

## **The Concept 'Praxis' And The Practice Of Anthropologists**

(ว่าด้วยมโนทัศน์ “การปฏิบัติ” และ  
ปฏิบัติการของนักมานุษยวิทยา)

Andrew Turton (แอนดรู เทอร์ตัน)

## Abstract

I was in northern Thailand for two years from late 1968. I had almost no contact with Chiang Mai University, except briefly with Professor Suthep Sunthornpasatch. In Bangkok I had also met Professor Pataya Saihoo, who gave me advice. In 1976, when I returned to the North, it was very different. Chiang Mai was a very lively place. This time I met many scholars, anthropologists, historians and others. Outstanding, even in so talented a milieu, was Anan Ganjanapan. He has engaged fruitfully at local, national, trans-national regional and international levels. Others have written about his published work and his overall achievements. I am not therefore going to speak directly of Anan Ganjanapan himself. I hope, nonetheless, that some of what I have to say, in this article, may provide some means of helping to assess Anan's achievements. I discuss a set of terms to reflect on the work of an anthropologist: *anthropology, intellectual, practice* and the key word in my title, *praxis*.

**Keywords:** Anan Ganjanpan, anthropology, intellectual, practice, praxis

## บทคัดย่อ

นับจากช่วงปลายปี 2511 ข้าพเจ้ามาเยือนและอาศัยอยู่ในภาคเหนือของประเทศไทยราวๆ 2 ปี ในช่วงเวลาดังกล่าวข้าพเจ้ายังไม่ได้รู้จักหรือติดต่อกับนักวิชาการในมหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ ยกเว้นการได้พบกับผู้ช่วยศาสตราจารย์ ดร. สุเทพ สุนทรภัสส์ ในช่วงสั้นๆ ก่อนหน้านั้นข้าพเจ้าพบกับอาจารย์พัทธา สายหู ซึ่งเป็นผู้ให้คำปรึกษา (เกี่ยวกับการทำวิจัยในภาคเหนือของไทย) ทว่าต่อมาใน ปี 2519 เมื่อข้าพเจ้ากลับมาทำงานวิจัยในภาคเหนืออีกครั้งหนึ่ง สถานการณ์แตกต่างออกไปอย่างสิ้นเชิง มาคราวนี้ เชียงใหม่กลับคึกคักมีชีวิตชีวา ข้าพเจ้าพบกับบรรดานักวิชาการทั้งนักมานุษยวิทยาและนักประวัติศาสตร์ และหนึ่งในนั้นที่โดดเด่นยิ่งคือ อานันท์ กาญจนพันธุ์ ตลอดเวลาที่ผ่านไปในฐานะปัญญาชน อานันท์ ได้เข้าร่วมเคลื่อนไหวในเวทีวิชาการทั้งในระดับท้องถิ่น ระดับชาติ ระดับภูมิภาค และระดับนานาชาติ นักวิชาการหลายท่านได้เขียนทบทวนและชี้ชวนให้ขบคิดเกี่ยวกับผลงานการศึกษาอันทรงคุณค่าของท่านไปมากแล้ว ในบทความนี้ข้าพเจ้าจึงจะไม่กล่าวถึงอานันท์ กาญจนพันธุ์ โดยตรงว่าจะลองเสนอบางแง่มุมเพิ่มเติมต่อการทำความเข้าใจชีวิตปัญญาชนของอานันท์ ผ่านชุดของคำจำนวนหนึ่ง คือ มานุษยวิทยา ปัญญาชน ปฏิบัติการ และแนวคิดซึ่งถือเป็นสาระสำคัญของบทความนี้ นั่นคือ “การปฏิบัติ”

**คำสำคัญ:** อานันท์ กาญจนพันธุ์ มานุษยวิทยา ปัญญาชน ปฏิบัติการ การปฏิบัติ

## Introduction

My first published piece of anthropological writing was a review of *Essays on Thai folklore* by Phya Anuman Rajadhon published in *Sangkomsat Parithat* in 1969. Had previously had the pleasure of meeting Phya Anuman in the company of Sulak Srivarak in it I regretted that there were so few Thai students of anthropology and not yet a single PhD in anthropology. This was not to come until 1972.

I was in northern Thailand for two years from late 1968. I had almost no contact with Chiang Mai University, except briefly with Professor Suthep Sunthornpasatch. In Bangkok I had also met Professor Pataya Saihoo, who gave me advice.

