

# Taking post-development theory to the field: Issues in development research, Northern Thailand

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**Abstract:** *Emerging post-development literatures consider how post-structural and post-colonial critiques of development could form the basis for new kinds of development practices. Much of the search for such post-development possibilities draws on new theories of discourse. This paper considers the challenges of bringing together empirical research and the experience of doing development with the often ethereal and deeply speculative work of discourse theorists. I reflect on the course taken by my own research in Northern Thailand, and discuss the possibilities that can emerge as theory confronts empirics, and conceptual frameworks are transformed through the daily politics of fieldwork.*

**Keywords:** *ethnography, fieldwork, governmentality, hegemony, Southeast Asia*

## Introduction

The term 'post-development' is called upon to serve many varied purposes in contemporary debates about international aid and the Third World. It can mean 'anti-development': a rejection of the development project and the binaries of Third World/First World, developed/underdeveloped that are thus invoked. It can refer to an analysis of the unfair dynamics of power that present themselves through any such language of development and representations of 'the poor' or 'the needy' underdeveloped subjects who require aid. It can also be used to invoke a sense of the long-held promise of development (Gibson-Graham, 2005) and to direct thought towards how development might yet be a conduit for achieving social justice. In all cases, however, post-development involves a critical engagement with what development is and what it has achieved. Because it is so critical, much post-development literature is accused of focusing only on a critique of development without offering any suggestions for how to move forward. This paper explores the tendency of post-development to conclude with critique and offer little in the way of new

possibilities. I argue that the lack of post-development alternatives is in a large part because of the way that post-development work has used Foucauldian analyses of power, and in particular ideas of governmentality. By reflecting on my own research, I identify where the governmentality approach ceased to be useful and discuss how a different set of conceptual tools – in discourse theory and post-Marxist theories of hegemony – opened up new possibilities for exploration and analysis.

This paper seeks to contribute to a long-standing tradition in ethnographic research and cultural geography of reflecting on the process of field research. At the same time, I aim to explore how the conceptual frameworks used allow us to see certain things in our research while obscuring others. By juxtaposing the use of theories of governmentality against the use of post-Marxist theories of hegemony, I demonstrate the value of experimentation in theoretical frameworks through the course of a research project. While I began my field research with the conceptual tools of governmentality, I was forced – by both the content of my data and the experience of fieldwork – to confront the limits of governmentality and look

for a new language that would allow me to deal fairly with the concerns and perspectives of my research partners.

The intellectual journey from governmentality to hegemony was both a response to the daily politics of fieldwork and a response to what I began to perceive as the interpretive limits of governmentality. Much post-development literature draws heavily on the work of Foucault, and in particular his later work on power and governmentality. Escobar (1995a,b) is one of the better known scholars to bring Foucault to the study of development processes. His now classic *Encountering Development* identified a development discourse of progress and modernisation and analysed the way in which discourse constructs a disadvantaged Third World, inhabited by poor and needy Third World subjects. At the same time, development discourses construct the First World as the model of progress and modernity, and the locus of the necessary knowledge to transform the 'underdeveloped' nations. Ferguson (1994), Li (1999) and Bryant (2002) are among others to have explored the ways in which development programmes can be analysed for their governmental rationalities and their underlying tendencies to produce new spaces and subjects that could be subjected to the governing rationalities of the modern state.

These analyses are powerful and have made important contributions to a critical awareness of complex power relations in and through which development work is conducted. But there are limitations in the approach. In this paper, I discuss how my dual use of theories of governmentality and theories of hegemony contribute both to an understanding of my field site – community development projects in Northern Thailand – and potentially to the way governmentality and hegemony are conceptualised. As a set of intellectual tools, Foucauldian analyses of power shapes what one can see (as a researcher and critical commentator) and what one can do (as a development professional). I explore how a Foucauldian approach plays out in the context of research into community development practice in Northern Thailand. In particular, I reflect on the process of a field-based research programme and the ways in which a Foucauldian analysis limited what could be seen and said about professional sub-

jects. Alongside, I explore what possibilities are presented by different tools for the analysis of power, in particular, how the work of Laclau and Mouffe on discourse theory move attention from dynamics of domination and control within power relationships, to dynamics of transformation and possibility.

I begin with an account of how international development can be understood as a technology of governmentality in the context of Northern Thailand. Then, I discuss the limits of a concept of governmentality for my project. Finally, I go on to explore how the concept of hegemony can work alongside governmentality studies to enable a productive analysis that opens up possibilities for new ways of thinking and doing, and new strategies for effecting social and political change.

