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Three populisms and two dead ends: Variants of agrarian populism in Thailand

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Abstract

This article discusses three forms of agrarian populism in Thailand: the “grassroots populism” of the Assembly of the Poor, the “reactionary populism” of the yellow shirts, and the “capitalist populism” of the red shirts. We examine how these three strands of populism are embedded within dynamics of agrarian change in Thailand and how the intellectual and activist orientation towards agrarian populism led to the neglect of labour, particularly agricultural migrant workers. We show how key ideological underpinnings of the Assembly's grassroots populism (Brass's “agrarian myth”) could be appropriated for the agrarian component of both reactionary and capitalist populism. Rather than a new populism, we argue that a broad and popular challenge to right-wing authoritarianism should develop inclusive class politics that embrace the rural–urban linkages that already define the social fabric of the new, rural, and agrarian precarious working class.

KEYWORDS

agrarian myth, agrarian populism, migrant agricultural workers, rural–urban linkages, Thailand

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the search for “possibilities for progressive politics in the contemporary countryside” (Pattenden, editorial), this article agrees with Borras's (2020) insistence on broad, pluralistic alliances between different social movements and

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between different classes of “working people.” However, we disagree that left-wing agrarian populism is the way to do it. To effectively challenge right-wing populism, a socialist perspective needs to shift from a “peasantist” approach to an inclusive “new class politics” (Candeias, 2017) that reflects the working-class reality of most people in/from rural areas. Rather than a cross-class alliance of “rural communities” based on an ideologically homogenized category of “the people of the land” or the “peasant way” (Borras, 2020, p. 5), we need a transnational, multi-ethnic, and rural–urban alliance of the working class.

Drawing on the Thai experience, we argue that Borras’s proposal for a progressive agrarian populism based on “the people of the land” has been tried and failed. In Thailand, the Assembly of the Poor (AoP) (สมัชชาคนจน; *Samacha Khon Jon*) was exactly the kind of broad and populist alliance between “poor peasants,” “indigenous peoples,” “fishers’ movements,” and “women’s movements, environmental advocacy groups, and radical food activist groups” that Borras (2020, p. 8) is calling for. However, after some initial success, the Assembly failed to achieve lasting change and—confronted by the Asian Economic Crisis of 1997/98—soon faded into insignificance. We will attempt to show that their populist movement represented a post-development shift in the political and intellectual orientation of the Thai left away from the working class and that this was part of the intellectual history that fed into the populist projects that followed them: the two dead ends of the reactionary and authoritarian yellow shirts and the modernizing but pro-capitalist red shirts.

At this point, it is necessary to briefly define how we use the (rather unfortunate¹) term populism in this article. In the context of critical agrarian studies, progressive, “agrarian populism” has been used (and critiqued) to characterize the “political bundling of various rural-based or rural-oriented social groups and class interests and issues into a homogenized category, ‘the people of the land’” (Borras, 2020, p. 5). In this sense, we use the term “grassroots agrarian populism” to characterize the AoP. However, the classic use of the term populism is that of an alliance between a section of the ruling class with a largely unorganized multi-class coalition of the masses, in which a “personalistic leader” expresses and mobilizes the social frustrations of lower classes in opposition to a supposed elite (Roberts, 1995). Arising out of a discussion of such leaders with mass support in Latin America, populism can depict a modernizing force pursuing “developmentalist, nationalist economic policies and generous social programs” (Weyland, 2001, p. 9) (e.g., Perón or Chávez) or a reactionary, fascist movement (e.g., Mussolini or Trump), and many different forms in between (e.g., Fujimori) (Ellner, 2003). We use populism in this latter sense to characterize the yellow shirts as a reactionary and authoritarian multi-class alliance with the monarchy (“reactionary populism”) and the red shirts as a democratic multi-class alliance with a modernizing faction of Thai capital represented by Thaksin Shinawatra (“capitalist populism”).²

The article proceeds as follows. First, we summarize the scholarship on the agrarian transition in Thailand. This is of general interest, because ostensibly, the Thai example supports the argument for the persistence of small-scale peasant farming. A closer look, however, reveals that smallholdings are embedded within a thorough capitalization and concurrent proletarianization of the rural space and of agrarian production. A dwindling class of independent small-scale farmers (peasants) is now flanked by a class of “emergent capitalist farmers” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 104) on the one hand and a rural–urban precarious working class (i.e., Bernstein’s “classes of labour,” p.111) on the other.

Second, we discuss the AoP as an example of the kind of agrarian populism advocated by Borras. As we will show, the AoP was initially successful in uniting quite disparate groups around a common identity of “Khon Jon—Poor People” against a “them” defined as large, capitalist corporations and an “urban elite.” However, the Assembly did not organize workers, and instead of rural–urban linkages, its post-development critique was predominantly one

¹The very generic use of the word has led to convoluted definitional debates and suggested solutions, such as restricting criteria to the political domain (Weyland, 2001), leads to the victory of form over content where very different formations such as Chávez or Thaksin are just as populist as Duterte or Ortega. As Dix (1985: 29) observes, “if virtually everyone is a populist, the category tends to become meaningless.” In addition, the term is used as a term of slander by the (neoliberal establishment against Trump AND Sanders, echoing their equation of fascism and communism. For the left, the characterization of neo-fascist movements (such as the AfD in Germany) as right-wing populism holds its own dangers (Foster, 2017).

²These latter two populisms are not strictly speaking “agrarian based” but rather urban-based with an important rural component or narrative.

of the rural *against* the city. Here we find it useful to incorporate some of the critique developed by a former editor of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Tom Brass. Brass (2000) famously argued that the merging of agrarian populism, New Social Movements and post-modernism represented a dangerous departure from class politics. More specifically, agrarian populism, rooted in petty commodity producers, reproduced an essentialist “Agrarian Myth” which counter-posed “the people” against big business along lines of cultural identity. We see similar ideological underpinnings in the Assembly that were later taken up by the yellow shirts.

We then discuss how the reactionary populism of the yellow shirts and capitalist populism of the red shirts engage with these social transformations in different ways. In our discussion of the reactionary populism of the yellow shirts, we show how the Assembly's agrarian populist critique of globalized capitalism as a foreign “un-Thai” influence gained traction after the economic crisis of 1997 and how many of the post-development ideas of the Assembly were re-cast in the context of a new alliance between a section of Thai farmers, the military, and the monarchy. The critique of globalized, corporate capitalism in the guise of prime minister and multi-billionaire Thaksin Shinawatra was framed in ethnic and nationalist terms by the yellow shirts. Suddenly, former allies from the anti-globalization movement, who had demonstrated with the Via Campesina against the WTO in Hong Kong, were siding with the military coup for “Thai-style democracy”! Many of the elements of food sovereignty and peasant-based agriculture were incorporated into a reactionary version of peasant essentialism, now rebranded as “King Bhumibol's Sufficiency Economy Philosophy.”

In reaction to this anti-democratic and authoritarian project, the red shirts developed their pro-democratic and modernizing populism. This too was based on a cross-class alliance, this time between a modernizing faction of Thai capital, a section of the state and, as we will argue, a broad mix of petit bourgeois “entrepreneurs” and “classes of labour.” It too “deliberately blurred” the class contradictions within its ranks, positing the question of political and social rights and equality as one between “aristocrats” (อำมาตย์; *amat*, i.e., the monarchy and its bureaucratic network of army generals, civil servants, and judges) and “commoners” (ไพร่; *phrai*, i.e., everyone else). The red shirts were in many ways a progressive populist movement (and *pace* Borras, 2020, p. 19), not of the same right-wing ilk as the populism of Trump, Erdogan, or Le Pen, but as a whole they were in no way anti-capitalist or socialist, and their vision of rural Thailand was a thoroughly capitalist one.

