

An orthodoxy of ‘the local’: post-colonialism, participation and professionalism in northern Thailand

KATHARINE ISLAY MCKINNON

*Development Studies, School of People, Environment and Planning, Massey University,
Palmerston North, Private Bag 11 222, New Zealand*

E-mail: k.i.mckinnon@massey.ac.nz

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Post-colonial critiques of development reveal the neo-colonial potential of the development project, embedded in the imbalances of power in relations between West and East, First World and Third World. One of the core responses to the challenge of such a critique has been to turn to new participatory approaches that privilege local knowledges, locally defined needs and priorities, above the vagaries of aid agencies or the ‘expertise’ of development professionals. In this paper I argue that such a shift in development discourse and method has had a significant impact on the discursive practices of professionalism and professional responsibility. Drawing on ethnographic research with development professionals in northern Thailand, I argue that participation has emerged as a new orthodoxy among development professionals who seek to identify themselves as ethical and moral agents of an emancipatory development project. The rise of such orthodoxy has had clear impacts in terms of fostering the emergence of local organization and advocacy groups. At the same time, however, this paper considers how a ‘pro-local’ orthodoxy may also be having dis-enabling effects for the very project of emancipation that professionals wish to carry out.

KEY WORDS: Southeast Asia, Thailand, development, participation, subject formation, discourse, ethnography

Introduction

Post-colonial critiques have presented fundamental challenges to an altruistic project of international development. Through a post-colonial analysis, relations between West and East, First World and Third World, can be understood for the ways in which they are inevitably and inescapably embedded in imbalanced relationships of power. From the realm of geo-political processes, to the actions and interactions of institutions, to interpersonal relationships and the processes of subject formation, post-colonialism reveals the remnants of imperial dominance and dispossession in our present world. In the context of international development, post-colonialism reveals the ways in which development and development discourses can be read

as part of a neo-colonial project that touches all levels of development activity – from the interventions of the IMF to the work of a small NGO. But if we see development as a potentially neo-colonial enterprise, is it ever possible to recover the sense of the development project as an altruistic endeavour with vital emancipatory potential? And what of the professionals who do development work? Must they also be considered agents of a neo-colonial project? How may we consider the place of development practitioners themselves in these debates?

In this paper I explore how post-colonial critiques have influenced the formation of professional subjectivities. I offer a genealogy of the professional subject as a key agent in an altruistic and emancipatory discourse of development, and outline how post-colonial critiques have presented fundamental

challenges to the assumed 'good' of the professional's role. I argue that as concerns have arisen around development as an imperialist or neo-colonial project, the development community has turned increasingly to participatory approaches and a discourse of 'the local' in an effort to recapture the emancipatory potential of development. Since the 1980s, participatory practice has become so prominent in both the context of community development work and academic research that it is being referred to as a 'new orthodoxy' (Henkel and Stirrat 2001). Manikutty, for example, claims that to express doubts about the positive outcomes that can be achieved by participatory approaches is regarded as being 'almost heresy' (1997, 115).

Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken with development professionals in northern Thailand, I consider the case of the Watershed Management Symposium – a forum in which the trajectories of these debates are particularly clear. The example of the Symposium indicates how the development community in northern Thailand has embraced a 'pro-local' discourse in response to the challenges presented to development through a critique informed by post-colonialism. In the process, development professionals have contributed to significant changes in the landscape of development practice in northern Thailand. In this paper I argue that the employment of a discourse of pro-localism has enabled local engagement with development programmes and national politics. At the same time, however, rhetoric used during the Symposium indicated that pro-localism may also have dis-enabling effects on the ability of professionals – particularly international professionals – to intervene in local debates. I suggest that it is time to take stock of both the enabling and disenabling effects of a discourse of 'pro-localism', and to begin to think of how a post-development professional might be able to sustain the critical lessons of post-colonialism, while continuing to act for positive social change in the 'Third World'.

This paper emerges from a larger project that undertakes an analysis of 'subject making' by development professionals and an exploration of the possibilities for imagining post-development practices. The research is a contribution to an emerging post-development project 'that is generative, experimental, uncertain, hopeful and yet fully grounded in an understanding of the material and discursive violence and promises of the long history of development interventions' (Gibson-Graham 2005, 6). The project is based in one 'space of development' (Escobar 1995) – the highlands of northern Thailand – and uses both an historical approach, to examine discourses of development in the highlands, and an ethnographic approach,

through interviews, participant observation and conversation with a range of development professionals. Such professionals may be international aid workers, staff of local NGOs, or academics and researchers whose work contributes to development debates and practice. They come from a range of backgrounds, including educated, urban, European and Thai, as well as those from 'hill tribe' villages who have joined the indigenous NGO movement in northern Thailand.

In this paper, I begin with a brief description of the highland space of development, and highlight the problematic nature of much development intervention in the region. Second, I offer a genealogy of the altruistic ideals that guide contemporary discourses of professionalism and demonstrate how the rise of a pro-local discourse sought to address a post-colonial critique. Finally, I present the case of the Watershed Symposium, in which the implications of an emerging pro-local orthodoxy are apparent.