### **Development as a technology of governmentality**

Since the late 1960s, the northwest border region of Thailand (see Fig. 1) has been the focus of considerable community development activities. Much of this was focused on the mountain villages of so-called 'hill tribe' minorities in an effort to address what became known as the 'hill tribe problems': (i) opium production; (ii) environmental destruction through 'slash and burn' farming; and (iii) the threat posed to national security by a mobile and unregulated population in the borderlands.

My project was motivated first by a desire to understand how highlanders had come to be characterised as a problematic population in need of development assistance. The characterisation of highlanders as a 'problem' is clear in the well-established use of the phrase 'the hill tribe problem' that was central to early policy documents on highland development in the 1960s and 1970s. The discourse of the hill tribe problem has shifted significantly since then, but much contemporary development work in the highlands continues to be premised upon very similar rhetoric. Thus, my focus on this discourse of a problematic population was intended to explore how it operated as a technology of governmentality.

Second, I was interested in the development professionals who were called in to do development work in the highlands: how did devel-

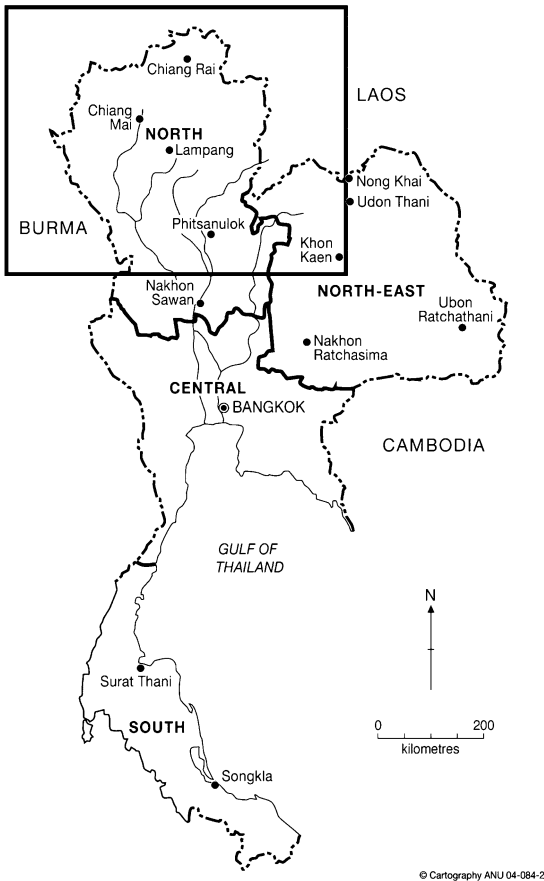


Figure 1. The northwest border region of Thailand

How did it become possible to make truths about persons, their conduct, the means of action upon this and the reasons for such action? How did it become possible to make these truths in these ways and in this geographical, temporal and existential space? How were these truths enacted and by whom, in what torsions and tensions with other truths, through what contests, struggles, alliances, bribes, blackmails, promises and threats? What relations of seduction, domination, subordination, allegiance and distinction were thus made possible? (Rose, 1999: 19–20).

These are questions about how knowledge and truth come into being in particular historical circumstances, and how these knowledges become performative. Governmentality studies unravel particular hierarchies of power in which conduct is regulated and shaped according to the authority of some system of truth or of some authoritative individual.

Rose’s ‘family of questions’ for governmentality studies allowed me to see and investigate certain things during the process of fieldwork. Primarily, Rose’s approach to the study of governmentality lends itself to the construction of genealogies. Foucauldian genealogies are an account of the emergences of contemporary norms. The genealogy looks for key moments, key discursive shifts that seem to have shaped the taken-for-granted; key moments when prior norms ceased to be normal and new languages and new truths emerged. Unlike veridical investigations of the past, Foucauldian genealogies do not search for a singular definitive cause or moment of origin as such, nor do they assume that the past has unfolded inevitably towards the present – there is no assumption that we are embedded in a teleological unfolding of time that can be understood necessarily as ‘progress’ or evolution (and the concomitant movement from worse to better or less to more that is thus implied – see discussion in Dean, 1992; Rose, 1999; McKinnon, 2004).

Using a genealogical approach in my fieldwork, I conducted lengthy and often repeated interviews, casual conversations and participant observation with professionals working in the mountains. Through these encounters, I sought an understanding of the kinds of professional identities, or professional subjects, that development professionals brought into being. I

opment professionals relate to a discourse of the ‘hill tribe problem’ and what role did they play in relationships of power embedded in remedying the ‘hill tribe problem’ and enacting development in the highlands?

