

## **Diverse present(s), alternative futures.**

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### **Introduction**

In an emerging body of work in post-development geography there is an increasing emphasis on paying attention to communities, perspectives, ways of being that are not normally seen or adequately acknowledged. This body of work shares an interest in giving accounts of lived realities and possibilities that are absent from and made invisible through dominant paradigms of global economic and political systems. Alternative economies and alternative ways of being often go unseen in discourses that focus only on the hegemony of global capitalism or the modern state. By focusing on such alternatives new post-development studies seek to make visible, and thus strengthen, what are often small scale, local examples of diversity in economic and political practices.

In this chapter I take a look at an emerging body of work in geography focused on what Gibson-Graham refer to as a critical and ‘generative, experimental, uncertain, hopeful’ (2005: 6) project of post-development. An easy critique of post-development geographies is that they constitute a futile project, unable to address the ‘real’ issues of social justice in the world and operating in some post-modern fantasy land. The argument goes that simply identifying that which does not fit the dominant hegemony (of global capitalism for example) cannot hope to successfully challenge its dominance. Indeed there is a touch of the fairy tale in a project of making visible. Most of us are familiar with a tradition of Western story-telling, in which the bare act of believing can make something so. In Peter Pan the application of fairy dust can only make us fly if we succeed in thinking happy thoughts. The Hollywood film, *The Neverending Story* told the story of a parallel universe of magic that was slowly crumbling into a black hole as children in our world slowly stopped believing in magic. Through these tales we were as children instilled with a hope that just believing can make it so: if you believe in magic it will exist; if you think happy thoughts you can fly. Arguments of alterity and transformative affects

are tinged with this hope – what we believe, what we say, how we speak and act and see may be able to constitute new realities, new futures.

Of course, just believing does not make it so. The link between what is seen and spoken, and the actualities of lived experience is not a matter of believing that reality can be fabricated out of thin air. A project of post-development is founded in the post-structural argument that how we understand the world (through language and representation) is intimately linked with what we then think is possible and thus how we live our lives. It is not, as the famous naysayer of postmodern cultural studies Alan Sokal would have it, an assertion that reality is invention (Sokal 1996a see also Sokal 1996b). Nor is it a neglect of material reality, a critique which has its voice in ‘assertions that capitalism *really is* the major force in contemporary life, that its dominance is not a discursive object but a reality that can’t simply be “thought away,” that it has no outside and that any so-called alternatives are actually part of the neoliberal, patriarchal, corporate capitalist global order’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 2). In contrast, geographies of alterity take as their point of departure that the way we see the world has material *effects*, on what we see, what we do and how we live. Focusing on ways of being that do not fit into the apparently hegemonic dominance of certain economic and political systems and trends does not “think away” those systems, but is a strategy for breaking down their dominance by locating and fostering diverse practices. By making diversity visible the limits of hegemony and its inability to be complete (and thus to completely dominate) are revealed.

In this chapter I explore what such projects of ‘making visible’ can hope to achieve. I offer a review of some recent work in postdevelopment geography, and present a case study of the indigenous rights movement in Thailand to consider how a project of identifying diverse practices may generate new visions into an alternative present – one that is obscured by hegemonic discourses. I explore whether a view into the diversity of the present helps to create alternative futures; that is, futures that do not adhere to the path imagined by dominant discourses of our era, such as that of global capitalism and the modern state.

## **Making alterities visible**

While small scale and local actions may not challenge hegemony directly, what they can do is give concrete demonstrations of how hegemony fails, where it does not dominate and the spaces in which viable alternatives can grow. Without rehearsing the arguments for why this is as valuable an enterprise as direct challenge to hegemonic systems, what follows are some key examples of how the small scale and local can make real changes in peoples lives.

One example can be found in Lakshman Yapa's work on rethinking poverty in Sri Lanka and in the United States (1998, 2002). In both these projects Yapa refuses to speak of 'the poor' or 'poverty', arguing that discourses of poverty help to construct conditions of material lack as a problem in a way that diminishes the capacity for the poor to act on their own behalf. Instead Yapa chooses to research and act on particular conditions and areas of concern that emerged through conversations with community partners and how they represented their desires for a better life. For example working on the question of 'how to live in healthy bodies'.

