Chapter 39

Wonderful, Terrible: Everyday Life in Bangkok

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The cities of the South have been generally absent from recent urban theory. For a time, at the height of modernist social theory in the 1960s, the "Third World City" received attention as constituted by its "problems" – problems of poverty, overpopulation, crowding, environmental degradation. This was accounted for by the decomposition of premodern agricultural societies, whose primary living site was thought to be "the village," fading in importance as the engines of industrialization and urbanization began to dominate in the new landscapes of modernity. In a broad sense, this was (and is) true enough. But the city in the non-West is often disregarded as a phenomenon in its own right, with its own distinctive history, traditions, rhythms, meanings and senses of place. It is as if the city as a space of human life belongs properly to the West. Non-Western cities are seen as the epiphenomena of social change rather than as integral to their own society's history and culture.

In this chapter I want to write about Bangkok, one of the largest and most complex cities of the Southeast Asian region. In doing so, I want to situate the city as a site having its own meanings and forms, not as an ersatz Western city but as the central node in the processes of transformation under late global modernity for all the peoples of Thailand, wherever they live. I take my inspiration from Walter Benjamin's "dialectics of seeing," or rather, of experiencing, presenting spaces and images drawn from the everyday-life world at a moment when the structurations of modern capitalism have taken an uncertain, uneven hold. Such an enterprise could fill a book, or multiple volumes. Here, only a sketch is presented, in order to pose Bangkok against its still-meaningful past, one which is implicit within its future.

There are many kinds of everyday in Bangkok, shared spaces, pulsions from the past, a memorialized present which feels like the future, already. An outstanding example of indigenous urbanism in Southeast Asia, three centuries of Royal presence are imprinted upon the city, creating a "discursive culture of place" (O'Connor 1990: 61). The people know the city by its signifying sites: palaces, statues, monuments, temples, shrines, markets, and waterways. Ancient though they may be, they are not "heritage," but zones constantly reinvested with desire and meaning, where people make offerings to spirits and images known to answer prayers, to provide

winning lottery numbers or ensure success in examinations. These are small, intimate spaces, but equally important are the vast public areas where collective affirmations or contestations take place, in events refracting past and present. Around the base of the Democracy Monument, and in the surrounding streets, vast crowds have gathered during this half-century, most recently in May 1992, when protests against corruption and unrepresentative government resulted in many tragic deaths but also substantial political change. This time, though, the protestors arrived in expensive cars carrying mobile phones; a "middle-class revolution" was said to be underway in the heart of the city (Sunghsidh and Pasuk 1993: 27).

Other shared spaces are sites of pleasure: the open "wet" markets where rich and poor mingle over the catfish and eels squirming in basins, sparkling fruits and vegetables just in from the countryside, sacks of rice of ten varieties, orchids and roses, chicken-feet, chili pastes, strips of still-bloody meats, honeys from the distant forests, possibly traded by mountain people who have never seen a city. Or at Chatuchak Park where hundreds of thousands visit the weekend market, circulating, perambulating, gazing: at giant spiders, monkeys, poodles, vegetables, amulets, cutlasses, kitchenware, military surplus, every conceivable thing which can be bought and sold.

Bangkok is the capital of Thailand (once known as Siam). The only nation of Southeast Asia never to have been colonized, Thailand has been in the forefront of the "Asian Economic Miracle," until recently exhibiting massive annual rises in Gross Domestic Product (8–10%+) and forging a new identity as a primary participant in the globalization of the region. The city, known formally as Krung Thep Maha Nakorn (The Great City of Angels), lies on a flat floodplain along the Chao Phraya River, which debouches into the Gulf of Thailand not far to the south. A classic example of the primate city, Bangkok dominates the economy and the imagination of the nation. With a population of around eight million (or more, considering illegal immigrants and circular migrants) it is more than 20 times larger than any other urban settlement in the country. Virtually all major transport links go through the city, shuttling thousands in and out every single day. Capital is concentrated in the capital: 95 percent of all goods, import and export, pass through Bangkok. The major Western and Japanese trading companies and banks and a large proportion of manufacturing industry are located in the Greater Metropolitan Region. Nearby provinces are now dormitory suburbs. Economic, social, and political power – and cultural capital – are to be found only in the city. Families on the road to wealth must move there: many prominent Sino-Thai business empires, for instance, were founded on agricultural activities in the provinces but as their wealth grew they inevitably moved to the city and consolidated their business links, diversifying into the vast family-based conglomerates which have been so strongly identified with the "Asian economic miracle" (Krikkiat and Yoshihara 1983: 20–21).

