

Activism, Expertise, Commons

Larry Lohmann

For many of us wondering ‘what next?’ it has often seemed common sense to see a world of coherent global processes following a similar logic everywhere in opposition to the diversity or chaos of local particularity. For the formally-educated middle classes in particular, something called ‘capitalism’ or ‘globalisation’ is usually seen (for better or for worse) as imposing a new order on what lies ‘outside’ or ‘before’ it, or on ‘the local’; ‘the market’ is seen (for good or ill) as overcoming custom and coercion; human agency, ingenuity and technology as reorganising a non-technical, inhuman nature (whether the results are seen as productive or disastrous); law as overcoming violence, corruption and arbitrary uses of power; and science (love it or loathe it) as bringing a new kind of order to rational discussion which transcends interest and ‘non-scientific’ impurities of ideology or bias. And it has often seemed reasonable to take these seemingly coherent global processes and try to oppose them to counterparts operating at the same level.

Yet, strictly speaking, such dualisms are impossible. Forever incomplete, they are always breaking down. The breakdowns are usually more immediately visible both to ‘hands-on elites’ and to what I’ll call ‘commoners’ than to the educated public in between – including many activists. Yet the dualisms are not just a middle-class illusion. The idea of potent, transcendental ‘global’ entities makes sense because a range of practices that appears to embody them is entrenched in the world and in everyday life. These practices, and their perpetual failures and attempted reformations, make up much of the play of power distinctive to the contemporary world. Those of us with ambitions to be activists neglect this play at our cost – and at the cost of movement-building. Let me take a few examples.

Dams

The story of big dam-building is still sometimes told among the middle classes, whether fans or critics, as one of the taming of rivers by human master-planners. This is an illusion. What happens is invariably the replacement not of a natural with an engineered landscape but of one social/technical body, no more natural than human, with another. Dam projects do not introduce knowledge and technology to a place where there was none, but rather reorganise and redistribute knowledge and technology. As they concentrate hydraulic power and technical control at single sites, they replace or dilute, for example, most existing knowledge of flood basin irrigation, typically distributed along the whole length of rivers, with new forms of accounting and description. Nor does this expertise, or the capital it accompanies, arrive on site fully formed and waiting to be applied. Instead, like the knowledge it nudges aside, it is created largely on-site. Engineering is messy. Underlying rock formations never turn out as expected. Improvised materials need to be brought into play. Mischievous leaks result in erosion and cost overruns. Delay leads to delay. The science is worked out on the ground. Calculations have to be redone and new calculation techniques thought up (such as cost-benefit analysis) which, while more centralised, turn out to be no more ‘accurate’ than their forebears. Then again, the project itself has to be constantly reconjured and ever more implausibly widened in its social scope as it meets with failure after failure. (See Box, ‘How development unfolds’.)



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How development unfolds

The first impulse of development agency planners, on being told that a proposed agricultural project will be counterproductive because it will damage local soils and water through monocropping or salinisation, may be to write an environmental component into the plan. When told that this environmental plan is unimplementable because it is bound to be subverted or ignored by local power-holders, the planners may respond by writing more enforcement into the plan. When asked where the enforcement will come from, planners may add a police academy to the plan; when asked how this academy is to be prevented from being used by a corrupt military, they will lay out schemes for ‘good governance’; and so on ad infinitum. At each stage, specialists in new fields are called in to create their own roles in the story of the global application of expertise.

Similar dialectics unfold once projects have been executed. An irrigation scheme on the Huay Mong tributary of the Mekong River in Northeast Thailand offers a mundane example.

In the late 1970s, the Huay Mong project was envisaged as an appendage to the grandiose proposed Pa Mong dam on the Mekong mainstream, from whose reservoir it was slated to draw irrigation water by gravity. When Pa Mong was shelved in 1979 – original proposals called for the resettlement of 250,000 people or more – planners consoled themselves by hurriedly redrawing Huay Mong as a stand-alone pumped irrigation and flood control scheme. An agreement securing partial funding was signed with the European Commission in 1981 and the completed project, fitted out with Belgian machines, launched in 1987 under Thailand's National Energy Administration.

At first, this 'social experiment' – as it is described by officials responsible for the project – consisted of nothing more than basic engineering works. Insufficient arrangements had been made, for example, for getting irrigation water to farmers. A new project was added to adapt the landscape to what had already been built. Tertiary canals were dug to ensure that every field had easy access to water, and the Agricultural Land Reform Office was drawn in as lead agency.

Yet many local farmers objected to the canals crossing their land, and those local residents on the side of the river that enabled them to benefit from the project's engineering works were reluctant to join the associated 'on-farm development' scheme. By 1993, European Union donors were demanding that someone 'create the need for the structure' – to quote the candid phrase of a Belgian consultant engineer who spoke to visitors in January 1998 about the project. Policy was rewritten and new agencies arrived to improve agricultural output and develop 'local institutions' and 'human resources'. Tertiary canals were now to be constructed only when requested by farmers, and villager 'self-reliance' and a 'sense of belonging' were to be fostered. Admittedly, these last phrases carried an Orwellian ring, given that the project had been imposed on the local area and that developing the financial and technical skills to manage it locally meant dependence on official schooling rather than local skills. But the real problem was that European donor pressure to retrofit the project to make it more 'participatory' – by making water-user group committees democratically elected, increasing their

role in maintaining the project's infrastructure, 'empowering' farmers' organisations, inducing government field staff to concern themselves with 'community development', and so forth – had ignited a further phase of resistance. This originated from the Thai government bureaucracies running Huay Mong, which understandably dragged their feet in the face of the Europeans' criticism of their prerogatives, working methods and 'top-down' approach.

To this, the European response was as absurd as it was inevitable: 'reform Thai government agencies'. In order to make sense out of concrete which had been poured at Huay Mong in the early and mid-1980s, it had become necessary by 1998 for the concerned European agencies to adopt a stance at once quixotic and openly imperialistic: that of remakers of the Thai state. The technician's dream of imposing effective irrigation and flood-control infrastructure on a Mekong tributary, instead of being checked and moderated by other realities, had, when faced with failure, resistance and the consequences of falsehood, ultimately merely engendered other hubristic fantasies calling for the political re-engineering of a larger society.

Policy reforms, too, lead to the proliferation of new fictions. For example, Northern activists have sometimes demanded that the World Bank abide by its reform pledges to 'promote participation' in the hope that this will check its tendency to impose locally inappropriate schemes on unwilling villagers. One of the Bank's responses has been to require of countries receiving loans that they conduct public hearings on plans for Bank-funded projects.

As Bank officials are well aware, these hearings are often reluctantly undertaken and officially supervised in a way which allows little discussion. The outcome is threefold. First, the activists' attention to the Bank's bogus 'participation' initiatives legitimises them for donor-country audiences. Second, the activists' usefulness to grassroots movements is diminished when they are tarred with charges of imperialism, which issue from officials of the recipient country inconvenienced by the demand for hearings. Third, local officials can be conveniently blamed for obstructionism by the Bank when the hearings turn out to be spurious, confirming the Bank's claim that 'we have the best of intentions but cannot be held responsible for local backwardness'. A new, more extensive set of falsehoods about 'participation' is born to replace the old.



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The response of development to the promptings of truth-tellers, in short, has little in common with the linear process by which a super-tanker's captain corrects course in response to repeated instrument readings and landmark sightings. If geometric metaphors must be used, it more closely resembles the processes of iteration which produce the convoluted, unpredictable patterns of mathematical chaos. Simple critical inputs into development tend to result not in asymptotic convergence to truth and effectiveness, but rather in a political Mandelbrot set of endlessly detailed curlicues and blobs beyond which unfolds a further infinite perspective of crazily saw-toothed coastlines, islands and indefinitely receding spirals.