Spaces of development in northern Thailand

The community of development professionals I work with came into being with the identification of a 'hill tribe problem' in the highlands of northern Thailand¹. This so-called hill tribe 'problem' opened up a space of development in the northern borderlands of Thailand from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Around this time, the highland population became problematized around three complementary issues: opium production, environmental degradation, and national security. As international funding became available to remedy these 'problems', foreign development professionals began arriving to work on multi-lateral development programmes, often focused around opium crop replacement. Between the late 1960s and 2000, highland villages were the focus of activities for approximately 20 internationally funded multilateral development projects, with a total budget of approximately US\$185 million between them (Renard 2001, 70–1); at least 158 registered non-government organizations (NGOs) if not more (Kampe 1995, unpublished data); and an indeterminate number of researchers – including at least 101 foreign researchers who registered with the Tribal Research Institute between 1968 and 1992 (Tribal Research Institute 1992).

What has come from all this intensive attention? As with Ferguson's (1994) study of Lesotho, it is not at all apparent that this development effort has led to 'improvements' in the lives and livelihoods of highlanders, as was the intention. Elsewhere, I have argued that these development efforts in fact satisfied multiple geo-political agendas around Cold War concerns with the spread of communism and the desire of the Thai state to actualize a vision

of total governance within its borders (McKinnon 2004). The introduction of community development interventions in northern Thailand can be understood as a mechanism through which the Thai state sought closer governance of the borderlands. Discourses of the 'hill tribe problem' of national security, environmental damage and opium, constituted a highland space characterized by lawlessness, distance from the state and a damaging otherness to the Thai nation. The highlands, constructed as a peripheral and disadvantaged region, inhabited by 'dangerous' and 'deficient' subjects, became a space of 'problems' which could then be 'fixed' through outside intervention. Measures taken by the Thai government and international donors transformed this problematic space into one that is governable, transformed remote mountains into accessible Thai territory, and made it possible for the state to administer the highland population.

Nevertheless, the development professionals that I work with, who undertook opium crop replacement and who continue to work in the highlands, do not see themselves as working in the service of broad geo-political agendas. Instead, they posit themselves as agents working on behalf of local communities, often pitted against the institutions they work within, in their efforts to empower and emancipate highlanders within the confines of the Thai state. Such attitudes are exemplified by one research participant, David Thomas², who has worked in the region since the 1970s. During our interview David spoke with passion against the 'patronizing attitudes' of an old top-down style of development and represented the effort to introduce participatory approaches, and place villagers at the centre of decision-making processes, as a struggle against 'the system': 'this is what is different about participatory work – the respect for the fact that this is their place and must be about their decisions' (personal communication 2001). David, like other development professionals I spoke with, represents himself here as a developer whose primary concern is to act as an advocate for villager's priorities and concerns, and for villager's empowerment, often working *against* the priorities and concerns of development institutions and the state.

How are we to understand this ongoing effort of advocacy and empowerment against the backdrop of a post-colonial critique? How is it possible for these professionals to continue to work for an altruistic ideal of development-as-empowerment, yet be fully aware of how their work has strengthened state domination, often to the detriment of highland communities? One response to the problem has been to rethink development approaches and methods in ways that begin to address ethical concerns, while providing new ways to work. Development profes-

sionals in northern Thailand have engaged with post-colonial debates, and emerging participatory development approaches, to reconfigure their role within development in the highlands. In doing so, they draw on longstanding discourses of the professional as an emancipatory agent, emerging post-colonial critiques of 'First World'-Third World' relations and recent movements towards participatory approaches in development practice. Thus, a generation of 'pro-local' professionals have sought to disestablish their role as 'experts' and reproduce the professional subject as a facilitator and an advocate for 'the local'. In the following section, I offer a brief genealogy of these shifts through a review of a discourse of professionalism.

The mythical professional subject

As it appears through a Western literature, discourses of development professionalism invoke a myth of an ideal, altruistic and 'good', professional subject. According to Laclau 'any subject is a mythical subject' (1991, 61). The term 'myth' is a way of referring to the contingent ideologies around which identities take shape³. 'The subject', then, refers to that identity that comes into being around a certain myth. Within a classic discourse of development, for example, what it means to be a development professional is established in relation to a 'myth' of progress. Both professionals and the underdeveloped subject whom they are to help are assigned certain roles within this broad conceptualization of human progress – they are rendered meaningful in relation to a myth of the social, an ideology in which human societies are seen to progress, to learn and to improve over time.

The 'pro-local' professional, who acts as an advocate for the local, is a mythical subject that takes shape around a variation of such ideas of progress informed by a longstanding ideological tradition in Western thought. The figure of the subject who intervenes in poor, disadvantaged, somehow backward communities is a strong presence in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The figure of Christ as an advocate for the poor, the sinner and the underdog, is one of the first appearances of this subject. Indeed, the religious duty of Christians to help the poor, and also to spread the word of God and the opportunity for redemption, was institutionalized in the work of the missions. While they are very often philosophically opposed to the work of missionaries, development workers and ethnographic researchers share a vision of a mythical subject who can 'do good' in communities of the Other – whether that Other is characterized as 'primitive', 'native', 'under-developed', 'Third World', or 'disadvantaged', depending on the discourse and the historical era.

In anthropology this ethic of doing good can be seen in discussions of the duty of the researcher towards the researched that has remained at the core of the discipline from Radcliffe-Brown to the present day (and remains a central part of other social science disciplines in which ethnographic field studies are central, such as human geography). Despite their differences, central figures in the discipline, like Radcliffe-Brown, Boas and Levi-Strauss, shared a sense that the anthropologist has a 'mission' of providing help, facilitating understanding, and instituting respect for and preservation of 'primitive' cultures (McKinnon 2004). This sense of mission provides an ideological foundation for the formation of the ethnographer subject, it is a 'myth' around which the ethnographer is constructed in a meaningful social role. The good ethnographer thus becomes someone who helps, who understands and translates, who respects the culture of the 'primitive' other, and works to preserve it against the eroding force of the modern world.

