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## Capitalist Trajectories in Mekong Southeast Asia

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Recent scholarship on labour and development in the global South has renewed critiques of modernisation theory along two main lines. The first has highlighted the unsuccessful transition of peasant smallholders into wage workers, whose incomes and employment benefits, it was once argued, would both satisfy their social reproduction needs and allow for expanded consumption. As a consequence of this apparently 'stalled transition' a contradiction has emerged between modernisation theory's valorisation of wage labour/full employment, and the precarious reality of work and un/underemployment in contemporary capitalism.

The second critique to emerge has focused on the failure of numerous late industrialising economies to transition from low to high value-added manufacturing. In the face of this latter failure of the modernisation project, governments and non-governmental advisers have sought to adapt their strategies to more effectively regulate growth in low value-added accumulation. Among the more prominent illustrations of such adaptive responses, international financial institutions and development think-tanks have advocated expanded forms of spatially regulated industrialisation—including export processing zones, industrial corridors and integrated subregions, of which the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) is a prominent example.

There is, however, limited evidence to date that the promise of well-remunerated wage labour is likely to be realised anytime soon. The evident contradiction between the promise and the reality of contemporary development strategies has led to disillusionment with industrial and other forms of waged and non-waged work. As a result, growing frictions at the point of production and beyond have emerged, exposing tensions and fissures in development models across the Mekong region.

What happens, we thus need to ask, when low value-added export-oriented factories that are central to long-term strategies for economic growth at a sub-regional level fail to serve as a stepping stone to higher value-added manufacturing, as modernisation and global value chain theories would have us believe? How do states, and workers and their families and communities, adapt to and address the apparent lock-in of low-value, precarious subcontracting economies at the national and sub-regional scale? If contemporary authoritarianism in late-developing Southeast Asia utilises ‘pro-poor’ economic growth paradigms to renew consent among its population, how can this be sustained when these models are predicated on a low-waged, low value-added labouring poor? This special issue seeks to address these and related questions.

Employing a wider comparative lens, the present trajectories of capitalist development in Mekong Southeast Asia suggest similarities, as well as significant differences, with late-capitalist developments in the global North, and they raise important questions about emerging patterns of development within the global South. We therefore look to Mekong Southeast Asia as an important locus for questioning received narratives of ‘development’, ‘modernisation’ and ‘transition’, many of which—whether their roots lie in Marxian or modernisation theory lineages—were derived from the historical experiences of Euro-American industrialisation. One of the overarching questions orienting this collection of articles is thus whether, and in what ways, the particular histories and trajectories of capitalist development in the global South, and in Mekong Southeast Asia specifically, challenge such received narratives (and continuing expectations) of capitalist development. Orienting our respective inquiries loosely around this question, this special issue aims to rethink capitalist development in the global South from the vantage point of Mekong Southeast Asia.

In taking seriously difference, particularity and heterogeneity in the histories and trajectories of capitalist development in Mekong Southeast Asia, this collection of articles follows the ‘materialist turn’ in postcolonial studies.<sup>1</sup> We include Thailand for inquiry under a postcolonial rubric both because of the developmental parallels it shares with other postcolonial countries and because of its own ‘crypto-colonial’ history under the Bowring Treaty of 1855.<sup>2</sup> A starting point of this ‘turn’ is recognising that the global dominance of mod-

1 Sandro Mezzadra, ‘Bringing Capital Back In: A Materialist Turn in Postcolonial Studies?’ *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 12, 1 (2011): 154–164.

2 Michael Herzfeld, ‘The Absent Presence: Discourses of Crypto-Colonialism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, 4 (2002): 899–926; see also Thongchai Winichakul, ‘Siam’s Colonial Conditions and the Birth of Thai History’, in *Southeast Asian Historiography: Unravelling The Myths:*

ern capitalism seems more and more disentangled from any world order centred upon the primacy of the US, Europe or Japan 'as the real invariable in the axiomatic of modernity'.<sup>3</sup> Pursuing this line of inquiry demands, as well, that we attend to processes of subjectification, as they are shaped by the varied experiences of capitalist development in the region. For it is out of this multiplicity of subjectivities, grounded in material experiences, that new forms of politics and struggle emerge.

