Incendiary Central:

The Spatial Politics of the May 2010 Street Demonstrations in Bangkok

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In May 2010, anti-government demonstrators made a flaming inferno of the CentralWorld Plaza – Thailand's biggest, and Asia's second largest, shopping mall. It was the climax of the latest major chapter of the Thai political conflict, during which thousands of protestors swarmed Ratchaprasong, the commercial centre of Bangkok, in an ultimately failed attempt to oust Abhisit Vejjajiva's regime from power. In this article, I examine how downtown Bangkok and exclusive malls like CentralWorld represent physical and cultural spaces from which the marginalized working classes have been strikingly excluded. It is a configuration of space that maps the contours of a heavily uneven distribution of power and articulates a vernacular of prestige wherein class relations are inscribed in urban space. The significance of the Red-Shirted movement's occupation of Ratchaprasong lies in the subversion of this spatialisation of power and draws attention to the symbolic deployment of space in the struggle for political supremacy.
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Introduction: The Burning Centre

In late May 2010, billowing charcoal smoke rose from the Ratchaprasong district in central Bangkok, casting a dark pall over the sprawling city. Much of it came from the flaming inferno of the CentralWorld Plaza, Thailand's biggest, and Southeast Asia's second largest, shopping mall.[1] What will likely become one of the most iconic images of the conflagration is a photo by Adrees Latif of Reuters featuring a huge golden head with the likeness of a female deity in a square in front of the mall, her eyes seemingly wide with surprise as a tattered Thai flag fluttered pitifully overhead and the 500.000 metre square complex blazed in the background (see Image 1).

Image 1: CentralWorld Plaza in flames, May 19, 2010. Adrees Latif, Reuters.

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[1] Arsonists also targeted the Thailand Stock Exchange, the Metropolitan Electricity Authority, the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board, numerous branches of the Bangkok Bank, the Siam Paragon shopping complex and several other commercial sites.

The political turmoil is far from over, despite the violent military crackdown that ended the siege which paralysed central Bangkok for months, after which some of the departing demonstrators allegedly looted and then set the mall alight. Instead, this was merely the climactic close to one chapter of the ongoing conflict, during which thousands of Red-Shirted anti-government protestors,[2] who included the UDD (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship) political movement,[3] swarmed the commercial centre of Bangkok in an ultimately failed attempt to oust the then Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's regime from power.

What makes the Red-Shirts' move to occupy the area — and this particular episode in Thai political history — compelling, is that Ratchaprasong is not just a 'commercial district', and the CentralWorld Plaza is not just a 'shopping mall'. Ratchaprasong, in conjunction with the adjacent district of Pathumwan (known popularly as Siam), as well as nearby Silom business district, comprises a crucible of shopping malls, luxury hotels and skyscrapers in central Bangkok which both materially and symbolically manifest Thailand's intense economic development in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

The following discussion is based on approximately 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bangkok between 2005 and 2007 and in December 2009, January 2010 and January 2011. I provide evidence that highlights the significance of the Red-Shirt movement's occupation of Ratchaprasong and the arson attack on CentralWorld Plaza, showing how Bangkok's upmarket districts, and the exclusive malls that define them as such, are representative of the physical and symbolic spaces from which the urban and rural working classes have, to date, been excluded.

The UDD formed in 2006 in protest against the military coup which deposed controversial telecommunications billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra, whom many of the rural and urban lower and working classes in Thailand supported for his populist pro-poor policies. Since then, they have held mass rallies attended by thousands of people and often taking place over several months, particularly in 2008, 2009 and again in 2010. Many demonstrations were counter-rallies against those of the Yellow-Shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) movement, which is seen to be a primarily urban middle class movement allied with right-

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[2] Many came from the impoverished, ethnically Lao, Northeastern 'Isaan' region of Thailand.

[3] The 'Red-Shirt' movement is officially known in Thai as *Naew Ruam Prachaathiphatai Toor Taan Phadeetkaan Haeng Chaat* (Nor Phor Chor). In English, they were formerly known as 'The Democratic Alliance Against Dictatorship' (DAAD).

wing establishment forces and Abhisit's Democrat party, though the constituency of the movement is far more complex and, of late, factions within the PAD have become increasingly evident.

