

**Censorship and Authoritative Forms of Discourse : A
Reconsideration of Thai Constructions of Knowledge**

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CULTURE AND DISCOURSE, LANGUAGE AND POWER, TEXT AND RITUAL
PRACTICE: reflections on the anthropology of Thailand through
the work of Andrew Turton

Abstract

This article discusses Andrew's Turton's work in 'Thai
Constructions of Knowledge', in relation to some of his
earlier work, in raising questions of violence and coercion in
relation to forms of tacit or implicit knowledge. Turton's
theoretical work is shown to be closely related to analyses of
the changing nature of Thai society.

**Censorship and Authoritative Forms of Discourse : A
Reconsideration of Thai Constructions of Knowledge****Nicholas Tapp****FIRST DRAFT ONLY - SUBJECT TO CONSIDERABLE REVISION!**

Thai Constructions of Knowledge was a remarkable work, as signalled by the introduction by Andrew Turton. Andrew Turton's work has probably always been deeply concerned with the interface, if one can call it that, of the elite with the popular, or local, and in *TCK* this was expressed particularly clearly, and in a new mode which became paradigmatic for studies of Thai society which followed it. Here we find the concern expressed with 'what becomes interesting, useful and proper to know', and a focus outlined on 'how topics and discourses become authorised, constructed, regulated, suppressed, and subverted'. As always these theoretical orientations are outlined against a backdrop of current analyses of Thai society itself and its changing historical formations. Here the argument is against 'the idea of a unitary, essential Thai culture', based on 'fundamental cultural axioms or principles'. What, then, given the Foucauldian connections of power with knowledge taken up in this work, makes particular forms of knowledge, textualised or otherwise, 'doxic', and is it the case that those forms of knowledge which tend towards the 'unstatable' are thereby, since they are less explicit, less contestable? The attention is forced to turn to the power of rhetoric, where the work of Maurice Bloch on formal rhetorical political speech in its Bernsteinian 'restrictive code' aspects is referred to, in a continuum of discourse from poetics of the kind which Manas specialised in, towards political executions and extra-judicial killings, seen (in fairly traditional political anthropology terms) as examples of the force resorted to when the persuasion required for hegemonic domination fails. Andrew's own article in this collection is crucial, for here he outlines his discomfort, although it is a respectful and sympathetic discomfort, with Tambiah's unitary structuralist model of ideological coherence of disparate elements in village spirit worship; there may in fact be cognitive dissonance, Andrew argues, when villagers take off their amulets before performing Buddhist rites. A new phase of religious studies, ably sketched by Catherine Bell (1989, *Hist.Rel.* and elsewhere since) in her description of the post-modern paradigms of heterogeneity and dissonance which replaced earlier structuralist coherences, or still earlier oppositional paradigms of the elite and the popular, the great and little traditions, is signalled here, with constant reference to the ideas of invulnerability which Turton suggests may form some kind of response to the 'immobilizing' effects (Inv.) of power of fear and silence which mechanisms of social exclusion and terror associated with powerful forms of domination, bring about. Invulnerability, he says, is crucial if fear can be seen as mediating 'between coercion and consent' (1984), and Thai society itself is painted in

terms of fragmentations and dissonances, contradictions and heterogeneities ('heterogeneity, decentredness, dispersal, fragmentation' (TCK) , in startling contrast to earlier paradigms of changeless consistency and cultural homogeneity. It was this of course which led to the later work on ethnicity and social identities in Thailand (*Civility and Savagery*, 2000).

