Introduction

When I was a kid I used to cheer every time a mercury thermometer would break in my house. Away from the eyes of my parents I would put the spilled quicksilver on a table, kneel down, eyes close to the board and move the mercury through small objects watching the stream cluster, divide, aggregate, and take part as it filled the tiny spaces between the static pieces. The first time I crossed a four lane street in Bangkok I stopped, middle way, to watch the flow of thousands of motorbikes swirling, zigzagging, sinuously moving through the static lanes of cars at a traffic light, feeling like a baby. After that, almost every day I walked up to one of the thousand pedestrian overpasses, built during the expansion years of Bangkok to reduce to its minimum the frictions and stoppages to the flow of traffic and business, and watched the dance of thousands of motorcycles, making routes and inventing passages where automobiles and bus waited, frozen. I stand there observing the mass of motorbikes arriving from behind, making their ways to the front of the line, and clustering in a dense cloud few meters away from the first cars. From above I stared, entranced, waiting for the traffic light to turn green, the flow restored until the next red light, car queue, and motorcycles dance.

Mobility and traffic, street-level and elevation were my first introduction to the enormous Thai metropolis. As I spend more time in the city it became clear that most residents lived their lives continuously activating and discussing knowledge and experiences of movement, detecting the best way to move from point A to point B, depending on time of the day, available cash, rush, and disposition or willingness to be exposed to heat, smell, and toxic fumes of the city. In a megalopolis of 15 million people (Thailand Census 2010), infamous for its traffic gridlocks and environmental hazard, having this knowledge and sensing when to switch modes of transportation makes the difference between being in time for work, a meeting, or a show and remaining stuck for hours in the tropical heat. Bus, taxis, cars, tuk-tuk, skytrain, subway, canal boats, river boats, vans, *song teaw*, bikes, motorbikes, motorcycle taxis, all of these possibilities present themselves to the dweller on the move, according to location and income. Only the two most recent entries into this mobility puzzle, sky-train and subway, offer predictable and regular schedules—outside malfunctions—but cover a minimal portion of the city. For the rest, managing time and space requires a high degree of expertise. The

new resident, be that person a foreign anthropologist or one of the internal migrants that populate the city, starts building this knowledge quickly, out of experiences, nerve-wrecking failures, and innumerable hours spent moving through the city or getting stuck in it. The new comer learns that the affordable busses are slow-moving from 8 to 9 am, from 12 to 1.30, and then again after 4.30pm, and that, in contrast to Europe and similarly to the US, are almost uniquely the transport system of the poor; that taxis, sheltered in an air conditioned environment, are never worth their price during peak hours when a short ride may add up to a day of income but can be otherwise convenient for long detour and often offer some of the best occasional conversations in town; that water transportation never experiences gridlock, and in their regular slowness can often save the day, if you are willing to take a smelly ride on the polluted canals.

With time, the newcomer learns that moving in Bangkok is a matter of navigating the city, its landmarks and rhythms with prompt reactions and creativity. During traffic hours, he readily discover that mixing and switching is the way to go: a section on a bus and then be ready to get off once it blocks in traffic, a short ride to the canal, another tract on boat and a final ride on a bus after you get out of the congested area. One of the main discoveries, however, it is that when the traffic blocks, subway and skytrain are too far away, boats do not reach, and buses are stuck, if you want to get somewhere fast hopping on the back of one of the omnipresent motorcycle taxis is your only choice. Tuck in your knees, and more or less smoothly zigzag through the halted city to your destination, or to the closest station of the two predictable transportation systems.

As I start talking to people about this technology of mobility stories started pouring out, almost often preceded by laughter at the thought of an international PhD student coming a long way to spend time with *motory rapjang* (motorcycle for hire). Laughter, Mary Douglas would say, comes from discomfort and the uneasiness of matter out of place (Douglas 1975). A Harvard student coming to Thailand to hang out with what is often presented by Bangkok urbanites and popular media as a dangerous, lazy, and motley bunch was definitely, to most people, matter out of place. "This is what my son will become, if he doesn't work hard," a young mother who migrated from the urban hinterland to work in a small office in Central Bangkok tells me

with concern. If, when she was young, tending buffalos (*liang khwai*) was the fate rhetorically reserved for disobedient and lazy youngsters, now that the country is urbanized and buffalo sparse, becoming a motorcycle taxi driver has taken the place of looking after buffalos as the epitome of the urban middle class' undesirable job for good-to-nothing.

The protagonists of this dissertation, young and for the most part males from the provinces of Thailand are these good-to-nothing who make the city function and allow circulation of people, goods, as well as ideas through the urban landscape and into the larger landscape of the country. This dissertation explores and navigates the paradox between the drivers' marginality and absolute necessity for the operation of Thai capital, and its capital city. As the laughter faded away and the person realized I was not joking, stories started to take the place of puzzlement. Everybody seemed to have something to say, an event to recount, a driver they knew or they regularly used. The first story was always about an accident, a narrative of an insane drive into clogged traffic, or a recounting of knees hitting blocked cars, while zigzagging through traffic. Soon to follow were stories of thefts, drug dealing, and occasional sexual assaults. These stories, however common in the actual experiences of riding motortaxis, often acquired the rhetorical marks of urban legend. They always happened to a friend of a friend, somebody they knew, a slightly too removed acquaintance. Rather than presenting actual experiences they strengthen diffuse perceptions of the drivers as unsafe, unreliable, and hyper-masculine. These stories were often topped with a concerned admonition on their dangerous nature.

"So you don't use them?" I would ask watching a common smile opening in the person's face. Another flood of stories would release, this time not about the generalized stereotype of *the* driver but about *a* particular driver, the one that the specific person used daily: some to go to work, some to send their kids back and forth to school, some to send documents, to deliver goods, to pay bills, to pick food up, to fix a broken pipe in their house, and some to get their regular stash of drugs. Everybody I met seemed to be connected to and through a motorcycle taxi driver. Utilities and post offices in Bangkok are for the most part populated by drivers, waiting to pay bills, deliver packages, or turn in documents. Banks are peppered by their colorful

vests, standing in line to deposit a check or collect a stipend for their regular clients. Offices rely on them to deliver documents and packages. At late parties, where the buzz started to run low or ice had melted away a phone number of a driver who works at night would pop up and the party would be extended after a fast delivery. Even e-commerce businesses offer motorcycle taxi delivery services, at the most expensive rate.

Fascinated by the 200,000 drivers operating in Bangkok, their omnipresence and multiple roles in the daily functioning of the city as well as radical marginality and invisibility I set out to explore the functioning of these almost invisible movers of the city, erased in transportation studies, away from government recognition, occasionally noticed by popular press and culture but largely overlooked by academic studies. How did these internal migrant come to be the mediators of the city? What role do they play in the daily life of million dwellers? How did they organize their mobility? What happened to them as they moved, and to the city around them? What political consciousness emerges on the move, and how do they act upon it? With these questions in mind I set to my investigation and navigation of mobility in Bangkok, ready to move with the flow, and getting stuck with it.

This dissertation explores the dynamics of mobility, immobility, and political mobilization in post-1997 crisis Thailand through an ethnographic study of some of the 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers operating quasi-legally in Bangkok. It follows the historical emergence and present trajectories of these drivers—most of whom are men from the impoverished northeastern Isan region of Thailand—as mediators of goods, images, ideas, and desires through the landscapes of Bangkok and into the larger geography of the Thai countryside. Through the analysis of these transportation operators, their internal organization, and their rise as central political actors in contemporary Thailand, I strive to answer these questions and to recover links among people, commodities, and spaces that anthropology has too often neglected. In their trajectories through Bangkok and beyond, the drivers re-define what urban life is, what spaces are reachable and unreachable, as well as restructure the economic, social, legal, and political relations among its dwellers. Their lives on the move, in other words, retain a transformative potential, not just for the city around them but also

for the drivers themselves who, a trip at a time, get accustomed to urban life, its marvel and its sorrows, its excitements and its crushing oppression. Situated at the intersection between (spatial) mobility and (political) mobilization, this dissertation investigates the multiple roles that the motorcycle taxi drivers play in constituting and re-configuring the physical, social, economic, and political landscapes of the metropolis for millions of Bangkok residents.

Mobility constitutes and shapes the birth, growth, and functioning of the modern metropolis. The circulation of people and objects establishes infrastructures (Larkin 2008), whether material or immaterial, that outlive their circulation and stratify to constitute a city (Lefebvre 1991). The study of this generative process, however, has historically suffered from a disconnect between social theory and empirical analysis. Scholars of urban sociology, critical theory, and urban studies have illuminated the roles of fragmentation (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999; Sennett 1969) speed (Schivelbusch 1986; Urry 2007; Virilio 1986), and mobility (Sassen 1991; Simone 2004) in producing spaces and experiences of the city (de Certeau 1984). Aside from some notable exceptions (Ho 2006; Malkki 1995; Tsing 2005), mostly outside urban settings, few works have connected these theoretical preoccupations with ethnographic analysis.

In order to address the accusation of being more interested in roots than in routes (Appadurai 1996; Clifford 1997), recent anthropological studies in urban contexts have emphasized "interrelations and linkages between local settings and larger regional or global structures and processes" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 7), as their focus on neighborhoods (Askew 2002, Herzfeld 2009), market places (Bestor 2004, Stoller 2003), and enclaves (Caldeira 2000; Low 2003) demonstrates. Although informative in unraveling the social complexities of localized social worlds and interactions, these bodies of literature ignore the role of mobility in structuring the city, its spaces, as well as its social relations. How are we to understand the social lives of mobile subjects, such as the drivers, if we are bound to analyze them through the lens of a local?

Like the quicksilver that so deeply fascinated me as a kid, the system of motorcycle taxi drivers proved hard to confine and difficult to grasp, especially to the tool of traditional anthropological research, accustomed to relatively stable groups, in which often territoriality and spatiality corresponded. This proved time and again during my research a source of frustrations, as well as its main methodological challenge and stimulus. This conundrum, I realized, has mostly been a result of traditional anthropological methods. As Ulf Hannerz argued, a certain degree of disciplinary orthodoxy and methodological conservatism "tended to bring the anthropologist to the ethnic enclaves, the ghetto, which had cultural and organizational characteristics with which he [sic] could—in his own curious way—feel comfortable" (1980:3). I propose instead to bend the disciplinary framework by pushing conventional ethnography to a position of "productive discomfort" (Herzfeld 1992:16), faced with a study of urban mobility. I put anthropology in conversation with a growing sociological and geographic literature, often referred to as the "mobility paradigm" (Urry 2006, Cresswell 2006, Adey 2010), that rescues mobility from the black box in which the social sciences has often secluded it. In this sense my research brings their proposals to the test of ethnographic analysis by developing a methodology that "also move along with people, images, or objects that are moving and being studied" (Urry 2007:6) and shifts between different disciplinary methods—from spatial analysis to participant observation, from archival research to cartographic mapping, from social history to visual analysis. Mobility, therefore, becomes not only the object of my analysis but structures its methodology.

This work is based on twenty-two months of fieldwork between July 2009 and May 2011. During this time my physical and conceptual trajectories, mediated by the drivers' paths, intersected with their multiple roles in Bangkok and multi-directional migration between the city and villages in the Thai countryside. My fieldwork, however, did not start by following the drivers but rather arrived at them by tracing the circulation of objects, documents, and commodities around the city. It was these objects, and a multitude of senders and receivers for which the motor-taxi operate as mediators, that directed me to some of the drivers in my neighborhood. While I worked as a motorcycle taxi driver in their group, the physical geography of the

area—and its landmarks—started to became familiar. During this period of my research, I also traveled to many of the drivers' villages, following the convoluted paths that connect the city and the countryside as well as the ideas, bodies, and commodities that travel along them.

This physical space was just one of the landscapes that the drivers traversed and operated on. As my research progressed, a complex geography of organizational structures, illegal economies, historical events, and political figures started to become visible. This geography was suddenly reshuffled when the Red Shirts protesters descended into Bangkok and took hold of the city with the help of motorcycle taxi drivers. In the weeks that preceded and followed the protest I found myself in the midst of the biggest political mobilization in modern Thai history, with a unique set of connections in place to make sense of the rapidly evolving events. This epochal uprising, and the central roles that the drivers played in it, demonstrated that "mobility means nothing without mobilization" (Tsing 2005:215) and that operators of mobility retain a potential to sever and filter the very connections they contribute in creating. During the protest this potential was materialized and the drivers brought the mobility of central Bangkok to a halt.

As a consequence, my mobile research became static. Over the next few months, my investigation resembled more traditional anthropological fieldwork, bounded in the protest area which drivers referred to as their "village in the middle of the city," tucked in between shopping malls, up-scale hotels, and a futuristic elevated train. It was in this reclaimed space, which they allowed to function, that I met the newly formed Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) and its competing leaders. When the street protest was suppressed, my research was again set in motion, plugged into an extensive landscape of drivers, labor organizers, police officers, army personnel, and politicians in which the motorcycle taxi association operates.

Following the different paces and paths of my fieldwork, this dissertation is composed of two interlocked trajectories, both organized around four chapters. This narrative movement starts with the creation of the conditions of possibility—material, technological, economic, and social—for the emergence in the early 1980s of the motorcycle taxi as a technology of transportation in traffic-ridden Bangkok. I focus on tight connections between processes of urbanization, privatized land development, industrial expansion and new

illegal economies. The text progresses by exploring the daily lives of the drivers as interstitial subjects, mediating between urban spaces and classes. I analyze the ways in which riding a motorbike shapes perceptions and practices of urban space as well as their presence in the city and in larger national imaginaries of Bangkok. Then, this trajectory branches out from the city into a larger rural geography that the drivers help shape and connect, through labor and movement. Finally, I explore the driver positioning into post-1997 crisis capitalist restructuring in Thailand and their formalization by Thaksin Shinawatra in 2003.

While Part I focuses on the drivers' everyday mobilities, the second half of the thesis examines how their mobility morphs into—and shapes—their political mobilization. These four chapters follow the Thai state officials' realization of the drivers' presence and strength in the city, their attempts to formalize and control their operations, and the emergence of the drivers as central power brokers in Bangkok. I explore how mobility not only defines their political subjectivities but also their strategies during protest and their bargaining power vis-à-vis the state. Finally, I examine the forms of organization that the drivers adopted, under conflicting leaders and conceptions of power, during and after the red-shirt uprisings of 2009 and 2010. On the overall, I follow the narrative movement from mobility to political mobilization and, in so doing, I explore the emergence—in late capitalist Thailand—of mobility, its spaces, and its operators, as quintessential political strategies, arenas, and actors.

Prologue

FIGURE 1 [Bangkok From Above]

Seen from above, Bangkok resembles an octopus, scarred on its left side by the sinuous bends of the Chao Praya River and squeezed in the middle, with its tentacles distending sideways. Large multi-lanes roads spread radially, departing from the Central Business District that clumps around Siam Square, where the city's elevated railway lines cross. Zooming in, the structure of the city starts to break down, and the octopus contorts into cramped and convoluted patterns. At this scale, the street network suggests the shape of multiple trees, the result of the roads' past lives as canals. Long boulevards hit a small maze of roads; cyclical roundabouts and centrifugal roads shatter against streets from which slender alleys (*soi*) branch out and conquer the space between them, without connecting. The result is a confusing chaos of alleys that keep breaking up, reaching from one another and then suddenly stopping a few meters before connecting, fractured by buildings, gardens, and parking lots.

This infuriating topography discloses the doomed audacity of multiple attempts to plan, organize, and dominate the city's organic and unruly expansion. All they left behind, however, is the chaotic and fragmented overlay that composes the landscape of the Thai capital. The same patchwork dominates Bangkok's architecture.

A crossroads since its origin, Bangkok still preserves the "thrown together" feeling of a harbor city, even if its most buzzing areas now far away from the water. Land-use and social segregation typical of European or American cities never take over here, even in the urban commercial core. Along the convoluted and narrow *soi* multiple architectural structures mix according to complex histories of booms and busts, which left untamed shrubs next to upscale residences, crumbling shop houses next to international shopping malls, small slums in the shadow of skyscrapers. Behind the elevated square of Bangkok's most glamorous shopping mall—Siam Paragon—and the nearby Princess Palace, two small slums survive, next to condominiums and small garment factories. From there a six-lane street overshadowed by the concrete rail of Bangkok's Skytrain, connects the commercial core of the city to

its financial district, extending along Silom and Sathorn roads. Even in this area, where land reaches prices comparable to New York or London and new skyscrapers appear continuously, the urban structure remains fractured, and its streets are flooded everyday by a mix of informal vendors, prostitutes, local dwellers, and office workers.

All around them, Sino-Portuguese shop houses modeled after Singaporean counterparts mix with neo-classic neighborhoods where the nouveau riche live. Dilapidated apartment buildings covered with rusty iron grating overlook low-rise villas with vistas on fake Greek and Roman sculptures and small corner shops. Decrepit wooden houses on stilts mold away in the shadow of glassy skyscrapers and mono-family homes dressed up as Gothic churches. Ubiquitous Buddhist temples sit next to Dutch-looking palaces providing all the pleasures of the red-light district of Amsterdam, small mosques along sleepy canals built by Thai Muslims, and giant ones sponsored by Middle-Eastern tycoons along busy highways. Half-empty Portuguese churches doze beside bustling shopping centers, Chinese shrines, Hindu temples, and massage parlors. At the verge of the city, up-scale residential complexes, copies of international cities, carry the name of their inspirations: London, Paris, all the way to the "Grand Canal"—a Venetian-themed neighborhood that screams Las Vegas more than Bangkok. As Bangkok paces out, these gated communities mix with giant industrial estates, unfinished town-houses left behind by the 1997 economic crisis, lush waterways, and swampy rice fields.

In the morning Bangkok wakes up from there: the octopus moving from the tips of its tentacles. Workers and their children flow into the city, where most of them work but cannot afford to live. Small vans, collective taxis, and buses ferry the working class through the complex maze of radial roads and branching streets, all the way to their workplaces. Those who can afford to save time, ride taxis or their own personal cars to the mass transit terminus and continue their commutes inside air-conditioned trains, through the elevated urban corridors that cut the Business District, or below ground, along the two lines of the subway. People living along the few remaining navigable canals jump on slim longboats and endure the pungent smell of the waterways in exchange for bypassing traffic. Even if the city provides for different locations, wallets, and urgencies with multiple forms of transportation, few of

them are able to reach deep into the maze of the *soi* where most of Bangkok's city dwellers reside. Mobility inside those *soi*, too narrow for buses and vans, subway and skytrain, and often clogged with cars, remain largely in the hands of motorcycle taxi drivers, who every morning arrive at their street corner just before the city revives.

Before the morning exodus begins, the drivers leave a myriad of small cramped rooms across the city. They traverse empty and silent roads atop their scooters, converging on their local stations (*win*) before the human tide starts pouring into the arteries of the city. Their work day begins around 5 am by carrying home the last nocturnal souls: the drunken party goers, the prostitutes at the end of their labor day, the night-shift workers. The calm period between them and the early risers lasts just a few minutes. Soon an electric impulse runs through the city's vein and the streets reanimate. Omnipresent food vendors set up their carts, light the grills, and pack commodities into one-portion plastic bundles. By 6.30 am the city is in full motion. Roller shutters go up, office buildings open their glass doors, factories activate their machinery, and schools unlock their gates. Suddenly the urban motion picks up and the roads get crowded, as the noise and smell of traffic intensifies. Drivers ride up and down the *sois*, restlessly carrying children to their schools and parents to their workplaces. Most are short trips with regular customers, some heading in the neighbourhood, others riding to the closest bus or train station, from which they continue their daily commute. Occasionally, a well-dressed business person jumps on the bike and, in a rush, directs the driver to far away locations, impossible to reach in time using any other mean of transportation in the morning traffic. More regularly, an office worker comes down to the street and hands one of the drivers some document to deliver, immediately, across town. After a couple of hours of rushed rides, the urban pace die out again.

While during peak hours the drivers speed through traffic muttering a few words to their passengers, in these extended waiting periods they engage more directly in the social life of the neighbourhood. A witty remark to a good-looking woman who works nearby, a short chat with the older man who stops every time he comes home from his afternoon walk, a helping hand to a vendor pushing the cart along the road: through these mundane interactions the drivers solidify their presence in the physical, social, and economic landscape which surrounds them. Then, at a familiar time, these

interactions dissipate as service workers on the street get ready to accommodate a new wave of clients. Sleepy vendors wake up and move their carts to cater for the after-work fluxes. Tables are replenished with goods. Drivers put their pastime of choice away and jump on their bikes, ready to ferry clients to Skytrain or bus stops or—when and if the traffic gets really bad—all the way to their homes. Then, as if responding to an unspoken call, the corners revive, dense with the physical and economic circulation released by offices and schools.

Children run around looking for after school snacks. Office workers speed out to avoid the worst traffic. Young workers stand in small groups deciding what to do next. Mothers pick up food, neatly packed in plastic bags, and head home. All around, smoke comes out of food carts. Slowly marinated meat hits the grill. Stuffed fish rolls are cooked on charcoal. Individual portions of rice are spooned out of enormous steaming pots. In this mixture of fumes, vegetables are pan-fried, stir-fried, deep-fried. Seafood mixes with vegetables, with egg, with noodles, with curry, with soup. A thick paste of chili and garlic hits sizzling woks. A few other ingredients are added in and rapidly stirred. Woks are emptied into rice boxes. Water washes the pan and then is rapidly discarded into a big plastic bucket. Again chili and garlic paste: a new cycle begins.

The drivers overlook the scene atop their bikes, one hand in the air to attract clients, peering at potential customers, scrutinizing their faces for a movement of eyebrows, an elevation of chin, or the hint of a hand sign to indicate interest in their service. Beside them, the streets are specked with cars, pick-up trucks, vans, and buses. For a while the traffic gets denser, without affecting the speed of motion. Then, slowly, the rhythm of the traffic lights becomes visible from the entrance of the *soi*, often hundreds of meters away from the intersections. Simultaneously with the red light, a line of vehicles accumulates past the alley where the *win* is located, filling the air with pestilent fumes. The rhythm of the city becomes syncopated by the fast running seconds between a red light and the next one. Green light: slow but steady movement of vehicles, people accumulating on the sidewalks, chatting and buying from vendors. Yellow light: the pace of cars gets faster, more nervous. People on the sidewalk walk away from vendors and concentrate at the pedestrian crossing. Red light: again the winding line of vehicles stretch past the motorcycle taxi group while people cross the street. This

cyclical routine repeats with minor variations for about an hour. Then, in a few minutes, the traffic comes to a complete halt.

Now the traffic lights change colour but no perceptible movement results. Cars and buses rest, engines on, in the middle of intersections, attempting in vain to move a few feet backward or forward while pedestrians cross the street, moving through halted vehicles. In these slow-moving, smoke-smelling, nerve-wrecking gridlocks the meandering mobility of motorbikes conquers the city, occupying and finding paths in the empty gaps between vehicles. If seen from a car or bus the street looks blocked; from atop a motorbike small whiling highways become visible in this metal maze. As cars slowly move, trying unsuccessfully to shift to another lane, these paths rapidly emerge and disappear, open and close, framed by rear-view mirrors and back lights. In these spaces motorcycle taxis find their ideal habitat, spaces of flow invisible and impervious to any other mechanical technology of mobility.

Eyes glued to the street, the motorcycle drivers read these emerging spaces, constantly looking for a path that will open up and guessing which one will close next. In this situation all the drivers' skills are summoned. Getting to their destination rapidly means arriving back to the *win* faster and getting another client sooner. Speed and money, in traffic, become synonyms for the drivers, in ways they do not for cabs. When facing a yellow traffic light, the taxi driver breaks, happily leaving the meter running. The motorcycle taxi, on the contrary, rushes through at full speed: right hand on the accelerator, twisting all the way to get as far as possible in between the two rows of cars, swinging just enough to dodge the driving mirrors. As cars move to one side, attempting to change lanes, the driver's right hand pulls the front break lever. Simultaneously the right foot pushes down the pedal, applying the rear break. Left heel pushes on the gear selector to lower the gear. Knees move in. Left arm extends. Harsh turn between two cars to find another space that opened on the right lane: a new limited window of street pavement. Left foot presses down, gear up. Right hand twists the grip, accelerate. The drivers' whole body adjusts to the rhythm of the mercurial traffic. Eyes, hands, head, feet, knees the drivers read and react to the pace of moving traffic, deploying complex skills, embodied to the point of becoming automatisms.

All of this occurs in relative silence. Different from most world cities, when traffic comes to a

halt, Bangkok quiets down: no honking or screaming and no vehicles speeding down the road, just the baritone roar of thousands of trapped engines and their toxic fumes mixing with the smell of food and rotting trash, locked in by the concrete Skytrain rail above. In this grey urban corridor the temperature starts to rise, heat emanating from the mechanical flock of vehicles clogging the street. People inside the air-conditioned cars and busses ignore this increase. Yet for motorcycle taxi drivers and their passengers, zigzagging through the maze of cars, the heat marks the body. It condenses behind the neck, down the spine, and behind the ears, providing unbearable discomfort on most days and welcome warmth on chilly rainy ones.

During this evening rush, the drivers' queuing system becomes whirling, their movements hectic, their conversations sporadic. At times the *win* remains empty, all the drivers on the move and clients waiting for them to come back. As the city experiences its infamous traffic blockades, motorcycles become the only way to navigate Bangkok's traffic without getting stuck. At peak-hours, housewives, businessmen, schoolchildren, office workers, vendors—regardless of class, age, and gender—all sit on the back of a bike, driven most likely by a young man from the provinces. In the uncommon physical proximity of the bike, the passengers tuck in their knees to avoid hitting cars and dive into the intricate traffic of Bangkok, carried through the jigsaw puzzle of cars, taxis, *tuk tuk* (auto rickshaw), trucks, buses, and pick-ups, by drivers in bright vests, eyes on the street, ready to see any small opening in between this slowly moving river of metal. As the drivers' wallets fill up, fatigue and pain gradually conquer their bodies. It starts from the hands: stiffened by the grip on the handlebar. At the point when the knuckles start hurting, it spreads up the arms, tense from a long day of rapid zigzagging with the weight of a passenger in the back seat. The calves are next, cramped by the continuous braking and changes of gear. Then the tension moves to the neck and from there down the back, curved on the bike. By the end of the day the whole body is unbalanced, under the stress of regular accelerations and braking.

Every day, at street corners, transportation nodes, parking lots, and housing complex all around Bangkok, 200,000 of these drivers—organized in 5000 *win*—go through the same motions, earning a living and allowing the city to move according to its cyclical repetition of peaks and drops, until it

finally slows down—after sunset—leaving them exhausted on the side of the street, ready for their last ride, all the way back to their cramped small rooms in the urban periphery. It is in one of these stations that this story begins.

It is a quiet afternoon in Bangkok. At the entrance of a *soi* off Sathorn Road—a major artery in the financial centre— a group of twenty motorcycle taxi drivers in colourful vests lounge in the heat of the day, waiting for clients. Tucked between a four-story shopping centre, the parking lot of an upscale spa, and the heavy concrete shafts of Bangkok's elevated train, the drivers fight the boredom of the off-peak hours. An occasional car drives past their group, filling with its roar the almost empty six-lane street. Above them, the elevated train, indifferent to the complex rhythms of the urban fluxes below, speeds through, before slowing down into the nearby stations of Surasak and Chong Nonsi, a few hundred meters away. A sleepy dog roams among the drivers before lying down on the stairs of the shopping centre. Once in a while, a customer passes through the automated doors of the shop, releasing a momentary blast of freezing air and a few notes of mellow music that dissipate as they roll down the concrete stairs in front of twenty angle-parked motorbikes. A few steps away the humid sultriness and the enervating echo of traffic remain untouched, revealing the ingenuity of the group's location.

A young driver sits on his bike, staring in the rear mirrors as he plucks rare facial hairs by pinching 5 baht coins together as tweezers. Next to him another driver lies on his bike, arms crossed behind his head. Years of practice have taught his body to conform to the machine. The seat transforms into a mat for the driver's back. The handlebar becomes a pillow and the two rear-view mirrors are bent inside out to hold the back of his head, as earplugs channel music from his cell phone. One leg hangs from the bike tail, a few inches away from the burning exhaust pipe. The other leg is crossed, foot against the knee over the tail light. A couple of drivers squat on the sidewalk, immersed in multiple newspapers' sport sections spread out on the pavement around them. Smoking avidly, they compile illegal soccer betting slips that a man will later come to pick up and deliver to the local underground bookie. One of them stands up, folds his slips and hides them secretively, away from the eyes of local police, inside the metal frame of a public phone booth that the group has transformed into

their transparent storage room. The heat inside the booth is unbearable. Colorful helmets dangle from a wire that used to connect the phone to the electricity post. A few jackets with embroidered logos of companies where some of the drivers work part-time as messengers pile up on top of the old machine. Other wires have been unplugged from the phone and bent into metallic hooks to hang up the drivers' bags, to which I add mine.

I came here to see Hong, a charming thirty year old man with long hair and a widening bald spot that he always hides below a hat. Hong was born in a small village in the northeastern province of Nong Bua Lamphu and migrated to Bangkok—like most of his colleagues—attracted by the prospective of better professional opportunities and a more exciting life. Following his dreams, Hong moved when he was fifteen to attend high school in the city, joining two siblings who worked in a local garment factory and a third one who had risen in the monastic ranks in the province and was sent to Bangkok to study further. After finishing school, unable to afford university training, Hong ventured into the tortuous circle of low-paid occupations and exploitative bosses that many of the drivers describe as their experience in the formal economy of the city. Adapting to the industrial discipline of labor and forms of workplace hierarchy, as well as to the urban bias against northeastern hillbillies (*khon bānnǭk*), proved difficult for Hong. In 2001 he began to work in a Korean-owned factory a few blocks away from where he now operates as a driver.

"Two years in there were enough to make me decide I will not work in a factory ever again," he tells me, remembering with acrimony and disgust his belligerent Korean boss. In 2006, three years after motorcycle taxis were formalized and registered by the government of Thaksin Shinawatra, fed up with being insulted all the time and considered a stupid water buffalo from the countryside, Hong invested all of his savings—25,000 baht (830 $)— in the illegal purchase of the vest from a friend who decided to leave Bangkok: he was now a motorcycle taxi driver.

Since then Hong has been working at a street corner, delivering newspapers in the early morning before shifting to passengers, goods, and documents. Every day he moves confidently through a concrete landscape he has come to know as his own. "Even better than my own village," he tells me, smiling. The village, however, has never faded from his mind, both as an imagined place of nostalgia

and as a future prize for his sacrifices. In the city, Hong claims, he is just saving money to build a house for himself back home, where he hopes someday to return with the economic and social capital to marry and start a small farm. If daily wages, much higher than those of other unspecialized jobs available to the drivers in Bangkok, brought Hong to this profession in the first place, `itsaraphāp (freedom)— he likes to repeat—is what keeps him in this hectic, stressful, and health-threatening job. While job insecurity, risk of road accidents, and constant inhalation of poisonous fumes are left to the protection of amulets and magic tattoos, freedom and independence enjoy a central place in the drivers' self-construction as autonomous urban dwellers. As Yai, the Vice-President of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) told me, staring right into my eyes, "motorcycle taxi drivers die young, but live free." Freedom from the factory discipline of labor and from bosses who look down on them, freedom to go home to their villages whenever agricultural and social life require their presence, or simply to take a break from work whenever they feel like it: all these multiple forms of freedom animate—at least discursively—the drivers' decision to enter and remain in this profession.

Taking advantage of this freedom, Hong sits with six other drivers next to the phone booth on makeshift wooden benches that they store overnight inside a small shop down the road. He loudly shakes dominoes in a reused plastic detergent bottle, before starting a new game, with the usual 5 Baht stake. "Are you playing?" he asks as he drops seven pieces in my hand. A few steps away, one of the drivers helps the older woman who runs a noodle cart next to their *win* to tidy up the pile of dirty plastic bowls that have accumulated during the recent lunch rush. At the street corner Adun—another driver—sits alone, immersed in a newspaper's political editorial. On his side, hanging from one of the trees that shade the motorcycle taxis' station, a plastic board with a local business advertisement helps the drivers keep track of their queuing system. The board is lined with numbered tiles—12, 7, 15, 2— corresponding to the number each driver has on his vest. Down the road a young woman waves at the group. Adun raises his eyes to the board, "twelve" he shouts at the colleagues playing dominos. Hong, whose vest bears the number 12, drops his pieces and jumps on a bike, puts on his helmet without bringing one for the passenger, and kick-starts the engine, speeding away in the small alley. His tile is moved at the end of the board and Adun distractedly takes Hong's place next to me at the domino

table.

A few minutes later Hong is back to the typically slow rhythm of early afternoons: sporadic passengers, an occasional delivery of documents to far away offices, a cigarette, some money lost and gained playing dominoes, and an endless search for distractions. During these hours, waiting becomes a skill, a virtue, and a form of engagement in the social life of the neighborhood, as important as their roles as movers of its dwellers and objects. It is, in fact, during this apparently dead time that much of the social relations between the drivers, other street workers, and local dwellers are forged and sustained. As the life of the street unravels in front of their bored yet vigilant eyes, the drivers engage in a sociality of proximity with the local street vendors, office workers, and urban dwellers. It is physical presence and boredom, not just speed and movement, to transform the drivers into central characters in the theater of life at a street corner. In this social environment they become not just vessels of mobility but also observers and guardians of movement in and out of the area, as well as readily available cheap labor for moving furniture and performing minor house repairs. Side characters by all means, yet always on stage, these drivers are the protagonist of this book.

Chapter 1: Unsettled Layers

> A genealogy […] will never confuse itself with a quest for their 'origins,' will never neglect as inaccessible the vicissitudes of history. On the contrary, it will cultivate the details and accidents that accompany every beginning; it will be scrupulously attentive to their petty malice; it will await their emergence, once unmasked, as the face of the other.
>
> *Michel Foucault*, Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.

In October 1983 Thailand Business, a bi-lingual magazine, dedicated a five-pages article entitled *Soi Bikes* to the emergence of the motorcycle taxis. "Living in Bangkok nowadays," the article began, "you must have seen many different groups of motorcyclists […] operating a new kind of business by picking up passengers and taking them to their destination."[1] In the previous years, as the city expanded and its roads further congested with cars and buses, Bangkokians had grown accustomed to the sight of motorcycle taxi's colorful vests ferrying clients down the sois. Their back seats carried school children, office workers, and local dwellers through smoky traffic during peak hours and poorly lit alleys late at night. For a few coins, what might have been a long walk became a short ride. Suddenly, the neighborhood seemed to shrink as residents who previously could not afford a taxi or did not own a car could now join the marvels of individual transportation.

Just as this new system of transportation caught the eyes of the city's residents and re-organized their lives, it also offered an investment opportunity for local businesses.[2] Interested in both processes, Thailand Business reconstructed the growth of the system out of a Navy housing complex in soi Ngam Duphli, a few roads away from Bangkok financial center, and explored the drivers' daily lives, their organization in informal groups clustering around a station (*win*), the internal rules of their queuing system, as well as the cost of vest rentals and operations. While motorcycle taxi groups had been developing an internal organization, the article revealed, they operated in a legal grey area in which local police officers extorted money from them, acquired

control over the groups' operations, and used the drivers as assistants in patrolling their neighborhoods. Even with the police involvement, the author concluded, the rapidly diffusing system offered potential economic rewards to local businesspeople willing to invest in it.

While the promises of economic return reached the business community, a debate over the safety and legality of using motorbikes for public transportation was taking place in much drier language. Motortaxis posed a challenge to law enforcement and transportation management. The Ministry of Land Transportation, which had banned three-wheeled rickshaws from Bangkok in 1960 due to their outdated slowness,[3] found this new system of transportation dangerous, un-developed, and unfit to their dreams of Bangkok as a modern global metropolis. Decided to outlaw them, the ministry produced a wealth of statistical data on motorcycle accidents throughout the 1980s. In their view, the proliferation of motortaxis had to be stopped on the grounds of safety. Across town, another Ministry also found itself preoccupied with their diffusion. In June 1983, a committee headed by the Interior Minister and the director of the Office of Policy and Planning began considering the legality of these motorcycles for hire.[4] According to Thai law at the time, vehicles registered for public use, given a yellow plate rather than the white one of those for personal use, had to be either three or four wheeled, such as buses, taxis, tuk-tuk, or the recently banned rickshaws. Motorcycles, one wheel short, would not qualify. Nonetheless, thousands of them were traversing the city, passengers on their back seats. Experts in the ministry debated: Should the limits of the law be expanded to incorporate motorcycle taxis? Should police officers, at least for the time being, arrest the drivers? What about their supervisors and group leaders?

As the ministerial bureaucracy discussed the legal minutiae of the driving code, the number of wheels allowed to a vehicle for public use, and their safety, police officers and army officials at the street level thrived in the legal grey area. Realizing the potential of the new business, they opened new motorcyclists' groups, rented out vests that operated as drivers' informal licenses, or simply demanded money from existing groups in exchange for directing their gaze elsewhere. Lieutenant Somboon Boonsuckdi, a navy officer who assumed the role of administrator of the Ngam Duphli motorcycle transport service—often referred to as the first

motortaxi group in Bangkok—was interviewed in the Thailand Business's article. He told the reporter that although the police refused him permission to open a station, he went ahead anyway and nothing happened to him, probably because he himself was a government official. In expanding their hold over this new business, state officials like Somboon were supplementing their meager official income, protected by their position. This dynamic was not new and has continued to organize the operations of informal and illicit economies in Bangkok. In it, state officials retain a central role by "using power/authority as influence"[5]—transforming formal authority (*amnāt*), obtained through their role in the state apparatus into influence (*`itthiphon*) over the operations of the urban grey economy. Underneath all these multiple interests, thousands of young rural migrants were buying motorcycles and using them as sources of income, often unaware of the actors and institutions that were scrutinizing, fostering, or ostracizing their operations. While the drivers responded to the needs of the rapidly expanding traffic-ridden city, and thrived in this niche, their presence raised questions well beyond transportation management and economic profit; questions about urban space and its legitimate holders; questions about risks, freedom, progress, and migration; questions about legal structures and economic relations; and ultimately questions about existing power structures, their brokers' roles and rights, and potential challenges to them.

When seen under this light, motorcycle taxi drivers emerge at the cusp of spatial, technological, epistemological, political-economic, and social transformations. In particular, four conditions of possibility, which came together in the 1980s, needed to be in place. The first was a specific social relation: a set of formalized, yet often informal, interactions between state officials, citizens, and territory—the dynamic of transforming authority into influence—which emerged at the turn of the twentieth century and organizes street life in Bangkok still today. The second revolved around a group of actors: the hundreds of thousands of young, and relatively unspecialized, migrants from rural Thailand who, from the late 1950s, provided cheap labor force in the city. The third condition was technological: the availability of affordable motorcycles which flooded Thailand in the 1960s. Finally, a physical setting: the maze of long and narrow alleys, known as *soi*, which solidified in the 1970s and rendered far-reaching mass public transportation in Bangkok virtually impossible.

Clearly none of these conditions were put in place with motorcycle taxis in mind, nor were they part of a unified strategy. Rather they were the outcomes of attempts to redraw and reorganize the social, economic, political, and material landscapes of the Thai capital. These attempts, however, were often ridden with contingencies and contradictions that triggered creative responses at the street level. The result was a continuous and open-ended process of layering which produced the traffic-ridden Bangkok in which the drivers started to operate in the 1980s. In this sense, this city was, and still is, an ever-changing canvas in which new layers are constantly superimposed by scraping or washing away the previous ones, often unsuccessfully. History of human kind is dotted by such over-imposed canvasses. In antiquity parchment was a scarce and valuable commodity. As a consequence, the same piece of animal skin was reused, often multiple times, by erasing the previous layer and adding a new one. The results are called palimpsests, documents in which faint traces of the former writing remain visible between the lines. Over the centuries, these traces would surface again, enough to be readable and re-emerge from the oblivion of history. Cities are quite similar to these palimpsests. After all, favorable geographic position and easy access to resources, much like parchment in antiquity, have always been scarce and therefore required constant re-use. As a result, new cities grow on top of older ones, making them into giant palimpsests onto which new configurations are constantly scripted over previous layers. Much like in palimpsests, even if the new urban scripts aim at erasing the past, dominating the present, and configuring the future, the previous layers often surface and remain visible to the attentive eyes.

Walking around a city, any city, we are constantly faced by traces of their past: converted warehouses that reveal the neighborhood's industrial past, grooved cobblestone roads which reminds us of a time when people moved on carriages, road names that hint at the artisans' workshops that used to be animate their lives. The traces of the precedent overlay haunt contemporary cities: ghosts that show us the doorsteps of the past and draw the contours of the future. Especially in cities like Bangkok, where informality and extemporaneous responses have ridiculed any attempt to plan, regulate, and control, these traces become material reminders of the city's contingent history in which everyday practices always overwrite the scripts that urban institutions, planners, and builders had drafted.[6] Motorcycle taxis are one of such over-writings,

one that both allows the convoluted script of contemporary Bangkok to function and raise significant challenges to it. As a consequence, exploring the conditions of possibility for their emergence—physical forms, technological tolls, migrant bodies, and social relations—means necessarily excavating the multiple layers that constituted the city in which drivers started to operate, as well as reconstructing the fragile history of these re-writings. In other words, it means conducting an archeology of urban practices and forms, starting from the funding of Bangkok as a city of canals.

The birth of the aquatic city

Bangkok begun as a floating shop, moored at the mouth of the Chao Praya River, down-stream from Ayutthaya, the capital city of the homonymous Kingdom.[7] The small trading and customs outpost of Bang Kok developed in the late fifteenth century as a Chinese-dominated node in the lucrative maritime trading network that connected the Gulf of Siam to the Indian and Southern Chinese Ocean. Its position guaranteed the town commercial success and strategic importance, especially after the Burmese attacked and sacked Ayutthaya in 1767. The following year, King Taksin (r.1767-1782), a warrior who had managed to push back the Burmese offensive, relocated the capital of Siam to Thonburi, an easily defendable area near the outpost, on the western bank of the Chao Praya River. Fifteen years later, Buddha Yodfa Chulaloke, later known as Rama I, organized a revolt against Taksin, ordered his beheading, and established the still-reigning Chakri dynasty. A new capital was established on the opposite bank of the river, by displacing a few miles south the Chinese traders who occupied the outpost. It was 1782 and this date became memorialized as the birth of Bangkok.

Relocating the capital across the river, however, was not enough to guarantee the legitimacy of a new dynasty which had risen to power through regicide. The new King needed to claim a direct connection with the previous sovereigns of Ayutthaya. With this in mind, the new capital was named Krung Rattanakosin in Ayutthaya, which remains today the name of Bangkok's historical district.[8] The connection between the new capital and the older royal city of Ayutthaya, however, was not just a matter of toponyms. It necessitated a

radical topographic intervention, one that required the erasure and overlay of the previous terrain. Firstly, Ayutthaya was on an island, located at the confluence of two rivers, from which departed a maze of canals, connecting the city to its hinterland. Major engineering was needed to carve an island into the river bend where Krung Rattanakosin was to flourish. In 1783, Rama I ordered the digging of a canal by Chinese workers, whom he rewarded with access land along the canal and south of the newly created island, in an area which would become the economic core of the city. From this first canal more and more branches were added during the first four reigns of the Chakri dynasty (1782-1868), coextensive with the expansion of the new monarchs' sphere of influence. Secondly, Ayutthaya's spatial and symbolic layout mirrored Indic and Buddhist cosmology.[9] Urban structure, organized around Buddhist mandalic principles, revolved around a walled palace that housed the main religious sites, the royal court, as well as most of the population. Each of the main buildings was oriented according to astrological considerations, which the sovereigns of Ayutthaya had imported from Khmer Brahmins, together with their royal rituals. The urban structure, cosmological tradition, and court rituals which had traveled westward from the Khmer empire now traveled downstream to Krung Rattanakosin. Along with them, bricks from Ayutthaya's most notable buildings were shipped and used in the new city. What the Burmese sack had left standing, the Chakri dynasty dissembled and reconstructed in the new capital as material evidence of Rama I's claim as the restorer of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.[10]

In the new city, as it was in Ayutthaya, water became the main channel for the mobility of ideas, administrative practices, urban forms, and material objects. Even if the early life of the new capital took place mostly inside the walls, its connections to the outside world were mediated by water. Commerce, ceremonies, transportation, war, and extension of political and cultural influence: all of these processes took place, for most of the first fifth reigns of the Chakri dynasty, on water and made the city famous among European travelers as the Venice of the East. While rivers and canals guaranteed the functioning of the Siamese Kingdom, salty water carried a major challenge to its survival.

In 1818, the British Crown—guided by the maritime expansion of the East India Company—acquired Singapore. By 1824, Malacca was also under British control and two years after significant parts of what came to be known as Burma fell to the colonial expansion. In 1859, French forces conquered Saigon and by 1863 the Kingdom of Cambodia had become French protectorate. Siam found itself surrounded by colonial powers that were slowly eating away the semi-autonomous tributary reigns and sultanates around it. The country responded to this threat by emulating colonial powers. In the late nineteenth century, the Siamese Kings expanded the area under their direct control by submitting tributary reigns through the same techniques adopted by Britain and France. The adoption of these colonial techniques would, inadvertently, set in motion three of the conditions of possibility for the emergence, a century after, of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok. Firstly, they would eventually grant local officials the immunity from legal scrutiny and repercussions which became the first condition of possibility for the drivers' operations in a grey legal area. Secondly, they created the conditions of uneven development which fostered mass internal migration from the outer provinces to Bangkok. Thirdly, they generated a network of roads, and the specific shape they retained from their previous lives as canals, which provided the terrain for the motorcycle taxi diffusion in the city.

The amphibious era: *siwilai*, nation-building, and urban centralization (1890-1910)

In 1861, a group of foreign consuls living in Bangkok wrote a courteous yet resolute letter to King Mongkut. Complaining of ill health due to the lack of leisure activities in the city, they humbly requested the construction of a proper road on which to drive their horse-drawn coaches, impossible to do on the existing small and murky paths around the palace. The King, concerned with the giving an international image of civility to his reign, immediately ordered the construction of the first paved street in Bangkok. In 1863, Charoen Krung—literally "progress of the city"—was opened to traffic.[11] The new road connected the royal palace to the southern section of the city and extended through Samphaeng, the area where the economically dominant Chinese population had been previously relocated. Charoen Krung quickly became the main

commercial thoroughfare in Bangkok. Soon after, several other streets were built around the royal palace. This period of road construction marked the beginning of a rather slow, yet epochal shift in the orientation of the city away from water.

During the rest of Mongkut's reign (1851-1868) and that of his son Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), the city led an amphibious life. The urban landscape was still crisscrossed by boats and it swarmed with floating houses (a middle way between barges and houses). Yet Bangkok became increasingly oriented toward land and the names of the streets built in that era revealed this new trajectory. The names of the three main roadways—Charoen Krung (progress of the capital), Fuang Nakhorn (diffusion of the city), Bumrung Muang (nourishment of the urban)—epitomize how progress and expansion were now discursively and spatially tied to roads and land. Bangkok was to shift from what came to be seen as the unruly flow of waterways toward a civilized land based city.

As the road network continued to expand, new technologies of mobility emerged. In 1872, Praya Choduek, a wealthy nobleman, imported the first rickshaws from Japan.[12] This new affordable land-based public transportation pre-dated by a decade the appearance of bicycles, which initially failed to conquer the urban landscape due to their high cost. Rickshaws, on the contrary, proved to be a success and spread rapidly across Bangkok, now a small city of about 170,000 souls.[13] Pedaling them around the city were Chinese coolies, who constituted the majority of the urban labor force. Under their bodies, the number of rickshaws in Bangkok became so significant that they required the introduction of the first traffic legislation. In 1903 the so-called Rickshaw Act was passed to regulate their use of street pavement and sidewalks, their behavior in the street, rules on yielding, as well as their numbers and operational costs.

The Kingdom's re-orientation toward land did not only produce new roads, transportation methods, and legal deliberations. It also changed its economic and political structures. By the 1890s land had replaced water as the dominant space for economic growth and the privileged channel for economic circulation and political control, in and beyond the city. Commodities, people, and institutions that once diffused multi-centrically through canals started to move overland, through a new infrastructure of transportation which

converged on Bangkok. This reorganization of the national territory posed all sorts of logistic and political challenges, including that of framing it as a legitimate enterprise.

