

Infrapolitics:
The Political Life of Infrastructure in a Myanmar Economic Zone

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
under the Executive Committee
of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2022

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Abstract

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In Myanmar's southern borderlands, the Dawei special economic zone (SEZ) is one of the world's most ambitious infrastructure projects. With strong backing from the Thai government and private sector, the project includes plans for a deep-sea port, a vast petrochemical estate, an industrial zone, a dam and two reservoirs, dual oil and gas pipelines, and road and rail links to the Thai border. Yet in 2013, the Myanmar government suspended the SEZ project following limited investment, as well as sustained criticism of the project's social and environmental impacts. Based on fieldwork conducted mainly over 18 months from 2016-2018, this dissertation follows the political activity and ideas that coalesced around the project—in Dawei town and the villages of the SEZ project areas—as rumors swirled that the project would resume. Against the backdrop of Myanmar's reform period in the 2010s, I bring together a set of changing material conditions and a series of political projects, locating the political life of infrastructure at that dynamic intersection.

This dissertation turns around three central findings. First, the outstanding political fact in Dawei is one of fragmentation over time, principally between town-based youth-led organizations and villagers living in the SEZ project areas. Although condemnation of the project was once widely shared, the period of suspension led many villagers to wish for the project to resume. This fragmentation leads me away from an a priori relational thematization of infrastructure. This theme prevails not only in anthropology's turn to infrastructure but also in Marxist geography and science and technology studies. Second, I identify two political trajectories, one secular-universal, the

other situational-differential. One criticizes the SEZ project through appeals to liberal values, calling for greater transparency, accountability, and local participation. The other sees in the SEZ project a promise of material progress and distributional gain: employment opportunities, financial compensation, better basic infrastructure. These trajectories present less a binary than a set of contingent tendencies that sometimes overlap. Both operate within a normative commitment to development; neither partakes of the rebellious or evasive repertoires of peasant politics past. Third, I argue that this fractured political landscape corresponds to a contradiction at the heart of postcolonial capitalism: between shared desires for developmental progress—a hegemonic complex that drives primitive accumulation onwards—and the splintering force of the accumulation process, which creates a heterogeneous material terrain. Thus, I trace and draw out the political implications of a differentiating accumulation process, tracking how a range of political subjects navigate an uneven landscape as the project's return loomed.

I suggest that the political activities and ideas I find in Dawei offer provisional answers to a pressing impasse: the need for new knowledge and new politics now that earlier promises of capitalist transition—from the farm to the factory, agriculture to industry—no longer hold. I find that for many of my interlocutors, the promise of developmental time remains, even if the absorptive, incorporative notion of capitalist transition does not. The forms and figures of the political in Dawei are not particularly hopeful or optimistic, nor radical or emancipatory. On the contrary, they inhabit and index a time-space out of joint, a difficult political present unmoored from past certainties. In a place supposed to exemplify the transition from farm to factory, I capture instead an elliptical present of incomplete structures and abandoned sites, horizons receding and beginnings fading from memory. Long on hold, the SEZ project has all the presence of a dream. It is now a kind of fantasy, unreal. For many, it is also an aspiration, unmet.

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Acknowledgements

The debts one accumulates on a journey such as this are impossible to enumerate. Yet some simply cannot go unstated. Mine are first and foremost to the group of friends who founded the Dawei Development Association (DDA). Here, I call them Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and U Sein. It should be clear from what follows that I believe DDA to be an organization of tremendous importance not only in Dawei, Myanmar, and Thailand, but for a broader understanding of the politics of capitalist development in the present. Not a page of this dissertation is without these friends' imprint, even if its flaws are mine alone. I owe special thanks to Kyaw Htet, whose insights shaped this dissertation project from beginning to end. I am also especially grateful to Naing Tun. His tireless efforts to draw attention to the abuses of mining and oil companies in Tanintharyi are a constant source of inspiration. So too for P'Fai. With her many trips between Dawei and Bangkok, P'Fai taught me more about a transnational, translational politics than perhaps anyone else. I am proud to call them my friends. More broadly, I owe my deepest gratitude to everyone who supported this research and shared their experiences in the Dawei area, Yangon, Bangkok, and beyond. I only wish there were more I could offer in return.

In Myanmar and the diaspora, countless others offered discussion, debate, and guidance. I thank especially U Aung Soe Min, Auntie and Uncle, Bobo Lansin, Nance Cunningham, Michael Dunford, Shae Frydenlund, Michael Haack, Emily Hong, Masao Imamura, Jack Jenkins Hill, Kirtana Das Mausert, Patrick McCormick, David Ney, Phyo Win Latt, Jacquelyn Pollock, Elizabeth Rhoads, Pyay Way, Matt Schissler, Thurein Linn, Alicia Turner, Matthew Walton, Uncle Win, Courtney Wittekind, Daw Yi Yi Win, and Yu Yu Khaing. My debts to Dennis Arnold, Stephen Campbell, and Elliott Prasse-Freeman, in particular, are clear throughout the text.

In the US, my intellectual home is Columbia University's Department of Anthropology. Above all, I thank my dissertation committee for many years of patient supervision and mentorship. Partha Chatterjee is one of the few genuinely indispensable postcolonial intellectuals. I consider myself deeply fortunate to have worked under his guidance. Nadia Abu El-Haj helped keep this project moving when it could easily have faltered. If I offer anything of value with respect to technology and technopolitics, it owes much to her work as a scholar and mentor. Elizabeth Povinelli's boundlessly generative intellect constantly pushed this project in new directions. Our exchanges opened horizons for this research that, inevitably, are only partially inscribed here. Brian Larkin's work on infrastructure, aesthetics, and imagination shaped this project in important ways. His engagement proved vital, especially at the writing stage. Tania Murray Li was more than an external examiner. Her scholarship on dispossession, development, and agrarian life in Southeast Asia is exemplary. I am grateful for her contributions. I thank Maria José de Abreu, Catherine Fennell, and David Scott for their critical support at different points. So too Marilyn Astwood, who does so much of the labor to reproduce the PhD program on an everyday basis. This project would never have come to fruition without her work during my years in the department.

In a former life, Paige West first introduced me to anthropology while I was still an undergraduate at Columbia. She encouraged me to consider graduate school, and I will be forever grateful. Rosalind Morris gave me a foundation in social and cultural theory. Elaine Combs-Schilling, whose memory I hold dear, ran the senior thesis seminar where I first learned what it means to conduct—or try to—ethnography. When I returned to Columbia, I found that an old adage—that one learns more than anything in grad school from one's peers—holds true. I thank in particular Julia Fierman, Naeem Mohaiemen, Fernando Montero, and indeed my own cohort: Hadeel Assali, Tomoki Birkett, Valerie Bondura, Luciana Chamorro, Syantani Chatterjee,

Margaux Kristjansson, Jasmine Pisapia, and Leslie Sabiston, all of whose work continues to challenge and inspire. Several of us became deeply involved in union organizing with our coworkers. I am proud to say that after protracted struggle, including multiple strikes and a bitter bargaining process, we won our union and have won our first contract.

Beyond Columbia, Andrea Muehlebach and Andrea Ballestero managed to sustain our “What is a financial frontier?” research collective across multiple years during a global pandemic. I thank them for including me, as I thank the others in the collective—Hannah Appel, Julia Elyachar, Karen Ho, Jorge Núñez, Horacio Ortiz, Gloria Perez, and Michael Ralph—for their generous insights, which greatly informed this project at the writing stage. The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies summer school in Kolkata connected me to friends and comrades who powerfully shaped this dissertation and, even more importantly, provided that camaraderie without which lonely, long-term projects like this can hardly succeed. I’m grateful to Sudipto Basu, Thiti Jamkajornkeiat, and Ping-Hsiu Alice Lin in particular. In Vienna, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) offered the setting I needed to finish this dissertation during a fellowship in 2021. I thank Shalini Randeria for introducing me to the IWM, and Franz Graf for his work coordinating the Fellows Program. I add that a National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship, fieldwork grants from NSF and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and a Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship sustained this project financially when it might otherwise not have been possible.

Unexpectedly, most of this dissertation came together in Ankara. Our Ankara family—especially Mercy and Jo; Svetli, Radina, and Kayo; Yeşim and Emine; Serhan Bey; Carolina, Alex, Rafa, and Ines; Mark, Kete, and Haydin; Mazen, Shirin, and Suraya; Euan and Yui—nurtured this writing process more than they can know.

Finally, to my parents: thank you—for everything. My mother, once a student of archaeology herself, had Margaret Mead’s autobiography on our bookshelf at home. Always one of my most committed readers, she was the first to read this dissertation in full. My father, raised in exile, is a visual artist whose subjects resonate with my own: displacement and dispossession, mobility and migrant labor. I am only now starting to appreciate how deeply rooted my interests are—how much my trajectory, even now, owes to my parents. They deserve more than these few lines. My older brother, Chris, is a rock in my world. It is a joy to see his own family blossom with Raquel and now Noemi. Their love and support mean everything. I thank Lanna’s parents, too. Over the years, their encouragement, and indeed respect—which is mutual—has meant more than I can say. And Dara and Ollie, Arthur and Adeline, and Uncle Steve—thank you for your wit and wisdom, your warmth and lightheartedness. This journey is unimaginable without you.

In Ankara, Rose was born shortly after midnight a little over a year ago. At the height of the pandemic, we found ourselves in isolation—fearful of exposure, overwhelmed as new parents, and yet brimming with light and love at a time of extraordinary suffering. It felt—feels—almost selfish. There are no words for what Rose brings to our world. I have Lanna to thank for so much of all this and more. We met well over a decade ago in a Thai-Myanmar border town. We moved to Yangon when Myanmar’s future seemed bright. We became graduate students together; married in Chiang Mai; began this fieldwork together; and became parents together. Her humanitarian work took us to Ankara, as it has taken us to Geneva, where I write these words. Her groundedness keeps me grounded, even as we dream—as we always do—together. This achievement, if it is one, is hers as much as mine, as much as anyone’s.

A note on translation and transliteration

All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. As for transliteration, the system used by the American Library Association and the Library of Congress—the ALA-LC system—has distinct merits. Designed by my grandmother, incidentally, it is particularly useful for scholars of Pali, as she was. Unlike other transliteration systems for Burmese, it is also reversible. If familiar with the system, one can move carefully not only from Burmese into the Roman alphabet, but also in the opposite direction. However, it is not widely used, and it is not easily accessible for those who do not already read Burmese language. Thus, as with other scholars recently (see for example Walton 2016), I have chosen to transliterate Burmese words and phrases in the simplest possible way for those unfamiliar with Burmese language. This may be frustrating for those who read Burmese language and are familiar with existing transliteration systems, yet I hope it makes the text more accessible overall.

*For Lanna, without whom I would have been lost many times over,
and for Rose, for whom the struggle for another world continues.*

Introduction

One morning, I was awake well before dawn, as one usually is with a newborn. I was a few time zones behind Myanmar, having moved to Turkey after finishing fieldwork. In the darkness, I noticed the breaking news alerts as they began flashing across my phone: Myanmar's¹ military had launched a coup d'état. The country's top civilian leaders found themselves detained; the circle of arrests began expanding to activists, journalists, artists, and other potential opposition figures; and phone and internet cuts began rolling across the country. It was February 1st, 2021.

In the weeks that followed, mass defiance electrified Myanmar's cities, towns, and villages. It took the form of large-scale work stoppages, marches and street demonstrations, blockades of urban intersections and trade routes, and general unrest, including acts of sabotage on pipelines and military installations. In many places, a festive atmosphere initially predominated. Friends in Dawei, the town in southern Myanmar that is the focus of this dissertation, sent pictures of marches across town, motorbike processions in villages, and key intersections thronged with thousands of protesters. There was one friend, mic in hand, fist raised, rallying the crowd as the demos kept growing. Meanwhile, a cousin in Yangon sent selfies from protests. He had never expressed interest in politics before.

A shift came at the end of February. As tensions mounted, my cousin and I found ourselves trading crowd-sourced images that were all over social media by then. They explained in Burmese what so many frontliners now know: how to build barricades, wash away tear gas, and tend gunshot wounds. Thus came the crackdown. Opening fire on protesters in Myanmar's main towns and

¹ I follow the convention of using "Myanmar" when referring to the period after 1989, when the military officially changed the name of the country (in English) from "Burma"; "Burma" when referring to the period before 1989; and otherwise "Myanmar" for general usage.

cities, cops and soldiers reclaimed most urban centers. The body count swiftly broke 50, before soaring into the hundreds and then thousands. Rural areas suddenly loomed large. With repression spreading unevenly beyond towns and cities, the countryside became important for maintaining resistance. In Dawei, frontliners had built barricades and donned gas masks, but cops and soldiers beat them back, killing several protesters in the process. But as the town became quiet, surrounding villages saw an upsurge of marches and demonstrations. Across the country, protestors also fled from urban areas to rural areas held by insurgent groups, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), which controls significant territory in the highlands around Dawei. In an echo of uprisings past, namely 1988, these protestors received guerrilla training, within a larger shift towards armed struggle. PDFs—People’s Defense Forces—formed and proliferated across Myanmar.

As the rainy season dried out towards the end of 2021—the dry season is fighting season in this country of decades-long insurgencies and counter-insurgencies—the military confronted an emboldened armed resistance up and down the country. In two days in November, resistance fighters reportedly killed some 100 soldiers across multiple states and regions. In the Dawei area, a group calling itself the Dawei Guerrilla Revolutionary Force claimed to have killed seven soldiers and injured ten others using landmines to ambush a military convoy.

In Yangon, my cousin wasn’t sending selfies from protests anymore. He was sharing photos of burning villages—evidence of the military’s brutal counter-insurgency strategies, honed across generations of armed conflict. His latest messages were a series of images from Chin State, in Myanmar’s northwest, where the military had been carrying out airstrikes against an especially bold collection of resistance groups. The images showed homes on fire against the backdrop of the Chin hills. Emojis dot some of the pictures: broken hearts, weeping faces. Plumes of smoke—looking dense and strikingly narrow, almost like tornadoes—trail upwards into the sky.

On resistance

This dissertation examines the political practices and imaginations that coalesce around a large-scale infrastructure project: the Dawei special economic zone (SEZ) in Myanmar's southern borderlands. At a time when connectivity has come to dominate planning and policy discourse in Asia, I foreground a particular port, economic zone, and trade corridor project, asking how changing material conditions shape political life. I pose this set of questions around infrastructure and the political—its contours and content, its figures and form—from a specific time and place: southern Myanmar during the reform period of the 2010s, a period ended by the 2021 coup. During this period, an outright military dictatorship gave way to a formally civilian-led government. A military-backed party governed first (2010-2015), followed by the National League for Democracy (NLD) (2015-2021), the long-outlawed opposition party led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

In some ways, I tell a story that is obviated by the events that followed the coup. It is a story that contradicts the archive of peasant resistance, an archive with venerable roots in Myanmar: with the open revolts that shook the colonial state, from Dawei (then Tavoy) in the 1830s to the great Saya San rebellion of the 1930s, as well as less obvious practices of evasion and everyday resistance, from the withdrawal of labor to acts of foot-dragging, theft, and sabotage. If anything, the resistance following the coup suggests the resilience of this repertoire, broadly speaking, an abiding ability—long resonant in the borderlands—to become ungovernable.

But what I found in Dawei during the reform period was something else: a politics of the governed. This politics was not premised on repertoires of avoidance or confrontation, evasion or resistance. Rather, it was forged in and through relations with state and capital, namely with the SEZ project and its public and private sector proponents. The political actors I followed actively cultivated and sought out relations with government offices and sometimes companies as grounds

of opportunity, of possibility—whether to criticize the project and push for better policies, or in fact to welcome the project and its promises of material gains. Identifying two divergent, if sometimes intersecting, political trajectories, I flesh out their implication in Myanmar’s state-driven process of capitalist restructuring, a process that precedes and conditions the reforms of the 2010s. Having detailed the spread and penetration of governmental power and transnational capital, I go so far as to suggest, in effect, the exhaustion of an earlier peasant politics. Yet the present resistance suggests the case is not closed. Conditions can change. The state is once again cruelly, openly authoritarian. Capital flows have dried up and, in many cases, withdrawn.

At stake is a premise fundamental to Marxist thought, which already informs this dissertation: the idea that differing material forces shape differing conditions for politics across time and space. One need only qualify this with the Marxism of and after Italian workerism, which holds that the political is more than a reflection of material forces; it can also transform those forces themselves. With a change in conditions, in any case, resistance has returned.

At the same time, I believe the material presented here remains highly relevant to this turbulent conjuncture. First, I argue that the reform period of the 2010s cannot be understood without reference to Myanmar’s longer-term process of state-mediated capitalist restructuring, which I refer to in Gramscian terms as a passive revolution: a capitalist transformation driven from above in the absence of bourgeois hegemony. I show how capitalist restructuring enabled the military to enrich itself, to claim and reinforce a position not only in politics but in the marketplace, eventually with the wave of foreign investment that followed the shift to a nominally civilian government in 2010. This process goes far in explaining how the military became emboldened enough to reclaim total power in 2021. Second, I emphasize that this process of capitalist restructuring increased economic disparities throughout Myanmar. In rural areas, market

liberalization since the 1990s has meant higher land values, a concentration of land holdings, the proletarianization of many smallholders, and volatile prices for agricultural commodities such as rice, leaving smaller farmers and landless laborers struggling to secure subsistence. In the Dawei area, I show how promises of material progress, some dating to the early postcolonial era, continue to inspire demands for better living standards against this backdrop of rural deprivation. The coup has betrayed the latest promise of economic and political transformation, even if, as I suggest, there was much continuity at stake. Still, this history helps explain why armed resistance is now flourishing in rural Myanmar, including the Dawei area.

Finally, it would be wrong to grasp this mass resistance as a simple return to earlier modes of peasant resistance. On one hand, this resistance does present a collective defiance rooted in the lifeworlds of rural Myanmar (although urban resistance remains significant). On the other hand, those lifeworlds are not the same as they once were, which is crucial for understanding the form and trajectory of the political in recent years. This dissertation shows how political subjects in Dawei now encounter capital and the state not from a cohesive, oppositional outside, governed by moral economies or otherwise—the grounds of peasant politics, in short—but rather from fraught positions of implication and entanglement, densely interwoven with the expanded presence of governmental power and transnational capital. This is an analysis that is sensitive to where and how political subjects locate the political in a changing social field. It would be a mistake to discard this locating of the political as we make sense of the coup and its aftermath. Loyalty to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD remains extremely widespread, including within the armed resistance; the resistance frames itself explicitly as a struggle for democracy and human rights; civil disobedience and non-violent struggle compete with armed resistance for hegemony in the new opposition; appeals for support to Western powers and the United Nations are commonplace; and resistance

leaders criticize ongoing investment from China and Thailand, while lamenting the departure of more “responsible” Western businesses. While some observers have seen signs in the post-coup political landscape of a turn away from Suu Kyi, the NLD, and liberal hegemony more broadly, I believe that is premature. This is a resistance that is faithful, in many ways, to the outlines—political and economic—of liberal modernity. Like the political activities and ideas I found in Dawei, it is better understood as fighting within and for—rather than from beyond and against—the political and economic promises of the reform period, from the governmental state to economic development. Paradoxically, it is a politics of the governed in the throes of mass resistance.

A broader point holds: the coup and its aftermath must not be seen in isolation, but rather within larger patterns of revolution and reaction, transformations and continuities—as Myanmar’s new generation of political prisoners, much like older ones, can attest. Writing in his own prison cell several generations ago, Gramsci taught that hegemonic projects can remain fluid and incomplete, situational and unstable.² A hegemonic project, whatever its shortcomings, can open a field of intervention, of struggle, which—restlessly, iteratively—sets the terms for further struggle as conditions change. The reform period, within Myanmar’s broader passive revolution, marked one such hegemonic project. Its promises continue to animate mass resistance.

Southern questions

In many ways, it is not Gramsci’s prison writings, but rather his earlier essay, “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” which leads us into the discussion that follows. The essay sets

² Stuart Hall stresses that, when examining hegemony in Gramsci, “what we are looking for is not the absolute victory of this side over that, nor the total incorporation of one set of forces into another. Rather, the analysis is a relational matter—i.e., a question to be resolved relationally, using the idea of ‘unstable balance’ or the ‘continuous process of formatting and superseding of unstable equilibria’” (Hall 1986a, 14). See Claudio Soprzanetti’s discussion of Thaksin Shinawatra’s time in office in Thailand as a hegemonic project along these lines (Soprzanetti 2017, 153–4).

out important themes for Gramsci's later work. It depicts the spatial stratification and worker-peasant cleavages that, from his southern Italian perspective, defined Italy's history of capitalist restructuring. Writing in 1926, Gramsci insists that the northern Communists' ability to navigate "the question of 'proletarian hegemony,' in other words of the social base of the proletarian dictatorship and of the workers' State," "depends on the measure in which (the proletariat) is successful in obtaining the consensus of the large peasant masses." Yet this challenge is not suprahistorical: "the peasant question in Italy is historically determined, it is not the 'peasant and agrarian question in general'" (Gramsci 2015, 19). Specific conditions prevail, such as the causal relation between northern industrial development and southern agricultural underdevelopment. These conditions fracture the time-space of the Risorgimento, the movement that unified the Italian state eventually on the basis of industrialization (Morton 2010). But for Gramsci, in effect, the Risorgimento did not create a unified modern Italy. It created something more mobile and contradictory; polarized between north and south, workers and peasants; unsettled, unstable, and at odds with itself; and thus, ripe for political intervention.

From southern Myanmar, I examine a historically determined process of state-mediated capitalist restructuring, geared towards national consolidation after decades of armed insurgencies. I do so by way of the Dawei SEZ project. I ask where this project has come from, why it is suspended, and whether it might resume; what its suspension means, experientially but also politically, for farmers, fishers, and activist groups in the Dawei area; what work its possible restart requires from project proponents and its critics; and what it might tell us about the politics of capitalist development in the present. Significant, here, are material processes of polarization and stratification, fracture and fragmentation, processes which create pressing political cleavages in the Dawei area, especially between town-based activist groups and villagers living in the SEZ

project areas. Like my interlocutors in Dawei, I interpret this field as an open question for politics, a site of political experimentation and innovation. From the perspective of prominent activists, whom I identify as organic intellectuals, much of this experimentation has to do with cultivating—or attempting to, at least—the political participation of villagers from the project areas. In order to form a social base for confronting the SEZ project, the “large peasant masses”—or their grounded, stratified equivalent, here—became pivotal. This organizational work proved difficult over time.

In posing these questions, I advance a critical literature in postcolonial and agrarian studies. This literature, resonant across South and Southeast Asia, holds that earlier promises of capitalist transition—from the country to the city, the farm to the factory, the peasant to proletariat, and precapital to capital—no longer maintain the purchase they once did, requiring new knowledge and new politics (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2011, Walker 2012, Li 2014). This impasse has a material basis. For while a wave of large-scale land acquisitions for crop production, infrastructure projects, and resource extraction has expropriated peasantries across the South (Borras Jr and Franco 2012, Hall 2012, 2013, White *et al.* 2012), minimal labor absorption has rendered many of them surplus to the expanded reproduction of capital (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009, Li 2010, 2011). At the intersection of ongoing dispossession and jobless growth, under the shadow of rising surplus populations, a question of politics looms: what is the nature of politics—political activity and ideas, political organization and imagination—with the passing of former transition scenarios? Those scenarios long provided the basic contours of political thought, practice, and struggle across much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, from revolutionary visions based on proletarianization to the policies of developmental states based on aggressive industrialization (Kaviraj 1988, Chatterjee 2008). For some scholars, the fashioning of politics in response to dispossession, yet

after the promises of older developmental trajectories, is among the most pressing political questions in the decolonized world (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2011, Li 2014).

I contend that in Dawei, a motley such politics emerged around the SEZ project. It is motley in its assortment of farmers and fishers, workers and traders, religious figures and community leaders, villagers from the highlands and the lowlands, and self-described civil society activists who have long proven strident critics of the SEZ project. But it is also motley in its contradictory contours. The two political trajectories I identify—which broadly contrast, even as they occasionally overlap—forge, on one hand, a politics based on liberal values such as transparency, accountability, and local participation, and on the other hand, a politics based on material demands related to employment, financial compensation, and better basic infrastructure, especially roads and electricity. However, neither trajectory, nor the multiple political projects that compose each of them, explicitly oppose the SEZ project. Contesting not the project writ large so much as the terms of its implementation, they construct the SEZ differently as a site for politics: for advancing liberal egalitarianism, especially among activists attuned to Myanmar’s wider reform period, and for reorganizing material distribution, chiefly among villagers living in the SEZ project areas. This split political field, I argue, reflects an antinomy central to postcolonial capitalism: shared commitments to developmental progress conflict with ongoing processes of primitive accumulation, which deepen disparities of wealth and power. Although actors key to both trajectories demonstrate a normative commitment to development, sharing a belief in the need for improvement in social and economic life, the accumulation process continually reestablishes rather than resolves material divisions between differently positioned political projects.

The reproduction of difference, in the Dawei area, became a challenge to political organization as rumors persisted that the SEZ project would resume. Over time, the most

prominent critics of the project, particularly activist groups based in Dawei town, could no longer count on the support of or solidarity with villagers living in the main project areas. Where once close collaboration had been possible between the town and the surrounding villages, namely with an upsurge of confrontation that marked the early years of the project, relations deteriorated after the project's suspension. Villagers demanded financial compensation for land seized, as well as for fields, crops, and property destroyed, which the project's lead developer insisted would only be paid in the case of a project restart. In a vicious circle, many of those villagers worst affected by the project's initial, truncated implication became the most ardent supporters of its return—precisely to claim some share of lost material wealth. Villagers also grew weary of the project's suspension. Persistent rumors about the project's return drove ongoing land speculation, land concentration, and hence a slow-burning enclosure process in project area villages. Public services were also on hold, road repairs deferred, and loan programs interrupted, while many villagers' friends and family continued to work as migrant laborers abroad, especially in the Bangkok area. In line with the Myanmar government's promises, villagers came to associate the project with important material gains: financial compensation, better basic infrastructure, and expanded employment opportunities.

In some ways, this arc of political activity follows a prominent account of popular politics (Laclau 2005): from unification across difference in the face of a clear antagonist—a military-backed government helping to drive this project forward, in the early 2010s—to the loss of that equivalential logic and a shift towards differential demands on the basis of discrete population groups—after the success of the initial upsurge as the NLD came to power. In other ways, however, this arc diverges. While villagers living in the project areas began to press a more differential logic, activist groups from Dawei town maintained, even deepened, their commitment to an equivalential

politics. Equivalential understandings of popular politics tend towards normative social unities—a sutured totality of the social, a universalizing sense of the nation—even if these are only empty signifiers in discursive operations. But the political trajectories I encountered in Dawei lead elsewhere. Activist groups struggled to address villagers’ material demands. Even as they joined and took part in larger struggles around infrastructure projects—in Yangon and Thailand, for instance—differential political logics continued to hamper their attempts to reinforce and build up wider movements against damaging infrastructure projects. Yet they stuck to—with dedication—those appeals to liberal values: greater transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making. To “touch” compensation, for instance, in one organization’s parlance, would be tantamount to something undesirable: fully conceding, in effect, the project’s return.

Following a politics that departs from equivalential logics, this dissertation poses the political in relation to postcolonial capitalism. Postcolonial capitalism, in Kalyan Sanyal’s (2007) formulation, is a form of capitalism structured by a contradiction between what he calls the accumulation economy and the need economy, or capital and non-capital. Liberal and Marxist historical narratives once shared the idea that subsistence production preceded and would be absorbed into industrial capitalism. The peasantry in the fields—“premodern” and “backwards,” the rural world of precapital—would be subsumed into the “modern” industrial sector—the more urban world of capital, corresponding to the factory. Sanyal points out that this shared narrative of historical transition has lost its grounding. Economic development, broadly speaking, retains enormous normative legitimacy in postcolonial settings; development agendas continue to carry tremendous political and economic weight. Primitive accumulation, Sanyal stresses, remains an ongoing process in Marx’s sense: the separation of producers from the means of production, or the peasantry from the land, paradigmatically. But where once an expanding industrial sector could

have incorporated dispossessed peasants, recent decades have seen the decline of labor-intensive industrial production. Jobless growth means that rather than farmers becoming workers, precapital is now non-capital: ceaselessly produced by the accumulation process, yet largely redundant to formal capitalist production. Minimally shored up by governmental interventions, subsistence for expropriated peasantries now takes place increasingly in the informal economies that are growing across much of the postcolonial world. Postcolonial capitalism reproduces rather than overcomes this fracture between economies of accumulation and subsistence, between capital and non-capital. With this disjuncture at its core, the postcolonial economic, as Sanyal sometimes refers to it, is not singular and homogeneous so much as contradictory and heterogeneous—a “complex hegemonic project” that thrives, he argues, in a “world of difference” (7).

Sanyal’s formulation is part of a broader materialist turn in postcolonial studies. This turn, emerging mainly since the mid-2000s, encompasses a wide body of work that attends to the relations between capital, capitalism, and postcolonialism (Young 2001, Venn 2006, Chatterjee 2008, Mellino 2011, Mezzadra 2011a, Deshpande 2012, Mellino 2012, Harney and Moten 2015, Walker 2016, Mitra *et al.* 2017, Venn 2018). Shifting away from earlier work in postcolonial studies, an emphasis on material difference rather than cultural difference—the one historically produced, the other pre-given, free-standing—characterizes much of this scholarship, including Sanyal’s. At stake is something fundamental: capitalism’s tendency towards differentiation. Class stratification is one form differentiation can take. But as Sudipta Kaviraj (2009) argues, a wider and more general conception of class also exists in Marx, a conception of social stratification more broadly.

In what follows, I take seriously capitalism’s tendency towards differentiation. Following not only the accumulation process in Dawei, but also the wider forces of accumulation that locate

the Dawei SEZ project in the first place, I recast primitive accumulation as a bordering technology: a force for the production of spatial and temporal difference. Understood as such, primitive accumulation is akin to differential accumulation, as in Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's (2013a, 2013b) contention that ongoing primitive accumulation has created not a borderless world, but rather a world in which borders of all kinds have proliferated. This insight allows me to interpret political activity and ideas, in Dawei, in a way that departs from a number of existing bodies of literature—from Marxist geography to scholarship on technopolitics, from political anthropology to studies of globalization. At the same time, this insight—that accumulation remakes rather than transcends spatio-temporal difference—is not simply an ethnographic discovery, nor a novel theoretical position. Instead, I show how it is at the center of a whole alternative thought of primitive accumulation, stretching across indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and radical traditions in Black and feminist thought (see e.g. Robinson 2000, Federici 2004, Gilmore 2007, Sanyal 2007, Coulthard 2014). This alternate thought consists of a historical materialism in which capitalism, fundamentally, reproduces forms of difference from which value is extracted. It places intertwined disparities—racialized and gendered, colonial and postcolonial—at the very heart of global capitalism. An important corollary, I argue, is that postcolonial difference is not a question of any necessary, timeless alterity. On the contrary, it is made and remade through contingent material processes, including primitive accumulation and the forms of politics it entails.

Infrapolitics: in and out of time

The bulk of this dissertation focuses on the political practices and imaginations I have encountered in Dawei. I first heard of the Dawei SEZ project in 2009. At the time, I was working

on the Thai-Myanmar border for a migrant justice organization based in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand. As our lead researcher, I helped coordinate a regional research project asking how an increasing number of SEZs in mainland Southeast Asia's border areas were affecting land, labor, and migration dynamics in the region. We collaborated with migrant organizations across Thailand, as well as in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Before 2010, however, it was still difficult to find and arrange research collaborations with individuals and organizations inside Myanmar. Yet Senior General Than Shwe, head of Myanmar's then-outright military dictatorship, had recently returned from China, where he visited the Shenzhen SEZ, China's first and most important SEZ. He proclaimed that the Dawei SEZ project—the governments of Myanmar and Thailand had agreed to implement the project in 2008—should be “like the Shenzhen economic zone.” It, too, promised to be a first SEZ; it, too, promised to liberalize a once-socialist economy. Attention mounted, but without grounded research prospects, we focused more on SEZ projects in other border areas.