Baan-kok (village of native plums) was originally the site of a French fort in the mid-seventeenth century and a largely Chinese trading and customs post until the late eighteenth century (Smithies 1986: 4–5). The Royal City with its new name was founded by King Rama I, first of the present Chakri Dynasty, in the aftermath of the destruction of the former capital Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767. Urbanism is

deeply implicated in the traditional political and social structures of Southeast Asia. The ancient kingdoms have been described as "galactic polities" – zones of power with a king and his city at the center, from which influence, protection, and authority radiate outwards and to which duty, tribute, and subordination are drawn. Complex principles of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology underlie the idea of the city, and its layout. Each dynasty has its own capital and the capital city is above all the space of the King, who is the fulcrum around which the entire social order turns, embodying sacred and superordinate powers, which extend their influence to all those who live within his city. Bangkok today is said to have no "center," in a geographical urban sense. But the city, as it was three hundred years ago, is centered by the presence of the King.

The Royal City contains an immensely complex network of buildings, including the Grand Palace, the Throne Hall, and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. The Royal Family today resides to the north in Chitralada Palace, not accessible to the public, but regular ceremonies are still held in the Grand Palace and its precincts, most notably the changing of the robes of the Emerald Buddha by the King in person, three times a year. Nearby, Sanam Luang, the great public open space which is the traditional royal cremation ground, provides a site for enormous public gatherings which spectacularize the relation between monarch and people. The annual Ploughing Ceremony, marking the beginning of the agricultural season, is presided over by the Royal Family, reenacting a ritual which goes back to the thirteenth century (Gerson 1996: 22–3). Other public events include celebrations of the King's birthday, significant anniversaries of the present reign, and in 1996 the cremation of the King's late mother, a daylong ritual attended by over half a million people wearing black, a huge crowd in respectful, uncanny silence. The event was televised nationally on all channels, and "the people" brought together in symbolic unity magnified by the new technologies of inclusion.

In public spaces, including the thousands of streets and lanes of the city where people mingle, stop, shop, sit side by side, and eat a bowl of noodles, difference is canceled, or put into abeyance. But, in most other respects, the lives of the rich and the poor, the foreign and the local, the immigrant and the householder, the ethnically marked and the "genuine Thai," the Muslim and the Buddhist, scarcely touch on each other. Bangkok has been a diverse, multicultural city since its inception: in the 1880s almost half the 500,000 inhabitants were of Chinese origin, with substantial numbers of Indians, Persians, Javanese, Malays, Burmese, Khmer, Lao, Mon, and Vietnamese, as well as *farang* (white Westerners), mostly English, Dutch, French, German, Portuguese and Swedish (Wilson 1989: 54).

One hundred years ago the city began to reflect the modernizing policies of the great King Chulalongkorn (1868–1910). This era created the preconditions for Bangkok's contemporary modernity. Canals were filled in to make roads upon which carriages could pass, the network of alleyways and floating houses and markets edging the river was removed and replaced by brick buildings. Many grand new buildings were constructed which reflected a blending of European and Thai sensibilities. The West became fashionable; the Thai elite learned English, French, and German; many traveled and studied abroad. The Royal Family patronized sciences, medicine, and learning, and introduced Western architects, sculptors, and painters to teach their craft to local people.

As Thailand became increasingly aware of the West, the question of "Thai identity" asserted itself. The position of the Chinese was especially important, given their dominance in the economy. At times respected, at other times rejected, the Chinese became increasingly assimilated, marrying Thai women, taking Thai names, speaking Thai in everyday life. Nevertheless the patriarchal structure of the Chinese family remained strong, providing one of the basic elements of the Sino-Thai business class which has been so strongly identified with the "economic miracle" (Pasuk and Baker 1996).