In comparing the agrarian trajectory of these three populisms in Thailand, we argue that the grassroots populism of the Assembly developed from the perspective of petty commodity producers, who wanted to preserve the state of being “middle peasants” in a neo-Chayanovian sense, as autonomous—and culturally specifically Thai—producers. The authoritarian populism of the yellow shirts, on the other hand, is based on a cross-class alliance—including peasants and capitalist farmers—dominated by militaristic and royalist networks, but which uses a similar view of the Thai peasant as its ideological projection. We argue that the much broader support for the red shirt movement can be explained by the incorporation of working-class people, by demands and policies (democratic rights, welfare state policies such as health care) that appeal to a broader section of society and that more accurately reflect the social transformation of the Thai countryside. In the agrarian element of this capitalist populism, however, working-class elements are subordinated to the “emergent capitalist farmers” and to Thaksin's programme of turning poor peasants into successful rural/agrarian “entrepreneurs” who can ride the wave of globalized capitalism.

The problem, then, of the AoP's progressive agrarian populist project in Thailand was that it was based predominantly on the perspective of petty commodity producers, failing to respond to the structural and social transformation of the last decades and neglecting the greatly expanded precarious working class. As it became a (socially) spent force, it (ideologically) fed into two populist projects dominated by sections of the ruling class in which labour and particularly migrant workers, are subordinated to capital and rendered voiceless. Our conclusion is that the new generation of Thai activists need to re-orient to this diverse and rural-urban working class to develop a broad alliance and political project that can challenge the military regime and modernizing sections of Thai capital at the same time.

2 | THE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL THAILAND

Thai agriculture has been characterized by the transformation of economic conditions and a differentiation of social relations. As can be seen in Table 1, Thailand has followed the general trend in which the importance of agriculture has diminished in comparison to industrial production and trade and services. This is reflected in employment patterns, where the share of those working in agriculture has dropped from 80% in 1970 to 42.7% in 2010, with a similar shift from self-employed and family workers (traditionally the form of employment for peasant agriculture) to waged workers. However, in the Thai case, the “agrarian transition” has not taken the form of dispossession and a polarization between large, agro-industrial plantation capitalists on the one hand and a landless proletariat on the other, as in many other parts of Southeast Asia. Instead, small-scale farming has endured, with the number of small-holdings increasing since 1960 to just under six million farms today, while the average size has decreased to just over three hectares (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2014, 2018). As Rigg (2019, p. 6) observes, “the smallholder and the smallholding remain—on paper—the dominant social form and economic enterprise in the Thai countryside.” This would suggest that the peasantry is still the majority class in rural Thailand and would support the political project of a modern form of progressive agrarian populism.

However, a closer look reveals a different and very interesting social dynamic. To explain what is going on, we need to briefly refer to key concepts in agrarian studies that examine social differentiation processes as rural areas are incorporated into the globalized capitalist economy. Starting with the term “peasant,” we are using this in the sense of “small-scale farmer,” that is, someone who owns or works enough land to support a livelihood based on farming, usually through a combination of subsistence production for the family’s own consumption and the sale of crops for cash income. In this context, the term “petty commodity production” (PCP) is often used to stress that “farming households are integrated in capitalist commodity relations” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 103). Importantly, PCP also extends to the informal, urban economy, defined as “the class position of producers and traders combining both micro-capital and labour (self-exploitation) under conditions of market exchange” (Harriss-White, 2014, p. 982). We are using the term “peasant” and “small-scale farmer” in this sense. In addition, as several authors point out, and we will discuss for Thailand, many households combine a small plot of land with wage labour to make ends meet and

TABLE 1 Employment indicators Thailand, 1970–2010

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Total active labour force (millions)	16.9	21.8	31.7	34.0	39.4
Industrial sector					
Agriculture	80%	74%	63.4%	48.4%	42.7%
Industry	13.3	17.3	19.0	15.9	16.8
Trade and services	6%	8%	13.5%	17.8%	19.1%
	1.0	1.9	4.3	6.1	7.5
	14%	18%	23.0%	33.7%	38.2%
	2.4	4.1	7.3	11.5	15.1
Employment category					
Waged employees		20.1%	28.8%	39.7%	42.3%
Self-employed and unpaid family workers		4.9	8.8	13.1	16.5
Capitalists		79.6%	70.0%	57.0%	55.4%
		17.3	21.7	18.7	21.2
		0.2%	0.8%	1.3%	2.0%

Sources: Neville (1986), ILO (2007), and NSO (2012).

can be characterized as peasant-workers. Bernstein coined the term “classes of labour” to highlight these linkages and fluidities of the rural working poor who:

have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and typically increasingly scarce wage employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and “informal economy” survival activity, including marginal farming. In effect, livelihoods are pursued through complex combinations of wage employment and self-employment. Additionally, many pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and marginal self-employment. (Bernstein, 2010, p. 111)

In addition to the independent producers engaged in self-exploitation for the market (“peasants,” “small-scale farmers,” and “PCPs”) and these peasant-workers or “classes of labour,” we also have “emergent capitalist farmers” (Bernstein, 2010, p. 104) who exploit a few workers (some of the time) and the precarious working class that has no land at all (ca. 40% of rural population, Somrasmi et al. 2019). The latter may well not be in a formal wage relation and work in conditions of subcontracted work, piece rate payment, or might be nominally self-employed.

Looking at Table 2, we can see that in the Thai case, the number of landholdings (which had increased substantially during the 1970s and 1980s as landless farmers occupied and converted forest areas) has remained basically stable since 1993 at just under six million. Land distribution has also remained roughly similar, with half of farmers now owning between 10 and 39 rai (1.6–6.4 ha), 37% less than 10 rai, and 12% 40 rai or more. At the same time, those living by farming is under half of all landholders, with most belonging to the “peasant-worker” category (with an interesting dip in 2003 which we will return to when we discuss the red shirts).

We can interpret Table 2 by drawing on Rigg (2019 p. 203), who, in over 40 years of research in different rural locations in Thailand, has identified a multi-plurality of class configurations, but with a clear tendency away from “self-provisioning peasant cultivators” towards “semi-commercialized peasant smallholders” on the one hand and “classes of labour,” that is, peasant-workers, factory workers and agricultural labourers on the other. In a process that he calls “accumulation without dispossession,” Thai agriculture has become integrated into agribusiness and further processing industries with an export orientation. Crops grown mainly for export include rubber, rice, sugar, cassava, and palm oil, which together generated export value to the tune of 18 billion USD in 2017 (Junghus et al., 2019, p. 60). Other crops, particularly broilers, maize, and tomatoes, are connected to global value chains via contract farming arrangements with agribusiness companies such as the Charoen Pokphand Group. In this context, a capitalist class of middle-sized farmers has emerged, not by expanding land ownership but by intensifying and commercializing production and accumulating capital (Rambo, 2017).

This transition from peasants to capitalist farmers has been widely observed and has given rise to new terms that attempt to capture the changing nature of villagers, such as “middle income peasants” (Walker, 2012), corresponding roughly to those with incomes over 17,000 baht and more than 40 rai in Table 3. But these “emerging capitalist farmers” also include many from the middle group. This can be seen by the fact that in 2013, the numbers

TABLE 2 Number, size, and income from landholdings, Thailand 1993, 2003, and 2013

	1993	2003	2013
No. of land holdings (million)	5.6	5.8	5.9
<10 rai (1.6 ha)	32.9%	37.6%	37.1%
10–39 rai	54.3%	51.1%	50.7%
>40 rai (6.4 ha) (%)	12.8%	11.3%	12.2%
Income from farming	46.0%	21.1%	47.5%
Income from farming and other sources	54.0%	78.9%	52.5%

Source: NSO (2014).