These questions were framed and informed by an interest in governmentality, and were inspired particularly by Nikolas Rose’s interpretation of governmentality studies. For Rose, governmentality is understood as a range of formal and informal technologies, programmes and strategies for regulating and shaping the ‘conduct of conduct’. Such technologies arise out of and gain their legitimacy through certain ‘regimes of truth’ whereby political, social and cultural norms become the taken-for-granted and normative foundation of social systems. Governmentality studies thus pursue a ‘distinctive family of questions’ (Rose, 1999: 19), which examine the emergence and effect of regimes of truth:

wanted to find out how they imagined their role as professionals engaged in a process of community development; what discourses of professionalism, development, ethnicity, modernisation and so on, and what rationalities, what truths, did they call upon in thinking about what they did and how they did it, and *who they were* in the doing. How did these discourses become embodied through practice? And how did all of these correspond with the discourse of a hill tribe problem that provided the first impetus for development interventions and development-related research in the highlands? Alongside this investigation in the present, my research extended into the archives of public and private libraries and collections to try and unravel how it had become possible to speak of highlanders as problematic 'hill tribes'; how this 'truth' had come into being and how it had been contested, restated and reformed through the history of development in the highlands. Finally, I sought to understand what had been made possible by the 'hill tribe problem', what relationships of power had been brought into being and what actions had been sanctioned or forbidden therein.

The discourse of the 'hill tribe problem' first emerged in the late 1960s under a set of particular geopolitical conditions and concerns, closely tied to the emergence of the Thai state and ongoing processes of nation-state building. In the 1950s, the northern borders of the Thai state were still relatively unknown, isolated and remote areas that had not yet been brought under the clear control of the Bangkok-based government. Until this time, the region had been allowed to retain some of its ambiguous position as a buffer zone between Thailand and neighbouring states. With the rise of the Cold War, however, tight control over the borders became a high priority.

As state authorities shifted their focus to the borderlands, the highland minorities that dwelled in those same hills started to be of concern. It was at about this time that the first references to highlanders enter state discourse. In 1959 the term 'hill tribe' entered the official vocabulary with the establishment of the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program of the Department of Public Welfare. The term 'hill tribe' came into being alongside a discourse of 'hill tribe problems' that the Hill Tribe Develop-

ment Program was designed to deal with. In 1964, the threefold 'hill tribe problem' would form the main objectives of the newly established Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program of the Department of Public Welfare. These were:

- 1 To promote and develop the socio-economic standard of the hill tribes by ways of promoting their occupation, education and health as well as helping develop their own communities.
- 2 To prevent forest and watershed destruction by way of introducing stabilised farming.
- 3 To abolish opium production by way of introducing other occupations to replace opium-raising.
- 4 To guarantee the public safety in border provinces by way of promoting mutual understanding and loyalty (Department of Public Welfare, Thailand, 1964).

These core 'problems' for which aid was required coincided with international geopolitical concerns of the day. The Thai Ministry for the Interior began to take interest in the highlands around the height of the Cold War and in the midst of the United States' engagement in Vietnam. It was also at a point where the trade in narcotics and the preservation of old growth forests were internationally emerging concerns. The issue of opium eradication was to become a core focus of many of the interventions in the highlands. It was a focus that would allow projects to simultaneously address issues of national security, the threat of communism and deforestation. The discourse of a 'hill tribe problem' clearly spoke to several of the multifaceted concerns of the day. Accurate or not, the rhetoric of narcotics, national security and environment connected conveniently to many of the preoccupations of the international community.

As Escobar has noted, the development process often works by defining new problems or abnormalities that can then be treated and reformed through the development process (Escobar, 1995a: 41). The process of defining a 'hill tribe problem' can be seen in this way. Rendering the hill tribes 'problematic' made it possible to subject them to the tools of government: registration, policing, survey and ultimately development. These measures would succeed in transforming the highlands from

ungoverned to governed spaces, making the border region clearly part of Thailand.

The first step to bringing development to the highlands was through the work of the Border Patrol Police (BPP), established in 1955. The BPP's main role in Northern Thailand was to bring the borderlands within the circle of government surveillance and control.<sup>1</sup> The BPP was assigned the task of patrolling remote hill areas, and forging friendly relationships with hill people. The responsibilities first taken on by the BPP were soon taken up by the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program (hereafter Hill Tribe Welfare Program) of the Department of Public Welfare, established in 1959. In the following decade, state presence in the hills continued to expand. The BPP was strengthened, and land settlement projects (*Nikhom*) became demonstration plots for alternative agricultural techniques. The *Nikhom* would also become the bases for Mobile Development Teams, which were to approach highlanders 'in their own world, in their own physical and social environment' (Mannorff, 1967: 537).