Today, the question of "identity" has come into prominence once again, precisely as the effects of globalization have been most strongly felt. As the new middle classes, academics, and commentators express angst over the loss of "authentic Thai culture" the distinctions of wealth and poverty in the country multiply exponentially. Bangkok, like most Asian cities, does little to disguise social inequality. The legless beggar who rents his square meter of pavement outside the entry to the new shopping mall, the filthy children asleep on the overhead walkway, the thousands crowded into jerry-built slums along the city railway lines, serve as constant reminders that poverty and suffering are ever-present. Thailand has until recently had no social security system. Thai culture stresses the individual, the role of destiny or *karma* in life's outcomes, the obligation not to interfere in the destinies of others. The very poor and the very rich are believed to be in their respective conditions for good reason. There is no such thing as an "accident of birth."

A kind of laissez faire at the level of philosophy is reflected in a similar condition in public life which creates strange contradictions in modernity. These attitudes ensure an endless supply of the cheap human labor essential to the late capitalist economy, yet the necessary rationalization of the life-world (Habermas 1984) which it also requires is constantly being undermined. This tension marks the city, producing endless shifting negotiations at the level of public policy as multiple arms of an immensely complex bureaucracy struggle over the same issues, most notably the chronic crisis of traffic, transport and city amenities, public health, air pollution. The prime purpose of each agency seems to be to maintain its own continued existence. Rather than overall coherence or cooperation, each is in opposition to the other, trying to outdo the other, promoting different resolutions to the city's problems (here a monorail, there an overhead expressway, here another road system), all under the control of separate bureaucratic agencies. The overall political structure, with the complex relations between the military, government, and business (cf. Pasuk and Baker 1996) means also that personal enrichment for "persons of influence" is often more important than any apparent functional purpose of the agency or organization. The citizens, meanwhile, make the best of their situation, surviving, enjoying, suffering, in wonder and terror at life in Bangkok.

Material

Bangkok is an intensely physical city. The smell of carbon monoxide mixed with garlic and spices, fetid drains, a hint of sewer; heat radiating from the road and glass-fronted buildings, above all the noise, the traffic ceaselessly throbbing, the whine of motorcycles, the perils of walking, of crossing a road, of breathing, the delirium after three hours in an open bus in a traffic jam, the sheer impossibility of everyday life.

The city decomposes and rebuilds itself every day. In the 1960s, four- or five-story "rowhouses" were built for a population beginning to burgeon: now damp eats into the cement, old paint peels, timber rots. Thousands live in the interstices between vast high-rise glistening offices and apartment buildings fronting the main roads. Inside, narrow laneways and alleys wind in accordance with the accidents of building-time, something built here, demolished there, leaving a space and a new passageway. On the top of many shophouses is a rooftop courtyard, often a carefully nurtured garden, an island of green on the roofline, where birds – black and white wrens – sometimes dance and flick their tails, and ravens sit on the forest of television antennas, the only nonhuman living creatures in the city apart of course from the cats, dogs, cockroaches, ants, rats, and occasional cobras.

The demolition of much of the low-rise central city is progressively replacing these dwellings with high-rise hotels, condominiuns, and office towers. In the remaining residential areas crowding is frequent; a random sample of Bangkok households found a level of household crowding four times that in Western societies (Edwards et al. 1994; Fuller et al. 1996). However Thai culture does not stress separation and privacy, and individuals tolerate far higher levels of shared space than any but the poorest in the West can tolerate. The Thai urban dweller's attitude cannot be predicated on Western planners' expectations. For example, it is clear that slum-dwellers often resist removal to state and private "low-cost housing," much of which remains vacant in Bangkok today (Yap 1996). Also in contradiction to Western understandings of "family values" a high proportion of Thai parents do not live with their children at all, leaving them to be raised by grandparents or other relatives in the provinces or elsewhere in Bangkok (Richter 1996). Husbands and wives, too, may live apart for long periods of time, depending on their employment opportunities. Thailand was among the first of the "developing nations" to drastically curtail fertility, in conjunction with women's widespread participation in the industrial labor force. As a result, "the family" as a co-resident domestic group is an increasingly tenuous entity. Women are choosing to have only one child (Richter et al. 1994) and informal marriage and divorce are so common as to be normative among the majority of the lower-paid population.