In 2010, however, I met two young people from Dawei in Chiang Mai, whom I will call Kyaw Htet and Win Tint.³ Both were taking part in training programs, one focused on civil society, hosted at Chiang Mai University, and the other focused on human rights, hosted by EarthRights International (ERI). Over coffee, they told me about their plans to found an organization that would oppose the Dawei SEZ project. In Chiang Mai, there was no need for tones hushed or conspiratorial, but it was clear that careful, sensitive work would be required in the Dawei area. It was not obvious that this work would prove possible. It was all the more exciting, then, when in 2011—by which time I was working in Yangon, in the more open atmosphere of the early reform period—I was able to attend the press conference in Yangon where Kyaw Htet, standing shoulder

³ Here and in the dissertation overall, I use pseudonyms for all of my ethnographic interlocutors. I have also changed the names of the villages around Dawei, as well as the names of the main Dawei SEZ project areas.

to shoulder with villagers and monks from the Dawei area, officially announced the establishment of the Dawei Development Association (DDA). Several months later, I traveled to Dawei for the first time, visiting each of the Dawei SEZ project's three main project areas with Kyaw Htet and others from DDA: Amya, the site of the deep-sea port and industrial estate project components; Kyaukpa, the highland village where a dam project, designed to create a water source for the industrial estate, would require the village to relocate; and Theinkun, a highland area where Karen villagers live along the roadlink project component. Soon after—my last visits before beginning my doctoral work—I returned to collaborate with DDA on research for Paung Ku, a Yangon-based organization, which was collecting research on the strategies used by small-scale groups like DDA to contest large-scale infrastructure projects. Annual summer visits followed for preliminary fieldwork before I moved to Dawei in 2016 for eighteen months, during which time I principally conducted participant observation with DDA. I returned for shorter visits in 2018 and 2019. Since then, a global pandemic, the military coup, and family obligations have prevented further visits.

Over this extended period, I have sought to follow, understand, and—where possible and appropriate—contribute to the political projects that have taken shape in Dawei. DDA is one such political project, but it is not the only one. Over the years, DDA has even found itself somewhat isolated with respect to the activities and expectations of many villagers, for whom the SEZ project holds out promises of material gain that, especially after its suspension, became difficult to ignore. DDA had set out to oppose the SEZ project. Instead, it would call for greater transparency, accountability, and local participation, the three-fold set of demands that objects to the *how* of the project more than its *if*—not fighting against the project so much as criticizing its management and oversight. For plenty of villagers, however, this is criticism enough. By the late 2010s, as rumors swirled about a possible project restart, DDA struggled to rebuild organizationally in the SEZ's

project areas amid greater support for its return among villagers. But those rumors came and went, like so many over the past decade. By the time of the military coup, no construction had resumed. In the months that followed the military's return to power, my messages with Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and other friends from Dawei had little to do with our usual discussions about the SEZ project. They had more to do with the barricades erected on the streets near where I had lived; the tear gas, smoke bombs, and lethal force used by cops and soldiers on friends at the barricades; and the formation of armed resistance groups within a wider turn to armed struggle.

This dissertation has grown from this roughly decade-long engagement with DDA and other organizations in Dawei. In it, I detail the fashioning of politics against the backdrop of postcolonial capitalism: at the confluence of a liberalizing state apparatus, with the reform period, and a relentless accumulation process, which continued even with the project's suspension. What I find is not resistance in that earlier mold of peasant politics. What I find, instead, is a political landscape that is frayed and fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete—forged not from any pure subaltern consciousness, but rather from a dense admixture of dominant and subordinate classes' experiences. Above all, what conditions this political landscape is infrastructures large and small, hard and soft. The SEZ project itself, no doubt, is primary, but it would be a mistake to disregard the water, power, and road infrastructures upon which it depends, as well as the feasibility studies, impact assessments, and policy frameworks that help determine whether the project will advance.

The idea of infrastructure I use here in some ways corresponds to the core common sense underlying anthropology's infrastructural turn: the notion that infrastructure, fundamentally, brings people, things, and ideas into relation, forming connections that make possible new social, economic, and political orders (Lefebvre 1991, Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001, Larkin 2008, 2013). Yet I balance this common sense with another set of concerns. I draw attention to how

large-scale infrastructures are not only technologies of relation, connectivity, and commercial exchange. As technologies of accumulation, they can also maintain and reproduce social differences in political and material terms—deepening political divides, while reinscribing economic disparity. Grasping infrastructure through this critical sense of its social life, I revisit and reclaim the concept of infrapolitics (Scott 1990, Moreiras 2006, Anand 2011, Bach 2017): a politics that challenges conventional thresholds of the political, that exceeds any terrain of autonomous political subjects, and that locates infrastructure with respect to political and economic forces beyond itself. More than a critique of infrastructure’s ruinous articulations, however, I also accentuate the distinctive promise and power that infrastructures can project—the way they can capture and guide expectations regarding historical time, developmental progress, and modernity itself (Prakash 1999, Goswami 2004, Bach 2011, Cross 2014, Anand *et al.* 2018). This is especially, if not only, the case in the postcolonial world, where infrastructures remain essential material indices of historical progress and national prestige.

To attend to infrastructure’s aspirational power, I suggest, is not to exit a project of critique. Rather, this power helps explain why infrastructures can present such difficult objects of political struggle. It helps account for why DDA, for instance, having set out to oppose the SEZ project, instead found themselves contesting its mode of implementation, its *how* not its *if*, which still became enough to marginalize them relative to the expectations of project area villagers. The political trajectories I identify in Dawei offer important lessons—simple enough to be overlooked, yet vital nonetheless—for movements seeking to challenge infrastructure projects in Myanmar, neighboring countries, and beyond. Opposition to such large-scale, destructive projects is not something that can be taken for granted; difficult organizational work often remains, even in the shadow of devastating dispossession; and reversals and redirections cannot be ruled out. Gains can

turn sour, as when DDA, ironically, having helped force the suspension of the SEZ project in the early 2010s, found suspension to be a political challenge too far—just about. The difficulties of life under suspension, it turns out, led many villagers to look forward to its possible return.

In the extended present of suspension, meanwhile, maintaining political organization is not easy. DDA, for its part, expended ongoing effort to look after relationships with farmers, fishers, and community leaders in the SEZ project areas, at least those with whom DDA still had relations. But with the project on hold—without the urgency of the SEZ moving ahead—it was difficult to keep up those relations and sustain political attention. Suspension made for an elliptical, distended present, a problem of situational drift to which activists and villagers alike struggled to adapt.

“Developmental time was always a myth,” Hannah Appel (2018a) reminds us. It is a myth powerfully revealed as such not only in anthropological research, but in anticolonial and postcolonial thought (Fanon 1961, Fabian 1983, Ferguson 1999, Chakrabarty 2007). Yet it is one thing to point that out. It is another to inhabit the breakdown of modernist time, with its sweeping promises of futurity. To live such a crisis in time, which is also to live a crisis *out* of time, can revitalize desires for precisely those futures. More than anything, it is the promise of basic material progress that critics of the Dawei SEZ have struggled to address. To point *this* out—or so I hope—is to clarify the stakes of infrapolitics for struggles yet to come. After all, the SEZ project began during outright military rule before the recent reform period. Far from obviating its return, the new regime arguably provides ideal conditions for it to resume.

Outline

Three parts organize this dissertation. Part 1 locates the discussion to follow, introducing the Dawei SEZ project while situating it historically, politically, and geographically. Chapter 1

summarizes the project to date, including its origins and its suspension. I show how, for villagers living in the SEZ's project areas, the daily frustrations of life with the project suspended—the public services interrupted, road repairs delayed, and loan programs deferred, as land enclosure continued—led many villagers to welcome prospects for its return. Chapter 2 sites Dawei at the nexus of three stories that together, I contend, require a differential account of primitive accumulation: Thai-led regional integration, national reforms in Myanmar, and conflict in Myanmar's south. I propose such a differential account by stitching together an alternative thought of primitive accumulation from indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and radical Black and feminist thought.

Part 2 turns to the political interventions that have taken shape around the Dawei SEZ project. Chapter 3 develops the conceptual and historical parameters for the discussion of infrapolitics that follows in the next two chapters, split between the two political trajectories I identify in the Dawei area. Chapter 4 presents the first of those two trajectories, a secular-universal trajectory represented mainly, if not exclusively, by DDA. Outlining DDA's history and following its work with other organizations and activities in Dawei, I show how neither civil society nor political society, the principal models for theorizing popular politics since the 1990s, entirely captures DDA's work and its ideas. Still, three plain political technologies—the meeting, the letter, and the workshop—enact a political imagination that is consistent in its appeals to a set of liberal values: transparency, accountability, and local participation. Chapter 5 shifts to the second of these two trajectories, a situational-differential trajectory that resonates in the villages of Amya, the main project area of the Dawei SEZ. In these villages, I describe how farmers and fishers, workers and traders, and community leaders practice a politics focused on possible material gains: employment opportunities, financial compensation, and improved basic infrastructure. Geared toward claims

on material distribution, this politics of distribution pursues circumstantial exceptions to universalizing norms and guidelines, such as laws and regulations, while mobilizing village hierarchies more than pushing against them. To the extent that it associates the project's return with basic material progress—more jobs, more income, and better roads and electricity—this politics welcomes a possible restart. It conflicts with organizations such as DDA, which continues to criticize the project from the standpoint of liberal values.

Part 3 follows how DDA translates its work beyond Dawei—or attempts to—before returning to and concluding with the problem of the SEZ's suspension. Chapter 6 moves with DDA through an exposure trip they helped organize, which brought villagers from the Dawei SEZ's project areas to several infrastructure projects in Thailand. Intended to motivate these villagers to contest, along with DDA, the SEZ's return, the trip itself becomes a site of political cleavage, as a conflict emerges around a particular villager. The contrasting political trajectories of the Dawei area travel with and hamper DDA even here. Dwelling on the politics of translation, I then shift with DDA to a regional SEZ forum in Yangon, which raises questions about equivalential conceptions of populism and social movements. The concluding chapter returns to the suspension of the SEZ project. I ask how the project persists—how, after so many years, its possibility remains at all. Drawing attention to maintaining basic infrastructure in the project area, as well as the work required by DDA to sustain itself in this drawn-out, extended present, I focus on three sites—a quarry, a road, and a shoreline—of breakdown and repair. I suggest the project exists at a threshold of figuration, where in coming years, much will depend on which densities of political and material form—which struggles, which structures—are able to take shape, stabilize, and endure.

Part 1
Locations

Chapter 1

Zone, or life in suspension

“History lies before Bayle like an abundant heap of ruins, and there is no possibility of mastering this abundance of material.”

– Ernst Cassirer (1932)

“Aw, eikmekthalobé”: it’s just a dream. When Ko Tun made his comment—that the project is just a dream—we were sitting on the balcony of a monastery in southern Myanmar, near the town of Dawei. Ko Tun, a smallholder farmer, was talking about the Dawei special economic zone (SEZ), one of the world’s largest infrastructure projects. Plans for the SEZ include a deep-sea port, a vast petrochemical estate, a smaller industrial zone for light and medium industries, a new township for workers, several coal- and gas-fired powerplants, a dam and two reservoirs, dual oil and gas pipelines, and road and rail links to Thailand. At over two hundred square miles, the zone is roughly ten times larger than the largest industrial zone in mainland Southeast Asia. Yet the project, once a showpiece for Myanmar’s new era of reforms, was suspended in 2013. Investment fell short, amid criticism of the project by Dawei farmers, fishers, activists, and social movements. Times have changed, however. Although land acquisition and infrastructure remain sites for the making of radical political struggles in Myanmar and neighboring countries (Sopranzetti 2012, Prasse-Freeman 2015, Levien 2018), those struggles have become notable by their absence in Dawei. Today, people like Ko Tun, who live in the SEZ area, increasingly say they welcome what they believe the project will bring: more jobs, financial compensation, and better infrastructure. I read Ko Tun’s remark as a dual commentary on the project’s suspension. The SEZ is now a kind of fantasy, unreal. For many, it is also an aspiration, unmet.

These days, the landscape of this dream looks more like a crime scene: cordoned off and set apart, a palimpsest bearing traces of disruption. Things built before 2013 have fallen into disuse and decay. Roads, bridges, water towers, pipes, signage, and housing are in disrepair. Most sites are deserted: a dormitory, boarded up; a port, its docks abandoned; a relocation village, without villagers; a quarry, blasted open, now silent. Flora is retaking the land. Farmers graze livestock in the ruins. Fishers motor out to sea beneath half-built bridges. But unlike the Benjaminian theme of the ruinations of projects past,⁴ these are ruins in reverse (Smithson 1996a): debris not of the past but of the future—and moreover, of futures deferred and still desired. A dreamworld on hold, Dawei surfaces the aesthetics and experience of suspension, as a condition unto itself, and one that might trouble the logics and telos of completion (Gupta 2018). For people like Ko Tun, what does it mean to endure or persist, or even to strive, in this state of suspension? I propose that life in this state of suspension is integral to the making, and indeed unmaking, of political struggle and subjectivity on this capitalist frontier.

This chapter considers the politics and poetics of suspension.⁵ In Myanmar, recent political shifts—from a military dictatorship ending in 2010, to the nominally civilian-led government that followed—have increasingly been seen as a stalled or failed transition in the wake of the 2021 military coup. These shifts, moreover, unfolded against a much wider global backdrop of uncertain futures, looming ecological catastrophe, and speculation that the time of time itself may be over (Latour 2010). “Suspension,” here, thus attends to but exceeds the status of the Dawei SEZ project; it points towards a broader uncertainty at large in Myanmar and beyond. In this chapter, I begin with background about the Dawei SEZ project, situating it geographically, conceptually, and historically. I then shift towards a series of ethnographic encounters, mainly with people living in

⁴ See Yarrow (2017), citing Dawdy (2010), Edensor (2005), Gordillo (2014), Schwenkel (2013), and Stoler (2008).

⁵ The formulation builds on those of Eshel (2003) and Larkin (2013).

the SEZ area today, that capture how people experience the suspension of the project and the possibility of its restart. I suggest that for many people living in the shadow of the project, it exists *sous rature*: under erasure.⁶ The very notion that there is such a project is both inaccurate—strictly speaking, it does not exist—and yet necessary, as it cannot be ignored. It exerts a certain force, if often ineffable, on the lifeworlds of those in its midst: like a dream, in Ko Tun’s words. In attending to this dream, I respond to the cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas (2018), who argues that in Asia today, the future is anachronistic. He calls for storytelling that captures the twisted temporalities of the present.

1.1 Abstract monuments, absent futures

In September 2010, Senior General Than Shwe, then the head of Myanmar’s military junta, led a state delegation to China, where he visited the Shanghai Expo and the Shenzhen SEZ. The Shenzhen SEZ had recently marked its 30th anniversary as China’s first SEZ, among the earliest in Asia. Upon his return, Than Shwe declared the Dawei SEZ should be “like the Shenzhen economic zone”: another first SEZ, this time Myanmar’s, and like Shenzhen, a vehicle for liberalizing a socialist economy (IHT 2010). Although a memorandum of understanding (MoU) announcing the Dawei project had already been signed in 2008, it was several weeks after Than Shwe’s visit to China that the Dawei SEZ’s chief developer was announced: Italian-Thai Development (ITD), Thailand’s largest construction company. Only five days after ITD signed the framework agreement, valid for sixty years, Myanmar held its first general election in decades. The long-time opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), boycotted the vote,

⁶ The notion traces to Heidegger’s lecture course of 1929-30, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Heidegger 2001). The formulation “inaccurate, yet necessary” comes from Spivak’s well-known preface to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1998). Spivak explains, “Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible” (Derrida 1998, xiv).

ceding the election to the military-backed civilian party. Still, the election punctuated a shift in political power from an openly authoritarian dictatorship to a partially civilian government led by a former general. Officially, the 2010 election marked the end of military rule, in place since 1962.

Perhaps it should have been obvious that the Dawei SEZ, initiated at the very end of military rule, yet tasked with announcing a new era, would stumble under the weight of its fraught symbolic burdens. Regardless, less than three years after ITD began implementing the project, Myanmar's government announced its suspension. ITD's main Myanmar partner had recently withdrawn over land disputes; activist groups had forced the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant that would have powered the project; highland villagers had blockaded roads over compensation demands; and ITD's roadshows, particularly in Japan and South Korea, had failed to attract investment, amid quiet disinterest from the multilateral development banks. In 2015, ITD itself withdrew from its framework agreement, against the backdrop of new national elections that swept the NLD, now entering electoral politics, into power for the first time. After initially vowing to reassess the Dawei SEZ with an eye to cancelling it, the NLD government came under pressure over the Rohingya crisis, a faltering national peace process, and economic under-performance, especially in foreign direct investment. Although the NLD shifted to planning for a restart of the SEZ project, no construction had resumed by the time of the coup—for reasons to be discussed subsequently. The project remained on hold.

The suspension of the zone attests to something fundamental about infrastructure. Although infrastructure sometimes enables the smooth and standardized circulation of goods, capital, and knowledge over space, as in dominant conceptions of infrastructure and different kinds of zones in particular (Harvey 2003, Barry 2006, Appel 2012, Easterling 2014), infrastructure can also be unsteady, unruly, and volatile, composed of and subject to manifold material and political

instabilities. In Dawei, the suspension of the zone and its longer regional genealogy push infrastructure away from a disembodied thematics of capitalist circulation and exchange, returning infrastructure instead to histories of colonial extraction, postcolonial conflict, and the making and remaking of subjectivity and political life. Relocated within, rather than beyond, politics and the social, the zone in Dawei—or the ~~zone~~ in Dawei—symbolizes a precarious political present, poised between dictatorship and democracy, development and degradation, the ruins of the past and the ruins of the future. After years of abandonment, meanwhile, the zone itself has acquired a spectral air. Long exposed to blistering sun and pounding rain, half-built structures lie cringing, rusting, across a vast, otherworldly landscape.

In a series of essays in the late 1960s, the land artist Robert Smithson wrote about what he called “new monuments” (Smithson 1996a, 1996b). For Smithson, the large-scale works produced by him and his contemporaries were both within and beyond time. Like the great monuments of the past, he wrote, each work “is charged with the rush of time even though it is static” (1996c, 112). Yet the new monuments, he stressed, departed from conventional art histories of scale, site, and beauty. The industrial towns of New Jersey took pride of place among his new monuments. He regarded Passaic, for instance, where he was born, as a place of remarkable degradation: a ruin, but not in the traditional sense. He describes Passaic as a “zero panorama,” running time against itself. From aging industrial structures to an emergent suburban sprawl, Passaic’s built landscape evokes, for Smithson, “memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures” (1996a, 72). Put differently, in steel he saw rust. “The more I think about steel itself,” he wrote, “devoid of the technological refinements, the more rust becomes the fundamental property of steel” (1996c, 106).

In some ways, the Dawei SEZ stands as an archetype of the *new* new monuments in Asia, a whole genre of spaces, places, and built forms that pay tribute to abandoned futures: the heavy

industrial plants shuttered in China's northeast, the ghost cities scattered across China's frontiers, the SEZs left incomplete in India since 2008, the hydropower edifices now idle along the Mekong River, including the largest of them all in Myanmar's far north.⁷ Some of these structures exemplify a process of exhaustion and decline. Others are simply not finished and may stay that way. According to one estimate, up to forty percent of infrastructure projects in China are begun but never completed (Bach 2017). In India, the financial crisis of 2008 has slowed the proliferation of SEZs, leaving many in a state of incompleteness (Cross 2014, 190).

These monuments, such as they are, resonate within cultural production. In Asian cinema and cultural theory, renewed attention to speculative capital and deindustrialization invites a return to images and languages of spectrality, disappearance, and de-description. In a recent film, a collective from Jadavpur University draws on Smithson in depicting an abandoned SEZ on the outskirts of Kolkata. The film explains that plans for the project never came to fruition. Within the zone, "Abstract monuments, housing almost no one, rise up from wide fields of paddy. Like nearly all smart utopias of global finance, it remains hung in limbo between two absent futures" (*Tracts of Dust* 2018). The film is part of a wider cinema of industrial decline and financialization, often preoccupied with material remainders. These are films with titles like *Rust*, *Remnants*, and *Rails*, as in Wang Bing's landmark trilogy memorializing the decline of China's industrial north, and *Tracts of Dust*, as in the Jadavpur collective's film.⁸ Ackbar Abbas, meanwhile, has theorized disappearance as fundamental to late modernity in East Asia, where, paradoxically, conditions of growth, expansion, and speed itself, per Paulo Virilio, disrupt the visible order. "Disappearance is

⁷ The Myitsone Dam, on hold in Kachin State in Myanmar's north, has been suspended since before the Dawei SEZ. The protests and media campaigns that led to the suspension of the Myitsone have been seen by some as a precursor to and enabler of the mobilizations that contributed to the suspension of the Dawei SEZ two years later.

⁸ See also *Behemoth*, Zhao Liang's figurative study of mining and miners in rural China, which tracks the degradations of economic expansion in explicit dialogue with Smithson's land art. It ends in the uncanny emptiness of one of China's many ghost cities. And *Yumen*, a collaboration between the artists Xu Ruotao and Huang Xiang and director J.P. Sniadecki, explores an abandoned oil town, once-thriving, in China's northwest.

a consequence of speed,” Abbas writes (1997, 9). In later writings, Abbas notes the “twist in social space” produced by large-scale projects like the Three Gorges Dam (2008, 6). Through demolitions, displacement, and the long timelines of projects such as these, disappearance remains crucial, generating nostalgic sentiments that run counter to historical time. He asks: “Is it possible to imagine the future not in terms of linearity, succession, and chronology, but in terms of temporal overlaps, repetition, and anachronisms?” (Abbas 2018)

These are cultural discourses that place in question modernizing promises—promises embedded in particular material forms and, often, an industrial political aesthetic (see Larkin 2018). Wang Bing has said that upon seeing the factories of the north, he felt drawn to them at once. “The factories,” he explained, “with their vast scale and texture, have an attractive force like that of a person’s past ideals” (quoted in Lu 2005, 131).

The Dawei SEZ shares much with these new abstract monuments, bearing witness to an absent industrial future, at least for now. Yet it also demands a more specific accounting, one that distinguishes between that which, long-standing, long operational, has only now fallen into ruin, and that which, unfinished, incomplete, has never and perhaps never will reach any state of completion. This is the difference between shuttered industrial plants, on one hand, and SEZs, dams, and other projects that are suspended—maybe permanently—on the other. Suspension is part of a wider phenomenon that, for Akhil Gupta (2018), characterizes many, maybe even most, infrastructure projects in the Global South, further disabling the trope of smooth circulation and exchange that prevails in scholarship on infrastructure. Roads being built and re-built, always subject to interruption, maintenance, and repair; powerlines and water systems by turns broken and fixed, broken and fixed; buildings that remain, as it were, in the present continuous, never finished, beams exposed and upper floors open to the sky: these are ruins of the future, for Gupta,

taking leave of linear modernist trajectories. Infrastructure, he argues, must be grasped “as an open-ended process rather than through teleologies of ‘completion’ and ‘progress’” (2018, 62). He summarizes his provocation as follows:

My argument is that the conventional view of infrastructural projects as beginning with planning and ending with inauguration misses the dynamic nature of infrastructural time in favor of a well-worn script of modernity. I...advance a contrarian view that sees infrastructure as a process that is characterized by multiple temporalities, open futures, and the constant presence of decay and ruination. I conceptualize infrastructure as a process, not a thing: a thing-in-motion, ephemeral, shifting, elusive, decaying, degrading, becoming a ruin but for the routines of repair, replacement, and restoration (or in spite of them).

Thomas Yarrow (2017) makes a similar distinction, showing how recent scholarship on ruins and ruination often draws on Benjamin to think the debris and degradations of projects achieved, however unsteadily (Edensor 2005, Stoler 2008, Dawdy 2010, Schwenkel 2013, Gordillo 2014). Yarrow, by contrast, focuses on a major unrealized resettlement project in Ghana, which many people in the area wish had been finished. He attends to a “paradoxical ruination,” which “entails a palpable sense of the failure of modernization to arrive, associated with an unstable and unresolved relationship between the actuality of existing circumstances and imagined futures that continue to be projected” (Yarrow 2017, 568).

The Dawei SEZ represents such a paradoxical ruination. Unlike China’s aging industries or abandoned oil towns, the Dawei SEZ does not testify to an industrial past in decline. It bears witness, rather, to a future on hold, an imagined future that, as we will see, continues to shape aspirations and political imaginations. Thus even in its present ruination, reflections on the project stand to reveal something about what people want from social and cultural life, including in material terms; how people understand themselves emplotted in time; and what possibilities they see in the future, socially, politically, and otherwise—in line with Arjun Appadurai’s (2013) writings on futurity. Less a ruin of the past than a ruin of the future—if a future always already

subject to ruin, following Gupta—the Dawei SEZ is best understood as a ruin in reverse, another phrase owing to Smithson (1996a): a collection of rubble, currently, that attests to futures suspended rather than the decline of a past. These suspended futures, moreover, consign villagers to a kind of “waiting room of history,” in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (2007) sense, where a “not-yet” relation to developmental time calls up histories of—as we will see shortly—liberal empire here.⁹ Still, these futures on hold continue to be objects of reflection and desire in Dawei, all the more strikingly given the history and temporal politics of infrastructure in these far reaches of Myanmar’s south. I turn now to the subjects addressed and brought into being over time by infrastructure in Dawei and surrounding areas.

1.2 Liminal extremes

Today, Dawei is the largest city in Myanmar’s southernmost division, Tanintharyi (formerly Tenasserim). With a population of about 70,000, the town itself—about 12 miles south of the SEZ area proper—is a regional center of trade and administration. It is the seat of the regional government, as well as a transit point for trade between Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, and to a lesser extent India.

It is as a transit point of sorts—a “hybrid borderland” between empires, in one historical account (Moore 2011)—that Dawei enters historical records. The Dawei historical chronicle, one of many historical chronicles in Myanmar, names several sites in the Dawei area visited by the Buddha during his lifetime, and then subsequently by monks who circulated within Asokan

⁹ Caroline Melly (2016) also writes of traffic bottlenecks in urban Senegal—the urban embouteillage—that they produce, even as they capture, a broad sense of stalled mobility across space and time. Erik Harms (2013), meanwhile, argues that evictions in Ho Chi Minh City push residents set to be dispossessed into enforced, alienated forms of waiting.

missionary networks.¹⁰ The Buddha left footprints and three sacred hairs, which his disciples enshrined at a pagoda north of Dawei and in the main pagoda of Dawei (Moore 2013). In this vernacular historiography, Dawei emerges as a place far-flung in early Buddhist geographies, yet also as a node of circulation therein. At stake in such sources is less empirical history than a cumulative self-understanding. The current chronicle compiles and reworks six previous compilations dating as early as the late nineteenth century. The current edition was published in 1974, a period of heightened insurgency in areas around Dawei; it suggests a concern to preserve local history. Regardless, the Dawei chronicle “authenticated oral tradition and...is not only significant in explaining and justifying the Buddhist heritage but in recording the acceptance of the people who shared the stories” (Moore 2013, 299).

Until the beginnings of colonial rule, in the early nineteenth century, Dawei remained at the outer limits of multiple state-making projects—Pyu, Burmese, Mon, Thai—and hence often between more than one. Thagara, an ancient city located between Dawei town and the SEZ area today, dates to the eighth century C.E., co-eval with Pyu cities in upper Burma. Thagara was a large walled city with canals, a monastic community, a line of Buddhist kings, specialized production areas, wet rice cultivation beyond the walls, and strong links to inland water routes for transport farther afield. The archaeologist Elizabeth Moore suggests Thagara lends credence to the notion of a “cultural package”—documented in greater detail in Sri Lanka and Central India—that brings together water management, urbanization, and the diffusion of Buddhism less by royal mandate than through exchange between monastic and lay communities (2013, 311). On the periphery of larger political geographies, this history includes lay subjects in a matrix that intertwines political rule with transportation, irrigation, and early infrastructures thereof.

¹⁰ Unlike in upper Myanmar, relatedly, one often finds portraits of Asoka at pagodas in Dawei.

The “Thagara dynastic line” rose and fell over several centuries, with the Dawei area eventually becoming subject to various empires throughout much of the second millennium C.E. Synoptic histories often portray Dawei as a place of extremity, describing the rule of a given dynasty or kingdom as extending “as far as” the frontier at Dawei:¹¹ under Mon rulers and then Ayutthaya in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; under the Toungoo dynasty and the Burmese King Tabinshwehti in the sixteenth century; under the Siamese reign of Naresuan in the seventeenth century; and in the late eighteenth century, under the Burmese king Alaungpaya, who seized control of Dawei during his invasion of Ayutthaya.¹² That invasion confirms a paradox of Dawei’s location: at the extremes of imperial projects, Dawei has also been a place of passage and transit.¹³ Even after the decline of Thagara and before Dawei’s later imperial subjections, Dawei, though relatively isolated, already had a port that made it known for its trade links to other areas. Moore writes, “All the archaeology suggests Dawei was nominally controlled for its port but remained culturally independent, protected by trade with links in all directions” (2011, 2).

Under British rule, these shifting relations between trade, circulation, infrastructure, and political subjection took on a different character. The First Anglo-Burmese War ended in 1826, resulting in Burma ceding most of its coastal territory to Britain, including Tenasserim and hence Dawei. A.D. Maingy, the first commissioner to arrive in Tenasserim, issued public proclamations in Myeik and then Dawei. At the very outset of his proclamation, among the first words to

¹¹ As in Hall’s summation of the expansion of Tabinshwehti’s empire in the mid-sixteenth century: “Moulmein surrendered without a blow, and the remainder of the Mon territory as far as the Siamese frontier at Tavoy fell into Burmese hands” (1960, 39). Tavoy is the former name for Dawei. The construction “as far as” also appears in Harvey (2000, 157), there too referring to the farthest reaches of an empire to Dawei’s north.

¹² See Moore (2011, 32–4) for a summary chronology of Dawei history. See also Hall (1960), Harvey (2000), and Phayre (1883) for synoptic histories that include detailed reference to Dawei over this period.

¹³ “Crossing the Hills,” the title of one of the first research studies of the Dawei SEZ, refers to and reflects this historical construction of Dawei as a hinge point between and at the limits of multiple empires past (Desmond 2011).

announce colonial rule in Burma, the commissioner pointedly hails his audience as liberal subjects of British empire:

The King of Ava [Burma] by his unprovoked aggressions and extravagant pretensions having forced the British Government to invade his Dominions, one of its first acts was to take possession of these Provinces. But it is against the King and his arrogant Ministers and not against the people of Ava that the English Nation is at war, and in proof of this fact, the Right Honourable the Governor General of British India has resolved upon affording to you the inhabitants of these Provinces, the benefits of a Civil Government under the Superintendence and direction of the Hon'ble the Governor of Prince of Wales Island. I hasten then to acquaint you that I am deputed from Prince Wales Island to assume charge of these Provinces and to provide them with a Civil and Political Administration on the most liberal and equitable principles. (quoted in Furnivall 1991, 5)

He continues, articulating elements of British direct rule that, by way of detached, laissez-faire policies, would privilege and protect economic activity: “ In respect to revenue and all other subjects your own customs and local usages shall be taken into consideration; but the most free and unrestricted internal and external commerce will be established and promoted” (1991, 6). Maingy reports that his words were well-received in Myeik and later Dawei. “Everyone hailed with delight,” he claims in a letter, “the certainty of being considered and protected as British subjects. They received with horror the possibility of being made again subject to the authority of their old masters, and with still a greater dread of being transferred to their inveterate enemies, the Siamese” (1991, 15). Regardless of his sense of his subjects’ “delight,” Dawei was soon shaken by an armed rebellion and, for a time, even seized from the British and held. The revolt was a serious one, aiming to recover the town from the British. According to a missionary history, “The fifth night was the worst of all, for the town was set on fire around, and by the light of the flames the enemy made a serious attack; but just in time to prevent the fire from attaining the frail wooden structure (the pier where they had taken refuge), a providential storm quenched it, and the muskets of the Sepoys again repulsed the enemy” (Yonge 1874, 157).¹⁴ Tenasserim’s future remained

¹⁴ See Yonge (1874, 155–8) for an account of the insurrection, noted as well in Furnivall (1991, 15).

uncertain for decades, in fact. Before being more firmly integrated in Britain's expanding colonization of Burma, Burma pressed for its return, and England wavered in its commitment to occupation. As for those who suffered the occupation, a later account notes that, Maingy's remarks notwithstanding, it became obvious "how soon they wearied of it" (Furnivall 1991, 15).

