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# Thailand's 'limited order trap' : a critical application of North, Wallis and Weingast.

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## Abstract

Development economics seems to rediscover the importance of domesticating violence as a condition of democratic empowerment. According to the theoretical framework developed by North, Wallis and Weingast (NWW), developing countries are defined as *limited access orders* that reduce the violence potential of powerful elite organizations through the manipulation of economic rents and the negotiation of more or less stable elite coalitions. NWW's framework must be credited for re-introducing social orders in economics' research agenda; allowing for different paths to development, and highlighting violence and conflict as a central force in societies.

In this paper, we first go back to the discussion of two main challenges in NWW's theory and methodology. The first one is their pluralist understanding of open access societies. The second is the way they link micro-level behavior to macro-political changes. We show here that, though alternative strategies could be followed, the methodological problem underlined by critics is somehow inevitable.

We then apply the alternative frameworks we designed to Thailand, which has been through what observers may call a "failed democratization process" in the last decades, in order to bring out the key challenges to build up analytical frameworks of failed processes.

## 1. Introduction

In 1997, Thailand adopted a constitution which appears as the most liberal and democratic it ever had. For a decade, the country saw an unprecedented development of civil society, private organizations, press and political freedoms. Many came to think that democratic behaviors were becoming rooted in Thai politics, and that the country was making a definitive transition to an open society. Yet, in 2006, a military coup forced the controverted but powerful Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to flee the country. In 2014 and after years of political turmoil, a second coup installed an authoritarian military junta to power. In August 2017, amid a generalized repression of political opposition and the reduction of civil liberties, Yingluck Shinawatra - the Prime Minister between 2011 and 2014 and Thaksin's sister - fled the country while she was due in court for a verdict on criminal charges of corruption in a rice subsidy scheme implemented by her administration. For most observers, these latest developments appeared as the last rebound in the country's failure to ensure stability, openness and development. As so, Thailand has become an emblematic case of openness failure and recurrent civilian conflict in South East Asia (Barter 2017). The case is all the more interesting that Thailand has never been colonized, so the usual explanations of failure in terms of colonial heritage (Acemoglu et al., 2001 ; Bertocchi, Canova, 2002, etc.) cannot be applied to it.

Development economics seems to rediscover the importance of domesticating violence as a condition of democratic empowerment. According to the theoretical framework developed by North, Wallis and Weingast (NWW) in 2009, and applied empirically by North, Wallis, Web and Weingast (NWWW) in 2013, developing countries are defined as *limited access orders* that reduce the violence potential of powerful elite organizations through the manipulation of economic rents and the negotiation of more or less stable elite coalitions. NWW's framework must be credited for re-introducing social orders in the research agenda in economics; allowing for different paths to development; highlighting violence and conflict as a central force in societies; and calling for a renewed attention on elite coalitions and bargains (Bardhan, 2016).

Since the early realization that "good institutions" are central for economic growth (...), development economics has taken a growing interest in political institutions as a determinant of good policies (Lin, Nugent, 1995 ; Weingast, 1995 ; Rodrick et al., 2004 ; Acemoglu, Robinson 2010 ; Acemoglu et al., 2011). The literature has looked into many issues such as governance, political capture, accountability, fiscal capacity, or the effects of centralization, strong government, or democracy. Yet, NWW (2009)'s work goes further in attempting to provide a larger theory including economic, political development and social behavior; and compared to the recent works on elites, democracy, and institutional persistence (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006, Robinson 2010), it theorizes pluralism, interdependence and rivalries among the elite as a the main driver of dynamics in societies. Their

work relies on both thorough historical analysis and case studies, and a systematic review of the existing literature in economics, sociology and political sciences, both classical and contemporary.

In this paper, we discuss NWW's main conclusions and bring out a number of conceptual and empirical challenges that we discuss from contemporary and more classical perspectives. Our purpose is to lay bricks on a research program on failure in development. We then apply our conclusions to the exploratory case study of Thailand's economic and political development.

## **2. Social orders and politico-economic change: an old story**

The publication of NWW's book in 2009 received much attention and contributed to renewed attention on the issue of violence and theories of the State. Yet, as proposed by Bardhan (2016), the research agenda on elite coalitions, bargain, or conflicts and its impact on economic development has yet to be carried out. We now review NWW's framework and discuss its implications.

### **2.1. Social orders in NWW: violence and rent-seeking-driven coalitions**

Relying on an extensive review of classical and contemporary literature, NWW's analyzes the production of "social orders" on the basis of joined political and economic development, or, as they call it, a double balance where equilibrium can only be met if a balance is concomitantly found in the economic and political fields (Grimmer-Solem, 2015). Their point of departure is that the main issue of a social order is to solve the problem of violence.

The framework separates social orders between two cases: limited and open-access orders. Limited access orders –also called Natural States - are second best social orders which solve the problem of violence among powerful groups through the extraction and sharing of rents. To safeguard these rents for the elites, access to economic and political power is restricted to a limited number of persons. Therefore, limited orders are characterized by personal relationships, lack of rule of law for the elite, and no monopolization of violence.

Powerful groups are considered as organizations, with elite being at the top and the rest of the population being clients, and work through an exchange of production (or labour) against protection, i.e. patron-client relationships (Wallis 2011). Powerful groups, which are defined through their violence potential, solve the issue of violence through the making of alliances/coalitions, under the condition that the benefits from peace are greater than the benefits from violence. Coalitions allow for: 1. the possibility of rent-sharing; 2. A better enforcement of elite's patron-client organizations. Overall, a peace agreement can be beneficial to an elite group because it reduces the cost of rent seeking. Therefore, the making of successful coalitions helps create stability within organizations, and not only across organizations; and seems to empower the people standing at the top of the organization, i.e. the elites themselves.