In 1976, when I returned to the North, it was very different. Chiang Mai was a very lively place. This time I met many scholars, anthropologists, historians and others. Some of them are attending this conference. Outstanding, even in so talented a milieu, was Anan Ganjanapan. I know that in addition to his impressive list of academic publications, Anan's active life has produced and continues to produce achievements and contributions to social movements, public policy making and to public awareness, community education and training in the broadest senses. He has engaged fruitfully at local, national, trans-national regional and international levels. Others have written about his published work and his overall achievements. I am not therefore going to speak directly of Anan Ganjanapan himself. I hope, nonetheless, that some of what I have to say may provide some means of helping to assess Anan's achievements. I discuss a set of terms to reflect on the work of an anthropologist: ***anthropology, intellectual, practice*** and the key word in my title, ***praxis***.

## Praxis And Anthropological Practice

One of the stimuli to writing something to reflect on Anan's work was a request by Utong Prasasvinitchai, when asking me to write an introduction to her translation (in Thai *Domination and Fear in Thai society* 2008) of my essay 'The limits of ideological domination and the formation of social consciousness' (1984). She asked me to go deeper into 'how [my] experience of Thailand and Thai people has affected and inspired [my] thoughts, and hence why and how [I] wrote all those pieces of work'. This coincided with a comment by Craig Reynolds on the notion of 'intellectual biography', a field in which he has produced some fine work. He said that what he wanted to know was 'what made this person think a certain way, how this person came to approach the field in certain ways, how to characterise this engagement with other cultures in the post-colonial world'.

This implies a special interest in the case of the 'stranger' who visits 'other cultures' or foreign fields. It raises the issue of degrees of otherness or exteriority of the social anthropologist (or indeed guests and sojourners from other disciplines or none). I have discussed these issues with dozens of research students from many countries working in both their 'own' and 'other' cultures, and various combinations. The west-European derived discipline of social anthropology grew up on the assumption that ethnographic practice was done in other cultures in other countries, often colonies of the home country, and in the case of Siam 'internal colonies'.

The notion of 'doing anthropology at home' however became current only during my own career. Many anthropologists from South East Asian countries have been trained in another, usually

western country, and to have researched in their own. The exceptions and variations will repay study. There is evidence that this is changing as more Thai anthropologists study Tai-speaking peoples and others in neighbouring countries.

Eric Hobsbawm, in his masterly autobiography *Interesting Times* (2002) writes, in his final paragraph:

'History needs mobility and the ability to survey and explore a large territory, that is to say the ability to move beyond one's roots. ... Anachronism and provincialism are two of the deadly sins of history, both equally due to a sheer ignorance of what things are like elsewhere...!'

Anthropologists differ from the historian in that they most often work at a very local level, or in small-scale interaction. At the same time they are tempted to make generalisations. But we are all historians in a sense. And I have often advised prospective anthropology students that while an experience of some exotic social life may be a genuine inspiration to study anthropology, I am more impressed by students' knowledge of their own history.

Georg Simmel's essay on 'The Stranger' is useful in this regard, as is the notion that the anthropologist has often, with advantage, undergone some personal or social disruptive or alienating experience or existential crisis, on the road to becoming an anthropologist. The following humorous formulation has some validity. (I owe it to Olivier Evrard.)

If you dislike your society, you become a sociologist.

If you dislike yourself, you become a psychologist.

If you dislike both, you become a social anthropologist.

You may think this is extreme, even if humorous, but if you substitute for the word 'dislike', the words 'are discontented with' or 'are critical of' then it has some relevance.

I am focussing on a particular question about the situation of Thai anthropologists who 'work at home'. But do they? In any given case there are likely to be several degrees and kinds of difference between the anthropologist and her/his subjects. We know that a difference can constitute a relation. It is not necessarily the case that the more local the anthropologist the closer they can get. The language, dialect or class register of fieldwork is in any case usually not the first one of the researcher. Class, wealth, education, urban or rural background, and other criteria, can cut both ways. Professional anthropological skills and flair also play a large part.

Western Social Anthropology for much of its history was concerned to document and explain 'other cultures' in order that people of yet other cultures, usually dominant ones, might understand them. This was then used both to produce information and advice about, say, government, or to develop more universal theories about human societies and cultures. This was outsiders writing for other outsiders. In any social reportage, the idea of an insider writing for an insider may be the norm; an insider writing for an outside audience is reasonable. . But an outsider writing for an insider seems the most problematic variation. 'Who are **you** to tell **us**?' 'What on earth are **you** doing **here**?' 'What can **you** tell us about **ourselves**?' 'Will you tell us things we don't want to hear or things we don't want you to know?' and so on.

Kathleen Gough Aberle in a key statement delivered in March 1967 entitled 'Anthropology and Imperialism' speaks of the

triple dilemma faced by anthropologists, namely simultaneous loyalties:

- (a) to the people studied;
- (b) to the discipline and colleagues;
- (c) to employers and funders;

to which she adds a fourth dimension:

(d) the new factor of a vastly increased and critical student body.

