
Eric Tagliacozzo

Tony Day’s *Fluid Iron* is a vast, far-ranging piece of scholarship on the nature of state formation in Southeast Asia. It is also a meditation on how power works, however, and how it has been organized generally, not just as seen in avatars of successive Southeast Asian states. My hunch is that this book is going to be read widely, precisely because it has so much to say to so many people. Day starts off his discussion with an examination of several important thinkers on the nature of state formation, and he earnestly tries to go back to the basics in doing so. He tells us that Weber is very important because his ideas on legitimately constituted authority, rational bureaucracy, charisma, and the exercise of control over the means of violence are still so current in how scholars think about states. Marx gets his airtime too, as Day stresses that such Marxian concepts as states serving the interests of elite classes and even the (seemingly long-ago debunked) notion of an “Asiatic mode of production” are still surprisingly with us. If this is some of the conceptual baggage that we drag around with us in thinking about states, then Foucault has asked us to be more modern and critical in our approach. Day tells us that for Foucault, states simply are relations of power: power is actually generated and harnessed through conflict, struggles, and unending processes of maneuvering. Though the author sees merit in all three of these foundational interpretations of the genesis of states, he is concerned that, in general, they propagate a distinction between traditional, non-Western, and cultural forms on the one hand, and modern, Western, and so-called “rational” forms on the other. Much of the book that follows this initial explication is an attempt to complicate that binary, which Day says fundamentally obfuscates the nature of state formation in real time and space.

Once he has given an exegesis of the genealogy of thinking about states, Day pushes this analysis into more local climes, asking how the analysis of states has evolved in Southeast Asian studies itself. This has a different timeline, and the important players are much more recent. There are appropriate nods to some of the founders of the discipline, at least as far as state formation in Southeast Asia is concerned: Clifford Geertz, for example, and his celebrated (if still problematic) notion of the theater state in Bali, and Oliver Wolters, who emphasized the continuities in area statecraft with an earlier age, even before the slow tidal flood of Buddhism and Hinduism swept over the region in the first millennium CE. Day also comments on Benedict Anderson and his famous take on Javanese power—his idea that a continuing cultural hold of Javanese-ness acculturates most expressions of power, at least on that very crowded island. Much of the rest of Day’s discussion, however, focuses on scholars in the generation after these three thinkers: Vicente Rafael and Rey Ileto on the Philippines; Keith Taylor and Hue Tam Ho Tai on Vietnam; Tony Milner, Barbara Watson Andaya, Jane Drakard, and Merle Ricklefs on the length and breadth of the Malay world; and Michael Aung-Thwin on classical Burma. If these thinkers have helped set the table on thinking about states, then Day says the main course has been served by the works of

*Indonesia 79* (April 2005)
two recent authors in particular: Anthony Reid and Victor Lieberman. It is through these two authors that Day sees the continuity of an emphasis on Weberian concepts of bureaucratic centralization, capitalism with a capital "C," and religious absolutism in its highest forms. Early modern Southeast Asia becomes an almost Weberian paradise of forms and types, though Day's vision of this same age is rather different in both emphasis and construction.

Day feels that as we move forward in time, the "state" becomes a more concrete and accepted notion, even if this is partially chimerical, at least in his view. If the notion of "states" has become more accepted as history has become more modern, Day argues, then culture has become less accepted as a methodology of studying any given political polity. The author finds this problematic, and there is much evidence to suggest that he is right on this count. Part of this phasing, he argues, comes from the changing nature of the sources themselves: for the premodern period, theorists of Southeast Asian state formation have to base their suppositions largely on temple reliefs, inscriptions, and literary texts, which are almost guaranteed to impart different kinds of information than the documents produced by states (and about states) in a later age. Day sees the watershed period for this mutation as the nineteenth century, as it was only then that "rationalized" Western writing about governance and politics in the region came into full view. It is this shift, that is, the process of taking culture out of the analytic equation and replacing it with something less "vague" and more overtly measurable, that the author hopes to problematize. For Day, "the state consists, like culture or societies, of power networks and struggles." (p. 35) This is a continuing process, then, one that connects ancient civilizations, such as those that built Prambanan and Borobodur, with our own.

The book unfolds along conceptual lines, not according to any predetermined chronology. In chapter 2, Day examines the relationship between kinship and gender, problematizing the gray boundaries between states and societies and showing the complicated agency that governs their interplay. In chapter 3, he moves on to an analysis of Southeast Asian states as cosmologies, particularly as seen through the windows of traditional literature and art. Day tells us specifically that he wants to excise the cosmological state from its anchor in Weberian theory and show instead that these older polities governed by a complicated process of regulation, which involved the channeling of power, morality, and even space, time, and identity into acceptable forms for the ruling regime. Chapter 4 then takes bureaucracy to task, as Day shows that the differences between modern or Western rule and its premodern variants in the region are actually far less than might have been supposed. "Traditional" Southeast Asian states could also be rational, alongside the more ritual functions that characterized many of these regional regimes. Finally, in chapter 5, he explores what he calls the "magical nature" of the Southeast Asian state by teasing apart the interactions between different coercive forms of state power. His argument throughout is comparative, and his examples move easily across geographies and, indeed, even across time periods, so that he presents literally scores of instances to test his hypotheses. Day wants to show that culture and politics cannot in fact be easily separated and that traditional and modern forms of this interplay are mirrors of each other in many shapes, guises, and forms.
The subject matter of this book is a tough one: it would be an achievement to get one’s arms around the mechanisms of one state, not many states, and to attempt to do this for multiple states in multiple places and over multiple time periods is ambitious indeed. I think *Fluid Iron* largely succeeds in its aims because it is a work of interpretation, not a work of methodical, archive-centered detail. A history of state formation along these latter lines would require a voracious mining of archival repositories, and even then it would be tough to do for one state, let alone many. (John Furnivall tried to do this with two colonial Southeast Asian states and was one of the very few who could attempt to do so, even at that juncture in scholarly time.) Yet because Day has left the archives behind in this monograph and has let himself float freely, he makes connections that many others would miss. He is therefore able to explore the connections between expressions of patriarchy in Southeast Asian societies centuries apart, for example (p. 83), while also musing on the birth of “truth regimes” among British polities in Asia, and how this affected the Dutch in their own colonies nearby. (p. 114) Day questions (p. 152) why Javanese was not chosen as a language of state by the colonial regime in Java (and he is certainly influenced here by Anderson’s earlier writings on the subject) and examines as well the role of *jaopho* (gangsters) in the functioning of the Thai political economy. (p. 272) Though the volume leans here and there a bit heavily on Indonesia (where Day is a specialist), for the most part it is truly pan-Southeast Asian in its scope. Throughout the book, however, his main concern is to show that “there never was a time when global as well as local transnational forces did not affect the dynamic of bureaucracies and rituals in Southeast Asia.” (p. 225) This is really Day’s main contribution to the debate on statecraft, I think—a careful and reasoned suggestion that we should be looking beyond easy binaries in explaining the nature of rule and should see continuities as well as breaks as emblematic of the complexity of power. The author took the words “fluid iron” in his title from a Dayak magic spell because it suggested to him the concept of strength in malleability. This book mirrors that notion and is a welcome and useful contribution to the literature.