



RADICAL EGALITARIANISM

LOCAL REALITIES, GLOBAL RELATIONS

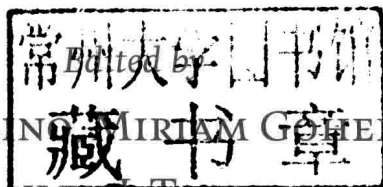
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FELICITY AULING, MIRIAM GREEN, AND
STANLEY J. TAMBIAH



FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York 2013

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Radical egalitarianism : local realities, global relations / edited by Felicity Aulino, Miriam Goheen, and Stanley J. Tambiah.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8232-4189-7 (cloth : alk. paper) —

ISBN 978-0-8232-4190-3 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Ethnology. 2. Ethnology—Sociological aspects.
3. Sociology. 4. Social sciences 5. Culture and globalization. 6. Equality—Philosophy. I. Aulino, Felicity.

GN320.R28 2013

305—dc23

2012041921

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

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Introduction: Engaging Radical Egalitarianism

Felicity Aulino and Miriam Goheen

This book represents a form of historically grounded, ethnographically driven anthropology that seeks to understand social phenomena by dialogically engaging global and local perspectives. As a whole, it promotes an approach to scholarship that actively avoids privileging any one conceptual framework or cultural form at the expense of recognizing another—a style of engagement that we are calling *radical egalitarianism*. The papers collected here provide examples of such an approach through original ethnographic and theoretical contributions that stem from research in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Assembled into a single volume, these chapters allow for a comparative examination of contemporary societies along several avenues of inquiry.

All of the contributors to this volume are in conversation with some aspect of the work of Stanley J. Tambiah.¹ From his earliest research on village agriculture and land tenure in Sri Lanka to his recent engagement with issues of reproductive technologies and perceptions of the self among Sri Lankan immigrants, Tambiah's work has demonstrated remarkable breadth and depth in both topic and theoretical

approach. Ethnographically focused primarily in South and South-east Asia, his work includes studies of religious syncretism, kinship and marriage systems, the relationships between religion and politics, ethnonationalist politics, multiple forms of rationality, theories of ritual, meaning in non-Western thought systems, and communal violence. A cosmopolitan figure in the larger worlds of the social sciences and humanities, Tambiah has produced a corpus of work that is drawn on by scholars in a wide range of disciplines.

Throughout this variegated field are two overarching concerns: (1) respect for creative human differences, what Tambiah has called "multiple orientations to the world"; and (2) the political potentialities of difference (both positive and negative) as historically constituted. From this standpoint, Tambiah has offered related insights into the historical development of social scientific categories and socio-political categories, and has raised vital questions regarding the possibilities of achieving equality and justice in the presence of competing realities. These matters lie at the heart of radical egalitarianism and form the backbone of the concerns of this volume.

Interlocking Themes

This introduction is intended as a brief guide to key themes in Tambiah's work, themes that are not only at the root of the articles presented here, but are also critical for the future of the social sciences and area studies alike.

First and foremost, Tambiah's anthropology insists on historical analysis. *World Conquerer and World Renouncer* (1976) is a prime example. In that monograph, Thai religion and society come into clearer focus as Tambiah traces the history and logic of Thai kingship and corresponding political structures. Drawing on historical data in this way counters would-be scholastic presumptions. For instance, Tambiah deploys the phrase *galactic polity* to depict a decentralized constellation of influence that typifies administrative realities in the past without relying on contemporary presumptions regarding bureaucratic hierarchy. This is but one of many examples; history figures large in many of Tambiah's writings, including *Bridewealth and Dowry* (co-authored with Jack Goody, 1973), *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets* (1984), *Buddhism Betrayed? Religion, Politics, and Violence in Sri Lanka* (1992), and *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (1996).

Such a method goes beyond the comparative tradition of Boas and his students and adds a dimension of movement, of trajectory, to historical accounts, without losing sight of primary contradictions and meanings as they are negotiated through time.² Due to the dialogical nature of Tambiah's work, he is able to describe the complex realities of global discourse, composed simultaneously of flows and structures, with its relentless interplay among various social formations and ceaseless negotiations between internal and external meanings and forms of power. In cinematic metaphor, this is akin to seeing the moving picture when all you have at any given point is a snapshot. Tambiah conceptualizes continuity and change acting simultaneously, necessary as they both are to any description of the social totality or formation in question.³ He recognizes some continuities as more potent than others, forming ongoing dialectics of necessary contradictions that are not negated or transformed but are seldom resolved and continue to inform the history of the totality through time.⁴ Neither structure nor system disappears, nor are they moribund or stagnant. Thus we find an insistence on history and context as a prerequisite to understanding the present meanings and overarching cosmologies in any given society.

