

Introduction

ON MAY 19, 2010, the Royal Thai Army deployed tanks, snipers, and war weapons to disperse thousands of protesters who had taken over the commercial center of Bangkok. Two months before, following four years of political unrest, these protesters, known as the Red Shirts, had taken over the Ratchaprasong intersection, the main space of elite consumption in the city and a nexus of transportation and trade in the city. The protesters demanded the dissolution of the government headed by Abhisit Vejjajiva, new democratic elections, and an end to the political and economic inequalities and double standards they experience every day. Key to the mobilization were motorcycle taxi drivers who slowed down, filtered, and arrested the movement of people, commodities, and information in the area. The drivers had proven to be an uncontrollable force, capable of playing cat-and-mouse with security forces, evading military checkpoints, and rescuing protesters and their leaders once the army attacked them. People who normally operated unnoticed as part of Bangkok's transportation infrastructure had taken over the city, challenged state forces' ability to control their capital city and revealed the fragility of their power. On May 20, when the army's attack against the Red Shirts came to an end, the motorcycle taxi drivers were nowhere to be seen. After weeks of occupying the streets and providing the only form of transportation through it, they had left the area, taking advantage of their mobility and profound knowledge of the city's shortcuts and backdoors to slip away before the military's fist clenched around the protesters. The military dispersal left behind ninety-two dead and more than two thousand injured. 7-Eleven shops, bank branches, the Stock Exchange of Thailand, as well as Central World, the biggest shopping mall in the country, had been set on fire (see fig. 1).



FIGURE 1. The burning ashes of Central World shopping complex after the army dispersal. Photo by Nick Nostitz.

The morning after, the Ratchaprasong intersection, site of the protest camp and the theater of the military violence, was eerily quiet, populated only by abandoned chairs and sleeping mats, empty stalls and a bare stage. The pungent smell of burned plastic and putrid puddles of water filled the area as burned-out shells of buildings stood watch over the deserted square. A few hundred meters away, a crowd of detained Red Shirts sat in silence inside the National Police Headquarters, fearfully awaiting their fate. As the sun started to recede, police officers began escorting them to charter busses and trains bound for the rural villages many of them came in from. I boarded one of these trains. Sitting in a car filled by demoralized protesters, I wondered, like many others around me, how I had ended up in this situation.¹ I had come to Thailand to study urban mobility and its role in producing and reproducing Bangkok. More than a year later, I found myself on a carriage heading hundreds of miles away from the city, witnessing the apparent defeat of the largest social movement in Thai history, a movement that for months had taken control and blocked the very urban mobility I wanted to explore. As I thought about how this journey started, my mind went back to my childhood.

1. For a more detailed narrative of the train ride see Sopranzetti 2012b.

When I was a kid I used to cheer every time a mercury thermometer broke in my house. Away from the eyes of my parents I would put the spilled quicksilver on a table and kneel down, eyes close to the surface. I moved the mercury through small objects watching the stream cluster, cleave, and reunite as it filled the tiny spaces between them. The first time I crossed a four-lane road in Bangkok I stopped midway through the overpass to watch the flow of thousands of motorcycles twisting and squeezing through the static lanes of cars at a traffic light, feeling like a child again, entranced and exposed to toxic material. After that, almost every day I climbed up one of the thousand pedestrian overpasses that were built in the 1970s and 1980s to minimize interruptions to the flow of traffic and business. From there I watched the dance of thousands of motorcycles, finding routes and inventing passages where automobiles and buses waited, frozen. The bikes arrived from behind and made their way to the front of the line to cluster in a dense cloud a few meters away from the first cars. From above I stared, waiting for the traffic light to turn green and motorbikes to speed into the empty road until the next red light.

