

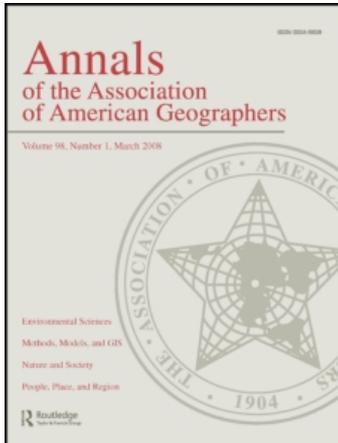
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Postdevelopment, Professionalism, and the Politics of Participation

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Development is a project of hope, guided by the aspiration for greater social justice and emancipation of the poor and disadvantaged in the world. Over the past decade postdevelopment critics have argued that this project of hope has failed, and, instead of creating a fairer world, development can only serve to perpetuate uneven power relationships. Emerging work by postdevelopment authors reinvigorates the positive promise of development as a project toward emancipation and social justice. Discursive practices of development professionals in northern Thailand illustrate how one might conceive of a postdevelopment practice in which aspirations toward social justice and emancipation can coexist alongside the messy realities of development work. Drawing on contemporary discourse theory, Ernesto Laclau's conceptualization of hegemonic struggle provides conceptual tools for thinking beyond the bind of development-as-power. Using hegemony to reimagine development as first and foremost a form of political engagement it becomes possible to imagine viable postdevelopment approaches and strategies. *Key Words: development practice, discourse, hegemony, Southeast Asia, Thailand.*

The idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape. Delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes have been the steady companions of development and they tell a common story: it did not work. Moreover, the historical conditions which catapulted the idea into prominence have vanished: development has become outdated. But above all, the hopes and desires which made the idea fly are now exhausted: development has grown obsolete.

—Sachs, *The Development Dictionary*, 1992

Development is a founding belief of the modern world. . . . In development, all the modern advances in science, technology, democracy, values, ethics and social organization fuse into the single humanitarian project of producing a far better world.

—Peet, *Theories of Development*, 1999

Development geographers have of late been preoccupied with considering whether new areas of debate labeled postdevelopment are of any use to the fundamental concerns of alleviating poverty, improving quality of life, and pursuing social justice. Development has always been embedded in a sense of hope: hope that it is possible to create a "better world," that human society has the means to do so, and that it can be achieved by harnessing resources and knowledges across international boundaries. But this hopeful vision of development as a humanitarian project has been strongly critiqued since the early 1990s. It has been suggested that the term "development" should be abandoned altogether. Yet the idea of development continues to sus-

tain a growing industry and, globally, increasingly diverse actors engage with it as a livelihood for themselves and their communities, and as a means to achieve social change. Because the industry shows no signs of decline, it becomes vital to consider how it might yet be harnessed toward the hopes and desires that first made "the idea [of development] fly" (Sachs 1992, 1).

In this article I focus the hopeful/critical lens of postdevelopment analysis on the discursive practices of development professionals. It is the individuals who "do" development, who attempt to carry out this project of producing a better world, who must be scrutinized for their roles in creating what Sachs (1992) has called the "ruin" of development. These individuals also may be a source of promise for rethinking "the hopes and desires" of development in ways that may make the idea fly again, in new directions. This promise is especially evident now when the professionals are no longer just the Western "experts," but also the local village leaders, activists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as well as national and international volunteers, government officials, and advocates, alongside a broad range of more-or-less well-meaning, and sometimes highly paid (and well-connected), international consultants.

Contemporary discourse theory can offer opportunities for thinking about and doing development in new ways. I focus particularly on the work of Ernesto Laclau and his retheorization of hegemony, which places political decisions at the heart of movements for social change. Laclau's poststructural thinking on emancipation and social struggle offers potential for reimagining

development and new kinds of postdevelopment practices while acknowledging the implications of the postdevelopment critique.

The exploration of Laclau's conceptualization of hegemonic struggle is part of a broader project on development discourse and practice in northern Thailand (McKinnon 2004). The research in Thailand was an ethnographic and historical study of development programs in the northwest borderlands of the Kingdom, focusing on the discursive practices of development professionals involved in these programs. Through extensive interviews and conversations with professionals and analysis of project documents and policy papers, the research investigates representations of development and the work of development professionals alongside their actual practices. I analyze how meanings of development are constructed (cited, challenged, and put into practice) and how this process is also a process of making subjects—professionals and “developpees”—all of whom are bound up in concomitant acts of doing and speaking.

Drawing on this research to ground my discussion of postdevelopment debates I begin with a discussion of the sense of failure that runs through much contemporary discourse on development. During the research, “participation” emerged clearly as a central concern for the loosely connected community of professionals in northern Thailand. I report on their debates around participation to show how development is perceived to have failed as a project of social justice on the ground. The perception of past failure is set against the persistent hope that if only participation could be done “properly” then the goals could be achieved.

In the second part of the article I discuss several key concepts in discourse theory that provide an alternative to the binary of success and failure that runs through debates on participation. I introduce some of the key points in the work of Laclau that might provide new avenues of analysis, drawing in particular on his discussions of hegemony and the political decision in his *Emancipation(s)* (1996). Through this analysis it becomes possible to see how participation has been posited as the only means to an unachievable goal of transforming society. Contrasting Laclau's work with social movements literature, I show how discourse theory moves beyond the desire for an end point to social transformation and focuses instead on a never-ending process of change and contestation through hegemonic struggle.

