Introduction

Silvia Vignato and Matteo Carlo Alcano

Southeast Asia and Italy

This special issue was born out of the second national conference of the Italian Association for Southeast Asian studies (ITASEAS, part of the larger European Association of Southeast Asian Studies, EUROSEAS), which took place in 2011 at the University of Milano-Bicocca. The purpose of the conference was to create a local network among researchers who study Southeast Asia in Italy, a country where area studies tend to be scarcely developed. The organizers, the only tenured scholars in Southeast Asian studies in Italy—Antonia Soriente, a linguist, and Pietro Masina, a historian, both from the University of Napoli l'Orientale, and Silvia Vignato, an anthropologist from Milano-Bicocca, engaged in the task with enthusiasm. The result is now the affirmation of a young network through which Italian researchers from various disciplinary fields and who are active both in Italian and in foreign universities and institutions can meet and interact. After the conference, and as a partial outcome of it, most of the younger scholars involved in this volume joined SEATIDE (Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion), a project of the European Commission Seventh Framework Program, and could thus further their studies.

These steps towards a better knowledge of Southeast Asia in Italy must be welcomed as a new perspective which opens right at a time when — in Italy maybe more than in other European countries — research in general and particularly studies about cultures and societies tend to freeze or to disappear altogether. Such an opening points to a necessary and specific political approach. As the European Commission remarks when designing new programs, Europe and ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) tend to be similar in many regards as they bring together smaller countries that strive to build a common political frame beyond deep regional differences in a world dominated by big nations. More and more, they tend to look to each other as best partners and a source of inspiration and must get to know each other better. Many issues which concern contemporary Southeast Asia are troubling contemporary Europe as well, far beyond the macro-political level. We question how we must define and interpret the borders and what we should make of those who cross them in legal and illegal terms. We ask how citizens will intermingle without losing their local roots and without the richer or stronger oppressing the weaker. We also ask what kind of em-

ployment and work we are choosing to create for future generations, what our cities will become, what a "family" is from a political point of view and what types of policies it calls for. The wide differences between the two areas create a mirroring effect which is sometimes enlightening.

The idea of an exchange between Europe and Southeast Asia is what made us decide to publish this volume in English despite the contributors all being Italian, a decision which has required, of course, a bigger effort on both the authors' and the editors' side. Italian speakers are a linguistic minority and only rarely are Italian works translated into English. Had we chosen, as we were much tempted to do, to publish this work in Italian we would probably have made a few of our university students happier but we would have definitely prevented most Southeast Asians or non-Italian scholars from accessing however little and imperfect knowledge our research brings about. On the whole, it seems a little pointless to publish something that none of the people liable to be interested in will be able to read.

The articles cover a great variety of countries and the authors come from different disciplines. In line with a tradition of Southeast Asian studies, a great number of essays were written by cultural and social anthropologists but the presence of scholars of linguistics and urban planning accounts for a multi-angled approach to the people and places of Southeast Asia. The anthropologists Giuseppe Bolotta and Amalia Rossi introduce us to different parts and aspects of Thailand—a big city slum and its children and the rural concerns of eco-Buddhist monks respectively. Adele Esposito, architect, documents the politics of heritage and the contradictions of urban planning in Cambodia. Antonia Soriente, linguist, describes the variety of local languages in Borneo and the interplay between language and ethnicity. Matteo Alcano and Silvia Vignato, anthropologists, document different processes of growth by investigating the worlds of youth gangs and institutionalized foster children in Indonesia and Malaysia respectively. Giacomo Tabacco considers migrant industrial workers and their anxieties in Greater Jakarta while Runa Lazzarino approaches forced migration through the stories and the emotions of Vietnamese women who are sheltered as survivors of human trafficking.

Subjects and places

What is in a "place"

When we gathered the contributions to our volume, it became clear that they all approached the question of how individuals and groups are affected by, react to, and reflect upon the changes that occur in the urban and rural environments they inhabit, and also how they are influenced by or determine such transformations. For this particular reason, the volume focuses on the relationship between subjects and places, and on how the transformation of

subjects is structurally and intimately connected with the transformation of places, and vice versa of course.