J.S. Furnivall, the colonial scholar-official who produced the fullest account of early British rule, locates Maingy within an important liberal tradition in British empire at the time.¹⁵ Writing in 1939, Furnivall asserts that "In those days all the leading men in India were disciples of Adam Smith," and "In theory Mr. Maingy was as good an economist as any of them. He disbelieved on principle in interfering with the course of trade, and it seemed to him that he had before his eyes in the undeveloped state of the country the result of vexatious interference by the Burmese Government" (1991, 63). The primary goal of the early administrations was to facilitate trade through resource extraction, particularly in mining and timber, not least to pay for the nominally self-sustaining occupation. Infrastructure was poor, however,¹⁶ with Furnivall noting wryly that whatever the objectives of political administration, physical infrastructure is also necessary. "The writs of Leviathan cannot run," he writes, "if there are no roads for them to run along, and the wealth on which he depends for sustenance cannot be used if it is inaccessible" (1991, 52). Hence Maingy's stress on infrastructure development, or as Maingy puts it one letter, "the facilitating and extending of communications." This articulation of communications brings together trade, resource extraction, infrastructure, and empire in one formulation. It reflects the liberal conviction, then widespread, that the free flow of goods, people, and ideas—circulation itself, in other words—

¹⁵ Liberal political economy, Furnivall stresses, was then central to the education of Indian Civil Service (ICS) trainees at Haileybury in England, while high-level officials in India—he notes Elphinstone in Bombay, and Munro in Madras—were committed to carrying out the "practical application" of laissez faire policies. He writes, "They were all 'political economists,' as the phrase went. The machinery of Leviathan"—or the colonial state, in Furnivall's usage—"they held, would automatically grind out wealth" (1991, 63).

¹⁶ Upon his arrival, Furnivall writes, Maingy "found the whole surface of the country, from the sea to the Siamese border, an almost uninterrupted stretch of jungle and forest" (1991:52).

is at the heart of historical progress, and requires material channels of exchange (Mattelart 1996).¹⁷ For Maingy and later officials like Furnivall, lofty notions of progress and improvement, powerfully future-oriented, hewed closely to material referents, namely the trade in extracted resources that infrastructure, they hoped—roads above all, in Tenasserim at this time—would make possible. Put differently, they understood infrastructures as bearers of mutability, of the possibility of change as such and thus historical development—and not only in terms of trade, revenue, and political economy. With his focus on “communications,” Maingy’s aim, Furnivall makes clear, was to effect a correspondence between material and moral progress, positioning Tenasserim and its people on a temporal trajectory of improvement.¹⁸

This notion of communications suggests that the subjects of British rule would also be part of a process of reciprocal change, transformation, and becoming, amid improvements in material infrastructure and the circulation of goods. Maingy’s letters indicate he believed this would take place. Yet his subjects themselves apparently had little interest in communications as understood within liberal political economy.¹⁹ The chief obstacle to the early administrations’ attempts to build infrastructure, mainly roads, was not just a limited labor supply due to sparse population and

¹⁷ See as well Larkin (2008, 2018) for discussions of Mattelart in relation to infrastructure.

¹⁸ As in two of the longer chapters in Furnivall (1991), titled “Material Progress” and “Moral Progress.” One notes, here, how sharply Furnivall, reading Maingy’s correspondence, differentiates the colonial state’s attitude towards “improvement” and “development” from Burmese rulers’ and subjects’. Unlike Maingy and his emphasis on road-building, “The Burmese rulers had no passion for improvement,” he writes (1991, 53). And in seeking “the development of (Tenasserim’s) natural resources,” Maingy had to chart an entirely new path. “Mr. Maingy had to take action, or else leave the country undeveloped. It did not worry the Burman that the country should remain undeveloped; he seemed to have no desire for gain at all” (1991, 64). In his later, better-known writings, such as *Colonial Policy and Practice*, a comparative work written in 1948 where Furnivall coins the notion of the plural society, Furnivall ultimately draws a strong distinction between Dutch indirect rule in Indonesia—attuned to society and exercising restraint over the economy—and British direct rule in Burma, which he condemns for pursuing impersonal, laissez faire policies that created a rampant economy and devastating social consequences (Furnivall 2014). Reflecting on the liberalism of Maingy, however, Furnivall in this earlier work accepts and reproduces the discourse of improvement he identifies within the activities of the early colonial state (Furnivall 2014).

¹⁹ Hall argues more broadly that whenever conflicts emerged “between liberalism and Burmese custom,” as they often did during early colonial rule in Tenasserim, the latter—recalcitrant, defiant, and generally difficult, in Hall’s telling—would win out (Hall 1960, 138–9).

remote settlements, but the active withdrawal of people in order not to become laborers (Furnivall 1991, 53–4). Officials would arrive in an area designated for roadbuilding only to find that the population refused to work or had already fled. This is a practice of labor withdrawal that reflects a larger pattern of Burmese subjects seeking to evade state-making projects and the coerced labor that defines them, from precolonial times to the colonial period and even in recent decades (Scott 2009, Aung 2014). Maingy attempted first to pay people then to coerce them to work, but eventually he turned to imported labor from India, much of it forced convict labor, to satisfy the shortage. Even so, only a single road was built beyond the few towns of Tenasserim during Maingy’s time, a 50-mile road leading south from Mawlamyine. A decade later, his successor stated bluntly that “there are no roads, canals, tanks, or other works in the interior,” and the situation remained much the same for decades after, even into the twentieth century (1991, 59). It was not until World War I, in fact, that “any great improvement in communication by land was effected.” Dawei-area mines had suddenly become tremendously profitable for tungsten, a munitions component, but Burmese labor still played only a miniscule role. This time Chinese and Indian workers met the shortage.²⁰ Indeed, earlier administrations represented their rule as engendering a progressive temporality, but their attempts to materialize historical progress failed in their own terms throughout the nineteenth century—such that a British mining engineer, speaking in the midst of Dawei’s mining boom in 1919, could say: “The future of Tavoy (Dawei) scarcely entered men’s heads ten years ago. It is one of the most significant changes that a day rarely passes now without enquiries for information reaching me about its potentialities” (Coleridge Beadon 1919, 88).

²⁰ See Coleridge Beadon (1919, 67) and Hall (1960, 160).

Maingy and his successors were puzzled, even frustrated, at their subjects' apparent disinclination to internalize and strive for the progressive futures they promised. Furnivall speculates that some people are simply unwilling to work, whatever the terms. But he also suggests something more specific about the history and politics of road infrastructures in Burma—whom they serve, whom they don't, and how people living near them might thus see them, and perhaps themselves. “Since the beginning of time,” he writes, “travelers in Burma have gone by water; a man from the uplands is proverbially a fool. Only an army would ever need roads and the roads for an army could be constructed by the soldiers, helped, of course, by pressed labour from each village on their way” (1991, 53). The Burmese invasion of Ayutthaya by way of Dawei had proceeded in just this way, Furnivall adds, only decades before the onset of British colonialism. For some, that invasion would have been within living memory when Maingy was trying to press villagers into roadbuilding for resource extraction.

In this hybrid borderland, this liminal extremity of empire, lay subjects long played important roles in expansive networks of exchange, communication, and circulation, from Asokan missionary geographies to Pyu-era trade and travel by port and water transport. Later state-making projects, however, constructed Dawei as a space of frontier warfare: at once object and corridor for empires seeking to expand their perimeters and launch attacks across territories. With colonial rule, the state in its proclamations hailed its audience as subjects of liberal political economy: of would-be inclusion and transformation in and through a material project of rule. Yet even by empire's own stenographer, J.S.F. Furnivall, the people of Tenasserim registered at best a weary indifference—and in reality, flight and even rebellion—in the face of the colonial state's commitment to “communications,” that is, trade in extracted resources as a spur to historical progress.

Whatever Maingy might have believed about the promise of empire, the response by his subjects in Tenasserim suggested a kind of counter-interpolation. Tenasserim's subjects appear to have grasped infrastructure less in terms of opportunity or possibility, much less subjective transformation, and more as sites of coercion, perhaps even danger, and spaces at times to avoid. The acts of refusal and revolt that greeted British rule placed in question the temporal arc of improvement that infrastructure represented for Maingy and his successors. Improvement for whom and at whose expense? Historical records do not indicate a sense of a promissory futurity on the part of Tenasserim's subjects—quite the opposite. However the colonial state hailed them, the people of Tenasserim seem to have understood themselves in different terms: as objects of a project of strict subjection, embedded in infrastructures of extraction.

1.3 Being and becoming on hold

At this liminal extreme of empires past, temporal subjectivity would be made and remade anew across Myanmar's twentieth century, from revolution to decolonization and the shift, recently, away from open authoritarian rule. By the time I sat at the monastery with Ko Tun, for whom the SEZ is just a dream, it seemed clear to me that, far from understanding infrastructure as materializing projects of exclusion, people in the Dawei area had come to perceive infrastructure within a rather different semiotic field. This field was defined, now, by many people's sense of what the SEZ might provide: employment opportunities, financial compensation, and indeed, better physical infrastructure, particularly roads.

At that point I had spent the better part of a year working with the Dawei Development Association (DDA), the organization that spearheaded criticism of the SEZ in advance of its suspension in 2013. Led by a handful of youth activists from the town of Dawei, DDA took pride

in fighting the SEZ, even if since 2013, the suspension of the project had led DDA to shift its activism towards other issues in the area: mining, palm oil plantations, and the energy sector, especially. When I arrived for fieldwork, however, the regional government had begun to change its stance on the SEZ and move towards resuming it. So I spent time with DDA in the home they had made into their office, helping them with trainings, workshops, organizing, grant applications, and writing and translating statements. But I also spent more and more time in the SEZ area itself, particularly in the villages set to be relocated for the first phase of the project if it ultimately resumes. Building on earlier work DDA had done to document the concerns of people living in the project area (SSDN and DDA 2012, DDA 2014), my immediate aim was to understand better what villagers now thought of the project in general—an issue of some urgency if it were to restart.

Initially, it did not really register with me that when I would drive out to and around the SEZ area—about an hour by motorbike from town—I would find myself, almost immediately, greeted by signs of the project’s suspension: building materials discarded by the roadside, signage torn up and fraying in the wind, graffiti scrawled across information boards, gates locked and rusting, with rambling structures languishing in behind. With DDA and the social movements in our network, suspension itself rarely surfaced in meetings, discussions, workshops, and more casual settings. It was mainly, if relatedly, questions about whether the project might resume, what the government was saying, rumors of funding set aside and new assessments, and talk of this or that investor getting involved. But I was spending more time with villagers in the SEZ area, sometimes formally and sometimes less formally: meeting people, usually friends of friends, at teashops or in their homes; having food and drinks, and watching movies or football, over long afternoons and into the night; organizing discussions at monasteries or *tamin saing* (small restaurants); walking with people around their fields, villages, and forests; and coming to

colleagues’, friends’, and friends of friends’ weddings, funerals, and monastic ceremonies. As I did so, the question of the suspension of the project and villagers’ varied experiences thereof began to emerge more forcefully as something to examine in itself, not least due to a paradox that I and others from DDA and other activist groups were having trouble resolving. Despite, as widely acknowledged, the likely destructive force of the project if it were to resume—through, if not only through, displacement, dispossession, and environmental degradation—more and more villagers seemed to be wishing for precisely its return. For some, it had even become a kind of fantasy, as for Ko Tun— something of a dream.

*

Fantasy takes leave of or reimagines the present.²¹ In the SEZ area, the present is often defined already in terms of neglect or degradation, as in one phrase that appeared and reappeared. The SEZ area, so it goes, is *kyeinsa thintè naymyay*: cursed land.

The first time I heard the phrase was at a public meeting in Dawei town hosted by the SEZ Management Committee, the government body tasked with oversight of project implementation. The committee had recently been reconstituted amid rumors the project would resume. One afternoon, at an auditorium attached to a shopping mall—the newest, hence very shiny, and also only mall in Dawei, built by a company with rumored ties to the SEZ—I took my seat alongside everyone else who had come: villagers, activists, journalists, businesspeople, educators, government officials, other members of the public. At the front of the hall, nine members of the committee sat at a long table facing us. The mood was strained, but respectful. After opening comments from the committee about plans to resume the project—a commitment expressed in only general terms that day—questions from the audience were pointed, often about the paucity of

²¹ One of the definitions listed for “fantasy,” one notes, in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is “A day-dream arising from conscious or unconscious wishes or attitudes” (fantasy | phantasy, n. n.d.).

project updates from the government over the past couple of years. The committee listened, even sympathetically, but noted repeatedly that listening as such was all they would do for the moment. Audience concerns, they said, would be recorded and shared among the policymakers responsible for the project. Nonetheless, the expression about the SEZ area being cursed did not come from a frustrated audience member, no shortage of whom were in attendance. It came from a committee member, a minister in the Regional Government, when he was discussing plans to restart the project. His view, he said, is that the area designated for the SEZ in Amya, as the area is known, has become “like cursed land.” Since the project’s suspension several years ago, he explained, “The residents haven’t enjoyed any public services from the government. They cannot even apply for agricultural loans.” He declared, in fact, that “I wish every day the project succeeds. The project has been suspended for a while, and residents have not received compensation. Management keeps saying that the project will resume. But the buildings and infrastructure, like schools and roads, have been forgotten by the government. If the project doesn’t go forward, the residents will suffer more.” Local media picked up this expression—cursed land—and spread it across headlines in the following days.

The phrase gained traction, at least to some extent. Later, I sat talking with a handful of villagers one morning in one of the larger villages of the SEZ area. Like most villagers in the project area, they were *chanthama*, or smallholder plantation farmers, focused on cash crops like betel nut, cashews, seasonal fruits, to some extent rubber, and to a lesser extent paddy rice. As usual, our conversation revolved around whether the SEZ might resume. But that possibility arose less as a matter of programming, activities, and strategy, as in discussions with DDA and others, and more as a practical possibility with ramifications for daily life—not to mention as a matter of aspiration. One practical consequence of the project’s suspension, I learned, was that registration

of farmland had been placed on hold within the project area. It was while discussing this situation that one *chanthama*, U Hla, echoed the minister's expression about cursed land. "Our land is now project land," he said, "so we don't get any financial support from the government. The ministers said themselves—our area is cursed. So if the project finally comes, the curse will be lifted." It's like the minister said, U Hla explained. Public services have been limited, loans for agriculture are on hold, and basic infrastructure development and maintenance—on buildings, roads, schools, and so on—gets either ignored or disregarded. U Hla also cited Form 7 for registering land. "All over the country," he said, "there's Form 7 for farmland. Only our area is left out, since we're in the project area. We don't know when they'll restart."

No land documentation, no loans, no road repairs or upgrades: such is the mundane, yet exceptional, presence of absence here. Public services are on hold, I found out later, because if the SEZ resumes, the villages in the project area—U Hla's included—will be displaced and resettled. From the government's standpoint, if these villages will be gone soon, why spend money on them? The trouble is that "soon" has extended to cover an uncertain suspended present, beginning in 2013. "*Kannayada kyaabi*," U Hla told me bitterly. We've been dealing with this, enduring this, for a long time.

The project's suspension, for U Hla, is a kind of burden, an onus: something to be endured. It also carries its own spatio-temporal discipline. Daw Po lives in a village near U Hla's. The first time I met her, there had been talk, recently, that her village would be relocated to the resettlement village built in 2011. It has stood empty, since then, slowly falling to pieces as wooden stairs warped, paint faded then chipped away, and water pipes—at least the few that are not blue plastic—rusted over. These days, spider webs span doors and windows like caution tape at a crime scene. Daw Po, a *chanthama* as well, explained to me once some of the planning for relocation.

She described how people came to survey the size of her home, the number of crops she had planted, and how much land belonged to her—as of that date. According to calculations yet to be made clear, she would be compensated only for that much; if relocated, her new home would be only that size. To plant more later, or to build an extension on her home—this would be considered manipulating the process for her own gain. It was forbidden. Planning for resettlement and compensation fixes time and space, as in: “this moment, and nothing after; this space, and nothing more.” Suspension holds those limits in place. With the project unresolved, Daw Po cannot improve or expand her home. She cannot plant more or diversify her crops.

Although people do, of course, do exactly those things—enlarging and improving their homes, planting more and different crops—in part to gain more compensation, in case that time ever comes, the formal ban on doing so remains a matter of exasperation. It is commonplace for farmers to express frustration about the imposed limits to cultivation and housing, even though those limits are regularly and openly transgressed. With no end in sight while the project remains on hold, these relatively simple matters of social and economic reproduction have come under duress, becoming forbidden, officially, under the spatio-temporal discipline of suspension. Whatever the minimal effects that discipline has on actual housing and cultivation practices, the imposition of formal limits does influence the repertoire of sentiments—annoyance, frustration, anger—that not the project overall, but its condition of suspension, has engendered among those who live in its shadows.

I came to understand that feeling stuck, immobile, arbitrarily *fixed* by virtue of living in this place—this is part of life in this state of suspension. Sitting with friends, one morning, Ko Sein, a neighbor of U Hla, told me they have become *kyuttideh*: facing difficulty, but in a way that suggests being constrained or confined, almost boxed in—and urgently so, as in the word for crisis,

akyutati, which shares the same root. Ko Sein is actually a migrant from Bago, in upper Myanmar, who moved to his current village in the SEZ area in order to work on the project.²² He now has some land and calls himself a *chanthama*, while working as a security guard at one of the semi-abandoned SEZ sites. For him, almost anything happening might mean relief, a possible exit from the confines of the present. “If it’s going to start,” he said, “I’d like it to start quickly. If they’re not going to do it, they should clear out completely.” He articulated a desire for closure, finally—whether for or against the project, moving forward or clearing out. But he also continued, adding that in his view, “If it starts, it will be better for the poor (*sinyethadwei*).” His comment resonates with an irony I found continually during my fieldwork. It is those who find themselves in the most difficult circumstances who, in many cases, most wish for the project to resume—even when the project itself has caused their difficulties. Daw Po’s neighbor, Ma Htwe, is a paddy farmer whose land has been heavily damaged by runoff from the quarry in recent years. “We’re suffering hugely,” she told me one afternoon at her home: *a-kyi a-kyay htikaiq niqnanaydabah*. For her, the project’s return means possible compensation for her damaged land, and maybe moving elsewhere to restart her livelihood. Amid the burdens of the present, even mundane things are on hold: land registration, loans, daily economic activity, home improvements, expanded cultivation. The project, by contrast, stands for a passage to somewhere else: another time, another place.

1.4 Futures past and present

A great deal of scholarship on SEZs understandably echoes the concerns of activists and other critics. Grappling with the history and politics of capitalist enclaves and zonal-spatial

²² Ko Sein is one of relatively few people to have actively moved to the area for employment reasons when the project began. But although there were more such people before the project was suspended, there are very few who have stayed since. Ko Sein is the only such person I encountered during my fieldwork.

infrastructures, this scholarship tends to emphasize the exclusive, extractive, and exploitative nature of SEZs' political and economic logics, in Southeast Asia and beyond (Ong 1987, Ferguson 1999, Ngai 2004, Ferguson 2006, Ong 2006, Arnold 2012, Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, Neveling 2015a, 2015b, Arnold 2017, Campbell 2018a). Another strand of scholarship, however, stresses that SEZs are also spaces of imagination that reflect, or even cultivate, desires and aspirations: hopes for the future, modernist fantasies, and expectations of growth and transformation (Bach 2010, 2011, Cross 2014, Easterling 2014, Aung 2017, Majumder 2018). In this sense, SEZs are more than technical projects, designed for extraction and circulation; they are conceptual projects as well, with a tendency to exceed both planners' intentions and activist struggles.²³ They take shape in semiotic fields where not just their developers, but also those whom the projects immediately address, might be, as Ko Tun's comment suggests, "in the grip of dreams"—as Benjamin wrote of technological production in the nineteenth century (1999, 152).

I keep returning to Ko Tun's remark, because it captures this aspect of the Dawei SEZ so well. It is "just a dream": slightly unreal, difficult to imagine, yet also an object and vehicle of aspiration, especially among those villagers for whom the suspension of the project feels like confinement, a condition of being *kyuqtideh*. After Ko Tun made his remark at the monastery that day, the expression stayed with me. At one point, I mentioned it to U Myint, an historian and tour guide who, at the time, had been contracted to host a group of Chinese students. Among other things, he showed them around the SEZ area.²⁴ Having joined the outing, I brought up Ko Tun's comment while we were standing as a group at Kilometer Zero, the beachfront site planned for the construction of the deep-sea port. U Myint's reaction was not quite what I expected: he burst out

²³ See Larkin (2008) for a discussion of technology's dual technical and conceptual dimensions in Nigeria.

²⁴ The group visited Dawei to learn more about large-scale infrastructure projects. The trip was arranged by an American teacher at their school, in Shenzhen, whom I have known for some years within Myanmar activist circles.

laughing. A dream? “Sure, sure,” he said. “Everything is like a story—legendary—because we’ve been hearing about it for decades.” He picked up on the illusory aspect of Ko Tun’s comment, with the reminder, indeed, that although the project was announced in the late 2000s, it had been publicly discussed since the 1990s.

From Kilometer Zero, we continued on with the student group to a visitor’s center built by ITD, the lead developer, to showcase the project mainly to government officials and potential investors. In fact, I first visited the center in 2012, on my first visit to Dawei and the SEZ area. The center was open to the public then. But it had been closed since I arrived for fieldwork in 2016. Whenever I passed it, the gate, though sagging, was always locked, staffed by a security guard who seemed always half-awake yet firm: no entrance. U Myint is more persuasive than I am. He quickly talked our way past the security guard and into the center, where the guard switched on the lights. The facility was in better shape than I thought it would be; to an extent, ITD had continued hosting visitors there since the project’s suspension. Information boards, exclusively in English, lined the walls of the main room, describing planned implementation phases, resettlement plans, corporate social responsibility standards, details of project components like the natural gas terminal and the Thai roadlink, and the broader vision for the project. “Why Dawei SEZ?” one board asks, before answering: “strategic location,” “efficiency of synergy logistics,” “new source of labor,” “new source of raw material supplies,” “investment promotion and tax advantages,” “green community of living with value chain,” and “various beneficial trade agreements made by ASEAN and partner countries.” I wandered around the room with U Myint, who at one point started chuckling while taking it all in. “*Eikmekthalobé*,” he said again, laughing—“like a dream, sure.” And he repeated his own interpretation: “like a story, like a legend,” he said, gazing absently at the information boards.

As we drove back to town later by van, the phrase popped up a couple of times more, reliably humorously for U Myint. I mentioned to him that, in fact, dreams seemed to be everywhere in Dawei. The most popular coffee shop in town is called Dream Journey. Packed in the evenings with young people and family, it's a place where I often met friends and colleagues for avocado shakes and/or surprisingly strong espresso. Dream Emperor is one of the better-known, if admittedly less-frequented, guesthouses in town. And in a series of interviews I conducted with activists in Dawei town, I usually ended by asking what kind of plans they had for the future. "You mean my dreams?" I was asked more than once in response. Recently, a friend posted on Facebook a picture of a broken bottle with the word "dreams" on it, accompanied by his translation of a letter that denied him university admission in Australia. In the van, though, U Myint seemed uninterested in all these dreams, so I let the topic drop. Meanwhile, my own imagination wandered back to the visitor center, the information boards, and a mural of sorts painted at the entrance to the bathroom in back of the center. It bears a message, a slogan, in English and Burmese: "We all share the same future—the ecological, prosperous and harmonious one." In the painting next to it, a man in shirt and tie, wearing an ITD hard hat, has his hand on the shoulder of a man wearing conspicuously traditional Burmese clothing—himself holding a model of a home in the resettlement village. To his right, a *sayama*—a schoolteacher—clutches a lesson book, staring calmly ahead. Below her, a farmer holds a potted plant. His smile is awkward, pained. The phrasing of the slogan is also awkward in Burmese. A friend speculated that it must have begun in Thai, been translated to English, and only then translated into Burmese.

I don't know when the mural was painted. But a certain amount of time and weather has taken its toll. Shadows of mold appear to be creeping down from the top of it, almost washing over it—slowly, gradually. Like the zone itself for so many villagers, the mural—along with the story,

the legend, it tells—is under erasure: inaccurate yet necessary, a myth of better futures that cannot be dismissed out of hand.

*

In this suspended temporal present, futurity looms large. Moreover, the politics and poetics of suspension, in Dawei, challenge us not to see this state of affairs as paradoxical. Gupta (2018) theorizes the suspension of infrastructure projects as opportunities to rethink Whiggish narratives of completion, including the modernist teleologies they entail in South Asia and elsewhere. Abbas (2018) proposes the notion of anachronistic futures as a way of coming to grips with what he sees as a crisis of temporal linearity in late capitalist modernity in East Asia. For both, as in many critiques of the linear, progressive, developmental time of modernity—whether in Benjamin, structuralism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, or otherwise—one senses that the critique should represent, or at least point towards, a kind of liberation.²⁵ The liberation at stake, which is powerful indeed—even messianic, in Benjamin—is from the unitary, totalizing, oppressive time of capitalist modernity. Relatedly, an important set of discussions argues that in South and Southeast Asia, the promise of postcolonial transition—from farm to factory, backwards agriculture to modern industry, from precapital to capital and beyond, in some countries—has lost its empirical and political purchase, creating an impasse for knowledge and politics (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2011, Walker 2012, Li 2014). But this impasse, itself a crisis in the projected linearity of postcolonial time, is hardly consonant with a sense of liberation. The failed promises of postcolonial temporality find their structural inscriptions in “jobless growth,” broad employment shortages, and the rise of low-wage, informal, precarious labor across South and Southeast Asia and beyond (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009, Arnold and Pickles 2011, Bhattacharya and Sanyal

²⁵ A necessarily partial genealogy of this extensive area of inquiry would include Althusser (2009), Benjamin (1988), Chakrabarty (2017), Chatterjee (2004a), Derrida (2006), Harootunian (2017), Lyotard (1984), and Sanyal (2007).

2011, Campbell 2018a). Dispossession persists, but with transformations in global value production—financialization, deindustrialization, the decline of labor-intensive manufacturing—it is increasingly the case that farmers' land is needed, but their labor is not (Li 2010, 2011). Far from working to build modern, advanced industrial nations, as in an earlier era's mythology of the citizen-worker, today's expropriated farmers are far more likely to end up working in informal economies, often in neighboring countries: undocumented, vulnerable, hyper-exploited.

As Yarrow (2017) reminds us, postcolonial development produced powerful subjective formations, often geared towards visions of progress and modernization that were intrinsic to the politics of developmental states nearly across the decolonized world. Despite the importance, then, of anthropologies committed to the critique of modernist temporality—especially, in recent years, in relation to questions and sites of ruin and ruination—the ethnographic stakes of specific ruinations remain pressing. The experiences of Ko Tun, U Hla, Ma Htwe, and the others encountered thus far in Dawei suggest that the sentiments produced by the SEZ's ruins in reverse—ruins not of the past but of the future—scarcely point towards felt liberation from modernist time. Rather, their experiences indicate a sense of constriction and enclosure, a confinement in and through the spatio-temporal discipline of suspension. Yet the project represents more than simply a break from the ennui of suspension and its hold on everyday life. The project—or more precisely, many villagers' desire for it to resume—also conveys the remarkable normative legitimacy that notions of progress, modernization, and development maintain. Notwithstanding claims of the empirical and political demise of such notions and the linear time they entail, those notions remain integral to subjective formations of desire and aspiration in many places around the world, including Dawei. These formations reflect, moreover, histories of colonialism, postcolonialism, and development, without which it is difficult to understand the articulation—which might seem

like a contradiction—between suspension and futurity that resonates in the situated ruinations of Dawei.

Postcolonial futurism

In 1919, recall, the mining boom in Dawei led one British engineer to exclaim, excitedly, that at last the area’s possibilities were in the air. Whereas “The future of Tavoy (Dawei) scarcely entered men’s heads ten years ago,” he wrote, suddenly “a day rarely passes now without enquiries for information reaching me about its potentialities” (Coleridge Beadon 1919, 88). It may have been so for people in the mining industry. Yet for people living in the Dawei area, it remains clear that resource extraction and its related infrastructures were still cause for avoidance and evasion. One morning in Kyaukpa—the highland village, once a mining area, where ITD plans to build a dam—a group of older villagers narrated to me the history of mining, there, as a history of upheaval, departures, and returns. When the mining picked up, villagers left, and when the mining declined, they came back—cyclically, multiple times, over a period stretching deep into the nineteenth century (Aung 2013). With villagers’ regular withdrawal, imported labor worked the mines. Today’s Kyaukpa villagers were proud of all of this. Their pride at having collectively survived these upheavals is why, they explained to me, they have refused to relocate for the dam project (see Chapters 4 and 5).

In and after national liberation, the temporal coordinates of political economy, material infrastructures, and subjective experience changed dramatically. If the colonial state tried and failed to use “communications” to bring into being mutable and changeable, hence modern and historical, political subjects in the Dawei area—failing through the counter-interpolations of those subjects themselves—the postcolonial state, in Burma, staged modernist futurity through a

contrasting set of terms: not the liberalism of empire, but the socialism of the postcolony; not laissez faire resource extraction, but state-led industrialization; not imported labor, but national citizen-workers; not primary commodity exports and colonial trade patterns, but nationalized industries and postcolonial development

Within this matrix of postcolonial nation-building, a politics of and for the future began to cohere across political and economic terrains. I call this politics postcolonial futurism (Aung 2018a). Slogans like *nainggnandawthiq si tho*, or “towards a new nation,” proliferated across political and economic life. The Pyidawtha Plan, the centerpiece of Burma’s early developmental state, was released in 1954, six years after independence.²⁶ The plan articulates a vision for industrialization under active state management, mapping the kinds of transitions that dominated planning in many of the new developmental states of the decolonized world. A projected transition from farm to factory, from agriculture to industry, was at the core of this vision in Burma. Within the Pyidawtha Plan—the name of which, first translated as “Happy Land,”²⁷ connotes satisfaction or enjoyment in a national frame—this transition was to be achieved through major investments in material infrastructure, within an approach framed as a radical rejection of colonial political economy. In a book summarizing the plan called *Pyidawtha: The New Burma*, one passage reads, “These are the elements of our future prosperity: fertile land, power, transportation, raw materials, and good human resources. Efficiently developed and wisely administered, they can provide the material basis for a new era in Burma” (Economic and Social Board 1954, 3). The plan keeps futurity central, depicted as a necessary overcoming of the colonial past and the constraints of extractive trade patterns. “In the past,” it reads, “our resources were exploited not for Burmans but for foreigners...But we shall waste no energies in lamentations or bitterness over the past. Our

²⁶ This section draws on Aung (2017).

²⁷ See Than (2013).

heritage is proud and strong, but our true history lies ahead.” A commitment to material progress comes mixed with overtures to Buddhism. “But do not forget,” the section on objectives reads, “that the objective of all these steps—separately and together—is a Burma in which our people are better clothed, better housed, in better health, with greater security and more leisure—and thus better able to enjoy and pursue the spiritual values that are and will remain our dearest possession” (5). The report even closes with an ode to dreams of the future. “We Burmans have a right to dream bold dreams and to make bold plans for the future. This we have done. We Burmans have, too, an obligation to act—that these dreams may come true. This we are doing. And finally, we Burmans have a sacred duty to conform both our dreams and our acts to our faith. This we shall ever do” (170).

In the aftermath of World War II, the Pyidawtha Plan focused granular attention, chapter by chapter over almost a thousand pages, on the reconstruction of roads, railways, waterways, and communications systems, much of which had been decimated through the aerial bombardments and ground campaigns that wrought destruction across Burma during the war. Like midcentury approaches to infrastructure elsewhere under Keynesian liberalism or developmental states, the plan ties infrastructure development to a broadly egalitarian state welfarism—that vision of a Burma in which “our people” are better clothed and better housed. Who “our people” were did not bode well for Burma’s substantial Chinese and Indian minorities, for whom Burmanization, nationalization, and industrialization—the three pillars that subtend the plan—became not just a rejection of British empire but also of people like themselves, associated with colonial economy and the trade patterns it produced. Yet for some people in Burma, the plan became something of a popular phenomenon. The plan itself was a sprawling technical document written in English and printed in London, with only limited circulation in Burma, but a Pyidawtha conference took place

in Rangoon. There, U Nu, Burma's first prime minister and the dominant political figure of the 1950s, gave a series of speeches introducing the plan in vernacular language. Collected in a book edited by the poet and writer Zaw Gyi—the basis of the book summarizing the plan cited above—the speeches were printed in Burmese in Rangoon. Part of U Nu's broader attempt to forge a socialist politics consistent with Burmese cultural and religious values, the speeches aimed at cultivating support for the plan not just among technocratic elites, but also among ordinary people across the country (Than 2013). Maung Maung, a public intellectual who went on to lead, briefly, the military government, wrote at the time that “without question, Pyidawtha has caught on in Rangoon” (Maung 1953, 119). City buses, he said, carried signs proclaiming “Pyidawtha” as their destination; children sang Pyidawtha songs in the street; and at Pyidawtha coffee bars, one could buy a cup of “Pyidawtha coffee” or cold glass of “Pyidawtha milk.” Maung Maung, amazed at the building and rebuilding of reservoirs, roads, bridges, and schools, declared that “Pyidawtha aspires not merely to develop Burma in material ways, but also to create the ‘new man,’ that is, a reasonable citizen who will participate actively and constructively in government, an intelligent, public-spirited individual possessing a reasonable share of modern education.”

