

Strange Hierarchies

BENEDICT ANDERSON

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What I want to do in this afternoon's session has two parts. The first consists of some brief reflections, general and comparative, on Inequality and Equality; the second is only a ragbag of possible, and I think doable, research projects for Ajam Pasuk and her associates to think about in the context of contemporary Siam. Many people, including even economists, think of inequality as an outcome or condition of social processes, for example economic competition. This is a conceptual error: inequality is a highly aggressive process as well as an unceasing everyday goal in most contemporary societies. It is basically a hunger and demand for social recognition, deference, and submission, and the other side of this coin is abjection, humiliation, and self-deprecation. But this hunger is expressed in different terms in different epochs. In antiquity and under feudalism, the processes were openly violent (conquest producing slaves), or based on claims to superior lineages (aristocracies), and grounded in religions (Son of Heaven, Divine Kingship, Devaraja, and so forth). All this imposed inequality was so successful that neither antiquity nor feudalism even had a word for inequality, which was only born in response to the birth of equality. Modern capitalist society is too complex to be managed entirely in the old manner, but fluid money is too unstable and too morally ambiguous to make ancient forms of inequality easily dispensable.

If the world today were a lot better than it is, we would all be celebrating the 220th anniversary of the birth of the greatest and most influential political slogan in human history: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*. Equality was its core, linking together Liberty and Fraternity. French revolutionaries abolished all aristocratic titles, and insisted that every adult be addressed equally as citizen or (a gender backslide) citizeness. Robespierre during his brief period as head of the revolutionary regime became the first ruler in history to abolish slavery as a matter of principle not only in France but also in France's very profitable slave-based colonies in the Caribbean. It took the US seventy more years to abolish slavery, and Thailand almost a hundred. Properties of the powerful Catholic Church were confiscated, and the special legal status of priests was

abolished. In the end even King Louis XVI and his wife were executed, as traitors to revolution and nation.

Equality created the specter of Inequality, with which we have lived ever since, and it did so in both philosophical terms (Rousseau's "All men are created equal, and everywhere live in chains") and moral: slavery is a vast and systematic social crime.

The power of the concept of Equality has proved so great over two centuries that today monarchies compose only about 14 percent of the membership of the UN (and their combined populations are less than half that of India alone), and in more than half of the cases they now serve only purposes of symbolic identity. No one in the UK thinks that Queen Elizabeth is divinely appointed, nor is she allowed to act politically. Feudal-style titles still exist in a few places, but where this happens, they are being commercialized. So inequality (which few people will defend any more in principle) has had to find other ways to express itself.

What does this process of unequalization look like in our time and how should it be studied? What is certain is that the research should focus on the unequalizers, those persons and groups who in modern terms wish to demand deference, submission, and even abjection from others, and to various extents have the power to get what they want. It is relatively easy to study the targets of inequality, but more difficult, rare, and sometimes dangerous to examine the unequalizers. Rather than blather on theoretically let me focus on Siam and suggest some doable and instructive projects within the suggested framework. They are presented here in no special order.

First: A study of the distribution of titles. In this regard Siam is both very odd, but also, shall we say, normal. The oddness comes from the strange decision of the leaders of the coup of 1932 to abolish quasi-aristocratic titles for males, but keep them for females. These titles are very important because once they are acquired they are stable, unlike incomes, and last for a lifetime. Few things would be more interesting to study than the evolution of the system of the titles, Khunying and Thanphuying. Why were women privileged? Statistically how did their numbers grow or decline year by year and decade by decade? What kind of women were honored, by who, and for what official and unofficial reasons? What has been the changing social and strategically political rationale for their peculiar elevation? How much submission can they successfully demand?

On the other hand, fully comparable with other countries, Siam has observed the aggressive self-promotion of the peculiarly bourgeois professions, with new and old titles expressing demands for other people's submission. My feeling is that fifty years ago, the old Sanskrit-derived terms *ajarn* and *khroo* were more or less equal forms of address granted from below by people who respected others they considered wise and learned in Buddhism, magic, astrology, and so on. Since then, *khroo* has sunk to be the title for little-regarded primary and secondary-teachers, while *ajarn* has moved up to mean mainly university teachers. From this position, quite recently and rather ludicrously, has emerged the bureaucratic title of *sastrajarn* [professor], which comes from above. In Indonesia, the parallel *ajar* disappeared in the 1950s, *guru* has moved down, and the *mahaguru* or *guru besar*, state-appointed, mostly resemble the *sastrajarn*. In Siam, *mor* [doctor] has the same trajectory: *mor du* [looking doctor, astrologer] and *mor nuat* [massage doctor] still exist as lowly honorifics, with small m's, but the status of *Mor* meaning professional medical experts has risen sharply, along with the social claims of doctors. Today doctors ride very high and like *sastrajarn* feel entitled (the word) to lecture or advice everyone on the basis of their professional skills—think only of *Mor Prawet*, *Mor Liep*, and so on. The change of *Mor* from a respect word freely given from below to a high state-derived social title is well worth comparative investigation. Research in this area is specially needed, because academics and doctors—busy lecturing everyone else in Thai society—are usually averse to any cool detached sociological-linguistic study of their own hunger for inequality.

