

The concept of ‘phatic labor’ is integral to the text, and its use in the ethnographic examination of motorcycle taxi drivers is an analytically rich implementation of Elyachar’s theory.

The benefits of the concept in the text are clear, especially in showcasing how lines/channels of mobility, driven (in both senses) by motorcycle taxi drives, connect various forms of capital (linking, for instance, the social capital of drivers and their connections to the economic capital of rich benefactors/clients), space (village-city), and social-relations (relationships between various socio-economic classes; between city-dwellers and families in the villages), in addition to establishing connections between political actors, producers and recipients of various forms of communication/information, as well as different forms of transportation. In their roles as phatic laborers, the motorcycle taxi drivers do not merely link, transport, and bind, but also create pathways, opening up and producing sedimented connections which become integral to flows of capital, information, sociality, ideology, and commodities.

In this sense, Sopranzetti’s work expands both Jacobson’s ‘phatic function’ — designating the ‘channels through which speech is conveyed’ — and Elyachar’s understanding of phatic labor as the communicative work done which creates communicative channels/pathways that can be subsequently tapped/exploited by other agents and/or utilized for recurrent flows. While this communicative aspect is indeed important in Sopranzetti’s account, phatic labor is broadened here to signify the fullness of Elyachar’s metaphor of phatic labor being similar to “the laying of cables or fiber-optic lines or the building of railroads.”

While I find this paradigm compelling, my concern is the same as it is in regards Elyachar’s own work: a privileging of the actions of various actors in producing channels for the flows of (in Sopranzetti’s monograph) communication, capital, commodities, ideology, desire, etc, at the expense of a more detailed analysis of the architectural, (infra)structural, rule-bound constraints (and the interests which stand behind them) which frame those channels and make them possible.

That the productive, creative work of the motorcycle taxi drivers is granted tremendous agency in the text—even within structures of domination and ideology, that Sopranzetti does, to be fair, describe—is admirable, especially within an ethnographic context that might otherwise condemn such drivers to the same kind of invisibility evidenced in the perceptions of many Bangkok’s residents. Nonetheless, I am skeptical of the tendency, exhibited in Elyachar, of seeing ‘the link’ between “communicative practices of sociality” and “the creation of infrastructure and the use of that infrastructure in economic projects oriented around a variety of goals” as being of equal causal importance; I am more skeptical still of granting the “communicative practices of sociality” an agency that precedes or supersedes the “infrastructure” and the interests and power relations which lie behind that infrastructure.

This position of focusing on the agential labor of individual agents in transcending their structural constraints, and in doing so restructuring those constraints and opening up new pathways, is in line with the work of theorists like De Certeau. Yet I wonder if there can be an over-romanticization of individual agency here, wherein structural constraints are in fact more determinative than De Certeau and Elyachar admit, and that what appears as subversions or re-workings of such (infa)structures are merely developments of more pliable pathways for particular power-relations to appropriate and extract value/surplus. *Owners of the Map* certainly does not reject this final point, although it does seem to place a large degree of agency and creativity on the shoulders of the motorbike taxi drives, and less on the determining (infra)structures in which they move.

Finally, on a different note, I did want more female voices in the text. The lack of women respondents is certainly largely explained by the fact that the drivers are (perhaps exclusively?) male, yet the male-centric nature of the ethnographic material does leave a large part of the story obscure (although perhaps this is covered in the sections not read for this week!).