In NWW, coalitions are therefore considered as second-best equilibrium, i.e. they solve the issue of violence but are made at the cost of long-run economic efficiency<sup>1</sup> and may change frequently. Indeed, they rely on group's self-interests (or intentionality of self-interests, Wallis, 2011), with outcomes which may change according to economic and political conditions. Any internal or external change in relative prices may modify the relative benefits of being in the coalition (benefits of peace vs. violence), and therefore end in a renegotiation, i.e. changes within the coalition. If no satisfying new bargain can be found, violence and the use of force are likely to arise and lead to a more radical change of coalition, with entry or exit of groups into/from the coalition, new internal hierarchies, or new terms for the access and sharing of rents. Yet, since coalitions are the only short-term solutions to violence, the nature of the governing coalition may evolve, but government through a coalition, i.e. the existence of limited access orders or "Natural States", is stable. To refer to the words of NWW (2009), limited access orders are "stable", but not "static".

To summarize, limited-access orders are therefore: driven by rent-seeking, relying on limited access to safeguard rents, involving stable States governed by unsteady elite coalitions. They are nonetheless considered as second best, i.e. limiting violence but reducing opportunities for long-run economic growth; and any attempt to suppress them may result in violence rather than the intended improvement in GDP, accountability, openness or democracy.

The transition of limited-access to open-access is seen as somehow unintentional, and happens when elite groups make decisions to safeguard short-term interests, but with long-term consequences in paving the way for open access. Such decisions often are reactions to the threats of other groups or factions: governing elites may be tempted to improve the rule of law in order to limit access to an emerging powerful group or to improve the business environment to increase their own rent, and so on. The transition is characterized as first a "doorstep" and then the "transition proper", and open-access is defined as providing impersonal rules, relying on economic and political competition, and a Weberian monopoly of violence in the hands of the State.

To conclude, NWW set a normative view to development - open-access being a first-best equilibrium - but a non-linear one where countries can move towards and back from open-access through multiple paths.

## **2.2. Powerful groups in limited access orders**

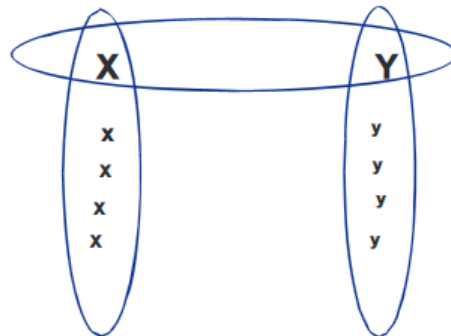
NWW's framework relies on an underlying theory of human behavior and social organization. It supposes that powerful groups hold some kind of rationality, in that they attempt to preserve their interests as a group. They reject the idea of pure economic rationality and prefer the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, economic production is designed to serve private economic interests and not overall public good and long-run economic growth.

intentionality, i.e. preserving self-interests based on perceived best-interests or beliefs (Wallis, 2011), but do not question the capacity of a group to follow intentionally their believed self-interest when deciding whether to participate to a coalition.

Figure 1. the double equilibrium: within and across group organization (figure extracted from Wallis, 2011)



**Fig. 1.** In the figure “X” and “Y” are the violence specialist, their clients are the “x” and “y”, respectively. The horizontal ellipse represents their organization, the “dominant coalition.” The dominant coalition is an adherent organization. The specialist limit the ability to form organizations to themselves. Their client organizations, the vertical ellipses, are contractual organizations, which can utilize the dominant coalition as a third party enforcer.

Yet, groups pursue their interest as a group only if the decision-making process within elite group allows such intentionality/collective rationality. NWWW (2013) and Wallis (2011) solve this issue: first by the description of elite organizations as being based on patron-client relationships, and secondly on assuming the existence of double equilibrium both across and within groups, i.e. the interests of the group to be in a coalition are aligned with the interests of the members of the groups; thirdly by introducing the notion of “shared beliefs” as a commitment mechanism. In fact, strong coalitions are supposed to strengthen the pyramidal structure of the organization: it helps elite enforce their organizations and strengthens relationship with “clients”: if the interests of the patron are preserved, than the interests of the clients will be too.

These are strong assumptions, which do not conceptualize potential misalignment of interests among group members, strategic behaviors by some of the group members, elite circulations, shifts of alliance happening outside of the coalition breaches. It is not clear whether and how changes in coalitions may affect within-group relationships; or whether and how changes in within-group relationships may occur independently and affect coalitions. To summarize, the “governed” are only passive figures in this framework.

### 2.3. Accidental change

If the dynamic is clear in NWW, actual changes in governing coalitions are hard to predict (Brousseau et al, 2011). It may come from any event modifying the relative benefits of being in the coalition and are partly considered as exogenous to the framework, which makes them look like accidental or at least circumstantial, i.e. defined as things that could not be predicted a priori, or actions made with consequences that were not predicted by the actors themselves. When changes are endogenous – initiated by a group to ensure group survival against other factions – then it is not clear whether and why. And if the coalition produces changes by its own actions, does it mean that rationality is limited to short term rent-seeking, and if yes why? Further details on the pattern of human behavior and micro-analysis on collective decision making by powerful groups would be helpful.

