Making the Mekong: Nature, Region, Postcoloniality

Dissertation

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the making of the Mekong region as an object of development. It makes three central arguments: One, that the region is not simply a given space of unity, but one whose characteristics, nodes of power and connections are forged by its very production as a historical and geographical object. Second, I argue that ‘nature’ and ‘development’ become enrolled in powerful, transformative ways in the production of the region. Third, the making of the object called the Mekong, has effects on present practices of development and resistance. The first two arguments are interwoven in the first three chapters. Chapter 1 considers the Mekong’s nature as produced within the texts of a French colonial expedition of the Mekong River between 1866 and 1868. In Chapter 2, I read the plans and texts of a multi-million dollar, international effort that converged on the Mekong river basin, one that attempted to transform it into a veritable Tennessee Valley Authority. I argue that this project, read through the valences of ‘nature’ and ‘development’, set apart and ‘enframed’ the Mekong as a space for intervention, one that continues today. In Chapter 3, I focus on the creation of the hegemony of development in the Mekong Project through the work of the geographer, the late Gilbert White, and the authors of an emerging global ‘integrated river basin management’ initiative. The remaining chapters – Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 – are snapshots of two moments in the contemporary politics of development in the now-enframed ‘Mekong’. Chapter 4
argues that the regionalization imperative and implementation of the Nam Theun II hydropower project in Central Laos helped to create the conditions of possibility for plans to build eight dams on the Lower Mekong mainstem. In Chapter 5, I explore the interactions between civil society, the Mekong River Commission and states in response to the mainstem dam plans. I argue that the settling of the Mekong as a space of development places a range of limits and possibilities in the negotiation of the costs and benefits of doing development.
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Selected Publications


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Major Field: Geography
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Introduction

Our region is a familiar place, where we know, to some extent, the lay of the land, the traits of the people and their resources, needs and problems.

- V.B. Stanbery, cited in Odum and Moore 1938

In 2006, the Lao state announced that six dams to be sited on the mainstem of the Mekong were up for tender. These large dams, ranging from between 240 to 1,300 megawatts of generating capacity, were to be built on a previous undammed 4,180 km long section of the Mekong River south of the Chinese border. These dams were to form an important driver of the Lao state’s development and poverty reduction strategy. At the same time, the state declared it would become the “battery of Asia,” an affirmation of the role of hydropower in gaining regional comparative advantage. In 2008, with the prospect of large dams upstream, the Cambodian state announced their interest in building dams on two sites on the main river in Cambodian territory.

The announcement of these dams shocked the international and local development communities. First, studies had indicated that mainstem dams had been relegated to the backburner owing to unfavorable conditions: political instability, the cost of projects, the knowledge of the large-scale resettlement impacts of these dams, and significant threats to the river’s fisheries (Compagnie Nationale du Rhone, 1994; Mekong River Commission, 2001). Second, these dams were the same ones that
were first conceived in the 1960s and 1970s, in a project aiming at building a cascade of dams and turning the Mekong river basin into a veritable Tennessee Valley of the East. The plans for these dams, produced by under the auspices of the United Nations and the United States Bureau of Reclamation forty years ago, were largely seen as monuments of an ambitious but untenable modernization project that failed to take off. Third, the financing and construction of these planned dams appear not to involve the traditional purveyors of development aid, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and overseas development aid, but rather private companies from neighboring countries—Chinese, Malaysian, Thai and Vietnamese firms. How are we to explain this sudden momentum for dam building of a new character?

One possible explanation points to changes in the political economic landscape of these countries. The 1990s were a decade of unprecedented economic change in Southeast Asia. Viet Nam and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (or Laos) announced the adoption of new market reforms, formally declaring the countries open to business. In 1991, the Paris Peace Agreements and subsequent national elections spelled the end of the Khmer Rouge, creating the conditions for Cambodia to rejoin the United Nations, as well as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The countries of former Indochina seemed politically aligned to participate more fully in the global economy.

The Asian Development Bank took an early lead in facilitating cross-border trade and economic alliances in this tentative new regional marketplace. The ‘Greater Mekong Subregion’ program (GMS) was launched alongside the ADB’s existing outfit in Bangkok in 1992. The goal of the GMS program is to facilitate the “development of infrastructure to enable the development and sharing of the resource base, and promote the freer flow of goods and people in the subregion” (Asian
Development Bank, 2010). About US$4 billion worth of infrastructure projects are in various states of completion, spanning technical assistance and loans to projects that cut across nine areas: transport, energy, telecommunications, human resource development, tourism, environment, trade facilitation, private investment, and agriculture (Asian Development Bank, 2000:2). Some of the priority projects given loans include the building of transnational highways, railways, hydropower, sustainable tourism, biodiversity conservation, energy transmission, and disease control. The transboundary nature of these projects is emphasized – whether through power sale agreements or highways that straddle two or more nations.

Hydropower has been a priority sector since the GMS’ inception. The Theun Hinboun, Mekong tributary project was the Lao government’s first joint venture with the private sector on a power plant, a collaboration that was facilitated by the Asian Development Bank. Downstream of the Theun Hinboun, is Nam Theun 2, a Mekong tributary project in Central Laos which it guarantees, funds, and whose public image it manages. Nam Theun 2 has become the showcase hydropower project of both the Lao state and the World Bank. The Bank insists a new phase of environmentally and socially-sound era of hydropower development has been inaugurated through Nam Theun 2’s attention to participatory decision-making, resettlement and biodiversity conservation. The dam’s completion in 2009 should have been a celebration of the Bank’s reorientation as a 'green' development partner of states, but the closing of the dam gates has been met instead with the prospect of a cascade of dams on the Mekong mainstem, all of which are unlikely to require World Bank financing or conditionalities.

In other words, a new configuration of capital relations is being forged by the push towards hydropower development and regionalization. At the same time,
hydropower and regionalism appear to be connected and framed by the Mekong river. This striking reference to the river as a unifying object has been noted by scholars of regionalization and development in the region (eg. Bakker, 1999; Hirsch, 2001; Jacobs, 2002; Sneddon and Fox, 2006). Bakker (1999) suggests that the hydropower development in the region is grounded by the Mekong watershed as a discursive framing and naturalizing metaphor. Sneddon and Fox argue that the analysis of the politics of hydropower development in the Mekong would be deepened by the consideration of the river as an ecological and “hydropolitical” space (2006:14). These writings point to the Mekong as a central metaphor and image in discourses of regional development and cooperation.

This prompts the question: What difference does it make that the object in question is a river basin? The use of the Mekong as a rationalizing image is found in the core arguments for regionalization themselves. Consider the following map of the Greater Mekong Subregion program (Figure 1.1). The map shows the six countries criss-crossed by economic corridors and biodiversity conservation zones. A skein of blue runs down the center of the map, a symbol of the one thread that connects the diverse nations of Viet Nam, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar with the southern Chinese province of Yunnan. The map suggests the absence of any physical barriers, neither the dividing line of the river nor even the river basin itself. The watershed of the river is unmarked; instead, the GMS envelopes all of the six countries, including parts outside the physical watershed, into its Mekong-centered imaginary.
**Figure 0.1:** Greater Mekong Subregion ‘Biodiversity Conservation Landscapes and Economic Corridors’


This connection between the river and the six countries is brought into greater focus by an Asian Development Bank brochure marketing the region as a potential place of investment and development:
The world’s 12th longest river at 4,200 kilometers (km), the Mekong is exceptional among the earth’s major waterways for being one of the least developed. The economic potential of the river and that of the land and peoples its passage defines is huge, although until now it has been largely undeveloped.

Rising on the high Tibetan plateau, the Mekong flows through Yunnan Province of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), then skirts Myanmar and Thailand before entering the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR). From Lao PDR, the river continues its passage into Cambodia where, at the capital, Phnom Penh. It splits into two main streams before crossing the border into Viet Nam and finally discharging into the South China Sea.

These six countries that share the Mekong River make up what has become known today as the Mekong region. Historically, the Mekong, unlike many other great rivers, has not served to unify human activity along its course partly due to natural barriers, and more significantly, because of war and conflict (Asian Development Bank, 2000. *A Wealth of Opportunity*, p. 1).

These passages explain why the Mekong is a unifying force for the region. Note how the idea of the river is first linked to nodes of economic possibility: “the economic potential of the river…*and* that of the land…and peoples”; “[its] passage defines.”

The Mekong River connects these countries not only physically but in terms of the “land” and “peoples.” In another text, the Asian Development Bank explains that the “geography and ecology of the GMS is fundamentally intertwined with its societies and economies” (Asian Development Bank, 2008).

The river is also seen as an indicator of the past and the region’s becoming. The land and people the river “defines” is “undeveloped” and has lacked unity “historically”. In terms of transcending the historical barrier of “war and conflict,” the passage seems to suggest that the “six countries that share the Mekong River” are poised to enter a new phase. The ascendance of Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam from conflict is echoed by the famous phrase by a former prime minister of Thailand, Chatichai Choohaven, who announced that the Mekong region had gone “from battlefield to marketplace.”
Aside from the utilization of the image of the river by the state, the ‘Mekong’ has also become the mantle of civil society efforts to challenge the policies and practices facilitated by the pro-capital GMS program. For example, the response of organized and institutional civil society to the plans for the mainstem dams have coalesced around the formation of a coalition called ‘Save the Mekong.’ This coalition was formed from a number of international, national and local non-governmental organizations with a long interest in national and regional struggles, to campaign against the building of the dams. Their protest has evolved to discussions around development priorities in the Mekong ‘region’: the ecological and socio-economic impacts of these dams on the lives and people of the basin. Since their inception in 2009, the coalition has built an argument around the disruption and loss of fish migrations and millions of fisheries livelihoods that “depend upon the Mekong for their food security and income” (Save the Mekong Coalition, 2010). One of the targets of the coalition’s activism is the Mekong River Commission (MRC), another institution that coalesced around the connection of the four states to the river. The MRC has styled itself as a transboundary river basin organization, focused on cooperation between the countries on the sustainable management of the water resources of the Mekong River. The institution’s avowed neutrality as a scientific and water resources management institution has come under criticism for its lack of engagement with the emerging development debates of the region, centered on the hydropower programs of the states (Affeltranger, 2008; Hirsch and Jensen, 2006; Ratner, 2003). With its various programs funded by donors from Japan, Australia, and the Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Finland), the MRC is largely removed from the economic decision-making, development planning and investment facilitation activities of the riparian states.
Given the plethora of new crises, actors and events surrounding hydropower development in the Mekong today, new questions emerge for scholars of development. For one, the increasingly regional character of investment in large infrastructure and national development projects today challenge the hegemony of global development institutions, which have long been targets of anti-corporate globalization social movements. These movements have resulted in a reorientation of the practices of global development institutions themselves. While acknowledging the problematic nature of these reforms (for example, the ‘NGOization’ and co-optation of segments of civil society, see Agrawal, 1996, Li, 1999; Moore, 1999; Roberts et al, 2005), the creation of Agenda 21, the promise of development institutions to engage in more democratic, participatory, stakeholder-led, equitable, sustainable and green practices, can be considered as gains of a long history of social movements. In the academy, there has likewise been a prioritization of critique on the Bretton Woods institutions and the global development aid industry (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Goldman, 1999). Post-development writing in the 1990s, for example, has dwelled on the characterization of development, and an insistence on the power of development as a discourse from ‘somewhere’, notably emanating from conceptions of European modernity and imprinted as a strategy for progress in a post-Cold War, decolonizing world (Escobar, 1995; Hart, 2001). Such analyses have been criticized for their failure in recognizing the complex articulation of development practices with varied historical contexts and subjectivities, producing unpredictable effects. As Vinay Gidwani (2002) points out, post-development scholars ignore the dynamic interaction between the core and periphery, one that constitutes these very places and of ‘modernity’, which, rather than being a singular, monolithic process, “exist[s] in the plural, in geographically and temporally varied forms” (Gidwani, 2002: 4). How
should critics of development contend with the displacement of the publically-accountable global development institutions by regional, private capital? Along what lines should the resistance to unjust development practices take place?

More recent scholarship has attempted to expand the critique of development practices by widening the analysis of development governmentalities to include interactions of development discourses and practices with knowledge production, representational projects of colonial and state authorities, and the everyday life of subjects (Agrawal, 2005; Li, 2007; Mitchell, 2002; Gidwani, 2009). These studies share a common effort to characterize development as differentiated in place. Moving away from the relatively aspatial discourse of development of some of post-development scholarship, place becomes a crucial lever for practices and the examination of their differentiated effects. Gidwani offers a characterization of development as a “placeholder concept,” something that stands in for ideals that adhere to a certain time and place (2002: 5). These openings afford an opportunity to examine development as a process that makes places. Place, in this sense, may be thought of as a mnemonic for the historical, social and political conditions that transform development practices and that are themselves changed by these practices. Gidwani suggests that we should think of development as that which is “anchored to a moral geography of place-making” (Gidwani, 2002:5).

If development is both a placeholder and a place-maker, and if place and development are mutually constitutive, we need to grapple with the categories of place that become central for development projects. For an engagement of the Mekong river as the central motif for regional development, we turn to conceptualizations of the region. The region appears to be the container for the play of development, a region defined by the arrangement of river, land and peoples. No
other discipline has made claims on the 'region' has much as Geography, and it is in Geography that one must begin to trawl for conceptualizations of the region.

**The region: enframing development**

For a long time, the 'region' stood supreme as a primary unit of analysis and even *raison d'être* for Anglo-American geography. One of the most sustained defenses of the place of the region in Geography was Richard Hartshorne's *The Nature of Geography*, which argued passionately for studying regions and processes of ‘areal differentiation’ (Hartshorne, 1939). He was accused, most vociferously by Schaefer (1953), of pursuing idiographic geography to the detriment or rigorous, scientific research that yielded generalizable insights on phenomena in the world. While these and a number of geographers defending or villifying the focus on the region have unwittingly or not made the region an object of disciplinary boundary-making, region-centered research in geography escapes easy characterization. Numerous histories of the 'region' in the discipline (for example, see Johnston and Sidaway, 2002) have traced the attachment to the concept to the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, who saw the region as a container for *les genres de vie* – random arrangements of climate, biogeography, cultural and livelihood practices that make a region. Seeking to distance themselves from the descriptive studies advocated by Hartshorne (who later contradicted himself by advocating generalizable, pattern-seeking studies while heading the Office of Strategic Services, see Barnes and Farish (2004), a number of geographers began to analyze the region as part of a nested hierarchy of spaces within locational models, lending themselves as units to be examined to understand broad patterns of economic and social activity.
While the debates between nomothetic and idiographic Geography have again and again announced the demise of the region, the region remains alive and well today. By the 1990s, there were two divergent networks of geographers who asserted themselves as regional geographers: one, those who drew from the by then well-established tradition of quantitative 'regional science', and two, the proponents of the 'new regional geography' inaugurated by the work of Doreen Massey (1979). It is the second group that appears to be potential interlocutors for a question on analyzing the power of the region as a spatial formation, and therefore bears elaboration.

New regional geographies, contrary to the name, begin with the question of the ‘local’ against the totalizing tendencies of the ‘global’. Massey's call for a new regional geography was broached in response to seemingly homogenizing capitalist tendencies – the pronouncement of increasingly globalized economies and transnational networks across space (Massey, 1979; 2005). How can local characteristics of place shape and help bring about change brought about by seemingly globalizing processes? How do localities matter? New regional geography sought to distinguish itself from the two strands of earlier regional geography – regional science and areal differentiation – by maintaining that space was always under construction and that space was constitutive of interactions. In doing so, they echoed some of the lesser-known but progressive critics who thought that either side had treated the region as a static entity, a container for external processes (Minshull 1967; Kimble 1951).

In spite of a progressive view of the ‘region’, critics of some of the research in new regional geography argued that regions continued to be treated as structured units of analysis. Regions continued to be spoken of as part of a hierarchical scalar matrix of local, regional and the global. According to Jones and Macleod (2004), such
rigidity have prevented new regional geographers from seeking answers to a core question: why regions grow, expand and decline.

It is this set of questions that have caused scholars to continue to fixate on the ‘region’ as spatial unit of analysis. Within this group, a small number of economic and regionalization geographers have argued for a more process-oriented, historical study of regions. For example, Paasi (1986; 2001) has suggested a greater attention to the way regions were created and institutionalized. Jones and Macleod that in order to understand the reasons for regional change, studies should focus on “the socio-spatial process during which some territorial unit emerges as a part of the spatial structure of society and becomes established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness” (2004:436). More recently, though peripheral to mainstream regional and/or economic geography, some scholars have called for genealogical and deconstructive approaches to the region. In a study of the role of the region in the identity-formation of mining communities in the LaTrobe Valley in southeast Australia, Katherine Gibson (2001) inadvertently produces an effective genealogy of the region, showing how the mining area's rendering as a resource space affected state attitudes towards the region as it declined in the 20th century. Carolyn Cartier (2002) notes that the 'macroregion' in Chinese area studies emerges out of central place theory and the naturalistic mapping of such regions onto watershed regions, with the consequence that such an approach often leaves out a China-centered view of economic and social processes.

Arguing against the region as a self-evident, preexisting 'scale', Larner and Walters (2002) call for studying regions as a product of political processes and rationalities. Such approaches need to link regions “in relation to a critical history of the arts of international government” (2002: 429). They go as far as to suggest that
this might open up regionalism as a kind of “imperialism” (ibid., 429). In a similar vein, in a study of the European Union’s Habitat Directive, Chilla (2007) shows that region-making relies on discourses of ‘nature’ and ‘Europe’, and argues that politically-constructed regions serve to deny space by neglecting other, alternative conceptions of space. These critiques suggest that regions serve as a process of othering, a function that has largely been ignored by new regional geography. Chilla (2007), Cartier (2002), Larner and Walters (2002) and Gibson (2001) appear to dance around the notion of place or region as text, a reading of which postcolonial and other scholars like Qadri Ismail have more firmly asserted. These scholars have suggested that the ‘region’ as a category that not only exists by virtue of processes of imperialism, othering, or silencing, but one that has effects.

**The conditions of possibility for development**

Understanding how development comes to take the form that it does – hydropower – requires us to ask deeper questions about the realm of ideas and the field of what makes something possible. Excavating the ideas of development, the region, and the relationship between them requires us to attend to the conditions of possibility for hydropower development and regionalization today. The conditions of possibility, articulated by Michel Foucault following Immanuel Kant, are the confluence of discourses, truths and statements within the field of statements, governed by certain rules of formation, which Foucault calls an episteme (Foucault, 1980: 197). An episteme is a “strategic apparatus which permits of separating out from among all the statements which are possible those that will be acceptable within […] a field of scientificity, and which it is possible to say are true or false” (Foucault, 1966:). By tracing the way development becomes attached to hydropower during the
institutions, for example, of the plans of the 1960s from which these new dams are taken, offer a way to understanding how the power of development as an idea is produced at the convergence of discourses and statements at certain spatio-temporal sites.

Yet, such an approach may be inadequate to explain why development ideas settle at a particular time, and at this particular place—whether the Mekong, Laos, or even ‘Asia’. Foucault’s archaeology has been criticized for yielding little other than “diagnostic knowledge” (Flynn, 1999: 42, 44). More critically, as Gayatri Spivak notes in *Can the Subaltern Speak*, Foucault lacks a “theory of interests.” His unproblematic treatment of subjects, groups and subaltern classes belies the assumption of a pure consciousness of these subjects that allow them to act directly against forces of their repression. The root of this failure to analyze the politics of representation, for Spivak, is Foucault’s privileging an analysis of power over the “relations of exploitation” (1988: 288). Foucault has failed to critique the conditions of domination within which power relations are not only created but perpetuated, what Spivak refers to the international division of labor (Spivak, 1988; 1999).

The international division of labor is not just pertinent to our understanding of investment in hydropower vis-à-vis an emphasis on regional development, but also to the discourse and practice of development. For Spivak, the international division of refers to the set of institutions, mechanisms and discourses that sustain imperial relations and uneven development (Spivak, 1988). Development today, for Spivak, is not only embedded within this system of economic domination, but is a very mechanism that sustains it. Development subjects, the targets of development, are created as a consequence of uneven development. The maintenance of the hegemony of development as the “domain of responsibility” for the betterment of the poor and
disempowered is made on the basis of the consciousness of the Other, calling on the authenticity of the Other, as a clearly-marked target for development (Spivak, 1994).

Neither history nor archaeology adequately address how relations of colonial domination, that create development subjects today, are maintained and produce new subjects and new faultlines. As Timothy Mitchell writes of his book, “This […] is not a history of the British colonization of Egypt but a study of the power to colonize.” In the same way, a history of hydropower development or the institutionalization of the region is not the same thing as a study of how colonial representations and practices “operate […] for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting” (Said, 1978: 273). Histories give authoritative accounts of places and events that aim to fill in gaps, provide completion and closure. These accounts suggest that events unfold with a clear beginning and end, according to a telos (Ismail, 2005: xviii; Gupta, 1998). Akhil Gupta critiques representations of rural India that conflate rurality and subsistence agricultural practices with time. Discourses of allochronism, the very conflation of the characteristics of a place with a particular position in history’s unfolding, makes it possible to argue for change, and justify modernizing interventions. In other words, histories have political effects. For Spivak, history consists of “a series of regulative political concepts, the supposedly authoritative narrative of whose production is written elsewhere, in the social formations of Western Europe” (1990: 204). This ‘elsewhere’ does not refer merely to the individual authorship of texts, but a mode of knowledge production that emerges from the drive to write about other places, impelled by the need to know. History as a discipline “underwrites […] the epistemological dominance of the West” (Ismail, 2005: xvi). In other words, history produces knowledge about the world and is the very basis for colonial power.
Place, history and abiding

My interest in the Mekong began with an encounter with popular literature written by a historian, Milton Osborne. As a scholar trained in Anglo-American geography, my first instinct was to be drawn to his writings on the French expedition of the Mekong in 1866, a story told like an adventure tale with pathos, tragedy, the colonial officers emerging as tragic heroes. The event was colonial geography’s high point – an expedition that was the essence of the age of exploration, and enthroned by the geographical societies in London and Paris. At the same time, Osborne’s account was troubling. These were celebrations of victories and exploits over a place marked for colonial rule. Osborne’s texts may not have contained as many overtly racial references, but its emphasis on the biographies of the explorers and the lament about the loss of the Mekong of the former times suggested that he cared more to uphold the heroism of the French endeavor.

Martin Heidegger stresses that our fixation to place is more than metaphorical. In his thesis on Holderlin’s poem Der Ister, Heidegger suggests that the river stands in for locality and journeying, the processes at the very heart of “the becoming of human beings as historical in their being at home” (1996:43). Locality and journeying are particular instances of spatial and temporal relations, where space and time are “forms of representation in accordance with which we human beings grasp objects and objectively given sequences of events, and indeed do so every time we ‘order’ them” (1996: 46). In other words, the repeated references to the river: in efforts at regionalization and resistance, come from a desire to order thoughts, objects and social life in the spatio-temporal instance of the river. The river is not a symbol, but a way in which the “historicality of human beings” is grounded (1996:44). This
can be read as the production of what it means to be human, a grasping at the idea of ‘home’, and the ordering of life and objects around a reinscribed history and sense of humanity.

Although not a postcolonial reading, Heidegger suggests that representations of place have implications for inscribing new forms of calculation and life, and more importantly, a sense of the historical for those who participate in place. In *Abiding by Sri Lanka*, Qadri Ismail articulates a postcolonial reading of place that takes account of this participation, in history, and in the writing of place, in this case, Sri Lanka. The concept of ‘abiding by’ is introduced as an analytical tool to distinguish between two kinds of texts about a place. One kind of texts “see the country [Sri Lanka] empirically, objectively […] and work to maintain this distinction, thus contributing to the further objectification of the country, to its production as only object, to its incarceration” (xxxii). Another kind, differentiated from the first, “intervene within Sri Lanka, have a stake in the country, produce it as both object of study and as the subject of intervention…[they] speak to the problem of Sri Lanka [emphasis in original]” (Ismail, 2005: xxxii). ‘Abiding by’ adjudicates the difference between these texts as those which produce place as an object of knowledge, and those that attempt to critique the very objectification of the place, while grounding the relation of texts to place in the very effects and possibilities these texts condition. Abiding is therefore “an epistemological relation to, or intervention within, a place that foregrounds, explicitly or otherwise, the ethical and political interests at stake in such a relation/intervention” (xxxii).

One must abide by a place. For Ismail, place is not a geographical location, but should be treated as “a debate; not as an object that exists empirically but as a text, or a group of texts, that is/are read (Ismail, 2005: xvii). Reading a place as such not
only critiques the objectification of a place but fends for it, interrupting the colonial production of knowledge about a place. What does it mean to abide by the Mekong? Does the Asian Development Bank, which writes the region as an economic space, abide by the Mekong? If the Mekong is a text, written to legitimize hydropower development, how can we ‘save’ it the way regional civil society is attempting to do so?

For Ismail, a postcolonial critique is to “produce a different object” (xv), to continue “the critique of empiricism, and of colonialism understood as a politic-intellectual project, to the study of […] the non-Western ‘place’, which is another way of saying the critique of “anthropology” (xvi). To anthropology we add ‘geography’: the ‘writing’ of the ‘earth’ and regions; both form the disciplinary basis of what it means to know a place. This new object cannot be the region that has occupied regional geographers. The region is a text that is read in the mode of a critique of colonial power, and therefore a critique of how disciplines come to know and write a place. My reading is not an attempt at complete coverage. Neither is it a history of the Mekong, nor an account of the politics of hydropower development in the Mekong. Nor is it a story of capitalist development. By abiding by the critique of the region as a form of colonial power is to privilege “the critique of colonialism as a condition of power in its own right” (Lalu, 2009:104), a critique that is easily obscured when colonialism is subsumed under accounts of capitalist transition. What does it mean to “critique of colonialism as a condition of power in its own right” for a critique of nature in/for the Mekong? A study of the power to colonize must necessarily challenge the authority of history to know the world and write about the way it unfolds.
My choice to stay in the Mekong, so to speak, comes out of a desire to work through the mechanics of settling this specific place that becomes a region, one whose very settling has effects. For example, it is acknowledged that the Mekong Project, which I study in Chapters 2 and 3, is imbricated and inextricable from a broader geopolitical project involving US interests in the region (e.g. Thongchai Winichakul, 1994; Biggs, 2006). The region’s unfolding, on the other hand, also involves the labor of making this region ‘make sense’. This process, I argue, is not simply region-making but region-writing, the deliberate juxtaposition of nature with the setting apart and Othering that which is ‘Asia’, a problem space, and a place that is calling out for development.

An approach that leads us to care for the region’s being is to ask how its meaning and existence, its very closure, is derived. This would require us to question the appearance of the region in geographic discipline: how the region comes to be central to questions of geography. Geographers have been more productive in examining imperial spaces through the lenses of postcolonial geography and critical histories of the discipline. For example, the shift of the region from a descriptive to systematic entity in the 1960s is described by Barnes and Farish (2006), who suggest that the involvement of American human geographers within the rise of the military, state and industrial complex during the Cold War gave rise to a new conception of the region. Attempts to characterize a postcolonial geography have centered around exposing the complicity of geography with colonial knowledge production (Bowd and Clayton, 2006; Radcliffe, 2005), and calls for geography to make postcolonialism more ‘material’ and/or spatial (McEwan, 2003), or to attend to postcolonial contexts which “exhibit neocolonial imperial power” (Sidaway, 2002:26). Evidently, postcolonialism has been widely interpreted by the reviewers and to some extent,
gatekeepers of postcolonial geography as a subdiscipline, leading to very different ideas of what it means to do a postcolonial critique, even if it means acknowledging geography’s collusion with colonialism. Within this literature, my work is in most sympathy with the more grounded, textual work excavating the relationship between geography and colonial discourses and practices (eg. Bowd and Clayton, 2006; Cleary, 2003). However, there is a need to analyze the effects of these discourses and practices; postcoloniality cannot be relegated to an analysis of a past colonial period, but as a condition of power that shapes the imperial present.