These questions call for an attention to terms. "Place" is one of the most productive and debated notions of modern social theory. Geographers have defined and explored the dialectical opposition between "space", a concept that encompasses historical time, social relations, political projects, abstract delimitation and circulation, and "place", intended as the localized phenomenological context of actual lived experiences (see, for instance, Yi-Fu Tuan 1977). They have studied how people form meaningful relationships with the geo-physical surroundings they occupy, constantly relating "space" to "place" and vice versa (Low and Lawrence-ZúÑiga 2003, p. 14). We think we can retain this suggestion. Here, we talk of specific sites and what they "do" to specific people by symbolically linking them to wider spaces. For this reason, we certainly remember De Certeau's (1984) suggestion to look at how people move within spaces and we detail such processes through accurate ethnography and with a focus on the construction of subjectivity.

Modern anthropology was compelled to consider the transformation of what in the 1990s authors started to call "locality" in opposition to "globality" or rather, globalization. The transformation of landscape involved Western anthropologists' own environment. The difference stated by Marc Augé between "places" and "non-places" that is, between specific socialized localities and "numb" global stopovers of supermodernity, has proved so meaningful that it has gone beyond academia and become a part of everyday Western terminology. It has given a word to the widespread feelings of alienation evoked by the *haut lieux* of globalization. "Non-places", in Augé's terms, are designed to be passed through or consumed rather than appropriated and retain little or no engagement with them: they are symptomatic of a generalized crisis of social relations and a detriment of specific identities (Augé 1992). Augé's opposition lingers in the background of any study of places. What results in the articles of this volume is a subtle and often implicit tension between place and non-place in all localities. In Indonesia, for example, shopping malls shape the dreams and the Saturday afternoons of the young people who can't afford to buy expensive goods and yet still decide to inhabit those places, their back alleys, and their parking lots in various ways. While becoming more and more similar to a Disneyland of Khmer exoticism, the Angkor compound and Siem Reap town maintain a dialogue with international tourism as much as with local ideas of space. In Southeast Asia, the aesthetic of modernity typical of non-places is not seen and depicted as a scary sterilization of otherwise human environments but as a perfectible goal to strive towards. Our focus on the troubled and multifaceted process of the localized making of the subject takes into account this specific feature, which does not correspond to the European fears of post- or super-modernity.

Other metaphors of environment and surroundings are relevant in the

essays in this volume. Quite naturally, in anthropology the notion of "landscape" has been used to account for the social construction of place by imbuing the physical environment with social meaning (see Hirsch 1995; Low and Lawrence-ZúÑiga 2003, p. 16). Appadurai (1988, 1995) has extended "landscape" beyond its landed side and imagined ethnoscapes and mediascapes. What he calls "locality", rather than "place", corresponds to the lived or embodied experience of those spaces, or "scapes", which are the product of mediated relationships, extended networks and immaterial exchanges. These aspects, identifies Appadurai, are fundamental to the construction of "local subjects" that is, the actual persons who experience the world through their idiosyncratic emplacement (Appadurai 1996, pp. 180-184). While the author underlines these local subjects' potential for organized opposition to overwhelming global and economic domination, in this volume, Vignato's article shows how "ethnoscapes" produce unexpected local subjects: born into an industrial world, illegal babies acquire a Malayness or an Indianness which do not fit into the dominant national picture of ethnicities and this regardless their carers' ideas.

The political aspect of the construction of places is of course a key factor in the making of troubled local subjects. Gupta and Ferguson (1997) show that conflicts arise from the meanings invested in sites, and from the forms of opposition, confrontation, subversion, oppression, violence and resistance that ensue. In fact, in her essay, Rossi directly addresses the makers of landscape—two Thai Buddhist "ecology monks"—as militants. In their case, like for the Malay babies, subjectivity proves unpredictable.

Unpredictability also stems from an environment which cannot be easily read. In his much celebrated essay, Harvey (1996) shows how the confusion, dissimulation, and multiplication of references which negatively qualify modern places also stimulate different subjects to develop strategies to overcome their feelings of loss and powerlessness. The children in Bangkok described by Bolotta as well as the young unemployed gang members in Surabaya described by Alcano are perfect examples of how a young person grows up amid such struggles. They go across empty lots, places under construction, city centers and peripheries much in the same way as they experience affective confusion and political upheavals: their view sometimes proves wiser and more vital than the urban, educational, and political planners would be able to foresee.