If the trajectories of capitalist development in Mekong Southeast Asia illustrate a heterogeneous unfolding of capitalist relations, this heterogeneous unfolding calls for a more critical interrogation of ongoing claims of 'transition' to a predetermined liberal-democratic end-point. Indeed, the very concept of 'transition'—born of a particular Western European historical experience—carries with it historicist assumptions of shifts from traditional to modern, informal to formal, agrarian to industrial and petty producer to wage worker, which fail to sufficiently capture the dynamics and multiple trajectories of capitalist development in the postcolonial world.<sup>4</sup>

Our collective project is, however, of significance not only for theorising capitalist development in the global South, for the present trajectories of capitalist development in the South may very well foreshadow emerging trends in the North. Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden have, for example, argued that contemporary manifestations of flexible and precarious labour in the global North follow earlier patterns of casual and informal employment long prevalent in the South.<sup>5</sup> More broadly, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have suggested that 'it is the south that often is the first to feel the effects of world-historical forces, the south in which radically new assemblages of capital and labour are taking shape, thus to prefigure the future of the global north'.<sup>6</sup> Might we then consider the frontiers of capital in Mekong Southeast Asia not as marginal to global capitalist formations, but rather at the centre?<sup>7</sup> How, in addition, might a clearer analytical grasp of the dynamics, trajectories and het-

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*Essays In Honour of Barend Jan Terwiel*, ed. Volker Grabowsky (Bangkok: River Books, 2011), 20–43.

3 Mezzadra, 'Bringing Capital Back In', 157.

4 Kalyan Sanyal, *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2007).

5 Jan Breman and Marcel van der Linden, 'Informalizing the Economy: The Return of the Social Question at a Global Level', *Development and Change* 45, 5 (2014): 920–940.

6 Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 12.

7 Etienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

erogeneity of 'frontier' labour and capital stimulate critical analysis of capitalist development in the global North, and of evolving capitalist relations between North and South, whether these be through capital relocation, international migrant flows or global supply chains? By working through notions of core-periphery and North-South this line of inquiry points to a different vantage of inter-state, institutional and other relations and networks, while also challenging inherited and readily accepted binaries such as informal-formal, rural-urban and the like.

The articles collected for this special issue engage the issues and questions touched on above through case studies from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Methodologically, the authors varyingly employ ethnography, the extended case method and participant observation as operationalised in anthropology, development studies, geography, labour and industrial relations, and sociology. Marxian approaches to labour and development comprise a common blueprint for these interventions, with varying attention to post-colonial studies, workerist/autonomist theory and critical industrial relations, alongside cross-disciplinary debates around the multiscale politics of power in the global economy. In order to situate these papers within contemporary debates surrounding late-capitalist development in the global South, we outline in the remainder of this introduction four thematic areas under which to group the various topics covered by this special issue's contributors. Specifically, these are: the truncated agrarian transition; informal, informalised and flexibilised labour; stunted industrial upgrading; and emergent forms of politics and struggle.

## 1 The Truncated Agrarian Transition

Modernisation theory is predicated on a historicist narrative that sees peasant smallholders move from the farm to the factory, with informal labour giving way to formal employment—most significantly within expanding industrial manufacturing sectors.<sup>8</sup> Contemporary developments in Mekong Southeast Asia challenge this historicist narrative. We see, instead, patterns of jobless growth, 'saturated' industrial labour markets, the informalisation of industrial production and the growth of surplus populations lacking access to formal waged employment.<sup>9</sup> It is for this reason that Henry Bernstein suggests a shift

8 Arthur Lewis, 'Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour', *The Manchester School* 22, 2 (1954): 139–191.

9 Tania Murray Li, 'Centering Labor in the Land Grab Debate', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38,

away from the classic agrarian question, to ask instead a contemporary agrarian question *of labour*.<sup>10</sup> While the former considers the capitalist transformation of agriculture in the service of growing urban industrial production, the latter attends to the proliferating (and largely informal) ‘classes of labour’ and surplus populations, as one-time peasants are expelled from smallholder agricultural production without being fully absorbed into formal employment—industrial or otherwise.

Despite the glaring lack—indeed, well into the foreseeable future—of well-remunerated formal employment, regional governments and policy advisors continue to valorise waged employment over redistributive social welfare programmes as the most effective means of meeting the social reproduction needs of dispossessed populations. This discrepancy between the hype and reality of (un)employment is by no means limited to Southeast Asia.<sup>11</sup> But its persistence in the discourse of the region’s politicians and ‘development’ actors pushes us to ask what ideological ends such continued appeals to salvation-through-employment serve in the context of the region’s ‘stalled transitions’.