She argues that anthropologists have become too 'subservient' to the state and the status quo. This debate, as you know, reached a high point of publicity and acrimony in November 1970 with the publication in the *New York Review of Books* of the long article by Eric Wolf and Joseph Jorgensen entitled 'Anthropology on the Warpath in Thailand'. (See also my review of Eric Wakin's *Anthropology goes to war: professional ethics and counterinsurgency in Thailand in the Journal of Asian Studies*.)

This is a critique of various kinds and degrees of anthropologists' involvement with US military projects, 'counter-insurgency' (or COIN) 'paramilitary adventures masquerading as scientific projects', 'in which anthropologists played a formidable part', especially those using models derived from cybernetics, applied psychology and behavioural studies. They cite evidence to show that 'the government [of the USA] is less interested in the economic, social or political causes of discontent than in techniques of neutralising individual and collective protest'. They give the last word to the radical American anthropologist Stanley Diamond: 'In the struggle for the creation of culture against collective and

dehumanising forces, no matter [what] their ideological pretenses ... there can only be partisans'.

If you think that this a long forgotten episode, see the report in the *New York Times* (October 2007) 'New Tactics for Old Wars'. A little history tells us that these are old tactics indeed. Since 2003 the US army has assigned anthropologists and other social scientists to 26 American combat brigades in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are known as 'human terrain teams'. They consist of five people: three military, one cultural analyst and one regional analyst. 'Human Terrain' is defined as 'the social, ethnographic, cultural, economic and political elements of the people among whom a force is operating'. The program specifically traces its ancestry back to the CORDS programme in South Vietnam in the 1960s (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development), which was linked with 'Operation Phoenix', a programme of assassination of civilian opponents of the government.

In the period when my generation, and I think that might include Anan - if only because I came rather late into anthropology - were being formed by the discipline of social anthropology, there were three principal theoretical paradigms on offer. They were three forms of structuralism:

Social-functional structuralism (chiefly organic and cybernetic models)

Mental structuralism (linguistic and psychoanalytical models)

Historical and material structuralism (Marxist and related models)

These were all 'modern' attempts to see beyond or behind surface appearances, *khang lang phaap* (behind the picture) to use the title of a famous Thai novel of the 1950s. The concepts of function, grammar and mode of production, which are the key terms of each kind of structuralism, all continue to have something to contribute to understanding features of human social life, that seem to be rather long-lasting and pervasive, if not permanent and universal. At the same time, all paradigms constrict reality and encourage normality and self-justification. They tend to become ever more systematic and 'scientific'. Thomas Kuhn has discussed the - non-political - possibilities for 'scientific revolutions'. These three paradigms sometimes claim to be mortal enemies, but all share problems with some of the most ancient and important philosophical and ethical questions, namely:

The scope of human freedom.

The role of human will.

The possibilities for personal and social transformation.

It has become fashionable, in the theoretical climate known as 'post-structuralism', to refer to this syndrome of problems as the question of human or social agency. Quite rightly this has received emphasis as a counter to the limitations - but not perhaps fatal flaws - in the preceding structuralist paradigms. It is also in the context of the so-called 'post-communist' world after about 1980. I do not want to discuss anthropological theories here, but I do want to recall the effort already made, before 'post-structuralism' within an 'alternative' Marxist tradition, which I shall outline.

We are considering a dilemma that has been around, in the West, since Aristotle (BE 108-170). This dilemma is that how to understand the double aspect of human knowledge and action. On the one hand we conceive ourselves to have a human capacity just to do things - to work, to behave, to react to stimuli. But on the other hand, we are also able to be widely aware, to think ahead, to be self and/or other critical, to try to go beyond or transcend the normal, the orthodox and the everyday. This capacity has been evident over the millennia in practices such as meditation and magic, the development of religious systems, and empirical experiment. It occurs in millenarian and utopian schemes, invariably short lived. It is apparent in the growth of science and of revolutionary changes in science and their social consequences.

