

The Politics of Mapping and the Bounding of Siam

Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of Siam by Thongchai Winichakul. Ph.D. Dissertation. University of Sydney, February 1988.

One of the things revolutionaries and radicals do during political lulls, "long periods of 'reactionary' chills", or the aftermath of a "failed" revolution is to engage in some soul-searching re-examination of their political life and experience. Initially, they focus on the sphere of praxis- the immediate stage they were involved in (strategy, tactics, united front, etc.). But as they reflect more deeply into their past, some go further to confront more fundamental questions that inform their actions. Some look at economic questions (mode of production, social formation, classes, etc.), others at political issues (the State, political culture and traditions, etc.). Others go back to history to determine how the ruling system evolved, dealing with the intricacies that the previous revolutionary ideology failed to consider. Others reconsider the problems of ideology, culture and legitimation, and the symbols that allowed ruling class hegemony to survive, endure and, perhaps, defeat the revolution.

The aim of such re-examinations is not merely to determine "where we went wrong". Radical "subversion" of the status quo continues even after the revolution had lost much of its dynamism. It seems to be the fate of revolutionaries- unless they have completely renounced their politics- to remain embroiled in the cause that they have fought for even as they may have ceased to possess the fire and unyielding commitment that swept them off their feet before. They do not put an end to their resistance. The opposition continues although the contours may have changed and the arenas broadened.

Thongchai Winichakul's dissertation on Siam's geo-body falls within this purview: first, as an attempt to understand how Thai nationhood emerged and why it remains a resilient

force in contemporary society (especially its traditional symbol of authority- the monarchy); and, second as a different attempt at radically subverting the "Thai" regime. This time it involves the steady process of de-legitimizing ruling class hegemony in spheres that normally would be conceived as ordinary and commonly accepted. He deals with one of the most common pieces of information- the map- and argues that beneath this "scientific" piece of cartographer's work is a disruptive, conflict-ridden process which makes the reader reconsider earlier interpretations of the formation of the geo-body that is now Thailand.

Siam Mapped also contends that the development of the Thai map reflects the encounters between the "modern" discourse of spatial conception against the indigenous one, the accommodation and eventual adoption of the former by the Siamese monarchy to determine its "exact" sphere of control and influence (vis-a-vis the colonial powers and also with its erstwhile tributaries), and, most important of all, the re-plotting of Siam's past to distinguish the Thai We-self from its "other". Thongchai deals with the Thai geo-body ("the most obvious, certain and concrete feature of a nation"- p. 27) to answer the question "how the identification of nationhood, Thai-ness, Siam, or whatever Thai have been constituted, no matter whether or when the state actually entered the model existence of a nation-state according to whatever theories" (p. 23).

With the victory of mapping and the emergence of a new geo-body and nationhood, other "significations" arose that were not necessarily linked to mapping, but evoking the feeling similar to that evoked by maps. The strengthening of one's identification with the "Thai" nation is one such signification. Mapping has also allowed the replotted of the past where facts and events are filtered and re-ordered "into a proper and intelligible story [designed to elicit] conceptual and sentimental effects" towards the Siamese nation. Siam becomes a Lamb that was able to survive the onslaughts of colonialism and preserve independence. History is also revised in the Thai atlas, such that

ruptures and dissonance (like the French-Siamese Crisis of 1893) are reinterpreted to become part of the "official" view of the evolution of the Thai nation.[1]

The result is an interesting act of subversion. **Siam Mapped** uncovers the fragility of the contemporary idea of "Thai-ness". Thongchai exposes Siam not as a nation whose formation was beleaguered by foreign enemies, yet managing to preserve its sovereignty via its ingenuous "modernizing" leaders. Siam is instead portrayed as a regional hegemonic power that competed with the British and the French in keeping as much territory as it could under its control, much to the detriment and destruction of smaller states which, before the emergence of the geo-body, maintained an unusual autonomous status vis-a-vis regimes like Siam, Burma and Annam.[2] Likewise, Siam is placed in the same category as the colonial powers, all of them "carrying different flags, (but acting as) agents or vehicles of the same geographical discourse to displace the indigenous space" (p. 220). The map and the geo-body created by Siam finally become powerful symbols that fuse together the idea of an external threat (otherness) with its "binary side", (the administrative reforms launched by the monarchy in order to impart significations; some not directly related to mapping) that draw emotional attachment to the "Thai" nation.