In the final part of the article, I turn to the example of the “Highland NGO”¹ (HNGO), an association established to represent the interests of minority highland groups and to undertake a broad range of community-

based development programs. The organization is certainly dedicated to participation, adopting diverse and politically astute approaches to development practice and apparently evading a binary of success/failure that afflicts others. Drawing on Laclau I identify the positive possibilities embedded in HNGO's approach that may help to inform emerging practices of postdevelopment and allow professionals to imagine how the development industry may still be a conduit for positive social change.

Postdevelopment and Professionals

Postdevelopment borrows from postcolonial analyses of the uneven balance of power in the world, and poststructuralist rejections of modernization theory and its paradigms of “progress.” Much attention has been given to the ways development creates and perpetuates uneven distribution of power, legitimacy, knowledge, and capacity, thereby undermining the very project of producing a better (fairer, more egalitarian) global community. Postdevelopment considers whether the very concept of development should be rejected and the project of “producing a far better world” (Peet 1999, 1) be given to an entirely different discursive practice, or even abandoned altogether.

Those who argue for the abandonment of the concept draw on postcolonial analysis of the ongoing impacts of the colonial era in the contemporary world. Postcolonialism has made it possible to analyze the ways in which development discourses—from a paradigm of “progress” and “underdevelopment” to contemporary discourses of participatory development—engender neocolonial logics. Such analyses reveal the ways in which indigenous knowledges, livelihoods, and economies of the “Third World” are delegitimized, devalued, stolen, and subjected to the dominance of “the West.” Drawing on this postcolonial critique, an emerging postdevelopment literature has argued that international development in general acts as a means of domination and control (see also McKinnon 2006; Simon 2006). Postdevelopment scholars have highlighted the ways in which dominant discourses of development construct the Third World as “deficient” and “backward” (Escobar 1995, 41), creating new, needy subjects (Li 1999) and providing a rationale to reshape nations according to normative standards (Ferguson 1994).

A second major influence in postdevelopment thought is poststructuralism and its rejection of essentialist explanations of the world. In poststructuralism all knowledge is inseparable from the uncertain and shifting language through which we come to know and express that knowing. Drawing on this principle, some

postdevelopment work deals directly with the fundamental uncertainty that must pervade scholarly work as well as the practice of development. Characteristic of this emerging debate is the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) who draws on Sedgwick to argue for “weak theory” (p. 4) that refuses “reductiveness and confident finality” (p. 7). “Weak theory” allows itself to be unsettled by the multiple and nefarious “posts” (-colonial, -structural, -modern, -development) that remove the certain ground upon which we have based our knowledge of what justice is and how to achieve it. Emerging in the embrace of uncertainty and contingency, this body of postdevelopment thinking can appear to threaten the very premise of the “development project,” undermining the certainty with which emancipatory actors are able to envision the end point of their interventions and the means by which to reach it.

Building on both poststructural and postcolonial influences, more recent work in postdevelopment is beginning to consider how to generate new practices of development that take on board the implications of a critical postdevelopment debate. One example is Lakshman Yapa’s ongoing project on “Rethinking Urban Poverty” in Philadelphia that seeks to operationalize alternative approaches to poverty against a conventional approach that “defines poverty as an ‘economic’ problem that can be corrected through more jobs and higher incomes” (Yapa 2002). Another example is Gibson-Graham’s (2005) recent work in the Philippines that adopts an asset-based development approach to a project directed at facilitating the reconstitution of subjects previously defined as needy and lacking. The project to highlight presences and assets is part of an emerging postdevelopment “mode of thinking and practice 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 challenge that emerges from such a hopeful/critical postdevelopment discourse is to consider where such hope can lead: how might we imagine acting with hope and a full awareness of development’s past as a mechanism of domination and control? What would such a postdevelopment practice look like? Who would do it?

I extend this hopeful and generative project by focusing on the discursive practices of development professionals. The issues of professionalism and professional ethics in community development have been the subject of increasing examination in the past decade. Much of this work has been strongly influenced by a postcolonial take on the dynamics of knowledge and power, and has examined the links between colonial authority and

contemporary development practice (Kothari 2005, 2006); critiqued the hegemony of a “new managerialism” and neoliberal modes of development practice and governance (Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2002, 2003, 2004; Townsend and Townsend 2004; Nightingale 2005); and presented a general argument that the development industry facilitates the imposition of Western knowledge systems and modes of practice that tend to devalue non-Western knowledge and approaches (see also Esteva 1992; Escobar 1995; Crewe and Harrison 1998). Although the postcolonial approach has made a vital contribution to debate and provided a much-needed critique of the dynamics of professional practices embedded within unbalanced First World–Third World relations, recent work has also revealed the more complex and nuanced ways in which knowledge and power circulate. Mosse (2005) for example presents an exceptionally deep ethnographic analysis of development practice that reveals the chaotic and haphazard relationship between policy and practice. The messy relationship between what is spoken or written and what happens is often unpredictable. As Laurie, Andolina, and Radcliff (2005) and Crewe and Harrison (1998) point out, local organizations and communities are often very capable of harnessing the language of development management to serve local interests and priorities.

This article is guided by an interest in the complexities of professional practice. Unlike the work of Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley, and Kothari, whose main interest is in how professionals act as a conduit for normative and Western knowledge and practice, this research shares more in common with Mosse, whose focus is on professionals as subjects in themselves for ethnographic enquiry.

Participation and the Failures of Development in Northern Thailand

The region of study is characterized by mountainous terrain and steep river valleys that form the borderlands between Thailand, Burma, Laos, and China and is home to heterogeneous, highland-dwelling people with linguistic and cultural characteristics distinct from those of the surrounding lowland populations. These highland groups² became the focus of a range of research and community development programs from the late 1960s that were targeted at gaining better understanding of, and intervening to remedy, a “hill tribe problem”: the concern that highland communities were problematic due to their role in supplying an illegal opium trade, the negative environmental impacts of their “slash and

burn” agricultural practices, and the threat they posed to national security as a mobile and unregulated population in the border area.