Praxis is a strange technical term, which you may or may not find useful. Consider for a moment what Thai words are available to translate, or stand for, this term. No Thai-English/English-Thai dictionary that I have consulted contains the word praxis. *Patibat* is obviously the word that covers much of the meanings, but is at base little more than 'do'. A Thai translations of Mao Tse Tung's essay 'On Practice' (which in another English version is 'On Praxis!') is *waduy kanpatibat*. As often, I would love to know how a Buddhist interpretation of all this would work out. The Buddhist (Pali derived) concepts *patipata* ('modes of progress to deliverance') and *patipan samphita* ('creative and applicative insight') are tantalisingly suggestive. The official dictionary (*rajabandit sathan 2525*) defines *patibat* as: '*damnoen kan pai dtaam rabieb baep phaen, chen patibat rajakarn*'. This rather wooden definition can serve as the most limited, normative definition available

Preparing for this chapter I re-read the excellent 5,000-word essay on Praxis by the Marxist philosopher Gajo Petrovic who was a founding editor of the journal *Praxis* in 1964 in Zagreb. The essay is in *A Dictionary of Marxist thought* (ed. Tom Bottomore 1983). For Petrovic, as for many, praxis is 'the central concept of Marxism'. It is a word with a history at least as old as Aristotle. I should say here at the start that the words praxis and practice are often used, and have been over centuries, to refer to 'the same thing'. But it is not just the difference between a word derived from Latin (practice) or Greek (praxis). Praxis is the term often used when trying to find a so to say higher definition. So while for some authors it is practice, for others it is 'practice *plus*'.

In Aristotle's categorisation of forms of knowledge and activity, there was at first a trichotomy:

theoria - the theoretical

praxis - the practical (including the economic, political and ethical)

poiesis - the poetical (which in its older meaning was also a creative-practical kind of knowledge and activity)

Progressive transformations in Aristotle's thinking result in the following. First of all the trichotomous distinction becomes a binary one: theory - praxis (which subsumed poiesis), but Aristotle seems to struggle with the notion of praxis. Next, praxis becomes ethics and politics, then praxis become mainly politics (subsuming ethics); and finally, praxis becomes 'good praxis' (*eupraxia* as opposed to *dyspraxia*).

When Aristotle was 're-discovered' in the late Middle Ages, the dichotomy theory/practice won the day. Hegel thought that

theory and practice could be united at a higher level, in a third term, which might be called praxis, but according to Hegel was realised in art, religion and philosophy. Marx saw *social institutions* as the cause of alienation, and so his notion of praxis involves a social as well as personal overcoming and spiritual transcendence, which he calls *revolution*.

To quote Petrovic, 'In Marx the concept of praxis became the central concept of a new philosophy which does not want to remain philosophy, but to transcend itself both in a new metaphysical thinking and in the revolutionary transformation of the world' (Petrovic). 'Labour', the alienated form of free human work activity, must be overcome. Theory and practice, idealism and materialism need to be transcended into and by self-activity, or 'practical-critical activity' (a term Marx uses in 'Theses on Feuerbach'), namely praxis.

Of the various appropriations of Marx's writings, even before his death, the dominant ones left this kind of debate behind. This is especially true of the once orthodox genealogy (in Marxism-Leninism at least): Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao. But there was always another unorthodox genealogy, or set of genealogies, for instance Labriola (from the 1890s), Gramsci, Lukacs, Korsch, Marcuse, Habermas and Petrovic, to name a few. Labriola referred to Marxism as 'the philosophy of praxis', a term which Gramsci also used, partly to avoid using the 'M' word in his prison notebooks.

Marcuse recalls Marx's distinction between 'the realm of necessity' (material production and reproduction) and the 'realm of freedom'. For Petrovic, 'Praxis in the realm of freedom is basically different from that in the sphere of necessity; it is the realization of the form and fullness of existence and has its goal or end in itself'.

This is not an easy formulation and needs time to digest!

Habermas, like many members of the Frankfurt School, emphasised the notion of 'critical theory', 'emancipatory ' as opposed to mere 'instrumental' reason. He criticises the tendency to conflate social praxis to work (which he calls purposive rational action) and/or 'interaction' (which he calls communicative action).

To return finally to Petrovic, Praxis is free, creative human activity, which can be revolutionary, that is socially and personally transformative. 'In the spirit of Marx, revolution is conceived as a radical change of both man and society. Its aim is to abolish self-alienation by creating a truly human person and a human society'. 'If praxis were to mean what human beings really do, then it is evident that there has always been more unfreedom and uncreativity in human history than the converse'. But praxis 'expresses essential human potentialities, something different both from what simply is and from what merely *ought* to be' (op. cit.)

A final term to reflect on is that of 'intellectual, as it is relevant to a discussion of the idea of 'praxis'.