Mobility and traffic, street life and elevation, were my introduction to Bangkok. As I spent more time in the Thai capital it became clear that most residents lived their lives continuously using and discussing their knowledge of moving through the city, detecting the best way to proceed from point A to point B depending on time of the day, their economic means, urgency, and willingness to be exposed to heat, foul smells, potential accidents, or toxic fumes. In a megalopolis of 15 million people, infamous for traffic gridlock, limited public infrastructure, and environmental hazards, sensing when to switch modes of transportation could make the difference between being on time or stuck for hours in the tropical heat. Buses, taxis, cars, *tuk-tuk*, Skytrain, subway, canal boats, river boats, vans, *s̄ng thāo*,² bikes, motorbikes, motorcycle taxis—all of these possibilities present themselves to denizens on the move, according to location and income. The two most recent entries into this transportation puzzle, Skytrain and subway, offer predictable and regular schedules—malfunctions permitting—but only cover a minimal portion of the city. For the rest, moving smoothly through Bangkok requires a high degree of expertise.

New residents, whether foreign anthropologists or the million migrants who populate the city, start building this knowledge quickly, out of experiences

2. Open-rear vans in which passengers sit on two rows of benches.

with nerve-wracking failures, and innumerable hours spent moving through and getting stuck in the city. They learn that the affordable buses are slow-moving from eight to nine in the morning, from and from noon to one-thirty, and again after four-thirty in the afternoon, and, as in the United States, are almost exclusively used by the urban poor; that taxis are never worth their price during peak hours, when a short ride may add up to a day's income, but can be otherwise counted on for a long detour and interesting conversations with drivers; and that water transportation never undergoes gridlock and in its predictable slowness can save the day if you are willing to take a smelly ride on the polluted waterways.

In time, the newcomers learn that moving around in Bangkok is a matter of navigating the city, its landmarks and rhythms with prompt reactions and creativity. During traffic hours, they discover, mixing and switching is the way to go: a section on a bus and then be ready to get off once it gets stuck in traffic, a short ride to the canal, another tract on a boat, and a final ride in a cab after you get out of the congested area. Nonetheless, when the traffic grinds to a halt, the subway and Skytrain are too far away, boats are not available, and buses are stuck, hopping on one of the two hundred thousand motorbikes operating as taxis is the only way to get anywhere fast. At more than five thousand stations across the city, small groups of migrants from the countryside in colorful vests wait for clients to jump on their scooters' back-seat and take them to their destination, zigzagging through the congested city (see fig. 2).³

My fascination for motorcycle taxi drivers may have stemmed from my childhood games and my adolescence meddling with scooters, but my research interest in urban mobility has been grounded in a disjuncture between urban theory and urban ethnographies. For centuries, urban plan-

3. The vast majority of drivers are males between the age of twenty and forty, mostly with primary and, in few cases, secondary education. About 90 percent of them were not born in Bangkok, with Isan (Thailand's northeast) being by far the most common region of provenience (Jetsada 2004). Even though men represent about 95 percent of the drivers, the number of women has been slightly increasing since the 1997 economic crisis, in which women were particularly hit by the lay-offs that pushed many workers toward this informal market (Mills 1999b). The drivers ride a variety of motorcycles and scooters, with the latter dominating the business given their manageability in traffic. The majority of them are Japanese brands, mostly Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki. Given the large national production of bikes, their costs remain relatively affordable. A driver's monthly income—normally between 12,000 baht (\$400) and 30,000 baht (\$1,000) depending on location—buys a second-hand bike in decent condition.



FIGURE 2. A motorcycle taxi driver leaving his station with a passenger. Photo by Agnes Dherbeys.

ners, mayors, and social theorists have acknowledged the centrality of circulation to the birth, growth, and functioning of the metropolis. Nonetheless, when ethnographers started to explore cities, they did not bring into their purview the infrastructures that allow for urban circulation, the lives of the people who manage and operate the means of public transportation, or the effects of circulation on urban experience.⁴ In the late 1990s anthropological studies, faced with the accusation of being more interested in stable roots

4. Since the beginning of my research in 2008, however, a number of ethnographies that focus on urban circulation have come out. In particular Elyachar 2010; Ghannam 2011; Harvey and Knox 2015; Luque-Ayala and Marvin 2015; Monroe 2016; Shortell and Brown 2016; Simone 2005; Truitt 2008.