From the earliest work of the Thai government’s Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program in the early 1960s there has been a steady increase in the number of organizations working with highland minorities. Until the early 1990s the majority of community development work in the highlands was undertaken by multilateral programs, cooperations between the Thai government and donors and governments in the United States, Australia, and Germany among others. After the liberalization of the political climate of Thailand following pro-democracy protests in 1992, there was an explosion of NGOs. In the north, many NGOs have since been established to work on development issues in highland areas.

The group of professionals who became my research partners form a loosely connected community centered on the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai (Figure 1). I use the term “professionals” to denote the broad range of individuals involved in development processes in

northern Thailand, including individual researchers and consultants from Thailand and abroad, Thai government officials, highlander NGO workers and activists, and the representatives of highland communities who take on official responsibilities as project partners and advisors. Based on fifty-two initial interviews, I developed closer relationships with three groups of professionals: those involved with bilateral and multilateral programs, particularly the Thai-Australian programs; those involved with a German-funded development research program, the “Uplands Program”; and the community advocacy and development association “Highland NGO.” With these professionals I had the opportunity for repeated interviews, conversations, and participant observation as they carried out their work in the city of Chiang Mai and in highland villages.

Professionals and professional discursive practices are of concern because not only are professionals a central part of the projects that so affect communities, but they are also the main actors in Thailand’s civil society, which is centered on NGOs and community groups. Unlike much work that seems to consider that professionals of various kinds (consultants, NGO staff, government officials) exist in a realm distinct from “the people,” this study is based on an understanding of the close relationships and interlinkages that exist between the two categories. Indeed, many of the individuals whom I discuss below identify themselves simultaneously as professionals with official roles and responsibilities and as members of minority communities, whether as a tribal man or woman, or as a close friend or family member through marriage. The boundaries between who is “inside” and who is “outside” highland communities is not clear, and this research focuses on those who move across those boundaries and the discursive practices that aid and shape their movements.

Development professionals working “on the ground” in northern Thailand are not unaware of the strong critique and fierce scrutiny that have been aimed at international development in recent years. Many of the professionals I worked with in fact are authors of some of the strongest critiques directed at development efforts in Southeast Asia and their problematic, neocolonial tendencies (e.g., see Kampe 1997). Locally, much of this critique was directed at the various “failures” of the early multilateral highland development programs. Based on my reading of project reports and internal memos from two of the larger multilateral highland development programs (the Thai-Australian and Thai-German programs), and interviews with Thai and foreign development workers who had been part of these programs and others (such as the United States Agency for



Figure 1. Map of mainland Southeast Asia.

International Development [USAID] program), I conclude that recognition of early failures led professionals to look for better ways of doing development in participatory approaches.³

The kinds of failures that tended to be most clearly recognized at an early stage were failures in technology transfer. The Thai-Australia project, for example, neglected to include highland farmers in the decision to invest in coffee as an opium replacement crop and did not provide training for how to care for this new crop. As a result the seedlings distributed to farmers died. Examples such as this were easily identified as problems since they involved significant portions of project funds and personnel time. Stories like this one were frequently recounted to me during interviews as I asked professionals to relate the histories of their working lives and recount the changes they had witnessed in highland development. Most often such stories were told to demonstrate how far the highland development programs were from any underlying development goal of social justice. This point was exemplified in my conversations with Chupinit Kesmanee. Chupinit was first employed as a graduate with the Hill Tribe Development and Welfare Program of the Thai Department of Welfare in the 1960s. He since became closely involved with advocacy for highland communities, and is now an academic and one of the few Thai advisors involved with HNGO (discussed later in this article). Chupinit told me stories of failed crop replacement programs as part of a narrative about the broader failure of development programs to value appropriately the horticultural knowledge and market expertise within highland communities. By ignoring the knowledge and expertise in highland communities the development programs failed to find appropriate ways to improve livelihoods and failed to account for or support the interests and concerns of highland communities over externally defined program goals. According to Chupinit this failure was an important “weakness of development” and the reason “why the idea of participatory action research was adopted by most NGOs (working in the highlands) and used in their development work” (personal communication, 20 April 2001). Thus, from the late 1970s and early 1980s, professionals in Chiang Mai sought a solution to the failures of development in emerging development approaches that highlighted a concern for participation. In an attempt to ensure more effective development as well as to ensure that interventions were tied to community interests (as opposed to geopolitical or program interests), participatory approaches were adopted by nearly every multilateral highland development project.

In moving to participatory approaches, professionals in Thailand were following a trend being established globally. Since the 1980s, participatory practice has become increasingly prominent and diversified both in the context of community development work and in academic research. It is referred to as a “new orthodoxy” (Henkel and Stirrat 2001; see also Manikutty 1997). There are numerous manuals and “tool kits” for professionals using participatory approaches (Zuraek 1988; Case 1990; Hope and Timmel 1995; de Negri et al. 1998a, 1998b). In such manuals practical guidelines provide ideas for how to negotiate through conflict while ensuring the inclusion of all sections of the community, thereby facilitating a process that will lead to planning and decision making on the basis of consensus. The how-to handbooks, then, envision a democratic process that, given a flexible, respectful, and egalitarian approach, can be used anywhere to achieve sustainable development and empowerment of poor and marginalized groups.