For this purpose, royal elite produced and diffused a discourse of "*siwilai*" (civilization), which reorganized the spatial, temporal, and political landscape of Siam by mirroring the French *mission civilizatrice* and the British white man burden.[14] Such discourse conceptualized the country as part of a world system in which European cities sat at the top of the pyramid and remote forests and their inhabitants rested at the very bottom. In between, rural villages followed the forest, themselves followed by regional centers and then Bangkok, topped by European capitals. A new spatial and moral hierarchy reorganized the city and its relation to tributary statelets: mirroring colonial discourse, it justified the expansion of Bangkok's control over them as a civilizing mission. In it, regional towns and villages became second class spaces, urban backwaters locus of uncivilized ways of life.[15] In this sense, this hierarchy linked the spatial configuration of the country with a temporal sequence. As a result, the village sunk into the past as the city leaped into the *siwilai* future. The spatio-temporal nation-building project, which was diffused through colonial relations, survived well beyond this period and still colors the relations between Bangkok and the rest of the country, went hand in hand with the emergence of a territorial, and increasingly national, system of administration and transportation that allow the state to expand its control over what had been semi-autonomous states and now became Siam's provinces. Paraphrasing Thongchai Winichakul, Siam create its own modern geo-body—a technology of territoriality which created the nationhood spatially.[16] The challenge was how to control and administer this body. The Bangkok-based elites responded centralizing state power, commodifying land, and introducing new technologies to sustain state penetration, both at the urban and national level.[17]

On the national scale, the King wanted to reorganize formerly semi-autonomous tributary principalities as parts of the Siamese state. This meant creating a new transportation infrastructure to expand the military, administrative, and economic control over its territory as well as to extract taxes and resources, both agricultural and human. King Chulalongkorn was well aware of it and did not fear saying it out-loud. As he stated in 1903:

"we are convinced that, to a very large and important degree, the material progress and prosperity of a people usually depends upon its means of transport. When there are good means of transport, people can travel easily and quickly over long distances. The population will be enlarged. Commerce, the foundation of the country's wealth will prosper. We have therefore been diligently striving to build a railroad befitting the strength of our country."[18]

While previous monarchs had opted for canals and water transportation as their main infrastructural investments, Chulalongkorn decided, in correspondence with the amphibious shift in the capital, that railways would become the new circulatory system of the Siamese geo-body. Faster than canals and more easily subjected to centralized control than roads,[19] the first railroads developed at the turn of the century. In 1893, the first line connected Bangkok to Pak Nam (mouth of water), a commercial and military harbor thirty miles south of the city, on the delta of the Chao Praya River. In 1899, the King ordered the construction of another line connecting Bangkok with the northeastern region, which was ridden by local insurgencies and risked becoming the next frontier for French colonial expansion in Indochina after the invasion of Vietnam in 1887 and the blockade of Bangkok's harbor in 1893.[20]

The new railways, which brought the formerly semi-autonomous territories closer to Bangkok,[21] had not only political and social implications but also economic ones. As the circulation of rice and, to a lesser degree, other forest and agricultural commodities became faster and cheaper, Siamese products entered prominently global markets. Agricultural land became, for the first time in Siamese history, a desirable asset and a locus of capitalist accumulation.[22] With the countryside turning into a space of production, land prices increased sharply and Bangkok-based economic actors started to look at the provinces as a space for investment and extraction of resources. In 1892, the monarch had begun to restructure the Siamese administrative apparatus by including previously semi-autonomous territories into the political and economic sphere of the Siamese state and organizing them into provinces, districts, and villages. The railways gave an unprecedented impulse to this process. A new class of administrators loyal to the centralized state, known as servants of the monarch (*khā rātchakān*), emerged through a new educational system and were sent out to administer the provinces. This reorganized the relation between bureaucrats, their posts, and citizens. Such

relation, in which state authority could be converted into local influence, remains today a characteristic of Thai bureaucracy, one that played a central role in the operations of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok almost a century later.

Power and Influence

As soon as administrative reform started to roll out it became clear that its main challenge would be guaranteeing the loyalty of its royal envoys. Before Chulalongkorn's reform, officers were sent out to look after the interests of the monarch and left free to collect their salaries by introducing local taxes and withholding money from the local population according to their will.[23] This configuration, while saving money to the monarch, ran the risk of both disenfranchising local residents and creating too powerful administrators. This, Chulalongkorn understood, could not be sustained, especially with colonial powers at his doorsteps fracture. In order to succeed his reform needed to control the degree to which local bureaucrats were allowed to extract wealth from their subjects and to formalize their relation to Bangkok by making them politically and economically dependent on the King, rather than on their ability to mobilize local resources.

The implementation of these reforms, however, encountered more difficulties and resistance than classic Siamese historiography has acknowledged. In the period between 1898 and 1905, a number of revolts exploded in provincial towns both in the North and the Northeastern regions of Siam.[24] These revolts, especially in the northern capital of Chiang Mai, were often instigated by the same local powerful men who were to become the backbone of the new Siamese state but, instead, opposed its expansion. Although local resistance was suffocated in blood and the reform largely succeeded in unifying and centralizing the nation, control over bureaucrats remained partial and often rife with a tension between their relatively low pays and their strong local authority. As a consequence, state officials retained a broad maneuvering room and used it to establish themselves as locally influential people. Introduced to cut-off local forms of patronage, the new administrative class ended up solidifying them. Patron-client relations were simply reorganized around access to state posts, which became the single most socially acceptable source of wealth and power. In this system,

official authority (*amnāt*) went hand in hand with personal political, economic, and social influence (`*itthiphon*) over local subjects. If this influence was previously located outside the state, and depended on the ability to mobilize local manpower and resources, now its source was the state itself, as official authority guaranteed control over local resources. This new relationship among bureaucrats, populations, and influence outlived this period, and provided bureaucrats with the opportunity to transform authority into influence.[25] A century later, as the Thailand Business's article reported, this opportunity guaranteed the first condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok and granted local officials immunity from legal scrutiny and repercussions, which was necessary to operate the transportation system in a grey legal area.

The *siwilai* city

While the nation's outer territories were reorganized through centralization, commodification of land, and new methods of transportation, its capital city underwent a reconfiguration along similar lines. Firstly, in 1890 the King created the Privy Purse Bureau (PPB)—renamed Crown Property Bureau (CPB) after the abolition of absolute monarchy in 1932—to administer the monarchy's private possessions and direct investments, which mostly revolved around land development; secondly, he established the Ministry of the Capital in 1892 to administer Bangkok. These two organizations composed a new governance apparatus that oversaw the city's refashioning as a *siwilai* metropolis. In particular, they financed and built the web of new roads which, following European cities, re-oriented Bangkok away from water.[26]

In 1899, King Chulalongkorn ordered the construction of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, literally "royal procession," a name inspired by Kingsway in London. If its name was of British inspiration, the avenue was part of an urban transformation modeled on Baron Haussmann's remaking of the French capital and came to be known as the Champs-Élysées of Asia. The linear expansion of Ratchadamnoen broke down the previous mandalic structure of the city, inspired by Ayutthaya and revolving around the royal palace and narrow radial canals departing from it, anddirected the city away from the river front and toward the European-influences grid plan of the Dusit district, where Italian architects designed the new throne hall and Royal palace.[27] A new

layer was added over the urban palimpsest, in an attempt to impose a European, and therefore *siwiliai*, urban structure over the aquatic city. This meant not only developing a new administrative structure and land market, but also introducing new technologies to move urban dwellers through the city. By the end of the ninenthenth century the first cars, which would become the dominant mode of transportation in post-1960s Bangkok, traveled the capital's newly created roads. In 1907, internal combustion engine buses were introduced in the Siamese capital, only thirteen years after Karl Benz—the founder of Mercedes Benz—had built the world´s first prototype. Land-based transportation, in the early life of the capital, closely followed new developments occurring in European cities, and projected Bangkok into the splendor of a global metropolis. Nothing could materialize this progressive movement and Bangkok's dreams of *siwilai* more than the tram, the new mode of transportation that was conquering colonial metropolis, from Paris to London. The first electrified systems of transportation in Asia appeared in Bangkok in 1893—only thirteen years after the first tram line in the world was established in Saint Petersburg—and, in the elite imaginary, drove Siam into the age of civilization.

By 1910, when Chulalongkorn died, Bangkok had changed its appearance and initiated an expansion away from water that would continue well after this period. In the years between 1890 and 1910, under the new system of local administration, more than 120 roads and 30 bridges were built, new patterns of land development, rent, and speculation had emerged, and new transportation technologies (trains, bicycles, trams, bus, and cars) were conquering the city and the nation. All of these changes solidified the image of Bangkok as a modern capital firmly based on land, kept in rhythm by the mechanical time of buses and trams and embellished, as a British journalist reported upon visiting Bangkok in 1900, by the "broad and well-kept roads, the row of new-built houses and rapidly spreading shops, with the stuccoed walls of palaces and prisons, of barracks and offices, displaying the Haussmann-like changes that King Chulalongkorn I (Rama V) has effected in the outward appearance of his capital."[28]

Envisioning the Future City: Thai Tram Workers Mobilization in 1923

If the outward appearance of Bangkok reminded the European visitor of the grandeur of Paris, when seen from street level Chulalongkorn's *siwilai* city was less magnificent than traditional Thai historiography has led us to believe. Similarly to what had been the case for Haussmann's interventions in Paris,[29] the transformations hardly fitted the depiction of magniloquent epoch-changing rupture. Thousands of miles away from Paris, Chulangkorn's dreams of *siwilai* remained an incomplete project, haunted by the previous layers of the city, partial implementation, and contingent everyday realities. These realities would give Bangkok the fractured road network which would provide, a century after, the second condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxi drivers.

The trams, flagships of the new era, epitomized the contingency of this urban transformation and the contradictions which doomed it. When in 1893 the Siam Electricity Company Co. Ltd. (an electric utility company founded by two Danish businessmen) acquired and electrified the failing horse-drawn tram, Bangkokians responded less than enthusiastically. Initially, the marvel and terror of electricity nearly brought the tram's operations to bankruptcy. Faced with diffused fear of electrocution,[30] strengthened by two such accidents within the first days of operation, Siam Electricity decided to offer tram rides free of charge for the first four months to attract customers and get them accustomed to the new system. The strategy was successful and after a few months the company started ferrying more and more paying customers. Bangkokians, however, remained wary of the *siwilai* nature of the trams, and nicknamed the new cars after one of their not-so-civilized characteristics. Formally named cars on rail *(rot rang)*, the tram became known in the streets as smelly cars *(rot ai)*, a moniker of the experience, introduced by mass transportation, of being packed next to strangers inside a steamy and sweat-smelling box in the tropical heat. Aside from its name, the smelly cars regularly faced setbacks such as electricity shortages and accidents that forced riders back to the canals, and water-based transportation, in order to move through the urban landscape.

Not all of the tram stoppages, however, were due to infrastructural failures or accidents. Occasionally they were the result of political mobilizations that, instead of pushing passengers back to Bangkok's past as an aquatic city, envisioned a new future for the Thai capital, one in which internal migrants manned its labor

force. A prolonged strike of tram workers in 1923, for instance, marked the first labor mobilization in the history of Siam and offered a glimpse into the emergence of a politicized Thai urban working class, a class which would come to dominate informal economies of Bangkok and, sixty years later, would drive motorcycle taxis through its streets.

The strike was the result of mounting tensions among the trams' European administration, Chinese middlemen, and Thai low level workers. In mid-December 1922, Hui, a Chinese foreman, sacked a Thai tram-worker. His fellow Thai employees appealed to the Danish owners of Siam Electricity, arguing that the worker had been fired without reasonable cause. When the owners backed Hui's decision, Thai newspapers reported the Chinese executive saying to his Danish superior: "Sir, you should not take care of Thai workers since they are just like a bunch of dogs, running back to our company after hearing the knocking of coconut shells with dog food."[31] These words, whether really utterred or not, sparked the largest workers' mobilization in Siam and escalated the already palpable tension between Thai and Chinese workers.

Anti-Chinese sentiments had been mounting in the country since the early twentieth century and had been most famously voiced in 1914 by King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) in one of the many editorials he published in the thriving popular press of early twentieth century Siam titled the "The Jews of the Orient." In this article the King—under the pseudonym of Asavabahu—responded to the mounting European and North American anti-Chinese discourse of the *Yellow Peril*,[32] stressing the difference between Siamese and Chinese. He referred to all Chinese people, regardless how long they have lived in Siam, as "aliens by birth, by nature, by sympathy, by language, and finally by choice, […] utterly without morals, conscience, mercy, pity. [A population that] where money is concerned, […] like chameleon, change their color to suit their surroundings."[33] Adopting an anti-Semitic repertoire familiar to European publics, the King casted the Chinese population as untrustworthy and devoted of any national loyalty; in short, a potential threat to the Siamese nation to be monitored and kept under control. When 122 Thai tram-workers went on strike on December 31st 1922, they adopted this available anti-Chinese discourse as a point of convergence against the Chinese domination of the city's labor market.

The workers gathered in front of Bangkok municipal offices to demand fair wages, a clear set of rules to govern their working activities, as well as the removal of Hui, his assistant Phin, and Ericson, the Danish traffic manager, for cruel and exploitative practices. Faced with the company's refusal to accept their conditions, they brought their demands to the Minister of the Interior, hoping that a fellow Thai would listen to their complaints. The minister agreed to negotiate with Siam Electricity and the workers went back to the company. To their disappointment, however, none of the demands were met. On January 13th 1923, the workers went back on strike, for the third time in a month. This time 300 workers, about 90% of the company's employees, joined the protest. The Minister, worried about his popularity, attempted once again to calm them by adopting the same nationalist discourse that the strike had used. One of his aids, Phraya Phetphani, addressed the stikers declaring that "the Minister wishes it to be known that he is a real Thai, as are [you] workers. Therefore the Minister fully intends to help you to the best of his ability and he will not show any favoritism to foreigners."[34] Unimpressed by the Minister's empty messagge, the tram-workers refused to return to work.

In the following days, the struggle turned violent. Groups of hooligans and boxers were recruited by the Danish owners to break the strike. On the other side of the picket line, the workers who did not strike faced violent attacks and accusations of being anti-Siamese and supporting Chinese domination. As Siam Electricity continued to ignore the workers' demands and hire substitutes, the attacks on trams intensified. Beatings and bombings replaced bad odors and electrocutions as concrete risks of a tram ride. By the end of January 1923, local newspapers reported that tram service was interrupted by bomb attacks that had damaged multiple tracks, shooting of passengers, and the appearance of barricades across the tramlines. Although disruption of service and protests continued until the end of February 1923, the struggle died out by the beginning of March and most of its participants were replaced by new workers.

Aside from the historical importance of this strike for the emergence of labor politics in Siam, the language of national belonging, ethnic inequality, and xenophobia revealed a mounting tension around the composition of Bangkok's labor force in the first decades of the twentieth century, a tension that would

eventually push the Siamese government to limit the number of Chinese migrants and foster internal migration from the outer provinces. The strike, in other words, not only showed the fragility of Bangkok's dreams of *siwilai*, condensed in the tram, but also foreshadowed a different urban future—one populated by a labor force largely composed by Thai internal migrants who would replace the Chinese in the underbelly of the city. This restructuring of urban labor markets would take three decades, and a nationalist turn into the administration of the country, to be completed but would eventually curtail international labor migration and attract millions of migrants from the Thai hinterland into Bangkok. Some of them would become the protagonists of this book and provide the second condition of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: cheap labor force formed by internal migrants.

"Thailand to Thais": *Chatnyom* and the Thai urban labor force. (1932- 1957)

On June 24th 1939 the Siamese National Assembly, instituted after the deposition of the absolute monarchy in 1932, changed the country´s name from Siam to Thailand. This decision was pushed vehemently by the then Prime Minister Plaek Phibun Songkhram and his propaganda mastermind Luang Wichit Watthakan. The change was part of a larger Thai-fication of Siam that had been taking place since the 1920s but that accelerated with the fall of the absolute monarchy. Exactly seven years before, on June 24th 1932, a group of civil servants—of which both Phibun and Wichit were prominent members[35]—staged a bloodless coup that forced King Rama VII to accept a Constitution and an elected government. With the abolition of absolute monarchy, the country required—as it did four decades earlier with Chulalongkorn's reforms—a new hegemonic discourse to substitute the royal paradigm, and its obsession with *siwilai*. Nationalism *(chātniyom)* filled the gap.

Even if nationalist rhetoric had emerged inside royal circles, most notably through the writings of King Vajiravudh, it was not until the demise of absolute monarchy that it became the driving force behind the state's economic and social policies, first under government of Phahon Phongphayuhasena (1933-1938) and later, more fully, with the election of Phibun as prime minister in 1938. Soon after becoming Prime Minister,

Phibun instituted a four-person committee headed by Luang Wichit which would promulgate cultural mandates to remove what they saw as flaws of Siamese society which hampered the country´s progress. Central to this enterprise was a representation of Siam as an ethnically homogenous nation. With this in mind, the first cultural mandate suggested renaming the country Thailand.

The decision to connect the nation to a specific ethnic group—namely the Tai[36]—claimed a direct, one-way correlation between the dominant, but by no means sole, population in Siam and the citizens of the Thai nation. Highland tribes, southern Malays, Chinese migrants, and other ethnic minorities were to adapt and adopt Thainess (*khwām pen thai*). The declared goal was both to promote cultural homogenization and to expel perceived outsiders from the national body, united under the slogan "Thailand to the Thais." Foremost among them were the economically dominant Chinese.

Xenophobia and distrust of Thai-Chinese's loyalties, which had colored the 1923 tram strike, reemerged under the government of Phibun and was magnified by an unfortunate international configuration. At a time when Thailand was knitting closer relations with Japan, China was at war with the emerging Asian power. In 1937, following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, the second Sino-Japanese War broke out. Japanese forces blockaded the main Southern Chinese ports in 1938 and Chinese merchants throughout Southeast Asia launchd a boycott of Japanese goods. This put the Thai-Chinese population—regardless of their participation to the boycott—in a tight spot: while as Thai they were allied with Japan, as Chinese descendants they were presumed to be collecting money to finance the war effort and participating in the boycott. In a period of nationalist zeal, their double loyalties were considered unacceptable, bordering on treason. Once again, Luang Wichit became the mouthpiece for these concerns. In July 1938, during a public lecture at Chualongkorn University on the Nazi annexation of Austria, Wichit resuscitated the language of Vajiravudh and brought it together with the growing tide of German National Socialism. In his words, the Chinese were worse than the Jews and he suggested that time had arrived for Siam to deal with its own Jews, following the model of German racial campaigns.[37]

While an annihilation of the local Chinese population was never really contemplated, non-Thai ethnic dress and surnames were forbidden, education in languages other than Central Thai prohibited, and the population was encouraged to support Thai products and restrain from buying foreign goods. All of these measures had a direct effect on the Chinese communities, which controlled both commerce and labor markets in the capital. Thai-fication of the national economy, and in particular its manual labor, became a central objective of the Thai government, supported—differently from other aspects of the cultural mandates—not only by its nationalist prime minister but also by his socialist alter-ego, the then Minister of Finance Pridi Banomyong. Such consensus initiated an enormous shift in the composition of Bangkok's labor markets, away from the hands of Chinese coolies toward Thai bodies.

By the late 1930s, Phibun created national companies and restricted the access of non-Thais to the production and distribution of commodities such as petroleum, tobacco, salt, and livestock, deemed of national interest. Remarkably, among the markets reserved to Thai nationals were taxis and rickshaws, which were rapidly diffusing in the city. Until this moment transportation in Bangkok has been in the hands, feet, and shoulders of Chinese coolies. Now the government was resolute in giving it to the control of Thai nationals, when it remains until now.

Even if the shifts in attitudes and policies on manual labor were side-tracked by the Second World War—in which Thailand allied with the Axis first and was then invaded by the Japanese in December 1941— the idea that Chinese prominence over the Thai economy needed to be limited survived the disastrous world conflict. In 1947, during the short-lived premiership of Thamrong Navaswadhi, a major policy decision—too often overlooked in Thai historiography—came into being. On May 1st 1947, the Prime Minister signed a decree that established a yearly quota of 10,000 to Chinese immigration. In 1949 the quota was reduced to 200 people, after decades of Chinese migration to Thailand in the order of hundreds of thousands. The numbers of Chinese migrants to Thailand dropped rapidly, both as a result of the new policy and Mao's rise to power in China, which blocked the outward mobility of its population. The importance of this change cannot be overstated. In the five decades before 1949, Bangkok had grown from around 200,000 people to

more then 600,000. Most of this growth was driven by Chinese immigration, which had touched its peak in the 1920s, when 408,100 Chinese citizens had moved to Thailand.[38] The city's roads, shops, and factories were dominated by them. If you were to interact with urban workers in construction, commerce, industry, services, as well as transportation, you would be dealing, in all probability, with first-generation Chinese migrants. In Siam, rural wages had historically been higher than urban wages, making migration from the provinces unattractive for all but members of the regional elites looking for a way into the growing state bureaucracy.[39] Once Chinese migration was drained businesses in Bangkok started to look for labor inside the national territory. Rural workers, however, had no incentives, necessities, or desires to move to the city. Phibun, who had orchestrated a military coup against his own government on March 1st 1948, set out to solve this problem.

In 1955 he introduced the rice premium, a tax on rice exports, with the declared objective of limiting rice subtracted from the national market, producing revenues, and fostering the growing industrial sector. The effects of this tax, however, were much wider. Firstly, the government hoped that by containing the domestic price of rice, the main staple food in Thailand, they would counter inflation and provide the Thai industrial sector with a cheap and competitive labor force. Secondly, the rice premium provided a significant portion of national revenues that were invested in fueling the industrial growth of Bangkok.[40] Lastly, the tax pushed rural workers, impoverished by the burden of taxation on their main agricultural product, to enter the urban labor force, recently purged of its Chinese domination. This tax, more than any other measure, rearranged the relation between Bangkok and the Thai countryside along a geography of unequal development that has dominated Thailand ever since. Rural Thailand, as a result, became a territory for the extraction of resources, both natural and human.

The transference of resources was immense. Because of the rice premium, rural production was undervalued, forcing many farmers to move to the city in search of more remunerative occupations. Once in the city, their urban wages were also kept low. Wages, in fact, were calculated in relation to the price of reproduction of labor—the cost of surviving in the city in a way that allowed the workers to keep working. By

cutting the price of rice, the Thai government kept this low and supported underpaid labor. Finally, the revenues coming from rice taxes were used to fuel the capital's industrial growth rather than reinvested in agricultural areas from where they were collected. The rice premium provided a prime example of accumulation through dispossession.[41] It was this dispossession of provincial Thailand that kick-started the country urban industrial development and forced millions of agricultural workers, who could not cope with the rapidly decreasing economic margins of agricultural activities, to join its labor force. As a result, Bangkok's labor market flooded with unspecialized internal migrants who continue today to animate the street economy of the Thai capital, including the motorcycle taxi business.

For the first few decades after the tax was put into effect, most of the migrants to Bangkok were farmers from the Central Region. But that would not always be the case.[42] Within twenty years, the city was flooded with migrant from the northeastern provinces, as a result of the construction of a road network that connected them to Bangkok.[43] Along this network and the existing railways, internal migrants from the region traveled to Bangkok. This configuration radically shifted the composition of Bangkok's labor force and restructured the social and economic geography of the Thai nation around the capital, reorienting the northeastern provinces as a labor reserve for Bangkok. In the decade between the introduction of a quota on Chinese immigration in 1947 and the end of Phibun's dictatorship in 1957, Bangkok's population doubled, from 604,530 to 1,204,894, and the city established its primacy over the country. Most of its growth was now driven by young internal migrants who moved to Bangkok and would eventually become the central actors behind the emergence of motorcycle taxis. Arriving in the city, many of them started looking for jobs, joining the available, underpaid, and often unspecialized labor force that sustained the city's developing industrial sector. It took, however, another shift in the orientations of the Thai political-economy away from agriculture toward manufacturing to provide the last condition of possibility for the emergence of motortaxis in Bangkok: the availability of affordable motorcycles. Such condition emerged as an effect of the rise to power of military dictator Sarit Thanarat.

Industrial Bangkok: *phatthanā*, planning, and the city of private transportation (1958-1980)

On October 20th 1958, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat lead a coup d'état against a military government that he himself had installed just a year before. Sarit, a charming officer born in Bangkok but raised in the northeastern town of Khon Kaen, presented his new seizure of power as a revolution. While the previous revolution in 1932 had removed the Siamese absolute monarchy and projected the country into what its leaders saw as the modern world of constitutional polities, Sarit's revolution was faithful to the astronomical origins of the word and intended a return to a political system that he saw as more Thai, one in which the monarchy regained centrality.[44] As he looked to reverse the democratic turn of the 1930s, his revolution faced the same challenges encountered by its predecessors. A new hegemoni discourse was needed to support the emerging political system and make its radical changes acceptable. *Phatthanā*, or development, was the answer. Sarit himself stated as much in a brief piece he penned in 1960. "Our important task in this revolutionary era," he declared, "is development [*phatthanā*] which includes economic development, educational development, administrative development."[45] For Sarit, *phatthanā* was a constellation of three principles: economic progress, order, and political obedience. As such it was implemented through new technologies and practices of planning that echoed both dominant international economic theory and technologies of power.[46] While reiterating global discourses of modernization, Sarit's ideology of development focused solely on social and economic progress, adopting a conservative political narrative and dismissing democratization as inapplicable to Thailand. Aside from the language of democracy, the first World Bank economic report in Thailand, carried out in 1957, became the model for many of Sarit's economic policies that advocated a boost to industrial development through private investments directed by state planning.[47] The effects were stark, both for the national economy and for the development of Bangkok. Under the NEBD (National Economic Development Board), later renamed NESDB (National Economic and Social Development Board), the first national plan came into action in 1961, supported by United States money and expertise.[48] Its objectives were double: upgrading national infrastructure—e.g. roads, water, and electricity—and promoting private industrial development. Sarit's government—following the advice of the World Bank—virtually prohibited state investments in emerging commercial and industrial activities,[49] which

had dominated the previous two decades of the Thai economy. In his vision, state enterprises should focus on infrastructural development while manufacturing should be left to private capital, domestic or foreign. In order to attract such capital, new economic incentives were introduced and labor markets were de-regulated. Four decades of labor organizing, which had started with a tram workers' strike in January 1923, were erased overnight. While suppressing labor organizations and regulations offered a cheaper, more domesticated working force, investment incentives subsidized industries considered essential for the national economy.[50] These new directions, introduced by Sarit continued to dominate Thailand well after his death in 1963. This approach was inherited by his deputy general and successor Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn, who remained in power until the student revolution of October 14th 1973. Between 1960 and 1972, foreign investments in industries amounted to 32% of the total registered capital. Of the foreign investors, Japan was the largest, accounting for 38% of the total, followed by Taiwan (16%) and the United States (14%).[51] The emerging automotive industry attracted a significant percentage of these direct investments, particularly of Japanese provenance.

In the years following the first national plan, the major international automobile manufacturers began opening production lines in Thailand. Nissan Motors paved the way in 1962, followed by Toyota Motors (1963), Honda Motors (1964), Ford Motor (1970), and General Motors (1972). Together, they slowly transformed the industrial outskirts of Bangkok into what came to be known as the Detroit of Asia. Inside the automotive industry, motorcycles played a central role both as an area of investment and as a tool for restructuring everyday mobility in the country. In 1964 Honda—which still today dominates the Thai market—opened its first out-of-Japan motorcycle production line in Bangkok. The other main Japanese motorcycle producers, the so called four sisters, followed the lead. Yamaha opened a factory in 1966, followed by Suzuki in 1968 and Kawasaki in 1976. Once cheap motorcycles started to be produced in Thailand, the new tools of transportation spread rapidly across the country's rural and urban landscapes. Affordable motorcycles became the preferred tool of mobility for its underclass. When Sarit first seized power in 1957, Thailand had 1,617 motorcycles—owned by elite families and imported mostly from the United Kingdom. By 1981, the number of motorcycles had skyrocketed to 307,168, 99% of which were

produced domestically.[52] The great majority of these motorbikes were not to be found in Bangkok but rather in the Thai countryside, where unpaved streets and limited income made them the only viable means of mechanical transportation.

The soi system: the failure of the *mư̄ang phatthanā*

If two-wheeled transport dominated regional centers and villages, cars crowded the streets of Bangkok, under the pressure of a new urban model that traveled from the United States, together with funds, expertise, and urban planning techniques. In 1958, the USOM (United States Operation Mission) sent a group of urban planners from MIT to Thailand to devise the first master plan for its rapidly expanding capital. After an extensive study of Bangkok's urban infrastructure, economy, and everyday life, the group presented in 1960 a final document to the Thai government entitled Greater Bangkok Plan 1990, but most commonly known as the Litchfield Plan. The plan, even if never officially ratified, provided a framework for the development of Bangkok over the next three decades. Its main contribution was the transformation of the Thai capital into a car-based city, a model most famously realized in Los Angeles. Two main proposals, consistent with dominant principles of modernist urban planning,[53] emerged from this document: building new highways to connect the Central Business District directly to outer ring roads while upgrading the quality of secondary roads; and introducing zoning practices to allocate different areas of the city to different functions—commercial, industrial, residential. Both proposals demanded a departure from the urban structures and life-styles that had dominated Bangkok since the reign of Chulalongkorn (1868-1910). Once again the previous layer of Bangkok was set to be erased to makes space for the new vision.

The city itself became a laboratory and a trial ground for the implementation of the ideology of *phatthanā*. While Parisian boulevards and collective modes of transportation found in European cities—such as buses and trams—had informed *siwilai* Bangkok between the 1890s and 1960s, the new *phatthanā* city was to be dominated by American-modeled high-speed highways and private transportation. Canals, which played a secondary yet important role in the previous urban landscape, were now filled in to make space for new

roads. Similarly, residential, commercial, and industrial spaces, which mixed in the city, would be disentangled and spread around the city. The plan relocated commercial areas at the center of the city, residential districts beyond them, and industrial production in the urban periphery while connecting them through private means of transportation. In this system, new models of planning, mobility, and dwelling were to be enforced, together with social practices associated with them. These grand plans, however, if coherent and definitive in the pages of the Litchfield Plan, crashed against the messiness, contingency, and contradictions of everyday life in the city, and the fragile and fragmented state apparatus that was supposed to control and implement them.

The abstract idea of re-writing the city looked, in practice, more like a confused entanglement of scribbles than a tidy overlay. Although the Master Plan presented the first holistic attempt to organize the Thai capital, the proposals were only partially adopted and large portions of its implementation were left to private developers, who followed through only on selected measures and left untouched significant previous urban structures and practices.[54] The traces of Bangkok's past structured, undercut, and often challenged the next urban transformation. The lingering of these previous layers was particularly evident in the new urban structure of Bangkok, which was deeply shaped, and often impinged upon, by its previous aquatic life, largely revolving around canals. This incomplete transformation brought together all the conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok: government officials ability to use their authority to operate safely in grey legal area, which had emerged at the turn of the twentieth century; hundreds of thousands of rural migrants who flooded the city from the late 1950s looking for jobs; affordable motorcycles which spread in the 1960s came together during this period; and a new road network, the maze of long and narrow alleys, known as *soi*, which rendered far-reaching mass public transportation in Bangkok virtually impossible and made motorcycle taxi a viable and necessary presence in the city.

Even though the Litchfield Plan had imagined large investments in creating a new, grid like, structure of the city, the secondary roads built during this period were literally constructed by filling in canals. Their very name, soi, had been previously used to refer to small waterways. This was the effect of the leaving urban

development largely in the hands of private investors without regulating their activities. Road and land development—which had been in the hands of the royal family and the Ministry of Public Works—emerged in the mid-1960s as a viable opportunity for private enterprises to turn a profit. As a consequence, private land developers surfaced as central urban power brokers, able to shape the future of Bangkok. Business people started to buy large portions of land, mostly rural land on the outskirts of the city, and transform them into residential plots. This urbanization of rural land proceeded according to a familiar script: small residential plots, minimum land improvement and public utilities, substandard access roads.[55] First, the developers acquired the plot either from private landowners or from the public administration and carried out essential land improvements and drainage. Second, basic infrastructure such as roads, water lines, electricity, and sewerage systems were put in place, at the developers' expenses. Then, the developers divided the land into smaller plots, to be sold to housing developers or directly contracted to house builders. Once the construction was completed, the houses would be sold to individual buyers.

While the reliance on private investors saved the Thai government heavy investments in road and land improvement, it also left developers free to maximize the amount of land transformed into housing, which they could sell, by minimizing the amount of space and money allocated to infrastructure. As a result, the city grew, and remains today, without centralized services, such as a city-wide sewage system or a gas grid. The same atrophic infrastructure was evident in the new street network. As the only portion of land which developers could not sell, road surfaces were kept to a minimum and often obtained by filling pre-existing small canals. These long, narrow and often dead-end waterways, which were already present in the agricultural land purchased by the developers, provided, both materially and linguistically, the basis for the secondary road system of contemporary Bangkok. This soi system, diffusing like slender branches into the agricultural landscape without connecting one to the other, followed a different logic from roads in comparable car-based cities. As a consequence, connecting them to larger thoroughfares was not without problems. The resulting network remained atrophic, more fit to be traversed by boats than by land-based transportation, such as cars or busses. Once again, previous layers of the urban palimpsest lingered into its present, haunting and orienting its future.

While the road network remained scant and disconnected, the number of vehicles rapidly grew in the city. As a result, traffic jams became a part of everyday life in the Thai capital and called into question the dream of a car-based Bangkok. In practice, the urban landscape had become, and remains today, a functional web of large streets that cross the city centrifugally before clashing into a confusing and dysfunctional maze of long, narrow, and often dead-end soi. It was this convoluted network of roads in Bangkok that created the excruciating traffic jams which set the scene for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in the early 1980s.

A solution to traffic: motorcycle taxis.

In the era of *phatthanā*, Bangkok grew exponentially. Its area almost tripled from 125 km² in 1955 to 330 km² in 1981. The urban population expanded even faster from over a million in 1957 to over five millions in 1981, due to increased birth rates, life expectancy, and internal migration. By the early 1980s, more than 50% of the migrants who were flowing into the Thai capital came from the northeast regions. In 1983, when the first article reporting on motorcycle taxis came out, 11% of the national population lived in Bangkok, 55 times the population of Chiang Mai—the second biggest city in the country. 75% of the phones in the nation were in Bangkok, 32% of its GDP was produced in this area, and 61% of the national electricity consumed here. More than 50% of country motor vehicles were in the capital, with more than 400,000 motorcycles and around a million cars. In this period, Bangkok emerged beyond doubt as the heart of the Thai nation. A powerful heart threatened by traffic, increasingly clogging its arteries.

By the late 1970s, Bangkok had risen to global infamy as the city of traffic disaster. The small soi operated as bottlenecks for traffic along larger roads. Private cars lined up in long winding queues at the entrance of these alleys. Buses and vans often did not even fit into the *soi*, which could hardly accommodate two cars traveling in each direction. Hours and hours were lost every day walking along these long roads to reach a bus stop, or waiting inside in a queue of cars and buses. Millions of dollars were poured on foreign consultants to create documents titled "Traffic Disaster" and "Bangkok Chaos" which continued to propose solutions that the Thai government was unwilling to implement. It was in these gridlocks, which came to

characterize life in Bangkok, that the fragility and contingencies of city planning in the era of *phatthanā* were most evident. As public transport remained hindered by the lack of investment, the elimination of trams and rickshaws, and the impenetrable soi system, local government struggled to find a solution for the everyday mobility of a city with the highest car ownership per capita and the lowest road pavement per car in Asia.[56] By the early 1980s, in the confused palimpsest of Bangkok, traffic had become unbearable. Out of necessity, a response started to emerge: a new informal solution that allowed people to cut through the traffic jams characteristic of life in Bangkok. This solution was provided by motorcycle taxis which moved through the city, like water had once done, by finding gaps and rivulets in the midst of traffic.

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[1]   Thailand Business 1983

[2]   Jetsada 2004

[3]   (Textor 1961) Textor's book provides an antecedent of sort for this study. He in fact explored the lives of rickshaws drivers in Bangkok in the 1960s. Similar to motorcycle taxi drivers they were for the most part male migrants from the northeastern provinces who struggled to participate in both the urban and rural life of the country.

[4]   *mōtœsai rap čhāng*, litterally motorcycles for hire, is still today the Thai name for motorcycle taxis.

[5]   (Sangsit 2548, Nithi)

[6]   Simone 2010: 3

[7]   The etymology of the name *Bangkok* remains unclear. *Bang* is used to refer to a town situated on a riverbank, while the origins of the second part of the name remains debated. Some people think that the it comes from *Ko* (island), as a reference to the landscape of the area. Another theory speculates that it is shortened *Makok,* the name for an autochthonous olive tree.

[8]   During the reign of Rama III the city name was changed again to *Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahintharayutthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Phiman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit*, literally meaning the city of angels, the great city, the eternal jewel city, the impregnable city of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous Royal Palace that resembles

the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarma. Regardless the change, the name of the previous trading post –Bang kok –remained how the Siamese capital was internationally known. In this text I decided to refer to the city as Bangkok in order to accommodate an international standard. It is worth, however, noticing that none of my local interlocutors ever referred to the city as "Bangkok" but only as Krung Thep.

[9]   Andrew's book.

[10]   Peleggi 2007: 31).

[11]   For a treatment of the word "*charoen*" see Thongchai Winichakul. In this seminal piece he reports: "etymologically a Khmer word, it can be found in the fourteenth century and probably earlier. In the older sense, it means cultivating, growing, increasing, building up or expanding until complete in a positive sense. It is applied mostly to non-material matters, such as cultivating merit and Buddhist awakening, maKing (someone) happier, growing up, increasing maturity, and so on. This older meaning of *charoen* gave way in the nineteenth century to connoting secular or worldly development, material progress, and technological advance." (Thongchai 2000: 260)

[12]   (Radom 2503: 128)

[13]   (Sternstein 1982).

[14]   (Thongchai 2000)

[15]   On baan nook as anywhere but Bangkok and its meaning

[16]   (Thongchai 1994: 16)

[17]   (Askew 1994; Povatong 2011).

[18]   (Holm 1977: 61-62).

[19]   (Elinoff 2013)

[20]   On isan insurgencies – Keyes A few years before, in fact, the threat of French expansion had materialized in Bangkok. Following a dispute over the control of the territory of the Laotian Kingdom, on July 13th 1893, two French gunboats blockaded Bangkok´s harbor, forcing the Siamese government to accept a new territorial order. Even if the French retracted after signing a treaty it became clear that Siam ran the concrete risk of falling under colonial domination (Thongchai 1994). The Siamese response was

twofold. On one hand, Siam played a delicate international game of equilibrium between England and France, which culminated in the 1896 Franco-British agreement to keep Siam as a buffer zone. On the other hand, the Siamese monarchs adopted forms of governance from colonial powers and applied them to the Siamese provinces. Among them, railways, figured prominently, as was the case in colonial India (Prakash 1999) and Egypt (Mitchell 1988), "envisioned as both a technology of governance and social improvement" (Elinoff 2013: 92).

[21]   If in n 1890 it took 11 day to travel from Bangkok to the northeastern city of Khon Kaen, by 1932 the journey was cut down to two days. The same was true for the northern city of Chiang Mai, now reachable in one day and a half, as opposed to forty two in 1900 (Kazikaki 2005: 156).

[22]   Differently from European feudalism the *sakdina* system, which precede the administrative reform in Siam, was not predicated on controlling territory but rather human power. Land was not considered a scarce resource, labor was. As an effect land was hardly desirable and rarely part of economic transactions (Peleggi 2007). In 1892 a new property law was introduced and the concept of private ownership of land was formalized, precisely to adapt to the growing value that agricultural land was acquiring as an effect of intensive cultivation (Askew 1993).

[23]   (Siffin 1966)

[24]   (Ji 2003)

[25]   As Siffin had argued: "The new and the old had more in common than appearances would suggest: the bureaucracy continued to serve as the chief source of status, security, and identity for Thais above the level of villages" (Siffin 1966: 148). Even with the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy, "the reformation ended. The King was toppled. Control of the government passed to a shifting succession of cliques, nominally operating within a constitutional framework but in reality depending upon control of military forces. The bureaucracy continued." (Siffin 1966: 149) It was in fact after the 1932 revolution that the bureaucracy became the main power broker in Thailand. The concept of "bureaucratic polity" was develop to describe this primacy of the apparatus from whose ranks, and not from democratic elections, emerged most of the leaders of the country until the 1990s.

[26]   Along these roads, the two institutions diffused a new architectural form, known as the shop-house. King Chulalongkorn had taken note of shop-houses—two-stories structures with a commercial ground-floor and a residential upper floor—during a visit to Singapore in 1870 and decided thereafter to import them to Siam. In the Kingdom this structure spread like wildfire pushed by the Siamese monarchs, who became the main builders and renters in Bangkok. In a few years, shop-houses became the dominant architectural form in Bangkok and the monarchs accumulated immense wealth from their construction. While the architecture of the

city obtained a more *siwilai* look, modelled on Southeast Asian colonial cities, its urban structure was reorganized following their European metropolis.

27   (Filippi 2008).

28   (Norman 1900: 124).

29   (Soppelsa 2009)

30   what Brian Larkin has called the colonial sublime (Larkin 2008)

31   Cited in (*Brown 2004: 148*).

32   The discourse of the Yellow Peril originated in the late nineteenth century with the migration of Chinese population to Europe and the United States. The term was used to express the fear that the mass immigration of Asians threatened white wages and standards of living and that they would eventually take over and destroy western civilization, their ways of life and values.

33   (Vajiravudh 1914).

34   (Brown 1990: 36)

35   Descendants of Chinese immigrants, the two men had met in Paris, where Luang Wichit was worKing in the Royal Siamese delegation as well as studying law and political science. Phibun, a young military officer, was also studying there and was part of group of young Siamese who were later to become the main actors behind the 1932 constitutional revolution and the deposition of the absolute monarchy. Among them, another Chinese descendant figured prominently: a law student named Pridi Banomyong, whose collaboration with, and later opposition to, Phibun would come to dominate Thai politics for the following three decades

36   As Thongchai Winichakul has argued, "in contemporary Thai, the word that connotes the Tai/Thai ethnicity is spelled in two ways. With exactly the same pronunciation—'thai'—one is spelled with a y at the end and the other without, respectively as 'thaiy' and 'thai'. When spelled 'thaiy' the word denotes the modern nation-state and its citizens, although in its Romanisation as 'Thai(land)', the letter 'y' is dispensed with. When spelled without the y ending, it is a looser term denoting the ethnic peoples whose languages belong to the same Tai/Thai linguistic family. This 'Thai' (without a y ending) includes the Shan of Burma, the Lao people on both sides of the Mekong, and people speaKing various Tai/Thai dialects in Thailand today, including the Muang people of former Lanna (Chiang Mai), the Tai Lue, the Tai Maung, the Tai Khoen in the border areas between China, Burma and Laos, the Black and White

Tai in Vietnam, and others." (Thongchai 2008: 576). In the writing of Luang Wichit the two terms were conflated, overlapping ethnicity and citizenship.

[37]   (Barmé 1993: 129

[38]   Skinner 1957: 177)

[39]   (Porphant 1998: 98)

[40]   Feeny 2003; Parnwell 1996).

[41]   (Harvey 2003).

[42]   In 1960, 61% of migrants in Bangkok were coming from the central region and only 20% from the Northeast. By 1980 northeastern migrants composed more than 50% of Bangkok's labor force.

[43]   These roads, however, were not built with the aim of assisting the transferring resources, natural and human, from the outer provinces to the city, rather they were put in place with the opposite trajectory in mind. Starting with the Korean War (1950-1953), Thailand emerged as the United States' primary ally in a region seen as at the forefront of communist expansion. After the French withdrawal from Indochina in 1954, and the beginning of the Vietnam War, the American presence grew exponentially. Concern over the potential expansion of communist forces into Thailand drove US funds into the country. This economic support materialized, among other things, through a capillary system of roads built to guarantee easy access to areas of potential risk, particularly in the northeastern region. The Friendship Highway, built in 1955 to connect Bangkok to the northeastern city of Korat, was the main infrastructural intervention in the area.

[44]   (Thak 2007: 92).

[45]   (Sarit 1960: 146

[46]   Kayes 1989, Ingram 1971).

[47]   It is in fact in this period that referring to the development of the Thai capital and economy in term of planning start to make sense. The new concept, moreover, was transliterated into Thai and the words for plan and planning in Thai – *phang* – remain very close to the English term. For a discussion on this concept in the Thai context see (Herzfeld 2013)

48   In the period between 1962 and 1970, under the umbrella of USOM (United States Operation Mission) American funds to Thailand averaged 14.2 billion baht a year, roughly the 12% of the total national earning from exports. Not only money, however, was offered to Thailand. Engineers, security experts, military personnel, agricultural and irrigation experts, urban planners: a whole transfer of expertise supported the alliance between the two nations.

49   Suehiro 1989),

50   The Board of Investments (BOI), established in 1959, classified these essential industries in three groups: Group A included agricultural machinery, metal products, and basic chemical and was granted complete exemption from import taxes on raw material and machinery as well as corporation taxes for up to five years; Group B, which included auto-assembling and electrical appliances received a 50% reduction in duties and taxes; Group C, which covered labor-intensive industries such as textile, was granted a one-third tax reduction

51   (Suehiro 1989: 187).

52   By 1990 the number jumped up to 719,158, five years later it arrived to 1,500,857 (Jetsada 2004).

53   (Holston 1989)

54   Shop-houses, for instance, became less omnipresent in the city and were often replaced by concrete residential buildings, increasingly taller and spread out, but they didn't entirely disappear from the urban landscape. Rather new shop-houses continued, and continue today, to be built in the center of the city and in its newly formed suburbs, displacing the suburban dreams and zoning principles that American planners had introduced to Bangkok in the 1960s. Similarly, the dream of moving the city through private means remained unfulfilled. As Bangkok sprawled, investment in buses was cut to the bone. For two decades, no new routes were added, and in that same period, other forms of public transportation were eliminated—rickshaws were banned in 1960, tramways in 1968. However, their presence—or rather their absence—remained engrained both in the collective memory and in the material features of the city. Not only did the nostalgic remembrances of the trams' quiet pace and whistling sounds survive, but the very tracks on which the carriages ran remained—and still remain today—mounted on the road surface, reminders of a previous layer of the urban palimpsest. As every driver in Bangkok knows, these tracks still groove the road pavement and disrupt the smooth flow of new private means of transportation, causing drivers to slightly swerve their cars and motorcyclists to incur more serious accidents.

55   (Durand-Lasserve 1980: 2).

56   Between 1961 and 1967 the population of Bangkok grew by 40%, the number of vehicles by 125%, while the road surface only extended by 5.4% (Sternstein 1971: 214).

Chapter 2: Riding the city

Since their first appearance motorcycle taxis spread around Bangkok like wildfire, growing from a few hundred in 1983 to around 40,000 a decade later, all the way to 200,000 by the time I began my fieldwork in 2009. During the time of my research the drivers—for the most part young male urban migrant men[1]—collectively operated a total of four to five millions daily trips, more than ten times the volume of people moved by Bangkok's subway and elevated Skytrain combined.[2] The magnitude of their movements and their presence at every street corner was predicated upon the drivers' ability to read the urban landscape, not over time as I did in last chapter, but synchronically, in the present of their movements through it.

Unlike the geologist or the urban historian interested in layering, the driver experiences the city as the speleologist, less concerned with the genesis and more attuned to the modalities of navigating gaps, traces, and fault lines left open in the surrounding landscape. If in the former chapter I interrogated time and space of the city as a contingent, contradictory, and ultimately fragile flow, in the drivers' everyday life, the two elements acquire a more concrete dimension, less concerned progression and more focused on practices and experiences. In other words, seen atop a bike, the historical layers of the urban palimpsest flatten into a landscape and "transform the temporal articulation of place into a spatial sequence of points" (de Certeau 1984: 35) that compose the urban landscape in which the drivers move.[3]

Following their navigations, I move between the logic of the theorist and the planner—to whom the city may often appear as a text to be analyzed or a map to be organized—and the practical logic of the drivers

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[1] The drivers are for the largest majority males between the age of 20 and 40, mostly with primary, and in few cases secondary education. About 90% of them were not born to Bangkok, with Isan being by far the most common region of provenience. Even though male represent about the 95% of the drivers, the number of women is however slightly expanding since 1997, as often women fared worst in the lay-offs.

[2] In 2012 they were an estimated of 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers operating in around 4000 wins, of which 120,000 regularly registered and 80,000 operating illegally. I have surveyed about 500 drivers over the course of my research coming from about 300 different wins. The drivers averaged between 20 and 30 trips per day, which would put the whole system to about 4 to 6 million trips per day.