than in ever-changing routes,⁵ began to emphasize “interrelations and linkages between local settings and larger regional or global structures and processes.”⁶ In cities this meant continuing to explore traditional objects of urban anthropology—neighborhoods, marketplaces, enclaves, ethnic groups, and urban deviants⁷—but also stressing their relations with the larger circulation of people, commodities, ideas, and modes of governance rather than their boundedness. The resulting studies unraveled the complexities of localized worlds and their interactions with larger-scale realities, yet mostly ignored the city as an entity beyond the sum of its neighborhoods and communities. In order to describe urban life most of these works adopted one of the oldest tricks in the anthropological book: they assumed a metonymical relation between the scale of local fieldworks and that of the city as a whole. By studying the first, they made claims about the second. In so doing, they implicitly postulated that dynamics visible at one scale must be present and parallel at the other, without questioning how those scales are produced, connected, and reworked in everyday life.

While scholars—particularly proponents of political-economic approaches, the mobility turn, and actor-network-theory⁸—have debated at length these shortcomings, I set out to approach them ethnographically rather than at the theoretical level.⁹ My idea was to explore the work needed to knit the city together and keep it connected, the people and infrastructures that perform it, and their roles in making and remaking the urban scale.¹⁰ Studying a city like Bangkok, where that work is painstakingly real and quotidian, but neglecting these dynamics meant missing an essential

5. Clifford 1997.

6. Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 7.

7. Bestor 1989, 2004; Bourgois 1995; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Herzfeld 2009; Levitt 2001; Low 2003; Mathews 2011; L. Ralph 2014; Stoller 2002.

8. Latour 2005; Latour, Hermant, and Shannon 1998; N. Smith 1992; Urry 2000, 2007.

9. How to deal with different scales ethnographically, I believe, remains one of the most poignant questions for contemporary anthropology. As Jane and John Comaroff have argued, the key problem of doing ethnography “is ultimately a question of scale [not] easily captured by the ethnographer’s lens. Should each of them nonetheless be interrogated purely in their own particularity, their own locality? Or should we try to recognize where, in the particularity of the local, lurk social forces of larger scale, forces whose sociology demands attention if we are to make sense of the worlds we study without parochializing and, worse yet, exoticizing them” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003, 151).

10. For a more detailed analysis of the relation between mobility and the birth of urban anthropology see Sopranzetti 2018 (forthcoming).

aspect of how the city is lived and preserved and how commodities, people, rumors, aspirations, and power circulate through its veins.

Attracted by these questions, I began to develop an interest in the only people who can keep the city moving when everybody else is stuck in traffic: the drivers who carry passengers on their scooters' backseats. When I asked people in Bangkok about them, stories came pouring out—to my surprise often preceded by laughter at the thought of a researcher coming halfway across the world to study the infamous and mundane *mōt-ēsai rap chāng* (motorcycles for hire). Laughter, Mary Douglas would say, is the result of bringing together disparate elements and arranging them in a way that challenges accepted relations.¹¹ A student at a prestigious university hanging out with people considered dangerous and lazy by Bangkok urbanites and popular media fit that description. “Motorcycle taxi driver? This is what my son will become, if he doesn't work hard,” a young mother who worked in a small office in central Bangkok told me half-joking and half-concerned as we chatted at a subway stop. When she was young, tending water buffaloes was the bogeyman fate reserved for disobedient and lazy youngsters. Now that the country is urbanized and buffaloes sparse, becoming a motorcycle taxi driver has taken its place as the epitome of the undesirable job for the urban middle classes. “Why would you want spend years talking to them?” she continued, referring to the drivers. “You study culture, you should focus on Buddhism.”

More interested in street life than in the quiet of monks' quarters, I continued to ask people about those alleged good-for-nothings who allow the city to function and its movements to continue. As the laughter faded away and my interlocutor realized I was not joking, stories replaced puzzlement. Everybody seemed to have an anecdote to recount, a driver they knew, a tale to tell. The first story was generally the recounting of an insane ride, knees hitting stationary cars while zipping through clogged traffic, or a deadly accident they saw happening. These were followed by stories of thefts and drug deals. These tales, however common to the actual experiences of riding motortaxis, often had the rhetorical marks of urban legends. They happened to a friend of a friend, somebody they knew, a slightly too removed acquaintance. Rather than presenting first-hand experiences, they strengthened the diffuse perceptions of the drivers as unsafe, unreliable, and lazy citizens.