Source: Larry Lohmann, 'Missing the Point of Development Talk: Reflections for Activists' (1998), available at www.thecornerhouse.co.uk

Nowhere is there a single line dividing human from non-human, or intentions from the world to which they refer. Nowhere do engineers or economists suddenly step from imagination to reality, from plan to real thing.¹ Nor, as big dams respond to circumstances by restlessly shifting their shapes from power generators to multipurpose projects to opportunities for social engineering to tourist attractions, do engineers or economists ever arrive at a point at which they can identify in their own terminology, once and for all, what big dams are about.

Yet the whole centralising process is good at creating, as an artefact, the notion that the world *can* be divided between abstract human calculation, expertise and the wealth-creating ability of 'the economy' on one side and a material world of waiting, indifferent natural resources on the other. The dam teaches the engineers and the economists, and they take what they learn away with them even as they, and the physical works of the dam itself, also work to make obsolete the knowledge of local farmers and fisher folk. Rivers become experienced (though not by those who have lived with them) as 'forces of nature' tamed by expert humans, even if the 'nature' in question is manufactured by the dam projects themselves. When the centralisation and simplification associated with big dams leads to their characteristic and familiar failures,² which are one moment in their evo-

1 For examples involving mosquitoes, irrigation, estates, debt, public health and mud bricks, see Mitchell, Timothy, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2002.

2 See, for example, McCully, P., *Silenced Rivers*, Zed, London, 1997.

lution, these failures come to appear not as a problem of the redistribution and reshaping of control and knowledge, but at most as resistance or falsification by this external ‘nature’, to be countered by adjustments in the expert text that represents it. The idealistic narrative of change as the application of a detached body of expertise and surplus-producing capacity to an essentially passive clay is preserved and repeatedly relaunched. Hence the chain of technical fixes and repackagings, followed by inevitable further failures and further fixes, that characterises the continuing story of big dams everywhere (as well as the stories of industrial agriculture, genetic engineering, international development, cost-benefit analysis, technical climate fixes, and so on).³

Lessons for activists

The lessons for activists, as I struggled to sum them up some years ago in an article based on experience of grassroots movements opposing large dams in the Mekong and Chao Phraya basins, are many:

...the intellectual aspect to the struggle against damaging development projects is not about whether what the experts say is true or false. More fundamentally, the struggle is about – so to speak – which genre of performance [see Box, ‘Development as Drama’] will prevail... Looking at activism in this way opens up new resources of power and influence for campaigners, and points toward contexts of truth-telling which are less likely to contribute to the production of more falsehoods and to defeats for popular movements. It encourages ways of facing up to, and creatively contending with, a number of political realities:

First, development can translate everything, including acts of opposition and their consequences, into its own terms, if not necessarily turn it to its advantage. There is no point in trying to find some Archimedean fulcrum ‘outside’ development, which development cannot attempt to make part of itself, and building opposition from there. This is only an extreme version of the illusion that development itself works to propagate – that it is converting

3 I’ve described this chain in a series of articles available on: www.thecornerhouse.org.uk for dams and development projects, ‘Mekong Dams in the Drama of Development’ and ‘Missing the Point of Development Talk: Reflections for Activists’ (1998); for cost-benefit analysis ‘Whose Voice is Talking? How Opinion Polling and Cost-Benefit Analysis Synthesize New “Publics”’ (1998); for genetic modification, ‘Genetic Dialectic: The Biological Politics of Genetically Modified Trees’ (with Viola Sampson, 2000); and for the Kyoto Protocol’s ‘flexible mechanisms’, ‘Democracy or Carbocracy: Intellectual Corruption and the Future of the Climate Debate’, 2001.

something undeveloped or underdeveloped into something developed. It is an illusion which carries all the risks of Orientalism and of mischaracterisation of change as being due to the power of a distinct entity called ‘development’.



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Second, there is equally no point in seeking an ‘inside’ to development from which it might be reformed so that it is, in the aggregate, more responsive to the facts, more effective, or more accountable. No such reform is possible, and there is no conceivable point from which it could be undertaken... Discarding the notion that development is the implementation of theories or plans makes possible a more nuanced understanding of development officials which avoids the facile assumption that they must either believe or not believe the falsehoods they express.

Third, actions in the struggle against development projects are taken in an intercultural space occupied simultaneously by what is called development and by other social forms and populated by actors playing concurrent roles in performances in multiple genres. Each action has both ‘development meanings’ and many other meanings. Seen as part of the drama of development, a protest against a World Bank-funded dam can be read only as an obstacle to progress, a call for ‘alternatives’, or a prelude to further development schemes to mitigate or compensate for losses connected with the dam. Approached as an event within another genre of performance, the same event may be read as a moment in the struggle to sustain or create local livelihoods and as a battle *against* ‘alternatives’ (i.e., those embodied by the dam and its effects), while the actions of World Bank staff involved are construed as obstructionist, mendacious or exploitative. Thus while the opponents of a development project cannot escape having their actions feed into an interpretive mechanism geared up to produce more such projects, development officials also cannot escape having their own actions reciprocally ‘contained’ within other performances which accord them few of the privileges they seek. If development can process everything, so, simultaneously, can other genres (e.g., the modes of storytelling proper to coffeehouses rather than offices, to in-shore artisanal fishing rounds rather than master-planning meetings, to forest honey-gathering rather than air travel).⁴

Fourth, development critics accordingly need not believe their actions are intelligible or effective only within the narrow gen-

⁴ Zerner, Charles, ed., *Culture and the Question of Rights*, Duke University Press, Raleigh, 2001; review of same at www.thecornerhouse.org.uk.

res of development or anti-development talk, with its intellectual formulas and global solutions. Making themselves answerable to specific movements can help campaigners see their actions as multiple in meaning and consequences. Understanding whom they are telling the truth to and for enables activists better to select those contexts of truth-telling which strain performances in the development genre to breaking point while simultaneously helping to craft effective concurrent performances in those other genres in which truth matters more (see Box, ‘Development as drama’).

Finally, there is no such thing as a campaign goal whose articulation ‘can’t possibly do any harm’. Even innocuous-sounding appeals for ‘more participation’ can lead, depending on where they are made and to whom, to outcomes that undermine participation (see Box, ‘How development unfolds’). The political meanings of such appeals are not contained in their texts but depend on the performances in which they find a place. Understanding these meanings is not a matter of academic theory but is itself a performance art requiring practice, experience, intuition, flexibility, improvisation, sensitivity to historical and political circumstances, a sense of what lies over the horizon, and an ability to handle unforeseen consequences.⁵



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Development as drama

A seminar in Bangkok in December 1997 gave a fragmentary glimpse of the multiple theatre of power in which development unfolds. Academics and officials who had been charged to come up with a plan to prevent or mitigate adverse impacts of a proposed Thai dam project on the seasonally flooded Nam Songkhram tributary of the Mekong were invited to Chulalongkorn University to set out their provisional conclusions for discussion before an audience of academics, villagers and activists.

In accordance with official policies of ‘openness’ forced by recent democracy movements, the protagonists abjured any claims to awful power or pomp, instead putting on a show of receptiveness to public opinion. During the first quarter of the seminar, representatives of the Department of Energy Development

5 ‘Missing the Point of Development Talk: Reflections for Activists’, see note 3.

and Promotion, which is responsible for the Nam Songkhram project, held the floor in easy, confident style, together with the academics it had hired. Officials and lecturers took turns explaining how this flood-control, dry-season irrigation project had been studied and restudied over the years as its specifications changed, following recommendations from the National Environment Board, from a project with a high-water level of 143.5 metres to one with a level of 139.5 metres above sea level; and how, given the necessity for compensation to the public for any damages that might result, it was necessary to discuss the project in advance with those who were to be affected. ‘If we know the project is useful’, said one, it is necessary to figure out ‘how to get them to agree’. In the meantime the audience played the role of complaisant listeners who believed that what they were hearing constituted respectable research and planning, in line with Borges’s classic definition of the actor, who ‘on a stage plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person’.