TABLE 3 Farming households, Thailand 2017

	Northeast	Kingdom (number and percentage of total households)	Average monthly income per capita (baht)
Households with farmland <3.2 ha (peasant-workers)	508,477 (9.1%)	1,371,435 (6.4%)	6,656
Households with farmland 3.2–6.4 ha (peasants, PCP)	279,271 (5%)	602,316 (2.8%)	7,886
Households with farmland >6.4 ha (“emergent capitalist farmers”)	93,139 (1.7%)	240,585 (1.1%)	17,086
Households renting farmland	72,524 (1.3%)	435,324 (2.0%)	5,378
Total (percentage of all households)	953,411 (17.1%)	2,649,660 (12.3%)	

Source: NSO (2020).

of those who hire employees increased to above three million or more than half of all the holdings. Almost all of these (94%) hire only temporary employees (NSO, 2014), that is, precarious agricultural workers.

A more recent survey, this time asking about sources of income and socio-economic class (i.e., not starting out from land ownership) identified only 2.6 million households as “farm operators” (see Table 3), supporting Rigg's claim that “the fact, however, that smallholdings persist does not mean, necessarily, that *smallholders* also persist” (Rigg, 2019, p. 141; italics in original). It is important to stress that most inhabitants of rural Thailand do not make their living from farming. Only 12% of households identify themselves as farmers (Table 3). Even those who could still be termed peasants or smallholders derive most of their income from off-farm activities (Rigg, 2019, pp. 168ff). This “deagrarianization” of rural areas is pronounced, with one case study showing only 15% of income deriving from agriculture (Rigg, 2019, p. 172), and another that only 5.1% of households had farming as their primary occupation (Rigg, 2019, p. 179). According to Chaowana et al. (2019, p. 1), on average, each farmer/peasant now earns less than 5,000 baht (166 US/135 Euro) per month from farming or only one third of their total revenue.

The shift to multi-sited peasant-worker livelihoods has a clear generational demographic: The elderly keep and farm a plot of land, while the younger generation has migrated to towns and cities and have become workers proper. Because of their ties to their parents and their parents' farms, this has created intense rural–urban interconnections of social reproduction. In her case study, a long way from urban centres, Soimart (2014) found that most young people lived outside of the village, working in the cities. For this generation, as in other countries, the rural space has become one of “translocal family reproduction” (Jacka, 2018), one where the parents can grow old, supported by their wages. This transition could be characterized as one from *liang wua* (taking care of cattle in the forest) to one of *liang laan* (taking care of the grandkids) (Rigg & Salamanca, 2011, p. 565), representing the shift to the rural space as part of the extended social reproduction networks of a new working class in Thailand.

The large majority, particularly of the younger generation of “rural” Thais, are now only linked to farms (if at all) as a place of social reproduction. This new generation of workers from rural backgrounds have multi-sited rural–urban livelihood strategies that are characterized by precarious employment. As Table 4 shows, most of these jobs are low-waged employment in manufacturing, sales, services (e.g., tourism), construction, mining, transportation, and mining. While the NSO characterizes nearly three million households as “entrepreneurs without employees,” a better characterization would be precarious workers in the informal sector, that is,

labor contracted through an agency and employed for a fixed term and paid either an hourly or task-based rate, workers hired on temporary contracts directly by the firm and renewed at employers' discretion, work outsourced to subcontracting firms or home-based workers, agency supplied workers, and migrant workers. All of these forms are characterized by low wages, few benefits, and uncertainty, and many are considered

TABLE 4 Employment status and income, Thailand (without farmers), according to NSO categories, 2017

	Number of households	Per cent	Average monthly income per capita
Entrepreneurs with employees	688,161	3.2%	19,267
Entrepreneurs without employees	2,776,769	13.0%	8,367
Professionals/Management/Tech self-employed	117,065	0.6%	14,644
Professions/Management/Tech waged	2,285,210	10.7%	18,465
Employed in agriculture, forestry, and fishery	1,088,860	5.1%	4,894
Labourers in transportation and logistics	491,811	2.3%	5,740
Clerical, sales, and services workers	3,401,841	15.9%	8,983
Workers in manufacturing construction, mining	3,008,244	14.1%	7,808
On social security or pensions	4,514,964	21.1%	7,064
Living off property rent	180,923	0.9%	14,965

Source: NSO (2020).

outside the coverage of the labor law, meaning that the right to establish a union is lost. (Hewison & Woradul, 2013, p. 451)

Estimates of the percentage of the workforce in Thailand's informal sector ranges from 55% (Dasgupta & Ruttia, 2013, p. 15) to 62.3% (Saowanee & Kornwit, 2013, p. 30) and 73% (UNDP, 2010 cited in Apichat et al., 2013). Precarious employment has become standard, common, and normalized (Hewison & Woradul, 2013), especially in agriculture (Dasgupta & Ruttia, 2013; Saowanee & Kornwit, 2013), the fishing industry, construction, and the tourist industry (Hewison & Woradul, 2013).

If the rural space has become more and more “deagrarianized,” that is, a living space for workers with mobile, precarious, and mainly urban employment, agricultural production itself has become more and more industrialized (i.e., linking the rural with urban processing) and proletarian. Here, we can speak of an agrarian proletariat proper, that is, farm labourers who work for wages on other people's farms. This agrarian proletariat is made up of rural labourers from different parts of Thailand and, increasingly, from neighbouring countries. Between 2003 and 2013, the number of permanent workers employed in agriculture nearly doubled to 1.16 million (NSO, 2014). Most workers are not permanently employed, but are daily or seasonal labourers, many of them unregistered migrant workers from poorer regions and from neighbouring countries. By 2019, there were over three million registered migrant workers, predominantly from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos in Thailand (NSO, 2022). Over half a million were working in agriculture (Junghus et al., 2019, p. 60), while the number of unregistered, illegalized workers is estimated to double that of those registered (Campbell, 2013; Kelly, 2011).

Arnold and Pickles (2011, p. 1608) estimate that migrant workers from these three countries made up nearly one-tenth of Thailand's workforce in 2008, working in “labor-intensive industries such as seafood processing and fisheries, construction, manufacturing sectors including textile and garment, agriculture and domestic work.” Without the citizen rights of Thai nationals, they are subjugated to additional forms of oppression and their rights as workers are curtailed (Arnold & Pickles, 2011; Campbell, 2013). Their lives are characterized by precarious working conditions, such as seasonal and temporary employment, subcontracted work, hire, and fire on a daily basis or piecework jobs (Latt & Roth, 2015, p. 234). Temporary and informal employment translate into lower income, as seasonal or daily workers do not have to be paid a minimum wage. Unsurprisingly, the gender gap is significant, with women earning on average 34% less than men, while racial discrimination is also high, with workers from Myanmar earning half or less than Lao and Cambodians (Junghus et al., 2019, p. 68).

Migrant workers are employed most heavily in the commercialized agribusiness export industries such as rubber, sugar cane, maize, or palm oil (Junghus et al., 2019). For example, the longan industry in Northern Thailand is

characterized by wage labour relations in the orchards and further processing factories (Dayley & Attachak, 2016, p. 47). The fruit is almost invariably picked by labour gangs from Northeast Thailand or Myanmar and growers often outsource the whole harvesting and processing operation. This takes on a transnational dimension, as agribusiness expansion in Laos fuels the outmigration of young rural dwellers to become workers in Thailand, which in turn accelerates social differentiation in rural Laos (Barney, 2012, p. 81). Borras et al. (2022, p. 3) have unearthed similar trans-local networks of workers from Myanmar, who are “rurally rooted” in villages where access to land, in addition to a productive subsistence element, takes a social reproduction function as space for housing, schools, clinics, or socialization.

