Primitive accumulation and the aquatic commons in the Lower Mekong basin: accumulating fish or capital?

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Abstract

This paper examines conflicts over the aquatic commons of the Mekong during the past four decades of 'official' water resource development strategies as coordinated under the eyes of basin-scale intergovernmental institutions. I argue that the UN-organized Mekong Committee and its most recent incarnation, the Mekong River Commission, have since inception in the late 1950s sought to reconfigure the aquatic resources of the basin to promote the needs of capital accumulation in a way that has led to the marked neglect of the livelihood benefits such resources confer. These efforts have in turn undermined the myriad common-pool resource systems of the basin. To clarify the conflicts between primitive accumulation and capital accumulation in the Mekong basin, I trace the evolution of the discourse and practice of "fisheries thinking" in the official Mekong institutions, and point out the current status of debates over fisheries in the context of rapid economic development. Part of the complexity of "the commons" in the Mekong is that while the basin itself is considered a common-pool resource to be shared by riparian states, the basin is also comprised of numerous, smaller-scale CPR systems that have become the focus of struggle among the state, local communities and other actors.

This paper examines the recent history of fisheries and fish production in the Mekong Basin—roughly the period corresponding to international developmental interest in the basin, or the post-WWII twentieth century—using Marx's notion of primitive accumulation to shed light on both the localized and broader-scale dynamics of aquatic ecosystem transformation in the Mekong region. I argue that primitive accumulation is a useful lens for sorting through the multiple ways in which fish production systems, at several scales, are being altered as a component of broader political-economic changes associated with capitalist economic development in mainland Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, the dynamics of fish populations, and the human communities and social relations that are supported through fish exploitation, present serious challenges to the conventional, largely agrarian, interpretations of primitive accumulation. The unique attributes of fish as a resource—their ecological relationships, behavioral patterns and special characteristics vis-à-vis property relations—create several intractable dilemmas for how we think about the alteration and loss of both common-pool resources and management regimes during periods of rapid political-economic change.

This paper also highlights the ways in which concerns over the 'politics of the commons' intersect quite substantially with recent thinking on the politics of scale and nature-society relations.[1] Most of the fisheries conflicts featured in what follows are highly localized in terms of their direct effects on human residents of the Mekong basin, and deal primarily with state interventions into common-pool resource management systems and the resultant disruptions to ecologies and livelihoods. However, the Mekong basin itself is frequently invoked as a transnational commons of interest to the riparian states of the basin (China, Burma, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam) in terms of cooperative development of a shared resource. Fish, as resources that are harvested locally and are transboundary in their movements (the latter quality is attributable to many Mekong species, including several economically important ones), reside simultaneously in several commons, from local to transnational. Indeed, it is this mobility of fish (in economic lingo a "fugitive resource") that makes it a difficult resource to render amenable to capitalization and commodification.

Part of the difficulty in adequately presenting these issues is related to the tremendous variability in fish production systems, fisheries resource management systems, aquatic ecology, institutional environments and general ecological knowledge in the different parts of the Mekong

basin (Hill and Hill 1994; Bao et al. 2001; Poulsen et al. 2002; Sverdrup-Jensen 2002; Coates et al. 2003). This variability is seconded by recent research into the tremendous diversity of fish species and fisheries management techniques at work in the basin (e.g., see AMRC 2000; Phayvan et al. 2000). I cannot pretend to be comprehensive in coverage. Because of this, I will focus primarily on the fisheries of the Mekong as imagined through the activities and reports of the official, Mekong-wide institutional actor, the Mekong River Commission (MRC), which for most of its history (1957-1995) was called the Committee for the Coordination of Investigations in the Lower Mekong Basin, or simply the Mekong Committee. I also rely on an emerging secondary literature—originating within the MRC itself, among academic researchers, and through a variety of community-based organizations and NGOs—that over the past five years has made remarkable contributions to common understandings of Mekong fish ecology and fisheries management. This paper thus seeks to traverse scales as well. Of course, insofar as the MRC and Mekong Committee before it are intergovernmental agents, I will also place a particular emphasis on the role of the state in exercising power over aquatic resources in the region.[2]

This concern with the state does not overshadow other ways of approaching concerns over the politics of the commons. Commenting on recent scholarship on the state and its role in, for example, capitalist development, modern social policy and other realms, Häkli notes:

> Yet the role of the state's territorial boundaries in circumscribing knowledge about society has not been given equal treatment. While an increasing reflexivitiy has emerged regarding the relationship between social science discourses and the state's agency and projects, the geographical contexts within which these interlinkages are analysed have often been taken for granted either as countries, nations, or societies, but nevertheless defined and demarcated by the state territory (2001:416)

I wish to stress two critical aspects of the case of the Mekong's aquatic commons that challenge conventional state theory in line with Häkli's assertions. First, the Mekong basin's integrity as a transboundary resource clashes with easy proclamations about the state's capacity to govern the environment within its national territory. The very existence of the Mekong

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[1] For a useful exegesis of the need for a critical examination of the commons literature in light of the political dynamics of various actors, including commons scholars, see Goldman (1997).