The work of J.K. Gibson-Graham involves a similar concern for language in their insistence on replacing a development focus on needs and lacks, with a focus on capabilities and assets. In their work in the Philippines and in Australia and the US, Gibson-Graham engage in a process of learning with communities about their skills and abilities, embarking on a joint discovery of existing assets and expertise. What they witness occurring through this conversation is a transformation of affect, a lightness of mood and the emergence of hope in their community participants, which has – in some cases – translated to community initiatives to establish new livelihood ventures and community support networks (see for example Gibson-Graham 1996, 2005, 2006). Gibson-Graham focus on beginning work from the here and now – with the tools and possibilities available already in locations and communities.

The use of asset mapping to initiate new possibilities is discussed by Cahill (forthcoming 2008) who has worked with Gibson-Graham on an action research project in the Philippines. The project challenged community member's beliefs about their own power to successfully initiate new economic enterprises. A mentality which characterised locals as lacking skills, commitment and opportunity pervaded both community members and

local NGOs and government officials. Asset mapping exercises identified possibilities that few had previously recognised – making visible to themselves what skills they already had and what they might be able to do with them. Building on this initial effort the project assisted local groups to form and establish economic enterprises using available resources and practices, rather than relying on outside support through traditional development interventions. The success of these initiatives helped to shift power structures in the immediate community as individuals involved grew more confident in their skills and abilities and reported being able to act with more strength in their personal and community relationships as a result.

Jayne Curnow's work (2007, forthcoming 2008) on pro-poor growth draws on Gibson-Graham. Based on ethnographic research in Eastern Indonesia Curnow discusses how local systems for surplus distribution differ dramatically from the assumptions made in mainstream ideas of how the economy does or should function. Curnow gives an account of cash surplus distribution that run counter to western capitalist values of wealth accumulation. Instead, the community sustains a cash economy based in community interdependence and the use of gambling as a means of cash redistribution. The example demonstrates the vibrancy of diverse economic forms in practice and reminds us of the need to be attentive to local particularities when it comes to understandings of how livelihoods are made and communities prosper.

Yapa, Gibson-Graham, Cahill, Curnow and others (see for example Cameron and Gibson 2005a, 2005b; Smith and Stenning 2007) are examples of projects engaged in 'making visible'. The impacts of their work is in part conceptual: a deliberate effort to think beyond the dominant paradigms we use to explain the world. Gibson-Graham works to think past a belief in the absolute dominance of global capitalism and neo-liberal agendas, Yapa strives to think against a mainstream idea of development and poverty to rethink what it is to be poor, Curnow looks beyond a dominant idea of economic development to see the things valued locally but invisible to a mainstream view. These challenges to the conceptual vocabulary we have for understanding the world also have tangible, or potentially tangible, impacts. Through their deliberate engagement with community post-development scholars like Yapa and diverse economies scholars such as Gibson-Graham, Cahill and Cameron seek to alter how ordinary people live and the possibilities they see for themselves. Curnow's work on the

other hand has potential to influence how economic development plans are made and carried out if the insights she presents can be taken up by planners and policy makers.

Postdevelopment geographies of the kind discussed above have tended to focus on questions of economy. The project of making visible, and the interest in locating diverse practices that are disguised by dominant hegemonies, is also applicable to questions of social and political organisation. In this chapter I am particularly interested in how indigenous identities challenge the hegemony of the nation-state, providing a way of being that does not fit with dominant systems of national belonging. As discussed by Niezen (2000), the global indigenous rights movement has emerged in resistance to the impositions of nation-states, yet also uses nation-state systems to push for their own goals. The international indigenous rights movement:

represents a new use of the international bodies of states to overcome the domestic abuses of states themselves, while pursuing development and recognition of international standards concerning the rights of indigenous peoples (Niezen 2000, 122).