[3] In other words, for the urban historian, interested in a history of the present, the objective is, as Nikolas Rose explains, "to reveal the historicity and the contingency of the truths that have come to define the limits of our contemporary ways of being" (Rose 1999: 276). For the driver, interested in the practices of the present, past and present morph into a coherent unity in which they can devise ways of acting in and on the city.

and the city dwellers—who move through the palimpsest as pens, tracing trajectories and connections that engage and disrupt that text. These logics, however, are not to be seen as diametrically opposite but rather as two complementary modalities of relation to the city which sustain and constitute one another. While in the historians' exploration of the urban palimpsest, traces of the past direct trajectories, in the drivers' daily navigations, the fragile history analyzed in the last chapter comes to life below the wheels and in their paths. In them, urban traces—the soi system, the tram's tracks, the local influential people or the forms of labor that dominate Bangkok—stand still and orient mobility, in the 'here and now' of a trip. Bangkok is, after all, the result of both logics and trajectories. The conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis, themselves fragile and opened to subversion, did not just determine and shape the drivers' presence and paths, but are actively challenged, adopted, or refused through the practical reasoning that underlies their everyday life. In last chapter I analyzed the former dynamic; here I focus on the latter. In this sense, I follow Bourdieu's critique of the dogmatic and normative nature of structuralist thinking and analyze the different experiences at play in the everyday practice of motorcycle taxi drivers' in the city. Quoting Bourdieu:

> The logical relationships constructed by the anthropologist are opposed to 'practical' relationships—practical because continuously practiced, kept up, and cultivated—in the same way as the geometrical space of a map, an imaginary representation of all theoretical roads and routes, is opposed to the network of 'beaten tracks', of paths made even more practicable by constant use (Bourdieu 1977: 37)

This chapter analyzes the drivers' as producers of these spatial, economic, and social paths. I start from an exploration of the drivers' daily delivery of newspapers, central tools for the creation of a Thai national "imagined community" (Anderson 1983). I use their role in this circulation to explore the drivers as connectors and mediators of physical and social landscape of the city. From there, I explore the phenomenological dimension of their labor, both in transit and during their waiting time at their stations. I analyze the first component, that of transit, through an analysis of the drivers' bodily practices, adjustments to urban rhythms, and convoluted mobility based on detours and continuous path-seeking. I then focus on the less-mobile aspect of their labor: the long waiting times at their stations. I show how, during this time, the

drivers create channels in the social landscape of their neighborhood, channels through which they attempt to enhance economic mobility for themselves and their families.

This channel-making labor had, as the urban palimpsest in which it takes place, its pitfalls: risks, contingencies, and failures that threaten the drivers' physical, social, and economic mobility. If, on one side, mobility and stasis defines the phenomenology of their labor and economic success, on the other, the danger of failures and accidents constantly faces both them and their passengers, undermining their mobility, their life, and their economic and social standing. Investigating both aspects, therefore, reveals the contingency and contradiction not just in the urban palimpsest in which the drivers operate but also in their everyday lives as well as their ability to adjust, challenge, and activate existing relations between their bodies, the city, and capitalism in contemporary Thailand.

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A journey through the city: building channels

It is Friday, full night. Hong sleeps next to me on a thin mattress thrown in a cramped wooden room in a narrow alley on Thomburi side of Bangkok, across the river from the Central Business District and his motortaxi station. Only the static noise of his mini-fridge and the occasional barking dog down the road break the silence. A small alarm clock with a sticker of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD)—the political group protesting the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva—projects the time as a red LED glow on the pavement. I grope for my glasses on the floor. 2:49. Next to me Hong snores soundly, taking advantage of the few hours of sleep that his role as invisible mover of the city allows. A few objects adorn the musty walls of his shack. A poster of Carabao, a country music star who narrates the stories of migrants like him, a small radio, a water heater, few boxes of instant noodles, and a couple of Buddhist protective amulets that he takes off and attaches to a nail every night before going to sleep. In a few minutes the alarm will go off and, as every morning, he will wake up, run across the tiny courtyard into the small wooden toilette in front of his room and shower, scooping buckets of cold water from a big cement tub. Back in the room

Hong will put on mentholated powder to fight the daily sweat and get dressed, before walking silently out of the small courtyard, a big leather saddle bag on his shoulder, and drive into the unusually quiet city.

BUZZZZZ …the alarm goes off.

The scene plays out in front of me but, differently from what I imagined, Hong does not kickstart the bike in the courtyard. Rather we walk the bikes out of the alley, so as not to wake up his sister and her family sleeping in the house next to his shack, start our Japanese bikes and drive away, into the night.

A few people sit in the street, placidly enjoying their last drink of the night as a street vendor prepares northeastern food for a couple of aging prostitutes courted by a taxi driver. In a few minutes we are merging into a major highway, speeding our way across the city, head tucked down to fight the chill of the night. Occasionally a car overtakes us as we make our way towards the eastern side of the city, where Hong works next to Bangkok's commercial and financial centers. As every weekday morning, before crossing the river Hong takes a detour into an industrial area. Here the day is fully in operation: the sound of machinery and diesel trucks covers the whine of our bikes.

We stop in front of a large iron door that opens into a warehouse, with the usual elevated floor to facilitate the movement of big loads directly from and into delivery trucks: printing press reveals the smell of ink and the rhythmical sound of cylinder printing machines. An older man drops a bundle of magazine Hong's arms without saying a word. From the covers a picture of a Red Shirts protesters change hands, as a few other motorcycle taxi drivers arrive to collect their share of papers. Hong proceeds to divide the bundle in two parts and sticks them into the saddle bags across his bike. "Let's go," he tells me as he puts his helmet back on. We leave behind the din of mechanical production and go back to the quietness of the pre-dawn city.

We ride across the Chao Praya River over Taksin Bridge and enter the nearly empty streets of Bangkok's financial district. During the day, Silom Road presents a crowded scene, nearly indistinguishable from other global business districts. Late at night, instead, the area reveals its peculiar double life as a

prostitution hub. Here the city is still in motion, dancing to the off-beat of loud music drifting out of the red light districts of Patpong and Thanniya, catering to a mix of Thai and international clientele. Hong stops at a motortaxi group, busy with the continuous flux of clients and prostitutes.

We eat a quick bowl of noodle soup with a young driver from Hong's village while they chat, filling each other in with news from their hometown: weddings, deaths, and the construction of new houses: news that travel from the provinces to the urban landscape through the drivers' daily mobility through the city and regular trips back to the countryside. As we take our leave, Hong agrees to call the other driver next time he plans to visit home.

In silence, we ride through back roads and parking lots, against the direction of traffic and across four-lane roads following a mental map that Hong activates every day, a sequence of landmarks that he has internalized but that means almost nothing to anyone but him. At every stop he pulls out a small stack of magazines that he gently leaves on newsstands and doorsteps before driving to the next shop, in a regular sequence. He stops only to put on a balaclava, oblivious of the growing heat, to protect his bald spot and his skin from tanning, a small sacrifice to the altar of urban living. "I already have dark skin," he tells me with a mix of irony and affliction. "No matter what I do I look like a *khon bānnǭk (*country bumpkin). I always look like I work in the field. Women do not like that. It may work with *farang.* [4] You like dark people but I cannot speak English so I am left with Thais and us Thai prefer white skin." With the sun up race, class, and regional provenance are marked also through skin care and sun exposure.[5]

As we progress along Hong's usual circuit, the city around us starts to awaken. Vendors push lonely carts to street corners, the first buses start to move, and more cars fill the streets. Continuing along his path we deposit the last bundle of magazines and head finally to his station in Sathorn soi 12. On the way we stop at one of the omnipresent 7/11 shop—the American multinational bought by a Japanese company in 1991

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[4] *Farang* is the word used to refer to foreigners, particularly Caucasians.

[5] This complex politics of skin-color is marked in Thailand by ethnic and class belonging. Whiter skin, in fact, besides pointing to Chinese origins also indexes a life of privilege, away from the rice fields. For this reasons, skin whiteners are very popular cosmetics in the country, advertised by famous actors or models.

and since operating more than 3000 shops in Bangkok—for the first of many energy drinks that keep Hong awake and alert during his interminable days of work. "When I worked in construction it was *yā bā* (methamphetamine)." Hong remembers. "The boss used to put it into the water we were given to drink. All of us, we worked high, we never stopped working. You feel like you have interminable energy, until you come back home and your whole body hurts." Although nowadays no one is drugging drivers like Hong, a circuit of exploitation, operating primarily onto their *bān nǭk* bodies, still structures their lives in the city and leaves them exhausted and poisoned by fumes at the end of the day, with few hundred baht in their pocket.

Hong's newspaper delivery provides a remarkable instance of the drivers' roles in creating the channels through which the Thai urban and national communities are constituted and preserved. In this sense, it helps us understand the communicative, social, and political-economic relevance of their labor as connectors of the Thai metropolis and the Thai state. Newspapers, as Benedict Anderson has famously argued, play a central role in the creation of the imagined community that is pivotal for the operations of modern nation-states. Every day around the nation, citizens engage in the simultaneous mass ceremony of reading the news, which create and solidities an anonymous imagined community rooted in everyday life.[6]

While scholars of nationalism agree on the roles of print capitalism in the creation of a unified nation, few have focused on the people who allow the circulation of its products. Seen from this light, the daily round of delivery performed by drivers like Hong takes on a new significance. The drivers occupy an often invisible yet crucial position as mediators and producers of the channels through which such communities are formed and connected. People like Hong do not just participate in the "imagined community," they also keep it alive by creating and sustaining the channels through which such imagination occur. It is through their labor, along with that of other workers, that newspapers circulate across the urban and national landscape and are made available for daily consumption, allowing the maintenance of a unified

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[6] As he showed, newspapers "create this extraordinary mass ceremony […] The significance of [which] is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. […] At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. [It] seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modem nations." (Anderson 1983: 36)

national community. The delivery of newspapers offers just one instance of the drivers' larger role as creators and gate-keepers of communicative channel or, to use the words of Julia Elyachar "phatic labor," workers who "produces communicative channels that can transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value" (Elyachar 2010: 253).

The concept of phatic communion, first used by Malinowski in his study of the Trobriand Island, was developed to analyze how linguistic interactions, such as gossip, salutes, and chit-chatting, play a role in creating and sustaining social ties, what he called "ties of union" (Malinowski 1936). For Malinowski phatic communion referred to "aimless" linguistic utterances which operate as an "act binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. [And configures communication] not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action" (Malinowski 1936: 468), of a community-making action. Roman Jakobson later used this concept to refer to the linguistic function which focuses on the preservation of channels of communication (Jakobson and Rudy 1962). Just to give an example, the humming or nodding that you hear and see in classrooms around the world accomplish a phatic function. In other words, it tells nothing about the process of signification but rather it marks that the channel of communication is still open and the public is not completely tuned off. Such function, Elyachar has argued, can go beyond the communicative dimension and produce channels for both economic transactions and political mobilizations. In this sense, it can be configured as labor in Marxist terms, a "formative activity" which produces value (Marx, et al. 1906 Vol. 2). Elyachar has taken up this concept and intersected with Marxist analysis of labor in order to talk about the economic and social significance of daily interactions in constituting the channels through which Egyptian workshops operate (Elyachar 2010). Expanding from purely linguistic practices, she analyzed how daily mobility in the city, house visits, and food-making constitute a phatic labor through which the channel necessary for the operations of workshops in Cairo are created and preserved.

Hong, and many others like him, perform the same labor every day in Bangkok, silently and invisibly weaving the threads of multiple imagined communities. Motorcycle taxis, in this sense, constitute one trip at a time the channels through which urban and national social, economic, and political communities are created and sustained. The delivery of newspapers, if symptomatic of their roles, is only a minimal part of the drivers'

participation in creating channels through which people, commodities, and ideas travel around the city, as well as across the larger national sphere. Hong, in fact, after quietly performing his newspaper round, will head back to his station and, together with other 200,000 drivers, will start ferrying bodies, documents, and commodities creating multiple channels—communicative, economic, and aspirational—that weave together the city, its dwellers, and economic circulation.

All around the city, motorcycle taxi stations (*win*)—a few meters of road pavement confined by two crash barriers borrowed from the local police station where a lines of bikes angle parked—start to thicken with drivers, who converge from small and cramped apartments in the urban periphery, where growing land prices and the sprouting condos are slowly displacing them. Each driver arrives, parks his bike, drops his stuff somewhere and rapidly gets his first client, as the morning traffic picks up. Drowsily they start weaving together Bangkok's social and spatial landscapes, one trip at a time, allowing the city to move, commodities to circulate, and urban dwellers to reach their destinations. Through their mobility, millions of people, as well as documents and commodities, are moved around the city, creating channels that define, especially during traffic jams, the difference between reachable and unreachable locations, markets, and meetings.

Hong and his colleagues, mostly males from rural villages, with their swerving mobility provide a functional system of transportation and delivery for a city that state-run mass transportation systems have failed to connect, both spatially and socially. In other words, they create not just immaterial communicative channels but also render viable the concrete infrastructural channels of mass transportation and economic circulation, which would otherwise be blocked. The importance of their phatic labor for the city is nowhere more evident than in the significance of motorcycle taxis to the operations of Bangkok ultra-modern elevated Skytrain.

The invisible creators of channels.

The elevated Bangkok Transportation System (BTS) opened in 1999, after decades of failed attempts. Its birth was one of the responses to the 1997 economic crisis, an economic collapse that set Thailand's

dreams of becoming a global economic power back a few years. The early 1990s, in fact, had been the years of Asian Tigers, with Thai GDP growing 10% yearly and Bangkok increasing its political, economic, and cultural primacy over the nation. The future was bright, both national government and International Financial Institutions (IFI) reassured (Stiglitz and Yusuf 2001). This massive growth, however, harbored unspoken fears of a burst, which were dramatically fulfilled in 1997.

On 14 May and 15 May of that year, the Thai baht was hit by massive speculative attacks. Driven by the easiness of moving capitals in and out of Thailand and the increasing instability of its economy, this speculation became the spark that ignited the Asian financial crisis. After some resistance from the Thai government to devaluate the baht, the currency was left free to fluctuate and lost more than half of its value in a few days in July 1997. Suddenly most Thai companies, which had borrowed in foreign currencies, saw their debt burden duplicate. In a few days, a significant number of these economic players went into bankruptcy. Thailand's booming economy came to a halt amid extensive layoffs in finance, real estate, industry, and construction resulted in huge numbers of workers returning to their villages in the countryside and 600,000 foreign workers being sent back to their home countries. [7] Financial markets, industrial production, urban change, internal migration, consumerism: everything seemed to stop (Bello, et al. 1998; Kasian 2002; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Warr 2005). These halting consequences were caustically represented by the photographer Manit Sriwanichpoom in his notorious exposition *Dreams Interruptus*, which presented desolated images of deserted buildings, incomplete skyscrapers, and abandoned tools.

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[7] The number of general unemployed grew from 697,900 during the dry season of 1997 to 1,479,300 in the dry season of 1998 (Pasuk and Baker 2008: 7)
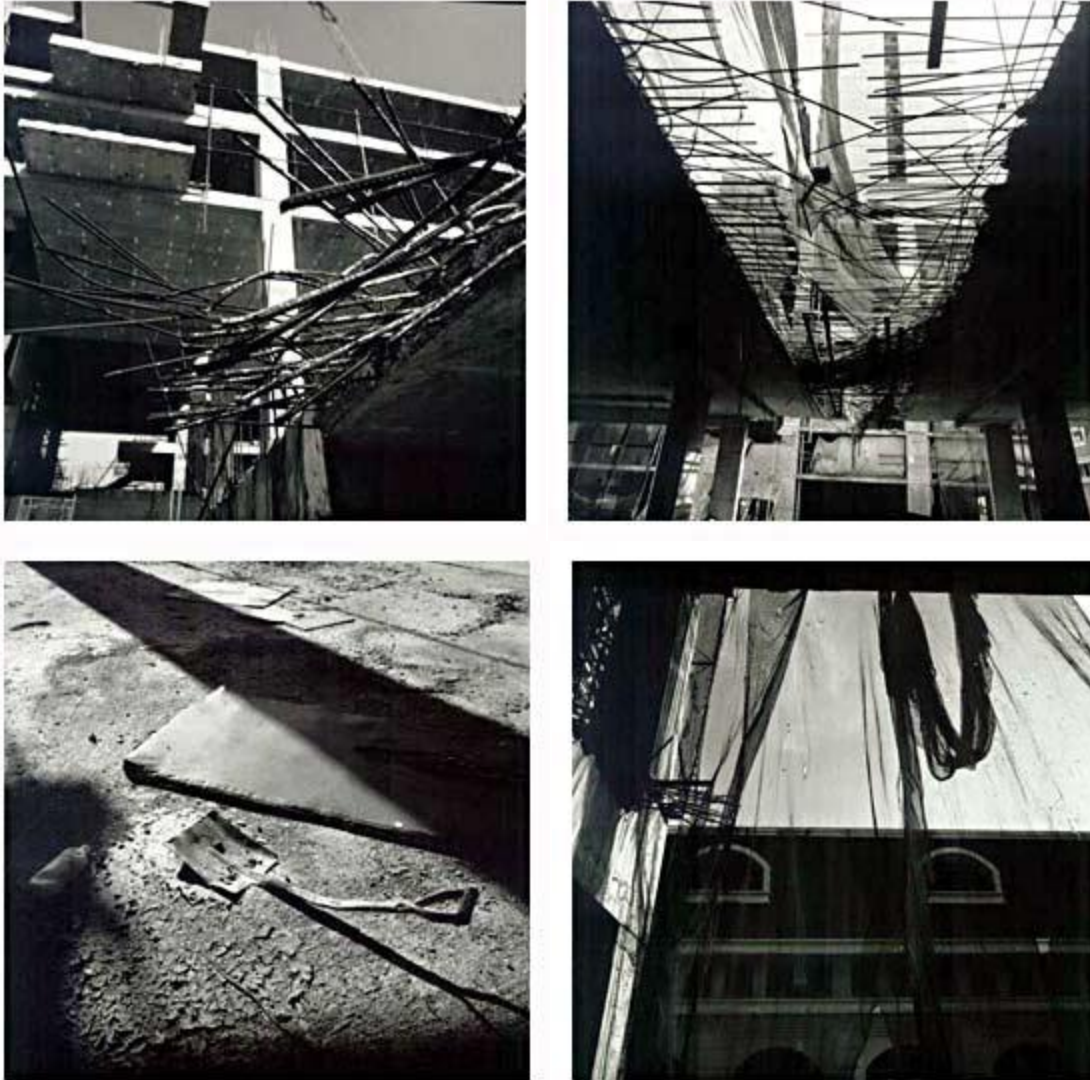
Figure 2: Four pictures from Manit Sriwanichpoom's "dreams interruptus"

The post-crisis governments of Chuan Leekpai responded to the economic slow-down with interventions that aimed at fostering physical mobility and economic circulation. In the following years, financial markets were deregulated, capital flows rendered more fluid, and international companies were granted unprecedented access to the Thai economy (Pasuk and Baker 2008). In Bangkok, shopping malls increased in number and size to foster consumption,[8] while new infrastructures of mass transportation, such as the Skytrain, were put

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[8] Interestingly even street vendors reconfigured new and highly formalized—yet illegal—organizational strategies, such as franchising carts, sold informally to vendors and spread around the city (Paisarn 2006).

into place with the idea of injecting new blood into the stagnant circulation of its Central Business District and force-restart the dream of becoming a global economic power (Bengtsson 2006; Peeradorn 2007). The Skytrain, in particular, was to be the symbol of the renewed metropolis, where well-dressed middle class clients (as the poster shows) would travel comfortably to their shopping malls in air conditioned cars, above the chaos of street-level traffic.

Figure 3: Poster from the walls of the Skytrain

This plan, however, encountered a number of problems that challenged the sustainability and economic viability of the proposed solution. The elevated railway that was supposed to conduct Bangkok out of the crisis failed to deliver its promises. In the first years of operations, in fact, the Skytrain struggled to fit into the existing urban structure and to become part of the everyday life of the city. First, the new system of transportation did not tap into the main residential areas, located far away from the Central Business District. Second, the overlaying of an elevated train on the fractured and maze-like structure of Bangkok allowed only for a highly condensed system that run along major through-fares, miles away from the deep soi where the majority of urban dwellers live. In other words, the problem of the soi system, which had burdened previous

forms of transportation such as trams and buses, remained in place, often positioning the Skytrain station well beyond the reach of the majority of urban dwellers. The new elevated railway turned out to be, at least for the first years of operation, an economic failure. Only with the expansion of motorcycle taxis, itself a consequence of the massive lay-off following the 1997 crisis, the Skytrain became viable.

The numbers of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, in fact, expanded rapidly after the crisis, as many laid-off factory workers entered the informal economy and took up this occupation. As a consequence, more motorcycle taxi stations appeared, often located next to the ramps connecting the elevated rail stations to the pavement below. These drivers operated the final or initial legs of a skytrain trip, those which connect the station to the travelers' homes, workplaces, or offices. In other words, they operated as what transportation studies call "feeders", systems of mobility that feed passengers to other forms of mass transportation. Although depicted as backward and unruly, these taxis soon became essential for the survival and economic viability of the Skytrain, allowing its passengers to reach the mass transportation to and from their homes, located deep within Bangkok's dysfunctional urban texture. In other words, the "modern" train needed the "backward" drivers to attract its middle-class passengers: it simply could not function without them. [9]

This relation is symptomatic of the drivers' contradictory position between indispensability, marginality, and invisibility in Bangkok. On one side, they create channels that allow for the circulation of passengers from their homes to the systems of mass transportation, and in so doing perform labor, phatic or not, which is absolutely necessary for the everyday life of the city. On the other side, they do so by remaining largely invisible, both spatially and socially.[10] The drivers often disappear into the landscape of the city and become invisible to its dwellers who rarely reflect on the roles that those drivers play in connecting and mediating the movement of the metropolis as well as millions of daily trajectories within it. While invisibility has been a characteristic of workers in capitalist cities across the globe (Holston 1989; Scott 1998), with the

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[9] The same has been true for Bangkok's subway, opened in 2004, as well as the recently inaugurated Airport Link, which opened during my fieldwork. In this case the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), which controls the operation of the system, contacted motorcycle taxi drivers to establish new stations even before the train started to ferry costumers, to make sure no initial inconvenience would limit the access to the Airport Link. All of this questions easy distinctions between "formal" and "informal" economies which has dominated Thai studies but rather suggest a vision in which highly formalized not-taxed economies support the functioning of "formal economies"

[10] Their stations often fill "dead-space" in between buildings or transitional spaces next to Skytrain ramps, bus stations, or boat piers.

rise of post-Fordism, with its flexible labor and post-industrial organization—which have dominated Thai capitalism after the 1997 crisis—new forms of invisibility have emerged. As Giuliana Commisso has argued, this shift has brought the destruction of

> the urban geography of the city-dormitory, of the city-barracks, in which compact masses and uniform individuals move according to predefined runs, rhythms and times regulated by the time of the factory around which everything swarmed. The new factory designs a different architecture, a different human geography. The compact mass of the Fordist city is replaced by an unstable aggregate of bodies. The spatial separation of the factory from the city determines a kind of 'immaterialisation' of the labour force, here meant in the sense of the social invisibility of the worker's job. (Commisso 2006: 183)

The new invisibility, in other words, relies on the destruction of collective daily routine of factory work and the emergence of industrial outskirts, which erased the urban working class from the city center. This transformation, as Michael Herzfeld pointed out, has had a deep effect in the spatial organization of Bangkok, in which economic inequality has been managed through "spatial cleansing," by which working class population has been evicted from the center of the city (Herzfeld 2006). Such removal, however, does not just take the form of material relocation but also of social, political, and discursive invisibility. The drivers, blending into the landscape of Bangkok, have in fact disappeared from the eyes of city dwellers, administrators, and planners, who take them for granted. Only when, on extremely busy hours such as Friday afternoons, it becomes hard to find an available driver, suddenly city dwellers realize the drivers' centrality to urban life. As a Thai upper class friend told me, "when the drivers are too busy and there is not enough of them at the station in my soi I realize that without them I remain stuck, with no channels (*nǣo thāng*) for me to move. Only when a driver comes back to the station, can I again get in motion and go back to my normal life and activities." It is precisely in this conundrum that the drivers operate: invisible as long as they carry out their work proficiently, visible and recognized in case of failures, accidents, or absence.[11]

This complex relation between indispensability and marginality, as well as between visibility and invisibility play a central role in the everyday operations of the drivers, as much as in their political

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[11] This (in)visibility which, similarly to the infrastructures studied in Brian Larkin's ethnography of Nigeria (Larkin 2008), disappears only in case of failures contributes to the negative image that motorcycle taxis hold in Thai society as unreliable and untrustworthy.

participation and role in street protest, which I will explore in the second part of this dissertation. For now, let us just state that this tension does not emerge just in relation to their clients but also vis-à-vis the state and political movements. Their invisibility, in fact, operates on multiple levels. As young migrants who mostly officially reside in their villages, they remain largely invisible to the statistical eye of the state and the municipal administration, as well as to the urban electoral apparatus as their official "housing registrations" (*thabīan bān*) place them far from where they actually live and work.[12] As formally self-employed service workers, with a murky legal status, they remain mostly unnoticed by tax collectors. As semi-visible "urban infrastructure" they remain under the radar of the state apparatus of intelligibility but also from its social provisions. And, as marginal yet essential feeders to systems of mass transportation, they remain largely invisible to both urban planners and scholars.

In this sense, people like Hong may seem like pawns in this game of mobility, capitalism, and urban politics. However, when we depart from the distracted presence that organizes our daily experiences of urban setting and fight the veil of invisibility that often falls over service workers, a new understanding of their roles and of the city around them emerges. These workers, we discover, are much more than mere vessels for the flows of people, objects, ideas, and life styles. Rather they operate a pivotal phatic labor for the city and the nation. In so doing, the drivers re-define what urban life is, what spaces are reachable and unreachable as well as restructure the economic, social, legal, and political relations among its dwellers. Their lives on the move, in other words, retain a transformative potential, not just for the city around them but also for the drivers themselves who, a trip at a time, get accustomed to urban life, its marvel and its sorrows, its excitements and its crushing oppression.

A phenomenology of riding

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[12] Similar dynamics, by which internal migrants remain registered in their place of origin, are typical of a variety of countries around the world, most notably in China migrants formally face a restriction on registering in the cities thanks to the very similar (and notorious) *hukou* registration system with deep effects on the social, political, and educational trajectories of these migrants and their families (Fong and Murphy 2006).

As the brief history of the Skytrain and the 1997 economic crisis demonstrates, the drivers' labor is organized in relation to complex histories of Thai capitalism, its booms and busts. Their embodied practices and experiences, in this sense, are situated within a particular configuration of capital and labor, which structures their everyday lives according to the complex rhythms of urban flows, economic production, and nature. Conversely, the drivers' everyday practices also structure such configurations, allowing people and commodities to flow across the city but also retaining the potential of stopping them, as the Part II of this dissertation analyzes. Their labor, in other words, can both interrupt and reinforce the operations of Thai capitalism as well as of urban modes of production by adapting or challenging its rhythms.

Organizing and policing this complex relation between rhythms and worker's bodies has been a central concern of capitalism since its origins, and even more clearly since its Taylorist turn. Labor struggles, in fact, have often revolved around attempts and resistances to organizing the workers' bodies in specific paces and rhythms, be them the despotic mechanical repetition of Fordist assembly lines or the unexpected fluctuations and vulnerabilities of flexible production in post-Fordism. In this sense, rhythms—so central to Engels' analysis of the British working class (Engels 1968)—are where structural political-economic conditions and the workers' everyday practices face each other in the territory of the present. For the drivers, rhythms are where the wheel of everyday life meets the road of political economy.

As I have shown their labor forces them to wake up before the people start leaving their homes, have lunch just before offices release their workers for the break, rest after the flow of urban workers recedes into their workplaces, carry out their physical functions before peak hours, and sleep when the rhythm of the city significantly slows down. All of these phases organize the rhythms of their labor and the practices of their mobility, as Hong's early navigation of the city revealed. Engaged in a complex and convoluted waltz with the rhythms of capital, labor forces, and urban nature, the drivers weave the city, its space, markets, and dwellers together. It is precisely the ability to read these rhythms and to keep a pace of mobility, especially when the whole city gets blocked in a traffic jam, which allows the drivers to produce and keep the city in motion, forging channels indispensable for the daily lives, economic practices, and mobilities of millions of Bangkok's residents. Hong's newspaper delivery is just one example of this: structured by the rhythms of print capitalism

and office work yet deeply engrained into bodily practices and everyday life. More largely, the driver's ability to adjust to multiple rhythms of capitalist production and consumption, of urban life, and of human bodies is where the specific experience of "riding the city" becomes clear.

During the day most of their rides are short and regular, ferrying clients to the near-by Skytrain or bus stations, shopping areas, or offices. Occasionally some of the drivers get a phone call from offices or shops in the area and take longer ride around the city, delivering goods and documents and filling in for the state's unreliable postal system. As the day progresses, their mobility takes on the serpentine and winding features described in the prologue. In the midst of thickening traffic the drivers call upon their skills and knowledge of the landscape, its shortcuts and hidden passages, to find paths through the maze of cars, buses, pickups and tuk-tuks. Especially in the morning and late-afternoon gridlocks this knowledge and skills become central to their work and allow the driver to find routes through spaces that seem to preclude any other form of mobility. If seen from a car or a bus the street looks blocked; from atop a motorbike small meandering highways become visible in this metal maze. As cars slowly move, trying in vain to shift to another lane, these paths rapidly emerge and disappear, open and close, framed by rearview mirrors and tail lights. In these morphing interstitial spaces motorcycle taxis find their ideal habitat, spaces of flow invisible and impervious to any other mechanical technology of mobility. Squeezed in these interstices, the drivers see a path and a shortcut when most people see a dead end.

Eyes glued to the street and body crooked to the bike, the motorcycle drivers read these movements and emerging spaces, constantly looking for a path that will open up and guessing which one will close next. The city, atop a bike, becomes a moving entity, an ever-changing maze of vehicles, traffic lights, road signs and traffic rules that can, at times, be ignored or manipulated to forge a path. When driving a motorbike in traffic the street is in front of you, ready to be taken. That street, however, is often blocked, clogged, occupied. New paths, therefore, need to be continuously found, on the spot, in order to progress. A mile ahead may take you through a back road with just enough space to squeeze ahead, against the regular flow of traffic, or through a parking lot that links back into the street. These detours become a source of wealth for

the drivers as their income is directly proportional to their ability to deliver clients faster, so to pick new ones from the station sooner. This form of meandering mobility, however, has not just economic effects. The detour, a word dear to the situationists (Debord and situationniste 1970) and to Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 1953) , becomes also a form of life, a modality of engagement with the city that orients their mobility in its phenomenological, discursive, and political-economic dimensions.

Such mobility, however, follow different configurations that the pedestrian meandering presented in De Certeau's famous essay "*Walking the city*" (de Certeau 1984). In this often quoted text, De Certeau starts from atop the World Trade Center in New York. Away from the roar of traffic the city appears to him as a panoramic text, open to reading because "removed from the obscure interlacings of everyday behavior" (de Certeau 1984: 102). On the ground, he notices, a different kind of activity is engaged by millions of walkers:

> *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the cursives and strokes of an urban 'text' they write without reading. […] The paths that interconnect in this network, strange poems of which each body is an element down by and among many others, elude being read. […] Such spatial practices refer to a specific form of *operations* (ways of doing); they reflect 'another spatiality' (an anthropological, *poietik* and mystical spatial experiment); they send us to an opaque, blind domain of the inhabited city, or to a *transhuman city*, one that insinuates itself into the clear text of the planned, readable city. (de Certeau 1984: 102-3)

Focusing on parallelism between walking and speech acts, de Certeau sees the city—both the planned city and the inhabited city—as a text, a text composed by the act of planning and walking. Such reading, however, is problematic in at least two ways and does not help us understand the phenomenology of riding the city.

 First, as Henri Lefebvre has sensed without fully developing this intuition, "a book signifies, whereas towns and rural areas 'are' what they signify" (Lefebvre 2008, Vol I: 233). In other words, if the materiality of a text becomes a form, which signify something other than itself, the materiality of the city is both its signifiers and signified. A text is present in front of us, outside from us, and therefore its existence in our lives as well as our *presence in it* is structured by our *presence to it* (we can always close a book and walk away). Physical space, however, is around us and structures our presence in the world as well as ourselves. Equating cities to text, therefore, fail to account for this central difference and to understand the material nature of

semiotic analysis. Second, as Solnit has argued, De Certeau's analysis "suggests a frightening possibility: that if the city is a language spoken by walkers, then a post-pedestrian city not only has fallen silent but risks becoming a dead language, one whose colloquial phrases, jokes, and curses will vanish, even if its formal grammar survives" (Solnit 2000: 213). Such alarmist tones, as Thrift has showed, "may be missing other languages which also have something to say" (Thrift 2004: 44). From there he continues:

> That is particularly the case if we are willing to travel off the path of language as the only form of communication (or at least models of language as the only means of framing that communication) and understand driving (and passengering) as both profoundly embodied and sensuous experiences, though of a particular kind, which 'requires and occasions a metaphysical merger, an intertwining of the identities of the driver and car that generates a distinctive ontology in the form of a person-thing, a humanized car or, alternatively, an automobilized person' (Katz, 2000: 33) in which the identity of person and car kinaesthetically intertwine. (Thrift 2004: 46)

If we accept to take this route and question the drivers' experience of riding the city as a "profoundly embodied sensuous experience" that entails a fusion between drivers and bike, than this form of engagement with the city may have much to say on the contemporary urban condition. The motorcycles' meandering yet mediated mobility, with its risks and failures, its tentative nature, and ever-failing attempts to control them provides a different narrative of urban experience, a narrative more consistent with cities like Bangkok that have not been planned by a centralize demiurge who organized the city and retain the institutional potency to provide solutions to its dwellers' everyday problems.

This alternative narrative is uttered in ways that profoundly differs from that of walking the city presented by de Certeau and that are dominant in cities like Bangkok, made un-walkable by their smoggy air and tropical heat. These cities invite an interaction between machine and human body which is not present in walking and that de Certeau condemned in his essay on train riding as a form of incarceration and distance (de Certeau 1984). Atop a bike, on the contrary, this interaction creates a heightened sensitivity to the relation among body, machine, the terrain, and the city around them. Such closeness experienced while riding has been masterfully described by the British novelist John Berger.

> Except for the protective gear you're wearing, there's nothing between you and the rest and the world. The air and the wind press directly on you. You are *in* the space through which

you are travelling. There is no vessel around you. But also, because you are on two wheels and not four, you are much closer to the ground. By closer I mean more intimate with the surface of the road, for instance. You are conscious of all its possible variations, whether it offers grip or is smooth, whether it's new or used, wet, damp or dry, where there's mud or gravel, where it's painted white (painted surface is always more slippery), where there's metal, where the wind blows dust, where ruts are being worn—all the while you are aware of the hold of the tyres or their lack of it on the varying surfaces, and you drive accordingly. (Berger 1991: 194-5)

In this paradoxical tension between mechanical mediation and heightened consciousness of one's surroundings lies one of the main phenomenological features of riding a motorbike: an act that entails both material and communicative components; an act that "is never a merely verbal operation but is embedded in material practices" (Laclau 2005). Riding on top of a machine in a city ridden by traffic, as the motorcycle taxi drivers do every day, gives a particular form to this act, which marks another pivotal difference between walking the city and riding it.

If, as Naor Ben-Yehoyada has shown (Ben-Yehoyada 2011), for de Certeau's walking the city resembles the performative linguistic act described by J.L. Austin (Austin 1962), riding the city—and the channels created through it—lacks the linear and predictable nature of Austin's performative acts. Riding winds, diverges, reinstates, deviates and swerves, making the felicitousness of such navigation less subjected to a series of discernable criteria and requisites. Riding retains a wandering mode, a tentative and always incomplete nature. In this sense the pragmatics of riding resemble less the one described by Austin, and taken up by de Certeau, and more the path-seeking and tentative pragmatics presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein and adopted by Tim Ingold in his work on way finding (Ingold 2000). As the Austrian philosopher showed, "we make detours, we go by side roads. We see the straight highway before us, but of course we cannot use it because is permanently closed" (Wittgenstein 1953: 25). Similar detours, as I have shown in the prologue, organize the drivers' phatic labor in the city, an engagement that always creates channels by *going by side roads*. Through these detours and a mastery over side roads when the highway in front of them, clogged by traffic, is closed, the drivers find their strength and relevance for the city as channels makers.[13] Although constantly

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[13] In this sense riding the city and producing channels through it, as experienced by motorcycle taxi drivers, resembles Wittgenstein's language-games, which lack the predictability and ontological reality of Austin's pragmatics. Language-game, he showed, "is so to say something unpredictable. I mean; it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there--like our life" (Wittgenstein, et al. 1969: 559). Equally the drivers' engagement with the city is not based on a pre-existing reasoning or logos, but

confronted with new and emerging barriers and dead-ends that are the product of urban activities, purposes, and contexts they retain the ability to traverse them. To these barriers the drivers respond by constantly and contextually devising new activities and discovering new paths, which solidify over time into 'beaten tracks' and established routes.

Sensuous Riding: Freedom and Danger

This ability to create new spaces and routes, however, is not just predicated upon mental calculations but rather rooted in bodily sensuous experiences that alert the body to its relations to the bike and the terrain upon which it is moving. A phenomenology of "riding the city," therefore, needs to explore this bodily attunement to the space traversed as well as its sensual dimensions. As Philip Pinch and Suzanne Reimer have argued,

> motorcycles because of their speed, acceleration and regulations relating to road use, are involved in driving manoeuvres and strategies of negotiation with cars across all highway landscapes, from congested cities to main roads and motorways. Consequently, motorcyclist practices, such as queue jumping, filtering between slow moving or stationary traffic and lane splitting fast moving traffic, can be perceived by car drivers to be particularly transgressive acts (Taylor and Marquez 2000)[which] evoke feelings of s*chadenfreude*, freedom and liberation. (Pinch 2010: 7)

Since their diffusion as a mass commodity, in fact, motorcycles have been presented as objects of transgression that provide freedom through speed, freedom available to workers at a moderate price.[14] Such

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rather is centered around constantly shifting and dynamic "forms of life," in which their practical reasoning become a form of "finding one's way" through the urban reality.

[14] Maxwell analyzing the diffusion of motorbikes in 1960s and 1970s America showed that, "in the 60s, the motorcycle was cast as an object for escaping society, not confronting it. […] The older cyclists and movies created a cultural image that the motorcycle was an object with which to express individuality, freedom, and rebellion […] Honda, more than any other company, played an instrumental role in channeling the image of the motorcycle away from the hipster to the factory worker and office employee. […]But while it associated itself with respectability ("You Meet the Nicest People on Hondas"), Honda made no effort to conceal the traditional forbidden and freedom image of the motorcycle" (Maxwell 1989: 18). Similar dynamics occurred in Thailand—again with Honda being a main proponent of the equivalence between motorcycles and freedom.

vision colors the representation of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok as masculine riders,[15] skillfully dominating the speed and dangers of riding through traffic, flirting with death on a battered bike. Danger and risks, in this sense, provide a counterpoint to freedom experienced atop a bike, a counterpoint which simultaneously strengthen its transgressive nature and potentially mine its enjoyment. Such transgressive acts of path-seeking are in fact constantly confronted by the all too real possibility of a failure or an accident, of injury or death, both for the driver and for his passengers. Danger and freedom, often seen as two connected constructs,[16] become continuous experiential realities for the drivers and color their self-representation. On one side, as Hong described to me many times, speeding through traffic and taking over cars, cutting through traffic and seeing wealthier travelers stuck in their cars, provides the drivers with a sense of freedom and of self-worth. On the other, this freedom always carries with it the possibility of accidents. This dichotomy is central to the drivers' experiences and drivers try to minimize the indeterminacy of this dualism with technical skill, attentive care towards their work, and through magic, using amulets or magic tattoos to protect themselves from accidents and take control over the potentially deadly contingencies of their job.[17]

Adun, a handsome driver in his forties, dark skinned and with a broad smile that ripples against meaty cheekbones almost contradicting his deep laconic eyes, often told stories about his accidents and how the small object hanging from his neck saved his life:

> My first accident wasn't too bad. I crashed with the car, but my hand was still holding the motorcycle, when I was down on the pavement. I got hurt just a little, my leg crashed with the handle of my motorcycle.
>
> Did you have any amulets with you?
>
> Yes, this is my belief. I wear them every day. Buddhists believe in Buddha amulets. I think they saved my life twice.
>
> How did they save your life?

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[15] As Halnon and Cohen have explored "lower-class men have sought alternative means of status enhancement" by "mastering a wild, screaming motorcycle." In this sense, they see bike riding as a mean through which working-class masculinity is reinforced (Halnon and Cohen 2006).

[16] For an extensive treatment of the ambivalent way in which speed, as a cultural and social construct, operates in relation to danger see (Tomlinson 2007).

[17] On the use of amulets among northeastern population see (Tambiah 1984).

Again it is my belief. I had two big accidents. The second one was really bad. The incident took place while I was driving in Korat at 180 km/hr. A car changed lanes and I crashed. I did a 360 flip. I had no passenger. I was on my way to my home town. I flipped over the car and slide for 20 meters. My wind jacket was torn. I thought either my leg or my arm must have broken. But no, I held up my motorcycle, and rode back home. I really respect amulets. Our job is dangerous. We may even ride well and carefully but sometimes the other side doesn't ride well, the accident can happen. It is not only us alone; it has to do with the other party as well. Sometime being a careful driver is not enough; it does not depend on you.

Even if drivers like Adun take every possible measure, technical and magical, to limit their risks, riding the city remains a dangerous game, and not just for accidents. Their very presence at street corners, immersed in the chemical and sonic pollution of a city as well as their posture takes a toll on drivers' bodies and well-being. Drivers condensed this sentiment into a well-worn phrase, "motorcycle taxi drivers die young but leave free" (*mōtōsai rap čhāng tāi reo tā̄ mī chīwit `itsara*). In this sense, freedom and danger both shape their relation to the city and to specific conditions of labor that, in turn, shape their bodies, well-being, and perceptions. This combination of freedom and danger—both in terms of physical and economic insecurity—has deep sensual implications, not just the driver but also his passengers and simultaneously ties together and pulls them apart.

The bond of physical proximity between the driver and the passenger, for instance, offers freedom from the alienation and *anomie* of urban life, as well as from the blockages of urban mobility on other means of transport, by putting them close to each other and immersing them in the thick of the city, its shortcuts, and traffic mazes. Yet, at the same time, this freedom always runs the risk of ending against a car or on the street pavement and pulls drivers and passengers apart, as the bonds of physical proximity established on the bike is experienced as a material and social danger.[18] Nowhere is this more evident that in the embodied, and gendered, practices of riding. Women passengers, in fact, are supposed to ride on motorcycle taxis seated with legs on one side, crossed one on top of the other and gracefully rested on the exhaustion tube. Such a posture, passively learned from other women passengers and actively discussed among them, it is one way in which the proximity of a ride is mediated through a position that shows distance, both physical and inter-personal. It is just for lovers and close friends, in fact, to ride astride, one behind the other. Even male

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[18] This is especially true when the passengers are women, as urban dwellers recount stories of passengers being sexually assaulted or harassed.

passengers, to whom is socially permitted to ride astride, negotiate the discomfort of proximity by holding on to the tail of the bike, and not to the driver in front of them. The complexity of the postures devised to resolve the tension inscribed in the driver/passenger relation, give us a sense of the duplicity of "freedom of movement" as experienced on a motorcycle taxi.

The Motorcycle Gangstress, a short story penned by nationally re-known author Chamaiporn Saengkrachang,[19] offers a striking rendition of the complex physical and social dimension of this freedom and its connection to unruliness, defiance of social norms, danger, and speed. The plot is quite simple. Glangjai, a middle class woman, after years of looking down on motorcycle taxi drivers as loud, dirty, and dangerous presences in the street gives in to the growing traffic in her soi and boards one. Her first ride expresses all the complexity of riding on motorcycle taxis: on a side, she does know how to sit, how to tuck her long skirt, and how to react to the dangerous speed of the ride; on the other, a strange excitement conquers her, as she feels carried away with the speed. Her first reaction is fear and a promise to herself to never risk her life on a bike again. Soon however she find herself longing for the frightening yet exciting experience of speeding through traffic, inches away from cars and buses. While her middle-class co-workers and husband ridicule her and try to dissuade her from boarding such a dangerous and "low" form of transportation, the next time she is late for a meeting and stuck in traffic in a bus she jumps on a bike and quickly makes her way to the destinations. This makes her realize that her middle-class status has blocked her in traffic, unable to afford upper-class transportation yet avoiding the dangerous yet effective mobility of motorcycle taxis. Glangjai decides to not make the same mistake again.

> All of a sudden, a motorcycle taxi driver wearing a bright orange vest wove through the traffic and stopped in front of their taxi. The driver was about to squeeze his motorcycle in the space between two cars when Glangjai grabbed a twenty baht bill, thrust it at the taxi driver, and dashed out of the car. 'To Sanam Luang, on the Thammasat Side!' she said, pulling herself up onto the motorcycle as she had before. (Boccuzzi 2012)

On top of this bike Glangjai realizes the "terrifying stasis that underlies middle class life—that of being pinned down, fixed into categories, and ruled by social conventions" (Boccuzzi 2012: 98). Glangjai is now definitely addicted to the speed and freedom of motorcycle taxis. In the final scene she boards a bike,

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[19] I thank Elle Bocuzzi for pointing out to me this short story and for here fascinating analysis of it in her book on migration and literature in Thailand (Boccuzzi 2012).

insisting to dress in a long skirt, symbol of her middle-class status, and holding an umbrella to cover her skin from the sun. Soon, however, the driver loses balance and they crash. Worried that she has been hurt the driver brings her home. Two hours later she emerges again from her house, this time fitted in clothes more suitable to ride a bike. Limping, she catches a motorcycle taxi to the hospital.

This story, the humorous tale of a middle-class woman who gets allured by the speed and freedom of movement on a motorcycle taxi, questions her class status and physical composure, and accepts the risk of an accident, condenses the tensions inscribed into the phenomenology of riding the city with its speed and dangerous freedom. Not every aspect of the drivers' operations in the city, however, is as exciting and nerve-racking as their fast zigzagging through traffic. Their presence, in fact, is not predicated exclusively upon such swift slalom through traffic but also upon long hours of waiting and sitting at their stations.

Waiting and boredom

Until now I have focused on the drivers' movement and its complex phenomenology of attempt, failed routes, and convoluted paths. This meandering progression positions them as phatic laborers and mediators of commodities and bodies. Their double role as phatic laborers and mediators, however, does not only play out in movement. Even if the drivers deliver people and objects around the city in a capacity unmatched in volume, presence, and spatial precision by any other transportation system, mobility is not their only form of engagement, especially at the smaller scale of their district. Sitting at street corners the drivers become privileged sources of local knowledge about territory, relevant landmarks, and shops in the area where they operate, but also provide a constant presence in the neighborhood. From good food to directions, from friend's houses to shortcuts, from a hand to move furniture to someone to keep an eye on their houses while they are gone, city dwellers turn to them whenever they need something at their doorsteps. As a consequence, a complex relation between movement and stasis orients the drivers' phatic labor in their specific urban neighborhoods, creating channels that connect and weave together local dwellers, shops owners, street-vendors, office workers, and police officers. Clearly, the movement of people, goods and

documents between all of these actors is central for the creation of these channels. Yet, for the drivers' presence in the local district, movement becomes less important and stasis, waiting, and boredom become forms of engagement as important as their flow, if less clearly oriented and intentional.

The drivers' phatic labor, as other forms of phatic function (Jakobson and Rudy 1962)—such as unconsciously nodding as a person speaks and humming "yes, yes" during a phone call—do not happen only through directed and pointed action, such as mobilizing commodities and people across the urban landscape from A to B. On the contrary, most of the times these actions occur with no specific goal in mind. In this sense, for the drivers, waiting becomes a skill, a virtue, and a form of engagement in the social life of the neighborhood, as important to the creation of its channels as their roles as movers of its dwellers and objects. This waiting—much like the productive boredom analyzed by Michael Herzfeld in his study of Cretan artisans (Herzfeld 2004)—is fecund with expectations and interactions, as well as with learning and discussions. If for the artisan's apprentice described by Herzfeld waiting became a time for "stealing with the eyes" the craftsman's skills, for the drivers waiting is a time for "mapping with the eyes" the neighborhood around them, as well as larger publics. Given the rhythm of the drivers' life on the side-walks, for instance, reading newspapers and magazines, as well as chatting with colleagues, play a central role in their daily life. This configures them, in relation to other service workers, as well-informed and eager readers of anything that comes into their hands and therefore often closely involved in the "public" that these newspapers create, and often active and vocal political commentators. While their political participation to these larger publics will be analyzed in the second part of this dissertation, for now I want to focus on another aspect of their apparently dead time at their station, one which has to do with the creation of channels through which social relations between the drivers, local state officials, street workers, and dwellers are forged and sustained.

As the life of the street unravels in front of their bored yet vigilant eyes, the drivers engage in a sociality of proximity central to their operations and significance for the city. It is physical presence and boredom, not just speed and movement that transforms the drivers into central characters in the theater of life at a street corner. A witty remark to a good-looking woman who works nearby, a short chat with the older

man who stops every time he comes home from his afternoon walk, a hand to a vendor pushing the cart along the road, and a quick repair for an older woman in the neighborhood: through these repeated everyday interactions the drivers preserve and create channels through which they attempt to enable their physical, social, and economic mobility. Such attempts to transform physical mobility and stasis into other forms of mobility are, however, a gamble,[20] one which can project the drivers into another life or keep them stuck in their place.