Such was the citizen-subject of Pyidawtha developmentalism, a “new man” for a new era. In the 1970s and 80s, however, the ideal of a collective subject that inhered at least in the public discourse of Pyidawtha-era infrastructure politics fell away. By the 1990s and early 2000s, the military had begun “us(ing) the construction of infrastructure of all varieties as demonstrations of their economic and political efficacy,” including the new capital, Naypyidaw, built ex nihilo in the plains of central Myanmar (Steinberg 2005, 110). In this period, “new highways, bridges, dams, and reservoirs, indeed a new capital city for Myanmar, rising in Burma's historic heartland, were to be seen as impressive physical evidence of (the military's) command of economic progress”

(Brown 2013, 184). By the late decades of military rule, in other words, infrastructure projects had shifted registers in their political semiotics. They had now come to address a subject who would be not so much served by, provided for, or made civic-minded by such projects—better clothed and better housed, and more responsible and active as a national citizen—but rather rendered over-awed, obeisant, and not least, neither active nor agentive as a danger to military rule. Long after the Pyidawtha era, infrastructure under the military came to symbolize the generals’ power and prestige, a far cry from egalitarian welfarism or the making of a new postcolonial subject.

Three sets of events in Myanmar’s southeast, including the Dawei area, repositioned the region in relation to the military government during its middle and later periods of rule. First, in 1982, the state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE) discovered the Yadana gas field roughly sixty kilometers offshore in the Andaman Sea, northwest of Dawei. In the 1980s, the military’s opposition to foreign direct investment left the field unexploited, but by the early 1990s, they had shifted policies towards a market-oriented socialist economy. MOGE contracted with the French company Total to develop the field in 1992, and in 1996 the Yadana gas pipeline became operational, moving gas from the Andaman to storage and processing facilities across the border in Thailand. Second, a long-running armed insurgency in highland areas of the southeast, led by the Karen National Union (KNU), emerged with renewed force around this time, leading to sustained confrontations between the KNU and the Burmese military, or Tatmadaw, along the mountainous north-south spine running down to Dawei. A third set of events might tie the other two together. In the early 1990s, the Tatmadaw constructed a railway south to Dawei using forced labor. Laborers built a series of military camps that remain along the railway, which cuts across Karen territory, including the pipeline corridor that had become a space of intense contestation between the KNU and the Tatmadaw. A human rights report from the time notes “considerable

disagreement between the human rights community and the oil companies as to whether the Ye-Tavoy (Dawei) railroad is actually connected to the pipeline project” (ERI and SAIN 1996, 15).

Interviews I conducted along the pipeline route suggest that for Karen villagers today, the links between the pipeline, railway, and conflict remain unclear. Like others I spoke to, one Karen *chanthama* shared clear memories tying railway construction to counter-insurgency, not least the forced displacement of his village. He himself was conscripted as a porter for the Tatmadaw at this time—notoriously difficult and dangerous work. But the connection to the pipeline did not arise until I suggested it myself, and it was not clear if he fully accepted the linkage or would have made it himself. Friends and colleagues in Dawei, on the other hand, remember the railway for the forced labor that produced it. They remember the trucks that would come into Dawei town, filling up and leaving quietly with men and women of a certain age. A few months later, the same trucks would return with fewer people. But far from somber events, the trucks’ returns were riotous affairs: occasions for singing and dancing, for music blaring from loudspeakers, for cathartic celebrations for those who survived. This is also when Thailand’s economy was booming, leading many friends and family members to seek work in Bangkok rather than risk conscription to build the railway. Well beyond the ideals of Pyidawtha developmentalism, here instead was an older set of factors: resource extraction and its material infrastructures, peasant insurgency and military repression, and labor withdrawal as a technique of evasion.

Yet the pipeline rarely appears when people talk about this period. Although friends from activist groups and social movements closely associate the pipeline with the railway and armed conflict, the connection has limited traction among other people in the area. Despite the gas field having helped reconstitute the region as a space conjoining resource extraction and heavy infrastructure, these linkages do not necessarily have deeper social and subjective purchase. Even

the railway, for many, seems more of a distant memory than something that might affect how people grasp and make sense of the present, including more recent large-scale infrastructure projects like the Dawei SEZ. Villagers in the SEZ project area had little to say about the railway whenever I mentioned it; friends from DDA speculated that perhaps few people from the project area had been conscripted. In fact, it is not the railway, the pipeline, or armed conflict—cautionary tales, all—that influences people’s understanding of what the future might hold if the SEZ project resumes. It is a broader sense of possible material transformations that is at stake. It is not just relief from suspension, but desire for something more, that grounds many villagers’ sense of what good might come from the project returning. More jobs, better infrastructure, and financial compensation are the basic coordinates of this aspirational matrix, premised on a broader, dominant understanding of development that hearkens back—for some—to the Pyidawtha era.

Spectral futures

Among friends and family in Yangon, the Pyidawtha Plan retains a certain resonance. Bookstores still carry the Pyidawtha book edited by Zaw Gyi. People working in and around civil society generally recognize and often discuss the plan’s historical importance, if as a relic of state planning more than a living vision to engage. At one point, I learned that an older relative of mine sold Pyidawtha souvenirs on the sidewalk outside the conference where U Nu introduced the plan to an emerging postcolonial public. One rainy evening in Yangon, much later, this relative’s son—my uncle, who knew by then of my interest in the plan and its reception—took me aside and quietly, almost reverentially, gave me a Pyidawtha stamp that survived from his mother’s merchandise.

These muted Yangon echoes aside, Pyidawtha is not something I have often encountered in Dawei, whether in terms of the plan itself, the vision it laid out, or as the name for a period, an era, that it arguably defined. Although I raised it occasionally with the youth activists in my immediate circle of friends and colleagues, I was always the one to bring it up, and I sensed I was the only one interested in it. But one time, at a *tamin saing* in one of the smaller villages of the SEZ area, I shared lunch with U Lay, a talkative older *chanthama* and former village head. As we finished our rice and turned to sharp, green tea—essential for washing down meals—I asked him to tell me a about the history of the village. I asked this question often, particularly of older villagers.

Me: Were you born here, uncle?

U Lay: I was born here, I was born here—right in this village.

Me: And during your life, what kinds of changes have you seen?

U Lay: Changes? If I had to say—well, a long time ago, back then, we didn't even have a school. After independence, we got a primary school only after the Pyidawtha project—

Me: The Pyidawtha project?

U Lay: —was established. At that time, yes—we had about sixty students, but just one teacher. This was during Ne Win's rule. No students, no teachers, and education—it was a confusing time.

Having heard little about the Pyidawtha plan in Dawei, I was surprised when he brought it up—and interested in how he remembered it. The Pyidawtha plan was actually abandoned in 1958, only

four years after its inception and before the onset of military rule under Ne Win. By 1958, the government had already determined the plan would not be viable financially due to the international collapse of rice prices in the mid-1950s. But for U Lay, the plan is more temporally indistinct; he associates it with early developmental socialism more broadly. He went on to talk about the manifold difficulties of village life under the military regime, saying “we had nothing, we had nothing.” Under Ne Win, the military radicalized the principles that undergirded the Pyidawtha plan: Burmanization, nationalization, and industrialization. But even after the shift towards more market-friendly policies in the 1990s, the village remained a place of great difficulties, U Lay made clear. Now he sees some encouragement in the new political landscape. “There’s a civilian government these days,” he pointed out brightly. “People themselves are also more clear and open, more knowledgeable,” he continued. “The media has opened up, too, and the oppression is not like before, I think.”

I asked him if he sees any comparison between the projects of today, like the Dawei SEZ, and the development plans of the past, like Pyidawtha. “The SEZ is a national project,” he said, using a formulation others echoed as well,²⁸ “but it is suspended.” So today, “we are still building roads ourselves here in the village.” During the Pyidawtha era, he continued, the government provided a lot. “They came and built schools—gave them to us.” But the situation is different now. The government is facing difficulties, he said, and the investment is coming from Thailand. Overall, he believes the SEZ should go ahead. “Over time,” he explained, “people have really come to want the special economic zone...People have had to go work in Thailand. Families have

²⁸ The Dawei SEZ project, like Thilawa and Kyaukphyu, the other two SEZ projects in Myanmar currently, is subject to national oversight through the SEZ Management Committee, based at the Union level of government. This is the formal sense in which the Dawei SEZ is a national project, an unusual distinction in Myanmar. Yet when villagers refer to the Dawei SEZ as a national project, as occurs often, the point of reference is often something larger, namely an understanding and acceptance of the idea that the project is important for Myanmar on a national scale, not just a local or regional scale. See the comments from the group discussed later in this section.

been broken up,” he said ruefully. “If the special economic zone happens, they’ll be able to live with their families again.” He also stressed his frustration with a road that villagers recently rebuilt themselves, and he emphasized that, in his opinion, a fair compensation rate would be good for villagers and generally welcomed.

U Lay was hardly alone in highlighting employment, infrastructure, and compensation as reasons he looks forward to the SEZ potentially resuming. In this area of long-standing labor migration to Thailand, and to a lesser degree Malaysia, the idea that the project might significantly expand local employment—one of the regional government’s leading claims about how the project will benefit people in and around Dawei—is an attractive proposition. Many villagers living in the project area believe the SEZ will enable migrant workers to return. In one of the larger villages near U Lay’s, one *chanthama* told me he believes that “people who’ve gone to work in Thailand will come back. They’ll get to live together with their families again.” His neighbor, the *chanthama* who also works security at one of the semi-abandoned SEZ sites, nodded his head. “Over there,” he said, referring to Thailand, “they can definitely work. But here, they can’t even eat enough.” As a migrant to the area, he said that since arriving, he’s seen that “each year, a few more (people) go to Thailand.” A friend of U Lay’s, meanwhile, a *chanthama* whose daughters are working in Thailand, described a similar employment situation. Her daughters, she told me, “went over there to work because there is no work in the village. They want to live with their mother, but if they come back to the village, there’s no work at all.” In a fishing village nearby, two other women whose children work in Thailand expressed similar attitudes: concerns about limited jobs in their village and hope that the SEZ might bring their families home. One expressed confidence that “if the project starts again, those who’ve gone off to Thailand will come back. We don’t want to live and work separately anymore.” The other told me that when the SEZ initially created jobs before

being suspended, her sons found work at one of the project sites. Now they are in Thailand. “About five years ago,” she said, “my sons worked on the site. But now that the project is stalled, my sons have gone to work in Thailand.”

Employment is one area of dense reflection on the futures the project might bring. Compensation and infrastructure are two others. Friends from activist groups and social movements made clear that compensation is a charged political issue. By and large, the main organizations that have criticized the SEZ project have chosen not to “touch” compensation, as it was often put, constructing compensation as something hot, difficult to handle, almost taboo. They know that many villagers want compensation, understandably, yet they feel strongly that one-time compensation payments cannot address the long-term livelihood impacts of displacement and dispossession. Furthermore, some organizations argue that to touch compensation is to accept the project fully moving forward, which some groups working in the Dawei area are not ready to do. Regardless, for people living in the SEZ area, compensation figures highly among that which villagers associate with the project’s potential return. The importance villagers attach to compensation is not without reason, given that many have already lost land or suffered environmental damage, and yet only a few people have received compensation thus far. This is one way some villagers have come to wish for the project to restart: they associate the project resuming with the possibility, at least, of receiving some compensation for past as well as future damages. Yet it is common for people who have suffered in some way to argue that compensation should precede the project’s return. The frustrations experienced thus far with compensation or a lack thereof help to explain the discontent, even resentment, that marks villagers’ comments about wishing the project will proceed.

In Ma Htwe's village, where some fifty farmers' paddy land has been ruined by runoff from the quarry on the hilltop above, one paddy farmer told me that "if the project starts again, it should only be after compensation is paid for paddy land that has been lost because of the rock quarry." Ma Htwe herself, meanwhile, said the project should start, but "only after we are paid compensation." She was skeptical about the process, however, and unsure whether the restart would come. "It's been *six years* since I've been able to do paddy farming," she emphasized. "For compensation, I'll believe it only once they pay it. We've been starving for six years." Although the compensation issue is particularly fraught for people living in the village nearest the quarry, it has fed confusion and highlighted village hierarchies—of income, of power, and more—nearly across the SEZ area. Some villagers have jumped at the chance to receive any compensation at all, among those few who have had the opportunity. But it has not necessarily been to their benefit, according to a *chanthama* from a larger village in the SEZ area. "For compensation," he said, "people who don't understand suffer more... They don't know how to negotiate. They're satisfied just to get paid, and just go ahead and sign." One of U Lay's neighbors also highlighted the differential and risky nature of compensation processes thus far. "If you're someone who knows how to manage the compensation you get, then there's money left over. If you can't manage it, then it all disappears, and there are even people in debt now." Like many others in the SEZ area, she stressed that, in stark contrast to how compensation has worked thus far, it should be handled impartially in a way that affords everyone the same rate. "It needs to be given equally and suitably," she said, using a phrase that tended to recur when she and other villagers spoke about how they thought compensation should take place: *taiqtaiqdandan*—suitably, or appropriately. "There are over six hundred households in (our village)," she continued. "If all six hundred households get appropriate and full compensation, we'll move." A group of *chanthama* in one of

the smaller villages offered similar comments about the importance of a fair process and equal rates. They also made clear that for them, the prospect of receiving compensation is why they now think the project should resume. They put it simply: “If they come to implement the project, we’ll get compensation.”

This group also echoed U Lay’s stress on the national character of the project, which for them was among its most important attributes. They described the project in terms I heard repeatedly in the SEZ area, characterizing the project as a matter of “national necessity” (*nainggnandaw loatchet*), and something to pursue “in order to develop the nation” (*nainggnandaw pwunpyoang*). One of the *chanthamas* in this group, Mya Sein, told me that if the project goes ahead, he believes the government will attend as necessary to villagers, taking responsibility as they should for villagers’ basic needs, particularly livelihood and compensation issues during the relocation process. Like U Lay’s reference to the project’s national importance, Mya Sein and his friends point not just to the formal status of the project’s national oversight, but also to a sense of its significance extending well beyond the Dawei area—reaching in fact a national significance. In so doing, they raise questions about claims regarding the exhaustion, in Southeast Asia, of developmental states and their normative grounds (Ong 2006), demonstrating instead the rearticulation of a nationally framed developmental vision in relation to an explicitly transboundary foreign investment project (Aung 2017).

If the future the project might bring includes significant, if short-term, financial benefits, then it also includes—some villagers believe—the possibility of better material infrastructures. When the regional minister called the SEZ area “cursed land” at the public meeting in Dawei, he was referring to buildings, schools, and roads neglected by the government, as well as agricultural loans on hold, all resulting from the suspension of the SEZ. The *chanthama* who later echoed his

phrase also reiterated the minister's position on the project. Responding to and reflecting on what suspension has meant in the SEZ area, the minister said, "I wish every day the project succeeds." The *chanthama*, for his part, averred that "If the project finally comes, the curse will be lifted." The minister and the *chanthama* share a temporal orientation—looking forward to the project's return—that is informed by the deterioration and lack of provisioning of infrastructure of all kinds in the project area, from basic infrastructure like roads to social and financial infrastructure like schools and agricultural loans. In U Lay's village, a feeling that basic infrastructure might improve is integral to how some people described to me their current thinking about the project. "The project is good," another *chanthama* told me one morning. "If it goes ahead successfully, we will resettle. *Toteqlaahmabaw*," she said emphatically, using a future construction of the verb *toteqdeh*, which is usually translated as to improve, progress, or advance. "Economically, socially—for us, everything—if there is improvement"—*toteqlaayin*—"it will be good. Roads, electricity—they'll become better, I think." Later, her neighbor also spoke of roads and electricity, suggesting that with the project on hold, the village has struggled to address such basic needs. "We need roads and electricity," she said starkly. "Please—whoever can do it for us, please come. Right now, no one comes."

Roads are an especially important site for consideration of what relief from suspension might actually bring. They are objects of anticipation and bearers—or so villagers expect—of connectivity (Harvey and Knox 2015). Existing roads are also highly valued, enough so that villagers themselves are sometimes the ones to maintain them. U Lay spoke of villagers having had to rebuild the road leading to and from their village (see Chapter 5). The regional government declined to invest funds in repairing a road largely within the SEZ area, reasoning that it should be the responsibility of ITD, the developer of the SEZ. Yet ITD cannot engage in road building or

maintenance while the project is suspended. As a result, U Lay and others understand that the project resuming would afford clarity and action in relation to road repairs and upgrades, his village's road being just one example of the confusions and frustrations wrought by the project's suspension. More broadly, villagers see road upgrades happening in surrounding areas, including the main road leading to and from the SEZ area, and they conclude that the suspension of the SEZ project prevents those upgrades from happening in their villages. In addition, many villagers welcome the roads built by ITD before the suspension of the project; these roads are now an essential part of everyday life in the project area. In the fishing village close to where U Lay lives, Daw San, the woman whose sons work in Thailand, said she is grateful for the road now passing through her village. When the project began, she explained, "there was no road cutting through our village. They (ITD) came and did it, and I'm so thankful. Because of this road, *lanpanseqthweyeh* has become good." Translations for *lanpanseqthweyeh* range intuitively from transportation, to connectivity, to road access, in literal terms. But as I puzzled over this phrasing later with colleagues from DDA, they suggested another translation backed up by other friends subsequently: communications.

Weak dreams

These comments from U Lay and others raise matters that cannot yet be resolved: over whether the project has created more, less, or no change at all in outward labor migration, an issue central to the question of what (if any) form primitive accumulation takes in this setting; over the felt importance of the family as a site for social reproduction, disrupted by employment opportunities seen as by turns stagnantly low or at best uncertain; and over village stratification—by income, power, gender, age, education, and more—which cuts across employment concerns,

the ability to navigate, or not, compensation processes, and the making of, the remaking of, and access to basic infrastructure like roads and electricity. These questions remain. What is essential to note here, however, is the sense of anticipation the project continues to engender among villagers living in the project area. Across lines of stratification in the project area, reflections on and expectations about the future pervade village life, over which hangs the stubborn question of whether the project will or will not resume. In that sense, suspension has not relocated temporal subjectivity to a place or space somehow beyond futural thinking or modernist logics of completion. Frustration with suspension—with its spatio-temporal discipline, with its almost carceral hold on social reproduction—instead fuels desires for the project to resume. More than escape from the burdens of suspension, however, those desires also reflect villagers' more forward-looking sense of the jobs, financial benefits, and infrastructure they associate with the project's potential return.

Daw San, for one, believes the road already built to her village has improved “communications” therein. Her comment traces the long arc of infrastructure and its interpolations in this liminal extreme of empires past. The colonial state expected that resource extraction, premised on roadbuilding in particular, would effect a correspondence between material and moral progress among the people of Tenasserim, producing mutable historical subjects commensurate to liberal empire. Yet those same people appear not to have recognized themselves in the future on offer; through acts of refusal and revolt, they demonstrated an understanding of colonial liberalism in more exclusionary terms. Under postcolonial socialism, the Pyidawtha era staged new futurist promises, rooted in a projected transition from farm to factory, agriculture to industry. U Lay paid tribute to the achievements of that time—the building of a school in particular—yet he stressed the confusion and deprivations of the subsequent period: “we had nothing, we had nothing,” he

said. The pipeline, railway, and armed conflict that followed hardly broke from a long-established pattern, hearkening back at least to the proclamations with which Maingy announced the beginnings of colonial rule. This pattern tightly conjoins resource extraction, infrastructure, and violence, including forms of displacement and dispossession. The Pyidawtha era appears, in this light, as a minor departure: a vision, perhaps naïve, of a different politics of material progress, including the physical infrastructure the plan held up as integral to any such progress. Still, in villagers' understandings today of what the SEZ project might deliver—jobs, infrastructure, and financial benefits, understood within a largely national frame—it is hard not to hear echoes of an earlier developmental paradigm, one dedicated to basic welfare and material needs. Although the empirical crisis of postcolonial transition is clear, something of its spectral promise remains. Postcolonial futurism, that erstwhile commitment to modernizing futures, can be restated in part as a subjective formation alive in the present. Suspension, in turn, does not so much disable as reinscribe and reinstall a desire for the affordances of modernist time. After decades of having nothing, nothing, as U Lay intoned, people in Dawei are ready to have something.

The political semiotics of infrastructure have changed greatly. From one notion of communications to another—from colonial extraction as historical progress to present-day roadbuilding as incremental achievement—Daw San's gratitude for the road marks a subjective transformation across time. In stark contrast to the colonial subjects of Tenasserim, who could not, or refused to, be hailed by liberal empire, Daw San sees something of or for herself in the project. When emphasizing that she wants the project to resume, she used a relatively strong verb, *sudtaungdeh*: she wishes for, even prays for, a return of the project.

Like others we have met here, Daw San is in the grip of dreams. But to be in the grip of dreams, in Dawei, is not necessarily to align with the heroic visions of progress and modernization

that marked recent centuries: the soaring built environments of the nineteenth century; the mass dreamworlds of the communist and capitalist blocs, in the twentieth century; or in the interstices of those blocs, the industrializing politics of and for the future that cut across the decolonized world. In many parts of the world, these visions lie in ruins, reminders that attempted high-modern historical progress can couple construction and destruction, generation and degeneration (Buck-Morss 2002).²⁹ In contrast, the aspirations articulated by people in Dawei tend to be more measured and modest, oriented towards jobs that keep families together, fair payments for project losses, and basic infrastructure like roads and electricity. Borrowing from the weak messianism of Benjamin (1988, 254), one notes a salutary weakness in the dreams of Daw San, Ko Tun, U Myint, U Lay, and the others we've met here.³⁰ Theirs are dreams not of a heroic, messianic historical spirit, but rather of more partial and more minor, less spectacular and more spectral—yet powerful all the same—rearrangements: to live and work near home, to receive some money for damaged lands, for electricity in the evening and a road in the rainy season. Weak dreams like these—fantasies foreshortened, with problems of their own—are not necessarily critical or politically promising.³¹ But after life in a state of suspension—and after decades of nothing, nothing—they are something.

1.5 From ~~zone~~ to zone

When Ko Tun remarked upon the dream-like nature of the Dawei SEZ, we were sitting on the balcony of a monastery at the northeast edge of the project area. Directly south of us, ITD had

²⁹ See also Howe et al (2016) for shades of a similar argument about infrastructure.

³⁰ Other invocations of weakness in social and political theory abound. Berlant (2011, 262) rightly calls attention to “weak theory” as articulated by Eve Sedgwick (1997). Other invocations of weakness, some tending more towards reinscriptions of heroic or resistant themes, include James C. Scott in his *Weapons of the Weak* (Scott 1985), the ordinary in the weak in the work of Hardt and Negri, weak thought in Vattimo, Derrida, Agamben, and others, and poor theory in the work of Ackbar Abbas (2008). Here, however, my point of departure is weak messianism in Benjamin, geared towards an apposite divergence from the heroic in empty, homogeneous time.

³¹ See Berlant (2011, 107, 117).

made preparations to dig a channel into the shore extending almost a kilometer inland—part of the deep-sea port around which the rest of the zone was organized. Today, although flora have retaken much of the land, a long indentation inland is still visible from afar, evidence of the partial, interrupted excavation for the channel. One day, I found a series of half-built structures on one end of the channel. Some small buildings stood exposed to the elements, doors open, windows broken, corrugated roofs loose and creaking in the wind. I entered one where a sign was still legible: “J. 1907 PORT WORK.” Shattered glass crackled beneath my sandals; I found empty bottles, a broken table, and the charred remains of a fire; and from a hole in the roof, a shaft of light made for dramatic plays of sun and shadow.

On the land outside, rotting steel structures stood out along what would have been the channel. I kept my distance from a herd of water buffalo grazing in their shadows. Steel beams reached skyward, with only bare architectural skeletons in place; the outlines of broader, thicker, denser structures hung in the air or lay on the ground, testifying to a stark absence of presence. Their colors varied across deep, rusted reds, recalling Smithson’s claim about how in steel, he saw rust. And like the new monuments he recognized in the work of his contemporaries—zero panoramas, he called them, brushing time against itself—here too were simple geometries, rectangles and triangles, that seemed to ask questions about the rush of modernist time. My question is about what it means to live—to endure and persist, and even look forward—under erasure, under the suspension of modernist time.

The discussion with Ko Tun followed a trip he and I had both joined earlier that year. Friends from activist groups and social movements brought villagers from the SEZ area to visit industrial projects in Thailand—for inspiration to fight the Dawei SEZ, or so some of us hoped. One day, we drove from the south, where we spoke with activists fighting a coal-fired powerplant,

to the eastern seaboard, which is the center of Thailand's petrochemical industries. During this drive in our convoy of minivans, we skirted Bangkok's southern edge. The sun had set hours ago and, from this elevated highway, the lights of the city shone in the night. Ko Tun and others, myself included, quickly reached for our phones. Holding them to the van windows, we did our best to capture the spectacle in the distance.

No matter the proximity of catastrophe to such dreamworlds, visions like this remain powerful. When they take the form of futures unfulfilled, then the ruins in Dawei might feel less like relief from the burdens of time, and more like standing reminders of futures deferred and still desired: the debris of what could have been, yet signs of what might still be. Put differently, Abbas (2018) calls attention to a crisis of linearity in late modernity in East Asia, a curious convergence between futurity and anachronism. Yet any such crisis here ultimately returns to and restores a desire for linearity—a vision of passage from ~~zone~~ to zone—particularly when aspirations for the future re-present and reinscribe the modernizing dreams of an earlier, arguably exhausted, developmental paradigm. In that sense, futures past remain resonant in the present, including the modernist temporality that underwrote mid-century visions of postcolonial transition. In Dawei and places like it—late-industrializing, postcolonial, steeped in a sense of deferred or denied historical development—the promise of progress is not easily let go. For many people who live in the Dawei SEZ area, suspension holds in abeyance a teleological ideal; it is a state of confinement and enclosure, of suffocating fixity. Suspension renews desires for release and dreams of the future—weak dreams remain dreams, for what might still be—including a return to the telos of the project. This is another way of understanding Ko Tun: the project is still a dream.

Chapter 2

Border/lines, lands, zones: Dawei at the limits to capital

Kinbun: the salt village. It used to exist on Amya beach, the white strip of sand—on a sunny day, it looks endless—designated to be remade as the deep-sea port at the edge of the Dawei SEZ. “Kinbun” does not mean “salt village,” but people call it that because collecting and selling salt to traders was one of the main sources of income for people who lived there. Fishing was another. Kinbun has the distinction of being the only village in the project area to have been displaced and resettled thus far—at least in theory. In fact, in keeping with the larger twisted temporality of the project, the resettlement process, which took place before the project’s 2013 suspension, was far from straightforward. At first, eight of forty families—it was a small village—moved to Zadi, the official resettlement village. But no one liked it there. All but one of those families moved elsewhere, some across the border to Thailand to work in Bangkok’s industrial areas, like many people from the Dawei area in recent decades. Others scattered to nearby villages; I met some when visiting friends and colleagues in the project area. Some managed to reoccupy land near the beachfront, not far from the earlier village site. The land belonged to a local businessman now, but with the project suspended, the former salt villagers came to an understanding with him to live there at least while the project is on hold. Driving along the windswept, deserted beachfront—cleared of so much plant and animal life for a project yet to really begin—I sometimes glimpsed their homes tucked back in a stand of squat, gnarled trees. The homes were small, low, and more makeshift than others in the villages of the project area. I had hoped to visit, but U Sein, an activist who lives in a village nearby, dissuaded me. They’ve been through a lot, he explained.

The same went for the lone family who remained in Zadi. I visited Zadi often with friends and colleagues, but we resolved not to disturb the family living there—one family among the hundred or so matching homes, still empty, now deteriorating, built to accommodate people displaced by the SEZ. Like the salt village, Zadi also struck me as representing a wider tendency of the project: the production of confusions in space and time. In a place supposed to exemplify a transition from agriculture to industry, through a project sequenced beginning-middle-end, there emerged instead an expansive present of incomplete structures and abandoned sites, horizons receding and beginnings fading from memory. Rather than farmers becoming workers, many fishers remained fishers, if more precariously than before. Some simply moved away, many to Bangkok. There, they form part of a hyper-exploited pool of migrant labor that, as we will see, hardly conforms to any linear proletarianization story.

With time out of joint and people out of place—in a zone, or ~~zone~~, with all the presence of a dream—confusions of nomenclature abound as well. To access Zadi, one drives north from Dawei town for about sixteen miles on the main road in the region, the Union Road, as it is called. At that point, a road popularly known as Shan Road bisects the Union Road. Shan Road—unpaved, and sometimes soft, sometimes hard; at times a loose strip of mud, at other times firm and fast like asphalt—is the road link component of the Dawei SEZ project. Turning right on Shan Road leads to the Thai border, after some eighty miles of notoriously arduous terrain. Much of that terrain remains held by the Karen National Union (KNU), a rebel group that signed a tenuous ceasefire agreement in 2012. Turning left means entering the formal demarcation zone for the Dawei SEZ. In prominent English and less prominent, but more fluent, Burmese, “Welcome to Dawei Special Economic Zone” reads a faded sign made of vinyl tarpaulin, nailed insecurely to a splintering wooden signboard by the side of the road. One end of the sign flaps languidly in the wind. The

demarcation zone officially marks off the roughly 125-sq. mile project area, but its limits are still under dispute. Contested zonal-spatial boundaries overlap and interpenetrate; capital and conflict create fissures in the time-space of nation. In English, moreover, “Shan” refers to Shan State or people from Shan State, in Myanmar’s northeast. In Burmese, however, Shan sometimes refers to Thailand, because Shan State, historically, was once integral to state-making projects centered in what is now northern Thailand. Today, when people in Dawei say friends have gone to work in “Shan Pyi,” or Shan Country, they mean Thailand, not Shan State. Thus, the project’s road link component is effectively called Thai Road, a sign of the project’s relation to Thailand. After turning left onto Thai Road, one drives west for another fifteen miles before arriving at the turnoff to drive north to Zadi. The area around the turnoff is called Kilometer Zero, signifying the terminus of the road link and the heart of the project area on the Amya waterfront. Yet Myanmar uses the Imperial System, and Thailand the Metric System; Kilometer Zero also associates the project with Thailand. Dawei is the largest of Myanmar’s three SEZ projects, all of which have national standing through union-level legislation and being administered by union-level officials. Still, the semiotic landscape of the project continually registers its proximity to Thailand, a matter of more than geography: the strongest support for the project has long come from state and capital in Thailand, much more than in Myanmar. Bordering the project—defining its limits, granting it proper names, tracing its genealogy and trajectory—is not a simple affair.

The first chapter introduced the sensory and material landscape of this vast, suspended, crumbling economic zone, attending in particular to how people living within it experience it being on hold. This chapter turns from ethnography to recent history and political economy, zooming out in order to better locate the project spatially and temporally. Three stories interlock: first, *border capital*, the story of how economic zones in border areas became policy priorities for

Southeast Asian states, especially Thailand, since the late 1980s; second, *passive revolution*, the process of capitalist restructuring in Myanmar over roughly the same period; and third, *southern mosaics*, the transformation of space and power in Myanmar's southern borderlands—again, broadly concurrent—where novel capital flows and armed conflict have reshaped longer-standing modes of political and economic organization. The Dawei SEZ occupies an absent center, until the last section. The intention is to sketch a genealogy of the project—its provisional emergence, not its historical necessity—that will situate the subsequent chapters. As the SEZ technically does not exist, being suspended, its absent presence here also reaffirms its existence *sous rature*, under erasure.

Although I locate Dawei at the intersection of these three stories, I seek to do more than provide historical and structural background for a thus-determined ethnographic present. Rather, I build an argument for the contingency of the current conjuncture, beginning by reconsidering scholarship on dispossession and primitive accumulation. Departing from the dominant paradigm in Southeast Asian agrarian studies, which traces to David Harvey's (2003) influential essay "Accumulation by Dispossession," I identify a body of work enabling an alternative, variable thought of primitive accumulation, namely as a bordering technology: a force for the making of spatial and temporal difference. Primitive accumulation, in this way, becomes a question of *differential accumulation*.³² In Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's post-workerist political economy (see Arruzza *et al.* 2018), the notion of differential accumulation ties into their prominent argument that ongoing primitive accumulation, far from producing a borderless world, has in fact led to a proliferation of borders of all kinds (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, viii, 2019, 128).