As Niezen goes on to discuss, the declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, since adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 13 September 2007, is significant because it recognises 'indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and, by extension, their right to secession in response to state-sponsored violations of their human rights' (2000, 131).

In the interest in secession the indigenous rights movements presents indigenous politics as an alternative to existing state systems. However, the UN declaration and the international rights movement as a whole provides support for a wider range of possibilities. In practice the campaign for indigenous rights is a campaign directed at demanding something from state powers, whether this be political power in the form of self government or political representation (see Kymlicka 1995) or simply cultural legitimacy and recognition. As states respond to indigenous demands in various ways there comes a shift in how the nation is imagined. The efforts of indigenous rights activists challenge seemingly immovable boundaries of national identity and demonstrate how dominant discourses of the nation and statehood are diverse and mobile.

## Indigenous activism in the highlands of northern Thailand

The issue of indigenous rights has only recently emerged in the context of northern Thailand. The north touches on a mountainous border region, shared by Burma, Laos, China and Vietnam (see Figure 1), that has been occupied for some time by a mix of highland ethnic groups. Since the modern borders of the Thai Kingdom were finalised in the early 1900s, highlanders have lived, legally and spatially, on the edges of the Kingdom. Although some communities had been in situ for an estimated 100-300 years it is still estimated that only 60-80 percent of eligible highlanders have been granted citizenship.

[insert Figure 1. map around here]

The Royal Thai Government (RTG) has had plenty of reasons for making it difficult for eligible highlanders to obtain citizenship. Among the reasons may be the bureaucratic hassle of processing so many new applications; the impact of a longstanding discourse of a problematic and dangerous highland population that continues to hold power in the public imagination, and connected beliefs that many highlanders are illegal immigrants who are responsible for degradation of the forests, introducing the AIDS virus, and trafficking narcotics.

For most of the 1900s the RTG has been busy constructing a homogeneous Thai national identity around the idea of one people, one language, one King. A Thai identity has thus been constructed around a shared Buddhist faith, loyalty to the King, and the establishment of the central Thai dialect as the national language. Groups within the nation that did not share in these pillars of national identity were either excluded from the emerging nation-state or were forced to allow distinct characteristics to be subsumed. In northern Thailand for example, the northern Thai (*Lanna*) script stopped being used, across the country many Chinese families changed to Thai names, and minority ethnic groups like the highlanders of the north missed out on citizenships papers that were distributed across the country.

In the 1990s, however, the situation began to open up, and those that were initially excluded from this homogenous national identity began to rediscover aspects of diverse cultural and national identities that had been repressed: Chinese-Thai began using their

Chinese names again; northern Thais began to rediscover and celebrate the Lanna script; and highlanders who were eligible for citizenship began to agitate for their rights. Working through NGO groups, with allies in academia, and using all available fora including the international Thai studies conferences, the Thai media, and public rallies, these highlanders began to speak about themselves as Thais who deserve the same rights as other citizens.

As I have argued elsewhere (McKinnon 2005) this was a successful strategy because while it was a challenge to existing discourses of Thai national identity, it also worked within the existing systems. In a region where the ethno-linguistic map reveals a complex distribution of language groups that has very little correspondence to national borders there was no effort made to challenge the idea of the Thai-ness of Thai-land. These activists did not seek to challenge the authority of the Thai state, or the legitimacy of the national identity and the identity cards that went along with it. Instead by speaking about highlanders as Thais these activists sought to simply shift the boundaries of who is a legitimate Thai subject outwards to include a new group of people within the Thai nation.

Like Gibson-Graham's project to work in the here and now, the effort for citizenship worked with what was available in that moment. In this case the avenue for action was open only temporarily – the situation changed dramatically since 2002. At this time the Thaksin government instituted a new war on drugs which adversely affected minorities in the north. Along with a broader campaign for law and order, and concerns with separatist groups in the South of the country, the government became increasingly hostile to any hint of challenge (and rather quick to use the word 'terrorist'). With this incidents of police harassment of northern activists became much more intense and one of the main campaigners behind the citizenship movement chose to emigrate to the US rather than continue to put up with harassment and put her family at risk.