The Siamese regime was, therefore, not what the Thai regime and both Thai and Western scholars think it was: an independent regime that managed to remain sovereign against the colonial power. It was a regime which learned the political value of modern cartographic discourse to delineate its spheres of influence and project itself as a state with regional interests (albeit bounded by colonial powers). The Thai monarchy's image as a "modernizing agent" is shown in a different light: an active agent of regional ambitions and national chauvinism. Thongchai commits the crime of *lese majeste*, but does so artfully by studying the map and without frontally attacking the regime. In this way, his study exudes more power than earlier stunted radical criticisms against the monarchy.

Thongchai also presents another way at analyzing colonialism through the modern discourse of mapping and surveying. The "harmless" medium of the map becomes transformed into a "technology of power over space... exercised through political and military means of spatial conquest and through the practice of mapping itself" (p. 261). New territories were bounded, colonial control firmly established and affiliation of indigenous communities, kingdoms or societies settled. Colonialism's power assumes a broader form when what were considered instruments that were peripheral to the main weapons of colonial expansion are now

portrayed in a different, far more "menacing" fashion. In a sense, Thongchai's use of the map in explaining Siam's geo-body and its impact on the past and present imagining of the Thai nation reminds us of the critical reinterpretation of anthropology which, instead of being a discipline that enlightens us of the nature of primitive societies, has become a weapon of colonial conquest.

At the losing end of both colonialist and Siamese use of the modern discourse of mapping were the smaller sovereign states, those "tiny states [whose] voices and agonies are not taken seriously and their inevitable expenditure [sacrificed] for [national and/or imperial] security" (p. 351). What has also suffered is the indigenous discourse of political space as "the modern geographical discourse displaced it and the regime of mapping became hegemonic" via its agents, "the contending countries" (p. 309).

One can only add the following points both as response and reaction to the study.

The modern map as "a form of false consciousness" evokes the image of a "curtain" that keeps the user/perceiver in the dark. What the map conveys to people is the earth, the natural foundation of which Siam stands on. The more important point, however, is that the Siam-the-nation is also Siam-of-people. The map effectively hides from the user/perceiver the nature of the people that stand on the natural earth. What he/she perceives are "citizens", homogeneously organized within the boundaries of Siam, but not the multi-ethnic, multi-language, multi-racial (?) human beings that the map and the idea of the *citoyen* try to bound, to "imprison".

In a situation where a bounded Siam was also mostly empty or part-empty space, and the State weak compared to the colonial regimes, the map compensated for both the politico-military weakness and the need to "fill" the space. It became the main medium by which Siam claimed its stake on that empty territory and put a "no trespassing" sign on its borders. The space would hopefully then be filled with people or be adequately protected by a stronger army (which perhaps explains the Thai military's fetish with higher defense spending and active role in politics). But that can come later. What matters then was that the claim has been made.

Thongchai speaks of the marginalization of indigenous discourse as a result of the joint use by colonialism and Siam of the modern discourse. One can add that this marginalization may also be the result of the inability of the indigenous discourse to penetrate the new one, much less try to neutralize its power by absorption and re-invention. Thus Mongkut, et. al. may not only be seen as "modernizing rulers," but

also as regional elites who, realizing the power of the new discourse, shifted away from the old one and "absorbed" the modern one.