Converting forms of mobilities: Kong, Boon, and Adun.

Kong is a middle-aged driver who operates in Bang Sue district, inside one of the many new developments (*mū bān mai*) mushrooming at the outskirt of Bangkok. Hidden away from the main road and framed by a cement arch that delimits its border, the neighborhood preserves the enclosed feeling of older urban communities shaded by mango trees. A few steps beyond the arch, however, open the view to two rows of modern concrete townhouses with adjacent garages, clustered around an L-shaped dead-end road. Right where the street bends, underneath a wooden gazebo, sits a group of five drivers, the only not private means of transportation available in the neighborhood. While their secluded location and few potential costumers limit trips with passengers to sporadic short rides to the main road, Kong and the other drivers make a good income, up to 1000 baht (30$) in a day, by delivering documents and paying bills for the middle-class residents. Even more important, and potentially remunerative, during their waiting time they create and sustain channels with local dwellers that can open unexpected routes of social and economic mobility.

The first time I visited Kong, he was sitting on his bike drinking a beer that an older woman in the neighborhood had offered to the *win* to thank them for watching her house while she was away, visiting her son and grandchildren in the northern city of Chiang Mai. As we start chatting, Kong's astute eyes, framed into an aging chubby face, kept looking away from me, checking on two local children who biked on the road

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[20] Gambling in this sense provided a model for the relation between risk-taking and masculinity among the drivers. For a treatment of their interplay in gambling culture see (Malaby 2003).

beside us to make sure they did not get into the main road, few meters away. It was clear, since this meeting, that Kong was immersed into a bundle of daily interactions predicated upon his reliable and consistent presence at the corner, which guaranteed him regular offerings of food and drinks—such as the beer we shared—as well as more significant and empowering forms of access, such as better jobs perspectives for his family, financing opportunities, and powerful patronage.

This mesh of social relations, however, was not built overnight but rather the product of sustained and long-term interactions that occurred mostly in the long waiting time between a ride and another. It was not by chance, after all, that drivers who operate in larger and more crowded roads could rarely claim the same immersion in the life of their neighborhood. Kong, on the contrary, has established his presence as a mediator of local dwellers' relations with post offices, utilities companies, and banks as well as an informal local security guard over his ten years of operations in the area. As a result of the relations of reciprocal trust that he has been able to build with local dwellers a continuous flow of money, bills, and checks traveled on his wheels in and out of the community. "They see me here every day. I saw their kids being born, their parents die. We are a community and we help each other. If they need something they know they can find me here, sitting on my bike. I help the neighbor take care of their gardens; I look after their houses, or give a hand to move furniture. They know they can trust me. Sometime they even trust me more than I would like" Kong told me during my first visit.

Puzzled by his allusion to this excessive trust and attracted to the calm of his neighborhood, I kept coming back to see Kong throughout my fieldwork, whenever I needed a rest from the chaos of the city and wanted to drink with him. During these visits I saw him managing the complex sociality of proximity that defined its daily presence and social standing in the neighborhood. One day, passing by, I stopped at his station but Kong was not there. The other drivers directed me to a small apartment in a crumbling construction building right outside the arch. Kong was sitting outside with a group of friends, without his vest and visibly drunk. "What happened?" I asked. "I am celebrating; my daughter has been admitted into a private school of accountancy. We fought but now finally she can have a better future, not like her father

working all day in the street." He laughed. "Does she have a scholarship?" I inquired, curious to how he could afford the school tuitions. "No, Mr. Pong will pay." He said raising his chin toward the biggest house in the neighborhood, at the end of the road.

Kong had talked to me before about Pong and their shady business deal. After years of using Kong to deliver documents around the city and keep an eye on his house when he left Pong, a wealthy businessmen involved in construction, had started to ask him to deliver envelopes with money around the city, in exchange for a generous fee. Over time, the amounts inside those envelopes grew from few thousand baht to hundreds of thousands, well beyond Kong's monthly and, at times, even yearly income. Kong diligently carried the money to their destinations without asking questions about their provenience and keeping to himself his fear of being caught by local police or by criminals with these piles of cash. "At the beginning, I was so scared when I had to carry this money." He told me. "What if I get attacked? I thought all the time. What if I get stopped? I used to tuck the envelope inside my pants, on the back and, cover it with my shirt and vest, then I found a better method. I parked my motorbike inside Mr. Pong's garage and unscrewed the front part of my scooter. I put the money in and then close everything so no one knows that I have money and where the money is."

As Kong's deliveries continued without glitches, the sums kept growing to a one-time peak of three million baht (100,000 $). "I was so scared," he recounts. "I had never seen so much money. I had no idea where to put them, the whole bike was full of money, in the front, in the back, behind the lights, I was a moving bank." He laughs. As an effect of this sustained relation, Kong and Mr. Pong created an increasing tight circuit of reciprocal favors in which the former became a mediator for the businessmen, as well as a handy-man in his house while the latter sponsored Kong son's ordination ceremony. This exchange of favors solidified over the years and culminated the day before. Kong's daughter had taken the admission exam to a local private accountant school and passed it, leaving him to find money to fulfill her dreams and activate new forms of social mobility for his family. During a chat with Mr. Pong outside his house, Kong had mentioned

his financial conundrum and the businessman had offered to pay his daughter's tuitions, opening up a new channel for social and economic mobility.

Through his sustained and regular presence in the neighborhood, the establishment of reciprocal trust and a circuit of favors, Kong was able not only to create new channels through which Pong's cash traveled around the city in exchange for a payment but also channels between him and the businessmen that allowed his daughter to enter a prestigious and expensive college in Bangkok, a school well beyond Kong's financial reach. He was able, in other words, to convert the presence in the neighborhood, both in terms of movement and stasis, into other forms of economic and social mobility for his family. Being able to navigate successfully the sociality of proximity in his neighborhood allowed Kong to transform repeated interactions into more concrete and empowering forms of access as well as establishing unexpected forms of social mobility that could be set in motion through his phatic labor.

A similar successful transformation of forms of mobility was performed by Boon, another driver who operated inly a small soi along Sukhumvit Road, which houses a mix of office workers, local elites, and expatriates. In the neighborhood Boon was renowned as a reckless driver, ideal if you had to get to your destination in a record time but otherwise to be avoided. Such a taste for speed was inscribed into his upper-body, scarred by the signs of multiple accidents, the most serious of which shattered his forearm's bones and left his right arm slightly bent, unable to distend fully. Speed atop a bike, however, was not Boon's only celerity. His fast tongue and taste for local gossip was another trait which made him a mediator of information in the neighborhood.

In March of 2010, right after the end of the school year, the story of the son of a local wealthy family was on everybody's lips. The boy, the talk on the street went, failed his primary school final exams and, in so doing, jeopardized his chances for a good education. The gossip, mixed with the sadistic pleasure of seeing a well-to-do family put to shame, spread like wildfire around the soi and arrived to Boon's ears. Waiting at his station, he listened carefully to this story and the half-muttered jokes that the local street-vendors repeated to each other every time the kid's parents drove past them. Soon Boon became himself a

teller of this story to other local residents, who stopped to chat with him on their way home, as he sat at the street corner waiting for clients. One of them, who often used Boon as a messenger, told him that he knew a school headmaster who could—for an appropriate remuneration—find a way to get the kid into a good school, regardless of his academic results. After a few days of reflection, Boon decided to pay a visit to the family and offer his services as go-between to put the family in contact with the headmaster. After they worked out a deal, which probably entailed a conspicuous bribe, Boon received a generous fee of 30,000 baht that he invested to finish the ground floor of his house back in the village, solidifying his local status as a successful urban migrant.

Boon's social mobility, in other words, was enhanced through a dense mesh of social relations with local street vendors and dwellers that he established over time and allowed for the creation of channels for social and economic mobility, both for him and for the young boy. Through them the child entered a good school and Boon created a debt of gratitude toward him, as well as an actual payment, which in turn solidified his position in the neighborhood, and his economic and social standing in the village. In this sense, the phenomenological dimension of Boon's labor in the city, made of movement and stasis, allowed him to transform his political-economic standing, both in the city and the countryside.

Through a complex relation between movement and stasis in their neighborhoods and an ability to create new channels as well as to move along existing ones, both Boon and Kong were able to transform and activate social relationships that, in turn, allowed for multiple forms of economic and social mobility. As in Bourdieu's theorization of the convertibility of economic, social, and cultural capitals (Bourdieu 1986), the drivers attempt to convert different forms of mobility—physical, social, and economic—one into the other. Such conversions are possible precisely because these different forms of mobility retain some similarities that allow for their exchange. As Kauffman, Bergman and Joye argued, referring to the correspondences between physical and social mobility:

> First, both forms of mobility are concerned with structural change and social transformation. Second, both are concerned with preconditions and consequences of movement; spatial mobility includes transport and communication systems as reactants to, or moderators of,

time and space, while social mobility proposes reciprocities between social background, institutional arrangements, inheritance and achievement. Third, both emphasize the importance of space (social vs. geographic) and time (temporal effects on social position and structure vs. speed of displacement of goods, information and people). (Kaufmann, et al. 2004: 748)

These parallelisms, I argue, can be expanded also to economic mobility that, in the same way, is concerned with structural transformations, is an effect of movement (of capitals and resources), and operates through a displacement of capitals, commodities, and labor over time and space. The exchanges of economic, social, and physical mobility, therefore, as Bourdieu has argued for capitals, can occur but "in contrast to the cynical but also economical transparency of economic exchange, in which equivalents change hands in the same instant, […] presupposes misrecognition, in other words, a form of faith and of bad faith (in the sense of self-deception), presupposes a much more subtle economy of time" (Bourdieu 1986: 54). This attunement to an economy of time, both in their physical and social mobility, makes the drivers' attempts to convert mobilities a gamble that requires patience and endurance

In other words, the phenomenology of the drivers' everyday labor—with its long waits at the street corner and speed of movement through the city traffic—requires them to adjust to urban rhythms in order to become mediators of movement in their neighborhood as well as reliable presence and trusted helpers. While adapting rhythms and striking a balance between movement and stasis insure their success as drivers, it does not, however, guarantee the success of their conversions of forms of mobility. This secondary mobility, on the contrary, requires a longer game, one that does not play out in the daily routines of rides but over years, in the time between rides. As we saw, Kong created the connections that allowed for his daughter to enter the private school over years of long waiting times at the neighborhood during which he established a close relation to Mr. Pong. Similarly Boon heard about the kid's difficulty and the headmaster through connections built over years of services in the neighborhood. The conversion of mobilities, in other words, happened over a much longer temporality in which particular relations, such as the one between Kong and Mr. Pong, are developed, nurtured, and solidified, before they can allow for the transformation of physical mobility into

more empowering forms of economic or social mobility. Such transformation, as Bourdieu has argued in the case of capitals:

> presupposes a specific labor, i.e., an apparently gratuitous expenditure of time, attention, care, concern, which, as is seen in the endeavor to personalize a gift, has the effect of transfiguring the purely monetary import of the exchange and, by the same token, the very meaning of the exchange. From a narrowly economic standpoint, this effort is bound to be seen as pure wastage, but in the terms of the logic of social exchanges, it is a solid investment, the profits of which will appear. (Bourdieu 1986: 54)

As Bourdieu acknowledged, however, not every investment is successful. Similarly, not every driver's navigation is as felicitous as Boon's and Kong's in securing strong connections and converting forms of mobility. Similarly to their physical movement, other forms of mobility are also ridden with risks and contingencies, less concerned with accidents and more dealing with the uncertainty of the future. In most cases, in fact, being able to traverse social and physical spaces, and to spend time in them, does not create new paths and mobilities but rather reveals the contingencies and fragilities of the drivers' attempts. Adun, whose life had been saved by his amulets, did not have the same protection from the contingencies of daily life in his neighborhood.

Adun's daughter, Nam, was at the time of my fieldwork finishing school in the countryside and hoped, and increasingly expected, to move to Bangkok after graduation. Her father's plans, however, were not to see his daughter swell the ranks of the urban working class but rather to find a way to get her into Saint Louis College, a prestigious school nearby his station, where she could study as a nurse. Adun's predilection for this college was not only derived from its reputation but also from personal channels that he had built over time with an older French priest who had been appointed to the school's church a decade before, as a form of retirement from his previous three decades of missionary life in remotes parts of northern Thailand. Carrying local clients to the church or the adjacent school, Adun had met the priest multiple times and started to run errands for him. Over time a solid friendship developed, a friendship that played into inter-generational relations and made Adun proud of displaying care for the elder priest, to whom he referred as *phọ̄*, father. "He reminds me of my father," Adun told me one time. "You know we respect elders here in

Thailand so I take care of him." Especially since the priest's health had taken a turn for the worst, Adun visited him every day, spent some time with him, and brought him some groceries that the congregation would not provide, such as cigarettes and a regular bottle of Cointreau, the expensive French orange-flavored liqueur for which Adun developed a taste. These visits, dense with care, attention, and concern, became a regular part of the two men's daily routines, slow hours in which Adun would take down his vest and sit at the priest's bedside. Over time, this sustained relation started to be envisioned by Adun as a potential channel for the realization of his dreams for Nam's physical and economic mobility. In their conversations he increasingly talked about her, her aspirations, and hopes. Slowly the priest became sympathetic to Adun's struggles and eventually promised to take care of her, once she would be done with school. For the biggest part of my fieldwork this seemed a successful story of Adun's ability to convert forms of mobility and provide new access to his older daughter, who was waiting in the village to move to Bangkok and get on to her aspiration as a urban dweller. Few weeks before I left Thailand at the end of 2011, however, the old priest unexpectedly died, leaving nothing written about his promises to Adun and revealing the fragility and contingency of his aspirations. Adun never spoke to me again about the priest's promises or bad-mouthed him for empty promises but it was clear that this occurrence set him years back in his search of a better future for his daughter and meanwhile forced him in the to send her to a high-school in the district capital instead of a cushy private nursing school in Bangkok.

As this failure reveals, the drivers' everyday lives, either in movement or in stasis, are ridden with danger and contingencies, threats to their spatial, social, and economic mobilities that amulets are not always able to control. These mobilities are constantly challenged by their own fragilities, the same fragility I showed in Bangkok's urban configuration and in the drivers' movements across the city. Like the drivers' lives, constantly balanced on few inches of rubbers tires and prone to accidents, their aspirations require adjustment to an economy of time and the establishment of sustained relations that can disappear in a moment, carried away from an external occurrence, a wrong move, or a death.

Adun: a life in between worlds

In this chapter I have analyzed the drivers' role in the city using the concept of phatic labor. I showed what types of communicative, social, and economic channels are constituted through this labor and analyzed the phenomenology of the drivers' navigations, their sensual components and risks. Moreover, I explored their attempts to transform them into path for social and economic mobility. Most of this analysis, however, has used Bangkok as the scale of operations. Yet the drivers' phatic labor is not limited to Bangkok, quite the contrary. Many of them, in fact, decided to take up this occupation precisely because it allowed them to go back to their provinces regularly, without having to request vacations or negotiate payments. Adun's personal history is emblematic of this professional decision and double life.

Born in a small village in Udon province, a few miles away from the Laotian border, he arrived for the first time in Bangkok in 1979, at the age of 15—or, as he punctuates time, "as soon as I got my ID." He came to the city and spent his first month walking to his job in a small shoe shop because he did not know how to jump onto a bus that stopped only for few seconds in front of his door—he told me one day, sitting on his newly purchased Honda. He was paid 50 Baht a week.[21] As soon as he accumulated a few hundred baht he went back to the village, home-sick. Soon desires for a stable income and a different life brought him back to Bangkok. He worked in jewelry-polishing, construction, and furniture-making, only to land finally in a small chemical factory. In his seasonal trips back to his village he got married, had children, but never managed to move his family to Bangkok, owing to the high material and emotional costs of raising his kids away from land, family, and the village school.

After a few years in Bangkok, Adun got to know a group of motorcycle taxis from his province operating close to his factory. Saving up a little money he bought a battered motorcycle,[22] and started to work

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[21] The official minimum wage in 1979 was of 45 baht per day.

[22] The drivers ride a variety of motorcycles and scoters, with the latter dominating the business given their manageability in traffic. The majority of them are of Japanese brands, mostly Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki. Given the local production of bikes as we saw in Chapter One, the costs remain relatively affordable. About a month of income as a driver –normally between 12000 (400$) and 30000 (1000$) depending on locations –buys a second-hand bike, in a decent state.

with them as an after-hours driver. Soon Adun realized that this job offered him a renewed freedom.[23] He had no boss who ordered him around, a better income, and the opportunity to go back home, whenever he had the money to do so, without having to ask anyone or lose face with a refusal. It was not, however, until 1998, right after he lost his job as a result of the financial crisis, that Adun became a full-time motorcycle taxi driver. After some harsh years of economic stagnation, the new job allowed him to bring home a better salary and to go freely back to his village for rice plowing, sowing, transplanting and harvest. In the next chapter I explore one of these trips and analyze the phatic labor that Adun, as many other drivers, performs between Bangkok and his village. In these trips they create channels connecting the two realities, move commodities and desires through them, and reclaim their central roles in the economic and social life of rural families and villages, either as farmers or as financial backers, as sponsors for ceremonies or just as guests.[24]

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[23] A new body of scholarship is emerging in Vietnam on the relation between motorcycles as technologies of transportation and personal freedom among urban middle class (Sidel 2008; Truitt 2008). While profoundly relevant for my larger work, in Thailand motorbikes remain largely a working class commodity and therefore respond to different logics and dynamics.

[24] Interestingly the previous transportation providers in Bangkok, the *samlor* drivers studied by Robert Textor, had a similar regional composition, adopted a parallel language of freedom, and played similar multiple social roles in the life of the Thai countryside and its capital in the 1950s (Textor 1961).

Chapter 3: A Train Called Desire

It is getting dark. The sulfurous lights of the city fill the winter dusk and reflect, through the large entrance, on the pavement of the train station hall, through dozens of moving legs. The Italianate barrel vault roof reveals the hands of the architect Mario Tamagno, who designed the station at the turn of the twentieth century. Two blocks of plastic chairs, on both sides of the hall, overflow with people, mostly internal migrants taking advantage of the long weekend to visit their homes. The crowd is peppered with foreign travelers wearing big backpacks and Thai fisherman pants that none of the locals would wear in a public space. Above, on the balcony, wealthier travelers sit outside small restaurants and coffee shops serving western food and drinks, pastries and donuts. The smell of wheat dough mixes with that of grilled chicken downstairs.

As I step inside the station the crowd comes to a halt, called to a pause by the national anthem broadcasting from the station's speakers. It is 6 pm and the Thai nation-state synchronizes its citizens. Everybody stands still, head up, facing a framed portrait of King Chulalongkorn that overlooks the scene from a neoclassical arch connecting the hall to the tracks. A few tourists sit on the ground, puzzled by the sudden immobility, indifferent to the state's interpellation. "Hail the nation of Thailand, long last the victory, Hurrah" concludes the crackling broadcast, snapping everybody out of their stasis. I look around but there is no sign of Adun, with whom I am supposed to meet and travel back to his village. Conscious of the drivers' slow descent into alcoholic inebriation on Friday evenings, I begin to worry he will not show up. He calls me an hour and a half later. "I'm already in the train," he says with his thick northeastern accent. "I have kept a spot for you, come in."

The platform overflows with people. Sellers run up and down replenishing the travelers with food and drinks. Bags are passed on to hands sticking out of the trains' windows, behind which

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passengers take their seats, according to their tickets and class. I get into the carriage and walk down a narrow corridor surrounded by wooden benches covered by thin grey plastic stuffing. Adun sits, slightly bent, on a bench he reserved for us. He wears dark blue jeans and a clean black T-shirt, a small backpack and his omnipresent purple belt bag with his documents and a few thousand baht. "Already drunk," he smiles. He takes a small bottle of rice whiskey out of his backpack and passes it to me. "Get used to this," he tells me struggling to keep his eyes open. "No whiskey and soda at home. And no ice too. In the village, we are not developed yet (*yang mai phatthanā*)."

In every one of the dozens of trip I took back to drivers' villages the rhetoric of the city as a space of development and modernity as opposed to the village as the space of "not yet" dominated the conversations. Adun's inscription of development to a specific urban location and consequent reframing of other locales as spaces of "not yet," as that of many other drivers I traveled with, resonate with a long history of dominant episteme in Thailand, such as those of *phatthanā* and of *siwilai* that I analyzed in the first chapter. In the context of colonial relations, Dipesh Chakrabarty has analyzed the role of similar narratives—what he calls historicisms—in constructing modernity or capitalism as global phenomena that emerged in one place (Europe) and, over time, spread outward.[1] The Thai national discourse of development, here voiced by Adun, is but one of the many local adoptions of the same narrative, one that replaces Europe with some locally constructed center, in this case Bangkok. By organizing time, spaces, and economic relations into an imagined linear trajectory, this narrative frames Bangkok as the ultimate space of development, both personal and national, defined by its distance from the village, reframed as the quintessential space of backwardness, non-commodified relations, and tradition.[2]

To be clear, these depictions are pervasive cultural and political-economic constructions and not accurate description of economic and spatio-temporal realities. However, they do come to

structure the way in which the world is described, perceived, and in turn lived, making them into realities. Concretely, these constructions direct many of the drivers to move to the city, organize their lives there, and their relation to the villages from which they left. It is in this mobility, moreover, that these narratives get confirmed and reproduced. The rice whiskey Adun is handing me, for instance, become one sign of the reality of such distancing of the village in the realm of "not yet"—not yet developed to use his words. Even if these narratives come to organize economic, spatial, and temporal landscapes of Thailand, and the drivers' lives in them, however, they do so without resolving some of their deep tensions. On one side, in fact, they position the urban as a place of progress and development but, on the other, they also frame it as one of perdition and egoism. Similarly, the rural becomes an unexciting place of backwardness but also as pristine place of calm and relaxation, both *before* and *away* from the city and its urban modernity. These tensions reveal the political work performed by these narratives in justifying and reproducing a system of national uneven development. After all, the rhetoric of tradition and modernity is one of the most critical instruments of hierarchy, whether for colonial power or for contemporary nation-states.[3] In the case of Thailand, these narratives have sustained a regime of internal colonialism[4] that has shaped and still shapes the relation between Bangkok and its provinces, as well as the personal trajectories of millions of migrants from those provinces. Their power, in fact, does not only lies in reorganizing the economic and spatio-temporal continuum of the Thai nation but also in creating in the migrants a hailing for the present, imagined as urban, capitalist, and modern: a hailing that contribute to extract from the provinces its most productive human capital. For Adun, in fact, as for many other drivers, these narratives do not just restructure spatio-temporal sequences; they also create a thirst for new commodities, life-styles, and forms of participation which can only be quenched by directing personal trajectories toward the city.[5]

This chapter analyzes the tensions between these three elements: evolutionary narratives, personal trajectories, and new desires by exploring the drivers' conflictual and contradictory roles as, on one side, recipients of these imaginaries and the desires that they configures, and, on the other, as their mediators and diffusors across the rural landscape of Thailand. I expand the analysis of the drivers' phatic labor initiated in the previous chapter, both spatially and temporally, beyond the city and into the Thai countryside. In their trajectories between Bangkok and their villages, the drivers do not just produce and sustain the channels that connect these spaces, they also circulate and mediate commodities, life-styles, and imaginaries through and between them. In so doing, they contribute in making into realities economic and spatio-temporal narratives that frame Bangkok as a space of development, a space of a glamorous and exciting future, while posing the villages they migrate from, and by implication themselves, as backward. In this process, the drivers uphold and confirm the distancing of city and village, a distancing of which they become both re-producers and victims and which sclerotize urban bias against them and their own exclusion. In this sense, the drivers remain caught in this mesh of distinct temporalities that compel them to shift regularly from the pace of the city to the pace of the village and vice versa but never allow them to fully participate in any of the two. Stuck in this complex conundrum between spatio-temporal imaginaries and desires the drivers are constantly struggling to reconcile their position while participating in reproducing the conditions which keeps them torn between these two realities.

This dilemma will bring me to the second part of the chapter, in which I explore an opposite, yet equally dominant, economic and spatio-temporal imaginary among the drivers: one that positions the village as a space of return, the ultimate space of their personal futures. To this future, and the desires that it configures, the city operates as an interim space, a space only functional, both economically and in terms of status, to that return. In paving the way to their imagined move back to the village once they saved money, however, the drivers live with anxiety

their urban experience which comes to be seen as undermining their ability to get re-accustomed to life in the countryside and, potentially, threatening the viability of their imagined returns. This conundrum in which the drivers are often stuck—pulled between conflicting narratives, trajectories, and desires—orients this chapter as well as the the drivers' multiple forms of mobility, the channels created through them, and their roles in pre-figuring and diffusing desires for urban consumption and life-style. Such mobilities and desires, however, remain ridden with contradictions and contingencies that generate expectations for a different life while, at the same time, undermining their full realization and fulfillment.

A train named desire

We are back in Bangkok train station, waiting with Adun as other passengers fill the carriages. The train slowly moves out of Hualampong station, a few minutes after 8 pm. In the crowded car, people settled in, cradled by the rocking progression of the locomotive. Some people put luggage on the racks, some set up for the night, other pass around small food packages. A few curious people stare at us, puzzled by our odd pairing. As the train moves through the city, Adun loudly enumerates infrastructural projects started by the former Thaksin government and left unfinished since the military coup that removed him from power in 2006.

His opinionated tirades dispense criticisms to everyone: the Oxford-educated prime minister Abhisit Vejjajiva who does not even know how to grow rice; the numerous Bangkok governors who declared they would solve the traffic problem but let cars park everywhere; the local police officers who are paid by drivers' taxes yet constantly demand bribes to let them pick up passengers or to close an eye on his occupation of public land or on not wearing a helmet. "Bureaucrats, civil servants, they are the problem of this country," he says as he takes another long sip of whiskey.

"Their salaries are paid with our taxes and yet they treat us as if they were the owners. They order us around. They eat on our work. It is like Thaksin said, when we go into an office in the district or our province it should not be us to *wai* (salute with palms pressed together) the officers, it should be them who *wai* us.[6] We pay for their salaries, for their desks, and for their computers; we are the owners. Instead, Thai people always feel like we are asking them a favor and we need to be nice to them."

For Adun, as for many other drivers who still support the ousted Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra was the first national politician to reconfigure—during his premiership—the engagement between citizens and state officials, reversing established relations of power. While traditionally citizens had to approach bureaucrats with the attitude of a subject, Thaksin—adopting the capitalist language of clients and services rather than the democratic language of citizens and rights— advocated for an opposite dynamic, one in which the bureaucrats must address citizens-clients with respect and deference. This inversion, condensed in the idea of "I don't have to *wai* an official, is the official who has to *wai* me," stuck a chord with migrant workers like Adun, who in their lives, both in the countryside and in the city, experience every day the categorical oppression and indifference of state bureaucracy.[7] Adun frequently talked about the experiences of being sent away, invited to return in later occasions, and asked for money by bureaucrats both in the city and in his village. As a consequence, he—as many other drivers—saw in Thaksin's discourse a recognition of their struggles and an attempt to question this bureaucratic indifference, whether or not it actually succeeded in reorganizing the relation between bureaucrats and citizens.

As Adun continues with his alcohol-fueled invective, increasingly more rambling and blunt, the train moves through industrial compounds toward the ancient capital of Ayutthaya, before making its way east into pitch-black rice fields and bustling provincial cities of the Isan plateau. We quickly go through the first bottle of rice whiskey and our conversation increasingly follows

meandering routes. I give the empty bottle back to Adun and I see a Kentucky Fried Chicken box coming out of his bag. "What the hell is that?" I ask with a tone only reserved to conversations among friends. Adun suddenly revives. "This is all my kids want from Bangkok." "What?" I ask, puzzled. "Yeah, all they want from the city is KFC and pizza. They must have seen it on TV and they cannot shut up about it." "Isn't that just very expensive fried chicken?" I ask. "I know and I don't even think it is good. It is greasy, tasteless and costs me five times the price of a piece of normal fried chicken but they want this from the city so I buy it. I have no fucking idea why they want this."

These pieces of KFC chicken provide one small example of the drivers' roles as connectors and mediators not just in the city, but between Bangkok and the Thai countryside, enfolded within—to use the words of Henri Lefebvre[8]—a banal everyday object: a "modern" commodity whose experience and imagination traveled to Adun's kids through multiple circuits of media-produced, and parents-indulged, desires for consumption. Through these circuits fried chicken, a common food available at any corner in Thailand, has been rebranded—and re-priced—as a new and better commodity, a sign of more advanced desires that only the city can feed and satisfy. While this process is largely mediated by tools of informational flows, such as TVs, radio, magazines, what is often forgotten is the role of people like Adun, who make their way back to their villages and provide a personal and experiential immediacy those desires. The trains and buses that day after day connect Bangkok to villages across the Thai countryside, in fact, do not simply carry migrant laborers but also, with them, commodities, tastes, and life-styles. Motorcycle taxi drivers are particularly well situated for making this connection, as their autonomous carriers provide them with unmatched freedom to move frequently back and forth between the city and their villages. Through their trajectories, urban commodities (e.g. iced whiskey, KFC), lifestyles, as well as discourses (e.g. modern commodities, developed tastes) circulate and transform the social, economic, and

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aspirational landscapes of Thai villages. Adun's return trip demonstrate precisely this point, bringing new imaginaries of the city and new possible futures, in this case enfolded in a greasy box of fried chicken.

The silence descends slowly on the train. As the darkness outside the windows thickens, we fall asleep. At the break of dawn, after ten plus hours of rocking movement in third class, we approach Udon Thani. Adun dozes on the hard grey bench, as people around us start to move, getting ready to disembark. We get off the crowded platform and walk in the direction of the nearby market: Adun, two pieces of greasy deep fried chicken, and myself, all three equally melting in the morning heat. The town immediately seems to contradict the narrative of Isan as a backward space of "not yet." Shopping malls occupy the roads around the station and the local market is filled with international commodities. The smell of hamburgers, frying bacon, and strawberries mixes with the usual local food stalls, catering to the older foreign men who live in Udon, brought here by the former American military base or by their Thai wives, often met in go-go bars in Bangkok or in the sex trade hub of Pattaya. "There are many *farang* here," Adun tells me noticing my eyes lingering on the large piles of strawberries. "There is a Swiss man even in my village, he does not speak Thai but he lives in the village three or four months a year. He has the biggest house. You will see." He precedes me in the narrow lanes of the market outside the train station. Soon we embark on a rickshaw headed to the nearby bus station, a large ground surrounded by small shops and street vendors clustering around a concrete roof. Adun walks to a small shop. "Do you want a beer?" He offers. "I am ok," I reply, wary of pre-10 am drinks. "*Tong thǭn*" Aduns tells me, humming the tones of a catchy Isan song that praises the virtues of the hair of the dog.[9] We sing for a minute, laughing together. He buys a big jar of biscuits—other urban item that go into his backpack to add to the KFC box. Soon we get on a local bus in the direction of Bandung, Adun's district capital, another hour away.

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This time Adun does not sit next to me but two rows in front. From my seat I can see him savoring the air of home as we slowly get deeper into the countryside. Dry rice fields pass by as the street gets less crowded and well-kept. His eyes examine the familiar landscape with a new light, the light that you can see on people who return home, people whose gaze moves across the familiar landscape and consciously attend to its places, counting landmarks as beads of a rosary.[10] As for many returnees, the familiar vision carries silence. Adun does not speak a word, his eyes locked on the window and his chin high in the air. We get off at a small intersection, a few miles before arriving in the town, and walk to a small shop nearby: Adun is home.

The shop owner comes out to greet him and fill him in on the events of the village. Someone has died, someone got married, a new cohort of teenagers moved to Bangkok, after completing primary education. Above our heads Thaksin Shinawatra, who still retains tremendous support among the motorcycle taxi drivers and in the northeastern region at large, looks over the scene from a big banner, sitting, elbows up, on a large wooden desk. "We love Thaksin," the old seller tells me. "He did so much for us. He brought money and development to our region, he…" Adun interrupts him, impatient to get home. "He knows, you don't have to explain." The shop owner laughs, "good."

A battered Yamaha motorbike slowly makes its way toward us, driven by a woman with a small child sitting on the bike's tank, between her mother and the handle. "This is my old bike, the one I had my big accident on." Adun tells me. "I used to drive this before, in Bangkok. It is a good bike. I could come back home in less than eight hours but it is uncomfortable to maneuver in traffic, too big. So I left it here for my wife and bought the small scooter, but I really like driving this bike." The bike, without a license plate, stops before us and the small girl runs toward Adun and jumps in his arms, in a physical display of affection rarely seem in the Thai capital. A few minutes later, all

crammed onto the bike, we drive on the asphalted street, built in 2004 with money from the village funds opened by the government of Thaksin Shinawatra. "This is all that the state has given us," Adun shouts to me turning his head, "this and the village school which was built by students from Bangkok forty years ago."[11] We drive toward the small village, slowly, greeting everyone we meet.

The village coalesces around the grey street, a clump of scattered houses covered by red dust that spreads over everything: buildings, motorbikes, fields, people. Small kids run around or sit outside their wooden houses. Most adults seem to have disappeared from the village, moved away to join the ranks of Bangkok's workforce. We pass an unfinished temple, a small concrete school and an empty square where middlemen come seasonally to collect rice, before arriving at Adun's home.

Incomplete homes, incomplete presents.

The compound, like most in the Thai countryside, comprises multiple housing units. At the entrance, behind a rudimentary arch, stands a small *salā*, a traditional wooden gazebo on stilts, under which two dogs lie drowsily. On the left, small vegetable plots provide for basic daily consumption. On the right, a small shack houses Adun's sister on the rare occasions when her family visits from Rayong, a regional center in eastern Thailand where her husband works as a doctor. A few meters away, is Adun's home. Originally a wooden structure on stilts, the house, as many in this village, shows the material effects of urban remittances, life-style, and architectural taste. The ground floor, traditionally left open to ensure air circulation, protection from floods, and shelter for cattle, has been enclosed in cement walls, interrupted by two doors and four wooden windows. "See," Adun tells me, "we just finished the house a few years ago. I had to save money for many years but now the house is beautiful." The concrete walls cost the family 70,000 baht ($2,300) and were built, differently from the upper part of the house, by hired skilled workers.

Outward migration has not just changed the materiality of Isan houses and their architectural styles, but it has also revolutionized labor practices in the village. Hiring labor is increasingly common throughout Isan. House renovations, which now necessitate specific skills, as well as agricultural work, to which migration has subtracted able bodies, rely now on hiring daily labor—often landless laborers from slums in the regions' growing cities[12]—to carry out the jobs formerly executed by household members. So did the enclosure of the ground floor of Adun's house.

Adun walks proudly into his enclosed home with an upright posture, adjusting his body from the marginal existence of a motorcycle taxi driver on the streets of Bangkok to his rural status as a relatively successful man who works in the city. The interior space of the house, organized around six concrete pillars is sober but peppered by commodities that display his urbanized tastes and economic potential to support them. Beside the entrance, on the right, two sewing machines sit idle underneath a window, surrounded by small colorful dresses that his wife is preparing for the upcoming temple fair. Next to them, a big sofa fills the space, towered by a picture of the King of Thailand. In front of the sofa, a TV dominates the room from a small table. It broadcasts images of a wealthy household somewhere in the suburbs of Bangkok where a family drama unravels before the attentive eyes of Nam, Adun's older daughter. She sits on the ground, ignoring the sofa behind her, as everybody in the family seems to do. Her eyes are glued to the screen, lost in a faraway reality, not just spatially and temporally but also economically, which she is learning to desire and yearn for and whose language, demeanors, and intricacies she is determined to grasp. Though the screen, she is learning to see the city as the locus of modernity, as opposed to the village around her.[13] Nam quickly *wai*s (salute) her father before sinking her teeth into the spongy piece of KFC that Adun handles to her, completing her imagination of a different life, one that express itself in a temporal sequence where the future has urban locations, life-styles, and taste bud stimulation.

Around us, the cement walls make the house stuffy, blocking the free circulation of air and light. As a result, other appliances had to be introduced to keep this more urbanized place livable: two florescent tubes, constantly on, hang from the roof lighting the room; on a side of the sofa, next to the television, a fan rotates, taking advantage of the sole electric plug in the house. Its mechanical sound mixes with the low buzz of the neon and masks the sounds of the country outside— neighbors chatting, the grind of a tire-less tractor's wheels, the bells of buffalos being herded from field to field, and the occasional passing motorbike or truck. Both the soundscape and the objects inside the house overcome the village outside it, adding a layer to the experience of urbanized villagers typical of migrant families.[14] This system of objects, as Baudrillard has called the carefully manufactured composition of commodities in interior design,[15] project the house into a developed future, a future that resemble the urban household on TV, a future desired yet always beyond complete reach.

As the discourses of development analyzed by Tania Li, this carefully assembled system of objects is "punctured by the challenge it cannot contain"[16] and it reveals all the contradictions of Adun family's attempt to emulate urban living: their TV set will never be fully up-to-date; the fans remain a step behind the air-conditioners dominating the city. Lacking sufficient resources and consistent access to emerging consumer technologies, what Adun's family has managed to obtain will soon be outdated and become not sign of their development, but rather of their inability to keep up with new trends. Their attempts are always condemned to be incomplete not just for the relative poverty of Isan but, more largely, by the necessity of preserving and re-imagining this gap between the city and the village to the dominant national narrative that produces Bangkok in opposition to the "not yet" developed Thai country side and, in so doing, preserve a geography of uneven development and exploitation. In this sense, the whole temporal, spatial, and economic order of the nation is predicated precisely on the distancing between the two spaces, through which

urban modernity and rural backwardness are mutually produced. For Bangkok to remain a modern center, one that attracts workers from around the nation, government funds, and international investments, it is therefore necessary that the village remains in the past of backward living.

Nam's desires to move to Bangkok, and realistically populate the ranks of its exploited working class, are grounded in, grow from, and are limited by these imaginaries. She is, Adun tells me, increasingly voicing her intentions to migrate to the city. Nam's desires have been—consciously or unconsciously—cultivated not just by exposure to a variety of media but also through Adun's mediation of urban imaginaries and commodities between the city and his home. Both flows, in fact, have contributed to orienting her future towards Bangkok, ultimate location of development. These, in turn, have made her only more conscious of her present exclusion from that future. Through this kind of awareness, as Henri Lefebvre has argued in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, "the harshness of peasant life and the squalor of the farmyard […] appear intolerable, they seem even more so once we become aware of the magnificent, grandiose character of the works they have produced with their labor. Our awareness of this contradiction becomes more acute, and we find ourselves faced necessarily with a new imperative: the practical, effective transformation of things as they are."[17] In front of the TV with a piece of KFC in her hands, Nam sees this imperative solidifying and the awareness of her situation growing, as she dreams of the city and its glamorous living. A dream that, as we will see, unfortunately will not be realized.

As Nam munches on the KFC, behind the cathode ray tube, a big picture of Adun's colleagues at his *win* hangs from a cement pillar: five northeastern men in cowboy hats at a bar in Bangkok, standing in front of a fake background with an image of the American Wild West. As I stop to look at the picture, Adun proudly points out to me a member name-tag of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), a political organization, part of the Red Shirts, which is

gaining momentum around the country, demanding democratic election and an end to political and economic double-standards (*sǭng māttrathān*). Behind the hanging laminated card, a curtain separates a small corner area where the family sleeps on thin mattresses, next to the wooden stairs that lead to the second floor. What used to be the core of the house—the upper floor—is left empty and rarely used, abandoned as a space of the past, of wooden rural life unfit for the modern, concrete-framed present. If in the city past and present maintained porous relations in the urban palimpsest, in this house the past is put away and abandoned in the frantic—yet always incomplete—pursuit of an urban modernity, a pursuit that is doomed to failure. Opposite the entrance a small door opens to an open-air canopy where the family cooks. Chickens run freely in the farmyard, kept out by a bamboo fence that surrounds the kitchen.

Adun's parents live beyond the yard, in a larger wooden house with small decorative engravings on the roof. Contrary to my unspoken romantic appreciation of this structure, Adun tells me: "That house is not finished yet." "What do you mean?" I ask confused. "You see the lower floor, it doesn't have concrete. I promised them I will finish it but I don't have money. Besides, my father almost never sleeps there. We built a raft, and he lives on the river, fishes… He likes being alone there, it is calmer." I notice all around us other houses, already *finished* or in the process of being retrofitted to include a concrete ground floor. Old traditional wooden houses, perfectly functional, have been transformed in the last years into *incomplete* houses ready to be transformed, whenever money comes in, into a *complete* residence. Regardless the resulting erosion of the area below the elevated floor and the destruction of traditional systems of air circulation, all around the Thai countryside people are investing in concrete ground floors, to complete their houses.

These work-in-progress houses, with only one wall up and unfinished pavement, reveal the material effects of the historicist narrative that Adun voiced on the train. In them, rural tradition gets

reframed as unfinished, and waves of modern necessities and desires arrive to fulfill and complete it, reconfiguring its economic, spatial, and temporal locations. It is in rural settings, in fact, that the material effects of these narratives become more evident. Everywhere around the rural landscape of Thailand, things that have been accepted in the past are now seen as unfinished, incomplete, to be rethought and updated. These unfinished houses, however, also offer evidence of another aspect of this wave of urban modernity. They remind the impossibility for rural migrants and their families to keep up with its progression, both materially and discursively. They remain always condemned to move too slowly, to progress too irregularly, to remain too backlogged when compared with the rapid march of urban modernity. Every step forward is followed by long pause, before the next remittance, the next rice harvest, the next buffalo sold.

The drivers' circular trajectories between city and countryside intersect at a variety of different angles with those narratives, the desires they configure, and the failure they prefigure. On one side, the drivers, as urban migrants are products, and victims of them, attracted to the city by them, and confined by them. On the other, they are mediators and reproducers, proponents and diffusors, of urban commodities, lifestyles, and aspirations as well as producers of some of the very channels that allow their circulation. Movement is, after all, always defined by a relation between space and time and the drivers in their trajectory carve channels are not just in the physical, social, and economic landscapes of the country but also in the temporal ones, solidifying the narrative that shape them. The drivers are, in this sense, engaged and suspended between the multiple temporalities of the city and the village and the experiences of their distinct social times, daily rhythms, and aspirational futures. While these two locations are presented as discrete social, spatial, and temporal realities they are, on the contrary, two sides of the same coin, configuring each other by opposition. It is only by reframing the village, its architectural traditions, and social practices as a thing of the past, incomplete and unfinished, that the city becomes the space of the present,

developed and in continuous evolution. Such discourse, however, is not just a narrative construct but is also grounded in the concrete and distinct rhythms of economic activities that distance the city from the village. As we saw in last chapter, these rhythms are the product of specific political economic configurations, forms of organization of labor, and everyday practices which assumed different configuration in Bangkok and in the country side. Moving between the two spaces, therefore, requires the drivers, as well as other urban migrants, to adjust both practically and discursively to their distinct rhythms every time they change their location. A trip back to his village with Hong, the young driver we met in last chapter, revealed the difficulties and contradictions that many of them experienced in switching between these multiple temporalities.

Troubled temporalities: Slow motion as adjusting to the past or adjusting to the future?

The mid-day August sun blazes down on us, unforgiving. The fields in Isan are filled with lush rice plants ready to be transplanted. Hong and I spent the last ten hours on an interminable bus ride, punctuated by multiple breakdowns and Hong's repeated proposal to abandon the trip and make our way back to Bangkok. Resisting to his frustration with our arrested movement, we remained on the bus that, forty minutes after passing through the provincial town of Nong Bua Lamphu, leaves us at a street corner, at the entrance of a county road that leads to his village. There, we hop on a tuk-tuk and head down a small asphalt road, past the roundabout, toward Hong's house. While this district has the lowest per capita income in the country (and the highest proportion of votes for pro-Thaksin parties, both in 2005 and in 2011),[18] the village looks relatively affluent, and almost all of the lower open spaces have been walled in concrete and made into large living rooms.

The front of Hong's family house has been transformed into a small shop, a tiny corner store to which the family refers to as "Family Mart," the name of the chain shop that, together with

7-Eleven, dominates the streets of Thai towns. Hong's sister, who has recently moved back to the village from Bangkok for health reasons, runs the shop. Outside, a large wooden table occupies a shaded area, where patrons sit for a cigarette or a few glasses of rice whisky, after a day of work in the fields. Once in a while somebody stops by, mostly on a motorcycle but occasionally on bicycle, and orders something, the top sellers being petrol, coffee, cigarettes, and alcohol. Life repeats as a regular cycle synchronized with the rhythms of nature, both in the shop and in the fields where the rest of Hong's family work plugging their way through the transplanting season. They wake up at 5 am, shower, drink a cup of instant coffee and head to the field. Rice plants are pulled out of the dry field and plugged in the wet field. Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut; Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut; Grab, pull, shake, gather, tie, cut. Small bunches of rice plants pile up at the side of the dry field. When a couple of dozen are ready, they gather them up one by one, split them in the middle and lay them down on a long bamboo stick, to carry them all in one trip: up the bamboo over the shoulder for the few steps over to the wet lot. One by one, bunches are transplanted in organized, straight rows into a plot of land covered with water. Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground; Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground; Grab the bundle, pierce the soil with the thumb, and insert the small bunch in the ground. This circuit repeats over and over again until a break for morning food, undistinguishable from lunch food.

Hong's mother walks into the bushes for spices or vegetables that make up the daily meals. "We don't have to buy anything here," everybody repeats, especially Hong. As Thai urban migrants often do, Hong stresses the communitarian and pre-capitalist nature of the village, confirming the distancing between the city and the village by adding a moral layer to the economic, spatial, and temporal ones. He idealizes an imagined past, probably never existed, and declares a nostalgia for a life that he does not have any more and to which he would have a very difficult time adjusting, after

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being taken in by the frenzied pace of the city. It is his mother who brings this point home during one of the continuous breaks Hongs takes from work in the field. "Hong is having more problems getting used to this and working with me," she tells me. "He has been in the city too long, he cannot do anything with his hands anymore and he doesn't want to. He gets bored so fast. He cannot adjust to the way of life in the village. He is used to a fast life. Here every day is the same, slow. It is hard for him."

After lunch, the family goes back to work while Hong and I fall asleep, overloaded by food and physical work—insignificant compared to what 70 year-old farmers around us sustain. "It is in our body already," Hong's grandfather tells me with an encouraging voice. "Sit down and take rest, otherwise tomorrow your back will be hurting a lot." Hong also cannot endure this work for too long, more limited by boredom than by physical exhaustion. After the nap, I wake up and walk into the field where Hong's older brother is working in silence. The skinny forty year-old man entered monkhood when he was a child and came out twenty years later a religious scholar, a former abbot in the local forest temple where all of the boys of the family ordained, and a student in religious schools around the country. Fed up with religious knowledge and ready to settle down with a woman, he went back home, disrobed, and lodged in a small shack in the field, where he takes full pleasure in rural silence and calm. From there, he works alone, eats small amounts of food, and is treated by the family with a mixture of distance and respect typical of their relation with monks. I walk to him and start plugging in rice plants by his side, water to our knees. After few minutes of silence he raises his head, stares for a moment at Hong, still sleeping at the side of the field, and begins to talk. "This is Hong," he says with a soft voice, interrupted by deep long pauses. "Living in speed and making a living out of it makes it really hard to go back to slowness." Long silence. Bent over the rice field he continues. "Especially if you have less than 30 years and 15 of them have been in the city." He pauses reflexively, while slowly pulling another bunch of rice plants into the

inundated field. "Hong needs to go, to change activity, to feel like something is happening. Maybe someday he will find calm again."

If not as eloquently, Hong also voiced his hopes to find that calm someday, a dream that orients his present life in the city and his future plans to come back to the village. The different rhythms of everyday life between these two spaces, however, will require him to make deep adjustments that seem hardly manageable. Used to the fast pace of urban life, and to a job that values speed and uninterrupted mobility, Hong is frustrated, and jaded, by everyday life in the village. As during the bus ride from Bangkok, with its failures and interruptions, slowness grates on Hong's nerves. Even if used to waiting for clients in the city, he struggle to adjust to the slow pace of the village. Waiting in the city is fecund with expectations and interactions, here in the countryside waiting means for Hong having nothing to do and nothing to expect.

