

---

## **Anomie, Racial Wage, and Critical Aesthetics: Understanding the Negative Externalities of Japanese and Thai Social Practices**

---

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, B.S., M.A., F.R.A.S.,<sup>1</sup>**  
Nova Southeastern University

### **Opinion Paper**

**Abstract:** *This short paper concentrates on three powerful ideas introduced by three important theorists, namely, Merton's interpretation of anomie in America, Fromm's critical aesthetics regarding man's consciousness in relation to nature, and finally Du Bois' concept of the "racial wage" (Lemert, 2004, pp. 218-240). Those theories are then applied to the Japanese phenomenon of the "compensated date" and the Thai "sex industry".*

**Keywords:** *anomie, racial wage, compensated date, sex trade*

Social theories usually explain how society functions or at times, how it is supposed to function. Nevertheless, they also provide important clues as to possible sources of conflict. They all attempt to explain reality but concentrate on specific aspects of it, or at particular ways to view it. This short thought paper will concentrate on three powerful ideas introduced by three important theorists, namely, Merton's interpretation of *anomie* in America, Fromm's critical aesthetics regarding man's consciousness in relation to nature, and finally Du Bois' concept of the "racial wage" (Lemert, 2004, pp. 218-240).

Merton's analysis of anomie in America explains how illicit acts can be encouraged by the social structure. By describing patterns of cultural goals and their parallel institutional norms, Merton shows that in America the cultural goal of accumulating wealth and subsequent

---

<sup>1</sup> Otto F. von Feigenblatt is an elected Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland and is currently pursuing a PhD at Nova Southeastern University. He is the author of *Japan and Human Security* and has published more than ten articles in peer reviewed academic journals. He is currently serving as the Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences*. Contact: vonFeigenblatt@hotmail.com

consumption is not coupled with strong social norms indicating how to attain that goal. In other words, people are expected to strive for financial success but the means are not as clearly specified as the ends. According to Merton, this leads to some individuals seeking wealth through illegal means, in opposition to the weak social norms in place. Thus, there are a few weak norms about how to seek success, but the goal is emphasized over the means. Following this line of reasoning, becoming a wealthy Mafia boss is considered successful even if the means used in obtaining the wealth are considered to deviate from social norms. While Merton's theory goes into detail regarding the possible modes of adaptation that a person may adopt in response to their relative acceptance of cultural goals and their internalization of institutionalized means, I would like to apply it to a comparable case in Thailand.

Women in rural Thailand, especially the Northern Provinces, are famous for providing a large percentage of sex workers and escorts in the Thai capital, Bangkok. The easy explanation for this is that people in the countryside are poor and thus they seek employment in the cities where they are coerced into sexual labor. However, this is far from the truth in the case of Thailand. Several factors are important, traditional Thai culture is matrilineal, the countryside has been deeply infected by consumerism by the media and Western influence without the means of obtaining the money necessary to join the capitalist market, and finally, the distorted version of Theravada Buddhism combined with animism practiced in the countryside lacks any moral precepts against the commodification of sex by single women. Therefore, you find fathers who boast of having their daughters as successful prostitutes in Bangkok and receiving monthly allowances from them. Furthermore, those women can return to their villages and show their wealth with pride even if everyone knows how they amassed it. Thus, we have a largely uneducated population constantly bombarded by the media, geared mainly to the Bangkok elite, to consume and to strive to be wealthy. That population lacks strong institutional norms regarding how to attain that wealth since both Religion and peer pressure support or at least condone the practice as long as it results in wealth. This results in young women growing up dreaming

of becoming successful sex workers in Bangkok and thus making enough money to buy all of the products they see on TV. It should be noted that people in the Thai countryside are not starving. Farmers are largely self sufficient and the country produces about 170% of the food it needs. Thus, those girls are not prostituting themselves in order to survive but rather to follow a relatively new cultural goal, becoming wealthy and consuming. This is similar to the Japanese phenomenon of the middle class high school girl who sleeps with rich middle aged men to buy expensive bags and other fashionable accessories (Chambers, 2007). Thus Merton's main argument applies to other cases such as high school girls in Japan and young women in the Thai countryside. Merton's theory provides a simple and parsimonious explanation to social problems such as the Japanese "compensated date" and the Thai sex industry. This theory can then be used to identify possible ways in which the state or other concerned parties can intervene in order to tackle the root causes of the previously described problems. If there is a lack of strong institutional norms defining how one is supposed to go about striving for success, then the State can strengthen the educational system in terms of moral values and ethical norms. Furthermore, religious institutions and NGOs can attempt to change the cultural definition of success by providing an alternative vision of "the good life". In summary the power of a theory such as Merton's is that it identifies and explains a causal relationship between something that can be observed in society, such as the incidence of crime, and the root causes that are not visible to the naked eye.

Du Bois' concept of the "racial wage" is another very powerful theoretical construct that explains how and why a minority of wealthy Northern capitalists and Southern landowners were able to control and subdue labor in the Southern United States during the period of reconstruction shortly after the Civil War (Lemert, 2004, pp. 238-239). Black labor and white labor had many interests in common such as better wages and better working conditions. However, neither one was able to achieve either of those interests. How was it possible for a few capitalists to control millions of laborers and avoid improving working conditions

and increasing wages? Du Bois explains that white capitalists and Southern landowners came to a tacit agreement with white labor. The agreement compensated white labor for the lack of improvement in working conditions and wages through what Du Bois called the “racial wage”. White capitalists gave white labor social status and respect *vis a vis* black labor. Thus an informal caste system was put in place in which money was not the main factor used to determine social status, but the color of one’s skin was deemed more important. White labor was thus co-opted through the payment of the “racial wage” which compensated for the meager monetary wages they received and the bad working conditions. Du Bois’ concept of the “racial wage” explains a very important and seemingly complex historical aberration.

