers' role in weaving together the city and facilitating the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas, the second showed that, when the everyday life of the city breaks down, the drivers take advantage of their position in urban circuits of exchange to emerge as central political actors who now block, slow down, and filter the same forms of circulation that they normally facilitate. In this sense, I propose to reconcile political-economy and phenomenology by studying ethnographically everyday life as the complex field on which logics of capital, practices, and discourse meet and interact generating and challenging one another. After all, as Lefebvre has argued:

> There is nothing more simple and more obvious than everyday life. How do people live? The question may be difficult to answer, but that does not make it the less clear. In another sense nothing could be more superficial: it is banality, triviality, repetitiveness. And in yet another sense nothing could be more profound. It is existence and it is 'lived', revealed as they are before speculative thought has inscribed them: what must be changed and what is the hardest of all to change. (Lefebvre 1991 Vol II: 47)

Grounding our investigation in an analysis of everyday life, therefore, poses us in front of this duality that forces us to overcome the opposition between phenomenological analysis and materialist political-economic

readings by focusing on both the superficial and the profound and analyzing their interactions. In other words, it helps us to reconcile phenomenological attention to mundane practices—often accused of superficiality—with larger analysis of political economic structures—often accused of missing practices—by showing the entanglements of social engagement, economic practices, political subjectivities, and everyday experiences over time and space. When analyzed through this lens, moreover, social life is presented under a new light. Superficial and profound at the same time, shaped by structures, process, and practices, it is revealed as a complex configuration, one that is always, at each turn, challenged by its own fragility. In my dissertation I have showed where and when such fragility emerges in the Thai capital, its movers, and power brokers. Here I propose to develop, through a critique of everyday life, a social analysis that accounts for the fragility of social life—a characteristic that we constantly experienced in our lives, always hanging in unstable balance, but which has been largely under-theorized by social theory.

By focusing on everyday life, instead, we cannot ignore this unsettling realization, faced by the fact that "the everyday is on the one hand an empirical modality for the organization of human life, and on the other a mass of representations which disguise this organization, its contingency and its risks. Hence the impression given by everyday life as 'reality': inconsistency and solidity, fragility and cohesion, seriousness and futility, profound drama and the void behind the actor's empty mask" (Lefebvre 1991 Vol II: 138). The constant revelation of this duality, in this sense, pushes social theory, as my dissertation has done, to explore the interactions between structures, processes, and practices as constantly ridden with contingencies and contradictions which in turn reveal the fragility of social life, its material and historical construction, as well as the fragility of political power and its practices. Studying such fragilities, I argue, is central to understand the genesis and inner working e of capital, everyday life, and political mobilization as well as their interactions.

Much work remains to be done in exploring what the implications of such approach maybe for social theory as well as political analysis and this work will surely prove challenging. Failing to recognize the fragile nature of social life, however, not only poses a theoretical dilemma for social sciences, but also questions our political stance. At stake is not just the risk of leaving social sciences stuck in the "sedentarist metaphysics"

that Liisa Malkki has described as a "logic that assumes the moral and logical primacy of fixity and place over movement and space" (Malkki 1995) and ignores the relevance of unstable equilibrium and transformation for social life. A more daunting danger faces us: that of either overestimating the grip of power or seeing acts resistance everywhere and in so doing erasing their significance. Both approaches have cornered the social sciences in a "praxis of political immobility," a position that, in times of mass mobilizations such as the one we are now living in, we cannot afford if we want to have any significance in the real world.

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