[2] The state is of course a key player in the process of capital accumulation. The different "moments" of primitive accumulation in England, consisting of the "colonies, the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection", all hinged crucially on "the power of the state, the concentrated and organized force of society, to hasten, as in a hothouse, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition" (Marx, 1976:915-916).

Committee and MRC represent a transnationalization of the state in the field of environmental management (see Sneddon 2002) and an admission of the tension between the riparian states' desire to promote national development and maintain cooperative relations with the other national actors with whom the basin is shared. Second, the fact that so little is known about the fish (and fisheries) of the basin, an essential transboundary resource, is an example of how the power and knowledge of the state does not encompass all of the processes (both human and nonhuman) occurring within its territory. In as much as the state seeks to 'make legible' the people and resources it wants to control in order to extend its territorial power (see Scott 1998), the vast majority of inland fisheries of the Mekong have remained illegible for most of the histories of the basin's current states.

In the first part of the paper, I trace the evolution of the discourse and practice of 'fisheries thinking' in the official Mekong institutions, and point out the current status of debates over fisheries in the context of rapid economic development. There has been a marked shift in the discourse of Mekong institutions in recent years towards greater recognition of the significance of fish and aquatic ecological integrity, reflecting in part the growing evidence of the importance of fisheries to basin livelihood systems and the intense disruption to these fisheries likely to result if the long-envisioned Mekong cascade of hydroelectric dams is allowed to proceed. In the second part of the paper, I explore the usefulness of the primitive accumulation thesis as a framework through which to think about the politics of the aquatic commons in the Mekong. This paper, it should be noted, should be taken only as a general sketch of these complex issues.

The importance of fish and recent trends

Before proceeding, however, it might be useful to briefly detail our current state of knowledge concerning Mekong fish and Mekong fisheries. Bringing fisheries and fish production systems into the realm of primitive accumulation creates difficulties in part because most the writing on primitive accumulation, dating to Marx, doesn't necessarily imagine a non-terrestrial production system that parallels the generation of food crops. History and geography, however, belie this simple assumption. An empirical accounting of the Mekong provides ample evidence of the importance, subsistence and otherwise, of aquatic production systems and their contribution to livelihoods. Seen within this logic, the disruption of fisheries, and commensurate loss of an important common-pool resource, constitutes an important component of more general processes of rural transformation in the Mekong basin.

Recent estimates of biodiversity in the basin identify at least 1,200 species of fish in the Mekong system, with a figure as high as 1,700 species not beyond reason (Sverdrup-Jensen 2002:iii; Coates et al. 2003:5). Of these, 120 species are traded commercially while the large majority of the total basin fishery is comprised of between 10 and 20 species (Coates et al. 2003:2). The number of rural dwellers who are partially, if not full-time, engaged in fisheries activities is estimated at 40 million (roughly 60 percent of the basin's inhabitants). In a fishery "still dominated by individual small-scale operations…from 64 to 93 percent of rural households in the Lower Mekong Basin are involved in fisheries" (Coates et al. 2003:14). Women and children are intimately involved in the fisheries activities, and the Mekong "has perhaps the most diverse array of fishing gears known anywhere in the world" (Ibid.).

There are 2 million tons of fish and other aquatic animals consumed in the basin every year, and 1.5 million of these come from natural water bodies. Approximately 240,000 tons come from reservoirs. The total estimated value of this annual catch is US$1.2 billion (Sverdrup-Jensen 2002:iv). While official estimates (those coming from riparian government agencies) of production in the individual countries or internal regions of the lower basin give values of 75,000 tons per annum (Mekong Delta), 70,000 tons (Cambodia), 25-30,000 tons (Lao PDR) and 65-75,000 tons (Northeast Thailand), a recent critical examination of fisheries statistics reveals that it is likely these figures vastly underestimate the actual annual production occurring in the lower basin. Once corrected, more accurate estimates would place annual production on the order of 500-600,000 tons (Mekong Delta), 290-430,000 tons (Cambodia), 200,000 tons (Lao PDR) and 75-175,000 tons (Northeast Thailand), an astounding leap in numbers (Coates 2002:74-102). I will return to these discrepancies later on.