“So you don't use them?” I would ask, waiting for the smile that often opened up on the person's face. Another flood of stories would gush forth, this

11. Douglas 1975, 96.

time not about *the* stereotypical driver but about *a* particular driver, a specific person they used daily: some to go to work, others to ferry their kids back and forth from school; some to pick up food and fix a broken pipe in their house, others to get their regular stash of drugs. Everybody I met seemed to be connected to and through a motorcycle taxi driver. Municipal and post offices in Bangkok are filled with drivers waiting to pay bills, deliver packages, or turn in documents. Banks are enlivened by their colorful vests, standing in line to deposit checks or collect stipends for regular clients. Offices rely on them for deliveries. At late-night parties, when the alcohol starts to run low or the ice has melted away, a phone number of a night driver will pop up and the party will be extended after a fast delivery. Even e-commerce businesses offer expedited one-hour motorcycle taxi delivery services, for an extra fee.

The longer I lived in Bangkok the more I grew captivated by the drivers—for the most part men from the interior of the country—who sat in small stations at almost every corner in the city. Riding to and from those stations, they connected houses, offices, factories, shops, and other transportation networks but were ignored in transportation and academic studies, beneath government recognition, and occasionally disdained by popular press and culture. How did these migrants become so central to the daily operations of the city? What motivated them to take up this occupation? What techniques did they deploy to navigate the physical, social, and legal landscapes of Bangkok? How did their lives on the move affect their relations with the city and the villages they migrated from? How were conflicting conceptions of the city, formal and informal economies as well as public and private spaces, sustained, adopted, or challenged by their different forms of mobility? With these questions in mind, I began my investigation of mobility in Bangkok, ready to move with the flow or getting stuck within it.

Like the quicksilver that fascinated me as a child, the system of motorcycle taxi drivers proved hard to confine and difficult to grasp, especially with the tools of traditional anthropological research, developed to study relatively stable and static social groups. Motorcycle taxi drivers were nothing like that. They hardly thought of themselves as a unified group; each station was completely autonomous and operated with almost no coordination with the others, and even within a station, drivers often came together only during working hours, after which they dispersed back into the city. Time and again during my research, these features became a source of frustration. Yet, when I was in a good mood it also provided some of the most useful methodological challenges and intellectual stimulus. These difficulties, I realized, were the

result of a certain degree of disciplinary orthodoxy and methodological conservatism in anthropology which “tended to bring the anthropologist to the ethnic enclaves, the ghetto, which had cultural and organizational characteristics with which he [*sic*] could—in his own curious way—feel comfortable.”¹²

As my fieldwork progressed, I regularly found this methodological predisposition pushing me toward a street corner, a group of drivers, or a neighborhood as the preferred scales of analysis. My research, therefore, became a continuous struggle to resist this comforting dimension. If I did not want to reproduce the disjuncture between traditional urban anthropology and urban theory, I had to adopt a flexible and mobile methodology, one that actively strove to “move along with people, images, or objects that are moving and being studied.”¹³ If I spent a few months with a group of drivers in their neighborhood, I would then shift to conducting research with state officers or labor unionists who think about the roles of motorcycle taxi drivers across the city and the effects of transformation in labor practices on their lives. If the recent economic history of Thailand became the focus of my work, I would then go back to the drivers’ villages or visit their families to see how the city and the drivers’ lives were perceived from there. If the migration attracted my attention, I redirected it toward the drivers’ bodies and explored what the constant movement was doing to them. In this sense, my research aimed at following the motorcycle taxis’ meandering mobility by shifting constantly between different scales and disciplinary methods—from spatial analysis to participant observation, from archival research to mapping, from social history to visual analysis. Circulation not only became the object of my analysis, it also structured its methodology.