In discourses of development, the professional subject takes shape around a similar ideological foundation and sense of duty towards the 'needy' communities of the Third World. It is the duty of the development professional to intervene, in order to do good, to make a difference in communities of the 'poor' and disadvantaged. In the emergence of what Escobar (1995) terms a 'classic' development paradigm, it is possible to locate not only the emergence of the 'needy' local, but also the concomitant emergence of those who would do development, who would bring their skills and knowledge to the Third World, who would – through research, or interventions on the ground – enable the transformation of underdeveloped and disadvantaged communities to advance to a 'better' (and more modern) state of being.

One can trace this discourse further still to the colonial era that predated, and informed, development-as-progress. In that imperialist paradigm, Europe championed itself as the bringer of progress and civilization to the primitive natives. This is not so different from development interventions that are supposed to bring all the advantages of 'development' to the underdeveloped Third World. As Cowen and Shenton (1996) note, development, with its companion 'underdevelopment', were invented well before Truman's famous speech marked a post WWII neo-imperial project 'for the colonial and post-colonial "Third World"' (p. 7). While discourses of development and discourses of colonial imperialism belong to very different historico-political moments, and are thus significantly different paradigms, both share a universalizing understanding of human progress. Likewise, both imagine an intervening subject from the West which is the

manifestation of that ideology of progress. The intervening subject brings progress, positive transformation and improvement. The professional subject is an agent of transformations – from uncivilized to civilized under colonialism, and from underdeveloped to developed in a classic development discourse. This professional subject is an expert who brings knowledge from developed nations to help underdeveloped subjects to progress.

In contemporary discourses, representations of what it means to bring positive transformation and improvement focus very strongly on an ethic of working *for the people*. It is a discourse which also has a long lineage. In a discourse of community development, the figure of the intervener as someone working 'for the people' goes back to a time before the recognized beginnings of the development era. James Yen, whose work on Mass Education in China began in the 1920s, spoke about the importance of bottom up processes of change, and empowering the masses through education, long before this discourse became part of the mainstream in the 1970s (Buck 1945; Mayfield 1985). While the work of prominent figures such as Paulo Freire has been closely linked with the emergence of participatory approaches within development discourse (Mayfield 1985; Triantafillou and Neilson 2001), Yen's role has not been so widely recognized. He began working in people's education in China in the 1920s and 1930s, and established the People's School that operated in the Philippines during the 1960s and 1970s. This work closely resembles the participatory approach that began to emerge in the late 1970s and has since become part of mainstream development discourse. Both Freire and Yen discuss the role of the professional as a figure who works 'for the people' above all else – a role that became in Freire's lexicon the 'revolutionary leader' who would empower the oppressed Other (Freire 1970).

Likewise, in the participatory approaches advocated by Robert Chambers (1983 1992 1997) in the 1980s and 1990s, the central purpose of development ought to be to empower the poorest of the poor. Chambers' call for development to be about 'putting the last first' (1983) has had a huge impact on community development methods since the early 1980s. Chambers argues that in order to achieve positive results in development work, development professionals everywhere must move towards a new development paradigm for which a participatory approach is the foundation. The participatory development professional invoked by Chambers is a subject that can bring positive transformation to the disadvantaged communities in which they work. It is a subject that is a catalyst for improvement, a facilitator of empowerment.

Development interventions are represented as something that can (or should) achieve a universal good that is somehow above politics. It is the professional subject that is the means for this to come into being. This ideal professional is the agent who can bring about processes of improvement, betterment, emancipation, that represent – in this discourse – an immutable moral good.

This professional subject is a shared ideal in discourses of development and of social research – most especially anthropology, but also other disciplines in which ethnographic field studies are common. This mythical subject is a knowing subject – who is sympathetic to, and understanding of the local. As ‘the people’s’ professional, this subject is close to the people with whom he/she works, whether they are conceptualized as ‘the primitive’, ‘local stakeholders’, or ‘the oppressed’. The professional is a subject who is able to ‘translate’ one society to another, to allow the urban West (or the colonial administrator) to understand the Others whom they are supposed to administer. They may also be the ‘rescuer’ of cultures and societies that are on the verge of being lost forever. This mythical entity is also a transforming agent whose knowledge may allow interventions to transform local life – either to ‘civilize’ it according to colonial precepts, or to ‘make life better’ through literacy, education and empowerment. Finally, the professional may be a revolutionary leader, whose interventions will bring emancipation and will, in Yen’s terms, bring ‘release’ from ‘illiteracy, poverty, disease and mis-government’ (Yen, quoted in Buck 1945, 84); in Freire’s terms, bring emancipation from oppression; or, in Chambers’ terms, bring empowerment and freedom.

Each of these mythical figures is imagined to be removed from the machinations of politics. They are subjects who are posited as existing in the service of an immutable moral good – the good of improvement and advocacy, and the improvement that they would bring is seen as part of a moral duty that is above politics. From the 1970s, however, ethnographic and development discourses that placed the work of professionals outside existing power relations and political struggles would begin to be seriously questioned and destabilized. In particular, visions of the professional’s effective autonomy from daily political life would be challenged with the rise of post-colonial and post-structural theories, and the emergence of new ethical debates around the involvement of Westerners in the Third World.