As the day wore on, however, some of the participants’ boredom with the performance began to show. Polite questions were succeeded by pointed observations of factual error. These observations then shaded into the sort of insinuation that can’t be held in the mind for any length of time either by a character in a play or by its audience: that the whole thing was a charade. Instead of treating the academics’ findings as a *substitute* for genuine debate, as the script called for, the listeners had the effrontery to begin to treat them as a pretext for a real one. Instead of suspending disbelief during the performance on offer, they began to discuss the agenda behind its multiple falsehoods.

Thus after Wanpen Wirotnakut of Khon Kaen University asserted blandly that the archaeological effects of the proposed project were ‘zero’, since only six ancient sites of cultural interest were in the vicinity, all of which were above the flood line, Srisakara Vallibhotama, a prominent anthropologist who had done the research Wanpen was citing, could hold his peace no longer. Pronouncing himself ‘shocked’, Srisakara pointed out that the true figure was 90 sites, and that all 90 would be submerged. But Wanpen’s fictional numbers, he went on with rising pique, ‘were not the important thing’:

‘Why is the person who did the original report not presenting these results? It makes me think that the decision about Nam

Songkhram has already long been made, right? You have to bring in this data to support the decision, right? So it's not transparent. Beware! You might not be able to do this. With the new Constitution, the people have the right to oppose the state. It's not for the state to come and make excuses... I study archaeology as the relationship between humans and environment. Archaeology is life and culture. The point is to study it from within. Do you see? Nam Songkhram and other dam projects are impositions from outside, led by the state... This is to look down on local people.'

Encouraged by this example, others leapt in. Chaovalit Witayanon, an expert on the diverse Nam Songkhram fisheries from which locals derive two-thirds of their income, noted that while the project's EIA (environmental impact assessment) advanced the 'sloppy' claim that none of the local fish studied were migratory, the truth is that nearly all are. The EIA's notion that if any migratory fish species were later found to have been eliminated, then they could be bred and released into the post-project water system, was, Chaovalit continued, 'absolutely uninformed by any scientific thought process or research'. Prasat Tongsir, president of the Chamber of Commerce in the provincial town nearest the proposed dam, observed that another project of a similar type built 30 years before had wiped out fish populations and exacerbated local conflict, and wondered out loud why this history seemed to have held no lessons for the present study team. A provincial teachers college instructor, Ekachai Khasawong, cross-examined Dr Boonyoke Wannthanupoot, a corporate consultant, who had assured the listeners that fish catches 'should not be altered' by the project because its gates would be opened to the surge of the Mekong in May. When Ekachai pointed out that the fish needed to migrate into the Songkhram river from the Mekong in March and April as well, Dr Boonyoke temporised: 'The details will have to be discussed further after construction. This is only the study period.' Other participants interrupted speakers to point out that while no plans were being made to compensate villagers for either lost fisheries or lost land, and the project planners had claimed the dam would not force floodwaters over the banks of the river, it was nevertheless admitted that 1,600 hectares of seasonally flooded forest would be permanently inundated. Moreover, the crude 1:50,000 maps the planners were working with made the drawing of high-water marks in this flat landscape wholly speculative.

Summing up succinctly, Ekachai and other representatives from



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the locality observed that the Nam Songkhram dam was a project with momentum but no rationale. Land at the headworks site had already been bought in anticipation of approval, but even with – or perhaps because of – decades of studies and modifications, no one could explain any more why it should be built. Irrigation? The National Environment Board had already said that this objective was inappropriate for the revised project. Flood control? The current level of the proposed dam was already below the annual high-water mark. Fishery promotion? Experts were in agreement that fisheries would be devastated, not improved. Tourism? Who would come to see an area whose riverine forest had been permanently flooded, together with much of its biodiversity? Vested interests, including political parties, quarrying interests and bureaucracies were the main parties pressing for construction, Ekachai and other local residents concluded.

How do actors in a drama handle this sort of unexpected outburst from an audience? One path is to ignore it; another to shrug it off as philistinism; another to treat it with the bewildered indulgence one accords the lunatic who leaps up on stage to denounce *The Tempest* as a pack of lies. ‘Of course there are some falsehoods here,’ goes the unspoken subtext. ‘We know that. It’s our duty to provide them. The show must go on. Why are you making such a fuss?’ But when the complicity of the audience is waning and even the coherence of the script is in doubt, other measures must be called into play. Staying in character, defter dramatic performers treat listeners’ dissatisfaction as an occasion for virtuoso ad libs, in order to incorporate it into the play itself.

Thus the beleaguered heroes of the December performance at Chulalongkorn did their best to recaptivate a restless audience by accounting for fanciful figures and impossible contradictions by even more fantastical explanations of the order of ‘the dog ate my homework’. When Witoon Permpongsacharoen of TER-RA, an independent organisation monitoring Mekong developments, pointed out that the mitigation report under discussion appeared to have smuggled in figures for internal rates of return from previous versions of the project, resulting in inconsistent figures (on page 23 the internal rate of return was given as 11.87 per cent, on page 65 as 12.8 per cent; the project’s Net Present Value was given in different places as both 21.94 and –57.19 million baht), the reply was that page 23 had been removed from the ‘final draft’ and had only mistakenly been left in Witoon’s copy. When the plausibility of this was challenged it was implied that

Witoon had obtained his copy through unauthorised means, or perhaps forged it.

The ripples of derision that greeted these sallies, however, signalled that the audience was finding the actors' improvisational skills as charmless as the script itself. Piling fantasy on fantasy couldn't cover the implicit uproar beginning to fill the hall. Not only were the spectators impatient; it began to look as if they had shown up at the theatre for an entirely different kind of performance: one in which the difference between truth and fraudulence *mattered*, in which belief and disbelief were relevant, learning possible, debate real, rationalism corrosive and cleansing, and the fate of the heroes of development of no greater importance than anyone else's. The struggle was not about whether what the experts said was true or false, but about which genre of performance would prevail. Would the audience be able assert a different treatment of the theme, the action, the characters themselves? Just as the listeners had shown themselves capable of switching between their Borgesian role and an entirely new one, so the impact mitigation study team suddenly began to appear not only as all-too-human members of an embattled middle class trying to make ends meet through thespian hack-work, but also – at the same time – as mendacious fraudsters ('hired academic guns' in Srisakara's smouldering phrase) conniving in the robbery of other people's livelihoods. Struggling to keep the play going, they increasingly had to step out of character to throw back the tomatoes and rotten eggs now being lobbed over the footlights.

In the circumstances, striding up to the stage apron in order to try to shout out an explicit defence of the play would have been tantamount to admitting things were out of control. Actors are not symposiasts. Who could defend *The Tempest* as a treatise on the geography of Bermuda in the face of a hooting, literal-minded mob? Riot was about to break out in the development theatre, and in a type of confusion which surely predates the postmodern era by centuries, the actors seemed momentarily unsure whether to try to continue the play or wade into the audience for an all-house duke-out.

With the assistance of the moderator, Chanthana Banphasirichote of the university's Institute for Social Research, some equilibrium was restored. The development drama, though now somewhat ragged, was allowed to resume its course. Recovering his face together with his place in the script, the senior represen-

tative of the Department of Power Development and Promotion present reiterated that he would submit to his chief all the helpful ‘views’ and ‘suggestions’ that had been received. Again taking up their roles in the play, many villagers who had travelled from upcountry to the meeting took care to deposit additional ‘observations’ and ‘questions’ in his basket.

But out of the confusion had emerged an additional performance, which was now proceeding along a parallel track. It was now possible to say new things, to examine publically the whole development drama from the outside, to ‘contain’ it just as it strives to ‘contain’ everything else. Witoon, for example, took the microphone to propose that, drawing a lesson from the debacle that had just occurred, the Department of Power Development Promotion simply give up trying to invent new visions for a Nam Songkhram dam – or any other irrigation-cum-power projects. Having been given its head in the irrigation field by the Democrat Party for its own ends, the Department had got itself into an institutional rut promoting comprehensive, abstract engineering projects which, when brought face to face with other existing social realities, had to be modified so thoroughly that they no longer had any coherent rationale, in spite of years of studies and revised plans costing millions of baht. Why not start all over again and take up energy conservation or some other type of future that would not lead to such endless contradictions? If the Department had sufficient daring, the site at Nam Songkhram which had been purchased so prematurely could even be converted into a solar energy experimental station or a fishery development centre.

