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River-Basin Politics and the Rise of Ecological and Transnational Democracy in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, debates over 'deliberative', 'transnational' and 'ecological' democracy have proliferated, largely among scholars engaged in discussions of modernisation, globalisation and political identity. Within this broad context, scholars and practitioners of environmental governance have advanced the argument that a democratic society will produce a more environmentally conscious society. We want to make a volte-face of this argument and ask: to what extent does engagement with environmental politics and, specifically, water politics, contribute to processes of democratisation? After reviewing some of the contributions to debates over 'ecological' and 'transnational' democracy, we explore this question within the context of conflicts over river-basin development in Southeast Asia and southern Africa. We argue that there are multiple pathways to democratisation and that, in some cases, the environment as a political issue does constitute a significant element of democratisation. But notions of 'ecological' and 'transnational' democracy must embody how both 'environment' and 'the transnational', as mobilised by specific social movements in specific historical and geographical circumstances, are politically constructed.

KEYWORDS: Ecological democracy, transnational democracy, Mekong river basin, Zambezi river basin, environmental politics

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, debates over 'deliberative', 'transnational' and 'ecological' democracy – in addition to other 'prefix' democracies – have proliferated, largely among scholars engaged in discussions of modernisation, globalisation and political identity. At the risk of stating the obvious, the core of many of these formulations is a normative vision that democratisation – of society in general, of how decisions are made within society, of how political struggles are shaped – will produce more equitable and just societies.¹ This work examines recent characterisations of ecological and transnational democracy through the lens of river-basin politics within two quite different historical-geographical contexts. The Mekong and Zambezi river basins have been the focus of recent efforts to appropriate, both materially

¹ Although this assumption, depending on the particular ideological and political motivations under which it is put forth, can be deeply problematic. Past efforts to advance a 'democratic' agenda at the global level, for example the "democracy promotion" campaigns of the successive US regimes from the 1980s onwards, have had less to do with expanding social justice and political rights than with promoting US geopolitical alliances and economic interests (see Robinson, 1996). Harsher is what Perry Anderson (2000) writes: "The spread of democracy as a substitute for socialism, as hope or claim, is mocked by the hollowing of democracy itself in its capitalist homelands... In general, what is strong is not democratic aspiration from above, but the asphyxiation of public debate from below".

and discursively, an array of hydrological and ecological dynamics associated with each drainage area. Most of these efforts are guided by a relentless developmentalist logic that perceives flowing rivers almost exclusively in terms of potential hydroelectricity production. Arising from the implementation of state-sponsored development programmes in each basin, an array of political actors – including state agencies, international conservation groups, and assorted representatives of civil society – are engaged in contests to define, negotiate and alter representations of each basin. River-basin politics in each region thus involves a diversity of positions and interests.

What, if anything, can river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi tell us about theories and processes of 'ecological' and 'transnational' democratisation? To address this question, we focus on the efforts of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), within the larger rubric of advocacy networks,² active in each basin to carve out transnational public spheres in order to promote more democratic control over decisions to govern the respective basins. We examine the activities of these actors, and the broader river-basin politics that constitute their 'governance conditions', in light of recent debates concerning democratic theory and practice. Within this broad context, scholars and practitioners of environmental governance have advanced the argument that democratisation is positively correlated with ecological sustainability, or that a democratic society will produce a more environmentally conscious society. While the arguments for, and critiques of, this position are sometimes compelling,³ part of our agenda is to make a volte-face of this argument and ask: how does engagement with environmental politics, transnational or otherwise, contribute to processes of democratisation?

We proceed with a brief review of work that examines recent theorisations of ecological and transnational democracy. These are set within the broader context of debates over other 'prefix' democracies (e.g. radical, deliberative and so on). We argue that a majority of this work is first-world centric and suffers from the dual problem of an overly narrow conceptualisation of 'environmental politics' and a failure to grasp the historical-geographical specificities (and indeed the unique political-economic contexts) of contemporary third-world societies. We also offer a sympathetic critique of notions of 'transnational' democracy. We use these critiques to develop some conceptual starting points for examining the links between environmental politics and democratisation as represented through the prism of what we define as river-basin politics. We mobilise these ideas in light of the activities of environmental advocacy networks in Southeast Asia and southern Africa. We argue there are multiple interpretations of, and pathways to, 'democratisation', and that the environment as a political issue, particularly in the so-called Third World, does in some cases constitute a significant element of democratisation. While there are significant efforts to create transnational/transboundary public spheres to serve as a check on state and corporate power, there are limitations to transnational democracy as a political strategy. Similarly, notions of 'ecological' democracy must also embody how 'environment', as mobilised by specific social movements, is imbued with multiple meanings.

THEORISING 'ECOLOGICAL' AND 'TRANSNATIONAL' DEMOCRACY

The roots of recent conceptualisations of 'ecological' and 'transnational' democracy are embedded within a larger movement within social and political theory to rethink democracy along deliberative and/or radical lines. Writing on 'deliberative', 'associative', 'radical', 'communicative', and 'agonistic' democracy (to highlight the most visible strains) has increased significantly in recent years, and a full

² We consciously distinguish an advocacy network from 'social movement', although there are significant conceptual and pragmatic overlaps between the meanings of the two phrases. A fuller clarification of the links between our notion of 'river-basin politics' and recent debates on social movements (see collected works in Giugni et al., 1999, Meyer et al., 2002, Smith and Johnston, 2002, Ibarra, 2003, Goldstone, 2004, and Tilly, 2004) is beyond the scope of the present argument.

³ See Midlarsky, 1998 and Walker, 1999 for different perspectives on this relationship. Walker, based on case studies from southern Africa, concludes that claims of a positive correlation between democracy and enhanced environmental sustainability are premature at best and spurious at worst.

exploration of these works falls outside our general aim.⁴ At the risk of simplification, advocates of 'alternative' democratic theory emphasise that the institutional trappings of 'democracy' (e.g. electoral systems, voting rights, representative assemblies, constitutions and so on) are vastly overrated in their capacity to bring about what they see as the necessary governmental and societal changes to confront centres of power (primarily state and corporate interests) that foster, and benefit from, the economic inequalities, systemic geopolitical violence, ecological deterioration and other problems characteristic of social and political relations in the early 21st century.

The alternative, argue many, is an enriched understanding of the deliberative and/or discursive aspects of democracy. For example, Dryzek (1999) asserts that the "essence of democratic legitimacy is to be found not in voting or representation of persons and interests, but rather in deliberation. In this light, an outcome is legitimate to the extent its production has involved authentic deliberation on the part of people subject to it". Ultimately, debate as fostered within a deliberative democracy model "is not merely a means by which individuals seek to achieve ends", but rather a way to "foster an imaginative interplay of identities, interests, and perspectives that encourages evaluations and judgements from an enlarged viewpoint" (Torgerson, 1999). Proponents of deliberative democracy argue that political agents should invest their energies in expanding the spaces of deliberation, and indeed engaging in negotiations, mediations and discussion in public spheres that would lead to consensus, or at least a workable agreement, and eventually action on crucial societal issues.⁵ On the other hand, several political theorists (prominently Chantal Mouffe) emphasise the 'agonistic' side of democratic relations, arguing that a recognition of difference as a crucial ontological foundation concerning social interaction problematises (at the very least) the capacity of deliberative democracy to spur societal change towards social justice. Others focus on the "key democratic innovations" (Saward, 2001) of recent theorising with an eye towards identifying those ways in which the procedures of democracy might become institutionalised in civil society. Certain 'political devices' – for example, novel supranational institutions, active public spheres, new environmental and social institutions, more powerful local institutions – are seen to be capable of reconfiguring democratic institutions and norms (Saward, 2001).

We do not want to suggest there is wide agreement among theorists of alternative and radical variants of democracy. One of the axes of contestation, for example, strikes the heart of political theory:

A key division within contemporary political theory is, then, between theories which see contestation as the ineradicable lifeblood of democracy, and which tend to be suspicious of overly rationalistic, institutionally based definitions of democracy and justice; and theories which continue to emphasise the importance of defining procedures for arriving at agreement within which disputes and contestation can take place (Barnett, 2004).

Setting aside Barnett's challenging intervention for the moment,⁶ our broader point is that there are multiple divisions within the so-called radical and deliberative theorisations of democracy, but all tend to share an overarching dissatisfaction with more mainstream variants of political theory – and the rather uncritical discourse of 'democratisation' so characteristic of state agents – that overly glorify

⁴ A cursory overview would mention Mouffe, Habermas, Benhabib, Dryzek, Cohen and Rogers, and Tilly, among others. For a review (and critique) of these debates from a geographical perspective, see Barnett, 2004. See also the collected works in Barnett and Low, 2004 for detailed explorations of the intersections between contemporary human geography and democratic theory.