The mythical professional and post-colonialism in Thailand

In the 1970s and 1980s, development professionals in northern Thailand began to engage with an

emerging debate around the ethics of intervention in the Third World, and began to question not only the practice of community-based development and research, but also the basic understandings of highland societies and ecology. This contingent of vocal critics questioned the nature of interventions in highland communities and the assumption of a ‘hill tribe problem’ upon which these interventions were based. Also questioned was the assessment of geo-political conditions that had prompted international governments to provide funding for development and research. Finding shortcomings in the status quo, these critical professionals turned to a search for better knowledge and new modes of intervention in an emerging discourse of participation. They began to argue against what they saw as fundamental inaccuracies in conventional understandings of the highlands, and called for changes to highland development policy and an abandonment of the idea of a ‘hill tribe problem’.

One key moment that forced professionals to look seriously at the politics of development knowledges and the impacts of their presence was the so-called ‘Thailand Controversy’. In the early 1970s the Controversy put the practice of researchers in northern Thailand to the forefront of debates in the US and Australia, and centred on the disturbing accusation that anthropologists working in the highlands may have been contributing to the counter-insurgency efforts of the Thai and United States governments to the detriment of the mountain communities they were researching. Social scientists working in highland communities were accused of providing information that would assist military operations, and potentially put the lives of their informants at risk (see Berreman 1991; Hinton 2002; Wakin 1992; Wolf and Jorgenson 1970 1971).

The various concerns that arose from this controversy presented a substantive destabilization of the assumption that simply by being ‘for the people’, ethnographic research could serve a universal moral good – of respect, preservation, understanding – and in doing so could stand outside politics. Through the debate surrounding the Controversy, it began to be acknowledged that researchers in northern Thailand were inevitably caught up in the geo-political climate of the Cold War. US involvement in Southeast Asian politics meant funding was made available for social research in ‘risk’ areas. As apparently ‘apolitical’ as the research itself may have been, the controversy made it clear that social research could not remain immune to the political climate of the times. These revelations had far-reaching implications. As the moral standing of these researchers was called into question, the professional started to be imagined not only as a force for good, but also as a sometimes complicit subject – aiding

and assisting state oppression, and facilitating the imposition of Cold War political agendas.

Contemporary debates around the ethical and moral responsibilities of professionals continue to coalesce around the question of the dynamics of power between researcher and researched, and likewise between the development professional and the 'beneficiaries' of development. This is an issue which has been of particular concern to scholars influenced by the work of post-colonialists such as Talal Asad (1973), Homi Bhabha (1994), bell hooks (1992 1994), Edward Said (1978 1993) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985 1999). These scholars share in a project to critically analyse the disempowering effects of Western colonial discourses of the colonized/subaltern.

Feminist geographers and anthropologists in particular have been concerned with the question of politics and power around field work in Third World or subaltern communities. Alcoff (1991), for example, argues that speaking for less privileged others is 'discursively dangerous' (pp. 6–7): 'the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies' (p. 29). One response to this argument has been to propose reflexive research modes as a way through the ethical dilemmas of doing field work in 'other' places. D'Amico-Samuels (1991), Di Leonardo (1991), England (1994), Katz (1994), Kobayashi (1994), and Scheyvens and Leslie (2000) are among those who have called for a reflexive research approach in order to forestall unconscious processes of dominance and to 'understand how discourses are produced and sustained, by uncovering and engaging social constructions on the very sites where they are produced and nourished' (Kobayashi 1994, 79). The reflexive researcher, then, is a professional subject who may be able to navigate the binds of a colonial heritage and mitigate what Alcoff represents as an inevitable imbalance of power.

A second, concomitant, response to concerns with an imbalance of power in the researcher-researched relationship has been to re-emphasize the importance of the responsibility of a researcher towards their 'subjects'. The codes of ethics developed by associations such as the American Anthropological Association (AAA) are an example of an attempt to articulate such concern through a regulatory framework, stating in the first principal of the code that 'anthropological researchers have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work' (see American Anthropological Association 1998). Concern for local communities also resonates strongly with advocates of participatory approaches in both community development and social research.

In development studies, the influence of post-colonial and post-development critiques has also stimulated questions about the power dynamics between professionals and 'beneficiaries'. Escobar's argument that development is in essence a neo-colonial project, for example, implicates development professionals as the agents of that neo-colonial enterprise. In response, Chambers (1983 1997), and other advocates of participatory approaches, have reiterated that the primary purpose of the development professional is to help the 'targets' of development interventions achieve a better quality of life, emphasizing the importance of working '*of* the community *for* the community' (Crespo *et al.* 2002, 63; see also Agarwal 1997; Harcourt 2003; Leeuwis 2000; Maheshvarananda 2003; Tandon 2002). These authors combat the tendency to see the developer as the expert with the specialized knowledge that will help the underachieving Third World subject 'catch up' with the West. In doing so, they emphasize the responsibility of the development professional to act instead as a facilitator, to help local communities achieve their own vision of a better future.

Even in recent critiques of participatory approaches, an ethic of working '*for* the people' continues to be a central concern. In Cooke and Kothari's (2001) examination of the tyranny of participation, for example, the authors continue to uphold the value of a participatory ideal in which development professionals put '*the people*' first. Throughout the edited volume, the ideal professional is again cast as a facilitator in partnership with the local, and the 'beneficiaries' as the people who participate as partners in the development process. This concern for local communities signals a key component of the universalizing discourses that provide the foundation for professional subjects – explaining the role of the professional and the local 'beneficiary' in terms of a universal ethic of aid and assistance that is based in '*the local*'.

