

Rethinking Myanmar's Left Intellectual History: The Subaltern Politics of Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi

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Authoritarianism casts a long shadow over the left intellectual history of post-colonial Burma. This can be understood as a legacy of Burmese political and military organizations that advanced top-down agendas of nationalization and central planning. The historical prominence of such centralizing political projects risks obscuring the alternative, bottom-up politics that were articulated by various left intellectuals in the country's late colonial and early post-colonial periods. This alternative left politics, which was informed by the struggles of subaltern classes in Myanmar, illustrates creative integrations of Marxist thought with the concerns of Burmese workers and peasants. In order to highlight key features of this alternative left politics, I focus in this paper on two seminal figures in Myanmar's left intellectual history: author and journalist Banmaw Tin Aung and militant labor organizer Thakin Po Hla Gyi. I draw for analysis on texts written by these two figures, with additional biographical details that shed light on their politics in practice.

Introduction

Authoritarianism casts a long shadow over the history of post-colonial Burma. This is no less true of the country's intellectual life than it is of the political and military institutions that emerged most prominent in the early Independence period. Rethinking the left intellectual history of post-colonial Burma, and rescuing it from the tragic legacy of these institutions, therefore requires an appreciation for those Myanmar intellectuals who sought to articulate an alternative to the topdown, state-driven politics of party and military elites. By this I mean a politics that privileges the self-organization of subordinate classes, as against the elitism that underpinned claims to authority by the country's formally left political and military groups, both those within and against the state.

Overwhelmingly, the political and military organizations that dominated the early history of independent Burma sought to legitimize their authoritarian structures and policies through appeals to leftist ideological rhetoric, largely Marxist-Leninist in character. This is, of course, clearest within the Communist Party of Burma (CPB; in both its "Red Flag" and "White Flag" factions) and Ne Win's Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP). Yet, even the coalition government of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), led by the social democrat U Nu, brokered little internal dissent and locked up political opponents.

This prominence of left-wing authoritarianism in post-colonial Burma has obscured English-language scholarship on the country's intellectual history. In part, this reflects a limited engagement with

Burmese-language political writing outside of a small number of texts that have been translated into English. As a consequence, left intellectual thought in post-colonial Burma has generally been reduced to orthodox Marxism-Leninism or reformist social democracy (e.g. Thomson 1959: 57). The result is that the writings of Burmese left intellectuals who advanced what might be called a “bottom-up” or subaltern politics, and who in many cases remained independent of political parties, is largely absent from English language scholarship on the country. Based on what remains, Myanmar’s left intellectual history appears to have involved little more than translating Marxist-Leninist texts into Burmese. This view is presented quite explicitly by Robert Taylor (2008: 6) in his introduction to the English translation of Thakin Soe’s *Socialism*:

By then [Independence in 1948] almost every articulate politician and nationalist in the country claimed to be a socialist, Marxist, or communist. The programmatic differences they pronounced with mere nuances on a theme that endorsed the fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism including the nationalisation of industry and the collectivisation of land for the benefit of the workers and peasants. While the governmental form adopted in the 1947 constitution echoed the institutions of British parliamentary democracy, the political inspiration of the ruling Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL) was that of an Eastern European or Soviet style mass and class party tolerating little dissent within or without its structures.

Marxist-Leninist theory and strategy were, to be sure, important influences on large numbers of politicians and intellectuals in post-colonial Burma. To stop at that, however, gives the impression that Burmese left intellectuals sought not to move beyond the elitist and authoritarian elements of Marxist-Leninist politics. While the politics of the CPB, BSPP and (arguably) AFPFL remained within the orbit of Marxist-Leninist party-centric state socialism, the same cannot be said of dissident thinkers who kept politically and intellectually independent. And, indeed, there *were* independent left intellectuals in post-colonial Burma who engaged critically with Marxist texts and sought to push Burmese political thought beyond “mere nuances on a theme” of Marxism-Leninism, and who advocated a more bottom-up form of politics.