⁵ See the collected works in Benhabib, 1996 for defences, extensions and critiques of this argument.

⁶ Barnett's (2004) critique of radical democracy rests on the argument that the different ways that one engages in 'politics' or 'is political' can depend on more than the agonistic tendencies founded on inherent human 'difference' as a category of being. Accordingly, Barnett argues there are "multiple ways of being political [that] are not all expressive of an abiding, singular will-to-hostility". He describes other ways to express one's individual and collective political identities, including acts associated with "generosity, receptivity, or hospitality" (ibid).

democratic institutions to the neglect of democratic procedures and processes.⁷ This is a perspective certainly shared by those working within the rubrics of ecological and transnational democracy.

Ecological democracy

There are several ways in which the notion of 'ecological' democracy has been promoted and employed. For the majority of academics and practitioners, examining the linkages between environmental politics and democratic concerns, an idealised 'ecological' democracy is a polity in which the myriad ecological transformations that promise profound alterations in the biophysical conditions of the planet (e.g. climatic change, loss of biodiversity, declining water quality, deforestation) are integral to the decision-making processes of a given state society (Eckersley, 1998). Most green activists and thinkers would agree that current global environmental problems can only be solved "if ecological values are incorporated into the entire fabric of social life" (Mathews, 1996). As described at a recent seminar for NGO leaders from the tri-continental world organised by the Finland-based Siemenpuu Foundation, struggles over sustaining the environment cannot be divorced from struggles for democratic participation (Atarah, 2004).

One tension within discussions of ecological democracy concerns the relative anthropocentrism of the concept, vis-à-vis ecocentrism. Ecological democratisation as defined by Dryzek (1996) constitutes "any enhancement of democratic values in an ecological context that does not sacrifice ecological values, or any enhancement of ecological values that does not sacrifice democratic values". Dryzek's invocation of 'values' is telling, because he understands environmental politics primarily in human terms. However, ecological democracy might also extend a notion of 'rights' to the non-human world as well (see Eckersley, 1998).⁸ In this understanding, the "ecological stress is on adapting, renovating, and deepening democracy rather than replacing it, rendering it fair and inclusive with respect to non-human interests as well..." (Saward, 2001).⁹ We will return to this point later in our conclusion. One of our arguments concerning river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi concerns the extent to which NGOs mobilising on behalf of basin residents and ecosystems are actively including non-humans into the political sphere.

Notions of ecological democracy must also confront the extent to which a given state will or will not be amenable to ecological advocacy. Hunold and Dryzek (2002) highlight the importance of examining the different political contexts, revealed most prominently in the type of state, through which environmental advocates must operate. Any conception of a 'green', or ecologically mindful, state, within this view, would exhibit an orientation towards sustainability based on two primary functions of states: accumulation (or economic imperatives) and legitimacy. They mobilise their framework through a comparative study of the United States, Norway and Germany, and conclude that 'green states' are not the impossibility that some believe, but that a thorough understanding of the political-economic

⁷ Yet the debates highlighted above are remarkably neglectful of the particular historical-geographical conditions characteristic of the politics of environment and development in third-world locales, a claim we shall reinforce in our discussion of river-basin politics.

⁸ For Eckersley (1998), liberal democratic states and societies could become 'ecologized' by (1) providing some means of representation for non-humans, future generations and non-citizens in cases where transboundary processes impact regions beyond national territories; (2) investing in knowledge creation focused on ecological processes; (3) creating procedures and spaces that promote deliberative processes of expressing the "democratic will" than what current competitive procedures provide; and (4) refashioning the structures and institutions of environmental regulation and governance to promote more integrated responses to environmental degradation.

⁹ From a purely governmental, human perspective, elements of ecological democracy would include: moves towards greater transparency in state decision making via, for example, access to information rights; expanding deliberative processes concerning environmental management and governance; improving the representational structures of government to create more space for environmental concerns; solidifying the legal basis for deliberative processes, which might enhance "public power"; reconfiguring the "hierarchy of ministries" within the state to prioritize environmental governance; and altering constitutional provisions to make environmental concerns integral to state governance (Saward, 1998).

and historical-geographical contexts within which a particular state has evolved is a necessary precondition for contemplating and working towards green states.

Articulated somewhat differently, Saward (1998) argues that for greens, there is no transcending of the state along the lines of some of the more utopian strains of green political theory. The state must be taken as it currently exists: an extraordinarily complex set of actors and institutions whose cohesiveness is primarily a function of imperatives (namely, capital accumulation) that are antithetical to green objectives. Therefore, greens would be wise to direct their energies towards a more pragmatic political agenda, which should focus on democratising both state and society. As we shall see, the question of the role of the state takes on a crucial significance in the context of river- basin politics in the third world.

Transnational democracy

In this section, we briefly lay out some of the central tenets of transnational democracy, point to its applicability to river-basin politics, and examine the links between ecological and transnational variants of democratic theory. Like ecological democracy, advocates and analysts of transnational democracy perceive the emergence of social movements that seek to transcend the territorial and political boundaries of the nation state as a logical step to counter the perceived abuses of power by states and transnational corporate interests. As Anderson (2002) points out,

(...) some of the most novel, vigorous and democratically inspired developments of recent years are to be seen in transnational movements. They point towards a more participatory and non-territorial future: organizing functionally around a plethora of political issues – from the problems of labour, women, and refugees, to the environment, militarism and Third-World debt – they herald a new transnationalism.¹⁰

As a field of inquiry, transnational democracy – including the prominent variants 'cosmopolitan' democracy and 'global' democracy (see Holden, 2000) – comprises a diversity of epistemological positions and theoretical suppositions. Goodman (2002) offers a useful analytical framework for understanding the various shades of transnational democracy. Within this understanding, transnational democracy is largely a reaction to the concentration of economic, political and sociocultural power in the hands of transnational corporate agents, intergovernmental institutions, global media empires and private transnational agencies. The social movements mobilising to confront these power centres generally fall within one of three camps: globalist adaptation (favoured by liberal institutionalists); localist confrontation (associated with post-structural understandings of power); and transnational resistance (associated with Marxist or neo-Marxist understandings of world politics). As Goodman (2002) notes, "each of these models reflects a particular experience and interpretation of the dominant sources of power under globalisation, and each implies a particular understanding of the appropriate 'level' and most effective form of contestation". As we argue below, we find strains of all three models at work in the efforts of advocacy networks engaged in river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi. However, our understanding of transnational democracy, as advocated by these networks, tends to align closer with Goodman's explication of transnational resistance. We make this claim, in part, because the transnational resistance model emphasises *transnational* political strategies to protect *local* autonomy. In this fashion, it "grounds democratisation in transnational participation" (Goodman, 2002).

As in the case of ecological democracy, proponents and critics of transnational democracy – despite its claims of moving beyond state-centred politics – must account for the state. One important

¹⁰ Anderson (2002) cites four parallel processes that, in combination, have propelled transnational democracy on to the political landscape: a weakening of democracy at the level of the nation state; transnational governance arrangements (e.g. multilateral trade agreements) characterized by "democratic deficits"; a convergence towards, and dissatisfaction with, the liberal democratic state as the universal model; and increasing claims (generally from civil society) for the democratization of transnational arenas.

consideration is how a democratic form of governing might actually transcend national boundaries given the tight association between the state-centred model of governance and the attendant evolution of democratic institutions. Dryzek (1999), voicing caution about ascribing too much to the democratic potential of transnationalism, points out that

Collective choice in the contemporary international system is at best only a thinly democratic affair, at most thoroughly undemocratic. It is thinly democratic when nation-states gather and negotiate on international agreements; at best, this is democracy at one remove, piggybacking on any degree of democracy present in the states involved.¹¹

Building on this point, we can state that the transnational democratisation that we are interested in drawing attention to in the Mekong and Zambezi basins is definitely not the form that might be associated with recent international agreements concerning the respective basins. Indeed, we contend that current institutional arrangements for governing each basin are in many ways anti-ecological and anti-democratic (Sneddon and Fox, 2006).¹²

The foregoing discussion of ecological and transnational democracy begs the obvious question of how the two notions might be connected in theory and practice. The links between the ecological and transnational variants of radical democracy find their most compelling support in the work of John Dryzek. In analyzing the discourse of 'sustainable development' (despite its numerous conceptual shortcomings), Dryzek (1999) argues that

(t)he actors and agents highlighted in the discourse are not realism's states or market liberalism's economic actors, but rather political bodies above and below the state, international organizations and citizens' groups of various kinds. Thus sustainable development is a discourse of and for international civil society... Sustainable development's function in the international system is to provide a conceptual meeting place for many actors, and a shared set of assumptions for their communication and joint action... Just as one can nowhere see or even envisage a true democracy, one cannot see or envisage true sustainable development.