## 2 Informal, Informalised and Flexibilised Labour

Modernisation theorists, such as Arthur Lewis, posited that a ‘modern’, ‘capitalist’ sector in developing countries would draw individuals away from rural subsistence labour and into formal—particularly industrial—employment.<sup>12</sup> When the concept of the ‘informal economy’ first emerged in the early 1970s, it was understood primarily as self-employment, and as a temporary economic strategy that rural-to-urban migrants drew on while they waited for their full incorporation into formal, urban employment.<sup>13</sup> In Mekong Southeast Asia, like much of the global South, the formalisation of labour has not played out as predicted. It has, in addition, been clear, ever since Jan Breman’s clas-

2 (2011): 281–298; Tania Murray Li, *Land’s End: Capitalist Relations on an Indigenous Frontier* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

10 Henry Bernstein, ‘“Changing Before Our Very Eyes”: Agrarian Questions and the Politics of Land in Capitalism Today’, *Journal of Agrarian Change* 4, 1–2 (2004): 190–225; Henry Bernstein, ‘Is There an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century?’, *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 27, 4 (2006): 449–460.

11 Franco Barchiesi, *Precarious Liberation Workers, the State, and Contested Social Citizenship in Postapartheid South Africa* (New York: SUNY Press, 2011).

12 Arthur Lewis, ‘Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour’.

13 Keith Hart, ‘Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana’, *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11 (1973): 61–89.

sic critique of labour market dualism, that formal and informal labour markets are interpenetrated and that, far from being limited to 'self-employment', informality has come to increasingly characterise waged labour across the board.<sup>14</sup>

There is thus both a persistence and a proliferation of informal forms of labour and production, including within sectors and enterprises that were once iconic of formal employment, such as large-scale industrial manufacturing. But what, specifically, are the emerging patterns of informal and informalised labour in Mekong Southeast Asia? How does the present multiplicity of forms of informal labour and production relate to, and interpenetrate with, formal employment and legally registered enterprises? And how do the de facto informal conditions of 'formal sector' employment force a rethink of the formal–informal binary?<sup>15</sup> Going further, what are the implications of abandoning the idea that modern capitalism is defined by a 'normal' capital–labour relation, or 'free' wage labour?<sup>16</sup> Global labour historians have considered the heterogeneity of labour relations as a characteristic of the colonial and postcolonial world, a sign of 'backwardness' to be overcome by development.<sup>17</sup> In the neoliberal era, the crisis of Fordism and global outsourcing have contributed to a re-emergence of this heterogeneity that has been scrutinised under varying labels, including flexibilisation, informalisation and precarity.

Despite aspirations for global relevance, much of the literature on labour flexibilisation and precarious work is derived from the recent experiences of the global North—Guy Standing's *The Precariat* being a prominent example.<sup>18</sup> Within this literature, flexibilisation is commonly linked, both historically and structurally, to deindustrialisation, a shift to services and a sharp decline from a highpoint of unionised industrial employment in mid-twentieth-century Fordist–Keynesian North Atlantic welfare states.<sup>19</sup> To be sure, employment flexibilisation and the expansion of precarious employment have been widely

14 Jan Breman, 'A Dualistic Labour System? A Critique of the "Informal Sector" Concept: 1: The Informal Sector', *Economic and Political Weekly* 11, 48 (1976): 1870–1876.

15 Dae-Oup Chang, 'Informalising Labour in Asia's Global Factory', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 39, 2 (2009): 161–179.

16 Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (eds), *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

17 Mezzadra, 'Bringing Capital Back In'.

18 Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

19 Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, 'Precarity as a Political Concept, or, Fordism as Exception', *Theory, Culture, Society* 25, 7–8 (2008): 51–72.

documented in Southeast Asia.<sup>20</sup> Yet the regional experience is one of flexibilisation overlaying industrialisation, rather than deindustrialisation. This has consequences for the kinds of questions that need to be asked. How, for example, do present patterns of flexible industrial wage labour in Mekong Southeast Asia shape or limit popular demands for stable, well-remunerated industrial employment?

### 3 Stunted Industrial Upgrading

Regional economies have demonstrated an inability to move, under the current international division of labour, from low value-added to high value-added industrial production. In Mekong Southeast Asia, consequently, there is a persistence of low-waged, low value-added industrial production, especially in apparel, footwear and electronics assembly. What are the effects of popular discontent over precarious employment and unemployment against the backdrop of an unrealised promise to upgrade to well-remunerated industrial employment? How, in addition, have governments and private capitalists adapted their accumulation strategies to maintain and increase profit in the face of this stunted industrial upgrading? Among such strategies, one prominent example in Mekong Southeast Asia has been the spatial relocation of capital to sites that can exploit geopolitical and internal borders as means to regulate labour mobility and workers' organising.<sup>21</sup> This has involved a proliferation of internal regulatory borders, as well as the de jure and de facto segmentation—indeed, fragmentation—of labour markets along lines of gender, ethnicity, citizenship and legal status. On the one hand, such regulation elicits questions around the role of regionally extended labour regimes in which East Asian capital and states, as well as international organisations, including the ILO, operate. Efforts to harness labour in the Mekong for Asia regional- and global-scale capital accumulation points to a need to understand the multiple and variegated mix of 'formal' tripartite institutions as well as more informal and regionally articulated state–state, state–capital and capital–labour relations. On the other hand, heterogeneity is not only constitutive of the production of subjectivity