A marvelous condensation of this feeling is offered in Citizen Dog (*Maa Nakorn*), a film directed by Wisit Sasanatieng, one of the main representatives of the Thai "New Wave" cinema. The 2004 box-office hit narrates the story of Bod, a young Isan migrant who moves to Bangkok and falls in love with another migrant worker, Jin. Through a surreal mix of cryptic discussion of urban class relations and classic boy-meets-girl narrative, the story follows Bod's failed attempts to get closer to Jin. Halfway through the movie Bod, ignored by Jin, finds no other ways to get her out of his head than to go back to his native village, an unwilling returnee from Bangkok. The return begins with a bucolic scene in which Bod's mother sifts rice in slow motion. For the whole time of his permanence in the village everybody goes through their daily occupations in slow motion, while Bod moves at a normal pace, confused by the different temporality of life in the countryside. The narrator explains:

Bod notices that everything moves more slowly in the country. His Dad said that the reason it was like this was that Bod had been in Bangkok. Time in Bangkok must move faster than in the country. His Dad said he had just got there, but he'll get used to it. Many days passed by, but Bod didn't get used to it. Time passed slowly, making him hurt even more. Every breath, when thinking of Jin, took half the day. Bod decided to return to Bangkok.[19]

Both Hong and Adun expressed the same feeling, without Bod's lovelorn yearning. They both commented on the slow pace of life in the village and the temporal discontinuity between life in the city, with its fast pace, and life in the village, lived in slow motion, to which they grew unaccustomed during their years in Bangkok. Even if the rhythm of village life appears to Hong, Adun, and Bod as a thing of the past, both collective and personal, another less corporal and more aspirational temporal sequence connects Bangkok to their villages as spaces of their future. Many drivers, in fact, endure life in the city with the explicit aim of saving money to go back home, where they hope someday to return with the economic and social capital to marry, buy a house, or start a small farm. Hong—young and accustomed to life in the city for half of his life—when confronted with the reality of his nostalgic dream of a return to rural life, struggles with the contradiction between this declared aspiration and its reality. Such contradictions are, of course, not unique to Hong, but endemic to the lives of millions of rural migrants from all around the world. Rural migrants, including myself, are stuck in this temporal contradiction between, on one side, the village as a discursive space of the past and a phenomenological site of slow pace and dense social interactions, and on the other side the village as the location of their aspirational future—a future whose realization hinges on a productive time in the city that, in turn, erodes that future through the adoption of faster rhythms and urban life-styles.

Motorcycle taxi drivers' mobilities between Bangkok and their villages are ridden with these contradictions. On one hand, most of them moved to city to follow desires for both modern life and

a future return, with increase status, to their village. On the other, the drivers run the risk of losing, in the process, their ability to adjust to rural life, thus eroding the very thing they long for. This erosion is not just the result of the challenging adjustment to the distinct rhythms required by these spaces but also of their active participation, in their trajectories, in reproducing the narrative distancing of the two spaces while, through their mediations, they keep them connected. It is through their mobility, among that of millions of other migrants, which commodities, lifestyles, and desires travel through this landscape and bridge the city and the village. It is through their mediations that such temporalities come to exist in simultaneity. Stuck in this complex relation between economic and spatio-temporal narratives, personal trajectories, and desires, the drivers are constantly struggling to reconcile their position, often reproducing the very conundrum that their lives in multiple spaces are aimed at reconciling.

Nak and the haunted dreams of return.

A prime example of the driver's participation in bridging city and country side and diffusing multiple imaginaries of the village was enfolded in another gift packed in Adun's bag during our train ride from Bangkok. Wedged between the money that sustained his family and the KFC box that gave materiality to his daughter's dreams of urban life, he carried a CD containing a cartoon titled *Nak*, one of the many Thai cultural products that contribute to locating the city and the countryside in two different, and contradictory, spatio-temporal locations. While studies of migration in Thailand have often focused on cultural production to explore the complexities of the representations of migrants' experiences,[20] when dealing with the imagined temporality of their mobilities scholars have mostly focused on the discursive construction of the village as the space of the past, whether pristine or backward. This depiction, however, is just a part of the picture.

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Although this analysis is of critical importance, few scholars have highlighted how the village is also an imagined space of return. National-level media and other forms of dominant discourses in Thailand—such as that of sufficiency economy which I will later analyze—also present the village as a place of return, a space of moral and ethical equilibrium to go back to. This moralization of an imagined past, which is always assigned to a other that is often at the same time kept in a position of exploitation and inferiority, in hardly unique to Thailand. Michael Herzfeld has shown how in Greece the village becomes both as a pedestal, posing its life on a higher moral ground, and a tethering post, trapping its dwellers into backwardness.[21] Similarly, in the context of the United States, native Americans are often depicted as backward, unruly, and prone to addiction while also seen as "natural," closer to the earth, and holders of a higher morality. The list could go on. These moralization of the exploited, only adds to the complexity and tensions engrained in their position and the cartoon Adun was carrying in the train ride is just an example of them.

The anime was produced in 2008 by the Thai Bboydcg studio and narrates the struggle between a group of village ghosts of the Thai popular tradition, headed by Mae Nak,[22] and powerful evil spirits that threaten mankind. The evil spirits, located in Bangkok, kidnapped a child from the village and the rural ghosts embark on an adventure to recover him from the dangerous city and bring him back to balanced life of the Thai countryside. The psychedelic cartoon offers what Kong Rithdee, the *Bangkok Post* film critic, unceremoniously called "a clumsy clash of civilisations: rustic postcards of old Siam vs LCD-billboarded mega-capital; Japanese anime pop-aesthetics vs sci-fi mytho-babble; liberal swagger (the legendary Nak is depicted here as a sexy, single-mum ghost) vs conservative reassurance (the ghosts cup their hands to pray when facing the film's monster-in-chief, a lava-breathing iron buffalo)."[23]

It was not until the third day of our visit, during the preparation for a wedding that Adun went back home to participate in, that he took out the CD and slammed it into a player to distract village's children while the adults took care of business. Participation and organization of merit-making ceremonies in rural temples, weddings, and other celebrations "are crucial opportunities to express an ongoing commitment to rural family and community, as well as claims to 'success' in urban employment."[24] Adun was expressing both commitment to local solidarity and his individual success by being present and carrying a present, an original copy of a cartoon that he gifted to the local children. As soon as the initial film credits ended, a narration of the multiple temporalities and moralities of migration in Thailand started to roll on screen, both presented and reproduced before the children's enchanted eyes.

The cartoon begins with a serene scene of the Thai rural past, when ghosts and human lived harmoniously, taking care and helping each other. This equilibrium between the spirit and human worlds was broken by the arrival of modernity, represented in the cartoon by Bangkok with its tall buildings, Skytrain, and tuk-tuk. After this contextualization, the screen fills with peaceful music and images of a stereotypical traditional Thai village, with its canals and wooden houses. In this idyllic environment, Tee, the seven-year old protagonist, is growing up under the protection of local ghosts: Mae Nak, Keaw, a headless ghost, Thong, a doggy ghost, and Eud, a tall demon. The story comes to a turn at a temple fair, during the open-air screening of the Thai horror movie *The Shutter*. As villagers enjoy the film, a sign of technological change, the movie's evil ghost comes out of the screen, spreads panic among the audience, and pulls young Tee inside the screen all the way to Bangkok: a city dominated by evil spirits headed by an evil King. As for many other youngsters in Thailand, images carry them to the city.

After much discussion, Gam, Tee's stubborn sister, convinces the band of local ghosts to embark in a train ride from a station named *bān nǭk* (countryside) to Bangkok, with the purpose of rescuing Tee. Meanwhile, the young boy is brought before the King of spirits, a floating fireball, who explains that Tee is a central piece for their plan to take over the human world. The skeletons in military hats that surround the King launch into a song:

We had enough of awajee[25], we want, we want BigC[26]
Throw away the same old menu, boiled chicken and pig head only
We want pizza, sushi, we want KFC
Wait for mid-day, we will possess the world
We are modern ghosts, we will be the rulers of the world
We do not have coconut shell as heads, mankind will soon find out
We will control everything that exists on earth, soon we will be kings
We shall capture, we shall enslave mankind, who will have the nerve to die?

We are modern ghosts, we do not fear sunlight
moisturizer SPF60[27]
Will protect us from sun light
Let's cover each other with protective cream, spray each other abundantly
We have to practice regularly
Sunrays are no problem, just cheerful complexion
Oh! Sun bathes

Altogether, helping each other, until we control the world
Continue on this road, we will be the rulers of the world
Catch, imprison, enslave mankind to control the world
Who resist us must die.

After the skeletons explain that their desires for modern commodities and comforts—among which KFC figures once again—motivate their plans, our heroes arrive in Bangkok's chaotic central train station, the same train station where Adun's trip back home began and through which many migrants enter Bangkok. Immediately Gam gets lost in the city, confused by the unfriendly and indifferent spirits that populate it. Once she finds again the village ghosts, they jump on a tuk-tuk whose driver rides crazily through the main landmarks of the city before bringing them to a skyscraper where the King of evil spirits resides. Leaving behind the driver, who cheats them on the

price, the group poses as FedEx carriers and enters the building. Meanwhile, humans in Bangkok start to be subsumed by evil spirits that emerge from the streets' asphalt, another symbol of hunted modernity. The cartoon builds up to the final confrontation between the village ghosts and the urban spirits. After a number of transformations and plot twists the ghosts succeed in blocking the evil plan, rescuing Tee, and saving the whole human world. The cartoon ends with a glorious return to the village where the balance between the human and the spirit world is restored, away from the insanity of the city.

The cartoon, as many migrants did in our conversations, moralizes the economic, spatial, and temporal narratives and presents an image of the city as a space of unbalanced sociality, selfishness, and indifference but also a place of desires and commodities, toward which urban youth are allured by media. In the cartoon, it is a movie character that physically carries Tee to the city; For Nam, Adun's daughter, it is television with its telenovelas and its images of urban modernity. The city, in both representations, is a space of glamour and conspicuous consumption, on one side, and a bedeviled space of perdition, on the other. Conversely, the village becomes a space of simplicity and pristine harmony, but also a place of return, of an imagined and conclusive future. Similar double representations dominated the drivers' mobility between city and villages. Their mediation between Bangkok and the countryside, however, is not just embedded in this contradictory location of the village in a collective past and an individual future, but also reproduce both narratives while flooding the village with new commodities and desires that question the declared pristine and pre-capitalist nature of village life. In this sense, the driver connect city and villages by circulating commodities, desires, and experiences that belie and undo the neat distinction between these two spaces while, at the same time, contribute to reproducing discursively the village and the city as spaces apart, operating according to different rhythms and logics. Motorcycle taxi drivers, in their oscillatory mobility, become vessels, proponents, and mediators of these ideas of

urban dystopia that strengthen the temporal location of the village as a space of the future while also casting it as nostalgic relic of the past. Yet, at the same time, much like the ghost in the cartoon, they lure villagers, including their own family members, into modern urban living, by circulating commodities and desires that frame Bangkok as a utopian space of enjoyment and grandeur.

Such tensions and contradictory depictions are only solidified and strengthened in the stories of everyday life that the drivers carry with them to their village, both in their bags and on their bodies. Sitting in poorly lighted houses in the northeastern countryside, where traditional wooden architecture mixes with the expanding presence of concrete, the drivers act as cultural brokers and mediators between the urban life of the metropolis and its goods, from cellphones to KFC chicken, from biscuits to nosy guest anthropologists, and the changing and complex realities of rural Thailand. Sitting silently around a mat on the floor overflowing with food, kids and older men listen with widened eyes and ears to the tales of the city, its social, economic, and political attractions and injustices. These stories, if not materially creating connections, frame imaginary trajectories and desires of urban life among rural dwellers, imaginations that oscillate between the celebration of urban life and its advantages, and dismissal of urban experience, its perils, and struggles.

Moving in Time: creating channels for migration

Until now I have focused mostly on narratives and desires that are circulated and reproduced through the drivers' trajectories as well as the commodities and stories they tell. As we saw in the small case of KFC, the cartoon Nak, or in the personal stories of urban life that the drivers tell, they create imaginaries that, as I mentioned, structure the way in which the world is described, perceived, and in turn lived. Through them future migrants begin to desire Bangkok and to plot their movement though individual connections and networks. The role of the driver's mediation,

however, does not just end at the level of contributing to create aspirations. In their presence in the city, in fact, they become concrete mediators and brokers of social and personal channels they are necessary to transform those imaginaries into lived experiences. New migrants, in fact, almost always move to the city through existing social networks of fellow villagers who relocated to Bangkok before them, as was the case for both Hong and Adun. Motorcycle taxi drivers, through their mobility and connections with local dwellers, office workers, and factory owners, they are privileged nodes of these networks that they contribute in creating and solidifing over time into full-fledged infrastructure of migration, an infrastructure that allows to transform desires into realities. Given their continuous presence in their neighborhood, their multiple connections with local dweller, and profound knowledge of the city, the drivers operate as prominent bridgeheads for the mobility of new migrants, hosts for their first weeks in Bangkok, and guides toward potential job opportunities and the complex adjustment to life in the city. It is not uncommon during the low-agricultural season in Isan, to meet young men from their districts hanging out at motorcycle taxi stations around Bangkok, scouting for the possibility of moving to the city.

Nok, a nineteen year old from Adun's village, arrived in Bangkok in mid-March, taking advantage of his network to check out the city, explore its labor market, and enjoy a few days of urban living. During his trip, Nok slept on Adun's floor. He often woke up late and when he came to the *win*, sat at a small iron table on the other side of the *soi* from the drivers. There, he was fed by Adun and local street-vendors who shared a bond of solidarity by caring for this new-comer. His presence at Adun's *win*, complemented by Adun's continuous inquiries in the neighborhood about available jobs as a security guard, revealed the multiple desires, risks, and temptations enfolded within the mobility of rural migrants, as well as the transformations that years of urbanization have brought to motorcycle taxi drivers.

Reclining on a plastic chair in the heat of midday, Nok showed the toll that the city was taking on his body, nerves, and liver. "The city is getting to his head," Adun tells me with a knowing smile. "We all lived this during our first years here. Drinking too much, going to have fun with women, staying up very late. He always comes back home in the morning and sleeps until late. There are not many occasions to have fun in the countryside and here in the city there are too many. But he needs to understand that he will never find a job like this. I try to help, asking around for work, as other people have helped me when I arrived and I was drunk on life (*mao chīwit*)." This idea of the city as inebriating to the mind and the body of young migrants resonated with the depiction of Bangkok that the cartoon presented of the city as a space of perdition. Such a discourse, however, proceeds hand in hand with an alternative narrative, one that characterizes the city as a place of refinement and progress. The discussion around Nok's presence in the group, encapsulated also this other side of urban modernity. "Look at him, you could see from far away he is a county bumpkin (*khon bān nǭk*). His clothes don't fit right." Id, another driver, mutters. "And look at what he is drinking." He laughs. "rice whiskey" In these jokes, the drivers demonstrate both their adoption of common urban bias toward villagers and their discomfort, masked behind irony, in looking at a person who could be a younger version of themselves. In Nok, the drivers find confirmation of economic, spatial, the temporal narratives that have oriented their lives. In him they see, with a mixture of derision and nostalgia, what all of them once were.

Moved by this identification, all of the drivers, and Adun in particular, tried to activate their networks to find Nok a job, a place to stay a bit longer, as well as directing him through the city. One after the other, in their breaks from ferrying clients, the drivers in the group sit down with him and give him advice, cautionary stories, or simple reassurances that life in Bangkok is indeed livable. They relate their own difficulties in finding a job and their experiences with the unlimited fun that the city can offer to a young man. In this sense, the drivers not only provided a solid infrastructure

of migration, through which Nok can envision moving to Bangkok and making desires into realities, but also created channels that could provide him an income, a home, or human support. This work, with all of its tensions and contradiction, is another aspect of the driver's role as connectors and mediators between Bangkok and a myriad of villages across the rural landscape of Thailand, one that perpetuates the contingent and contradictory cyclical mobility between them.

Following this circular mobility, in next chapter I move back to the city and explores the legal and discursive dimensions of the drivers' presence in the streets of Bangkok, the personal motivations behind their decision to take up this job, and the forms of labor and political organizing that emerged over time among them. It is through the tension among motivations, labor practices, and organizing that the contradictions, contingencies, and fragilities of the drivers' lives got reframed as political demands that took the form of struggles for increased job security since 2003 and participation in the Red Shirts mobilization since 2009.

LEFT OUT:

I walk to the ticket box and get a third class ticket to Udon Thani, capital of one of the northernmost provinces of Isan, a few miles from the Laotian border. I pay 265 baht (9 $) for a ride that is free to Thai nationals, one of the many "populist" policies introduced by the former government of Thaksin Shinawatra and carried over by his successors, including Abhisit Vejjajiva who came to power in 2009 through a combination of conservative activism, parliamentarian maneuvering, and judicial coups which used Thaksin's hand-outs to justify themselves.

participation in the diffusion and reproduction of these narratives, in other word this narratives and in making them into realities imaginary and imagined narratives and the new desires As the drivers move between Bangkok and their villages, this produced b

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and, as a result, specific commodities and life-styles, which come to be seen as modern and urban, become tools to pull rural subjects out of their "backwardness" and project them into the future.

In this context, motorcycle taxi drivers, autonomous workers who enjoy unmatched freedom to move frequently back and forth between the city and their villages, occupy a unique position. Mobilizing and transmitting such commodities, and the economic and spatio-temporal imaginaries enfolded within them, is another dimension of the drivers' trajectories

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[1] See Chakrabarty 2000: 9

[2] See Elinoff Sopranzetti: 301 – Erik Harms

[3] (Herzfeld 2004: 30).

[4] This relation—analogous to what Gramsci has described in the Italian South—started during the reign of King Rama V. A completely new set of techniques of governance, modeled around colonial administrations in the region, was introduced by the Siamese absolute monarchy and actively implemented well after the fall of absolutism in 1932, into the Cold War period, by the Thai developmentalist state, as I showed in Chapter 1. These new techniques ranged from territorial constitution and penetration to forms of governance and administration, from religious conversion and proselytism to racial politics and resources extraction The persistence of such regime has been showed by a number of scholars (Reynolds 1987; Reynolds 2002; Thongchai 2000), and most prominently voice by Peter Jackson and Rachel Harrison (Harrison and Jackson 2011). Paradoxically, this recognition of colonial structures operating in Thailand and specifically in Isan, has not just been voiced by critical intellectuals. One of the most public contemporary formulations of internal colonialism in Thailand has been voiced, in fact, by Gen. Sayud Kerbphol, echoing Marxist voices that he has personally contributed to suffocate during the Cold War. An ultra-royalist military official, first director of the CSOC (Communist Suppression Operations Command) and central figure in the later renamed ISOC (Internal Security Operations Command) between 1966 and 1983, Supreme Commander of the Royal Thai Army between 1981 and 1983, vocal member of the

conservative yellow shirted PAD (People's Alliance for Democracy), and actual president of the People Network for Election and the Bangkok Vegetarian Society, Gen. Sayud Kerbphol was quoted saying: "Avoiding colonization by Europe simply meant that we colonized our own people. This internal colonialism in which officials appointed by the metropolis rule and drain the country-side like conquered provinces has led to obvious differences among the Thai." (Bangkok Post, January 4th, 1976)

[5] Talal Asad has analyzed how European power operated in colonial settings "not as a temporary repression of subject population but as an irrevocable process of transmutation, in which old desires and ways of life were destroyed and new ones took their place" Asad 1991: 314

[6] On the social significance of the *wai* see (Aulino 2012)

[7] As Herzfeld has shown, state bureaucracy operate by "treating the clients like dirt" (Herzfeld 1992: 167) and professing indifference to the citizen's requests by "petty harassment and especially the often repeated advice to 'come back tomorrow,' the endless sets of more and less identical forms, the bureaucrat's professed inability to predict outcome and duration" (Herzfeld 1992: 161).

[8] (Lefebvre 1991, Vol I : 134)

[9] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWB4qs3tGQY.

[10] Wisdom sits in places p.107 "by now and again, and sometimes without apparent cause, awareness is seized-arrested-and the place in which it settles becomes an object of spontaneous reflection and resonating sentiment. It is at times such as these, when individuals step back from the flow of everyday experience and attend self-consciously to places-when, we may say, they pause to actively sense them, that their relationships to geographical space are most richly lived and surely felt."

[11] this school was part of a program of education and development, which I analyze in Chapter 6, which was sponsored by the Thai government between 1974 and 1976 and sent university students from Bangkok around the country.

[12] Elinoff 2013

[13] As Mary Beth Mills has observed: "Widespread images of Bangkok (particularly on television which is widely available in rural areas) highlight the city as the focal center of modern Thai life, the pinnacle of 'national development' and 'progress'. By contrast media images, as well as most attitudes fostered by the centralized Thai state, commonly identify rural agriculturalists with the national periphery; they are *khon baan nohk*, literally people of 'outlying' communities, located on the nation's social and cultural margins. As such they hold significantly lower status and power than their better educated and more sophisticated urban compatriots. Consequently many young men and women in the countryside are drawn to Bangkok in part out of desires to enhance their own knowledge and status. (Mills 1999b: 35)

[14] (Thabchumpon and McCargo 2011)

[15] (Baudrillard 1996)

[16] (Li 2007: 11)

[17] (Lefebvre 1991, Vol I: 134)

[18] 7 (Pohphant 2014- ISEAS)

[19] (Wisit 2004)

[20] (Boccuzzi 2012; Mills 1999c)

[21] (Herzfeld 2004)

[22] The story of Mae Nak is one of the most well-known and popular Thai ghost stories. In it, a young woman, Nak, dies of child birth while her husband, Mak, is away fighting a war. When Mak returns home, however, he finds his loving wife and child waiting for him and they go back to their life. Each neighbor who try to warn him that he is living with a ghost is killed by Nak, who wants to remain in this world with her husband. One day, as Nak is preparing *nam phrik*, she drops a lime off of the porch. In her haste, she stretches her arm to pick it up from the ground below. Mak sees it and at last realizes his wife is a ghost. Terrified, he runs away. In her grief, Nak roams around terrorizing people who, she believes, caused Mak to leave her.

[23] Kong 2008

[24] (Mills 1999b: 185)

[25] Buddhist hell

[26] Popular department store in Thailand

[27] Whitening and protective cream popular among Thai urban middle-classes.

Interlude

March dusks in Bangkok last only a moment. The sun rapidly disappears behind buildings leaving a lingering light that sharpens the shadows and gives depth to the otherwise flat surface of Singaporean looking shop-houses. In the old section of Bangkok, streets that during the day have the dowdy look of chaotic comings and goings underneath a convoluted mesh of electric wires, suddenly reacquire the aristocratic look celebrated in the pompous and lengthy Thai name of the city: Krungthep, the city of angels, the great city, the eternal jewel city, the impregnable city of God Indra, the grand capital of the world endowed with nine precious gems, the happy city, abounding in an enormous Royal Palace that resembles the heavenly abode where reigns the reincarnated god, a city given by Indra and built by Vishnukarmahe.[1] A tone of ochre accentuated by the incandescence street-lights, that only in this part of town substitute the otherwise omnipresent neon, yellows the dusk, flavored by the smell of food carts and their mouth-watering smoke.

Imagine walking along these streets on such an evening, your palms sweating and your shirt adhering to your body. A few hundred meters from you, the sound of huge speakers winds though the small alleys, reaching your ears, syncopated, as you move thought the static traffic, trying to cross the street. "Brother and sisters, it is time for this government to step down, for too long Thailand has been controlled by an aristocracy (*ammat*)" Crackling speakers' sound mixes with car engines. "The time for democracy has arrived." Around you small groups of people dressed in red shirts walk through the stopped cars as they head toward Racthadamnoen, the large French-styled boulevard where a huge Red Shirts protest is taking place. Around you, drivers are trying to U-turn their cars, discouraged by the immobility that has captured them. On your right, a long orderly line of cars fills the street, framed by equally ordered rows of shop-houses. Behind you, the same scene. In front, crowd control barriers block the street. Behind them three lines of motorcycle taxi drivers wait for you, fingers in the air, ready to utter their usual first sentence: *pai nai?* Where to?

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[1] The name in Thai is *krung thēp mahā nakhǭn `omraratnakōsin mahintharāyutyā mahādinkaphop nopratnarātthānībūrīram `udomrātniwasēmhātthān `omraphimān`awatānsathit sakkathattiyawitnukamprasit.*

The first line of drivers, further away from you and closer to the protesters, sit astride, bikes slightly transversal, and one foot on the ground, ready for you to jump on their back seats. The second line, less interested in clients, sits with both feet up, resting on the foot pegs, or stands, one knee bent on the seat. In the third row, right in front of you, drivers chat distractedly sitting on their bikes or standing, giving you their backs. All of them wear the orange sleeveless vest distributed by Thaksin's government in 2003, embroiled with a number printed on their chests on the left and the Bangkok insignia—the god Indra riding a white elephant—on their right. A few hundred meters away from the drivers the crowd of protesters starts to thicken, soon becoming a uniform sea of red. Through this sea of protesters who flooded here to voice a multiplicity of demands only motorcycle taxis can navigate, finding routes where all other modes of transportation see a wall. Regularly a motorbike emerges from the crowd and drives back to the pack, parking at the end of the third row, as everybody moves a position up. "*Pai nai*? Where to?" repeats the first driver in the front row. "Democracy Monument" you shout as you jump on the bike and slide into the crowd, directed to the heart of the protest.

The ride proceeds slowly through the periphery of the rally, zigzagging though protesters, parked cars, and scattered vendors selling Red Shirts' paraphernalia: T-shirts and jackets, books and posters, wristbands, armbands, music from protesters' bands. As you get closer to the crowds, food and drinks take over the stands, providing for the multiple tastes of the thicker crowd of Red Shirts around you. Money change hands all around, fueling the economy of a protest that attracts a multitude of street-vendors, motorcycle taxi drivers, and other service providers toward the protest and gives it the feeling of a street fair. Thousands of people dressed in red fill the street pavement, while the broad side-walks are taken over by large tents. Most of them are towered by banners with the name of the province their occupants come from. Some function as mobile hospitals or registrations booths for the UDD (United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship), the most organized section of the Red Shirts; others as massage parlors, resting areas for monks, or small radio and TV stations. Protesters move from tent to tent, chat a bit, buy something to eat, and make their way back toward the monument where the whole ground is covered by plastic tarpaulins and portable chairs. Sitting on the asphalt, the crowd becomes impossible to penetrate, even by a motorcycle

taxi driver. Your driver stops, tells you he cannot go any further, gets his 10 baht coin, and makes his way back to his line.

Around you, everybody is facing toward Democracy Monument, which stands in the middle of a roundabout which breaks in two sections the huge boulevard. Originally commissioned in 1939 to commemorate the 1932 coup that posed an end to absolute monarchy in Siam, the monument was supposed to fulfill Ratchadamnoen's fate as the Champs-Élysées of Asia by providing its *Arc de Triomphe*. What the monument did provide, however, was a center of gravity for mass political mobilizations in Thailand since the 1970s and a symbol to the struggle for democracy that begun with that coup and, according to the Red Shirts, still remains incomplete. To crystalize the unfulfilled nature of this dream the protesters have wrapped up the monument's centerpiece, a representation of a palm-leaf manuscript box containing the 1932 Constitution on top of two offering bowls, and surrounded it with a red cloth with written "return power to the people" (*khɯn`amnāt hai prachāchon*). Around the monument, in front of each of the four wings that surround the dome, large screens broadcast a phone-in video by Thaksin Shinawatra. From his studio in Dubai, he charges up the crowd, criticizing the injustice of the present government and its refusal to give people real access to opportunities. Some protesters sit on the ground, staring enchanted at their exiled hero. Others walk around distractedly, uninterested in the words of somebody they see as tangential to their struggle. Peppered among them are hundreds of motorcycle taxi drivers, many still wearing in their vests. Since thousands of Red Shirts descended upon Bangkok on March 12th, these drivers have acquired a central role in the internal functioning of street protests as transportation providers, political mobilizers, leaders' personal guards, collectors of information, as well as generic supporters. Obviously not every motorcycle taxi driver in Bangkok agrees with the Red Shirts, nor all of the supporters visit the protest sites, but the large majority of them sympathized with the movement and thousands actively participated in it.

It was during this early stage of the protest, which alternated between gatherings in Ratchadamnoen and daily caravans of protesters around the city, that I met Oboto, one of the drivers who organized their anti-influential people mobilizations since 2003 and now led their participation in the Red Shirts. A charming

man in his forties, Oboto was born in a village in outside Ubon Ratchathani, in northeastern Thailand. As a teenager, he moved to Bangkok and became a political organizer in the slum of Klong Toey where he still lives and works. After the 1997 crisis Oboto was laid off from his job as a hospital porter and started working as a motorcycle taxi driver. By 2003, when the government of Thaksin Shinawatra began to draft the formalization of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, Oboto had already become a local figure among Klong Toey's drivers.

As the formalization brought together disgruntled drivers, he met other leaders of motorcycle taxi groups across the city who, like him, had been fighting against the meddling of influential people—mostly government officials—in their activities. Fostered by the sudden media attention to their pledges, these leaders became increasingly visible in Thai public sphere and street politics, and progressively connected to the Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who used their expertise in drafting and implementing the formalization of motorcycle taxis. Even after his fall, this alliance was not forgotten. Since the 2006 coup, the group started to mobilize support in favor of the ousted prime minister and against the military government which had taken his place. It was not until a month before the beginning of the Red Shirts protest, in February of 2010, that Oboto and the other leaders decided to formalize their collective organization and established the association of motorcycle taxis of Thailand (AMTT), an informal trade union, with the purpose of protecting drivers from racketeering and incrementing their collective visibility and negotiating power.

Coherently with their political history and alliances, the association immediately entered the orbit of the Red Shirts movement. Such collaboration, however, was not without its risks and difficulties. On a personal level, their support to the movement put their livelihood in danger, because of repeated threats from the post-Thaksin government of Abhisit Vejjajiva to revoke their licenses if they took part in the protest. On a collective level, becoming closely affiliated with one side of the political spectrum could potentially jeopardize their ability to negotiate with opposing governments, both present and future, on issues of social welfare, job security, and incorporation into the state apparatus. Regardless of this double risk the Association of Motorcycle Taxi drivers of Thailand (AMTT) decided to get on the Red Shirts stage in Ratchadamnoen on

April 3ʳᵈ and show its support for and alliance with the Red Shirts. Even if united in front of the masses in their pledge, as the protest progressed it became clear that the main leaders of the association saw this "going on stage" (*khɯn wēthī*) under different, and ultimately incompatible, agendas. While the most of the leaders of the association, personally supporting the Red Shirts, saw the union's participation to the protest as part of a bargaining game with the government and the army, Oboto and few others leaders refused to see the protest just as a means to this end.

As a result, Oboto slowly drifted away from the association and became the main liaison for the Red Shirts among the drivers. This separation revealed the division of politicized drivers into two factions, one that followed the association, and therefore saw the protest as a way to acquire stronger negotiating power vis-à-vis the Thai state and its military forces, and another that saw itself as first-and-foremost a group of Red Shirts supporters, uninterested in any negotiation with existing forces. When I met Oboto, on March 15ᵗʰ 2010, three days after the beginning of the march that brought thousands of protesters into Bangkok, this conflict had not yet emerged but Oboto had already raised to a prominent position among Red Shirts drivers, as our first meeting revealed.

Oboto was standing in the middle of Rachadamnoen Road. This avenue, contrary to the planners' intentions to make it into a space of beautification and consumption, developed historically as the quintessential political space in the city, tucked in between the old Royal Palace and the new one or—for the people who prefer a more democratic version of its history—in between the Parliament and Sanam Luang, the Royal Ground where major national ceremonies are staged. In the middle of this road Oboto stands, a few hundred meters away from the Italianate Democracy Monument embellished with bas-reliefs of soldiers. Tidy black hair, a medical mask on his face, and aviators' sunglasses, Oboto perfectly embodies his role as a masculine and distant leader. He wears the orange vest distributed by the metropolitan police to licensed drivers, but he has made it his own. On his chest, instead of the usual number, is a big promotional ad for the opposition party. On his back, rather than the name of the district where he operates, a sticker declares "*santi withī*" (peaceful means), surrounded by two sentences: "*rao rak nai lūang* (We love the King) and "*thai rak thai. Khit tɛ̄ktāng tɛ̄ mai tɛ̄kyɛk*" (Thai love Thai. We think differently but we are not divided.). Not just a political

mobilizer, Oboto, like many other drivers, transformed their uniforms into mobile political boards, calling for unity in a time of great political division.

His eyes move frantically, following the movements of half a dozen motorcycle taxi drivers who are organizing and directing other bikers into long parallel rows. People around him guide the staging, shouting and honking and gesticulating to direct the crowd's movement. Surrounded by the fumes of motorcycles and cars, Oboto watches, silent. Behind, his red motorbike glimmers in the sun, enfolded by a giant Thai flag, attached to the bike with rolls of large brown tape, flapping in the wind. Further behind thousands of other bikers are scattered. Monks, street-vendors, youngsters, older women, middle-age men, small families tucked on the short seats, young lovers tied together in a hug, thousands of people dressed in red all wait for Oboto to start moving, sitting on their bikes or roaming in the labyrinth of wheels spreading across the boulevard. The rumble of engines builds up, reverberating on the surrounding neoclassic architecture: the loud roar of cheap copies of Harley Davidson, the baritone screams of used-up sporting Yamaha; the popping dialogue of the few Vespas mix with the larger chorus of new Japanese scooters, dominated by the mechanical regularity of Hondas and Yamahas and peppered with the high-pitched sounds of Kawasakis and Suzukis. A few hundred meters behind them cars are parked, blasting Thai country music from their audio sets. City vehicles and pick-ups descended from the provinces, vans, auto-rickshaws, trucks, taxis. The odd caravan crowds around a big truck, deck opened, filled by huge black speakers beneath a small makeshift stage from where a young woman harangues the protesters.

On the right side of the street, a couple of motorcycle taxi drivers in their vests ride up and down bringing information and orders back and forward between the protest's main stage and Oboto. I start talking to him explaining what I am doing in Thailand. "Call me later," he tells me hastily, "here is my number." I put the small piece of paper somewhere, never to be found. I see the motorcycle taxi drivers' orange vests disappearing around me, carefully folded away, as people cover their license plates with boards or plastic bags. "This way they will not know who is who," Oboto tells me without taking off his vest, conscious of the Prime Minister's threat to take license away from drivers who were recognized in the protest. Soon he jumps on his bike, and the huge caravan starts moving, compact, through the streets of Bangkok. I get on my

motorcycle and follow them. The heat is merciless as the procession keeps halting to remain in lockstep, moving in the direction of Din Daeng, a lower income neighborhood in the Northern section of the city. The bikes cross the Central Business District and passersby look rather confused, often meeting the moving convoy with scared gazes and perplexed eyes. Only a few people in the street cheer the protesters, offer drinks, or greet members of the moving convoy. The situation changes suddenly as soon as the procession passes an invisible line that divides the commercial area from the social housing complexes in Din Daeng. From here on, hordes of people flood in the street to cheer, support, or just salute the convoy that grows at every corner as other bikes, cars, and pick-ups join in.

In the two weeks that followed caravans like this crossed the urban landscape of Bangkok almost daily bringing usual traffic to a halt, re-defining streets and spaces of transit as a pivotal political arenas in the city, and challenging the state forces to control and contain a truly mobile protest. Heading these caravans at all times was a thick crowd of motorcycle taxis working as scouting vanguards, collectors of information on the army's and police's movements, and feeders of directives between the front-lines and the leaders' truck. In this phase of the protest, the drivers not only operated as political mobilizers, inciting city dwellers to come out, join the protesters, or just show their support, and as mobile political messages, transforming their vests, bodies, and bikes into itinerant boards, but also as physical and informational mobilizers, literally making the protest mobile.

The second time I met Oboto, after I tried in vain to look for his number in every jacket, bag, and pair of slacks I owned, was on April 26th 2010, more than a month later. Since last time we had seen each other the Red Shirts' mobilization had changed. The protesters had abandoned their mobile strategies and, after a violent confrontation with soldiers on April 10th, they had taken over the commercial heart of the city. If movement had been the central strategy for the first month of protest, now it was barricades and blockages that filtered and modulated the circulation of people, goods, and information. An area of four square kilometers had been sealed off by the Red Shirts, protected by intricate bamboo barricades patrolled by hordes of motorcycle taxi drivers and fierce-looking protesters. On April 26th, the asphalt underneath the

barricades was sticky, covered in petrol that leaked from the car and truck tires speared onto bamboo sticks, ready to be ignited in case of an attack. From the holes in this amateur barricade protesters stared at the other side of the street, trying to read the army's movements. Outside the area, motorcycle taxi drivers rode around and regularly reported to the barricades on soldiers' activities.

The barricades, which sealed the area occupied by the Red Shirts, gave materiality to the limits of the protest area, where alternative spatial practices had taken the place of urban transit, reshaping the rhythms of urban life in Bangkok. People walked in the middle a major traffic artery, slowly moving toward Bangkok's main commercial hub. It now took half an hour to reach the center of the protest, stretching the usual transportation time tenfold. The atmosphere was calm and joyful, with food being cooked, and the usual protesters clapping to leaders' speeches. I passed small stalls selling food, books, slippers, CDs. While street-vendors are normally present in this area negotiating their presence in the rare and heavy policed interstitial spaces between retail shops and transportation routes, their carts were now conquering the street, entering the road pavement, becoming its foci instead of carefully occupying left-over niches. Motorcycle taxi drivers were also reclaiming a similar centrality in the area, now operating not only as unique transportation providers but also directing traffic, taking over the roles of traffic police officers with whom their life is in constant negotiation. Physical and economic mobility was not stopped in the area, but its pace had been taken over and modulated by the very people who otherwise invisibly mediate them.

At the core of this reclaimed area was the Ratchaprasong intersection, a neuralgic node of capitalist circulation, iconic space of transit and middle-class consumption in Bangkok. The intersection featured the biggest shopping mall in the country, up-scale hotels, the largest clothing whole-sale market in the city, and a prime open air shopping and entertainment plaza. Since the protesters had occupied the area, all of them shut down, marking an epochal disruption of capitalist flows in the city. Above it sat the nexus of Bangkok's Skytrain—Siam Square station—the only cross-platform interchange of the whole elevated transportation network, normally serving between forty and fifty thousand passengers each day. Now the platform was empty as the Skytrain had been blocked, following the protesters' threat to occupy it.

A disorienting stillness occupied a space where continuous flow is the norm. In the middle of the intersection, normally traversed by traffic, a huge stage rested, broadcasting its sounds into crowded four-lane streets where human voices could rarely be heard before the protest. On top of the stage a large banner declared, in English, "Protesters Not Terrorists." Underneath, a larger squared banner showed a fighter with open hands, similar to Zapatista's stencil art, topped by a white inscription, "*phrai*" (commoners, serf). On the grounds in front of nearby shopping malls the crowd was instead more dispersed. People sat on the pavement and listened distractedly. Others moved around searching for a space for the night, in an endless motion. Some walked with chairs, some laid down mats, stopped their carts, and renegotiated space with the protesters who had been here all day long. A few meters away from them wet laundry dried in the sun on the handrails of the Skytrain stairs, in front of a small plastic shack adorned by beef jerky, hanging from a rope tied between an advertisement board and a street light. On the other side of the street, three young models overlooked the crowd from huge advertisement boards. The three graces carried the names Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Versace.

As dusk approached, I strolled through the sea of protesters who came to join the movement after their working hours. As I walked in the crowd I saw Oboto's face broadcasted through the half dozen big screens scattered around the newly formed plaza. "The 200,000 motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok are here to help and support the Red Shirts," he reassured the crowd, standing straight in the middle of the stage. I walked to the backstage and saw him stepping down small iron stairs. Oboto was wearing his usual vest, but no sunglasses and mask this time. As he was juggling conversation between protest leaders and two other drivers, Oboto greeted me and introduced me to them. "They work as personal guards to the Red Shirts leaders. You know," he stared at me. "If you want to get out fast, motorcycle taxi drivers are your best choice." The drivers' mobility and knowledge of the city, which they have acquired over years of operations, make them central to the internal functioning of the protest, and its invaluable allies. "Everybody wants us to be on our side" he added "we know how to move, how to get out nobody has our knowledge of the city. We are the owners of the map." He laughed, raising his eyebrows.

Chapter 6: Burning Red Desires

> Men do not fight or die for tons of steel, or for tanks and atomic bombs. They aspire to be happy, not to produce.
>
> *Henry Lefebvre,* Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. I

On May 19th 2010, the Royal Thai Army deployed tanks and war weapons to disperse the thousands of Red Shirt protesters who had taken over the commercial center of Bangkok demanding democratic elections and an end to political and economic double-standards in Thailand. In the two months leading up to that day, protesters had effectively transformed the Ratchaprasong intersection from a center of up-scale consumption into a national political arena. By May 20th, when the violence stopped, at least 92 people had been killed and more than 2000 injured filled Bangkok's hospitals. 7-Eleven shops, bank branches, the Stock Exchange of Thailand, as well as Central World, the biggest shopping mall in the country, were set on fire, filling the air with a pungent smell of burned plastic and stagnant water. The intersection, a theater of violence and the location of the protest camp for the previous month, was now empty, bird twits echoing through the deserted roads.

After weeks of occupying these streets and controlling transportation through them, motorcycle taxi drivers had left the area, taking advantage of their profound knowledge of the city's shortcuts and backdoors, to disappear before fist of the military clenched around the protesters. A few meters away from the burning shopping complex a crowd of Red Shirts, driven to mobilize by a multitude of aspirations and demands, sat in silence in the National Police compound, lining up to be filed.

In the late afternoon of May 21st, after an endless 24 hours waiting to find out what their destiny would be, police officers moved the protesters to bus and train stations from where they were finally allowed

to return home. I boarded one of these trains heading to the northeastern province of Udon Thani[1] where I planned to spend some days with the defeated protesters and meet Adun, who had gone back to his village a few days before, giving in to his wife's pleas to get away from the explosive situation in Bangkok.

On the train I met Id, a man in his fifties from Korat province.[2] Id sat in third class with the head in his hands, passing his knotty fingers into fluffy grey hair. His swollen eyes stared the emptiness over my shoulders. His hands, frantically caressing his head, revealed the marks of a rural upbringing but also suggested a softness untypical of rural workers. Like many others in the train, Id was trying to come to terms with what had happened in the past months of protest and the situation in which the last dramatic days had left them. As the train departed, cutting through a dark city emptied by the imposed curfew, Id broke the silence. "Democracy is justice (*prachāthippatai khư̄ khwāmyuttitham*)," he began, explaining his reasons for shutting down his small barbershop in Korat to join the protest in Bangkok. "For the most part we don't have legal, political and educational justice. It is a matter of opportunity (*`ōkāt*), and double standards (*sǭng māttrathān*). As a consequence" he continued "we have to come and fight for our kids, for our nephews, for the population at large." These words resonated with those I heard almost every day among motorcycle taxi drivers, voices that lamented their long-standing exclusion from the legal, political, and economic opportunities that are available to the rich and the powerful but seem to constantly escape them, and keep escaping their children. Ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra had started to hear these voices out and the military coup which removed him in 2006 had, in their view, once again hushed them.

Listening to Id grievances I asked him about life in the Isan he grew up in, before the accelerated neoliberal transformation of the 1990s and the 1997 crisis (Bello, et al. 1998: 261; Jackson 1999; Pasuk and Baker 2000). Id recounted his days growing up in his small village wooden house crowded by his grand-parents, parents, and five siblings a few hundred meters away from a small rice field and a forest which provided for most of their food. He narrated of a simple but hard life, of regular days made more exciting,

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[1] For a more detailed treatment of this train ride see (Sopranzetti 2012)
[2] The city of Korat, officially known as Nakhon Ratchasima, traditionally marked the fuzzy boundary between the Lao and Siamese territories. The city is often referred to as the "gateway to Isan" for its strategic geographic position along transportation routes, both streets and railways, ascending to the northeastern plateau.

when he was a teenager, by the arrival of politicized university students who came at first to open local schools and, driven by political repression, ha later run into the forest and took up armed struggle. He told a common rural story of not having the opportunity to study beyond elementary school and entering a life of daily wages. He recounted his dream of using his hands not only to transplant rice but also to cut hair. Following his dream, he became an apprentice hair-dresser in town until he opened his own barber shop in 2004, during Thaksin's premiership. "Compared with when I was a kid, [now] we have everything in the countryside. We have motorcycles, TV, cell phones. Now things are better than 20 years ago. We have asphalted streets; we have electricity, everything…" Id said before stepping into a long silence. "Life today, however, is harder." Intersecting discussions on relative poverty with the hierarchy of the Thai political and temporal landscape under the discourse of *phatthanā* (development), he explained: "The whole world has developed and Isan too. But we are slower than Bangkok so we remain behind. We know in which direction the world is going, we just can't follow it. My father did not study at all yet he still had a job, my nephew finished high school and cannot find anything to do. We have new needs, new things we want. The whole world is developing, we must follow that development. Cell-phones for instance, we never had them 20 years ago, but now you cannot work without them. The government of Abhisit is slowing us down, they want use to remain undeveloped villagers (*chao baan mai phatthanā*). They call us stupid and as a result they take whatever they want, it is their mind-set (*withī khit*)."

Id and many others Red Shirt protesters I encountered during my fieldwork in Bangkok and in Isan villages reacted to the dominant spatio-temporal narrative that I explored in chapter 3 which frames Thai poor and the rural population as backward while actively keeping them behind, both discursively and economically. They did so by endorsing capitalist consumption and access to resources and services as a way forward, a necessary step to participate in the development of the nation and keep pace with it. In their view, the present government's depiction of their basic needs and desires as the result of Thaksin's populist "handouts" and of capitalist greed was offensive, dismissive, and an attempt to keep them behind. Abhisit Vejjajiva, they felt, was curbing these desires, framing them as superfluous and unnecessary. For Id, as for many of the drivers, the desires for the commodities he refers to—motorcycles, TVs, and cell phones that are

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rapidly saturating villages in Isan—are not just dreams of participating in capitalist voracity or gifts of a patron but tools of connection, technologies of economic, physical, and informational mobility. As such, these objects become necessary tools for those excluded from the rapidly developing Thai capital to create and preserve connections required to keep up with the pace of domestic and global capital—be them keeping in contact with their families, learning English, or being able to mobilize their products. For instance, without cell-phones or motorcycles workers like motorcycle taxi drivers would be prevented to perform their activity. Dismissing their desires to acquire such commodities and services either becomes, as Id argued, a form of oppression that goes well beyond limiting their consumption but reveals a larger system of injustice and double standards. It was this perception, situated in the existing infrastructure of mobilization I explored in last chapter, to support the Red Shirts' collective actions. In order to understand this phenomenon, therefore, we need to explore how these desires came into being in Thailand, how they came to be seen as needs, and how different government where seen as fostering or limiting them. I do so by reconstructing the development of those desires over the last three decades in relation to the local restructuring of capitalism, first toward Fordist mass production and mass consumerism and then along post-Fordist lines, with the emergence of the individualized entrepreneur and consumer. From there I analyze how, since the 1997 crisis, those desires became a terrain of political struggle, a space for the creation of electoral consensus and eventually shaped Red Shirts' vision of the world and political subjectivities.

Cashing in on desires

Fordist capitalism emerged globally after the Second World War as a new form of routinized and intensified labor organization with the purposed of increasing production while mass fostering consumption. The rationale behind this new contract between labor and capital was the transformation of workers into consumers who could create a mass demand for commodities necessary for economic growth. In other words, if the mass of the workers could also become mass of consumers the threat of crisis of over-production, individuated by Karl Marx as a weakness of capitalism, could be dispelled. This implied both a

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new social contract, in which waged labor should be better reattributed in order to provide workers with buying power, and the manufacturing of new desires for commodities. This objective, as the marvelous documentary the Century of the Self carefully reconstructs (Curtis 2002), was clear, and so stated. As Paul Mazur, one of the first non-family employees to work for Lehman-Brothers, declared after the 1929 crisis, the plan was to "shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old have been consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America, man's desire should overshadow his needs" (Curtis 2002). This was done, with the help of psychoanalytic theory, by connecting consumers' behaviors to their deeper desires and by imbuing commodities with meanings well beyond their function. It was not the object that the workers needed to desire, but the lifestyle that those objects stood for. The newly developed advertisement industry was in charge of creating this shift. And creating they did, across the globe.

In Thailand, this training was part of the USA involvement in the region during the Cold War. Starting from the late 1950s, under the new episteme of *phatthanā,* Fordism expanded in the country. Development, an ideal goal of Sarit's government, revolved around the new worker/consumer, a "modern" citizen who lived by the slogan "work is money, money is work that gives happiness." (Suwanlaong 2006: 129). Once again the advertisement industry was central to the creation of this subject and the stimulation of his desires. Between 1963 and 1965, agencies from Japan and the USA opened branches in Thailand. By 1967, the country had its own Advertising Association and the industry grew exponentially in the next three decades. Exactly during the same period, the country, and particularly Bangkok, saw a rapid diffusion of shopping malls, the temples of Fordist mass consumption (Peeradorn 2007) and the cathedrals of the new society of ever-desiring mass consumers. Mass standardized goods flooded Thai households, beginning from Bangkok and rapidly spreading throughout the country.