Dryzek (1999) thus sees discourses of sustainable development, and the social movements that adopt such discourses, as the political sphere where deliberative, ecological and transnational understandings of democracy and democratisation come together.

WHAT CONSTITUTES 'RIVER-BASIN POLITICS'?

Building on the above discussion, our understanding of 'river-basin politics' makes us attempt to interpret the 'ecological' and 'transnational' strains of democratic theory and draw out what may be useful in these notions for interpreting struggles over the river-basin development. Part of our aim in these debates is to examine the actors and strategies that explicitly seek to frame the Mekong and

¹¹ Indeed, one of the central debates concerning transnational democracy revolves around the question of democratizing existing *inter-national* (or global) norms and institutions versus the creation of novel transnational spaces – or political scales – that in effect transcend the current global political system. The former route is regarded with suspicion by some analysts who see transnational democracy as yet another instrument of western (read United States) hegemony towards relatively powerless third-world state-societies, or perceive it as deflecting attention away from critical issues in the domestic sphere (Schmitz, 2004).

¹² Both the 1995 Agreement for the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin and the 2000 Protocol on Shared Watercourses in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Region (which encompass and take precedence over an earlier, Zambezi-specific agreement and an earlier SADC-oriented agreement) construct the basins as 'objects of development' (see Mitchell, 1995) and make no explicit allowances for the participation of non-state actors in river-basin governance (nor do they explicitly *exclude* the participation of non-state actors). In addition, we are not examining the geopolitical relationships among the different states of each basin. While intriguing, and certainly an important factor for considering processes of democratization, our focus is on the local-global array of actors and institutions that constitute river-basin politics as something different from (perhaps less than and more than) conventional geopolitics.

Zambezi basins either as, for example, 'development engines', 'livelihood systems' or 'conservation regions'.¹³ We are thus interested in how political strategies are performed in both basins, and also what the outcomes of political struggles (many of which are ongoing) might mean for the ecologies and communities of these complex, hybrid entities. We thus interpret river-basin politics as the contestations and collaborations among different actors seeking to articulate, define and advance – through discourses, policies, coercion and other means – a particular relationship between, on the one hand, human livelihood and economic activities and, on the other, river-basin processes involving hydrological and ecological dynamics (e.g. flow regimes, aquatic organisms, channel-floodplain relationships).

In both the Mekong and Zambezi basins, river-basin politics describes the extent to which access to resources and alteration of ecosystems enhances the power of some actors, generally at the expense of others. Because the costs and benefits associated with river-basin development are distributed unequally, and due to the profound interconnections between social and natural systems in these basins, these are especially appropriate cases for an investigation of the shifting power relations that are at the centre of environmental politics. It is important to understand that access to resources is an aspect of power relations that differs from actor to actor. For fisherfolk in Cambodia, power may be enhanced by continued access to a healthy fishery, or for an expansion of livelihood opportunities via other means. For the government of Laos, power might derive from the development of an export market for hydroelectricity. For an international environmental NGO, power might be expressed through a successful campaign to influence an international funder of a large dam. Both the diversity of actors and the different values they assign to basin resources make the politics especially complex.

The river-basin politics of the Mekong and Zambezi basins also require us to think carefully about the usefulness of current debates on ecological and transnational democracy by virtue of their intersection with the broader characteristics of third-world politics. Most of the recent debates surrounding political theory dealing with democracy have been initiated within, and focused on, the political dynamics of the global north/first world. This is a point forcefully presented by Ilan Kapoor (2002) who argues that Habermas and Mouffe (two titans of literature on theorising democracy) do not "take the Third World or Western colonialism/imperialism into consideration in their democratic theories". More specifically, the variants of democratic theory flowing from Habermas and Mouffe are particularly negligent in their failures to confront two basic characteristics of third-world politics: the relative importance of economic and material conditions of existence in third-world societies, and the significant role of the state (*ibid*).

Regarding Kapoor's first point, what stands out about river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi cases is that the struggles among actors are fundamentally about access to, and use of, water and water-related resources. Whereas basin states prioritise commodification of the rivers' resources in terms of energy production (hydroelectricity) and agricultural input (irrigation), the basins' millions of residents see water and water-related resources largely in livelihood terms – for household consumption, as a key resource for food production, and as an important subsistence and a source of commercial fisheries. Moreover, from colonial times to the present, conflicts between state and community in both basins have revolved around struggles over the control and utilisation of resources. This is where a political ecology perspective (see Bryant and Bailey, 1997) becomes useful because it emphasises that 'environmental' politics in the third world arise from a nexus of capitalist economic development (or more aptly accumulation through dispossession), ecological transformation and struggles to maintain resource-dependent livelihoods. This immediately calls into question any simple invocation of 'ecological' democracy as a panacea. For the river-basin politics we describe below,

¹³ Both the Mekong and Zambezi have historically been the focus of several prominent initiatives on the part of international conservation organizations such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and Conservation International (CI) amongst others. While these international NGOs are certainly crucial political agents (see Sneddon, 2006), our focus here is on the activities of national and regional NGOs.

'ecological' democracy is perhaps better seen as flowing from efforts to enhance, more broadly, participatory democracy and the democratisation of development decision making.

Echoing Kapoor's second point, the various roles of the third-world developmental state (see Leftwich, 2000) are also crucial to any understanding of river-basin politics, due in part to the power of states to intervene in river systems through development projects, and in part to the questions that arise concerning sovereignty, territoriality and transnational governance (and by affiliation transnational democracy) among states that share water resources. For example, western-oriented democratic theorists have had little to say about the 'burning issue' of transnational governance (examples include international trade regimes and international environmental agreements) and its impact on third-world states. As Kapoor (2002) notes", more than ever, Western hegemony and the loss of Third World national control point to a need for transnational democratic governance". Kapoor contends that a transnational democratisation is more than a futile theoretical exercise, but rather a normative aim that would, if implemented, have a transformative effect on how economic development, among other political-economic processes, is carried out. Here again a consideration of the character and dynamics of third-world states is critical. Transnational democratisation, expressed in part by the activities of non-state actors such as the ones we highlight below, may provide a vehicle for the emergence of "alternative mechanisms of global environmental governance" (Conca, 2006) that create opportunities for third-world states to pursue more equitable and ecologically sustainable development strategies. However, it is unlikely that specific regimes in the Global South which derive part of their political legitimacy and economic power from formal, state-centric international governance arrangements – environmental or otherwise – will support such mechanisms. This sets the stage for conflicts over river-basin development, whereby state actors promoting formal regimes in both basins may be more concerned with conventional development and management of resources, while non-state actors promoting alternative governance models are more likely to be sympathetic to livelihood and ecological concerns.

What of our original contention that environmental politics in the context of struggles over river-basin development contributes to broader processes of democratisation? Scholars of ecological democracy have pointed out how, in a western context, a host of processes – public hearings, right-to-know laws, alternative conflict-resolution methods and public inquiries – have contributed to a general opening up of the political system (Dryzek, 1996). Furthermore, this opening up of deliberative spaces may itself reinforce and strengthen environmental policies and regulations:

The significance of new forms of environmental degradation may be more rapidly brought into the open; a fuller picture of the social and ecological interconnections among issues may be built up; and a wider range of public policy options can emerge and be subject to critical scrutiny (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 1996).

In effect, adherents of ecological democracy see environmental politics and deliberative democracy as mutually supportive. Yet these claims presuppose a set of legal, cultural and political institutions and mechanisms – ones that define more or less a liberal democracy – that look quite different when examining the societies constituting the Mekong and Zambezi basins. Again, Kapoor's arguments about the western bias in debates over radical democracy and democratisation, primarily through their failure to appreciate the political dynamics characteristic of third-world societies, are a compelling reply to an uncritical enthusiasm for deliberative models of participatory democracy.