This ethic is shared between discourses of professionalism in both development and ethnography. A tradition of 'putting the people first' in development discourses parallels a sense of duty to the researched in discourses of anthropology and ethnographic research. In both, ethical priority is given to the needs, desires and perspectives of the Third World Other and the role of the First World professional is to be a positive presence in rural villages⁴. This shared vision finds expression, in the case of Chambers and the participatory approaches he advocates, in a language of putting the last first, and the first last. For feminist ethnographers, privileging the local means abandoning the claim to be able to represent the objective truth. For some post-colonial authors, it means that one should not

attempt to speak for others from 'less privileged' backgrounds (Alcoff 1991). And, for all ethnographers who subscribe to the ethical standards of organizations like the AAA, the emphasis on the local means owing ultimate responsibility to the researched, to participants and informants.

The combined response to the challenges presented by ethical debates around the politics of development and ethnographic research, and the responsibilities of the professional, was ultimately to rephrase a longstanding discourse of a benevolent professional working 'for the people'. This reconfigured ideal is the 'pro-local' professional subject. It is a subject founded upon the myth (in Laclau's sense of the term) that positive social change may occur through the appropriate interventions of a trained professional, and a discourse of the ethical responsibilities to, and greater respect for, the local.

The mythical pro-local professional has become a powerful presence in the development community of northern Thailand. Out of 50 interviews with representatives of various international and domestic NGO organizations, researchers, and government officials working in community development in northern Thailand, all but three spoke of the primary importance of a participatory approach, efforts towards empowerment, and the role of professionals as facilitators of development agendas defined by the communities concerned. Closer ethnographic work with three projects in the north confirmed this broad picture of the dominance of a pro-local professionalism in the development community in Chiang Mai. Interviews and conversations with staff from the Thai-Australia project (now concluded), a European funded research project HARP (Highland Agricultural Research Program)⁵, and an indigenous organization 'Highland NGO', revealed a constant concern among professionals that they should only intervene with utmost concern for the community. As stated by one respondent working with HARP, it is vitally important to 'take time' in arranging access to a community, and to do so in a way that is 'humble and shows respect' (personal communication 2001). This respondent, and her colleagues, also spoke of the problems of implementing a vision of a truly participatory approach. Yet, in spite of much discussion of the difficulties of applying participatory approaches, both among professionals in Chiang Mai and in the development literature (see, for example, Briggs and Sharpe 2004; Chhotray 2004; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Harrison 2002; Snell and Prasad 1999), 'pro-localism' continues to define the 'good' professional subject. The conundrum that faces the development professional, then, is how to live up to the desire to be a good, participatory, pro-local

professional, although participation so often seems to fail. It is a matter of how to respond to arguments like that made by Cooke and Kothari (2001) that participation, as a new orthodoxy, is only a superficial engagement with the rhetoric of participation and a failure to enact what Mohan (2001) refers to as 'deep empowerment'.

I would argue that discussion of the failures of participation present too simple a picture. It is not always the case that a superficial application of participatory approaches fails to achieve empowerment. Rather, a rhetoric of participation and prolocalism has been instrumental in creating conditions for local voices to be heard – often for the first time – by those who might be cast as 'powerful': representatives of the state; decision-makers in international organizations like the World Bank or the UN. In the case of northern Thailand, the contemporary success of Highland NGO is a good example of some of the empowering effects of participatory rhetoric. Highland NGO was the first NGO in the north to be run by highlanders. It was established at a time when highlanders had very few avenues for political representation or community advocacy in the Thai state. The organization grew out of the efforts of a team of Thai and foreign academics, development professionals and highland leaders who joined together in the late 1980s to initiate an organization which would be run by highland people, and provide a vehicle through which highland people could speak for themselves. It is now one of a network of organizations run by highlanders that undertakes community development work and public advocacy on behalf of their members. When international donors insist on local partners, Highland NGO is often called upon to fill this role and represent community concerns, with the result that the organization has now become a focal point for efforts of highland advocacy and the pursuit of indigenous rights. Thus the 'mere rhetoric' of participation can be seen to have had palpable effects on the landscape of indigenous politics in northern Thailand.

Adding to a more complex picture, I would also argue that a participatory orthodoxy also presents problems of a kind unrecognized in the critiques of Cook and Kothari. For those very professionals who are striving to help bring about 'deeper empowerment', an insistent and moralistic pro-localism can often constrain and dis-enable genuine efforts to intervene in line with their emancipatory vision. These trends are evident in the discourses of participation and professionalism employed by participants at the Watershed Management Symposium, held in Chiang Mai in 2001. Through an exploration of the arguments and concerns highlighted in the Symposium, I explore how the simultaneous

enabling and constraining effects of a discourse of pro-localism.

The Watershed Management Symposium

The stated aim of the Watershed Management Symposium was to provide a 'forum for substantive discussion of issues relating to watershed management', to propose principles that should guide watershed management, and to bring together different parties concerned with highland watershed areas to discuss issues, approaches and possibilities for policy directions (Chayan 2001). The politics of the room were quite clear to most of those attending. On one side were the workshop organizers and their allies – including community leaders and representatives from highland villages, left-leaning academics, activists, development workers and public intellectuals whose political sympathies lay with an ethic of local knowledge and local decision-making. On the other side were the Royal Forestry Department, the conservation groups, and a handful of academics who remain loyal to a reconfigured, but still recognizable, discourse of the 'hill tribe problem', and tend to argue that highland communities should not be allowed to stay in watershed areas. This broad range of participants represented many who are involved in contemporary development processes in the highlands and most of the key parties currently engaged in negotiations around highland development and land management policy. As such, the discussions in this temporally and physically concentrated space captured the range of discourses and perspectives that defined the development context of the highlands in 2001.