#### **2.4. Open Access: theoretical and methodological challenges**

Open access in western or developed societies is described as responding to completely different rules or logic, with a “doorstep”: this is not necessarily confirmed by facts since some rent-seeking and limited access obviously persist in developed societies. The normative view that open-access and limited access are fundamentally different is clearly based on an idealized view of western societies.

*“ The internal logic of natural States differs from the internal logics of open access orders; we cannot explain the process of development in one order by appealing to the other” (NWW, 2009)*

Violence and Social Orders provides an important contribution by bringing back politics in development studies, and especially how the use of coercion may imply adaptation or collapse regarding the variety of social experiences of the path to open access.

As Robert Bates points it, NWW’s conception of open access society ‘resonates’ with the writings of John Stuart Mill (2002) and Thomas H. Marshall (1950) and those of the modern pluralists, David B. Truman (1951) and Robert A. Dahl (1961)’ (Bates 2010 : 754) and fails to pay sufficient heed to its main critics :

- a. Politics of interest groups favor the “large” over the “small’, so that pluralist politics always get biased in its achievement (Olson 1971)
- b. Pluralist systems are subject to political capture, which means public power is easily mobilized for private advantage (McConnell 1966 ; Stigler 1971 ; Lowi 1979) – and especially, may we add, in transition economies (Jensen 2002 ; Hellman et al. 2003).
- c. In the presence of openness, exit becomes an option (Hirschman 1970; Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Bates et al. 1985): ‘Those who are mobile are better positioned to negotiate than are those who are not; to elicit their agreement to share in the costs of public programs, politicians may have to give them a greater share of the benefits. Thus the ability of footloose businesses to secure favorable tax treatment from states and

financial capital to cow national governments. In a world in which markets have become increasingly global, openness assumes a greater role in shaping patterns of domestic political advantage' (Bates 2010 : 755).

NWW, in their second book (North et al. 2013), have faced these critics by incorporating electoral histories, parties and exit threats into their historical narratives. But they seem to have done so more empirically than theoretically. This leads them to apprehend structural changes in the composition of State elites as political events rather than more sophisticated social processes. This effort to keep a pluralist line may explain that they exclude to discuss Pareto's understanding of the circulation of elites.

### **3. Reexamining some classic literature**

Bates's second reserve is that, as a book largely devoted to characterization and classification, their contribution reverts to classical sociology by classifying societies as traditional or modern, generating ideal types, appealing to the notion of equilibrium, and insisting that the political and economic performance of societies are affected by social institutions, so that micro-level reasoning plays a limited role in their arguments:

*'I wished to be introduced to active agents, be they politicians, merchants, farmers, or kinsmen. I wanted to be informed about the problems they faced, the constraints they encountered, the beliefs they entertained, and the strategies they devised'* (Bates 2010 : 755).

Interestingly, and despite an extensive review of literature of classical literature on social orders and political development, NWW leave aside the discussion of Pareto's conceptions of social action and equilibria, or Norbert Elias description of monopolization and interdependence among elites. Elias and Pareto's intake on the role of elites are notably missing from the current debate on institutional change and the economic theory of the State. Let us then go back to this discussion.

#### **3.1. Intakes from Pareto's sociology of elites**

In Pareto's views, the social heterogeneity that characterizes relations between the elite and the mass is the result of a 'natural' talent gap, and on a social equilibria based on the aggregate of logical and non-logical social action which have produced residual instincts or "*residues*", and derivations as justifications explaining individual interests by pseudologic arguments.



Residues define a very cognitive understanding of social action, as they are defined as intermediary between the sentiments we cannot know directly and the belief system and actions that can be known and analyzed. But contrary to cognitive science and experimental economics, residues cannot be explained with the help of logic and experimentation, as they are non-logical, while they are responsible for maintaining social equilibrium.

**Classes of residues according to Pareto. A theoretical reminder.**

Class 1 residues are based on an inclination to combine things and synthesize information and are found in inventors, speculators and politicians. Class 2 residues give stability to social relations by both loyalty and subordination which produce an inertia associated with group membership. Class 3 residues are original expressions of unexpressed desires of individuals, through external action such as ecstasy, collective emotion, crowd movement and so on. Class 4 residues explain are based on social feelings towards the others, such as pity, cruelty, self-sacrifice, etc. Co-operation, sympathy, or its contrary are the results of these residues. Class 5 involve individual acts based on self-interest. These residues maintain the integrity of personality on the basis of personal moral standards. Class 6 residues are responsible for “mental states” having to do with sexual activities and are very complex.

Derivations are the ways individuals rationalize the justification of their actions in order to convince the others of the relevance of their own views. They are what social actors have good reasons to believe to justify their acts (Boudon, 2013), and, put together, form ideologies.

Expressions of derivations and residues help characterizing struggles between elite groups. According to Pareto, the very idea of a struggle between elites provides sufficient explanation for the evolution of socio-political equilibria as a wave law. The typology of residues is often reduced to classes 1 and 2 to explain the dynamic at stake (Aron 1938-40). Class 1 residues support tricks, adaptation, innovation, in order to contain the emergence of a new elite, according to the Machiavelian description of the behavior of Foxes. But elite groups can also gain the loyalty of newcomers by exploiting their class 2 residues and convincing them that betraying their group of origin will be paid off by an access to better positions. If the elite’s derivations reveal insufficient to maintain social order, only coercion allows to maintain institutions. Pareto shows that the circulation of elites is a law/regularity because the dominant groups that constitute the governing elite often prefer to ‘buy’ civil peace to preserve their short-term interests rather than use coercion or force, therefore leading to the weakening of their domination which structures opportunities for quick

shifts of political regimes. Such structures of opportunities correspond to the Machiavelian moments of *Fortuna*. This is a very different reasoning from the more axiomatic one in which a revolution would succeed at any moment if a fraction of the poor takes part to it (Acemoglu, Robinson 2001: 941).