Finally, it is worth remembering that Anna Tsing (2012) has unveiled the political and social potential of the "innocent" sensorial experience of a place. At the beginning of her well known article about mushrooms she evokes the simple, pleasant impression of "place" that the act of picking up mushrooms provokes in her; she then proceeds to show how an important balance is both broken and recreated by that gesture at the cellular and the global political level. The subjects in this volume do not despise the

sometimes scary places they live in, whatever the political implications of oppression or exclusion. On the contrary, these articles try to render the complexity of an impression that people feel as simple, natural and unquestionable: I belong here.

Urban spaces, tourist sites, remote areas or shelters are all explored by the authors of this volume bearing in mind the impression of immediacy and evidence that belonging to a place confers to those who inhabit it. By watching how individuals and groups ground their experience in particular places at various levels we attempt to catch the complexities of "being there" in Southeast Asia, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1988).

Who, and where

The places portrayed in the volume are a slum, a poor neighborhood, the barracks crammed around an industrial area, a shelter for victims of human trafficking, a number of orphanages, a tourist destination, and a constellation of upriver villages and two retreats for Buddhist monks. Such variety offers insights into the life worlds of those who inhabit the asphalt, the concrete, the exhaust fumes and the waste of the Southeast Asian city. It illustrates the trajectories of those who move along and across small urban areas or are trafficked and rescued across national and international borders. It brings forward the connection to the land and the territory that some of the subjects who dwell in the rural areas of Southeast Asia manifest as they experience development, dispossession, and contestation. These places reveal processes of growing up, growing together, and growing apart that blend with networks, whether it is kinship, ethnicity, language or criminality that is at play.

While cities rapidly expand and develop as vital centers, they also give rise to new forms of exclusion from economic, moral, and affective prosperity; urban life impinges on individuals and groups and can lead to inequalities, hardship, and deprivations. Urban destitution is by no means a new phenomenon in Southeast Asia and researchers have grown accustomed to looking into the lives of those who were born in and inhabit the shadowy interstices of Southeast Asian cities (Evers and Korff, 2000; Beazley 2002; Davies 2004; Johnson, 2006; Barker 2009 to mention some of the works on the subject). Here we describe the orphans of a Bangkok slum, the young gang members who operate in a dirt path on the edge of Surabaya, the factory workers who commute to work form their barracks in the area of Greater Jakarta, the newborns who were brought into the world at a public hospital in Penang by a terrified migrant woman. We seek to gain a better understanding of what lies underneath and beyond urban poverty and urban inequity as we inquire on how the social actors we have met try to find their own position in the world and give an accurate account of themselves. In a courageous multidisciplinary book where academic and literary

standards overlap within ethnography, Barker and Lindquist (2014) read contemporary Southeast Asia through a collection of what they call "figures of modernity": "persons within a given social formation whom others recognize as symbolizing modern life" (2014, p. 1). Most subjects we describe in this volume fit this definition. They are "real people who also operate as "symbols" that embody the structures of feeling associated with larger, seemingly impersonal conditions of a particular time" (2014, p. 3).

The overall picture clearly shows that Southeast Asian cities, whether metropolises like Jakarta and Bangkok, smaller yet thriving cities like Surabaya and Penang island or even a smaller country town like Siem Reap enact cultural and economic processes; these processes are historically grounded in a recent, fast and, to some extent, globalized process of urbanization which carries its own transnational and local models. As Aihwa Ong remarks, "the vagaries of urban fate cannot be reduced to the workings of universal laws established by capitalism or colonial history" (2011, p. 2). What we describe is, on the one hand, the power of attraction and destruction that both Asian and global models exert on specific people and, on the other hand, deviations from and opposition to these models.

