

Peycam seems uncertain as to whether Saigon's newspaper village in the 1920s represents a short, unique episode in Vietnam's long history, or the nascence of a modern public sphere throughout the country. At one point he says mournfully, "In the years that followed mass mobilization was to become more important than political agency grounded in autonomous critical judgment exercised by individuals reached in their private depths by the journalists' arguments" (p. 215). Later, however, he insists that the legacy of Saigon's newspaper village lives on.

I favor the second interpretation. After the late 1930s Popular Front resurgence and colonial crackdown, mentioned above, Vietnam enjoyed another flowering of the press between April 1945 and November 1946. Despite subsequent wartime tribulations, Saigon journalists continued to spar with returned colonial censors and police for another seven years. From 1955 to 1963, Ngô Đình Diệm ran a tight ship, but the Saigon press from 1964 to early 1975 was remarkably alive and sometimes confrontational. Since the late 1980s, Vietnamese journalists have been testing the envelope imposed by the Communist Party, with mixed results. In short, the twentieth century history of Vietnam possesses an intriguing newspaper thread that still weaves its way through events today.

But it is not necessary to accept this interpretation to be able to appreciate *The Birth of Vietnamese Political Journalism*. Philippe Peycam takes us back to a place and time different from our own, sets the scene skillfully, introduces us to key participants, and then pursues a variety of paths taken and not taken. He challenges reader complacency and questions established verities. One doesn't have to agree with the Habermas model to affirm that something exciting was happening in Saigon in the 1920s.

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### ***The Institutional Imperative: The Politics of Equitable Development in Southeast Asia***

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*The Institutional Imperative* provides an argument for equitable development, that is, economic growth with income equality. The research is conducted through a comparative-historical approach with Thailand and Malaysia as the major case studies, and the Philippines and Vietnam supplementary instances. Kuhonta rules out alternative explanations that rest on structural factors like democracy, class, and ethnicity, and makes an institutionalist argument: "Institutionalized, pragmatic parties and cohesive, interventionist states create organizational power that is necessary to

drive through social reforms, provide the capacity and continuity that sustain and protect a reform agenda, and maintain the ideological moderation that is crucial for balancing pro-poor measures with growth and stability” (p. 4). Two cohesive, institutionalized parties, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), have geared their countries toward relatively equitable development. Thailand and the Philippines yield mediocre results “largely because there have been no political parties with the requisite organizational capacity and ideology to advance social reforms” (p. 244).

The longitudinal comparison between Malaysia and Thailand from the colonial era to the 2000s makes the study rich in history and detail. However, the research design is slightly problematic. When it comes to in-depth policy analyses, Kuhonta chooses a policy set of land resettlement, education reforms, and health care for Malaysia (pp. 100–114); but he selects rural debt, dams, and health care for Thailand (pp. 174–188). Such a mismatch saps the strength of the causal links and the alleged “structured comparison” (p. 5).

Apart from research design, the book suffers from two analytical drawbacks and one misconception. Even though institutions and ideologies are considered to be the two determining factors in explaining developmental variation, the author does not take either of them seriously in analytical terms.

### **Institutions as Temporally Prior to Individuals**

To begin with, while arguing in favor of the institutional imperative, the author downplays the role of institutions in shaping the incentives and interactions of political actors. Although insisting that “[i]nstitutional variables therefore operate within a configurational and historical field and must always be kept in that context” (p. 46), the “close contextual analysis” runs aground at the empirical level. Thailand’s failure of party institutionalization is attributed to politicians’ misbehavior and incapacity: “Parties rose and fell in factions’ battle for spoils rather than because of any struggles over principle . . . . Personalism pervaded the party system, with virtually every party . . . driven by a leader’s charisma and political skills rather than by organizational and ideological imperatives . . . . Unlike in Malaysia, parties lacked continuity, institutional complexity, extensive memberships, and roots in society” (p. 167).

Missing are the different institutional arrangements that determine how the political games are played in both countries. At the meta-level, while electoral politics is the only game in town in Malaysia, it has never been so in Thailand. In post-independence Malaysia, the aristocrats have to ally with UMNO and maintain their interests through political party structures. In sharp contrast, Thai politics after the 1932 Revolution has been shaped by the ongoing struggle between the traditional elites and elected politicians. The former, whose power and prerogatives have not been eradicated by colonial power, has impeded party institutionalization through any possible means

e.g. coups d'état, gratuitous violence, judicial review, and ideological campaigning to delegitimize majority rule.

Consider the impact of such meta-games on constitutions, regarded as the supreme formal rules that form political behaviors. In the early 1970s, when UMNO deemed the then constitution to be hindering the effectiveness of political parties and government, the party “passed constitutional changes to tighten party discipline,” “solidified the party secretariat to improve organizational effectiveness,” and “sought to increase party vigor and dynamism by encouraging frequent meetings at all levels” (pp. 85–86). Thai political parties have not been granted such a privilege as constitutional design has been kept under the tight control of the traditional elites. The multi-member plurality electoral system, the appointed senates, and the party-switching law of MPs are among significant regulations deliberately designed to nurture fragmented parliamentary politics. The 2006 royalist coup that led to the enactment of the 2007 Constitution to restore such regulations should be clearly evident. After all, if institutions are seen—as most institutionalists believe—as temporally prior to individuals, it might be the case that political parties in Thailand are not institutionally weak, but rather *institutionalized to be weak*.