Once I took this approach and stopped slicing the drivers’ experience into one specific scale or area of the city, the full extent of their roles in weaving Bangkok together and performing the work necessary to keep it alive began to emerge. Ferrying customers across the urban landscape to their homes, schools, and jobs, moving commodities, stories, and aspirations both within the city and out in villages, the drivers made and remade Bangkok, day after day, one trip at a time. Following them, the geography of the city—with its landmarks, rhythms, flows, and blockages—started to become familiar. Yet, this concrete space was just one of the landscapes that the drivers traversed and operated in. As my research progressed, a complex geography of organizational structures,

12. Hannerz 1980, 3.

13. Urry 2007, 6.

illegal economies, self-representation, historical events, and political figures came into relief. In time, it became clear that their everyday life in the city was reorganized by the economic transformations that took place after the 1997 financial crisis and pushed many of them out of the factory floor and onto the street, where they operated as service providers and entrepreneurs of urban mobility. The change both affected and was effected by new forms of body discipline that the drivers experienced on the move. Similarly, it reshaped their perceptions of themselves, the city around them, and the country as a whole. This, it seemed, created new expectations and desires both for them and for their families back home. From those desires, something else was emerging: a series of collective demands and a growing dissatisfaction with the country's political and economic situation.

These processes showed the complex entanglements between new forms of capitalism in Thailand, the drivers' bodies, discourses, and actions, and their political mobilizations. Yet, whenever I tried to talk to them about the relation between these aspects, I found that the drivers did not think of them as cause and effect but rather as moving landmarks through which they oriented and adjusted their trajectories. Their approach urged me to bring the same refusal to adopt a single entry point that directed my methods to inform my theoretical framework. This became the main theoretical challenge and contribution that runs through this book.

While inquiries into political economy, everyday life, and political action have dominated social sciences in recent decades, they have often remained separate and generated conflicting theoretical reflections. Marxism, phenomenology, and post-structuralism all have struggled with reconciling these three elements but often overemphasized their separateness and relative hierarchy. Orthodox Marxism tends to reduce everyday life and political relations to the logic of capital and its contradictions. Phenomenology, on the contrary, elevates everyday life and perception to the realm of an irreducible universal, frequently underestimating both their relation to capitalism and to political configurations. Finally, post-structuralism focuses on the discursive component of power relations so strongly as to leave little space for an analysis of material relations and everyday acts of subversion. Many scholars have attempted, and managed, to work in between these three schools. Such productive engagements, however, have been largely pursued by dodging or resolving the contradictions between the three schools and factors.

The drivers were bringing me down a different road. Their actions and reflections pushed me to analyze the concrete entanglements among eco-

conomic restructurings, everyday life, and political actions without emphasizing any of the factors as primary. It was the unresolved tensions between the three elements that defined and propelled the drivers' lives, not a cause-and-effect relation between them. This realization put me on the road laid down by Henri Lefebvre in *Critique of Everyday Life*, a road that remained widely unexplored because it departed from that of orthodox political-economic analysis and crossed the paths of phenomenology and post-structuralism. Lefebvre's approach, like the one the drivers were inviting me to follow, started from an analysis and critique of the everyday as the territory where structures, processes, and practices meet and question each other.

The necessity of such an approach became evident when the drivers' political demands started to gain momentum. For the first year of my research, their critical voices populated half-drunken conversations at the end of long days at work and occasional nights at a karaoke bar. Then they began to coalesce around small protests that called for the resignation of the ruling government in 2009. At the beginning of 2010, however, those sparse protests coalesced into a mass social movement: the Red Shirts. That March, Red Shirts protesters took hold of Bangkok and blocked its main centers with the help and support of large portions of the city's motorcycle taxi drivers. In the weeks that followed, I found myself in the midst of the biggest political mobilization in modern Thai history, with a unique set of connections in place to make sense of the rapidly evolving events. As a result, my research was radically transformed.

What had started as an investigation into urban circulation turned into something much larger. I was, unexpectedly, witnessing collective action emerging among precarious workers. Over the previous decade, in fact, the drivers had come to think of themselves as individual entrepreneurs in competition with one another. Yet they were now acting as a collective and adopting circulation, and the ability to take control of it, as a technique of political mobilization. The uprising and the central roles of the drivers demonstrated that operators of mobility had the potential to take control and sever the very connections they had helped create. During the protest this potential was realized and the drivers brought the mobility of central Bangkok to a halt.