Worldwide, everyday life became the new frontier of capitalist expansion, a territory to be colonized through mass production and advertisement (Debord 1970). Such colonized reality as Henry Lefebvre has described in his *Critique of Everyday Life*, revolves around a consumer society that is

based upon mass consumption and massive production of needs. [In this system] the manufacturers of consumer goods do all they can to manufacture consumers. [...] The consumer does not desire. He submits. He has 'strangely' motivated 'behavior patterns'. He obeys the suggestions and the orders given to him by advertising, sales agency or the demands of social prestige [...] The circuit from need to desires and from desires to need is constantly being interrupted or distorted. These 'orders' from outside become subtly abstract fragments or absurdly concrete 'motivations'. Desires no longer correspond to genuine needs; they are artificial. (Lefebvre 2008, Vol III: 24)

As Sunate Suwanlaong has argued in her study of contemporary Thai consumerism, the creation of these desires was achieved by attaching and associating the commodity "with emotions or with one's social aspirations" (Sunate 2006). Since the 1980s in Thailand, she showed, "the task of advertising thus becomes not only to inform the consumer of the availability of a particular product on the market, but to build and expand his need for that product" (Sunate 2006: 155-156). The results were stark and created the mass-consumption and mass spending bubble that crashed with the 1997 crisis. That, however, did not bring an end to the manufacturing of consumers and desires in Thailand, quite the contrary.

This process became only more prominent in the post-crisis period, it just adopted different strategies. Since the crisis Thai capitalism entered a post-Fordist phase. This meant firstly a reorientation of the locus of accumulation away from industrial production toward the service economy and the financialization of economic life. Simultaneously, mass production, which in the previous Fordist economy was predicated upon the mass consumer/worker, was now reoriented toward individualized, flexible, and less secure working arrangements, as we saw in the case of many motorcycle taxi drivers who previously worked in urban factories and took up this occupation since the crisis. This individualization was predicated upon a new form of control, one that aimed at submitting "the living body of the worker, not only as a bearer of nerves and muscles, but also of more general social attitudes, intellectual abilities and powers" (Commisso

2006: 171). It meant, in other words, not only changing their relations as workers and consumers but also reconstructing them as new individual entrepreneurial subjects in every aspect of their lives.

When it comes to motorcycle taxi drivers, their position as workers was transformed, as I have shown, through the introduction of a language of "freedom" and "entrepreneurship," which both emancipated them from the monotonous discipline of industrial production and fixed work-days and lured them into accepting reduced rights and individualizing their relations of production. This individualization, however, did not occur only with regards to labor. A parallel shift, in fact, has characterized post-Fordist consumption. Together with the raise of the figure of the individual entrepreneur, sponsored by Thaksin's rethoric and policies, consumers desires were also reframed not any more as the expression of the mass worker/consumer but of individualized entrepreneurs/consumers one that was central to the construction of their subjectivity. The standardized mass consumer, central to Fordist economies, has been substituted by individualized consumers (Amin 1994), desiring products that do not just fulfill generalized desires but also hold the promise of expressing an owners' individual identity, to represent them.[3] Consumption, in other words, became an expression of their social attitudes, intellectual abilities and powers.

New financial mechanisms, however, were needed to support this revived consumption. If during the Fordist period, consumption was supported by increases in wages, since 2001 relied on the expansion of personal debt. As the corporate sector experienced poor performance after the crisis, financial institutions shifted their lending strategies toward personal loans. Credit card and leasing companies started to play a more prominent role in the consumer credit market (Thitima 2006). As an effect, household debt grew exponentially. Between 1994 and 2000 it had increased modestly from 52,001 baht per household to 68,405. Since the beginning of the economic recovery household debt jumped to 82,485 in 2002, rose to 104,571 in 2004 (26.8 % increase since 2002) and kept growing to 118, 568 in 2007 and expanded since them to an alarming 13.6% per (Forbes 11/04/2013). The economic recovery, in other words, was achieved by jump-starting the market and cashing on people desires, not by increasing their real buying power but by granting

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[3] Apple has managed, maybe better than any other corporation, this post-Fordist consumption modality, making its product into a status symbol and a way to declare the owners is, indeed, "a Mac person".

them access to credit. This mechanisms were not specific to Thailand, but characterize contemporary post-Fordist capitalism world-wide. The expansion of personal debt, in Thailand as in the United States or Europe, became necessary to foster consumers' desires while also cutting wages. As Costas Douzinas has argued in his recent study of contemporary Greece, "Post-Fordist economy of services treat people everywhere as desiring and consuming machines" (Douzinas 2013: 9) and debt became the fuel these machines ran on.

While these mechanism have been carefully studied, together with the centrality of the creation and restructuring of desires to contemporary capitalism, few authors have reflected on the significance of those desires for political mobilization— a significance voiced by Id on our train ride. Desires, in fact, have often been dismissed, as we saw in Lefebvre's words, by both conservative and radical thinkers on the basis of their "artificial nature." The same has happened in the context of Thailand where self-righteous Bangkok elites, as well as a number of Thai public intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa and Prawase Wasi, have referred to these desires as effects of "globalization," "un-Thai," emblems of the "un-genuine" nature of rural and urban poor' political demands, or disruptions to the "traditional self-reliance" of village life. Thai Marxist scholars have also been quick to reject the desire for commodities and services as an oppressive form of false-consciousness or an ill-informed market practice of the uneducated *chāo bān* (villagers). Both groups, in other words, have seen these desires as illegitimate, because artificial. In particular the political forces behind the Abhisit government dismissed them as externally created by the corrupt populism of Thaksin Shinawatra.

Portraying these desires as "artificial"—as opposed to an abstract and romantic idea of "authenticity" that often sips into both Thai conservative and radical discourses—provides a problematic ground from which to dismiss their political significance. Just as the artificial and imagined nature of nationalist passions does not make them less real, significant, and effective in rallying political passion and participation (Anderson 1983), the same can be said of these desires. After all, as Marx himself stated in opening Capital, "the commodity is, first of all, […] a thing […] which satisfies human need of whatever kind. The nature of these needs, whether they arise, for example, from the stomach or from the imagination, makes no difference." (Marx, et al. 1906, Vol I: 1)

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Even if we accept the dominant Thai discourse—and I do not—that these desires are artificial, and without material basis, they can still have very real and significant political effects. Therefore, instead of preoccupying ourselves with justifying the legitimacy of these desires or dismissing them as false consciousness, I propose to analyze their historical emergence in post-1997 crisis Thailand, beginning with the extreme electoral success of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his policies.

Unleashing Desires: the Shinawatra legacy.

Thaksin Shinawatra was elected prime minister of Thailand in January of 2001 with a solid majority and an ambitious plan to reform Thai politics and society. The son of a politically connected middle-class family in Chiang Mai,[4] Thaksin had broken into the business world in the late 1980s, acquiring a large portion of the national mobile communication sector through personal connections and state contracts. The 1997 economic crisis left his businesses largely untouched, with less liquidity but in a stronger market position. Aside from strengthening his domination over telecommunications, the crisis marked a major turning point in Thaksin's political career. On July 14th 1998, after a series of unimpressive performances in ministerial positions, [5] he founded the Thai Rak Thai (TRT) party, and went on to become the first ever Thai prime minister to serve a full term and be reelected with an unprecedented absolute majority. The new party, under the slogan "Think New, Act New, for all Thais," ran, for the first time in Thai history even by his opponents' estimations, with a clear political platform. Soon renamed "Thaksinomics" (Looney 2004), this platform emerged in opposition to the neo-liberal policies that Chuan Leekpai had adopted after the 1997 crisis.

Central to Thaksinomics was a significant expansion of the government's role in promoting economic growth and managing its social consequences (Pasuk 2004). Stepping away from the deflationary and neo-liberal policies sponsored by the IMF, which had failed to fix the after-effects of the 1997 crisis,

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[4] His family background has been carefully bent by Thaksin and often transformed in his self-narration into a struggling lower class environment.

[5] Thaksin had unimpressively held three short ministerial positions, once as minister of foreign affairs and twice as deputy prime minister, between 1994 and 1997 and destroyed his first party, Chamlong Srimuang's Phalang Dhamma.

Thaksin understood that economic growth required the government to foster consumption by providing easy access to credit and protecting national businesses (Pasuk and Baker 2008). This new agenda, at least for most of Thaksin's first term as prime minister, seemed to satisfy both domestic capitalist forces—scared by the "opening" of the Thai markets to global capitals advocated by the IMF—and the large rural and urban masses who were concerned with growing economic difficulties and the decline of state services after the crisis.

After a largely successful first term, in which the TRT absorbed all its allied parties, Thaksin was re-elected in 2005 by a landslide, with a new slogan—"The heart of TRT is the people"—but a consistent political platform. His second mandate, however, was short lived. After a series of protests which cornered him to declare new elections in early 2006, which the Abhisit's Democrat Party boycotted, the Royal Thai Army, under the command of royalist Gen. Sonthi Boonyaratklin,[6] rolled tanks into Bangkok on September 19th while Thaksin was in New York. The ousted Prime Minister remained in exile and the democratic phase that had started in Thailand with the May 1992 protests was brought to a halt by the tenth successful coup since the fall of the absolute monarchy in 1932. Justifying "toppling democracy" (Thongchai 2008) with "toppling Thaksin"(Kasian 2006), the coup-makers effectively offered Thaksin a new political life, transforming the deposed authoritarian prime minister into the most grotesque of democratic heroes.

During his premierships, in fact, Thaksin had shown a tendency to authoritarianism, a poor human rights record, and a low tolerance for criticism. He violently dismissed and often silenced any form of dissent, coming from journalists, NGOs activists, or public intellectuals. In the new social contract proposed by his government criticism was seen as illegitimate, anti-national, and potentially a betrayal of that contract. In this sense Thaksin was a truly populist leader. Given his enormous popular and electoral support, he argued, every action he took, even if illegal or questionable, had to be accepted and could not be scrutinized.[7] Once this popular support was silenced by the coup, however, Thaksin became a symbol of the military suppression of

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[6] The appointment of Sonthi to army chief in 2005, under the pressure of director of Privy Council Prem, has been retrospectively individuated multiple times by Thaksin as the biggest mistake in his life.
[7] This became clear since the first days of his premiership during his trial for hiding assets only to become more evident and vocalized in the case of the extra judiciary killings during the controversial "war on drugs" or the bloody handling of the southern insurgency.

democratic politics, a man whose aspirations and reforms were, similarly to what happened to rural citizens in Id's word, blocked and slowed down by state forces.

The figure of Thaksin Shinawatra has generated unprecedented debate and divisions both in Thai society and among scholars of Thailand. Over the course of his two premierships, former friends and patrons became his archenemies and harsh critics would be found marching in the streets dressed in red shirts as Thaksin's face shone from posters and screens around them. Journalists, public intellectuals, opponents and supporters described him alternately, or simultaneously, as a populist handing money to the poor, a commoner from the countryside vindicating centuries of Bangkok's domination, a neoliberal media tycoon protecting the interests of big businesses, and a developmentalist leader with a proclivity for authoritarianism. Other observers defined him as a breath of fresh air in the democratization of Thailand, a republican at heart, one main factor behind the re-politicization of the Thai army, the first Thai politician to develop and implement holistic policies for the poor, and a profit-minded capitalist who turned to politics only to expand his wealth and power (Chareonwongsak 2006; Funston 2009; Thitinan 2005). Thaksin himself contributed to this confusion with chameleonic policies and speeches. As Pasuk and Baker have summarized:

> In 1999 he presented himself as a spearhead of pro-business modernization. By 2004, he had espoused a one-party populism in opposition to liberal democracy. In 2009, he called for a revolution against the privileged. […] He has been surrounded by advisers putting ideas and words in his mouth. He has been open to the forces of a society undergoing jolting change. As a man of no real principles, ethical and political, he has reflected the forces swirling around him. (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 354)

Astute receptor of these forces, Thaksin leaned heavily on his advisors' expertise to crack electoral politics by balancing authoritarian leadership with an almost obsessive reliance on marketing techniques. As a shrewd businessman, Thaksin knew that mapping and satisfying people's desires would be the central pillar of his

government, his business success, and his personal political endurance, well after his deposition by the military Council for Democratic Reform (CDR).

It was precisely on these desires, which he unleashed and legitimatized, that Thaksin cashed in, both as a businessman and as a politician. Two years before his first premiership, he told his party assembly that their "party members roamed the countryside and villages to listen to the needs and desires of the people" before outlining their platform. As Nidhi Eoseewong, a leading Thai public intellectual, has argued, "Think new, act new' [the Thai Rak Thai slogan] is just somebody taking the dreams of Thai society and making them into policy" (Choi 2002: 9), and no one better than Thaksin knew how to sense the unfulfilled popular demands for more goods, services, and a more understanding political leadership (Choi 2002: 45). Under his leadership capitalism thrived and consumption rates returned to pre-1997 crisis levels two years into Thaksin's first premiership and continued to grow in the following two.

At the core of Thaksin's vision was the expansion of capitalism through the promotion of national capital, fostering of consumption, and the introduction of social provisions for the masses (e.g. universal health, access to credit), a model that resembled Singaporean state capitalism more than neo-liberal democracies.[8] In a speech to police officers, he explained: "capitalism has targets but no ideals, while socialism has ideals but no targets [therefore] we need to combine the best of each […] I'm applying socialism in the lower economy, and capitalism in the upper economy" (Pasuk and Baker 2009: 342). In other words, Thaksin's state capitalism understood the market to operate freely only under the strict control of the state, not outside it, as traditionally presented by neo-liberal discourse.[9] Thai Rak Thai's agenda shared with neoliberalism the discourse of free markets, the use of the language of business to understand the operations of public administration, and the reframing of citizens as consumers and entrepreneurs but, unlike classical neo-liberals, Thaksin believed that the responsibility for making entrepreneurs thrive and clients satisfied did

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[8] Largely this new configuration of the relation between state and capital is expanding throughout East and Southeast Asia, driven by the success of the Chinese economy. Ian Bremmer's book "The End of Free Market" provides an analysis of the expansion of this model, intrinsically alternative to Western neoliberalism (Bremmer 2010).

[9] I here refer to the neo-liberal discourse because, as many others have shown (Ferguson 2009; Graeber 2007), in practice neo-liberal "free markets" are often controlled by the state, in a way or the other, yet are discursively presented as operating according to their own rules and dynamics.

not fall into the invisible hand of the market but in the strong hands of the state. Under this protective umbrella, Thaksin unleashed capitalist desires, particularly those voiced by classes that were traditionally excluded from the capitalist feast: the rural masses and the urban poor (Sopranzetti 2014). If for Thaksin these desires were nothing more than a way to restart the stagnant Thai economy after the 1997 crisis by expanding the reach of capitalism, for the recipients of his policies, they provided a language in which to articulate their demands for full inclusion in the national economic, social, and political system.

The motorcycle taxi drivers were among the groups Thaksin's policies were designed to benefit.[10] Adun liked to repeat this point and stress the role of Thaksin into raising this consciousness among the drivers during our long, uncomfortable, and often drunken twelve-hours long train rides between Bangkok and his village in Udon Thani province. On a trip back for rice transplanting season, he told me:

> Thaksin showed us that we were important people, that we were part of the economy and that, as tax payers, we had the right to be respected and supported by the bureaucracy. After all who pays the bureaucrats stipend, desks, and computer? Us. So they need to accommodate our requests, they need to respect us.

Adun, as many other motortaxi drivers I have talked to, saw two sets of reforms as central to Thaksin's support of their entrepreneurial activities: a formalization of their relationship with state bureaucrats; and a deeper inclusion of the drivers in capitalist economic activities. The first reform, as I have analyzed in Chapter Four, reconfigured the relationship between citizens and state officials, reversing traditional relations of power. While traditionally citizens had to approach bureaucrats with the begging attitude of a feudal subject, Thaksin—using the capitalist language of providers, clients, and ownership—advocated for the reverse, a system in which bureaucrats have to address citizens with respect and deference. As Pin, one of the drivers' political organizers, told me:

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[10] In a very famous summary of Thaksin's autobiography that was posted as an electoral manifesto around the country, Thaksin stated: "Even today, my friends range from hired motorcycle drivers to the presidents of great countries."

In the past, when a sheriff walked into a house, we have to give him a wai first, when you go to apply for an ID, we have to wai from a clerk. But when Thaksin came, he changed this: a clerk has to wai first because a clerk's salary is paid by people's tax. Government official's salaries are paid by people. Government officials are not our bosses; in fact they are our employees. Thaksin told us about this.

Thaksin framed this reversal in the capitalist language of consumption, rather than that of rights. In other words the population deserved respect as stakeholder and clients, not as citizens. If "popular participation was limited to a 'consumption' mode" (McCargo and Ukrist 2005: 14) then, self-evidently to a mobile phone tycoon, their desires had to be satisfied by the sales person. To the drivers' ears, however, the Prime Minister was not just offering a product but rather he spoke of inclusion in the Thai state and respect from its officials; he spoke of an end to bureaucratic indifference and oppression; he spoke of the legitimacy of their participation, both in the nation and in the market.

The second intervention, presented under the official label of "war on dark influence," formalized and regularized the operations of motorcycle taxis. Rather than romanticize poverty, Thai Rak Thai repositioned it as a socio-economic position characterized by a lack of state support for the economic activities of low-income entrepreneurs and a constraint on their innate economic dynamism. To unleash this potential meant, in Thaksin's vocabulary, recognizing the motorcycle taxi drivers as capable economic actors to whom the state had to offer a structure of inclusion—namely registration, formalization, and access to a system of credit, taxes, and social security. In other words, the reform framed the drivers' activities as a fount of entrepreneurship, with the often contradictory political significance of this label. Once again, for the drivers this meant something different from what Thaksin expected. If for the prime minister they were to become entrepreneurs and consumers, the drivers claimed a role as stakeholders and citizens. It was this shift, as we saw in chapter 4, to provide them with the collective organizational structure that was central to their

mobilization to support the implementation of this reform and to their later participation in the Red Shirts protests.

As an effect of these two reforms, the drivers developed a taste of the possibilities that a government relying on their electoral support could bring to their lives, even if just as unleashed aspirations framed in the language of consumption and entrepreneurship. Over time, the drivers not only adopted Thaksin's discourse of entrepreneurship and consumption but went beyond it and, using a city-wide network that emerged during their formalization, morphed it into larger demands for social, economic, and political equality and participation. Whether or not part of the prime minister's intention, his premiership did not just unleashed capitalist desires for commodities but also fostered these demands. In this sense, many of the drivers saw the attack to Thaksin as an attack to these demands. When Thaksin was removed from his position on September 19th 2006 by the hands of a military clique, the desires that he contributed to unleash did not just disappear—rather, they gained momentum, this time championed by the will of popular masses, and not an authoritarian tycoon.

Taming Desires: the post-coup unelected governments.

While scholars in and beyond Thailand have largely under-theorized the political significance of desires, their potential to stir popular mobilization did not go unnoticed by the royal and military establishment that deposed Thaksin. Since his first election in 2001, army officials, Bangkok's elite, and multi-millionaire royalty had been working to suppress popular desires, portraying them as deleterious greed. The popular book "*Phrarāchā phū pen mɯng nai lōk*" (The King who is Number One in the World), printed in 2006 for the sixtieth anniversary of the King's reign, offers a fairytale-styled popularization of this discourse. The cartoon narrates:

In a far off place, the king came across a village that had almost no one living there. "Where has everyone gone?" the king asked the small group of remaining villagers. The villagers answered their king: "A demon of the dark called Greed came and visited and asked the

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people to leave the village. Most of the villagers abandoned the village and went to live in the City of Extravagance". The king thought for a moment and then gave the villagers a radiant seed. The villagers took the seed and planted it and it grew into a radiant tree that grew large branches and spread its radiance in all directions. The king told the villagers that the radiant tree is called Sufficiency. The radiance of the tree shone to far off places, as far as the City of Extravagance. And many of those who saw it travelled back to return to their village. (Hewison and Kitirianglarp 2010: 241)

In a single paragraph, decades of rural migrations and personal struggles to obtain better access to resources, education, and commodities are reduced to mere seductions by the "dark demon of Greed" who attracted the passive villagers into the City of Extravagance, otherwise known as Bangkok. It took the glorious King's intervention, and his seed of sufficiency, to persuade the villagers lost in the City of Extravagance to start flocking back home.[11]

The post-coup government led by Gen. Surayud Chulanont attempted to use this "seed of sufficiency" to curb popular demands, with much less fantastic results. On October 24th 2006, thirty-five days after the coup, Surayud formally endorsed "sufficiency economy" (*sētthakit phǭ phīang*), an economic philosophy that had been formulated by the King Rama IX in a famous speech delivered immediately following the 1997 economic crisis. Advocating a scaled-down, moralized economy in which Thais should be "happy with whatever little we have," sufficiency economy represents an amalgam of Buddhist metaphysical repression of desire and nationalist nostalgia for a rural past of self-reliance and communal living.

Revolving around the concepts of moderation, immunity, and ethics, this doctrine offered an alternative view of economic processes that bore little resemblance to either Thaksin's state capitalism or the

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[11] This fable is also a prime example of the duplicity of the national discourse I analyzed in chapter 3 that framed the countryside both as a place of backwardness and corruption and as a place of harmonious returns.

deregulated capitalism that led Thailand into an unprecedented economic crisis in 1997.[12] By echoing Resonating with the call by Bhutan's monarchy to consider gross national happiness (GNH) above gross national product (GNP), sufficiency economics offered a radical corrective to market-driven economic theories and proposed to forego economic growth for the psychological and moral well-being of the nation and its people.

Adopting a widely appealing language of harmony and happiness, sufficiency economy provided national elites with a powerful tool for social control. It presented social harmony and acceptance of existing hierarchies and inequalities as the "moral" behavior of self-sufficiency, and offered a episteme which would legitimize the preservation of class differences (Hewison 2008), disciplining dissent in the name of social harmony (Wah 2004), state's pulling back from provision of resources and services in the name of localism (Ivarsson and Isager 2010), and political conservatism in the name of preserving normalcy (Glassman 2010).

As adopted after 2006, this economic theory operated by rephrasing desires and expectations—unleashed under Thaksin as emblems of entrepreneurial dynamism—as intrinsically un-Buddhist and ultimately un-Thai. Through this discipline popular desires were reframed as illegitimate and immoral and suppressed by the new military government. Peter Calkins, an economist at Chiang Mai University, former Harvard student and Cornell PhD, and main academic collaborator to the Thailand's National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) development of this new theory of sufficient economics provided the clearest statement of the relation between this theory and desires. In an essay called The Sufficiency Economy at the Edge of Capitalism—endorsed by the NESDB as a central reference in understanding the new economic philosophy—Calkins argued:

> Moderation challenges the very first sentence in the Parkin and Bade book—["all economic
>
> questions arise because we want more than we can get"]—by saying that wants are not

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[12] As reported in a booklet published by the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB): "Sufficiency means moderation, reasonableness, and the need of self-immunity for sufficient protection from impact arising from internal and external changes. […]In addition, a way of life based on patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence is indispensable to create balance and be able to cope appropriately with critical challenges, arising from extensive and rapid socioeconomic, environmental, and cultural changes in the world."

unlimited, they can be satisfied. In fact, one will be happier if one can control one's desires. 2500 years ago at Mrigadava Forest in Vanarasi[sic], the Buddha explained that life is full of suffering precisely because we are tempted by the unlimited desires now enshrined in the Western definition of economics; and that the only way to avoid suffering is to avoid greed for things and situations we don't need. (Calkins 2007: 5)

Professor Calkins rejected the dominant discourse of Western capitalism and bridged Buddhist teachings with a vague concept of "moderate economics" to advocate for the economic viability and the unquestionable moral superiority of a model that reconfigured desires for commodities and services as temptations, much like the one voiced by the "demon of the dark called Greed." Whatever Calkins' intentions may have been, the suppression of desires, concealed as a call for more moderate economic practices, became pivotal for the suppression of political and economic forces unleashed during Thaksin's premierships.

The military government, in fact, not only dismissed desires for commodities and services but also implicitly swept away other forms of demands voiced by the rural and urban masses as extravagant, greedy, and damaging to harmonious social living. Behind a rosy language of more equitable, harmonious, and sustainable economic practices, an ultra-conservative agenda was making its way into the Thai political arena and its government's actions. As Andrew Walker has argued in his study of the political implication of sufficiency economy on the rural electorate, "not only were the rural people to be shielded (or excluded) from full and active participation in the national economy but their participation in electoral democracy was delegitimized and the power of their elected representatives was constrained" (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 261). Again, as during Thaksin's premiership, capitalist desires and their repression came to stand in for larger economic, social, and political struggles. Once these desires were effectively rephrased, and their legitimacy questioned, the interim government and the military forces attempted to defuse their political potential.

The military junta endorsement of sufficiency economy was in fact a way to legitimize its power in opposition to Thaksin's "populist" policies which by feeding those desires had, as coup-maker Gen. Surayud declared after his speech declaring the adoption of the sufficiency economy, undermined the morality of local economic and political systems (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 261). This argument was so central to the struggle that, in an unprecedented move to cement the economic doctrine into state policy, sufficiency economy was written into the new 2007 constitution proposed by the military government, requiring future governments to organize state administration and economic policy around its principles.[13] By opposing the former Prime Minister's policies through an appeal to a higher order of morality represented by the king and his sufficiency economy, Surayud retrospectively legitimized the coup as the virtuous act of removing an immoral leader.[14]

Such a legitimation, however, was not enough to guarantee the taming of popular desires and demands. A militarized propaganda machine was set in motion. The ISOC (Internal Security Operation Command), a military division infamous for its violent repression of leftist politics during the Cold War, was resuscitated to advance the philosophy of sufficiency economy. In an attempt to win back the people's support, the army and the ISOC shared responsibilities. While the former focused on businesses and the middle class, the latter played a crucial role in mustering support from people at the grassroots level (Ivarsson and Isager 2010: 208). The new ISOC received a "reward" of 84.3 million baht by the Surayud government and became a central instrument of military propaganda, one that would play a major role in limiting the motortaxi drivers' participation in the Red Shirts protest in 2010. The Center for Poverty Eradication and Rural Development under the Philosophy of Sufficiency Economy was set up in 2007 under the supervision

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[13] In the months before the draft was voted through a referendum, the ISOC was ordered by the coup-maker Gen. Sonthi to use its 700,000 nationwide staff to "promote proper understanding of the constitution" among rural people and to use door-to-door tactics in their campaign to "educate" people, so they would not be "tricked" into rejecting the draft. Despite the military's "educational" campaign, the rural masses of Isan refused to "learn" and, faced with a referendum, rejected the constitutional draft by 62.8%, though it was approved nationally (Nelson 2008).

[14] Moreover, at the same time he was endorsing this rhetoric of a scaled-down economy and "being happy with what you have", the junta behind his government, which went under the name of Council for National Security (CNS), was receiving salary payments totaling 38 million baht a month, six times higher than the payment of the corresponding bodies after the 1991 coup. Moreover, the new "sufficient" government raised the military budget, which had been stable since 1999, by 35% in 2007 and by another 24% in 2008.

of the ISOC. Once again, as during the Cold War, the ISOC presented its operations as an attempt to "educate the population," this time to the principles of sufficiency.

Overall, through the adoption of sufficiency economy, the newly established military government not only legitimized its rise to power but, more largely, initiated a militarized suppression of rural and urban demands. Taming the emerging desires and aspirations that had been so central to Thaksin's unprecedented electoral success was essential for the repression of the political forces that had brought him to power. Leaked documents dating back to a meeting marking Gen Sonthi's retirement in September 2007 reveal the existence of such a calculated plan. In the meeting Sonthi spoke of a deliberate scheme to fight what he called "the war for the people," a struggle similar to the one waged by the same institution against radicals and communists during the Cold War, but which now pit the military and the palace, on one side, against successful elected politicians. In Sonthi's words:

> Whether in the pre-war era, the Cold War era, or the era of capitalist democracy, their activist struggle to win over the people has not changed at all […] They have not lost their inclinations or ideology […] They win over the people through elections in order to take state power and have the ability to make changes they want at an appropriate time. One party, that was founded in 14th July 1998, with a secret organization of this group in the background, is a mix of capitalism and populism […] It is our duty, as soldiers of the King, to understand these matters, to understand the war for the people, both in the era of Cold War and in the era of populism […] So all of us must contest with them to win the grassroots back for the King […] Our most important aim is that all the masses in the territory must be ours.[15]

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[15] This document was leaked in the Pro-Thaksin website www.hi-thaksin.com, as report 0402/513 of the army's Policy and Planning Department in date 26th September 2007. The legitimacy of this document was discussed for a while until General Sonthi himself admitted the validity of the document declaring to the Bangkok Post that the plans were intended to guide the public down the 'proper' path to democracy.

In this struggle for the masses, both sides unsheathed their best weapons: for Thaksin, capitalist desires and pro-poor policies; for the army, a combination of the monarchy's charisma and its repressive measures.[16] Both, however, underestimated the ability of the people they were battling over to absorb the impact of their propaganda and deflect it toward their social, economic, and political objectives.

The popular response to the army's offensive was complex and varied, ranging from ironic dismissal to tepid adoption. Almost nobody I met related to the doctrine behind sufficiency economy: it simply had little to do with their life-experiences, aspirations, and desires for the future. Some more critical drivers felt that it was enacted with the direct objective of limiting their economic, social, and political growth, though these individuals were careful to voice their opinions only in private and confidential settings.

Adun, sitting in a small *sālā* (pavilion) in his village, echoed the voices of the large majority of the drivers I talked to: "What can we do? We went to Bangkok to support our families, to send our kids to school and now they tell us that we should accept our situation, we should accept (*jom rap*) double standards (*sǭng māttrathan*), we should accept (*jom rap*) people looking down on us (*dū thūk*) or we should come back here, to the countryside. If I want to stay in the countryside what could I live on? See, everybody is sitting in front of their houses. There is no water in the field. There is nothing to do. I need to save first to give a good education to my children. I have to buy them shoes, uniforms for school, to have them study English, to buy a computer. With what money? Should I just give them the same life I had, working in a field for no profit, without the opportunity to study? What should I do?" Adun let these questions answered, leaving space to the sound of the country around us. One of his neighbors, also a motorcycle taxi driver in Bangkok who sat next to us filling the day with glass after glass of rice whisky added, "We struggle every day, we fought all of our lives. Now we fight the government because we don't accept (*mai jom rap*) double standards anymore. We are done with accepting. We've had enough of people ordering us around. We want democracy and we want the opportunity to choose (*`ōkāt lȳak*) who governs us."

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[16] In reference to this war, Andrew Walker has argued: "In General Sonthi's more militaristic vision, there was a 'war for the people' going on, and the sufficiency economy philosophy had to be used by the army to win the population back from the populist appeal of 'Thaksinomics'" (Ivarsson 2010: 261)

As Adun states, the desires that they see trivialized by the sufficiency economy agenda are not just the capitalist desires advocated by Thaksin, but rather larger desires for social, economic, and political participation, be they through formal education, English fluency, access to the Internet, or democratic representation. Caught between dreams of a return to an idealized pre-capitalist village life and the desire for economic, social, and political advancement, people like Adun are faced daily with the impossibility of fulfilling either fairy tale. In this sense, the discourse of sufficiency has contributed to the isolation of the rural electorate and the urban poor from the unelected governments of Gen. Surayud and, after December 2008, Abhisit Vejjajiva. Both governments, as Id told me on the train, represented a step back from the changes initiated by Thaksin and contributing to the impossibility to fulfill the desires that the ousted prime minister had legitimized and sheltered. It was this step back, and its effects on their daily struggles, that turned millions of people across the country toward the Red Shirts, a movement that promised to express and defend their legitimate request to express political demands, to be treated fairly, and to achieve what Thaksin had promised to them: "*democracy kin dai*," (democracy that you can eat) a democratic system that would also grant their livelihood. Participation in the movement was a way not only to demand commodities and a more understanding political leadership but also to reclaim their rights of inclusion and to demand change, effectively transcending Thaksin's discourse which saw them only as consumers or entrepreneurs. The conflict over the representation and legitimacy of those desires, in fact, opened a space in which Red Shirt supporters could transform them into political demands. It was in this space between unleashed, tamed, and unfulfilled desires that the drivers' political subjectivities emerged and their participation to the Red Shirts clustered. These unfulfilled desires, while generally relevant to the Red Shirts, played a specifically important role in the drivers' politicization. Why was this the case? What was about their position and occupation to make them particularly prone to this "politics of desire"? In order to answer these questions we need to go back to the drivers' everyday experiences and they role in circuits of exchange and circulation in contemporary Thailand.

Mediation and Desires among Motorcycle Taxi Drivers.

During one of the many excruciatingly slow afternoons spent at his station, Adun talked to me at length about a lucrative scheme in which his *win* was involved, when the I-Phone 3 was first released in Thailand in 2009. A shop located in Lad Phrao, on the other side of Bangkok from the group, had received a large shipment of the phones and was selling a limited quantity of only 30 units a day. Each buyer was allowed to purchase no more than one phone, priced at 20,000 baht (660 $). A shop owner in Adun's neighborhood, for whom the local drivers operate as messengers, asked him and his fellow drivers to queue every morning in front of the shop in Lad Phrao and buy as many as they could. For each phone a driver brought back, he would receive 500 baht ($16). The shop owner then sold the phones in his store for 25,000 baht each. The arrangement made the drivers some money, solidified their relationship with a local merchant, and showcased their role as mediators and connectors of the city.

The effects of this mediation, however, did not end at the shop counter: shuttling the costly phones across the city sparked long discussions among the drivers about their own phones. Chatting on the sidewalk while sipping ice-cold beer after a long day of work, Adun and his colleague at the *win* made note of all the features of the iPhone that were nowhere to be found in their outdated machines as well as the unequal distribution of wealth that makes a month of their income insufficient to buy a single phone. "Fuck man." Pond, a twenty-year old driver who always put on a New York Yankees hat when not driving, burst out. "You can do everything with this phone and it's so fast. Music, internet, photos. I get them on my phone but they are so slow. I have to go to an internet point if I want to really get online." The other older drivers, none of which had internet on their phones, spoke of what it meant to be excluded from the Internet sphere. Adun, an eager reader, told them: "You can find everything there, it is like the biggest library in the word and we cannot use it. It is like when we were in school, we had to drop out because our families could not afford it. Same here, we are kept out."

A few weeks later, as we sat with some friends outside Adun's village on the river bank waiting for a fish to nibble at our bait, the same conversations travelled with us to the countryside, now tinged with a sense of personal pride that came with the knowledge of and contact with the new phone. Narrating the story of

the transaction he told two older men who sat with us "there is everything in a small phone. You can do everything with it, take picture, see the weather, find every information. It is like having the whole world in your pocket." The expressed desires for the new product went clearly beyond the necessity of mobile phones as tools of connection into a larger desire to partake in conspicuous consumption and gain the status that come with it. Yet they also offered the drivers a material language to articulate perceptions of inequality and differentiated access. In other words, desires for equal access to commodities and services, and the impossibility of fulfilling them, became a material reminder of larger systems of exclusion and exploitation.

Discussions of this sort are all too common among motorcycle taxi drivers I worked with in Bangkok, given their specific position between urban classes and spaces, but also between the city and the Isan countryside. Their job allows them to access spaces of privilege and wealth from which other lower class urban workers are excluded but also to have direct experience of urban shacks and rural life.[1] Wealthy private houses, glamorous offices, and high-end shops figure in the landscape of their mobility as much as slums, tiny rooms, rural villages and Isan bars. The structure of their labor and mobility, in other words, puts them at a peculiar position in movement between urban classes and spaces that allows them to perceive the inequalities in relation to desires, access, and exclusion in the city. It is precisely their physical and social interstitiality, and the stark perception of class and regional inequalities that they derive from it, that offered them both a daily experience of inequality and a chance to conceptualize it in relation to spaces and objects of privilege that they contribute, together with other migrants and media, to mediate and diffuse into the landscape of Bangkok and the Thai countryside. Mediation, however, is never a frictionless process. As goods, documents, or newspapers passed through the drivers' hands they became objects of desire, providing a material reminder of the larger structural barriers that keep drivers from fully accessing and enjoying services and commodities available to their clients. As these desires circulated, and were internalized—and, as Id said during the train ride, Abhisit Vejjajiva's government of came to be seen as the one who "slows us down"—the inability to fulfill them provided a material language to articulate new forms of political subjectivity. Unfulfilled desires, in other words, morphed into political demands among Red Shirt drivers and allowed them to articulate struggles for social justice and equality. The phenomenology of their labor in the city, with its zigzagging

progression through blocked roads, access to a multiplicity of spaces, and mediation of the exchange of unobtainable commodities did not just help drivers to navigate the urban landscapes and to convert different mobilities one into the other, as I analyzed in Chapter 4, but also shaped their political subjectivities and their emergence as central actors in urban politics. Desires for commodities, such as the iPhone, now familiar yet still unattainable, pushed the drivers to reflect on their political-economic position, initiating a process opposite to the one famously described by Karl Marx as commodity fetishism. The German philosopher showed how commodities conceal and mystify social relations by substituting "definite social relation between men themselves [with] the fantastic relation between things" (Marx, et al. 1906, Vol I: 165). Here, on the contrary, the drivers' alienation from accessing these commodities revealed and demystified social relations of exclusion and exploitation—with regard to consumption rather than production—under which the drivers operate. If for Marx commodities become "products of the human brain [which] appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race" (ibid.), for the drivers unobtainable commodities unveil the social relations that marginalize and cast them away from the promises of both capitalism and democratic politics. In this sense, their experiences of exclusion, both from conspicuous consumption and from access to services reveal their larger exclusion from social and political participation. Their roles as mediators made them only more aware of their exclusion, made even more intolerable by the proximity to privilege and the realization of their role in circulating objects and traversing spaces that will always remain unreachable. This, as Henri Lefebvre has argued, often becomes a push toward social change, as "our awareness of this contradiction becomes more acute, and we find ourselves faced necessarily with a new imperative: the practical, effective transformation of things as they are." (Lefebvre 2008, Vol II: 138)

Everyday realizations, such as the fact that a single phone worth more than one month of your labor and that this condition excludes you from social and economic opportunities, I found, go a long way in raising such awareness among the drivers and supporting their political mobilization around unfulfilled desires. With this I am not arguing that this forms of politics necessarily maintained a revolutionary potential for the drivers nor that it develops into a critique of the capitalist system as such. Rather I am just showin

how the Red Shirt mobilization revolved around this politics of desires, without dismissing it as a form of false consciousness. After all, political mobilization rarely has the abstract and ideological purity that political theorists and critics often would like to see. As Andrew Metcalfe has argued,:

> Working class people are often mythologised as Prometheans, but Hamlet would equally serve as a model. People's midnight ruminations about a daily humiliation they suffer, about the shame they feel, about the claims to honour they would like to make: these too are struggles about class. Whatever people's long term interests, however economically exploited they are, there are personal matters of dignity and identity that demand people's attention on a daily basis, and anyone who does not understand the character of these private class struggles will not be able to understand those carried out in public places. (Metcalfe 1980: 56)

Even orthodox and critical Marxism, which we would expect to be sympathetic to this struggles, has often dismissed similar political actions because they did not fit into their ideal of political struggle as the result of a unified class consciousness. This reluctance has produced an easy dismissal of the myriad personal struggles that claim personal dignity by negotiating demands into existing discursive and material fields (Metcalfe 1988; Thompson 1971), in this case of everyday desires.

Countering this reduction, I argue that legitimate political struggles, much as class in the previous quotation, do not operate just in the abstract world of unified entities but also in the world of people who lead everyday contextual struggles to make ends meet. They pertain to people who work and save to send money back to their families, send their children to decent schools, provide them with tools of physical and informational mobility, and have some extra cash to drink and bet on sports in the weekend. Such aspirational struggles need to be acknowledged and explored, in order to consider their actors not just as faceless members of a class, but as full humans, directed both by collective aspirations and personal desires. Once we question this dogmatic reading, desires for commodities and service and the impossibility to fulfill

them—which Id, Adun, and many other drivers and Red Shirts supporters voiced—can provide a concrete language to challenge existing social inequality, economic exploitation, and political oppression.

The political significance of desires for commodities and services, in this sense, is intrinsic to the logics of post-Fordist capitalism that connects individual consumption to personal identity and value yet, at the same time, generates inequalities that do not allow large numbers of people to partake in this subject construction through consumption. Nonetheless, this configuration acquires specific features in different contexts, products of a contradictory and contingent history. In the case of Thailand, as we saw, these desires have been placed in a recent political history, which this chapter has analyzed, but also into a longer spatial and temporal hierarchy—the discourse of *siwilai* which I explored in Chapter 2—which transformed them into a field of economic and political struggle in contemporary Thailand. Since Chulalongkorn's times, in fact, the ideal figure of the village and the villager—whether living in the countryside or in Bangkok—were positioned in a pre-capitalist and backward past and the city in a capitalist modern present. As we saw, this discourse has played a central role in structuring and justifying economic, social, and political inequality in Thailand. Recently, however, has also indirectly framed capitalist desires as potentially emancipatory forces. The implication of the narrative of *siwilai*, in fact, is that modern commodities and services are an urban phenomenon, while pre-capitalist collective living and a romanticized notion of poverty characterize the pristine rural experience. The implications, however, are deeply contradictory: on one hand, by celebrating poverty and the rural experience as a refusal of capitalism on moral grounds, popular desires for commodities and services are seen as immoral and illegitimate; on the other, positioning poverty and rurality as backwards reframes the fulfillment of those desires as a step toward the present and out of a long history of spatial, social, and political marginalization. In this configuration, desires for commodities such as a phone or a motorcycle can come to represent an act of defiance to the existing social, economic, and political hierarchy and form of exclusion.

Therefore, it was not desires for commodities and services themselves that politicized the drivers, but rather the realization of being trapped in a system that is both fueled by those desires and dismissive of them

as immoral and irresponsible when voiced by rural and urban masses while also making their fulfillment impossible. Concretely, it was not the desire to own an IPhone that made Adun reflect on his exclusion, but rather the impossibility of ever owning one given his socio-economic position that made him aware of such structural limitations.

Thaksin's premiership had, if only discursively, lifted these limitations and showed people who had been largely excluded by the Thai political system the aspirational and material consequences of a government elected by them and dedicated to accommodating their desires. When these desires were crushed by military tanks and larger structures of exclusion, a rosy call to a romanticized past of self-reliance and social harmony could not tame the masses back to the previous status quo and political apathy. Repressed desires, as Deleuze and Guattari have stated, have to potential of "calling into question the established order of a society" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977: 5). The mechanism they set in motion, what they call a "desire-machine" needs demolition in order to be assembled (ibid.) Desire-machines work only through continuous break-downs, and in those they reveal their explosive potential, as the Thai government of Abhisit Vijajjiva would quickly learn. In this sense, the desiring-machine, or more accurately its break-downs, experienced as an impossibility to fulfill those desires, became a force that called for the demolishing of an existing political system. What pushed people to question this established order, in other words, was not desires themselves but their repression. And desires, when repressed or unfulfilled, can heat up, slowly burning inside, eroding their own foundations and even destroying the very objects they long for, along with anyone standing in the way. The Red Shirts protest in 2010 was an example of such an "explosion," to use a word dear to Lefebvre, Deleuze, and Guattari. It was this explosion and the repression that followed it, as fiercely stated by many Red Shirt protesters, that "opened their eyes" (*tham hai koet tā sawāng*) on who their real enemy was.

Burning Red Desires

On November 1st 2006, one-and-a-half months after the military coup and a week after sufficiency economy was endorsed as a policy by the resulting military government, a lonely protest against the new

political order took place. Praiwal Nuamthong, a taxi driver who had driven his car into a military tank at Royal Plaza the day after the coup, hanged himself under a pedestrian flyover on the Vibhavadi-Rangsit Highway, leaving a note opposing the military intervention. A few weeks later three anti-coup groups, composed largely by university students, radicals, and Thaksin supporters organized through personal networks, staged small protests of a few dozen people, which seemed lone screams into the silence of militarized Bangkok. Soon, however, their voices gained volume. By December 10th, Constitution Day, a crowd of few thousand people protested in Sanam Luang, the expansive grounds in front of the Royal Palace. This original nucleus of the Red Shirts, among which motorcycle taxi drivers figured prominently, mobilized against the proposal to draft a new constitution and used this occasion to start forging a more stable network. It was not, however, until June 15th 2007 that the United Front of Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) was created, merging Thaksin's supporters, pro-democracy activists, and radicals. Tellingly, its offices were located in the Imperial World working-class shopping mall, along Lad Phrao road, a space of reachable desires for the people who were to become the movement's urban supporters. From the central offices and a myriad of local committees around the country, Red Shirt organizers feverish started to build the infrastructure of mobilization that I analyzed in the previous chapter.

After a violent confrontation with the Yellow Shirts on September 2nd at the Makkhawan Bridge along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the UDD, at this point still not associated with the color red, halted its rallies, waiting to hear the results of the December 2007 elections, which were easily won by the party they supported, a proxy of Thai Rak Thai led by Samak Sundaravej. Protests, however, revived in May 2008 to defend the right of the pro-Thaksin government to stay in power despite the mounting protests at Government House by the yellow-shirted PAD. Political instability escalated new un-elected government headed by Abhisit Vejjajiva was installed in December 2008, thanks to the defection of twenty-two MPs from Samak's party. Reacting to the new political landscape, the UDD reorganized its forces. The most evident transformation was the adoption of the color red. This choice had to do with the colors on the national flag. The Thai flag is composed of three colors: the central blue, which represents the monarchy; the white that

stands for Buddhism, and the outer red, which symbolizes the nation. Claiming to be the expression of the people, the movement, now known as the Red Shirts, stepped up the conflict.

On March 26th 2009 the Red Shirts set up a permanent protest camp in front of Government House and demanded Abhisit's resignation. On April 8th a crowd of more than 100,000 joined the camp and rallied there and at the adjacent Royal Plaza, while parallel rallies were held in a dozen provincial centers. Overnight, mobility through the transportation hub of the Victory Monument was brought to a halt by a crowd of taxi and motorcycle taxi drivers. Circulation, the quintessential characteristic of capitalist systems, was blocked by the very people who were supposed to operate it. Symptomatic of the importance of motorcycle taxis to these protests were the threats, launched first in 2007 by the chief of the metropolitan police Adisorn Nonsi and then in 2008 by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, to revoke the licenses of those drivers who were seen protesting against the coup or with the Red Shirts. Despite these threats, the drivers continued to play an active role in the protests. On April 11th, a group of Red Shirts broke into the ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) summit being held in Pattaya, effectively bringing the meeting to an end and forcing Thai and foreign heads of state to flee. On April 13th, ten thousand military troops were moved into Bangkok to "clean" the streets and reestablish usual urban flows. In the first serious clash between state forces and Red Shirts around Victory Monument, at least 70 people were injured and the army seemed to have won the confrontation: the protest at Government House dispersed and many observers thought that to be the end of the Red Shirts.

But the UDD merely went underground to reorganize at a deeper level. They rebuilt their local branches, extended their presence in rural Thailand, and trained their members. More than 450 "Red Shirts schools," opened all around the country. A tactic developed by activists in the 1970s, these schools were central to the elaboration of the movements' demands and rhetoric and to merge the three streams that, as I showed in the previous chapter, composed the Red Shirts in 2010: the Thaksinites, the democracy activists, and the radicals.

Early in 2010, the movement reappeared. Several protests attracting thousands of people were held in big cities in Isan. They remained almost completely unreported in the national and international news, but they played a central role into building momentum for the political unrest to come. On March 12th 2010, following a trial to seize Thaksin's personal funds, the Red Shirts' leaders declared the "Million People March." Thousands of protesters from across the nation converged on Bangkok and united with local Red Shirts. A stage was erected at the end of Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the historical road of political protest that connects Sanam Luang to Royal Plaza, respectively home of the Royal Palace and the Thai Parliament. On April 3rd 2010, a second stage was built at the core of Bangkok's central business district, a paradigmatic space of inequality: the Ratchaprasong intersection. The geography of political mobilization in the city was moving away from the old politics of the palace, the military, and the bureaucracy and toward spaces of consumption, desires, and stark inequality.

On April 10th, the Thai Royal Army deployed armed guards and tanks in the Ratchadamnoen area to disperse the protestors. A fierce fight broke open and the armed section of the Red Shirt made its first appearance killing five high rank officers in a grenade attack under the military lines and fencing off the military attack. The failed dispersal left behind 26 dead bodies, including those of the officers. On April 14th the protesters, realizing the difficulties of protecting two different camps, picked up their tents and moved to Ratchaprasong, reorienting the political geography of Bangkok. Established political arenas, such as Sanam Luang and Ratchadamnoen road, though initially adopted by the Red Shirts, were abandoned and the commercial hub around the Ratchaprasong intersection was transformed into a new political arena.