While one may indeed agree with Thongchai that the hegemony of the modern discourse led to the twilight of its indigenous rival, the study is not very clear about the process in which this conflict and victory/defeat transpired within the smaller kingdoms. It is clear in the case of the Siamese kings- they simply adopted the modern discourse. But what about the sovereigns among the Karens, Lao, etc.? How did the modern discourse foist itself upon them and their peoples? And did it succeed? I'm afraid it did not completely.

Perhaps this partly explains why secessionist movements continue to bedevil Burma and Thailand. These movements reflect, in a way, the resilience of both the indigenous discourse and the ability of the people of these "smaller states" to retain their autonomous and distinct existence despite the map.[3] One may, however, hasten to qualify that this is not the original old discourse. Secessionism has likewise mixed in the new discourse by delineating the boundaries in which the hoped-for new nation would demarcate itself.[4] In the same vein, Hmong and Meo tribes could easily agree

to collaborate with the US against the National Liberation Front and the Pathet Lao because they never really felt themselves bounded by the "official" map. And how should we regard an un-bound, fluid politico-military-economic geography like the Golden Triangle?

As a final point, the question may be asked: where is Leviathan? Or perhaps, more importantly, who is Leviathan in Thongchai's mind? One senses that Thongchai is not really clear about this. Mapping is a colonial weapon and one can conclude that Thongchai is more concerned with revealing to us the insidiousness of this seemingly harmless instrument. Yet, it also appears that Thongchai is more concerned with Siam. He seems to argue that in spite of colonialism, a regime can take advantage of one of the weapons of colonial Leviathans for its regional ambitions. If such is the case, then our earlier description of *Siam Mapped* as an act of subversion may be true. And it also means that in thinking of Leviathan, we must not only focus our attention on the colonial powers, but also at Southeast Asian "junior Leviathans" that, even as they recognize their weakness against or subordination to the former, employ weapons of colonialism to create, maintain, and defend their interests vis- a-vis subaltern groups, classes, communities, and societies.

NOTES

1. "Not only does [the historical map] reject the existence of anything like Bangkok hegemonism, but it also refuses any view that Siam was delimited for the first time by the European powers. To put it more positively, this map shows the existence of the greater, homogeneously bounded Siam long before the 'threats' by the European powers. The numerous incidents tell us of the unreasonable 'cruelties' which forced Siam to sacrifice her legitimate body time after time, hence the suffering Siam had endured. In some versions, the losses are calculated in square kilometers, as if to quantify the amount of sufferings which is nearly a half of the proposed legitimate body. Nonetheless, the map seems to say that despite that amount of agony, the most important thing is to preserve independence. And Siam survived." p. 370.

2. As Thongchai eloquently puts it, "Siam was not a helpless victim in the imperialist division of the world as is generally thought. The Siamese ruling circle at the close of the 19th century was still familiar with the tributary relationship, while many of the elite also became familiar with the Western political geographical discourse as well. It was in the wake of European expansionism armed with the force of the new kind of boundary and polity that Siam urgently needed to secure its rulers were aware of the uncertain nature of the sovereignty of those tributaries, in that they did not yet really belong to Siam. But on the other hand, it was desirous for Siam to expand and

enforce a stronger grip over the tributaries. The difference from previous overlordship protection was that this time Siam was also equipped with a new kind of mechanism of overlordship in terms of force, administration and boundary demarcation. That is to say, Siam entered the contest with the European powers to conquer and incorporate the marginal states into its own territory. This expansionist drive was expressed overtly and straightforwardly..."[under-scoring supplied] pp. 235-236.

3. This puts Anderson, contrary to Thongchai's critique, in a much stronger position, given the fact that language, among other things, has preserved these people's capacity to imagine themselves as one Karen, Lao, Shan, or whatever, nation. The strength of secessionism is such that even recently, the Burmese Communist Party split with a larger faction going over the side of secessionism.

4. Which reminds us partly of Marx's statement in "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", to wit: "In like manner the beginner who has learnt a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can produce freely in it only when he moves in it without remembering the old and forgets in it his ancestral tongue." Tucker, 1972, p. 437.