Thus, our goal is in part to contribute to a more general rethinking of the potential utility of various 'radical' democracies to the historical geographical contingencies of contemporary third-world politics (see Kapoor, 2002). Part of this re-theorisation, we suggest, must include cases such as the river-basin politics we describe as constitutive of, rather than simply a reflective of, a politics of democracy. In other words, we seek a potential displacement of 'democracy' – whatever its normative understanding – from its 'normal' residence within the western political theory. Some of this might occur through a more thorough grounding of democratic theory in recognition of the material bases of third-world

politics – and thus the limitations of an 'ecological' democracy that is not directly linked to resource-dependent livelihoods – and the particular characteristics of third-world developmental states. Despite this claim, we also recognise the deep penetration of western understandings of democracy in both the regions we examine. Perhaps even more important to river-basin politics, we also recognise the overwhelming influence of a discourse of development – and its attendant strategies, techniques and practices – on the riparian states of each basin. Indeed, the river-basin-/water-oriented social movements emerging in each basin face the fundamental challenge of confronting 'development' – arguably a quintessentially "modern, Western notion" (see Escobar, 1995) – with an agenda of 'democratisation', another concept with strong western overtones.

RIVER-BASIN POLITICS IN THE MEKONG AND ZAMBEZI BASINS

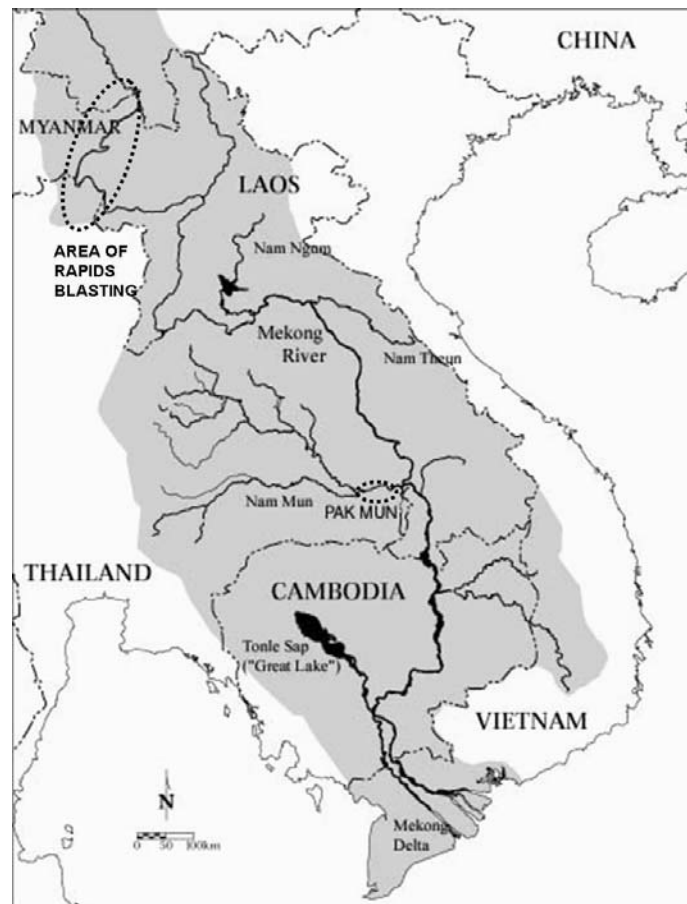
We introduce this section by identifying several of the political-economic and social forces that are broadly common to both the Mekong and Zambezi as a way of defining what we call 'river-basin politics' in each basin. These processes include certain aspects of economic globalisation (primarily those associated with its 'neo-liberal' variant); regional economic integration, or regionalisation (acknowledging the role of each basin's hegemonic geopolitical power, a crude but useful label); how the intertwined processes of economic globalisation and regionalisation have coalesced, at least in the strategies of each basin's riparian states, around the notion of hydropower development; and the responses to these political-economic processes in the form of ecological transformations and the emergence of social movements focused on water resources development. While differing significantly in terms of important biophysical and socioeconomic characteristics, not to mention governance arrangements, both the Mekong and Zambezi basins (and the resources they encompass – forests, flowing water, animal products, agricultural lands) are, in the early 21st century, being steadily brought into the orbit of global forces of political-economic transformation. This is hardly a novel process, but the array of processes sketched above (e.g. economic globalisation combined with state-driven developmentalism) have lent new urgency to the political struggles over the basins' resources.

Since the early 1990s, the six state countries with territory within the Mekong basin (China, Myanmar, Lao PDR, Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam; see figure 1) – in tandem with transnational allies such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) – have initiated multiple development forums and capital investment funds designed to attract private investment to the Mekong region (Stensholt, 1996). The river itself is seen as a crucial developmental resource in terms of hydroelectric production and riverine transport of goods (Akatsuka and Asaeda, 1996). Despite the historical differences in the economic growth models employed by the Mekong states, all share an unswerving commitment to rapid commodification of their respective resource bases, a process that has already resulted in widespread ecological disruption, especially as evidenced in Thailand throughout the past two decades and at an accelerated pace in the other countries over the last ten years (Hussey, 1993; Malhotra, 1999; Hirsch and Mørck Jensen, 2006). Hydroelectric development in the Mekong (part of which would entail a cascade of up to 12 massive dams on the river's main channel) is perceived by the states,¹⁴ the intergovernmental institution responsible for spurring cooperation (the Mekong River Commission, or MRC),¹⁵ and the host of multilateral and bilateral aid agencies funding Mekong-related development programs as a key, if not *the* key, means of spurring economic growth and industrialisation.

¹⁴ China – which along with Myanmar has never been party to international agreements concerning cooperative development of the Mekong – completed the construction of two large-scale hydroelectric dams on the Lancang river (the Mekong as it flows through Yunnan province) in the 1990s, and has plans to build at least seven more large hydroelectric schemes.

¹⁵ The MRC consists of three permanent bodies: the MRC Council (representatives of each riparian state at the ministerial level), the MRC Joint Committee (riparian representatives at the department-head level), and the MRC Secretariat, the technical and administrative body. The semi-permanent Donor's Consultative Group consists of representatives from donor countries and cooperating agencies (Chooduangnern, 1996).

Figure 1. Mekong river basin showing locations discussed in text.



A similar dynamic exists in the Zambezi basin (encompassing portions of the national territories of Angola, Namibia, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, Malawi and Mozambique; see figure 2), although the historical trajectories of development, and indeed the political construction of each basin as 'transnational', have proceeded via different routes. Indeed, the Zambezi has already experienced significant alteration via the construction of the Kariba dam (on the border between Zambia and Zimbabwe) and the Cahora Bassa dam (in Mozambique's Tête province), which were constructed during southern Africa's colonial era and originally served to substantiate colonial domination of the region (see Isaacman and Sneddon, 2000). Despite the horrendous sociocultural, economic and ecological track records of these two large hydroelectric schemes (in particular Cahora Bassa), the Zambezi's hydroelectric potential figures strongly in regional discourses of development (Swatuk, 1996):

The desire for hydroelectric power [for the states of Southern Africa] is compelling and overwhelming. The provision of power for industrial development, the prospect of steady source of foreign exchange deriving from, for example, the sale of hydroelectric power, fish exports, and tourism, among others, in addition to the creation of numerous jobs in seriously debt-distressed national economies, are clearly hard to resist.

The Republic of South Africa – via its enormous energy utility ESKOM – perceives hydroelectric development in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (including new projects along the Zambezi) as a key part of its plans to meet increasing electricity demand within the country and integrate regional energy transmission under the rubric of the aforementioned Southern African Power Pool (SAPP). South Africa has also proposed several interbasin transfer schemes to withdraw water directly from the main channel of the Zambezi in order to supply its water-scarce northern

provinces (Swatuk, 2002). As the developments surrounding hydroelectric development and interbasin transfer projects in the Zambezi and broader SADC region indicate, South Africa's capacity to influence the direction of water resources development mirrors China's economic and political influence in the Mekong (see below).

Figure 2. Zambezi river basin showing locations discussed in text.