The 2010 UDD protests began in mid-March, immediately after 46.37 billion baht, or US$ 1.4 billion, worth of Thaksin's assets (out of a total of US$ 2.2 billion) were seized by the Supreme Court after it found him guilty of conflict of interest during his 2001-2006 rule as Prime Minister. Accusing Abhisit's coalition government of coming to power through illegal means, the UDD was also demanding fresh elections.[4] Nonetheless, opponents of the Red-Shirt movement had yet more to gain from the attack on CentralWorld Plaza, which played right into, and compounded, pre-existing negative perceptions of the UDD and its members as violent and unscrupulous. These images are reflected in a cartoon in the March 29, 2010 edition of the ASTV-Manager Daily newspaper (founded by PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul), which depicted the red demonstrators as water buffaloes led by ex-PM Thaksin Shinawatra, congesting Bangkok's streets in lieu of the usual traffic (see Image 2).
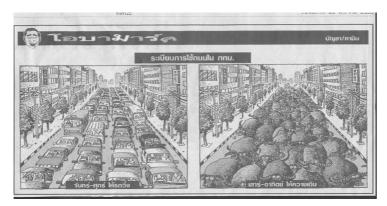

Image 2: ASTV cartoon featuring the Red-Shirts as a herd of buffaloes invading the streets of Bangkok. Published on March 29, 2010.

Such intensely negative stereotypes of Isaaners are pervasive in Bangkok's everyday life. On the other hand, the Red-Shirt movement has taken to using symbolic language evocative of the oppression of the *sakdina* era in order to characterise the conflict, referring to themselves as the *phrai* ('commoners') who are challenging the oppression of the *ammat*

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[4] An election was held in July 2011, following a series of failed negotiations, the violent military crackdown on UDD protestors in 2010 and considerable pressure on Abhisit's government. The election results were in the UDD's favour, with the Democrat party losing control over parliament to the Pheu Thai party led by Thaksin's sister and Yingluck Shinawatra, the first female Thai Prime Minister in history.

class; *ammat* was used to refer to government officials or bureaucrats but the Red-Shirts use the word to refer to the socially and politically privileged elite.[5]

However, I suggest that the 'urban-rural divide' is both more exaggerated and more complex than it is usually portrayed by the foreign and local media, by academics and by the political actors themselves. Consequently, here, I offer empirical evidence that helps to problematize the simplistic Red-Yellow binary model of the Thai political crisis. While structural disparities undoubtedly underpin urban-rural differences, these differences generate, and reinforce, powerful and pervasive cultural conceptions of urban superiority and rural inferiority that have been deployed to great effect for the purpose of political mobilisation in what appears to be a spontaneous grassroots uprising but is essentially a struggle for power between competing élite factions.

Spatial Hierarchies and the Urban-Rural 'Divide'

Spatiality in Bangkok is inflected with tones of class and ethnic difference. The maintenance of both real and figurative boundaries of urban space is a symptom of deeper social divisions that play out along the regional fault lines which have come to define the discourses and dynamics of the political crisis. The conflict is typically construed in terms of a modern-day class struggle based on an urban-rural 'divide' between the Bangkok-based PAD, and Thaksin's rural supporters in the UDD.

However, I suggest that it may be more productive to conceptualise the relationship between Bangkok and Isaan in terms of spatial hierarchy, rather than in the terms of dichotomy or difference that are generally used to depict the urban-rural 'divide'. The historian Thongchai Winichakul (1994: 79) has suggested that in pre-modern Thai indigenous concepts of power and space, 'the political sphere could be mapped only by power relationships, not by territorial integrity'. In a discussion of Muang (Northern Thai) indigenous space, Davis elucidates that 'political space…is classified according to distance from the centres of culture and political power, along a continuum from the towns, through