With the ousting of the Thaksin government in a military coup in 2006 activists have found another opportunity to intervene positively on behalf of highland communities. With the flux in Thai leadership that came after the coup activists and NGO groups saw a chance to again place the needs and concerns of indigenous groups on the government agenda. In early 2007 I worked in partnership with indigenous NGOs in northern

Thailand to bring together a group of twenty five highland village leaders and highland NGO workers in Chiang Mai to discuss ways to engage with the international indigenous rights movement. The majority of those participating were themselves members of highland minority groups, with only four ethnic Thais present (and myself the only foreigner), and all have an extensive background in development work and activism in the highlands. Only seven women attended, including myself. The workshop, on 'Indigenous identity and politics in northern Thailand', was an occasion for the group to discuss the use and translation of the term 'indigenous'.

The term does not translate easily into the Thai language or the context of highland minorities in Thailand. These groups are much more commonly seen as recent migrants who arrived in Thai territory between 300 – 50 years ago, or even more recently in the case of those who have arrived as economic or political refugees from Burma and Laos. The term 'indigenous' is often understood to denote groups who have a historical, often pre-colonial connection to a place and the land. For highlanders, who do not claim prior rights to land in the same way as Aboriginal groups elsewhere might, a claim to indigeneity is controversial (see Toyota 2005). Much more common are the terms *chon phao* 'ethnic/tribal group' or *chon phu khao* or *chao khao*, both of which are terms used for highland minority groups in particular. These terms do not, however, indicate the aspects of an indigenous identity with which highland activists identify and the political recognition that comes with that identification.

It is only in the first decade of this century that groups in the north have started to think of themselves as indigenous and to begin to identify their situation with that of other indigenous groups globally. The grounds for indigenous identification lie in the definitions of indigeneity formalised by international organisations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the Asia Development bank (ADB) and International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (WGIA). The ILO for example states in Convention no. 169 that a people are considered indigenous either because they are descendants of those who lived in the area before colonization or because they have maintained their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions since colonization and the establishment of new states (ILO 1989). Likewise the Asia Development Bank states that:



Indigenous peoples should be regarded as those with a social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society, which makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the process of development (ADB 1998)

Where the term minority indicates difference from majority population in culture, ethnicity, religion, language, and can apply broadly to groups such as religious minorities, immigrants and refugees, it accords no special rights to that group. The term indigenous, on the other hand, also indicates difference from the majority population, but also a special relationship with the land, natural environment, as well as the recognition of special rights by international agencies such as the United Nations, the ILO, ADB, and the WGIA. Definitions of indigeneity as accepted by these agencies generally recognize that indigenous groups are prior inhabitants of colonized lands; descendants of pre-modern population; groups with culture and history distinct from dominant or mainstream society; are often vulnerable populations; and, are groups who self-identify as indigenous. On the basis of these broad definitions highland communities can legitimately claim an indigenous identity in terms of their historical relationship with the highlands of Southeast Asia, their distinct culture and history and the vulnerability they experience within contemporary nation-states.

The workshop on indigenous identity held in mid-2007 was intended as a discussion among highland village leaders and highland NGOs about whether identifying themselves as 'indigenous' was appropriate or desirable for highland communities. For the majority of NGO staff participating it was clear that the use of the term indigenous was not only appropriate, but would assist in their struggle for equal rights and recognition in eyes of the Thai state.

The indigenous peoples movement is progressive in many countries.. but in the Southeast Asian region we must admit that it's rather weak. ... [So] it is necessary that we hang on to the strong indigenous movement so that we can benefit from it also...The issue is what word or term do we want to call ourselves. [It must be] a term that is mutually agreed and accepted [among all highlander groups] and has a meaning equivalent to 'indigenous peoples' as the terms carries with it both the promotion and protection of rights in the context of being in a country (NGO representative, Indigenous Identity Workshop, Chiang Mai, 29 May 2007).

By identifying as indigenous, highlanders could access the support available internationally through organizations such as the ILO or IWGIA. Furthermore, NGO

participants discussed how the term could provide an impetus for mobilisation of indigenous groups within Thailand and help to create a new political space in which to claim rights and recognition by the state and the Thai public.