Second. Language. After physical violence, language practices in ancient times were the second most important instruments of inequalization. This habit is worldwide, not in the least peculiar to Mueang Thai. Leaving aside *rajasap* [royal language], which is actually a bit less inegalitarian than what can be found in Java, Japan, and so on, someone with linguistic skills should study the way abjection is built into the Thai language, especially the Bangkok dialect. The key to the study should be pronouns and terms of address that can be reciprocal and those that cannot. *Ku rak myng* [I love you; colloquial] can be returned to the speaker, as can *chan rak theu* [I love you; formal] (a bit artificially), as can *khun* [you; neutral]. But almost everything else reflects inequality—positive and negative: *khapajao*, *nu*, *dichan*, *phi*, *nong* [terms for I], and so on. Few things are more repulsive than the habit of yelling at young waiters “Nong! Nong!” without any wish to learn even *Ai* or *I-nong*'s

name. Fake-familial terms of this type cannot be reciprocal, but demand a certain level of everyday cringing and self-abasement. Police use *uwa* and *leu* [I and you; rough] but are furious if these words are sent back to them. In Bangkok, the egalitarian, unisex *chan* [I] is often used only to speak to household servants. Women are specially disadvantaged, caught between the childish *nu*, the artificial and pretentious *dichan* [I], and the ambiguous *chan*. At the apex of this linguistic pyramid of inequality is the self-styled term *phu di* [good people, meaning aristocrat] a few of whom are indeed *khon di* [good people], but generally they are the rudest people in Thai society. There is a need for a manageable dissection of hierarchy built into Bangkok Thai. In what ways is this hierarchy resisted? Why and how is Bangkok Thai so much more hierarchical than other forms of Thai outside the capital?

A more elaborate study could be imagined which would look at Bangkok Thai comparatively. Indonesia is a nice place for the comparison. The Indonesian language is both a national language and a lingua franca, and the latter status is much older than the former. It doesn't belong to any significant ethnic group, is understood by almost everyone, and in different parts of the country people speak it with different accents and some vocabulary drawn from the local mother tongues. Its pronoun system is simple and gender difference is not much marked. Hence its effect is in the direction of equality, though the Suharto dictatorship made not very successful efforts to create a hierarchical "civilized standard version." Bangkok Thai looks like the opposite in some respects, and is in part modeled on the Queen's English, an aristocratic dialect imposed through the class structure, the mass media, and the educational system. Under it lie, first, the regional Thai languages of the North, South, Isan, and the *Neur* [northerly] areas of the Center; and below that the non-Thai spoken languages like Khmer, Mon, Malay, and so on. But the prestige of the Queen's English has been dying for forty years. On radio and TV in the UK no one is embarrassed to speak "London," Liverpool, Scots, Belfast, and so on. How to speed the day when broadcasters and parliamentary orators speaking Northern, *Neur*, Southern, and Eastern Thai are normal, is a good equalizing idea. It's also worth noting the rational, simple spelling that Laos uses by contrast with the irrational and pretentious spelling that is official in Thailand.

Third, Geographies of Fear. Anthropologists typically study villages, small towns, minorities, and tribes. But a few years ago, a remarkable Eurasian called Lizzy van Leeuwen (2011) published a wonderful book (*Lost*

in Mall), based on research in an upper middle-class gated community in Jakarta. In principle the gated *muban* [village, community] is exclusionary; it is supposed to segregate a stratum of more or less wealthy people from those less wealthy and with fewer educational qualifications. But Van Leeuwen discovered some interesting things. First, that the principle of self-segregation was never really achievable because privileged people require entourages to make the equality of the *muban* bearable. So the *muban* was quickly penetrated by vendors, small stores, convenient salons, dressmakers, *yaam* [guards], maids, and so on. It turned out that these processes created a complex of fears—fear of *yaam* being robbers, maids being thieves, salons producing unpleasant gossip, small storekeepers being spies for criminals. Hence Van Leeuwen discovered a culture of tension and low-level paranoia, as well as one with very poor local intelligence. This is the psychic price of privilege under modern capitalism.