³² The term appears in the work of Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler (Nitzan 1998, Nitzan and Bichler 2009), but it has gained a different resonance in the writings of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b, 2013a, 2019), who do not trace their usage to Nitzan and Bichler. I draw on Mezzadra and Neilson's usage.

However, rather than using “border thinking” to specify hard distinctions between insides and outsides, interiors and exteriors—of capital, the nation, or particular zonal formations, for instance—Mezzadra and Neilson helpfully stress instead the provisional and contested nature of borders, ever made and remade in shifting political and economic conditions.³³ In this chapter, I consider a particular borderland as such—Myanmar’s southern borderlands around Dawei—as well as a broader provocation, which is that time and space, history and geography, are always already produced by the “world-configuring function” of borders (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b, 6).

This chapter articulates then follows the notion of differential accumulation across all three stories in play, linking *border capital* to the more Gramscian provenance of *passive revolution* and *southern mosaics*. As Adam David Morton (2010) reminds us, Gramsci’s theorization of passive revolution builds on rather than breaks from his pre-carceral work, notably his 1926 essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question,” which describes the spatial polarization and worker-peasant cleavages that resulted from Italy’s own history of capitalist restructuring. The making and remaking of spatio-temporal difference will be central here as well. Harvey’s dispossession framework, advancing the crisis theory he first formulates in his 1982 book *Limits to Capital*, emphasizes systemic unity over differentiation, holding that capital’s limits are continually produced and overcome by capital’s own autonomous tendencies. By contrast, I draw on the alternative thought of primitive accumulation outlined below to suggest it is possible to understand

³³ Border thinking is a stance that has also gained traction in Southeast Asian Studies, albeit through a different lineage due to interventions by Willem van Schendel (2002) and James C. Scott (2009), for whom highland border areas provide key locations from which to rethink categories like nation, state, and area. Although border thinking is sometimes associated with the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) and Walter D. Mignolo (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006), here my point of departure is the intersection of post-workerist thought and postcolonial studies in the writings of Mezzadra and Neilson (Mezzadra and Rahola 2005, Mezzadra 2011a, 2011b, Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a)—as well as, albeit to a lesser degree, the borderlands research focused on and around Southeast Asia (van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009).

primitive accumulation as challenging this historicist telos of the present. Broadly in line with both the Gramscian tradition and the post-workerism that emerges in its wake, I illuminate a messy and multiple geography of capital open to many possibilities. This openness is integral to the possibility of political intervention, the contours of which I address in the chapters to come.

2.1 Differential accumulation

Studies of the accumulation of capital have received fresh impetus since the early 2000s. A revitalized scholarship on accumulation has argued that a process Marx (1990) once consigned to capital's prehistory—primitive accumulation, or original or primary accumulation, that is, the separation of producers from the means of production—is in fact a central and persistent feature of the expanded reproduction of capital in the present (Perelman 2000, De Angelis 2001, 2007, Read 2002, Harvey 2003, Glassman 2006, Hart 2006, Sanyal 2007, Arrighi 2009, Mezzadra 2011c, Hall 2013, Li 2014, Levien 2018).

The dominant framework comes from David Harvey. In his 2003 essay “Accumulation by Dispossession,” he reworks Rosa Luxemburg (2003), arguing that ongoing dispossession reflects crisis tendencies internal to capital, crises that require spatial expansion and intensification across North and South, urban and rural (Harvey 2003).³⁴ According to the crisis theory Harvey first puts forth in *Limits to Capital* in the early 1980s, overaccumulation crises create the need for a “spatial fix”: the building out, or up, of material forms, such as infrastructure, over space (Harvey 2006a). With his own thesis of overaccumulation, Harvey pivots away from early debates on capital,

³⁴ Although he celebrates Luxemburg's landmark disclosure of an “organic linkage” between capital-labor relations in the realm of production and the “force, fraud, predation, and looting” that Marx limits mainly to an initial phase of accumulation, Harvey holds that the “predatory side” of capitalism has become “internalized within capitalism,” and the mechanism “organically” linking the two aspects is not crises of underconsumption, per Luxemburg, but overaccumulation (Harvey 2003, 139, 2006a, xvi, xvii).

imperialism, and finance—best known in Hilferding, Lenin, and Luxemburg—and towards questions of post-Fordist financialization. By the early 2000s, Harvey reconnects these elements. Stressing contemporaneity, he eschews the language of the primitive, primary, and originary, speaking instead of dispossession and its intimate imperial relation with finance in the present. Moreover, he theorizes this relation as redistributing dispossession throughout the geography of capital, from peasants thrown off land in China and India to people evicted due to housing privatization in London. This account of capital’s “organic unity,” in which dispossession is a moment in a larger totality, has its corollary in Harvey’s discussion of proletarianization. In a unilinear narrative, the peasantries of China and India are becoming urban working classes. The unemployed are part of Marx’s “industrial reserve army,” not permanently excluded but eventually to be integrated.

Today, “accumulation by dispossession” is a key paradigm for agrarian studies in Southeast Asia. On one hand, Southeast Asianists have used Harvey’s framework to understand regional and global processes, reinforcing its unifying ambit. Writing on land grabbing, for instance, Derek Hall observes that “The relevance of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession to the analysis of the global land grab will be clear to anyone familiar with these concepts” (Hall 2013, 1583). Jim Glassman, echoed by Ian Baird (Baird 2011, 11), avowedly highlights Harvey’s claim that primitive accumulation, once a subject for development studies almost exclusively in the Global South, also occurs in the Global North, lending the phenomenon an almost transhistorical character (Glassman 2006, 621–2). On the other hand, Southeast Asianists have drawn extensively on Harvey to make sense of phenomena in Southeast Asia, especially rural Southeast Asia. In work on land concessions, rubber plantations, fisheries, and rural industry—in work in Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar—a strong tendency exists to understand phenomena in

Southeast Asia as instances of the larger process Harvey describes (Glassman 2006, Sneddon 2007, Arnold and Aung 2011, Baird 2011, Hall 2012, 2013, Kenney-Lazar 2018).

The dominance of “accumulation by dispossession” notwithstanding, another body of work provides a coherent alternative thought of primitive accumulation. Spanning indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and radical traditions in Black and feminist thought, this alternative current tracks the making and remaking of fragmented and differential geographies of capital. Glen Coulthard (2014), for instance, rethinks Marx’s primitive accumulation thesis, arguing that what sustains colonial dispossession in Canada is the making of indigenous colonized subjects, who by accepting and identifying with colonial power relations ultimately accede to the dispossession of native lands. This emphasis on capitalism’s colonial articulations also resonates in the work of Jodi Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed, and Chandan Reddy, for whom “economies of dispossession” names entwined genealogies of capitalism, colonialism, and racialization, explicitly contrasted with Harvey (Byrd *et al.* 2018). Melamed has also proposed her own revision of Harvey, drawing on Cedric Robinson’s (2000) concept of racial capitalism to understand how ongoing primitive accumulation, including in indigenous territories, works towards and through racialized processes of social separation. Paradoxically, separation of this kind fractures the logic of capital’s unity, yet it is also “needed for capitalist expropriation to work” (Melamed 2015, 78).

The paradoxical relation between capital and difference—the former thrives on, works through, being splintered by the latter—is an important theme in postcolonial studies. Kalyan Sanyal (2007) and Partha Chatterjee (2008), reflecting on peasant struggles against an SEZ project in West Bengal, contend that for various politico-ideological reasons—the need for dominant classes to seek subaltern consent to maintain narrow, fragile projects of rule; the normative legitimacy of ‘development’ in postcolonial states; the governmentalization of state apparatuses

across the decolonized world—ongoing primitive accumulation in India would be untenable without programs in welfarist governmentality. By mitigating the force of accumulation, such programs sustain its possibility. This dynamic is at the heart of what Sanyal calls “postcolonial capitalism”: capitalism wherein a contradiction between accumulation and survival—an accumulation economy and a need economy, the latter maintained through governmental “reversals” of the accumulation process—is continually recreated, reproducing a fundamental heterogeneity that is beyond any transition scenario where capital (the domain of accumulation) supersedes pre-capital (the domain of survival, of need) (Sanyal 2007, 39).

Sanyal conceptualizes postcolonial capitalism as breaking with the historicism of both liberal and Marxist narratives of modernization in postcolonial countries, which posit “an irreversible macro-level change from pre-capitalism to capitalism” as a result of which “pre-capitalism in its entirety is replaced by capitalism” (Sanyal 2007, 67). This teleological conception of historical time stands for historicism more broadly in postcolonial criticism, as in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s definition of historicism as follows: “a mode of thinking about history in which one assumed that any object under investigation retained a unity of conception throughout its existence and attained full expression through a process of development in secular, historical time” (Chakrabarty 2007, xiv). Indeed, one way to read Sanyal is as transferring to political economy a critique of historicism for which Chakrabarty is well known in postcolonial historiography. In “writing ‘difference’ back into Marx,” Chakrabarty’s provocation is to “open up the Marxist narratives of capitalist modernity to issues of historical difference” (92, 19). Reading capitalist modernity against any necessary historical telos, Chakrabarty draws from Marx’s own writings on the history of capital, locating in “the intimate space of capital an element of deep uncertainty,” an

element that troubles historicist thought's tendency to "neutraliz(e) the contingent differences between specific histories" (64, 48).

Within this alternative thought, radical Black and feminist traditions also insist on both the contemporaneity of primitive accumulation and its imbrication with the making of historical difference. Cedric Robinson's (2000) landmark rereading of WEB Du Bois and CLR James foregrounds how both criticized Marx and Marxist thought for largely relegating primitive accumulation and slavery to capitalism's past and early history. For Du Bois (1998), expropriated African labor underwrote American slavery's centrality to modern capitalism, whereas for James (1989), primitive accumulation in Haiti led revolutionary struggle to occur there first. Although Robinson concedes that for many Black radicals, Marxism's apparent universalism was essential to its attraction, he reconceives Black radicalism against the grain, extracting from its historiography a "more complete contradiction" than the "mistaken" totality that Marxism claims to represent: the contradictions not of capitalism but racial capitalism, whose tendency is "not to homogenize but to differentiate—to exaggerate regional, subcultural, and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones" (Robinson 2000, 26).

Autonomist feminists, on the other hand, have pursued analyses that often run parallel to these attempts to track difference in the expanded reproduction of capital. From Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972), on one hand, to Leopoldina Fortunati (1996) and Silvia Federici (2004), on the other, autonomist feminists stress that reproductive labor is integral to capitalist reproduction, yet obscured by its exclusion from the wage relation—an analysis that Mezzadra and Neilson read as one of "differential inclusion" within a wider terrain of feminist thought (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 160). Federici in particular has closely examined the history of primitive accumulation, demonstrating that primitive accumulation in the metropole and the

colonies was densely interwoven with “the construction of a new patriarchal order, making of women the servants of the male work-force.” Overall, she argues, “primitive accumulation has been above all an accumulation of differences, inequalities, hierarchies, divisions, which have alienated workers from each other and even from themselves” (Federici 2004, 115).

If primitive accumulation historically drives the making and remaking of material difference—between men and women, colonizer and colonized, settler and native, and capitalist, worker, and slave—then primitive accumulation is also legible as a bordering technology, producing differences over time in specific locations. Put differently, “accumulation by dispossession” names a historicist paradigm committed to a convergent geography of capital, where North and South, urban and rural are subject to the same autonomous tendencies of capital. This alternative current, by contrast, grasps primitive accumulation in terms of contingent processes yielding difference across space: in colonized and postcolonial spaces, then and now; in the domestic economies of intimate space; and through situated political struggles in which commonality and equivalence cannot be taken for granted. This current insists on thinking the history of capital differentially, exposing the historically deterministic elements of the prevailing dispossession framework to contingencies of time, space, and politics. An emphasis on differential accumulation brings together this alternative current of thought. Borrowed from Mezzadra and Neilson, who use it to think the “dissonance and variability” of capitalism’s tendency towards differentiation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 128), the notion of differential accumulation stands for a possible displacement of capitalism’s conventional time-space coordinates, returning primitive accumulation and heterogeneous forms of labor power to the core not just of capital’s origins but its expanded reproduction in the present. Within this notion of differential accumulation, the following three stories condition the possibility of the Dawei SEZ.

2.2 Border capital

Plans for a port and economic zone in Dawei first surfaced in 1996, underscoring a wider regional history: that of how border areas became targets for zonal infrastructure projects for planners, policymakers, and firms and business leaders across mainland Southeast Asia. That story picks up in the late 1980s, with Thai-led regionalization efforts bringing special attention to rural and border areas as spaces that might be useful for promoting cross-border trade linkages. Economic zone initiatives helped incentivize the redirection of capital flows to border areas, while labor flexibilization trends meant that, for many producers uprooted by changes in agrarian economy, proletarianization would not take place conventionally.

It will be helpful to begin, however, with a longer spatial dynamic and the earliest plans for an economic zone in Dawei. As described in the previous chapter, Dawei existed for centuries at the liminal extremes of state-making projects, which hardly made it unique. In precolonial Southeast Asia, state-making projects took the form of a particular political geography: a patchwork of lowland polities, whose powers emanated outward from city-state centers, weakening along the way (Anderson 1972, Tambiah 1977a, Thongchai 1994, Lieberman 2003a, Scott 2009). These “mandala” polities, with their shifting “concertinas” of sometimes overlapping power centers (Wolters 1999), left expansive areas effectively beyond and between major sources of authority, including the borderlands between present-day Myanmar and Thailand (Leach 1960, Thongchai 1994, Pongsawat 2007, Campbell 2018a). In fact, the question of demarcating that boundary first arises with British efforts at the court of Siam upon the colonization of Tenasserim, including the Dawei area, in the mid-1820s (Thongchai 1994, 62). The very possibility of territorial difference, here, does not precede this combination of imperial power, attempted colonial dispossession, and the notion, then novel, that political power might be exerted over space in

addition to people. Spatializing ruling projects were typical of the modern state in Southeast Asia, in colonial then postcolonial form. Only the modern state could realistically attempt to project the power necessary to enclose these vast, non-state borderlands within centralized, territorially demarcated projects of rule (Anderson 1991, Scott 2009). Still, instances of rebellion and insurgency, as well as less conspicuous forms of refusal and resistance, continued to upset state formations in Southeast Asia, especially in highland border areas like those around Dawei. To an extent, the very geography of those state formations remained unstable. Even in recent years, hundreds of miles remained to be formally defined along the Thai-Myanmar border—a product of decades of armed conflict along the border (Bangkok Post 2016).

Some eighty miles west of that border, on the shores of the Andaman Sea, the first plans for a port and economic zone in Dawei materialized in 1996. The proposal emerged in a fragile setting: that same year, farther north in Tanintharyi, the Yadana natural gas pipeline came online after sustained military offensives by the Burmese armed forces, or the Tatmadaw, against the Karen National Union (KNU) to seize territory for the pipeline. Around the same time, the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI), a leading Thai business association, submitted a proposal to Myanmar's military government to develop a Kanchanaburi-Dawei cross-border economic zone, focused on an "Export Centre" to be built in Dawei (Pa Pawklo 2002, 2). The proposal resembled later plans for the Dawei SEZ, envisioning a genuine mega-project—"the world's 5th-largest shipping centre"—that "would connect the area around Tavoy (Dawei) to Thailand, creating an industrial zone and building a highway between Tavoy (Dawei) and Kanchanaburi province," the Thai province bordering Tanintharyi. A company called Myanmar Kanchanaburi-Dawei Development Co. Ltd. made contact with Myanmar's Ministry of Construction, as well as the KNU. But while a lack of investment resulted in the project downsizing to its road component, the

KNU still reportedly refused to approve the project. KNU sources criticized the Tatmadaw for using the existing road corridor for troop transport and using forced labor in the process: conscripting villagers as porters, as well as to build and rebuild sections of the road after each rainy season. The proposal for an economic zone foundered until the 2008 agreement between the Myanmar and Thai governments, which established the present outlines of the Dawei SEZ project. That Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) breathed new life into these older plans, but the suspension of the project in 2013 again brought activities to a halt.

The 1996 proposal was consistent with a vision of regional integration that Thai leaders had been developing for roughly a decade. In the mid-1980s, Thailand, like other members of Southeast Asia's pro-capitalist bloc—especially the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, at this time—began to pursue export-oriented economic growth strategies premised on labor-intensive light manufacturing. Shifting away from more domestically oriented import substitution strategies, Thai planners and policymakers, advised by the World Bank and flush with a wave of capital investment from East Asia, began to consider how best to spatialize new capital flows both in Thailand and within mainland Southeast Asia (Arnold 2007, 25). The administration of Prime Minister Chatchai (1988-1991) was instrumental in articulating a “battlefields to marketplaces” vision aiming to move beyond conflict in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar and towards economic integration through trade between regional neighbors. Chatchai's “constructive engagement” policy with Myanmar in that period was part of the same strategy: building relations with neighboring countries through trade-based cooperation (Fink 2009). This policy approach was consistent with, and at times directly involved, capitalist restructuring through reducing restrictions on capital flows, cuts in public spending, and rolling back labor protections (Arnold 2007, 16, Campbell 2018a, 4).

This integration push led Thai policymakers to try to capture and ground mobile capital flows in locations strategic for encouraging cross-border trade. As a result, border areas came to prominence around this time within Thailand's planning and policy apparatus as sites of prospective trade-based links between neighboring countries. By the early 1990s, concerted attempts emerged to redirect industrial activity away from urban growth poles and towards more rural areas. In 1992, Thailand's lead planning agency, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), released its seventh five-year plan. The plan advocates "industrial decentralization to the regions"; "new economic zones" in the North, Northeast, West, and South; and infrastructure provisioning, mainly roads, to make these new spaces accessible (NESDB 1992, 119–225). The eighth plan turns more specifically to SEZs in border areas, calling for "special economic zones and tax-free zones along the borders so as to hasten the expansion of trade and investment both inside Thailand and with neighbouring countries" (NESDB 1997, 68). In parallel, in 1993, Thailand's Board of Investment (BOI) unveiled a policy package called "Policies and Criteria for Investment Promotion," which created a three-tiered system of zones for incentivizing investment in specific areas. The areas zoned to receive the heaviest incentives were those areas highlighted as priority investment locations by the NESDB, including border areas. Although these efforts faltered with the financial crisis of 1997, they re-emerged in the early 2000s under the administration of Prime Minister Thaksin (2001-2006), who pushed forward Chatichai's earlier call for trade-based regional integration (MMN 2013, 167). In 2003, Thaksin led the establishment of the Ayeyawaddy-Chao Phraya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy (ACMECS), a platform for member states—including Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar—to design and implement cross-border trade projects. Although the Dawei SEZ was not one of them,

four “sister city” border economic zone projects were established through ACMECS channels along Thailand’s borders in the mid-2000s.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) also played a significant role in this period. In 1992, the ADB launched its Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) program which, focused on the five countries of mainland Southeast Asia plus China’s Yunnan and Guanxi provinces, aims to improve transport infrastructure and promote cross-border trade initiatives in line with Thai-led regionalism (ADB 2007, Arnold 2010). Among the ADB’s flagship GMS initiatives are a series of regional economic corridors, announced in 1998. At their core, the corridor initiatives are projects geared towards upgrading and better linking road infrastructure in the region, particularly roads that connect population and production centers, provide access to rural areas, and lead to and from borders (MMN 2013, 166). Today, the North-South Economic Corridor (NSEC) connects Kunming to Bangkok; the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), Da Nang, Vietnam, to Mae Sot, on Thailand’s western border; and the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), Ho Chi Min City to Bangkok, with plans for the Dawei SEZ to mark its eventual western terminus.

Both the ADB and the Thai government routinely specify “regional connectivity” as being among their prime policy objectives. The ADB understands its GMS program as creating a “smooth” market space in which, with goods and services able to move more freely, “natural” comparative advantages can manifest between and among different areas, be they states or otherwise (MMN 2013, 167). The Thai government designed the ACMECS border zone initiative around a similar objective of enabling inherent comparative advantages to emerge between member states—through the creation of infrastructural linkages aimed at boosting trade volumes (Ratanarut 2008). Instead of creating a smoother or more even market space, however, the period of regional integration has instead seen marked tendencies towards a heightening of regional

hierarchy, stratification, and inequality (Sciortino 2008, Arnold 2010, Arnold and Aung 2011). Thailand has benefited much more than its regional neighbors from higher trade volumes, consolidating its position as the regional economic power with growth figures that far exceed the other countries'. Poorer countries have gained less from regional trade patterns, with infrastructure linkages turning Laos and Cambodia into places of goods re-export and transit between higher-volume trade centers in Thailand and Vietnam. Asymmetric income and wealth distributions have increased both across the region and within particular countries (Sciortino 2008).

Border-based economic zones, in other words, have been integral to the production of a regional capitalist geography since the early 1990s. In tension with the discourse of flow, flux, and connectivity that so marked scholarship on globalization in the 1990s (Harvey 1991, Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Appadurai 1996)—much of it modeled on the post-Fordist political economy advanced by Harvey in the 1980s (see Tsing 2000, 340)—that regional geography has reproduced forms of spatial stratification over time. Moreover, state activity—at the level of planning, policy, and the active reorganization of space in relation to novel capital flows—has been integral to the making of that geography for decades. Economic zones, in fact, have been crucial sites through which scholars of Southeast Asia have sought to understand changing relations between state and capital (Arnold 2007, 2010, Campbell 2018a). Studies in particular of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle, established in 1994, have focused on how to conceptualize economic zones within debates around neoliberalism (Ong 2000, 2006, Sparke *et al.* 2004, Sidaway 2007). Economic zones, here, become less about capital versus state, or a power shift from state to capital, and more about their dense imbrication in zonal-spatial assemblages designed for the differential governance of people and things. In turn, economic zones exemplify how transformations in Southeast Asia's capitalist geography—as with neoliberalism itself in the work of Aihwa Ong

(2000, 2006, 2007, 2008) and Anna Tsing (2000, 2006)—might best be grasped as provisional projects rather than epochal determinations, as scenes or stages of encounter rather than a singular unfolding of capital’s internal logics. This change in emphasis parallels the move from Harvey’s accumulation paradigm, premised on the organic unity of capital’s expanded reproduction, to an alternative current that stresses accumulation’s differential articulations with situated political projects.

As the prospect of a cross-border zone based in Dawei emerged and then re-emerged in recent decades, economic zones in Southeast Asia themselves became indices of changing dynamics in global capitalism. Zonal-spatial enclaves—from the free port to the trade entrepôt, from the free trade zone to the special economic zone, from late antiquity through colonial modernity and the present—have long been integral to commercial activity, imperial enterprise, and the expanded reproduction of capital (Neveling 2015a, 2015b). Even Dawei manifests historically as a trade entrepôt: the archaeological record suggests that for a period of time before colonial rule, rulers in the area controlled Dawei for its port, which linked Dawei through trade relations to areas farther afield (Moore 2011). An oft-quoted 1995 working paper from the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines an export processing zone (EPZ), then the lead term, as “a delimited geographical area or an export-oriented manufacturing or service enterprise located in any part of the country, which benefits from special investment-promotion incentives, including exemptions from customs duties and preferential treatment with respect to various fiscal and financial regulations” (Romero 1995, 1). More recent research from multilateral agencies holds up such zones as phenomena of some magnitude—quantified, in the late 2000s, at more than 3,500 zones in over 130 countries employing in excess of seventy million workers—that are best covered under the term “special economic zone,” including EPZs, free ports, enterprise zones, free

trade zones, single factory EPZs, and specialized zones such as logistics hubs and petrochemical estates (Beyonge 2007, Akinci and Crittle 2008, Neveling 2015a). Although employment in such zones in Asia and Africa surged in the postwar period, reflecting the “new international division of labor” that made for “super-exploitation” of labor in the so-called “newly industrializing countries,” it was not until the 1980s that the growth of economic zones in China drove a true explosion of employment in economic zones—from 1.3 million to 22.5 million workers between 1986 and 1997 (Neveling 2015a, 1, 2). During the same period, a wave of economic zones in Southeast Asia also became sites of connection between labor and capital for low-end light manufacturing (Ong 1987, Sparke *et al.* 2004, Arnold and Pickles 2011), with planning and policy mechanisms in the mainland later respatializing such connections to border areas in pursuit of a newly regionalized, if persistently stratified, capitalist geography.

Accordingly, economic zones in Southeast Asia, eventually including border economic zones in the mainland, crystallize wider shifts in regional and global capitalist geographies in at least three ways. From Southeast Asia’s supply chain integration to subsequent attempts to integrate the region through transport and logistics infrastructure, economic zones in the region reflect both globalizing production trends, on one hand, and on the other hand, logistics’ heightened importance as a mode of operation for the expanded reproduction of capital (Neilson 2012, Bernes 2013, Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 2019, Cowen 2014). A third way that border economic zones relate to wider shifts in political economy is in reflecting trends related to labor, including labor mobility and flexibilization. The question of labor, moreover, returns border economic zones to debates around primitive accumulation and, relatedly, proletarianization.

As expanded capital accumulation has reproduced regional stratification, so too has it proletarianized many smallholder farmers, if not in a straightforward fashion. From a labor

standpoint, the state-planned redirection of capital flows to rural and border areas, including border economic zones, took place against the backdrop of two key factors since the 1980s: first, export-oriented growth strategies that dramatically expanded waged industrial employment in light manufacturing primarily in urban areas; and second, the then-increasing commoditization of land and agriculture in the region (Glassman 2010, Arnold and Aung 2011). While border areas became targets for economic zones, regional shifts towards cash cropping, agro-industry, mechanized agriculture, and in some areas, surges in mining and logging—all changes in agrarian economy made possible, in part, by roads and other infrastructures providing newfound access to rural areas—were reducing possibilities for small-scale subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture. According to one analysis tracking this process, rural producers “are not only dispossessed and transformed into wage workers but most often literally pushed into motion spatially. They are becoming a migrant labor force, whether within or across national borders—very often both” (Arnold and Aung 2011, 12). Concurrent labor flexibilization trends have heavily shaped proletarianization trajectories. For producers dispossessed, the result has largely not been a transition to a thus-reconstituted pool of free, formal, waged industrial labor—as in prevailing narratives of accumulation and dispossession, such as Harvey’s—but rather entry into Southeast Asia’s swelling ranks of low-wage, informal, precarious labor. This is a process widely known as exclusion, wherein uprooted producers are increasingly redundant to the formal reproduction of capital (Li 2010, Arnold and Aung 2011, Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011, Hall *et al.* 2011, Deshpande 2012, Campbell 2013). In Thailand, like in other countries then pursuing intensive capitalist development, the period of export-oriented industrialization also saw labor market deregulation, a steep decline in union density, and a resulting flexibilization of labor arrangements (Deyo 2012, Campbell 2018a). In a temporal reversal, in fact (see Campbell 2018), this expansion

of informal, precarious labor emerged not in conjunction with deindustrialization and Fordist decline, per studies of precarious work considering explicitly or otherwise advanced industrial countries (Neilson and Rossiter 2008, Lee and Kofman 2012). Instead, labor flexibilization has come about in a time of intensified industrialization, itself unfolding simultaneously with a process rarely put into conversation with regional scholarship on exclusion and informalization: that of ongoing primitive accumulation owing, in part, to the capitalist restructuring of agrarian economy during the same period.

In addition to flexibilization dynamics, forms of coercion and racialization also mark the space of migrant labor in Thailand—itsself a critical destination for people from the Dawei area who have migrated abroad, like so many salt villagers displaced from Kinbun. With the vast majority of migrant labor in Thailand undocumented, studies of migrant labor from Myanmar to Thailand highlight the efforts workers make to avoid contact or confrontation with Thai police (Aung 2014, Campbell 2018a). Stephen Campbell holds that Thai policing of migrant labor—through factory raids, arbitrary detention, extortion at checkpoints and elsewhere, threats and intimidation related to worker organizing, strikes, and court cases, as well as other forms of subtle and less subtle violence, including extrajudicial killings—brings into focus the importance of the capitalist state in capturing mobile labor in conditions of “super-exploitation” (Campbell 2018a, 84). Dennis Arnold and John Pickles, meanwhile, contend that Thai policing contributes to the reproduction of a “racialized” segmentation of the labor force in Thailand through which workers from Myanmar, stigmatized as brutish alien others requiring coercive discipline, remain trapped within low pay and poor working conditions (Arnold and Pickles 2011, 1614). These “extra-economic” factors, far from being incidental to the expanded reproduction of capital, undergird capitalist exploitation. Campbell, examining a border-based factory enclave called Mae Sot on

Thailand's border with Myanmar, argues that “that which has shaped patterns of migrant employment...and has facilitated a heightened extraction of surplus value through waged labor, includes extra-economic compulsions—notably, the coercive police violence that escapes most formal economic models, Marxist or otherwise. But this does not make Mae Sot exceptional, for capitalist orders have always depended on coercion and other extra-economic practices, relations, and logics” (Campbell 2018a, 85).

The notion of an economic zone in Dawei emerges clearly within the trajectory traced here: that of how border areas became target areas for zonal accumulation initiatives within a wider process of capitalist restructuring. Yet it differs in one important respect: its aim is not labor-intensive light manufacturing for export, but on the contrary, the more capital-intensive storage, processing, and transshipment of natural resources, namely oil and natural gas. While plans include some factory-based production of consumer items, the emphasis is heavily on petrochemical industries, which require relatively less low-valued labor and relatively more high-valued labor, such as in engineering and management—and much less labor overall.³⁵ Thus, while the Dawei zone remains of a piece with border zones' distillation of larger shifts in political economy—the relocation of production networks to economic zones in Southeast Asia, the emergence of logistics as a key mode for the expanded reproduction of capital—it demands even greater attention to situated processes of exclusion, with producers uprooted highly unlikely to find employment on or within the Dawei SEZ, or indeed in stable industrial employment within Thailand's highly flexibilized labor force. This “agrarian question of labor” (Bernstein 2004, McMichael 2008, Levien 2012), wherein exclusion processes mean farmers' land is needed but their labor is not (Li

³⁵ This phrasing—referring to low- and high-valued labor rather than low-skilled and skilled labor—follows usages developed among migrant activist organizations in Thailand as critiques of nominally skills-based wage hierarchies in Thai workplaces.

2011), recenters primitive accumulation's differential tendencies. Rather than confirming the organic unity of capital's historical geography, those tendencies illuminate the fissures that run through it in time and space. At stake, however, is less an epochal division between who or what is within or beyond capital—after all, flexibilized informal labor remains essential to labor-intensive manufacturing in Southeast Asia, even as the latter contributes less and less to value production on a global scale³⁶—and more so the fundamentally shifting and unstable borders of capitalist geography, always subject to situated historical contingencies.

In recent decades, then, primitive accumulation and heterogeneous forms of labor and labor discipline—from forced labor for the Tatmadaw to racialized coercion in and around Thailand's industrial heartland—have been central, not peripheral, to Southeast Asia's changing capitalist geography, relocating the making of spatio-temporal difference at the core of capitalist operations in the present. It is in this sense that, in and through the production of border lines, lands, and zones, primitive accumulation might be grasped as a bordering technology, a force that stratifies space over time. Capital itself, as a result, can be understood as border capital: both constituted by and constitutive of differentiating forces, primitive accumulation prominent among them.³⁷ In this genealogy, capital encounters elements beyond itself, contributing to the provisional respatialization of capitalist geography in mainland Southeast Asia, not least through the state-led design of a series of border-based economic zones. These zones simultaneously transcend and

³⁶ See: manufacturing's declining share of global value production (World Bank 2017) amid arguments in South and Southeast Asia about jobless growth, labor flexibilization, and rising surplus populations (Sanyal 2007, Kannan and Raveendran 2009, Arnold and Pickles 2011, Campbell 2018a).

³⁷ This is less a story of what borders mean for capital, for instance whether borders might secure or protect one place from another—such as “national capital” in Myanmar from wealthier, more powerful neighbors like China or Thailand—or whether moving industries across a border might be desirable for securing more favorable conditions of accumulation—although this is in fact the case with the Thai government's interest in building the Dawei SEZ, a petrochemical estate, in Myanmar, where environmental regulations are not as stringent. (See discussion of Prime Minister Abhisit's comments subsequently in this chapter.) My intention, rather, is to identify capital—more specifically, primitive accumulation—as itself a bordering technology, a force for the making of spatial and temporal difference.

reinscribe borders between neighboring countries, enabling cross-border flows of goods, services, and labor while reproducing regional disparities of income and wealth distribution between these same countries.