However, many of these concerns had been flagged much earlier, in the short introduction to the remarkable collection *History and Peasant Consciousness in Southeast Asia* written together with Shigeharu Tanabe, and in Andrew's own major article in that collection on 'The Limits of Ideological Domination and the Formation of Social Consciousness', and many of the remarks in this article are so extremely topical that it is needful to remind oneself that it was written in - well, before - 1984. Here we have the direct attempt to engage critically with theories of ideology in the context of the Thai social formation, a social formation which, it was already clear, could not be reduced in any simplistic way to the mechanisms of exclusively defined classes as they had been classically understood (Laclau, radical democracy). It is here that the project to look at the 'relation between ideological and other forms of domination or subjectification or reification' is announced, and this is explicitly associated with how we understand the changing nature of Thai society, and the question of the 'relative autonomy of local communities' in their relationship with the state, both in fact and as a 'cognitive/ideological construction' (introduction). There is great attention paid here to the apparently successful way in which in Thailand alternative forms of discourse appeared to have been 'co-opted' by the state, and the dialectical relations between forms of dominance, persuasion and consent. A Gramscian model of hegemony had proved salient here, which forced the attention not just towards local institutions, but towards 'non-institutional, informal, extra-judicial...social forces'. Here already we are enjoined not only to focus on fixed or structured forms of identity, but on 'fragmented, less articulate, and everyday forms of popular culture and consciousness' (introduction). There is a constant concern with creativity, what is loosely glossed today as agency, in many of these statements, and at the same time with informal power structures at the local level, such as thugs, spies and informers. What really could be more salient or important in the current conjuncture, when we see an effective silencing of media debate under the guise of a self-censored 'free press', challenged by the reversion to an earlier and more overt form of militaristic state force?

It is these covert processes of subterfuge and silent refusals to participate, these alternative spaces of identity formation and construction of unorthodox perspectives, that I want to be concerned with here.

Although difficult to summarise in its reach, the article particularly highlights, perhaps, the constitution (and reconstitution! *sic*) of social subjects through ritual discourse, such as 'rituals of expulsion' and inclusion, from *suukhwan* to Village Scout rituals, the prevalence of violence in Thai society, and the importance of understanding 'local power structures'.

Nobody perhaps has yet really come to grips with or understood, or done a genuine analysis of (although I know of one relevant doctoral project; Dierikx, forthcoming, on the Thai/Cambodian border) these local forms of power associated with magical beliefs and masculinity and status, tattooing and blessing and, indeed, 'invulnerability'. Yet these discussions of state ideology and popular forms of resistance and autonomy certainly pointed research towards this direction. These mechanisms of violence and consent, as one may call them, have defeated most research understandings, yet here we had something of a framework for their theoretical understanding and analysis within a historical framework. The struggle has perhaps constantly been against a kind of 'culturalism', which was at once the result of a certain kind of conservative anthropology concerned with the reproduction of social forms, and a nationalist rhetoric which sought to downplay the realities of difference in the interests of a common assumed unity. It has now perhaps become almost commonplace to see culture as a site of struggle, and so many of the older disciplinary boundaries between politics and culture, economics and ritual, have broken down or dissolved entirely in new understandings of the politics of cultural difference. Yet in the Thai and wider context the work of Andrew Turton has I think been fundamental in opening paths and guiding the way towards new forms of engaged research and more nuanced understandings of historical processes and the mechanisms of social exclusion and inclusion, accommodation and resistance, which build up a complex and highly differentiated society.

What has interested me particularly as a result of all this and in my own work has been the attempt to understand tacit forms of knowledge which have exercised indeed many anthropologists and social scientists. It is clear that the old 'dominant ideology' thesis had much in common with anthropological understandings of society and culture which tended to depict them as seamless wholes, unitary bodies with, as Andrew says, fundamental guiding principles. The primacy of 'false consciousness' was challenged I suppose on the one hand by Gramsci who pointed to the importance of what he called 'common sense' as a fragmentary discourse of scattered folk perceptions which could not be made into the sort of seamless wholes beloved of elites, and on the other by Althusser for whom ideology was not necessarily conscious, but rather something that worked at a semi-conscious level to constitute subjects, the classic example being the structure of university buildings which so clearly separate different