This dual emphasis on history and context also leads to an insistence on the rationality of all societies. Tambiah's *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (1990) is a significant contribution to the history of ideas in this regard, as he traces the antecedents of the debates on magic and science in the humanities and the social sciences. Tambiah understands there to be multiple rationalities in the world. But whereas standard notions of cultural relativism can leave one without a basis for taking an ethical stance, Tambiah's resolve to assess social totalities provides grounds for understanding the local roots of social oppression and the means by which adequately to judge moral worth, both from within the local context and from the outside. *Leveling Crowds* (1996) provides a compelling example of this theory in practice, as Tambiah traces the specific origins of ethnonationalist conflict in South Asia as someone quite troubled by the violence it entails.

Finally, appreciating how context and history inform Tambiah's discernment of social totalities, all rational in their own right, leads us to the importance of meaning in Tambiah's work. Of course the emphasis is on meaning within the logic of context, more than on meaning in the psychological sense. Tambiah's "A Performative Approach

to Ritual" ([1979] 1981) demonstrates this well. In it Tambiah draws on Austin's speech-act theory to elucidate rituals as constitutive acts—like marriage vows, baptism, the naming of a ship—and on Peirce's three-part classification of signs to infer the communication of understanding in ritual performance. In that article as elsewhere, Tambiah integrates formal analysis into a cultural account to elucidate meaning and its structure. Such analyses then open out to the exploration of political power and can make comprehensible the motivations for and particular maneuvers of political action, for instance, in terms of the larger framework in which they occur.

These four interlocking themes of history, context, rationality, and meaning all inform the engagement with radical egalitarianism in this volume. This then is not a simple stance that emphasizes individual rights and extends liberal largess toward those "less fortunate." It is a deep and abiding appreciation of the value of difference and a commitment to the kind of careful scholarship that can adequately bring the contours of a given society or situation to light. Such scholarship cannot and does not adhere to any one particular lens of theorizing. As Tambiah would say, "You use what works!"⁵

As proponents of this sort of radical egalitarianism, the authors in this volume use "what works." Rather than exemplifying a particular school of thought or promoting a single theoretical vantage point, the authors here follow Tambiah's lead, focusing on the significance of context, the importance of ethnography and historical analyses, and the need to see societies as totalities. They argue the urgency of constructing inclusive ways of knowing in the twenty-first century. They promote a diversity of knowledge that does not privilege Western discourse but draws on it for understanding. And they share a commitment to humanitarianism alongside a demand for global solutions rooted in local meanings and understanding.

The Essays

This volume is divided thematically into three sections: "Religion, Trade, and Transnational Networks via Thailand"; "Cosmologies, Ideologies, and Localities"; and "Violence, Political Conflict, and Humanitarian Intervention." Like the loose description of key elements of Tambiah's scholarship above, however, the thematic division suggested by these section titles is loose: many of the papers here demon-

strate elements from all three themes, reflecting the rich complexity of thought and analysis promoted throughout the collection.

Stanley Tambiah provides the first selection of the volume. In “The Charisma of Saints and the Cult of Relics, Amulets, and Tomb Shrines” he offers a sample of a comparative project that identifies the “organic affinity” among saints and related objects across religious traditions. He draws largely from Buddhist and Christian examples, with additional reference to Sufi and other Islamic sources, to argue that saints are in fact “creators of community and conduits to the divine or to the supramundane.” Tambiah revisits important pieces of earlier scholarship to make vital differentiations in the classifications of holy objects and religious followers. He shows that saints have commonalities across religions, but more than that, he contends that saints in fact *constitute* communities as much as they serve as a religious model for them. Tambiah demonstrates how saints, through social engagements and “objectified” charisma—both when they are alive and after death—can help us to trace political and economic lineages; moreover, they provide the links that allow and indeed constitute the power passed therein. Harking back to his extensive work on commensurability, ritual, semiotics, and center-periphery relations, Tambiah offers here a glimpse of an enormous scholastic project with great future potential.