Migrant workers do not usually figure in portrayals of Thai agriculture, they constitute the “hidden rural poor” (Rigg, 2019, p. 209). For example, in one Royal Development Project in Northern Thailand, which portrays an image of “Thai” eco-agriculture, between 500 and 1200 (!) migrant Shan labourers were employed on a temporary basis (Latt & Roth, 2015, p. 230). As Latt (2011, p. 532) argues, these migrant workers are effectively erased from the picture of Thai agrarian society that ignores the “exploitation of a marginalized, impoverished, and effectively invisible Shan labor force.” If we did start including them in our description and analysis of rural Thailand, they would paint a different picture, not of “Thai peasants” but of a fluid and multi-racial working class “employed as wage laborers on rice farms; in the fishing industry; on rubber plantations; and in rural industries, such as rice mills, canning factories and chicken slaughterhouses” (Rigg, 2019). They are not confined to the rural area but have livelihoods that span the rural and urban, agricultural and industrial, and that are embedded in trans-local networks of social reproduction.

To summarize the development over the last four decades or so, an increase in the number of peasant smallholders in the 1980s was followed by an agrarian transition characterized by the intensification and capitalization of capitalist farms on the one hand, and the “deagrarianization” of rural Thailand on the other hand. Worker-peasant households combining farming activities with wage labour shifted demographically to become sites of social reproduction of the parent and grandparents, whilst the younger generation joined the ranks of the precarious working class. At the same time, agrarian and agribusiness production became increasingly proletarian, with a large proportion of migrant workers from Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Following Glassman’s (2010) approximation, but with some key differences in interpretation, we estimate the proportions of major classes in Table 5.³ We now discuss how these developments are related to three very different political projects of agrarian populism.

³For the ruling class, we follow Pasuk’s (2016, p. 410) approximation of the richest top 1%, that is, “families headed by businessmen, property owners, professionals and managers” including members of the Royal family, top military brass, politicians, and top bureaucrats. To the middle class, we add the categories “Entrepreneurs with employees” (i.e., medium and small capitalists), “Households with farmland > 6.4 ha” (i.e., capitalist farmers), “Professionals/Management/Tech self-employed and waged” (i.e., professionals such as lawyers, doctors, professors, engineers, and managerial staff), and those “Living off property rent” from Tables 2 and 3. All these categories have significantly higher per capita monthly incomes than 10,000 baht. We assume that half of those working as “entrepreneurs without employees” to be lower middle class (i.e., urban PCP) and half of those on pensions to be formerly from the “Professionals/Management/Tech self-employed and waged” category. Here, we differ with Glassman (2010), who defines all the “Entrepreneurs with employees” and the managers and professionals “working on their own account” as dominant classes, and all the “entrepreneurs without employees” as middle class. We define the peasant class quite narrowly as having enough land to support themselves by farming without exploiting workers, that is, the category of those owning or renting more than 3.2 ha (20 rai) and less than 6.4 ha (40 rai) farmland from Table 2. These are fluid categories. We are assuming that 3.2–6.4 ha are sufficient to provide a livelihood based on farming, that is, petty commodity production without employing (migrant) workers. In the 1990s, 10 rai (1.6 ha) was seen as the minimum required landholding by many small-scale farmers. However, for 2017, we assume that less than 20 rai (3.2 ha) is not sufficient to support a household and that farmers or their children need to supplement their income by wage labour. We also assume that above 40 rai, farmers start to employ workers, and are thus in the category of “emergent capitalist farmers.” Of course, this depends on the quality of the farmland and other socio-economic factors. A government official might own 3.2 ha and employ workers to grow rice for him. If the boundaries are lowered, we would expect to have less peasant-workers and more peasants and capitalist farmers. We adopt a definition of working class to include the categories “households with farmland < 3.2 ha” from Table 2 (i.e., peasant-workers), half of the category “entrepreneurs without employees” (i.e., precarious workers), those “employed in fisheries, forestry, and agricultural services,” “labourers in agriculture, forestry, and fishery,” “labourers in transportation and logistics,” “clerical, sales, and services workers,” “workers in manufacturing construction, mining,” and half of the category “on social security or pensions.” To the working class, we assume that the 2,120,546 officially registered migrant workers in 2017 (NSO, 2022) are included in Table 4, to which we add another estimated four million illegalized and temporary migrant workers (at a ratio of 2:1, see Campbell, 2013). Here we equate number of workers with number of households, assuming that they have to support a household whose social reproduction is spatially distant (e.g., in Myanmar, Laos, or Cambodia).

TABLE 5 Rough generalized estimate of major classes in Thailand, 2017

	Households	Per cent
Ruling class	254,600	1.0%
Middle class	7,157,811	28.1%
Peasant class	819,000	3.2%
Working class	17,226,678	67.7%
Total households	25,458,089	100%

Note: Derived from Tables 2–4, see footnote 3

3 | GRASSROOTS AGRARIAN POPULISM—THE AoP

The Assembly of the Poor (AoP), founded in 1995 and gaining national prominence with its “99-day-demonstration” in Bangkok, was a highpoint of grassroots mobilization and political articulation by marginalized small-scale farmers and fishers from rural Thailand. Emerging from mass movements by indigenous peoples in the North fighting against their eviction from national parks, by small-scale farmers defending their land against mass evictions in the forestry project Khor Jor Kor, by small-scale farmers and fishers protesting the Pak Mun Dam in the Northeast, and small-scale fishers in a struggle against industrial trawlers in the South, the Assembly was able to unite a wide range of activists and groups around a common, left-wing populist project (Missingham, 2003; Prapas, 1998). Many of their alternative practices and policy demands were very similar to those advocating Food Sovereignty or community-based resource management today. Indeed, it could be argued that the initially successful anti-globalization movement (of which the Assembly was part) was built around a similar formula to what Borras is advocating: a multi-class alliance predominantly of peasants, fishers and various social or activist movements against the common enemy of neoliberal capitalism and urban-biased development.

The struggles at the heart of the Assembly arose out of contradictions of “successful” development, which was marginalizing petty commodity producers in the countryside. Thailand was industrializing and, from the mid-1980s onwards, became increasingly embedded within a globalized economy via export-led growth. Different sections of Thai capital such as the Crown Property Bureau, agribusiness corporations, and the military were jostling over resources and export markets.

A key area was forestry, and the interlinked interests between the Royal Forestry Department (RFD), the (largely military-controlled) timber industry, and the pulp and paper industry. In the 1970s and early 1980s, Thai timber companies, in conjunction with the RFD, had deforested much of Thailand's forests, exporting vast amounts of logs and processed wood. Landless farmers used the logging roads to encroach into the denuded National Forest Reserves and cleared logged-over woodland to carve out their own little homesteads. This wave of land occupations is part of the reason for the overall increase in the number of farms between 1975 and 2005 (Rigg & Salamanca, 2011). However, after the forests had been logged out, the pulp and paper industry saw the forest reserves as a new resource for establishing fast-growing eucalyptus plantations. Led by the royal conglomerate Siam Cement and its subsidiary Siam Pulp and Paper, and with the aid of the military and the RFD, an ambitious project was drawn up to evict tens of thousands of families from over 300 forest reserves in the country. This project would become known by its Thai Acronym, Khor Jor Kor (“โครงการจัดสรรที่ดินทำกินแก่ราษฎรผู้ยากไร้ ในพื้นที่ป่าสงวนเสื่อมโทรม” [จก.]) (Pye, 2005).