People in the basin consume fish, on average, at a level not less than 30 kg per capita per annum. In the words of one report, "fish is the most important source of animal protein in the diet, with no alternative in sight" (MRC Secretariat 2001:4). In addition, the numerous small fish consumed whole or processed into fish paste (e.g,, the Cambodian *trey rial* fishery) are a crucial source of calcium in the diet of basin residents (Ibid.).

It is impossible to underestimate the diversity of ways in which fisheries management and production systems in the Lower Basin countries have historically been organized. A project initiated by the Australian Mekong Resource Centre demonstrates the complexity and importance of Mekong fisheries, even at what we think of as finer geographical scales (AMRC 2000). Focused on a single district (Samasomboun) within the province of Champassak in

southern Lao PDR, the project explicitly highlights the diversity of "aqua-ecosystems" within the Mekong region and how livelihoods have co-evolved with the complex ecohydrological dynamics of the river. The study reveals a portrait of extraordinary diversity concerning the timing (day-to-day), location, seasonality, duration and management of fisheries within and across the four villages examined in detail. The findings, which can only be summarized here, stress that crucial fisheries extend beyond the Mekong's main stem to major tributaries, small swamps, rice fields, closed ponds and small streams. What the project calls "indigenous fisheries" can be perceived "as a livelihood system consisting of multiple dimensions" (AMRC 2000). Some of these dimensions include: dependence on different water bodies as sources of fish; the utilization of fish in different ways (e.g., home consumption versus marketing, preserved fish paste versus daily eating) according to village and season; and adaptability in management regimes (e.g., more "open" versus restricted periods of fishing, different types of gear). Other studies confirm these observations (e.g., Phayvan et al. 2000).

There has also been a recent efflorescence in ecological understandings of Mekong fish behavior, such as migration. Fish species of the Mekong undertake several different types of migrations, and even populations of the same species may undertake different types of migrations at different life stages. Furthermore, geographically disparate populations of the same species may undertake quite different migration routes. In addition, longitudinal (long-distance routes within the main channel and tributaries) migrations may be combined with lateral (movements from the river and main tributaries into the floodplains during the rainy season and back to the channels during the dry season) migrations (Bao et al. 2001:10). Knowledge of migrating fish is also crucial to the livelihoods of basin residents. As noted by Bao et al. (2001, page 11), "many fisheries are based on the capture of migrating fish. Good examples are the bagnet (*dai*) fisheries of Cambodia and the Khone Falls fishery, one of the most important in Lao PDR. Even the larval drift is exploited as millions of iridescent shark-catfish (*Pangasianodon hypophthalmus*) larvae are caught each year and stocked in ponds and cages in the Mekong delta in Vietnam."

What is perhaps most remarkable in assessing the long-term trends in wild capture fisheries in the Mekong[3] is the manner in which estimates of fish production and understandings of fish

[3] Questions remain about whether or not the diverse fisheries of the basin are in fact in a period of long-term decline. Coates (2002) argues that such sentiments are premature, and are hardly backed up by the extremely flawed statistics available concerning historical trends. However, numerous accounts of fisherfolk in the basin attest to a

ecology have radically changed over the past four decades. In short, the amount of fish produced in the basin, the economic and livelihood importance of fish, and estimates of the actual number of species living in the Mekong system have all increased dramatically. Coates (2000) demonstrates that in the past four decades official estimates of fish production have vastly underestimated the actual production somewhere on the order of a factor between 4 and 20 times (see above for the individual countries). I shall return to this point in the final section.

States and fish: the evolution of basin-oriented fisheries knowledge in the Mekong

In a foreword to a 1992 report on the status of fisheries in the Mekong, the Executive Agent of the Interim Mekong Committee notes with satisfaction that the "Mekong Committee, since its establishment in 1957, …has long recognized the importance of fisheries to the people of the basin" (IMC 1992). But just what has this recognition entailed? I suggest that the authors of this report are remarkably generous in their assessment.

