

The SUNTA Best Graduate Student Paper prize for 2012 was awarded to Claudio Sopranzetti for his paper “The Owners of the Map: Mobility and Mobilization among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers in Bangkok.” Here is a brief summary of his work.

On May 19th 2010, the Royal Thai Army deployed tanks and war weapons to disperse thousands of protesters who had taken over and blocked the commercial center of Bangkok demanding democratic election and an end to political and economic double-standards. In the previous two months these protesters, known as “Red Shirts,” had effectively transformed a space of elite ultra-consumption and a nexus of economic, mediatic, and physical mobility into a new national political arena, a space of face-to-face relations and intimacy. Key to these mobilization were motorcycle taxi drivers who, after weeks of occupying the streets and being the only form of transportation through them, had disappeared, taking advantage of their profound knowledge of shortcuts and backdoors to decamp before the military’s fist clenched down on the remaining protesters. On May 20th, when the violence stopped, at least 92 dead bodies had accumulated. Seven-Eleven shops, bank branches, the Stock Exchange, as well as Central World, the biggest shopping mall in Thailand, were set on fire, filling the air with a pungent smell of burned plastic and stagnant water. A few days later, shops re-opened, traffic resumed, and the usual urban circulation was back.

In this article, I discuss connections between spatial mobility and political mobilization among motorcycle taxi drivers. Through the study of their multiple roles, both as transport operators and as political mobilizers, I echo Anna Tsing’s reminder that “mobility means nothing without mobilization” (Tsing 2005: 215). Here, I propose to explore the nexus of these two phenomena – mobility and mobilization - and analyze motorcycle taxi drivers as central political actors in contemporary Thailand. In this sense, the article does not analyze the Red Shirts

movement, to which they participate, for its demands, political structures or internal organization but focuses on investigating the historical emergence of “technique of mobilization” based on modulation and control over mobility. I focus on acts of disruption of movement along major infrastructures, defined as “institutionalized networks that facilitate the flow of goods in a wider cultural as well as physical sense,” (Larkin 2008: 5) as moments of time-space modulation as well as transformative strategies that set in motion alternative messages and configure new modalities of political mobilization. Focusing on such techniques, both in the 2010 Red Shirts protest and in other Thai political mobilizations, I explore the solidification of spaces of mobility as major political arenas for political struggles in contemporary Thailand.

Ethnographically, I focus on three aspects. Firstly the multiple roles of transportation operators, in this case motorcycle taxi drivers, as mediators of people, commodities, spaces, and social relationships who, by virtue of their labor and relations of exchange, find themselves in a particular position to develop a political consciousness and to act upon it. Secondly, I explore the reconfiguration of spaces of mobility as spaces of mobilization re-signified and re-spatialized into political arenas where distance stretch, time assumes a different pace, and alternative messages travel. Thirdly, I show the potential that spaces of transit offer, once blocked, to fill their networks with alternative images and political demands.

Conceptually, I theorize the emergence of new forms of political mobilization as disruption of capitalist flows, modulation of time-space, and establishment of alternative mobilities. From the Arab Spring to the ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement, late capitalism is seeing the unfolding of political conflicts in which mobility *becomes* mobilization and shapes its strategies and tactics. In Thailand, highways, airports, and shopping intersections rearranged the political landscape and are reshaped from spaces of flows to spaces of protest. Globally,

social media, bridges, ports and financial nodes are figuring more prevalently in the global landscapes of mobilization, and changing its morphology.

In this sense, this article is first step toward exploring emerging modalities of political engagement, for which mobility, and its spaces, become a central locus and a pivotal technique of mobilization. Failing to acknowledge and explore these changes, I argue, not only poses a theoretical dilemma for anthropology, but also questions our political stance. At stake is not just the risk of leaving anthropology stuck in the “sedentarist metaphysics” that Lisa Malkki has described, but the more daunting danger of remaining cornered in a “praxis of political immobility” where we have often secluded ourselves in times of mass mobilizations.

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