Timothy Mitchell’s work most exemplifies the attention to the relationship between the settling of colonial power, and its contemporary effects. Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts*, is an account of the extension of colonial rule in Egypt into present-day forms of domination (Mitchell, 2002). Drawing also on the compelling representations of the Nile river, Mitchell excavates moments from the settling of the ‘economy’ to the agency of the mosquito, to the representations of the peasant in Egyptian historiography, in extending colonial domination to the present. This later book extends his earlier reading of Egypt’s enframing as a space for colonial rule (Mitchell, 1991). His method in the two books are opposed to a history of colonialization in Egypt. By articulating the essentializing discourses of nature, a critique of historiography, and the settling of place, Mitchell’s goal is to unpack the events at which the very power to colonize, settles.

Mitchell’s remarkable reading reminds us that we cannot abandon nature. Nature is the essence of this place we call the Mekong. A postcolonial reading of the region, therefore, must examine this process of essentialization, and the very drive to do so. As Geoff Mann points out in his call for an ethicopolitical emphasis in political ecology, the question “what makes history happen?” is also to ask “what...
makes nature happen?” (2009: 343). The question here is how to engage nature as a lever in the creation of a moral rationale for development, one that creates the Mekong region, an empirical, postcolonial object.

Aims of the dissertation

This work is a postcolonial reading of the Mekong that constitutes an attempt at a response to Osborne’s text, by way of attending to the question of the Mekong as an object of development. My dissertation focuses on the closure of the place called the Mekong through discourses of nature, development and civilization. What makes it possible to speak of the Mekong as an economic region as simply just is? What is the making of the Mekong for? I hypothesize that the production of the Mekong as an object of development provides the conditions of possibility for development today, exemplified by the hydropower push and its particular characteristics. But while the accounts of the colonial Mekong expedition first drew me in, the question of how development comes to take a particular shape or form today, compelled me to turn to the texts that labored for the settling of the Mekong as a place to be developed, a calculable resource, and geopolitical object. Where the French encounter with the Mekong created the basis for the expansion of colonial power over Indochina, it was the texts and the events around the Mekong Project that labored to produce a Mekong that was whole, bounded, and calling for development. In other words, the dissertation argues that the power to colonize did not necessarily settle within a distinct historical period of French political rule, but through epistemological relation of the text to the place in terms of the “ethical and political interests at stake in such a relation/intervention” (Ismail, 2005: xxxi).
As a student of geography, I duly labored in the ‘field,’ in the traditional arenas of both the historian and geographer: the archive, and the development community. Having based myself in Vientiane, Laos for 14 months from September 2007 to December 2008, I read the production of the Mekong across/between the archives and the engagements and struggles of the Mekong development community with the prospect of intensifying hydropower development in the region. I worked my way through the engineering studies, survey reports, and minutes of meetings of the Mekong Project at the Mekong River Commission documentation center. This part of the research overlapped with an internship at the Mekong River Commission, which afforded me the chance to be a participant-observer at meetings where many of the debates around hydropower were held.

Reading between the archive and the contemporary debates made for an uneven and multi-layered ‘field.’ My access to the meetings at the Commission was gained by my legitimacy as a Ph.D student conducting research, and my participation the daily work at the Commission. At the same time, being between these meant that my identity as a researcher came into question; I was never completely an archivist nor one who attempted a complete collection of interview subjects. It was my attempt at writing in the gap between empiricism and the very resistance of it.

Outline of dissertation

My dissertation contains three interlocking arguments. First, the region is not simply a given space of unity, but one whose characteristics, nodes of power and connections are forged by its very production as a historical and geographical object. Second, I argue that ‘nature’ and ‘development’ become enrolled in powerful,
transformative ways in the production of the region. Third, the making of the object
called the Mekong, has effects on present practices of development and resistance.

The first two arguments are interwoven in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. Chapter 1
considers the Mekong’s nature as produced within the texts of French colonial
officers who explored the river between 1866 and 1868. This limited reading forms a
foil for a reading of another moment of intervention, this time more sustained. In
Chapter 2, I read the plans and texts of a multi-million dollar, international effort that
converged on the Mekong river basin, one that attempted to transform it into a
veritable Tennessee Valley Authority. I argue that this project, read through the
valences of ‘nature’ and ‘development’, set apart and ‘enframed’ the Mekong as a
space for intervention, one that continues today. In Chapter 3, I focus on the creation
of the hegemony of development in the Mekong Project through the work of the
geographer, the late Gilbert White, and the authors of an emerging global ‘integrated
river basin management’ initiative.

The remaining chapters – Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 – are snapshots of two
moments in the contemporary politics of development in the now-enframed ‘Mekong’.
Chapter 4 begins with a visit to the Nam Theun II dam in Central Laos, a World
Bank and Lao government flagship collaboration with wide-ranging effects on state
and regional development efforts. The chapter examines the relationship between
development, Nam Theun II, and the plans to build eight dams on the Lower Mekong
mainstem. In Chapter 5, I explore the interactions between civil society, the Mekong
River Commission and states in response to these plans. I argue that the settling of
the Mekong as a space of development places a range of limits and possibilities in the
negotiation of the costs and benefits of doing development.
Chapter 1:

‘The geographical problems that it offers’:

From river to region

The journey begins a few hundred feet above the Earth’s surface. In his book, *The Mekong: Turbulent Past, Uncertain Future*, Milton Osborne describes first flying over the river in 1959 in a Royal Air Cambodge DC3 from Saigon to Phnom Penh: “[W]hat I saw through the thick, dusty haze was a river of enormous size stretching in great serpentine bends into the far distance” (Osborne, 2001:11). Arriving for the first time in Southeast Asia as a newly-assigned Australian diplomat to Cambodia, this vision of the great, meandering river begins, he says, his “deep and abiding fascination” with the Mekong (1996; 2001). Inspired by the sight of the river, Osborne goes on to write two of the most widely-read, popular accounts of the Mekong today: *River Road to China* (1996) and *The Mekong* (2001). It is these two historical accounts of the Mekong that we must contend with in our question about the Mekong river – its making and its place in history, for a number of reasons.

First, Milton Osborne is a well-known historian of Southeast Asia and the Mekong. After his diplomatic service ends, he obtains a doctorate from Cornell University, one of the key centers of Southeast Asian area studies in the United States, thereafter holding academic positions in the United Kingdom, Australia, Singapore
and the United States. *The Mekong*, claims the reviewers on the back of the book, is the “definitive guide to the Mekong”—“an entire history of the river from its earliest times to the present” (Christopher Koch, back cover); “a masterly chronicle of one of the world’s mightiest rivers”, a “must read” for any prospective traveler to the lands along the Mekong’ (Osborne, 2001: front matter). The book’s place in the annals of what is known as the ‘Mekong’, especially in the light of the river’s central place in the regional programs and the way that the book is shaping a popular consciousness about the river, warrants our attention to these claims – its completeness, history, and ‘objectness’.

Second, we must take Osborne seriously because he has said that he ‘abides’ by the Mekong: “I hope my interest in the river can be more kindly described as a deep and *abiding* fascination,” (my italics) says Osborne. By claiming to abide by a place – the Mekong, therefore, Osborne must be taken seriously as someone who attempts to speak not only *of* the place but *for* a place. By speaking of the Mekong, he is creating an epistemological relation, a relation that is at the same time an intervention in the place. We must ask: what is it that he abides by? On what grounds do his claims on the place lie? What kinds of ethical and political interests do these pursue? What are the gaps between Osborne’s abiding and Qadri Ismail’s reference to abiding as an “epistemological relation to, or intervention within, a place that foregrounds, explicitly or otherwise, the ethical and political interests at stake in such a relation/intervention” (Ismail, 2005: xxxii)?.

Third, Osborne’s books foreground the Mekong in the French colonial discovery and exploration of the river. In 1866, a group of French officers set off from Saigon on a two-year journey up the Mekong. The expedition was awarded the highest honor from the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1870, the same
award given to David Livingstone for discovering the Victoria Falls three decades earlier. Osborne’s *River Road to China* (1996) is dedicated to the expedition, the most widely-distributed account in English of this period of the Mekong’s history. We read this because Osborne writes the French expedition as a heroic venture and a chronicle of exploration, an prelude to *The Mekong*, a book that also incorporates contemporary events: “the Mekong’s past and present and its uncertain future, and the lands through which it flows” (Osborne, 2001). But even though he claims to write about the ‘Mekong’ as it stands in 2001, it is not hard to see that his real passion lies in the 19th century. Osborne devotes more than half of *The Mekong* to the colonial “beginnings” (“Monuments, Tombs and a Great River”). Both *River Road to China* and *The Mekong* are not only firm tributes to the men and the exploration, but to colonial Indochina as glorious period in the past. His descriptions of current places and people linger on this past. “It had been a companionable time as the cheerfully rotund Boun [his Lao translator on a trip on the Mekong] spoke wistfully in French – a language seldom heard in Laos these days” (2001:1).

Osborne’s claims of his ‘abiding’ by the Mekong challenges me to engage with the popular, romantic imaginary of the Mekong that Osborne has contributed to in his immensely popular book, regarded as an authority on the Mekong. In order for me to critique Osborne’s production of knowledge about the Mekong, I am challenged to read the accounts of the same expedition in an alternative way. After briefly attending to some of the traces of romanticism for the French on the Mekong, this chapter turns to a reading of accounts of the 1866 expedition written by two of its members, and translated into English. I argue that both attempts to romanticize the Mekong River privilege the moment of its ‘discovery’ by the French. These accounts create the Mekong as an empirical space to be known, a problem for geography and a
space of the ‘other’. It is a production that Osborne perpetuates and resuscitates, literally, from the ashes of ‘history’, and one that is sustained by Geography.

**Nostalgia and monomanie**

*Une monomanie du Mékong*: this is how Milton Osborne describes the main protagonist of his account of the 1866 expedition (2001:11). Francis Garnier is the tragic hero who sacrifices his life not only for the Mekong but in the name of French colonial expansion in Indochina. Particularly, Osborne’s own singular passion appears not to be the Mekong, but the French on the Mekong. From his descriptions of Phnom Penh and Luang Prabang in the dying days of Empire, in 1959, he spares no affection for the vestiges of French influence:

Here was a city that many thought was the most attractive in the whole of Southeast Asia. It was no longer the collection of wooden buildings and garbage-strewn streets with open sewers that Lagree, Garnier and their companions encountered in 1866. As the French consolidated their control over Cambodia, they had laid out the centre of Phnom Penh in a grid pattern, the streets lined with trees in a nostalgic effort to recall the cities of their homeland—an echo of Provence (2001:180).

The French colonial period appears to put order to the “garbage-strewn streets with open sewers.” The hyphen locates this act in the quest for nostalgia: “an echo of Provence.”

With the same melancholy, Osborne laments the passing away of French influence in this part of the world. “The late twentieth century has been less kind to the memory of men who were once hailed as heroes,” he laments in *The Mekong* (2001:10). Even in the home villages of these men in France, Osborne observed, their commemorative statues lay vandalized and disrespected. For example, the leader of the Expedition, Doudart de Lagrée, is a name “hardly known outside of France”, and

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his marble statue in his hometown of Saint-Vincent-de-Mercuze defaced. Regretfully, he notes that the Paris statue of Francis Garnier, who took over the Expedition on Lagrée’s premature death, stands “mocked by those who abhor the imperialist values it enshrined when it was erected in 1896.” In a part-ironic, part-wistful way, he notes that the statue is “an extraordinary confection…a classically heroic pose, with half-naked women and wild animals drawn from an Indochinese bestiary draped about his legs and feet” (2001:11). Osborne compares this neglect to “the contemporary rape of the statuary and carvings found in Cambodia’s Angkor temple ruins—ruins that are also depicted on this extraordinary monument.” (2001:10).

For Osborne, the neglect of the French in their own territory is matched by the lack of attention in modern times of the rich history of the Mekong. His books and commentaries (see also Osborne, 2007) begin, notably, with the ‘differences’ between the Mekong of the ‘past’ and the present/future. For example, The Mekong begins with this quote, taken from an un-cited ‘World Bank report’:

Between 1969 and 1997 Cambodia’s total forest cover has been reduced 30 per cent. If the present rate of logging continues, the country’s forest reserves will be exhausted by 2003 (Osborne 2001: i).

Osborne does not give the source of this World Bank report, but it is assumed to carry some authority. The passage produces in Osborne a nostalgia for the change that occurs roughly around the end of French colonial rule (1948) as well as a postwar period of international intervention (the American military pullout by 1975). The loss of Cambodia’s forest parallels the disappearance of nature from the French period to the present. This ‘nature’ is active and vigorous, and intact in the first moments of European discovery:

 Much of the wildlife that Father da Cruz described when he traveled on the river in the sixteenth century has vanished, but the kingfishers that were so
often mentioned in nineteenth century descriptions are still there, darting down from the trees with a haleiyon flash to pluck a fish from the water (2001:268).

This nostalgia for nature is matched by the romanticism sustained by the reverence for the European encounter with it.

Continuing with this discourse defined by ‘change’, Osborne then provides an anecdote about his observations while visiting Khinak on the Lao-Cambodian border. Here, in the vicinity of the “great natural barrier” of the Khone Falls, Osborne and his companion encounter “Sino-Thai” businessmen who had come across the border from neighboring Thailand in their four-wheel drives, celebrating the success of yet another illegal logging deal (2001: i). What is the significance of these – not just Thai but Sino-Thai – businessmen? On the one hand, it could refer to the dominance of Thais of Chinese descent in Thai economy and politics, most of whom settled in Thailand from southern China in the 1700s. Or perhaps the mention of the Chinese ethnicity of the Thai businessmen is an oblique reference to the intensification of Chinese capital flows to Laos and Cambodia that Osborne comments on elsewhere (2007).

Regardless of the reason, this ‘definitive history of the Mekong’ is full of traces. His account not only romanticizes France, nature, and the past, but provides a racialized commentary on the present and the future, one that is simultaneously “uncertain”, if not “endangered” (2001:5).

To provide an oblique counterpoint to Osborne, I turn to a reading of two separate accounts of the expedition, by Francis Garnier and Louis de Carné. Numerous books on the subject are available in French, but my reading focuses on the two that have been translated to English. The translation of these accounts owe a debt to Osborne, whose Mekong books were key in popularizing these exploits, and led to
the translation and publication of exploration accounts in English\textsuperscript{1}. My reading does not claim to be complete, yet no readings can ever make that claim. Instead, my reading selectively and purposefully attempts to contest the romantic vision that Osborne promotes in his account, and to take on this romanticism as an object with ‘ethical and political’ implications for the production of the Mekong as a place.

‘Misleading’ or ‘serving’ Geography?: The Mekong Expedition

We turn now to the Mekong Expedition of 1866-1868 not only because its significance was hailed by Osborne, but because it was a key event for settling the Mekong as an object that we know it today. The work of making the Mekong was by no means completed in this expedition\textsuperscript{2}, but the 1866 expedition holds a special place in the European annals of discovery as the first to ‘see’ the Mekong for Europe for the first time.

The launch of the expedition was prompted by a number of factors. Entrenched in Saigon close to the Mekong Delta since 1857, a number of French colonial officers lobbied for an exploration into the unknown country north of the Mekong delta. “For a long time,” wrote Garnier, “the gaze of the colony had been cast with curiosity and impatience towards the interior of Indo-china which was shrouded in great mystery” (Garnier, [1885] 1996:1). Louis de Carné, in his own account, also

\textsuperscript{1} In the mid-1990s, a Bangkok-based company published translated versions of the travel accounts by Francis Garnier and Louis de Carné, two of the six French expedition members. Osborne himself had used original French sources for his two Mekong books.

\textsuperscript{2} The Pavie mission, a series of expeditions conducted over 1879-1895, was much more extensive in coverage. While this mission may have mapped the Mekong more ‘accurately’ and in a more focused way, the mission was not bound by the Mekong river or its watershed, even though expeditions extensively surveyed the Mekong between Saigon and Luang Prabang in 1886 to 1889, and parts of the Lao, China and Burma border on the left bank of the river from 1894 to 1895 (Guillebaud 2003). While this mission may have mapped the Mekong more ‘accurately’ and in a more focused way, the opening was provided by their predecessors in 1866, who launched an expedition bounded exclusively by the main river.
pointed to the unknowns that the expedition sought to redress: “Uncertainty begins within two degrees of Saigon, the very inexact charts of the great river; beyond that, only misleading geography instead of serving it” (de Carné [1872]1995:37).

The desire to fill in the blanks of unexplored space did not come from nowhere. In spite of having captured Saigon in 1857, Cochin-china had not turned out to be a jewel in the French colonial empire. On the contrary, it had become a liability. According to scholars of French Indochina, Saigon was neither as successful as Singapore or Shanghai, two strategically-located, profitable port cities that had been opened up by the British. The lucrative trade passing through these ports and their geographic and navigational connections to mainland China worried the French (Ennis, 1936). A successful British expedition up the Salween River at the border of Thailand, Burma and China substantiated fears that they were about to win the race to close off the French to Chinese trade. There were visions of the Mekong river becoming a kind of Yangzi River to Saigon, the so-called Shanghai of Southeast Asia³ (Ivarsson, 2008).

But while colonial competition and geopolitics created the conditions for the expedition, the most important qualitative reason that drove the particularities of the journey, was to discern if the Mekong was navigable from Saigon all the way to the Chinese border at Sipsongpanna. This desire to find a navigable route to China was woven through these accounts as that primary question of the expedition. A secondary reason that became equally if not more crucial, was to fill up the gaps of an “unknown and faraway region” in the outer regions and the lands that lay unclaimed by Europe outside the boundaries of the French colony centered in Saigon (Garnier,

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³ This is not to privilege a colonial account of trading in the region. Trading networks between especially coastal cities ran far and wide; the trade with China was so extensive in the 1750 and 1820 that administrative revenues increased three to fourfold over the period, establishing a permanent presence of Chinese populations and business networks in the region. See eg. (Cooke and Li 2004)
De Carné reflects on these two intersecting motivations for the expedition:

The principal results which were expected from the exploration of the Mekong may be summed up in a few words. It was desired, first, that the old maps should be rectified, and the navigability of the river tried, it being our hope that we might bind together French Cochin-China and the western provinces of China by means of it. Were the rapids, of whose existence we knew, an absolute barrier? Were the islands of Khon an impassable difficulty? Was there any truth in the opinion of geographers who, with Vincendon Dumoulin\(^4\), believed that there was a communication between the Meïnam and the Mekong? To gather information respecting the sources of the latter, if it proved impossible to reach them; to solve the different geographical problems which would naturally offer, was the first part of the programme the commission had to carry out. (de Carné [1872]1995:36)

The expedition was for the sake of geography; behind the two questions lay the possibility of more: solving the “geographical problems which would naturally offer” [sic]. In other words, the Mekong was instrumental in this expedition; what kinds of geographical problems would it present?

In 1865, due in no small part to Francis Garnier’s passionate lobbying, the colonial governor in Saigon, de la Grandiere, won approval for the expedition from the French Minister of the Navy and the Colonies. On his return to Saigon, the governor appointed the members of the team, reluctantly approving Garnier’s place on the expedition and appointing, to Garnier’s disapproval, the governor’s own nephew, the 23-year old Louis de Carné, the youngest member of the expedition\(^5\) (Osborne, 2000).

\(^4\) A noted hydrographer who made maps of New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the Pacific, sailing on Dumont d’Urville’s last voyage to New Zealand and the Pacific. See http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Bio32Tuat-t1-body-d6.html

\(^5\) Francis Garnier, who struggled to be included in the project that he had so relentlessly promoted, was disdainful towards de Carne; in the text, there is little mention of his efforts, compared to other members of the expedition. Instead he describes him at the start as “a young assistant in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who owed it to nepotism, that is, his kinship with the governor of the colony, that he was able to start his diplomatic career with this exploration” (12).
The river’s changing moods

In spite of the determination to put the stream to work, the Mekong was not yet a river to be tamed. Indeed, from the beginning, the river appears to throw the men into fits of despair, sorrow, hope, and awe. The river’s agency is solidified in descriptions such as this one by Garnier ([1885]1996:38), upon reaching the first obstruction at Preatapang, near Sambor:

On 20 July the course of the stream which had bent to the west during the passage of these rapids, turned exactly northwards and for the first time the horizon displayed some undulations of the terrain in this direction. The river had become calm again and displayed a magnificent appearance.

Passages like this are echoed by writers like Osborne, who also comments on the river’s different “moods” along the 4,000 km length of the lower basin (Osborne, 2001:3), where both the French and Osborne limit their accounts.

These changing moods presaged the river’s ability to transform suddenly and without warning. Earlier in the same excursion, Garnier found himself on a river that would simply not cooperate. The river is active, purposeful and wily: “we found ourselves facing formidable rapids: the clear and easily discernible banks of the islands which had so far framed the arm of the river that we had been following suddenly vanished” (Garnier, [1885]1996: 57). Down on the river, the multiple streams escape detection: “the muddy waters flowed impetuously in a thousand channels, the inextricable network of which it was impossible to discern”. Three phrases “impetuously”; “inextricable” and “impossible to discern” govern the growing desperation. Within hours of reaching their first obstacle near Sambor, the river appears to thwart the expedition not long after it begins. “Enormous sandstone blocks”, says Garnier, “indicate[d] that a bank of the same stones crossed the river and barred its entire width.” And thus:
The future of rapid commercial relations on this vast river, the natural route from China to Saigon, of which I had happily dreamt the previous evening, appeared seriously compromised to me from this moment on. (Garnier, [1885]1996:57).

In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt describes Alexander von Humboldt’s romantic view of nature in his experience of South America at the turn of the 18th century. His “reinvention” of South America is that of nature, a “spectacle capable of overwhelming human knowledge and understanding” (Pratt, 1992). Likewise, descriptions of the Mekong in the two books were part of that first European encounter, that epistemological tradition that presented the image of a spectacular, agential, petulant river that constantly humbled the explorers.

*Ancient civilizations and the civilizing mission*

The fascination with the river is almost matched in ardor with the passion for ‘Angkor’, a prized sighting that was equaled the enthusiasm of charting the unknown river course. When Henri Mouhot, a botanist and explorer sighted the spectacular monuments rising out of the plain east of the Great Lake and brought these sights to Europe, he created a popular mania around the prospect of newly-discovered ancient civilization in the ‘Far East’. This fervor is fueled by the dramatic circumstances of his death from malaria in 1861 in Luang Prabang in modern-day Laos. Mouhot’s death was made even more famous as it came to light that his attempts to traverse unknown lands for the French empire had been thwarted by his lack of support by institutions at home. Mouhot was denied grants and passage by the French companies and the Napoleon III government, and only managed to sail for Bangkok owing,

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6 Osborne too alluded to the spectacular Mekong, but his gaze was more fixed on the explorers.
ironically, to the patronage of France’s most ardent competitors: the Royal Geographical Society and Zoological Society of London (Osborne, 2001).

These circumstances together with Mouhot’s lonely death and sacrifice in Laos, undoubtedly fed the indignation of French officers who had lobbied over decades to conduct a survey up the Mekong, and who for a long time argued that their government underestimated the importance of such an expedition for the continuance of French colonial power. Luang Prabang was thus significant for de Lagrée and his group, who upon arrival, erected a stone and epitaph over Mouhot’s grave (Osborne 1996). The ruins at Angkor, which was first sighted by Mouhot, therefore served as an important point of remembrance for the expedition.

The encounter with Angkor was a highlight for the expedition’s members. It is also an encounter that informs the way lands to the north of Saigon, and the Mekong, would be imagined. In Garnier’s account, his excitement of Garnier can hardly be contained: “I will no doubt be excused for these two short excursions in the domain of politics and history, made to plead the cause of … a precious discovery.” Geography and its questions are left aside for the moment as he writes of the purity of Angkorian carvings and their comparison to the periods of classical Europe: “my thoughts drifted to the great era which had sired an art so perfect and, at that moment, I came close to adding a fourth, the Khmer, to the three classical centuries of Pericles, Augustus and Louis XIV” (ibid., 9).

In contrast, encounters with the contemporary descendents of the Angkor appeared to greatly disappoint. “Laos, a vast region,” de Carne writes, “was reckoned at Saigon one of the most unhealthy countries of the world.” ([1872]1995:36); the expedition is “depressed by the sight of “the general decay of the people” ([1885]1996:136). In addition, residents appeared disinterested in helping the French
seek out the ruins. “Local traditions preserved the memory…of their existence and
the name of these monuments,” explains Garnier, “but nobody admitted knowing the
way to them, or, knowing it, nobody wanted to serve as guide.”

The locals’ inability to recognize the significance of something so precious
appears to be consistent with observations of their behavior over the course of the
mission. Locals appeared to rebel, refuse requests, and cooperate. In a
reconnaissance mission near Sambor with local guides, Garnier comes up against
locals who repeatedly ignore or misunderstand his requests. He is puzzled by their
lack of enthusiasm for and significance of these tasks for ‘geography’. “Having
reached the middle of the river,” he explains, “my oarsmen pointed in the direction of
Preatapang. That was all I could get from them. In spite of all my efforts, they rowed
me back to the bank we had left…” (Garnier [1885]1996:57-58). The next day,
continuing his mission, Garnier turns his frustration into a strategy to counter the
inexplicable disobedience of the oarsmen: “I soon figured out that their intention was
to pass to the middle of the river, leaving the rapids...Firmly determined not to miss
reconnoitering this famous passage as we had the first time, I ordered Ranaud to
pretend that he would take the paddle in the back, while at the same time I gave a new
sign to the oarsmen, my hand on my revolver, to follow the route that I indicated”
([1885]1996:62). Still, Garnier acknowledges that completing the hydrographic
reconnaissance of the river “would require time and support of the inhabitants of the
country”.

The success of mission civilatrice is not easy when locals refuse to cooperate
in their own salvation. The Mekong expedition exemplifies the heart of the civilizing
mission: the stated goal was to “report any miscellaneous facts which might throw
light on the history, philology, the ethnography, or the religion of the peoples along
the great river... to know our neighbours of Laos better (emphasis added); the resources of their country, and their relations with the Indo-Chinese powers, of which they were vaguely known to be tributaries” (de Carné [1872]1995:36). On the other hand, tolerance of the locals could not be at the expense of maintaining French superiority over them: “There it was important to break the ice which, from the beginning of the journey, threatened to compromise the good understanding so necessary for success, without however casting aside the dignity due to the flag and the interests that we wanted to serve” ([1885]1996:85).

The romanticization of Angkor is echoed by attitudes towards the archaeological qualities of the Mekong. While puzzling over whether the observed Lao and Siamese “civilizations” had the same “source”, de Carne notes that “it would be unwise to decide the question”. Yet, humanity and the grand stream merge into one as he too slips easily into the language of their unity: “Indo-china is, besides the most fruitful field which the savants who seek to discover the lost sources of that grand stream, whose waves are nations, and to make out, in some sort, the genealogy of humanity, can ever explore” ([1872]1995:135). The Mekong, in other words, just as signified the origins of Indochina and its peoples; the river and civilization are mixed as a singular ‘nature’: “The reader,” Garnier says, turning to his audience, “who has been suddenly transported from the ruins of an ancient civilization and swiftly conducted, from island to island, from rapid to rapid, to the heart of an unknown and almost wild country, must be somewhat out of breath” (Garnier, [1885]1996:78). Both Angkor (culture) and the Mekong (nature) are primal grounds for the intertwined purposes of discovery and salvation of Indochina.

*Seeing and fixing the river*
In spite of the rapids which put an end to the goal of a route to China, the expedition continued to ascend the river’s course upstream into modern-day Laos. The goal had shifted to recording the sights and making surveys and notes on topography, physical geography, and social observations along the river. The map-making fell to Garnier and to Louis Delaporte, the expedition artist. In his memoirs, Garnier speaks frequently and colorfully of his survey excursions. Although Osborne does not make much of the scientific aspect of the expedition, he argues for the gravity by which the explorers carried out the scientific studies. Consider the fastidious nature of the following statement:

The French Commission had covered 9,960 kilometers between Cratieh, the last point in Cambodia for which the hydrographic engineers of the Navy had data, and Shanghai, the arrival point of the explorers on the Chinese coast. Before this journey of exploration, the whole of the interior of eastern Indochina was completely unknown. Of Cambodia itself, except for the river mouths, only two points were known: the first, Xieng Hong, situated on the 22nd degree of latitude to the north, which the English lieutenant MacLeod had reached, and the second, Luang Prabang, on the 20th degree, determined by Mouhot, who had died there in 1861. Even then, the latter’s determination was wrong by one degree (Garnier, [1885]1996:4).