domains of knowledge.¹ To the duo of Gramsci and Althusser we should add Foucault who was a major influence on Turton and colleagues, but let us just consider him here from the point of viewpoint as yet another theorist who showed us the 'unconscious' workings of ideology ('discourse') in its materiality and practical implications, in our lives. Space and architecture are indeed prime arenas in which this kind of semi-conscious, ideologically informed knowledge, has been shown to particularly express itself, and Andrew's earlier work on domestic architecture showed an awareness of this (in *Natural Symbols in Southeast Asia*), as did Bordieu's revised work on the Kabyle house and its symbolic aspects, in his own construction of a theory of the *habitus* which also was largely unconscious or 'doxic' as Andrew put it (*Outline of a Theory...*1977). It has always interested me, though, how at the same time as we had Gramsci's notion of commonsense as essentially un-ideological, that is forming a direct perception between people and their practical environment, a contrast Bloch was to build on his argument for a radical difference (reflecting older Marxian divisions between science and ideology) between socially determined, ritual consciousness, and practical, unideological or socially determined knowledge, based on a direct perception of the world and practical activity, a collection of folk tales and folk perceptions, myths and fragmented memories, songs, superstitions and proverbs of varying truth value, but essentially free from susceptibility to the bricolaging activities of dominant ideologies as a result precisely of this 'unsystematicness' which as Turton wisely remarks in the *TCK* article on 'Invulnerability and local knowledge' may be the 'normal condition of popular knowledge' - at the same time as this argument for commonsense as un-ideological, we had the arch-conservative American cultural anthropologist and harbinger of the new turn towards an 'interpretive' anthropology which some have glossed as post-modern, actually probably a new kind of cultural relativism in disguise (Clifford Geertz), arguing for commonsense as deeply ideological, in the older sense of that term, as precisely that which is, as Andrew suggests, uncontestable because it is so deep-rooted. One of the best examples I know of this kind of unsystematic, deep-rooted tacit or habitual knowledge,

¹ Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci is actually ambivalent about common sense, which he contrasts to 'good sense' as something which is assumed by all and may form the object of criticism - but both form a part of what he calls 'spontaneous philosophy', found in 1) language 2) common and good sense 3) religion and in general folklore. See Nun and Cartier, 'Elements for a Theory of Democracy ; Gramsci and Common Sense' in *boundary 2*, 1986, where the influences of Vico and Croce, William James and Bradley are considered on Gramsci. As they say, Gramsci was within a tradition which considered common sense not as negatively defined by reason, but as importantly without or beyond rationality. It was 'fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential', like the positions of those who held it; like religion, it could not attain an 'intellectual order' because it was impossible for it to attain unity or coherence, and it was also deeply conservative and dogmatic (although this might not be a bad thing among Italian peasants resisting early capitalism). It was also a form of knowledge which was dynamic, always changing and incorporating new features, and contained some truths. Therefore, while it was the 'folklore of philosophy', it could also be the precursor of a genuinely scientific philosophy. In other words, its fragmentation freed it to some extent from ideological structurings, while it still needed to be re-ordered by Marxist philosophy.

comes in fact from the field of Chinese ethnography, in an article by Xin Liu on the cave dwellings of Shaanxi, which showed how implicit social hierarchies (between seniors and juniors, men and women) reflected in the use of domestic space (like seating arrangements), remained entirely untouched by the efforts of the Maoist revolution to radically disrupt and alter such hiererachies, precisely because they were so silent, accepted, unthought and unspoken (in *Landscape, Culture and Power in Chinese Society* ed. Wen-hsin Yeh. Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkely, 1998). That kind of silence of course is quite different from the silence which results from fear and intimidation, of which Turton speaks often, the *khit ork phuut mai ork* (1984) of the weak farmer confronted by the powerful official. Yet it reaches to a similar depth of tacit, implicit, popular knowledge and ways of being which I feel Turton's work often touches. Indeed Xin Liu expresses his awareness of the strength of such unarticulated consciousness, if we can call it consciousness at all, when he begins his article with a quotation from Bourdieu ; 'It is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know'.