Participatory approaches are seen by many, however, to have failed in practice as a panacea for the ills of development. The abundance of how-to guides stands alongside an extensive literature recognizing the difficulties and complexities of putting the ideals of participation into practice, and debating the value of participation. This literature draws attention to the politics and manipulations of power that exist beneath a veneer of participation (Goodwin 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Pottier, Bicker and Sillitoe 2003), discussing the misuse of participatory tools (Snell and Prasad 1999), and the failure to overcome “existing relations of domination and control” (Chhotray 2004, 327) to adopt anything more than a formulaic approach to indigenous knowledge (Briggs and Sharp 2004). Participatory approaches and attempts to put local perspectives and priorities first almost inevitably succeed in maintaining existing uneven power relations, both within local communities and between the “participants” and outside professionals. It is suggested that what is missing is a “genuine” participation; instead, participation has become simply a bureaucratic requirement: a box that needs to be ticked for a project to proceed (Parfitt 2004, 548) or mere rhetoric used to obtain funding (Leeuwis 2000).

This area of debate about what constitutes genuine participation resonates most clearly with the narratives of professionals with whom I worked in northern Thailand. In Chiang Mai informal conversations over beers and debates in conference rooms would often turn to questions of what development programs were *not* doing for highland communities and what could be done better. It was not just participation that was required

to overcome the weaknesses of development, as Chupinit stated, but “true” participation. Debate occurred particularly frequently around one of the programs I was investigating, the Uplands Program, a German-funded development research program using participatory approaches. In 2001, during its first phase of operations, the program hosted a workshop on Participatory Technology Development. In the course of the three-day event the Uplands Program itself came under scrutiny. Some of the issues that caused comment during open sessions were that the program’s research focus was perceived as primarily set by academics from Europe, that local community members were not involved in management-level decision making, and that only one or two Asian faces were present at the workshop. On this basis the ethical soundness of the program, the justification for its work, and the benefits to its community partners were all called into question by the development community gathered at the event. These concerns coalesced around one central feature: was the Uplands Program truly participatory?

Whether or not such concerns were justified, the debate about the Uplands Program, along with the literature on participation, indicates the strong hope that, applied correctly, participatory approaches can achieve positive results. A participatory approach that genuinely places local perspectives and priorities first ought to be able to enact an empowering and beneficial transformation in the community. In these discourses of participation, several key processes are occurring. First, an ideal of participation is being invoked as the key to enacting development-as-social-justice. Second, that ideal is in itself being constructed as universally valuable and universally achievable. Finally, however, much of the debate (couched as it is in a lament of how programs are failing to enact genuine participation) focuses primarily on the failure of participation: the failure, yet again, of development to enact a project of social justice.

As is demonstrated in the prolific debate on participation discussed above, discursive practices of participation continually confront the incommensurability between the universal and the particular, between ideal and implementation. Take for example, Robert Chambers influential work (1992, 1997) that argues for a participatory approach that is universally applicable, and furthermore that—done properly—has a universal potential to achieve its goals of empowerment. Participation is then a tool for realizing a set of universalizing ideals in the messy ground of particular contexts, in local, empirical reality. Chambers writes *as if it were possible* to realize such universal ideals in every particular reality. When a participatory approach is put into practice,

however, what otherwise exists only in texts, in conversations and discussions, enters a new realm, where it becomes subject to the constraints and barriers presented by institutions, conflicting perspectives and priorities, and external social and political circumstances.⁴ The discourse assumes that participatory methods can be used anywhere, and that there is no contradiction in so privileging the local in a discourse that is so international. Yet, when participation is put into practice it is subject to multiple, particular constraints, and, to judge from debate, is thus considered very often to fail to live up to its promise.

The “Empty Signifiers” of Development: Laclau’s Contribution

In the diverse literature and debates reviewed above there is a shared concern for our apparent failure to live up to the promise of development. In much of the contemporary debate the cause of such failure is located in the perpetuation of an imbalance of power between developed and underdeveloped, between those institutions and organizations that do development, and the “underdeveloped” communities that are the focus of their attention. For development professionals this perpetual imbalance of power becomes a personal issue; it defines the professional as someone who must struggle against such an imbalance in opposition to the domination of “bureaucracies” and as an advocate for locals. The failure of development is a problem that must be faced in the every day of development work, and for development professionals in Chiang Mai, as for Chambers, Ferguson, Cooke, Kothari, and others, success *ought* to be possible—if only “the system” can be uprooted and local communities afforded more power to find the solutions they need to the problems they prioritize. These professional subjects (practitioners, scholars and critics alike) may be engaging postdevelopment concerns, but they are not (successfully) imagining new kinds of professional engagements that may help to take them beyond the historical failures of development and the strictures of the system. I suggest a potential source for such new imaginings is the work of Laclau and his work in *Emancipation(s)* (1996) on universality, the subject, and hegemonic struggle.

Laclau has yet to be given full consideration by development geographers despite the direct relevance of his work, and that of the Essex school of discourse theory, to current debates in development. Part of the reason that Laclau’s work has not been taken up may be the Eurocentric focus, especially of his early work with

Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; see discussion in Escobar 1992, 79). The dynamics of political struggle first explored in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), and further examined in later works (Laclau 1991, 1996, 2005; Mouffe 1993, 2005; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000) have since been taken up to explore a broader range of political contexts and social struggles (e.g., see Norval 1996, 1998; Howarth 1997, 2005; Howarth and Norval 1998). As yet little work has been done in Asia, however, and none at all in mainland Southeast Asia.