The BPP and the Mobile Development Teams were only the first step in what would become a much more extensive process involving internationally funded multilateral development programmes and teams of international researchers. Over the next two decades, the United Nations and the governments of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and Germany among others would establish multilateral development programmes in the highlands. While opium crop replacement was often the central focus of these projects, the process of finding alternative cash crops was expected to simultaneously address issues of national security and deforestation through the increased contact between highland communities and state officials, and the introduction of permanent cropping systems, which would entail permanent settlement. The Thai-German Highland Development Programme (TGHDP), the longest running of the multilateral projects, provides a good example of these broad-ranging aims. The TGHDP was established in 1981 and was aimed at accomplishing five central objectives:

1 Improvement of subsistence in cash farming practices supporting more sustainable farming systems.

- 2 Conservation, development and efficient utilisation of the natural resources in the highlands, in particular forest, soil and water.
- 3 Improvement of social services in the highlands, as well as communications and infrastructures.
- 4 Furthering the stability and security of highland areas through rural development measures.
- 5 Facilitation of integration of the highland population into the mainstream of the Thai nation (Dirksen, 1993: 4).

Here, certain 'abnormalities' were presented for treatment: the disadvantaged ethnic minority, shifting cultivation, inefficient utilisation of natural resources, opium cultivation, security and stability, integration of the highland population in the Thai mainstream, community stability, sanitation and education, and access to Royal Thai Government support (Brandenberg, 1982). The process of redressing these 'problems' would, over the next decade, ensure that the communities within the TGHDP project area were brought into the state system by building roads, connecting villages to markets and extending state services such as schools and health clinics.

The aims and objectives of development work in the highlands and the approaches used have changed significantly since the TGHDP began work. In keeping with a community development gloss, the emphasis of earlier projects shifted from opium eradication to drug trafficking and addiction. Security issues were played down, although highlanders often remain depicted as threatening outsiders. Environmental degradation, preservation of forest areas, along with finding modes of sustainable agriculture or at least marketable agricultural produce remained strong concerns. A shift in project focus is in part the result of the strong critique levied at a discourse of the 'hill tribe problem' and the way projects were established to respond to it. As a result, most development projects these days engage a participatory rhetoric, which prioritises addressing the real needs of highland communities.

The new participatory projects, however, take place in a social and political landscape that has been shaped by many years of development work that originated with a concern for the problematic hill tribes. Since 1972 when the

first multilateral programme (the Joint Thai–United Nations Programme for Drug Abuse Control) commenced work, life in the hills has changed dramatically. Villages are now registered and every resident has been issued with personal identification papers – although many still do not have citizenship papers. All villages now have an elected headman whose duties are to liaise with Thai government authorities and in many places this elected representative has replaced traditional leadership structures. Very little opium is grown in the highlands anymore, and few communities are able to maintain their traditional rotational farming systems. Instead, the focus has shifted to the production of cash crops such as cabbage, coffee, lychee and flowers. Very few communities, however, have gained title over their farmland, even where fields are dedicated to long-term crops like coffee and lychee.

While there is debate about whether or not highland villages have benefited from development, one clear outcome of the attentions paid to highland communities over the past four decades is that the highlands have been brought within the ‘embrace of the state’ (Torpey, 2000). Highland villages are now very clearly within the governing authority of the state and its various branches, and development programmes have been a part of the overall process that has brought about these changes. The discourse of a ‘hill tribe problem’ provided the rationale for development interventions, and a means (among others) for highlanders to become subjects governable under the formal authority of the Thai state (as well as the less formal authority of development programmes).

Viewed through the governmentality frame, it is possible to see how discourses of the ‘hill tribe problem’ of national security, environmental damage and opium, constructed a highland space characterised by its lawlessness, its distance from the state and its damaging otherness to the Thai nation. Measures taken by the Thai government and international donors transformed this space into a governable space, transformed remote mountains into accessible Thai territory and made it possible for the state to administer the highland population. The highlands, constructed as a peripheral and disadvantaged space, inhabited by ‘dangerous’ and ‘deficient’ subjects, became the space of

‘problems’, which could then be ‘fixed’ through outside intervention. In the process, the highlands became known and governed in new ways, transforming remote and largely un-governed – at least by the Thai state – highland communities into governable spaces and governable subjects.