Rural and forest environments are no less concerned about change than cities as they often give way to extensive agricultural exploitation and planned intervention decided and carried out by powerful national and international agencies. Like the second and third generations of urban poor, those who live in the folds of constantly disappearing local and regional patterns of land use and exploitation also look from and upon their own particular niche. Such niches can be identified in the very terms of work and environment, like when we contrast "rural, i.e. peasants" with "urban, i.e. second and third sector workers". But it can also be described as a linguistic niche, as in the case of the linguistic micro-groups of Borneo; an ethnic niche, as in the case of ethnic minorities of Northern Thailand; or as a niche determined by gender, as in the case of rural women who have been trafficked and now live in Vietnamese shelters. Rural immobility—such as people who spend their entire lives in their village—does not mean that massive modern change does not affect forests or rural environments. On the contrary, it can sometime blur those very changes, as Amalia Rossi has argued in her doctoral thesis in the case of Thai forests (Rossi 2012).

By exploring the political, economic, and social environment of the urban and rural landscapes of Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, and Vietnam, the essays shed light on numerous forms of life experiences that originate at the margins of society and the ways social actors rethink their presence within certain surroundings, move around and attempt to define precise boundaries. Needless to say, we are bound to acknowledge movement as an intrinsic aspect that qualifies places as meaningful spaces. Southeast Asian countries have been and are concerned by massive flows of people

and goods. Migrations take place from the whole region towards other parts of the world (the Gulf, Europe, the United States, Australia, Japan, Korea being the main targeted destinations) but also, within the region, from poorer to richer regions and countries, typically Malaysia and Singapore. On a smaller and more fragmented scale, movement can be regarded as a resource by millions. Such movements are constructing a specific political and subjective space and knowledge.

Subjects of places

To conclude our argument, we now need to shift our focus back to the subjects. Whether in cities, in forests, or rice fields, we track down the *subjects of places* from a multiple methodological approach. As architects, we become sensitive to the actors that converge on the scene of humanitarian planning and their prejudices. As linguists, we see spaces and identity renegotiated in linguistic variations. As ethnographers, we describe the manifestations of subjectivity in the world and in a specific context and thus make our informants' worlds come alive. By watching bodies in space, we seize cultural intentions. In other words, we move away from a culturalist definition of the self and address "contextualized, spatialized, self-aware individuals of inequality", as Mattison Mines defined them in a farsighted book published in 1994. Mines considers the efforts that the Tamils he studied (all members of a merchant caste) make in order to compose a vast array of social definitions of themselves. From a subjective perspective, social structures (kinship, castes, wealth—then inequality) and spatial dimensions are clearly perceived as culturally given whereas interiority and internal balance are considered as a personal achievement beyond, through, and sometimes against those very structures (Mines 1994, pp. 22-24). What is interesting in this formulation is that it underlines what further theories would call, in a very sophisticated argumentation, *agency* (Ortner 2006), while retaining the clear importance of awareness of social structures, a specific feature of the Tamils as well as of the people of Southeast Asia.

While most of the people we deal with in this volume have grown apart from whatever is considered as a "traditional" setting, the strong consideration for outer social structures is common to them all. Slum urchins and young gangsters respect their parents and have ideals of well organized families; activists rarely speak against tradition or religion; and the same goes for the workers in Jakarta. Thanks to this awareness, the Thai teenagers moving around the slums of Bangkok transcend what might be called a "culture of the slum", as much as the Malaysian foster children are beyond their caregivers' "culture of poverty and charity" or the female guests of Vietnamese shelters who situate themselves beyond their rescuers' "culture of humanitarian help". These subjects are aware of such historical definitions and are able to work with them and see their marginal status on a

long-term temporal perspective. Because they are young or relatively young adults, what they learn is to see into their own future the difference with their ancestors' worldview while we, as anthropologists, learn what is vitally handed over and what is discarded from one generation to the next in spite of the context.

Margins and transformation

The essays in this special issue make use of, address or imply the idea of a margin—one more spatial metaphor. This is a broad and convenient category, loosely defined, and that is precisely where its force resides. It allows us to align and compare a wide range of phenomena, experiences and subject positions that share the same quality and state of exclusion: from prosperity and mobility, from knowledge, from expression and from political participation.

We understand the idea of margin in its multiple formulations. In its physical and spatial meaning, we describe the margins of urban cities and developed or integrated areas: the margins of Surabaya, where new high-rise buildings are erected while huts and barracks stretch along the riverbanks; the wild slums that border the railway tracks in an area just off the city of Bangkok; the village; the rural areas that lack economic opportunities in Northern Thailand. Spatial margins might take on different forms and express different degrees of exclusion: the back alley of a shopping mall in an Indonesian city might constitute a margin within a city center. A similar back alley conveys a higher degree of marginality when it is located behind the barracks that surround the factories in the outer areas of Greater Jakarta.