Statements like these are when places begin to appear as points on a map, gradually filling up the spaces. The passage contains the latent excitement of someone peering over a map, tracking known and unknown places on a grid of calculation.

The expedition members were ‘seeing’ these lands for the French colonial enterprise for the first time. The members saw themselves as scientists for France. For example, de Carné, when speculating on a “common civilization” of Lao and Siamese society, comments: “[n]one of us could commit himself to this serious undertaking; and, therefore, it is better to be silent, at the risk of appearing incomplete, than to run the danger of misleading the investigations of men especially devoted to such subjects, by a display of artificial learning and improvised science” (de Carné,
According to Osborne, the records made over two years filled a thousand pages, and included surveys, observations, logs of food purchases, bottles of wine on board (Osborne, 1996:79, 91). The earnestness to fulfil the scientific cause to which the mission was put exemplifies Heidegger’s characterization of science as ‘calculative thinking’: “calculative thinking never stops, never collects itself” (Heidegger, 1977:46).

The scientific gaze was applied to the geographical questions that called to them, the main source of questioning and calculative thinking. What is worthy of study? Just as places, towns, and people are objects to be made legible, so are the features of the Mekong. As the expedition rests at Sieng Pang, Garnier writes that de Lagrée had speculated on how the river could be made navigable “very easily”, “if some works were undertaken.” ([1885]1996:67) At another stop on the Se Don, a major tributary, Garnier reports that they “examined” the falls. But “these waterfalls”, he said, “offer only a negative interest…from the geographical and commercial points of view” ([1885]1996:99). On the other hand, “from the geological point of view they were of the greatest importance and they revealed the nature of the lower strata” ([1885]1996:99). Here, the agents of science are wrapped up in science for its own sake – the search for the “primal ground” of the Mekong (Foucault 1972:48). While the waterfalls may not offer any commercial interest, there is a desire to excavate the nature of the underlying rock. As Heidegger would say, because the men are working under a circumscribed activity, science, with its practices of naming, ordering and calculation, and are subject to its call to view all objects with the attitude of collection, they are not always in control of what is revealed. He notes for example that a lumberjack is “made subordinate to the orderability of cellulose, which for its part is challenged forth by the need for paper” (Heidegger 1977:18). In the same way,
laboring under the structure of thinking circumscribed by the collective endeavor of scientists, the explorers are bound in a particular relation towards the object, the Mekong.

At times, the struggle to answer the call of geographical questioning is eased by new vantage points. Climbing up the peak of Phou Molong, Garnier is ecstatic to gain a view of the stream from a high point: “I was especially happy at the easing of the burden of my work as a geographer which was the result of this. In one glance, I could cover the whole river and fix its contours.” (Garnier, [1885] 1996:96, my emphasis). The rare vision, afforded by a ‘god’s eye view’, allowed Garnier to “fix” points on a gradually-filled space on his map. It is not until a hundred years later that this aerial vision becomes the primary way of ‘seeing’ the Mekong, rendering it a very different kind of space. Up the mountain, the French obtain a rare glimpse of what Heidegger refers to as the new framework of arranging space-time, one that eases the knowability of objects and affords the unusual ease of calculation.

*Abandoning geography*

Osborne’s version of the events has the expedition end in tragedy. The tragic aspect is marked by the deteriorating health and conditions as its members proceeded north of Luang Prabang towards the Chinese frontier, and finds a climactic turn in the death of the expedition’s leader, Lagrée, south of Dali in China. At ‘Ssu-Mao’, the travelers were confronted by a ‘Muslim’ revolt and the dilemma of whether to continue finding the source of the Mekong, or to conduct a commercial survey of the southwestern provinces of China. At this moment, the commercial question won out as the impracticalities of continuing the scientific mapping of the Mekong became apparent.
The abandonment of the Mekong for a reconnaissance of the Red River valley, in the interest of finding a commercial opening for the French empire, is a bitter disappointment for some members, including Garnier. As de Carné puts it: “We were compelled by the Mussulman revolt to leave the Mekong, in order to gain the Sonkoi; to abandon geography, and solve a problem of more practical and immediate importance” ([1872]1995:362, my emphasis). In the end, it is de Carné, rather than the poetic Garnier, who calls to a close these geographical problems first asked of the expedition. “[I]t is true,” de Carné laments, “that Saigon is for ever separated from China by a long series of cascades and rapids, and in this manner destroy the most favorite of its dreams; but these would have been words painful to utter, and still more painful to hear” ([1872]1995:362). The Mekong lay abandoned as an impossible passage. By accident, however, the French discover the potential of the Red River (Sonkoi), flowing across southwestern China into today’s Hanoi. “[The Sonkoi], writes de Carné in 1872, “promises to realize all the hopes and expectations which the Mekong destroyed,” ([1872]1995:362).

Amidst the failure of the Mekong and the vagaries and accidents of exploration, French political ambition remains intact. Francis Garnier, whom Osborne portrays as the tireless patriot on search for more lands to explore for the French state after the end of the Mekong expedition, is martyred at this new site of French colonial history. Refusing to retire in France, Garnier leads a group to meet rebels as the French wrest control of Hanoi, and dies in an ambush. It is Leon Garnier, who, in a plea to remember his brother’s heroism, brings the latter’s Mekong exploits to bear on the successful reorientation of French imperial efforts in Indochina:

His words echo his brother Francis’ earlier on the tantalizing vision of French control of the Mekong:

If we want the trade of the Mekong valley to expand as much as possible, then the French flag must be hoisted on the right bank of the river, below the waterfalls, to protect the transshipments of goods ascending or descending the river, to facilitate works that can improve the passage and to increase the extent of the zone of civilizing influence, which alone can bring the development of which these rich areas are capable ([1885]1996:74-75).

Within the next decade, subsequent missions to the Red River, the valley first traversed in the ruins of the Mekong expedition, succeeded in bringing parts of northern Vietnam under French control. According to Ennis (1936:42), the 1866 expedition was the “basis for French expansion” in the region. The return of Francis Garnier and the surviving members to Europe coincided with the onset of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, during which French national fervor was revitalized and led to a resurgence of colonial conquest (Said 1994). From 1880 to 1895, French possessions were increased from 1 million square kilometers to 9.5 million square kilometers, from 5 to 55 million inhabitants (Ennis 1936). In 1893, French gunboats traveled up to Bangkok on the Chao Phraya, demanding the cessation of territories east of the Mekong (Ennis 1936; Winichakul 1994). For Osborne, Francis Garnier’s death in 1873 as he attempts to lead a force to capture Hanoi adds pathos to an expedition that answered only a few ‘geographical questions’ to the affirmative but effectively opened up the way for empire.
Conclusion

Much has been made of salvaging the political instrumentality of the expedition, but little has been said about how it was instrumental in inaugurating a way in which the Mekong became known. This is not surprising – in terms of the maps and surveys – the expedition’s products were eclipsed by a later, more extensive effort launched by the French colonial state. Auguste Pavie led a series of missions between 1879 to 1895 with 40 assistants covering 676,000 square kilometers (260,000 square miles), producing the first atlas of the Mekong (Pavie [1903]1999) and at least six volumes of observations. Nevertheless, while the Pavie mission made more accurate maps and conducted their exploration and surveys in a more calculated, and arguably more rigorously scientific fashion, it was the earlier expedition that firmly planted the image of the Mekong within the circuits of the circulation of knowledge. It did so by bringing back information to centers of calculation in order for such efforts to be repeated towards a particular goal (Latour, 1987). As Latour (1987) argues, what matters is not the accuracy of the maps, but the very fact that the Mekong was mapped at all. In his example of the first European visit to the Sakhalin Islands in the coda of Science In Action, the first round of information obtained was by no means more ‘accurate’ than local knowledge. Yet, because, first, it was circulated at all, and second, information was inscribed in a way that could be read and interpreted in Europe – information that was useless for locals but instrumental for enabling repeated visits. Places became points on the map, and comments on the future instrumentality of landmarks, timber, and people’s lives – whether it is to commerce, geology or ‘geography’ – were woven into a grand narrative of an adventure united by une monomanie du Mékong. In other words, the knowledge brought back was sufficient so that colonial authorities saw the value in the places,
suggestions and people inscribed as data. For the explorer of the day, the ultimate mark of value was recognition by geographical societies in the centers of calculation – on behalf of the expedition, Francis Garnier accepted the Victoria medal from the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1870.

In privileging the mechanics of creating value through cycles of accumulation of knowledge, Latour did not give much room to the other aspects of value creation. The earnestness with which the travelers conducted their activities, the conscientious recording of place names, events, people, conducted in an attitude of scientific rigor, served to delimit a space. The explorers in 1866 did not purposefully seek to know how and where to intervene along the river. Yet, the expedition was a call to the Mekong as an object of fascination and an empirical space that could be known. The Pavie Missions, learning from the 1868 failure to utilize the Mekong for navigation, took their surveys elsewhere. Of the four missions they conducted, only two were dedicated to areas around the Mekong river: between Saigon and Luang Prabang in 1886 to 1889, and parts of the Lao, China and Burma border on the left bank of the river from 1894 to 1895 (Guillebaud 2003). The Mekong was not the object of a sustained initiative again until a century later.
Chapter 2:
A ‘Giant Asleep’:
Nature and the problems of development in the Mekong

It was not until a century after the failure of Lagrée’s expedition to chart a course on the Mekong river to China that the Mekong again became the object of the state. We noted how the French expedition’s failure augmented the colonial gaze over the present-day Laos and Cambodia. The expansion of territorial power involved areas that were not only in the areas surveyed by the expedition as it slowly made its way upstream, but also in places outside this region – the result of the accidents and contingencies of exploration. This occurred in spite of, or resulting from the force of, the Mekong River as an object of aestheticization and reverence. Even though the exploration of the Mekong created the conditions for the intensification of French colonial power over Indochina, the ‘Mekong’ never again became a singular object of study, romanticization, or calculation for the French.

In 1952, the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) published a short, 18-page report with the lengthy title, ‘The Development of the International River Mekong: Technical Problems Related to Flood Control and Water Resources Development’. The report was based on a preliminary study conducted by the ECAFE in 1951. Its main recommendation was that the key to the development of northeast Thailand was to build the Pa Mong Dam for irrigation and power generation. Two other dams built at Khone Falls and Sambor would contribute
to establishing a power generation regime in the Lower Mekong, and would also aid in navigation (Hori, 2000:94). This report was to grow into a two decade-long, multi-million dollar, multinational project centered on the development of the Mekong that included 18 countries at its peak.

Why did an interest in developing the Mekong reappear? Why ‘the Mekong’ and not simply the Mekong Delta, or any of the large river basins situated, in the 1950s, in much more politically-friendly states? How and why did this interest grow into the world’s biggest and most international development undertaking by the 1960s? The aim of this chapter is to attempt to answer these questions. I argue that this project was the second moment of objectification of the Mekong river that created the region that we know as the ‘Mekong’ today. I argue that this moment, this initiative, created the ‘region’ by the expansion of the notion of the Mekong as single thread of navigability to the Chinese frontier to a bounded ‘region’ for production and development, one that makes it possible for us to speak of the Mekong region today.

To make this argument, I look at the mechanics of settling the ‘Mekong’ as an object. My primary focus is the way that discourses of ‘development’, ‘nature’, ‘resources’ and ‘man’ emerge and are joined across a particular space-time. The articulation of a region called the Mekong is contingent on and occurs within a number of key events: decolonization, Viet Nam, the rise of the 20th century imperial project of the United States, which Neil Smith calls the period of American ‘globalism’ (Smith, 2002), and the building and reinforcement of a global development industry. If ‘place’ is “a text, or a group of texts, that is/are read” (Ismail, 2005: xvii), the Mekong as a place is constitutive of the production of discourses about the place – development, nature and resource – within the attempts to know and grasp the Mekong empirically.
Fashioning the global frontier

In a 1965 speech at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, US President Lyndon Johnson connected the emerging Mekong cooperative development effort with the transformation of the American South. “The vast Mekong River,” said Johnson, “can provide food and water and power on a scale to dwarf even our own TVA” (Johnson, 1965: no page). The United States went on to pledge $1 billion to the ‘Mekong development project’. The speech sealed the Mekong as an image made in the Tennessee Valley Authority, the quintessential New Deal project of the 1930s. It was not by accident that Johnson selected the Mekong as the anchor for his speech.

Aside from the impetus to reassure the American public that the administration were more interested in development than escalating the war in Viet Nam, the connection of the TVA to the Mekong was already well-established by that time. Plans for the United States commitment to a TVA-style development project in Southeast Asia were simmering as early as 1961, when Johnson was still vice-President. According to Gardner (1997), Johnson was informed of a project to develop the Mekong by Arthur Goldschmidt just as he was preparing to visit Southeast Asia. Fascinated, Johnson visited the Mekong Committee’s Bangkok office. The Mekong project answered Johnson’s search for a “moral equivalent” of war (Gardner 1997:39). But the TVA is more than an idea that has passed through a network of politicians and their biographies, but one whose shape, form and intent has helped delineate the same for the Mekong. How did the TVA come to be the symbol of the efforts at a Mekong project? More pertinently, how did the export of the TVA shape the particular geographies of the project?
In 1933, the Tennessee Valley became canonized as an economic development and modernization project centered on the generation of electricity. At its peak during World War II, the TVA employed some 28,000 people. By the 1950s, the TVA, set up by the government to build projects as well as sell power, had become the nation’s largest supplier of hydroelectric power. Amidst a mix of criticism and support at home, the project was nevertheless flagged as a success story abroad. By the time of Johnson’s speech, the TVA had become synonymous with American-style ‘development’ internationally. Truman’s Point Four Program (1949) articulated development within the administration’s intensifying Cold War strategy. Earlier, American planners overseeing the Marshall Plan advocated for the central TVA premise of ‘productionism’ as key to European recovery (Ekbladh, 2002). Later, as American policymakers turned to winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of people against communism, the Tennessee Valley became synonymous with foreign assistance, as a form of development aid that would also re-orient people’s values towards those represented by the TVA model (Ekbladh, 2002:349).

While the Tennessee Valley was made popular through numerous aid and exchange programs bringing engineers from around the world to the United States (see Ekbladh, 2002), the promotion of the TVA as a model development project must be attributed to David Lilienthal. Lilienthal was the Tennessee Valley Authority’s chairman between 1941 and 1946, who, during his tenure, took it upon himself to actively promote the project abroad. His enthusiasm and ambassadorial forays to India, Southeast Asia and Europe won him the moniker, ‘Mr TVA’ (Ekbladh, 2002). For example, Lilienthal travelled to South Asia in 1951, where he met and found agreement with Jawarhalal Nehru’s plans for a TVA-style Damodar Valley electrification project.
But Lilienthal’s lasting contribution to the project was his authorship of a book, *TVA: Democracy on the March*. It is this book that we turn to, to understand how the TVA was imagined as bringing development not only to ‘lagging’ regions of the United States but also to the global South. *Democracy on the March* attempted to balance the sought-after readership of the book: both Americans and people abroad. Lilienthal dedicated the book “to the people who live in the Tennessee Valley Region” (*ibid.*., front matter), claiming it “as a report to the whole people; it is they who own the TVA”. At the same time, the book’s intended audience was much wider. “[T]he book can only serve its purpose,” argued Lilienthal, “if this story of the TVA idea is made as widely available as possible” (*ibid.*., iii).\(^7\)

I choose to read this text because of these broader ambitions, which led it to appear at various moments in the story of the institutionalization of plans to develop the Mekong. The American private foundations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the China International Famine Relief Commission (CIFRC), were well-established in China by the 1940s, and they first saw the possible connection between the success of the TVA at home to the problems of rural development abroad (Ekbladh, 2002). These foundations also funded visits by these engineers in China, Europe, and Southeast Asia to the TVA and other basins like the Colorado, to learn firsthand the way river valley projects were being built and managed (Ekbladh, 2002; Biggs, 2006). Throughout this period, the Office of Strategic Services in China distributed 50,000 copies of *Democracy on the March* (Ekbladh, 2002). Some of the Chinese engineers who began to study the TVA eventually became the architects of the Three Gorges and Yellow River projects in China. Reading *Democracy on the March*...
March allows us to examine the logic behind the claims of transformation and development that a TVA model was to bring to other parts of the world. What are the mechanisms by which such development will occur, and how have these arguments come to shape the geographies of an emerging Mekong Project?

TVA: Democracy on the March was, in short, an unabashed polemic on promises of the Tennessee Valley model at home and abroad. The book quickly goes from the achievements of the TVA to an enthusiastic exposition of how it demonstrated “a distinctively American way of getting things [sic]” (Lilienthal, 1944: iii). The TVA represents “distinctive” “methods of democratic development”, explains Democracy on the March, whose “roots lie deep in the soil of American tradition and common experience” (ibid., 7). In short, this method was “democracy at the grass roots” (ibid., 7). “People are the most important fact in resource development,” notes Lilienthal, “Not only is the welfare and happiness of individuals its true purpose, but they are the means by which that development is accomplished” (ibid., 84-85). The claims of democracy, however, go beyond development as a collective goal. Rather, Lilienthal’s arguments are buffeted by the development of ‘individuals’. As a means of explaining how the TVA promotes the becoming of ‘Man as an Individual’, he notes that

[T]he purpose of resource development must be more than the mere physical welfare of the greatest number of human beings...A man wants to feel that he is important. He wants to be able not only to express his opinion freely, but to know that it carries some weight (ibid., 84-85).

In other words, development is not merely economic. It is a means to make a man. Antonio Gramsci explains how the conception of man today is given by ‘democratic ideology’, which pronounces man as an individual. This conception, of man in the “singular” (Gramsci 1971: 357), that allows for the possibility of man to “feel that he
is important” and to “know that [his opinion] carries some weight” (Lilienthal, 1944:85).

The becoming of man, defined by a command over nature, and defined, as Gramsci points out, “as a “defined and limited individual” (Gramsci 1971:352), makes it possible also to define ‘progress’: “[i]n the idea of progress is implied the possibility of quantitative and qualitative measuring, of ‘more and better’” (ibid., 357). Resource development fulfills the progress of man because “the quantity of electrical energy in the hands of the people is a modest measure of the people’s command over their resources and the best single measure of their productiveness, their opportunities for industry, their potential for the future” (Lilienthal, 1944:18). How does the individual become the center of this potential? Democracy on the March argues that “the individual farmer was the only one who could apply all this available expertness [agricultural knowledge gleaned from experiments]” (1944:90). Demonstration farms provided the way in which “farmers, their wives and children, with their neighbors learn and demonstrate the unity of resources”. These “schoolrooms of the valley” would “demonstrate the principles of grassroots democracy” (ibid., 90).

The liberal conception of man that makes possible the centrality of the individual in his own development one that is necessarily ignorant of historical-geographical conditions. In Gramsci’s terms, this possibility forgets the “objective conditions, of possibilities or of freedom” that undergirds this “freedom” of the individual (ibid., 360). In other words, the conditions that render man not as an individual with freedoms, but as an “ensemble of social relations” (ibid., 357). As Gramsci points out,

Man is to be conceived as an historical bloc of purely individual and subjective elements and of mass and objective or material elements with which the individual is in an active relationship (ibid., 360).
With ‘man’ at the center of development comes the assumption that he is in control of the conditions of development. This reasoning allows the TVA to take up the mantle of ‘freedom’, where freedom, according to Gramsci, is the natural consequence of the idea of ‘possibility’ that appears from the accounting of how “man dominates nature and chance” (Gramsci, 1971:360). This is where “the measure of freedom enters into the concept of man” (Ibid., 360). The ‘Tennessee Valley’ is therefore an expression of this freedom and possibility—in Lilienthal’s words, “region-building at its grassroots” (Lilienthal, 1944:87).

An ahistorical sense of ‘man’ also allows Lilienthal to sell the TVA as a vision for ‘man’ all over the world. “Our foreign visitors see with particular clarity that TVA speaks in a tongue that is universal, a language of things close to the lives of people”. What are these ‘things’? “Soil fertility, forests, electricity, phosphate, factories, minerals, rivers” (ibid., 219) – that is, material resources, the keystones of man’s domination of nature and chance. Likewise, the desire to transform nature is a common language: “No English interpreter is needed when a Chinese or a Peruvian sees this series of working dams, or electricity flowing into a simple farmhouse” (ibid., 219). Electricity production is a transcultural desire, and dams translate this possibility on behalf of Americans. Such desire for development in the global South is akin to the thirst for development of the United States south: “Ten years ago the Tennessee Valley was regarded in the electrical appliance industry as the ‘zero’ market of the country; a few years later it was the leading market of the entire country” (ibid., 225).

This view was also held by Lyndon Johnson who, before he became president, worked extensively on New Deal projects on the Colorado and other areas of the
Southwest. Johnson later communications revealed that he saw the Mekong project as a TVA for Asia in the same way that “economic integration with the nation as a whole could cure the South and close the North-South gap” (Arthur Goldschmidt to Lyndon Johnson, 1963, cited in Gardner, 1997:42):

In the countryside where I was born, and where I live, I have seen the night illuminated, and the kitchens warmed, and the homes heated, where once the cheer less night and the ceaseless cold held sway. And all this happened because electricity came to our area along the humming wires of the [Rural Electrification Commission] (Johnson, 1965: no page).

The ‘nationalisms’ breaking out everywhere at the end of the second World War are akin to sectionalism within a country, argues Lilienthal: “[i]t is a folly to expect Americans clearly to see the tragedy, for the world, of an intense nationalism until restrictive sectionalism within the nation is also seen as a self-defeating policy” (ibid., 226). This sectionalism between the northeast and the South and West, for Lilienthal, is based an unequal economic relationship between the two regions wherein the South and West “have been so long predominantly a raw-materials source for the dominant manufacturing regions” (ibid., 226). He goes as far as to call this relationship “colonialism, or exploiting the hinterland” (ibid., 226). *Democracy on the March* implicitly contained a political theory of control – one that attributed political conflict to uneven development.

The TVA proposes a solution to such sectionalism, and in doing so provides lessons for dealing with a world awash with nationalisms. The TVA did “not rob Peter in the north to swell lean pockets of Paul in the interior,” argued Lilienthal, “but would benefit both regions” (ibid., 228). An advantage of supporting a project like the TVA, he argued, was that its benefits accrued nationwide. Regionalism was therefore of national interest because it “the solution of regional problems and the
development of regional resources are matters of concern to the whole country” (ibid., 228). For example, Lilienthal cites the example of how the need for fertilizers in the Tennessee Valley required their production in California, and new furnaces from the Midwest.

In other words, Lilienthal was substantiating the argument for regional development in its modern form by offering a scenario of comparative advantage and ‘trickle down’ effects to the entire economy. This long-term view of spillover benefits at home had its parallels on a world scale: “When Americans see that it has helped, not hurt, the people of Ohio, say, to have this southern valley more productive, we shall see that much the same thing will be true if, in their own way, Mexicans and Brazilians and Russians and Chinese develop their resources and trade with us and with each other” (ibid., 226). That this “comprehension can best be learned at first hand” is echoed by Johnson on the eve of his Baltimore speech: “We are in a better position to handle some of the problems of the developing countries because of the problems we faced so recently in developing our own” (Lyndon Johnson to Arthur Goldschmidt, 1963, cited in Gardner, 1997:43).

The TVA scheme, therefore, was more than a development plan. As a model with which to produce the essential man, through his exploitation of nature, and its benefits for widespread economic development, Lilienthal gave the TVA the character of a political theory and practice. The TVA was even a means of resolving regional conflicts between nations. For example, Lilienthal proposed that the Kashmir conflict could be solved by developing the Indus River as a unit (Ekbladh, 2002). According to Ekbladh (2002:354), it was this opinion that led to Eugene Black, the first president of the newly-formed World Bank, to shift the focus of an offer of aid and technical assistance in 1960 to the Indian and Pakistani prime ministers on the
basis of the development of the Indus river basin. Black was not only president of the World Bank but also became one of the most prominent advocates of the Mekong Project (see Black, 1965). This gesture of the World Bank effectively brought the decades of efforts around the promotion of the TVA into the core of the postwar development project.

A regional commission for Asia

The global application of the TVA as a plan for development began in the United Nations regional commissions. In 1947, the first of five UN regional commissions, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), was created in Shanghai. The regional commission was created to address the inadequacies of the functional commissions (such as the Economic and Social Commission or ECOSOC) to keep up with current developments and problems on the ground in countries or regions of concern (Asher et al 1957:240). An area focus would allow the “problems” of development on the ground to be “analyzed maturely and incisively” by the “application of science and technology” within regionally-focused projects (ibid.: 240). Specifically, “areas of special promise”, identified as the development of power resources, improved water control, industries and transport, would be given special attention through research and demonstration projects. Commissions like the ECAFE would then provide “expert advice to assist in development planning” (ECAFE 1957:1). The ECAFE was to house the Mekong Committee that oversaw the planning of the Mekong river.

By prioritizing the application of science and technology to the special problems of regions, the ECAFE set out to locate problems and possible projects. Shanghai in 1947 was on the brink of revolution, but the location of ECAFE’s office
there in its early years attracted Chinese expertise and development ideas that helped shape the agenda of ECAFE in lasting ways. Notably, these included skilled and influential Chinese engineers had been working on planning major developments on China’s large rivers. Shen Yi, a mayor of Nanjing, and P.T. Tan, who had participated in numerous international collaborations conducting experimental projects on flood control and river basin planning (Hori, 2002:93), were amongst hundreds of engineers who had already encountered the TVA in their work. Tan and Shen had been working towards implementing multipurpose river valley development in the Yellow River when the shift in political power in China placed these plans on hold (Hori, 2002:94; Ekbladh, 2004). But by the time the United States Bureau of Reclamation (US BuRec) visited Chinese engineers in the late 1940s, eager to sell their services to the Chinese state, they were advised to go to the Mekong instead (Biggs 2006).

**Flood control and the problems of Asia**

Like economic development in the impoverished American south, flooding was a problem that could not be denied. “Before the men of the Tennessee Valley built these dams, flooding was a yearly threat to every farm and industry...a barrier to progress,” Lilienthal writes; “In the others of the earth’s thousand valleys people live under the shadow of fear” (1944:15). The problem of flooding was bad enough for the Tennessee Valley, but the consequences elsewhere in the world appeared to be worse. Just as flood brought fear and a multitude of calamities, flood control would bring relief from these multiple problems: “And in the fall of 1943 came [the] flood’s [of the Khari River in India] horrible sequel: famine” (19, my emphasis). Democracy
on the March translated these effects for the American population: “All over the world the story is much the same” (1944:18).

It was precisely this global nature of the problem of flooding that was to be addressed by the United Nations ECAFE’s newly-formed Flood Control Bureau, started by Tan and Shen in 1949. “Of the thousand million human beings who live in the ECAFE region,” the bureau’s resolution states, “almost half live in the valleys of great rivers and are subject to the danger of floods which bring famine in their wake and cause millions of casualties every year” (ECAFE Res E/CN.11/66). The Flood Control Bureau therefore was set up to purport a solution, ‘flood control’, to a problem, already foreclosed: flooding.

The Mekong became a priority target for the Flood Control Bureau. At the inception of the bureau, a study of the Mekong was proposed, having “examined briefly the problems of international rivers in the region” (1957:iii). If ‘Asia’ had problems with flood control, these were magnified in the Mekong. This was explained by the ECAFE’s first Mekong report, ‘The Development of the International River Mekong: Technical Problems Related to Flood Control and Water Resources Development,’ the result of the reconnaissance of a five-member investigative team to parts of the river basin in 1956, and the first organized institutional survey of the Mekong since French colonial times.

The report remarked that “the Mekong is one of the principal rivers of Asia but it differs from most other Asian rivers in that it annually inundates several million hectares of arable land which is without any significant protective measures against such flooding” (ECAFE, 1957:25). In addition, the Mekong’s vast potential produced a proportionate picture of waste:
Here is one of the mightiest rivers of the world – the Mekong! But in spite of its great length and water potential, economically it contributes very little but causes more damages to the millions of its riparian peoples…millions of acres of otherwise arable lands have been made useless, and crops have been seriously damaged by inundation due to its floods and the backing up of water into its tributaries (1960/7/A1).