Van Leeuwen has two especially fascinating chapters. One is on air-conditioning. Not only the house of the family where she stayed was air-conditioned 24 hours a day, no matter whether any one was at home, but so was the garage, the automobiles. She showed how the family used their cars to go to air-conditioned schools, malls, offices, saying that the Jakarta heat and dust and pollution were grave threats to health. If possible they would never breathe natural air. Without AC, they would fall prey to epidemics, asthma, heatstrokes, darkened skins, and so on. The *muban* itself could not protect them from these threats. One room in the house was not air-conditioned, that of the live-in maid. The family said that the maid wouldn't like air-conditioning because she was a *chao baan* [villager, common person] and not used to it, disregarding the obvious fact that the maid spent most of her time in air-conditioned rooms, cooking, cleaning, baby-sitting, and so on.

Another chapter describes the complete panic caused by the turmoil surrounding the fall of Suharto. The daughter was immediately sent to grandma's in a remote suburb. The oafish teenage son disappeared to hang out with his friends in a mall, and kept his cellphone shut. The layabout husband followed suit, claiming he wanted to take photos of the demonstrations. The hysterical mother was left alone with the maid and the family's three Mercedes Benzes. She could drive one of them to a safe place, but only by leaving the other two unguarded—the mobs might come, the maid might have a secret boyfriend who would steal one, and so on. She didn't even know her neighbors well enough to trust them to help. This

is the kind of close-up study of unequalizers that really should have been done a long time ago in Siam. But another kind of study, economic and sociological, should be done on the whole process of self-segregation and the new well-off *muban*, how these communities are distributed geographically in Bangkok.

Also, the rise of the condo. I myself live in a smallish, rather rundown condo in Thonburi. The residents are all middle-class, business people, professionals, *mia noi* [minor wives] of big police officers, teachers, and so on. Mostly they keep to themselves, and have almost no sense of collective solidarity on upkeep, security, and giving the staff decent pay, social recognition, gratitude, or rest. The interesting group are the *yaam*, hired by businesses specializing in home security. They are not well educated and come from the poorer classes, mostly from *tang jangwat* [the provinces]. The residents don't care to know their names, addressing them simply as *nong*. Fellow residents are warned not to give them any small gifts like fruit once in a while because they will "get spoiled." Precisely the absence of any decent social contact means that the *yaam* are constantly suspected of thieving or acting as watch-outs for criminal gangs. In this sense security actually compounds insecurity. Otherwise they are stereotyped as lazy, sleeping on the job, not respectful, getting drunk, enjoying music too much. In the background lies the absolute unreliability of the local police. A good research project would study the whole business of home security: companies (sizes, numbers, run by who?), training (if any), discipline, relations with customers (*yaam* are much cheaper than private bodyguards), recruitment, turnover, wages, culture, and so on. It would be a good look at one side of the geography of fear.

Fourth, a project for serious feminists. In New York City around 1910, a quarter of the population was employed in domestic service—chauffeurs, cooks, maids, gardeners, washerwomen, and so on. By 1940 they had almost disappeared. We know the reasons: the mass production of labor-saving machines for cooking, cleaning, and so on; the arrival of crèches and kindergartens; much smaller families; much more enjoyable employment in factories and the service sector. Middle- and upper-class Southeast Asians have long had access to the machines, and even to kindergartens; they have smaller families than their parents'; competition for cheap labor by factories, and service industries is very visible. But, unlike New Yorkers, they cling to the need for maids, especially, fellow nationals if possible and not too insolent, otherwise very poor foreigners. Why? Not long ago a survey was published in

Manila asking Filipinos who had moved to California, but still liked to come “home” for long vacations, what they loved about the motherland. One of the most honest answers was: “It is sooooo wonderful not having to make my bed in the morning!” This is the entourage principle inside inequality. It is not enough to feel autonomously privileged, one needs to have this privilege constantly demonstrated in everyday life, refracted through the behavior of the entourage—obedience, diligence, linguistic abjection, loyalty, gratitude. It also shows how middle-class people, with their privileges, anchored unstably in mere money, so like to ape aristocracies in their own social-climbing ways. What makes the study of these mini-entourages of special interest is that their axis is common woman-ness. (One could add in passing that maids are the people from whom middle-class children can learn the ropes, and practice being unequalizers).