A mass movement of civil disobedience emerged against this project—first as a loose network (the “Committee of 36 Forests”) and then a more organized farmers’ union (สมัชชาชาวนาชาวไร่ภาคอีสาน, literally the “Assembly of Rice and Upland Crop Farmers in Isan Region”) (Pye, 2005). This farmers’ union was one of the backbones of the AoP. The movements by indigenous small-scale farmers in the North and the Mun River inhabitants in the Northeast were also mass movements, the former involving over one hundred villages in the Northern Farmers Network, and the latter mobilizing thousands in collective protests and actions of civil disobedience over a period of 12 years or more.

Another member was the Federation of Small Fishers of Southern Thailand, whose members had been involved in a fight against industrial trawlers. Other, much smaller groups were the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) (Heis, 2015), a network of slum dwellers, and a group of workers affected by workplace illnesses, as well as—with the status of advisors—various NGOs such as NGO-CORD, the Thai Volunteer Service, and the Friends of the People (Missingham, 2003; Pye, 2005).

Coming together in the Assembly, which was founded in 1995, these predominantly rural networks created a progressive populist project around defending land rights, the local management of resources, decentralization, and “people-centred development” (Pye, 2005, p. 266). Using the inclusive identity marker of *Khon Jon*, that is, poor people, the Assembly could bring disparate groups together to pressure the government. In a statement at their first large protest in 1996, the Assembly stated that “Today, the power of the poor, which used to be scattered around (the country), has moulded us together like hundreds of rivers merging to form an ocean” (cited in Pye, 2005, p. 267).

In its first years, the Assembly was very successful. The organization of the 99-day-demonstration—a permanent occupation of an area adjacent to Government House—was itself a huge achievement (Missingham, 2003; Prapas, 1998). The empowerment created by the self-organization of the grassroots another. Apart from achieving a number of concrete demands at the end of that protest (Missingham, 2003; Prapas, 1998), it also shifted the parameters of agrarian and natural resource policy up until the present day. The small-scale farmers in the National Forest Reserves have been able to establish their rights to the land, the mass eviction of indigenous peoples from national parks has not taken place, and Thailand has stopped building new dams—at least domestically. Alternatives put forward by the Assembly such as small-scale ecologically sustainable agriculture, or community forestry, have remained a vibrant reminder, conceptually, and practically, that a different kind of rural development is possible.

In many ways, then, the Assembly represented the kind of progressive agrarian populism advocated by Borras. In the mid-nineties, it was a success story and an active part of the anti-globalization movement, including La Via Campesina. The question, though, is why this brand of agrarian populism petered out towards the end of the 20th century, with the Assembly now a shadow of its former self? Despite professed sympathies of the authors with this movement, in retrospect, a sober analysis of its social base and ideology is necessary. To start with the former, it is clear that its class base was firmly petty commodity producers, that is, small-scale producers defending their land, access to natural resources, and livelihoods against encroaching capitalist development. Ideologically, the Assembly corresponds closely to Brass's (2000, p. 16, Table) characterization of an agrarian populism influenced by post-developmentalism. The Assembly invoked the peasantry as historical subject, with a political identity based on ethnicity, culture, and nation, rather than class. The term “poor people” is the kind of strategic homogenizing that Borras (2020, p. 9) is arguing for.

In terms of economic discourse, the orientation was very clearly on “small is beautiful” (Brass, 2000, p. 17), with the stress on subsistence and diversified production for local markets. Ideologically, this was portrayed as a conflict between big capitalists/corporations versus peasants and rural folks (Brass, 2000, pp. 148, 166) or, more simply, between the “city dwellers” and exploited rural Thailand. This sat easily with a culturalist argument of national, Thai identity and the “sons of the soil.” The alternative is very much a “post-development” one, with sustainable/from below development a means to regain and empower the cultural identity of peasants and the nation. As Misingham (2003, p. 61) analyses, “rather than attack the basis of Thai nationalism the Assembly invokes it to support its claims and build solidarity.”

The post-modern, “New Social Movements” approach of an anti-party-political framework or a “refusal of politics” (Brass, 2000, p. 148) was evident in the Assembly's strategy and tactics. It stressed horizontality and the uniqueness of each individual struggle that made up the network, using this as a novel negotiating strategy (Missingham, 2003; Prapas, 1998). In part in conscious contradistinction to the hierarchical and dogmatic structures of the Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (where some of the leading activists/advisors had spent a brief spell after the bloody crackdown on students and socialists in 1976), it defined itself as exactly *not* a political party. Rather than striving for political representation, reformist policies, or the overthrow of the state and capitalism, it pursued an autonomist strategy. In other words, the ultimate goal was for traditional, Thai communities to be left alone from encroachment by the state or capitalist corporations (Hewison, 2000).

However, the apparent strength of this modern-day agrarian populism, appealing as it was, was grossly overestimated. From our perspective, the success of the 99-day-demonstration was in part because of a major shift in the balance of forces achieved by the democracy movement of 1992. This not only toppled the military and curtailed its political influence but also led to a democratic phase in which political parties were vying for popular support. While many at the time thought that the Assembly's success was due to its creative protest forms and new populist messaging (Baker, 2000), it was in fact largely due to the fact that the urban population, including the working class in Bangkok, had rioted on the streets and created a space for an offensive of grassroots demands (Ungpakorn, 1997). This can be seen most clearly with the anti-Khor Jor Kor Movement: the military-led project could only be cancelled after the generals behind it had been stripped of power (Pye, 2005).

The demise of the Assembly came with the Asian crisis. The shock treatment of economic meltdown led to a regrouping of Thai capital and a new austerity offensive prescribed by the IMF and implemented by the Democrat Party led government. The Chuan government reneged on all of the promises made by the previous cabinet (Missingham, 2003). Faced with a new offensive by the ruling class, and in the absence of a clear urban or working-class response, the Assembly criticized the crisis as one created by the incursion of foreign, globalized capital. In this vein, it joined the aptly named "People's Patriotic Alliance," together with NGO-CORD, the State Enterprise Workers Confederation and the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD) (Missingham, 2003, p. 204). All three organizations were to play a leading role in the reactionary populist movement of the yellow shirts.

The glaring omission of the Assembly's broad-based agrarian populism was the workers. In fact, the Assembly could be characterized as "everyone but the workers." Naturally, some of the members of the AoP would have already been reliant on wage labour, not just on farming—but the AoP did not organize them *as workers*. This is problematic for three reasons. First, as the social make-up of Thai agrarian society transformed, the social base of the Assembly, that is, independent petty commodity producers, dwindled. Its perspective of semi-autonomous PCP could speak to less and less people. Second, the ideology of cultural, traditional Thai/indigenous communities excluded the migrant workers, who had no voice or network within the AoP. Third, as we will show below, this brand of agrarian populism could mutate into other forms of populism, one reactionary, and one dominated by the modernizing fraction of Thai capital.

4 | REACTIONARY POPULISM—THE YELLOW SHIRTS AND SUFFICIENCY ECONOMY

If the AoP represented those peasants with their own land who had expanded numerically during the 1970s and 1980s, mainly through surreptitious land occupation in logged-over forest areas, this social base has been eroded over the past 20 years or more. Its agrarian populism of independent and autonomous Thai farmers no longer fitted the material reality of most rural Thais. The grassroots populist project of the Assembly faded into the background as Thailand was hit hard by the economic crisis of 1997–1998 and subsequently became dominated by the intense political polarization between the yellow and red shirt movements. Although the Assembly as an organization did not join either camp, many of its members did. Examining the lineage between the Assembly and the reactionary populism of the yellow shirts, we argue that this is made up of three elements: first the direct involvement of NGOs associated with the Assembly in the yellow shirt movement, second the intellectual history of anti-globalization critique in Thailand, and third the co-optation of the Assembly's autonomist vision of Thai agriculture into the reactionary agrarian populism of King Bhumibol's "Sufficiency Economy Philosophy" (SEP).