### The limits of governmentality

This very brief genealogy of highland development programmes and ‘the hill tribe problem’ that drove them demonstrate what a Foucauldian analysis can reveal. In this case it brings forward the complex relations of power underpinning the conduct of development. A focus on governmentality allows analysis of how the apparently benign practice of helping the poor and needy hill tribes of Thailand is in fact bound up in the play of geopolitics. A governmentality approach has been brought to analyses of development elsewhere with often similar results. Ferguson’s (1994) analysis of development programmes in Lesotho, for example, revealed the geopolitically legible outcomes of apparently apolitical and unsuccessful development programmes. Bryant has used governmentality to critically analyse the participatory development agenda of contemporary Filipino non-government organisations, demonstrating the dynamics of domination and control embedded in an apparently benign development process (Bryant, 2002). And of course, critics like Escobar, Esteva, Yapa and others are known for their analyses of development discourses and the relations of power so embodied. Along with my own analysis of the discourse of highland development, these studies conduct a post-development critique that problematises development agendas and approaches. The critique that is often raised in response is that while post-development can offer critical analysis, it is not, however, able to offer any viable alternatives (see for example Corbridge, 1998; Schuurman, 2000). This is true despite the fact that, as Rose states, what distinguishes governmentality from other studies of power and the state is ‘their power to open a space for critical thought’ (Rose, 1999: 19). Studies of governmentality are directed by an interest in what such studies may ‘make amenable to *our* thought and action, in the sense of

us being able to count its cost and think of it being made *otherwise*' (20, original italics). In seeing the constructed nature of the taken-for-granted of state, subject, of practices of development and the problems they are supposed to address, it becomes possible to see how things might have been made in *this* way, and that they might also have been made *otherwise*. What governmentality cannot (and was never intended to) do, however, is provide an adequate sense of how an *otherwise* might look, how we might strive towards it.

Foucault's own refusal to identify how *otherwise* might look need not constrain the work of those who use and build on his ideas in their empirical work. Yet it seems very little of this has been done. I suggest that part of the reason why the governmentality perspective cannot guide us to alternative futures has to do with the position of the subject, and the way the subject can be understood, through a mode of analysis that focuses so much on relations of domination. Foucault's analysis of power is often misunderstood for simply an analysis of modes of domination and control. In fact, the model of diffuse and ever-present power that Foucault argues for means that power is seen as much in a productive and positive role as a role of delimitation and domination. There is a reason, however, why this point is so often misconstrued. In pursuing an analysis that focuses on various technologies to shape the 'conduct of conduct', attention is pulled towards the dominant discourses, institutions etc., which shape us as subjects, rather than how we shape ourselves in relation to those dominant discourses. The focus, in other words, is on structure over agency – on the discourses that shape our becoming subjects, rather than how subjects might shape the discourses.

It is not surprising that so much post-development work concludes at this point of analysis where the (deliberate or accidental) manipulations of institutions and normative discourses delimit and define what is possible. In focusing our attention here, I argue that we (post-development scholars) tend to forget that one of Foucault's core contributions was to introduce an understanding of power as a diffuse and ever-present aspect of all human relationships and social dynamics. There is no point at which we may step outside such rela-

tions and achieve a *freedom from* power. If this is so, then we must presume that subjects are not only made in the enactment of normative discourse through self-government, the conduct of conduct, but that also, as Butler (1993) has argued, with each act of constituting ourselves as subjects, we not only repeat a normative model, but also alter and reinvent it.

With this understanding of the power manifested in the ways that we shape our own becomings, I turn now to a discussion of where post-development thought might be taken through consideration of the subjects at the heart of development – in particular professional subjects who enacted the highland development programmes in Northern Thailand. Following a more 'traditional' post-development analysis, one can see how the development professionals who carried out the programmes could be seen as agents of governmentality. Based on my ethnographic work with professionals in Chiang Mai, 2000–2001, however, a characterisation of professionals as agents of governmentality just did not fit with the heartfelt stories I was told of their struggle to act as community advocates. Many of the professionals I worked with clearly recognised that the programmes they worked on were often articulating institutional or state concerns, but they articulated a narrative of their own becoming as subjects that focused instead upon a role of community advocacy. Many professionals I worked with spoke about their work as characterised by an effort to make sure that concerns and priorities of highland communities became central to the projects they were working on.

The tension between the professional subject as agent for state or institutional power, and the professional subject as community advocate, came through clearly in the case of an agricultural project in the northern province of Nan. One of the key issues, which the project had been addressing, was fire management. The village fields encroach on officially designated reserve land, under the management of the Royal Forest Department (RFD), and every year when villagers burned the fields to replenish the soil after harvest, there was the risk that fire could spread into reserve areas. The question of fire damage is an emotive one, and could inform a decision to force villagers to move out of reserve land. The RFD is known for being

hostile to the presence of highland villages in reserve areas. In this case, however, over many months of meetings and discussion between project staff and village representatives, project staff began to understand that each of the villages already had fire management strategies in place.