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[5] The Thai class structure in pre-modern times was characterised by an elaborate system of status differentiation called *sakdina* which originated early in the Ayutthayan era (approximately 1350-1767 CE). Society was divided into four main categories of people, in descending order of status. There was an upper stratum of *naai*, comprised of princes and royalty (*jao*). Below the *naai* were members of an aristocratic nobility (*khunaang*). Beneath the *naai* were *phrai* (commoners), followed by *thaat* (slaves) (Akin 1979:28-29; Hewison 1989:134-135; Loos 2006:35; Likhit 1990:192)[5]. The *sakdina* system was abolished after the 1932 revolution and the shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy, although remnants of it remain in the current Thai class system.

the villages, and into the forested wilderness' (1984: 81). Within this system of social differentiation, townspeople enjoyed more prestige than country people, the latter being expected by law to give way to the former when the two crossed paths (Davis 1984: 82). In this light, instead of viewing the relationship between Bangkok and rural Thai society *only* as a structural 'divide', we might consider casting it in the framework of indigenous concepts of the spatialisation of power relations.

In more recent times, the heavily increased emphasis on consumption and material wealth in Bangkok, a result of intense economic growth in the latter decades of the twentieth century juxtaposed to the striking poverty of the Northeast, has further exacerbated this dynamic, which is expressed in the pervasive and frequently pejorative discourse of *baan nork*. *Baan nork,* to be distinguished from more neutral terms used to describe rural people and places (normally involving the noun *chonabot*), is a combination of the Thai word for 'house' or 'village' and the word for 'outside'. This is not just a spatial description of the remote backwaters of Thai society which most people conceive of as 'upcountry'. Rather, *baan nork* is everything stereotypically negative that derives from undistinguished origins, including being poor, backward, slow, naïve, rough and unrefined.

As O'Connor points out, 'Bangkok and the Bangkok élite rule a powerful and elaborate hierarchy…of wealth and style expressed in a person's clothes, car, house, ideas, and education' (1988: 253). Discussing the widespread consciousness and desire for being *thansamai* (modern or 'up-to-date'), Mills argues that 'among people at all levels of contemporary Thai society…the commodified signs and symbols of *thansamai* consumption and display [are] increasingly essential markers of individual, household, and/or community claims to status among both village and city dwellers' (1999: 12). In other words, in Thailand, the markers of class distinction (Bourdieu 1984) are very much embedded in cultural notions of the urban. As opportunities for education and employment in the countryside are severely limited in comparison to those available to Bangkokians, many rural people seek better prospects in the city (see also Mills 1999: 44-46). As a result, the lowest prestige and lowest paying jobs in Bangkok are filled predominantly by unskilled workers from Isaan; therefore, most of the Isaan people with whom Bangkokians come into contact work in unskilled jobs in the service, industrial and construction sectors.

Until fairly recently, with the establishment of convenience stores and hypermarkets in provincial towns, markets and shop-houses were the main venues of consumption in provincial or rural areas. Hence, a sense of ease and familiarity with shopping malls is another

indication of a 'sophisticated' urban lifestyle and, accordingly, a particular class *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984); it functions as a status distinction to position urban and rural individuals in relation to one another in yet another expression of the cultural spatial hierarchy. In Bangkok, there exists a striking division between élite space and non-élite space, which can also be respectively known, colloquially, as *hi-so* ('high society') space and *lo-so* ('low society') space. Certain malls in downtown Bangkok, like Central Chit Lom or Siam Paragon, are known as prestigious and *hi-so*, not only because of their marketed images and expensive merchandise but also because people dress up (*taeng tua dii*) to go there and adhere to more rigid codes of conduct than at a place marked as *lo-so*.

If crowded *hi-so* enclaves attract patrons by virtue of their allusions to exclusivity, status and prestige, *lo-so* venues are filled by virtue of the fact that the vast majority of people who are neither part of, nor pretend to be part of, the Bangkok élite engage in everyday consumption in such places. For many Bangkokians, *lo-so* space — the street restaurant, the cheerful but basic drinking hole, the less prominent mall or the market or shop-house — is part of the fabric of their everyday, undistinguished (in a class sense) life. It is also not simply a question of pollution or 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966; see also Raya 2004,[6] and Brody 2006), because for Bangkokians a market or other *lo-so* space is clearly hierarchically distinguished from that of a *hi-so* one, such as an upmarket mall.