The second article, James Taylor’s “Understanding Social Totalities: Stanley Tambiah’s Early Contribution to Sociology of Thai Religion,” first provides a synopsis of Tambiah’s work in Thailand, particularly his use of Weber and the notion of “totalization” relevant to this section’s themes of religion and transnational networks. Taylor goes on to offer a “Tambiahian analysis” of Thai forest monks, or the *dhutanga Kammatthāna* tradition. Here he uses historical and linguistic tools to discuss the *vinaya*, or monastic disciplinary charter, and its connection to affiliation lines distinct from—and often hidden by—nationally recognized sects. He concludes that “Tambiah was correct in his early analysis of Thai Buddhism as he emphasized a need to see the religion as a dialectical relationship between doctrinal, textual perspectives on the world, and action within the world as a consequence of historical transformation”—and his own ethnographic contribution supports this agreement in important detail. Ingrid Jordt in turn offers a “view from Burma” in her “Transnational Buddhism and the Transformations of Local Power in Thailand.” She focuses on a key figure from

Tambiah's research, Phra Phimolatham, and his Burmese counterpart, Mahasi Sayadaw, as a means of delineating the political landscape of Thai monastic reform and exploring the transnational ties between the Thai and Burmese sanghas during key years of national development. Jordt connects the lay meditation movement following Mahasi's teachings to the colonial landscape in Burma, revealing another angle of the viniya reforms and sectarian divisions brought out in Taylor's piece. She argues that the visits between Phra Phimolatham and Mahasi Sayadaw can be seen "as a form of Buddhist diplomacy." Despite the ultimate political ramifications (namely, Phimolatham's forced disrobing and six-year imprisonment), she traces "cultural models by which Buddhism travels in the region and beyond" and the "possibilities [that] existed for Phimolatham (and for us today) for a nonsectarian and indeed a nonnationalist Buddhism."

Drawing on the same period of nationalization in Thailand discussed by Taylor and Jordt, Irving Johnson concludes the first section with a discussion of Kelantan Buddhist monks and their communities along the Thai/Malay border—communities that have increasingly drawn upon a "system of Thai Buddhist cultural patronage emanating from Bangkok" while strategically maintaining political and social ties to the Malay sultan. In "A Muslim King and his Buddhist Subjects: Religion, Power, and Identity at the Periphery of the Thai State," we are asked to consider notions of the galactic polity, with an ethnographic case study from the periphery of the Thai state. In this short piece, Johnson considers the role of the Muslim Malay sultan as he in some ways stands in for the Buddhist monarch as protector of the Dharma in this small, distinctly non-Buddhist region. Johnson paints a picture of a people positioned between two polities, of "Kelantanese Thais living on the frontiers of two colonially imagined states" and how they "continue to define themselves based on the way powerful centers of power impact on their lives."

Michael Puett and Prista Ratanapruck open Part II of the volume, "Comparing Cosmologies, Ideologies, and Localities," with pieces that bring to bear Part I's themes of religion, trade, and transnational networks in an expanded arena. In "Economies of Ghosts, Gods, and Goods: The History and Anthropology of Chinese Temple Networks," Puett follows a trail of Chinese ghost stories to vast temple networks that he claims are again on the rise in China and beyond. To understand these networks, which have significant religious and economic implications, Puett also describes an ontology of discontinuity funda-

mental to the creation and continuation of these networks' connections. He recounts Tambiah's assertions about such ontologies—in which the world is fragmented and humans must impose order and harmony—and their distinction from ontologies of continuity, upon which so many Western cosmologies and contemporary theories are based. With historical acumen and vital ethnographic data, Puett is thus able to challenge popular readings of what is taking place in contemporary China. As he asserts, any perspective that lacks the insight offered by a more totalizing analysis such as this “misconstrues the economy and society of so-called premodern China” and “misses a very significant aspect of the resurgence of these older economic patterns.” Ratanapruck too promotes such an alternative appreciation of economic and religious patterns in “Trade, Religion, and Civic Relations in the Manangi Long-Distance Trade Community.” Here she discusses the cosmological underpinnings of Manangi trade, with accounts of religious tributes and wealth redistribution. Both Puett and Ratanapruck take up Tambiah's ideas to promote reconceptualization of unexamined assumptions. Puett thus captures a core intention of this collection as he writes: “An anthropology worthy of its name is one that will take non-Western theories of the self, ritual, statecraft, and economy seriously and allow them to help us question the Western narratives and frameworks that are still too often taken for granted.”

James Ferguson obliquely heeds this call in his “Cosmologies of Welfare: Two Conceptions of Social Assistance in Contemporary South Africa” by putting economic issues squarely in the realm of cosmological inquiry. In his examination of the Basic Income Grant (BIG) proposed for South Africa, Ferguson succeeds in making the familiar unfamiliar as he uncovers the cosmological frameworks implicit in this new welfare scheme, marking a shift from a social democratic standpoint to what he calls a neoliberal frame.