Laclau's discussion of hegemony and emancipation is particularly relevant to the discussion of development in the Third World. Community development, of the kind under discussion here, has its roots in Marxist analysis of social change and is directly concerned with achieving an egalitarian global society through empowerment of those at the bottom of social, economic, and political hierarchies. Laclau's work with Mouffe (1985) is also part of a Marxist epistemology and has inherited the task of writing for social change. Laclau offers a careful reconsideration of the tenets of a Marxist approach to social change through discourse theory, drawing on Derridian and Lacanian thought in an analysis of the political focused, often, on processes of subject making. In *Emancipation(s)*, Laclau's analysis of efforts for social and political transformations provides some useful tools for reconsidering a process of social change called "development."

Seen as a struggle to achieve social transformation according to a particular vision of what a better life would look like (empowered, sustainable, not poor, etc.), development can be viewed—like any ideological struggle—as a hegemonic struggle. Hegemony is a term most commonly associated with the Italian Marxist thinker Gramsci,⁵ whose theory of hegemony was founded on an understanding of the way political struggles work: that to be successful they must bring together ideology, identity, and objective power. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) poststructuralist reinterpretation of hegemony takes up this understanding of political processes and develops Gramsci's theories in a reconceptualization of hegemony as a never-ending process of political struggle that occurs not just in the domain of formal politics (political parties, elections, revolutions, political protests, etc.) but as part of relationships of power across all social relations. Laclau and Mouffe's work is in part an anti-essentialist critique of Gramsci's idea of hegemony that emphasizes the necessary incompleteness of hegemonic formations and the partiality of their processes of subjection. In their discussion of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe open up a new radical

critique of forms of domination and begin to formulate a project of liberation (Laclau 1991).

Laclau and Mouffe's work shares much with the rise of social movements theory. Both emerged as a response to the collapse of the communist bloc, the shifting nature of popular struggles, and the apparent shortcomings of existing tools of analysis. New social movements literatures provide a nuanced view into forms of social struggle that arose in Latin America in the 1980s, when Latin Americans researchers were forced to confront the limitations of existing theory for analyzing and understanding the dynamics of contemporary social struggle. A shift in theoretical approaches emerged with "the realization that the dominant frameworks of the past—especially functionalism and Marxism—that for so long provided theoretical legitimacy to the social science enterprise are now relatively exhausted" (Calderón, Piscitelli, and Reyna 1992, 30). The new social movements of Latin America were unique as they eschewed formal political representation and thus demonstrated the inability of the state to respond to emerging demands (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 4). A central characteristic of the new movements was also that demands for change in material, social, and political conditions that disadvantaged certain groups was bound up with the constitution of new identities. Escobar notes that new social movements are equally and inseparably "struggles over meanings and material conditions" (1992, 319).

Although discourse theorists also recognize the importance of identity politics to contemporary social and political struggle, what is distinctive about the work of Laclau and others is that, unlike many writing in the new social movements literature, hegemony does not allow for an end point to struggle. Fals Borda (1992), for instance, speaks of new social movements as "Trojanism" or "beachhead action" from which it will be possible to institute new forms of participatory democracy that will emphasize pluralism and tolerance. He advocates for a "humanist anarchism" (1992, 312) that will reinvent power, pointing optimistically to a future in which a greater inclusion of "popular knowledge" and "common sense" may ensure radical transformation. For discourse theory there is no future point for transformation when hegemonic power may be overthrown. Instead, hegemony understands that politics, broadly defined, is an endless process through which competing ideologies struggle always against each other, as they are constantly morphed through reiteration and repetition. Thus, as de Sousa Santos's (2003) discussions of global capitalism show, hegemony is never fixed or absolutely dominant. Concomitantly, there are no "counterhegemonic" movements as such, but endlessly proliferating hegemonies

that all push against each other (in a process of agonism or antagonism) while seeking to draw together dispersed interests around a shared political identity—the empty signifier.

The empty signifier is the indeterminate something around which hegemonic struggles are formed. It is that which is struggled *for* and the ideological core of any social struggle. This ideological core plays the role of the universal. In place of a genuine universal (such as “justice,” “freedom,” “democracy” taken as self evident), Laclau (1996) argues that there can only ever be a discourse that takes the role of a universal. The ideological core, then, is an “empty signifier”: an identity, a symbol of something empty enough of precise meaning to be able to represent the interests and concerns of disparate factions. As Gasche (2004) discusses, the empty signifier is at the same time not entirely empty; it stands for *something*, some identity that can capture imagination, something that is meaningful enough according to a given temporal or spatial context. Development, and the participatory community development of the kind under discussion here, “participatory development,” is an example of the empty signifier. What it stands for is not entirely clear, but it is an important symbol of a kind of development that will make poor and disadvantaged people stronger, more able to live healthy, fulfilling, and happy lives. It is based in a democratic ideology, bound up with ideas of fairness and visions of egalitarian society that are peculiar to a contemporary international context.

To rethink development, and participatory development, through the idea of hegemonic struggle highlights that development itself and the actions of professionals are part of a political process. That is, they are part of an always incomplete struggle to bring a certain reality into being, and that struggle is informed by the empty signifier of development: a fuzzy ideology that holds up values of justice, rights, and global equality as its core. Rather than seeing development as a universal good, and something that can be brought into being, it can be reframed as a field for social struggle and a zone of political engagement.