Turning his back on Nam Songkhram entirely for the moment in order to explore an even wider theme, Srisuwan Kuankachorn of the Project for Ecological Recovery meanwhile opened a conversation with Wipada Apinan of the Environmental Policy and Planning Office. Concerned at the extent to which EIAs had become mere tools in legitimising decisions made on engineering and economic grounds, Srisuwan asked Wipada whether it would be possible for state environmental agencies to press for a policy of not approving environmentally inadequate projects no matter how highly they were rated in engineering and economic terms. Out of 200 EIAs he had studied, he noted, only one had recommended that the project in question not be built, and all were of worryingly low quality.

And so the meeting ended inconclusively, as most such meetings do. The episode may not mean much to the overall course of development along the Nam Songkhram, or the Mekong. But the clash of fields of force connected with different genres of performance that it exemplified is not something politically minded activists in the region or elsewhere can ignore. The authors and heroes of the development drama have been given repeated opportunities to indulge a wonderful and terrible capacity to turn truth into fantasy. If the biographies of other playwrights and actors are any guide, that capacity is unlikely to be restrained just by giving them more truth and more life to work on.

Commodification, privatisation and 'the economy'

One story of commodification and privatisation frequently told among the middle classes, whether fans or critics, is that of the application of universal principles of property and exchange to diverse things and places so that the price mechanism and other latent market forces are liberated to do their work, overcoming 'command and control' inefficiencies, irrationalities, subsidies, corruption and colonialist-style coercion. Property law is promulgated where before, it is said, there was arbitrary or unrestrained rule, chaos or the *res nullius* or open access of unpoliced land, water or ideas. Contract, corporate, tax and criminal law is reformed and deployed. Lands are mapped and surveyed whose extent and boundaries no one is felt quite to have had an accurate, calculable grasp of before. Trade is channelled here and rechannelled there. New equivalences, calculation, exchange and efficiency become possible through the drawing of boundaries between what is internal and what is external to 'the economy', which is imagined to have been walled off – by, among other things, the state (and government, law, statistical production, economic knowledge) – as a machine which exists separate from the state, from a passive 'nature' which is categorised as 'resources', from a world of coercion, violence and unpredictability, from a past, historical world of 'primitive accumulation', from reasoning about ends and the development of desire, from self-provisioning ways of livelihood on which it is said to be everywhere encroaching, from an informal, unwritten, unmeasurable, implicitly-understood background of 'external' social practice, and from all possible claims, costs, interruptions and misunderstandings that might make the act of exchange, and thus the economy itself, impossible to complete. These walled-off



Meanwhile, the boundaries defining what the market will deliver 'efficiently', and what count as 'subsidies' and 'state interventions', turn out to be shifting, unstable and constantly reimprovised.

acts of exchange are modelled as gravitating towards equilibrium, and their aggregate, ‘the economy’, as being self-contained, measurable and manageable, in contrast to a secondary, accidental, residual ‘outside’. For economics texts or International Monetary Fund or World Trade Organization documents to acknowledge the existence of politics – racism, colonialism – or the details of local rural life, or even the need to investigate whether past liberalisation efforts have done what they said they would do, would be self-evidently to ‘change the subject’. Whenever parts of the imagined ‘outside’ do need to be ‘assimilated’ (due, for example, to the need to ensure social welfare or environmental protection) to the imagined ‘inside’, simplifying institutions go to work, from government departments of statistics employing thousands of clerks, to World Bank projects on ‘the informal economy’ or ‘water privatisation’, all the way down to Chicago lecture halls or the rooms in which the new social practice of ‘contingent valuation’ questions (‘What would you be willing to pay not to have a radon-contaminated environment?’) is floated.

Yet this narrative, too, has an illusory subject. The forms of accounting associated with macroeconomic management – which arose out of a colonial and immediately post-colonial political experience – do not provide a more ‘accurate’ understanding of a pre-existing world, but just set up new practices in new places whose ostensible ambitions come to grief again and again. New mapping projects cannot create the disembodied form of knowledge they aspire to but only introduce a different set of social instabilities, conflicts and crises. These involve everything from the moving of survey marks to boundary disputes to the shrinkage of the paper that maps are printed on to the disruptive politics of rural property claims exacerbated by the attempt to transfer political conflicts to new, centralised sites of calculation in offices. New regimes of private ownership, land titling, or ‘structural adjustment’ have never been separable from the process of excluding a welter of claims and entitlements in favour of certain monopolies, engendering fresh chains of organised violence, reaction, retreat, legal argument, charges of arbitrariness and economic theory. Similarly, to realise orthodox environmental economics’ dream of a world of expanded calculation in which all ‘externalities’ are ‘internalised’ would ultimately make calculation and exchange impossible. Violating Miss Piggy’s rule ‘never eat anything bigger than your head’, it would entail exploding ‘the economy’ as an entity and as a concept – a state of affairs which, for the economically interested, would naturally invite a cascade of further ill-fated stabs at technical fixes. In many ways, such ‘technical’ initiatives and their consequences make the world less, not more, calculable.⁶

6 For further examples, see Mitchell, *op. cit.*

Meanwhile, the boundaries defining what the market will deliver ‘efficiently’, and what count as ‘subsidies’ and ‘state interventions’, turn out to be shifting, unstable and constantly reimprovised. As one World Bank consultant said in the 1990s, ‘the Bank can never challenge the dominance of the motor car because of the fact that it is run in the service of the oil companies, and they cannot countenance change in the dominance of road transport. As a result, in the World Bank, new roads enjoy “investments”, while railways only receive “subsidies”.’⁷ Aggregates of larger market actors as well as institutions of economic assessment and governance constantly alter ends as well as means on both social and individual levels, meaning that the application of purportedly ‘non-political’ notions of ‘efficiency’, ‘growth’, ‘contraction’, ‘competition’, ‘economies of scale’, ‘fine-tuning’, ‘demand’, ‘economic choice’ and ‘utility’ turn out to be, crudely speaking, pieces of Whiggish politics.⁸ ‘The market’ shows itself to be impossible to pin down as a discrete entity separable from the ‘non-market’. As Gertrude Stein might have put it, ‘there is no *there* there’.

First, candidates for the title of ‘the market’ or ‘world trade’ turn out always to have had ever-varying ‘non-market’ practices at their centre (colonialism, East India Company-style monopolies, enclosure, family labour, slavery, price supports, patriarchy, import quotas, dumping, immigration laws, subsidies, self-provisioning, households, kin or ethnic networks, joint stock companies, transnational companies and their cultures, non-market movement of goods within corporate hierarchies, games by which labourers ‘make out’). For example, for the North to dominate the trade in sugar cane, which needed tropical sun, slavery, which is a ‘non-market’ institution, was necessary. With the loss of the Caribbean came sugar beet, which had to be protected with the ‘non-market’ instruments of price supports and import quotas. Surplus beet sugar was then dumped (a ‘non-market’ practice) on the world market, depressing cane prices and costing Southern producers billions. The sugar glut of the second half of the 1990s was generated by EU and US subsidies (a ‘non-market’ institution) which pushed prices below production costs for all countries except Brazil. The price of sugar in the US included hundreds of thousands of dollars paid by the sugar industry to buy votes (a ‘non-market’ distortion) in



Candidates for the title of ‘the market’ or ‘world trade’ turn out always to have had ever-varying ‘non-market’ practices at their centre.

7 Interview cited in Young, Zoe, *A New Green Order? The World Bank and the Politics of the Global Environment Facility*, Pluto, London, 2002.

8 See, for example, ‘Pulp, Paper and Power: How an Industry Reshapes its Social Environment’ (1995) and ‘Whose Voice is Talking? How Opinion Polling and Cost-Benefit Analysis Synthesize New “Publics”’ (1998), available at www.thecornerhouse.org.uk.