Du Bois’ concept of the “racial wage” can be applied to other cases such as Thai society. Thailand has one of the largest Chinese communities in the world (Tong Chee Kiong, 2001). The Chinese community has historically been involved in business and industry while ethnic Thais have preferred the professions, the armed services, and the bureaucracy (Wyatt, 2003). Economic success has brought the Chinese many problems with their host communities in Southeast Asia, such as violent raids on business districts in the Philippines and massacres in Indonesia (William T. Tow, 2000). However, the relationship between Chinese and Thais in Siam and later on in Thailand has been relatively peaceful (Mulder, 2000). The reason for this relative peace can be explained by Du Bois’ concept of the “racial wage”. Historically Thai society has been highly hierarchical and one’s position (role, profession, etc) largely determines one’s social status and relative position in the hierarchy. By restricting the entrance to the civil service and most professions to ethnic Thais and by publicly showing respect to rank based on role not wealth, the Thai elites (Monarchy, military, and top bureaucrats) pay ethnic Thais a “racial wage” in order to accept the economic inequality with the Sino-Thais. This system has kept the peace between the two groups for centuries but has recently started to crumble due to the entrance of Sino-Thais into politics and the recent coalition between the poor rural population and progressive Sino-Thais in the Capital. Following Du Bois’ reasoning, once

the “racial wage” ceases to be a factor, then the elites will come under attack, and that is exactly what is happening in Thailand (“Asia: The first hurdle; Thai politics,” 2009; “Asia: The trouble with Harry; Thailand’s lese-majeste law,” 2009; “Leaders: The king and them; Thailand’s monarchy,” 2008; “A right royal mess; Thailand’s king and its crisis,” 2008). Thus Du Bois’ concept of “racial wage” is a very useful explanatory device that can be used to explain Thai social stratification and could even be applied to the Japanese transition from the Edo Period, in which the Samurai class had a monopoly on social status and the right to bear arms, and the Meiji Revolution, during which they lost that monopoly and the social status that came with it (Smith, 1997).

Finally, Fromm’s social aesthetics have a great explanatory power. Fromm makes the distinction between viewing nature as a landscape rather than unconsciously feeling as part of nature. Thus, Fromm uses a concept from aesthetics in order to explain the distinction between subject and object. According to Fromm in the Middle Ages, peasants unconsciously felt as part of nature (Lemert, 2004, p. 219). They did not feel it as external they rather worked with it and in it seamlessly. This changed in the renaissance when man started to view nature as a landscape, as an object. I would like to take Fromm’s reasoning a step further to argue that an anthropocentric philosophy was favored by Western Humanism which is what truly propelled this process of separation between man and nature. If one compares Western anthropocentric humanism to Japanese Zen Buddhism or to Zhado (Way of the Tea), or Ken do (Way of the sword), one notices that the distinction between object and subject is not present in the Japanese Arts (Feigenblatt, 2008). The subject, the participant, is supposed to merge his consciousness with his or her surroundings. Thus, when you drink tea it is important not to concentrate only on the Tea nor the tea set but rather on your state of mind and the whole atmosphere (kuki in Japanese). The goal of the Tea ceremony is to transcend the subject/object distinction and through this to reach enlightenment which in this context means “peace with nature”. Ken do, the way of the sword, is based on a similar philosophy. You are not supposed to feel

that you are holding a foreign object, the goal is for you to feel as one with the sword. The sword is supposed to become an extension of your body. What is important in this discussion is that the state of mind that is sought is the radical opposite of Western anthropocentrism. When a Japanese Tea Master sips his tea in front of his Garden his goal is not to observe it as he would a “painting” but rather to merge his consciousness with the power and balance represented by the garden. Imagine the consequences for conflict and even for health that a transition in the West from an anthropocentric view of the world to a more integrated relationship with nature and the rest of humanity could have.

## REFERENCES:

- Asia: The first hurdle; Thai politics. (2009). *The Economist*, 390(8614), 44.
- Asia: The trouble with Harry; Thailand's lese-majeste law. (2009). *The Economist*, 390(8615), 48.
- Chambers, V. (2007). *Kickboxing Geishas: How Modern Japanese Women Are Changing Their Nation* (Hardcover ed.). New York: Free Press.
- Feigenblatt, O. v. (2008). *Understanding Japanese Animation: The Hidden Meaning Revealed...* (2nd ed.). Bangkok: Guild of Independent Scholars.
- Leaders: The king and them; Thailand's monarchy. (2008). *The Economist*, 389(8609), 14.
- Lemert, C. (2004). *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Mulder, N. (2000). *Inside Thai Society* (1st ed.). Bangkok: Silkworm Books.
- A right royal mess; Thailand's king and its crisis. (2008). *The Economist*, 389(8609), 33-35.
- Smith, P. (1997). *Japan A Reinterpretation*. New York: Random House.
- Tong Chee Kiong, C. K. B. (Ed.). (2001). *Alternate Identities: The Chinese of Contemporary Thailand*. Singapore: Brill Times Academic Press.

**Otto F. von Feigenblatt, B.S., M.A., F.R.A.S., Nova Southeastern  
University**

- William T. Tow, R. T., and In-Taek Hyun (Ed.). (2000). *Asia's emerging regional order: Reconciling traditional and human security*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.
- Wyatt, D. K. (2003). *Thailand: A Short History* (Thailand ed.). Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.