In the text that follows, I seek to draw out key features of this alternative left politics, while arguing for its significance in helping us rethink Myanmar’s left intellectual history. I pursue these aims through an engagement with two central figures in the country’s left intellectual history: author and journalist Banmaw Tin Aung (1920 - 1978) and militant labor organizer Thakin Po Hla Gyi (1908 - 1943). Both individuals embodied, albeit in different ways, what Antonio Gramsci identified as the “organic intellectual.” By this he meant an individual who is tied “organically” to a particular social class and who, drawing on existing cultural repertoires, serves to articulate a strategic analysis that advances the interests of that class (Gramsci 1971: 5 - 23; see also Hall 1986). As a manual labourer on the colonial oil fields, Thakin Po Hla Gyi’s “organic” links to the working class may have been more direct than those of Banmaw Tin Aung—a novelist, newspaper editor, and one-time timber broker. Yet both men shared a commitment to, and a significant influence over, the Burmese working class, in whose interest they strove to articulate an alternative to the established order, and a program to move beyond it.

With the above aims in mind, I proceed below with an overview of the distinction between top-down (elite) and bottom-up (subaltern) left politics. I then examine tendencies in the writings of Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi, which exemplify this bottom-up form of politics. I add to this analysis additional biographical details of these two figures, which shed light on their politics in practice.

My hope is that the limited study I present here will stimulate further research into the anti-authoritarian currents in Myanmar’s left intellectual history. In addition, I propose that those

engaged in social research in Myanmar take seriously the politics of Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi as a basis on which to develop a critical research agenda relevant to the contemporary moment. I therefore conclude this paper with some brief comments on the legacies of Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi in present-day Myanmar, and I offer some notes towards a critical social research agenda drawn from their politics.

Left politics, top-down and bottom-up

A conventional categorization of left political traditions distinguishes between those advancing bottom-up versus top-down political programs. Emphasizing this distinction in 1871, Mikhail Bakunin (1971: 263) wrote that for the proletarian revolution to be truly emancipatory, it would need to entail subordinate groups organizing “spontaneously, freely, from the bottom up, of their own accord and true to their own interests, never following a prearranged plan imposed upon ‘ignorant’ masses by a few ‘superior’ minds.” For the aims of this paper, I wish to highlight two areas of difference between these two categories of left politics—namely, the revolutionary role of subaltern classes versus the vanguard party, and secondly, the trajectory of revolutionary action.

On the first of these, Leninist politics are quite clear: the revolutionary workers’ party and its cadre of professional revolutionaries are assigned a leading role. Lenin’s reasoning follows from the analytical distinction he makes between political (party-led) and economic (trade union-led) struggles. “Class political consciousness,” Lenin argues, “can be brought to the workers *only from without*; that is, only from outside the economic struggle” (2012 [1902]: 112). There is thus a need for those engaged in political (rather than “merely economic”) struggle to bring revolutionary consciousness to the working class. For this reason, the political struggle requires a party of “professional revolutionaries... led by the real political leaders of the entire people” (Lenin 2012 [1902]: 127). This allocation of a leading role to “professional revolutionaries” and the vanguard party was adopted in theory and practice by the CPB, as well as the BSPP. The BSPP, after seizing power as a Revolutionary Council in 1962 and then proclaiming itself the sole legal political party, argued in its founding document, *System of Correlation of Man and His Environment* (1963), that, “In building a socialist society... It is therefore vitally important that socialists are able to lead the people in a correct way... only when men of excellent morals are in the leadership... [can] the socialist programme... be carried through.”

In contrast to this separation of the political and economic, for left political traditions that have advanced a bottom-up revolutionary agenda, the struggles of subaltern classes over their immediate “economic” concerns are imbued with political content (Cleaver 2000). One implication of this unification of the economic with the political is that subaltern classes are themselves the leading agents of revolutionary action, the revolutionary character of which develops out their struggles over immediate material conditions. This was the basis of Rosa Luxemburg’s critique of the Bolshevik form of political party, with its assumed position of revolutionary leadership. Instead, Luxemburg (1972: 280) argued, “The masses are in reality their own leaders, dialectically creating their own development process.” As their own leaders, subaltern classes themselves, rather than the party, are the ones who must carry out the revolution—or, as Marx put it in his 1864 dictum: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”