And of course that perception is itself deeply sociological, speaking of a profound depth of unawareness which calls for analysis, rather than description, explanation rather than mere understanding. My favourite adage on this comes from Stephan Feuchtwang's remark in his article on (Chinese) religion in the famous collection of Marxist anthropology articles edited by Maurice Bloch as an ASA volume in 1973; 'If social relations were self-evident there would be no need for social science'. From that point of view one would have to think of Leach's early warnings (1960, 'Jinghpaw Kinship Terminology') not to confuse the level of the 'ideal' stated by our informants, with either the level of statistical averages (the 'norm') or the level of everyday practice ('actual behaviour'), or Raymond Firth's endeavours (Andrew's teacher, I believe?) to rescue a level of 'social organisation' from the ideal models of 'social structure'. But we are not quite talking about that level of what actors do not realise about why or how they behave, here, although this is implicit in these debates, but more about a level of knowledge which is partially conscious, partially unconscious, something like an iceberg partially submerged. It is this level which, I think, much 'postmodern' analysis misses (see below).

It is worth noting that the attempt to archaeologically excavate such depths of perception, or semi-perception, raised inevitable questions about the textuality or otherwise of discourse and pointed towards the importance of oral narration techniques and transmissions of knowledge in a way which has maybe paralleled the swing there was in some quarters towards (first, an anthropology of practice, and then) an anthropology of embodiment; again I think Andrew signalled this swing very clearly when he spoke, as early as 1984, of techniques of

'manual knowledge', in reference to Brun's work which was later taken up by Craig Reynolds in a historical context.

Bloch in later works like *From Blessing and Prey to Hunter* made good use of Dan Sperber's careful work on symbolic language in putting forward an argument that ritual could not properly be understood either by intellectualist or functionalist viewpoints; the one treated ritual as a statement, as 'saying something' about the world, while the other saw ritual as a action, as a kind of activity, 'doing something' in the world, whereas in actuality ritual is neither statement nor action, but something inbetween. Sperber had talked of semi-propositional 'representational' beliefs, like convictions or culturally bound assumptions, which might be only half-understood and therefore not of a verifiable, 'propositional' type (1985). Back in 1975 Sperber had talked of the importance of 'tacit knowledge', which he saw as either 'implicit' in the sense that it can be made explicit, or 'unconscious', in understanding cultural symbolism. He also distinguished an 'encyclopaediac' knowledge (of the world) from the 'semantic' knowledge (of categories), and argued that 'symbolic knowledge' was something in-between, a kind of learning and remembering, both ritual and verbal, and not wholly expressible semantically (1975;108). These distinctions between habitual or embodied knowledge and our more cognitive theoretical knowledge continue to be salient in cognitive anthropology and neural psychology, and the related distinctions between 'insider' and 'outsider' knowledges of a society, tacit and more 'experience-distant' forms of knowledge (Greetz 1983) not necessarily related to membership of a society, continue to be discussed. .

Returning to Bourdieu's remark about what agents do having more sense than they know, which I noted above reiterates a classic sociological view as well as general theories of false consciousness, it may also be taken to be a presumptuous one - that somehow we, as analysts, as social experts, must know better than the people who talk to us, why it is that they do the things they do; there is a privileged insight which belongs to the analyst rather than to the social actor who must remain mystified and confused. And that, of course, raises the whole question of the authority to speak for the subaltern, which has been most intensively discussed in the context of South Asian studies, a field Andrew has been very aware of. Passing over Spivaks' notorious remarks about this, in the various versions of her speech questioning the possibility of resurrecting a genuinely subaltern voice at all, more recently Hansen (1997; *Thesis Eleven*) has provided an overview of the debate and how the programme to generate an indigenous voice is itself heir to a 'romanticist communitarian discourse born in the West'. What was being picked up on here, I think, was a Master-Slave dialectic of a Hegelian kind, through the process of colonialism, in which images of homogeneous autarkic local communities were constantly being constructed by contrast with representations of the dominant West as Other and as modern and progressive