Critics of the development trajectories sketched above, citing the dubious legacies of past efforts to undertake large-scale river alteration via damming and other infrastructural development (see WCD, 2000; McCully, 2001) argue that current plans for rapid basin transformation will entail a host of deleterious socio-ecological consequences: massive displacements and resettlement programmes for the thousands of people in each basin whose communities correspond to future reservoirs; permanent disruption of natural flow regimes that sustain, particularly in the case of the Mekong, productive fisheries and the communities who depend on them;¹⁶ a cascade of ecological impacts including disruption of, in the Zambezi, a globally recognised wetland ecosystem in the deltaic region and an economically important estuarine fishery; and long-term, unpredictable effects on the rivers' eco-hydrological characteristics that stand to increase human vulnerabilities and test ecosystem resilience in innumerable ways. Social movements in the Mekong and Zambezi that are contesting state designs on the basin's resources are perhaps best characterised as networks (or coalitions) that operate locally, nationally and transnationally. These networks are composed of community-based organisations (particularly in the Mekong), local and national NGOs of specific countries, international advocacy

¹⁶ In the Mekong, at least 40 million rural people are active in some aspects of the basin's fishery (Sverdrup-Jensen, 2002). 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). Furthermore, 2 million tons of fish and other aquatic animals are consumed in the basin each year, at a total estimated value of US\$1.2 billion (Sverdrup-Jensen, 2002). 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).

groups,¹⁷ and an assortment of academics, media members and (on occasion) sympathetic government officials.

At a more theoretical level, a central feature of the networks we highlight in each basin concerns their calls for participatory democracy at a transnational geographical scale and at transnational levels of formal governance. Regarding the question of geographical scale, development interventions (e.g. impoundments, water transfers) in river systems shared by more than one state are by definition transnational in their effects. The transboundary character of ecological problems in the Mekong and Zambezi "has highlighted an increasing lack of correspondences between those who make decisions, those who possess the relevant knowledge, those who are responsible for decisions, and those who are affected by them" (Eckersley, 1998). Regarding the focus on transnational institutions, advocacy networks in the Mekong and Zambezi perceive severe 'democratic deficits' (see Moravcsik, 2004) in the way that current institutional arrangements for governing the basins operate.

The democratic opposition to neo-liberal forces, which by definition lacks the transnational representative institutions it wants to see established, necessarily emphasizes participatory democracy. Ideally complementing representation, participatory forms are more amenable to border crossing, escaping the limitations and problems of territoriality and state sovereignty, and 'oiling the wheels' of 'multi-level governance' (Anderson, 2002).

Advocacy networks in both places interpret river-basin politics as a dynamic response to the fundamentally transboundary character of the biophysical processes that are an important source of livelihoods for basin residents, *and* as a means of enhancing transnational representation.

Our focus here is on the transnational advocacy networks (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) that have emerged in the last decade and are directly involved in river-basin politics. For the sake of brevity, we concentrate primarily on the activities of two specific organisations – the Southeast Asia Rivers Network (SEARIN) and the Network of Advocacy for Water Issues in Southern Africa (NAWISA). While quite different in organisational structure and political strategies, both advocate participatory democracy as key to reforming current institutional arrangements for governing the Mekong and Zambezi basins.¹⁸ In addition, we argue, both serve as critical nodes of democratisation (ecological and transnational) in the larger politics of each basin.¹⁹ It should be noted, however, that neither advocacy network is immune from criticism. It is not our goal to uncritically celebrate the activities of either transnational advocacy networks or the NGOs that comprise such networks. As recent literature on the intersection among advocacy, political change and democratisation has shown, any assumptions regarding the inherent effectiveness of NGOs and advocacy networks as agents of political change are deeply problematic (Hudson, 2001; Mercer, 2002). Our intent is to highlight the activities of two environmental advocacy networks both of which operate in a transnational setting, and interpret their recent activities in light of thinking on ecological and transnational democracy.

¹⁷ International Rivers (IR), formerly the International Rivers Network (IRN), has been a prominent presence in the river-basin politics of both regions. The IR perceives itself as a global watchdog for safeguarding river-basin integrity and the livelihoods of those people (primarily in the global south) confronted with large-scale water development projects. The IR has consistently drawn attention to the negative socio-ecological impacts of large dams over the past three decades, and supports local and national campaigns throughout the world to oppose the construction of large-scale projects. It has been very active in both the Mekong and Zambezi regions by fomenting international media coverage of anti-dam campaigns, offering technical expertise on the effects of large dams, and serving as an informal consultant on political strategy with NGOs in both basins (interview with IR staff, August 2003). The IR has also drawn criticism from a host of third-world governments that perceive its aims as antithetical to economic development and hypocritical by virtue of its location in, historically, one of the largest dam-building nations in the world, the United States.

¹⁸ 'Participatory democracy' is distinguished from 'liberal democracy' (where the emphasis is more on representation through elected bodies than on direct action by civil society) by the former's "more varied, flexible and often non-territorial, functional social basis" (Anderson, 2002).

¹⁹ While space precludes a full exegesis of the topic, we do acknowledge the limitations of NGOs as agents of transnational democracy (see Hirsch, 2002 and Kamat, 2004).

The case of the Mekong

Over the past two decades, several NGOs have been at the forefront of articulating an alternative vision of Mekong development, one that counters the developmentalist vision set forth by the riparian governments (and more or less mediated through the formal mechanisms of cooperative Mekong governance) embodied by the Mekong River Commission (MRC). Although based in Thailand, the Southeast Asian Rivers Network (SEARIN) has become a hub within a broader coalition of dam-affected communities throughout the Mekong region and an array of local and national NGOs. As described in their public-relations material, SEARIN "is a campaign-based organization, working to support local community rights to their rivers and to oppose threats to rivers and riverine ecosystems in mainland Southeast Asia, such as large dams and water diversion projects". It was created in the late 1990s by a group of Thai activists and academics who had worked on a variety of campaigns centred on the struggles of communities to assert their livelihood rights in the face of large-scale state development projects. Thailand's 'environmental' movement is tightly interwoven with social movements concerning community development, women's rights, farmers' struggles, and urban workers' rights (see Hirsch, 1997), although the plethora of NGOs aligned within these movements do not always see eye to eye in terms of broader political strategies (Lertchoosakul, 2003).²⁰ SEARIN's efforts to promote participatory democracy in the Mekong context have been twofold: (1) focus attention on the shortcomings of the Thai state's development model and its disruptive socio-ecological effects (e.g. via promotion of large dams, or other water resources development projects) where the Mekong basin overlaps the Thai national territory; and (2) hold the 'official' transnational institutions (i.e. the Mekong River Commission, bilateral donors, international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank) with responsibility for governing, for investing in, or for otherwise intervening in the Mekong and other basins in Southeast Asia.

From its inception, SEARIN's central goals have revolved around 'opening up' democratic and transnational spaces in order to advance participatory democracy in the context of discussions and negotiations over the construction and impacts of large dams. Representatives see themselves as key intermediaries between states and communities (particularly rural communities), giving voice to the latter's livelihood concerns, but in a way that strives to let community members speak for themselves.²¹ This strategy perhaps reached its most effective levels in the (occasionally violent) deliberations over the future of the Pak Mun hydroelectric project in northeast Thailand, an anti-dam campaign wherein SEARIN staff members have played, and continue to play, key roles.²² More recently, China's efforts to begin blasting a series of rapids – in the Mekong's mainstream both near the Thai town of Chiang Khong (in northern Thailand where the Mekong briefly forms the border between Thailand and Lao PDR) and upstream along the Laos-Myanmar border – to facilitate navigation and the transport of goods from Yunnan province to downstream locales have become one of SEARIN's focal campaigns. Another key campaign centres on the Salween river development debate. A brief survey of the 'river blasting/navigation improvement' conflict helps frame some of our broader questions concerning transnational and ecological democracy in the Mekong.

The Upper Mekong River Navigation Channel Improvement Project is designed to enable commercial navigation – primarily for 300- to 500-ton Chinese vessels – along an 886-kilometre stretch of the river from Simao (Yunnan province, China) to the city of Luang Prabang in Laos. Brought into existence by an

²⁰ Thailand's rather relatively strong and effective network of NGOs emerged from democratization struggles in the mid-1970s, when many of the country's activists were forced into hiding in the wake of the rise to power of successive military regimes. Many pro-democracy activists of the 1970s – after aligning with the armed insurgents of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) or working quietly with community development organizations – re-entered political life by fostering the rise of NGOs throughout the 1980s and 1990s (see Ungpakorn, 2003).

²¹ Interview with Pianporn Deetes (SEARIN Project Coordinator) and Dr. Chayan Vaddhanaputi (SEARIN Advisor and founding member), Chiang Mai, Thailand, 8 November 2004.

²² See Lertchoosakul, 2003 for an incisive analysis of the complex role of different NGOs engaged in the campaign in opposition to the Pak Mun project.

Agreement signed by China, Myanmar, Laos and Thailand in 2001, blasting of rapids and reefs along the stretch (to be followed by dredging operations in a later phase) began in 2002. Local communities, in alliance with NGOs such as SEARIN, along this reach of the Mekong quickly expressed concerns that blasting would do irrevocable harm to a number of locally crucial fisheries (Oasawa et al., 2003). As two representatives of Thai villages located near the blasting activities in Chiang Khong province angrily attest, the lack of democratic processes in the navigation improvement project has been apparent.