Their influence should not come as a surprise. Both in academic and larger public debates, the rhetoric of mobility has taken an increasingly central stage since the end of the twentieth century. Studies of migration, transnationalism, media, and globalization have put mobility at the center of academic discussion as well as daily conversation. In particular, analyses of

contemporary capitalism have noticed the decreasing importance of factory-line modes of production in favor of more flexible economic practices, centered on mobile financial capital and floating labor.¹⁴ Financial markets, communication technology, global trade and migration—just to mention a few phenomena—have forced us to rethink the way we look at space, time, economy, society, politics, and human relations. Nonetheless, the people who allow the channels of economic, social, and conceptual exchange to remain open are seldom named and reflected on. The events in front of my eyes showed that these people could also take control of flows and reclaim their centrality by adopting mobility as a tool of political mobilization, not just as a form of labor or a locus of capitalist accumulation.

I remembered underlining, fervently with a sharp pencil, Anna Tsing's observation that "mobility means nothing without mobilization."¹⁵ This lesson was now delivered in a very concrete way by Bangkok's motorcycle taxi drivers. While my first year of fieldwork dealt with the drivers' role in making the city, my second year focused on the increasing importance of circulation in contemporary Thailand, its transformation into a toll of political mobilization, and the unmaking of urban connections. How and why did the drivers emerge from their invisibility as an urban infrastructure to take on such a critical political role? What made them into such effective political actors in protest? What did this reveal about the role of circulation in Thailand after the 1997 economic crisis and about state forces' struggle to control their own territory?

Trying to remain faithful to the entanglement between mobility and mobilization among the drivers, this book is composed of two interlocking trajectories, organized around eight chapters divided into two even parts. Part 1 looks at the drivers' everyday lives and how their circulation brings the city into being as they carve channels through it. In it, I analyze how histories, relations of exploitation, everyday practices, and legal arrangements are inscribed onto the drivers' bodies, trajectories, and aspirations, both in the city and in their villages, and have come to orient and shape their consciousness as residents, migrants, and political actors. In chapter 1, I reconstruct the conditions of possibility—material, technological, economic, and social—for the emergence of the motorcycle taxi in the early 1980s as an unintended

14. Amin 2013; Bryan and Rafferty 2006; Harvey 2012; Lazzarato and Jordan 2010; Mezzadra and Neilson 2015; Mezzadra et al. 2013; Roberts 2010.

15. Tsing 2005, 215.

consequence of the conflicting orders configured by processes of urbanization, privatized land development, industrial expansion, and new informal economies. In chapter 2, I explore the drivers' everyday lives as urban connectors, mediating between urban spaces and classes. I analyze the ways in which driving a motorbike shapes perceptions and practices of urban space and configures the drivers' meandering and path-seeking presence in the city. Chapter 3 branches out from the city into a larger rural geography. Here I analyze how the drivers' mediation of desires and lifestyles configures a hierarchical relation between the city and the villages and generates expectations that their circular migration often fails to fulfill. Finally, in chapter 4 I position this gap between expectations and reality in the post-1997 capitalist restructuring in Thailand and the paradoxes of the driver's reorganization as free entrepreneurs which emancipated them from the discipline of the factory floor while inscribing them in a new system of precariousness.

While part 1 focuses on the drivers' everyday mobility, part 2 of the book examines how that mobility morphed into and shaped their political mobilization. In it, I reveal how circulation emerged both as a characteristic and a strength of contemporary capitalism but also a weak spot, always open to challenges from the people who operate economic, social, and conceptual exchange yet are excluded from its effects. Chapter 5 follows the government's realization of the drivers' strength in the city in 2003. I explore the resulting attempt to formalize and control the drivers' operations as part of a larger struggle over the Thai state, a struggle that cost Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra his position in a military coup in 2006. In chapter 6, I analyze how the drivers' position in urban circuits generated new desires among them, and how after the 2006 coup, the government repressed those desires and saw them transforming into collective demands. In chapter 7, I explore how those demands resulted in the Red Shirts' protests in 2010. During this time, the drivers' mobility, their knowledge of the urban terrain, and their invisibility to state forces not only defined their political subjectivities but also their actions in the mobilization. Finally, in chapter 8, I examine the forms of organization that the drivers adopted, under conflicting leadership and conceptions of power, during and after the Red Shirts' uprisings of 2009 and 2010.