Consideration of participatory development as itself a political process has tended to frame politics in the negative, focusing on how the presence of power relations detracts from the true empowerment of development’s subjects. There has been considerable attention focused on how participation may also function as a mechanism of governmentality, training “self-sufficient, active, productive and participatory citizens” (Cruikshank 1999, 69); bringing into being “self governing and responsible individuals, i.e. modern citizens in a western

liberal sense” (Triantafillou and Nielsen 2001, 63); or extending “political rationalities of control and surveillance to hitherto ‘marginal’ people and biota” (Bryant 2002, 286). In contrast to these accounts, Walker et al. (2007) argue that participation has been used as a political tool by indigenous groups negotiating with the WWF in Oaxaca, Mexico. I argue that, as in Oaxaca, development processes in northern Thailand must always be viewed as a process of political struggle. Using hegemony as a lens it becomes possible to see how an understanding of development as itself always political can enable new strategies and modes of engagement.

HNGO and Development-as-Politics

To demonstrate the potential of a hegemonic approach I turn now to the example of the HNGO. The organization was first formed in the late 1980s as a partnership between highland leaders and Western professionals who sought to establish an organization through which highlanders could steer their own projects, be their own advocates, and speak for themselves. In its early years HNGO advertised itself as an organization to support highland culture. In a political climate where dissent or political protest was extremely risky, this rather benign mission statement ensured that the organization would survive into the 1990s when Thailand political climate began to change and community advocacy groups were able to operate unhindered. As the political climate changed, HNGO’s activities also shifted, and the organization has since come into its own as a major player in community advocacy and activism for highlanders rights. There are no longer any foreigners involved in the organization, except as partners in some particular projects. A handful of staff members are ethnic Thai, but the majority are highlanders and the leadership of HNGO has been in the hands of a board of tribal representatives since 1990. Although registered as an NGO, the organization is in fact an association of member villages representing the major tribal groups in the highlands.

With a handful of similar NGOs in northern Thailand, HNGO is a conduit for expressing the concerns and priorities of highland communities to mainstream Thai media and state authorities, as well as undertaking development projects that seek to respond to the needs and priorities expressed by member villages. An estimated 60 percent of highlanders lack the citizenship papers that are needed to live and work legally in Thailand. Therefore, one of the programs led by HNGO has been a campaign for Thai citizenship (see McKinnon 2005). A significant component of their work also

involves establishing after-school education programs in tribal culture and language. As highland communities become increasingly integrated into the central Thai administration, many community representatives feel that tribal language and culture are not being taken up by young people anxious to find lucrative jobs in the cities. With increasing pressure on arable land, additional programs address the need to find viable livelihoods and continue to lobby for land title for the many highland villages that exist on land officially under the management of the Thai Royal Forest Department.

I sought to include HNGO as a research partner because of its reputation with other highland community groups and development professionals in northern Thailand. After introducing myself and my research to several senior staff members I negotiated to offer my services as a volunteer in exchange for the opportunity to observe the daily work of the organization and participate in its activities. During this time I was able to interview most senior staff members, in some cases several times, and, in addition, I participated in conversations and meetings around the projects for which they needed my help as translator and writer.

One of the first meetings I attended was an annual meeting of all of the organization's village partners. Village representatives of the organization's member villages gather annually for a three-day meeting to discuss their community's priority needs and concerns. The outcomes of these discussions then form the basis for HNGO's annual work plan. Unlike the majority of other development organizations in Northern Thailand, HNGO's work is based on preexisting relationships with highland communities, and village-based projects take place only at the invitation of the village concerned. At the meeting I attended, every member village had sent a man and a woman as representatives. Working in focus groups divided according to tribal groups, the representatives discussed community needs and priorities before reporting back to the meeting as a whole. Based on this discussion, HNGO facilitators compiled a list of high priorities. NGO staff presented the summary of key points to the entire gathering who then voted on which should be taken on as priorities for HNGO's work plan for the coming year. The highest priorities set in 2001 were to obtain citizenship papers and land title for highlanders, address the problems of drug addiction, and address the loss of traditional knowledge and tribal language as young people moved from highland areas into the cities.

Many of these priorities were reflected in the work HNGO undertook in the following year, but the process of translating priorities from felt needs to representative

statements, to annual work plans, remained problematic. Like many local organizations, HNGO relies on funding from several different international organizations and more often than not the priorities of those donors direct the work that HNGO is able to do. The management committee must develop a work plan based on the priorities set by community representatives and at the same time can only undertake work for which there is financial support. In the end the decisions are made in small meetings of HNGO staff. This decision-making model is repeated constantly through the year on a smaller scale as HNGO staff holds meetings with village partners in the process of conducting specific projects.

The compromises that HNGO must make between addressing members' priorities and the practicalities of obtaining funding are no different from the compromises anyone has to make in taking a participatory approach. What is innovative in their approach, however, is that compromises are never expressed as a failure of true participation. Instead, the compromise is simply part of the process in which development is posited as a *tool* within a broad *political* project of advocacy for highlanders.

Many of the priorities identified by those who spoke at the annual meeting of HNGO members represent problems that can only be addressed by engaging in a mainstream political process. For example, little can be done to address the issue of land title without effectively lobbying the Thai administration. This is clearly recognized by HNGO. A senior staff member, Khun Rungarith,⁶ told me how, over the preceding decade, staff at HNGO had come to the realization that a number of key issues affecting highlanders "could only be solved at the policy level." The organization thus had to look at "how to lobby the government and get policy changed" (personal communication, 13 September 2001).

Lobbying government and debating policy has become a part of the daily work of the organization, alongside and aligned with work that is more recognizable as "development programs." Under the Thaksin government, members of the board sat on committees advising Cabinet on highland policy; staff ran campaigns to lobby for the rights of highlanders to apply for citizenship, including gaining media coverage and becoming involved in mass protests in Chiang Mai (see McKinnon 2005); and the staff maintain close links with other highland organizations and academics who also work to bring the needs of highland communities to the attention of the Thai public and Thai policymakers.