Notably, the Dawei SEZ is not the only border economic zone that has not come to fruition. All four of Thailand's bilateral cross-border zones planned within the ACMECS framework are, a decade onwards, operational but in varying states of incompleteness, underscoring the tentative, contingent nature of capital's historical geography. Nonetheless, the economic zones discussed here—from the early zones capturing investment in the 1980s and 90s, to the border zones later planned to decentralize production and connect regional neighbors, all of which are premised on exclusions and exceptions vis-à-vis state-level legal and political regimes—have introduced novel forms of striation and variegation into national and regional spaces, highlighting the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia's late-modern capitalist geography. The following section turns to the story of capitalist restructuring in Myanmar.

2.3 Passive revolution

In Myanmar, another story of fragmented and contingent capitalist restructuring begins around the same time: the late 1980s. As Thai leaders explored regionalized export-oriented growth strategies eventually geared towards channeling capital flows to border areas, ongoing armed conflict along the Thai-Myanmar border effectively meant that regionalizing logistics and infrastructure initiatives, such as ACMECS border zones and the ADB economic corridors, extended only to Thailand's western border. The early career of the Dawei zone is some indication of this: the first attempts to develop a cross-border zone in Dawei foundered by the early 2000s amid conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KNU. In Myanmar's south and southeast, then,

expanded forms of capital accumulation in recent decades would take shape less through the making of a post-conflict capitalist geography—as in Chatichai’s “battlefields to marketplaces” vision—and more in and through processes of conflict themselves.

Before turning to southern Myanmar, however, here I first introduce the decades-long reorganization of politics and political economy in Myanmar, breaking from the widespread view that the post-2010 reforms marked a sudden turn from military power towards an open market economy. Elaborating a different account, I invoke Gramsci’s concept of passive revolution, which denotes a process whereby capitalist restructuring takes place not through any Jacobin social revolution, but through situational alliances between dominant classes. Gramsci’s theorization of this revolution without a revolution emerged from his sustained interrogation of Italy’s own process of capitalist restructuring through state integration, which for him resulted in a stratified process of state formation that included a spatial fracture between north and south, as well as a political cleavage between workers and peasants—as first examined in his 1926 essay “Some Aspects of the Southern Question.” A complement to the notion of differential accumulation in post-workerist political economy, passive revolution is a concept attuned to the making of differential historical geographies. It is also premised on the weakness, not the strength, of bourgeois claims to state power, thus attracting considerable attention in postcolonial studies. Partha Chatterjee, for instance, argues that “passive revolution is in fact the general framework of capitalist transition in societies where bourgeois hegemony has not been accomplished in the classical way” (1993, 212).

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On March 30, 2011, a former general named Thein Sein was sworn in as Myanmar’s President, presiding over a state apparatus that would be formally civilian-led for the first time

since 1962. In April 2012, the National League for Democracy (NLD), the once-outlawed opposition party led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, re-entered electoral politics in by-elections as Suu Kyi won office for the first time. Then in late 2015, the NLD swept national elections. Suu Kyi, prevented constitutionally from becoming President due to her children's foreign citizenship, became de facto head of state with the title of State Counselor. In addition to these dramatic changes in political leadership, the government abolished the media censorship board, appointed an independent National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), legalized trade unions and public demonstrations, passed a much-anticipated foreign investment law designed to boost foreign direct investment (FDI), and pursued ambitious peace talks with rebel groups aimed at achieving a national ceasefire. Undertaken within the framework of a new constitution, drafted by the military and approved in a national referendum in 2008,³⁸ these reforms led the US and the EU to repeal economic sanctions in place since the early 2000s. Yet the new constitution also protected the Tatmadaw's role in politics. Military personnel were granted a permanent minority of unelected parliamentary seats, enough that any constitutional amendment—to abolish their minority, or enable Suu Kyi to become President, in the two main constitutional reforms pushed by the NLD—would require their support. The military also maintained direct unilateral control over three crucial ministries: Defense, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs, the latter being the country's sprawling civilian bureaucracy.

Notwithstanding the military's ongoing roles, these reforms captured attention around the world. Observers praised what they saw as, on one hand, a political transition from dictatorship to democracy, and on the other hand, an economic transition to a liberal market economy. A wave of analyses hailed the "Burmese Spring," a watershed event in the vein of the Arab Spring, but

³⁸ The referendum infamously took place in the midst of a major natural disaster, only days after Cyclone Nargis swept across the Irrawaddy Delta and much of central Myanmar, leaving some 130,000 people dead.

without the turbulence of broad, social mobilization (Lintner 2011, Reuters 2011, Huang 2012, Larkin 2012a, Rieffel 2012, The Economist 2013). The World Bank (2012) acclaimed a “triple transition” to democracy, the free market, and peace, given the renewed ceasefire negotiations. The International Crisis Group (2012) celebrated reformers’ attempts to “end (Myanmar’s) isolation” and “integrate its economy with the global system.” By 2015, speculation suggested that some generals loosened political restrictions due to genuine concerns over the country’s long-term, grinding poverty (CNN 2015); others argued that the military, having rewritten the constitution and retained substantial ministerial control, retreated from formal politics secure in their position for the future (Zarni 2015). Earlier, some critics had worried about entrenched military interests and ongoing armed conflict, but other prominent voices hit back, arguing that the only operative choice was between the old authoritarian socialism and the forward-looking liberalization process (Thant Myint-U 2011, Dapice *et al.* 2012). Amid a general flattening of the pre-2010 period into an undifferentiated era of authoritarian socialism, dualist imaginaries circulated: dictatorship or democracy, socialism or capitalism, authoritarianism or freedom, this transition or no transition at all.

These discursive juxtapositions occlude longer and critical shifts in politics and political economy, beginning in the late 1980s with the military’s earlier wave of market liberalization reforms. Against the tendency to view the late decades of outright military rule in terms of “timewarp” (Callahan 1998) and “stasis” (Larkin 2012b), I suggest that this period is in fact one of significant, if constrained, change. Punctuated at the outset by the popular uprising of 1988, this period unleashes a set of forces—in private capital, entrepreneurial activity, and borderlands dynamics—that transforms Myanmar’s political economic landscape, including in the south and southeast.

The demise of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) in 1988, in the wake of the mass protests of that year, provides the immediate setting for the highly state-mediated turn to market liberalization reforms in the years that followed. For decades, civilian and then military governments had devised economic policy foremost as a rejection of colonial political economy (Brown 2013, 131–75). At the center of the parliamentary socialist period (1948-62), the Pyidawtha plan—with its three pillars of industrialization, nationalization, and Burmanization—aimed to shift away from primary commodity exports, namely rice, and towards domestic industrial production. The government especially sought to reduce the roles of Indian and Chinese minorities, who by the late colonial period in places like Dawei—a commercial hub, as we have seen, which eventually developed strong trade linkages and mining and timber industries—had come to dominate market activity. Then under successive periods of military rule led by General Ne Win (1962-74, and 1974-88), the military intensified its state-led, import-substitution industrialization policies, especially its state monopoly on agricultural marketing. Sometimes referred to as “squeezing the cultivator,” this policy banished private trade in all agricultural transactions (further sidelining Indian and Chinese traders), imposed low procurement prices in order to maintain food supply in urban areas, and sought to generate funds, including foreign exchange, for a growing number of state-owned factories run by state economic enterprises (SEEs) (Okamoto 2008, 13–7, Brown 2013, 139–44). The results were disastrous. Despite an infusion of official development assistance (ODA) beginning in 1974, mainly from Japan and West Germany, the agricultural sector declined precipitously, while a persistent shortage of foreign exchange meant SEEs could not import the raw materials and machinery they needed (Kudo 2001, 10–1, Myat Thein 2004, 85–120, Larkin 2012b, 11). In 1988, protests swept the country and, faced with demands for democratization, the military government collapsed. A military coup installed a new

regime calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Confronting social unrest, grinding poverty, and the withdrawal of all international assistance—including ODA, after the military’s crackdown on protesters and refusal of democratization—SLORC policymakers began to advance a series of market liberalization reforms.

Bereft of external support amid a crisis of domestic political legitimacy, the SLORC liberalization program began as an attempt to manage the fallout of broad, social mobilization. In one of few attempts to take seriously the market liberalization period under SLORC, Koichi Fujita, Fumiharu Mieno, and Ikuko Okamoto show how “economic contradictions” arising from state-led industrialization caused “large-scale political unrest” in 1988, leading Myanmar to pursue economic reforms that differed markedly from those of its neighbors at the time. Whereas Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia could draw on substantial external financial and political support for their concurrent market liberalization programs, in Myanmar the military’s violent suppression of the 1988 protests—independent sources estimate several thousand protesters were killed (Lintner 1990)—and subsequent military coup led to widespread international condemnation. Without international assistance, reforms in Myanmar would have to be undertaken unilaterally: “the instability of the political regime forced it to adopt a somewhat different course, since the country could not expect much assistance from the international community to push forward reforms” (Fujita *et al.* 2009, 1). Toshihiro Kudo similarly suggests that the 1988 protests must have been critical to the military’s sudden abandonment of socialist economic policies: “Such a policy change was probably driven by the political and economic crisis of 1988 through the people’s uprising against the then government” (Kudo 2001, 20). The change indeed was rapid. In 1987, the previous regime had already decontrolled the domestic marketing of agricultural produce. Then in November 1988, barely a month after the crackdown on protests and the military

coup, the new regime legalized foreign investment by introducing the Foreign Investment Law. Further measures allowed private participation in foreign and domestic trade and legalized cross-border trade, formerly considered illegal smuggling (Kudo 2005, 7). In early 1989, the regime formally abolished the socialist economic system by revoking the 1965 Law of Establishment of the Socialist Economic System.

Although SLORC dismantled much of the country's socialist economic architecture in a short period of time, state control remained prominent in the years that followed. Struggles for power within the state apparatus pitted some generals, ministers, and other officials, especially those with ties to SEEs, against others who supported a more thorough liberalization process. The former group largely won out (Jones 2014a, 148–9). Between 1989 and 1997, a partial opening saw rapid economic growth driven by the “normalization” of prices for agricultural commodities, namely rice and pulses. Rising domestic rice prices and a push to expand rice production contributed greatly to this growth, as did exports of pulses and prawns, with India becoming the principal importer of pulses from Myanmar. By 1997, although the 1997 financial crisis did not greatly affect Myanmar, still relatively isolated, growth figures slowed as the initial expansion wore off.³⁹ SEEs, meanwhile, were not scaled back. They maintained both significant employment figures and limited GDP contributions, dominating key sectors while consuming major government subsidies (Fujita *et al.* 2009, 6–13). In 1997, SLORC renamed itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), while conservative forces within the state, including regional military commanders and high-ranking generals, consolidated their gains with the formation of the Trade Policy Council (TPC), which established new restrictions on private sector activity. Growth

³⁹ The agriculture sector cooled off after its early rapid growth; an over-valued exchange rate continued to hamper machinery imports, impeding growth in manufacturing; and SEEs maintained too central a place in otherwise changing economic conditions (Fujita *et al.* 2009, 11–3).

in private industrial enterprises trailed off, while state policy recommitted to state-owned factories run by SEEs. With the Yadana pipeline operational as of 1996, gas revenues now began providing the foreign exchanged needed to operate large-scale state enterprises (Larkin 2012b, 14). In line with the return to SEEs, the military also established a second parastatal holding company, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC), the first being the Union of Myanmar Economic Holding Limited (UMEHL), already established in 1990. In addition, in 1997 the SPDC announced their intention to manage a controlled shift to what they called “discipline-flourishing democracy,” building towards the constitutional convention that eventually produced the 2008 constitution.

Despite this high degree of state mediation, the post-1988 period saw the critical re-emergence of private capital as an important element in Myanmar’s political economy. Foreign investment and private trade were now possible, if not without constraints, while even the renewed SEE strategy reinforced novel private sector possibilities. Limited state capacity and the legalization of joint ventures between SEEs and private enterprises meant some SEEs were in practice operated as private businesses (Jones 2014a, 149). Overall, a “significant shift in ownership and control towards the private sector” took place: the number of private sector enterprises grew 50% between 1992-1998; in the late 1990s, private enterprises made up 75% of GDP and 85% of manufacturing output; and as of 2003, despite the slowdown of the late 90s and new SPDC trade restrictions, the number of SEEs had decreased 53% against the 59% growth in the number of private firms since 1989 (149). As of 2005-06, the state’s share of GDP had declined from 45% in 1985 to less than 7%. By the mid-2000s, natural gas exports had come to exceed \$2 billion per year, while limited state control of some export activities—especially of pulses and prawns and in garment manufacturing—had allowed notable expansion in private exports, as well. Despite a bank run in 2003 and occasional claims of the economy’s imminent collapse, Fujita et

al argue that by the late 2000s, Myanmar's economic conditions were unexpectedly strong, with moderate growth rates sustained for most of the period since 1988 (Fujita *et al.* 2009, 13). The main factors were a high growth rate in agriculture due to pulse and prawn exports, an expansion in the financial sector after the legalization of private banking, the emergence of a garment sector in the mid-1990s, private investment from China and Chinese trade networks that escapes formal recording, and abundant revenues from natural resource extraction, especially through the Yadana pipeline.

In this period so often dismissed as static authoritarianism, at least four changes occur that are particularly important for situating the political economic landscape around Dawei in recent years. First, liberalization of agricultural trade increased rural economic disparities. Compared to China or Vietnam, Myanmar has long had a highly unequal agrarian social structure, tracing to the consolidation of land holdings during the colonial period by South Indian (Chettiar) moneylenders. Land reform measures in the 1950s, targeted at breaking up Chettiar holdings, prioritized redistribution of land to small and tenant farmers rather than landless laborers, leaving a significant pool of landless laborers throughout the socialist period and beyond—a figure consistently estimated at some 40% of all rural households (Fujita *et al.* 2009, 9). With market liberalization reforms in the 1990s, gains in agricultural output and exports, mainly through expanded rice production and pulse exports, drove up land values, fueled a new consolidation of land holdings, and proletarianized many smallholders. Amid heightened rural income inequalities, traders and larger farmers benefited most, while smaller farmers and landless laborers struggled to secure basic subsistence (Okamoto 2008, 200, Fujita 2009, 246–80). Once entitled to rice rations under socialist rule, landless laborers also suddenly had to contend with a newly volatile privatized rice market after the elimination of rations. Fujita concludes starkly that “in general, the agricultural laborers

in Myanmar were reduced to a bare subsistence level during the last two or three decades, and are now suffering ‘absolute poverty’” (Fujita 2009, 263).

Second, the return of private capital in the 1990s coincided with the emergence of a distinct private sector elite. Unlike neighboring countries, Myanmar’s class landscape for decades had featured a glaring absence of monopoly houses, entrepreneurial capital, and rural landed elites. Lee Jones writes of the “historic weakness of Myanmar’s bourgeoisie” (Jones 2014a, 148); Michele Ford, Michael Gillan, and Htwe Htwe Thein note that in Myanmar, “there was no domestic bourgeoisie to speak of before 1988” (Ford *et al.* 2016, 22); two prominent volumes from the 1990s on entrepreneurial capital in Southeast Asia contain no discussion of Myanmar (McVey 1992, Hewison *et al.* 1993); and David Abel, once a well-known SLORC minister, has said that without a “fluent, responsible middle class,” SLORC had tried to “build it up” (Jones 2014a, 148). Indeed, the benefits of liberalization accrued disproportionately to military personnel and their businesses, as well as adjacent private entrepreneurs, who through close relations with the military “secured the lion’s share of lucrative deals” at the time (Jones 2014a, 150). Within this latter group, about fifteen individuals became known as “national entrepreneurs” (or more popularly as cronies). This group was “systematically favored by state patronage and now own Myanmar’s largest conglomerates, with interests spanning banking, real estate, tourism, mining, timber, manufacturing, construction, transport, and telecommunications.” In a polarized private sector where most activity is very small-scale, these entrepreneurs are widely seen as controlling over half of Myanmar’s wealth while owning only five percent of all businesses. Major figures such as Tay Za (of Htoo Trading Co.) and Zaw Zaw (of the Max Myanmar Group), arguably the two best known of this group, first established and grew their businesses in the early 1990s—Tay Za in timber extraction, and Zaw Zaw by importing buses and construction machinery (Aung and

Campbell 2016). Both were areas formerly closed to private participation. Others within this group—among them Khin Shwe (chairman of Zaykabar Ltd.), Htay Myint (chairman of the Yuzana Group), Sakura Htay Aung, Zawtika Khin Hlaing—went on to participate in electoral politics after 2010, some within the military-backed party and others as independents.

This core of Myanmar’s entrepreneurial elite bears a complex relation to state power. On one hand, this elite depends on state patronage to maintain and expand their businesses, especially during the state-mediated liberalization process of the 1990s and early 2000s, when access to military officials could be decisive in securing contracts, moving projects forward, and consolidating control over newly privatized areas of economic activity. On the other hand, the state also came to depend on the capacity and expertise of this elite. For matters small and large—from getting merchandise to trade exhibitions on behalf of high-ranking generals, to arms purchases, ceasefire brokering, and humanitarian aid after Cyclone Nargis in 2008—the state needed this business elite to perform tasks that it and its SEEs could not, especially in infrastructure provisioning. “Most visibly,” Jones writes, “crony capitalists were frequently tasked with constructing infrastructure, such as roads, dams, and pipelines, and the new capital at Nay Pyi Taw” (Jones 2014a, 151). For Jones, who uses the terms “crony” and “oligarch” interchangeably, a relation of co-dependence has emerged and remains today. By contrast, Ford et al (2016) argue that a decisive shift has occurred whereby this elite, formerly dependent on the state and hence legible as cronies, has now reached a position of such security that they operate largely independently of their past state patrons—no longer as cronies but as oligarchs. Ford et al point to how Tay Za and Zaw Zaw, for instance, actively pushed beyond military and military-backed institutions to cultivate relations with the civilian opposition in the run-up to the 2015 national election. Notwithstanding this debate on the relation between the state and this relatively new

entrepreneurial elite, it is clear that the latter comes into being after 1988, marking a split between cronies-cum-oligarchs at the top and a more diffuse panoply of much smaller enterprises constituting the remainder of a highly expanded private sector.

Third, in two main cycles of privatization, from 1995-2007 and then 2008-2011, SLORC and then SPDC transferred many state assets to private ownership in line with their stated pursuit of a market-oriented economy. Both cycles reinforced domestic capital; purchasers of state assets were required to be Myanmar citizens. The first cycle, though longer, was limited in its impacts. As we have seen, initial liberalization strides slowed by the late 1990s, after which renewed restrictions on private sector activity and a return to SEEs heralded a reconsolidation of state control over the economy. Still, by late 2002, over 160 SEEs had been privatized, among them cinema halls, factories, rice mills, and saw mills—all relatively small-scale assets, as key ministries maintained control of larger assets and enterprises (Thein Tun 2002, Ford *et al.* 2016, 26–7). The second cycle was more wide-ranging and included larger enterprises, with some 300 entities sold off across mining, transport infrastructure, and manufacturing (Turnell 2011, 153, Ford *et al.* 2016, 27). With Tay Za and his conglomerate, Htoo Trading, the clearest beneficiary of this second privatization cycle, Ford et al argue that privatization in advance of the 2010 election was decisive in cementing the increasingly independent power of Myanmar’s domestic capitalists.

Fourth, parallel to the emergence of a domestic business elite, liberalization reforms after 1988 also enabled the military and military-backed enterprises to build and consolidate strong positions in the private sector. Albeit consistent with a longer history of military activity in Myanmar’s economy,⁴⁰ the military’s establishment of two military holding companies, UMEHL

⁴⁰ Most notably, the military’s Defense Services Institute (DSI) came into being to operate canteens in the 1950s, expanding considerably by the end of the decade into banking, shipping, international trade, transportation, a department store chain, a hotel company, and poultry and fishery businesses (Callahan 2003, 191).

and MEC in 1990 and 1997 respectively, marked a new chapter in the armed forces' relation—formerly mainly proscriptive—to private capital. Owned by the MoD and led by active and retired generals, both companies came to outpace SEEs in securing domestic and foreign joint ventures in a newly permissive trade and investment climate (Larkin 2012b, 41). While UMEHL tends towards lighter industries (banking, trade, gems) and MEC towards heavier industries (construction, mining, iron and steel production—including interests in the Dawei SEZ), ultimately both are remarkably broad industrial holding companies, if also famously secretive in their structure and operations.⁴¹ Seen as more efficient than SEEs and able to utilize political relations to gain contracts that even the top business elite could not, these two parastatals made strides across Myanmar's privatization cycles. Noting the opacity of the second cycle in particular, Ford et al describe a pattern “whereby the largest and most potentially lucrative assets were not subject to standard processes but were instead transferred to the control of the military or their close associates,” that is, not just to the emergent business elite but to UMEHL and MEC as well (Ford *et al.* 2016, 30). Another military parastatal, the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA)—founded by SLORC in 1993, and built to resemble Golkar, the state party that supported Suharto in Indonesia—was also a beneficiary of liberalization reforms (Jones 2014a, 150). A mass organization with formal membership estimated to include one-third of all adults in Myanmar by the early 2000s, the USDA drew on explicit state support—and itself became a critical patronage source at local levels—in developing a wide range of businesses both nationally and locally, with activities spanning gems, bus and train transport, import businesses, aquaculture, plantations, rice mills, and real estate (Steinberg 2001, 111–2). In 2010, the USDA

⁴¹ MEC retains this reputation, while UMEHL became a public company in 2016 (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2016).

transformed into the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), the military-backed party that contested, successfully then unsuccessfully, the 2010 and 2015 national elections.

Each of these four changes helps contextualize the political and economic terrain that has emerged around the Dawei SEZ. A polarized agrarian structure, raising questions about the place of agricultural wage labor; a particular “national entrepreneur,” Zaw Zaw of Max Myanmar, whose participation in the Dawei SEZ focused on land acquisition and construction, until his company withdrew in 2012; a more open field of privatized activity in heavy industry and infrastructure provisioning, which has allowed domestic and foreign capital leeway in an area of once tight state control; and notable roles, if sometimes opaque, for USDP business networks and MEC, in conjunction with wider changes in private industry: all of these elements trace to the critical transformations of the post-1988 period, inaugurated by the popular uprising of that year and military leaders’ attempts to contain political turmoil through state-mediated capitalist restructuring.⁴² Broadly but importantly, the return of private capital and historic emergence, in parallel, of a domestic business elite radically shifts the situation encountered in Myanmar’s south by activist groups and social movements, farmers and workers of various kinds, individual firms and businesspeople, state officials at multiple levels, and other actors like armed rebel groups.

Without a revolution, then, a revolution occurred: beginning in 1988, not 2010, one of the world’s most isolated military dictatorships abandoned its socialist economy in pursuit of capitalist restructuring, such that today a formally civilian-led government presides over a much-liberalized

⁴² Studies of the early post-1988 period emphasize that the 1988 uprising was a significant factor in leading the reconstituted military government to pursue market liberalization in the 1990s (Kudo 2001, Fujita *et al.* 2009). Large-scale public unrest mainly disappeared subsequently in Myanmar’s lowlands, with scholars arguing that, as economic conditions failed to improve for the majority of the population, most people’s response was depoliticization and a focus on daily survival (Skidmore 2004, Fink 2009). The clear exception is the so-called Saffron Revolution protests of 2007, when Buddhist monks led demonstrations in major cities. Questions remain, however, over how widespread lay participation was during those protests (Zöllner 2009). Opposition leaders saw those protests as ultimately failing, leading to a lack of political mobilization in the years immediately before and after the 2010 shift to a quasi-civilian government (Jones 2014b, 782).

political economic apparatus. Yet as with Gramsci's analysis of Italian unification, here as well the pre-existing dominant classes remain, and in positions of significant power. In a revolution that has been in part a restoration, capitalist restructuring has not ended military power so much as enabled its reorganization within both the state itself—in the Tatmadaw's unelected minority in parliament, and in its control of three pivotal ministries—and the expanded private sector, not least through UMEHL, MEC, and the USDA. By the time the NLD won the 2015 national elections, they did so having secured compromises, not without tensions, with the military and the business elite. Suu Kyi became not President, but State Counselor; and the military, though reduced in its political role, has expanded its business operations while retaining considerable parliamentary and ministerial power. With top entrepreneurs seeking relations with the NLD and vice versa, the NLD publicly accepted financial contributions from Tay Za and Zaw Zaw while campaigning. Tay Za even gifted Suu Kyi a "platinum membership" for his airline Asian Wings, allowing her to fly free in perpetuity (Aung and Campbell 2016). Meanwhile, smaller-scale actors in Myanmar's private sector have become increasingly diversified, with the technology sector, service economy, consumer sector, and manufacturing all attracting attention in recent years.⁴³ Although leading businessmen close to the military are still often vilified throughout the country, they were pivotal figures in the return of private capital in the 1990s, and now, a capitalist growth consensus prevails across the formal political spectrum (Jones 2014a, Aung and Campbell 2016, Ford *et al.* 2016, Aung 2018b). Building on the market reforms of the 2010-2015 USDP government, themselves an intensification of the liberalization process that long preceded 2010, the NLD devised an economic platform that in many ways prioritized continuity: advancing structural commitments to

⁴³ See for example McKinsey Global Institute (2013), Nielsen (2015), and Nitta (2018).

private sector-led economic growth, particularly through ongoing deregulation of foreign investment and the agricultural sector (Turnell 2015, Aye Thidar Kyaw and Hammond 2016).

Far from being liquidated, the dominant classes, increasingly capitalist in nature, have retained and expanded positions of strength in the current conjuncture, against the background of the containment and management of political turmoil and social struggles from below. Fittingly, the military-linked businessmen who entered politics in 2010, but lost in 2015, remained upbeat. Khin Shwe and Htay Myint had become USDP parliamentarians in 2010, while Sakura Htay Aung and Zawtika Khin Hlaing ran as independents in 2015. All lost to NLD candidates in 2015, but Khin Shwe, for one, said he looked forward to more foreign investment under the NLD—confirming at once the broadened domain of private capital, foreign and domestic, and the power that the top business elites had secured. “When the investments come in, there is no one apart from us, the ‘cronies,’ who will be able to work on the same level as the foreign investors,” Khin Shwe said after the election. “That’s why I put my trust in Aung San Suu Kyi. I am genuinely happy that the NLD is forming the new government” (Hnin Yadana Zaw and Slodkowski 2015). In Gramsci’s terms: no Jacobin spectacle, no heroic modern prince, but rather a conjunctural series of “molecular changes which in fact progressively modify the pre-existing composition of forces, and hence become the matrix of new changes” (Gramsci 2012, 109). The primary scene of those changes for this discussion is Myanmar’s southern borderlands, where a legacy of armed conflict and new flows of capital have reorganized space and power in the area around Dawei.

2.4 Southern mosaics

This last story addresses how the first two interact, with industrial policy becoming a useful point of connection between market liberalization in Myanmar and regional shifts in capitalist

geography, which converge here on patchwork geographies of accumulation in Myanmar's south and southeast. During the 1990s and into the 2000s, in fact, the industrial sector was not among Myanmar's more dynamic areas of economic activity, yet a number of changes took place that are relevant to the Dawei SEZ.

In the 1990s, economic conditions in Myanmar, long premised not on industry but on primary agricultural commodities, became only more reliant on agriculture: double-cropped paddy farming increased rice production, the decontrol of agricultural marketing expanded agricultural trade, and exports of pulses and prawns surged. By contrast, industrial structure and output remained static throughout the 1990s, such that, in one significant account, "agriculturalization" rather than "industrialization" is held to best describe the form of economic growth in this period (Kudo 2001, 19).⁴⁴ SEEs also continued to dominate infrastructure provision in telecommunications, electricity, and transport. But Kudo demonstrates that despite "the generally held impression" that SLORC committed greatly to infrastructure development in the 1990s—he acknowledges that "the government...constructed many roads, bridges, dams, power plants, new airports, and so forth"—in actuality spending on infrastructure projects such as these ultimately declined in real terms during this period, as infrastructure provision remained in effect woefully insufficient for both the public at large and private enterprises of all kinds (Kudo 2005, 24).⁴⁵

Still, certain aspects of the industrial sector began to shift in noteworthy ways. From the mid-1990s until the onset of US sanctions in 2003, the garment sector flourished within a series of new industrial zones. With the establishment of the Myanmar Industrial Development Committee

⁴⁴ Across primary, secondary, and tertiary industrial sectors, employment figures changed by less than 1% between 1985 and 1998. A polarized structure remained. In 1998, SEEs continued to hold powerful positions, accounting for 68% of factories classified as large—a category amounting to only 1% of all registered industrial enterprises—while 94% of industrial enterprises employed fewer than ten workers (Kudo 2001, 36).

⁴⁵ Kudo explains that budgetary constraints owing to increased defense expenditures and inefficient management of SEEs were among the key factors hampering infrastructure spending.

(MIDC) in 1995, eighteen zones took shape not only around Yangon—including the Shwepyithar and Hlaingtharyar industrial zones, as well as North and South Dagon, the four zones that are today at the center of labor-intensive manufacturing in Myanmar—but also on the fringes of cities and towns in other states and regions (Myat Thein 2001, 286–7). Three of these zones were built in Myanmar’s east and southeast, in Taunggyi, Mawlamyine, and Myeik, a town south of Dawei (Myat Thein 2004, 259).

Although this spate of zonal industrial projects under MIDC certainly reflects economic policy imperatives—among MIDC’s four functions is the “creation of suitable conditions for changing Myanmar to an industrialized state” (Myat Thein 2004, 200)—at stake as well was the ongoing management and containment of feared political unrest. In the wake of the 1988 uprising, poorer areas in central Yangon came to be seen as politically volatile, having been at the heart of the recent protests. Burgeoning industrial zones on Yangon’s outskirts intersected with SLORC’s interest in creating a more secure urban core, less prone to political disruption. As a result, “the population surplus of downtown Rangoon and the squatters living around the pagodas and monastery compounds, who provided scores of demonstrators during the anti-socialist revolt, were expelled and forcibly resettled into the new townships created...in far away paddy fields” (Lubeigt 2007, 159). Those townships included the industrial zones then being built, which stood to both quell—in part by relocating—the specter of popular unrest and newly contain otherwise burdensome private enterprises. “Potentially explosive crowds of Central Rangoon were dispersed to South and North Dagon, Shwepyitha, and Hlaingthaya by a junta keen to get rid of these trouble-makers. Small private industries causing a nuisance in residential quarters subsequently were also resettled in special areas, which became *ipso facto* ‘industrial zones.’”

Eventually industrial policy also shifted towards connecting to regional integration initiatives. After these initial eighteen industrial zones in the mid-1990s, five more were established in the mid-2000s, four of which were in Myanmar's south and southeast: in Hpa-an, Mawlamyine, Myawaddy, and Three Pagodas Pass. Through this push towards the southeast, policymakers aimed precisely to connect with the Thai-led ACMECS initiative, as well as the ADB-backed regional economic corridors (Lubeigt 2007, 162–5). All sites but one are located on a proposed extension of the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), while within the ACMECS framework, talks between Thai and Myanmar policymakers highlighted the mutual benefits of economic zones in Myanmar on or near the border: jobs, technology, and tax revenue on the Burmese side, and especially low labor costs for Thai investors. Although like the Dawei SEZ, plans for these zones first faltered, industrial zones now exist in Hpa-an, Myawaddy, and Three Pagodas Pass, if smaller than first planned and still lacking investors (Chan Mya Htwe 2015).⁴⁶

In southern Myanmar, this series of industrial zones helped introduce a spatially fragmented pattern of accumulation in conjunction with Thai-led regionalization efforts. Additionally, however, a legacy of armed conflict and, more recently, a tenuous ceasefire process have also shaped this setting in crucial ways. In Myanmar's north and northeast, especially Kachin State and Shan State—important points of comparison for the south—a succession of ceasefires signed in the early and mid-1990s did much to open rebel-held territory to new flows of capital, particularly in the form of timber and rubber concessions. Describing what he calls “ceasefire capitalism,” Kevin Woods (2011) argues that through difficult ceasefire negotiations, capitalist development came to replace outright warfare as the primary relation of power between the Burman center and *taingyintha* (“ethnic”) borderlands. In the north, timber and rubber concessions

⁴⁶ Mawlamyine, meanwhile, rather than disappearing from policy discourse, remains the subject of perennial discussions about extending the EWEC.

proved to be key vehicles for the reorganization of space and power, rearticulating relations between state, capital, and non-state armed groups in the context of novel foreign and domestic investment flows. With military, state, non-state, and business actors competing and sometimes cooperating for control over space and resources, “a complex mosaic of territory” emerged, “a patchwork of land control that is constantly contested and reworked” (749). As part of this process, business and political elites from and across both the Burman lowlands and the ethnic borderlands forged alliances that incorporated borderland spaces and people into ongoing political and economic changes. For Lee Jones (2014a, 2014b), drawing on Woods, these politico-business complexes—and not only in the North, in Jones’ view—have been decisive in co-opting and demobilizing long-standing armed opposition to Myanmar’s military in the ethnic borderlands, which after 1988 had come to represent the only true existential threat to military rule. From the 1990s onwards, Jones argues, capital flows tied to ceasefire processes relocated ethnic political and business elites, including leaders of insurgent groups, within rather than beyond or against Myanmar’s wider transformations in politics and political economy.

