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Research into Urban Development and Cognitive Capital in Thailand

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Abstract: *This paper presents a reflection on the development of field studies activities in Thailand in connection with a research project on current patterns of urbanisation and environmental management. The argument focuses on the issue of the acquisition of knowledge and introduces the concept of cognitive capital. A brief case study is presented looking at issues faced by street vendors in central Bangkok.*

Keywords: Informal economy, urban development, Thailand

1. Introduction

This paper presents a reflection on the development of field studies in Thailand, where interviews and dialogues with key actors were carried out in an investigation concerning urban space production and reproduction. Experiences in the field and contacts with communities, authorities, NGOs, CBOs, academics, etc. have confirmed statements by a number of authors about Thais avoidance of social conflict (Mulder, 1996, Phongpaichit & Piriya-rangsan, 1994). To the extent that dialogical methods involve the very exposure of social conflict, their application in a Thai context deserves attention. The present paper presents a reflection on the application of the above-mentioned methodologies in a study of environmental management in Thailand.

2. Background

This paper is based on experiences gathered through a number of field study visits to Thailand in the development of research in current urban development in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The research project

in question investigates links between processes of decision making, on the one hand, and urban environmental management, on the other hand.

This research project started off through contacts with low-income, urban communities and the organisations that were supporting them in their attempts to improve their environment and secure tenure of the land on which they were illegally settled. Initially a team of researchers (comprised of this author and his colleagues at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts) carried out interviews with people living in urban communities in Bangkok and Chiang Mai including academics, governmental officials and NGOs. Of especial importance was the Community Organisation Development Institute (CODI), which from 1996 to 2002 implemented the DANCED supported project Urban Communities Environmental Activities (UCEA).

Through discussions with the above-mentioned actors and through direct observation, it became quickly apparent that the study of environmental

issues could not be confined to urban processes solely concerning low-income groups. The environmental management of urban elements, such as a canal, it was felt, would be better dealt with through work in a broader urban scale where the factors involved in its pollution could be more successfully addressed.

That perspective led to study of environmental issues through an investigation of (a) planning practices, (b) private initiatives and (c) processes of use and appropriation by people.

An example of that approach is a study of the Mae Kha Canal in Chiang Mai (Ribeiro & Srisuwan, 2003), which builds on the investigation by Kold et al. showing that its pollution is only marginally related to the presence of informal settlements along its banks (Kold et al., 2001). In order to deal with this problem, Ribeiro and Srisuwan argue that three main areas need investigating firstly, the role of Chiang Mai Municipality in the (lack of) provision of an adequate sewage system, secondly, the role of private companies in (not) properly dealing with their sewage, and thirdly the actions and practices of the people living in squatter settlements along the banks of the canal.

Each subsequent study visit reinforced the argument that if planning is to be used as a tool in urban management, then we need to study concrete processes of urban development in the light of planning practices which “support” such developments and of initiatives by people who use and appropriate urban spaces on a daily basis. This led to a formulation where **formal** urban development (that is, development that is regulated and financed by official channels) should be seen simultaneously with **informal** urban development (that is, development that is not regulated or financed by official channels, such as squatter settlements and street vending, amongst others).

Formal and informal practices prove, nevertheless, to be entangled and no clear-cut edge exists between the two. The concept of **informal space** is introduced here to indicate that informality is not a self-contained practice, but rather a condition which permeates both the action of people squatting on the banks of a canal and that of officials, who implement planning regulations in the light of personal agendas.

The field studies carried out in connection with the research project described here involved gathering primary data in the form of maps, aerial photographs and reports, on the one hand, and interviews with Thai people living in low-income settlements, officials, NGO workers and academics, on the other hand. The very process of gathering data proved to be very problematic. Even when co-operation had been established and a mutual trust between Thais and the present author had evolved, the data made available was partial, incomplete and in some cases unreliable. These difficulties led to a reflection on attitudes to knowledge found among Thais and to the formulation of the **concept of cognitive capital**, following Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 2000).