My aim in this section is to offer a brief accounting of the development discourse[4] concerning fish and fisheries in the Mekong Basin since the inception of the UN-generated Mekong Committee in the late 1950s up to the present day. I contend that in addition to the outright neglect of fisheries by the Mekong Committee and affiliated riparian states throughout the first three and a half decades of official Mekong governance, a neglect reflected in the remarkable lack of knowledge regarding fish ecology and fisheries management (see Sneddon and Nguyen 2001), the riparian states of the basin have consistently argued that the eventual destruction of the wild capture fisheries of the basin due to large-scale water development is a foregone conclusion. Given this, the argument continues, any efforts to understand and manage fisheries should be directed squarely at increasing the overall fish production levels of the basin

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reduction in the *size* of fish caught (especially those deemed economically important) and perhaps a reduction in numbers as well, although these accounts are highly localized (see Sithirat 2002).

[4] I use "discourse" to refer to a "shared way of looking at the world" that involves using a "particular kind of language when talking about events, which in turn rest on come common definitions, judgments, assumptions, and contentions" (Dryzek 1997:vii). Apthorpe (1986) discusses the deeply problematic nature of development policy discourse. In general, the discourse of development policy "justifies itself as being professional and scientific, and on that account socially and politically and altogether unproblematic" (1986: 378). Undefended assumptions abound: policy is based on resolving "problems"; institutions are unproblematic and reified (e.g., the region); decisions will be based on the best available knowledge; and the policy-making process is a rational, neutral process of moving through institution-building, data, planning, implementation, monitoring, etc. (379-380).

through investments in aquaculture and reservoir fisheries. I contend that this strategy is a not-too-subtle facet of primitive accumulation in the Mekong basin.[5]

Throughout the period 1957 to roughly 1970, the potentials and challenges of fisheries knowledge production were systematically ignored by Mekong development institutions. For the Mekong Committee and its member states of Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam, inter-state cooperation revolved almost solely around the construction of a series of mega-dams on the river's mainstream (eventually focusing on the Pa Mong on the Lao-Thai border and the Sambor and Tonle Sap projects in Cambodia). Fisheries were an afterthought to the more important work of collecting enough data to actually engineer the projects and the no less important function of securing enough international aid to build them. The Mekong Committee's Annual Reports from this period reflect precisely this prioritization.

For example, the 1966 Annual Report notes that the presence of economically-important migratory fish, in the face of the huge mainstream projects, "will determine…the need for costly fish ladders at dam sites" (Mekong Committee 1966: 78). Further,

> …experience from water resource development projects in other countries suggest that fish production can be the source of major economic and nutritional benefits from reservoirs, canals, artificial fish ponds, and even flooded rice fields (Ibid.).

Studies of fisheries, where conducted, were confined entirely to those locations facing future disruption from the construction of mainstream and tributary dams (e.g., the Pa Mong project, the Nam Phong basin in Northeast Thailand) (Mekong Committee 1967: 87). Clearly, a capitalized, more controllable form of fisheries had begun to capture the development imaginary of the Mekong institutions.

No where is this demonstrated ore clearly than in a self-styled "Information Note" published by the Mekong Secretariat in 1972. The report begins with the story of "Nai Thong", a "prosperous fisherman" living on the banks of the Ubolratana reservoir (created after the flooding of the Nam Phong in 1965) in Khon Kaen province, Northeast Thailand. The introduction goes on to describe the improved conditions for people fishing in ther reservoir, where it is "easy to find work" and there is visible improvement in the general health of the villagers" (Mekong Secretariat 1972: 1-2). The author also notes that the Nam Phong experience is "typical what has happened at a dozen or so reservoirs all over Thailand" and that "(f)ish

[5] When thinking about the relationship between scientific knowledge, technologies, and the state, we should recall Poulantzas' observation that "power is ideologically legitimized in the modality of scientific technique, as if it

production has invariably increased after dam construction, although the production increases may have differed in degree" (Ibid; 2). This rosy assessment belies the myriad assortment of problems that continue to plague the Ubolratana fisheries (including high incidence of water-borne diseases) a conclusion reached by a project itself co-sponsored by the Interim Mekong Committee in the late 1970s (see NPEMRP 1980).[6]

In addition, the Malthusian spectre was an important component of fisheries development as imagined by the Mekong Committee in the 1960s and early 1970s. In the words of one report, "(d)emographic trends postulate a doubling of population in the region by 1995. Hence, an additional fish supply of ca. 570,000 m. tons has to be provided by 1995 if the basin population is to achieve a protein intake equivalent to the current national levels" (Pantulu and Bardach 1970:1). As argued vociferously by V. R. Pantulu (eventual ecologist of the Mekong Committee) and John Bardach (a prominent architect of the global aquaculture movement in the latter 20th century) in the same report,

> the urgent need for enhancing production of a protein rich food item like fish is obvious. It is evidently neither possible nor desirable to rely exclusively on fish production to meet the increasing protein needs of the population; if only because the projected required levels of production are practically unattainable."