Congress to keep subsidies in place.⁹ Second, any movement towards commodification of basic non-commodifiables such as land, livelihood activity, water or money necessarily engenders, at different levels of society, what Karl Polanyi called answering movements of self-protection.¹⁰ Third, and perhaps even more important, what is described as the march of ‘free markets’ or ‘capitalism’ has such divergent and contradictory effects that it is hard to locate a single logic in it anywhere. Timothy Mitchell, the political scientist and close scholar of Middle Eastern societies whose insights I am relying on throughout this paper,¹¹ documents how in the case of Egypt, for example, ‘free market’ reforms generally ‘produced results opposite from those their proponents anticipated. Instead of moving towards high-value export crops such as cotton and vegetables, farmers increased their production of staples’, while ‘monopolisation, hoarding, speculation and the exposure of farmers to international price swings that everywhere in the world make free-market farming impossible’ wreaked further havoc.¹² To deal with the instabilities their programmes had caused, market reformers called for future markets to enable farmers to sell in advance at more stable prices, but such measures tend simply to open up another field of financial speculation, shifting still more income away from growers. The push toward a single price for wheat and reductions in subsidised wheat (allowing subsidised US white flour into the country) resulted in smallholders setting aside more of their land to grow the grain not for sale, but to process at tiny village mills using non-commercialisable fuels (including rubbish from the international tourist industry) for their own household bread. Others involved themselves in the ‘market’ crop of sugar (though cane was hardly a textbook commodity since government-owned mills fixed the purchase price, and even with privatisation farmers still had no choice of who to sell the crop to) only to get state loans that were then used to support the larger system of subsistence activity. In this case, ‘rather than a subsistence sector surviving in support of capitalism, market crops, protected and promoted by the state, survived in support of self-provisioning.’ In Lesotho, meanwhile, a society

9 Mitchell, *op. cit.*, see note 1. .

10 In an age in which, as E. P. Thompson puts it (*Customs in Common*, Free Press, New York, 1990), the market is such a ‘great personage’, it is easy to forget the empirical truth that as Polanyi put it, complete marketisation ‘would result in the demolition of society’. See Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 2001 [1944].

11 Mitchell, *op. cit.*; Mitchell, ‘Everyday Metaphors of Power’, *Theory and Society* 19, 1990, pp. 545-577; Mitchell, ‘Fixing the Economy’, *Cultural Studies* 12 (1), 1998, pp. 82-101.

12 Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

as ‘marketised’ as one would wish – being dependent on wage labour, having centuries of experience of buying and selling – the placement of cows in a separate domain from cash is actively maintained, especially by men, as prestige and retirement fund,¹³ just as people in industrialised societies have consistently greeted the advent of ‘market-friendly’ standardised national currencies by breaking them into discrete, *less* ‘inter-countable’ categories such as pin money, clothes money, education money, and so forth.¹⁴ In a world in which the continuing enclosure of land, water and livelihood activity is supplemented by new enclosures of wombs, genes, knowledge, atoms, and even the atmosphere, nowhere does ‘primitive accumulation’ turn out to be quite distinguishable from ‘advanced accumulation’. Nor, as tycoons such as Russia’s Roman Abramovich or Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and politicians such as Mozambique’s Joaquim Chissano feed off processes of liberalisation or ‘economic shock therapy’, does corruption turn out to be anywhere in retreat in the face of the ‘free market’. Privatisation of electricity and water regularly takes forms unanticipated by its neoliberal would-be architects.

Thailand, for example, as Chuenchom Sangasri points out, has spent tens of millions of dollars on ‘designing competitive market mechanisms, legal and regulatory arrangements, and assorted contracts’ to privatise electricity supply on the assumption that ‘the economy’ can



Privatisation of electricity and water regularly takes forms unanticipated by its neoliberal would-be architects.

13 Ferguson, James, *The Anti-Politics Machine: Development and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

14 Zelizer, Viviana, *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Pay Checks, Poor Relief and Other Currencies*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997.

be separated from 60 years of shifting political relationships among the government, parastatals, the private sector and civil society. The result has been only to raise capital for debt-ridden state-owned utilities and salaries for upper management and other staff. No competition has resulted, no protection from monopoly abuses, no transparency, only a sale of minority shares of state monopolies that are to remain partially self-regulated. An interview with a senior manager at Thailand's Provincial Electricity Authority (PEA), for instance, shows the reaction of top utility management to incentives that are driving the privatisation programme, and the changes necessary within the organisation in order to make privatisation operative:

PEA senior manager: 'Under competition everything will be the same, our arrangements for the documents, everything the same by the state agency... (but salaries change)... The PEA Governor salary will change the most. Now he only makes 100,000 baht a month. But if we privatise he will have salary 460,000 baht per month. So the Governor, he is very enthusiastic to privatise. [laughter] We had planned to privatise in the mid next year, the Governor said "NO!", he said, "you have to privatise this year".'

Interviewer: 'Within this year?'

PEA senior manager: 'Yeah – easy. You only change the signboard, the papers, the business cards. It is OK.'¹⁵

Similarly, prices have gone up while services decline as a result of privatisation in the UK, Sweden and the USA. Old bugbears of corruption, force, arbitrariness, and local particularity are nowhere made marginal, but are merely redistributed, remaining central to anything we might want to call 'the market'. The social networks and types of control that attempt to set off 'the economy' or the 'free market' from the 'non-economic' or 'non-market' constitute, as Mitchell puts it, both a 'limit and a horizon', constantly opening what is conceived as 'the economic' to other forces and logics.

Yet, again, the processes that have striven to give birth to 'the economy' have been good at producing the impression of a coherent, abstract, overarching, unitary entity, which is somehow different in kind from ordinary, particular practices. To move calculation from the field to the survey office, from the farmer to the district official, from the iron triangulation marker to the paper map, from the fac-

¹⁵ Graecen, Chuenchom Sangasri, and Graecen, Chris, forthcoming in *Pacific Affairs*.

tory to the computer-human complexes calculating GDP, from the shrimp fisher to the yearbook publisher, from the part-time opinion poll employee through the questionnaire form through the statistical tabulator to the political pundit, is to take such a big step that it can begin to seem not an action or a chain of sweaty, contested social practices but the symbol of an absolute gap between reality and its representations, between deed and word. In the North particularly, some of the physical and temporal distances between (on the one hand) the people involved in ‘programming’ institutions like schools, universities, agricultural extension departments, statistics offices, organised churches and mosques, management institutes, development agencies and economic planning ministries, which imagine they oppose themselves to, and stand outside, something called ‘real life’, offering operating codes to be mastered before taking up practice and (on the other hand) what is seen as the ‘outside’ world have grown so large that it seems there could be no other explanation than that the one must be concerned with something (a locationless or utopian ‘theory’ or ‘author’) metaphysically different from what the other is involved with (a located or, so to speak, toposian ‘practice’). It is in part this physical distance that requires and enables expertise as domination, through, for example, development programmes that treat countries as objects laid out like a map or engineering projects that reorganise rivers and transform the distribution of power, technology and information across the countryside.¹⁶ Truth and accuracy have become increasingly a matter of the degree of correspondence between imagined theory and practice, imagined mind and material – a problem which it is the prerogative of experts to investigate, adjudicate and claim credit for. All the while, as Noam Chomsky puts it in another context, ‘everyone is led to think that what he knows represents a local exception’.¹⁷ This is one reason why it has become so natural, since about 1950, to refer to countries and regions as independent ‘economies’, not communities, people or societies. ‘Market forces’ are experienced as operating on a wholly different level from acts of bargaining in the village square. ‘A (growing) economy’ is experienced as something that has always been there. Both are seen as potent, living abstractions for which experts and the politicians and officials they advise are the proper spokespeople.

Here, accordingly, as in the example of large hydroelectric dams, one starting point for activists is to uncover and challenge what happens in



To most ‘educated’ people, scientific facts seem to represent a kind of closure which ordinary agreements never achieve.