In some usages we find 'intellectual' referring to any type or stratum of person considered educated, even secondary school students in an essay by Mao Tse Tung in 1937 in which he urged the recruitment of large numbers of intellectuals. But in the 'cultural revolution' in China thirty years later, despite a period when a hundred flowers were encouraged to bloom, it seemed as if intellectuals were dispensable. Of course anyone can think and argue, even 'criticise after dinner' (a notion Marx used in *The German Ideology*). Most sociological definitions of 'intellectual' refer to extent of education and literacy, and the social position

and social function of 'the intellectual'

It is of note that in English, particularly in Britain, the term intellectual is often avoided. From various viewpoints it is seen as too pretentious a term, too *avant-garde*, too leftish, too independent from proper academic or scholarly discipline, i.e. unorthodox. But the British are quite happy talking about 'French intellectuals'. This is partly due to the historical-sociological fact that British culture has not produced 'public intellectuals' in quite the way post-revolutionary France has.

Antonio Gramsci (*Prison Notebooks*) wrote extensively on the role of 'intellectuals'. This is of particular interest in considering of his notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. He distinguished between 'traditional' intellectuals' - he had in mind especially the Italian ecclesiastical stratum - and 'organic intellectuals' who arose within a particular, and especially emerging class. They are of interest partly because they are not necessarily reliable members of a given class. He also speaks of 'new intellectuals':

'The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior or momentary mover of feelings and passion, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, "permanent persuader", and not just a simple orator.'

It is pertinent to note that in the late Middle Ages 'rhetoric' (a term most often used nowadays to mean 'eloquence' or 'simple oratory') was the name of the science of politics and one of the senior scientific disciplines. Gramsci's emphasis is again on the notion of 'critique'. This includes the critique of 'common sense',

which he uses to mean the every-day practical, the deeply sedimented norms of an established order. He also uses a phrase I much like and I quoted in my essay on 'Limits of ideological domination...', namely, 'the renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity.'

Eric Hobsbawm wrote an interesting essay entitled 'Intellectuals in the class struggle', in his short book *Revolutionaries*. He wrote this in 1971 at the height of the global anti-imperialist movements in which students and intellectuals played a prominent part. It was a good year to reflect on the issues. From his historian's perspective, he notes the increasing proportion of intellectuals in the social revolutions of the mid-to-late twentieth century, especially in Asia. Chiang Mai University, Thailand's third university, the first to be established after Thammasat and the first to be established outside the capital, was an early sign of that huge expansion of higher education. This was to be partly responsible for the prominent role of Thai students in the 1970s.

Hobsbawm notes that though they, the new intellectuals, 'revolutionary' intellectuals, have a belief in the need for radical change in society in order to achieve what they see as desirable and possible in life, they often have quite modest expectations, rather than instant utopias. Thus they struggle to establish respect, self-respect, rights, just treatment, and so on. Impatience with the absence or failure of alternative ways, or their slow development, can lead to a sense of urgency and more precipitate action. Young people are more prone to such action. Hobsbawm draws a distinction between the situation for intellectuals in Europe and for those in Asia, where 'they confront problems of mass poverty, oppression and injustice which make any call for

patience and gradualism sound almost obscene'.

### Concluding Remarks

I suppose that the fullest conception of 'praxis' in its 'fully free' state can only be imagined or hypothesised. I would like to encourage consideration of the term in the light of Buddhist thought. Perhaps praxis, as a heightened form of action, of being, like some views of the concept *nipphan* (nirvana) might be achieved intermittently, historically.

One orthodox Buddhist text I often consult has the following to say about Nirvana:

'Thus is Nibbhana immediately visible in this life, inviting, attractive, and comprehensible to the wise. The extinction of greed, the extinction of anger, the extinction of delusion, this, indeed, is called Nibbhana.'

I mentioned earlier the attractiveness of the Buddhist notion of *patiphan samphita*, in my limited understanding at least. In addition to the already cited explication of this concept as 'creative and applicative insight', there is also 'discrimination of sagacity; analytic insight of ready wit; initiative'. The 'Eightfold Path' of 'right action' (namely wisdom, morality, concentration) and the conjoint notion of *karma/cetana* (action/volition) are also central to this discussion.

The concept 'praxis' is not a magic bullet, a heroic concept, or a kind of impossibilism. As the German playwright Brecht's says through his character Galileo, in reply to the remark 'Woe to the country that has no heroes': 'Woe to the country that has need of heroes'.

Praxis, we can say, is a dimension of human and social activity, an aspiration and striving for personal and social transformation and transcendence.

I suggest that this does indeed have a bearing on our assessment of Professor Anan's *kan patibat*. It is certainly more than *patibat rajakan*, in what I called the 'official' definition, fine and proper though that might be. It is *patibat sangkhom* infused with critical consciousness, the ability to 'think outside the box', and with those characteristics just cited: creative, analytic and discriminating insight, ready wit and sagacity. It is praxis.

We salute the work of a good citizen, a true 'public intellectual', and an excellent social anthropologist.