The definition [of 'indigenous'] is for creating political space, not just in our country but also at an international level. In deciding the term we choose to define ourselves we should think of the pro's and con's. Let's think how it would be reflected at all four levels – regional within Thailand, at the national level in Thailand, at the regional level in Asia and internationally. Whatever term we choose we need to fight for it, for its acceptance (indigenous (NGO representative, Indigenous Identity Workshop, Chiang Mai, 29 May 2007)).

NGO representatives at the workshop were anxious to agree on a Thai translation for indigenous that they could then pursue in their campaigning efforts. The urgency of their discussions was due to the opportunities presented by two concurrent events. First, the fact that the second indigenous peoples decade is underway and presents an opportunity to link in with international campaigns on behalf of indigenous peoples. Second, the fact that the military coup in Thailand had left the nation in a state of transition as elections were yet to be held and a new constitution was in the process of being drafted. While Thai politics was in this state of flux it was seen by those organising the workshop as an ideal moment to ensure that highlanders, and other minority groups in Thailand, could be recognised as distinct yet legitimate members of the national community, and to campaign for their special way of life to be valued and sustained (field notes, 27 May 2007).

The effort to change the way highlanders are viewed is an exercise in manipulating language and rhetoric so as to bring into being new political and social possibilities. The recognition of highlanders as Thai citizens brings major changes to the lives of those who are granted papers, among which are the freedom to travel within the nation, ability to send children to school and to use public hospitals. The push now to be recognised as indigenous is on one level simply a game of language, of what term is used to describe this population. The implications of terminology, however, are huge in terms of the possibilities that being indigenous can present. By making their indigeneity visible to the Thai public, highland activists are creating new avenues to secure community rights to land and support in efforts to sustain highland language and culture.

## Conclusion

By focusing on what does not fit with dominant hegemonies post-development studies are accused of simply ignoring what is ‘really important’, and failing to act against the injustices of dominant systems. Postdevelopment geographies, however, are based in the hope that paying attention to the diversity that exists, though it may be small scale and local, can help to make real changes in peoples lives. Such studies insist that what are often thought of as absolute hegemonies, be it global capitalism or the nation-state, are in fact flawed and incomplete systems. By focusing on where they fall short it becomes possible to find the beginnings of alternative futures.

Although temporary, the openings found and exploited by indigenous activists in Thailand demonstrates the way in which there are *always* openings to be discovered. Under the Thaksin government citizenship activists found ways to push for highlanders to be accepted as legitimately Thai despite decades of a Thai nationalist discourse that clearly excluded highlanders. Following the military coup NGOs were finding ways to create new spaces in Thai politics for even more recognition of the status of highlanders, and other minority indigenous groups in Thailand. Within these movements one can find hope and demonstrate that the seeming dominance of an exclusionary discourse of Thai nationhood is not all-powerful and everlasting. It can and does change, and the discrimination and marginalisation to which highland minorities have been subjected in the past does not entirely disempower. There are always ways and means to act as long as we are engaged in a project of searching for these opportunities and uncovering what we do not see if we are only concerned with the injustice of a situation, if we only see dominance and disempowerment and are outraged. This is when it becomes possible to do something and bring alternative realities into being in the here and now.

I argue that the task of uncovering alternative realities and of working to see things differently, is not only relevant to a project of transformation – it is vital. It is vital because rather than being a project of looking to the hope of a future transformed world in which these injustices are no longer, it is a project of finding and creating hope in the world we live in, in the here and now. What is coming into being in the context of the alterities of Gibson-Grahams’s alternative economies; or Yapa’s anti-development project of healthy bodies, and my own analysis of hegemonic strategies and indigenous rights is not just fairy dust, it is not just the power of belief. Rather, it is about the power

we invest in those beliefs. The process of making visible the diversity social, political and economic realities gives them a presence in the here and now and generates new possibilities in the present that are otherwise obscured by the dominance of hegemonic discourses.

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