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Rules of experts*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

¹⁷ Chomsky, N., *Language and Responsibility*, quoted in Chomsky, N., *Class Warfare*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. 61.

these physical distances that are so easily translated into metaphysical gaps. For village-level leaders in the South, and for the unemployed or homeless in the North, this move is so obvious it hardly needs to be stated – and it is also often easy for expert ‘turncoats’ with a working understanding of what goes on over those physical distances to grasp. But for middle-class NGOs, especially in the North, for whom it is easier to ‘black-box’ these physical distances and for whom, accordingly, the dualistic metaphysics tends to be common sense, it has sometimes seemed more ‘realistic’ simply to try to feed more expert ‘truth’ or ‘ethics’ into the imagined ‘theory’ or ‘rule’ or ‘plan’ side of the dualism by erecting new institutions of text-formation. The practical result is often to help reproduce the sources of power the NGOs are battling. For middle-class activists to pay more serious attention to grassroots protests against this move, rather than dismissing them as ‘rhetorical’ or ‘political’, could lead to greater awareness that their well-intentioned actions may not always have the political consequences they aim at.

Science

To most ‘educated’ people, scientific facts seem to represent a kind of closure which ordinary agreements never achieve. They look, to cite the phrase of sociologist of science Harry Collins, like ships in bottles that seem always to have been there and can never get out again. Even among scientists, as Collins notes, the hard graft by which the ships got in the bottles ‘is so routinised that the tricks are only visible when some self-conscious attention is given to them’,¹⁸ as happens in scientific controversy or in cases involving commoners whose interests lie in making public the mechanics of the craft, and how it can go right or wrong.

One source of the power that radiates from the finished product consisting of ships in bottles is, again, institutions that embed in society the experience of a dualistic world of disembodied ‘representations’ or ‘texts’ versus an embodied ‘reality’. In the words of the late Bernard Williams, natural science is generally seen as an activity in which a ‘nature’ purified of human activity ‘inscribes itself into scientific journals without benefit of human intervention’. Such views help engender (for instance) the false cliché that it is possible to have a ‘science-based’ or ‘science-led’ policy whose science is not also at the same time policy-based.

‘Science studies’ scholars like Collins (a close student of what hap-

¹⁸ Collins, H. M., *Changing Order: Replication and Induction in Scientific Practice*, Sage, London, 1985, p. 6.

pens day to day on the laboratory bench), together with critical anthropologists and political scientists like Mitchell (a close student of rural Egypt), do what they can to take stock of this very 20th- and 21st-century power, by undermining the credibility of the dualism. Mitchell points to the ever-renewing failures of attempts to ‘fix’ or ‘enframe’ an arena for economic actions, to exclude, to keep out of the picture all those claims, costs, interruptions and misunderstandings that would make the act of exchange, and thus the economy itself, impossible to complete, by rules, procedures, institutions and methods of enforcement which are thought to have a special, metaphysical, extra-economic status (as a picture frame seems distinct from the painting it surrounds). ‘The constraints, understandings, and powers that frame the economic act and the economy as a whole and thus make the economy possible, at the same time render it incomplete.’ Pieces of the frame that involve rules for exchange, for instance, involve potential exchanges of their own; no rule contains or encloses its own interpretation, and applying it involves negotiating its limits and exceptions, just as translation and translational disputes are prior to meaning.¹⁹ These negotiations become part of the act of exchange they

19 See Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, Cambridge University Press, 1953; Quine, W. V. O., *Word and Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1960; and review of Zerner, Charles, ed., *Culture and the Question of Rights*, www.thecornerhouse.org.uk. While Mitchell prefers the French ‘governmentality’ vocabulary of Foucault and the dramatic ‘frame’ metaphors of Goffman and Michel Callon, and Collins favours the concepts of ‘rule’ and ‘same’ explored by the later Wittgenstein (that early ‘deprofessionalised’ intellectual), both, I would argue, deploy a tradition most elegantly represented by paragraph 201 of the *Philosophical Investigations* and its immediate surroundings:

‘This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. It can be seen that there is a misunderstanding here from the mere fact that in the course of our argument we give one interpretation after another; as if each one contented us at least for a moment, until we thought of yet another standing behind it. What this shows is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call “obeying the rule” and “going against it” in actual cases. Hence there is an inclination to say: every action according to the rule is an interpretation. But we ought to restrict the term “interpretation” to the substitution of one expression of the rule for another... If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do.”’

In fact, the bizarre dualisms Mitchell goes on at such length about are all, in one way or another, variants of the ‘rule/social practice’ dichotomy undermined by Wittgenstein.



Imagine someone whose experience of a 'market' has always involved bargaining trying to deal with a supermarket.

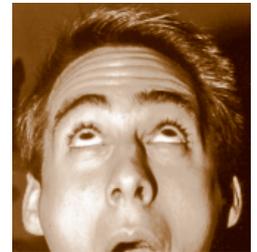
are supposed to regulate. Acting according to an implicitly understood or accepted norm unavoidably involves engaging over time in a series of exchanges, 'economic' and 'non-economic', out of which the norm or understanding emerges. (Imagine someone whose experience of a 'market' has always involved bargaining trying to deal with a supermarket; or see the attempts of contingent valuation specialists to evade the reality of subject 'gaming'.) To enforce a regulation involves all the expense and interactions of adjudication, resort to force, and monitoring. At every one of these points the 'frame' opens up and reveals its dual nature. Instead of acting as a limit, containing the economic, it becomes a series of exchanges and connections that involve the act of exchange in a potentially limitless series of further interactions. Thus the problem of setting apart 'the economy' is not a 'residual one of accounting for informal and clandestine activities, or turning externalities into internal costs. The problem is that the frame or border of the economy is not a line on a map, but a horizon that at every point opens up into other territories.'²⁰

Collins, meanwhile, throws into relief the impossibility of there being some disembodied, higher-order algorithm that can be used to determine whether a scientific experiment has been replicated or not, by invoking what he calls the 'experimenter's regress'. In order to know whether an original experiment has been repeated in the 'same way', it is necessary to build a good second set of equipment and ensure it is manipulated by good researchers. But the quality of the equipment and researchers can't be determined until it is seen whether they obtain the correct outcome, which can't be determined until it is seen whether the equipment and researchers are doing their jobs right, and so on *ad infinitum*. The only way of breaking into this circle, and thus entrenching scientific facts, is to fall back on what any abstract, disembodied algorithm tries to exclude – webs of practices involving what in the terms of the dualism would be called 'non-scientific' criteria (see Box, 'Reviving the ether'). Changing knowledge is changing social order. Science is both politics and culture. Unfortunately, the structure of contemporary scientific and other political institutions such as technology or treasury ministries, or law courts, tends to discourage attention being paid to these social interests and contingencies, which are instead tacitly 'black-boxed', particularly after scientific agreement has been achieved, and particularly when the boundary between the subculture of scientists immediately involved in an experimental controversy and that of the general middle-class public is crossed. Whether in controversies over cold

²⁰ Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 292.

fusion or nuclear missile targeting, what was controversial among scientists and resolved only through political bargaining in the scientific community becomes a magically incontrovertible scientific fact when the agreement is finally presented to society at large. The result is what Collins calls a ‘model of science and the natural world that is positively dangerous for democracy and for the long-term future of science itself’.²¹ This model ‘allows the citizen only two responses to science: either awe at science’s authority along with a total acceptance of scientists’ *ex cathedra* statements, or rejection – the uncomprehending anti-science reaction.’ Centralisation of certified inquiry within certain groups (Collins calls this the ‘privacy of core sets’ of researchers) helps create the illusion that the only choices are between a purified science that in fact never existed – the ship magically appearing in the bottle (the very image of the rule as it appears in modern forms of power) – and a shady, ‘impure’ ideological enterprise. Thus Justice Parker, in the Windscale Enquiry of 1977 in the UK, regarded questions about the interests underlying conflicting expert opinions over nuclear risks not as revealing the relevant social factors within the scientific debate but as accusations of personal dishonesty.²²

This model ‘allows the citizen only two responses to science: either awe at science’s authority along with a total acceptance of scientists’ ex cathedra statements, or rejection – the uncomprehending anti-science reaction.’