Accordingly,

> … fish production within the Basin itself will have to play a very significant role if nutritional catastrophe is to be avoided. In this context, fish production from the planned Pa Mong reservoir and associated irrigation assisted fish culture development in the region will play an immensely important role" (Pantulu and Bardach 1970:1).

A seminal study conducted in the early 1970s by Karl Lagler stresses not the actual fish of the Mekong (their behavior, ecology and diversity), but rather the long-term productive potential of the basin's fisheries. According to the Lagler report, as of the mid-1970s, the fish and its benefits were 'still obtained mainly by simple harvest from natural, unmanaged production'

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flowed automatically from a rational scientific practice" (1980:55).

[6] A report in the late 1970s mentioned the problem of theft among the fisherfolk communities, with 65 percent of all households living in shoreline villages reporting at least one instance of gill-net theft. Gill-nets are expensive items, and replacing them typically means buying new ones on debt from fish dealers. Fishers were then forced to sell their catch to their creditors who would underprice the fish (Supachai *et al*. 1979:194-195). As recently as the early 1990s, fishing was allowed everywhere throughout the year with little regard for fish spawning areas and the spawning season, although there has been some enforcement of laws regarding the use of hazardous techniques. Illegal fishing in the form of explosive devices, poisonous chemicals and electro-fishing was rampant. Apparently, there is no government agency prepared to undertake the development and implementation of a comprehensive fishery management system (Pholprasith and Virapat 1994).

(Mekong Committee 1976:iii).[7] The authors of this report note early and often that production figures for fisheries in the basin could be improved through management (of a hierarchical, expert-driven kind) and additional production could and should be obtained by the expansion of aquaculture (Ibid:iii). Tellingly, the report concluded:

> We recommend that the Mekong Committee make development of aquaculture a primary goal of water resource development. Due to the unique characteristics of the Lower Mekong Basin macrosystem—its water supply, its climate, the love of fish for food. The indigenous historical aquacultural achievements—the aquacultural opportunity should be seized…(Mekong Committee 1976:355).

The Mekong Committee 'could initiate a new revolution—the "Blue Revolution"—to provide food from fish in the "blue" waters to meet the needs of an increasingly undernourished world' (Ibid., 355-356).

By the 1990s, the importance of fisheries to livelihoods in the basin and its relative neglect in the past became increasingly appreciated within the formal institutions of Mekong governance. This recognition became manifest in several ways. A 1992 Interim Mekong Committee report argues that the "lack of statistics, recognition and understanding of the subsistence fishery is particularly significant, because this fishery is undoubtedly an important source of animal protein, highly sensitive to environmental changes, and may be negatively affected by developments which have been initiated without their full consideration" (IMC 1992, xiii). The report goes on to recommend that the "Mekong Committee has a strategic role to play in the development of fisheries in the Mekong Basin. This role should go beyond the previous fisheries involvement, which was largely restricted to measures to reduce the adverse impacts of water resource development projects and to promote aquaculture in irrigation service areas" (IMC 1992, xv).

The seminal Hill and Hill (1994) fisheries report, although its purpose was to evaluate the likely effects of ten potential hydropower dams on the 'most important groups of fish species' in the Mekong and attendant fishing communities, also noted the past failings of Mekong institutions. For example, the authors point out that the life histories of Mekong fish species are

[7] Contrast this with the findings of a recent MRC study by Sverdrup-Jensen (2002), who acknowledges that the 'capture fisheries' of the lower Mekong basin 'have a centuries-long history of local resource knowledge, catch technology, fish processing, marketing and social organization' that is virtually unparalleled (2002:iii). The Lagler report also notes that there 'is little management of these rich resources' and that virtually all of the fisheries of the basin are open access with no enforcement of existing fishery laws and regulations (Mekong Committee 1976:80). This flies in the face of what is now known about traditional management of Mekong fisheries at the community level.

probably the least known aspects of Mekong fish ecology, and that '(o)nly a limited number of reaches [of the Mekong] have been studied in any detail' (1994:4). There is such an insufficiency of data regarding Mekong fish ecology, that it is impossible to draw specific conclusions regarding many aspects of Mekong fish and the likely effects of large-scale damming, although they contend that the Sambor and Tonle Sap run-of-river projects (at the time a focus of the riparian states) 'will substantially alter' the 'highly diverse and productive fishery' of this area (Hill and Hill 1994:vi).