### **Ideology Matters More in Its Quality than in Its Moderation**

In the same way as with institutions, although Kuhonta realizes the importance of ideology, he values only its moderation, not its *quality*: “Along with their institutionalized structures, UMNO and the VCP also share another critical property: moderation” (p. 241).

Nonetheless, the moderation of any ideology is a moot point, for it depends as much upon the eye of the beholder as upon the contextual settings. More importantly, with different ideologies held by political actors (yet partly shaped by prevailing institutions), how UMNO responded to the May 1969 riots varies greatly from what the Thai elites did to political turmoil in the late 2000s. UNMO saw the pre-1969 system as “no longer viable” and could no longer “sweep things under the carpet.” As a consequence, it “decided that the state needed a more decisive and long-term policy agenda” (pp. 84–85). In stark contrast, the Thai elected politicians (the Abhisit and Yingluck governments) reacted to the political conflict by becoming more compromising and moving instead toward more “populist” policy packages, such as direct money transfer and infrastructural mega-projects. Above all else, both Thailand’s elected and unelected elites preferred to maintain the “sweep things under the carpet” manner in the face of political difficulties.

In addition to political turmoil, the two countries also took different routes in reaction to such troubles as the leftist movements and rural poverty. Not taking into account the difference in ideological quality and consequent political choices, the book does not analytically incorporate the role of ideology into its analysis.

### Colonial Legacies: Another Alternative Explanation?

While the book challenges democracy, class, and ethnicity, it is colonial legacies that should be treated as the most important alternative explanation. Kuhonta details how the British succeeded in eradicating the power of Malaysian traditional elites and in dividing the political and economic classes (Chapter 3). Such legacies have had profound implications for post-independence political-economic structures in Malaysia, not least the settlement of electoral politics as previously discussed. However, the author not only does not compare the differing impacts of colonialism on Malaysia and Thailand, he also misreads how colonialism shaped the Thai state apparatus (Chapter 5).

The book repeats a popular misconception about King Chulalongkorn's "cohesive state" by asserting that "[a] series of modernizing reforms led by King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, r. 1868–1910) gave the state a new lease on life. Centralized, rationalized, and cohesive, the Siamese state not only survived external and internal threats; more important, it had become a veritable bulwark of political power and legitimate authority during a period of intense crisis" (p. 125). Nonetheless, the author fails to explore the uneven configurations of the modern Thai bureaucracy.

Besides the "patrimonial features" indicated by the author (p. 129), the Thai bureaucracy had other underlying weaknesses right from the beginning, among which were the *bloated and overlapping* features designed by King Chulalongkorn. The Gordian knot for the King was not just how to escape being colonized but also how to undermine the power of, without overly alienating, the great nobles and provincial elites. Such conditions led to the creation of new organizational functions to superimpose, without abolishing, the existing provincial administration. Moreover, the administration before his reign was segmented across regions, not functionally differentiated. The King maintained some overlapping authority not only to avoid further conflict with the regional elites but also to ensure that a "check-and-balance" system would be in place to diminish the nobles' power to challenge the throne. The bloated structure caused a budget deficit and widespread official corruption whereas the overlapping structure encouraged unproductive competition and duplication among ministries.

Accordingly, it is misleading to assume that Thai twentieth-century political actors had been accommodated by the cohesive state apparatus. Puncturing this myth will help us assess the evolution and capability of the Thai bureaucracy in a more balanced manner. Yet this does not mean that the bloated and overlapping structures have persisted until now simply as a result of "path dependence." That question requires further research. It means that arguments that attribute today's inefficient state to the country's democratization process, politicians' behaviors, social norms, or the lack of threats, are at best half-truths.

## Politics of Equitable Development?

All in all, I think the book addresses the *politics of implementing social policies* rather than the politics of equitable development per se. This is because the author does not provide a solid link between his studied policies and equitable outcomes. Take education policies (pp. 106–109), for example. Even though education may lead to individual betterment, whether it generates national prosperity and reduces income disparity is highly controversial in the economics literature. If the key to Malaysia's equitable development, as the author states, is the support for its citizens to “exit the traditional agricultural sector and gain more productive employment in the modern economy” (p. 48), then policies toward the manufacturing sector are equally, if not more, important than education policies for that specific purpose.

Despite the above debatable flaws, the book makes a significant contribution to both the institutionalist and Southeast Asian bodies of literature. In regard to the former, *Institutional Imperative* looks at the role of political institutions in determining equitable development, a crucial topic neglected amid the rise of new institutionalism. More profound is its impact upon the latter body of work. The book's comparative approach presents an advance in regional knowledge accumulation—the call for which was sounded by Kuhonta's own co-edited volume, *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (2008)—and paves the way for a new era of Southeast Asian scholarship.

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## *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism*

MEGAN C. THOMAS

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In *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism*, Megan C. Thomas illustrates the myriad political meanings and possibilities of modern scholarly knowledge. During the 1880s and early 1890s, a critical mass of linguistic, folklore, ethnological, and historical studies on the Spanish Philippines materialized. Researched and