

Student C:

Reaction Paper - Space, place, and history

This week's readings all dealt with the representation of space, and the ways that places take on meanings. A central theme in all the pieces was that space, in and of itself, has no meaning. Magnitogorsk was just a Ural mountain steppe before it was infused with a Soviet Socialist mission. The exhibition is given meaning through its relationship to the rest of the world, just as Egypt is given meaning (for Europeans) through the expos. The national boundaries of Siam did not even exist until they were constructed to represent a nationalist agenda. Each author focuses on a different way in which the meaning of place is created, but all share the idea that it must be created. Meaning is not a priori.

For Winichakul, in *Siam Mapped*, the meaning of the nation of Siam is created through the technique of mapping. He coins the term geo-body, or the territory that is associated with (and integral to) the We-self of a nation, to describe the importance of place in national identity. He argues, however, that place was not always so central. In the past, people employed different ways of representing space that were not associated with the territory of the nation state. In such so-called "traditional" methods, representative geography was less important than spiritual or religious references. These references showed, for example, the relationship (conceived spatially) of different aspects of Buddhism.

The identity of Siam as a kingdom, however, was not associated with a geographic place until a series of interactions with the British and the French. The arrival of mapping technologies and the use of visual representations of territory solidified the connection between nation and geography. Winichakul suggests that to apply modern ideas of territoriality and nationalism on historical inquiry is anachronistic because these concepts are discursive constructions. In Siam, these constructions were formulated through a set of modern, as opposed to traditional, technologies and interactions with Western colonial powers.

Kotkin, in *Magnetic Mountain*, suggests that the meaning of a place is achieved through resistance and conflict. In tracing the convoluted process by which Magnitogorsk was planned, Kotkin shows that attempts to assign it meaning from above seemed to fail. Grand visions of the Socialist City of the Future were replaced with meanings that were generated on the ground. These meanings emphasized things like mistake, chance, unplannedness, randomness. These meanings, the "idiocy of urban life," became the meaning of Magnitogorsk.

In the second part of the Kotkin piece, he shows how resistance by residence of Magnitogorsk helped shape the on-the-ground identity of the city and residents. Centering his discussion around the concept of "living space," Kotkin shows how an official definition is altered in everyday practice to produce a meaning different from the official intent. Rather than being an abstracted notion, "living space" became a complex set of social interactions, including both resistance and alliance.

Mitchell, in *Colonising Egypt*, suggests that the world expositions in Europe were important methods of mediating the meaning of Egypt, both for Europeans and Egyptians. The expositions served to reproduce in microcosm the social order that Imperial European powers sought to produce in the rest of the world. In this way, they served to shape the perception of Europeans at home and (more importantly) abroad, and also of the Egyptians themselves. These simulations were centrally important to reproducing capitalist relations, and to instill a capitalist meaning, in Egypt and in the minds of Egyptians.

Because *Siam Mapped* was the only book we read in entirety this week, I am going to limit my criticism to this work. Winichakul describes the discursive construction of the nation through mapping and modern geography. My main question about his argument revolves around his insistence on categorizing the world into modern versus traditional and western versus eastern. The distinction between traditional and modern concepts and practices is problematic for several reasons. First, he did not fully address (in my opinion) the fact that the concept of the "traditional" is a social construction, just like the idea of the modern. In fact, the "traditional," like the map and geography, is a component of modernist discourse. In his attempt to critique the anachronistic application of modern ideas on "traditional" conceptions of space, Winichakul reproduces the anachronistic category of the traditional.

Secondly, even if the ideas of the traditional and the modern are both part of the same modernist discourse, the viability of the distinction between the traditional and the modern within that discourse is increasingly being questioned. Several authors, especially in post-colonial scholarship, have suggested that dichotomies between tradition and modernity do not represent the hybridity of on-the-ground situation. In other words, so-called traditional conceptions of space still exist today, in the modern world, in coexistence with modern ones. In addition, so-called modern conceptions of place coexisted with traditional ones in the past. Winichakul describes the slow process of give and take between Siam, Britain, and France. During this process, both traditional and modern views coexisted in a hybrid form.

Somewhat separate from my questions about the use of the concept of traditionality, is my concern that Winichakul reproduces problematic east/west dichotomies. His analysis suggests that nationalism is an ideology empowered by western technologies. It seems to me, however, that Thai nationalism is a mix of Siamese and western attitudes. While Thai nationalism, as viewed through the geo-body, might rest on western technologies, I imagine that some sort of Thai nationalism would still exist, even if these technologies were absent. Similarly, there is something Thai about Thai nationalism, just in the way that there is something English about English nationalism. In other words, all nationalism is not the same; Thai nationalism is not entirely western, even if it is based on western concepts of place. It seems to me that he does not entirely account for the hybridity of the Thai version of nationalism.