Following the Hill and Hill report, studies sponsored by the MRC Fisheries Programme have reached new levels of sophistication regarding the complexity and livelihood importance of Mekong fisheries (see previous section's discussion of Mekong fisheries knowledge for evidence).[8] This program was established in 1995 with a mandate of "coordinated and sustainable management, use and development of the inland living aquatic resources in the Mekong River Basin" (quoted in MRC Secretariat, 2001:3). A central component of the MRC's Fisheries Programme is to coordinate activities of the line agencies of the four riparian governments of the lower basin. Significantly, the program has focused on increasing baseline ecological knowledge of the multitude of fish species in the Mekong and their behavioral patterns, particularly with regard to migrations. Development of aquaculture, although now reimagined primarily in "small-scale" terms, remains central to the fisheries operations of the Secretariat (MRC Secretariat 2001). The program has also initiated a project to incorporate local ecological knowledge of fish behavior into more conventional forms of Western scientific understandings of river ecology (see Bao et al. 2001).

These changes in the MRC Secretariat's position towards fisheries in the basin are significant for several reasons. I highlight two here. First, they explicitly recognize a tension between what has long been considered the primary goal of official Mekong institutions—hydroelectric development—and a set of socio-ecological processes—fisheries consumption and management—that are crucial to the livelihoods of the basin's residents. This tension is not new. Writing in the late 1960s, Le Van Dang, an engineer and Chief of Vietnam's Inland Fisheries Programme, argued that upstream hydropower development will almost certainly have

[8] Ironically, this turn towards fisheries as a central interest of Mekong governance institutions, while long overdue, was recently threatened, or at least saceld back, when the Danish government, long a supporter of Mekong-related fisheries research, drastically cut back its funding levels following a de-emphasis on foreign aid that accompanied the ascension of a right-leaning political party to power in Denmark in mid-2002 (MRC official, personal communication, July 2002).

'disadvantageous' effects on the fisheries of downstream 'victim countries' such as Vietnam (Dang 1967:9). Dang points out that:

> This has been many times unsuccessfully brought to the attention of the representatives of the Mekong Committee by the Vietnamese Department of Fisheries, but the problem of fisheries in the Mekong River Development Program remains unsolved, always claiming for a satisfactory solution of it in pursuance of the national interests' (Ibid:10).

Indeed, the emphasis on aquaculture and reservoir fisheries throughout the first three decades of the Mekong Committee's existence demonstrate a clear institutional recognition that wild capture fisheries are likely to be irrevocably disrupted by large-scale hydroelectric development. By the time of the Hill and Hill (1994) report, this recognition appears to have become institutionalized to some extent.[9] And the conclusions of more recent reports (e.g., Bao et a;. 2000; Sverdrup-Jensen 2002; Coates et al. 2003) second this assertion.

Second, the increasing attention given to the importance of wild capture fisheries within the MRC Secretariat is not paralleled within the fisheries agencies of the four riparian governments of the lower basin. Concerning the characteristics of inland fisheries development strategies in the four states, the IMC (1992) report notes that it is "a common feature that commercial aspects of fisheries development overshadow subsistence and nutritional aspects and that fish to a large extent is considered a cash crop and also, although to a lesser extent, an export commodity. It is also a common feature that all countries put a lot of emphasis on the development of their (commercial) aquaculture potential" (IMC 1992: 46).

The refrain of promoting the growth of aquaculture as an important part of economic development was first broached by riparian state governments—seeking ways to capture economic benefits from the region's aquatic resources—during the formative years of Mekong governance institutions. In its influential 1959 report outlining the future development course of Thailand, the IBRD (World Bank) had this to say about fisheries:

> One of the most promising other types of primary production is the fishing industry. Next to rice, fish is the most important staple in the Thai diet, and there is ample scope for increasing both fresh-water and marine supplies. It should be easier to raise the output of fresh-water fish up country…(IBRD, 1959:8).
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> It is also logical to develop fishponds in all parts of the country, including the Chao Phya Plain. The fish can be properly nurtured and substantial returns obtained with less trouble

[9] For example, the authors conclude that the proposed cascade of dam projects —then being considered by the IMC—from Pak Beng to Pa Mong will 'have wide-ranging and subtle impacts on fisheries' (Hill and Hill 1994:v).

> and greater certainty that by fishing, often laboriously, in "natural" waters (IBRD, 1959:85).