Reviving the ether

The Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887 ‘defined our modern view of the universe’ when it found that light ‘always travels through space at the same speed, whatever direction it is heading in and whatever the motion of its source: there is no way to put the wind in light’s sails’.²³

The experiment was designed to detect a postulated ‘ether’ which was thought to fill all of space and to constitute an absolute frame of reference relative to which the earth and other celestial bodies would have a velocity. If the ether existed, then there would be an ‘ether wind’ blowing past the earth as it rushed through space. Light heading into this wind would be slowed down.

Michelson and Morley set up an interferometer measuring the speed of two light beams travelling in perpendicular directions.

21 Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

22 Wynne, Brian, *Rationality and Ritual: The Windscale Inquiry and Nuclear Decisions in Britain*, History of Science Society, St. Giles Chalfont, 1982.

23 Chown, M., ‘Catching the Cosmic Wind’, *New Scientist*, 2 April 2005, p. 30.

Any motion of the earth relative to the ether would produce a difference in the speed of the light travelling in the two directions. When the light beams were recombined in an eyepiece, any speed difference would show up in a striped pattern of interference fringes. For confirmation, the apparatus would then be rotated 90 degrees to see if the fringes shifted position.

Given that the earth travels at 30 km per second around the sun, Michelson and Morley reckoned that the ‘ether wind’ would reduce the speed of light travelling in the same direction as earth by at least the same amount. Their experiment was sensitive enough to detect this effect, but it showed nothing. The two experimenters concluded that the ether did not exist. Einstein built his special theory of relativity on the result. If there were an ether, his theory would become a special case of a broader theory developed earlier by Hendrik Lorentz, who assumed an ether.

Textbooks written since 1887 have tended to ‘black-box’ Michelson and Morley’s now canonical finding, giving the impression that other interferometer experiments have all confirmed it. The reality is not so simple. Instead, succeeding experimenters who have found an ether wind have seen the reliability of their apparatus questioned on the ground that they have not come up with the ‘correct’ result. In 1902, for example, William Hicks reinterpreted the original experiment and found it showed an ether wind speed of 8 km per second. Another scientist, Dayton Miller, found the same and showed the result to Einstein. Einstein thought it ought to be explainable by temperature differences in the equipment. Miller then repeated the experiment in a cooler place and got the same result. Other experiments since have also shown a measurable ether wind. However, a recent high-tech German experiment using laser light bouncing back and forth in two vacuum cavities oriented at right angles to each other, and run for over a year, has confirmed that there is no ether. Now Maurizio Consoli of the Italian National Institute of Nuclear Physics wants to settle the matter by yet another experiment. Consoli notes that interferometers filled with air have yielded an 8 km per second result, those filled with helium a 3 km per second result, and those using a ‘soft’ vacuum a 1 km per second result. He believes, controversially, that any Michelson–Morley experiment will not show a result if conducted in a vacuum. Consoli plans an experiment using an apparatus similar to the German setup, but filled with a dense gas to slow down the light.

Consoli thinks his experiment is capable of settling, once and for all, the question of the ether's existence. Other scientists believe that question has already been decided, or, if not, that Consoli's experiment is not designed in a way that would do so. Whatever Consoli's result, however, it is fair to say both that it will make a contribution to the discussion and that it will not close the issue. As any such scientific story shows (and this one, from a recent issue of *New Scientist*, was chosen virtually at random), it can never be unequivocally clear that the result of any particular experiment requires a change in theory rather than a re-examination of the equipment or the researchers for possible deviations from other experimental setups. No 'factual' court of appeal exists that could settle the issue outside of the open-ended arguments and other practices of scientists themselves. Historian E. P. Thompson famously sought to rescue the 'obsolete' handloom weaver and the Luddite cropper from the 'enormous condescension of posterity',²⁴ and it will always be possible to do the same with a temporarily-eclipsed scientific theory or derided bit of laboratory apparatus.

Source: Marcus Chown, 'Catching the Cosmic Wind', *New Scientist*, 2 April 2005, pp. 30-34.

This 'flip-flop' model of scientific knowledge is the analogue, in Collins's analysis, of what Mitchell identifies as the dichotomous effect suggesting that progress is the application of ideas to objects, meaning to reality, agency to passive matter, or, in development jargon, the 'implementation' of 'objectives' or 'projects'. And it is a phenomenon visible elsewhere as well. Examinations of structural racism, for example, are routinely treated by the middle-class white public in countries such as the UK and the US as accusations of personal prejudice against this or that individual – a reaction which surely contributes, among blacks, to what bell hooks calls 'white people fatigue', or the need to have to explain structural racism to those who see it as a simple or non-existent problem. If the dualism gives scientists only two choices (you're either a 'bad scientist' or you never participate in 'the ideological' to arrive at a scientific fact), it does the same with citizens (you're either a bad guy or your actions never further racism). This reaction is as inhibiting to democratic inquiry, to inquiry into more democratic ways of doing things, and to political organising as

²⁴ Thompson, E. P., *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, London, 1980, p. 12.

Collins's 'flip-flop' model or the beliefs about 'the economy' to which Mitchell points. This is one reason why it is so inconceivable that (say) World Bank or IMF documents, which are so deeply implicated in racism, could ever mention racism or conceive of any discussion of racism in financial, monetary or development policy: because to do so would be seen as throwing accusations at individuals or groups, undermining the cohesiveness of the authors' centralised professional communities and their social life with their professional peers. It is also why, within establishment walls, it is politically incorrect to excavate the racism in such documents, which, professionals insist, must be seen only in their proper genres, against an approved canon of orthodox economic theory. Racism talk, after all, is sociology, not economics, is it not? And is it not a challenge to the professional class interests and solidarity of practitioners of both disciplines to confuse the two? To read World Bank documents playfully, as sociology, or worse, as ghost stories, exotic travellers' tales, racing forms or manifestoes for conquest is forbidden, and not to be borne by serious men in suits sitting in clean, carpeted rooms. More often than not, activists obey this literary and bureaucratic etiquette, believing that treating a country economic report as if it were an old wives' tale told around a fire at night will see them banished from the table.



No one can avoid respecting 'the economy' any more than they can avoid privileging scientific facts.

For both Collins and Mitchell, these 'flip-flop' dichotomies are not simply illusions, but are entrenched throughout society, right down to institutions like fixed land rents and money. No one can avoid respecting 'the economy' any more than they can avoid privileging scientific facts. These phenomena, even if they fail to do what they say they do, are here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future. But this indispensability has been *made*, as has the characteristic drama powered by the chains of failures of the imagined plot of history that they engender: ever-renewed attempts to apply universal principles to a local, tangible material regarded as their other pole, or achievement of better and better representations of a non-discursive world through an ever more 'purified' science. And that fact ought to suggest innumerable possibilities for activism and for approaching the future in a different way.

Commons and commoners

Whether the future can be approached in that way, however, as I've tried to stress throughout, depends not on coming up with a new 'theory' in any sense in which theory is viewed as different in kind from practice, but on forming working alliances that can engender complexes of new practices. It's here, I'd like to suggest, that a con-

nection can be made with the notion of commons (see Box, ‘The Postulation of “Resources”’).²⁵

The postulation of ‘resources’

In commons patterns, the right to survive tends to overshadow exclusive individual rights to possess, exchange, and accumulate. Communal use adapts land, water and work to local needs rather than transforming them for trade and accumulation. A commons imperative is to tap wages to meet fixed needs, defend local pricing, pressure the state into providing spaces for the vulnerable, fragment money itself into different types earmarked for different uses, even, where necessary, transform individually-titled land into non-saleable plots governed by the community. Commons patterns typically deny rights to outsiders and in the past have instituted separate spheres for men and women under patriarchal control in household and community.