As we all know, the press is constantly full of ghastly sensational stories about maids, especially from Singapore, but elsewhere too: savage treatment by the mother of the family, sometimes including physical torture, intimidation, humiliation, suspicion, and in response sabotage, sex with the husband, deliberate neglect or abuse of the family’s small children. Plus loneliness, incessant demands, sequestering of documents, horribly long hours. I am sure that the newspapers love the extreme cases, and there are wives/mothers who have close and warm relations with their servants—but not many. I have often listened to middle-class mothers talk together about the “maid problem.” These maids are always said to be lazy, duplicitous, sexually aggressive (to Dad), immoral, dirty, stupid, insolent, incompetent, unreliable, bla-bla-bla. You never hear a maid being praised. I once tried asking a group of such mothers (some of whom imagined themselves as good feminists): if the maids are this bad, why on earth do you want to hire them. Blank looks! How stupid men are! Everyone I know has a maid or two! But finding a good one is harder than finding a good husband.

NGOs and human rights groups have done a lot of good research on maids, especially foreign ones who are the most exploited. But for the equality project, it is their employers who need to be studied carefully. The experience of advanced capitalist countries is that live-in maids are actually unnecessary. So why do so many Southeast Asian middle-class women pine for people for whom they have such contempt and whom they so visibly fear? Theoretically maids are an interesting site to study the cross-effects of class inequality and intra-gender inequality. Let me add some thoughts here

from a feminist friend of mine who has thought long and seriously about the question. She said:

You are too hard on these women, and you are not thinking about the broad middle-class cultures in Southeast Asia today. Be more understanding and compassionate. Men are often much better cooks than women (just look who cooks in Bangkok restaurants), but they expect to be paid. Usually, they won't cook gratis at home. These women are "conscious," they don't want to be their husband's maids, someone else should be. In their generation they were taught cooking by their mothers, but their daughters are used to take-out, and sometimes don't want to learn how to boil an egg. Mothers also realize the irony that by employing maids, they are telling their children that they don't need to clean, wash, or do any other domestic chore. Nothing in contemporary youth culture says to the young: help your parents. Of course the maids are younger than their employers, and they have various reasons (pleasure, revenge, boredom) for playing up this advantage in playing mother off against father. The daughters meantime have imbibed the most selfish aspects of a superficial feminism. The irony today is that there are plenty of middle-class mothers who feel closest to their *krathoey* (transgender) sons, for whom mum is a protector against the shame of Dad, whose ideas of being a woman are almost wholly pre-feminism! What you describe for New York only means that the "end of maids" occurred in the high era of industrial capitalism there when feminism was barely thought about and big factories with lots of women together were commonplace. What is happening in Southeast Asia is a question of bad timing. You always misquote Gramsci to me, you old fool: "The old is dying but struggles to live on. The new is still struggling to be born. In such times monsters appear." Feminism arrived in Southeast Asia in another time—under financialized capitalism, globalization, surviving feudalism, and so on—hence is disconnected from most of the actual conditions, economic and otherwise, in these societies. Gramsci expected monsters, but not you.

My friend was and is right. All the more reason, in monstrous times, to study seriously the place where the contradictions of inequality are best

exemplified: the middle-class family in its loneliness, fear, and, sometimes, good will. But this family has to learn to love the word *ratsadorn* (people).

Fifth, a very small project for an economist. About fifteen years ago, I got interested in statistical narratives, especially those in national censuses. A standard table on income distribution is usually very peculiar. The core of the table is organized in a scalar manner: numbers of people with annual incomes between say 30–50 thousand dollars, 50–70, 70–90, 90–110, and so on up to, say, 300. It's a question of increments. But framing this core are: Below 30, and Above 300. These are handled as residuals. There is no poverty line, no notice is paid to the huge experiential difference between 25 and 15, 5, or 0. Similarly, scholarship disappears above 300, there is just a cloud which must include 350, 3,500, 35,000, 350,000, 3,500,000. Squashed together, and with the likelihood that the majority is near 350, they are just more of the same. But if the same scalar scheme of 20-thousand dollar increments were applied to the over 300s, the table would cover many pages. The narrative of the table says: the US is an egalitarian society, everyone is middle-class, except for a few very poor and a few very rich. Don't worry or get upset.

Thus the project I suggest is a semantic study of Thai economic statistics. How are they narrated and narratively organized? What categories are used to show what? To show what I am getting at, just imagine an income-distribution table that was not scalar, and consisted of just two categories: total number of people with incomes up to 80 thousand, and total with incomes over 80 thousand. Here the narrative, backed by the same data, would be a narrative of haves and have-nots, of polar oppositions.

Notes

- 1 For a collection of these and other articles, along with a full assessment of Ben's contribution to the study of Thailand by Tamara Loos, see Anderson 2014.
- 2 For the benefit of non-Thai readers, English equivalents of Thai terms not in Ben's original text have been added and placed within square brackets.

References

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