The livelihoods of local people and the local environment were not addressed in the report [an environmental impact assessment carried out by the Thai government and approved roughly two weeks prior to blasting]. There was no mention of what would happen in Chiang Khong. The responsible people never consult with the local people. The Port Authority [the office responsible for overseeing the blasting] never had a public hearing, never met with the community. People only know what is going on when the blasting begins. [We are concerned about] the high water and the shoals and rapids are part of a holistic system upon which fish depend. When we asked the authorities about the blasting, they said 'do not call it blasting, call it extraction'. This is our life, our home – islands with rapids are essential for fish.²³

SEARIN became engaged with the conflict over the blasting of rapids near Chiang Khong upon hearing reports from community-based NGOs in the project area that fishing families had noticed an array of odd environmental cues regarding river flows and channel morphology (e.g. unexpected river fluctuations, bank erosion, appearance of previously invisible sand bars).²⁴ They subsequently worked (and continue to work) with some of the riverine communities to create a variety of public forums (conferences, workshops) for shedding light on the socio-ecological impacts of the navigation improvement project and villagers' grievances, and enlisted allies (e.g. Thai academics, media representatives) to call into question the Thai state's role in advancing the project. Eventually, as more of the Thai state's questionable brokering of the project came to light, blasting was suspended in April 2003, although China has *since* consistently pushed the project forward.²⁵ While environmental considerations (e.g. the devastating impacts the blasting and later dredging activities would have on local fisheries) have been central to the anti-blasting campaign, such questions are always related directly to the livelihood concerns of those communities who stand to be most affected by the activities of the project. While efforts to democratise Mekong decision making thus have an explicit 'ecological' orientation, this component is seen as effective only insofar as environmental processes are connected to the materiality of basin residents' daily lives.

At the level of transnational advocacy, the anti-blasting campaign (along with SEARIN's other Mekong and Salween-oriented projects) is one strand among dozens of narratives promulgated by transnational advocacy networks in the Mekong region to emphasise the lack of democratic processes, including spaces of deliberation, involved in river-basin development. SEARIN and other NGOs point out that the institutional mechanism responsible for engendering cooperative arrangements, conducting studies and developing state-state mechanisms for 'sustainable development' of the Mekong – the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat – had been negligent in either not taking a stronger role in 'managing' the project to ensure it had fully considered harmful socio-ecological impacts or, perhaps worse, not fully realising that the agreement signed by two of its member states (Thailand and Laos) had been created in the first place. SEARIN used this occurrence to press forward its claims that the MRC Secretariat, without much greater levels of participation in its decision-making apparatuses, is an

²³ Messrs Somkiat Kheunchiangsa and Niwat Roikaew, speaking at Mekong Dialogue, a forum organized by Oxfam in November 2002.

²⁴ Interview with Pianporn Deetes, 8 November 2004.

²⁵ Ironically, it was an appeal to conventional security concerns that may have played a key role in getting the Thai government to suspend the rapids-blasting part of the navigation improvement project. Riverine communities in Chiang Khong pointed out – via letters to local and national government agencies, and via media coverage of public conferences – that blasting of the Mekong could alter the river's channel to such an extent as to alter the geopolitical boundary between Laos and Thailand, possibly to the benefit of the former.

ineffective transnational mechanism for ensuring the sustainability of livelihoods and ecosystems in the Mekong.²⁶ The MRC Secretariat counters that it can create and maintain a participatory sphere (or indeed a 'public' sphere) for non-state actors, and act in a way that addresses non-state actors' ecological and democratic aims, only in tandem with the riparian states' developmental goals. According to a staff member of the MRC Secretariat,

What has to be understood is that the MRC Secretariat is not the decision-making arm of the MRC. The Joint Committee, consisting of the National Mekong Committees of the member states, holds all the legal rights to make decisions regarding the direction of the MRC Secretariat. They are our masters in terms of the ability to develop programs, establish priorities, etc.²⁷

In other words, the intergovernmental MRC, and its administrative arm, the MRC Secretariat, are utterly beholden to the riparian states, their collective discourse of Mekong development and on who should be allowed to participate in Mekong politics.

Such arguments raise a host of questions concerning the relative effectiveness of SEARIN and other groups' focus on the MRC Secretariat, an outgrowth of Mekong network's more general strategy of seeking to open up a more democratic transnational space focused on Mekong development. As alluded to above, a crucial fulcrum of political conflict in the Mekong (and, incidentally, in nearly all third-world transnational basins) is the confrontation between the riparian states' vociferous defence of national sovereignty to the exclusion of virtually all other social goals, and the insistence of the non-governmental critics (i.e. basin-oriented advocacy networks) that democratisation in terms of environmental decision making would lead to livelihood and ecological sustainability. Nearly all advocacy networks in the Mekong (with the partial exception of efforts in Thailand; but see Simpkins, 2003) have effectively turned away from efforts to democratise the politics of the respective basin states. It is crucial to note that many of the reasons SEARIN and other NGOs, such as the Bangkok-based Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA), have been hesitant to engage more directly in democratisation are simply pragmatic and shared by NGOs worldwide: limited funding; a limited number of staff persons; and a high rate of staff turnover. Moreover, NGOs in Thailand – and in many other places characterised by authoritarian governments – must confront the very real danger that the state will use extra-legal means of coercion (e.g. threats, direct violence) to intimidate political opponents.

Ultimately, in the Mekong, where the riparian states of the basin retain the most direct political-economic power to direct river-basin development and environmental governance, assisting in the formation of more democratic governments (which would presumably create a greater willingness to rethink current Mekong development trajectories) has never been a central component of NGO strategies. While this should not detract from the substantial ways in which Mekong advocacy networks have promoted ecological and transnational democracy, it does serve as a warning about the relative effectiveness of initiatives to democratise inter-state institutions *sans* a concomitant political project of reforming domestic political institutions.²⁸

²⁶ The MRC (and its previous incarnation the Mekong Committee) has consistently been the focus of criticism emanating from NGOs in the region because it is perceived as the key institutional locus whereby 'development' of the river basin occurs. Conversely, many argue that the MRC, and its operational branch, the MRC Secretariat, is a 'paper tiger' that does not have the authority or political capital to promote a more ecologically just and livelihood-oriented form of development in the Mekong against the wishes of basin states (see Hirsch and Mørck Jensen, 2006).

²⁷ Interview with Ann Lund, then Basin Development Plan Advisor, Natural Resources Planning Division, Mekong River Commission, 16 July 2003. The MRC also encompasses the MRC Joint Council, cabinet-level officials from the member states, the MRC Joint Committee and senior officials from water-related departments or ministries.

²⁸ On this point, Forsyth (2007) argues that environmentalism in Thailand over the past three decades has indeed contributed to an opening up of democratic spaces, but the environmental norms held by different social groups within Thailand's 'environmental' movement are of diverse origin, and contribute to democratization processes in complex ways.

The case of the Zambezi

In ways similar to the case of the Mekong, river-basin politics in the Zambezi basin in recent years has centred on the desire of basin states and international financial institutions to see Zambezi resources converted into commodities for the benefit of national economic growth. As sketched in the introduction to this section, Zambezi's potential to produce vast amounts of electricity has taken priority over other social and environmental goals, such as ensuring environmental flows in the river sufficient to meet the ecosystem and livelihood needs of basin residents.²⁹ Perhaps even more so than the Mekong, transformation of the Zambezi, in part because of how it is linked to global financial networks and regional energy politics, must be set within the broader context of water development in the SADC region.³⁰ In order to set the stage for a discussion of the efforts by a recent transnational advocacy network in the region, we briefly turn to a concrete case of hydroelectric development in the Zambezi, the Mphanda Nkuwa hydroelectric project and efforts by the dam's critics to raise questions about its social and ecological sustainability.

The Mphanda Nkuwa hydropower project emerged as a priority project for the Mozambican government in the late 1990s following a series of feasibility studies regarding how to most effectively develop the hydroelectric potential of the Lower Zambezi valley (entirely within Mozambique), the downstream region of the transnational Zambezi river basin in Southern Africa. The completed dam, to be built at a cost of roughly US\$2.5 billion, would have an installed electricity-generating capacity of somewhere between 1,300-2,500 MW and would sit 70 kilometres downstream of the Cahora Bassa project, a large dam initiated by the Portuguese colonial government in the early 1970s.³¹ Promoters of Mphanda Nkuwa within the Mozambican government, most prominently officials with the Ministry of Mineral Resources and Energy, were quite clear from its inception that the project could only go forward with private-sector involvement in the form of transnational capital.³² Accordingly, the government announced in April 2006 that China's Export-Import Bank had agreed to finance construction of the dam. Although the government has not yet finalised approval of the project, financial discussions are slated to begin in 2008 and construction on the project may begin as early as 2009 ("Mozambique to approve", 2007).