Moving north from South Africa to Nigeria, Victor Manfredi's “‘A Recurrence of Structures’ in Collapsing Nigeria” next turns on Tambiah's Southeast Asian “galactic polity” to probe parallel “Asiatic” social formations in Atlantic Africa. Manfredi details the history of an *Ágbò* land dispute, which he argues can be seen as “an instance of galactic ‘pulsation between modalities.’” He thereby uses Tambiah's theoretical lens to prompt a careful reconstruction and reconsideration of past events in Nigeria. Manfredi locally recasts events otherwise too easily rendered in a colonial tone (anthropological or

otherwise), with particular attention to language and the ramifications of the United States' current global presence.

Where Manfredi implicitly critiques the anthropological trend of "othering," Mariza Peirano takes it on directly, drawing attention to another key aspect of the volume as a whole, namely the importance of a tight connection between ethnography and theory. In her article "People and Ideas Travel Together: Tambiah's Approach to Ritual and Cosmology in Brazil," Peirano traces the influence Tambiah has had on anthropology in Brazil, providing an informative bibliography that follows a number of theoretical threads from Tambiah's research—with welcome attention to "Tambiah's transformation of ritual from a classical empirical subject to an analytical tool" and his characteristic "combining [of] microethnography and macrosociology." In this piece, as throughout the section, we see Tambiah's influence on the field of anthropology in the use of close historical and ethnographic context in service of totalizing analyses that lead to rich theoretical openings. Peirano ends with a call for a closer look at Tambiah's *Leveling Crowds*, as does Sahlins in Part III, as a means of understanding how microevents turn into larger social issues, and vice versa.

Michael Herzfeld concludes Part II with a piece entitled "Paradoxes of Order in Thai Community Politics." Reflecting on political negotiations in his field site of Pom Mahakan—a small, contested community in Bangkok's Rattanakosin Island—Herzfeld once again returns us to Thailand. His analysis demonstrates the continued utility of Tambiah's ideas of the galactic polity, ritual, and performance for elucidating political subtleties in a country where cryptocolonial surface structures belie the ambiguities of social practices that are themselves a "more identifiably indigenous strain in the political thought of the residents and their leaders." Herzfeld unpacks the uses of national symbolism and the "global hierarchy of value" in this Thai community's struggle for survival. He documents the formality of group meetings and other tactical engagements in which, he claims, the "highly ritualistic performance does not in the least undermine its performative force." In concluding this section on cosmologies, ideologies, and localities, Herzfeld does not attempt to analyze contemporary communities in terms of sacred geometry or the reproduction of traditional configurations. He does, however, show how "ethnographic observation opens up some of the intimate spaces of social life that official ideology deliberately occludes." Here he draws on the rich frames of Tambiah's work to assess the historical links and

present-day implications of his observations on political conflict, providing a natural segue to the book's next set of themes.

The third section of the volume focuses on violence, political conflict, and humanitarian intervention. Marshall Sahlins introduces these topics with his article "Structural Work: How Microhistories Become Macrohistories and Vice Versa," in which he brings Tambiah's notions of transvaluation and parochialization to bear on a vital discussion of "how small issues are turned into Big Events." Sahlins draws on the three examples of Elián Gonzalez, seventeenth- through nineteenth-century Catalan peasants, and Greek city-states during the Peloponnesian War to understand structural patterns. Whereas in this collection's first article Tambiah uses the concepts of *transvaluation* and *focalization* to elucidate a general phenomenon of saints and amulets across religions, Sahlins takes on these concepts to uncover "the dynamics of structural amplification"—drawing out the section's themes with formal significance.

Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and Byron Good next take up issues of ethnonational conflict in "Perspectives on the Politics of Peace in Aceh, Indonesia." Building on Tambiah's 1996 avowal that "something has gone awry in center-periphery relations throughout the world," their paper examines how "crises, such as natural disasters or conflicts, and a society's accommodation to humanitarian responses, reveal larger social and political forces usually hidden from view." Drawing on their rich ethnographic experience in the region since the devastating 2004 tsunami, the Goods suggest that Aceh is now a "kind of laboratory for new forms of governance," an experimental case study in decentralization in the midst of delicate peace negotiations brokering the end of a gruesome, decades-long struggle. In the end, the situation in Aceh is brought into clearer relief through comparison with parallel events in Sri Lanka. One country sustains peace while another tumbles back into violent clashes in the face of an enormous natural disaster. This underscores for the authors the continued importance of Tambiah's call for "sustained comparative examination of ethnonational conflicts," with ramifications for understanding varied forms of governance, reconciliation, and humanitarian aid.