The first panel of the Symposium established themes key to the Symposium as a whole: community, participation and scientific knowledge. The first speaker, Professor Somsak, Director of Community Forestry Training, focused on the importance of a participatory approach in developing watershed management strategies. He argued that professionals must be placed in the role of facilitators rather than experts, shifting away from 'techno-centric' styles of development, away from development interventions which sought to introduce new technologies and new management strategies, to something which worked with practices and knowledge already present in the local communities⁶. The idea of shifting away from 'techno-centric' styles of development and the concept of development workers as 'experts', continues an argument with a longstanding presence in the community of highland professionals (exemplified in statements by David Thomas above). The ideal, fair, professional subject of this vision is the facilitator, and

the highlander – the 'local' who should be included in watershed management planning – is not a deficient subject in need of help, but a knowledgeable and capable local in partnership with the professional.

Following Somsak, Dr Shwan Thanhikorn spoke as the representative of the Royal Forestry Department. Shwan emphasized that, as an arm of government, the Royal Forestry Department has a responsibility and a commitment to the people, and that the Royal Forestry Department shared a common goal with delegates attending the Symposium – to preserve natural resources, to preserve biodiversity, as well as allowing production and most importantly to allow people to survive. He stated that he had come today to gain an understanding of the attitudes of the community and the new ideas for management options, and emphasized that the priority must be to 'preserve the natural resource at the same time as thinking about the rights of the community'.

Shwan's reference to the 'rights of the community' is symbolic of how a discourse of 'the local' has been increasingly adopted by government offices like the Royal Forestry Department. Historically, the Department was associated with a discourse of a 'hill tribe problem' and of moving to relocate hill tribe villages out of the mountains. 'The community' that Shwan now refers to is a wider Thai community, and a discourse of 'the rights of the community' has been enrolled into the debate about the rights of lowlanders over highlanders. Discussion of the 'rights of the community' also provides the opening for a highland subject to be considered legitimately Thai, to be considered part of that community, and have their rights considered alongside those of lowland Thais – a new development in a context where highlanders have long struggled for recognition as citizens of Thailand (see McKinnon 2005).

The final presentation on the opening panel picked up on themes of participation, community, and the value of local knowledge, but also introduced a new theme – that of Western science as a form of imperialism. Professor Anan Ganjapan, an anthropologist at Chiang Mai University, and an active consultant and commentator on the progress of development in the mountains, spoke in the opening panel of the symposium on the problematic influences of 'Western knowledge' and 'scientific knowledge'. He argued that Western science had introduced problematic understandings of the highlands and had led to the development of problematic watershed management policy. Anan's argument drew a strong distinction between Western scientific approaches, and local wisdom and local knowledge. He stated that the root of many of the problems with watershed management policy grew

from what he termed 'linear thinking', referring to a 'colonial mentality' which leads towards a prejudiced interest in the exploitation of resources; and the domination of scientific knowledge and devaluing of local indigenous knowledge. Anan called for a paradigm shift to take on a more complex view to allow a diversity that a 'linear' system would not allow, and to learn from local people and local management practices.

In the space of the Symposium, Anan's critique of 'Western' scientific knowledge in favour of local indigenous knowledge became a narrative through which 'problematic' policies of the past could be explained and an allegiance with 'the local community' declared. Anan's argument was taken up in statements such as this comment from a participant the following day:

We cannot use the paradigms thought of by *farangs* [foreigners]. It is not enough to rely upon the use of Western science . . . We need more involvement of local people in policy formulation in order to find solutions.

Anonymous comment from the audience, Watershed Symposium, Chiang Mai 2001

The opposition established here between 'science' (as Western and colonial) and 'local' or 'indigenous' knowledge imbues both forms of knowledge with moral value. In this discourse, knowledge of the local ranks as better than the (scientific) knowledge of the West, and holds greater utilitarian value in terms of finding solutions to social problems.

In the discussion that followed this first session, the two main factions present at the Symposium became clearly divided, and the line between them was established through the advocacy of 'local/indigenous knowledge' against an advocacy of 'scientific knowledge' and an agenda of conservation. The first question-and-answer session was dominated by exchanges between Forestry Department officials and their opponents. Many of the comments circulated around combative assertions of a rural–urban divide in terms of rights and responsibilities (as well as a rural–urban divide in terms of legitimate forms of knowledge). Shwan had spoken of the responsibilities that both the Royal Forestry Department and highland people had to the broader population. Responding to him, Khun Wandii – a representative from the Highland NGO – stood up and demanded to know why highland people were the only ones charged with the responsibility of conservation, when their resource use was so small compared with urban uses. She stated that in the North 'we have more forest because of *chao khao* [hill tribes] yet mountain people are blamed for forest destruction, blamed for drugs'. She pointed out that only 20–30% of the

Akha minority group have citizenship, yet mountain people recognize that forest management is a shared responsibility and are willing to co-operate.