Although many are poor, the city promises much. The abundance of new Western-style material goods in every public space means people can hope to possess them, if not now, then in the future. So the city functions as a spectacle, a site of desire, pulling towards it thousands and thousands from the countryside who come to work, to labour, to hope, to obtain money to send home to their families, and, in the narrative dreams of the city, to go back home a rich person, buy a rice farm, rehouse the elderly parents. The city guarantees nothing, but it provides hope, an escape from the certainty of provincial dullness, limited diets, backbreaking labour under a pitiless sun. It provides spaces and opportunities, but also threats and fears, fears of being robbed, of contracting terrible illnesses such as AIDS, of being unable to live in the material spaces, unable to endure the horrors the city can throw up in exchange for its pleasures.

For the wealthy, there is nothing which cannot be obtained in Bangkok. Automobiles, houses, clothing, jewelry, gold, every modern appliance, air conditioning, abundant supply of servants, ever more elaborate internal decor, access to world-class private hospitals full of the latest computerized tomographic scanners and

magnetic resonance imaging machines (Nittayaramphong and Tangcharoensathien 1994) that ensure the smooth participation of the wealthy in the global flow of material goods and lifestyle desires. For over a decade, from the mid-eighties to the late nineties, this material plenty seemed limitless, and a new bourgeoisie expressed its tastes and preferences in an orgy of consumerism which sustained, and was sustained by, the endless demolition and rebuilding of the city itself, new shopping malls, international hotels, luxury condominiums and apartment buildings. During this decade the unifying aspects of public culture began to fray: the rich moved further and further away from the city, into suburban enclaves from which they excluded others, a fundamental shift in the interaction between material, space, and the social which hitherto had seen rich and poor living side by side in the city, in the same areas.

Vertical

Bangkok, now, is a vertical city. In traditional cosmological thought the vertical is the axis of merit, with superior above and inferior below. New construction techniques have permitted this axis to be expressed without restraint in the city. In the 1960s it was a vast horizontal plane glittering between water and sky, its highest point Wat Saket (the Golden Mount), site of the early cremation grounds for the poor (Smithies 1986). The first high-rise buildings appeared in the mid-1970s, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s the city was in a frenzy of the vertical. The heady eclectic architecture of the boom years rose as a result of several distinctive factors. Architecture as a profession has been limited since 1965 almost exclusively to Thai citizens. For complex reasons to do with landownership and entitlements there were no effective city planning ordinances or controls on either land clearance or building construction. Hence in the 1980s there was nothing to restrain development other than the available funds and the imaginations of clients and local architects. The *nouveaux riches* wanted every possible style of distinction in their new suburbs: a Roman villa, Spanish hacienda, Georgian manor. In the city, buildings sprouted Ionic, Doric, and Mock Tudor styles, as well as "Hollywood Gothic" (Hopkins and Hoskins 1995: 28–9). Young architects with six months' experience designed skyscrapers. Developers were their own planners and architectural anarchy reigned. Up, up, and up were the orders of the client: Baiyoke Tower One, in 1992, 60 stories high, was, by 1998, eclipsed by its neighbor Baiyoke Tower Two, at 90 stories. The Thai Wah Tower matched it. The sense of delirium experienced in this new built environment is hard to explain: the sky mirroring off vast glass spaces, window-cleaners perched with buckets and rags hundreds of feet above the city, laboriously washing down thousands of square meters of glass which will at once be dirty again in the city's murky air; the lavishness, absurdity, stunning beauty of it; a city composed of feral skychasers. What could be left of "Thai culture" in this modernist/postmodernist pastiche? Well, said the architects, not much . . . but there was at least the roof! Hence many of the dramatic vertical constructions are topped by little gestures towards the traditional steeply angled Thai roofline, creating the oddest sense of dislocation high in the sky.