Although a lot has been written about the yellow shirts as representing the "urban elite" against the "rural poor," it was actually a populist project based on a multi-class alliance that included rural Thailand. Led by sections of the ruling and middle classes losing out to the modernizing capital faction represented by Thaksin Shinawatra, it included PCPs (particularly from Southern Thailand), parts of organized labour (e.g., the state employees trade union led by Somsak Kosaisuk) and capitalist farmers.

The yellow shirts emerged from a broad and diverse movement against the Thaksin government in 2006. Very soon, however, the coalition—naming itself the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD)—lurched rightwards, calling for a “royal intervention” against the elected government and tacitly supporting the military coup of September 2006 (Pye & Schaffar, 2008). In the years following the coup, the movement became more and more “yellow” (i.e., the royalist colour), taking on many of the attributes of reactionary populism outlined by Borras (2020, p. 5), including a “disdain for basic democratic institutions” and authoritarian, militaristic, and xenophobic tendencies. The reactionary nature of the yellow shirts can be seen by the platform of their “New Politics Party” which called for a parliament in which only 30% of members should be democratically elected and the rest appointed, and in the nationalistic warmongering tones of leaders such as Chamlong Srimuang, Sondhi Limthongkul, and Somsak Kosaisuk⁴ against Cambodia over the Preah Vihear temple (Nelson, 2014).

This rightward shift of the movement against Thaksin was facilitated by several NGOs, some of which had a close working relationship with the Assembly. An important role was played by leaders with formerly democratic credentials such as Chamlong Srimuang and trade unionist Somsak Kosaisuk (both leaders of the 1992 democracy movement) and particularly Phibop Thongchai and Suriyasai Katsila of the Campaign for Popular Democracy (CPD). As discussed by Uchen (2013), a key role was played by the “Friends of the People” (“กลุ่มเพื่อนประชาชน”), an NGO that had been the main executive body of the AoP. A row of other NGOs closely related to the Assembly also joined the PAD or were supportive of the decision to form it, including FTA Watch and the Four Regions Slum Network. NGO-CORD, a key NGO platform of Thailand, facilitated the forming of the alliance between NGOs and Sondhi's faction a few days before the launch of the PAD in 2006.

Although the decision to join forces with the openly royalist Sondhi Limthongkul was partly tactical to oust Thaksin, and has been criticized as opportunist manoeuvring (Thongchai, 2006; Uchen, 2013), the affinity between the grassroots populism of the AoP with the reactionary populism of the yellow shirts goes deeper. In addition to other similarities, two strands of intellectual critique of globalization by activists and scholars in the 1990s stand out, that is, the critique of capitalist globalization as a Western and foreign development impacting Thailand negatively from the outside, and the distrust of electoral democracy and politicians (because of corruption and the dominance of business interests).

A key ideological plank of the Assembly, particularly on the part of NGO members and their intellectual advisors, was to cast “traditional” rural Thai communities in opposition to the city which was portrayed as the site of capitalist elites and consumerist middle classes. This localism had a strong nationalist bent in which capitalism was seen as a foreign influence. Arguing from a culturalist Buddhist position, intellectuals such as Sulak Sivaraksa criticized globalization as western colonialism in which Thai politicians were “selling out the country to the foreigners” (cited in Hewison, 2000, p. 288). This was to become a major rallying cry for the first mass movement against Thaksin in 2006 under the slogan “กู้ชาติ” (“restore the fallen nation”).

In this respect, the 1997 economic meltdown was thus considered to be not only an economic crisis but also a cultural and moral one. Several writings by Thai intellectuals and NGOs organizations at that time voiced similar Buddhist apocalyptic themes framed as Thais versus invading foreign influences (see, e.g., WGPA, NGO-CORD, 2002a; Pittaya, 2003; Surichai, 2003). This is the context for the critique of parliamentary democracy as corrupted by (foreign) capital. Because the liberalization of the Thai economy in the 1980s was correlated with a political liberalization and a parliament dominated by businessmen turned politicians, Thai activists and progressive scholars became disillusioned with electoral democracy and turned towards ideas of direct democracy. As Uchen (2013) explores in detail, there was a close relation between activists and intellectuals working on rural and development issues, the CPD, and the emergence of this anti-parliamentary position.⁵ The term “people's politics” (การเมืองภาคประชาชน) was advanced, and

⁴In an interview with one of the authors in 2005, this trade union leader expressed his nationalist outlook by declaring that he would not give “one inch of Thai soil” to Cambodia.

⁵For example, Surichai Wangeao and Wanida Tantiwitthayaphithak were both on the first executive committee of the CPD in 1991, and the latter was to become advisor and a de facto leader of the AoP.

this can be seen as a precursor of the “New Politics” put forward by the PAD, leading to the demand for the appointment of 70% of members of parliament representing different “estates” and professions of Thai society.

The alternative to this “foreign-imposed globalization”—and this is the core of the rural populism advocated by the AoP—was to be found in the non-Western self-sufficient and sustainable livelihoods of the Thai small-scale peasantry. Both WGPA, NGO-CORD (2002a, p. 54) and Surichai (2003, p. 59) emphasized the agency of “rural folks” and “ordinary people” (คนสามัญธรรมดา) in rural areas. The (village) “community and its values become a means of resistance to globalization” (Hewison, 2000, p. 287). But this imagery could be used both by grassroots populism and by the reactionary populism formed around the “Sufficiency Economy” of King Bhumibol—the ideology which would later be heavily manipulated by the military regimes and right-wing factions.

In the hagiographic literature on the Sufficiency Economy, King Bhumibol's “philosophy” “[...] lies at the heart of Thailand's development thinking” (Priyanut, 2004, p. 127). Evolving from remarks made in a speech in the context of the Asian Crisis, the “philosophy” is in essence some recommendations for a self-sufficient small-scale farmer to dig a pond and grow a number of crops for subsistence and for the market to diversify risk, coupled with some Buddhist virtues such as “moderation, reasonableness [...] patience, perseverance, diligence, wisdom and prudence” (Priyanut, 2004). The farm or family level is then up-scaled to the nation as a whole, implying that if businesses, government officials, and politicians had been more Buddhist and less greedy, they could have shielded Thailand from the worst ravages of globalization and the economic crisis. Some academic activists believed that SEP derived from the Buddhist idea of middle way, focusing on adequacy and balance, therefore, following this path will lead not only to righteous lives but also to freedom and self-reliance of all Thais (see Chaiyudh, 2002; Suparb, 2002).

It is these shared “images of an authentically Thai village in which local production systems and local culture are mutually reinforcing” (Walker, 2012, p. 203) that made it so easy for the alternative peasant-based agriculture to be “co-opted and incorporated into the royal concept” (Schaffar, 2018, p. 389), something which was actively pursued by royalists and the military regime (Rossi, 2012). Government funding for SEP was made available for Assembly networks such as the Alternative Agriculture Network (Heis, 2015). In this way, “notions of self-reliance and self-sufficiency are effectively hijacked into an official state development discourse” (Hewison, 2000, p. 290).

The similarities between the two concepts SEP and food sovereignty are not just superficial and the incorporation of the AoP's alternative agriculture is not merely the imposition of right-wing populist ideology from above. Rather, there is an intellectual lineage leading from one to the other. As Schaffar (2018) explains, one part of this lineage is the “Community Culture School” (influential within the grassroots movements including AoP) led by the former Marxist Chatthip Natsupha that counter-posed the Thai village and peasant culture against a Western-imposed capitalism. Chatthip (2004) endorsed the SEP as the King's acknowledgement of the authentic community culture and economy practiced by rural Thai people. Similarly, WGPA, NGO-CORD (2002b) stressed the similarities of the alternative agriculture practiced in their networks to SEP. In this reading, the SEP represents the essence of Thai society—that is, the King, the farmers, and traditional agriculture—in opposition to foreign and vulgar capitalist globalization and to the nationalism of the modern urban elite.