The following examples illustrate the construction of class-based spatial boundaries in Bangkok through both enforced and voluntary exclusion of poor and rural Thais from élite spaces of consumption.

Kai, a thirty-year old Sino-Thai schoolteacher, told me how one weekend morning she decided to buy some take-out noodle soup for herself and her sister from the popular food court at the exclusive Emporium shopping mall in the Phrom Phong district of upper Sukhumvit. On that occasion, Kai left home without dressing up or even changing clothes, as she was only planning to 'pop in' at the store. However, as she walked to the entrance of the mall dressed in shorts, a t-shirt, sandals, un-made up face and undone hair, she was stopped by the guard, who simply stated that she could not enter ('*khao mai dai, khrap*'). She did a double take and told the guard that she went there all the time and that her home was just down the road. He simply repeated that she could not enter. She ended the story with the furious pronouncement that '*khon Thai chorp duu tuuk khon Thai*' (Thais like to look down upon fellow Thais). Noting Kai's casual appearance, in her flip-flops and shorts and cosmetic-

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[6] Thai authors are cited by first name, according to standard convention.

free face, the guard assumed she was a lower class and, perhaps, a rural person.

Kai's story is not unusual. I heard of many similar incidents that point to a more or less 'unofficial' policy of exclusion of such people from the most prestigious malls. Kai's experience contrasts with that of Arun, who is also Sino-Thai but has pale skin and markedly Chinese features. He described his own debate with a friend, who insisted that he had witnessed people being refused entry to the Emporium because of their appearance. Arun was sceptical, maintaining that he had gone to the Emporium several times dressed in what he described as 'an old crumpled t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops' and had not been turned away. His friend pointed out, 'Fair enough, but you're white and you have Chinese *ngo heng*.[7] If someone who has Thai facial structure and is dark does that, they're not going to let them in'. Arun later mused, 'Now everything's pushed towards being skinny, white and foreign. Everything's about whitening cream…everything's about weight loss, and all the condos are about being Manhattan or Parisian; apparently it's no longer good enough to be Thai'.

Needless to say, in the context of Arun's and Kai's remarks 'being Thai' is strongly connected with appearing to be poor and/or of rural origins. The possibility of being turned away, coupled with the sense of feeling out of place if one does make it past the guards, means that there are many who simply do not make the attempt to go to these malls. This was typically phrased to me as, '*Mai klaa khao*', which should be distinguished from the expression '*mai yaak khao*' (I don't want to enter). '*Mai klaa khao*' denotes that the speaker is 'not brave enough', or does not 'dare', to enter.

Som's experiences are a good illustration of this. Originally from Buriram, in Isaan, Som completed her education up until *por hok* (grade six) and is a housewife. She said, 'I don't want to go to Central. It's full of people who dress nicely. At Lotus (a hypermarket), there are people who dress nicely and people who dress naturally, normal. I've been to Central a couple of times. They emphasise the way you dress, so I don't want to go'. I found similar views amongst other informants of provincial origins, including Aek a teacher who graduated at Ramkhamhaeng University. His wife stays at home to care for their baby daughter, and also sells lottery tickets to make some extra income. In response to my questions, he said that he had been with his family to Robinson department store a few times but shook his head adamantly when I asked if he had ever been inside any of the branches of Central, saying, '*mai klaa khao*' (I don't dare to enter). Chaat had an identical attitude toward Siam Paragon. When I asked why, he answered, '*Sangkhom mai meuan kan*' (It's a different

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[7] Teo-Chiew Chinese word for 'facial structure'.

society). He pointed out that a poorly dressed or obviously unfamiliar individual in *a hi-so* place would stand out as one of the minority (*chon klum noi*) amongst all the other patrons. As a result, he said, they would 'be looked down' (*dohn duu tuuk duay saai taa*); people would 'stare at you from your head to the bottom of your feet' (*mong tang tae sii sa jarot plaai thao*), he added, and would wonder why you were dressed that way ('*thammai taeng tua yang nii*').