It is an approach that has evolved over time, and at the community level political and developmental interventions are often closely tied to the organization's

overall participatory approach. This became obvious to me in an interview with Khun Rungsarith. He told me that HNGO's strategies have "changed a lot since the beginning":

Every year we re-evaluate our strategies and approaches and adjust. Through this we came to the current system, which also emphasizes reliance on community volunteers. . . . Because we cannot do all the work ourselves. And if we hired more staff it wouldn't be so good for long term sustainability. It is better that when projects finish people in the communities can go on and do the work themselves.

(personal communication, 12 June 2001)

The reliance on community volunteers ensures sustainability; it is also a tool for community participation and leadership. The long-term functioning of the organization and its programs also relies on a very different set of partners: large international NGOs (INGOs) and bilateral donors with whom it is not always possible to focus on the priorities set by community representatives. Part of the reason for getting involved in the work of such international organizations is the pragmatic necessity to secure an income for the organization:

But there is also a hidden agenda, which is to work through international organizations in order to get our voice heard at the policy level in the Thai government. These institutions have the respect of the Thai government, and get listened to. HNGO's voice can be heard much more through the interventions of these organizations than it would be otherwise.

(personal communication, 12 June 2001)

One example of such cooperation with a large INGO is the "Sentinel Surveillance Program" that the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) was in the process of establishing in northern Thailand. The program was an effort to combat child trafficking, and would be an extension of similar programs already in place in Burma and Laos. It involved recruiting key individuals from border communities, offering them training in research work and social surveying, and then sending them back to their home villages to do research on such issues as HIV/AIDS or migration patterns in the community. This information would be fed back to the United Nations (UN), which would compile regional information and alert the appropriate agencies (such as the Thai Health Department) of problems in particular places. As demonstrated by the priorities expressed at the annual meeting, this surveillance program is being implemented at a time when highlanders' rights are far from guaranteed and closer scrutiny of highland villages may not be

desirable. Lack of citizenship papers or title to their land is a concern embedded in debates about forced relocation and expulsion of highlanders without appropriate paperwork. In such a volatile context, how can involvement in surveillance be considered anything other than failed development in which a project of social justice is subsumed within the uneven power relationships between marginalized highlanders and the state?

I asked Rungsarith if he was not also concerned. He agreed that the program was a bit like "Big Brother," but emphasized that it would be a useful way to bring the problems of highland communities to the attention of the Thai government. As he explained, the cooperation with the UN for community surveillance is a strategy through which HNGO hopes to promote a better understanding of the highlands among Thai government officials who, Rungsarith and others at HNGO insist, continue to adhere to an outdated vision of the "hill tribe problem." The strategy also means that HNGO is involved in a process through which border villages will become more closely observed, albeit by a UN agency. In addition, it will facilitate closer regulation of villages by the state. The kind of regulation Rungsarith anticipates—the intervention of the Health Department, for example—involves an extension of a modern mode of government into these peripheral areas. Attention to the health of the population and the treatment of disease do constitute extensions of the hand of the state into border villages, but such state intervention is unlikely to be unwelcome. Although the Big Brother aspects of the program may be of concern, by cooperating with the UN the HNGO is able to use the "sentinel" program and its connection with a high profile INGO to have its concerns brought to the attention of sections of the Thai government that may be difficult to access otherwise. In this case, Rungsarith does not see any conflict between HNGO's efforts to act in the best interests of local communities and modes of governmentality, such as surveillance and regulation of health, which this program inevitably extends.

Making Development Political

By prioritizing the political aspects of its work, the HNGO finds a mandate for practices that would otherwise be seen to contradict the participatory ideal. A statement of the ideal (exemplified by authors such as Robert Chambers) establishes a universalizing myth of participation that sets it up as empowering, inclusive, and democratic, and as the way to achieve development-as-social-justice. It is an ideal that is evoked as a counter to "failed" development: that which is top down, does

not address the real needs and priorities of local communities, and is often aligned with external (political) aims and agendas. In this discourse (exemplified in debates about the Uplands Program), participatory development is positioned as an anti-hegemonic discourse in opposition to the dominant hegemony of mainstream or top-down development. Taking on an understanding of hegemonic struggle as argued by Laclau, however, a discourse of participatory development must be understood not as counterhegemonic, but as another hegemonic movement that pushes against and competes with the dominant model.

By seeing participation not as a counter (that will, it is hoped, replace mainstream development approaches and cure the ills of development) but as its own hegemonic formation, it becomes possible to see it, not as the answer to the failures of development but as one intervention in a field of competing ideological formations. It is this more flexible, and politically legible, way of thinking of participation that is reflected in HNGO's practice. For many in the Chiang Mai community of development professionals, the pragmatic and flexible adherence to a participatory code evidenced in their engagement with the Sentinel Surveillance Program could well constitute "failure" in that it does not meet the strict criteria required to pass the test of being *truly* participatory. For HNGO, however, this is not a failure. This may be in part because, as highlanders themselves, HNGO staff members see themselves, and are seen by others, to represent *innately* the best interests of other highlanders. Whether or not this is so, I suggest that HNGO's mandate can be understood as an engagement with the universalizing ideology of participation that implicitly recognizes the contingency of these ideals. For HNGO there is an explicit recognition that development is politics and, rather than being an end point (or beachhead) in itself, participation is one part of an ongoing process of struggle.