The second area of distinction I wish to highlight between top-down and bottom-up left politics concerns the trajectory of revolutionary action. As Lenin argued in *State and Revolution*, the revolutionary party needed to seize state power, nationalize the economy, and manage production and distribution through centralized state planning, at least until the “proletarian state” finds itself “withering away” (1992 [1917]: chapter 1). Operating in similar terms, the BSPP (1963), after nationalizing all major industries, defined socialism as “the centralised guidance of the society.” Likewise, Thakin Soe (2008: 34), a founding member of the CPB and subsequently leader of the

underground “Red Flag” Communist Party, explained that, for him, what characterizes “a socialist government” is that it “will plan production based on population statistics.” The problem, however, as Luxemburg (2006 [1900]: 216) again critiqued, is that without mass, democratic participation in the management of socialist society, “socialism will be decreed from behind a few official desks by a dozen intellectuals.”

For bottom-up revolutionary movements, by contrast, collectivization proceeds not “from above” through nationalization and centralized state planning, but rather “from below,” as subordinate classes themselves seize the means of the production, retaining direct control over production and distribution through their own self-management. This *political* seizure of property and implementation of collective self-management are, in fact, workers’ immediate “economic” struggles taken to their logical conclusion (see Brecher 1972, Ness 2011). For this reason, there is a radical political content embodied in workers’ everyday struggles under capitalism, even if the workers involved do not articulate their actions in such terms (James 1999: 169).

The notion of “revolution from below” emerged as an explicit agenda within European anarchism during the second half of the 19th century. The idea of bottom-up left politics, however, can usefully encompass a broad spectrum of self-organized workers’ and peasants’ struggles in other temporal and geographic contexts. This perspective has informed the British “history from below” school, including E. P. Thompson’s (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class*, as well as the work of the Subaltern Studies Group through the 1980s (Guha 1999; Guha and Spivak 1988). [1] It is in this latter sense that I see Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi as advancing a bottom-up, subaltern politics—one which takes as its point of departure the self-organized struggles of subaltern classes, and which recognizes the revolutionary political content in their immediate “economic” struggles.

Banmaw Tin Aung and his politics

Born in the town of Bago to ethnic Chin parents in 1920, the author who would later become known as Banmaw Tin Aung spent much of his youth relocating across colonial Burma. Among the places he resided during this period was the town of Banmaw (Bhamo) in Kachin State where his father, a Christian pastor, was called to serve in 1932. It was from this town that the author (named Oo Tin Aung at birth) would later derive his pen name, which he first used in 1945 with the publication of his novel *Naw Mu Gay*.

It was in middle school in the mid-1930s that the young Tin Aung began reading Marx (Kyaw Than Myint 2000: 150). Shortly thereafter, as a high school student in Yangon, he became involved as an organizer in the student strikes of 1938 (Kyaw Than Myint 2000: 152), the same year he published his first novel. During the subsequent war years the author served in the Burma Independence Army (BIA) and its successor, the Burma Defence Army, from 1942 to 1945 (Kyaw Than Myint 2000: 154). With the end of World War II, Banmaw Tin Aung’s literary and journalistic output increased significantly. Aside from his consistent production of novels, he also served, beginning in 1949, as co-editor alongside Dagon Taya for the latter’s magazine *Taya*, and as editor of his own journal *Linyon (The Eagle)* beginning in 1950, and of a newspaper established under the same name in 1951. Banmaw Tin Aung’s close personal and professional relationship with Dagon Taya, which began shortly after the War, was to endure until Tin Aung’s death three decades later. Dagon Taya, one year Banmaw Tin Aung’s senior, became an important influence on the latter’s political and literary ideas (see Dagon Taya 2000a). This fact is significant, given the independence of Dagon Taya’s own politics. As one account of his life puts it:

Despite his strong leftist sympathies Dagon Taya felt no need to conform to preconceived notions of socialist orthodoxy, either intellectually or in his lifestyle. He eschewed any sycophancy towards self-declared “liberators” of the masses, and

throughout his life, kept his distance from political parties. (Min Zin 2000)