In brief, spatial marginalisation is a major part of everyday life for the urban and rural poor in Bangkok, lending undeniable significance to the Red-Shirt movement's occupation of central Bangkok and the subsequent razing of one of the city's most upmarket shopping complexes.

Conclusion

The political demonstrations in Bangkok that I have described at the beginning of this article dramatically played on the feelings of various segments of the population. Red-Shirt supporters saw themselves as protesting against the excesses of a privileged, materialistic élite, as embodied by Bangkok's shopping mall culture. This was paralleled by the sense of outrage expressed by many Yellow-Shirt supporters, who hold the unabashed view that the urban and rural poor are ignorant, uneducated and gullible country bumpkins, whose political mandates are worth little, if anything at all.

In this light, the 'breaching' of central Bangkok by the Red-Shirt movement, and its partial destruction upon the said demonstrators' departure, can be seen as merely an amplification of the symbolic significance of the everyday division of space in Bangkok and its — now literally — incendiary dynamics. Within this everyday division of space, shopping malls are not merely a playground for passive consumers caught up in the throes of global capitalism, material representatives of the deterioration of high culture in favour of a vulgar mass culture, or as more positive discourses may depict, of a modern, progressive urban future. They also cannot be understood as globalised 'non-spaces', lacking distinctive characteristics in the Castellian sense (1996). They are the spatial foci of a matrix of physical and social boundaries, constructed and imposed by a variety of actors, which articulate the morass of conflicts — of which ethnic and class prejudices are a fundamental component — that make Thai society and drive the political crisis.

Many of the economically disadvantaged constituents of the Red-Shirt movement are among those who are typically kept out of élite spaces or who, alternatively, do not dare to

enter them. Recent events convey not only a powerful message of dissatisfaction and discontent by the Red-Shirts; they also punctuate the important role of spatial politics in cities. The indication is that the urban and rural poor who are excluded from élite urban spaces — and the attendant vast share of benefits of Thailand's neoliberal marketization — are no longer willing to be passive about their marginalization or their lack of a political voice.

Nonetheless, the resentment of the urban and rural lower and working classes is not the only factor driving the political turmoil. The notion of a 'rural-urban class divide' also serves to obscure the many other voices dissatisfied with the social order; people who are caught in a struggle between élite factions vying for supremacy in the face of an uncertain future. While there is insufficient space to deal with this issue in the present article, it should be mentioned that one of the major difficulties with the urban-rural divide analysis is that it does not always take into account either the everyday challenges facing supposedly comfortable middle class in Bangkok or exactly how complex and heterogeneous the middle class actually is.

In other words, as I have argued elsewhere (Vorng 2009), the privileged and affluent 'urban middle class' that is usually represented in the popular and academic discourse arguably accounts for only a very small upper-middle class group. The rest struggle economically, and many of the newest members of the middle class generally have rural origins themselves, though very recently they have managed to move into lower-level white collar jobs in the city. A pervasive sense of injustice arises from the privileges and entitlements accorded to individuals with wealth and influence, whose actions are not limited by the bounds of the law. In this situation, those in positions of power and influence manipulate the patronage system to serve successfully their own interests, often at the great disadvantage of others. In this light, it is not entirely surprising that these frustrations have been instrumental in the political mobilisation of both the lower *and* the middle classes. In a nutshell, the foregoing shows that social class and urban-rural divisions in Thailand are far more fluid than the way in which they are typically depicted would lead us to believe.

The evidence from Bangkok illuminates the inextricable links between power, space and social life. As more of the world becomes urbanized, it flags a need for increased anthropological attention to the mutual constitution of social space and relations of economic and cultural inequality. The recent, tumultuous events in the Thai capital suggest that the investigation of such processes may well have implications beyond the anthropological

investigation of space and place, as well as discussions of cities and urban society. It may help to grasp broader, overarching questions concerning the unjust distribution of power and the intense political struggles which follow. Nevertheless, the more the so-called urban middle classes and rural working classes direct their frustrations at each other in this conflict, the less attention they channel into reforming the unjust social system in which they are all embedded. Until both the 'Yellows' and 'Reds' realise that there are issues of common interest which are much deeper than those which divide them, political unrest in Thailand looks set to continue.

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