Other aspects of Mphanda Nkuwa also highlight the transnational networks necessary to conceive of, finance, construct and operate the project. The feasibility study for the dam, carried out in two stages from 1999 to 2002, was financed by grants from Germany, France and Norway and carried out by a consortium of international consultants (Lahmeyer International, Electricité de France and Knight Piesold) (African Energy Intelligence, 2003). Furthermore, the market for electricity produced by Mphanda Nkuwa is clearly regional in scope. The transmission infrastructure will cost an estimated US\$1.7 to US\$2.3 billion ("Mozambique to approve", 2007), and is expected to be a key component of the regional Southern African Power Pool (SAPP), a plan originated in South Africa to coordinate the partially independent and nationalised energy production and distribution systems of the region that would "promote system reliability and meet growing electricity demands at the lowest possible costs"

²⁹ This question of environmental flows has become a critical discourse of conservation politics in the Zambezi (and also in the Mekong, albeit to a lesser extent). In general, international conservation groups, in alliance with a host of national-level NGOs and sympathetic environmental professionals in South Africa, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana and other basin countries, argue that the ecological and social benefits of maintaining the historically defined hydrological regimes (including seasonal changes between wet and dry seasons) of the Zambezi and other southern African rivers as close to a 'natural' state as possible far outweigh the economic benefits of large-scale transformation of the river through infrastructural development (see Dyson et al., 2003).

³⁰ See Ali, 1999, for a discussion of water-specific issues in SADC and Taylor, 2003, on the political economy of regional economic integration in southern Africa.

³¹ For an examination of the social and environmental history of the Cahora Bassa project and the transnational politics associated with recent developments concerning Cahora Bassa, see Isaacman and Sneddon, 2000.

³² According to Castigo Langa, the then Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources in Mozambique, the government is "aware of the role the private sector can play in the development of national energy infrastructure, both for its enormous capacity to mobilize necessary financial resources and for its potential in fostering efficiency and competitiveness..." (Langa, 2002).

(Lopes and Kundishora, 2000). Electricity demand in South Africa is expected to increase from the present-day level of approximately 36,000 MW to 42,000 MW by 2010. Finally, the actual operation of Mphanda Nkuwa's dam and transmission lines would most likely be carried out by non-Mozambican private companies under the rubric of a build-operate-transfer (BOT) scheme whereby foreign firms would eventually turn over control to a Mozambican public-private partnership.

Various researchers and NGOs have criticised the project on the grounds that it is ecologically unsustainable and promotes existing inequities in Mozambique. Livaningo, a Maputo-based NGO concerned with environmental justice, and Justiça Ambiental! (a water-oriented offshoot of Livaningo) have drawn attention to several shortcomings in the project's environmental impact assessment (EIA), including a lack of attention to the dam's downstream social and ecological consequences. Critics of Mphanda Nkuwa also argue it will provide few benefits to the region's 3 million or so rural inhabitants and will weaken ongoing efforts to restore Zambezi river flows in the ecologically sensitive deltaic region of the basin, and underestimate the dangers of constructing such a huge project in a seismically active area (Lemos and Ribeiro, 2007). Using the report published by the commissioners of the World Commission on Dams (WCD) as a guide on how to improve the environmental performance and public accountability of large dams, Livaningo and Justiça Ambiental! have been engaged in numerous dialogues with the government and the international donor community about how to promote genuine participation by dam-affected communities in negotiations and decision making over the construction of water infrastructural projects. In a way that parallels the global financial and political networks necessary to fund and build Mphanda Nkuwa, both NGOs contributed to the formation of NAWISA, a transnational advocacy network designed to democratise water resources development in the SADC region.

In part because of its relatively recent creation, NAWISA has played less of a direct role in the river-basin politics of the Zambezi than is the case with SEARIN and the Mekong. What we highlight here is, first, the diversity of the network and, second, NAWISA's stated goal of assuming a position as transnational network representing civil society, in response to the transnational development networks composed of state- and market-based actors poised to further transform the Zambezi. NAWISA was initiated in 2001 under the guidance of the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), a South African NGO that has combined scientifically rigorous critiques of water resources development projects with direct advocacy on water resources policy. As stated in its mission statement, the member organisations of NAWISA (with NGO representatives in Mozambique, Zambia, South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola, Malawi and Namibia) strive "to work together to advocate for the sustainable management of Southern African water resources through effective participation of civil society".

One of NAWISA's central challenges is accommodation of the very different political identities of its member NGOs, contingent on a number of historical factors surrounding the broader state-society relations in each nation, in a way that still demonstrates a shared commitment to ecological and transnational democracy.³³ The Mozambican members (see above) tend to assume a more confrontational mantle when challenging the state; in contrast, the Zambian representative – Advocacy for Environmental Restoration Zambia (AERZ) – works in close cooperation with a number of state agencies on specific projects, and is generally hesitant to launch forceful anti-state commentaries. EMG, the South African NGO representative, is the most sophisticated and resource-rich of the network, and has gone furthest in articulating a regional vision of alternative water resources development. This vision, in particular its emphasis on empowering communities most directly affected by water infrastructural projects to participate in development decision making, is based firmly on the recently published report of the World Commission on Dams (WCD, 2000).

Despite this diversity of membership, the NGOs comprising NAWISA find common ground in forwarding a way of looking at the Zambezi, and other shared basins in the SADC region, in terms of

³³ An advocate of deliberative democracy would argue that this is the essence of democratic decision making and a necessary precondition to broader political agendas.

ecological and livelihood sustainability, and of participatory democracy. They perceive their role as one of ensuring the transparency and accountability of water resources development processes initiated and managed under the SADC umbrella. As expressed by the coordinator of NAWISA's Zambian representative,

[t]he idea of NAWISA is similar to the idea of having a loose communication network through which we can coordinate activities of [common] interest. In terms of the Zambezi and other SADC international waters, NAWISA allows us to track the latest activities in river basin management. It is the hope of NAWISA that we will look at the Zambezi, and create a kind of alternative way to look at the basin and its development.³⁴

Although the Agreement on the Establishment of the Zambezi Watercourse Commission (ZAMCOM) was adopted in 2004 by the basin's riparian states, there is no equivalent body to the Mekong River Commission in the Zambezi.³⁵ Accordingly, some members of NAWISA see their existence as an envoy of transnational civil society as holding genuine potential for fostering more democratic decision making over water projects in the SADC region.³⁶ A staff member of *Justiça Ambiental!* (Mozambique) addresses this point:

Referring to SADC, I think SADC could potentially be very interesting. They [SADC agencies concerned with coordinating water management] could serve to push the government of Mozambique to move forward, specifically with issues of integrated water management, issues of work on dams; if the regional policy is a progressive one, it could move forward this process. If SADC policies say that there should be stakeholder involvement, it would help us.³⁷

The faith that *Justiça Ambiental!* and other Zambezi-oriented NGOs working on basin issues place in SADC as a vehicle for transnational democracy may be misplaced, but there is a chance that NAWISA would serve a role in an emergent Zambezi institutional framework that has never been available to advocacy networks in the Mekong. As explicated in the Mekong section, the institutional framework for governance in the Southeast Asian case has evolved in such a way that basin states are readily able to deflect calls for greater levels of public participation – in short, calls for democratisation of Mekong development – by finding cover under arguments that such advocacy threatens state sovereignty. Advocacy networks in the Zambezi, by contrast, perceive a greater willingness on the part of the basin's riparian states (with the notable exception of Zimbabwe) to contemplate on a more flexible understanding of sovereignty when it comes to water resources decisions. Indeed, the Zambia-Zimbabwe joint authority Zambezi River Authority (ZRA) expresses a willingness to incorporate the perspectives of non-state actors in the ongoing evolution of ZAMCOM.³⁸

To summarise, part of what we are seeing in both the Mekong and Zambezi contexts is a river-basin politics that brings into focus the typical conflicts associated with the transformation of nature under a

³⁴ Interview with Delax Chilumbu, Country Coordinator, Advocacy for Environmental Restoration Zambia, Lusaka, Zambia, 26 March 2004.