The very fact that an Akha woman, and a representative of a highlander run NGO, was standing up to speak marks the empowering effect that a 'pro-local' discourse has had in northern Thailand. As a staff member of Highland NGO, Wandii's contribution to the debate at the Symposium illuminates some of the power that the knowing local subject can now wield in contemporary Thailand – although to do so, of course, they must speak Thai and adhere to contemporary Thai norms of public representation. During my field work, Highland NGO leadership sat on advisory boards drawn from across the political spectrum, to advise the Thai Cabinet on issues around watershed management and citizenship policy. Increased political liberalism, along with the growing participatory orthodoxy in northern Thailand and worldwide, has allowed what was in the late 1980s a very small movement of highland activism, supported by a handful of pro-local professionals, to emerge as a significant and independent voice in national level debates. These days, even the ordinary highlander, standing behind a microphone and speaking to an audience made up of foreign and Thai academics, government officials, and development professionals, can have a voice that reaches political players.

Shwan's response to Wandii's criticism is symptomatic also of the power of a discourse of pro-localism. Rather than engage with the substance of her accusation, he attempted to smooth the issue over, recognizing that there were problems, while declaring his own, and the Royal Forestry Department's, innocence:

We don't ask the hill tribe people to answer the problem for everybody, the hill tribe people still live on the mountains which proves that we don't need to move them. Now we're trying to think freshly about how to do things in the government. The hill tribes live close to the watershed so they might feel a little bit under pressure . . . but we don't want to repeat the mistakes from other countries. We don't want people from other countries to tell us what to do when they have hurt their own people. There are many ways to look at the problem . . . Please don't think that government institutions don't try to do their best. I came to listen both to blame and advice. I'm mostly getting blame but that's OK too . . .

In the short phrase 'we don't want people from other countries to tell us what to do when they have hurt their own people', there is, simultaneously, a parallel drawn between 'their own people'

– indigenous populations – and highlanders, and an emerging narrative of what ‘people from other countries’ do and the advice that they give.

Without explicitly responding to Wandii’s criticisms, Shwan is using an emerging narrative in which the ‘paradigms thought of by farangs (foreigners)’ becomes an explanation for past ‘mistakes’, and Western science emerges as a problem in itself. The solution to watershed issues is thus to be found in ‘local’ knowledge – the knowledge of Thai communities, both lowland and highland. A discourse of the local is here replacing an old sense of the problematic hill tribe subject, and at the same time the source of the ‘problem’ is assigned to a new location – the influence of foreign(er) approaches and foreign(er) ideas. While appeals to the importance of local knowledge are allowing a vision of cooperation between Thai and highlander to emerge, at the same time, the narrative is imagining a new outside – the *farang* outsider, the Western scientist toting a colonial knowledge system and creating problems in the highlands.

As the Symposium drew to a close, the emphasis moved to a rhetoric of balance and compromise, of reaching truer understandings and better – fairer – management strategies, through a partnership of local and scientific knowledge, of highland villagers and professionals working together. In his summary of the preceding days, Chayan stated that:

Science has provided the main direction for finding answers and providing ideas about the best way to manage resources. This has ignored local wisdom. The problem with relying on scientific knowledge for policy is that this knowledge is not complete. Policy must also consider cultural dynamics. A new attitude should integrate science, local wisdom, and social science as a new body of knowledge that will correspond better to reality.

This conciliatory speech pulled together diverse themes from the discussion over the previous two days, introducing a rhetoric of balance, and the integration of different kinds of knowledges and perspectives. These themes were supported by comments from highlander village representatives in the audience. A Karen villager made the point that:

One professor said that science is simply composed of local wisdom gathered over generations. If it is applied to natural resource management, science and local wisdom should be linked and equal status given to both.

Like Chayan, this speaker pointed to the possibility for a better knowledge and a better understanding emerging from a synthesis of local knowledge and science. Simply the presence of a highland villager,

speaking in such a public context in support of linking ‘facts and data’ with ‘local wisdom’, is in itself materializing a new ‘hill tribe’ subject who is wise, and who jointly produces better knowledge alongside the scientist and the scholar. The highlander subject who found voice in the Symposium is not only a ‘local’ subject, but a subject with ‘local wisdom’ who must form part of decision-making practices within development interventions. The discourses of pro-localism deployed in the Symposium invoked a new highland subject who is expected to have a place in decision-making in the context of participatory development programmes and in the broader formulation of national level policy.

The appeal for locals, academics and the state to work together to make a better society is not a new or challenging discourse. However, the fact that the appeal was being made by village representatives, to an audience of government officials, academics and NGOs, makes it so. Unlike the highland subject who is envisioned as the ‘participant’ in the process of participation introduced by the multi-lateral highland development projects of the previous decade, here are speaking, lobbying highland subjects, who want to ‘work together to make a good society . . . [and are] interested in how we can become good citizens and contribute to a better society’ (Hmong representative from Doi Pui, speaking during the closing session).

Debate in the Symposium took place between two clear factions: ‘pro-highland’ professionals and local representatives, who place themselves in the role of working ‘for the people’ and respecting local knowledge; and the conservation groups, conservative academics and Royal Forestry Department officials who find themselves using the same arguments around ‘natural laws’ and ecological imperatives, though for varying political purposes. All sides represented at the Symposium used a discourse of local knowledge and community, and invoked professional identities in line with a participatory professional subject – a subject who works in partnership, who respects science and local wisdom equally, and brings both together for the sake of a better future. Considering that the participants in the Symposium came from opposing sides of the political spectrum, their mutual affirmation of a pro-local discourse points to the convenient ambiguity of a rhetoric ‘the local’ and the way it can be used for a range of political arguments. This also demonstrates the degree to which a pro-local discourse has achieved the status of orthodoxy across the political spectrum.