Now much of the new cityscape is crossed by overhead transport systems, involving thousands of tonnes of concrete, giant stanchions lodged into the ground as far

as they will go, creating a second level of streetscape so that the "below" world becomes dark, shaded, like a streetscape from Ridley Scott's film *Bladerunner*. The nerve of it! Skyscrapers multiplying enormous weights in steel, glass, and concrete, resting on a soft, unstable, muddy base. Bangkokians are pleased to tell you that the whole city is sinking – by some centimeters each year – into this sludge. And then it rains. Generally lasting from July to October, the rain falls in daily downpours and the city begins to fill. Pumping stations try to empty it out but particularly when the tide rises it is hopeless, the city is flooded, pedestrians wade through thigh-deep water their belongings in plastic bags on their heads, and tiny canoes like those plying the waterways of the city one hundred years ago creep along between the skyscrapers. Above all, traffic stops.

Immobile

The volume and density of Bangok traffic has become legendary, a media spectacle for Western documentaries, an evidence of irrationality and perversity, a failure of the project of modernity. Building up in the seventies, expanding in the eighties, finally exploding in the nineties beyond any management strategy, the traffic jams multiply. Peak hours last from 5 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. The richer people became, the more cars they bought, and the further they moved from the city into gated security estates. But the prestigious schools, colleges and universities, the banks, shopping centers, entertainment venues, offices and ministries and businesses remain in the city. Wealthy families need not one, but two or even three, cars with drivers. Families rise at 5.00, at 4.30 a.m. Children eat their breakfasts in the back of the car, tended by a maid, en route to their expensive private schools. At the end of the day, the same car has to go to get them home again. The parents likewise go in different cars to different parts of the city, and the driver drops them off and picks them up again. The density of traffic means that the slightest hitch in one part of the city quickly results in gridlock in others. Some days people sit in their cars for three or four hours at a time. People joke: you can be conceived, born, and die in your car. Portable toilets are called for along the street. Emergency vehicles cannot attend emergencies. A heart-attack victim in the city center at 5 p.m. is sure to die. Above the city, a helicopter flies, sending reports to a city radio station whose sole rationale is the giving and receiving of traffic reports. Trapped in their cars, motorists call up on their mobile phones "Accident at Patumwan intersection," or report "Traffic backed up to Soi 21."

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), governments, politicians, all claim they will resolve the traffic problem. Transportation plans multiply but no level of government can implement them (Daniere 1995). There is plenty of public transport (buses, taxis) but it all needs to use the same roads. Motorcycle taxis cluster at the intersections of main roads, providing the fastest and most perilous way of getting around the city. The cacophony at street level is deafening.

At major intersections, at peak hours, stand the traffic police, in tight boots and uniform, with masks over their noses and mouths. The fumes engulf them, the carbon monoxide eats their brains, their lungs collapse. In 1997 a traffic policeman began to hallucinate – instead of cars and buses, bikes and tuk-tuks, he saw a vast parade of spirits led by the long-dead King Chulalongkorn himself, proceeding up

the thoroughfare. The policeman began to dance, gesturing to the oncoming manifestation of the spirits of modernity, holding up the traffic as the vast throng of supernaturals approached and passed slowly by.

By contrast, and miraculously, it is possible to experience the city when it is completely stilled. Suddenly all movement ceases, the noise abates. Pedestrians are alone on the street. And then, from a distance, motorcycle outriders swoop, followed by Rolls Royces and other "official" vehicles, flags of the kingdom fluttering. The Royal Family, perhaps even the King himself, traverses the city. When the King travels, all else is stilled. His route is opened before him: all roads leading to it are closed. Nothing impedes the royal movement. Pedestrians stand by the side of the road. The do not cheer or wave: they stand, heads bowed, subjects.