3. Cognitive Capital

The concept of cognitive capital refers to the condition of knowledge as a resource, which can be traded and exchanged for money, influence or personal favours. This may be the case where an official in the Planning Department of Bangkok Metropolitan Authority sits with outdated floor-area ratio documentation (that is, the addition of the area of all floors in the building divided by the area of the plot) on plots located in central areas of Bangkok. Those documents show ratios before the 1980s building boom, thus before the erection of several skyscrapers. Because those maps are out of date, taxation of the owners of the plots in those areas is a fraction of what it should be, had recent building developments been recorded. The officer in question sits with that knowledge and, by refraining from updating the floor-area ratio documentation, is in a position to trade the information for cash, influence or favours.

One of the consequences of the above-mentioned attitude to cognitive capital in the planning process is that a certain type of information about the physical and economic development of the city (such as the documentation on floor-area ratios) is not made public. The fact that it is not made public prevents any form of planning or public participation, which could influence urban development. Levels of decision-making and instances are treated as personal fiefdoms. Instead of a system whereby information is co-ordinated and supports articulated decision-making, planning, room for participation,

implementation and administrative continuity; urban development is fragmented, multifaceted and follows a complex, conflicting and not seldom contradictory network of spheres of influence and power supported by a knowledge, which comes with a particular official position. As pointed out earlier, knowledge is there to be traded for cash, mutual favours or influence, according to the personal agenda of the official in question. This could in itself be called an informal practice. So, informality is “insidious” to official planning practices. Such informal practices in the planning process contribute to Bangkok’s complexity and fragmentation.

In attempts by this author to gather data on recent and current development of Bangkok, in the form of maps, aerial photographs or written documentation, often some form of resistance was met. In a number of cases, the documentation (reports, digital maps, projects outlining future development) presented in the course of meetings was unavailable to detailed perusal or photocopying. It was argued that the documentation in question was not yet made public or was still under elaboration. In other cases, it was pointed out by researchers in Thailand that access to official documentation is difficult even for them. In other circumstances, interest in particular issues raised the mistrust and suspiciousness by officials.

Cognitive capital is also a useful concept to describe cognitive practices by those involved in the so-called informal economy. Here we are faced with fragmented, localised knowledge, as a central element in the development of informal activities. For local knowledge to be an asset, it is important that it remains local. An example of that is the collaboration between massage parlours and “tuk-tuk” drivers, where the latter hustle tourists to use the services of the parlour for a fixed fee. In the case where the tourist has the knowledge about the business and its location, the services of the “tuk-tuk” driver are not needed. In a line of business, which relies on local knowledge, at the moment when this knowledge is no longer local the possibility of making an income by selling it is then lost. The survival of that type of business depends on access to particular types of information and on the fact that such information remains local.

In carrying out a research project focussing on the interactions between formal and informal prac-

tices in urban development and environmental management in Thailand, I was faced with the task of gathering knowledge from officials, on the one hand, and from people involved in practices such as street vending or squatting, on the other hand. In both instances, cognitive practices and attitudes to cognitive capital emerged as central issues raising new research questions, challenging the scope of the research and its methodology. This suggested that a longer field research of months, maybe years would be needed in order to gather reliable data for the development of the research. Joint research activities with Thai academics also proved to be of central importance in having access to local data.

In a field visit in February/March 2003 a pilot project was developed as a step in the design of the research. The case of the Bo Bae Market in Bangkok was chosen for the pilot study, because there was in the area, at that particular time, an open conflict between street vendors and local authorities. The assumption was that because the conflict was being reported in the Thai papers, there would be a better chance of information being made publicly available than if things had been running smoothly.

4. Bobae Market

The conflict involving vendors in the Bo Bae Market and the newly appointed district officer at the Pomprap Satru Phai District was reported in a short article on page 2 of the Bangkok Post on the 24th February 2003. That article referred to the imminent eviction of “illegal stalls” owned by “illegitimate traders”. In examining this and subsequent articles published in the Bangkok Post and in The Nation following the development of the conflict, I became intrigued by the fact that the eviction concerned “only” 170 vendors out of thousands who have business in that area. My immediate question was: Why precisely these people? What distinguishes them from the other vendors, who just as them are “illegally” occupying the sidewalks in the Bo Bae area?

The information available in articles on the Bo Bae Market (published in the Bangkok Post and in The Nation) in the discourse of officials at the Pomprap Satru Phai District and in the accounts of vendors, did not seem to shed light on the reasons for the eviction. The fact that the eviction of vendors located

near bridge 4 in the Bo Bae Market was justified by the argument that these vendors create traffic congestion in the area was also puzzling. These vendors had been asked to move to a much narrower sidewalk on the opposite side of Krung Kasem Road, where the chances of creating traffic congestions were even more likely.