We also understand it in Veena Das' (2004) political interpretation: the margin of the state, where the rules are vague, the control is absent, the welfare does not exist or it resists and other agreements govern the macro and microsocial life. Penang's foster institutions take advantage of the imperfections of the legal system and draw their strength from various forms of ethnic solidarity, as much as migrant industrial workers in Tangerang and Cikarang find a system of care within unions. At a different level of analysis, in Siem Reap international urban planning is confronted on a regular basis with buildings and arrangements wanted and decided by small local enterprises.

In many cases, we evoke a personal margin as well, a border between ages or personal status like "being or not being a monk" or "being a single or a married woman", or even "being enslaved or rescued". The transformation we examine can simply mean the process of a child growing up—which of course is never "simple"—or the transition from one gender *habitus* to another or, like for the Javanese factory workers, the double change of becoming a migrant and gaining independence from kin and neighbors. By observ-

ing people in the process of growing up, learning a new language, looking for a job and questioning the path to adult life and personal achievements we introduce a margin that is also temporal and historically informed.

We often render a margin-to-margin transformation both within the subject and in spatial arrangements. For example, the youths of Surabaya described here move from experiencing a sense of helplessness and disconnection as schoolboys or underemployed young men to joining groups of outlaws; the Vietnamese returnees of human trafficking articulate within themselves the thin boundaries between a feeling of shame and self-indulgence when entering the world of international aid. In fact, with the exception of Esposito's essay concerning Siem Reap urban planning, all the other articles keep a close focus on the individual as the subject of a margin rather than as a marginal subject.

Even though our idea does not necessarily imply an opposition between margin and center, or more classically between center and periphery,[1] while we multiply our descriptions of the margins we are bound to acknowledge or at least evoke the presence of multiple centers as loci of power. The opposition center/margin in Southeast Asia has a highly coded symbolic meaning and a long tradition in Southeast Asian studies. Since the ancient hinduisation, a mandala-shaped political and cosmological order has structured or informed the states and the powers of the area. To date, nation-states have further emphasized the importance of capital cities—in Indonesia, for example, any governmental office or agency which is located in Jakarta is generally referred to as *pusat*, "center" (Dove, Kammen 2001). But in line with the mandala tradition, it appears clearly today that a nation is only a part of a space defining its center. Meaningful centers of power for Southeast Asia can be both within and outside the region, as Esposito's and Rossi's essays show about international agencies and corporate agribusiness. Similarly, if we consider the space of circulation created by human trafficking, we can estimate that in places like Riau—in the middle of the Strait of Melaka—the very state borders can take a role of centers; and in unknown, dangerous cities, shelters like those described by Lazzarino in Vietnam appear as marginal havens.

Politically, the idea of centers of power is quite meaningful. But from a subjective point of view, being in the center often implies that people tend to subscribe to a normative organization of the self rather than gaining a lively and powerful organization of it. A subject who abides by the criteria of normality is entitled to hope he or she will be successful, like the factory workers described in this volume by Tabacco, but can find it difficult to react to unexpected fate. Reflecting on margins then adds a further dimen-

1 We think, for example, of Langholm 1971, Appadurai 1986, or Comaroff 1991 and 2013 [1985].

sion to our interest in subjects. In spite of their distance from the powerful coded selves (the so-called normal subjects) all the social actors we describe are quite resourceful from an individual point of view, whether they are a widow or an orphan, gang-kids or polyglots. Their vitality then suggests the shaping up of a different, or many different, powerful norms. Arthur Kleinman wrote that "the margin may be near the center of a most important thing: transformation. Change is more likely to begin at the edge, in the borderland between established orders" (Kleinman 1995, p. 5). This is what we have attempted to do in this volume: to stay close to transformation. The marginal space we describe is always a space of transformation, or, in Kleinman's words "the center of transformation"—a locus of unprecedented, unpredictable, and note-worthy forms of power.

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