In similar fashion, Banmaw Tin Aung, although a determined communist, was never a member of the CPB. He eschewed the path of armed struggle that the CPB took up (Win Lat 2000: 192). Instead, due to his belief in the “spirit [*seit-dat*] of the working class,” Banmaw Tin Aung gave priority to workers’ organising and struggles, in which he “saw clearly the [coming] era of people’s power” (Dagon Taya 2000b: 188). Banmaw Tin Aung also persistently critiqued post-Independence Burma’s successive governments—notably, U Nu’s for not seeking peace through negotiation with ethnic and communist insurgents, and for constitutionally privileging Buddhism; and Ne Win’s for being undemocratic and authoritarian. [2] In response, the governments of both U Nu and Ne Win had the author imprisoned on three occasions for a total of 14 years (1952 to 1957, 1958 to 1960, and 1965 to 1972). While out of prison in 1960, the government awarded Banmaw Tin Aung the prestigious *Sapay Beikman* literary award for his novel *Mama Gyi*. The author, however, refused to accept it. Banmaw Tin Aung’s death in 1978 has been attributed to both cancer, as well as to the poor state of health to which he was reduced as a result of his lengthy prison stays (Lay Hti Ohn Maung 2000: 141).

Employing Banmaw Tin Aung’s writing to illustrate a politics that diverges from Leninism is a somewhat contentious project. Banmaw Tin Aung, after all, made on multiple occasions fairly uncritical statements of support for Lenin, and even offered Stalin praise as a “strong defender of Marxism-Leninism” (Banmaw Tin Aung 1964: 337). Such statements notwithstanding, I maintain that Banmaw Tin Aung still advanced an alternative politics—one which diverges from the party-centric aspects of Marxism-Leninism. To support this claim, I survey below some pertinent features of Banmaw Tin Aung’s politics, drawing primarily on his fiction to illustrate my points.

As I have stressed, Banmaw Tin Aung saw revolutionary politics emerging from within subaltern classes through their immediate struggles against oppression and exploitation. Such politics did not depend on professional revolutionaries bringing political consciousness to workers and peasants “from outside.” Banmaw Tin Aung illustrated this point on numerous occasions. Prominent amongst these was his 1961 novel *Ng’aw*, in which the author recounts events from the 1930-1932 peasant revolt in colonial Burma. British colonial officials asserted at the time that the revolt had been instigated by the “pretender-king” Saya San, who employed the trappings of Burmese monarchs to incite peasants to back him in revolt against colonial rule (Aung-Thwin 2010: 2). In Banmaw Tin Aung’s account, however, Saya San never even appears “on stage.” His character is, in fact, marginal to the events of the entire book. Instead, Banmaw Tin Aung (1961: 226-227) seeks to portray the rebellion as a revolutionary movement that emerged organically among the peasants involved in response to their collective experience of oppression and exploitation:

Before long the peasant uprising had spread like a forest fire with great velocity across the whole of Myanmar, and from the start it was not based on any prearranged plan. At that time, no one, no political association or party, had yet organized or encouraged the peasants of all Myanmar. Once starting like that at Thon-seh Township, Tharrawaddy District, the reason for spreading like a forest fire with great velocity across the whole of Myanmar was none other than that the peasants of all Myanmar had exploded in anger as a result of the ill treatment and oppression by the British colonialists and their collaborators. [3]

Extending this argument about the political primacy of subaltern self-organisation and collective action, Banmaw Tin Aung saw these classes as setting the revolutionary agenda, leaving career politicians and their political organisations lagging behind. This was an analysis he made for Burma’s national liberation struggle, which he saw as having been led by peasants, workers and students, rather than by formal political parties and their established leadership. He presented his

historical reading of these events in his 1958 novel *Myaing* (Banmaw Tin Aung 2011: 134 - 135):

[Following World War II] after the British colonialists strategically deployed their troops and annexed the whole of Myanmar, our leaders woke up with a start from their slumber. The Rakhine rebels, Ley-way rebels, and Kyauk-kyi rebels who raised the alarm and thus caused [the political leaders] to wake up in this way deserve our gratitude. Had our leaders not been woken up by these peasant rebels and their struggles, I can't say whether they would still be sleeping... Working class struggles, student and youth struggles, and the struggles of government employees rose up high to be recorded for posterity. Especially, it must be said that the most extraordinary thing in the history of our Myanmar national liberation struggle was the enthusiastic collaboration of the peasants with the multitude in the national liberation struggle. [This collaboration] brought about the intensification of the [national liberation] struggle. The general strike of September 1946 was paramount for the post-war anti-colonial national liberation struggle of our Myanmar nationals. The huge military and the whole machinery of colonial rule that the British had established came to a halt.