Project staff began working with these informal village regulations to facilitate negotiations between neighbouring villages about who held responsibility for fire control around the zones where their territories met, and how to establish a communications system to ensure no fires got out of control. The project recorded their agreed regulations, and negotiated with the RFD to give formal recognition to the agreed strategy. From here, they drafted detailed rules and regulations, and mapped out areas of responsibility. The process even extended to negotiation of more general rules on land management and forest conservation. The final product was a document entitled 'Village Watershed Network Rules and Regulations', and included detailed guidelines and an agreed system of fines that now hold power at the District Government level.

I held long conversations with the Chief Technical Advisor on several occasions, and he discussed this success with evident pleasure and pride. He spoke of the special effort it requires to sit and meet with villagers over many long nights and to get them thinking about their problems and how they believe these problems should be solved. To succeed through this process to compile community management strategies that clearly originated in and were owned by the villagers themselves, was seen as an achievement. Even more so was the success in obtaining formal recognition of the strategy from the RFD. In a recent email reflecting on his experiences in the project, the advisor outlined how he negotiated a difficult position as a consultant brought in to carry out an already established project:

I was contracted under a master-servant relationship (contract with the consulting company selected by the donor government) to implement the project objectives agreed with the implementing agency. From my project implementation experience, I knew the 'top down' approach being used by RFD staff before the Nan project did not work and would not result

in successful project implementation. I had therefore to demonstrate to the RFD staff processes that enabled greater participation of the village stakeholders . . . [and] could result in successful implementation of the project objectives and make [the RFD's] day-to-day work easier (e.g. forest fire management) (pers. comm., 21 November 2006).

One way to understand the advisors' work is to look at it as part of a process of governing and introducing regulatory authority – the formality of the process itself gives legitimacy to only certain kinds of knowledge. Furthermore, the outcome of the project is one more step in deepening the fit between the expectations and priorities of state authorities (such as the RFD) and the conduct of good citizens in highland villages (although many of these good people do not have citizenship). These processes are certainly occurring but the manager himself understood his role differently. For him, part of his work is to act as an advocate for processes that will bring communities to the centre of the project. An important component of this is to work to change attitudes and approaches within the RFD:

One of the most satisfying results of the project to me was to observe the changes in RFD watershed management. Chiefs who at the beginning of the project were using 'top down planning and implementation' were saying to me 'of course we have to work with the village people if we want to have effective fire management (pers. comm., 21 November 2006).

The advisor's pride in the project comes from successfully shifting the focus of RFD from an agenda of limiting and controlling village activity, to a sense of partnership and a greater respect for village skills and knowledge. As they have been deployed through post-development literature, the conceptual tools of governmentality do little to help us see how this process can be opening up new possibilities and opportunities, and reconfiguring long-standing relationships of power. It is a process ultimately grounded in a sense of hope that, as a development professional, one might bring into being a better future. The language of governmentality does not easily enable analysis that may be true to such hope.



Here is where a post-development analysis confronts the implications of Foucault's refusal to speak of 'what is to be done'. What Foucault provides are critical tools for the analysis of the history of the present. While, as Rose (1999) states, they help us to think how things could have been otherwise, they are not tools for practical transformative action. Although it can take us to the threshold, the language of governmentality does not lend itself to proposing what an alternative future might look like. For Foucault the work of the intellectual is to make things possible by transforming how we imagine ourselves:

My role – and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are much freer than they feel . . . To change something in the minds of people (Foucault, in Martin *et al.*, 1988).

Development, in contrast, is primarily concerned with transformative action – it is posited on the very (modernist) premise that we can envisage a future that is better and work to bring it into being. While anti-development critique concludes with the argument that the whole project of development is so problematic that it should not continue, post-development maintains some commitment to the hope that drives development interventions. Post-development problematises various aspects of the epistemology and ontology of the modernist development project: (i) its assumption of universalism; (ii) its focus on the concept of *progress* and the privileging of an economic essentialism within that; and (iii) the problematisation of a condition labelled underdevelopment and the suggestion of remedies. Using the tools of post-modern and post-colonial analysis, the job of post-development then is to locate alternative ways of doing development that build upon critical histories of development, and seek new, post-development ways of doing development.