Just over 100 years ago, when the King traveled through his city, all were required to stay indoors. Bands of the King's archers and stave-carriers cleared the streets for the royal progress. Any person caught out of doors, in those days, had to prostrate himself, face down. Inside the houses, shutters were drawn. No commoner could look at the face of the King, but, if he did – peering through a chink in the wall, for example, or a glance upwards from the dust or mud – the offender was beaten, blinded, perhaps killed. Today, ordinary people are permitted to enter the King's presence, on certain very rare occasions: and they are permitted to watch his passage, behind the dark tinted windows of the royal vehicles, and share the spaces of the city. But, and here is a genuine transformation, even the most lowly person can look on the royal visage when it appears on television.

Mobile

For all the problems of vehicular movement, the streets, laneways, and alleys of the city are the sites of a continuous mobile commerce. Even though the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration has repeatedly tried to clear the sidewalks of vendors, selling and buying from mobile stands which take over the edges of the streets cannot, it seems, be prevented. Women with mobile kitchens set up restaurants, with folding tables, battered metal stools, condiments, utensils, the last word in fast food, providing noodles, soups, stir-fries, and omelettes in moments; diners perch at the edge of the traffic, chat, eat, drink, meet friends: for breakfast, a midmorning snack, lunch, anytime – anytime being a good time to eat (Yasmeen 1996). The dried-squid vendor pushes his cart along, ringing a bell. The pulse and nut vendors, migratory Indians from the subcontinent, carry trays of their wares on their heads. The hard-boiled-egg vendor wanders along, bearing a whole brazier full of hot charcoal on one side and eggs, chili, and sauces on the other. Glass-fronted cabinets on wheels contain fresh fruits on ice. As the day passes, crowds pulse in and out of the office buildings, the giant department stores and malls, wherever the business of the city takes place, and the swell of people eddies, pauses, stops, buys, eats. Further out along the residential streets, vendors push their carts and call out their wares: housewives and maids appear at their gates, haggle, purchase, take away the evening meal already cooked, in plastic bags. Others sell cane furniture, tables, chairs, cushions, pottery, plates, and glassware from their carts; others again come to buy: secondhand goods, empty cardboard boxes, wastepaper. Everything that can be bought and sold from a single person's pushcart will, sooner or later, appear at the gate.

Mall-time

There is also shopping to be done in the new spaces opened up by the consumptionist frenzy of boom-time. Since the mid-1980s, shopping centers and shopping malls have risen as among the most important signifying spaces of the city, paralleling the *wats* (Buddhist temples) as places around which life is oriented. Some are situated in glitzy mirrored spaces, multistoried, linked by escalators and atriums with displays, fountains, exhibitions. Department stores are often Asia-wide chains such as Robinson's, others are identified with Sino-Thai business families which began in an earlier phase of capitalist development, most famously the rice-milling dynasty now proprietors of the Central Department Store chain (cf. Pasuk and Baker 1996). In the Bangkok malls, the anchorstore is often Japanese: Sri Tokyu at Mah Boon Krong, Isetan at World Trade, Sogo at Sogo Centre. Malls are ranked in status, from the more "popular" to the most exclusive. There is a logic of display, of ambulation and bodily experience. In the majority of malls, small-scale independent vendors are located at the basement level; international fast-food outlets such as McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pizza Hut occupy higher levels, upmarket designer stores sell jewelry, CDs and videos, mobile phones and computers nearby. Homeware stores sell the latest in gadgets and furniture, and at or near the top, upmarket exclusive restaurants and bars, and perhaps a food court for the mass consumers, lead into the movie theaters and entertainment centers. These are perambulatory spaces cleared of vehicular traffic, where the movement of the body proceeds without the fear of machine-movement, a flâneurial space, air conditioned, a wandering environment and a space for looking, seeing, being seen, breathing, wanting. Outside, it might be storming, raining, fetid, desiccating: inside, it is comfortable, graspable, lookable – Benjamin's Arcades, revivified in today's Southeast Asia.