Banmaw Tin Aung takes this line of analysis further in *Ng'aw*, where he criticizes urban politicians for being divorced from the immediate material struggles of subaltern classes. The political rhetoric of these "leaders" was, Banmaw Tin Aung (1961: 212 - 213) argues, largely posturing, and in any case irrelevant to the immediate, yet revolutionary, struggles of these classes:

In the cities there were political organisations clamouring for independence to be granted. However, those political leaders were only on the main roads yelling these demands. Not one of them entered into the farm fields and the mud. Was their so-called independence struggle only for the urbanites paying their taxes and residing on the main roads and in the municipalities? Furthermore, the peasants understood nothing at all of the meaning of the words "home rule" which those political leaders, stretching out their fist-clenched arms, were shouting at the top of their lungs as though suffering from hemorrhoids. Not understanding, they were not interested. Not being interested, the peasants did not in the least hold in high esteem those political leaders who were taking part in the "home rule" struggle while paying their taxes and residing on the main roads and in the municipalities.

Banmaw Tin Aung had earlier stated this critique of politicians and political parties rather explicitly in his 1958 essay, *Thwe hnit Myey-gyi* ("Blood and Earth"), in which he advocated political autonomy for workers and workers' unions. "Politicians," he wrote, "are thugs [*lu-maik*] who look out only for their party and their organisation."

So, what, then, is the political trajectory of these subaltern struggles, within which Banmaw Tin Aung saw so clearly an "era of people's power"? One possibility is suggested in his 1963 novel *Yoma Taik-bwe* (*The Battle of Yoma*). Towards the start of the novel, residents of a village outside Taungoo gather to discuss the sudden Independence of Burma following the flight of the British in the face of joint Japanese and BIA troops (Banmaw Tin Aung 2012: 24 - 25). Talking among themselves about how to best take advantage of the situation, some of the poorer villagers propose that they seize the property of the local McGregor Timber Company, including the company's timber supplies and three elephants that had been used to haul logs, as well as agricultural land on which they had up till then been tenant farmers. What is key here is that the villagers are proposing their own direct seizure and control of this property, not its reallocation to a new, national government administration.

Thakin Po Hla Gyi and his politics

Born in the Magwe area to a family of poor peasants, the young Po Hla witnessed at age 14 British colonial authorities arrest his father when the latter could not afford to pay his land taxes. The event, which would have occurred around 1922, devastated his mother and further impoverished the family. It also served as a seminal moment in fomenting Po Hla's strong anti-colonial convictions, along with a general antipathy towards authority (Thakin Khin Zaw et al. 1963: 24 - 26).

Two years later, in 1924, Po Hla, now a young man, enlisted in the British Army, under which he was deployed to Iraq—a territory the British had recently seized from the Ottoman Empire during World War I. The biographical account of Po Hla's time in Iraq focuses on two moments where he fought against racist privilege in the British Army, and was detained for insubordination as a result (Thakin Khin Zaw et al. 1963: 14 - 19, 32 - 34). The first of these events involved Po Hla standing up for an African soldier who was beaten in a boxing match with a British officer when the latter began punching "free of the rules"—presumably below the belt or behind the head. The second event saw Po Hla challenge the racist segregation of the army's mess tents, in which British officers were served separately from the non-European infantry, whose soldiers had come from colonized African and Asian countries.