When extended over the basin, the image of potential and loss is impressive: “millions of...people”, “millions of acres...made useless”. The river basin was effectively a space of loss, waste and devastation: simultaneously an Asian as well as a Mekong problem.

A 1956 Bureau of Reclamation-commissioned survey of the Mekong gave serious contest not only to this picture of unmitigated waste from floods, but to the viability of instituting flood control mechanisms in the first place. The Wheeler report, named for Lieutenant Raymond Wheeler of the US Army Corps of Engineers, reported that “flood control was found to not be of interest in the Mekong basin”.

“[P]eople have adapted their living and pursuits to the wet season floods,” the study reports (United States Bureau of Reclamation, 1956: 27). Even more damning was the conclusion that “more important values might be jeopardized by attempts to moderate or eliminate floods.” Flood control plans – the digging of diversion channels and the building of weirs and dams – appeared to subvert the "values" of fishermen who had not only adapted to flood extremes, but relied on them. The first, and most lauded survey of the Mekong had undermined the very raison d’être of the Flood Control Bureau.

Even before the Mekong project began, its very rationale had been proven unnecessary. But turning back did not appear to be an option. Even with the possibility that flood control measures might make irreparable damage to livelihoods, the Wheeler report decided to hedge on its conclusions, recommending caution
instead: “Any major plans for flood control or its combination with other uses in a multiple purpose project should wait upon the completion of hydrographic and topographic surveys and the collection of basic data which will permit adequate engineering study and analysis” (United States Burec, 1956: 80) The deferring of the question of flood control to after the completion of data collection not only allowed the Flood Control Bureau’s agenda to proceed, but also laid down the way in which such difficult, ethical problems would be handled. Moreover, the collection of this data would be vital to maintaining Bureau of Reclamation’s relevance, and that of the growing United Nations development bureaucracy, in the project.

While flood control was to be a particular problem to be tackled by the new Flood Control Bureau, the bureau’s resolution states that “flood control is fundamentally a part of, and cannot be separated from, unified river basin development” (Res E/CN.11/292). The connection has already been foreclosed, and its foreclosure was made by the line traced from the TVA to the Mekong. Hence, there is little doubt that by the time the two engineers set up the Flood Control Bureau in 1949, ‘flood control’ merely provided the scaffolding for more extensive plans to implement a development project as extensive and far-reaching as the TVA. The Flood Control Bureau served as the first step towards a coherent and organized Mekong Project.

Staging the Mekong

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8 The connections between the TVA and John Wesley Powell’s ideas of river basin-based regionalism are elaborated in Worster (1985; 2001). Francois Molle details the spread of ideas of unified basin development to UN initiatives on integrated river basin development (Molle, 2009).
In 1956, the ECAFE secretariat assigned its staff to conduct a field reconnaissance pertaining to “problems of development in the lower Mekong basin” (ECAFE 1967:2), as part of their specific attention to the “problems of Asia and the Far East” (1957:240):

The region served by the Commission has a population of approximately 1,700 million and an area of over 30.3 million square kilometers; that is to say it contains about one half of the entire human race within about one-fifth of the land surface of the earth. Much of this region lies in Asia, a continent with many distinctive features and special problems… (ECAFE 1967:2).

As a commission over a place that holds ‘half of the human race’, ECAFE notes its role is “one of the most challenging tasks in the history of man” and that “the success of these efforts depend on the welfare and happiness of half the human race” (ECAFE 1967:3).

The litany of Asia’s problems went beyond flooding. The problems of Asia begin from its victimization by history and its staging within a nostalgic past. Just as the encounter with the ruins of Angkor Wat framed the civilizational discourses of the region, so did the ancient past – of Asia, the Mekong, and at times Indochina – provide the foundation for a narrative of greatness and decline:

[Asia] is the birthplace of many of the world’s oldest and most long-lasting civilizations…[h]owever, for various reasons, during the last two centuries or so, Asia suffered a severe decline which has only begun to be arrested (ECAFE, 1967:2).

The magnificent setting of an ancient past appears as a foil to the present, making current problems appear more acute. In addition, ‘Asia’ is taken as a totality that has suffered a decline. But what is this ‘Asia’, and why is ECAFE concerned with it as a whole?
The whole of ‘Asia’ presents a development dilemma for the world: "The industrial revolution in the West put a virtual end to Asia's profitable export trade in luxury goods and high quality manufactured articles,” argued the report; “conversely, Asian markets were soon flooded with an ever-increasing volume of machine-made goods" (ECAFE 1967:2). While the West was culpable in this victimization, ‘Asians’ were unable to keep up with these changes of global nature: “[f]or various reasons, the industrial revolution, which wrought such gigantic transformations in the West, was tardy in making much impact on any Asian country except Japan” (1967:38).

The narrative pinpoints the unequal terms of trade as the culprit of lagging economies, but the explanation leaves out the linkages between colonialism, established as a past historical period, industrialization in Europe, and the suppression of industries in the colonies. Rather, ‘Asians’ are to blame for their own problems: “Asians were slow to adopt modern industrial and agricultural techniques resources were not adequately developed; stagnation set in and lasted over a long period” (ECAFE 1967:2).

“Development assistance,” commented Eugene Black, then-president of the World Bank and staunch supporter of the Mekong Project, “should be concerned with helping those who have seen the promises of modern society and have come to believe in progress but are unable to escape their historical predicament because they lack the qualifications and, usually, the opportunities as well” (Black 1969:92).

In other words, ‘Asia’ is a name for that which needs to be saved. In a 1963 polemic detailing the Mekong development model, C. Hart Schaaf, the first executive chairman of the Mekong Committee, refers to the area allochronistically: “The Lower Mekong countries reflect the centuries before the advent of the Western powers” (Schaaf and Fifield 1963:21). Here, the Mekong is a placeholder for the past. Schaaf and Fifield’s stage the Mekong as that object-place; like a play, they offer ‘The
Setting’. In the ‘pre-colonial period’, they explain, “the history of the Lower Mekong is replete with the rise and fall of principalities and kingdoms, with the fortunes of strong and weak dynasties, and with the vicissitudes of local wars and invasions from the outside” (1963:21). The result of this history is that

Boundaries were vague and frontier zones were common, the concept of sovereignty as it came to be developed in the West not being applicable. Alliances were made and broken depending upon the inclinations of absolute rulers who were widely given the attributes of divinity. Power politics operated without benefit of moral restraint or international law (Schaaf and Fifield, 1963:21).

Asia’s essential pre-colonial qualities endow it with essential problems. Tradition had mandated the existence of vague boundaries, shifting frontier zones, and despotic rulers. The result is a “power politics” that was not desired, especially posited in opposition to “moral restraint” and “international law” (ibid., 21).

The invocation of ‘international law’ is novel. It is something that de Carné only moved to suggest when he considered regionalism in the form of nationalism a threat to French ambitions on the Mekong: “European intervention is to be mistrusted given nascent nationalism (which incidentally is also a European invention but lives in the hearts of savages), but then one day the veil will be lifted and all will know that Europe was right after all” (de Carné [1872]1995:13). To pair the “international law” that governs fixed boundaries with “moral restraint” is to make shifting boundaries appear not only unlawful and unproblematic, but also un-Christian and savage.

**Inscriptions of development**

Before we turn to the settling of the Mekong as a space of development, a note on the production of these texts within which the labor of making the region is found. After the 1954 Geneva Agreement granted independence to Cambodia, Laos and
Vietnam, the governments requested the US government to conduct a study of the Mekong following the conclusions of the ECAFE report. Just as the ECAFE concluded their first report, the US Bureau of Reclamation made its first visit to the basin. The Wheeler Mission was conducted in 1957 in response to a request made by the Mekong Committee for “expert assistance” from the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration. Led by Lieutenant Raymond Wheeler of the US Army Corp of Engineers, the survey comprised leading figures in engineering at that time: the presidents and general managers of Nippon Koei, Japan, Quebec Hydro, the Central Water and Power Commission of India, and SOGREAH from France (Biggs 2006). The report marked the return of colonial experts to Indochina since the fall of the French at Dien Bien Phu. As an external expert analysis of the situation, the Wheeler Report was the first ‘definitive’ report on the Mekong’s potential (Hori, 2002), the first independent expert assessment of the river’s potential for development, and a milestone. As distant, objective observers, the experts legitimized the claims of the Mekong’s potential.

Curiously, both reports share in their presentation about the potential of the Mekong—so similar that near-verbatim statements can be found in both. Both alluded to the importance of the Mekong as a “snow-fed river”, giving rise to “a relatively abundant discharge during the low-water period” (ECAFE 1957:2). Similarly, the ECAFE report states that “hydroelectric power sites are easily accessible and are located within moderate distances of potential load centers.” The Wheeler Report points out that hydropower sites “are easily accessible and are located within reasonable distance of potential load centers” (5). In another statement, the Wheeler Report says that “The topography of the basin appears to be suitable for diversion of the river flow for irrigation of large tracts of land” (5), while this
statement appears in the ECAFE report as “The topography of the basin also permits diversion of the river flow for the irrigation of large tracts of land” (17).

While these two reports are marked by the difference in status – by the Bureau report’s relative independence, the external nature of its experts, and even the world-class expertise of the team – the Bureau’s report merely restated the potential of the Mekong. The repetition may have been necessary in the interest of time; however, this mimicry suggests that as scientific inscriptions, the two documents may be seen as necessary passage points in the solidification of the fact: of the Mekong as an object to be intervened in. It is this production of the Mekong, within these spaces of expert activity and ‘seeing,’ that we now turn to.

The nature of the river basin

The French spoke for and of the Mekong river – its boisterous flow, the various moods, the furious intensity of the rapids that foiled the goals of the expedition to find a route to China. Their surveys filled up the colonial authorities’ empty maps, at the same time making the Mekong representable as a mapped object within European circuits of scientific endeavor. The Mekong Project went further. It completed the task of rendering the Mekong as a natural object, not just as a filled-up empty space, but a space to be developed. In doing so, it relied on the efforts of enframing the Mekong. Just as Amazonia as that imagined nature was remade by repeated (re)presentations by explorers, geographers, opportunists, modern scientists (Raffles, 2002), modern remakings of the Mekong also rely on accounting for its nature, civilizational, and history. To rely on these is to depend on the solid ground of the ‘truth’ about the Mekong: What is it? What do we know about it? How do we know it?
“Facts about the region,” argued Lilienthal, “are often just as potent tools of resource development as TVA’s giant earth movers…or the tilted terracing machine.” Lilienthal identified the effectiveness of “facts” in a way that was compatible with the heavy emphasis in Mekong Project reports on the collection of hydrological, social, ecological and geographic data. But these facts about the Mekong did not simply lie out there to be discovered. Consider this quote by the 1958 United Nations report, ‘Program of Studies and Investigations for Comprehensive Development: Lower Mekong Basin’:

The Mekong is a majestic river. Even a cursory examination of the available hydrologic and topographic data, meager as it is, has convinced the Mission of the great potential of the Lower Mekong for service to the riparian countries in the fields of navigation, hydro-power generation, irrigation and other related water uses (United Nations 1958:5).

This pronouncement echoes the awe of French descriptions of the river, but the conclusions come from another kind of view. The vantage point for apprehending the Mekong had already changed. The “great potential” of the Mekong is not identified by the physical experience of the tumultuous rapids, or the sight of towering sandstone rock, but by the examination of data: flow records created by the French colonial administration, the lines on topographic map and economic estimates of electrical power. It is this data that “has convinced the Mission of the potential” of multiple development possibilities. Throughout the 1950s, this quote features in the beginnings of numerous reports. The aim of the mission was to determine priority areas of projects, data to be collected, and cost (Sewell and White 1966), but for some, having been preceded by other visits and studies, the Wheeler Mission was merely symbolic of the plans that were already set in motion, not only for flood control but multipurpose development (Biggs, 2006).
But the river itself must take centerstage in the argument for intervention. The Wheeler Report writes almost exclusively on the river’s physical qualities. For example, considering its source in the Himalayas, the report writes: “Since it is a snow-fed river, the Mekong has a perennial flow”. This echoes an earlier report, ‘Development of Water Resources in the Lower Mekong Basin’ (ECAFE, 1957), where the Mekong’s physical endowments appear naturally suited to use. Consider these two passages:

Like many great rivers of the world, it forms a favourable access route for inland waterway transport to the interior. Its degree of sinuosity is so moderate that the distance on the river along the waterway seldom exceeds that along existing land routes (ibid., 62).

According to the topography, the main river could easily command the vast area of river alluvium and delta below Kratié (ibid., 18).

In other words, the possibilities do not simply exist: the Mekong makes them available. The river basin is literally physically in-place for hydropower and irrigation works. “[T]he great length of the navigable parts”, reports ECAFE, “permits great savings in transport costs” (ECAFE, 1957:18). “The river” permits, forms, seldom exceeds, “commands [a] vast area”. Just like in the memoirs of the 1866 expedition, the river in the 1957 text is anthromorphized. But unlike the powerful, uncontrollable force of the singular stream of colonial depictions, here it is the Mekong’s specific, essential qualities, that is, sinuosity, length, topography, that lend themselves to the particular uses: navigation, hydropower development, transportation and irrigation. These qualities of the river eluded the French as they spoke of the river’s greatness. How can we understand this shift?

Discerning sinuosity, length and topography emanates from a particular way of seeing. The French expedition established the first map of the Mekong. Aerial
photography, which was employed during the wars, made possible the remote assessment of these ‘geographical problems’ that first motivated the launching of the dangerous and difficult expedition of 1866. Garnier hinted at the possibilities offered by a god’s eye view (Haraway, 1991) when climbing a high hill for a better view, he exclaimed, “The tops of the neighboring mountains provided numerous, excellent reference points and it was not necessary, as it was the case before, to retrace one’s tracks to figure out the configuration of the banks” (Garnier, [1885] 1996:96). While Lagrée, Garnier, de Carné and their crew physically encountered the impassable barrier of the Khone Falls, aerial photography allowed these barriers to be sensed from a comfortable distance.

The capturing of the basin as a whole is akin to Heidegger’s notion of ‘enframing’ (Heidegger, 1977). For Heidegger, the essence of modernity lies in this process of representing the world by making nature an object of research through ordering and calculation. The Mekong is enframed in two ways: first, by apprehending it, and second, the particular entrapment of the object as a whole, river basin. Aerial photography reveals the real Mekong by first capturing nature as a picture. This entrapment renders the representation of the Mekong as a collection of pixels. The top-down view of the river reveals meanders and channel pattern makes available the river as something real and tangible. Such an enframing has ontological consequences:

Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces…[b]ecause physics, indeed already as pure theory, sets nature up to exhibit itself as a coherence of forces calculable in advance, it therefore orders its experiments precisely for the purpose of asking whether and how nature reports itself when set up in this way (Heidegger 1977:21).
Sensing the whole river is a form of intimation that takes a further step from an aesthetic appreciation of the river – both objectify, but modern technology, with its god’s eye view, also orders and renders the object and its parts into calculability. As Timothy Mitchell (1992) says, enframing is a kind of representation does not simply create an image of an object, but produces the object by making it ‘real’, separate from its representation. As a result, the picture of the Mekong as a whole points to the possibilities for intervention: “The topographic map of the lower Mekong basin indicates the possibility of diverting the flow of tributaries away from the Mekong basin” (ECAFE 1957:42).

With these possibilities also comes the intimation of the problems that thwart these possibilities, particularly, those problems given by ‘nature’. For example, “the problem of bar formation” is indicated as an errant physical process (US Bureau of Reclamation, 1956: 15). Furthermore, “[a]t a number of locations, viewed from the air, the low water width of the Mekong River is excessive which leads to such difficulties as bar-building, cross-overs, and excessive meandering of the low water channel (ibid., 13).

Nature becomes naturally excessive and difficult, and the river is not always cooperative. The river must thus be cajoled: “…an effort should be made to encourage the river to scour the point bar that now requires annual dredging” (ibid., 14). The reference to a river requiring persuasion cannot be innocent. Texts pushing modernization agendas throughout the 1950s and 1960s are replete with the need to convince people to abandon old lifestyles and subscribe to the new modern conception of economic life. Just as the river is to be persuaded, so are the people, to give up, for example, those ‘values’ accrued towards seasonal flooding. The language
of “persuading” the river to act in accordance to an already-defined purpose is replicated in the form of an emerging logic of development.

**Harnessing the ‘giant asleep’: From river to basin**

Nature, once again, does the work in transforming the way we think of the ‘Mekong’ from river to river basin. As the 1957 ECAFE report explains, “Since a river basin, from headwaters to the sea, should be regarded as a single dynamic and organic system, it is desirable that planning for the optimum use and conservation of water resources should cover an entire river basin, including the main river and its tributaries” (ECAFE 1957: 9). The river as a singular organism calls for new approaches to development: “When the enlarged perspective is adopted,” explains a report on Integrated River Basin Management, “the process of water planning changes” (Panel of Experts 1970: ix).

The emerging paradigm of integrated river basins development brought the concept of unified river basin development to the fore. At the same time, it was an initiative forged through the attempt to bring divergent global concerns of development together. The initiatives around integrated or unified river basin development involved, firstly, a concern for the emerging social and economic effects of dams. The second was a concern with the conservation of resources. Why these two interests, and how did they come together in the paradigm of the unified river basin?

The link between conservation, resource use, and development was forged at the Scientific Conference on Resource Conservation and Utilization (UNSCCUR) in 1949. Held at the temporary home of the United Nations at Lake Success in New York, the conference was initiated by President Truman. Lamenting the “waste of
natural resources due to the war”, President Truman suggested a conference to examine assistance to regions suffering from “economic under-development” and as well as to those “affected by the exhaustion of their natural resources” (UNESCO, 1948:1).

But why and how are these two kinds of problems related? By fear, writes Truman. “The real or exaggerated fear of resource shortages and declining standards of living has in the past involved nations in warfare,” he wrote, “[c]onservation can become a major basis of peace” (ibid., 1). The conference was based on the idea that resources are both needed for “industrialization”, at the same time they must be “conserved” to prevent conflict. “Less developed countries” should engage in the “diversification of the economy”. This diversification could be achieved by increased agricultural production, extension of agricultural areas, changing the training curriculae for underdeveloped areas, and the possible assistance of scientists in the “economically advanced countries” (ibid., 1-2). These questions prompt the need to clarify the “special research and design problems of underdeveloped areas” (ibid., 2). At the same time, conservation or the ‘saving’ of resources meant promoting “the effective use of land and water to improve residents’ lives” (US Bureau of Reclamation, 1956: 5). Hence, in a move seldom seen today, ‘underdevelopment’ and ‘conservation’ were brought together in a desire to solve the most pressing problems of both postcolonial and industrialized economies.

These two divergent ideas behind the conservation of resources found shelter in the concept of multipurpose development. Multipurpose development made it possible to encourage the discovery of previously unutilized resources. It also muddled ‘use’ and ‘conservation’. Water, in fact, filled in the middle ground between the two. The conservation of underutilized water was congruent with the use of water
for the good of ‘man’. Such was the logic of a follow-up conference in New Delhi in 1951 focusing on water use and conservation, the Regional Technical Conference on Flood Control. This United Nations-organized conference concluded that one, flood control was an “inherent part of the development of river basins” (Hori, 2002). Two, flood control and the use of water resources were “essential” to the economic development of a nation (Nguyen, 1992: 52). Consequently, when the ECAFE adjourned in Lahore a month after the end of the Delhi conference, the problems of transboundary rivers were added to their scope of work. Reflecting on the decision to focus on unified basin development at their 20th anniversary, the ECAFE noted that “it became clear that flood control was fundamentally a part of, and could not be dissociated and undertaken separately from, unified river basin development” (ECAFE, 1967:50). With unified river basin development, in the senses of the paradigm established by UNSCCUR, the concept came to the Mekong already foreclosed within the rationale of flood control. Still, there was a need to conceptualize the Mekong and its particular position within a discourse of underdevelopment, waste and vast potential that would make it amenable to planning. What were the possibilities afforded by a view of the basin as a whole?

A whole-basin view allows for the grasping of multiple possibilities, at one glance. In contrast, the French expedition, going upriver, can see only one or a few things at a time. On his journey, Francis Garnier muses on the uses of trees he encounters in a forested part of the basin:

The zone that we traversed was almost completely uninhabited and covered by magnificent forests. The most common species of tree that we encountered was the Yao of which I have already spoken, the ban-lang which furnishes excellent oars for navigation and the cam-xe which provides a nice type of wood for cabinet making. the first of these three types of trees, which is the most remarkable by its size and its height, was the only one which seemed to be put to use (Garnier [1885] 1996:56).
Note the way in which ruminations on use are interspersed with the flow of the travelogue. The comments on the functions of these different types of timber, upon harvesting, already turn trees into resource: a “nice” wood for “cabinet-making”; wood that “furnishes excellent oars”.

Consider the difference, a century later. In the 1957 ECAFE report, a map shows the mineral resources of the Mekong river basin. Instead of place-names, interlocking circles cover the basin. Showing the “promising minerals” “so far reported” (1957:16), the circles are labelled Pb, Cu, Fe, Au, Sn. The report assesses minerals as “worth exploring”, “provided cheap power and improved waterways are made available to process them and facilitate export of the ores and products” (1957:14). The emergence of “geological”, and here we may add, silvicultural, “ways of seeing nature” (Braun, 2000; Wong et al 2007) are consistent with a new political rationality based on a new regime of calculability that defines the basin as a whole.

But a different vantage point is not sufficient for articulating the Mekong as resource. Useful trees are not only marked out, but when they enter into a regime of calculation, they appear next to other useful objects. Physical attributes are isolated, and are marked by use: “Soil,” writes Schaaf and Fifield, supports “one of the most important rice-producing areas in Asia” (Schaaf and Fifield, 1963:14). Gold, iron, timber, soil, fish, rice paddies, water, and even the very rapids that thwarted the earlier explorers – are all enrolled into the new regime of the calculation. But what allows them to emerge and appear together? What gave impetus to the emergence of these new allied objects?

‘Water’ and ‘minerals’ were the key resources identified at the Scientific Conference on Resource Conservation and Utilization (UNSCCUR) in Lake Success.
in 1949. The high-profile conference, initiated by President Truman (see Chapter 3), had direct impacts on the work of the UN regional commissions. The conference drew up a list of problems that required solutions, to be overseen by regional commissions: flood control, irrigation, hydroelectric power potential, river channel deepening, freshwater needs, and pollution elimination (Asher et al., 1957: 195). The ECAFE thus began to attack these various sectors. In 1953, the commission sponsored a regional conference on mineral resources in Tokyo. Reports on the coal and iron resources of the region and the uses of lignite in 10 countries of the ECAFE region appeared in the 1960s. Industrial surveys across the Lower Mekong countries determined the detailed goods to be manufactured in Laos, Thailand and Cambodia in relation to the labor and existing industrial capacities of each country (ECAFE, 1959). Power market surveys laid the groundwork for the first treaty for the sale of electrical power from Laos to Thailand. The confluence of an emerging global discourse on resource conservation, and the rush to inventorize exploitable natural resources in newly-decolonized nations, was crucial for making these objects and activities appear together. For Heidegger, all planning and investigations are marked by “calculation”, in which things are taken into account for specific purposes. For him, objects appear because “[t]he world now appears as an object open to the attributes of calculative thought” (Heidegger, 1977:50).

What happens after objects become open to calculative thought? What is the animus or motivation of calculation? Calculation is for something; it is the moment when the object comes alive as a resource that the connection of object and use is made. But how do objects come alive as resources? To provide animus to the discharge of soil, tin, copper, timber and water as resources, speculation on the magnitude of their presence must be made. The 1957 report notes that “the total area
under irrigation, dependent essentially on small-scale projects, is under 200,000
hectares” (1957:19). The Sambor rapids, Khone Falls, Khemarat gorge, and Pa Mong
gorge “together have a firm power potential of about 1.5 million kilowatts” (1957:17).
In central Laos: “a reservoir with a capacity of a billion cubic meters could be created
by blocking the Nam Theun, where it flows in the Na Kay plateau, with a 35-metre
high dam, the water stored when diverted into the Se Bang Fai could generate 300,000
kilowatts of firm power” (ECAFE 1957:19). These figures roll off the reports,
quantifying and calculating the river and its attributes to a degree never before seen.
It is the very attitude that prompts Heidegger’s observation about modernity and
calculation:

Calculative thinking computes. It computes over new, ever more promising
and at the same time more economical possibilities. Calculative thinking races
from one prospect to the next. Calculative thinking never stops, never collects
itself. (Heidegger, 1977: 46)

Calculation’s animus appears to be its own self, driving more and more objects to be
created under the purpose of the search for resources. ‘Data collection’ becomes the
primary goal of the committee formed in 1957 to take stock of the growing plans,
activities, objects and experts converging on the Mekong; the Mekong Committee is,
after all, short for the ‘Committee for the Coordination of Investigations of the Lower
Mekong Basin’. The Wheeler Mission, for example, stressed that “the complete
survey of the Mekong River as a regional stream, briefly outlined above, together
with continuous systematic and uniform collection of basin data will provide the
information so essential to making adequate river development plans” (US Bureau of
Reclamation 1956:39). The ECAFE found data lacking in virtually all sectors: “An
accurate and up-to-date inventory of mineral resources, including fossil fuels, is
necessary for formulating sound industrial development plans” (1957:39).
Hydrological data is even more unreliable: “There is a dearth of hydrologic and meteorologic data in the basin […] there has been no systematic discharge observations along the Mekong except those at Phnom Penh taken during a short period” (ECAFE 1957: 62). Such desire for completeness, accuracy, systematicity, and timeliness forms the core of the Mekong Committee’s ‘program of investigations’.

Just as estimates can produce a picture of potential, so can calculation produce an image of waste. For planners, the numbers point to this dissonance: “[T]he contrast between the acute need for water and the abundance of water pouring unused into the sea is staggering,” write Schaaf and Fifield (1963:73). This waste is even more startling when one considers the Mekong River as a whole: “The average discharge, as noted, is about 400,000 cusecs. Reserving the low water discharge averaging 60,000 cusecs for maintaining navigation would leave a balance of more than 300,000 cusecs”. Quantifying the resources produces an acute sense of loss: a Mekong with seemingly limitless potential, but incredibly underutilized. This underutilization calls for development: “The water resources of the Mekong, though abundant, have not been exploited for the purpose of significantly changing or advancing the living conditions of the 17 million people in the lower Mekong basin” (ECAFE 1957:19). Schaaf and Fifield make a similar statement: “Millions of people live in the Lower Mekong Basin. They travel about on the river, mostly in very small boats…[b]ut in terms of man-made engineering structures, almost nothing has been undertaken – until very lately – to exploit it” (Schaaf and Fifield, 1963:73).

The lack of these very interventions, together with the generation of numbers to show the actual or estimated potential of developing the river basin, produce the image of a great gap between the problems of development in Asia and the wealth and richness these calculations suggest. “The most striking aspect of the Lower Mekong,”
write Schaaf and Fifield, “is not the size and length of the river, nor its potentialities, but the extent to which these resources have been left untapped” (1963: 73, own emphasis). As a “living, organic being” (Panel of Experts 1970:3), the river calls for a kind of responsibility: in “providing a source of wealth which ought to be shared equitably, as a legacy among its beneficiaries.” (Panel of Experts, 1970:3), that is, development.

Seeing the Mekong as a whole makes it easier to take it apart. “The Mekong is divided into 4 parts according to possible control and use of water that might affect land use: hill area (>200m msl, entire northern Laos), plateau […] Mekong plain […] Mekong delta […]” (ECAFE 1957:10). This is precisely what the Mekong represents for calculative thought. The “is” here brings together the Mekong’s wholeness; one imagines skimming a map from the border of China through to the delta plains, and imagining a map populated by dams, plantations, flourishing fields, and people. It is possible for this image of wholeness exist, while producing another one in which the basin exists as naturally divided according to use and ‘management regimes’. The idea that makes this possible is the concept of the basin as a system.