The use of terms such as “illegal stalls” and “illegitimate traders” by Government officials seemed to be part of an attempt to articulate a discourse of illegality to discredit the evicted vendors and which was further emphasised through reference to the existence of extortionists operating in the area. The concerned vendors, on the other hand, denied such claims and accused the authorities of having interests in the area:

“... some extortionists at Bo Bae were found to be former thetsakit inspectors, and police were compiling evidence before arresting them, said Mr. Samart.” (Treerutkuarkul, 2003d)

“The same politicians [behind evictions] were allegedly preparing to rent more plots for stalls in Soi Anantanak, behind Hua Chiew Hospital, for up to 30,000 Baht per month, ... [traders] claimed.” (Treerutkuarkul, 2003a)

In my interviews with the evicted vendors, these allegations were repeatedly stated. And to my question as to why only a group of 170 vendors were evicted, they answered that the other vendors had paid a fee to government officials in the past, which gave them the right to trade in the area. The status of the other vendors, the evicted vendors reported, was just as illegal, but they had reached an agreement with the district authorities and were thus allowed to stay. Whether or not the above allegations are true, one can say that there are different degrees of informality concerning trade in the Bo Bae Market. Some informal traders are tolerated by the Authorities and other informal traders are not, even though both groups are “illegally” occupying a public sidewalk. It is interesting, in this connection, to refer to the Thai Prime Minister’s policy concerning informal markets, commented by Treerutkuarkul in her article for the Bangkok Post:

“Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra’s policy to rid Bangkok’s pavements of illegal stalls has raised

fears of eviction among traders at Bo Bae Market.” (Treerutkuarkul, 2003a)

Which stalls are to be deemed “illegal stalls”? Where is the dividing line between those stalls that are legal and those that are illegal? If the argument is based on urban functionality, that is, traffic flow and obstruction of sidewalks, then it is not at all clear to the outsider why those particular 170 vendors were evicted and not the others.

The above statements by street vendors of government officials having personal business interests in so-called informal activities are a possible explanation. But whether or not such explanations are true, the fact remains that there exists a fuzzy edge between the formal and the informal sectors.

My next move was to interview the newly appointed District Chief Officer, whose decision to evict Bo Bae Market traders was one of the first actions after him taking office. To the question as to why those 170 vendors had been evicted, Mr. Suchart Channoi stated that their stalls were illegal. “But what about the other stalls at the Bo Bae Market?” I asked. “*The owners of those stalls had paid a fee, through negotiations with an earlier District Officer, which allowed them to stay in the area*” Mr. Suchart Channoi replied. This statement and the openness with which it was delivered implied that the payment of the fee involved a degree of formalisation of the stalls in question. However, the Chief District Officer’s evasiveness meant that no further information could be extracted about the type of negotiation that had been incurred which granted some vendors the right to trade in the Bo Bae Market area.

5. Concluding Remarks

Further field research is required in order to shed light into the nature of negotiations and agreements between authorities, informal traders and shop owners who give permission and in many cases provide electricity to street vendors. Already, differentiated treatment of street vendors by authorities has been observed not only in the Bo Bae Market but also in areas such as Sukhumvit Road, where day hawkers selling snacks (fresh fruits, coconut water, etc.) are harassed by policemen as soon as they park their stalls on wheels in a particular spot on the sidewalk. Evening/night street vendors, on

the other hand, set up their stalls fixed spots and get their power supply from local shops. These vendors have not only established a partnership with local shop owners, they can also go about their business without being disturbed by the police.

The nature of the relationships between, Government, vendors and shop owners is worth more detailed investigation. But already at this point of the research project, it is apparent that a conception of knowledge as a capital plays a central role in the above-mentioned relationships.

The most significant knowledge in the above narrative is not the knowledge that was made available to the researcher, but knowledge that remained undisclosed. The incongruence between the various accounts presented in this paper indicate that such knowledge is there, lurking under the surface. Possible fragments of such knowledge were made available through the development of this research, but up to this point, it is very difficult to state the extent of fragments in the light of what has remained undisclosed.

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