Upon returning to Burma in 1927, Po Hla went back to Magwe where he took a job as a manual laborer for the Burmah Oil Company. Shortly thereafter he joined the mass-based *Dobama Asiyayone* and began reading publications of the left wing Nagani Book Club (Thakin Khin Zaw et al. 1963: 88). Over a decade later, when a strike erupted in January 1938 over an unfair dismissal at the Chauk oil field, Thakin Po Hla Gyi was among the key organizers of the action, which continued throughout the year and culminated in a workers' march to Yangon on November 14 (Khin Yi 1988: 84). Over the period of the conflict the strike spread to other work sites, such as the Yen-an-chaung oil field and the Syriam (Thanlyin) refinery, with over 10,000 workers, including many women, taking part (Thakin Po Hla Gyi 2012: 45 - 46, 32). Although the strike did not result in an indisputable success for the workers involved, it served as a critical catalyst for what became known as "revolution year 1300 [1938]," which saw widespread popular unrest among the country's workers, peasants and students. During these events, Thakin Po Hla Gyi wrote and published a short book entitled *Th'beit Sit-bwe (The Strike War)*, which was both a means of raising funds for the striking oil field workers, and an appeal to workers across the country to take the strike into their own hands as part of a broader anti-capitalist, anti-colonial agenda.

At the onset of World War II, British colonial authorities arrested Thakin Po Hla Gyi for organising another oil field strike and deported him to Banmaw, Kachin State. When Japanese forces entered Burma in 1942, Po Hla Gyi was able to return to the Chauk oil fields where he hoped to revive the oil field workers' association, which had declined in his absence. The Japanese military authorities occupying Chauk at the time offered Po Hla Gyi a position in the local wartime administration, given his involvement in the anti-colonial *Dobama Asiyayone* (Thakin Khin Zaw et al. 1963: 274-275). Thakin Po Hla Gyi, however, refused the offer. His reasoning was that the wartime administration was implicated in the oil field workers' continued subordination, and that the re-establishment of the oil field workers' association needed to be done from outside the government. He died shortly thereafter from a stomach ailment in 1943. His only historically prominent piece of writing is the 1938 book, *The Strike War*. It is from this text that I primarily draw for my analysis of his politics.

Central to Thakin Po Hla Gyi's politics was the belief that workers themselves were principle agents of revolutionary change through their direct struggle against capital. He argued passionately that those who primarily needed to organize in order to overthrow imperialism and capitalism in Burma were not primarily middle class intellectuals, but rather "we poor who have no property" (Thakin Po Hla Gyi 2012: 35). For Thakin Po Hla Gyi it was principally the strike, or rather the general strike, which was going to uproot capitalism. In political theory, this privileging of the strike as a revolutionary strategy is most commonly associated with syndicalism. But let us allow Thakin Po Hla

Gyi (2012: 8) to speak for himself:

There should be no doubt that taking hold like a great weapon of the methods included in this publication called *The Strike War* will enable the easy abolishment of the capitalist system of exploitation, oppression and tyranny. In other words, the poor must take hold of this great weapon [the strike] that makes the capitalist robbers run for their lives trembling in fear.

If the workers themselves were to carry out the revolution, which would begin with the general strike, what would be its revolutionary trajectory? Although Thakin Po Hla Gyi does not spell this out explicitly in *The Strike War*, we can get an inkling of what he and his striking coworkers wanted by examining their demands, which are included in the appendix to his book. Among the 20 demands listed, many relate to working conditions, such as shifting from day-rates to monthly salaries, increasing days off to 53 per year, and putting an end arbitrary dismissals. The most radical demand listed, however, is "To return to national workers the oil fields that have been in the hand of the capitalists for 50 years" (Thakin Po Hla Gyi 2012: 47). Note that this is not a demand for nationalization and state control over the oil industry, but rather for direct control of this property by the oil field workers themselves.

About mid-way through the oil field workers' strike, in July 1938, a series of violent anti-Indian riots erupted in Yangon. What is significant is that, although the striking oil field workers were predominantly Burman and Indian, the riots do not seem to have troubled the solidarity of this multi-ethnic workforce. Commenting on this fact shortly after the riots, Burmese author and political activist Thein Pe Myint (2006: 14) observed that, "In oil-field strikes such as Yenangyaung and Syriam and some other strikes, Indian workers and Burmese workers were inseparable." In much the same way, Thakin Po Hla Gyi argued that the negative impact the riots had on the strike was not in fragmenting workers along ethnic or religious lines. The problem, rather, was that the riots distracted the public's attention away from the strike, and led poor workers elsewhere in the country into ethnic and religious conflict, and away from class struggle. Thus wrote Thakin Po Hla Gyi (2012: 23 - 24):

Each time these riots have occurred they have caused the uprisings of the poor against the capitalists to fade from public attention. The capitalists' stratagem of causing dissension has been able to bring about division between those who have been close... It can be seen that each time a strike uprising occurs an Indo-Burmese riot follows and covers over the strike... It can be immediately seen that with the emergence of the Indo-Burmese riot, the capitalist government promulgates in reference to that riot many new laws and imposes restrictions on political activities... We slaves are engaged in petty internecine fighting. There is no prestige in it at all. And we fail to get at the real issue... We should understand that by stirring up religion and ethnicity the matter of the poor vanishes.