and advanced, which then became necessary sites of struggle and articulation in resistance to those impositions of state-related forms of power and authority, in what Spivak aptly called a 'strategic essentialism'; and then these images of unequal power relations were being refracted onto the image of the social scientist with his (yes, his) informants and interlocutors. I think an awareness of subaltern studies has been important in Andrew's own work, as too the familiarity with South American projects and tendencies, stemming from Liberation Theology and radical priests or ex-priests like the late Leo Alting, to give voice to the marginal and repressed, and to articulate the unarticulated and perhaps inexpressible.

So where does all this leave us? In a situation in which it becomes more important than ever to discuss openly the freedom or monopoly of the press in Thailand, to reactivate suppressed memories of the 1973 coup as Thongchai has valiantly done, to debate the role of the monarchy and its continued relevance and the strangely arbitrary laws of lese majeste which have afflicted many of our friends. The processes of co-optation and censorship, of appropriation and domination, of violence and consent, to which Andrew's work has constantly drawn attention, have perhaps never been so salient as today, in the very fierce struggle which continues to take place between what one may call unblushingly call reactionary and progressive forces, very largely about what may be said and what may not be said. It is perhaps when compromise and accommodation become impossible that power is handed, not to the people, but to certain extra-judicial factions among the people which support certain tendencies within Thai society rather than others, as we saw in the very terrible killings and accusations which characterised the War on Drugs, and the complete breakdown of communicative public space which has resulted in the use of force in the South. Indeed it may be argued that it was precisely Thaksin's resort to popular might that opened the way for his own removal by military force. I don't think anyone has an adequate theory of social violence, but Andrew's work has certainly been fundamental in alerting us to the importance of these issues of violence and coercion in the Thai context and their intimate relations with tacit understandings and silences, strategic or otherwise.

(EP Thompson is referred to on brigandage, 1984)

Abstract; This article discusses Andrew's Turton's work in *Thai Constructions of Knowledge*, in relation to some of his earlier work, in raising questions of violence and coercion in relation to forms of tacit or implicit knowledge. Turton's theoretical work is shown to be closely related to analyses of the changing nature of Thai society.

A footnote - as an afterthought, I have to say that I find quite objectionable some recent views such as a recent article by Yoshinori Nishizaki in *Asian Studies Review* ('Constructing Moral Authority in Rural Thailand : Banharn Silpa-acha's Non-Violent War on Drugs', Sept. 2007) which compares rural views

of corrupt politicians in Thailand to the way Marcos or the Burmese leaders may be perceived as 'rural heroes' by farmers in villages. Despite the corruption scandals known to surround the figure of Banharn, he stresses that he is seen as a benevolent *pho muang* by some. In a view which purports to be postmodern but which may actually be more ethnomethodological, the argument is that there is no 'essentially' depraved or benevolent Banharn; it is all spin (my gloss) - what matters is how moral authority is constructed at the village and provincial levels, through the kind of village ceremonies and meetings with schoolchildren the article well describes. Villagers are 'agnostic' about Banharn's corruption, the article argues, because they do not see it, but they treat him as a 'virtuous leader' because this is what they *do* see. Criticising 'false consciousness' arguments, and the condescension of arguments that villagers need educating in what democracy really means, and specifically disagreeing with Turton's 1984 'limits of ideological domination' argument (this seems to imply that he believes there are no limits to ideological domination, 'ideology' is in effect all we have), it seems to me this kind of approach begs important questions of truth and levels of analysis which are barely touched by such descriptive accounts. (This follows the context of other works by Aghiros and collections by Ruth McVey and Kevin Hewison).