This logic provided the basis for an ecologically objectionable program of fish stocking carried out by the Thai Bureau of Fisheries in all regions of the country.[10]

The point here is that the governments of the basin are still proceeding with fisheries development strategies according to the logics outlined by the Mekong Committee during the first 3-4 decades of its existence. The discourse presented in fishery project documents emphasized (1) the almost inevitable collapse of wild capture fisheries due to the foreseen construction of large-scale hydroelectric projects and (2) the need to replace the fisheries production lost therein through the promotion of aquaculture and reservoir fisheries. Not incidentally, both of these forms of fisheries are far more amenable to commodification and privatization than wild capture fisheries, a point to which I now turn.

Primitive accumulation in the Mekong aquatic commons?

> *So-called primitive accumulation, therefore, is nothing else that the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It appears as 'primitive' because if forms the pre-history of capital, and of the mode of production corresponding to capital.*
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> *...great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled onto the labour-market as free, unprotected and rightless proletarians. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil is the basis for the whole process (Marx, 1976:874-876).*

I want to conclude some ruminations over what the institutional history of 'fisheries thinking' within 'official' Mekong institutions might tell us about primitive accumulation and the politics of the commons.[11] While Marx was centrally concerned with a terrestrial environment and agricultural systems, the same processes that seemed to characterize the

[10] External assistance for fisheries development in Northeast Thailand has followed a quite different route. Because of the region's favored status as focus of development, fisheries development policies have tended to emanate from the central Thai government and its development donors. "Indeed, in some cases, such assistance has taken a different view of development needs than those enunciated by the Mekong Committee." The report suggests that "certain projects funded through the Mekong Committee have been more extensions of on-going Thai government programmes rather than pilot development projects central to the Committee's mandate" (IMC 1992, pages 73-74).

[11] I must plead guilty to shirking some very important questions regarding both primitive accumulation and the actual state of common-pool resource management systems in the Mekong. For example, to what extent are rural inhabitants of the Mekong turning to industry-based livelihoods due, in part, to the loss of f if fishing as a livelihood option? While to some extent this may be applicable to Northeast Thailand, it hardly meshes with the situations in Lao PDR and Cambodia. In addition, the Mekong represents a complex mosaic of property rights arrangements, particularly with reference to aquatic resources and water bodies. I hope to return to these issues in subsequent work.

transition to industrialized capitalism in 19th century England do find common ground within an industrializing Southeast Asia in the latter half of the 20th century. In a Mekong basin today wracked by conflicts over water and water-related resources—from the Pak Mun dam controversy and Nam Phong river pollution in Thailand to the Nam Theun Hinboun, Nam Theun 2 and Nam Ngum projects in Lao PDR; from the fisheries conflicts in Battambang, Stung Treng and Kompong Chhnang provinces in Cambodia to the Yali Falls binational turmoil between Cambodia and Viet Nam—the manner in which people's livelihoods are being uprooted in the face of capitalist economic development appears remarkably similar to what Marx described.

We should not, however, carry the analogy too far. The historical trajectories of the countries that comprise the Mekong are vastly different from those of England and other industrialized powers. In addition, three of the four countries of concern to us here (Lao PDR, Cambodia and Viet Nam) have been and remain, at least nominally, socialist in character. Ironically, it is the nominally socialist countries of Cambodia and Viet Nam which exhibit the most capitalized and privatized fisheries in the basin. For example, Cambodia's fishing lot system, wherein the government grants concessions to large-scale fishing areas in the Tonle Sap and other reaches of the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers, has been in operation since the French colonial regime instituted the system in the late 19th century (see Bardach 1959). Today, these larger scale operations are characterized by site monopolies, a government licensing system, large-scale fixed gears (nets, fences and barrages), subcontracting arrangements, and hired labor (IMC 1992: 27). Similarly, the culture of *Pangasius* species in ponds with overhung latrines, largely confined to Viet Nam, dates at least back to the previous century (IMC 1992: 29). Fish such as *Pangasius sutchi* and *Channa micropeltes* are cultured in pens and cages, frequently below floating living quarters, on the Mekong and Bassac rivers in Viet Nam and the Great Lake in Cambodia (IMC 1992, page 30).