Big Market

The gobal capitalist market is knitted into the fabric of everyday life, although largely invisible. Global fluxes and flows, mostly symbols on computer screens, have somehow produced all this wealth and luxury in a small Southeast Asian nation. There are places in the city where the operation of this market is embodied: in Silom and Sathorn, where the minions of transnational capital wear their uniform of suits, and where the Western foreigner, the Chinese, Indian, African, and Thai wear Gucci and Armani, and drive BMWs and Mercedes. The head offices of the great banks, insurance, and finance companies are located along the streets of this area. But this is not a unified space, nothing like a Central Business District: in an adjacent street is a Hindu temple, a crowd of sidewalk vendors, and here, at a sudden intersection, the two notorious alleys which make up the places where that other district of desire is found: Patpong. Here is the primary space of the body-trade, flesh-trade which emerges after dark in a pulsation of disco, neon, bodies, sites of bizarre action – where play-and-pay is the rule, a dense network of bars and brothels with names harking back to imagined masculinist realms, some feudal, some merely inane: King's Castle, Pussy Galore, Vikings, Playskool, Long Gun.

Metastases

North, east, and south, networks of transportation spread out from the city. Countryside, rice fields, orchards, almost overnight become urban space. Cement, textiles, processed food, wood, and cork: name-brand international products, sports-shoes, clothing are churned out in makeshift factories along the new highways. The labour is provided by the streams of country girls and boys, most poorly educated and skilled only in farming. They arrive alone in the city, or have been hired by contractors, and are housed and fed on site. Many are paid below minimum wages, or not at all. Many are grateful anyway, for two meals a day and a place to shelter. Others, many of them young girls, feed the construction boom, carrying concrete and bricks up and down the high-rise buildings, earning $US2 a day, 12-hour days, seven days a week (Seabrook 1996).

Thousands of small communities, extended kinship networks of farmers, settlers, and traders, are obliterated. The city grows, expands, eats them all up. Where will they go? It doesn't matter. They stand in the way of the modern, they inhibit the development of housing estates, golf courses, factories, wholesale markets: they are human barriers to the logic of a globalized economy. They are sucked into the vortex, spat out, and they remove themselves, to sink or swim. There are no bodies to appeal to, or organs of the state to defend some idea of a right to a continued collective existence.

Resistance

Yet sometimes there is resistance. In old slum communities, such as those at Klong Toey near the port, residents of several generations' standing have refused to move. In spite of the poor conditions, crowding, damp, rats, people still want to stay in their place. Some who moved on later moved back again. Others resist removal in the name of history, culture, and religion. The old Muslim village of Baan Krua is probably the most famous. Right in the center of the city, surrounded by high-rise hotels and apartment blocks, it is a little oasis along a polluted canal, its mosque brightly painted and surrounded by waving palms. It stands in the way of one section of the new expressway, and in spite of the most vigorous efforts to force its removal and the relocation of its people, it has somehow managed to survive, notably with the support of academics, environmentalists, and historians. For how long? With the economic shock of the late 1990s maybe longer than anyone might have imagined.

IMF Terror

Thailand was declared an NIC (Newly Industrialized Country) by its own Prime Minister in the early 1990s. The heady mix of capital and consumption, rendered visible in every part of the city, seemed to have no end. It seemed that Bangkok, for all its woes, would grow and expand for ever, that new technological solutions, maybe even a subway, or magnetic railroads, or gigantic hoses pumping in fresh air – anything is possible – would rescue the city from its horrific aspects and reveal it as wondrous and magical at last. But the Asian Crisis of late 1997 called a dreadful halt

to such imaginings. The wash of funds began to dry up; the irrationalities of the financial, business, and bureaucratic system were targeted for reform by what seemed to be, once again, a ruthless colonizing West. The outcome of the crisis became apparent at once on the face of the city. The overhead cranes dispersed, leaving buildings half-built, unfinished, unoccupied. The overhead train project paused, slowed, leaving whole sections built but joining to nothing. Thousands of illegal immigrants were deported; thousands more country people left the city, and returned home to swell the numbers of impoverished and near-subsistence rural folk. Banks folded; the middle classes could no longer be certain of employment; students studying abroad had to return home; sales of Mercedes automobiles dwindled. Bangkok, City of Angels, pauses, but its frantic pace is not visibly affected, swollen now with European tourists seeking the bargains to be wrested from a stumble in the rush to global integration. Bangkok could stand as a catastrophic example of modernity run mad; or it could yet unfold into one of the most astonishing cities anywhere in the world.

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