Overall, this book explores the work performed by motorcycle taxi drivers in their constant making and unmaking of Bangkok, not by focusing on the sturdiness of material forms, established hierarchy, and political hegemony or on the ubiquity of everyday resistance and unbounded ingenuity. Rather,

I center on contradictions, tensions, and fragilities as unyielding features of social life in Bangkok, on the drivers' all-too-human need for resolution that can never be fulfilled, and on the doomed attempts by state forces to impose order over the kaleidoscopic realities of contemporary Bangkok—its rhythms, apertures, blockages, pretenses, and dirty business. In each chapter, I explore the productive nature of these predicaments: those that created Bangkok; the contradictions and contingencies that animated the drivers daily mobilities and their risks; those engrained in their role as mediators between the city and the countryside; those present in the freedom that motivates them to take up their line of work; the contradictions that the drivers experience in their expectations, dreams, and desires that in turn build their political consciousness; and finally those inherent to power in contemporary Thailand and the multiple ways of understanding it.

Behind this narrative, however, stands a deception: that of claiming to say something about the city as a whole. Bangkok, like any other city, contains infinite cities, each composed of invisible threads, each distinct but never complete. Each of its residents, observers, and planners has created a mental image and an imagined totality which they see as *the city*. They have locations, foods, smells, styles, buildings that come to define their city. Yet, each of them sees different shapes, different layers, and maps unique in their partiality yet common in their pretense to be Bangkok. Cities are, after all, a glass shop full of kaleidoscopes pretending to be monocles. The same goes for social movements, protests, and other forms of collective organization, including the nation-state. Behind their pretense of coherence and unity stands the multiplicity of masses of people, all with their own personal stories, demands, desires, hopes, and frustrations. Behind the imagined communities, the political ideologies, the networks, the factions, and the orchestrated strategies, lies the unbounded messiness and tragic beauty of human nature.

This book, like any other rendition of a city or a protest, hides that deception, a laughable pretense of unity if not of plenitude. Its blind spots and unexplored routes are too numerous to list. However, a few are worth pointing out. First, my engagement with the city has been dominated by masculine gazes, both mine and those of the drivers, who for the most part are men. Even the few women who work in the system do so by accepting and endorsing forms of masculinity. Second, my navigation of the protests was, as any trajectory inside any social movement, occasional and personal. The people I met, the conversations I listened to and participated in, as well as the demands they voiced were a tiny fraction of a movement that was defined and strength-

ened by its heterogeneity and multiplicity of forces it included. These blind spots, along with many other omissions and partial views, make any attempt on my part to come to a unifying conclusion little more than a fated endeavor, as doomed as any other in this story, to find a resolution. The reader, aware of the limits, might decide to ignore them. The author, aware of his ignorance, decides to pretend, hoping that this deception will allow glimpses of clarity rather than obscurity. Alan Moore, the author of *V for Vendetta*, said that artists use lie to tell the truth, while politicians use them to cover the truth up.¹⁶ In this text, I tried my best to follow the first model, aware of the risk of reproducing the second. As I write the last revisions of this book, the tension between my attempt to describe and understand something about Bangkok and the Red Shirts movement and the absurdity of such an enterprise—especially as a military dictatorship is once again ruling Thailand and a new king in power—remains very much unresolved, looming over this whole project. The only solution I could find was learning from the motorcycle taxi drivers and, rather than reconciling this tension, leaving it unresolved and allowing it to become a productive force, an engine propelling the book. As is the case for the drivers, once I took this path the road ahead was uncertain. Sometimes it led to successful navigations, other times to terrible accidents. Which of these this book is, it is not for me to say.

16. Moore 1988.