### Productive post-development analysis using hegemony

The concept of hegemony has not yet been explored with regard to post-development, but could provide one way for conducting post-development analysis without falling into anti-development closure, or the unproductive

pattern that much post-development work is accused of. Hegemony, as conceptualised by Laclau and Mouffe (both together in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985, and separately Laclau, 1991, 1996, 2000, 2005; Mouffe, 1993, 2005), and the debates on radical democracy that have emerged from their work, bring post-structural analyses of society and power together with a critical rethink of Marxism and Gramsci's work on hegemony. The influence of Foucault's work is clear in this branch of discourse theory. Like Foucault, they recognise the diffuse nature of power, and its central role in social relations. As Butler notes:

Distinct from a view that casts the operation of power in the political field exclusively in terms of discrete blocs which vie with one another for control of policy questions, hegemony emphasises the ways in which power operates to form our everyday understanding of social relations, and to orchestrate the ways in which we consent to (and reproduce) those tacit and covert relations of power (Butler, 2000: 13).

Power is a central element in the way social norms are established and how they evolve. Yet, as distinct from a language of governmentality, hegemony is also a concept born of a political agenda – that of rethinking Marxism in the post-Soviet age and formulating a new project of liberation (Laclau, 1991).<sup>2</sup> Thus, rather than being focused upon the points at which power becomes fixed in certain normative discourses or acts of governing, Laclau and Mouffe draw attention to the points where power is moving and unfixed, the spaces where 'new conceptual horizons (may be) opened up by anomalous or subversive practices' (Butler, 2000: 14). What hegemony allows is a framework for seeing how the anomalous or subversive practices that we may uncover may signify a rearticulation that pushes at the malleable limits of hegemony.

For Laclau and Mouffe, hegemonic formations are always in the process of being made; they are discursive constructs that never quite achieve fullness and are never quite completely realised. As an incomplete and malleable entity any hegemonic system is always already contested and shifting and any claim to power is already contingent. Where governmentality studies focus analysis on how dominant discourses came into being, and how they operate to sustain

relations of power, hegemony identifies where dominance is interrupted and thus begins to articulate a means of intervention. Both build on a post-structural analysis of discourse and language that takes as its base the premise that all meaning is contingent – thus, there is no objective truth beyond discourse; in other words, there is no irreducible ground upon which a given social or political system may stand. What political movements do stand upon, then, is a contingent and constructed ideology – a set of values and beliefs (or myths in Laclau's 1996 terminology) that are called upon as if they were universal. Justice, democracy, nation, humanitarianism and progress are examples of these – they are hard-to-define terms that are called upon as universal at the same time as their meanings can never quite be fixed.

One important implication of Laclau and Mouffe's analysis (and one which Laclau has gone on to explore more carefully) concerns the role of the subject. As with hegemonic formations, Laclau sees the subject as a discursive and mobile entity whose coming into being forms the core of hegemonic struggles. It is in the subject that identity takes shape as the material expression of ideology – that political movements become tangible and affective in the work of identification and action. The subject may be thought of as the point at which a universalising discourse becomes aligned with particular reality, where the gap between them is bridged. Thus, any subject is the expression of an ideological formation.

To consider the development professionals with whom I worked, one can think of those individuals working to materialise a certain ideology, a certain set of values. As they identified themselves as a certain kind of professional, they are bringing into being a certain subject. This subject takes shape around the expression of particular ethical values, a particular approach to development work, and, by extension, a set of universalising ideals. The majority of previous analysis considering development professionals focuses on their position as agents of neocolonialism or as conduits for the imposition of Western-defined development norms (see Townsend *et al.*, 2002, 2004; Kothari, 2005, 2006; Nightingale, 2005). I argue that the story is not so straightforward in northern Thailand (see McKinnon, 2007, 2008). In the case of

the Nan advisor, his sense of professional identity comes into being around the articulation of ideals of empowerment and altruism – the point of development is to make life better for village people, not to carry out state-led agendas.

In fact, among most of my research partners in northern Thailand it was taken for granted that the work of professionals ought to be about bringing into being a more egalitarian world in which all human beings could access the same rights and opportunities, could live happy lives and be valued and respected. These were taken to have universal value and universal applicability, and the role of these development professionals was to work and struggle to bring this hopeful future into being. Through the analytical lens of discourse theory, the work of professionals can be understood as a way of bringing a certain kind of subject into being – in this case a development professional who is ethical and an advocate for poor communities. As that professional subject comes into being, so too do the universal values which it reflects – those universalising values of development-as-social-justice. In the coming into being of the subject, the ideological foundations of a hegemonic project also come into being: as Žižek points out, Laclau sees the subject as 'the very agent that accomplishes the operation of hegemony' (Žižek, 1991: 182). Universalising ideals become tangible in and through a particular identity, through the existence of the subject.