In Myanmar’s south and southeast, the nature and timing of the links between conflict, ceasefires, capital flows, and accumulation patterns differ. While most rebel groups in the north signed ceasefires in the 1990s, the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military arm, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), maintained their armed struggle in present-day Kayin State (Karen State) and Tanintharyi Region, including the highlands around Dawei. Displaced Karen civilians fled to refugee camps on the Thai side of the border, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in KNU territory, informal hiding sites elsewhere, or standardized resettlement sites—“model villages”—built along roads in government-controlled areas (Woods 2019, 1, 6). The Thai government, meanwhile, adjusted its relations with the KNU. Once tolerant of the KNU as a buffer

force against the Communist Party of Myanmar (CPB)—which collapsed in 1989—and the Myanmar military more generally, the Thai government’s “battlefields to marketplaces” vision repositioned Myanmar’s borderlands as spaces for investment (6). If in the north, timber and rubber were pivotal in respatializing political and economic power after the ceasefires, then in the south, where conflict continued, natural gas and timber were followed shortly by palm oil and mining concessions. Across territory cleared of KNU forces by the Tatmadaw, the Yadana natural gas pipeline, north of Dawei, became operational as of 1996, bringing together the French company Total, the Burmese SEE Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), and PTT, the Thai state-owned oil and gas company, which processes and distributes the gas in Thailand. Concurrently and in many cases in the vicinity of the pipeline route, Burmese state and military officials granted extensive timber concessions to Thai companies eager for new opportunities after Thailand’s national logging ban entered into force in 1989. Then in 1999, about two years after a major offensive that saw the Tatmadaw sweeping south and east into Dawei township against the KNU’s southern forces, the Myanmar government declared Tanintharyi the future “oil bowl of Myanmar.” By the conclusion of the second seven-year plan for palm oil development in 2013, 1.9 million acres had been granted to military-linked companies in Tanintharyi for palm oil plantations, a land area remarkably equaling one-fifth of Tanintharyi’s total land area (7). In some cases, farmers evicted from palm oil plantations were relocated to new villages like the “model village” resettlement sites of the 1990s.⁴⁷ As farmers were evicted, palm oil companies hired migrant workers from upper Myanmar as plantation laborers, housing them in their own newly built company villages.

⁴⁷ These villages are themselves comparable, as Woods notes, to the “strategic hamlet” villages constructed by the C.I.A. in Southeast Asia during the U.S.’ own Cold War-era counter-insurgency operations.

Conservation efforts ran parallel to this nexus of conflict and capital.⁴⁸ Established the same year the Yadana pipeline came online, the Tanintharyi Nature Reserve Project (TNRP), which benefits from substantial financial and technical support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), encompasses most of the eastern end of the pipeline route, helping to undermine KNU control of the area (Woods 2019, 10). More recently, the Ridge to Reef conservation project—currently being implemented by the Myanmar government with support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Flora and Fauna International (FFI)—has taken shape with the aim of protecting 800,000 acres of forest in Tanintharyi. The UN’s Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program targets Tanintharyi for the protection of forestlands as well, as do other conservation projects such as the Tanintharyi National Park (TNP) in Myeik District, south of Dawei, and the Lenya Forest Reserve in Kawthaung District, farther south (11-12). These conservation projects contribute greatly to the respatialization of power in the south, weakening KNU territorial claims and displacing Karen villages from newly protected forest reserves. By the late 2010s, some 3.3 million acres, or over half of the region’s official forest cover, had been registered by the government as forest reserves large and small.

If capital flows followed ceasefire processes in the north, relations in the south are not as direct between capital, conflict, ceasefires, and conservation. In 2012, the KNU signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement with the central government, and then in 2015, they signed the government’s multilateral Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), becoming the most significant rebel group to do so.⁴⁹ Thus the pipeline, timber, palm oil, and indeed Dawei SEZ concessions largely precede

⁴⁸ Such efforts also underline a longer tendency in Southeast Asia for forest policy to be wielded as an instrument of counterinsurgency. See Peluso and Vandergeest (2011) for a discussion of this legacy.

⁴⁹ By this time, many of the northern ceasefires dating to the 1990s had broken down. Across Kachin and Shan States, several of the largest rebel groups in Myanmar – the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the United Wa State

the KNU's ceasefire commitments, as does the TNRP. On the other hand, these concessions follow military campaigns that, first along the pipeline route and then in more southern directions, seize and secure territory for new foreign and domestic investment. In this sense, the ceasefires are more continuous than discontinuous with conflict as such; they formalize and deepen the reorganization of space and power through conflict, further facilitating investment and conservation projects. The 2012 ceasefire also prompted renewed discussions regarding the return and repatriation of refugees and IDPs to state-controlled territory, including discussions over whether new villages might be needed to house returnees who are now without land, and whether the Dawei SEZ might provide a critical source of employment for returnees (Myo Thant Khine 2014).⁵⁰ The smaller zones in Hpa-an, Myawaddy, and Three Pagodas Pass attracted discussion in this context as well. Meanwhile, land confiscations surged across Kayin and Tanintharyi after the 2012 ceasefire, including large concessions for resource extraction and agribusiness, as well as smaller confiscations by companies and local officials—such as along the Hpa-an-Myawaddy highway, which is the proposed extension of the East-West Economic Corridor, and indeed around both the Hpa-an industrial zone and the Dawei SEZ (TNI 2012, KHRG 2013, 2015, 2016, HRW 2016, Sekine 2016). Furthermore, while the larger stories relate to gas, timber, palm oil, conservation, and the Dawei SEZ, Thai- and Myanmar-backed mining activity has reportedly increased as well in the ceasefire period, both in the vicinity of the pipeline route and along the roadlink corridor connecting the Dawei SEZ to the Thai border (Su Phyo Win 2016a, Myat Moe Aung 2018, Win Zar Ni Aung and Ye Htut Win 2019). Thus, in the south and southeast, although ceasefire dynamics have undoubtedly enabled heightened flows of investment capital, a patchwork

Army (UWSA), the Shan State Army-South, and the Shan State Army-North – continue to reject the nationwide ceasefire process.

⁵⁰ See also L2GP (2015), MIMU (2016), CAT (2018), and Chandran (2019).

geography of accumulation did already precede the ceasefire period, based on militarized dispossession for resource extraction, agribusiness, infrastructure, and conservation.

While the relation between conflict and capital in the south provides some contrast with that of the north, similar dynamics around politico-business complexes have emerged in both settings. In the north, those complexes that newly integrated the rebellious borderlands in a wider process of political economic restructuring took shape around timber, agribusiness, and a changing drug trade (Callahan 2007, Woods 2011, Jones 2014a). These complexes included, for instance, Kachin business elites and rebel leaders, Chinese agricultural investors, Burman military commanders, Burman business elites developing agribusiness plantations—and in Shan State, Lo Hsing Han, Khun Sa, and later Steven Law, among others with ties to Shan State’s drug trade.⁵¹ Southern politico-business complexes formed around timber and mining, palm oil plantations, and infrastructure development, including the Dawei SEZ. Alongside in-flows of Thai and Malaysian investment capital, Burman businessmen have sought to build and maintain new business activities on this changing southern frontier. Htay Myint, founder of the Yuzana Group and one of the main tycoons to emerge in the 1990s, capitalized on his close relationship with the then southern military commander, Ohn Myint, to gain extensive palm oil concessions in southern Tanintharyi beginning in the late 1990s (Woods 2011, 762). Yuzana became the leading company in southern agribusiness, and the company was also said to have a stake in the Dawei SEZ project (Ko Wild 2011). In addition, Zaw Zaw, founder of Max Myanmar and another “national entrepreneur” who entered business in the 1990s, made Max Myanmar the leading Myanmar company to participate

⁵¹ Lo Hsing Han and Khun Sa, both notorious for opium trafficking through strong ties to Shan rebel groups, wound down their activities in the 1990s. In return for helping to broker ceasefires, state authorities permitted Lo to funnel his capital into founding Asia World, now among Myanmar’s largest and most important business conglomerates. Steven Law, Lo’s son, oversees the conglomerate today. Khun Sa, meanwhile, famously “surrendered” to the government in 1996, receiving “national entrepreneur” status in exchange. Along similar lines, the private banking system that reemerged in Myanmar in the 1990s stems almost entirely from the business activities of Sino-Burmese elites who, with extensive links to Shan rebels, first made their fortunes in the opium trade (Jones 2014a, 152–3).

in the Dawei SEZ project soon after the project's announcement—until its withdrawal in 2012 (Mizzima News 2012).

Relatedly, political and business elites in and from the south and southeast themselves also took advantage of new business opportunities. Within the KNU, the KNLA's southern forces, especially 4th brigade covering Tanintharyi, are said to be more receptive to ceasefire talks and business projects than their northern counterparts (Brenner 2018). Since the 2012 ceasefire, southern leaders associated with Saw Mutu Say Poe have consolidated power, elevating KNU leaders who through increased investment dating to the late 1990s have profited from timber and mining especially (Smith 1999b, 409, South 2008, 75, Brenner 2018, 89–90). The KNU's position on the Dawei SEZ is also now more ambiguous than in recent years, with the KNU having once gone so far as to blockade road construction after Karen villagers demanded compensation for damaged land (DDA 2014, 79). Beyond the KNU, Dawei companies such as Dawei Princess, Dawei Development Public Company Limited (DDPC), Dawei Dragon, Shwe Wei Company, and until recently, Global Grand Services (GGS) are among those in Tanintharyi that have benefited from new flows of capital in recent years.⁵² News reports suggest Dawei Princess, run by the businessmen U Ko Ko Maung and U Ngwe Soe, has facilitated ceasefire talks, received timber concessions in KNU-controlled areas, and been a subcontractor on the Dawei SEZ (Karen News 2012). DDPC has also been among the main sub-contractors for the Dawei SEZ, with further ventures in electricity provision, trade and tourism, and private education. DDPC's vice chairman, U Ye Htut Naing, has chaired Tanintharyi's Chamber of Commerce and Industry since 2014, while

⁵² Involvement in the fast-changing politico-business complexes of the borderlands is not without its risks. GGS, known like DDPC primarily for its activities in electricity provision, went on to leverage its close relationship not with the Burmese military, but with the new regional NLD administration after 2015. The company eventually faced corruption charges after receiving concessions for construction and maintenance projects that did not pass through formal tendering processes (Lun Min Mang 2019). The NLD's regional Chief Minister, Daw Lei Lei Maw, resigned to face corruption charges.

his other businesses—Dawei Dragon and Shwe Wei Company—cover rubber plantations, hotels, and real estate in the Dawei area. In comments for a national investment conference, Ye Htut Naing stressed that investment from Thailand and upper Myanmar, as well as improving infrastructure linkages, have been and will continue to be critical for Tanintharyi’s growing private sector (Invest Myanmar 2019).

Over decades, in short, a motley admixture of conflict, capital, ceasefires, and conservation in Myanmar’s southern borderlands has produced an array of spatial formations. Economic zones, pipelines, plantations, mines, and forest reserves, as well as IDP camps, “model villages,” and company villages—many new, some old; some only planned, others already implemented—together compose a blurry mosaic of accumulation that has incorporated politico-business elites in a wider process of capitalist restructuring: the passive revolution that, partially intersecting with Thai-led regional integration initiatives, has not so much destroyed as reorganized older dominant forces through conjunctural shifts in political economy, including outright armed conflict and its legacies. Woods writes, “A map of the spatial and temporal convergence of land grabs and green grabs, militarization and population displacements in the forests of Tanintharyi Region results in a messy collage of colors, dots, and lines representing the complicated overlapping of oil palm concessions, government and KNU forest reserves, deforestation, historical villages, government villages, and IDP and refugee return areas” (Woods 2019, 12). Although partial and complex patchworks of political and economic control have important historical precedents in colonial and postcolonial power relations both in southern Myanmar and elsewhere in Myanmar’s borderlands (Maclean 2008, Grundy-Warr and Dean 2011, Woods 2011, Ferguson 2014), the current enclave geography in the south has taken shape most directly according to relatively recent conflict, ceasefire, and investment dynamics. In intricate articulation with military force, state and non-state

political projects, and major conservation initiatives, novel flows of capital have helped reorganize space and power in the southern borderlands, generating selective and fragmented processes of primitive accumulation that, as Woods stresses, enable “a continuous unfolding of the violent and recursive cycle of the (re-)production of capital” (Woods 2011, 751). The industrial zones established in the mid-1990s are also part of this story, eventually leading to a series of southern zones that, like the Dawei SEZ, are now part of a changed landscape of space and power in the south.

The blurred character of these southern mosaics is worth underscoring. This enclave geography notwithstanding, Woods, like Ken Maclean (2008) writing on mining practices in Myanmar, departs from key studies of enclave extraction (Tsing 2000, Ferguson 2005, 2006, Hardin 2011). He suggests one need not emphasize “pointillist” disconnection from national spaces, nor clear boundaries between the enclave and its environs, but perhaps more so “a broader brush stroke which results in the points of extraction bleeding into one another” (Woods 2011, 755). Put differently, primitive accumulation remains differential accumulation, and capital remains border capital; at stake is the production of spatio-temporal difference. Yet in focus again is not sharp distinctions between inside and outside, between that which is within or beyond capital, the nation, or specific zonal formations. At issue, instead, is the contingency and instability of those distinctions themselves, always problematically inscribed—and often contested—across time and space.

2.5 Dawei at the limits

Occasionally I came across people from Kinbun, the salt village, while spending time in the SEZ project area. Displaced and uprooted for a project that has yet to proceed, the former salt

villagers have dispersed: to Bangkok's outskirts, to the reoccupied area along the beachfront, or to other villages nearby, but generally not to Zadi, the official resettlement village now in a state of ghostly disrepair, with but one family living there. In one of the larger villages not far from where Kinbun used to be, I met Daw Aye Kyi, a woman who used to live in the salt village. She told me that these days, it's hard for the friends and neighbors she once lived with. The fishing boats are not really going out anymore; many people are without work. "Since there is no work on the boats now," she explained, "a lot of people can't find work. And since there is no work here, younger people are all going off to work in Thailand." Daw Aye Kyi now cultivates betel nut and cashew trees, but she fears for her land. She has seen friends lose land through land speculation and opaque compensation processes, with backing from local and regional government officials. "It's difficult," she said, and confusing. The project is stalled, yet some people, wealthier people—people who have things, *shii deq luu deh*—are still buying up land. Was the project moving forward or not? She was worried: maybe the people who have things know more than everyone else.

Working across recent history and political economy, this chapter has situated the Dawei SEZ at the intersection of three stories: the way in which border areas became targets for zonal industrial initiatives in Southeast Asia, led by Thailand's push for regional economic integration; Myanmar's own process of market liberalization, which began not abruptly after 2010 but much earlier in the wake of the 1988 uprising; and the remaking of space and power in Myanmar's southern borderlands in the context of conflict, ceasefires, and new flows of capital. Each of these stories is contingent: subject to chance, and dependent on multiple factors, including factors that exceed and sometimes contest capital's own internal logics—from states that channel and spatialize capital accumulation in particular geographic forms and places, to popular insurrections and armed struggles to which, in part, capitalist restructuring has emerged as a response. Instead

of depicting a smooth and unitary geographic trajectory, these stories trace the emergence of a broken, partial, and fractured landscape of accumulation, a rough mosaic of industrial zones, resource concessions, agribusiness plantations, and conservation reserves. Capturing what I call border capital, these stories locate the Dawei SEZ not in a featureless landscape of flow, flux, and fluidity, but in one in which borders—border lines, lands, and zones—have been made and remade at the forefront of capitalist transformations. These transformations include globalizing production trends, the rise of logistics, the trend towards labor flexibilization, and in Myanmar, a process of capitalist restructuring that, without a revolution, achieved a revolution: a passive revolution wherein the military, in lieu of any historic bourgeois hegemony, established and deepened a liberalized political economy through conjunctural relations with other domestic elites across the Burman lowlands and minoritized borderlands.

The novelty of border capital need not be over-stated, however. Even the earliest attempts to demarcate Thailand's western border resulted from British colonial officials' curious (for its time) desire to control territory, not simply people, in Tenasserim—part of a commitment, if not soon successful, to colonial dispossession through resource extraction in the areas around Dawei.⁵³ As in the alternative thought of primitive accumulation identified above, here too one sees how colonized and postcolonial spaces displace the conventional coordinates of capitalist modernity, producing and maintaining spatio-temporal difference. In the zonal accumulation patterns of southern Myanmar, primitive accumulation and heterogeneous forms of labor power—corvée and forced labor, and racialized coercion relocated to Thailand's industrial heartland—resonate not only at capital's space-time periphery: on the cusp of its arising, or at the edge of its expansion. They resonate as elements integral to capital's expanded reproduction and the antagonisms of the

⁵³ As noted above: see again Thongchai (1994, 62).

present. Before delving into the grounded political projects that are confronting the landscape described here, it will be helpful to close this chapter by relocating the Dawei SEZ in light of the stories traced thus far.

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When the first proposal emerged in 1996 for a cross-border economic zone premised on a “shipping centre” and “export centre” to be built in Dawei, Thai-led regionalization efforts, which included establishing economic zones along its borders with neighboring countries, had been underway for several years. Myanmar’s reconstituted military government, aiming to stave off popular discontent and address dire economic conditions, had embarked on a major market liberalization program. That push involved forming industrial zones first in the Burman lowlands, then in its southern borderlands. The south itself, meanwhile, had been changing rapidly. Tatmadaw offensives, aided by the railway built through forced labor in the early 1990s (ERI and SAIN 1996), made gains against the KNU especially along the Yadana pipeline route, reducing the KNU’s territorial holdings and enabling increased capital flows from central Myanmar and abroad. Resource concessions, agribusiness plantations, and conservation projects loom large in this reorganization of space and power in the south. On the other hand, plans for a cross-border zone based in Dawei faltered until the late 2000s, with early Thai support for such a project—from the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) and a Thai company called Myanmar Kanchanaburi-Dawei Development Co. Ltd.—suffering from limited investment and ongoing armed struggle, reflected in the KNU’s reported refusal of the project (Pa Pawklo 2002, 2–3).⁵⁴ These initial discussions highlight that the main impetus for a zone in Dawei has long come from the Thai side of the border,

⁵⁴ See also Jasparro (2003) and Ishida (2006).

while any prospect for such a zone hinges in part upon armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KNU.

In 2008, the MoU between the governments of Myanmar and Thailand formalized a commitment to move ahead with the project. This is the point at which most of the main project components were determined: a deep-sea port, a petrochemical estate, a coal-fired powerplant as the power source, a large reservoir as the water source, a highway and railway to the Thai border, and in an initial stage, a two-lane highway to the border, a small port to facilitate construction activities, a township for housing managers and workers, a smaller reservoir, and improved telecommunications infrastructure for the project area (Htoo Thant 2017). Then in 2010, Italian-Thai Development (ITD), which is Thailand's largest construction company, signed a framework agreement with the Myanma Port Authority (MPA), which granted ITD a sixty-year concession as the lead developer of the project. Following upon Senior General Than Shwe's visit to the Shenzhen SEZ in China, which led him to proclaim that Dawei should be "like the Shenzhen economic zone" (IHT 2010), the selection of ITD and an accompanying burst of media coverage brought increased attention to the project. By now, other components had been added to project plans: dual oil and gas pipelines, most prominently, as well as a natural gas processing terminal and, almost as an afterthought, a potential industrial zone for small and medium industries. *Pace* the notion of Dawei as Myanmar's Shenzhen, it was clear at this point that the focus of the Dawei SEZ would not be labor-intensive light manufacturing, per an earlier generation of economic zones in Southeast Asia, but rather the storage, processing, and trans-shipment of petrochemicals—and this within a transport and logistics framework prioritizing cross-border infrastructure connections between Dawei and Bangkok, Thailand's heavy industrial eastern seaboard, and the ADB-backed Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), which would terminate at the Dawei SEZ.

Media coverage upon the announcement of ITD's involvement underlined the extent of Thai support for the project. While the framework agreement met with limited public commentary in Myanmar, ITD officials and even Thailand's Prime Minister offered dramatic claims about the project. "We need tons of workers," Premchai Karnasuta, ITD's president, said (IHT 2010). "We will mobilize millions of Burmese." According to an ITD project manager, "You have to think of Myanmar as Thailand 50 years ago. There's nothing in the country but wilderness and cheap labor." Prime Minister Abhisit, explaining the Dawei project to viewers of his weekly television program in Thailand, infamously said that "Some industries are not suitable to be located in Thailand. This is why they decided to set up there." Thailand's push for a zone in Dawei comes from the eventual stress on border areas as priority spaces to channel and ground mobile capital, a focus that emerges from the regionalizing drive of a dense planning and policy apparatus in which Thailand's NESDB and BOI feature prominently—and more recently, the Neighbouring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency (NEDA). But Abhisit's comments, aside from highlighting that public backing for the Dawei SEZ goes to the top of the Thai government, also point towards another factor driving formal Thai support for the project: Thai environmental policy, which throughout the 2000s responded to and evolved as a result of heightened Thai environmental activism. By the late 2000s, further investment in heavy industries in Map Ta Phut in particular—the sprawling petrochemical estate on Thailand's eastern seaboard, the largest in Thailand and mainland Southeast Asia—had become less tenable in political and regulatory terms, a factor Thai activists regularly cite in terms of how the Dawei SEZ became a priority project for the Thai government. No such constraints seemed to exist in Dawei, which moreover could be easily linked to Bangkok and Map Ta Phut if the SEC were extended westward. This cross-border connection would form a single tightly integrated corridor for heavy industries linking the

Andaman Sea to the Gulf of Thailand, a vision that has explicitly informed justification for the project in Thailand (Termpittayapaisith 2015).

Thus in 2010, ITD was expecting few obstacles; company executives were eager to begin and enthusiastic about project prospects. “This will be exactly 10 times bigger than Map Ta Phut,” an ITD managing director claimed. And according to an ITD vice president: “It is totally different from Thailand. This would argue about compensation and go to court. That’s not the case with this project” (IHT 2010). Almost a decade later, it is clear that compensation disputes hampered the project almost from its inception, leading at one point to a blockade of the project access road by Karen villagers (Karen News 2013). Legal actions, meanwhile, continue to be among the tactics used by different organizations to slow down and raise concerns about the project. More broadly, the Myanmar government suspended the project in late 2013 following criticism of the project, the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant, and a shortfall in investment. ITD, for its part, withdrew from the framework agreement in 2015 before subsequently taking on a more limited role as a contractor, even if the company still tends to be referred to as the lead developer.

Apart from Than Shwe’s early declaration that Dawei would be like Shenzhen, Myanmar government officials’ public remarks about the project have been noticeably more restrained than those coming from across the border. Under Thein Sein’s USDP administration from 2011-2015, officials’ public commentary tended toward cautious displays of support for the project in principle, coupled with concerns about implementation, costs, and whether ITD would be able to secure enough investment. By 2013, with the powerplant already cancelled, discussions turned to the circumstances and implications of the project’s eventual overall suspension. Members of the Dawei SEZ Management Committee (DSMC), drawn from relevant union-level ministries—among them the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Transport, the Ministry of Social Welfare,

Relief, and Resettlement, the Ministry of Planning and Finance, and the Central Bank—considered what role ITD would have going forward. Aye Myint, then Myanmar’s Minister of Labor and chair of the DSMC, said of ITD that “They can keep working if they want, but they will have to compete with other international investors” (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2013). Han Sein, Deputy Minister of Transport, said “The project is quite extensive, and ITD could not invest everything. In this economic zone, there needs to be a lot of investors.” Aye Myint also hinted at concerns over power dynamics in the implementation of the project. “Many people said they were concerned that Thai businesses would exert too much influence over the SEZ, and that Myanmar would be a loser. But they are wrong. The management committee by the Myanmar government is the most powerful.” Despite limited outward support, the Myanmar government did develop a policy and oversight framework for the SEZ in the early 2010s, including the DSMC and a law specially promulgated for the project, the Dawei Special Economic Zone Law. Yet after the project’s suspension, government statements continued to swing between concern and tepid support. Following the NLD’s sweeping electoral victory in 2015, the Tanintharyi Chief Minister, an NLD member, signaled a potential reassessment of the project, declaring that “If it doesn’t benefit the residents, we have no reason to accept it” (San Yamin Aung 2016). The reassessment never materialized. Several years later, the regional government said that if the union-level parliament accepted a loan from the Thai agency NEDA for road construction, then the project would resume, beginning with the Thai road link component. Meanwhile, after a high-level government meeting on SEZs in March 2019, a terse communique from the President’s Office suggested discontent: “Progress and implementation of Dawei SEZ was seen to be slow and weak. Draft Terms of Reference (TOR) between NEDA of Thailand and Ministry of Construction was coordinated for a two-lane motor

vehicle road connecting Dawei SEZ and Htikee and it has been learnt that site visits had been conducted. Progress was slow in continuing preliminary projects” (Office of the President 2019).

Several factors might help explain this ambivalence from the Myanmar government, this tendency to shift between restrained support and raising its own project concerns. First, the project bears an uncertain relation to the extended capitalist restructuring initiated in Myanmar since the late 1980s. That process did not lead to significant industrialization (Kudo 2005). It expanded private sector activity, and it created important business opportunities for a nascent civilian elite and military personnel. But the areas of growth concentrated on cash crop agriculture, Yangon-based garment production before the onset of US sanctions, and eventually resource extraction, particularly natural gas due to the Yadana pipeline and a wave of concessions tied to conflict and ceasefire processes. The broader industrial sector, for its part, remained polarized between a minority of SEEs—large, but few, and sluggish—and a vast majority of very small-scale private industrial enterprises. What success there was, in the industrial sector, was limited to the boom in garment production prior to US sanctions. More recently, of the three SEZ projects initiated in Myanmar since the late 2000s, only the Thilawa SEZ near Yangon—the smallest of the three, with substantial support from Japan, and a focus on labor-intensive production for export—has become operational. While it remains unclear if or to what extent the Dawei SEZ will resume, the Kyaukphyu SEZ in Rakhine State is similarly uncertain, hindered by persistent violence in northern and western Rakhine.⁵⁵ Within a still limited industrial sector, economic analysts have consistently noted that the Dawei and Kyaukphyu SEZ projects are far from the country’s main population centers and lacking in stable financial backing (Szep 2012, Ariffin 2018).

⁵⁵ The most recent major wave of violence against Rohingya people in Rakhine State took place in 2017. Widely considered tantamount to genocide, this violence led to over 700,000 Rohingyas fleeing to refugee camps in Bangladesh. See OCHA (2017).

Second, the project does not necessarily align seamlessly with either the mid-2000s southward shift in industrial policy, or the resource and agribusiness concessions that took shape beforehand and afterwards. The industrial shift towards the south has yet to succeed in any direct sense; the four industrial zones that constituted it, albeit operational, remain in varying stages of incompleteness in terms of activity and investment. Pursued as a way of connecting to regionalization efforts led from Thailand, these zones have faltered while the KNU continued to maintain territory along the Thai-Myanmar border, impeding cross-border infrastructure development. In fact, while resource concessions and conservation projects followed in the wake of the Tatmadaw's southern offensives and subsequent ceasefire agreements, plans for industrial zones have continually stumbled. A provisional explanation might take into account that, in contrast to the relatively contained spaces of logging concessions, palm oil plantations, and forest reserves, the industrial zones of the south—from the Dawei SEZ itself to the four smaller zones to the north—all depend on relatively expansive infrastructure linkages, which themselves may require a degree of political economic stability that current ceasefire processes have not yet achieved. What is clear nonetheless is that whereas resource concessions and agribusiness plantations have thrived within a political ecology of conflict, ceasefires, and capital flows in Myanmar's southern borderlands, all of these zonal industrial projects remain incomplete, underdeveloped, or on hold.

Despite, then, a certain consistency with a wider patchwork accumulation geography in southern Myanmar, the Dawei SEZ may be contingent upon conditions that are not yet in place. In any case, that is implicitly the position of the Myanmar government, as the Dawei SEZ falls outside of the NLD government's formal industrial policy in a variety of ways. Issued by the Ministry of Industry in mid-2016, the policy includes four economic corridors but none in Tanintharyi; a near-term priority on labor-intensive rather than heavy industries, emphasizing

areas around Yangon and Mandalay; further emphasis on primary commodity industries and basic manufacturing enterprises; and discussion of regional economic linkages, but without mention of the Dawei SEZ (Kyaw Phone Kyaw 2016, Ministry of Industry 2016). Despite officially being the site of mainland Southeast Asia’s largest petrochemical estate and cross-border economic zone project—by a factor of ten, according to common estimates⁵⁶—the Dawei SEZ appears only briefly in the policy as one of the three SEZs that “are implemented,” as a place where a deep-sea port “is encouraged,” and as an area for agro-industry (Ministry of Industry 2016, 16, 33, 35). After over a decade of plans, the project barely registers in the government’s industrial vision. One high-level economic advisor to the NLD has suggested the project should not go forward at all. The project, he said, is too far from Myanmar’s commercial centers, and with infrastructure links mainly to Thailand rather than upper Myanmar; it is also unlikely to create jobs, as higher wages in Thailand continue to draw migrant workers from the Dawei area. The benefits would accrue to Thailand much more than Myanmar, in his estimation (Marks and Chou 2017).

In Thailand, by contrast, enthusiasm for the project among key stakeholders has remained remarkably consistent. Though beset by domestic scandal in Thailand,⁵⁷ ITD is still eager to resume activities in Dawei; Prime Minister Prayuth has continued to support the project since coming to power in a 2014 coup; and Thailand’s planning and policy apparatus remains committed to driving the project ahead. With explicit backing from the NESDB and NEDA, Thailand’s government had already allocated \$130 million in soft loans to fund the road link component of the project by early 2017 (Wongcha-um 2017). Top officials from both agencies spoke out in support of a swift restart, while the five-year master plan for ACMECS (2019-2023)—developed

⁵⁶ See for example ERI (2012, 71).

⁵⁷ ITD’s president, Premchai Karnasuta, was arrested in February 2018 for poaching endangered species, including a black leopard, at a wildlife sanctuary in Kanchanaburi, Thailand. Sentenced in March 2019 to sixteen months in prison, Premchai was freed on bail pending an appeal (AFP 2019).

concurrently, with Thailand still the leading force within ACMECS for regional integration—prioritizes completing the Southern Economic Corridor, with Dawei at its planned western terminus (Ono 2018). After some thirty years of capitalist restructuring in Myanmar, as well as major shifts in space and power in southern Myanmar, Thai-led commitment to this cross-border project and regional economic integration—itsself a complex articulation of state, capital, and differential accumulation patterns—remains the overarching dynamic pushing for a zone in Dawei.

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“Welcome to Dawei Special Economic Zone” reads the sign, badly faded, more in English than Burmese, at the entrance to the contested demarcation zone of the Dawei SEZ. A village uprooted, but less resettled than dispersed; a resettlement village, empty and decaying; a road link, cutting through rebel-held territory to the border; and Shan Road and Kilometer Zero, testifying to the spectral presence of Thailand in southern Myanmar: these are signs, all, of the discordant temporalities and displaced geographies—the confusions in time and space—that suffuse the landscape in and around Dawei. A place that once promised a transition from agriculture to industry, the postcolonial promise par excellence, instead now presents a difficult, suspended present, caught between the farm and the factory, the rural and the urban, and the south and the north, in their various geo-historical instances. If the project were to resume, however, then the three stories told here—the rise of economic zones in Southeast Asian border areas, the elite pursuit of capitalist restructuring in Myanmar, and the transformation of space and power in Myanmar’s south—suggest that continued primitive accumulation, rather than resolving this dissonant time-space through an autonomous logic of capital, might instead repose the problem of difference in fresh terms: not as something to be transcended, subsumed, or sublated, but as something made and remade anew, including at the limits to capital. Thus, if in the dominant dispossession

paradigm, the limits to capital are reproduced and overcome through capital's own internal tendencies, then here the expanded reproduction of capital is difficult to grasp through any singular logic of capital. Capital's expanded reproduction takes shape instead in tight articulation with state policies and popular unrest, armed struggle and extra-economic force, all of which contain but exceed a conjunctural and differential—in a word, bordered—history of capital. Beyond the historicist foreclosures of singular histories of capital, Dawei might re-emerge in a time-space of possibility, not necessity: of historical under-determination. That this might be most important in a political sense—in and for the making of grounded political projects, attuned to intervention in a historical present understood as open and contradictory, not singular and determined—is a contention I turn to now.