Consequently, the SEP became the linchpin of the yellow shirts' reactionary rural populism. It could appeal to some of the remaining self-sufficient peasants, to some of the worker-peasants and also to the more well-to-do farmers who employ temporary workers and produce for export markets and newly emerging demand for organic produce by sections of the Thai middle class. Ideologically, it could draw on a form of “populist localism” that was “reactionary, romantic, [...] anti-urban and encourage[d] chauvinism” (Hewison, 2000, p. 289). Because the grassroots populism expounded by the AoP was centred on the figure of the independent and culturally Thai nationalist peasant and on an urban–rural dichotomy, it had no place for workers, and particularly, the multi-national composition of the working class in Thailand. Without the perspective of an organized labour movement and the potential of rural–urban linkages that such an orientation could offer, it was easier to join forces with the monarchy and the military in a nationalist reaction against the modernizing project of Thaksin.

5 | CAPITALIST POPULISM—THE RED SHIRTS AND AGRARIAN MODERNIZATION

While some sections of the AoP, particularly of the NGOs associated with it, drifted rightwards after the People's Alliance for Democracy embraced the military coup of 2006, other sections, particularly from the grassroots, joined the red shirts.⁶ The red shirts were also a multi-class populist alliance of sections of the peasantry, capitalist farmers, worker-peasants, and sections of the urban middle class and the precarious working class (Ammar & Somchai, 2012; Pavin, 2013) but led by the globalist faction of Thai capital (represented by the billionaire Thaksin). One study describes their members as “farmers, the lower middle class, low ranking government officers, secondary and middle school graduates, sticky-rice eaters, small-traders, semi-skilled self-employed workers, people selling food from their pickup trucks, or traders selling fresh goods at weekend markets” (Naruemon & McCargo, 2011, p. 1006). Workers—particularly those with rural–urban linkages—made up a significant proportion of the red shirts. This can be seen by the voting patterns in the highly industrialized districts of the Bangkok Metropolitan Region and in the North and Northeast, where many of the precarious working class are still registered to vote (Glassman, 2010). The 2010 protest camp in the middle of Bangkok would fill up in the evenings, as people working in the city joined after work. Hewison (2012) points to the correlation between rising inequality and voting patterns and stresses the self-characterization of their movement as “class warfare” (*songkhram chonchan*) and the “remarkable demonstration of solidarity between red shirts and Bangkok's service and working people” during the Bangkok convoy protest in March 2010. In the same vein, Keyes (2012) points to the red shirt support in the “suburbs of Bangkok” “heavily populated by working-class people with roots in rural North Eastern Thailand.”

The red shirts were made up of a variety of different groups and currents that combined the struggle for democracy with demands for more social inclusion (as implemented by Thai Rak Thai programmes such as the “30-Baht” universal health coverage, rural investment funds, or rural investment projects) (Pavin, 2013). They were able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of supporters in sustained protests against the military until their violent dispersal in May 2010 in Bangkok (Sopranzetti, 2012). Parties supported by the red shirts were able to secure electoral victories up until the second military coup in 2014, putting their stamp on the politics of the country for a decade or more.

Despite working-class support, however, the politics of the redshirts were shaped by the ruling class and middle class leadership as a populist project. The red shirts were extremely successful in “aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogenized voice” (Borras, 2020, p. 5). They did this by articulating their struggle as one of *phrai* (ไพร่ = commoners) versus *amat* (อำมาตย์ = aristocracy), terms borrowed from Thai feudal society (Turton, 1980). *Amat* was shorthand for the alliance between monarchy, military, and judiciary that was identified as being behind the coup against the democratically elected Thaksin government in 2006 (Apichat et al., 2013). The term allowed the red shirts to criticize the undemocratic “network monarchy” (McCargo, 2005) without mentioning the King personally (thereby circumventing the draconian Lese Majesté Law) and to express “the deep resentment against the inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity” (Pavin, 2013, p. 9) that had built up in decades of unequal development in Thailand. It was a genius “generic term that stood for everything and everybody who oppressed the Thai population and constrained its full democratic potential—from the military to the government, from the Privy Council to the palace” (Sopranzetti, 2018).

Phrai, on the other hand, was a term that resonated with a wide range of different social groups. In feudal times, the *phrai* were the serfs, the Thai farmers exploited by the aristocracy. In the modern context, the term was used as a “critical commentary on inequalities of social class and political power” (Naruemon & McCargo, 2011, p. 1006). Deliberately blurring class distinctions, “the red shirts were not referring to themselves only as the poor, the peasantry, or the working class but rather a new category” made up of “migrants stuck between rural backwardness and

⁶For example, one of the key grassroots leaders from the Northeast, Sa-Ing, was one of the initiators of the first rural march on Bangkok in support of Thaksin in 2005 and one of the leading activists against the Khor Jor Kor project, Luen Sichampho, was a red shirt organizer.

urban poverty” and “entrepreneurs torn between a new freedom and new forms of exclusion and exploitation” (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 193).

Thaksin's government and policies were geared towards modernizing Thailand with a programme of export-oriented industrialization and free trade coupled with neo-Keynesianist investment, particularly in rural areas. Certain policies such as the 30-Baht universal health care programme or the doubling of the minimum wage under the later Yingluck administration were universally popular and shored up support in the working class. The agrarian populist element, however, aimed at the thorough capitalization of rural Thailand. In Thaksin's famous phrase, it was about “turning farmers into rural entrepreneurs” (Pasuk & Baker, 2004).

Apichat et al. (2013) argue that Thaksin's policy menu was tailor-made to attract and to serve the “new lower middle class.” Flagship economic and social development programmes such as the small and medium enterprise (SME) funds, the Village Development Fund (VDF), and the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) scheme were designed to create ladders of economic “opportunity” and to accelerate the capitalization of Thai agriculture and rural society sketched out above. Rural development policies created additional income opportunities—hence the rise of the “farming and other sources” category in Table 2. They proved to be highly successful, bringing prosperity to rural regions, at least to those who were able to transform into small-scale capitalists. This rural class of entrepreneurial farmers and urban small business owners became a vocal core of the red shirts (Naruemon & McCargo, 2011).

The democratic aspirations and political activism of the red shirts were directly related to these socio-economic policies. Most had originally been passive supporters of Thaksin, because they had seen the success of his development programmes and had benefited from them. The military coup in 2006 was interpreted as a reactionary throw back by the *amat*, and the red shirts were adamant that they should be able to elect a government who had given them so much. The coup triggered the red shirts movement, transforming Thaksin supporters into political activists (Apichat et al., 2013, p. 58).

However, the class character of workers' participation was silenced by the populist character of the red shirts. The symbolic dichotomy of *phrai* versus *amat* omits the *thaat* (ทาส), that is, the indentured slaves that made up a sizeable proportion of the labouring classes in pre-modern Thailand (Turton, 1980). The metaphorical modern-day *thaat*, that is, low paid, precarious, and migrant workers, were subsumed under a general framework of pro-capitalist modernization led by large-scale capital, capitalist farmers, and small businesses in the urban and peri-urban settings. This silencing of workers as working class by defining the red shirts as middle class was echoed and facilitated by the way in which intellectuals analysed and characterized the red shirt movement.