A forthcoming article by Andrew Walker ('The Rural Constitution and the Everyday Politics of Elections in Northern Thailand', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, February 2008), puts this in a much broader perspective. This is similarly a critique of the 'negative portrayal of rural electoral culture', the view (by both political commentators and the recent coup leaders) that support for Thaksin provided 'clear evidence of voter irrationality', the view that the 'Thai populace lacks the basic characteristics essential for a modern democratic society' - which Walker, as in other articles, also associates partly with the communitarian valorisation of rural culture as against its commercialisation and the injection of large amounts of (as he sees it, necessary) cash - against the view of 'gormless' rural voters and a 'failed democratic electorate'. Here the argument, following Kerkvliet, is for a broader understanding of local politics as involving debate and cooperations between groups and individuals over local resource allocation and the values which underpin it and, following Nidhi on the 'cultural constitution' in Thailand, that these local values embody a 'rural constitution' which shapes the processes of local elections and political behaviour. Relations with the state are mediated through culturally embedded actors, argues Walker, and the skilful ethnography in this piece shows us how local voters do appear to particularly value leaders who are local, and will therefore understand local priorities, how they expect various forms of assistance besides monetary assistance from their representatives, and anticipate a certain amount of personal aggrandizement but not too much - and in the case of Thaksin took considerable pride in the

economic achievements of the country and in his good English, seen as a sign of the educational status also much valued in the local perspective. Thaksin was also admired, says Walker, for his campaigns such as the war on drugs, which received considerable local support and commendation. Again, the *methodology* owes much to Andrew Turton's longstanding arguments for precisely this sort of analysis of local situations, yet the conclusions seem to me to merely reflect local ideological misapprehensions in a sadly mimetic way, with no attempt, in true postmodern style, to ask where truth may actually lie, or perhaps more pertinently, to probe alternatives to the dominant perspective, alternatives which may be barely discernible and certainly not overt. Besides local institutions of the state, the call in 1984 (T&T) was to look particularly at 'non-institutional, informal, extra-judicial, sometimes illegal and subterreanean, social forces, processes, and milieux'. There is no attempt here, for example, to deal with the power of fear and intimidation, to come to terms with the surveillance capacities of the modern state, or its powers to terrorize and the capacities of violence which the war on drugs unleashed at the local level throughout rural Thailand. That was an instructive case, for it was not just a matter of concerned village elders and a feckless minority of youth, criminals, ethnic minorities or other scapegoats, but a matter of very real conflicts and disputes, hatreds and enmities, between different individuals and indeed different categories of individual at the local level who resorted happily to the violence which had suddenly been legitimated, and therefore unleashed, in order to settle long-standing scores which run beneath the surface of village life. The appalling excesses of this time have been well documented, with cases of planting of drugs on victims after their deaths, the killing of children, and how local police fulfilled their quotas. In many areas there was open licence to shoot and kill those who stood in the way of particular alliances between local officials, police and drug dealers. In Khek Noi, a large Hmong settlement, extra-judicial killings had become almost the norm and an atmosphere of utter terror reigned. In such literature there seems to be a worrying unconcern with 'selective traditions' (Williams 1977, 1980, in 1984), *exclusions* from discourse, 'restrictive' practices such as scapegoating and 'excommunication' (Therborn 1980, in 1984), the complexities of actual consciousness at any one time as a 'multiply determined configuration of elements' (1984), the relations between domination, persuasion, and consent, and the more structural aspects of power, indeed with what Reynolds in a literary context importantly called 'state poetics' in *TCK* (the rules about what can be said), which has become too diffuse to be grasped at all. Perhaps what is missing is class analysis. Perhaps that has just become too difficult, and too complex, for a largely interpretive anthropology.

Afterword - Scott Lasch has recently written interestingly on a post-hegemonic phase of social understanding; in reference to Negri's (2000, *Empire...*) appeal to Spinoza's notion of the

(common) *potentia*, rather than the *potestas* of 'power from above', instituted power - and that creativity, that inventiveness. Here is where we can perhaps (not-very-finally) locate the work of Andrew Turton; in *puissance*, rather than *pouvoir*...