The central area of high-scale hotels and glass skyscrapers covered with brand names, of shopping malls and fancy cinemas was taken over and shut down. Spaces of consumption and desire, from which many protesters had felt excluded, were appropriated and became places of discussion and dwelling. As Veera Musikhapong, one of the leaders of the democratic protest of 1992 and of the Red Shirts told me, "Ratchaprasong is not just a space of shopping malls, it is a symbol. A symbol of inequality and double standards, a symbol of the relation between aristocracy (`ammāt) and commoners (phrai) and now we are

taking over this space to show that commoners can decide for themselves." At stake was not only a symbolic

fight over sites of privilege and exclusion, their blockade and re-appropriation, but also faith in the army's

reluctance to destroy capitalist commodities. Disoriented by the violence that had just occurred in the

Ratchadamnoen area, many protesters turned to these fetishized commodities, and their power to fend off

military offense, for protection. As Sun, a young bookseller who was nearly always present at the protest

sitting in a Maoist shirt behind a small table filled with radical books, from Marx to Jit told me, "the owners

of these shopping malls are the people behind this government and the aristocracy. They don't want the army

to engage in fighting here. They will damage their property. We are safe here, protected by Louis Vuitton's

bags." Once again, instead of mystifying social relations, as in classic Marxist notion of commodity fetishism,

highly coveted commodities such as Louis Vuitton bags revealed them and informed the protesters' spatial

strategies. Protestors, aware of the relationship between the owners of such commodities and the Thai army,

use them to their advantage, turning high-end fashion items into a useful shield from military intervention.

Sun's analysis, even if it was accurate for the month following the Red Shirts' move to Ratchaprasong, proved

in the long run to overestimate the protective power of these commodities.

On May 19th 2010, the hopes of the young bookseller and thousands of others around him were

dashed. After five days of fierce fighting around the city, tanks rolled into the protest area early that morning

and continued their deadly march well into the evening, leaving 52 bodies on the street, none of which were

army personnel. The commodities' protective spell revealed itself as a chimera, unable to save the protesters

from the army's violence. When these objects, condensed in this hub of consumption, showed their

powerlessness to protect the protesters from the army, the inflammatory potential of desires for them broke

free, exploding. Much like in bursts of jealousy, the longed object of desires became the objective of

destructive violence. As Manuel Castell, one of the main theorists of New Social Movements, has written,

once popular appeals remain unheard, movements react, "eager to destroy the closed walls of their captivity"

(Castells 1983: 376). These walls, for the Red Shirts, were filled by commodities on display.Throughout the

afternoon of May 19th the facades that had served as shields for the protesters became the objects of their

furious, albeit lucid, rage. Protestors set fire to shopping mall, convenience stores, and bank branches in the

Central Business District, carefully selecting the buildings that served as symbols of unfulfilled expectations and betrayed desires.

The selection of these targets, even if often presented as mindless destruction, sheds light on the Red Shirts' political demands and grievances but should not be misunderstood as a sign of anti-capitalist struggle. The protesters, in fact, do not propose a revolutionary solution to the political impasse nor developed a systematic and coherent critique of the contemporary capitalism , with clear visions and established objectives. Rather, for the most part, these protesters are demanding access to an economic, political and legal system from which they are normally excluded. If these demands will eventually develop into a larger critique of this system or only into the request for an easier path through which to realize their desires for commodities, services and political representation remain to be seen, as the ongoing protests in Thailand reveal. Whether this transformation should entail democratic elections or larger social, economic, or political transformations, whether the demands would be satisfied by the removal of Abhisit, a reinstating of Thaksin, or even taking down the monarchy and the aristocracy around it largely differ from a specific section of the movement to another, from a leader to another, and from a supporter to the other. What connected them all was a demand for equal access to economic, political, and legal resources, often, yet not always, framed in the language of fulfilling desires for commodities, services, and political representation. It is around this "politics of desires" that the drivers went from workers operating urban mobility to central political actors, using their position to bring the city to a halt. It is around this "politics of desires" that the drivers took a multiplicity of roles in the 2010 Red Shits protest, roles that next chapter analyzes.

Chapter 7: The Owners of the Map

The last two chapters have progressed from a study of the historical emergence of discursive, spatial, organizational, and strategic infrastructures of mobilization that provided both the conditions of possibility and a framework of action for the Red Shirts as a whole to an investigation of desires and political consciousness among Red Shirts' motorcycle taxi drivers. In this chapter I continue this exploration and focus on their specific roles in the 2010 protest. Until now, I have argued that the drivers' political consciousness emerged out of the mobile and interstitial nature of their phatic labor and the unfulfilled desires that their position configures. This chapter provides the other side of this dynamic: namely the drivers' adoption of mobility and immobility as tactics to challenge existing forms of social inequality, economic exploitation, and political oppression in Thailand.

Following Anna Tsing's reminder that "mobility means nothing without mobilization" and her question "how does political agency grow in a time of flow?" (Tsing 2005: 215), I investigate how the connections between spatial movement, social mobility, and political mobilization shaped the drivers' activities in political protest. Once the protesters took over the center of Bangkok the drivers blocked, slowed down, or filtered the circulation of people, goods, and information that they normally facilitate. In so doing, they posed a significant challenge to urban and national power brokers and to state forces' control over the city and its fluxes. To use the words of Oboto—the Red Shirt drivers' leader—the drivers used their role as "owners of the map," holders of an unmatched knowledge of the urban terrain to emerge as intractable political actors. As "owners of the map," the drivers were able to chart the terrain of the protest better than anybody else and to move through it, making it readable and permeable for their allies or uncontrollable and opaque for their enemies. They deployed their potential to share or withhold knowledge and their invisibility to the state apparatus as tools of struggle, tools that made them into invaluable allies and dreaded enemies.

Although this potential pre-dated the Red Shirts' protest, the drivers' strategic significance was recognized by both sides of the conflict over the course of their three-month long occupation of Bangkok.[1] I reconstruct this recognition by breaking down the 2010 protest into four different phases and exploring, in each of them, the drivers' participation and tactics.[2] These phases were not discrete partitions of the flow of events, but rather I use them as an analytic device to illustrate how the tactics drivers adopted in one phase did not disappear in the following one, but rather remained in place, enriched by a new arsenal of tactics. As a result of this accumulation of tactics the drivers gained, over the course of the protest, increasing centrality and visibility both inside the movement and on national media, a visibility that was central to their negotiations with state forces after the May 19th 2010 military crackdown on the Red Shirts protest.

Phase 1: Movers of politics (March 13th to April 10th)

On March 12th 2010, the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) declared a "Million People March." Hundreds of thousands Red Shirts started descend toward Bangkok from their regional centers, mostly in Northern and Northeastern Thailand, while urban supporters took the streets, demanding the resignation of Abhisit's government and an end to double standards in the country's legal, economic, and political system. Nationwide caravans converged on Bangkok and mixed with local residents to stage the largest popular protest in Thai history to date, a protest that would last for sixty eight days, failing to remove the un-elected government but succeeding in reorganizing the discursive and political landscapes of Thailand. A central stage was erected along Ratchadamnoen Avenue, the historical avenue of political protest around which protesters started to build shelters and tents. As the protest camp grew with the arrival of regional supporters, workers in the street economy moved in to satisfy Red Shirts' needs for food, drink,

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[1] Other significant protests and political actions took place outside Bangkok, particularly in the cities of Chiang Mai, Nong Khai, and Khon Kaen. However, I here focus mostly on a Bangkok-centered reading of the Red Shirts protests as my fieldwork was for the most part based in the Thai capital at the time of the mobilization.

[2] For a more detailed analysis of the Red Shirts' protest events see (Sopranzetti 2012)

transportation, and commodities. Among them were thousands of motorcycle taxi drivers, who mixed

political participation with labor. As Yai, one of their political leaders, told me

> Motorcycle taxi drivers were part of the Red Shirts in different ways. One group took benefit
> from the protest. This small group worked at the protest as taxis and made an income
> transporting Red Shirts supporters. They came to make money. The protest was good for
> their livelihood. 'The longer it lasts, the better for me,' they thought. But there was another
> group of motorcycle taxi, a larger group of drivers who had a Red heart. They went because
> they wanted democracy and justice. Another group was composed by drivers who are
> relatives of the Red Shirts from rural areas. The Isan folks came to Bangkok, they came. 'The
> Isan people love Thaksin, I love Thaksin, and I go, too.' The motorcycle drivers had
> different segments but everyone joined the Red Shirt because by supporting them the drivers
> would have the power to negotiate with anyone, the way it was with Thaksin. Since the coup
> state authorities and Abhisit government did not see the drivers, they chased the people we
> loved out of power, they destroyed justice. When they became the government, they
> oppressed the motorcycle taxis, they blocked out development and they wanted to take over
> the business and give it to their party's friends and influential people. Motorcycle folks had
> to decided, and they decided to join the Red Shirts.

Whichever their reason to be in the area, thousands of drivers joined the protest and played a central role in

its operations, in and outside its camp. Inside it, they became the only viable mean of mechanical

transportation able to move through the thick of crowds. Outside it, they helped the protest remain mobile.

Although the Red Shirts established a camp, for the first three weeks of the protest caravans of Red Shirts—

always headed by motorcycle taxi drivers—drove through the city, inciting local dwellers to join in protest

and showing their support for a movement that national media incorrectly portrayed as largely rural. Almost

daily caravans of cars, trucks, and motorcycles traversed the urban landscape of Bangkok, transforming the

rhythms of the city and capital, the same rhythms that structured the drivers' everyday life and their struggle

to operate as phatic laborers. While, as I showed in Part I of this dissertation, the drivers needed to adjust to

the rhythms of capital, labor forces, and urban cycles for their profession, they now intervened and

challenged those rhythms by taking over and filtering the same channels they normally contribute to build.

The weavers of the city became, for once, its blockers.

The drivers, however, did not just filter and break up urban rhythms, but also organized and

modulated the rhythms of the Red Shirts caravans. Such careful management of the pace of the parade's

movement was necessary to bring urban circulation to a halt, create widespread traffic congestion around the

city, and challenge state forces to control and contain a truly mobile protest. Such work was largely performed by the drivers. On the one hand, they rode in front of the caravan, directing its movement, and pacing its rhythm and speed to make sure that it remained united and compact. On the other, taking advantage of their ease in flowing in and out of the protest and their familiarity with the city's back-roads, taxi drivers also became scouting vanguards, making sure the caravans' path was clear of anti-riot police, creating a buffer zone between the front of the mobile protest and the leaders' truck, and collecting of information on the army's and police's movements. In each of these caravans, drivers rode up and down the moving protest, feeding information and directives between the front-lines and the leaders' truck.

Figure 5: Red Shirts' caravans

In all of these senses, the drivers operated as movers of politics, not just by literally making the protest mobile, modulating its rhythms, and allowing the flows of information in it, but also by circulating its discourses around the city. In their daily lives, the drivers became political mobilizers, talked to people in their neighborhoods about Red Shirts' pledges, and transformed their vests, bodies, and bikes into itinerant

political boards.[3] Many of them circulated political slogans—including "stop double standards" (*yut sǭng māttrathān*), "dissolve parliament" (*yup saphà*); "I come for myself" (*kū mā`ēng*)[4]—while riding across the city, in or outside the protest. Such circulation, however, was not without its risks and challenges.

Since the beginning of the protest, a new spatial organization had emerged in Bangkok. "Red areas" and "Yellow areas" were becoming a new way of organizing space in the city. These spatial divisions determined levels of comfort or danger for the drivers, who frequently traversed the invisible borders between those zones. A failure to recognize them and to act accordingly (for instance, by hiding political messages when entering a hostile area) could endanger these drivers and provoke a fight because of the signs of their political affiliations.[5]

Overall, in this phase the drivers carried out multiple roles as movers of politics yet remained, as in their daily life in the city, little more than service-workers, part of the logistical infrastructure necessary to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people but largely unrecognized either for their contribution or as significant political actors in the protest. This was soon to change as the Red Shirts changed their strategies, after a series of media-driven protests around the city, including the symbolic pouring of huge quantities of human blood in front of Government House (Taylor 2012), and an unproductive round of televised negotiations between the protest leaders and the government. On April 3rd 2010, the Red Shirts' leaders decided to make the protest less mobile while keeping its multiple fronts. As in the pro-democracy protest in 1992, they established multiple protest camps around the city. On that day, thousands of protesters moved from Ratchadamnoen Avenue to the city's upscale commercial center, the Ratchaprasong intersection, despite the government's declaration that such a move would be considered against the law. The Red Shirts had decided to change strategy. The caravans, which until that point had been largely successful in revealing the

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[3] This was not the first time that political groups had used the drivers as mobile boards. Politicians running both for national and city elections, in fact, have used the vest as mobile advertisement since the early 2000s (Wassayos and Manop 2003).

[4] For a more detailed analysis of the discourse of *kū mā`ēng* as a response to the accusation to the Red Shirts of being a rented mob paid by Thaksin Shinawatra see (Tausig 2013)

[5] While some of the drivers I met refuted to adjust their bodies and gadgets to this political geography, many of them wear easily-removable signs of political affiliation, such as foulards and wrist-bands, which they can keep when in their *win* or in the protest area and take down when carrying clients outside their soi, or whenever they enter "yellow areas." It was not long, however, before the larger Bangkok public started to identify motorcycle taxi drivers with the protest, regardless of the symbols they carried.

government's inability to limit and control a mobile protest as well as harnessing large urban support for the movement, were abandoned as a main strategy.


Figure 6: Location of the two protest areas

While this change could have reduced the role of the drivers, quite the contrary happened. On the evening of April 3rd, the leaders of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) went on the Red Shirts' stage in Ratchadamnoen. Ignoring the threats voiced by Abhisit and Bangkok's governor to withdraw the licenses of drivers who participated in the protest, Yai, Lek, Lerm, Pin, and Oboto, together with sixteen other motorcycle taxi organizers, pledged the association's support to and alliance with the Red Shirt movement in front of a sea of people. This event marked a radical shift in the history of motorcycle taxi drivers' political participation. After having taken part in street protests in 1992 and having played a role in the pro-Thaksin networks since the coup of 2006, they were now recognized as a legitimate section of the movement. They no longer composed a "rented mob" operating as unruly gangs to whom no protest leader was willing to admit connections as in 1992. The drivers were now legitimate political actors, standing proud on the Red Shirts' stage. As a result, more drivers around the city joined in the protest, galvanized by this recognition of their contribution.

Meanwhile in the Ratchaprasong area, the Red Shirts were establishing a consistent presence. A new stage was set up underneath the elevated Skytrain rails, facing the ground in front of Central World, the third biggest shopping mall in Asia that Jim Taylor has described as "a one-stop shopping and amusement park of hyper-consumption, of pleasure and unlimited desires in reproduced bourgeois play-space" (Taylor 2011: 6). The middle-class conspicuous consumption was brought to a halt by the protest as up-scale hotels, shopping malls, and retail shops shut down, frightened by the rising sea of protesters. What was supposed to be the location for a one-day demonstration became a second front of conflict. For the next eleven days the protesters and their leaders juggled between the traditional space of politics, around the Sanam Luang-Ratchadamnoen-Royal Plaza axis, and the new political arena in the city, the Ratchaprasong intersection.

On April 7th, with both Bangkok's historical center and its business district solidly in the hands of the Red Shirts, a group of protesters attempted to raise the stakes and stormed the Thai parliament. That night, the government declared a State of Emergency in Bangkok and surrounding areas, outlawing any gathering of more than five people and giving unprecedented powers to the newly formed Center for the Resolution of the Emergency Situation (CRES), a committee of senior military officers, security officials and government ministers headed by Suthep Thaugsuban. From there to the army dispersal of the Red Shirts on May 19th, CRES operated as a shadow government, often wielding more power than the prime minister himself.[6] The first CRES action was to issue arrest warrants against the main Red Shirts' leaders, who remained on the loose. Two days after, on April 10th, the CRES ordered a military intervention to disperse the protest at Ratchadamnoen Avenue. The results were disastrous. The Thai Royal Army clumsily attempted to disperse the protest from the area, losing heavy weaponry to the crowd as well as three tanks that were taken apart, covered in anti-government and anti-military graffiti, and left dismantled next to Democracy Monument.

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[6] These provisions, if largely ineffective in preventing the Red Shirt mobilization, would remain in place for the following eight months, to be lifted only in December of 2010.
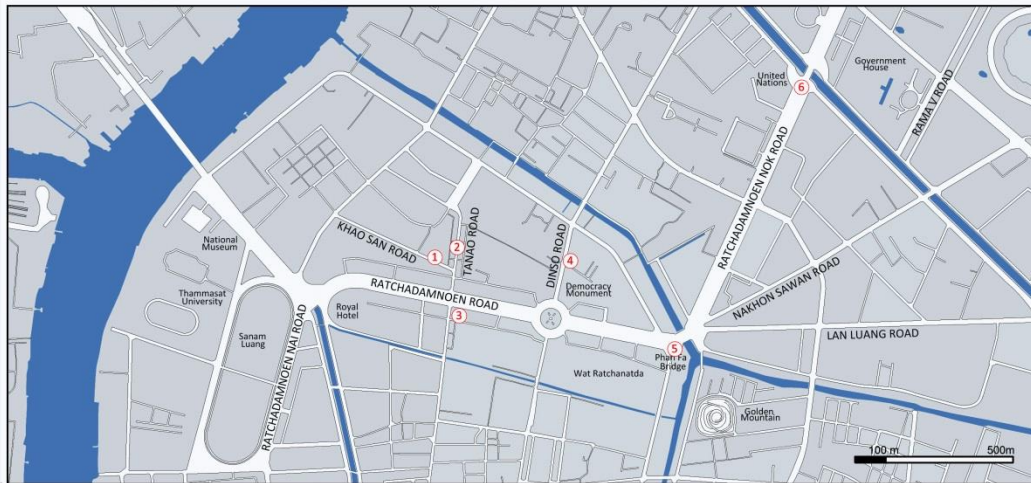
Figure 7: Map of the Ratchadamnoen area with events

The clashes culminated in after-dark shootings. Twenty-six people were killed—including five high-ranking military officials hit by an M-79 grenade—and 860 people injured. During this violent confrontation, local drivers, with their unmatched knowledge of the urban terrain, provided invaluable assistance to the protesters, guiding them through the mesh of local small soi and helping them to surround and ward off the army. In the following days, a mixture of excitement and fear permeated the protest. During the clashes, they succeeded in pushing back the military, but only at the cost of nineteen supporters' lives. Keeping up this defensive strategy on two fronts—it became clear—was unfeasible.

Figure 8: Protesters stand on military tanks in front of Democracy Monument

Phase 2: invisible movers and mobile guards (April 14th – April 22nd)

On April 14th, the protesters left the Ratchadamnoen area and relocated completely in Ratchaprasong. Nattawut Saikua, one of the Red Shirts leaders who had also been active in the mobilizations of 1992, was reported as stating: "We will use the Ratchaprasong areas as the final battleground to remove the government" (Asia Times, April 15 2010). The choice was symptomatic of an emerging political geography of mobilization that revolved around spaces of capitalist consumption and circulation and identified this area as a symbol of inequality and unfulfilled desires. The decision, however, was also tactical. The protesters believed that the army would not lead an attack with the risk of damaging property that belonged to the *ammat*, whom the Red Shirts saw as the enemy. As a protester told me, "The army has no problem with

destroying lives but they don't want to destroy goods." A place of exclusion and unequal access, they argued, would therefore provide them with a shield of jewels, handbags, and luxury goods.

Whether the change of location had any actual effect on preventing another immediate dispersal remains unclear. In any case, the CRES temporarily abandoned its violent dispersal strategy but kept pressure on the protesters by issuing new arrest warrants. On the morning of April 16th, police officers attempted, and failed, to arrest some of the most confrontational Red Shirts' leaders, including Arisman Pongruangrong, a pop-singer turned activist. Once again, the drivers played a central role in neutralizing the offensive.

Early that morning, I received a call from Sun, a driver who worked as personal guard to a prominent Red Shirts leader, inviting me to accompany him to the hotel where Arisman was staying. "I need to go with some other drivers to get him out of there," he told me with excitement. "The police are coming to arrest him, but first they called me," he laughed. Since April 10th, a number of drivers I knew were hired by Red Shirts leaders as personal guards, selected precisely for their knowledge of the urban terrain, familiarity with escape routes, and ability to disappear into the confusing landscape of Bangkok, in case of an army attack. Sun was one of them. This time, however, it was not his ability to move through the city that made Sun into an invaluable ally but rather his long-standing personal connections to local police officers, also acquired in his daily presence in the city. As the police were gearing up for the arrest, a lower level officer, Sun's personal friend and fellow Isan migrant, tipped him off. The news ran fast among the Red Shirt chain of leadership and a rescue team was rapidly organized. In the escape—as incredible as it was clumsy—chubby Arisman climbed down from his hotel room balcony with a rope made of electric cords, to be greeted by a crowd of Red Shirts and journalists and then disappear from the scene, leaving the police empty handed. The escape was broadcasted around the country.[7]

This highly visible failure was yet another embarrassment for the CRES and the government, one that they refused to repeat. The pressure on the protesters and on political mobilizers around the city was immediately stepped up. In the afternoon of the same day, the 21 drivers' leaders who had gone on stage to support the Red Shirts found police officers waiting for them at their houses. The CRES summoned and

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[7] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1qo2PTcp8w

questioned them, together with community leaders and managers of local radio stations, on their involvement in the protest and intimidated them into abandoning the Red Shirts. The drivers, in particular, were threatened that, if seen again at the rallies, they would be arrested and banned from their profession. If, on the contrary, they left the protest and joined the government side, CRES officers promised them large concessions, including help fighting influential people.

While the threats fell onto deaf ears, the promises opened a breach in the drivers' leadership. The members of the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) started to discuss internally what their priorities should be. Everybody agreed that Thaksin had done a lot for them, and personally supported the Red Shirts movement. As a collective organization, however, the majority of them believed that their purpose should be to gain concessions for the drivers as a professional group, and not for the social movement that they supported. As Lerm, the AMTT president, told me, "we are Red at heart, but our vest is orange and we need to stand united as Orange Shirts. Our duty is to the drivers not toward the Red Shirts." The decision, however, tore apart the leaders who had organized the drivers since their fight with local influential people in 2003. While all of them continued to provide assistance, and to support the movement personally, the association formally exited the scene and stopped providing direct support to the protest. Oboto, together with other lower level organizers, left the association and rapidly emerged as the sole leader of the Red Shirts' drivers, and main liaison between the movement and the motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok.

This fracture among the drivers, if significant in terms of street-level organizing, was only a minor side-effect of the CRES's new strategy. More significantly, the humiliation of Arisman's escape induced a change in its leadership. Even if Suthep formally remained in charge, the actual decision-making shifted toward military personnel and General Anupong Paochinda, the army Commander-in-Chief, became the de-

facto head of CRES, now authorized by the prime minister to use force to ensure peace and order. The time for a civilian running the operations was over, it was now time for the army to lead.[8]

The CRES immediately declared Ratchaprasong a dangerous area and sidelined the police, whom they perceived as sympathetic to the protesters' pledges. The protesters responded by declaring their intention to extend the occupied area toward Silom road, the core of Bangkok's financial center, a few roads away from where Adun and Hong operated. The Red Shirts, after having occupied and brought to a halt the main node of commercial exchange in the city, were now threatening to take over the core of its financial circulation as well. Anupong forcefully refused to let this extension happen and to allow the protesters to move the protest around the Ratchaprasong area. On April 18th, a significant military contingent marched into Silom Road, taking control of the area and setting up army checkpoints throughout the city, with the purpose of limiting the spill-over of the protest and putting pressure on the occupation of Ratchaprasong. Even if the mobile protests headed by the drivers were over, the Red Shirts drivers retained their ability to move through check-points—by taking up fake clients and becoming indistinguishable from other drivers—or to dodge them—by taking side-roads and circumvent them. The rest of the protesters, however, were immobilized in the two square miles area they occupied and blocked. Day after day, they fortified the area by raising intricate bamboo barricades. Such make-shift barriers grew taller and wider, soon to enclose the whole protest site. On one side of the barricades, crowds of protesters armed with bamboo sticks and sling-shots waited for an attack. On the other, thousands of menacing heavily armed soldiers surrounded the area, ready to move in. In this stalemate, tension became palpable and grew by the day, locked into an asymmetrical spatial war.

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[8] An anonymous source told a reporter from the Nation, a filo-governative newspaper, "Deputy Prime Minister Suthep is a civilian, and the situation has changed. He will still play an important role […] but to keep things moving fast and effectively, the line of command must be concise" (Nation, April 17 2010)

Figure 9: Barricades in front of Silom Road

Phase 3: modulators of mobility and mobile informants (April 22nd – May 13th)

On April 22nd four grenades exploded in the middle of Silom road, where a small crowd of anti-Red Shirts protesters had accumulated, sheltered behind the army lines. A person was killed and 75 injured. As the whole country speculated about who the culprits were, security was elevated on both sides of the barricades. On the red side, a band of security forces and guards, manned by a significant number of motorcycle taxi drivers, was established and operated behind the convoluted mesh of bamboos and barbwire that sealed off the whole area, now covered by car tires soaked in petrol and ready to be set on fire in case of a military offensive. On the army side, camouflage clothes were laid out to cover the soldiers' movements, their growing stacks of weapons, and half-a-dozen *Humvees*. As the army established more and more checkpoints around the city, the Red Shirts also filtered movement in and out their occupied area. Getting in with a

motorbike now meant having to stop at the entrance and get off, while the bike compartment and your body were checked by the security forces who lingered at the periphery of protest. If until now the drivers had kept the protest mobile, in this new stationary phase they became guards, controllers, and operators of mobility inside the occupied area. As in their everyday presence in the city, these roles were performed both in movement and in stasis.

Drivers became omnipresent at the barricades and controlled flows in and out of the protest area, acting as traffic control officers, guarding the entrances, and operating as the only form of transportation inside the occupied areas. Many of these drivers talked to me about the feeling of having reclaimed the city that had been taking their lives and sweat. "I come here every day to send passengers" Tob—a motorcycle taxi driver operating in the Ratchaprasong area—told me, referring to the adjacent Skytrain station, "now I come to meet my friends from my village, I sit where normally cars run, I sleep where I normally I can stop only for a moment to get the money from my clients. I feel like I own this city (*čhao khǭng mư̄ang*). I come back every day to my village, my village in the middle of the city (*mūbān klāng mư̄ang).*"

Again, as in the words of Oboto, control over mobility in the city and ownership of its spaces emerged in the driver's discourses and practices in dialectical tension, a tension that revolved around different speeds, paces, and activities. In this phase, in fact, the drivers were not only claiming their role as "owners of the map," privileged holders and connoisseurs of its symbolic representations and hidden paths. Through modulating mobility, they reclaimed their centrality as owners, transformers, and gate-keepers of the physical spaces to which they normally operate as invisible connectors. Through their actions, these spaces were adjusted to a different rhythm that resembled—in Tob's words—that of a village (*mūbān*). The tension between multiple rhythms of lives that haunted the drivers' mobility between the city and the countryside, were solved—if just for a short period—by transforming the most fast-paced section of the city into a slow paced village, a village in the middle of the city.

Adun offered a poignant example of the drivers' enjoyment of these reclaimed spaces and rhythms and their significance to popular participation to the protest. Every night, after a long day's work on the streets or sitting on his bike waiting for clients, Adun stretched his back, took off his vest, and rode into the

protest area. On one of those nights, we decided to go together and, after a few drinks at his station, we headed toward Ratchaprasong. Adun, three other drivers, and I entered the protest area on bikes, waving to two other motorcycle taxis who patrolled the barricade. We rode slowly through the protest, enjoying the feeling of being in a small convoy, getting close to each other to talk. A stencil, a few hundred meters inside the protest area, declared in English: "Red Land." As the crowd thickened around us, we parked and walked to a large white gazebo, which hosted Adun's fellow villagers who had joined the protest. Mats covered the ground where a group of older men and women sat in circle, shoeless.[9] Younger protesters lingered outside the circle, occasionally passing food and iced water to the elders. As if inside a house, everybody took off their shoes before entering the gazebo and bowed slightly at the elders before greeting the person they came to see.

At one corner of the tent, a small crowd gathered around a large TV screen, broadcasting still pictures of bullets and bullet wounds. A well-dressed man in his fifties talked into a microphone, describing each bullet type, its range and deadly potential, and showing pictures of the damage it can cause. Like a vocal vendor at a village fair, he sensed the feelings of the crowd with great empathy and alternated information and pictures, passing around real bullets, sealed in hermetic plastic bags. At the stall in front, a small projector showed soundless images of the violent confrontation between the Red Shirts and the army on April 10th. On the other corner of the Bandung gazebo, an aluminum saucepan sizzled over a small fire burning inside a clay pot, spreading a strong smell of wild herbs. Next to the fire, large plastic bags full of papayas, nuts, and an enormous quantity of chilies accumulated on the floor. An older woman, sitting among these bags, prepared papaya salad, holding a pealed green papaya in her left hand, rhythmically plunging a knife onto it with her right, cutting narrow strips. As the knife found its way into the fruit, just after being raised again, her left hand slowly turned the papaya around, while she chatted with her nephew, a taxi driver in Bangkok.

Adun and I sat down, at a corner of the gazebo. Immediately, grilled chicken and hot sticky rice were brought to us. A young man handed us some cans of beer, hidden in small plastic bags. "Drink," he told me,

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[9] In Thailand when entering houses and other enclosed spaces is usual to take off shoes, here this meant personalizing a piece of road pavement into a collective space.

"but keep it in the bag. The guards don't want us to get drunk." Adun looked at him with a mixture of respect and derision. "I have known him since he was a kid," he told me with half a smile. "We just arrived yesterday," an older woman shouted over the noise from large speakers that broadcasted speeches on stage. "Somebody came around to the village and told us that they needed people at the protest and our tent was getting emptier. So we decided to come to Bangkok. They organized a car from the village and brought us here." "I have been back and forth three times already," another woman in a *sarong* added. "The first time I was at Ratchadamnoen and the other two here. I stay for some time and then go back when I miss home or I get bored. There is not much to do here."

A constant refill of people was organized from the countryside, where the slow agricultural cycle of April allows most people to leave their fields. A phone call came from someone at the protest, or some organizer spread the word that new people were needed in Bangkok. Volunteers stepped forward and the crowd was kept constant. "We came on behalf the many others who cannot, who have a job, or have to look after children. We are old so we can come but we are here for our children and nephews too." the older woman pointed out to me. Mobility, in other words, was not just a strategy of this protest, it was also necessary to the protest's survival. "Is this your first time in Bangkok?" I asked her. "No, I have been here before. My daughter works here, but I don't like the city. I came to support the Red Shirts." I turn to the larger group. "So do you like being here?" A moment of silence. "It's boring," a woman broke the silence and they all laughed with embarrassment.

Bored by the long day of political uneventful political tirades at the protest, many of the Red Shirts from the countryside used part of their day to visit family friends, famous city landmarks, or experience some of the thrills of Bangkok. To these explorations drivers like Adun operated as guides, directing the rural protesters around the city to good affordable restaurants, convenient markets, or nightclubs. For the drivers, on the contrary, the protest site became the attraction, an urban village to go back to see friends from the village, eat with them, and sit, chain-smoking cigarettes, with the background of inflamed political speeches, barely distinguishable under the chit-chatting. "I have heard them before," Adun told me, smiling. "They always say the same thing. I agree with them but I'd rather talk to people from home, hear news of what is

going on back there, and have nice food. I am here anyway and I am ready to help if something happens." Many like Adun have supported the Red Shirts for a long time, both ideologically and by becoming members of the UDD, but seldom joined them in protests before the arrival of their fellow villagers. Now that the Red Shirts have taken over this space, and morphed its rhythms into those of a village, the gravitational force of acquaintances has brought them here to swell the ranks of the movement.

At times, all that is needed for active participation in a political protest is a friend you have not seen for a while, a distant aunt who is sleeping at the protest, or the longing for a homemade papaya salad. After all, how many people marched to the Bastille because their neighbors invited them to come along? Or how many people participated in the anti-Vietnam-War protests hoping to get laid? Similarly mundane, yet by no mean insignificant, reasons laid behind the presence of many drivers and other internal migrant workers in the protest. Political ideals, democracy, equality, and unfulfilled desires, in other words, brought them to the protest as much as a free bowl of food, the desire to be part of history, influence, or just witness it, the chance to take the girl from the shop next door to somewhere different on a date, or the possibility to "go home," as Adun said, without having to take a twelve hours train ride. Such everyday personal dimensions of political struggles, as I showed in the previous chapter, do not detract from the significance of political movements but rather provide them with a texture of life that composes the soil on which political passions grow. As we discussed these motivations, sitting on mats, the tent slowly fell quiet as one after other the elders went to sleep. Adun, tired by his day of work, fell asleep shortly after as I lay down not far from him, cradled by a soft Isan song and by the whirring of a fan.

A few hours later, Adun woke me up. "It is time to go back to work," he told me at daybreak, ready to return to his usual urban frenzy. The protest site was at its emptiest. A few other urban workers moved silently in the middle of sleeping bodies scattered anywhere, getting ready to go to work and open the windows and shops of the city, prepare its breakfasts, and deliver its people and commodities. Around us other regional migrants were leaving the protest to service a city that is slowly eating their lives, only to come back here after their shift, creating a cyclical compression and swelling of the protest size. The smell of

burning charcoal, breakfast soup, and steaming sticky rice filled the road underneath the immobile Skytrain. As we rode out of the Red Shirts' area, Adun stopped in a small parking lot, few hundred meters away from the army check-point that divided the protest area from his station. He put back his vest and, once again an innocuous motorcycle taxi driver and not a Red Shirts supporter, he passed through the soldiers' line unnoticed, making his way toward a long day of waiting and weaving through traffic.

The bored calm at the village in the middle of the city would not last. In the following days, rumors of an imminent violent dispersal started to circulate: national media increasingly presented the protesters as infiltrated by terrorists and demanded an end to their occupation; business leaders lamented the economic disaster that the mobilization was bringing to the country, both by blocking its commercial core and by hurting the country's image and flourishing tourist industry. Significant military and police contingents started to move toward Bangkok. It became evident both to the protesters and to the Thai public idiom at large that state forces were closing in on the protest. Once again the Red Shirts were compelled to change their strategy. Once again the roles of motorcycle taxi drivers would change with it.

On April 26th, the Red Shirts declared they would organize a new caravan the following day, an attempt to reinvigorate their protest and expand it beyond the confines of the Ratchaprasong area. Abhisit immediately replied that the government would not allow red-shirt protesters to leave their protest site to cause confusion in the city. Anupong echoed him. The following day, ignoring these intimidations, thousands of motorcycles and cars converged on the eastern side of the protest camp, potentially safer because of its proximity to the US embassy. Once again Oboto, recognizable from afar by the large Thai flag attached to his bike, was heading the mobile protest. The caravan left in the late morning, directed toward Talad Thai, a large wholesale market about 30 miles away in the industrial outskirt of northern Bangkok. The purpose, as it had been with previous caravans, was to rally support for the Red Shirts around the city and incite their supporters to join the protesters. Proceeding under a merciless heat, the parade grew in size along the way as more and more bikes and cars joined in. Motorcycle taxi drivers, as usual, took care of keeping the group compact and informing the protesters about the best routes to take. As the convoy entered Vibhavadi Rangsit

Road, a four-lane highway that leads to the market, it enveloped usual traffic, without disrupting it. Just beyond the old international airport of Don Muang, however, a traffic jam blocked the road, right underneath a flyover.

The red convoy stopped and a few drivers were sent out of the caravan to check what the problem was. The bikes spread radially, zigzagging through the cars in the front to see what had blocked the traffic and driving off into side-roads to check for possible exit routes. A few minutes later the scouting vanguards came back with bad news: less than a mile ahead, a line of soldiers, in anti-riot gear, blocked the road, determined to force the caravan back into the protest area; above us other soldiers were moving on roofs and on the flyover; behind us police forces also moved in, leaving no way out. Fear traversed the caravan, as people snapped tree branches and advertisement boards to set up makeshift barricades. A round of tear gas canisters broke the standstill, filling the air with its pungent smell, yet too far away to make breathing painful. Oboto, too important a mobilizer to be left in the thick of conflict, took down his vest, which made him recognizable, and disappeared into a small soi on the back of a local motorcycle taxi driver.

Not realizing the seriousness of the danger, I rode though the traffic jam, toward the army line. I barely made it to the top when the army opened fire. The first rounds of rubber bullets were shot into the air while everybody ran away, bullets falling on the street as loud rain and bouncing off the flyover before hitting the ground. Soon after the first rounds, the soldiers started to advance, this time shooting at eye level. Confusion took over as the soldiers moved in our direction, covered by shots coming from the overpass, where the other soldiers had taken up positions. I rode into a small soi with other protesters, looking for a way out. Local dwellers told us that there was no exit from this soi, urging everyone to move away before the army advanced, closing the only exit route. Scared by the army progression we rode back toward the Red Shirts crowd, rubber bullets whistling around us. Three hundred meters further away, a large group of Red Shirts was setting up defenses, creating small barricades in the middle of the street and breaking off anything that could be used as a weapon, including bamboo sticks and iron bars. A second round of tear gas reached us, this time hitting the crowd with its full effect. Some groups of protesters hid behind the barricades, using

them as giant shields to push the military back. Suddenly, the sound of army shoots changed: as on April 10th the soldiers had started to use live bullets.

The first injured protesters—mostly shot in their legs—started to flow from the front lines and were rapidly put into ambulances that ran off, passing through the line of police officers who blocked the road behind us without intervening in the fight. Above us a few soldiers moved furtively on roofs, confirming the rumors of the army deployment of snipers.[10] Blocked between army and police, we were terrified envisioning a massacre. Then, suddenly, as a saving grace, heavy rain started falling, cooling the spirits and stopping the fight.

We remained under the pouring rain for another hour, waiting to figure out what would happen next. A few protesters negotiated with the anti-riot police, while the others looked around with anxiety. Time seemed to slow down, dripping like rain under the flyover. Then hordes of police officers in normal uniform, without weapons or protections, came out of vans and passed the anti-riot police, cheered by the locals and the protesters. For some time these police officers and the protesters engaged in a strange dance, advancing and retreating as if in a collective courting ritual. After some time, the police officers in uniform, as if taking courage, started to walk, unarmed, toward the protesters and passed us, taking up a position between the Red Shirts and the army, effectively shielding the protesters and offering an exit route. The crowd in the street cheered and applauded the police officers as the procession slowly made its way back to the Ratchaprasong area, still headed by a small vanguard of motorcycle taxi drivers who controlled the road and directed the convoy through flooded side roads. Mobile protests, it became evident, would not be tolerated by the army, which had demonstrated its willingness to use live ammunition to keep the protesters at bay. A violent dispersal of the protest camp, everybody seemed to agree, was just a matter of time.[11]

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[10] The only victim of this confrontation was a soldier who was killed in friendly fire, most probably by one of these snipers. He and a fellow private were riding at full speed back from the front toward the army line and were shot down, confused for Red Shirts protesters.

[11] On April 29th, the Yellow Shirts gave an ultimatum to the government demanding a dispersal of the Red Shirt in a week time, before they would take matters into their hands. What was paradoxical about this was that two of their main leaders, Chamlong

The day after this confrontation, protests spread to major regional towns and Red Shirts there established roadblocks to prevent the movements of troops toward Bangkok. In the Thai capital, however, the protest was effectively contained. Security forces closed all roads around the rally site. Moving in and out the protest became more difficult. The only group untouched by this transformation was the motorcycle taxi drivers who, once again, became essential for the protest. Their ability to move through apparent blockades, which oriented the drivers' daily operations in the city and their ability to provide transportation in the midst of the protest, now allowed them to traverse military check-points that had theoretically been set up to limit the movement of Red Shirt protesters. Any of the Red Shirt drivers could get on their bike, take up a fake passenger, and move easily and unnoticed through the army checkpoints and behind the lines of the military forces, collecting information on the movement of state forces around the city and reporting inside the protest area.

Especially after the protest was sealed off on May 12th, and moving provisions necessary to sustain the tens of thousands Red Shirts who were living in the Ratchaprasong area became problematic, the drivers' knowledge of hidden paths, underground parking lots, and back roads were central to keep the protesters going. Once again, the "owners of the map" proved to be invaluable allies in this phase of static blockage, operating as connectors, diffusors of goods and commodities, and collectors of information. This ability, however, did not just catch the eyes of the Red Shirts' protesters. On the other side of the barricade, the army also understood that the drivers could be invaluable informants on the Red Shirts' operations. Since the soldiers moved into the Silom area, their headquarters—located in an abandoned building at the end of the road—had seen a regular flux of motorcycle taxi drivers who were also soldiers and reported on the movements inside the Red area, again taking advantage of their ability to pass through unnoticed through road-block and check-points. Such ability, whether to the service of the protesters or of the army, was predicated on the tactical use of the driver' vests as tools of struggle: taking down the vest—as Oboto said— made them anonymous in the crowd; putting it on when moving around the city—as Adun did after his daily

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Srimuang and Piphob Thongchai, who had risked their lives in 1992 to oppose military interventions in politics were now demanding a violent military dispersal against their opponents.

visits to the protest—made them invisible transportation providers to the eyes of the soldiers and protesters alike.

A similar dynamic has been described by Franz Fanon's analysis of the roles of women in the Algerian War and their uses of the veil as a tool of struggle (Fanon 1980). During the battle between liberation forces and French colonial officers, he reconstructed, wearing a veil in the Kasbah assured women invisibility to French soldiers, while not wearing one in the European city allowed "the unveiled Algerian woman [to] move like a fish in the Western waters" (Fanon 1980: 58). Much like the veil, the driver's vest "removed and reassumed again and again, […] has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a mean of struggle" (Fanon 1980: 60). Both groups played with the complex relation between visibility and invisibility that structured their presence in the city by manipulating the clothes, behind which they could become invisible or without which they would disappear in the crowd. Becoming invisible, in other words, allowed them to operate as unnoticed connectors and movers of objects and information through the army lines.

The drivers' daily invisibility to the state-apparatus that marginalized them in their daily operations in the city, also provided them in the protest with the potential of challenging state power, and its ability to control and manages its territory and people. After all, as both de Certeau (de Certeau 1984) and James Scott (Scott 1998) have argued, state power performs its mastery over places through sight, by making its subjects visible and legible. Such characteristic, however, does not only frame the hold of a state but also configured its weakness. After all, as de Certeau has argued, "power is bound by its very visibility" (de Certeau 1984: 37). Eluding its gaze, therefore, means posing a significant challenge to power by blinding it, by taking away its control over a "detailed 'map' of its terrain and its people" (Scott 1998: 24). In this sense the drivers posed a double challenge to this power: first, claiming their position as "owners of the map," they question its ability to hold and read such a map; second, by remaining invisible to the state apparatus, they revealed its inability to dominate its subjects. While this potential became clear during this phase of static protest, it only acquired more prominence once the stalemate broke and the protest turned into urban guerrilla confrontation.

Phase 4: mobile fighters (May 13th – May 19th)

On May 13th, a high-speed bullet tore apart the curtain of tension, uncertainty, and expectation that had descended over the protesters and the country at large. After two weeks of feverish negotiations, calls to dispersal, and failed resolutions, this bullet pierced the head of Major-General Khattiya, aka Seh Daeng, a renegade army specialist and main military strategist for the Red Shirts, leaving him in a puddle of blood on the pavement just after sunset. It did not take too long for the Red Shirts to understand that this was going to be the beginning of a military attack. Signs of the imminent dispersal had been accumulating: the previous day electricity, water, and phone services were cut off from the area. The protest was completely sealed off, leaving motorcycle taxi drivers as one of the few groups still able to find their way in and out of its heart. Once Seh Daeng was hit, the incubated tension broke open. Hordes of Red Shirts started to pour onto the streets around Ratchaprasong, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at soldiers, who responded with occasional rounds of bullets. The long night, filled with fast moving shadows, grenade attacks, and continuous shootings in the darkened Central Business District, completely reshaped the conflict, as protesters now openly adopted guerrilla warfare tactics (Sopranzetti 2012).

Figure 10: Map of the Ratchaprasong area with events

The following day, Red Shirts created tires barricades outside the originally occupied area, effectively surrounding the soldiers, who remained stuck in between the Red Shirts in Ratchaprasong and the new barricades. To limit even more the army's movements the protesters set the new barricades on fire: a curtain

of black smoke enveloped the protesters, making harder for snipers to hit them, and for foot soldiers to control their actions.[12] From behind the smoke, protesters threw rocks, Molotov cocktails, and firework at the soldiers who replied with endless rounds of live bullets. They shot randomly, succeeding more in keeping the Red Shirts away than in hit them. The conflict had transformed into urban guerilla warfare (Sopranzetti 2012).

Day after day the barricades grew higher, the explosions louder, and the rifle rounds closer.
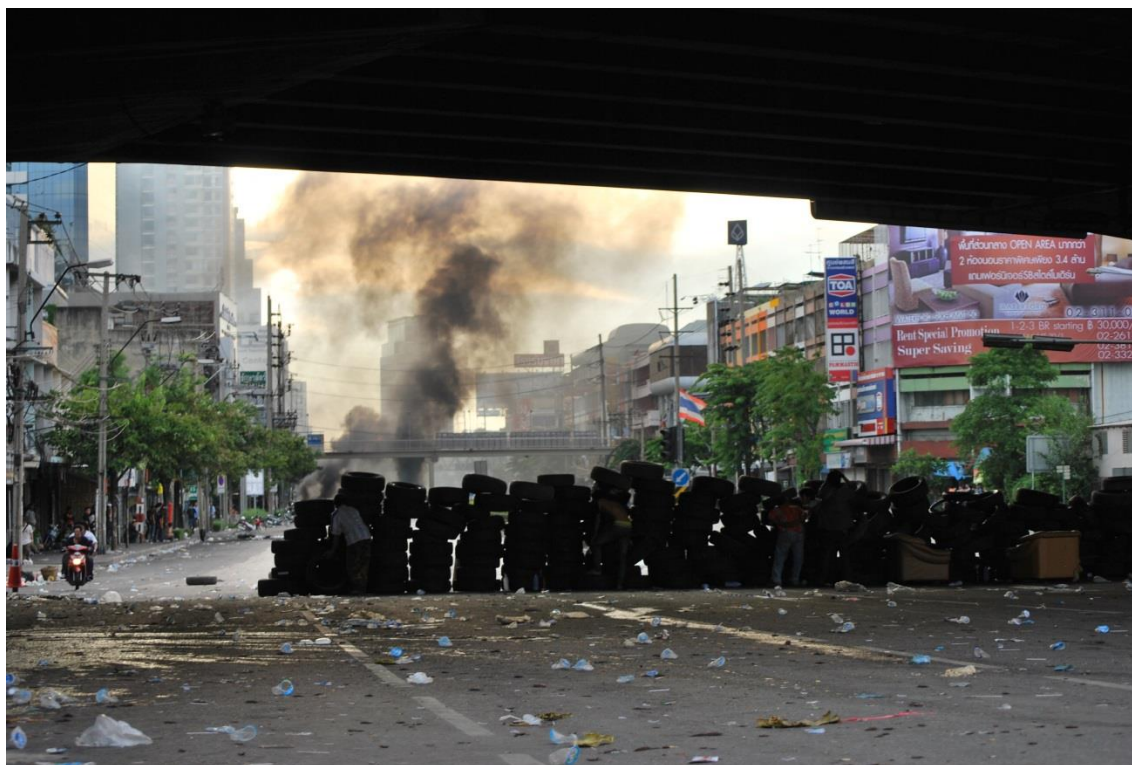

Figure 11: Tires barricade on Rama IV Road

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[12] Nonetheless snipers continued to randomly kill Red Shirts in the following days. While images of army snipers were released daily and nobody in the state forces was hit by them, the government insisted, against all evidences, that they were not soldiers.

Figure 12: Protesters hiding behind tires barricades

Then, after the night descended, the conflict zone filled with fast moving shadows. Fires and grenades exploded both inside the protest area and close to army lines, echoeing in the city, followed by rounds of soldiers' M-16 rifles.

Figure 13: A typical scene of after dark confrontations

The number of fatalities and injured grew, marking a macabre daily bulletin presented every morning in national media: 16 dead and 141 injured by May 15th; 24 dead and 198 injured by May 16th; 36 dead and 258 injured by May 17th. For the next several days, until the final army dispersal of May 19th, Bangkok Business Center resembled a war zone, with almost uninterrupted live ammunition shots, grenades attacks, sniper hits and guerrilla warfare tactics, from walls of burning tires to a game of cat and mouse between soldiers and protesters in the maze of Bangkok's soi. Building halls, small hidden gardens, and abandoned houses became invaluable hiding and moving places for the Red Shirt fighters, while big roads became the space of the army, which occupied them and unloaded round after round of live ammunition toward the burning barricades in the distance. The soi system, which has provided one of the conditions of possibility for the emergence of motorcycle taxis in Bangkok, was now the best ally of their drivers.

Once again the motorcycle taxi drivers' knowledge of the territory, and ability to move through it, became fundamental to direct the protesters' the actions and to maintain the upper-hand in their mobility through the maze of the soi. Their roles were multiple. First of all, the drivers provided provisions, water, and fuel—necessary to keep the barricades burning and to fill Molotov cocktails—both inside the protest area and to the fighters behind barricades. Using their vests as a tool of struggle, able to make them "move like fishes in water," the drivers were able to move in and out of the areas and provide supplies. Second, the drivers become movers of the Red Shirts' military strategists who circulated from one front to the other distributing directives on where to establish new barricades, how to move through the soi, and how to prevent the soldiers from advancing or retreating. Third, they became inseparable from the Red Shirts' leaders who, blockaded inside the protest area, waited for an all-out army attack to the Ratchaprasong stage, knowing that their chances of getting out alive depended largely on their drivers' ability to move furtively out of the sealed protest area. Fourth, as the number of injured started to grow the drivers operated as rescuers and first aid workers, picking up injured protesters, mounting them on their bikes, and driving them out of the protest zone into nearby hospitals.[13]

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[13] Interestingly in journalist pictures of injured a motorcycle taxi driver wearing his vest can often be noticed.