Conclusion: a basin unfolding

In 1961, C. Hart Schaaf, the colorful and controversial Executive Agent of the Mekong Committee, seals the image of the Mekong as a basin and provides posterity with the anthropomorphism: a ‘giant asleep’:

[T]he Mekong River is […] a resource: a mighty giant, though a giant asleep. Awake, and harnessed, this giant can bring water to our fields, food to our tables; he can bring light to our homes, and power – almost unlimited power – to our growing industries (1961/12/A4).
The image of a ‘giant asleep’ completes the vision that began with the Tennessee Valley, which Lilienthal describes as an “idle giant” (ibid., 2) transformed. The basin, grasped as a whole by modern techniques, is a new Mekong, unfolding into its own. “This report first outlines some major aspects of the unfolding needs of the basin,” announces Gilbert White and his collaborators on the new Ford Foundation report (White et al 1962:1). These plans are to unfold “as a new basin takes shape” (White et al 1962: xvi). While the labor of producing an image of the whole basin continues, the end-point has long been decided. The ‘basin’ is no longer simply a physical area defined by the watershed of the Mekong river and its tributaries, but the end-point of development: “As important to future water planning as improvement in basic economic data is understanding of processes that are at work in shaping the basin” (White et al, 1962: xvi).

It is no coincidence that these quotes come from the geographer Gilbert White. As a geographer and one of the authors of a global strategy of integrated river basins management, White takes the basin and its encoded meanings of development, unity of nature and democracy into the next phase of the Mekong Project.
Chapter 3:

‘A Plan to Meet the Needs’:

Gilbert White and the Economic and Social Aspects of Mekong development

In June 1961, New York City, a small group of eminent international planners and scientists gathered in the Ford Foundation headquarters to discuss a new project in the Mekong. These included John Krutilla, an expert on floodplain management who had worked at the Ford Foundation-funded thinktank, Resources for the Future. Egbert de Vries was a prominent Dutch agricultural scientist and a founder of the transmigrasi program in Indonesia. A third member, Harold Dunkerley, was a young English economist on the verge of a career with the World Bank. The team was chaired by Dr. Gilbert White, a professor of Geography at the University of Chicago.

This motley interdisciplinary team of a geographer, economist, agricultural scientist and planner had been brought together by the Ford Foundation. The Mekong Committee had commissioned the Ford Foundation to conduct a study on the “social and economic aspects of development” on the Lower Mekong. Following the New York meeting, Gilbert White flew to Bangkok for five days. The group met again in late September, this time in Southeast Asia, where they were to begin “intensive work” over the next few weeks in the four riparian countries (Mekong Committee, 1961: 18). The Mekong Committee attached a “senior official involved in economic, fiscal, social and administrative policy making” from each of the four countries was to serve as country ‘correspondent’ in the team. The local official’s role was to prepare
data identified by the team as relevant in advance of the visit of the consultants, and would be “on call” to work with the visiting team (Mekong Committee, 1961:18). Later that year, the team attended the Fifteenth Session of the Mekong Committee meetings in Bangkok, where they were given a warm reception, and where statesmen conveyed their excitement at the completion of the much-awaited expert study. Dr. Boonrod Binson, the Chair of the Mekong Committee, introduced White to the session as “one of the world’s best known economic geographers and water resources analysts” (Boonrod Binson, 1961:1).

The resulting study, *Economic and Social Aspects of Lower Mekong Development* (1962, hereafter *Economic and Social Aspects*) was a turning point in the Mekong Project. Although a little-studied report, this claim has been made by two scholars (Jacobs 1992; Hori 2002). We turn to Hiroshi Hori for the specifics of this change:

The reports on studies for development of the lower Mekong Basin conducted from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s…focused almost exclusively on matters such as the scale of hydroelectric power, irrigation of farmland, improvement of navigation, and flood control, giving little, if any, consideration to the socio-economic aspects of development. However, from the beginning of the 1960s, the feeling gradually spread among those involved in Mekong development that this type of technical development plan was not sufficient and that they should not embark on development without giving due consideration to social and economic questions (Hori, 2002:125, italics added).

The feeling about technical development gradually spread; consideration to social and economic questions became a part of development plans from the beginning of the 1960s. What happened to create this change in sentiment? What marked this turning point in the Mekong Project almost five years after the Mekong committee was set up? How did these tendencies towards social and economic questions, as Hori writes, “gradually spread”? What was the nature of these ‘social and economic
aspects’ of Mekong development? More pertinently, how did attention to these shift the geographies of Mekong development planning? This chapter addresses these questions.

These questions are not just significant because they mark a shift within the plans to develop the Mekong. Nature, history, and the production of otherness enframed the Mekong, rendering the river basin as an object of empirical questioning and intervention. But given this space, what sort of interventions should take place? How do development projects gain currency? The chapter argues that it was the White report, as *Economic and Social Aspects* came to be known, that reoriented the studies, plans and investigations towards questions about what it meant to create ‘development’ for the people of the basin. I will deal with two sets of implications of this reorientation.

First, these new questions created an opening – in what was so far still a generalized vision of the technical transformations to be enacted – for addressing the question of people and society. This opening for people and society is roughly akin to the distinction, albeit problematic, of Gillian Hart’s big ‘D’ development and Arturo Escobar’s articulation of development as modernization (Hart 1999; Escobar 1995). Today, we are hard pressed to find a development project that is not without some claim to social, environmental or economic considerations. Our question about the social and economic turn in the Mekong project, therefore, prompts the broader question, how did development come to be synonymous with the very inclusion of social, cultural and economic goals? How did the inclusion of explicit socioeconomic goals come to take on such importance, and how do these goals shape the practices and meanings that constitute development? Studying the mechanics of how this inclusion is made possible this case should help answer these questions.
Second, Gilbert White’s leadership in the *Economic and Social Aspects* report raises a number of questions on the role of geographers, the making of the region, and the ethico-political commitments that surround the role of the discipline in development policy. Without eschewing other key actors in this story or privileging a biographical approach, the figure of Gilbert White provides a lever to understand how place-making depends on the triangulation of moral and ethical dimensions of development planning, the ‘mangling’ of science and policy (see Barnes and Farish, 2009), and disciplinary issues.

By the time White stepped off the plane in Bangkok in July 1960 to begin his work in the Mekong, he had built up an established record in academic geography and extensive experience in policy. White’s dissertation, ‘Human Adjustment to Floods: A Geographical Approach to the Flood Problem in the United States’ (White, 1944), and his life’s work popularized the notion of human-induced hazards – hazards that have disproportionate impacts on people due to different propensities and vulnerabilities. White argued for a focus on preserving the ecological integrity of environments in order to protect people from hazards (Hinshaw 23). His focus on the non-technical aspects of infrastructure development is seen as progressive for his time. His active, long-term engagements with floodplain management in the United States and in other parts of the world has been attributed with laying the foundation for the concept of sustainable development and political ecology (Cohen, 2006; Schwartz, 2006).

White spoke ardently about the need for geographers to help take on questions asked by policy and to contribute their knowledge to making the world a better place (White, 1963; 2002). While his active engagement with policy has given rise to comments that he did not commit to any single geographic theory (Cohen, 2006). It is
this attitude and these conditions that lead him to Southeast Asia and to joining a project that provided the strongest rationale for developing the Mekong.

**Saving and use: The promise of multipurpose development**

“This report first outlines some major aspects of the unfolding needs of the basin,” announces geographer Gilbert White and his collaborators in *Economic and Social Aspects*. Planners talked about development goals that accrue to the river basin from the outset of the surveys in the mid-1950s, but the first surveys made reference to only general goals and even more general ways of implementing these goals.

In the 1950s, plans and the articulation of the promise of the Lower Mekong centered on electricity generation, with sweeping expectations that industrialization would be an end-goal. But in their enthusiasm to develop potential hydroelectric power sites, the ECAFE admitted that there “does not appear to be any immediate outlook for industrial development on a large enough scale to serve as a guide for the probable requirements of power” (1957:30). Because of the high cost of electricity, there is “a lack of impetus towards industrial enterprise” and hence “delayed” development. On the problem of the “need for generating large blocks of hydroelectric power”, the report laments that “[t]he area is economically and industrially under-developed, and the levels of living are low” (ECAFE 1957:30).

The availability of cheap electric power, therefore, is a necessary condition for successful industrialization. Likewise, the 1957 ECAFE survey suggests that “[g]iven cheap power and essential raw materials, industry is expected to develop in such areas, increasing the demand for power at a greatly accelerated rate” (italics added, 1957:31). Industrialization becomes a natural consequence of cheap electric power, and demand for power will naturally increase with development. Development thus occupied the epistemic space within a circular argument between hydroelectricity and

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9 This sentiment is echoed by a Lao member of the Mekong Committee during a 1961 meeting:

The use of [hydro-electric] resources will be justified only if it is accompanied by industrial development of the region, involving an increase in the consumption of electric energy, and by a corresponding economic development (Mr Ouкео Souvannavong, in Mekong Committee, 1961).
industrial growth. It was *Economic and Social Aspects* that first questioned the practical achievement of these general goals.

The publication of *Economic and Social Aspects* came during a critical juncture in the first few years of the Mekong Committee’s inception. The text interrupted the unquestioning support of infrastructure development towards a goal of social development that had been up to then, left vague and unsubstantiated. At the same time, the report represented the convergence of a number of international initiatives towards the implementation of multipurpose development on rivers. The study team brought in a coalescence of a new kind of expertise – integrated river basin development – to be applied to the Mekong as a means of facilitating development via water resource projects.

While unified basin development was supported by initiatives such as UNSCCUR and the flood control resolution made in New Delhi in 1951\(^\text{10}\), the conclusive step towards unified basin development as global development paradigm came in 1956, when the Economic and Social Commission (ECOSOC) of the UN requested a review of the administrative, economic and social implications of integrated river basin management from its staff and a panel of experts. This report became the definitive guide to UN-supported river basin projects around the world by gathering the existing ‘scientific and technical’ state of knowledge on such developments up to that point (Panel of Experts, 1970). It took into account the burgeoning concern over the social and environmental effects of large dams (ECOSOC, 1970). This concern was institutionalized in 1966 when the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) appointed a special task force to study the social and environmental effects large dam projects in Africa. Corrective measures were

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\(^{10}\) See Chapter 2.
being sought to operation plans of these dams, which were being funded by the UNDP (White, 1998:23).

As a nod to these events in the international development arena, the Wheeler Report wrote that it was imperative that “riparian countries must cooperate to draw up a development plan based on the ideal of balanced comprehensive development of the lower Mekong Basin” (US Bureau of Reclamation, 1956:95). But like the attention on people, only lip service was paid to multipurpose development in the Mekong until 1962, when the question of what it meant to benefit people in the basin was opened up. Up to then, even the Executive Chairman, C. Hart Schaaf, was blithely celebrating the Mekong Project a “shortcut to industrialization in the region” (Schaaf and Fifield, 1963:102). It was White and the Ford Foundation team in 1962 that were to substantiate the concept of multipurpose development and what it meant for the Mekong.

Meeting the needs: Questioning development

Gilbert White brought not only the credibility as an expert in basin management, but experience shaped by his immersion in New Deal programs and environmental policies. In 1935, the Hoover dam opened as the largest in US history. A year earlier, White had joined Roosevelt’s administration where he worked on New Deal programs that employed victims of the Depression in new conservation programs for national forests, rivers, and public lands. Here, he sat at the forefront of nascent efforts to determine water and land laws and policies towards building a federal floodplain management plan. According to Hinshaw (2002:44), White’s

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11 White’s work included, for example, reviewing plans for large dams on the lower Mississippi tributaries and conservation strategies for the Missouri.
increasing disillusionment at the politics of starting a federal floodplain management program led him to turn increasingly to floodplain management efforts at other scales. White thus became involved in the Northeastern Illinois Metropolitan Planning Commission, establishing the first metropolitan floodplain management plan and mapping floodplains. This project tested the hypothesis that flood control could be joined with multiple uses of a basin. This marked the beginning of White’s advocacy for the use of flood-prone areas as wildlife protection and recreation zones.

The opportunity to test the applicability of multipurpose development at an international scale came when White obtained a grant in 1956 to study changes in floodplain occupancy from the Ford Foundation-supported Resources for the Future (White 2002: 363), co-founded by John Krutilla, who later helped write Economic and Social Aspects. In 1960, White’s emerging renown as an expert in multipurpose river basin development became solidified when the United Nations invited him to join its panel of experts on integrated river basin management.

There is hardly a reference to White’s accomplishments without mention of his humanism and pragmatism (see Hinshaw, 2002; Cohen 2006). The caution is carried in the prologue of the study: Economic and Social Aspects begins with the sentence “There is no one simple program for harnessing the Mekong in the public interest as there are many possible variations each with its own advantages and disadvantages” (White et al, 1962:1). Against the triumphalism of Nehru’s ‘temples of modernity’, the report advocates a long-term view of development that necessitates a more conservative approach: “we must recognize that even in the most favorable circumstances the development of the Lower Mekong from its inception to its completion will take many decades…Yet an attempt must be made to start things initially “about right” (ibid., 61).
Elsewhere, White lamented that one of the TVA’s most glaring omissions had been that it had privileged the profit motive over other interests and uses, for example, recreation (White, 1963). It is White’s trademark cautionary and pragmatic stand that took the Mekong Project into a new direction. Apart from breaking away from talk of the Mekong’s potential, the report took seriously the avowed aims of development by proponents of the five-year old project. It asks: what would it take for a regional concentration of industrialization to take place in the Mekong? “Industrial concentration”, argued the White report, “would be required if a developed Lower Mekong were to serve as a focus of an industrial complex” (ibid., 33). What would be the role of electricity generating industries, prioritized by earlier reports, in such a process? The processing of electrical power itself, argued the White Report, was not a “sufficient condition” in the development of the Mekong (ibid., 33):

To the extent a developed Lower Mekong could serve as a focus of such complexes in a regional context, it would further industrial concentration. But electro-process activities often provide small employment in relation to capital requirements and power consumption (White et al, 1962:30).

The report warns that “[a]n imposing array of additional conditions must accompany the introduction of power to ensure industrialization” (ibid., 33). “To meet the food needs of the population growing at the current rate”, it explains, “would demand major expansion of agricultural and industrial plant, transport, education, and commercial and technical organization” (White et al, 1962: xvi). These mechanisms for increasing food production “must be combined with other technical measures in integrated programs including education, extension, transport, credit, marketing, and other related measures” (ibid., 33).

The opening of these arenas of additional interventions that are couched as necessary if an electrical processing industry, industrialization, and ultimately
development were to take place. “Water management projects,” the White report
announces, “hardly ever have the automatic effect of increasing production. They
must be complemented with planned measures in both public and private sectors
which for their implementation require investment or current expenditures” (White et
al 1962: 44).

The UN Panel of Experts’ study too questioned the narrowly-focused plans for
developing water resources. “[E]ngineering measures,” it noted, “are not likely to
bring the desired improvements in levels of living unless they are accompanied by
secondary measures affecting other aspects of resource use (Panel of Experts, 1970:
ix).” The opening up of ‘industrialization’ as a material and social process of
development in the report shifts the idealization of development as a series of
“concrete structures” to the intermediary steps needed to achieve development by
industrialization. The Mekong Project is to account for what needs to be done, and
question how dam building will actually lead to the increase in economic growth, with
industrial development as proxy. The steps to be considered require caution about the
scale of development. One aspect of this is the distribution effects of development – a
question that lends itself to the lauding of White’s humanism and progressive thinking.
The UN’s Panel of Experts express concern about “degree to which benefits from
increased production of land are passed on to indirect beneficiaries such as merchants
in nearby towns” (ibid., 422).

This caution gives way to pragmatic planning – how are farmers to be
expected to change their practices? What are the limits and conditions one is working
with? To what extent can we work within these limits? The report instead proposes a
pragmatic view centered on the assessment and utilization of “available social
resources” in combination with understanding the “range of choices” (White,
White’s mission was ready to transform the vision of Mekong development to one that was more pragmatic, and encompassing a broader vision, one that necessitated a reorientation in planning and information collection. In other words, the report tried to understand how such planning could be put into action. But to appreciate this transformation, an understanding of the premises of this shift is necessary.

A regional geography of the Mekong

For White, Mekong basin development provided the perfect opportunity to demonstrate key geographic principles. A year after the publication of the Ford Foundation report, White wrote ‘Contributions of Geography to River Basin Development’ (1963) based on his experience on the UN Panel of Experts on Integrated River Basin Development and the Ford Foundation study.

*Economic and Social Aspects* had maintained that the basin has the benefit of “economy, politics, and administrative efficiency” (White et al, 1962:59). It pointed out that the greatest inhibiting factor of development was its dependence on “larger manufacturing units and larger markets”; only the basin could help achieve these “economies of scale” (ECAFE, 1957: 39). A “pooling of resources as well as of markets” is therefore essential (*ibid.*, 39). White saw the relevance of geography, particularly regional geography, for articulating such efficiencies and dynamics within a river basin. By comparing “environmental complexes from place to place” (White, 1963: 418), regional geography offers insight into how water management practices affect different places differently. White pays tribute to the geographers who have paved the way to finding “homologues” between diverse parts of the Earth’s surface. For example, he says it is “helpful […] to have brief outlines of regional patterns such
as that by Johnson” (*ibid.*, 418). The “homoclimates of Meigs” and the “indices of economic development” could also help geographers “identify situations which are similar to the basin under study” (*ibid.*, 418).

Attention to regional differences is vital, according to White. He gives the example of how a lack of sensitivity shown by planners regarding the applicability of outside models of development planning could be counterproductive to planning in an area. The Mekong Project appears to exemplify this. In a veiled critique of the earlier Wheeler reconnaissance report, White lamented that the United States Bureau of Reclamation had “applied a view” in the Mekong that had “grown up” in a temperate environment. Making an implicit reference to the importation of the TVA model to the Mekong, he reflects on the Mekong project up to 1962:

> More difficult are the constraints that stem from cultural blunders such as the assumption that unlike places are alike. Many of the single-purpose and ineffective efforts at water development have come from people who set out to implant the methods of another culture in inhospitable social soil (White, 1963:416).

Geographers can address this “myopia” through “historical” and “regional geographical studies,” he surmises (*ibid.*, 418).

However, beyond this, the contributions of regional geographers have limited value. In a surprise twist, White says that such “regional geographical studies” are “not necessarily useful beyond giving a very broad background for the more detailed studies required for basin planning” (*ibid.*, 418). The problem, says White, is that these studies are not targeted towards relevant “questions”:

> These studies may be so general as to lack meaning, they may sacrifice analysis to description, or they may address themselves to questions which, however interesting for other purposes, are useless for this purpose. (White, 1963: 418).
In other words, studies of regional complexes are not readily encapsulated within the mode of calculative thinking. The key questions of river basin development today, for example, how “water management might affect an area”, require a different tact. Geographers must establish an approach, yield generalizable findings, and set problems “for attack” (ibid., 418). For example, he singles out a geographer, ‘Barrows’, as exemplifying the good use of geographic skills in contrast to the weaker, general insight given by regional geography. Barrows was a geographer whose work was “influential” for having examined the possible impacts of the building of the Grand Coulee dam (ibid., 418). White argues therefore that a cultural and ecologically-sensitive geography could contribute to obtaining a better grasp of the underlying conditions for developing river basins.

One of the least understood factors, but one that was fundamental planning decisions was the farmer. Amongst the factors that must be considered, the farmer – his behavior and way of life – was the most troubling and fascinating. “There is little understanding of the reason why the current technical knowledge is not applied by farmers in the field,” White et al (1962) stress. The turn to the farmer relocates the scale of action from the basin to the individual subject. How do farmers adapt to changes in lifestyles? What can be done to help them adapt better? Economic and Social Aspects explains: “[t]he farmer's reactions to his land-water environment in his decisions to plant, harvest, and market must be identified” (1962:28). “[I]t is imperative,” insists the report, “to understand how farmers decide to grow how much and what crops and by what methods of cultivation, by non-rational means” (ibid., 28). In order to understand this complex chain of possible impacts on the life of these Mekong basin residents, one needs to understand how the farmer reacts to external stimuli:
Vagaries of weather and market help make the patterns deep-rooted, and the farmer is cautious to change them. Even when there is full knowledge of possible technical improvements and even where large-scale engineering aid may be provided, the farmer reacts slowly. His family organization, village tradition, the market prices, his achievement motivation, the credit to carry him over a transition period, tax incentives and ease of communication may affect his readiness to try a new fertilizer, or change to irrigation in the dry season, or use a new seed (White et al, 1962:26).

The question was not whether to intervene. The question is how farmers will adapt to the inevitability of change. This is most telling in the UN Panel of Experts Report on integrated river basin management which encouraged planners to think of how water control projects would appear to the “layman”:

The water control structures themselves will present the lesser likelihood of opposition. People will generally accept, even if they do not understand, the engineer’s conception of a programme of engineering works if limited to the larger aspects...[m]ost difficult of all will be to portray the interlocking and indivisible primary and secondary effects of a comprehensive development programme. Most of the water control structures do not yield automatic results but rather open up opportunities for new initiative and investment. (Panel of Experts, 1970: 12).

Change, rather than dam-building, is the major premise for these concerns. By the time the World Bank wrote their first assessment of the Mekong Project in 1972 to signal their interest in the Mekong initiatives, it argued that dams were of little point compared to agricultural reform, and that a move towards industrialization and privatization was more urgent (IBRD, 1972).

Grounding the ‘farmer’

The call by Economic and Social Aspects to examine the farmer’s character, his family organization, and village traditions, stem from a longer tradition of knowledge production that is at once colonial, global and disciplinary. According to White, such insights owe a debt to regional ethnographers and geographers. “Any
consideration of the opportunities for water management in the Lower Mekong,” he suggests, “must be in the debt of scholars such as Gourou, Peltzer, Pendleton and Robequain” (White, 1963:418). In the tradition of disciplinary continuity, White names the experts who have come before him in order to settle the place and position his own authority in relation to them. These include not only geographers and near-contemporaries such as Pendleton, an American soil scientist who was at the same time an observer of ‘Siamese’ life and culture (Carter, 1958). The list also included the two best-known scholars of tropical and regional geography of the French school in the 20th century: Pierre Gourou and Charles-Edouard Robequain.

The reference to Gourou and Robequain is no accident. Both were geographers who held positions in national universities in Paris. Their seminal work – Robequain’s *Le Thanh Hoa: etude géographique d'une province Annamite* (1929) and Gourou’s *La terre et l’homme en extrême-orient* (1940)—have been described as key “baseline” studies (Kleinen, 2005:340) for a geography of rural Indochina. Robequain’s work has been described as the “first serious attempt by French scholars to systematically analyse the relations between land and life in northern Vietnam and bring French geographical ideas and methods to bear on one of France’s key colonial possessions” (*ibid.*, 341). Particularly, both Gourou and Robequain’s lifelong scholarship was characterized by the French regional geographic inquiry founded by Paul Vidal de la Blache (Bowd and Clayton, 2005, Brelle, 2002). Hence, the *genres de vie* of the Vietnamese countryside and the descriptions of regional complexes for rural Indochina under French colonial rule were clear themes that ran through their descriptions of the relationships between land and people. Pierre Gourou’s ‘village studies’ informed colonial policy at various moments, as the colonial government in Saigon struggled to contain political unrest in the onset of the world depression in the
1930s. It was not surprising that his expertise on local demography was tapped upon in attempts to modernize the agricultural base of the Vietnamese economy, including the possibilities for land reform, creation of village handicraft economy and small-scale industry (Kleinen, 2005). In repopulating the question of development that had become a technical enterprise, White is putting the farmer back in his proper place – the object of development. The ‘farmer’ is opened up as an actor by listing the arenas of social life that are likely to be altered by incipient plans. In doing so, he has realigned the trajectory of contemporary studies and data-collection to their proper lineage in colonial geography.

The return to the farmer re-opens the anthropological investigation not only of Indochina, but especially of the region, this place called the Mekong. From the White report onwards, these anthropologists and geographers found a new area of study: the Mekong region. Where the basin was thought of as a non-human space subject to technological interventions, White’s report opens people’s livelihoods subject to inquiry. The ‘farmer’ is opened up as an actor by listing the arenas of social life that are likely to be altered by incipient plans. A new anthropology of the Mekong, inaugurated by *Economic and Social Aspects*, is thus populated by a new generation of ‘peasant’ scholars of mainland Southeast Asia and Thailand professing a similar debt to Gourou and Robequain. This new generation of Southeast Asian studies scholars were direct participants of the American academy’s push towards specialization in area studies12 (see Glassman, 2006).

12 Scholars such as Thomas Fraser and Charles Keyes who were specialists in rural Thai studies, for example, Keyes on northern Thailand and Fraser on northeastern Thailand, also became conversant with the social and cultural aspects of life in the Mekong basin. A look at some of the contributions to scholarship on the socio-economy of the Mekong suggests a few directions taken after the White report.
Grasping the ‘baseline’

Jasper Ingersoll’s explicit call for an anthropology of the Mekong (1967) represents the start of the new social studies of the Mekong basin, the newly-opened up space for investigation. In “Mekong River Basin development: Anthropology in a new setting”, Ingersoll asks how anthropology can “relate” to the ongoing push to modernizing development. His call for a policy-informed anthropology is conditioned by his funding situation does not appear to be a problem for him: Ingersoll readily enthuses that he was in the middle of field research for study of the ‘Mekong River Valley’ funded by USAID (Ingersoll, 1967:147).

Even more explicit about studies oriented towards questions of development was Thomas Fraser, who began his career as an anthropologist of the northeast of Thailand (see Fraser, 1970). Fraser was less keen to advocate for anthropology than to bring an image of local systems of livelihoods in relation with the market. What set Fraser apart was his interest in the workings of local markets. More than others, he sought to discuss the dynamic livelihood strategies of rural people. In doing so, he painted a picture of the ‘peasant’ not as a static, unchanging actor, but an opportunistic migrant. “[T]he peasant village cannot remain stable,” Fraser noted, and that “outside influences” and increasing engagement in wage labor were creating “internal differentiation” (ibid., 382).

Nevertheless, in spite of his lively and detailed report of the complex transactions of goods and middlemen involved in interior trade, Fraser’s study of the ‘Fishermen of the Middle Mekong’ (1973) is explicitly oriented towards answering particular questions. The purpose here too is to provide “baseline information”, on the “types of fishing activity” and the “adaptive changes fishermen will be required to make in order to exploit this changed environment” (Fraser, 1973:1). What are fish
yields like? How much time do people spend fishing? Are fishing methods efficient?

His conclusions are that fishing is carried out largely as a subsistence activity in combination with agricultural work. “There is little commitment on the part of the villager toward fishing as a way of life,” he surmises. Moreover, the “marketing situation” of fish catches is also not ideal: “there are far too many small economic transactions going on for any hope of efficiency” (ibid., 22). Ultimately, as to the question of the impacts of dams, Fraser concludes: “[f]ishermen and fish marketers will form a relatively small proportion of the people affected by the development of Pak Mun [a northeast Thailand dam project].” In fact, he concludes, “[t]he effects on these people will largely be positive, in terms of greater yields and consequently more profit” (ibid., 29).

‘Baseline’ studies like Fishermen of the Lower Mekong serve to channel anthropology and geography, regional and cultural ecology towards the service of questions. It was the pursuit of these ‘baselines’ that Economic and Social Aspects sought to address. For its authors, this required that information be collected on issues oriented towards “the current land use, its recent history, the prevailing agricultural practices, land-use capability, cultural characteristics, and transport and market facilities” (White, 1962:26). An extensive data collection program was the most pressing requirement of the project; the “data-collection and investigations recommended” would be “basic to arriving at a point where effective designs and schedules may be prepared with an eye both to the basin as a whole and to national plans” (ibid., xvi). The result of this call is borne out in the following years of the program. The White report was placed on equal footing with the Wheeler report (1957) as the two documents which became “the basis for [the Mekong Committee’s] programs (Jacobs, 1992:25-26). As Jacobs also points out, international assistance
began to flow on the publication of the report. The United States Army Corp of Engineers produced an atlas of resources (1965), while France undertook an analysis of local power demand that resulted in the signing of the 1971 bilateral agreement for the sale of electrical power by Laos to Thailand. ECAFE took the responsibility of industrial market surveys. Celebrating its 20th year, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East noted that since its inception in 1947, it had become more attentive to the “social aspects of economic development” (ECAFE 1967:7). Gilbert White himself noted that *Economic and Social Aspects* “led to the reorientation of the cooperative efforts…directing attention to work on tributaries rather than large, mainstream projects” (White 2002:355-356).