The Paretian understanding of shifts in social orders may thus be defined as sequences of sophisticated processes of circulation of elites leading to quick reversals whenever the class 1 residues and associated derivations prove insufficient to ensure the loyalty of emerging groups. In this theory, the circulation of elites is supported by two processes of social betrayal. One occurs inside the main elite, as ensuring positions to newcomers imposes to exclude the weaker members of the coalition. The second occurs in the opponents' groups, as they have to betray the other members of their class to access positions. Revolutions occur either because of the circulation of elites is too slow, or because the derivations of the governing elite are too weak to sustain avoiding coercion.

Schematic as this may sound, the Paretian view is more dynamic than NWW's conceptions of equilibrium and change. It usefully complement NWW's framework by providing an understanding of within elite group circulation through strategic behavior, and extend the vision of "beliefs" through the idea of derivation as a pivot structure of enforcement of elite's organizations, away from simple patron-client relationships. The "governed" can be manipulated, but they are no more passive and some elements are capable of seizing opportunities to move upward.

On the methodological ground, Pareto's framework has received a number of criticisms which are also instructive for NWW. Firstly, it is inductive in the explanation of social action, so it reveals ineffective to define universal laws of social dynamics; secondly, it often requires abductive reasoning to explain ex-post the break of social equilibria; thirdly, it never explains why 'pure economics results' should be kept in to explain economic facts while abductive reasoning by reference to political history makes this logically impossible (Baldin, Ragni 2016).

This re-examination of Pareto is helpful to deepen the discussion of both the limits of NWW's pluralism and the ones of their methodological ambitions, which face the same contradictions that social sciences' explanations of macropolitical changes usually do.

An alternative way to discuss this is to analyze the break of a social equilibrium from the perspective of a social interdependence between elite groups rather than a basic social competition between them. This is how Norbert Elias proceeds. Though it is wholly sociological from beginning to end, we would like to show it can provide powerful inspiration to extend NWW's framework.

### **3.2. Exploring Norbert Elias's alternative conceptualization: games, interdependencies and breaks of the equilibrium**

In *What is sociology?* (Elias 1978), Norbert Elias's defines interdependences as the results of social games, making the study of micro-level relations very close to game theory (Swedberg 2001). Elias shows that the increase of interdependences has two main consequences. Firstly, it tends to increase the number of players, as the quest of social promotion is the most common goal in social life. Secondly, it produces social integration processes that are only achievable if violence is domesticated through what he calls a process of civilization. But social integration and civilization are not following a linear evolution. Breaks occur in equilibria when some groups of the elite are unable to ensure the social role they were supposed to play towards other groups. In this respects, Elias meets both Pareto's theory on elite's capacity, and NWW assumption that elite enforce their organization through a win-win transaction of protection, i.e. the social role of elites, against production or labor; even though Elias idea of "social role" encompasses much more than mere "protection" in a patron-client relation.

Thus, the way Elias defines the evolution of social figurations is more cyclical than evolutionary. When he explains the institutionalization of States, Elias pays much attention to the construction of the fiscal monopoly, through which tax liability or exemption is allocated to groups in relation to the role they play in the development of the political entity they are part of. Processes of monopolization are also observable in trade or industry, quite comparatively to Schumpeter views (Stokvis 2002). As Schumpeter does it, Elias draws cycles of emergence, monopolization, hegemony and destruction through the monopolization gained by an alternative process of emergence (Baur, Ernst 2011)<sup>2</sup>.

Elias's historical sociology is very complementary to Tilly's weberian one, on which NWW elaborate their framework of monopolized coercion. In Elias's view, the main driving force behind the construction of a State is the emergence of tax monopoly. Tax monopoly is the institution through which the political authorities are made able to consolidate the positions of social groups. The power offered by maintaining and sophisticating a tax monopoly is the one of compelling or exempting people, thereby hierarchizing statuses and drawing a social order. From this perspective, Elias insists on the fact that governing developing states consists in navigating tax exemption to the military and tax exemption to economic forces in search of a political equilibrium between these two interdependent forces. From this perspective, coercion and capital are not monopolized through accumulation but through a process Elias calls the 'tension-equilibrium'. The tension-equilibrium is

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<sup>2</sup> The psychic economy of individuals is quite different in Schumpeter and Elias's views. Schumpeter is closer to Nietzsche in his description of the entrepreneur as an heroic social agent (Lapied, Swaton 2013), whereas Elias insists on the socialization of individuals and tensions between their belonging to social circles, which echoes a more kantian and simmelian understanding of social life.

compared to a rope pulling game in which the authorities alternatively help one team and another to manage interdependencies and maintain their authority. Bypassing a limited access order would thus correspond to a process of civilization through which the balance of power evolves from a basic struggle to a more socially coded struggle of influence which sophistication progresses with the diversification of statuses granted to the people. From this perspective, Elias explains the Revolution as the result of the inability of aristocrats to fulfill their primary role of warmaking and to justify huge revenues for an idle class in times of famine. At this point of our discussion, let's underline that the dexterous use of tax monopoly in ensuring social promotion and consolidating the political authority of elites may be the missing link in NWW's theory.