Figure 14: Motorcycle taxi driver helping protesters to organize defenses

Figure 15: Drivers operating as first aid personnel

This situation continued until the early morning of May 19th when, tired of the ongoing struggle, the army entered the protest area from Silom Road around 9 am. The bamboo barricades were quickly torn down by tanks and assault units conquering Lumpini Park. During the course of the day, the soldiers continued their progression toward the Ratchaprasong intersection, leaving behind a dozen of dead protesters. Motorcycle taxi drivers, central to the operation of the Red Shirt protest since its beginning, had already disappeared from the area, taking advantage of their ability to slip through the closing grip of the army.

Less than a mile away from the protest stage, the army advanced slowly, fearing the presence of bombs and significant armed resistance. This resistance, however, was scattered: a violent section of the Red Shirts attempted for a few hours to keep the soldiers away but soon gave up to the incommensurable power of the army, its tanks and snipers. The militarized protesters, more able than other Red Shirts to understand the army's operation fled the area, leaving the army's advance unopposed. The soldiers, now in charge, fired indiscriminately as the remaining protesters converged around the stage. At 1 pm, with the army now closing

into the Ratchaprasong intersection the protest leaders invited Red Shirts supporters in the area to surrender, preventing more useless casualties. The small crowd of 5000 hard-liners still present around the stage booed, voicing their willingness to lose their lives for the cause while the leaders left the area and walked to the nearby National Police headquarter to surrender, aware that the army would be much less kind to them.

Some of the remaining protesters, aware that nothing was left for them to do vent their frustration and rage against shopping malls and banks in the area, symbols of the system of inequality that they came to protest and that was now crushing their resistance. Looters entered the shopping malls at the Ratchaprasong intersection. Outside the buildings some of the remaining hard-liner protesters plastered the malls with rocks and Molotov cocktails, determined to bring the whole area down with them.[14] Similar arson attacks were taking place around the protest camp, targeting shopping malls, banks, and retail shops. In the following hours, while the army advanced toward the Red Shirt stage, 34 buildings, mostly were set on fire, both in the protest area and in the zones that had been controlled by Red Shirts for the previous days. Among them was Central World, the biggest shopping center in the country and a symbol of conspicuous consumption and inequality. With water being cut from the area by the government, there was nothing to be done to control the fire. The building became an oven and collapsed on itself, as if a giant spoon had gone through it.

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[14] Jim Taylor has argued that the burning of Central World was not carried out by Red Shirts' sympathizers (Taylor 2011). While I was not personally present at Ratchaprasong intersection on the afternoon of May 19th—as it was not Taylor—the report of Thai and international journalists and observers who were in the area, as well as the repeated threat by Red Shirts leaders to burn the malls down in case of a dispersal (Sopranzetti 2012), are consistent with a small group of wild-dogs Red Shirts sympathizers as the culprits.

Figure 16: Central World the day after the army dispersal

Chaos diffused around the Ratchaprasong intersection. Many of the remaining protesters took refuge in Wat Pathum, a temple that the CRES had declared as a no-conflict zone. Soldiers moved into the area from the Skytrain rails. A cross-fire exchange broke open around the temple area and high-speed bullets were shot inside the temple from the rails, killing six people, including Kamolket Akahad, a 25 years old nurse who had joined the protesters to take care of injured.[15] The Red Shirts' protest was over and once again, as in previous political movements in Thailand, the army had brutally drowned the protesters' voice in blood. As the remaining protesters were rounded up inside the police headquarters nearby the stage, the soldiers' advance left behind a haunted human-less space where, for the first time, one could hear the twitter of birds in an area normally smothered by the noise of traffic and, for the last month, by the Red Shirts' political tirades. Emptied of the protesters, the area remained filled only by their objects: clothes, fans, TV sets, motorcycles, unfinished food, half-cooked rice, piles of vegetables, half-opened tents, monks' clothes, wallets, documents, bags, red paraphernalia, medicines, sealed water bottles still cold. Framed by the deafening sound of birds echoing in the emptiness, the three months long Red Shirt protest came an end, leaving behind 92 dead bodies and more than two thousands of injured.

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[15] The Thai army maintains that this shoots were not fired by soldiers. Yet multiple photographic evidence shows army personnel moving and firing from the Skytrain railways nearby the temple.

Figure 17: What is left of the protest

Fragility of power

While the Red Shirts had failed to remove the government of Abhisit Vejjajiva and suffered significant losses, they had also revealed the fragility of Thai state's power and showed that a motivated group of protesters could take over the center of Bangkok, hold it for months, and keep Thai government, police, and army in check, forcing them into an internationally embarrassing use of force to clear them. In particular, the drivers' emergence as actors in the protests and as a political force to reckon with in the city revealed the centrality of mobility and its operators not just for the daily operation of Bangkok and of Thai capital, but also as spaces, tactics, and actors of political mobilization.

Such centrality, however, should not come as a surprise. Both in academic and larger public debates, the rhetoric of mobility has taken an increasingly central stage in the last twenty years. Studies of migration, transnationalism, media, and globalization have put mobility at the center of academic discussion as well as our daily conversations (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000; Friedman 2005; Stiglitz 2002). In particular, analyses of contemporary capitalism have noticed the decreased importance of Fordist modes of production in favor of more flexible economic practices, centered on relations of exchange and mobile capital (Hardt, et al. 2000; Harvey 2006; Lazzarato and Jordan). Financial markets, communication technology, global trade, migratory movement, and terrorism—among other phenomena—have forced us to rethink the way we look at space, time, economy, society, politics, and human relations at large. In this "mobile turn" (Urry 2007), however, the roles, demands, and struggles of the operators of mobility have been largely overlooked. These phatic labors, as I have shown, allow channels of economic, social, and conceptual exchange to remain open and, even if excluded from the effects of their labor, they retain, at least potentially, the ability to modulate and sever the connections that they participate in creating and mediating. Even if when most scholars talk about the people who "control" flows, those operators are seldom named, in the protest they had reclaimed their centrality and adopted their mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just as a form of labor.

The drivers' multiple roles in the protest, and their ability to bring the city to its knees, questions established understanding on how power and resistance operate. Two dominant theories have directed contemporary analysis of power. On one side, Michel Foucault has seen power as an ubiquitous, all-powerful apparatus of governance (Foucault 1977; Foucault, et al. 2007), operating through mechanisms that produce their own subjects as well as forms of resistance, which "can exist only on the strategic field of the relations of power" (Foucault 1977:126). After all, he argued, "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978: 95-96). In this view, as Holloway has argued, "there are a whole host of resistances which are integral to power, but there is no possibility of emancipation. The only possibility is an endlessly shifting constellation of power-and-resistance" (Holloway 2005: 56). On the other side, James Scott has proposed a vision in which small everyday acts of resistance constitute, over time, emancipatory struggles and demonstrate the

subalterns' refusal to consent to hegemonic dominance (Scott 1985; Scott 1990). Power, in his view, is more effectively challenged by these forms of ordinary resistance than by open opposition and protest. Such vision is invaluable in revealing the importance of an analysis "that is *not* centered on the state, on formal organizations, on open protest, on national issues" (Scott 1985: xix). Yet, as Lila Abu-Lughod has argued (Abu-Lughod 1990), it also create a "romance of resistance" that over-estimate the relevance of this everyday acts.

Both theories, for opposite reasons, fail to account for the emergence of the drivers as significant political actors engaged both in forms of emancipatory politics and hegemonic dominance as well as for their ability to take the city center hostage and become important allies or significant enemies for the government, the army, and the Red Shirts alike. Their roles in protests, in other words, do not show power in Bangkok to be either an all-encompassing functional apparatus or opened to radical subversions through small acts of resistance. Rather they revealed power in the city—much like its urban structure, human expectations, and drivers' lives—as a fragile construct, intrinsically ridden by contradiction, contingencies, and failures. Such fragility, here revealed by the ability of operators of mobility to take over and filters urban flows and bringing state forces and capitalist circulation to their knees, opened possibilities for fractures, struggles, and take over. The Red Shirts' protest in 2010 was one such example, in which marginal operators of mobility and circulation took over the channels they create and in so doing challenged capitalist circulation and political legitimacy in the Thai nation. In this sense, I do not argue that forms of everyday resistance have intrinsically the potential to challenge and overturn domination, nor that these struggles are always inscribed into a disciplinary apparatus that does not allow for dissent. Rather I have shown that power—either as hegemony or as domination, either administered by Thai state forces or by the Red shirts' protesters—is always a frail apparatus, traversed by fault lines and weak spots. It is only when attacked on those spots, in other words, that this apparatus reveals its cracks, contradictions, and failures and opens itself to challenges. In this sense not every act of defiance or resistance retains the potential of questioning and unsettling power, as Scott's theory of power lead us to believe. Their ability to do so is rather the result of tactical considerations,

provisional coalitions, and timing—framed by a pre-existing discursive, spatial, organizational, and strategic

infrastructure—that allows them to hit those specific spots.

Ratchaprasong, and the flow of people, commodities, and capital through this space, offered one

such spot. In all four phases of the protest, the political mobilization entailed a radical restructuring of the

everyday life of the city, particularly of its mobility, by the very people who were operating it. In them the

drivers operated as transport providers, political mobilizers in their urban neighborhoods and rural villages,

Red Shirts' leaders' personal guards, guards at barricades, collectors of information as well as generic

supporters. If the phenomenology of their everyday practices had constituted the drivers as political subjects,

during the protests of 2010 their political mobilization adopted such a phenomenology to restructure

everyday life in the city. Through the multiplicity of their roles, the drivers showed their position as "owners

of the map," privileged connoisseurs of the city's hidden paths and flows. By disrupting everyday life they

reclaimed political centrality as owners, transformers, and gate-keepers of both social and physical channels in

the city. Mobilizers and stoppers, operating mobility and operating onto mobility, the motorcycle taxi drivers

reclaimed their role as both political actors and controllers of urban channels of communication, able to

perform both phatic labor—by which the channels are built and sustained—and a-phatic labor—by which

the same channels are filtered, slowed down, and, at times, cut off.

Similarly to the 2006 migrants' protest in Chicago and Los Angeles analyzed by David Harvey, the

Red Shirt protest offered "an impressive demonstration of the political and economic power […] to disrupt

the flows of production as well as the flows of goods and services in major urban centers" (Harvey 2012:

118), and showed how marginal urban workers can take advantage of the fragility of power and reveled it as

an illusion. Much like the Thai state in my analysis, and capitalism in John Holloway's critique (Holloway

2005),[16] power is unveiled as a shadow on the wall, which belies the fragility of the object that cast it and

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[16] "Capitalism is two-faced. The very nature of its instability (the separating of done from doing) generates the appearance of stability
(the separation of done from doing). The identity (is-ness) of capitalism is a real illusion: an effective illusion generated by the process
of production (the process of separating done from doing). The separation of constitution from existence is a real illusion: an effective
illusion generated by the process of production (the process of separating existence from constitution). The illusion is effective
because it belies the fragility of capitalism. It appears that capitalism 'is': but capitalism never 'is', it is always a struggle to constitute
itself. To treat capitalism as a mode of production that 'is' or, which is the same thing, to think of class struggle as struggle from below
against the stability of capitalism, is to fall head-first into the filthiest mire of fetishism. Capital, by its nature, appears to 'be', but it

generates the appearance of stability and unity, an appearance that the Red Shirts were able to challenge. Once its fragility is revealed, however, the illusion of power becomes hard to reconstruct and a space for questioning and challenges opens up. In this sense, the Red Shirts' protest, as other moments of political mobilization in human history, marked a significant success precisely because of their ability to poke holes into this illusion, to unveil the intrinsic fragility of power and, as Red Shirts supporters liked to repeat, to "open the eyes" (*tham hai koet tā sawāng*)of its subjects.

Such a revelation, however, does not necessarily configure a revolutionary moment or an overthrowing of a political system, as the Red Shirts' protest demonstrated. Much like other systems in unstable equilibrium, power is a fragile construct, relatively easy to challenge, yet—if able to survive the challenge—also malleable, prone to readjust and incorporate it to find a new equilibrium. The next chapter analyzes this readjustment after the 2010 protest, in particular in reference to the deeper incorporation of motorcycle taxi drivers and the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMMT) in the social security system and in the state's security apparatus.

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never 'is'. That is important, both to understand the violence of capital (the continued presence of what Marx called 'primitive accumulation') and to understand its fragility. The urgent impossibility of revolution begins to open towards an urgent possibility" (Holloway 2005: 74).

Conclusion: So What?

When I started my dissertation my advisor asked me why someone conducting research in Melanesia should be interested in my work. As a conclusion to my dissertation I go back to that query and pose a larger question that academic analysis, in my view, should always ask itself: we have learn something new about a specific context, so what? In attempting to answer this question, more than a conclusion I offer the incipit of a theory in the original sense of the term: a heuristic project larger than this dissertation, both conceptually and ethnographically, that emerged, as any theory should, from a concrete journey—in this case among motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok.

In each chapter I have attempted to analyze this ethnographic experience and a semi-organized theoretical reflection has taken shape as I progressed. It seems useful, therefore, to conclude my exploration by organizing the analysis in a more systematic form, one that emerges from the specific context yet engages with larger questions and processes that can easily be overlooked and reduced by a strictly ethnographic gaze. I decided to provide such analysis at the end of this text, and not at the beginning as most anthropological texts do, to render justice to the process through which such reflections emerge. It seemed therefore sensible to present it after the rest of the material as a way to reflect over it and push it into new conceptual and ethnographic investigations. In this sense, I do not aim at developing a formal theory, which would supposedly be applied outside this specific context. Rather, after providing a general view of the interaction between logics of capital, everyday experiences, and political relations in the specific context of urban Thailand, I propose to expand my observations to provide a starting point for future research that may investigate similar dynamics across the globe, eliciting or disproving such similarities.

These three lines of inquiry—logics of capital, everyday experience, and political relations—have dominated social sciences in the last decades yet have often remained separated and, at times, have generated opposing and conflicting theoretical reflections. Marxism has often reduced everyday life and political

relations to the logic of capitals and its contradictions; Phenomenology has elevated everyday life to the realm

of an irreducible universal, frequently underestimating the other two aspects; post-structuralism has expanded

the realm of political relations so widely to make every other consideration secondary and, in the process,

leaving no space for political engagement. While many scholars have attempted and managed to live in

between these three schools—and have generated invaluable products from this position—this has been

largely done by dodging and resolving their contradictions rather than analyzing concretely how the logics

capital, the demands and necessity of everyday life, and the desires of politics are closely entangled and in

constant tension and reorganization. This is not to say that I am alone in this project. Rather I follow the road

paved by Henri Lefebvre's trilogy of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, a road that, for a reason or the other, have

fallen out of fashion but which departed from the orthodoxy of political-economic analysis and historical

materialism by both questioning and incorporating aspects of phenomenological and post-structural analysis.

Lefebvre, similarly to what I have done in this dissertation, proposes to develop such an approach by starting

from an analysis and a critique of the everyday as the territory where structures, processes, and practices meet

and question each other. In the first volume of this forgotten masterpiece, the French philosopher stated:

> The method of Marx and Engels consists precisely in a search for the link which exists
> between what men think, desire, say and believe for themselves and what they are, what they
> do. This link always exists. It can be explored in two directions. On the one hand, the
> historian or the man of action can proceed from ideas to men, from consciousness to
> being—i.e. toward practical, everyday reality—bringing the two into confrontation and
> thereby achieving *criticism of ideas by action and realities*. This is the direction, which Marx and
> Engels nearly always followed in everything they wrote; and it is the direction which critical
> and constructive method must follow initially if it is to take a demonstrable shape and
> achieve results. […] But it is equally possible to follow this link in another direction, taking
> real life as the point of departure in an investigation of how the ideas which express it and
> the forms of consciousness which reflect it emerge. The link, or rather the network of links
> between the two poles will prove to be complex. It must be unraveled, the thread must be
> carefully followed. In this way we can arrive at a *criticism of life by ideas* which in a sense
> extends and completes the first procedure. (Lefebvre 2008, Vol I: 145)

In this dissertation I attempted to unraveling this network of links among motorcycle taxi drivers in Thailand

and by proposing a critique of ideas (such as urban development, freedom, neoliberalism, desires, and power)

through a focus on lived experience and a critique of lived experience through an analysis of the logics of

capital and political economic relations. It is precisely in this double tension that political desires, consciousness, and mobilizations emerge and that power reveals all of its fragility and contradictions. The challenges of such an approach are multiple and analyzing everyday life, and in my specific case everyday urban mobility, as a bundle of practices and representations (Cresswell 2006),[1] entails—as Lefebvre acknowledged—a tiring and careful work of exploring multiple contradictions and contingencies in the relation among structures, processes, and practices.[2] Chapter after chapter I have attempted to reveal such predicaments: those that created Bangkok as a palimpsest onto which the drivers' everyday lives are inscribed; the contradiction and contingencies that animate their daily mobilities and its risks; those that are ingrained in their role of mediators between the city and the countryside; those ingrained in the discourse of freedom that motivates them to take up this job; the contradictions and contingencies that the drivers experience in their expectations, dreams, and desires that in turn build their political consciousness; and finally those inherent to power, whether in the form of state forces, their control over territory and citizens, or of social movements, political organizations, and their negotiations with those forces.

In order to follow this line of thought, however, an updating of the analysis of the logics of capitalism was necessary. As I have shown, in fact, contemporary capitalism is largely—with few significant exceptions—beyond the industrial era in which Marx based his theories. With this I do not mean that industrial production is irrelevant to today's capitalism or to deny a significant amount of political, economic, environmental, and social energies revolve around relations of production but rather than the locus of capitalist accumulation has shifted and that the creation of plus-value globally is now firmly away from industrial production and the factory floor. No statistic is clearer in marking this transformation than the evolution of the relation between financial turnover and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the United States. If in 1970 the trading in U.S. stock markets moved $136.0 billion, or 13.1 percent of U.S. GDP, in

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[1]Tim Cresswell argued that "consider, then, these three aspects of mobility: the fact of physical movement: getting from one place to another; the representations of movement that give it shared meaning; and, finally, the experienced and embodied practice of movement. In practice these elements of mobility are unlikely to be easy to untangle. They are bound up with one another. The disentangling that follows is entirely analytical and its purpose is to aid theory construction." (Cresswell 2009: 19)

[2] I choose this terminology because it implies both internal tensions—that generate contradictions—and external predicaments—that configure continuous contingencies.

1990 this market worth $1.671 trillion, or 28.8 percent of U.S. GDP in 1990 and by the year 2000, trading in U.S. equity markets was $14.222 trillion, becoming the 144.9 percent of GDP only to grow more until the 2008 crisis. In other words, financial capital is now bigger than the "real economy."

This shift has opened a new phase of global capitalism, which the crisis revealed in all its contingencies and contradictions. As David Harvey has argued, the global economic crisis of 1973 was solved with a "spatial fix," namely the inclusion of new territories into the capitalistic system by financializing growing economies and out-sourcing production around the globe, increasingly in China. Such a spatial fix seems now to be approaching its full extent as more and more production concentrates in few hot spots, most notably in East Asia and increasingly in China. Through this fix the cost of labor is being reduced, under unbearable job conditions, to a bare minimum. As an effect, the creation of plus-value out of the production processes, which has oriented Marxist readings of the organization of everyday life and political relations, has significantly decreased, as Marx had predicted: production offers few roads for more accumulation. This, however, did not bring capitalism to an end but rather as global production costs are approaching, and at times, surpassing the minimum cost of the reproduction of labor, capital accumulation has to move somewhere else and, as the growth of financial markets reveals, it is increasingly moving toward the financial and services sector and became more involved in exchange and circulation of "fictitious capital" than in the production of "real capital" (Harvey 2012; Marx, et al. 1906).

To describe this transformation, scholars have constructed the concept post-Fordism, a system defined—as I showed—precisely by the break out of lines of production and factory labor toward a service-oriented world, dominated by flexible labor and entrepreneurial forces. This change potentially has massive effects on our understanding of the logics of capital, its relation to everyday life and political relations. First of all the concept of class has experienced a deep questioning as its classical definition that individuates in relations of production its discriminating factor came under review. New definitions have emerged that see consumption, or larger dispositions, as determining aspects. Similarly, instead of the proletarianization of the bourgeois expected by Marx we are assisting to the "entepreneuralization" of workers around the world,

increasingly understood as "free" economic agents and the expansion of capitalist logic from the working hours into every aspect of our lives, from relationships to politics. The life trajectories of motorcycle taxis in Thailand offer concrete examples of this transition from the factory floor to the informal service economy, with all the perils and advantages of their "free" life. Plenty more examples are available both in Thailand and all around the globe, from the flexibilization of labor to the expansion of self-employment. While such implications have been noted, one aspect remains largely unexplored. If in industrial capitalism the location of politics was often individuated in relations of production, and specifically the factory floor where plus-value was extracted, where is politics moving in this new configuration? While studies of social movement have argued that identity politics has been the new issue, I add that mobility and its operators are also becoming significant sites, actors, and strategies of political mobilization. Before I analyze the hypothesis that emerged from the specific context of my dissertation, I need to reply to two more questions: if this transformation of capitalism away from production is happening globally, why is Thailand a significant angle from which to analyze it? And why is studying motorcycle taxi drivers useful for these explorations? The reason for both choices, I argue, is historical.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Southeast Asian economies lived through a period of unprecedented growth, led by a massive influx of foreign capital and a realignment of national economies toward export-oriented industrialization. GDP grew in Thailand, in the decade between 1986 and 1996, faster than in any other nation of the world. In these ten years, the country experienced an average growth rate of 9.5 percent per year, with the peak at 13.3 percent in 1988. Simultaneously, the volume of exported goods and services rose at a yearly average of 14.8 percent, with the peak at 26.1 percent in that same year (Pasuk and Baker 1996). Such growth was accompanied by a significant improvement in quality of life, life-expectancy, literacy rates, access to commodities, and services for the Thai population (Pasuk and Baker 2002). As Stiglitz has argued, until the economic downturn of 1997, "East Asia had not only grown faster and done better at reducing poverty than any other region of the world, developed or less developed, but it had also been more stable" (Stiglitz 2002: 90).While this celebratory tones forget the harsh inequality and exploitation behind this economic expansion, it was remarkable how Thailand became the champion of a model of development that

systematically ignored the suggestions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the recipes of the Washington Consensus to liberalize its economy and reduce state interventions.

Rather than adopting the market-driven and anti-state approach proposed by these institutions, the East Asian expansion was driven by strong states that regulated the relations between capital and citizens, advocated gradual liberalization of markets, and centrally planned industrial, social, and monetary policy. After 1993, however, Thailand started to follow the IMF suggestions and liberalized national capital market with the belief that this measure would help its economy grow even faster. Soon the country became a trial ground for the neo-liberal restructuring that has since been pushed around the globe by International Financial Institutions (IFI) and the US Treasury.

The effects in Thailand were tripartite: international capital flooded the country; national companies borrowed heavily from international markets; and the national banking system was de-regularized leaving its actors free to invest in whatever sector of the economy they wanted—particularly real estate—rather than having to follow government directives. Rapidly the Thai economy inflated, new capitals entered the country, and real estate became an enormously profitable market, apparently confirming the IMF's expectations. Inside this bubble, however, the conditions for a burst were emerging. The new international capital was highly volatile and could get out quickly if the country experienced economic stagnation; real estate could remain a profitable speculative investment even after the demand for its products withered; international loans in foreign currency could grew overnight as they remained subdued to changes in the baht's exchange rates. All of these potential risks became reality in 1997.

On May 14th and 15th 1997, following a stagnation in the housing market, the Thai baht was hit by massive speculative attacks. Driven by the facility of moving capitals in and out of Thailand and the increasing instability of the national economy, this speculation became the spark that ignited the Asian financial crisis. After some resistance from the Thai government, interest rates were increased drastically and the baht devalued rapidly. The currency, left free to fluctuate, lost more than half of its value in a week. Suddenly most Thai companies that had borrowed in foreign currencies saw their debt burden double. In a

few days, a significant number of these economic players went into bankruptcy. Thailand's booming economy came to a halt amid extensive layoffs in finance, real estate, industry, and construction.[3]

Financial markets, industrial production, urban change, internal migration, consumerism: everything seemed to stop (Bello, et al. 1998a; Kasian 2002; Pasuk and Baker 2000; Warr 2005). All around the country unfinished buildings, vacant structures, and foreclosed homes became the symbols of this crisis. At the same time, laid-off migrant workers reacted either by returning to agricultural land, which had always offered a security net in times of economic recession, or by inducing a massive informalization of labor (Amin 1994). Many Thai workers, in fact, drifted away from manufacturing jobs toward more insecure, informal, and service-oriented occupations. Among the occupations that received those workers was driving motorcycle taxis whose numbers expanded, as we saw, from 37,500 in 1994 to 109,056 in 2003 and became fundamental to the process of circulation of people and commodities so central to post-Fordism capitalism in the Thai capital.

While different from the recent global economic crisis in its monetary component, the 1997 crisis in Thailand followed an uncannily similar progression to the 2008 global financial crisis. First, the crisis was the product of liberalized and unregulated capital markets, particularly of the accumulation of toxic debt by companies and private citizens who over-leveraged their assets. Second, it revealed itself with a crash of the housing market that had received a large chunk of the monetary fluidity that had flooded the country. Third, the response to the crisis was a bailout of financial institutions and big corporate players who had caused the crisis, or at least ignored its signs, together with fiscal austerity measures that reduced employment, access to credit, job security, and established rights for citizens. Workers, then as now, had no choice but to de-regularize their labor, accept more flexible positions, and drift toward service economies. As in 2008, when pushed in front of the choice between supporting real earners or unscrupulous financial institutions, the state decided to support the latter, abandoning the former. As a consequence, the 1997 economic crisis in Thailand—much as happened in the 2008 financial meltdown in the United States with its bailouts and the austerity measures forced by the BCE around Europe since 2009—strangled the country's productive

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[3] The number of general unemployed grew from 697,900 during the dry season of 1997 to 1,479,300 in the dry season of 1998. (ibid: 7)

economies and sacrificed them on the altar of financial stability. The crisis, in other words, provided in the short run an unprecedented opportunity—as it is happening today in Southern Europe—for the expansion of a neo-liberal agenda and a reduction of national economy sovereignty.

Even if the crisis was ostensibly brought to be by the US Treasury and the IMF's suggestion to liberalize capital markets, "the collapse of a number of East and Southeast Asian economies in 1997 was seen by many within the neoliberal camp as cutting the ground from under their opponents and signifying the superiority of markets over states" (Robison and Hewison 2005: 188). The same organizations that had praised the growth of East Asian economies suddenly started to "condemn them as 'failed' cases of 'crony capitalism'" (Beeson 2005: 204). As Milton Friedman had theorized, economic crisis offered unprecedented opportunities for economic restructuring. "Only a crisis—actual or perceived—produces real change. When that crisis occurs," he argued "the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable" (Friedman 1962: vii-ix). When the 1997 crisis hit, the neo-liberal ideas championed by Friedman were alive and well and this economic downturn provided an opportunity for apologists of market neoliberalism, principally the International Financial Institutions (IFI), to dismiss state-led capitalism and argue that state's interventions in the market were behind the down-turn. A turn toward free-markets, they argued, was now "politically inevitable" and the IMF started to push the sinking economies to conform to their credo. Thailand, where the crisis began, became the main trial ground for this free-market shock therapy (Klein 2007), the same therapy that is today being administered to Southern European economies. The results were disastrous.

Thailand entered the International Monetary Fund recovery program in August 1997. In the following months the country accumulated US$ 17 billion in loans from different sources,[4] and initiated a season of structural adjustments that involved a retreat of the state from direct investments, a push toward

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[4] The lenders were Japan $4 billion; the central banks of Australia, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore $1 billion each; the central banks of South Korea and Indonesia $0.5 billion each; the World Bank $1.5 billion and the Asian Development Bank $1.2 billion. Since then, Japan has taken up the contributions of South Korea and Indonesia.

macro-economic prudence, deregulation, privatization and liberalization.[5] While the government headed by Chavalit Yongchaiyudh tried to react by introducing a mild form of capital control to prevent foreign capitals from abandoning the sinking Thai economy, the IMF strongly opposed such measures and cornered Chavalit into retracting them. International capital, free to leave, fled the country as the national economy sank under the weight of the money drain. While neighboring Malaysia refused the IMF's diktat and limited the out-flow of international capital, starting its road to recovery, the Thai economy sunk, carrying Chavalit with it. His government fell in October 1997 and Chuan Leekpai took office in early 1998, with every intention of facilitating the IMF's solutions to the crisis.

The new government was basically a vane, caught in the wind of the IMF, whose program involved sky-rocking interest rates, cutting government spending—in particular social services—and increasing taxes with the purpose of stabilizing the national financial markets, precisely the recipe being adopted today in Southern Europe. This approach included also "structural reforms" that entailed a retreat of the state from interventions in the economy and a further opening to foreign capital, which rapidly conquered the national banking system and significantly increased its shares in the Thai economy (Pasuk and Baker 2008). The plan guaranteed that foreign lenders would be repaid but it proved disastrous for the country and its economic sovereignty. As Stiglitz has shown, "the breadth of the conditions meant that the countries accepting Fund aids had to give up a large part of their economic sovereignty" (Stiglitz 2002: 96).

The loss of sovereignty experienced in Thailand and across Southeast Asia, however, provoked a strong reaction to the measures by national forces. Local public opinion started to claim that the crisis and these responses were the result of a purposeful plan by the United States to destabilize the growing Asian economies through capital speculation and IMF's interventions. Such discourse became dominant among the Thai public and the crisis, which initiated well before the IMF took over national economic policies, became popularly known as *"wikrit IMF"* (IMF crisis). In all truth, since the Fund's intervention the Thai economy did plunge at an unprecedented rate. The national GPD fell by 7.9 percent in 1997, l2.3 percent in 1998, and

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[5] These solutions were outlined in "letters of intent," which were negotiated between the Thai government and the IMF, but over which the Fund retained veto-power (Siamwalla 2000). This power was applied forcefully to reject the introduction of forms of capital control to prevent foreign capitals to abandon the sinking Thai economy.

7 percent in the first half of 1999. By 2000, three years after the crisis, Malaysia, ignoring IMF's suggestions and strengthening capital control, had solidly recovered. On the contrary, Thailand had followed IMF prescription to the letter and "was still in recession, […] little corporate restructuring, and close to 40 percent of the loans still non-performing" (Stiglitz 2002:127). As a consequence, the post-1997 crisis political and economic landscape in Thailand started to move away from neoliberal orthodoxy and toward new forms of regulated economy that we have seen emerging in the last years around the globe, especially out of South America, and that scholars have analyzed as post-neoliberal (Macdonald and Ruckert 2009).

By the year 2000, it was clear that the government of Chuan Leekpai had lost its popular support, not only for its failure to deliver economic recovery but also for allowing and supporting policies that were largely perceived as an international attack to Thai political and economic self-determination. The attempt to deepen neoliberalism in Thailand had been a failure, both economically and socially. Neoliberalism and de-regulatory policies became a political rotting corpse and both sides of the Thai political spectrum tried to take distance from IMF policies and previous government that had endorsed them. As Friedrich Hayek, the first president of the Mount Pèlerin Society—the think-tank behind the formulation of neo-liberalism—had argued, the success of any economic theory is predicated upon the acceptance of a social philosophy that "would become persuasive to others only if [it was] connected to a worldview that they found compelling" (Burgin 2012: 51). In post-crisis Thailand a neoliberal world view of free markets and rational individual actors, was simply not compelling—economically, socially, and electorally. As Jim Glassman has shown,

> when this [vision] contributed to further economic decline, popular opposition to neoliberalism crystallised, bringing together a heterogeneous array of forces ranging from [social] groups (opposed to specific government development policies) and state enterprise employees (opposed to privatisation) to business leaders (opposed to forced closure and restructuring of firms) and some government officials (Glassman 2010: 1311).

This array of forces was the electoral base for Thaksin Shinawatra's first election as Prime Minister in 2001. Once in power, his government "opposed neoliberal orthodoxy […] and held the motley assemblage of social forces together through extensive 'populist' spending programmes. It is crucial to note that Thaksin's policies were anti-neoliberal precisely in that they challenged neoliberal preferences for minimal state spending on

domestic business and the poor. They were not antagonistic to trade liberalisation and the like […]. While much reviled by neoliberals, Thaksin's populist programmes constituted some of the post-Cold-War Thai state's first major—and, arguably, long overdue—ventures into the provision of basic forms of social welfare appropriate to an industrial society, such as national health insurance" (Glassman 2010: 1312). While Thaksin distanced himself from orthodox neo-liberalism, he also, as I showed, speeded up the expansion of post-Fordist capitalism, pushing for a capitalization and financialization of the low-income economy and a flexibilization of labor in the country, mostly in the service sectors.

In this sense, post-Thaksin Thailand, in which my fieldwork took place, provides an invaluable observational point from which to explore the effects of a neo-liberal economic crisis and the resulting restructuring of capital, everyday life, and political relations. Such case, in fact, offers an optic through which to observe this transformation and steal a glance into one of a potential future—whether utopic or dystopic—of post-neoliberal crisis capitalism, a future which may be emerging also in other contexts around the globe. If we want to study this configuration in a post-neoliberal crisis context—not just in macro-economic terms but also in the complex configuration between the emerging logics of contemporary capitalism and the restructuring of everyday life and political relations—Thailand offers an invaluable entry point, one that, with significant exceptions (Bello, et al. 1998b; Bello and Docena 2004; Stiglitz 2002), has been overlooked.

Why then focus on motorcycle taxi drivers, the phatic laborers who allow the city to move? My answer here is partial—as part of the reason was just my own interest—and mostly comes from the new centrality that circulation and exchange have assumed in academic analysis, public debate, and post-Fordist capitalism. As I have shown, the rhetoric of flows has taken an increasingly central stage in the last twenty years, pushing for a "mobile turn" (Urry 2007) that has questioned our understanding of social life, its structures, processes, and practices. Studies of migration, transnationalism, media, and globalization have put mobility at the center of academic discussion as well as our daily conversations (Appadurai 1996; Castells 2000; Friedman 2005; Stiglitz 2002). Urban studies, in particular, have recognized its importance to the

historical development and everyday practices of capitalist cities that are the product of movement and fluxes (Castells and Pflieger 2008; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2006).

In this debate, however, three aspects have been largely overlooked. First, as the focus on mobility became more prominent, many observers tended to focus on flows as steady and unhampered processes (Appadurai 1996; Ong 1999). Categories like free market, open borders, smooth communication, or fluid movement dominated public discourses. In response, other scholars started noticing that, for the people and spaces that remain outside neuralgic links of global capital, markets are seldom free, borders are rarely fully open, communication is often interrupted (Massey 1993; Ferguson 1999), and movement, as people living in Bangkok experience every day, is rarely fluid but more often based on stop and go, friction, and stasis (Bird 1993; Caldeira 2000; Tsing 2005). Both reflections, whether with celebratory or condemnatory tones, have assumed a progressive narrative of capitalist expansion that pushes toward an incremental fluidity and speed of flows, at least for the "winners" of global capital. Such vision, however, have failed to reflect on the multiple and oscillating rhythms of these flows, defined as the patterns of movement through time. Once we focus on these rhythms, as I have done in the dissertation, a different picture emerges, one in which flows are revealed both in their significance and intrinsic fragility while mobility and immobility stand in dialectic tension, as they did during the Red Shirts protests in 2010.

The second largely understudied aspect has been an exploration of the roles, demands, and struggles of the people who operate this mobility and modulate its rhythms. For this reason, it is significant to study the "phatic laborers" who, as we saw, "produce communicative channels that can transmit not only language but also all kinds of semiotic meaning and economic value" (Elyachar 2010: 453) but often remain cut off from the full enjoyment of these channels. Even if excluded from the effects of their labor, these operators retain, as the role of motorcycle taxi drivers in street protests demonstrated, an ability to filter and sever the connections that they participate in creating and mediating. Nonetheless, when most scholars talk about the people who "control" flows, those operators are seldom named. State bureaucracies, jet-setters, business people, international elites come under scrutiny but financial operators, software developers, secretaries, and

transportation providers are often overlooked. What is mobility doing to them? How do they engage and make sense of it? How is their political participation reshaping the landscapes they operate in? These are questions that my dissertation attempted to answer in the case of motorcycle taxi drivers but remain open to further explorations.

The third often overlooked aspect is the rise, suggested by the drivers' mobilization in Thailand, of forms of political participation that adopt mobility, and immobility, as an organizational strategy and a political arena, whether virtual or physical. Such centrality of circulation as both the constitutive strength and objective of late capitalism seems to be confirmed by the increasing adoption of "spaces of flow" (Castells 2000) as central political arenas precisely for their neuralgic importance for the operations of capitalism and capitalist institutions. Internet activism during the Arab Spring, terrorist attacks on "spaces of circulation, consumption and communication" (Augé 1995: 98), flash mobs inside consumption hubs, pirate seizures of oil tankers passing off the Horn of Africa, closure of highways and ports in Italy, and the Occupy Wall Street movement are just some of the most emblematic examples of this developing trend that still remains largely under-theorized.

For all of these reasons, therefore, studying motorcycle taxi drivers, their mobility and mobilization in Thailand, offers a useful entry point to shed light on these three blind spots and reflect on the emerging configuration between the logics of contemporary capitalism, everyday life, and political relations, with all the contingencies and contradictions among their structures, processes, and practices. A question, however, remains: What is the effect of such an approach on social theory and where do we go from here? The rest of this conclusion will attempt to answer this question, proposing new paths of investigation.

First of all, my dissertation offers a revision of Marxist theory, not just in pushing for an incorporation of phenomenological attention into everyday practices and post-structuralist focus on discourse, but also by updating its analysis of political consciousness and mobilization in relation to shifting configurations of global capitalism. Marxist analysis of politics, as I showed, relied heavily on the idea that production remained the center of accumulation and therefore the space in which the contradictions of

capital were more evident. For this reason—this theory went—relations of production represent the ultimate locus of politics. In classical Marxist theory, as well as in parties that based their operations on it, the factory floors and the proletariat that filled them were the spaces and actors of politics, the locations and the agents of history. Such vision, however, is heavily questionable in post-1997 Thailand where, as I showed, new regimes of accumulation have increasingly taken distance from production while labor politics has lost centrality—as the difficulties experienced by the Association of Motorcycle Taxis of Thailand (AMTT) to mobilize drivers through a labor union demonstrates. The same is increasingly true for a variety of world economies, maybe with the notable exception of China. As a consequence, if we accept that in post-industrial and post-Fordist societies, production no longer occupies such central stage for the capitalist extraction of plus-value, a question arises: where did accumulation go, and where will politics be located?

My speculation, which remains a hypothesis that would require further investigation, is that the locus of accumulation has increasingly moved away from the factory floor toward the "market," at the same time an imaginary space and ephemeral actor that has emerged as the ultimate space of capitalism.[6] While on the factory floor the focus was mostly on production, in the market circulation and exchange acquire a new centrality. In it most of the plus-value is created in exchange, through the movement, circulation, and marketing of goods and financial products, and not in the act of production. This has generated a shift from relations of production to "relation of exchange" as the core of both capitalist accumulation and political mobilization. Exploitation and alienation, in this new configuration, acquire new forms. If in production alienation took the form of estrangement of the worker from its products and from itself, in exchange alienation—as my dissertation showed—becomes also estrangement from the desires of mobility, whether physical, economic, or social that the capitalist system presents yet whose fulfillment remain constrained by its structural relation and everyday practices. In this new configuration, in other words, capitalism is not satisfied with the exploitation of workers' labor but also exploits their desires to fuel its progression yet keep them outside its benefits. It is in this unique position to experience such a conundrum and react to it context

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[6] Such reading is confirmed by the post-1970s obsession, mostly directed by the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, with "letting the market operate freely" or "managing the market."

that motorcycle taxi drivers, operators of the circulation of people, commodities, and discourses around Thailand, as well as creators of the channels through which these circulate, have emerged as central political actors both in Bangkok and across the landscape of the country. After all, if we accept that circulation and flows are both a characteristic and an objective of capitalism, as first described by Marx and then developed by David Harvey in the context of late capitalism, and that contemporary capitalism is more and more making exchange, and not production, the locus of extraction of plus value, then it should not come as a surprise that mobility and its operators, such as motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, are emerging as loci, and actors of political mobilization, as the Red Shirt protest suggests. Is this just a characteristic of the contemporary social movements in Thailand or is this part of a larger trend of political mobilization world-wide, as movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring seem to suggest? Are we in front of a significant shift in the location and strategies of political struggle or just of an extension of modalities? These questions, which my dissertation raises, offer the ground for further ethnographic and comparative research as well as for a re-theorization of social movements, that this text has only begun to sketch out.

Asking this question, and exploring the relation between mobility and mobilization in post-Fordist capitalism, does not only pushes us to reconsider the location and strategies of contemporary politics, but also invite us to develop a new way of analyzing social movements, a way that reconciles political-economic analysis with the exploration of both discourses and everyday practices. As I showed in the case of motorcycle taxi drivers in Thailand, in fact, each of these dimensions taken separately would fail to account for their roles in allowing the city to function, mediating its bodies, commodities, imaginaries, and desires, creating a political consciousness of their exclusion, and finally acting upon it through filtering or severing the same mobility they normally facilitate. In this sense, studying social movements historically through an analysis of its "infrastructure of mobilization" with spatial, organizational, discursive, and strategic components, instead of focusing on each one of these aspects separately, as social theorists often do, has allowed me to deepen the observation raised by scholars of New Social Movements (NSM). NSM theorists, in fact, have shown that "power operates not only by obvious repression or through visible institutions but also and even more effectively through the production of human subjectivities through the spaces and grammar of everyday life […] that are particular to postindustrial capitalism" (Abelmann 1996: 3). In this sense, I position myself in the path opened by Alain Touraine and his student Manuel Castells and consider contemporary political struggles to be always over a claim for a way of life in which actors, and not just unified classes or overarching apparatuses, play a role. Such claims, however, necessitate merging into collective discourses, organizations, and actions to acquire historical significance and challenge the hold of power. While both orthodox and critical Marxists, including Gramsci, have retained that such processes occur mostly in the sphere of consciousness and awareness (Tuðal 2009), I follow Lefebvre in reclaiming the centrality of habits and everyday practices in the creation of both structural relations and political mobilization. In so doing I surpass both New Social Movement approaches, such as the one I analyzed, and

Political Opportunity (PO) currents, such as the one championed by Charles Tilly (Tilly 1978; Tilly and Wood 2009), and propose a holistic investigation of political mobilization which analyzes the interplay between political-economic conditions, political discourse, and existing frameworks of action.

Are the drivers' mobilization and the Red Shirts protest around them, a product of political economic structure? Are they the products of discursive formations and apparatuses of governamentality? Are they the product of everyday practice? Rather than attempting to provide an answer, I followed the lead of Francesca Polletta and James Jasper and proposed an analysis that "avoids a priori assumptions about causal mechanisms and allows for a number of different relationships between cultural and discursive practices on the one hand, and legal, political, economic, and social structures on the other" (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 285) in the specificity of the ethnographic context. In this sense, I questioned the primacy of one of these aspects over the others and attempted to reconcile multiple schools of thought. In such an analysis, while I questioned the post-structuralist obsession with discourses and history over material practices, strategies, and organizational forms, I also recognized the relevance of these social imaginaries to the operation of social movements such as the Red Shirts. While I challenged the idea that political-economic structures pre-dates a superstructure and an ideology, I however analyzed how such structures shape everyday life and mold its practices. While I disputed the primacy of experience and perception to "being in the world," I accepted that everyday life is central field in which structures, processes, and practices are solidifies, experimented, and challenged. In other words, rather than questioning the primacy of one component over the other, I analyzed their interaction through an ethnographic engagement with everyday life, as experienced by motorcycle taxi drivers. If we accept such a vision, therefore, it becomes clear that both purely political-economic analysis and purely phenomenological inquiries fail to account for the complexities of social life.

Here resides, I believe, the biggest contribution and challenge posed by my work. On one side, my project explored the historically determined political economic relations in order to understand the life paths, daily experience, political participation and position of the drivers in the urban system that extends from the core of Bangkok to the remote villages from where the drivers arrive. On the other, I was confronted daily with the lived experience of operating in these circuits and all the ways in which the phenomenological experience of the drivers and their perception of the city conformed and challenged their political-economic

position while structuring their consciousness as human beings, migrant men, and political actors. The decision to divide the dissertation in two parts accounts for these two aspects. In the first section, the everyday mobility of motortaxis was the focus. I explored the phenomenological dimension of riding through the city from a motorcycle seat. I looked at the symbiosis between drivers, their bikes, and the city. By analyzing how drivers bring the city into being as they carve channels through it and are in turn molded by the city's rhythms, I reflected on how political economic relations of exploitation are inscribed onto the body of the drivers. In the second section, I showed how this everyday mobility structures political mobilization. I analyzed the mutually constitutive nature of phenomenology and political-economy by exploring how everyday mobility generates political consciousness among the drivers. Finally, I revealed how this consciousness of political-economic inequality, in turn, morphed into political struggle and a transformation of everyday life during the Red Shirt protests in 2010.

The two sections thus form two parts of the picture: while the first showed the drivers' role in weaving together the city and facilitating the circulation of people, commodities, and ideas, the second showed that, when the everyday life of the city breaks down, the drivers take advantage of their position in urban circuits of exchange to emerge as central political actors who now block, slow down, and filter the same forms of circulation that they normally facilitate. In this sense, I propose to reconcile political-economy and phenomenology by studying ethnographically everyday life as the complex field on which logics of capital, practices, and discourse meet and interact generating and challenging one another. After all, as Lefebvre has argued:

> There is nothing more simple and more obvious than everyday life. How do people live? The question may be difficult to answer, but that does not make it the less clear. In another sense nothing could be more superficial: it is banality, triviality, repetitiveness. And in yet another sense nothing could be more profound. It is existence and it is 'lived', revealed as they are before speculative thought has inscribed them: what must be changed and what is the hardest of all to change. (Lefebvre 1991 Vol II: 47)

Grounding our investigation in an analysis of everyday life, therefore, poses us in front of this duality that forces us to overcome the opposition between phenomenological analysis and materialist political-economic

readings by focusing on both the superficial and the profound and analyzing their interactions. In other words, it helps us to reconcile phenomenological attention to mundane practices—often accused of superficiality—with larger analysis of political economic structures—often accused of missing practices—by showing the entanglements of social engagement, economic practices, political subjectivities, and everyday experiences over time and space. When analyzed through this lens, moreover, social life is presented under a new light. Superficial and profound at the same time, shaped by structures, process, and practices, it is revealed as a complex configuration, one that is always, at each turn, challenged by its own fragility. In my dissertation I have showed where and when such fragility emerges in the Thai capital, its movers, and power brokers. Here I propose to develop, through a critique of everyday life, a social analysis that accounts for the fragility of social life—a characteristic that we constantly experienced in our lives, always hanging in unstable balance, but which has been largely under-theorized by social theory.

By focusing on everyday life, instead, we cannot ignore this unsettling realization, faced by the fact that "the everyday is on the one hand an empirical modality for the organization of human life, and on the other a mass of representations which disguise this organization, its contingency and its risks. Hence the impression given by everyday life as 'reality': inconsistency and solidity, fragility and cohesion, seriousness and futility, profound drama and the void behind the actor's empty mask" (Lefebvre 1991 Vol II: 138). The constant revelation of this duality, in this sense, pushes social theory, as my dissertation has done, to explore the interactions between structures, processes, and practices as constantly ridden with contingencies and contradictions which in turn reveal the fragility of social life, its material and historical construction, as well as the fragility of political power and its practices. Studying such fragilities, I argue, is central to understand the genesis and inner working e of capital, everyday life, and political mobilization as well as their interactions.

Much work remains to be done in exploring what the implications of such approach maybe for social theory as well as political analysis and this work will surely prove challenging. Failing to recognize the fragile nature of social life, however, not only poses a theoretical dilemma for social sciences, but also questions our political stance. At stake is not just the risk of leaving social sciences stuck in the "sedentarist metaphysics"

that Liisa Malkki has described as a "logic that assumes the moral and logical primacy of fixity and place over movement and space" (Malkki 1995) and ignores the relevance of unstable equilibrium and transformation for social life. A more daunting danger faces us: that of either overestimating the grip of power or seeing acts resistance everywhere and in so doing erasing their significance. Both approaches have cornered the social sciences in a "praxis of political immobility," a position that, in times of mass mobilizations such as the one we are now living in, we cannot afford if we want to have any significance in the real world.