Contra these examples, I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of fisheries in the basin are small-scale in character, subsistence-oriented and managed as a kind of common-pool resource. Cooperation over fisheries also, on occasion, extends beyond the boundaries of the localized fishery. One recent study found that fishers in southern Lao PDR communicate with neighbouring villages downstream and upstream to get, and spread, the news about any fish on the move, so that they are 'ready for action' when the fish pass through" (Poulsen and Valbo-Jorgensen 2001). At another level, the Mekong fisheries are increasingly acknowledged as a critical transboundary resource, although there is a glaring lack of mechanisms to confront the

challenges of managing a transnational resource. As Sverdrup-Jensen (2002) notes, 'there are no institutional arrangements at the regional level for joint management of trans-boundary fish resources' (iv). The point here is that political concerns over the commons are apparent both at the scale of local fisheries (where conflicts tend to be drawn primarily between the state and local communities) and at transnational scales (wherein the networks of conflict, which on occasion might be state-to-state, tend to draw in additional actors such as international financial institutions, international conservation groups, etc. Furthermore, the politics of the commons as represented through fisheries conflicts, whatever their scale, tend to not hinge directly on fisheries per se, but rather on struggles over dams and other forms of water manipulation as state intervention. Given the importance of fisheries as a basic resource in the basin, these conflicts are only likely to increase in the future as states—in the quest for capital accumulation—further encroach on aquatic commons. What scale these assume, and which actors are engaged in the struggles (e.g., states versus states, communities versus states), will play a profound role in directing subsequent transformations in the basin.

At a basic level, the question of fish production, particularly inland wild capture fisheries, creates thorny dilemmas for the proponents of transforming fisheries into a vehicle of capital accumulation. Water rights are notoriously difficult to implement and enforce, and this is true of the countries of the Mekong region. At one level, legal institutions for dealing with riparian rights deal almost exclusively with water as an extractive resource. Water's capacity to serve as an environment for fish is simply not part of the aquatic property rights equation. At another level, it is virtually impossible to stake a claim of ownership on a particular fishery, and there is no guarantee from season-to-season year-to-year that the fishery will actually contain fish. Fisheries have also historcally been a refuge for people in the Mekong faced with ecological and economic hardships.[12] As recently as the early 1990s, it was "clear that an increasing number of farmers in at least some parts of the basin are resorting to fisheries as a reaction to an increasing population pressure on agricultural resources [or to being increasingly marginalized through a variety of political-economic processes], including land. The fish stocks represents [sic.] the last common resource available and thus the last place to go when other resources are becoming insufficient (IMC 1992, page 29). What we can thus perhaps read off of the recent history of

[12] This assertion is vividly portrayed in the autobiographical novel *Luk Isaan* [Child of the Northeast] by Boonthawee K. In this evocative story detailing several months in the life of a small boy living in the province of

fisheries discourse and actual fisheries development policies in the Mekong is an imperfectly and thwarted series of attempts to capitalize a resource that is in many fundamental ways extraordinarily difficult to commodify and privatize. Nonetheless, what is going on in the Mekong has shown that these efforts to commodify and privatize have had serious effects in terms of socio-ecological disruptions, something attested to by the aforementioned level of fisheries conflicts.

There is evidence to suggest that the recent efforts of the MRC Secretariat to emphasize the fisheries aspects of Mekong development constitute a larger move within the Secretariat to perceive the basin in a different light than in the past. Within this view, the basin comprises a complex mosaic of local and transboundary aquatic commons and attendant management regimes; a mosaic of socio-ecological processes that is already under threat from a variety of political-econo-mic and environmental processes. This stands in contrast, however, to the perspective of the fisheries agencies of the riparian states, who remain trenchantly committed to inserting fisheries production firmly within larger-scale national goals of capitalist economic development. This raises a very interesting question, and one not typically considered by the local-national coalition of social and ecological advocates[13] who have been critical of Mekong-level governance in the past: is it possible to 'empower' the MRC in such a way as to promote its recent impulses towards progressive fisheries research and advocacy?

Primitive accumulation is a complex and not-easily traced process. By looking at the transformation of fisheries in the Mekong basin (primarily in the lower reaches) and the transformation of 'fisheries thinking' within the basin's dominant institutional actors, my aim has not been to offer definitive evidence that what we have witnessed over the past 4-5 decades is a sterling example of the rural disruptions caused by processes of capital accumulation. Rather, I argue the theoretical tools represented by primitive accumulation and similar tools (e.g., debates on the second contradiction of capitalism and the conditions of production)[14] do help place the 'fisheries problem' within a broader scale set of processes related to theongoing political-economic transformation of the Mekong.

Ubon Ratchathani (Northeast Thailand), one of the book's central motifs is the epic journey of Khun's [the protagonist] family to fish in the River Chi when the rains do not come in time to successfully initiate rice growing.

[13] I am here thinking of the Thailand-based NGOs Project for Ecological Recovery (PER) and its regional offshoot Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), the Southeast Asian Rivers International Network (SEARIN) and the US-based International Rivers Network (IRN). And I make these comments in sympathy with their objectives and intentions.

[14] See the collected works in O'Connor (1994).

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