³⁵ In other words, there is not yet a functioning intergovernmental body charged with fostering and coordinating large-scale development, environmental governance and state-state cooperation in the basin. So far only Angola, Botswana, Mozambique and Namibia have ratified the ZAMCOM agreement. Zambia is particularly concerned with how its sovereignty over the Zambezi's waters might be affected. The Agreement provides for a tripartite structure including a council of ministers, technical committee, and secretariat, with the objective, according to Article 5 of the agreement, to "promote the equitable and reasonable utilization of the water resources of the Zambezi Watercourse as well as the efficient and sustainable development thereof".

³⁶ Our interpretation of this sense of cautious optimism is that the historically specific conditions that gave rise to the original Mekong Committee in the 1950s and fuelled its development in the 1960s (e.g. sponsorship of the United States as part of its Cold War geopolitical strategy, a lack of sensitivity to the social and ecological impacts of large dams) are dissimilar from those at work in southern Africa in the early 21st century.

³⁷ Interview with staff members of *Livaningo*, Maputo, Mozambique, 24 March 2004.

³⁸ Interview with Jefter Sapukwanya, staff member of ZRA, May 2004. Since 2004, ZAMCOM, under the auspices of the ZRA, has held several "basinwide stakeholders forums" with this goal in mind.

neo-liberal governance regime wherein the simplification of complex ecological systems (e.g. river basins) is accomplished through their transformation into commodities to be privatised and/or developed as part of state-led industrialisation strategies (see McCarthy, 2004). The narratives and strategies of the advocacy networks opposing developmentalist tendencies in both basins – typified by SEARIN in the Mekong and NAWISA in the Zambezi – emphasise the disruption to resource-dependent livelihoods that is certain to accompany large-scale water development and the need to create more participatory modes of environmental governance. In effect, they are articulating an ecological and transnational vision of democratic decision making in each basin, and they have strongly linked this to basin-oriented, or regional, political processes. These advocacy networks define ecological democracy largely in terms of the concrete linkages between ecosystemic processes (e.g. river flows and the benefits they confer in terms of fisheries, enriched floodplains, and so on) and the livelihoods of basin residents. (This is perhaps more relevant in the Mekong case, but is reflective of the stance of Zambezi social movements as well). A more apt description is perhaps socio-ecological democracy in order to emphasise the blurring of the boundaries between humans and non-humans when it comes to state interventions that will irrevocably disrupt both spheres. Concomitantly, advocacy networks in both basins are working to generate transnational democratic spheres – in the Mekong this has been a largely reactive process directed at both state water resources development strategies alleged to be anti-democratic and unsustainable, and at the perceived failings of the intergovernmental Mekong River Commission to uphold its mission; in the Zambezi, transnational democracy is seen as a proactive strategy of inculcating participatory democracy within basin governance institutions, in theory, 'from the ground up'.

In both basins, the creation of transnational democratic spaces is often described as demanding structures that are very different from the top-down, more rigid bureaucracies characteristic of states. Dave McDevette of Empowerment for African Sustainable Development (EASD) notes that:

To facilitate science-society links, institutional design that reflects natural processes can be best simulated thru networks. Through networks we can create processes, tap into processes, and introduce by way of process. In terms of networks of environmental practitioners, EASD helps to facilitate understanding through meetings, creating networks, and giving opportunities to talk and share ... We need visionaries, creating a knowledge environment, not competing with one another. There is an emotional edge to all of this. It is about paradigm shifts, power issues. Our experience has been that local people have great ideas and lots of knowledge, but they do not have confidence in their ideas. People do not always hear and listen to local people. That is what matters. Participation from a wide range of stakeholders can lead to institutional innovation ... We need to think about chaos and non-linear systems. Decision-making is not linear. There are multiple pathways, and these networks can generate an environment for better decisions, maybe influencing a particularly powerful person, eventually.³⁹

Lianne Greef also invokes a network model when she describes the way the Environmental Management Group, which is a NAWISA member, tries to make connections and create spaces. She explains:

EMG tries to bridge the gap between decision makers and those affected by decisions – creating spaces for others to say what they know. For example, bringing together Southern African voices in the WCD process and strengthening networks. We are most effective when we engage in triangulation – the EMG and IRN working with other partners. This has worked well.⁴⁰

In the Mekong basin, events such as the November 2002 Mekong Dialogue, a forum organised by Oxfam and others, seek to create spaces for villagers, academics, and activists to share information and

³⁹ Interview with Dave McDevette, founder of Empowerment for African Sustainable Development, Cape Town, South Africa, May 2004.

⁴⁰ Interview with Lianne Greef, Cape Town, May 2004.

strategies. These dialogues are examples of attempts to provide alternatives to top-down, state-centric structures of basin governance such as the Mekong River Commission.

DEMOCRATISING RIVER-BASIN GOVERNANCE?

If we take our definition of democracy as "a project concerned with the political potentialities of ordinary citizens, that is, with their possibilities for becoming political beings through the self-discovery of common concerns and of modes of action for realizing them", (Wolin, 1996), then activities described above in the Mekong and Zambezi regions are definitively democratic projects. Yet these projects also reflect ecological concerns, though not wholly, and efforts to bring non-human entities (e.g. water and water-related resources) into the political sphere. In addition, social movements (or perhaps better yet transnational advocacy networks) active in both basins recognise the need for a transnational democratic space in order to counter the riparian states' efforts to appropriate and commodify the Mekong and Zambezi basins. As Anderson (2002) puts it:

While state sovereignty is being eroded by globalization, a gap is seen to be opening up between state and popular sovereignty with the latter doubly disadvantaged. Popular decision making is losing out not only to 'global' forces but more immediately to 'its own' state as well.

It is the effort to regain even an inkling of popular sovereignty in the face of global and state forces that makes transnational democracy such an attractive option.

Returning for a moment to Goodman's (2002) clarification of transnational resistance as in many ways the most potent form of transnational democracy, both advocacy networks/social movements perform this resistance in similar ways. Both are a far cry from David Harvey's 'militant particularisms', locally oriented social movements that tend to see all political struggles only in terms of overly narrow goals, and are thus unable to see commonalities with broader struggles against global capitalism. Both SEARIN (one of the hosts) and NAWISA (via its member organisations Livaningo and EMG) recently sent representatives to Rivers for Life, the 2nd International Meeting of Dam-Affected People and Their Allies, held in Rasi Salai, Thailand in late November 2003. As stated in the declaration of the delegates, dam-affected peoples "have... joined in solidarity with the global struggle against neo-liberalism and for a just and equitable world". NGOs in both the Mekong and Zambezi, despite their political limitations in, for example, fomenting radical political change at the level of the state, are key conduits for linking local sites of resistance (e.g. struggles over specific water projects) to more extended networks of transnational democracy.⁴¹

Finally, at a more theoretical level, river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi challenge easy assumptions regarding projects that emphasise ecological and transnational politics. In the Mekong, in particular, advocacy networks are also involved in constructing an ecological democracy that is perhaps more 'radical' in its interpretation of human-environment relations than similar efforts to democratise environmental decision making in advanced industrialised societies. In ways that echo Braun and Disch's (2002) recent call for a radical politics that recognises a non-modern ontology,⁴² advocacy networks in the Mekong (and to a certain extent in the Zambezi as well) are not concerned about ecological conservation as an end in itself, but rather seek to combine eco-hydrologic processes and the livelihoods of basin residents who depend on these processes within a larger democratic covenant. Advocates are not seeking to *extend* rights to the ecological entities that comprise the river basin; their emphasis on participatory democracy perceives livelihoods and the river basin (humans and non-humans) as a tightly integrated set of political agents. Insofar as basin states' political machinations to develop the river basin in a non-participatory manner threaten socio-ecological disruption, they must

⁴¹ See Glassman, 2002, for a more detailed account of how the aforementioned Pak Mun conflict intersects with anti-globalization struggles popularized after protesters confronted the WTO ministerial meeting in Seattle in 1999.

⁴² See Latour, 1993, for a fuller explication of the porosity and non-existence of the dividing lines between people and things.

be seen as profoundly (and doubly) anti-democratic. Furthermore, efforts to promote what we term socio-ecological democracy in both basins – by virtue of the transnational economic, political, financial, advocacy and biophysical processes that are interwoven and interact throughout these regions – are also efforts to promote transnational democracy. At the very least, river-basin politics in the Mekong and Zambezi basins raise intriguing questions regarding the efficacy of ecological and transnational democracy.

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