

Author’s Rejoinder to Maurizio Peleggi’s Review of *Subversive Archaism: Troubling Traditionalists and the Politics of National Heritage*

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Maurizio Peleggi’s respectful but critical review of *Subversive Archaism* (vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 473–75) opens up space for productive further discussion. His impressive historiography was an early inspiration for my involvement in Thai Studies. While he is certainly entitled to find my argument unpersuasive, I am puzzled that, while he uses the term “crypto-colonial” (Herzfeld 2002), he has difficulty in seeing the parallels—admitted differences notwithstanding—between the respective historical conditions of Thailand and Greece and the position of marginalized communities within each.

We agree on one consequential point: subversive archaism often fails. It is a recognizable social tactic rather than a coherent social movement. The rightists Peleggi calls subversive archaists do not fit the model; they are strategists, not tacticians, and as he emphasizes, already in or close to power. Their superficially similar use of official heritage discourse serves less to oppose the state than to remodel it.¹ Unlike the subversive archaists I describe, they see marginal populations not as fellow sufferers, but as enemies deserving extirpation.

My efforts to defend the Pom Mahakan community met with instructive failure. In crypto-colonial societies, an ironic deployment of etiquette allows officials to keep the upper hand over foreigners who question their actions. My participant observation, as anthropologists call their research technique, entailed experiencing

this humiliating dynamic, albeit to a degree and in a register very different from that encountered by the residents. My interventions were products less of “audacity” than of the ethical commitment that anthropologists make to living local interlocutors regardless of personal risk; on my first visit to Pom Mahakan, the residents had asked whether I would help them. At the same time, against Peleggi’s claim that I represented the bureaucrats as “callous”, I have noted the oppressive hierarchy that silences many Thai bureaucrats, especially minor functionaries who may have sympathized with the residents (Herzfeld 2016, p. 8).

Some “establishment” Thais did sympathize with the residents. These exceptions do not contradict the connections among bourgeois values, a “protestant” understanding of karma as self-evident predestination, and middle-class antipathy to poor provincial Thais considered lacking in full Thai-ness (Bolotta 2021; Sophorntavy 2017, pp. 129–36)—a nexus for which Peleggi’s (2002a, 2002b) contributions provide historical context.

Peleggi’s review also elides the reflection of relatively recent political divergences in my respective experiences in Greece and Thailand. Greece today is a genuinely democratic state; its elected government, although in the hands of a conservative party with which I have little ideological sympathy, honoured me with citizenship for services to the social sciences—work in which my research on Zoniana is prominent. In Thailand, a state where unelected senators can prevent an elected prime minister from taking office, my efforts to promote Thai Studies at Harvard may indeed have gained me the affordances Peleggi mentions, but, for the reason just described, these failed to invest my moral commitment to Pom Mahakan with material effect. Comparison between Greece and Thailand entails weighing the differences that Peleggi correctly recognizes while also acknowledging common origins in, and effects of, decades in the colonial penumbra.

The differences are especially instructive at the local level. Zoniana still exists; it has a future. Pom Mahakan was destroyed, its memory cruelly caricatured in official signposting of traditional

professions once subsisting on the site but subsequently destroyed by the forces that now affect to commemorate them.

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NOTE

1. See also Niklassen (2023). On the tactics–strategy distinction, see de Certeau (1984, pp. 52–60).

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