While Thakin Po Hla Gyi emphasized the capacity and primary importance of workers' self-organization, subsequent Burmese politicians and political parties have sought to use his legacy to legitimize the principles of authority and individual political leadership over the masses. In 1987, for example, the BSPP government, following its demonitization of all prior bank notes, issued a new 45 kyat currency note with Thakin Po Hla Gyi's portrait on one side and the colonial oil fields on the other. In the post-1988 period, opposition politicians inside Myanmar and in exile have likewise sought to use Thakin Po Hla Gyi's legacy to legitimize their own political roles. It was this self-promoting appeal to Thakin Po Hla Gyi's legacy by opposition politicians that the late Ludu Sein Win criticized in a 2010 opinion piece, in which he wrote:

Without fully understanding the past, some assume that leaders like Churchill and Roosevelt were makers of history. And by pointing to figures such as Thakin Phoe Hla Gyi, General Aung San and Saya San, they often conclude that people will follow if they are led. While it was believed that Thakin Phoe Hla Gyi masterminded the labor strikes of oil fields against British oil interests, it was in fact Thakin Phoe Hla Gyi who was born of the movement.

At a broader level, Banmaw Tin Aung (1973: 100) likewise emphasized that regarding the 1938 uprising, it was not due to individual political leaders or political parties but rather to “the Myanmar working class” striking on the oil fields that “the whole population of Myanmar rose up and followed.” Significantly, Thakin Po Hla Gyi also highlighted this very point, playing down his own role in the strike and that of other Thakins. Appended to *The Strike War* is an article from the *Dobama Asiyaone* journal *Kywe-kyaw-than (Proclamation)*, explaining that, “In truth, the Thakins did not ignite the fire in the strike” (Thakin Po Hla Gyi 2012: 51).

Conclusion: Towards a critical research agenda

At the present conjuncture, no one in Myanmar is seriously proposing a revival of the CPB or the founding of a new Leninist party. Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi, by contrast, retain their relevance. Thakin Po Hla Gyi and the 1938 oil workers’ strike continue to serve as points of reference for worker organising in the country. In 2013, for example, Myanmar labor activist Su Su Nway commemorated the 75th anniversary of “revolution year 1300” together with Thakin Po Hla Gyi’s 84-year-old daughter (*The Irrawaddy* 2013). Likewise, Banmaw Tin Aung’s novels continue to be widely read in Myanmar, and they have recently gone through a series of reprints. These books continue to influence new generations of organizers and activists in the country (e.g. *Workers and Farmers Solidarity League of Burma* 2011: 26 - 29).

What would it mean for those of us doing social research in Myanmar to likewise take seriously the politics that Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi advanced? At one level, this would simply mean focusing our research on the struggles of workers, peasants and other subordinate classes in Myanmar. More deeply, however, a critical research agenda derived from their politics would need to acknowledge and draw out the political content of these struggles, recognizing them as claims made on the direction of the country’s development. This would require, among other things, attending to the participatory, egalitarian, and solidaristic forms and aspirations that develop within the self-organized struggles of Myanmar workers and peasants. To what extent are the struggles of workers and peasants in Myanmar embodying a politics that none of the country’s opposition politicians and political parties have been able to effectively capture? This question is part of the legacy of Banmaw Tin Aung and Thakin Po Hla Gyi. Out of respect for their commitment to the advancement of workers and peasants in Myanmar, we as social researchers and analysts might start by taking this question seriously.

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Footnotes

[1] See Chakrabarty (2000: 14 - 15) for important differences between these two traditions.

[2] Personal communication, U Nyein Way, literary editor, *Mizzima News*, 23 September 2014.

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.