## **4. Thailand: the failure of the transition to open access**

### **4.1. Empirical challenges:**

The theoretical framework of NWW has been confronted to facts through various case studies and historical narratives around the world, such as the republic of Weimar (Reckendress, 2015), the East Indian monopoly (Bogart, forthcoming) or South Korea (You, 2015), Mozambique, Mexico or Congo (North et al. 2013) and so on. Yet, a common problematic throughout these empirical studies is that a broad framework and systematic analysis of societies is not easily tested through econometrics, and has only been looked at through extensive historiographies or monographs. As is the case for Pareto's theory, the remaining question is how a framework which was mainly obtained through inductive methods can be "tested" empirically, i.e. testing understood as a hypothetico-deductive process. Also, NWW's theory is not easily reduced to a sufficiently small number of variables to allow identification in econometric tests, and most variables would anyway be co-dependent, strongly endogenous, and with no evident direction of causality. As stated above, changes can only be spotted by abduction and historical reconstruction.

Yet, it seems important to at least specify the patterns we are looking for when analyzing case studies and historiographies. Here, after a linear description of the situation in Thailand, we will first identify the different powerful groups with violence potential, their organizations, and the rent to which they may have access. We will then track coalitions made among these groups, and, when possible, the terms of the alliance following the Eliasian idea of interdependence, NWW's idea of rent-sharing and Pareto's ruse vs. force strategies. Finally, we will look for periods of political breaches or renegotiations and track the possible exogenous or endogenous, internal or external changes in relative benefits which may possibly explain political movements. For changes which are not easily explained by relative benefits and group's self-interests, we will look for Paretian strategic

behaviors from within the elite groups, the role of derivations and residues, and Eliasian interdependence and an evaluation of elites' capacities to fulfill their social function.

As we will see, Thailand is a perfect case study, with over 12 military coups (and even more significant breaches in political coalitions if we account for judiciary or constitutional coups).

#### **4.2. Thailand' political development at a glance**

Since its 1932 revolution and despite long period of military dictatorship, Thailand is commonly referred to as a constitutionalist monarchy. With 12 military coups since 1932 (3 interventions of the army since 2006), it may be qualified as a quite unstable political regime. Yet, for the outsiders and on touristic brochures, Thailand gives the impression of a quiet stability. This impression directly relates to a certain stability of economic policies over time towards export-led growth, tourism, financial liberalization, and the defense of business and investor rights. The general stability in the identity of the leading elites, and the 66 years of ruling by King Rama IX add to the phenomenon. Such feeling of continuity – despite the 12 military coups - goes well with NWW's argument of stable limited-access order despite frequent changes in political regime or ruling government, and sporadic violence. If most military coup were made without casualties, the army violently repressed street demonstrations in 4 occasions: 1973, 1976, 1992 and 2010. Even the receding of political liberalism and human rights since the 2014's coup (Human rights Watch report 2017) does not seem to have frightened foreign investors.

#### **1932-1957: the demise of the monarchy**

The history of Thailand politics can be summarized as follow. Until 1932, Thailand was ruled by an absolute monarchy with a modern State structure and a strong bureaucracy which, since King Chulalongkorn State reforms in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has ensured the development of efficient public infrastructures<sup>3</sup>. Notably, Thailand has never been colonized, both because of the modernization of the States undertaken by the absolute monarchy, and the fact that a conquest of Thailand put at risk the balance of power between the UK in Burma and the French in Indochina.

In 1932, a coup d'Etat led by a coalition of bureaucrats and military officers paved the way for a constitutional monarchy. After a great instability of power and a number of coup and countercoup involving different factions from the army, the bureaucrats, and the aristocrats, the initial coalition was broken in 1938 by General Phibun Songkran. He was one of the leader of the 1932 revolution, and excluded or imprisoned his former allies. During World War II, Phibun made an alliance with

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<sup>3</sup> At least for the time and given the context.

Japan, establish a strong and almost fascist military dictatorship which lasted until 1957<sup>4</sup>. During the Phibun era, the power of the monarchy was clearly undermined, Phibun seeing it as one the main danger to his power (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2005). Rama VII indeed abdicated in 1935, the young prince who succeeded to the throne was young, spent most of his time in Switzerland and when he finally returned to Thailand in 1946, was shot in mysterious circumstances. His younger brother Bhumibol, who was to become Rama IX and reign for decades, was only 19 years old at the time and did not leave in Thailand.

### **1957-1992: army, bureaucrats, monarchy**

Yet, after his return in 1946 and the final demise of General Phibun by other factions of the army in 1957, King Rama IX started to restore the power of the monarchy by making alliances with the new ruling general Sarit Thanarat (Handley, 2006) and his faction. Despite sporadic contestation from educated middle class – against a military dictatorship - in 1973 and – a violent repression of a socialist student movement which among other issues attempted to question the role of the monarchy – in 1976, King Rama IX's prestige and popularity did not cease to grow, and the army kept a good grip on power. Over time, the monarchy finally became the one inevitable power in Thai politics, especially so after a televised intervention of the King in 1992, where he was seen to order three despotic army generals to end street bloodsheds and to resign.

Thailand is a big country, both in terms of population and superficies, and public management both at the central and local level was maintained by a strong bureaucracy born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as an extension of the monarchist State, and with a strong prestige based on expertise: until the 1960's, the bureaucracy absorbed most of the graduate students produced in the country (Baker, 2016). Between the 1960's and 1992, the army, the bureaucrats and the monarchy – and its large aristocracy – were the three stable forces in the country, governing large organizations of clients and general support by a large share of the population, based on what NWW might call 'shared beliefs'. Political movements and coups were mainly designed to maintain the balance of power in the coalition and limit over-ambitious personalities or non-efficient<sup>5</sup> governments, except maybe in 1976, where all the groups colluded as one to suppress the socialist and anti-monarchist dissent fueled by a marginal communist guerilla in faraway jungles (the repression was probably encouraged by the USA fighting the Vietnam war, Thailand being their main military base in Southeast Asia, it was vital to keep it communist -free).