Liisa Malkki approaches the ethics and politics of humanitarian practices from another angle in her discussion of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Her "Tale of Two Affects" presents a depiction of two contradictory yet interdependent sensibilities present

in international aid—the humanitarian sensibility on one hand, and the professional sensibility on the other. Malkki employs the compelling example of “aid bunnies,” handmade stuffed animals donated by thousands of well-intentioned knitters. This example draws attention to a “shared, universalizing social imagination of human need and suffering ‘out in the world’” as well as to the international professionals who at times rely on the “humanitarian affect” for funds and a certain degree of protection. She calls for an appreciation of professionalism as a kind of affect, and in the end proposes that occupational categories can help us see beyond “states of exception” even in zones of brutal devastation.

Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney closes the section with her piece “At the Base of Local and Transnational Conflicts: The Political Uses of Inferiorization.” Again emphasizing the importance of extensive historical and ethnographic data for incisive theoretical perspectives, Ohnuki-Tierney illuminates the causes of violent clashes with their concomitant ideological underpinnings with an analysis of the United States’ “master narrative” for the attacks of September 11, 2001, in comparison to the discourse it created concerning the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II. Here she points out noteworthy, unnerving parallels between these two storylines, particularly in terms of their use of stereotyping, as she advocates “us-ing” rather than “other-ing” and demonstrates the power of scholarship for deconstructing the means by which war is propagated.

Michael Fischer’s afterword brings the collection full circle, returning once more to Tambiah and our conversations with him in this volume. Fisher offers an extended introduction to Tambiah’s work for those who are unfamiliar with it, and a biographically rich review for those to whom Tambiah’s opus is already well known. Entitled “Galactic Politics, Radical Egalitarianism, and the Practice of Anthropology: Tambiah on Logical Paradoxes, Social Contradictions, and Cultural Oscillations,” this piece revisits the theme of radical egalitarianism, drawing out the paradoxical and fraught nature of the term and the multiple meanings it assumes in varying contexts. Beyond the style of anthropological engagement we claim for it here, Fischer traces six iterations of the theme of radical egalitarianism in Tambiah’s work, moving from Buddhist monks renouncing the world yet maintaining a claim to guide it, to forms of colonialist “egalitarian nostalgia” and socialist and fundamentalist utopianism; from wealth redistribution schemes and social welfare politics, to the “juggernaut of mass par-

ticipatory politics.” He reweaves the themes of the volume, stitching in ideas of cosmic rituals, charismatic circuits, and collective violence to complement the existing organization of the book by drawing additional connections between pieces. With unusual insight, Fischer highlights some of the most exciting elements of Tambiah’s eclectic and rich contribution to knowledge; he provides a lens for understanding why these intellectual contributions have been the source of inspiration for several generations of scholars, and gives a sense of how they will continue to inspire many more to follow.

This volume would not have been possible without generous contributions from many friends and colleagues. Special thanks are due to everyone who contributed here, as well as to those who attended the overflowing panels that in part gave rise to this volume. Much gratitude goes to the organizers of the 2007 American Anthropological Association panel—Saipin Suputtamongkol, Prista Ratanapruck, Deborah Tooker, and Felicity Aulino. Thanks also to Saipin Suputtamongkol and Michael Herzfeld, organizers of the panel at the 2008 International Thai Studies Conference in Bangkok. We thank Engseng Ho, Deborah Tooker, John Kelley, Thongchai Winichikul, and Paritta Chalermpong Koanantakool, who were key discussants in those sessions. We are indebted to James Boon and Elizabeth Traube for their insightful comments on the collection. And very special thanks go to Michael Puett, Michael Herzfeld, and especially Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, who were particularly key to the production of this volume and have provided immeasurable support in the process.

Decades after the utterance, the wisdom of Tambiah’s intellectual call to arms cannot be overestimated:

Now, then, might be the proper time for anthropologists—for whom a “totalized” account of how the various levels and domains of man’s life intersect and hang together is a necessary entailment of their disciplinary perspective—to infiltrate health care, the legal system, and other domains, and to maintain strenuously that the physical and the mental in man, his sense of person and self and of his rights and obligations, are embedded in his social relations, and these again in the collectivities of family, occupation, class, community, and nation. The times are appropriate to reiterate and demonstrate that the pursuit of social sanity and prosperity requires the broadening of the frontiers of knowledge into areas