

Book Reviews

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Subversive Archaism: Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage. By Michael Herzfeld. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. xvi+239 pp.

Archaism—the espousal of antiquated cultural norms—is prevalently a conceited posture, but in his latest book the prolific anthropologist Michael Herzfeld theorizes it counterintuitively as a cultural practice that marginalized social groups deploy to reject the subaltern role in which they are cast by the state. This subversive use of archaism makes people into the “troubling traditionalists” of the subtitle. In the commonplace liberal view, traditionalism is troubling because its mobilization of cultural heritage to inform a nation’s envisioned future bespeaks reactionary ideologies. Herzfeld reverses this perspective by casting traditionalists as clever parodists who “challenge the moral and cultural authority of the state” (p. 121) through “a performance of conformity with ideals of national heritage, but one that deliberately sets a trap and tempts the state to fall into it” (p. 144). The state’s deployment of the bureaucracy and the armed forces to rebut traditionalists through vilification and even eviction from their dwelling places is accordingly a key focus of this work.

Herzfeld theorizes subversive archaism through a comparative analysis of Zoniana, a mountain village on the Greek island of Crete, and the urban community of Pom Mahakan, a now demolished slum within Bangkok’s historic core, which is also the subject of his earlier monograph *Siege of the Spirits* (2016), written before the demolition of the slum in 2018. While Zoniana and Pom Mahakan are two sites of Herzfeld’s ethnography, their comparison is motivated by the fact that “both communities share ... an awareness of the

replacement of an older polity by a modernist nation-state of largely foreign inspiration” (p. 42). Additional comparisons are drawn from Rome, where Herzfeld has researched housing policies, and many disparate corners of the world thanks to his effortless mastery of a vast literature. Comparison, he suggestively remarks, “is not merely an academic operation. Local people and state officials also compare, and their comparisons are consequential” (p. 122).

Zoniana and Pom Mahakan have, in fact, little in common geographically, historically or sociologically but for the experience of interfacing with national states (long run by military dictators) that “both lay claim to a sedimented and documented autochthony” (p. 37). Of course, claims to autochthony underpin most nationalisms. Herzfeld dismisses James Scott’s Southeast Asia-based paradigm of evasion of state control by ethnic minorities as inapplicable to Zoniana and Pom Mahakan (pp. 4–5, 133–35), whose inhabitants have not shunned the state, but have instead engaged with it by ambivalently showing both loyalty and mockery. Pom Mahakan’s tragic fate demonstrates, however, that subversive archaism’s tactic of countering state intrusion may be ineffectual despite its cultural sophistication (for example, in the use of speech registers). Analysis of this failure would seem central to the theorization of subversive archaism, yet is sidestepped by the author.

There are other gaps in the treatment of the Thai case. Herzfeld juxtaposes anthropologically and ethically the Pom Mahakan community (working class, ethnically diverse and religiously inclusive) and the Bangkok middle class (classist, racist and conformist). But the Sino-Thai make-up at the origins of the bourgeois ethic, if not “ethnic aesthetic” (p. 139), questionably framed as two sides of the same “karmic ideology”, goes unmentioned but for an indirect reference (p. 32). That exemplary, troubling traditionalist, the octogenarian Sulak Sivaraksa, charged four times with lese-majesty (most recently in 2014 for questioning the historicity of a remote royal deed), is puzzlingly ignored. Yet Sulak’s own descent from Sino-Thai Bangkok tycoons would provide an instructive contrast to the lumpen proletarian archaists of Pom Mahakan. The latter’s

divided political sympathies in the polarized situation of the early 2010s, when the *truly* troubling Red Shirts challenged the state's legitimacy, are also overlooked here (cf. *Siege of the Spirits*, pp. 23–25).

Later in the book, Herzfeld addresses his role as not just a participant observer but also as a spokesman for the Pom Mahakan community, participating in meetings with the metropolitan authorities and speaking to the press. Such direct engagement with politics, even though only at the municipal level, would be unthinkable even for Westerners who, unlike Herzfeld, have lived in Thailand for decades (Bangkok, moreover, is the national capital—no ordinary city). Although powerless in challenging the bureaucratic apparatus, Herzfeld's ability to make his voice heard was arguably due to his audacity as much as to his status as a Harvard professor capitalizing on Thailand's neo- or crypto-colonial relationship with the United States. Herzfeld is of course fully aware of the affordances his status brings to social interactions in Thailand, but not in Greece (p. 152). Still, his description of interactions with Thai bureaucrats, uniformly portrayed as a callous lot but for one Muslim city council member (p. 148), is strangely lacking in self-reflexivity.

As the formulation of an analytical concept grounded in ethnographic comparison, Herzfeld's beautifully written book is predictably stimulating, but ultimately unpersuasive (see his own cautionary comments on pp. 164–67). The recent rise to power of troubling traditionalists in India, the United States, Russia, Eastern Europe and, lately, Italy points indeed to an alternative trajectory of subversive archaism—from antagonist of the state to its avenger.

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REFERENCE

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