For example, the authoritative Thai study on the red shirts by Apichat et al. characterizes their social make-up as “emerging-lower-middle-class,” consisting of commercial agriculturalists, self-employed, small-scale traders/entrepreneurs, clerks, and low-skilled workers (Apichat et al., 2013, p. 34, similarly Yukti & Uchen, 2012). In this way, workers are erased as an independent social class. Instead of analysing the red shirts as a contradictory populist movement made up of different social classes, workers are lumped together with the petite bourgeoisie and termed lower middle class. Similarly, after characterizing the red shirts as a pluralistic mass movement (“พหุสัมพันธ์ของขบวนการมวลชน”), Pinkaew (2013a, 2013b) concludes that the movement was a spontaneous and centreless networks of individuals organized as Deleuzian “rhizomes” around a new form of identity politics.

The weakness of labour as an organized voice within the red shirts was connected to the precariatization of the Thai working class. Informal and temporary contracts made it difficult to organize collectively, while nominally self-employed internalized a perception of being independent service providers. A case in point are the thousands of motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok, who became a backbone of the protest movement. These Thai internal migrant workers from the Northeast would count as “entrepreneurs without employees” in Table 4, because they own their own motorcycle and their income depends on how many customers they serve. However, the motorcyclists were tightly organized in groups controlled by figures from the police and the military, who used a system of brightly coloured motorcycle vests and thugs to enforce regular payments by the drivers. When Thaksin regularized this system and went against the extortion by registering the drivers and handing out government issued licenses and vests,

they repaid him by coming out in force in the pro-democracy movement. The figurative *amat* was a very concrete experience for them, made up of powerful men linked to the network monarchy and the military regime (Sopranzetti, 2018).

Sopranzetti (2018) uncovers how the motorcycle drivers started to organize collectively to push Thaksin to move against the state officials exploiting them. Most of the drivers were exactly the type of migrant workers with urban–rural ties described in the second section of this article and who had worked in various different wage labour jobs before becoming drivers. Some of the leaders had had previous experience of organizing in factories. But Sopranzetti takes Thaksin's framing at face value, arguing that the motorcycle taxi drivers were independent entrepreneurs. Generalizing from this, he argues that Thai capitalism in general had entered a “post-Fordist phase” in which millions of workers had become “individualized, free, and precarious entrepreneurs” (Sopranzetti, 2018, p. 173). In this way, precarious workers, even those with previous organizing experience, self-identified as “entrepreneurs” rather than as a particularly precarious part of a larger working class (movement).

The overall result was that the mass movement of the red shirts, involving millions of working-class people, was a thoroughly capitalist populist project, albeit with a strong emphasis on social justice and a welfare state. In the rural setting, Thaksin's modernization project was to intensify capitalist relations in the village, thereby accelerating the process of class differentiation between capitalist farmers and a waged rural–urban proletariat.

6 | CONCLUSION

This discussion of three populisms in Thailand has shown how the agrarian populism developed by the AoP declined and was integrated ideologically into two dead ends—a reactionary version of alternative small-scale farming embedded within the nationalist and royalist populism of the yellow shirts on the one hand and a capitalist populism based on the modernization of rural Thailand on the other.

The politics of the AoP were not as such reactionary or capitalist. The Assembly was a member of La Via Campesina, their base was not capitalist farmers but precisely the alliance between peasants, fisherfolk, and indigenous peoples that make up many of the progressive populist movements that formed much of the social base of the anti-globalization movements in the Global South. But the Assembly was exactly *not* “fundamentally founded on an alliance between the classes of labour or working people” (Borras, 2020), with no organized presence within the working class. This facilitated the progression to the other two populisms in three ways.

First, faced with an authoritarian austerity crackdown after the Asian crisis, the rural-based alliance of petty commodity producers was, by itself, too weak to shift the balance of forces to their benefit. This led to populist projects in the narrower sense, that is, built around an alliance with a section of the ruling class. One current of the Assembly joined forces with the monarchy and the military, as a supposedly culturalist bulwark against globalized capitalism represented by the billionaire Thaksin. The other current joined forces with the billionaire to overcome the supposedly feudal remnants of the aristocracy and for a modernized capitalism more inclusive for the petite bourgeoisie.

Second, the quite successful framing of “us versus them” around a common identity of “poor people” lent itself readily to similar narratives of “peoples politics” (against the big “foreign” capitalists) in the yellow shirts and of *phrai* versus *amat* in the red shirts. Both were potent formulae, but ones which subsumed working-class interests under populist projects dominated by a reactionary military network in the former, and by corporate and petit bourgeois interests in the latter. This and the related intellectual trajectory that saw the working class as outdated and the new movements as “post-class politics” precluded broader alliances based on class solidarity. While the Assembly excluded foreign migrant workers and their voices from their movement—because it did not organize workers—the yellow shirts excluded them as “un-thai” foreign elements and the red shirts did not include them in their populist imaginary of the *phrai*—forgetting the *thaat*.

Third, the social base of the Assembly represented only one section of rural Thailand, that is, those peasants and indigenous peoples with land and subsistence production that were under attack from processes of industrial development in the 1980s and 1990s. The deep transformation of Thai rural society and the experience of working people of precarious work, migration, and rural–urban ties and mobilities passed them by. While the yellow shirts conserved the imagery of Thai farmers in their reactionary rural populism, the red shirts articulated most closely the experience, aspirations, and demands of this new, mobile, rural–urban, migrant working class (Somchai, 2016).

Given that military authoritarian populism, of which the rural trajectory is an important part, is now in power, Thailand offers many lessons on how *not* to challenge right-wing, authoritarian populism. Looking forward, a new democracy movement, led by the youth, has emerged. This new democracy movement is audacious and inclusive, incorporating feminist and LGBTIQ movements, and has come up with its own, highly evocative symbol: the three finger salute from The Hunger Games trilogy. But the movement is now at an impasse, as the street protests have been ignored and repressed by the military regime. The question of what kind of broad and popular political project can challenge the authoritarian populism in power is an immediate one.

While Borras's call for a broad, anti-fascist and anti-capitalist alliance that appeals to different sections of society around unifying slogans or banners is well taken, the question is an alliance between whom? It is not sufficient to advocate a plural, diverse alliance of left-wing groups or to demand that these be broadened. In Thailand, it was precisely the framing of agrarian populism that led the Assembly and the left-wing intellectual tradition to neglect the working class. The result is that the labour movement is weak, divided and without a political voice. And, without real working-class organization, there is no “peasant-worker alliance” (whether you call this alliance the “working people” or not) (Borras, 2020, p. 34). Generations of intellectual orientation towards agrarian populism (at least in Thailand) have stifled a political orientation towards the new working-class realities of rural society and of agrarian production.

Looking at the lessons from recent Thai history, we conclude that an agrarian populist project is not the way to go. We concur with Bhattacharya (2014, p. 960) that we need to “return to a discourse which puts labour and labour rights at its centre, in a more comprehensive manner.” The new generation of activists should develop an inclusive “new class politics” (Candeias, 2017) based on the realities of millions of working-class people. New in the sense that working-class politics must be sensitive to and inclusive of the contemporary working class that is much bigger and diverse than a subsection of the class in some few traditional industries, one which is predominantly made up of women, migrants, and precarious workers. This includes careful attention to the struggles by migrant workers and overcoming politics of exclusion in the Thai labour movement (Campbell, 2018). Rather than a *rural* project, a broad and popular challenge to right-wing authoritarianism should embrace the rural–urban *linkages* that already define the social fabric in practice.⁷ These linkages and experiences are socially reproduced everyday by millions of workers in Thailand. They could be used as the material basis for transformative emancipatory politics.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

⁷This article is an analysis of agrarian populism in Thailand and cannot explore the difficult questions of how to organize rural–urban workers. We recommend the discussion of Myanmar migrant workers by Borras et al. (2022) and their thoughtful conclusions, particularly on the relationship between land and labour, though we also note that they have much more to say about land than about the politics of organizing around pay and precarious working conditions which are just as relevant for the social reproduction of workers.

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