HNGO's purposeful engagement with INGOs demonstrates that these professionals approach the orthodox ideals of "participation" as flexible and open signifiers, to be used within the play of politics rather than as absolutes to which one must strictly adhere. Participatory approaches are important in their work, but also important is the need to engage successfully in the kind of political struggle that will change how highlanders are perceived by the Thai public and Thai policymakers. Opportunities to use development programs as a conduit for being heard is seen to outweigh, in this case, the need to immediately adhere to the priorities identified by member villages in the annual meeting. This is not participatory, but it is a strategy for achieving goals of

social change that, it is clearly recognized, can only be achieved by engaging in politics.

Through their openly political mode of engagement and interventions that take advantage of the pliability of discourse, HNGO is engaging in development practices that are less inclined to find legitimacy through appeal to universalizing discourses of absolute moral good. As a result of its overt political engagement, I suggest, HNGO is able to engage participation not as a moral absolute, but as a guiding philosophy that must sometimes be subordinated to more important political goals. The practices of HNGO demonstrate the opportunities that may open up by rephrasing development, not as a moral issue but as a political issue.

For scholars and practitioners who accept Sach's accusation that development has been fraught with failures and crimes, yet still hope that development might be, as Peet claims, a way of producing a better world, rephrasing development as politics is one way forward. Discourse theory, and the work of Laclau, provides a conceptual framework for understanding how development-as-politics might work, and for recognizing how it is indeed already in practice in the example of organizations like HNGO.

Using the idea of development-as-politics as a starting point, new postdevelopment approaches and strategies might be formulated around Laclau's understanding of hegemonic politics. At the core of these new strategies would be a recognition that there is no point where the process of hegemonic struggle can cease and one hegemonic formation becomes complete. The incompleteness of any hegemonic formation presents both opportunity and challenge. On the one hand it allows us to see the weaknesses in the systems we may struggle against; as a hegemonic formation, global capitalism, for example, must always be viewed as an incomplete and ever-transforming entity (see Gibson-Graham 1996, 2006; Cameron and Gibson 2005 for discussion of the new opportunities such a perspective can make possible). The challenge, however, is that incompleteness applies equally to the hegemony that proponents of participatory development might be working for. Taking incompleteness as a grounding condition for any such movement for social change necessitates an explicit acceptance that there is no end point to the work of development and no perfect tool that can ever bring such an end into being. In addition, a postdevelopment practice based on ideas of hegemony would include the necessary acknowledgment of the temporally situated and contingent nature of the core ideology around which that project of development takes shape. Rather than being configured around a moral discourse about what development is and

how it should be carried out, hegemony allows a re-framing of development as a political enterprise, where expressions of ideology can be understood for how they are employed (and deployed) in the process of struggle.

Conclusion

This article began with a consideration of the post-development problem: the problem of how to imagine a development practice that can maintain the hope for “a far better world” (Peet 1999, 1) while incorporating the understanding that the story of development has been fraught with “delusion and disappointment, failures and crimes” (Sachs 1992, 1). Reviewing development in the highlands of northern Thailand I demonstrated how professionals in that community are well aware of the practical and ethical failings of development and have turned to participatory approaches in the hope that these will allow a better kind of development that can be true to underlying hopes for justice and equality. One effect of the participatory orthodoxy, however, has been yet more discussion of how development projects fail to live up to the promise. Drawing on Laclau’s work on hegemony shows how a sense of failure can in part be linked to the ways in which participation has been called upon as a universal around which a movement for participatory development has taken shape. A concomitant effect is the necessary policing of boundaries between what we are fighting for and what we are fighting against, and thus the demarcation of what is truly participatory and what is not. By highlighting this boundary demarcation, a reconsideration of development through the frame of hegemonic struggle, and thus an explicit recognition of the politics of development, may open up new opportunities for thinking and doing something that we can name postdevelopment.

The example of HNGO’s annual planning process reveals how the organization may be seen, in Cruikshank’s (1999) terms, to be training citizens as the planning sessions follow democratic, rather than traditional, modes of consensus-based decision making. The organization’s involvement in such initiatives as UNICEF’s “sentinel surveillance” program also demonstrates the degree to which the NGO is complicit with processes through which highland communities will become more closely regulated by the disciplinary mechanisms of the state. My informants at HNGO, however, represented the program as an integral part of a broad strategy through which the organization is to achieve the central goal of gaining a place of legitimacy and respect for highlanders within the Thai nation-state. These staff members at HNGO did not feel they were violating

precepts of ultimate loyalty to and respect for the local. This is in part because the organization is—intentionally or not—engaging strategies that may be understood as a form of hegemonic struggle. The HNGO is an indication of how a postdevelopment practice might look, where the political nature of development interventions are explicitly acknowledged, in place of an assumption of the political neutrality of empowerment, or the universal good of improvement. In place of an essentialist, universalizing moral imperative, a postdevelopment practice could instead be acknowledged as part of a broader hegemonic struggle, through which professionals strive to bring into being particular ideals of a just and fair society.

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Notes

1. The name of this organization and its associated staff have been changed.
2. Sometimes referred to as “hill tribes,” the highland minorities in northern Thailand comprise a diverse mix of distinct cultural and language groups. The Thai Ministry for the Interior officially recognizes ten such minorities: Karen, Hmong, Yao, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Htin, Khamu, and Mlabri.
3. Limited space does not allow for further elaboration. See the discussion in McKinnon (2004).
4. See Ferguson (1994) and Mosse (2005) as examples of studies that highlight the apparently haphazard progression of aid projects.
5. Forgacs (1988) and Hoare and Smith (1971) provide an introductory selection of Gramsci’s texts; see also Gramsci (1992).
6. Khun Rungsarith is a pseudonym. A neutral Thai name was chosen so as to disguise the particular tribal identity of this research partner.

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