20 For example, Kevin Hewison and Arne L. Kalleberg, 'Precarious Work and Flexibilization in South and Southeast Asia', *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, 4 (2012): 395–402; Dennis Arnold and John Pickles, 'Global Work, Surplus Labor and the Precarious Economies of the Border', *Antipode* 43, 5 (2011): 1598–624; Frederic Deyo, *Reforming Asian Labor Systems: Economic Tensions and Worker Dissent* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

21 Arnold and Pickles, 'Global Work'.

under capitalism: it may also shape the language and strategies of any project of liberation and critique of capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

One response to limited livelihood improvements has been increasing appeals to citizen workers to make short-term sacrifices for long-run national economic development—with implications for spaces of protest. For instance, in the case of China, Aihwa Ong provides a useful illustration of variegated state strategies of rule.<sup>23</sup> She points out that every day the Chinese state faces numerous incidents of labour or peasant unrest, most of which are harshly put down or left unreported. However, by tolerating recent worker demonstrations against select foreign companies, the state permits mass resentment against global capital. The selective political approach to worker unrest demonstrates a complex state engagement with the still-resonant notion of people's or nation's sovereign territory versus the threat of foreign capital. The state goal is to manipulate the political situation in order to achieve an implicit state–society bargain that trades acceptance of political authoritarianism for sustained improvements in economic and social well-being. The authoritarian state, in its multifaceted embroilment with global capital, she contends, cannot be frozen in a posture of opposition to the masses, but must strategically intervene in unstable conditions, one moment acting as a draconian oppressor of workers, the next as a protector of labour against the deprivations of global capital. What happens, then, in contexts like the Mekong where improvements in economic and social well-being are lagging or moving in reverse gear? The cases of Cambodia and Myanmar and the repression of workers' protests in export-oriented industrial zones is instructive in this regard, as are widespread protests of rage by Vietnamese workers outside the gates of 'Chinese' firms in 2014 that went largely unchecked by authorities. What kinds of 'mass' protest do workers in the Mekong employ, what are the logics and strategies, and what responsive strategies do workers' movements induce?

#### 4 Emergent Forms of Politics and Struggle

The stunted agrarian transition and the de jure and de facto informalisation of labour challenge political strategies and tactics derived from liberal and radical traditions that privilege workplace organising and struggle by a mass indus-

<sup>22</sup> Mezzadra, 'Bringing Capital Back In'.

<sup>23</sup> Aihwa Ong, 'Powers of Sovereignty: State, People, Wealth, Life', *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 64, (2012): 24–35.

trial proletariat employed in large-scale factories and mines. To be sure, mass strikes, both within and outside formal unions, continue in Mekong Southeast Asia, and they should not be treated as an outmoded form of struggle. Indeed, the scale of industrial strikes in the GMS speaks to the divergent class trajectories between the deindustrialising and post-industrial global North, and industrialising Asia. Nonetheless, questions remain about the ways that employment flexibilisation, including constraints on formal unionisation in some contexts and its proliferation in others within the GMS, has shaped the forms and dynamics of industrial strikes under the region's particular precarious conditions, highlighting the changing role of trade unions and other civil society organisations operating from local to global scales.

At the same time, the contemporary proliferation of casual employment and informal petty commodity production within the GMS demands a better grasp of the forms of politics by dispossessed populations located outside formal industrial employment. How, we might then ask, do the particularities of capitalist development in the GMS shape and make possible certain forms of politics and struggle among dispossessed and (often informally) exploited populations? Under such conditions, are emergent forms of struggle best understood as popular claims on the state, shaped by the conditions of a dispossessed 'political society'?<sup>24</sup> Has the fragmented spatial segmentation of regional labour markets motivated migrants, both rural–urban and cross-border, to employ their very mobility in order to contest such forms of spatialised regulation? And what forms of struggle remain possible for those who are at once exploited outside direct wage relations while also lacking the leverage of electoral mobilisation?<sup>25</sup>

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