**Conclusion**

At the 17th Session of the Mekong Committee in 1962, Mr Phlek Chhat, Chairman of the committee, expressed delight that the report had confirmed the “magnificent” opportunities afforded by developing the basin. The report, he said, was an “encouragement of what the four Mekong riparians [are] seeking to do” (1962/17/A7:35). For its novel contributions to elevating the ‘human’ side of development, *Economic and Social Aspects* appeared to have done little to change the status quo in the project that was coalescing in the Mekong basin.

What the Ford Foundation mission did was to open up the question of what it meant to develop the river basin. At first glance, White seems to encourage the utilization of systematic, scientific approaches as if they were opposed to a less problem-oriented regional geography. This is especially so since regional geography, especially that characterized by Hartshorne’s areal differentiation and Vidal de la Blache’s *genres de vie*, had by the 1960s lost much of their viability for geographers
(see Hartshorne, 1939; Schaefer, 1953). The ongoing disciplinary crisis as regional geography began to take on a new focus in systems science and quantification is reflected in White’s ambivalence, as an academic whose life-long burden was to make geography relevant for policy. White’s contribution to the Mekong Project, is thus formed at the intersection of shifting sands within the geographic discipline, and the demands of a growing global development industry.

At the same time, through his quest for the ‘real’ of the Mekong – the baseline of the region as a social-environmental complex, White never threatens the privilege of regional geography. By paying homage to Gourou, Robequain, and the anthropologists in service of an American global imperialism (Smith, 2000), White merely reestablishes the foundation by which socially-cognizant studies are made: the study of regions as empirical objects to be known and grasped. The social turn represented by White’s contributions demanded the same rigor of questioning as hydrological, geological and climatological studies had done for the Mekong’s nature. Society was the new object, and this demanded a renewed engagement of anthropology and geography of the Mekong that would produce an accurate ‘baseline’ of the emerging region as a social space.

The ability of area studies experts to chart a new path of scholarship based on the societies of the Mekong basin came from past efforts of enframing, but it was White’s call to social studies that opened up the region to anthropological inquiry. In turn, the failure to destroy regional geography and its roots in anthropology allows for the ethnographic gaze to be attached afresh to questions and calculability of the modernizing project – how much, how efficient, and how affected?

Gilbert White, in his humanism, helped to create the conditions legitimizing the Mekong Project as a development project. In other words, Economic and Social
Aspects provided a moral justification for development, one that took the basin from a physical space to be transformed, to a social landscape to be engineered.
Chapter 4:
The dreamworld of regionalism

The river is a singular kind of journey, insofar as it simultaneously proceeds into what has been and what is to come.

If there is a dreamscape of the Laos of the future, this was it. Turning off the north-south national Route 13 at Thakhek, we started along the east-west Route 8 across the narrow waist of the country. The smooth, tarred road shot out through the rural countryside, a landscape of scrub and secondary forest, and distant hills. Here and there, a cluster of thatched-roof single-household dwellings appeared, alongside playing children, goats, and people carting sacks of rice and firewood. This dusty provincial thoroughfare glistened with the promise of regional transborder connectivity.

We were squarely in the Greater Mekong Subregion East-West Economic Corridor. I knew this road only from glossy Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) brochures, in which maps of mainland Southeast Asia were crisscrossed by rectangular blocks indicating transportation corridors. On one particular map (see Figure 4.1), Route 8 sparkled with cartographic efficiency: the East-West Economic Corridor joined Thailand to the west to the Vietnamese port of Vinh to the east, and its dead center was found in this sliver of central Laos we were travelling through – the mountainous, heavily-forested Khammouane province.
If the ‘region’ today has been the result of colonial efforts resulting in a basin enframed, what consequences does this enframing have on the way in which the new region-as-marketplace is being imagined?

Walter Benjamin has left us with the concept of ‘wish image’ to describe “new natures” that draw on the past to produce an image of a promised future (Buck-Morss, 1989: 110). The wish image was first articulated by Benjamin to describe the building of the arcades in Paris that evoke the appropriation of the promises of technology by capitalism and the state (Buck-Morss, 110). The iron and glass of the arcades carry the image of the future, “the as-yet unimagined forms of which alone have the potential to actualize the collective dream" (ibid., 117). Like the arcades, the map of the GMS is an image of the new icon of progress: a space opened up by connective corridors, a place of development symbolized by the nod to the loosening of barriers to trade, goods and people, and also to the simultaneity of the progressive view of development, emblazoned by the presence of green conservation reserves. The map makes the claim that it is possible to have both economic growth as well as sustainable development—the aims of a modern development project.

This chapter argues that current developments, some twenty years from the virtual shut-down of the Mekong Project, gesture towards the fulfillment of the ‘region’ created in the Mekong Project. I argue that the ‘dreamworld’ imagined by the GMS are being inscribed on current and future projects, and this world is haunted by the enframing of the Mekong. In particular, I draw on two sets of projects: first, the Nam Theun II hydroelectric power project in Central Laos which began operations in March 2010, and second, the plans by the Lao and Cambodian governments to build a cascade of eight dams on the Lower Mekong mainstem. I attempt to relate them as two developments that haunt and are haunted by the region that was produced.
in the Mekong Project. The enframing of the Mekong as object and region continues to transform economic and social activity, twenty years after the plans, investigations and offices of the Mekong Project drew to an premature close. In the dreamscape of the future, the promise of regional development lies in a hydropower site under construction.

**The road**

When our utility vehicles started the ascent up the Nakai Plateau a little after lunch, the first sign of a looming construction site was the wide, tarred road that wound all the way to the top, where the main dam stood. The lack of potholes was conspicuous for a country road in a remote part of Laos, some two hundred kilometers from the capital. Here, the road to Nakai was smooth, and the stark red ferrous oxide weathered down to a pink-brown hue pointed to its frequent use by construction vehicles.

I had inserted myself into a group of retired Thai civil engineers and their families for their tour of the Nam Theun II project. The engineers, all male, had graduated from the class of 1969 at Khon Kaen University in northeast Thailand. Khon Kaen University was one of the premier engineering and agriculture training schools in the country when it was built in 1963 in the northeast corner of Thailand near Laos. Testament to its specialization in agriculture and engineering, the university attracted students from as far away as Bangkok. This was not therefore a typical retirees’ tour. Many of the men had been chief engineers in some of the region’s largest hydropower and energy projects in the last three decades, and were some of the architects of Thailand's industrial development in the 1970s through the 1990s. The tour was organized by Khun Thanin, a diplomatic and thoughtful man,
and a graduand of the class of '69. He was now vice-president of the company which oversaw the construction of the Nam Theun 2. I first met Khun Thanin at a conference organized by the Mekong River Commission; on hearing my interest in the Nam Theun 2 project, he invited me on this trip. My own traveling group comprised of the incumbent chief engineer of the Nam Ngum 3 hydropower project just north of Laos. He had come down from the Nam Ngum 3 site where he was supervising construction to meet his old classmates, and was designated to pick us up from Vientiane en route.

Our convoy slowly made its way through the vast construction site of the project up to the plateau. Our ascent through newly-exposed sandy roads, strewn with construction material, worksites, and workmen, took more than an hour. I was reminded of how the finished project that appears as a single dam relies on the labor of cutting through large tracts of densely forested areas, of building weather-friendly roads, and on-site offices, canteens, and housing for workers. The vastness of the area under construction, not yet covered up by tourist-friendly greenery and secondary forest regrowth, astounded me. As we reached the top of the Nakai Plateau, the cars rolled to a halt. Our first stop: the Nam Theun II dam itself, a 40-meter high structure. At the site, the men lingered over structures, discussing their specifications, at home with each other and with the subject of hydroelectricity. Wearing hard hats and peering into wells and over safety walls, their excitement was palpable. For many of them, the energy industry had been their entire livelihood. The general opinion on the Nam Theun 2 itself, however, was mixed. “In reality,” one man commented, the dam itself was not an impressive structure. For the engineers who had worked on some of the largest dams projects in the region, Nam Theun 2's 39m-high structure could not compare. Yet, my traveling companions agreed that the dam was very advantageously
located. Its location on top of the 350 m high plateau negated the need for a high dam wall to create the pressure ‘head’ necessary for electricity generation.

The potential of a dam built up on the plateau traversed by the Nam Theun was first talked about by French colonial engineers. As early as 1927, the spectacular drop of the Nam Theun as it flowed over a 400-square meter plateau, was noted to have substantial hydroelectric power generation potential (Bézat, 2009). But it was not until the Mekong Project that hydropower plans began to be fleshed out in earnest. “A reservoir with a capacity of a billion cubic metres could be created by blocking the Nam Theun, where it flows in the Na Kay [sic] plateau, with a 35-metre high dam; the water stored when diverted into the Se Bang Fai could generate 300,000 kilowatts of firm power” (US Bureau of Reclamation, 1956:19). “Laos is particularly rich in water-power potential,” declared the seminar report on tributary developments by the Mekong Reconnaissance Team by Government of Japan (1961:37). The same report claimed the Nam Theun was the best-known of the projects that came under preliminary investigation13, pointing to the fact that knowledge about the potential site at Nam Theun pre-dated the first surveys by the US Bureau of Reclamation.

Nam Theun’s hydropower potential became additionally attractive when attention turned to the development of the tributaries. This emphasis owed to the White Report (White et al, 1962), which stressed the importance of first seeking hydropower possibilities on the tributaries before attempting more complex and ambitious projects on the mainstream. Tributary developments had the benefit of “lend[ing] themselves to experimentation with as yet untried methods of fostering economic development in the basin” (White et al, 1962: 104). Building dams on the

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13 The other potential sites for hydropower mentioned were on the Nam Suong near Luang Prabang; Se Bang Hieng; the streams originating from the Bolovens; the Nam Ngum and the Nam Theun rivers.
tributaries of the Mekong would aid in the learning process that could be deployed when nations were more ready to take on bigger, mainstream projects. Further support for attention to projects like Nam Theun came in 1961 when the Mekong Reconnaissance Team of the Government of Japan launched an extensive study on tributaries.

The report, funded by the Japanese government, spared little praise for the Nam Theun’s natural potential, based on its natural topographic attributes, geologic amenities and geographic location within the emerging geobody (Thongchai WInichakul, 1996) of the Mekong region:

The Nam Theun holds the greatest hydropower potentials among the Mekong tributaries and its development cost is very cheap. Besides, it is only 250 to 300 kilometers distant from power consuming district on the east coast of Viet-Nam, where an industrial harbor is expected to be developed in the future. On the other hand, as there are found the existence of such mineral resources as limestone, gypsum, etc., in the vicinity of the project area, when the main river course will become navigable upon completion of the entire Mekong project, a possibility of industries, utilizing such materials and the above cheap power, will be expected within the project area. For the above reasons we consider that this project should be given the first priority for its development when the development of the Mekong basin, especially the industrialization, is materialized (Government of Japan, IV-37 to 38, emphasis added).

Nam Theun should not only be developed, but the project should be given top priority. This sentiment is repeated by the executive summary of the same report, which also places a future Nam Theun project at the center of future efforts to solidify the development of the Mekong region: “The Nam Theun […] is considered most suitable as the future key position of a grid system of power transmission centering around the Mekong basin” (Government of Japan, 1961: S-3).

The hydropower potential of the Nam Theun River continued to be highlighted in sporadic investigations in the 1980s, after the activities of the Mekong Committee came to a halt with the withdrawal of American personnel. Although the
Committee was not disbanded, a skeleton committee remained under the new name of Interim Mekong Committee, to reflect the loss of Cambodia from the initiative. One of these investigations was a 1984 pre-feasibility report produced by the Secretariat of the Interim Mekong Committee, which was revised in 1987. In that same year, the Ministry of Industry and Handicraft of Laos commissioned Swiss consultants Motor Columbus to conduct its own pre-feasibility study. This was the first time that the Lao government, rather than the Mekong Committee, had taken the initiative to commission a study on a large hydropower project.

The proposed dam came close to the specifications suggested by the French in the 1920s when they first reported on the potential of a great drop of the Nam Theun River. Taking advantage of the large ‘head’ afforded by the steep 350-meter drop of the river as it flowed out of the Nakai Plateau, a 39-meter high gravity dam would be on the Nam Theun river (see Figure 4.2). Because of the energy generated from this topographic feature, the dam itself would be relatively low, 48 meters. A reservoir to be created behind the dam would flood an area of 450 square kilometers of forest. In addition, an 8,000,000 cubic meter (280,000,000 cu ft) artificial regulating pond would be built. Nam Theun 2 would be a trans-basin diversion project, which means that the water used would be released from the project’s power station into another Mekong tributary, the Xe Bang Fai River via a 27 kilometer (17 mile) artificial downstream channel. Plans are afoot to build a dam upstream, to be called Nam Theun I, which would maximize the benefits of water control afforded by the cascade nature of the two dams on the Nam Theun. The dam was to generate 1,070 megawatts (MW) of power, 995 MW of which would be sold to neighboring Thailand, and 75 MW would supply electricity for domestic use in Laos (NTPC, 2008).
In 1993, the Lao government signed the project development agreement with a group of private sponsors, as well as the World Bank. The World Bank was brought to the negotiating table in July 1989, when together with the Lao government, the Bank commissioned Snowy Mountains Engineering, an Australian consulting firm, to carry out a feasibility study for the hydroelectric project. Following that, a Panel of Experts appointed by the World Bank visited the site in February 1990, and at the end of the same year, the feasibility study of the project was completed. The feasibility study paved the way for the project development agreement to be drawn up.

But before then, the financing had yet to be worked out. The dam was projected to cost US$1.3 billion. To finance the project, the agreement worked out one of the most complex public-private partnerships in the history of dam development: financed through equity and loans from 26 institutions, and owned by a consortium of state, private and international capital: Electricité de France (35%)
stake), the Electricity Generating Public Company of Thailand (25%), the Italian-Thai Development Public Company Limited of Thailand (15%), and the Government of Laos through a holding company (25%). Together, these companies formed the Nam Theun 2 Power Company in 2002. Nam Theun 2 is designed as a ‘Build-Operate-Transfer’ (BOT) scheme, which means that the Lao government takes complete ownership of the project from the Nam Theun Power Company after 30 years of operation.

Owing largely to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the financing only closed and construction began in 2005. During the delay between the signing of the PDA and the start of construction, campaigning against the NT2 peaked. A Japanese NGO, Mekong Watch, became one of the first groups to campaign against NT2 when some of its members first came across a large-scale logging operation in the Nakai Plateau by a company backed by the Lao military in 1997. TERRA cites the Asian Development Bank's 1999 report *Timber Trade and Wood Flow - Study Lao PDR* as confirming that not only logging was starting in preparation of the dam that had not yet obtained final approval by the World Bank, but that the logs from the proposed Nam Theun 2 reservoir area were accounting for 27 per cent of the official log supply in the year 1997-8 (TERRA, 2000). The resistance against NT2 was genealogically diverse, and tapped on various strands of the anti-globalization and environmental movements in the region. The most active group – Project for Ecological Recovery (TERRA-PER), was a Thai-based advocacy group based in Bangkok with connections to local groups that had galvanized in the wake of controversial hydropower projects in Thailand. The resettlement and reconfiguration of livelihoods around the Pak Mun and the Nam Pong projects in northeastern Thailand, in particular, produced an active anti-dam movement in Thailand. International Rivers, the
Berkeley-based anti-dam advocacy group, worked closely with TERRA and local
groups.

In spite of all this, the World Bank approved a US$20 million grant and loan
guarantees worth US$250 million in 31 March 2005. Through the seventeen years
since the project development agreement was signed, the project was simultaneously a
milestone and a controversy. Unlike other projects, Nam Theun II is a lever to
examine how hydropower development comes to shape a notion of regional
development ala the Mekong.

Here, my analysis diverges from existing studies, many of which have
analyzed the implications of NT2 for political and economic implications (see Singh,
2008; Goldman, 2004; Iverach, 1997), my analysis diverges from existing studies in
terms of its focus on the production of NT2 as a development project, its connection
to the making of the Mekong region, and the project’s implications for the broader
process of economic regionalization, understood as a genealogical process. What
arguments are enrolled to configure the hydropower project as a development project?
What are its promises? What kinds of valences within development practice does the
project tend towards? Most fundamentally, how is this project shaping a Mekong
regional development?

Nakai-Nam Theun: Biodiversity and enclosure

The World Bank contributes $250 million in guarantees and $20 million in
grants to Nam Theun 2. A Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA)
guarantee provided shields the project’s funders and backers against losses from
“expropriation, breach of contract, war and civil disturbance including insurrection,
coups d’état, revolution, sabotage and terrorism” (BIC-USA, 2008). In addition, the
Bank negotiated an International Development Association (IDA) credit of $20 million to finance part of the Lao government’s equity stake in NTPC. Another $42 million in guarantees from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank each lend further assurance to companies (Nam Theun Power Company, 2008).

From glossy brochures to the World Bank’s blog, ‘NT2 Chronicles’, Nam Theun II appears as an open, transparent undertaking, testament to the Bank’s attempts to sell it as an open, participatory process. The World Bank’s involvement in the Nam Theun II has necessitated the making of the hydropower project as one that is beneficial to the ‘development’ of the people living on the plateau, to that of the Lao national economy, and even to biodiversity conservation. For the Bank, Nam Theun II plays a vital role in the reinvention of itself on the global stage, a claim that others have made (see for example, Goldman 2000). Since the failure to win hegemony over the building of the Narmada Dam in India, the Bank has struggled to realign themselves as facilitators of large infrastructure projects in the Third World. Dams – the Bank’s core sector in Third World loans in the 1980s – had taken a serious hit. The Bank’s response was to initiate a World Commission on Dams (WCD), an international commission that promised to look honestly at the impact of dams around the world. In 2000, the WCD launched *Dams and Development*, a report that claimed to herald the construction of hydropower projects that would adhere to the goals of sustainable development (World Commission on Dams 2000). *Dams and Development* has become de rigeur for the assessment of the social impacts of dam developments regulated by international finance and development institutions. Ultimately, Nam Theun II was the laboratory for testing this new view of hydropower.

The Bank’s contribution to the development values of the project site, however, only became clearer in the later stages. An early settling of the Nakai
Plateau as a space for imminent state intervention was its transformation into a national biodiversity area. The legal instruments for this began with the Tropical Forest Action Plan in 1989, during Laos’ first national forestry conference. The World Bank began working with the government of Laos on the TFAP to collect data on the “social and ecological processes” pertaining to forest communities (Goldman, 202). These activities culminated in a forest decree in 1993, in which forests were classified into protected and conservation areas. These categories also prescribed the uses of these zones, with protected forests becoming government-controlled land, and uses ascribed to lands under different degrees of protection (Barney 2009; Peluso, 2009). A further decree in 1994 expanded the forest lands under protection to a quarter of the forested land, and announced a new category: the National Biodiversity Conservation Area. These initiatives came to pass with the help of the World Bank’s Global Environment Facility. They were also promoted by international NGOs, notably the Swiss International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). By 1996, 12.5% of the country was turned into NBCAs. These conservation measures, many argue, ultimately served to bring land under the Lao government’s new rubrics of ownership laws and titling schemes.

The Nakai-Nam Theun was the first National Biodiversity Area to be created. “[T]he reserve's hyphenated name,” explains the IUCN report, “links the region's major river, the Nam Theun, with its most distinctive feature, the Nakai Plateau, about a third of which is included within the present NBCA boundary” (Marsh, 1996: 22, author’s emphasis). The same geographic hyphenation can be extracted from the perspective of Nam Theun II’s first Environmental Assessment and Management

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14 Such projects have had far-reaching effects on the control of land uses, including a stipulation that effectively rendered the practice of swiddening illegal—one of the main goals of the Government of Laos’ Forestry Strategy 2020 (Government of Laos, 2005).
Plan. Nam Theun II would provide $1 million per year for thirty years towards the management of a 3,500 square kilometer forest area in the “Nam Theun watershed”, which was “recognized to be of high-level international biodiversity significance”.

The Plan stressed that “[t]he importance of this provision can scarcely be overemphasized because”:

[The provision] will greatly increase the probability of this important natural resource being preserved and protected against degradation\textsuperscript{15}. This measure will in fact change the expected biodiversity impact of the overall project from one of apprehension about lessening of diversity to one which will be very significantly preserve diversity as compared to without project conditions (SEATEC, 1997:1, author’s emphasis).

Not only would the project and biodiversity be harmonious enterprises; there could be no effective conservation without Nam Theun II. “This project…seeks to protect the Nakai-Nam Theun watershed, a globally significant biodiversity site,” reiterates the World Bank’s report on the economic outlook of Laos in 2004 (World Bank, 2004: 25). The effect of the hyphen therefore is not only to mark the plateau’s most distinctive feature, the Nam Theun, but acts as a political enclosure for the Nam Theun to be incorporated into the area’s biodiversity aims.

\textsuperscript{15} The report refers to the extraction of forest products and illegal hunting as sources of degradation. Yet, the first clear signs that the Lao government would go ahead with the project was the discovery that the Nakai Plateau was being extensively logged by BPKP, a parastatal organization of the Lao Ministry of Defense. This discovery was made by the IUCN, which also reported a road had been cut through the NBCA to access “high value timber out of the border area by helicopter” (Marsh, 1996:vii). The report expressed concern that the presence of large sawmills run by BPKP around the area was evidence of “facilities” that “outweighed sustainable sources of timber” (ibid, 19). Subsequently, the IUCN reported, the road cut by the company had become a passageway for the extraction of non-timber forest products. Soon after the discovery, the Lao government asked the BPKP to cease their operations, placing a moratorium on all logging in the Nakai-Nam Theun NBCA. This moratorium on logging was seen as an act of respect for an agreement by the government to restrict logging within the NBCA and on the Plateau in 1995-6 while financing negotiations were going on (IUCN, 1996: 19). Logging continued in spite of the ban (Goldman, 2004, Barney, 2009). The IUCN points out that the Lao Ministry of Defense was “the most effective implementing agency of government in this part of the country” (Marsh, 1996: 15), but this understates the fact that logging is the Lao military’s most profitable source of income.
State of development: From project to program

The blossoming of the Lao bureaucracy created to manage these land and environmental regulations has led Michael Goldman to call Laos an “environmental state” (Goldman, 188). In Goldman’s thesis, the World Bank’s interventions in development projects, under a renewed emphasis on neoliberalism and environmental soundness, have provided the impetus for certain parts of the state to “become capitalized and transnationalized in an effort to support large capital projects” (Goldman 188-9). But the characterization of Laos as such a state neglects a few things. First, one that Goldman hints at but does not flesh out – that ‘environmentality’ is only a front for territorialization – the strengthening of government control and claims over the land and lives of people living in far-flung parts of the country. Second, a more recent turn of discourse has placed environmental goals behind a more compelling discourse: development.

In the years that the project became stalled due to the impacts of the ‘Asian’ economic crisis, the justification for Goldman’s ‘environmental state’ gradually gave way to Nam Theun II’s benefits for development. Nam Theun II’s role as a development project or program has been stressed at every opportunity since the late 1990s. A feasibility report published in 1997 wrote that “the NT2 Project has long been identified as one opportunity with the highest potential for contributing to national economic development” (1997:1). This discourse of development has been buffeted by a renewed emphasis on regional development – tropes of connectivity and cooperation. The World Bank’s public relations arm explains a need to think of the project in terms other than that of ‘sustainability’:

NT2 is more than a project; it’s a program. At the program's heart there is undoubtedly a sustainable hydropower project, but there are two additional elements that make it more program than project: a set of revenue
management arrangements designed to help government ensure the revenues have real developmental impacts; and a range of complementary activities and projects that aim to strengthen national capacity to better manage hydropower developments (William Rex, World Bank 2008).

Nam Theun II is stressed as a keystone project that is expected to kick off Laos’ ambition to become the “battery of Asia” (Bardacke, 1998) promising “poverty reduction and economic development” (World Bank, 2004). A World Bank blog about the progress of the project explains that Nam Theun II “is about development, regional integration and poverty reduction” (Rex, 2008: no page). A better understanding of how the World Bank encourages environmental and social behavioral change may be gained by examining the institutional mechanisms by which its development policies and conditionalities are channeled. The two detailed here are: 1) The NT2 Social and Environmental Project; and 2) Private sector facilitation projects.

Development and environmental initiatives are facilitated by the Bank’s Nam Theun II Social and Environment Project. The Social and Environment Project was designed as companion project to the Hydroelectric Partial Risk Guarantee, the component that governs the financing aspects of the World Bank’s involvement in Nam Theun II. The Bank’s stated purpose for the Social and Environment Project is to “ensure the sustainable development of the Nakai-Nam Theun Plateau and Watershed (including surrounding parts of the ecosystem) and mitigate the environmental and social impacts of the proposed Nam Theun 2 hydropower project” (World Bank, 2004: 26). ‘Sustainable development’ and ‘mitigation’ spill over a range of programs of different scope and scale. The first – and most traditional – was a set of environmental, social and ‘cumulative’ assessments conducted in conjunction
with the Nam Theun Power Company, the consortium of companies who own the project.

These ‘independent assessments’ have been subject to controversy. At least two consultants have been fired or their studies suppressed for conclusions that did not go along the Bank’s official line. Among these were Tyson Roberts, an American fish biologist who was hired by the Bank to study the impact of the dam on fisheries in the Nam Theun basin. Roberts eventually wrote a report detailing the severe impacts of the dam, notably the hydrological and ecological implications of the transbasin diversion that would cut off water supply to the downstream of the diversion. Roberts’ report was not made public and upon his complaints, he was fired from the position. He subsequently published his assessments with International Rivers Network (now International Rivers), the Berkeley-based river conservation NGO. According to the IRN, Roberts was by no means the only consultant to have been hired only to have their studies suppressed because of their unfavorable conclusions.

A seemingly less controversial group, the Nam Theun 2 ‘International Environmental and Social Panel of Experts’, was created as an independent body by the World Bank to assess the adherence of the project to its goals. This panel has comprised largely of bureaucrats and engineers accredited by the International Hydropower Association and well-known consultants like Thayer Scudder, an American anthropologist well-known for his expertise on large dams and relocation effects. For example, the Panel visited the Nam Theun site in February 2008, and their conclusions on the soundness of the project and its progress allowed for the project to come to a close and the reservoir filling begin, in April 2008. The Bank has stated again and again that the Panel is an independent group of experts who offered a
Livelihood restoration and resettlement programs

The jewel in the Bank’s crown, however, lay in the resettlement and livelihood restoration programs. Resettlement programs were to come under the assumption that the economic benefits from the hydroelectric project would trickle down to both the people to be resettled and the wider community. According to the Bank’s explanation in a forecast of Laos’ economic outlook: “The project would provide to Nam Theun 2 Power Company a portion of the Government’s equity to finance eligible environmental and social mitigation measures…programs designed to reduce poverty and conserve biodiversity in areas around the plateau and watershed and downstream, and build government capacity for environmentally and socially sustainable development” (World Bank, 2004: 26).

As the project’s financing close and the dam site opened up for construction, the Bank redoubled its efforts into promoting its progressive resettlement policies, together with a joint ‘capacity-building’ program with the Lao government to get its institutions up to speed on facilitating future Nam Theun 2s. In response to the close scrutiny of its role in NT2, the Bank announced a participatory process of decision-making on the eventual resettlement, in which ‘project affected peoples’ would be consulted on the manner in which they would live in their new villages – what they would grow, structure of their houses, and the location of their new villages. About 6,200 residents from 17 villages located within the proposed reservoir and surrounding areas had to be moved. A ten-year mitigation and compensation program was launched in June 2000, and a logical framework (logframe) was used to...
implement activities and conduct socioeconomic baseline surveys (World Bank, 2009:A2). Apart from the half-term reports, the Bank conducts ‘Living Standards Measurement’ surveys once or twice a year, measuring household incomes (ibid., 10). Three stakeholder forums have also been held by the end of 2008, claiming to reach 400 participants (ibid. 14). Nakai has become a test-case, a grid of impact analyses, longitudinal surveys, demonstration plots, livelihood pilot programs, and a framework for stakeholder involvement. Visiting World Bank officials, government ministers, and others made frequent treks to Central Laos for a tour of the construction site, which has accommodation facilities for large groups. An ADB consultant I spoke to described the residents of the primary resettled village in Gnommalat as “almost spoilt” for the attention they were receiving from visitors from all over the world.