### **1992-2014: a failed transition to democracy**

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<sup>4</sup> if we except the short post-war period 1944-47 when Phibun fled the country only to return three years later as the leader of a new military coup

<sup>5</sup> Evaluated in terms of capacity to maintain power of the coalition.

Between 1992 and 2006, Thailand has been governed by semi-liberal constitutions, with elections of a civilian government and moderate protection of human rights. During this period, the power of the army was apparently undermined, and elected politicians emerged as new actors with nonetheless circumscribed power – they remained clients of traditional groups and if a number of them came from new businesses, many originated from the old establishment. Moreover, politicians were not popular and were labelled as corrupted and of small moral virtue, as seemed to confirm the frequent shifts in loyalty in Parliamentary coalitions and within political parties. The king, on the other hand, had constructed an image of protector of the democracy and gained considerable popularity.

A new constitution, judged by many as the most liberal Thailand ever had, was voted in 1997, and paved the way for the rise to power of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a rich business owner and political tycoon who became very popular among the poorest fragment of the Thai population (Northeastern rural population and poor urban suburbs) and won multiple elections. His populist pro-poor policies as well as the war on drugs spurred street demonstrations, and strong opposition from Bangkok traditional elite, middle class and the southern population. In 2006, his government was ousted by a military coup while he was abroad and he never returned to Thailand. Between 2006 and 2014, the country saw a violent opposition between his supporters called red-shirts; and his political opponents (yellow shirts). After a number of elections, judiciary coups, street demonstrations and a violent repression of street demonstration with over a 100 casualties, a coup d'Etat in 2014 put an end to elective democracy, brought forward the actual prime minister General Prayut Chanocha, and paved the way for the royal succession: Rama IX died in 2016 and was replaced by his son Rama X, a controverted figure known for a tendency to violence, scandal and erratic behavior.

Recent political history (since the emergence of Thaksin) is interpreted in various ways: the first consists in seeing the 1992-2014 period as the story of a failure of a democratic regime to unable stability and reduce endemic corruption. This is the theory defended by the protagonist of the 2014 coup. The second interpretation points at the responsibility of the monarchy in undermining democracy and ending the threat caused by Thaksin and at the role of the plans for succession to the throne as a driver of hidden plots and counterplots (MacGregor, 2014). For other still, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century actually saw the last surge of a decaying network monarchy (McCargo, 2005). Yet, as we will describe later – and as McCargo's work (2005) on network monarchy shows well - the history of Thailand is in fact the story of bargains, alliance, and misalliance among different powerful groups trying to keep their grip on power and economic rents, and their more or less successful attempts to enforce elite organizations through patron-client relationships. As will see, NWW's provide a satisfactory interpretation of political events – if maybe incomplete – until 2006. But then,

we have no clue as to why Thaksin failed in reaching the highest levels of power, and why the apparent evolution of the limited order towards more open competition ended back just where it was, or maybe worse off with the establishment of a hard line military dictatorship.

## **5. Why did the transition fail: from NWW to Pareto**

### **5.1. The old establishment: a basic limited access-order**

The account of Thailand's history makes clear that three groups have become pivot throughout Thailand history: the army, the bureaucracy, and the monarchy. McCargo (2005) calls this tryptic "network monarchy" and suppose that the monarchy became, if not dominant, at least positioned at the center and an inevitable member of the coalition. As Baker states (2016): "*The political structure of modern Thailand can be seen as a network of oligarchies, built around the three pillars of monarchy, military and bureaucracy. The survival of these pillars is a function of continuities in the country*" p. 393. The coalition between these groups was made around the idea of complementarities (bureaucrats' expertise, the force of military and purity or celestial legitimacy for the monarchy). For instance, General Sarit (Prime minister from 1958-1963) clearly saw the strategic importance in allying with King Rama IX to give to his military government the legitimacy it lacked; and he encouraged the reestablishments of traditional rituals and mythologies performed by the King and his family (Gray, 1991; Handley, 2006).

Rent-seeking clearly came along with limited-access to economic activities: despite a lack of transparency which survived until today, the crown property bureau contributed to make King Bhumibol (and his son today) the richest monarch in the world, with a fortune estimated to around 30 billions<sup>6</sup> dollars. Most of the manufacturing sector is still in the hand of traditional elites nowadays, thanks to the selective distribution of State-regulated business licenses in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century emergence of Thai capitalism (Rock, 1995), and a careful transmission of productive capital in traditional families (Choonhovan, 1985). Until the 1990's, economic organizations and to a lesser extent civil society had an existence, but struggled to exist fully outside the State, which makes post war Thailand closer to what NWW call a basic limited order (which is an intermediate state between fragile and mature limited orders).

### **5.2. Factors for change**

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<sup>6</sup> Although lack of transparency makes it very difficult to clearly state the origin of the fortune, it seems to be related to many successful land deals.