The coming into being of the subject is also a process through which hegemonies are contested and transformed. In the constant work of articulating identities, the subject becomes the site of hegemonic struggles; as professionals work to 'be' the right kind of professional, they are working with and altering the kinds of development that are also being brought into existence. Where concepts of governmentality tend to look at the subject in relation to dominant discourses, this conceptualisation of hegemony includes analysis of how processes of subject formation are also processes in and through which dominant discourses may be reconfigured, shifted or combated. By examining the daily struggles of development professionals, it becomes possible to see clearly the productive possibilities that may emerge. The project advisor's stories of negotiating with the RFD to get them to take on board village fire

management strategies invoke the sense of a professional who struggles for social justice against state hegemony which has defined the hill tribes as 'problematic'. Through the process of delicate negotiation, the hard work of community meetings and the determination of the professional to 'empower', something takes place, which can be seen as a positive step towards some kind of social justice or liberation. In this process of doing development, hill tribe villagers characterised in the past only as 'problematic' are also able to become characterised as knowledgeable and respected. With project staff acting as facilitators, guiding negotiations between villages, and between villages and the RFD, village law is able to enter the realm of state government. Through this process, local practices and regulations of the village become not only accepted by the state, but also invested with state power. Moving beyond the kinds of analysis of power and relations of dominance that have characterised much post-development debate enables us to see these movements as positive possibilities. Such possibilities can be recognised by a post-development approach that is flexible and responsive, and interested in engaging with theory alongside a productive interaction with 'the field'.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I began with the question of how post-development theory is relevant to the 'real world' and how one might put post-development theory to good use. Much post-development work relies upon Foucauldian analyses of power and concepts of governmentality, but, I argue, have allowed their attention to be pulled too much towards relations of dominance and control rather than looking into productive power relations. By tracing a genealogy of the 'hill tribe problem', I showed how the focus on governmentality can reveal important dynamics in the development process, and particularly the ways in which development programmes were called into being as a technology through which to extend state regulation and render the high-land population governable.

There are limits to the usefulness of this analysis however. When I came to consider the role of

the professional in a dynamic of governance and development, this approach draws attention to professionals as agents of governmentality, in stark contrast to professional's representations of themselves as advocates for hill tribe communities with responsibilities to help and empower. While the post-development use of governmentality allows analysis to focus on multifaceted relations of power and governmental rationalities bound up in development, it fails – as it should – to provide any positive sense of 'what is to be done'.

New theories of hegemony may provide a basis for thinking how development professionals might act positively within the complex power dynamics of development. In the work of Laclau and Mouffe, the formation of subjects, the machinations of modern modes of power and the politics of everyday life, are understood to be interconnected, fluid and discursive processes. Laclau's explorations of hegemony are an exploration of modern modes of identity politics in which the formations of institutional powers (particularly in the state) are bound up with the formation of subjects and the discursive interplay between the universal and the particular. In the idea of hegemonic struggle, it became possible to not only analyse what had been and how it became so, but also think of the strategies that could move practices of development beyond narrow geopolitical concerns.

The project advisor in Nan was one research partner whose approach to development and professional identifications could never be comfortably characterised within a frame of governmentality. At the same time as it was vital to understand how his efforts were tied up with a complex set of power relations, embedded in rationalities of government, it is not necessary to see these efforts only for how they were subsumed in such rationalities. Applying theories of hegemony allows me to both recognise and value the subversive struggle he is engaged in. The concept of hegemony as a never-ending process of political struggle provides a way to see the geopolitics of development while being able to recognise and value the positive potential of development work from within a critical post-development perspective, and in doing so perhaps begin to work towards a vision of new kinds of post-development practice.

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## Notes

- 1 For concise discussion of the BPP's role in the highlands, see Hanks and Hanks (2001) or Renard (2001).
- 2 By contrasting Foucault and governmentality with new theories of hegemony I do not mean to imply that the work of Foucault is not political or that it is not useful in formulating transformative political projects. To the contrary, Foucault's influence in the recent work of discourse theorists like Laclau is very strong. In addition, the political project of post-development that I argue for elsewhere (see McKinnon, 2007) is quite close to the vision of a progressive politics hypothesised by Foucault in 'Politics and the Study of Discourse' (Foucault, 1991(1968)). The point is that the path of attempting to articulate a transformative political agenda is not central to Foucault's work. To achieve this requires us to think with and beyond the writings of Foucault to, as Dumm (1996) puts it, think through 'the lens they provide' towards 'a better way to think for ourselves about how we might be free' (xxiii).

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