The World Bank also claims that NT2 is an opportunity for them to help to reform Lao government transparency and accountability practices, and make them better prepared to handle budget and private sector investments in the future. The result from NT2 is not just a hands-off approach, but one that helps the Lao government in terms of improvements in bureaucracy. In the World Bank’s view, Nam Theun 2 has knock-on effects on its communications and management policies. A website, poweringprogress.org, is set up to look like it is the Lao government’s public relations face for hydropower development. It is drawn up to a level of generality that includes all planned projects. As a World Bank official said:

The government now actually produces charts to show what hydropower projects will be done. It has a resettlement policy. They didn’t have agencies like STEA (Science, Technology, Environmental Agency) before…ten years ago, no-one thought the Lao government could do a project like this (World Bank official, interview, Vientiane, April 2008).
The Nam Theun Power Company claims that the project “exceeds” the “10 applicable World Bank guidelines on social and environmental issues” (NTPC, 2010).

This claim has been vehemently opposed by NGOs and Nam Theun 2 watchers. In February 2008, International Rivers reported that biomass clearance had not at all proceeded at the promised pace; only a fifth of the forest in the reservoir area had been cleared. The newly-created reservoir began filling in April 2008, with much of the forest left uncleared, giving rise to threats of the eutrophication of a lake by which the Bank had envisioned fishing livelihoods to be supported. NGOs saw the losses of foraging ground for non-timber forest products, an important supplement to the rice staple for people.

Experts admit that livelihood rehabilitation has not caught up with the completion of the construction phases of the project (McDowell et al, 2008; interview with independent consultant, 2008). “It’s a lesson from NT2,” a consultant working the neighboring Theun Hinboun dam admits. When asked about his responses to NGO accusations, a manager in charge of the resettlement program told me that the villages had been in “dire conditions” before resettlement. It came down to the question of development, he said: “to develop or not to develop”. There were no schools, not enough rice, a mortality rate of 60%. Villagers, he said, had to walk for “forty minutes” to the river to get water. There was no electricity. They may not have been asked if they wanted a dam, but they had some “decision-making powers” when it came to how they wanted to live in their new villages. New systems of community-based decision-making had been set up. Another manager, a World Bank representative, argued that the villagers had been offered and exercised a “choice”.

NGOs who have conducted visits unannounced accuse the Bank of covering up failed livelihood rehabilitation projects. They argue that the democratic process of
participation and decision-making has not been upheld, claiming that villagers are kept from talking to outsiders, and coerced into saying that they are living well, for fear of repercussions. “It’s a disaster,” one independent consultant for International Rivers, who had visited the site a month before the impoundment of the reservoir in 2008, told me. The villagers, they contend, did “choose” within conditions of their own making.

‘Doing dams right’

Regionalism was already on the cards when the Japanese reconnaissance team recommended the construction of Nam Theun II to the Mekong Committee in 1961. “The reservoirs to be created in series on the lower Nam Theun,” the report said, “will exert very favorable influence on the navigation and flood control of the main Mekong” (Government of Japan, 1961: III-10). Together with other tributary and mainstem dams, Nam Theun 2 would be a major node in what was to eventually become an extensive, basin-wide coordinated project consisting of multiple hydropower cascades, irrigated valleys and navigation routes. Its revitalization in 1987 was more modest. But as it neared completion, the ideal conditions for developing the river more extensively, unexpectedly, had begun to appear. “From battlefield to marketplace” was the famous early pronouncement by Thailand’s Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven that spoke of rapidly-changing economic and political conditions in the region. As Nam Theun II’s plans came to include the World Bank, the government of Laos declared that Laos would become the “battery of Asia”.

But Nam Theun’s importance can also be seen in other ways. On 23 June 2006, the Lao government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Mega
First Corporation, a Malaysian company, to develop feasibility studies on a possible
dam site near Don Sahong in Sipandon (‘Four Thousand Islands’), an area just north
of the Khone Falls and close to the Cambodian border, where the Mekong river splits
up into hundreds of rivulets. A year later, MoUs on six other new projects had been
signed, all on the mainstem of the Mekong in Lao territory (see Figure 4.2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>Progress of Memorandum of Understanding or Project Development Agreement</th>
<th>Planned Operation date</th>
<th>Investors/ Sponsors</th>
<th>Planned market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Power Projects in the Planning Stage</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban Koum</td>
<td>Champassak</td>
<td>2330 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 25 Mar 2008</td>
<td>To be determined</td>
<td>Italian Thai; Asia Corp Holdings Ltd.</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lat Sua</td>
<td>Champassak</td>
<td>800 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 2 April, 2008</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Charoen Energy and Water Asia</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>Luang Prabang</td>
<td>1410 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 13 October 2007</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Petrovietnam Power Corp</td>
<td>Laos, Vietnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pak Beng</td>
<td>Oudomxay, Xayaboury</td>
<td>1300 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 29 August 2007</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Datang International Power Generation</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand, China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pak Lay*</td>
<td>Xayaboury, Vientiane</td>
<td>1320 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 11 June 2007</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>CEIEC; Sinohydro</td>
<td>Thailand, Laos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanakham</td>
<td>Xayaboury, Vientiane</td>
<td>500 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 11 December 2007</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Datang</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xayaboury*</td>
<td>Xayaboury, Luang Prabang</td>
<td>1260 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 11 Dec 2007; PDA signed 25 Nov 2008</td>
<td>TBD</td>
<td>Ch. Kanchang and PT</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don Sahong</td>
<td>Champassak</td>
<td>360 MW</td>
<td>MOU signed 23 June 2006; PDA signed 13 Feb 2008</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Lao government 20%; Mega First (Malaysia) 80%</td>
<td>Laos, Thailand</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*indicates feasibility studies being conducted

Table 4.1. Specifications of proposed mainstem Mekong dam projects. Source: Nam Theun Power Company (2009)

All of these dams are being negotiated between the state and companies from
Thailand, Viet Nam, China and Malaysia. The uproar in the international presses and
reactions by NGOs testify to the surprising outcome (Hanim 2008; AFP 2007; AFP 2008a; Baynham 2007). The outcry occurred even after a report in 1994 undertaken by the Compagnie Nationale du Rhône, Lyon, France under the name of the interim Mekong Committee (The Mekong Secretariat) hinted at the interest of member states in opening up the old studies of the dams (Compagnie Nationale du Rhône, 1994). Following the Lao government’s decision to begin studies on the dams, the Cambodian government announced that they would be considering 19 dams in its part of the watershed (AFP, 2008b; Hickey 2008).

Apart from the debates over the environmental consequences of a cascade over a large part of the Lower Mekong, Mekong watchers were surprised that none of these dams would involve the World Bank or even the Asian Development Bank, but private companies from around the region. Among these reactions were speculations that these dams would have none of the social and environmental “safeguards” that Nam Theun II came with (Fullbrook, 2007). NGOs, consultants and even hydropower developers I interviewed said that they did not expect future dams to have similar policies on resettlement and livelihood restoration as Nam Theun II. These sentiments were articulated even by World Bank and ADB officials interviewed. As a Nam Theun II representative lamented, Nam Theun II may represent the “last project” in Laos in which safeguards for the mitigation of social and economic effects have been vetted by the two banks.

The assumption is that the recent shift in power of the private developer, not only private but also regional and Chinese, means projects that will be non-transparent and lacking in social and environmental standards. Such an assumption produces a number of legitimacies and dissonances. First, the effect of such emerging discourse is to legitimize and affirm the World Bank and ADB as good partners of
development. While the World Bank and ADB may lose potential loan clients, the vilification of private ‘Chinese’ firms has inadvertently cast them as more socially and environmentally conscious development actors. This is in spite of a number of major problems in the implementation of Nam Theun 2.

The same institutions have repeatedly referred to Nam Theun 2 as proferring “lessons” for development. At a speech at a conference organized by the Mekong River Commission conference to discuss sustainable hydropower in the region, a World Bank official from Washington D.C. stressed Nam Theun 2’s contributions:

Laos can draw on the lessons that have and are emerging from the Nam Theun 2 project. The preparation of NT2, with the numerous studies conducted and the at-length consultation processes, paved the way for more participatory, transparent and improved hydropower development in Laos. These lessons can be evaluated and replicated in future projects so that the best social and environmental programmes are put in place in order to effectively manage impact (Bond, 2008).

In an interview with an ADB expert, I was told that one of the “lessons” learned from NT2 was the regret that biodiversity clearance had not gone on as scheduled. In fact, the World Bank intends to publish a book based on these “lessons” and its experience of greening Nam Theun 2, to be titled *Doing Dams Right* (Bretton Woods Project, 2008; personal communication with ADB official, October 2008). Likewise, a World Bank official interviewed said that further involvement would be up to the governments:

It would not be up to the Bank to say we would like to finance another dam. […] If the government does ask the Bank to come in, my sense is that it would be a good thing. Because if [...] you have a lot of less than stellar developers involved, if the government approaches the bank, one, the government is saying that they do realize they want better social and environmental programs, and they know the World Bank comes with that (World Bank official, interview in April 2008).
As potentially the last project to have such safeguards in Laos, the book and lessons will continue to uphold the Bank’s image as a ‘good’ partner in development.

Second, the assumption that hydropower developers have no incentive to build in social and economic safeguards is based on their fundamental market-oriented nature. In interviews with representatives from three hydropower companies (two from China and another from South Korea), two of which have signed agreements to develop feasibility studies on a number of mainstem dams (the other representative worked on a tributary project in the Sesan watershed), these planners suggest that ADB loans were ‘attractive’ because of their low interest rates, and were still being considered. The engineers and planners I talked to expressed hesitation at taking these loans because of the “conditions” that accompanied them. On the question of why the interest in taking on the mainstem dams, one representative said that the government had put out a call for tenders on feasibility studies. In addition, the Lao government had “demonstrated” that dams were welcome and that projects could be completed with satisfactorily low risk, both politically and economically, in Laos. When asked how the state had demonstrated this, all three developers cited Nam Theun 2 as proof of a successful project that had gone to completion.

In typical fashion documented elsewhere with the World Bank’s dealings with states (see Wong and Wainwright, 2009), the Bank maintains a distance from national projects in order to balance criticisms of the institution’s activities. The Bank constantly insists that it neither funds nor owns the project. For example, in a weblog post titled NT2: Not a World Bank hydropower project (04/30/2008), William Rex states that “First, while the World Bank is a strong proponent of NT2, it doesn’t own or implement the project. NT2 is a project of the Government of Lao PDR, involving
an innovative public-private partnership of three key private sector companies and a Lao state-owned enterprise” (World Bank, 2008).

Beyond laying the culpability on the World Bank or the Lao government, or to argue for or against the presence of the Bank, a better way would be to view the chain of events as part of the same purpose – to complete the vision of regional integration that began in the 1950s. From the Mekong Project to the building of Nam Theun 2, the region has provided the rationale for their claims towards development. Regionalism belonged neither to the World Bank or the Lao government, however, the Bank’s over-zealous interventions in Nam Theun 2 inadvertently created the conditions for the revitalization of the Mekong Project hydropower cascade. The Bank’s interventions on the other hand came as a necessary response to institutional demands, as well as the demands of global capital. At the same time, its attention to social and environmental aspects, and of ‘doing dams right’, steered the public debate towards the mitigation of the impacts of the future dams.

Conclusion

Our last stop on the tour was the electric power station, a massive structure that looked like an inverted shopping mall, the cavernous building criss-crossed with bright blue beams. Electric lines looped across electrical poles receding into the distance, towards the Thai border town of Nakhon Phanom, ready to transmit electricity. The transboundary nature of this set of structures could not be more apparent. In the future of the hydropower development in the Mekong, Nam Theun II – its resettlement villages, capacity-building programs, and enclosure of a conservation space – was the showcase of a new way to ‘do dams right’. Hydropower was no longer the environmentally and socially-devastating enterprise it was
throughout the 20th century, but beneficial to development. The advice of Gilbert White to learn first lessons from tributary development had been right – Nam Theun 2 had helped in the realization of bigger, more ambitious dams. In the context of the mainstem dams, Nam Theun II was a kind of ‘hydropower-lite’.

With Nam Theun 2 providing a crucial step for hydropower developers, the Lao state and regional and global development institutions to produce ideal conditions for the mainstem dams, the at-times racialized debates over ‘Chinese’ versus ‘Western’ strategies of hydropower development (see, for example AFP, 2008c) merely serve to detract from the becoming-space of the Mekong region. The involvement of exclusively regional actors may be read as a fruition of the intended purpose of setting apart of the Mekong – modernization accompanied by privatization and development in the hands of regional actors, and the empowering of regional actors to engineer their own ‘take-off’ (Mekong Committee, 1970; IBRD, 1969; see Rostow, 1966). The Greater Mekong Subregion, represented by the wish-image of the map criss-crossed by zones of access, may fulfill the dreams of regionalism, after all.
Chapter 5: Producing development tradeoffs

‘[K]nowledge’ is not something that could be described by itself or by opposition to ‘ignorance’ or to ‘belief’, but only by considering a whole cycle of accumulation: how to bring things back to a place for someone to see it for the first time.


Asked for his views on the fish ladder, one fisherman laughed. How can fish swim up and down if the ladder is steep and there is a strong current?

- Lor Chandara (2004: no page)

When I arrived in Vientiane in 2007, the plans of the Lao and Cambodian governments to build dams on the Mekong mainstem were only sinking in. From international NGOs to regional anti-dam activists, to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) itself, groups scrambled to reorganize and rethink existing institutional goals. In June 2007, a coalition of 175 environmental and civic groups sent an open letter to the Commission, accusing it of remaining "notably silent despite the serious ecological and economic implications of damming the lower Mekong.” In March 2008, 51 citizens’ groups and individuals from all six Mekong countries demanded that the MRC respond to its "crisis of legitimacy and relevancy, recently exemplified by its failure to respond to civil society concerns over plans to dam the lower Mekong mainstream” (TERRA, 2008:no page). Then, in September 2008, severe flooding in the upper parts of the Lower Mekong basin in Laos and Thailand, some of the worst
in a century, sparked public speculation that the sudden release of water from the reservoirs of the new mainstem dams in China had been responsible. Groups accused the Commission of failing to warn villagers of the impending rise in water levels on time, but also used the opportunity to highlight the potential damage caused by damming the Mekong. In the wake of the flooding, the Commission was propelled to the front page of the Bangkok Post with the headline, ‘MRC defends China over Thai floods: Mekong basin flooding worst in 100 years’ (Wipatayotin, 2008).

This chapter is an account of the development debates that emerged at this moment of crisis. Will the release of water from dams during the off-peak season cause major flooding in the future? Will the dams built impact the diversity and volumes of fish and fish catches in the Mekong? Can dams be built in order to allow for fish to pass? How far do fish swim up and downstream to spawn? Are fish populations declining due to over-extraction16 in the first place? How much are fisheries worth?

The questions are not merely a product of an incomplete field of knowledge about the Mekong. These events and questions coalesce to create a crisis. They create new points of fissure, new confrontations between a shifting field of actors. It is during crises that development dilemmas come to the fore, and where smooth narratives of development are interrupted and new narratives produced. Concepts are created, re-opened, and forced into closure. The following debates open up: What is to be done about the Mekong? Who gets to decide? And perhaps, what openings are there for new collectives, new democratic futures in the Mekong, if at all achievable? What are the conditions for alternative forms of development in the Mekong?

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16 In 2008, the World Wildlife Fund for Nature released a report on the ‘World’s 10 greatest threats to fisheries’ and featured the “Mekong River” as an example where the biggest threat to its fisheries was overfishing.
This chapter gives an account of this crisis of development. I argue that this is not a crisis that is brought about merely by the announcement to build the mainstem cascade, but one which has been created out of conditions laid down by the interactions of enframing, regionalism, and the momentum created by the events around Nam Theun 2. The central argument of this chapter is that framings of development-as-regionalism are never left behind. In attempts to settle the question of the main development challenge in the Mekong region today, the debates are premised on the very meaning of the ‘region.’ The account of this crisis, therefore, brings us to an account of how development is being defined, measured and spoken about.

The debates forced open by the issue of the mainstem dams will be examined through an analysis, informed in part by participant observation, of two ‘expert’/stakeholder meetings organized by the Mekong River Commission to discuss various aspects of the mainstem dams issue. If crises bring new actors together, then so do these fora. As spaces that are stratified and highly politicized, they are ideal for examining the possibilities and limits of speaking between actors who are differentially empowered. I study the emergence of a concept, the tradeoff, through these power asymmetries. Ultimately, the chapter argues, our efforts to settle the development question leads development stakeholders to run into the walls, rapids, and currents wrought by powerful logics of the Mekong as a region enframed.

**A tale of two meetings**

The Mekong River Commission was instituted in 1995 as a reinstatement of the old Mekong Committee of 1957. The resuscitation of the old committee meant that China did not feature in the new committee just as it was excluded from the old.
The four member countries – Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam signed the Mekong Agreement, with the purpose of agreeing to the “joint management of their shared water resources and development of the economic potential of the river” (Mekong River Commission, 2010). The newly-formed Commission did not take on the role of a planning institution for the Mekong. Instead, owing to the influence of earlier executive officers, the MRC fashioned itself as a “knowledge-based” institution engaged in the sustainable management of water resources in the Mekong basin (ibid., no page). In spite of stressing its ownership by member countries, the MRC is funded largely by overseas development aid (Japan, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Australia). Another factor that challenges its ownership is that until recently, a high proportion of its technical staff in its various departments – Navigation, Fisheries, Environmental Program, Basin Development Planning – were ‘non-riparian’. National Mekong Committee (NMC) representatives are appointed from each riparian government, but these representatives largely come from environment and water resource ministries, which have little teeth with respect to planning decisions involving foreign direct investment, economic aid, and foreign policy. While final decisions must be signed off by riparian representatives, the programs being signed off became increasingly bureaucratic and administrative in nature. By 2000, critiques of the MRC by donors and non-governmental organizations had escalated. In a detailed study of the MRC’s institutional crisis, Hirsch and Jensen (2002) summarized that the MRC had itself not been tested with a crisis, leading to its lack of focus, lackluster, and toothlessness. In addition, the MRC was seen as paying only lip service to stakeholder participation, with few avenues for the engagement of local communities and non-governmental organizations.
The institution was seen as swaying heavily to the policy orientations of different Chief Executive Officers, many of them staying for 3-5 year terms. When the news of the dams broke, the MRC was in the middle of a leadership gap. The former executive officer had left at the end of 2006, leaving a one-year gap before the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO). The old CEO was seen as having a pro-dam development emphasis, and was highly unpopular with non-governmental advocacy groups for his alignment with national plans for the intensification of hydropower. The individual programs within the MRC were left on their own devices (each program was funded by a different group of donors) until the arrival of the new CEO.

In March 2008, the first stakeholder consultation on a new Mekong basin development plan occurred, and was touted as the first truly participatory meeting in the MRC’s history,

On his arrival at the MRC, the new CEO acknowledged the new developments that had arisen, and declared the MRC would act:

We now need to move forward quickly to make up for lost time. The challenge is to see what can be done with the available knowledge to take a more integrated perspective (Jeremy Bird, Speech: Vision for the Next Three Years, June 20, 2008, MRC Secretariat, Vientiane).

The growing criticism of the MRC aside, the institution was still perceived as the best channel to address growing concerns about development futures of the countries of the basin (Hirsch and Jensen, 2002; TERRA, 2008). The MRC made it clear that while tributary development should in large part be yielded to nations, it could not avoid participating in the debate over developments on the mainstem. In other words, the basin – its sustainable development and management – is taken to be the MRC’s responsibility.
Civil society groups did not simply demand that the MRC act to halt the movement towards dam construction. They did so by holding the organization up to its claims as the knowledge base for Mekong water resources governance. In a September 2008 letter, a coalition of six Cambodian and Thai NGOs laid out the following demands:

It is now time that the MRC’s role is reviewed to ensure it is acting in the manner befitting an objective, scientific river basin management organization that it was set up to be. An important first step would be for the MRC to publicly call for a dam development moratorium until scientific evidence of the individual and cumulative impacts of dam development is in the public domain and all party stakeholders including public consensus [sic] has been achieved on the best way forward. Otherwise, the MRC’s role in the future is in doubt (TERRA 2008: no page).

The demands were specific: to halt activity on dams until the truth about dam impacts came to light. The demand specifically called upon science to adjudicate on the impacts of dam development. In other words, it was the ‘knowledge gap’ prevents actors from moving forward and clear agendas from being made. In Hirsch and Jensen’s authoritative study on the role of the Mekong River Commission, they had concluded that the NGOs themselves needed to “improve their capacity with river science” (2002: xix). In 2008, a number of Finnish researchers who had worked closely with the MRC implicitly agreed that facts about the hydroecological regime of the Mekong river were subject to much speculation when they published a book entitled Modern Myths of the Mekong (Kummu et al, 2008), attempting to counter these ‘myths.’

With its determination to silence the critics on its performance thus far, the MRC planned a two-day event around the setting up of a new program to look into the coordination of imminent hydropower plans. The two meetings served distinct purposes. The first, the Expert Meeting on Dams as Barriers to Fish Migration
(hereafter ‘Fisheries Expert Meeting’), aimed to bring together the “experience and knowledge” of “experts from around the world on fisheries ecology and hydropower development…to assess the possible impacts of mainstream dams on the fisheries of the Mekong, and to see what mitigation activities could be relevant to this region” (Barlow, 2008). The second was the “Regional Multi-stakeholder Consultation on the MRC Hydropower Program (hereafter Hydropower Consultation), targeted specifically at gathering information to shape a Hydropower Program at the MRC. These two forums cannot be interpreted apart from the political desires of the MRC to seek institutional legitimacy, especially from its donors. Yet, to view the forums merely as simply the effect of the relations between institutional actors, as we have already seen (see Chapter 4), atomizes institutional struggles as constitutive of contemporary political dynamics. As Timothy Mitchell argues:

[T]he boundary of the state (or political system) never marks a real exterior. The line between state and society is not the perimeter of an intrinsic entity, which can be thought of as a free-standing object or actor. It is a line drawn internally, within the network of institutional mechanisms through which a certain social and political order is maintained (Mitchell, 1991:90).

Institutional mechanisms, such as meetings and bureaucratic practices of organizations, stand at the conjunction of social and political events. How can we read these forums that allow us to better understand them in terms of the gathering momentum for hydropower?

‘Mekong fish still can’t jump’

The two MRC forums reopened a debate that had first fomented in the 1990s. Fish ladders installed in the Pak Mun dam, on a Thai tributary of the Mekong, in the 1980s failed to prevent massive losses of fish, sparking a controversial debate on the
implementation of ‘Western’ technologies in the Mekong. The debates gained momentum with the publication of the 1994 MRC ‘Report on Run-of-the-River Hydropower’ (see Chapter 4), which not only resuscitated the possibility of Mekong mainstem dams in the public domain, but placed the MRC at the forefront of this push towards large hydropower. There had not been an institutional survey of mainstem dam possibilities since 1986. In response, fish biologists and dam watch groups published a number of studies detailing fisheries livelihoods, documenting ecological keystone species and their biology (Roberts 1995; Roberts and Baird 1995). The adage ‘Mekong fish can’t jump’ became a popular rallying point against the assumption, painfully extinguished by the failures at Pak Mun, that fish ladders would allow for fish to pass. Consequently, the momentum of public opinion, sparked by anti-dam campaigning, swung against dam building. An 2004 MRC report was quoted as acknowledging that dams were "the overriding threat to the future of the Mekong's fish and fisheries" (MRC, 2004).

Among the mainstem dams that were being signed off in MOUs since 2006, one stood out for its disproportionate impact on fisheries. This was the Don Sahong hydropower project, to be built in Champassak Province in southern Laos. For a two hundred kilometer stretch of the Mekong river, the river breaks up into rivulets that runs between thousands of riverine islands of different sizes. It was here that the 1866 Mekong Expedition encountered rapids so insurmountable as to thwart their plans for navigation up the river. The hydropower dam to be built on the Hu Sahong, one of the rivulets – the deepest of the main channels – was recently found in plans to be located on the stream preferred by fish to pass up and down the river in their migratory journeys. This was first pointed out by an early study by (Roberts and Baird 1995), who conducted investigations independent of the MRC. Just a hundred
kilometers downstream of this dam lie concentrations of fishing communities that gave momentum to the idea of the Mekong’s productivity as an inland fishery. In 2006, the Lao government asked the MRC to provide their expert opinions on the feasibility study of the proposed Don Sahong dam. Although I am not able to share this confidential internal exchange, the individual members of the team argued strongly against the dam, yet the evaluation report that emerged from the bureaucratic process effectively put an MRC stamp of approval on Don Sahong.

**From the mouths of experts**

The proposed dam at Don Sahong undoubtedly lurked behind the Fisheries Expert Meeting. First, it recalled the failed experiment with fish ladders at Pak Mun. Second, if built, Don Sahong would undoubtedly have disproportionately large effects on blocking fish migration compared to other planned dams upstream. To assess the possible impacts of mainstream dams on the fisheries, and to uncover decisively what mitigation measures could be imagined in the light of these impacts, an expert group was assembled. Experts were flown from France, Germany, the United States and Brazil for the meeting, bringing experiences on the Rhone, the Columbia, the Amazon to bear on adjudicating for what was possible for the Mekong. The two-day meeting, titled ‘Examining barrier effects of mainstream dams to fish migration in the Mekong’ took place entirely behind closed doors.

The ‘conclusions’ of the experts meeting were put forward the next day, in a special session at the Hydropower Forum, which was also by invitation-only. A day after the experts meeting ended, a representative of the panel – Patrick Dugan, head of an international fisheries research organization, World Fish, took to the stage in front of 200 participants. He began by spelling out the well-known facts about the unique
global position of the Mekong’s inland fisheries. The issues that the experts meeting had debated in the last two days were laid out as facts: Mekong fishes are dependent on migration over large and short distances. More than 70% of total fish catch is dependent on long distance migrations; dams are a barrier to fish migration, with their effects varying depending on species, location, design, and operation of the dam; the impact of dams on the mainstream is greater than the impact of dams on tributaries; dams that prevent migration in the middle and lower reaches of the Lower Mekong Basin would have greater impacts on fish production than dams in the Upper Mekong in China.

From existing science, Dugan said, we know that existing fish passage technologies cannot cope with high species diversity and large fish migrations that are found in the Mekong. Existing fish passage facilities – ladders, passes, guides – were mostly developed in North American and European basins. These dealt with five to eight species, mainly “good jumping salmonids”. At any one part of the Mekong, on the other hand, fifty species of fish would pass through, at an intensity of a hundred times greater the “biomass” of fish passing through in a North American or European river. This effectively meant that in these contexts where fish mitigation facilities were developed, 300 million fish would pass through in a year. In the Mekong, the figure was 300 million in an hour.

Stressing the specificities of each river’s condition and dam, Dugan spoke about the importance of understanding fish biology and their responses to flow regimes and guides, in order to tailor such facilities, if built, to the species, location, dam design, and types of turbine. He stressed the need to integrate such mitigation measures at the start of dam design, and cited the example of dams that needed to be retrofitted with passage facilities at costs which today exceed operation costs of dams.
But even if such care was taken, existing turbines had not been well-tested in large river basins, and their survival rates were as low as 5%.

Dugan ended his presentation to the rapt and sober audience, with the summary that dams in the middle and lower reaches of the Lower Mekong Basin would have major impacts, and that existing mitigation technology could not handle the scale of Mekong migration, which was six to ten times the number of species and about a hundred times the biomass of fisheries for which existing technologies were built. The Mekong’s nature came to the fore as that which exceeds any of these technologies; its rich diversity and volumes of fish spoke of a river so lively as to be un-containable.

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Sociologists of science conceptualize the production of facts as a collective process, rather a linear process of discovery. They show how facts undergo processes of translation, trials of attribution and *interessement*, the enrolment of interests, of diverse collectives of human agents and non-human actors, to become established truths (Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1987; Callon 1986). Scientific activity, in other words, is a way of *staging* facts in a way that attempt to make these stable. Forums like fisheries expert and hydropower forums are laboratories for the fixing of ideas about the Mekong’s nature. In this case, they also stage the production of development truths.