The 1992 period can be considered as a transition period where the power and popularity of the army receded, maybe because the ugliness of violence – made obvious to all with the 1992 bloodshed – becomes intolerable in a complex society, as well-described in Elias’ *Civilizing Process* (1939); and where many factors came together as potential drivers of change. First, under external pressure and probably the internal realization that economic rents would be greater through reform, the old establishment moved towards export led-growth and opened the economy to foreign investment. Reforms were made to favour business interests –at least those controlled by the establishment - and the Thai economy gradually became more liberal and less regulated – with as a direct consequence the 1997 financial crisis. New business organizations started to proliferate, and gave way for very successful companies in emerging sectors, as perfectly illustrated by Thaksin’s business empire in telecommunication (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2004). After 1992 and the establishment of elective democracy, and even more so after the 1997 constitution, elected politicians, political parties and a dynamic civil society also became more visible. They were nonetheless quickly assimilated to ‘money politics’ and gained a bad reputation among the public for the collusion of new economic interests and politics (Pathamanand, 2001). In fact, new businessmen and elected politicians were not able to sustain strong elite organizations of their own and had to look for patronage among the old establishment to sustain their position (McCargo, 2005; MacGregor, 2014). Even the Parliament became a story of coalitions, with loyalty changing at a fast speed (Chambers, 2005). In the meantime, the country saw rapid economic growth, a wide scale financial crisis in 1997; and the Thai rural population saw its education and income level raise.

The situation gave opportunities for new elites of second rank to try to emerge as new political forces. Among them, business-owner Thaksin Shinawatra understood the potential power of the “one people, one vote” slogan embedded in political elections, and seized it. His strategy was double: first, to construct a new patron-client organization with himself and his crownies at the top, through populist policies and a vote buying effort<sup>7</sup> towards the population receiving the least protection and economic rent from the traditional establishment, i.e. namingly rice farmers from the poor North and Northeast population, and urban poor from Bangkok. Populist policies included free healthcare, micro-credit programs, and strong rice subsidies. Meanwhile, most of the tax effort relied on the middle-class, and the rural population from South Thailand, where rice cultivation is negligible, did not benefit much from it (Baker 2004). Unsurprisingly, and confirming that patron-client relationships are an important part of elite organizations, these last groups were later found among the fiercest opponent to Thaksin, i.e. the yellow shirts. Secondly and besides forming his own elite organization, Thaksin attempted to collude with parts of the old establishment, especially in the context of

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<sup>7</sup> Vote buying being a clear pattern of all political parties at the time (Phongpaichit et al; 2000)

expected succession to the throne. To summarize the available information, he attempted an alliance with the crown prince, who was in deathly conflict with influential members of the establishment<sup>8</sup>, unpopular, and endangered by other factions said to favor a popular princess for the succession. Basically, Thaksin would have tried a bargain in which he would be allowed by the monarchy – through the prince - to maintain his hold on the government, in exchange of supporting (and protecting) the prince during the succession, i.e. lending his own popularity to the crown prince.

### **5.3. The set-back to a military dictatorship: why the transition did not take place**

Until here, NWW's framework explains well the course of events, both the coalition made among the old establishment, and the emergence of Thaksin and his clique of new businessmen – sharing many similarities with the *bourgeois* of the French revolution. There are also strong Paretian elements in the abilities and strategic behaviors displayed by secondary or not ruling parts of the elite (the businessmen + politicians) trying to obtain better positions. And yet, in 2006, Thaksin was ousted by a coup, and despite all his attempted strategies and financial support for a return to power, he failed. His sister Yingluck Shinawatra – who was elected prime minister in 2011-2014 - has faced charges of corruption in a rice-subsidies program, and has fled the country in August 2017 and seen her family assets seized by the State. She was allegedly threatened with decades of imprisonment and abuses in jail.

NWW's framework does not provide satisfactory explanations of the failed transition: Thaksin had built an apparently strong elite organization based on solid patron-client grounds; his bargain to make an alliance with parts of the old establishment was in good way; the country had seen a strong development in pluralism, freedom of expression and a multiplication of private organizations outside of the direct control of the State. And yet, Thailand has returned to what seems like a basic limited order.

There are different ways to interpret the demise of Thaksin and co.'s attempt, and the failure of a transition to a more open order.

A. The behavior of elites' organizations are not always rational or even intentional. According to MacGregor (2014), what seemed so threatening in Thaksin to the old establishment was the alliance made with the crown prince, against which many felt a real loathing for personal matters. Another interpretation for such deadly grudges against the crown prince (and therefore Thaksin) was a more rational and self-interested realization that having an unpopular prince as a King could undermine the future power of the monarchy, and put a serious threat to the establishment's political and economic interests. But in the end, nothing explains why the crown prince got sufficient support

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<sup>8</sup> And especially members of the powerful Privy Council.

among the establishment to become the new King in 2016, while on the other hand Thaksin's threat was eliminated with intense efforts.

B. Internal conflicts within the monarchy contributed to a restoration of power for some factions within the military – which had returned to the backstage of Thai politics after 1992 - and in particular those close to the Queen. The Queen had independently developed army corps under her name, and the instigator and leader of the 2014 coup, actual Prime Minister General Prayuth Chanocha, is a former member of the “Tigers”, a faction loyal to the queen. Such rise to power of army factions which were previously second-rank was also permitted by the reduced abilities of other rival top-ranking officers positioned at strategic places of the States. These top-ranking officers abandoned the use of force to prefer ruse, as well illustrated by the behind-closed-doors intriguing of General Prem Tinsulananda, the chief of the influential Privy Council. Here again, facts stress the importance of giving more attention to elite's strategic behaviors at different levels or degrees of power, and to elite circulations or within group conflicts in governing elite organizations.