The Symposium also saw new openings in the discourses employed by both a ‘pro-highland’ camp, and the opposing Royal Forestry Department and conservation representatives. Both sides appealed

to a discourse of conciliation, compromise and joint understanding, and opened space for seeing all parties in attendance – hill tribes, policymakers, development professionals, and academics – as equal, and potentially united, voices. The new sense of reconciliation and partnership was certainly assisted by an emerging discourse of a problematic and imperialistic ‘Western knowledge’, that simultaneously entailed a removal of *farang* from a place of legitimacy in the debate, while creating a new alliance between ‘locals’ in ways that re-imagine highlanders and lowlanders, hill tribes and urban officials, as equally Thai.

Conclusion

This paper began by outlining the problem of how to understand or support the altruistic aims of development professionals, when it is clear that development is very often harnessed in service of geo-political aims and where post-colonial critiques have elaborated the dangerous neo-colonial power dynamics of development agendas. One response is to understand how contemporary visions of the ethical ‘good’ professional subject draws on a long lineage, in which aims of altruism and the focus on a sense of responsibility to the community is in part a way to move the neo-colonial tendencies of international development. Contemporary debate draws upon this lineage in imagining a pro-local professional subject who adopts participatory approaches to achieve good (emancipatory and empowering) development. Unfortunately, it seems that participatory approaches are not quite the sought after magic bullet, and, in the past decade, much critique of participatory approaches has focused on how participation has failed to live up to a promise of empowerment and emancipation. What discussion of the Watershed Symposium shows, however, is that it is not simply a case of failing to live up to expectations. Discourses of a pro-local ethic and participatory approaches can be harnessed in multiple and complex ways by the full spectrum of political players – whether one might consider them true representatives of local communities or not.

The critique of Western knowledge apparent in the Watershed Symposium, and the concomitant (re)valuing of the local, constitutes an on-the-ground application of postcolonial critiques and a discourse of participatory development. The use of a pro-local discourse may or may not be ‘true’ to a participatory approach, but it has played an important role in promoting greater opportunities for ‘locals’ – in this case highlanders – to become vocal participants in political debate. The village representatives who spoke at the Symposium represent a new kind of ‘beneficiary’ subject in the

development spaces of the highlands – one who no longer requires the mediating presence of any professional, foreign or local, in order to speak out.

A simultaneous effect of this, as it emerged through the Symposium, is a delegitimization of the voices of foreign professionals. A foreign voice is recast in this rhetoric as representatives of an imperial Western, scientific knowledge, and the voice of those who have ‘hurt their own people’. If this is indicative of a shift in the Chiang Mai development community at large, then it is possible that there will be decreasing opportunities for *farangs* to contribute to ongoing debates around the impacts of highlanders on Thailand’s watershed forests or on options for community-based forest management.

For those who continue to strive to bring ‘Western’ scientific knowledge to the highlanders’ fight for land rights, and who seek to undermine erroneous assumptions that continue to inform Royal Forestry Department policy, the de-legitimization of their contribution may well have detrimental consequences for the cause. A view where the moral right is placed so absolutely with the local (and the wrong, conversely, with what is ‘foreign’) lays waste to the idea that there can be an international project for social justice and emancipation – if one cannot ethically intervene in communities outside one’s homeland, then international development can only ever be imperialistic. Yet, there are still *farang* working in Chiang Mai who strive to bring into being that ideal image of the professional as an emancipatory agent, a facilitator of empowerment: David Thomas persists in his struggle against ‘the system’; another worker continues her advocacy for a core sense of respect and humility; and Highland NGO continues to draw on foreign support in its work to secure a fair deal for highlanders within the Thai state. If we are to take seriously the contribution these professionals hope to make, then the post-colonial critique, and its expression through a pro-local disposition and a participatory development approach, must be harnessed in a re-imagining of development professionalism. This has to be one that recognizes the long lineage of altruistic aims and emancipatory ideals that have shaped a contemporary vision of the good development professional; one that, at the same time, takes seriously post-colonial critiques of development and their implications. This has to come about whilst supporting the aspiration to a project of social justice and emancipation, fully attentive to the complex politics of development.

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Notes

- 1 The term 'hill tribe' came into use in the Thai government with the establishment of the Hill Tribe Welfare Division of the Department of Public Welfare. The mission of this government body, as for most other agencies working with highland populations, was defined around a threefold 'hill tribe problem' as described, for example, by the Department of Public Welfare (1964), Manndorff (1965), and Saihoo (1963). Since the term 'hill tribe' has come to be associated so closely with the sense of a stigmatized and problematic population, many scholars prefer to use the term 'highlanders' to refer to the many minority groups who have historically inhabited the mountainous borderlands between northern Thailand, Burma, China, Laos and Vietnam.
- 2 'David Thomas' is a pseudonym.
- 3 Laclau's discussion of the mythical subject is strongly informed by Zizek's (1991) critique of the use of 'subject positions' in Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and by Lacanian theories of subject formation and the role of fantasy in processes of subject formation (for further discussion, see McKinnon 2004).
- 4 See Triantafillou and Nielson (2001) for a discussion of the close relationship between ethnography and community development.
- 5 Highland NGO, HARP and the name of HARP researcher Natalie Cook are all pseudonyms.
- 6 The following record of the Symposium is drawn from my own notes taken during sessions, as well as the summaries of each presentation provided in the Symposium handbook. Most of the presentations were given in Thai, with a concurrent English translation provided over headphones, thus the quotes given below are a combination of my own translation with that given by the official translators.

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