The expert panel comprised of scientists and engineers who had not worked in the Mekong before, served as a body of specialists to adjudicate fairly on whether fish migrations would be impacted by the mainstream dams. In doing so, they called on a broad body of science, which extended beyond the ‘local’ experience of Mekong hydroecology, to the general science of fish migration behavior, dam design and
systems analysis. In other words, it was not enough to draw on the studies of the 1990s that spoke of the characteristics of fish ecology. In this case, as Latour points out, networks do not merely follow a “Great Divide between the universal knowledge of the Westerners and the local knowledge of everyone else” (Latour, 1987:232).

‘Expertise,’ however, needs to be defined by more contingent political struggles. What gives shape to this unique staging of the production of a development truth are the years of acrimonious and bitter exchanges within communities of experts, hydropower builders and NGOs over the issue of fisheries impacts, now lying hidden under the smooth articulation of these truths at the Hydropower Forum. More than once, studies on fisheries impacts of dams done either independently or on request by hydropower companies had been dismissed. In the 1990s, Tyson Roberts, an ichthyologist from the Smithsonian Institution documented ecological keystone species and their biology, combining some of his fish biology studies with ethnographic research in southern Lao fishing communities. Roberts, together with a World Bank expert, was subsequently hired by the Nam Theun Power Company to study the impact of the Nam Theun 2 dam in Laos on fisheries. His report demonstrated severe impacts of the proposed dam on aquatic ecology, but was not published as part of the EIA. International Rivers, the lobbyist NGO based in Berkeley, later carried the report, which included a preface describing the conditions of the Power Company’s sidelining of the damning report. In a higher profile case, a study documenting the impacts of the Theun Hinboun dam on villagers done by Bruce Shoemaker for International Rivers was “aggressively” refuted and discredited (Shoemaker 2000) by the Theun Hinboun Power Company and the Asian Development Bank, which oversaw the project. The ADB tried to refute the study by sending in its own consultants. Subsequent fisheries experts hired by the power
company to look into claims of damages to fisheries reported serious impacts, and were not released to the public in spite of public pressure\textsuperscript{17}.

Together with the controversy over the Pak Mun fish ladders, these struggles were erased in two strokes the Fisheries Expert Meeting. One, because the meeting was conducted behind closed doors, the scientific and local knowledges that emerged from the earlier debates over Pak Mun had not come up in discussions of whether there had been any precedent for the interactions of fisheries and dams. In order for the conclusions to be seen as legitimate, they needed to be staged as neutral discoveries. For this to happen, the Fisheries Expert Group needed to arrive at their conclusions in secret. The act of boundary-making around the facts that were to emerge as ‘expert opinion’ was predicated on the black-boxing of these facts. The meeting minutes were not shared, and neither were the debates that ensued between the experts themselves. Secondly, this black-boxing was necessary because of the translations that needed to be done. Translation not only turns knowledge into \textit{expertise}, but marginalizes and subjugates other knowledges. In the act of translation, experts validate local knowledges.

Not only was collective local communities’ experience not deemed good enough to pass off as scientific facts about the Mekong, but even MRC reports by long-term MRC experts were unable to stand alone as authoritative knowledge. The MRC Fisheries Program was the longest standing program in the institution, established as early as 1972, and holding a repository of species documentation and observations based on close collaboration with national fisheries managers and fishing communities. Perhaps it is the very fact of this community-based work, conducted

\textsuperscript{17} These battles were detailed in Hirsch (2003) and Shoemaker (2000).
throughout the 1970s and 1980s on a limited budget, attributed to its failure to be regarded as not supplying the right resolution and type of laboratory-based scientific study that comes to be regarded as paramount in the decision to build dams or not. The international consultant’s expertise, which is mobile and generalized, is privileged over that of those who know only the Mekong. The conclusions read out at the larger Hydropower Forum the next day appeared to come from the mouths of these international experts, rather than from fifteen years of claims, refutations, and protests.

**The stakeholder as witness**

The first time we encounter an event, we do not know it; we start knowing something when it is at least the second time we encounter it, that is, when it is familiar to us (Latour, 1987: 219).

In the language of science studies, “witnesses” attest to the soundness of scientific methods (Shapin and Schaffer 1989; Latour and Woolgar 1986). The new witness in environment and development policymaking is the *stakeholder*. Environmental policy today needs to be seen as taking shape in front of a democratic field of participants. Participatory decision-making is now written into the rules of policymaking. Participation is equated with democratic policymaking. Experts speak to a wider audience, called ‘stakeholders’, who confirm that they have heard this by repeating and transforming facts in the hotel conference room to each other. Just as the fisheries experts constituted expert witnesses in the closed-door forum, so did the ‘conclusions’ of the forum require witnesses, of a different kind. If the conditions for the making of facts are constitutive of the facts themselves (Latour, 1987), then how witnessing takes place, and under what conditions, must be examined.
At the conclusion of the Fisheries experts meeting, delegates literally moved across the hall to the Hydropower Forum, to discuss a range of topics from estimations of fisheries impact, the potential of mitigation measures, components of the new proposed hydropower program, and the experiences of other basin authorities with sustainable hydropower development. About a hundred and fifty participants attended the Hydropower Forum.

The participants in this second forum were carefully screened for their legitimacy as witnesses. Requests made by organizations and persons who wanted to join the form were considered carefully, and the MRC placed limits on the numbers and constituency of the forum. In fact, an effort was made to hand-pick the constituency of the Forum so that the truth would be heard by a broad enough field of witnesses, but also by a certain quality of witnesses. MRC member state representatives screened these lists, voicing their concerns about the types of NGOs allowed into the forum. Some representatives expressed concern over extending the invitation to too many international NGOs. In a coordination meeting, a Thai water resources official went down a list of proposed NGOs for Thailand, insisting that only representatives with Thai-sounding names should be allowed to come, stating that foreigners did not understand the local culture. Here, we have a reversal of the ‘Western’ versus local witness, and the establishment of the boundary between ‘local’ and ‘foreign’ or others. International NGO representatives had to be kept to a minimum – while national and local groups must be seen among the audience. This is to ensure that truths are seen to have local currency and legitimacy within the Mekong context.

The stakeholder as witness does not go uncontested. NGOs are not unaware of the politics of inclusion as witnesses. For example, TERRA, the most vocal
advocacy group and organizer of previous campaigns, refused to attend the Forum. Their lack of attendance, given their dominance in this campaign, was a powerful silence and a refusal to legitimize the MRC’s claim to the democratic inclusion of stakeholders. A representative from TERRA later insisted that they were not ‘stakeholders’ at all. The “real stakeholders”, she said, were constantly left out of the meetings, and TERRA could not speak for them. Another clear moment of resistance came when the presentation by the representative of the fisheries expert panel ended, and a representative of a Thai NGO stood up to respond. Instead of merely celebrating or affirming the acknowledgment of truths they had always vouched for, she demanded instead to know why certain groups had been excluded from the Forum:

We are calling this a regional multi-stakeholder consultation, but I don’t see any representatives from local communities – local villagers, fishermen, farmers, who depend on the resources of the Mekong river. Are they counted as stakeholders? We have bankers and financiers [in the audience], so why don’t we ask these stakeholders to sit with us to consult on the Hydropower Program? (Author’s notes, September 2008)

Here, a witness questions her own enrolment. The response from the CEO was that there had been little response “not just from communities but also NGOs”, referring to TERRA’s notable and determined absence from these meetings. By noting this, the CEO pointed to the attempts already made to ‘include’ stakeholders. By creating a stakeholder’s forum, the MRC produced a space for stakeholders. But the space of the stakeholder forum is a container: one that collects and keeps count of presences and absences. By refusing this space, TERRA and other NGOs choose to contest the very idea of inclusion. The space of inclusion, as a container, can become segmented and defined. Here, in the CEO’s reply to the Living Rivers Siam representative on including local communities already affected and potentially affected by dams:
We need to find a way in other consultative meetings where we can bring in their voices. This is not the right environment to do [include local communities as stakeholders]. We need to go down to the subarea level, and use local languages. The sound system, [etc], are barriers to communication (Author’s notes, September 2008).

Local communities, in other words, make bad witnesses. They cannot rise ‘up’ to the level of the Forum, thus they must be approached ‘downwards’. The sound system, the means of communication present in this particular space, reaches only appropriate subjects. With English as the medium of communication in these forums, only those ‘communities’ who are at the same time local and global (Tsing 2004) are legitimate stakeholders. The stakeholder is no longer a member of a group with a stake in the project of determining development outcomes, but part of a particular kind of community: an epistemic community. It is the very enrolment of selective witnesses, that reveals the stakeholder as a marginalized subject position. It is this very selectivity that conditions the very claim of wholeness, of general inclusivity.

**Tradeoff**

The staging and mechanics of participation create the conditions for the formation of concepts and policies. It was clear from the Hydropower forum, from the testimonies of the fisheries experts and engineers on the Columbia River that building dams on the mainstream of the Mekong would virtually cut off passageways for fish migrating upstream to spawn, and prevent them from returning downstream. With two million people directly dependent on fishery, and given the fact that fish form a central part of diets throughout the basin, these dams would undoubtedly cause an irrevocable change that would be felt basin-wide. Neither could co-exist with each other, given the magnitude of the impacts of the dams. The main message of the
Forum, therefore, was that there was a *tradeoff* between hydropower and fisheries in the Mekong.

![Figure 5.1: The hydropower-fisheries tradeoff. Source: Barlow (2008)](image)

How is the tradeoff conceptualized? While the tradeoff was used in speeches and during discussions, it was a fisheries scientist in the MRC who attempted to visualize it. In two powerpoint presentations given at the Hydropower Forum and an NGO voices meeting in November, this official spoke passionately about the potential losses of fish production and livelihoods. During these presentations, he produced his own visualization of what he perceived was the main dilemma in the Mekong: the tradeoff between hydropower and irrigation receipts on the one hand, and the value of fisheries on the other. He estimated receipts from hydropower to amount to $2-3 billion, while the fisheries production in question would also be worth $2-3 billion. He explained that the tradeoff existed because the receipts from the building of the mainstem dams were assumed to go into national incomes and into development
programs that would redistribute these receipts to citizens. This would trade off the incomes of the estimated two million people involved in the extraction, sale, and processing of the products of the inland fisheries downstream of the planned dams.

Although not an officially-publicized figure, and one that he only intended to illustrate what he saw as the pressing issue, the graphical representation of the tradeoff is instructive for conceptualizing the debates around it. First, the picture of the scale shows the scale tipped lower at the ‘Hydropower and irrigation’, suggestive of the fact that the tradeoff may not be ‘equal’. Second, the pairings of ‘food production/food security’, ‘improved living standards/livelihoods’ are uneven, with ‘improved living standards’, ‘secondary industry’, and ‘government revenue’ tipping the scale in terms of greater specificity and suggesting of qualitative ‘goods.’ These are compared to their opposites: ‘livelihoods,’ ‘biodiversity,’ and ‘ecological functioning,’ that do not contain ideas of ‘improvement’ or gain, only the idea of the maintenance of these things. Thirdly, the dollar signs in both ovals (the left oval being bigger) show that the two sides of the scale are equivalent to one another in terms of monetary value. Finally, the expression “So the equation is…” seals the relationship of equivalence between the two sides.

Such pictures of development force us to stop and ask: How has ‘balancing’ come to mean ‘equating’? The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘tradeoff’ as “a balance achieved between two desirable but incompatible features; a sacrifice made in one area to obtain benefits in another; a bargain, a compromise” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). The key terms here are “desirable”, “incompatible”, “sacrifice”, “bargain” and “compromise”. Borne out of cost-benefit analyses, the tradeoff is a means of equating one factor with another in a situation where one thing must be sacrificed by another. In order for ‘hydropower’ to be posed as the opposite of
‘fisheries’, those two must be produced as what Heidegger calls ‘ontic’ categories. In other words, the essence of hydropower and fisheries is contained in nothing more than that they exist (Heidegger, 1996). ‘Hydropower’ and ‘fisheries’ merely exist. Both are objects with immanent, intrinsic value because value has been attached to them, a kind of value that is transferable and generalizable. The intermediate form of value that allows hydropower and fisheries as ontic categories to enter into an exchange relation, is money. For Karatani, Marx already saw the power of money as a “powerful signifier” of value (2003:201), because money is based on an assumption that the money economy transforms the being of things. That is, things neither have immanent value or even relative value, but their value can be defined by the use value of another commodity. Money is that which gives things the quality of exchangeability.

But just because things have exchange value does not mean they ‘equate’. The classic formulation of Marx’s general formula of capital, M-C-M’, demonstrates this. In this relation, the buyer is always already placed in an advantageous position over the seller of the commodity. The repetition of this asymmetric relation leads to a gap between seller and buyer that is ever widening (Karatani, 2003:201). Money, therefore, is by no means an equitable form of value. Money appears to make receipts from the sale of hydropower equitable with the fisheries-dependent livelihoods of two million people: that is, $2 to 3 billion. But just as money does not denote an equal exchange, ‘hydropower’ and ‘fisheries’ are no more exchangeable for one another. The relationship between them, governed by the imagined form of value, money, is an imaginary form of adequation.

The concept of tradeoffs as a conceptualization of development options did not accrue to these events by accident. In 2000, the World Commission on Dams
(WCD) launched 'Dams and Development', a report that promised to herald a new way of viewing hydropower in terms of sustainable development (World Commission on Dams 2000). The WCD was set up by the World Bank to retool its image, in the wake of a violent backlash against the Bank over the building of large dams around the world. The Commission offered “a new framework for decision-making that moves beyond simple cost-benefit tradeoffs to introduce an inclusive ‘rights and risks approach’ which recognizes all legitimate stakeholders in negotiating development choices” (Asmal 2001: no page). This ‘framework’ is largely held as the moment of ‘greening’ of the hydropower industry as well as development aid. The simple, one-dimensional notion of ‘tradeoffs’ is to be replaced by widening the decision-making space to include a multiplicity of actors and desires:

The report argues that it is not necessary to trade off one person’s gain against another’s loss. Rather, by negotiating outcomes through multi-criteria analysis - technical, environmental, economic, social and financial - the development effectiveness of water and energy projects would be improved, with unfavourable projects being eliminated at an early stage. (Asmal 2001: no page, emphasis added)

There are no longer gains and losses as seen in the conventional sense of a tradeoff, only an improvement in “the development effectiveness” of projects. In other words, the report invites us to shift our perceptions of the issue, which would result in the disappearance of the problem of having to sacrifice one side for another altogether. The over-simplistic tradeoff disappears, to be replaced by a multi-criteria, multi-actor approach to development decisions. Hence, the tradeoff embodies the spirit of modernist planning as well as a liberal notion of balanced development capable of saving resources for future generations.

The World Bank was the first to introduce the tradeoff as a way of conceptualizing development dilemmas in the Mekong. As its involvement in
national infrastructure projects intensified with Nam Theun 2, the Bank attempted to clarify its own role within other existing international and regional initiatives converging on the Mekong. Among these was a strategy paper for the Bank’s role in the issue of water resources management, the ‘Mekong Water Resources Assistance Strategy’ (World Bank, 2004). The Bank set out its prognosis of the past, present and future water resources situation in the basin in a 2004 report, *Modelled Observations on Development in the Lower Mekong Basin*. In this text, the tradeoff provides the moral and structural bone to the question of development in the Mekong. The following appearances of the term ‘tradeoff’ point to its utility as a moral imperative:

The over-riding priority is to build trust among the countries – accepting that there will be *tradeoffs* in Mekong water use (p. 23).

The recognition that *tradeoffs* exist, and can be resolved to mutual satisfaction, is growing. This calls for more support to assist the countries to analyze *tradeoff* issues and to address them through compromise and reciprocity. Resolving the hard *tradeoffs*, will, however require development of higher levels of trust than exist at present (p. 25).

The language of the report leaves no question about how we must tackle the dilemmas of water use and resource sharing. We are left with no choice but to accept that there will be *tradeoffs*. There are no specific tradeoffs, only a reference to “decisions [that must] be based on the trade-offs in economic, environmental, and social dimensions that emerge when water use is changed” (*ibid.*, 17). Not only does the text posit the existence of tradeoffs, but it implies that tradeoffs must be, and are, the only basis on development dilemmas are to be resolved. MRC public documentation and speeches began to rally around the idea of the tradeoff. In 2005, for example, the MRC commissioned an “independent” panel of experts to conduct an “integrated and holistic assessment of the beneficial uses (economic, social and environmental) of the
[Lower Mekong Basin], in order to “stimulat[e] discussion within and among the countries on trade-offs between development and economic and social impacts” (MRC 2006).

The mechanics of the tradeoff, in the end, is dependent on an assumed process: redistribution. The $2-3 billion earned by the state in hydropower receipts will be redistributed. The effects of this redistribution are even found at the bottom of the figure: there is hardly any need to say that redistribution is the mechanism that will lead to “food production”, “improved living standards”, “secondary industry” and “government revenue”. For the Lao state, that has long clamored to join the ranks of industrialized countries, the promise of “secondary industry” is alluring. It is the same promise of the Mekong Project in the 1960s, which posited hydropower as going along hand-in-hand with industrial development.

**Conclusion**

By November 2008, the tradeoff had become the central concept for development struggles. Although NGOs have been known to be critical of institutional representations of problems (Friend and Blake 2009; Hirsch and Jensen 2006), at the Forum they appeared pleased with what they saw as a hard-fought admission by the MRC of the true nature of the costs stemming from going ahead with the development of large dams on the mainstem. As the MRC’s first admission that hydropower development would have costs on fisheries-based livelihoods, its conceptualization of the development dilemma at the Hydropower Forum was very well-received by non-governmental organizations amongst the audience. For fear of angering the governments, said one experienced campaigner, the MRC had long withheld speaking outright about the possible costs of hydropower development. The
tradeoff began to spread, starting from ‘Mekong Voices’, an NGO forum held later that year in November. As the official conference document says:

The construction of dams on the mainstream will have a significant impact on the fish resources provided by the river. These impacts cannot be mitigated. Therefore the choice for the mainstream remains: fish or dams (TERRA 2008: no page).

Where tradeoffs once served as the acknowledgement of a compromise and a nod towards democratic inclusion, they are now too harsh, too singular. In a development industry that seeks to invent new ways of incorporating complexity, from logical frameworks to multi-criteria analysis, the tradeoff is now inscribed in a field populated by stakeholders endowed with multiple rights and desires. But what does this democratized version of the tradeoff mean? The tradeoff is not gone; it has simply burrowed deeper in the bureaucracy of development decision-making. It is this sleight of language that enables bureaucratized development organizations to offer the compromise of hydropower development as a “green” solution that need not lead to a win-lose solution. Indeed, multi-criteria analyses contain the promise of win-win solutions, where actors – including the correct term for people who are asked to accept these changes, these “project-affected peoples” – are no longer inserted into ‘win’ or ‘lose’ boxes, but differentially placed within an imagined ‘compromise’.

And what is the nature of the compromise? The compromise does not mean simply giving up fisheries to accept the gains from hydropower receipts, but to transform their desire for present ways of living altogether. In other words, in asking people to compromise, what is sought is a change in their lives and desires, that is, their very subjectivity and livelihoods. They are asked to accept another form of development, of betterment. As a tradeoff, this other form of development – at once
national and regional – is equated with giving up these livelihoods. The tradeoff, therefore, has become a form of compromise, rather than sacrifice.

Compromise comes from the old French *compromis*, which is a “reference of a dispute to an arbiter; arbitration; the decision of an arbiter” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Not only do parties on either sides of the equation make an agreement (promise), there is the implied figure of the arbiter or referee who makes the final decision that parties abide to. Hence, a compromise is “a joint promise or agreement made by contending parties to abide by the decision of an arbiter or referee.” Stakeholders come to hear about the tradeoff and unwittingly agree to the conditions of the forum, that is, 1) to follow the framings provided by a figure of a referee; it is also 2) an attempt to enter into a joint promise or agreement. The tradeoff is the figure of this compromise, and the arbiter of the Mekong, the Mekong River Commission. At the stakeholder forum, participants make a pact, whether they act on it or not, to surrender to the decision of the MRC and to expertise. In the act of witnessing lies the act of surrender.
Conclusion

Our last stop on the Nakai Plateau was the resettlement village. The first thing I noticed were the smooth pine boards in a homogeneous color, unlike the houses all over the rural Lao countryside, heft of wood in multiple shades colored by age and wear. The second thing I noticed was the liveliness of the place: there were too many people in the village, I thought, for the middle of a March afternoon. The vehicles stopped in the middle of the village, and we spilled out into the main street. It must have been a sight to behold – well-dressed Bangkokians and urban types spilling out of shiny, large SUVs. People – behind windows, standing in doorways and in front yards – stared back at us. The houses stood neatly next to each other, forming two rows on either side of the track. Each one was the same pine-colored construction standing on stilts, with a front yard and an outhouse. One group stood listening to Khun Thanin explain about the resettlement project, but I was only half-listening. The cameras came out. Some people walked into the front yards of the compounds. They peered into houses and opened the doors of the outhouses.

My first thought was how this was a perfect demonstration of the well-known fact of Thai people’s feelings of superiority towards the other nations in mainland Southeast Asia, a sentiment that had come out especially in Mekong River Commission meetings, where member representatives appeared to play out power asymmetries that had sedimented over much older political conflicts between the
states. These relationships were playing out before my eyes as the well-heeled city
dwellers, national and also regional élites, examined the houses, the latrines, and the
villages like an exhibit. One girl swung her digital SLR camera onto the fence to
steady it, aiming straight for the house in front of her.

We had become hydrotourists to a museum of the future. In the forecast
future of the hydropower development in the Mekong, Nam Theun II – its
resettlement villages, its capacity-building programs – was the showcase of a new
kind of hydropower development. The spectacle of the dam, cut deep into the side of
the plateau second only to the vision offered by the new development project that was
the promise of Laos’ transformation into the “battery of Asia”. This promise is made
possible because of the operative arrangements that exist, since the first power
purchase agreement between Thailand and Laos in 1965, of a relationship based on
comparative advantage. This relationship is not just economic, but is built from a
geopolitical, postcolonial rendering of space and people that created the possibility for
a number of things. The Bangkok hydrotourist and the ‘project-affected peoples’
stand together as two sides of the tradeoff: a class divide, but one that was ultimately
regional in character.

But how can we characterize the legacy of the Mekong Project, as we
hypothesized in the beginning? It is not only found in the way these plans have been
dusted off, the old feasibility studies becoming a template for the new studies being
done by Malaysian, Chinese, and Thai companies. Instead, as I have tried to show, it
was the earlier attempts to mark, name, define and substantiate the space – known as
the Mekong – for development that enabled the kinds of development practices and
policies we have today. This is not to say that development has a unilinear,
predictable trajectory, or the idea that development today is ‘determined’ by events in
‘the past’. There are a number of events that could not have been predicted. For example, the decline of traditional sources of development aid, replaced by financing and construction of the new dams by regional and Chinese capital. The rise of a vociferous civil society, produced out of the victories of global environmental and anti-globalization movements as well as democratic openings within Thailand, Cambodia, Viet Nam and Laos, are making demands on states, companies and institutions like the Mekong River Commission that have never been seen before. Development, while taking a number of paths, needs to be actively sought out as a desire.

To bring these arguments and ruminations to a close, I return to a question posed to me by a Mekong River Commission official in 2008. I had told him about the aims of my project – to read the texts of the Mekong effort of the 1950s to 1970s, and to try to draw out lessons for today. He heard me out, and then asked, “So what if you find out it’s all modernization theory?” I read this question in two ways. First, it was a demonstration of a kind of cynicism and weariness towards yet another researcher rehashing the not-too-glorious past of Western development aid in the 1960s, where it was too top-down, unattentive of social and environmental consequences, even arrogant. Second, it was a challenge to me to make these historical studies ‘relevant’ to the present.

This challenge has occupied me throughout my research and writing, and I will try to summarize my thoughts here. ‘Modernization theory’ is an obvious reference to Walt Rostow, whose *Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-communist Manifesto* (1960), became articulated in a crude model of development for Third World nations. Modernization is not just the vision represented by Rostow, but a mnemonic for a new mode of economic, political, and social life brought on by a
belief in development as a progressive process of growth. More than that, this belief is founded in the process of unfolding development; for Rostow, the development of a nation was to unfold towards a stage of high mass consumption. The idea of unfolding is at the heart of ‘development’. It is this mechanism of unfolding development that allows for the Mekong to be spoken of as a place of development.

‘Modernization’ makes demands on space and nature in particular ways. While the French saw the river as a conduit for navigation, transporting them into a possible future of territorial expansion, the Mekong Project did more. It rendered the river calculable, enframing it as nature that responded to the questioning and call of development. The river was thus produced as something that naturally gave itself up for development. The being of the Mekong, therefore, was that of a ‘standing reserve’. The river basin appeared as the thing that was simultaneously unfolding and the end-point of development. Nature is not just socially constructed, but a powerful lever in the making of the Mekong. In the becoming of the region, the people of the Mekong, like Nature, need to be encouraged to do the same. “Modernization theory”, returning to that mnemonic suggested to me by the official, thus commands space and nature to be enrolled in a new way of life, that is, development. The Mekong Project, unlike the French, has left behind a landscape of calculable nature whose boundaries and meanings are still legible, if not intact, today. The Mekong is a place inscribed with uneven development as a natural process of economic growth, based on a hydropower trading arrangement based on comparative advantage.

Today, economic regionalization is intensifying on a number of scales. In June 2009, US President Obama announced that Laos and Cambodia each “ceased to be a Marxist-Leninist country,” and removed the two countries from a trade blacklist. This paved the way for the United States Exim (Export-Import) Bank to finance
exports of US goods to the two countries. The announcement was quickly followed up by a trip by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to the region in July 2010, where she attended the US-Lower Mekong Delta Ministerial Meeting, the first official US engagement with the Mekong since its surveyors pronounced the river ‘majestic’ in the 1970s.

The recognition of Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam as new growth areas, a new global frontier for capitalism, is accompanied by shifts on a global scale in the legitimization of uneven development as a key to economic growth. The year I spent in Laos coincided with the World Bank’s launch of its World Development Report that made explicit the connection between geography and economic growth (World Bank, 2008). Drawing on Chicago school theories of location and economic change, the Bank produced examples of how “more successful countries” took advantage of the spatial and geographical processes aiding economic integration. The processes of economic integration were the encouragement of transport, communication and economic links between emerging cores and peripheries. Economic integration in this way, argued the Bank, would support development, an antidote to spatial inequality. On the other hand, spatial inequality is an unfortunate but inevitable feature of geographically unbalanced development. The following paragraph summarizes the argument, where economic inequality is a necessary by-product of development according to geographically-maximizing principles:

Economic growth will be *unbalanced*, but development still can be inclusive—that is the message of this year’s World Development Report. As economies grow from low to high income, production becomes more concentrated spatially. Some places – cities, coastal areas, and connected countries – are favored by producers. As countries develop, the most successful ones also institute policies that make living standards of people more uniform across space. The way to get both the immediate benefits of the concentration of production and the long-term benefits of a convergence in living standards is *economic integration*. (World Bank, 2008: i)
In *Reshaping Economic Geography*, spatial inequality in economic development is not just a natural, but desired, feature of development (Maringanti, Sheppard, and Zhang, 2009). No longer is inequality the dark side of economic development; instead, conditions of inequality are the wellspring from which future economic development will occur.

The Greater Mekong Subregion fares well in the report, clinching a mention on Page 15. According to the report, the GMS exemplifies a space of dynamic cross-border migration within the region. Within it, Thailand is characterized as an “economic engine of growth” that drives overall regional growth by attracting migrants (World Bank, 2008:152). Migrants constitute a “reservoir of cheap and flexible labor and a boost to its competitiveness in some sectors” (ibid., 3). While the report acknowledges the negative aspects of migration, especially the vulnerability of illegal migrants, it casts this as a problem of a lack of capacity and legal and policy frameworks of countries to regulate these movements. The trend of large disparities and the availability of a source of cheap labor, however, is not a problem after all. The report states: “[d]espite marked disparities in economic development, the subregion is extremely dynamic, with annual growth rates averaging above 6 percent in recent years” (2008:153).

The region, exemplified by the Greater Mekong Subregion, is the geographical basis for development: development’s *place*. As a place of development, the region is necessarily devoid of history, and devoid of the conditions that have created certain places as regions to be developed. The erasure of these conditions for making places amenable to development makes it necessary for us to continue our critique of colonial power.
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