C. The last interpretation relates to the Paretian “derivations”. As Pareto shows, elites lose power to others when their derivations (or ideologies) become too weak to derive strong support from the governed. Or, as Elias puts it, elites lose their power when they fail to fulfil their social function. According to this perspective, the traditional establishment has managed to maintain its power among the threat of new groups and a more open society through its capacity to maintain a myth on its own legitimacy. As Baker proposes, from the 1960's onward, the establishment has “*developed explanations of their own legitimacy which challenged the democratic principle*”. This includes both the strategy to show the king as a quasi-god embedded in Buddhist traditions, pure from worldly corruption, and defender of democracy; and to undermine politicians, liberal economics, and western democracy as leading to money-politics (Baker, 2005). These “derivations” spread by the ruling establishment was still well alive in the 2000, and the rumor of anti-monarchist behavior that were spread about Thaksin and his red-shirt supporters managed to bring together a strong coalition of elites, middle class and southern farmers who did not have much else in common than their opposition to Thaksin. And in disposing of Thaksin and other “bourgeois” threats, they also contributed to a military dictatorship. Clearly, the derivations for democracy and economic liberalization was too attached to an idea of corruption to confront the believed purity of the old establishment.

Two more things deserve to be said. The first is that if we trust Elias' theory, Thaksin also was disposable because he was not part of the main network of interdependences. The traditional establishment has always kept a strong control of the economy through control of capital, and could easily maintain its economy and access to rent without the backing of the new businessmen. The

opportunity cost of removing Thaksin was therefore lower. Secondly, Thai political history is not over and certainly not linear; and many - including McCargo, 2005 – have described the monarchy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as being at the end of its power. This may even more be the case in 2017, after the death of the so popular King Rama IX and his replacement by the unpopular – and probably unfit for ruling - crown prince now crowned as Rama X.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to discuss NWW's analytical framework of violence and social order theoretically, empirically and methodologically.

Theoretically, we underlined the importance of NWW's contribution to development economics regarding the study of institutional and political factors which ease or block transition to open access orders. We then focused on the challenge of transition and insisted on the limits of NWW's theory mainly based on pluralism, interest groups' rationality and patron-client relationships. Firstly, as Bates argued, NWW's theoretical pluralism faces many classical objections about the possibility of its achievement, the importance of capture and the existence of exit strategies. Secondly, the patterns defined by Pareto and Elias shed the light on the interdependencies produced by the competition for social promotion and advantageous statuses sanctioned by tax exemption, income increase, etc., and the political process through which a social order cyclically evolves through successive equilibria followed by the circulation of elites (Pareto) or the maintenance of a tension-equilibrium (Elias). Exploring the nature of equilibria through such kinds of political interdependences implies to go beyond the classical idea of aggregates based on basic patron-client relations and interest groups' rent-seeking strategies. This is not to say that such behaviors are insignificant but that a more dynamic perspective on the complexity of microsocial and micropolitical games is needed.

Empirically, we decided to present the very first step of our case study on a descriptive manner that would allow introducing active agents (politicians, military, merchants, etc.) and inform about 'the problems they faced, the constraints they encountered, the beliefs they entertained and the strategies they devised' (Bates 2010 : 755). This led us to the conclusion that all the elements for the transition underlined in NWW are only enough to explain a big push towards open access, but not whether the big push will succeed or fail. More micro-analysis of elite circulations, their relationship with their organizations' members, and the nature of their strategic behaviors is necessary to turn successful transitions that looks like accidents into socio-economic regularities. Empirically, it probably requires sound comparisons between cases of

successful transitions and cases of failed transitions, rather than extensive case studies among countries with different levels of development. In the case of Thailand, the political cycles could be defined as following a 'limited order trap', which cannot be explained by simple variables such as the rents produced by military expenditures, tax rates, or so on, but by more intricate processes of interdependence between them, with sequences that are difficult to parse statistically.

On the methodological ground, we showed that NWW or any other study attempting to empirically address the question of transition failure, is confronted to the same limits as Pareto's methodology : it requires abductive reasoning to explain breaks of social equilibria *ex-post* ; its complexity and extended multi-dependence is not easily reduced to 'ceteris paribus' relationships between a few variables in an econometrics model ; panel data that would allow to describe such long-term processes are often not available ; and the role played by subjective variables such as derivations, ideologies, or beliefs are by all records difficult to track empirically. The real challenge for future research therefore stands in finding empirical methodologies which reflects the complexities and interdependences in social processes while following scientific reasoning for hypothesis testing.

To conclude, this paper is mainly exploratory and opens two avenues for future research.

First, future research could inventory countries which have experienced failed transition and are therefore snared into a 'limited order trap'. Then, a range of variables (tax compelling and exemption, public spendings, access to civil service, geographical distribution of elite groups, etc.) could be tested on this very limited panel. As for Thailand's case, we must pay attention to the way political regimes maintain an Eliasian tension-equilibrium – be it monarchy or not – as it might prove to be the key factor which traps a country into a limited order.

The second avenue for future research is the modelization of games and tension-equilibria on the basis of Elias' theory to theoretically explain transition failures. This would extend the research program defined by Acemoglu and Robinson (2001). A main challenge would be to go beyond the idea of a repeated game between a homogenous elite and the poor by introducing non-cooperative games between sub-groups of elites. From this perspective, given that 'strategies depend only on the current state of the world and the prior actions taken within the same period' (Acemoglu, Robinson, 2001: 942), the tension-equilibria between the sub-groups maintained by a central authority would be worth be compared to the kind of Markov perfect equilibrium designed by these scholars.

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