The ‘resource’ theory which gains meaning by trying to oppose itself to commons, by contrast, tries to allow subsistence rights only to private property owners, not unemployed workers. Faced with common land, it calls for subsidies to fence off, mobilise and develop it for production, consumption and exchange, disregarding local adaptations if necessary. Trying to shape societies and bodies around centrally organised norms, it imagines work as a commodity activating capital and competition. Rather than earning enough for their needs, individuals are pictured as learning to have needs they can satisfy with the money they must earn. Under the influence of resource prac-

25 There’s no space here even to sketch the complexities connected with the contemporary politics of the commons and its relation to commodification, privatisation and so on. Some useful sources are Polanyi, *op. cit.*; Thompson, E. P. *Customs in Common*, *op. cit.*; Illich, Ivan, *Gender*, Pantheon, New York, 1983; Acheson, J., and McCay, B., *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources*, University of Arizona Press, Tuscon, 1990; Fairlie, S., Hildyard, N., Lohmann, L., and Sexton, S., *Whose Common Future? Reclaiming the Commons*, Earthscan, London, 1993; Scott, James C., *Seeing Like a State*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1999; Blackwell, B., ‘Micropolitics and the Cooking-Pot Revolution in Argentina’, ZNet, 29 August 2002, www.zmag.org/content/. There is now even a large academic association called the International Association for the Study of Common Property, with many thousands of detailed scholarly articles in its bibliographies.

tices, women tend to suffer unequal wages or increased confinement to a domestic domain, while new forms of oppression and ethnic division and new ‘arm’s-length’ notions of responsibility that encourage humanitarianism and notions of universal human rights alike become possible.

Most of the people who contest the middle-class received wisdom that is the common target of Mitchell, Collins and other renegade intellectuals whose work I have used in this paper live in worlds far removed from their university milieu. I make no self-ironising intellectual’s apology for trying to connect the seemingly disparate issues I’ve mentioned, nor for trying to bring together the work of certain pointy heads with that of certain grassroots activists, because the image of these separations is part of the problem of power that is my subject, and I happen to be situated where I know some of the pointy heads. But in the sections on privatisation and contemporary science above I could perhaps as easily have cited the everyday battles of villagers and activists at the grassroots, especially in the South. It should be possible, for example, to recognise in the ubiquitous resistance to the pattern of application of one technical fix after another an attitude which knows from its own experience that there is no way out of the regress generated by the erection of a dichotomy between rules and forms of life.²⁶ Surely no one is more likely to contest the dualism of meaning and reality than the millions of the world’s people who owe their livelihoods to the commons and whose experience is devalued and whose interests are thwarted by the forms of centralisation that give rise to the illusions that nature was never human, that before Aswan there was no irrigation, and that no one used to live in the Serengeti. No one is more likely to reject the view of humans as active and other elements of ‘the economy’ as passive inputs than those who live with, rely on, fear and expect an active, mischievous world interacting with human communities. No one is more likely, either, to grasp the destructive, unforeseeable, unending outcomes of an approach which believes it can repress politics by replacing it with economic, natural-scientific or other techniques imagined to be situated on a higher plane than the embodied, improvisatory realities of commons regimes. No one is better equipped than those who have fought at the grassroots the currents of centralisation mentioned above to understand the destructiveness of the ever-repeating political drama of technical-fix application that tries again and again to repress the

²⁶ Wittgenstein, *op. cit.*

consequences of uncertainty, complexity, non-linearity, ignorance, indeterminacy and contextual uniqueness with a fantasy of engineering or management. And surely no one is better able than commoners to understand that ultimately, there can be no complete escape from commons into ‘resources’, or better mobilised to counter Western technocrats’ self-justifications that they are unsituated, interchangeable agents of disembodied forces and needs and are merely applying universally-valid techniques after political decisions have been made elsewhere. I would still hold, more or less, with what I wrote of Thai grassroots environmental politics more than ten years ago:

Viewing consultants as characters in detailed local narratives (as commoners tend to do) renders implausible their claims that their backgrounds, companies’ interests and personalities are irrelevant to their work, that as agents of impersonal forces they have the right to investigate others without being investigated themselves, that they are effective but not responsible, and that the information they hand out is ‘objective’. From this point of view, international agencies’ frequent claims that their past failures are not likely to be repeated sits uneasily with their continued reliance on unacknowledged local experience from outside the locality. In general, villagers’ sense of the indispensability of personalised relationships and oral, local orientation buttress what Richard Rorty calls a civility- or conversation-oriented rather than a putatively non-personalised, algorithm-oriented notion of rationality.²⁷

The different perspectives I mention – which often lead to miscommunication, disagreements or conflict – are often replicated within NGO politics. Anybody who has spent any time in meetings convened to organise a global NGO campaign will remember times at which an enormous gap in strategic thinking suddenly becomes evident between two factions, one usually (but not always) from the North, the other usually (but not always) from the South, with each side suddenly staring at the other in bewilderment, each believing the other side not to be engaging with the realities of power, each wondering how to begin to explain why. To the Northerners, the Southerners’ intense focus on the broader picture of exploitation, together with their determination to draw lessons from the concrete details of past experience with particular institutions in particular

27 ‘No Rules of Engagement: Interest Groups, Centralization and the Creative Politics of “Environment” in Thailand’, in Rigg, Jonathan, ed., *Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Change in Thailand*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 1995, pp. 211–234; available at www.thecornerhouse.org.uk.

geoning future numbers of people? Stop being so politically correct for a minute – isn't it time to face the fact of this potential future explosion?' Here the vision of 'future numbers', no matter how implausible, becomes an abstract 'frame' seen as different in kind from political analyses of current scarcities and actual popular responses. Similarly: 'If you don't like US policy, who would *you* put in place of Bush or Wolfowitz?' (assuming that everyone must share a picture of politics as propelled by an agency acting out of people's heads on an essentially passive world). Or: 'You keep talking about the needs and practices of the forest-dwellers you know, but people are wiping animals out. How would *you* save the world's vanishing wildlife?' Some Thai forest dwellers, with the help of a local NGO, once compiled a weighty 297-page volume documenting the biodiversity-preserving practices of three forest communities as a way of helping prevent themselves being evicted from protected areas in Chiang Dao, Samoeng and Mae Waang districts of Chiang Mai province. During an ensuing seminar, a Forest Department official was asked for his reaction. He replied that the book was very convincing. But, he said, what about the hundreds of mountain villages other than the three which were under study? Surely these three had to be rare case-study exceptions to the higher, permanent rule which dictated that humans and forests belonged in separate spheres.²⁸ Here, of course, are still further versions of the cut and thrust described so well by Mitchell. It is not so much that the challenge to commoners by officials and Northern activists in these examples assumes that the institutions they refer to are omnipotent, simply needing a new 'programming text'. It derives its real power from the prevalence of practices creating the effect of a disembodied, unphysical space out of which texts existing externally, at a higher order than ordinary practice, can speak without ambiguity or incompleteness. The officials or Northerners in the NGO meeting room almost always misidentify the dispute they have with commoners as one between practitioners and theoreticians, or between realists and idealists, or between reformers and revolutionaries, whereas in many cases their antagonists have long been calling these dualisms themselves into question.

Reflecting on the power of commons politics in a world of commodification, privatisation and expert power prompts many questions deserving further investigation. What role has the enclosure of commons played historically in the creation of an illusion of 'disembod-



'If you don't like US policy, who would you put in place of Bush or Wolfowitz?'

28 Lohmann, Larry, 'For Reasons of Nature: Ethnic Discrimination and Conservation in Thailand', paper presented at Cornell University Asian Studies conference, April 2000, available at www.thecornerhouse.org.uk.

ded', non-tangible global processes? What are the precise roles that the institutions that further this illusion play in the dramas propelled by chains of failures of technical fixes? In what ways are chains of failures of technical fixes historically connected to chains of attempts to escape the experimenter's regress? But perhaps most important of all: what role might new ways of insisting on narrating and interfering in these chains from a commons standpoint play in a new politics of movement-building – one which both helps hasten along the breakdowns due to the 'incompletenesses' that Mitchell and others analyse and helps open new possibilities for decentralisation and democracy?



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