Part 2
Interventions

Chapter 3

Infrapolitics: conceptual departures, historical grounds

In early January 2012, the Dawei Development Association (DDA) released an open letter. It called for the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant then set to power the Dawei special economic zone (SEZ). Under construction at that point for about a year, the SEZ had already generated significant controversy over resettlement plans, land acquisition, environmental impacts, and closed, top-down decision-making. The day DDA released the letter, a Saturday, a delegation of high-level officials from Myanmar and Thailand—including President Thein Sein and Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, respectively—visited the SEZ project. They hoped to encourage project investment while signaling Myanmar’s new economic openness (Bangkok Post 2012). The delegation met at the Visitor Center built by Italian-Thai Development (ITD), the Thai construction company with a 75-year concession to lead the SEZ project. At the Visitor Center, a few people from DDA managed to approach the delegation and hand over the open letter. They also released it to friends and contacts in the media. It appeared to have an immediate effect: two days later, Myanmar’s Ministry of Energy announced the cancellation of the powerplant.

Yet the letter was only the last step in several weeks of coordinated activities. These included a visit to Thailand to learn about the Map Ta Phut industrial estate, on which the Dawei SEZ is modeled; press conferences in Yangon and Bangkok, organized by DDA and their allies, which condemned the Dawei SEZ; and a campaign around Dawei—“No Coal in Dawei”—involving stickers, t-shirts, and a beach-cleaning event at a popular beach near the SEZ area, during which volunteers handed out pamphlets explaining the potential impacts of the powerplant. Financing, a challenge for ITD from the beginning, appears not to have been a problem for the

powerplant component itself. And prior to the government meeting at the Visitor Center, there was no sign that project proponents—namely ITD, and an ensemble of state agencies from both sides of the border—were rethinking such a fundamental aspect of the project. On the contrary, their visit to the SEZ area aimed to promote the project writ large. Still, at a sensitive time in a wider reform process, the Myanmar government appeared vulnerable to grounded mobilization. In cancelling the powerplant, government officials cited the importance of “listening to the people’s voice” (Eh Na 2012).

About two years later, far from the main beachfront project area, another kind of action took place: a blockade—in fact, multiple blockades. In September 2013, and then again in November, Karen villagers blocked sections of the road, still unfinished today, that connects the main SEZ area to the Thai border and beyond. Why? Villagers cited broken promises from ITD (DDA 2014, 83). In this highland area, the “roadlink” component of the SEZ project did not require resettlement of the villagers, but road construction had involved clearing parts of some villagers’ agricultural land. It had also damaged villagers’ land holdings in some areas (mainly smallholder cash crop plantations, especially rubber and betel nut, but also semi-subsistence swidden cultivation areas). Villagers demanded the financial compensation they had been promised. Meanwhile, in the villages of the main, lowland SEZ area, too, material demands were often at the forefront of political activity: concerns about compensation and agricultural livelihoods led villagers to form committees that refused resettlement plans. In December 2013, not long after the highland blockades and lowland resettlement disputes, Aye Myint, a government minister, announced the temporary suspension of the SEZ project overall. The powerplant suspension, the subsequent withdrawal of Max Myanmar—ITD’s lead Myanmar partner, which withdrew over land acquisition difficulties in 2012—and ITD’s inability to secure further investors all contributed

to ITD's concession being revoked. Aye Myint explained the suspension would be temporary. The government would restructure the project to attract more investment (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2013).

Fast forward several years more, and in late 2017, the project remained suspended. That November, a workshop took place on the top floor of Zeya Htet San, a hotel in Dawei town, about 16 miles south of the main SEZ project area. For the better part of four years, uncertainty had prevailed. A few times each year, rumors circulated about new investment, a reorganization of the SEZ, sometimes even the imminent resumption of the project. My friends and colleagues in Dawei grew wary, and weary, of these rumors. To an extent, political activity had moved on. DDA, which began as a loose network active in Dawei town and surrounding villages, became more of a formal organization with a handful of full-time staff, an office in Dawei town, and donors who visited periodically. With the SEZ on hold, issues related to mining, palm oil plantations, fishing and fisheries, community-based tourism, and conservation efforts came to occupy more of DDA's time. Karen villagers in highland areas, as well as Amya villagers living in the lowland SEZ area, were still integral to DDA's activities. But they began to operate more independently, sometimes forming organizations and networks of their own.

At Zeya Htet San, the workshop was like many I attended, and sometimes helped organize, while living in Dawei. Fifty or so people, mostly associated with organizations based in the Dawei area, sat in folding chairs around tables spread throughout the meeting hall. Tinted windows shielded us from the sun, while in between tea breaks, speakers from DDA, a Yangon-based activist group, and several Karen organizations addressed the workshop theme: "Taking Back Our Natural Resources." DDA jointly hosted the workshop with a Dutch NGO that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy in Myanmar. A scholar-activist based in The Hague led the workshop, with speakers touching on land, palm oil, mining, oil and gas, forestry, a changing legal

context, and how these all connect. I sat in the back. Kyaw Htet, the founder of DDA—whom I first met in 2010 in Chiang Mai, before DDA was founded—joined me when not introducing a speaker or facilitating discussion. The mood was subdued. Towards the end, the scholar-activist from The Hague attempted a rousing conclusion, narrating resource politics as a conflict between ordinary people and elites. If ordinary people across these different kinds of issues—mining, oil and gas, forestry, and so on—came together, he said, they could fight back against the elites and reclaim their natural resources. I looked around. I saw mainly people who in the Dawei area would qualify as elites: NGO staff, and people working at organizations based in and around Dawei. Organizations that represent themselves as local civil society—a subject to be addressed in detail in Part 2—made up the majority of the attendees, although a small minority of villagers also came to town for the workshop. Kyaw Htet, for his part, seemed distracted, spending a lot of time on his phone. As the scholar-activist built towards his conclusion, backlit by a Powerpoint slide bearing the Leninist slogan “What is to be done?”, Kyaw Htet leaned over, showing me something on his phone. “Have you seen this?” he whispered. “No,” I whispered back. “It’s the new regional development proposal,” he explained enthusiastically. Someone had just sent it to him. I had a quick look. Legislative procedures, policy changes—this is what absorbed his attention, as the scholar-activist urged a convergence of struggles over land and resources. They seemed worlds apart. I meant to have Kyaw Htet send me the proposal, but as day turned into night, and dinner into karaoke—the natural cycle of the workshop, in short—the proposal slipped my mind.

3.1 Relocating the political

What kinds of political formations have emerged around Dawei in recent years, and how are they best understood? What relations might they bear to the Dawei SEZ project, and hence to

broader structural factors? At the same time, how might questions of political form—formalistic questions, indeed, of empirically observable activities, tactics, practices, techniques, and so on—be brought together with questions of political ideas and political thought—questions of belief and meaning, of subjectivity and imagination? How or to what extent might infrastructure name the central condition for the politics to be examined here? Is there a (or any) sense in which actually existing political struggles here reveal something distinctive about politics and the political at a moment in many ways posterior to earlier teleologies, of liberal modernization, socialist revolution, or postcolonial transition? Finally, what might political struggles in Dawei over and around land, natural resources, material infrastructures, and related forms of primitive accumulation bring to light about adjacent questions of politics: peasant politics, postcolonial politics, the question of the relation between civil society and political society?

In this chapter, I theorize and historicize what I argue I encountered in Dawei: a postcolonial infrapolitics. In conversation with the materialist turn in postcolonial studies (see Mezzadra 2011), I suggest that infrapolitics, here, is best grasped in light of the contradictions Kalyan Sanyal (2007) describes in his account of postcolonial capitalism. And drawing on Partha Chatterjee's (2004b) distinction between civil and political society—as political society, for Chatterjee, names a key form of struggles around infrastructure, including the processes of dispossession they often entail—I go on to identify two political trajectories associated with different actors in the Dawei area: one secular-universal, the other situational-differential. But rather than assimilating the two trajectories to a duality between civil and political society, respectively, I foreground the instability and interpenetration of these trajectories, showing the multifarious, reticulated political field that has emerged. Ultimately, this chapter and those that follow—on DDA, village-based politics, and a series of translocal, transnational political

projects—underpin the broader argument at hand, which is that the politics of the Dawei SEZ is fundamentally heterogeneous, reflecting the contradictions of postcolonial capitalism itself.

I begin with a set of conceptual departures and historical grounds, including a genealogy of associational life in Myanmar. This genealogy includes a version of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) calls “liberal diasporas,” or the ways in which liberalism has long circulated openly yet unevenly across colonial and postcolonial worlds, generating subjective, institutional, and discursive identifications with—if also dispersions and elaborations of—liberal doctrine. A diasporic liberalism proves decisive in the formation of DDA, the organization with which I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in Dawei.

Throughout, I often use the language of “political projects.” I do so to underscore my sense that politics, like capitalism, is not a context but a project (see Appel 2019).⁵⁸ I stress what I see as the open-ended, indeterminate, and experimental character of much of what I have found in Dawei. Practicing a politics in the wild—impure and reflexive, like “economics in the wild” for Michel Callon (2006)—town-based youth activists and village-based networks alike adapt and respond to, not always without difficulty, changing political and economic conditions: from the establishment then suspension of the Dawei SEZ, to the rise to power of the National League for Democracy (NLD), both nationally and within the Dawei-based regional government. A project, I suggest, is something with enough coherence to merit attention, yet also something unfinished and

⁵⁸ For Appel (2019, 2), “Capitalism is not a context; it is a project.” She is thinking with Karen Ho’s (2014) argument that capitalism, rather than an external context that determines the behaviors of individuals, is better understood as something more internally constitutive of individuals and social life. As such, capitalism is something that, fundamentally, requires work to be made and remade—from within, as it were—instead of simply existing a priori and dictating practices from afar. Appel also refers to Anna Tsing (2001, 4), for whom projects are “organized packages of ideas and practices that assume an at least tentative stability through their social enactment, whether as custom, convention, trend, clubbish or professional training, institutional mandate, or government policy. A project is an institutionalized discourse with social and material effects.” Last, for Appel, is Édouard Glissant (1989), who famously grasps the West not as a place, but as a project. These usages share an understanding of projects as processes enacted temporally through specific practices, techniques, and ideas.

ongoing. DDA is a key political project in the Dawei area in this respect, but village activities in Amya, Kyaukpa, and in the roadlink areas suggest political projects as well. No doubt, the openness of these projects mirrors the unfinished quality of another: the Dawei SEZ. Further, to speak of a project is to indicate something that does not simply exist, but has actively been brought into being. I show how, at one level, the Dawei SEZ is the fundamental condition for the political projects I consider below; it is its perils, if also its promises, that set the contours of the activities I examine here. But political projects also require particular practices and techniques. The snapshots above signal many of these techniques. Open letters, press conferences, exposure trips (such as to Map Ta Phut), research reports, blockades, public events, sticker campaigns, networks and committees of various kinds, and countless meetings and workshops—these are some of the techniques through which people around Dawei have forged political projects. Subsequently, I will focus on three such techniques in detail. I refer to them as political technologies, however mundane, through which DDA brings its project into being: the meeting, the letter, and the workshop. Yet I emphasize that this formalistic terrain also bears on and reflects, hence is not cleanly separate from or opposed to, the political subjectivity and imaginations of those who engage in politics around Dawei.⁵⁹

3.2 Infrapolitics revisited: towards a postcolonial politics of infrastructure

Three terms will help situate the discussion conceptually in this and the following chapters: infrapolitics, postcolonial capitalism, and political society. James C. Scott coined the term

⁵⁹ Bridging political form and subjectivity, I move past the formalist-substantivist divide that, similar to economic anthropology, structured political anthropology for decades beginning in the 1940s: from Fortes, Evans-Pritchard, and Leach, who projected in common a strong separation between the political and the cultural (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940, Leach 1964), to the interpretive anthropology of Geertz above all, whose insistent re-embedding of the political in the cultural deeply marked his work as part of the University of Chicago's Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations (Geertz 1973, 193–341). See also Spencer (1997).

infrapolitics as a way of understanding not open peasant rebellion, but everyday peasant resistance. It denotes “the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups” that, “like infrared rays,” lies “beyond the visible end of the spectrum” (Scott 1990, 183). His examples, now familiar, include foot-dragging, theft, arson, tax evasion, squatting, feigned ignorance, poaching, and flight. This *infrapolitics* constitutes a “hidden transcript” that contrasts sharply with the “public transcript” more familiar to social science, ranging from “the relatively open politics of liberal democracies” to “loud, headline-grabbing protests, demonstrations, and rebellions.” Scott’s usage continues to be used in studies of rural politics in Southeast Asia (Hirsch and Warren 1998, Potter 2011, Michaud 2012), as well as in studies elsewhere that challenge conventional thresholds of the political (Marche 2012, Scott 2012). Yet two other usages exist.

First, infrastructure has become a prominent site of anthropological inquiry in recent decades. This “infrastructural turn” (Dalakoglou 2016) registers new interest in infrastructural decay and collapse, with the long decline of Keynesianism; a growing anti-anthropocentrism in a moment increasingly grasped as the Anthropocene; and a continued attention to deep or hidden structures of relation, whether in psychoanalysis, structuralism, or Marxian emphasis on “relations of production” (Lowrie and Boyer 2014, Boyer 2018). Within this scholarship, the term *infrapolitics* has been used occasionally to think politics in relation to infrastructure (Anand 2011, 2017, Donovan 2015, Bach 2017, Appel *et al.* 2018). In his study of Mumbai’s water infrastructures, for instance, Nikhil Anand shows how, whereas Scott (1990, 184) coined the notion of *infrapolitics* to understand “the cultural and structural underpinning of more visible political actions,” Mumbai’s water systems also challenge liberal humanist attachments to a publicly observable politics. Anand builds on Scott’s formulation to examine “the politics of the hidden, underground materials of the city’s water infrastructure,” a system that is “differentially

visible and political, acted upon by human agents,” yet also itself “a vital participant in its political life, often acting in ways outside or beyond those desired by its government” (2017, 245–6).

The second usage beyond Scott’s traces to a convergence of poststructuralism and Latin American Studies since the late 1990s. In the writings of Alberto Moreiras, John Beverley, and others once associated with the Latin American Subaltern Studies group, *infrapolitics* is “a matter of the non-political without which the political itself would be unimaginable or impossible” (Beasley-Murray 2014). This formulation is not without continuity with Scott’s—with *infrapolitics*, Scott attends to “the cultural and structural underpinnings of more visible political action”—but it also breaks with Scott. Whereas Scott shares with early Subaltern Studies research an attempt at recovering an autonomous subaltern consciousness, purified of the distortions of elite historiography, Moreiras in particular calls for a rethinking of the political without or beyond an attachment to autonomous political subjects. In Moreiras, for Andrew Ascherl (2013, 191), the subject “both emerges from and generates as its remainder a non-subjectivizable remnant that Moreiras once referred to as ‘subalternity,’ but has now renominated (without eschewing the subaltern as a concept) ‘the non-subject of the political.’ The non-subject is, in this sense, a more resistant form of the subaltern. It cannot be appropriated, nor is there anything proper to it.” Moreiras’ contribution parallels Gayatri Spivak’s critique of early Subaltern Studies’ investment in autonomous subaltern consciousness (Spivak 1987, 1988). Her interventions reoriented Subaltern Studies research away from its attachment to a pure subaltern consciousness, giving rise to a turn that “now acknowledged...that subaltern histories were fragmentary, disconnected, incomplete, that subaltern consciousness was split within itself, that it was constituted by elements drawn from the experiences of both dominant and subordinate classes” (Chatterjee 2010, 295–6).

Moreiras' analogous sense of the non-subject—inappropriable and improper, proximate to Spivak's figure of the subaltern—recasts the political beyond any affinity to the subject.

I do more, though, than follow the grain of infrapolitics' conceptual itinerary. I also “bring capital back in,” resituating infrapolitics in light of the materialist turn in postcolonial studies (Mezzadra 2011a).⁶⁰ Here then is the second term in this discussion: *postcolonial capitalism*. Although a wide swath of work now addresses the relations between capital, capitalism, and postcolonialism (see for example Young 2001, Venn 2006, 2018, Chatterjee 2008, Mellino 2011, 2012, Mezzadra 2011, Deshpande 2012, Harney and Moten 2015, Walker 2016, Mitra *et al.* 2017), it is Kalyan Sanyal's (2007) formulation of postcolonial capitalism that is best-known and most relevant. Introduced in Chapter 2, Sanyal's formulation presents capitalism in the decolonized world as exceeding any transition scenario in which “capital” will supersede or absorb “pre-capital.” Against the historicism of both liberal and Marxist traditions,⁶¹ Sanyal describes how ongoing primitive accumulation, together with partial reversals that restore subsistence possibilities for those who are dispossessed, reproduce and maintain a duality between what he now calls not “capital” and “pre-capital,” but “capital” and “non-capital.” Unlike pre-capital in historicist transition narratives, non-capital and its “need economy,” for Sanyal, will not simply disappear or be subsumed into formal capitalist production, once called the “modern sector” (Sanyal 2007, 39–40, 58). Instead, non-capital is continually reproduced as a result of ongoing primitive accumulation, due precisely to politico-ideological factors whereby the force of primitive accumulation comes to be mitigated through governmental interventions that make survival

⁶⁰ Notwithstanding earlier work we might think of in the vein of postcolonial materialism, such as Talal Asad's (1973) insist relocation of anthropology within the history of colonialism.

⁶¹ These historicisms project in parallel, for postcolonial nations, “an irreversible macro-level change from pre-capitalism to capitalism,” such that “pre-capitalism in its entirety will be replaced by capitalism” (Sanyal 2007, 67).

possible for those excluded in non-capital's need economies, in Sanyal's terms.⁶² This ongoing exclusion means postcolonial capitalism reproduces difference and heterogeneity, a split at the heart of what Sanyal sometimes calls "the postcolonial economic."

In more synoptic terms, Sanyal identifies a basic contradiction that is constitutive of, and thus fundamental to, postcolonial capitalism: between widely *shared* desires for developmental progress—the sine qua non of postcolonial politics and economy, a whole hegemonic complex that drives primitive accumulation onwards—and the *splintering* process that accumulation creates—especially through processes of exclusion that do not overcome, but rather reinscribe, difference and heterogeneity at the core of the postcolonial economic.

I build on Sanyal's formulation, yet I reconsiders three aspects in and through its transposition. First, state power in Myanmar began to reach more widely and deeply than ever before during the 2010s, but the welfarist governmentality that Sanyal sees as sustaining the possibility of dispossession in India was at a nascent stage in Myanmar, and not necessarily on its way to any kind of completion as a process.⁶³ The military coup is evidence of this. Second, Sanyal's binary theorization of capital and non-capital has come under criticism in empirical and conceptual terms (Breman 2013, Campbell 2018b). Stressing the distinction between the two, his theorization threatens to obscure how forms of hierarchy, subordination, and exploitation intrinsic to capitalist production, including class and waged labor, can remain operative, as well as within circuits of capital accumulation, in the largely informal sector activities Sanyal conceptualizes as non-capital. It is also worth remembering that Sanyal's writings on postcolonial capitalism began

⁶² As noted in Chapter 2, those politico-ideological factors include "the need for dominant classes to seek subaltern consent to maintain narrow, fragile projects of rule; the normative legitimacy of "development" in postcolonial nations; (and) the governmentalization of state apparatuses across the decolonized world."

⁶³ See Prasse-Freeman (2012) for more on the abiding "low infrastructural power" of Burma's postcolonial state, which resonates with Scott's (2009) description of the *longue durée* limits of the state in Burma and neighboring countries.

as interventions into public debates over a wave of peasant struggles against a car factory and an SEZ project in West Bengal (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2008, Samaddar 2009, Majumder 2018). By reworking his account vis-à-vis the Dawei SEZ project in Burma, this chapter revises its more dualistic aspects in light of another set of grounded political activities. Third, I attend less to primitive accumulation in the abstract, and more to infrastructure, not least as it has often been large-scale infrastructure projects that have driven new rounds of accumulation and dispossession in mainland Southeast Asia in recent decades (Glassman 2010, Arnold and Aung 2011).

Still, this and subsequent chapters bring to light something I understand to be intimately related to the split Sanyal describes in the postcolonial economic: a *political* split. A novel understanding of infrastructure politics is at stake. In the Marxist geographic tradition that Harvey has done so much to shape, infrastructure is understood to penetrate and to circulate, “fixing” capital—namely its periodic crises of overaccumulation—while opening up expansionary systems (Harvey 1991, Arrighi and Silver 1999, Harvey 2006a, Arrighi 2009). Infrastructures compose the organic unity of capital’s historical geography; they are the material expression of capital’s unity, especially now that finance capital, for Harvey, saturates capitalist geographies across North and South, urban and rural. In the political vision Harvey extrapolates from his dispossession thesis—an aspect of his thesis that is often overlooked—capital’s unity promises political unity: between anti-capitalism at the point of production, in the field of expanded reproduction, and anti-imperialism at the point of enclosure, in struggles against dispossession (Harvey 2003, 176, 179).

But what if the organic unity of capital does not hold? What if the material forces in play are not one but several across North and South, urban and rural? What if material infrastructures are bearers not of unity but heterogeneity, of accumulation processes that fracture the postcolonial economic rather than recomposing capital’s singularity? At issue is a premise fundamental to

Marxist thought: different material forces shape different conditions for politics across time and space. At the same time, political struggles can do more than reflect underlying material forces; in many cases, they transform those material forces themselves (Tronti 1966, Hardt and Negri 2009). This workerist insight need not disregard, however, “the world beyond the factory wall” (Wright 2002, 225, cited in Campbell 2018a, 13). Well beyond the factory wall, at the point not of production but enclosure around a major infrastructural assemblage, I ask: what alternative political trajectories might become legible if postcolonial capitalism is fundamentally heterogeneous? How might attending to the differential aspects of accumulation surface politics and political forms that historicist transition narratives might otherwise occlude?

Classic studies of peasant politics often reflect historicist transition narratives. As tragedy or otherwise, such studies stage peasant resistance or rebellion in opposition to forces of modernist transformation, among them capitalism, empire, and elite nationalism. But if postcolonial capitalism breaks from historicism, then it might provide an impetus to rethink peasant politics. Chatterjee (2008), for instance, argues that fundamental changes have taken place in rural societies since theorists of peasant resistance in South and Southeast Asia contributed seminal works in the 1970s and 80s (Adas 1974, 1979, Scott 1976, 1985, Guha 1983). In Myanmar, these studies continue to set the terms for research on rural politics (Lieberman 2003b, Brown 2005, Scott 2009, Prasse-Freeman 2012, 2015), in part due to restrictions that for decades prevented sustained research in rural areas.⁶⁴ As a result, transformations in rural life seen elsewhere regionally—the variable spread of governmental power, the growing reach of transnational capital, the allure of urban mobility and consumption (Chatterjee 2008, Walker 2012)—have been slow to register in Myanmar’s ethnographic archive. In Dawei, however, as we will see, agrarian subjects now

⁶⁴ See Thawngmung (2004) for an exception.

encounter capital and the state not from a cohesive, oppositional outside, as in earlier accounts of peasant politics and moral economies (Thompson 1971, Scott 1976), but rather from fraught positions of implication and entanglement.

The third term enters here: *political society*, which Sanyal (2007) and Chatterjee (2008) have proposed might heuristically open up the forms of politics that have emerged around dispossession and exclusion under postcolonial capitalism. Political society refers to people who

do not relate to the organs of the state in the same way that the middle classes do, nor do governmental agencies treat them as proper citizens belonging to civil society. Those in political society make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual, and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations. (Chatterjee 2008, 57)⁶⁵

Political society suggests the limits of civil society in postcolonial settings. Whereas civil society represents an influential but small section of elite associations, political society defines a larger, more heterogeneous domain of political life in postcolonial societies. Eventually, political society becomes the characteristic form of postcolonial popular politics, for Chatterjee (2004b). In political society, a situated politics of exception and negotiation, beyond the liberal constitutionalism of legal rights, defines struggles around *inter alia* urban housing, population resettlement schemes, rural development projects, infrastructure projects, access to and expansion of public services, and even electoral politics. Moreover, if civil society conforms to a secular-universal logic, then political society conforms to a situational-differential logic: the one defined

⁶⁵ This description of political society—what people within political society do and how—expands on Chatterjee’s earliest formulations of the concept, which focused on conceptually distinguishing civil and political society in the history of postcolonial nations (Chatterjee 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2000). These initial formulations identify civil society as a, even the, critical site of transformation in the colonial period, a site of free and autonomous associational life that, nevertheless, was accessible to only a demographically limited section of the colonized elite. Political society, by contrast, represents the most significant site of transformation in the postcolonial period: a site of governmental interventions by developmental states upon would-be empirically discrete population groups (castes and religions, ethnic groups and races, tribes), yet also a vast space of mediation between the state and populations where much of postcolonial democracy, messy or otherwise, actually takes place.

by equalizing imaginaries within a homogeneous construct of nation, the other by circumstantial accommodations pursued based on heterogeneous population groups.⁶⁶

The two political trajectories I identify in Dawei—the first secular-universal, the second situational-differential—could easily map onto a civil-political society distinction. The ethnographic material requires something else, however. I argue against reinforcing a civil-political society binary, describing instead two trajectories that, as tendencies or dynamics, often overlap.⁶⁷ With this intermixing, neither civil nor political society exhausts the forms of politics that have taken shape in Dawei. On the contrary, I show how contradictory political forms reflect, as well as shape, the heterogeneity of postcolonial capitalism. This contradictory terrain also brushes against any sense of a shared trajectory towards a more equivalential political logic. Such a logic does emerge and remain, with DDA above all, but only as villagers in the Dawei area move towards more situational, materially oriented, and differential logics of politics—a fracturing process at odds with Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) influential conception of popular politics.

This construction departs from most accounts of Myanmar’s shift towards civilian rule. These accounts have long teleologically stressed the role of civil society to the exclusion of other political formations (South 2004, Jain 2006, Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2012, Bünthe 2016, 2018, Ganesan 2017). Even more critical appraisals of the recent reform period emphasized political economic transformations more than changes in the form and subjectivity of grounded political struggles (Jones 2014a, 2014b, Aung and Campbell 2016, Ford *et al.* 2016). By contrast, I begin articulating

⁶⁶ The political society concept has engendered debate. For some, the formulation maintains too distinct a separation between civil and political society (Gudavarthy 2012, Sarkar 2012, Anand 2017). For others attuned to the politics of dispossession, the concept is too broad to address the specificities of struggles around dispossession (Levien 2013).

⁶⁷ This construction is not bound by current theorizations of the politics of dispossession, whether in the convergent political vision of Harvey’s thesis, which remains within a historicist notion of capitalist transition (Harvey 2003); reassertions of agrarian radicalism in Myanmar, neighboring countries, and farther afield (Roy 2011, Levien 2013, Edelman *et al.* 2015, Prasse-Freeman 2015); a more all-encompassing political society argument, as in Chatterjee’s reflections on the politics of dispossession (Chatterjee 2008, 2017); or Sanyal’s (2007) own speculations on postcolonial political directions, which draw on and overlap with Chatterjee’s.

a notion of postcolonial infrapolitics. Shifting from dispossession as such to an infrastructural assemblage that entails it, I take seriously the unique promise and power that infrastructures project in the decolonized world. They are vehicles for the normative legitimacy of development, a whole conception of postcolonial modernity, which, as Sanyal recognizes, postcolonial capitalism contains in multitudes.⁶⁸ Still, I account for the frayed, fragmented, and heterogeneous political struggles that infrastructures can engender.

Felicitous itineraries are at work. For if the conceptual journey of infrapolitics now locates it beyond its association with the autonomous resistance consciousness of the peasant, so too does the political society concept grapple with differential, fragmented, and incomplete political projects in the wake of an earlier peasant studies paradigm. Both, if largely unremarked, register the critique of the attachment to a bourgeois humanist subject of history, a critique that Spivak advanced in the late 1980s (Spivak 1987, 1988). Postcolonial capitalism provides the mediating term for a heteronomous political present. In the subsequent chapters, I track the emergence of a fractured infrapolitics. Far from a celebration, I suggest this field represents a challenge to fresh mobilization amid persistent government plans to resume the SEZ project.

First, however, the following section helps situate the blurred edges of this postcolonial infrapolitics by providing a genealogy of associational life in Myanmar. Within it, I trace the arc of two broadly corresponding strands of associational life: the *thakhins*’, a secular-universal logic most resonant in the nationalist politics of colonial Rangoon, and the *wunthanus*’, a situational-differential logic closely tied to Buddhist imaginaries of moral revival in Burma’s hinterlands.

⁶⁸ Anand (2017, 14) writes of postcolonial infrastructures that “They are political structures and cultural forms that have...been associated as symbols, promises, and vectors of modernity. In both social theory and political life, infrastructures have served as temporal markers for what distinguishes the developed from the developing world, a telos upon which the wealth of nations and the modern time of their cultures have been mapped and assessed.”

3.3 A genealogy of associational life

The precolonial and colonial periods

It is often acknowledged that a dearth of research exists on the history and nature of associational life in Myanmar (Steinberg 1997, McCarthy 2012, Griffiths 2020). This situation owes in part, no doubt, to Myanmar's military government prohibiting the formation of independent associations for most of the past 60 years. Even a partial genealogy, however, should be useful for better locating DDA and other political projects around Dawei.

In a relatively early study aiming to historicize civil society as such, in Myanmar, the political scientist David Steinberg notes he knows of no relevant research on the precolonial period. He then adds that "There would be those who could argue that such organizations existed, or even were prevalent, in the pre-colonial period. The whole structure of the village headman system, for example, might be construed as an element of civil society designed to ward off interference by the state in village affairs" (Steinberg 1997, 3). For Steinberg, who evokes the classical understanding of civil society in liberal political theory, civil society represents power centers that stand outside of and limit, or, diffuse the power of the state. Hence his sense that elements of rural life and even administration that check the reach of the state could be legible in terms of civil society. Kyaw Yin Hlaing, a political scientist who later joined the administration of President Thein Sein (2011-2015), looks beyond civil society in his survey of associational life more broadly. He suggests that while precolonial Burma featured no shortage of associational life at the village level, it is still the colonial period during which associational life really flourished in wider and much more formal terms. "Although formal organizations emerged only during the colonial period, associational life was not alien to Myanmar society," he writes.

Community organizations that functioned more or less like neighbourhood organizations in Western countries have existed in almost every village in pre-colonial Myanmar.

However, in pre-colonial days, these community organizations appeared to have functioned more like informal institutions than formal ones. It was in the colonial days that Myanmar people began to form formal associations and organizations that had societal influence beyond a small community. (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 145)

Kyaw Yin Hlaing points to “Western education introduced by the British” and “the advent of print-capitalism” as the means by which, during the colonial period, people in Burma learned how political subjects elsewhere, especially in the West, used associations to pursue social and political objectives.⁶⁹ He adds that Christian missionaries and people working in business and trade—from Europe, China, India—founded religious, social, and business associations that would have shown people the activities of “modern, formal” associations.

Some of the contours of associational life in the colonial period thus come into view—precisely the period during which the largely urban *thakin* and mainly rural *wunthanu* milieus will develop along contrasting lines. Access to Western-style education, ability to participate in the public life of print-capitalism, exposure to Christianity and foreign trade: predictably, these suggest the relatively urban, relatively elite social locations of colonial-era associational life. But the urban and the elite do not exhaust the character of associational life in this period. Several archetypal sites of colonial modernity—the university and the factory; the railways and the oilfields—became sites of pivotal associational activity, with student unions and labor unions organizing themselves along formal representative lines (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 145). Both had members elect their leaders by popular vote. Student unions at Rangoon University—which produced nearly all of Burma’s most important political figures in the late colonial and early postcolonial period, from Aung San and U Nu to U Thant and Ne Win—led protests against colonial rule as early as 1920. Much earlier, in 1897, Indian and Burmese workers formed Burma’s

⁶⁹ The reference to print-capitalism, of course, signals the influential work of Benedict Anderson on print capitalism – newspapers, journals, and more – as the material basis of nationalism in the colonial world (Anderson 1983). Anderson supervised Kyaw Yin Hlaing’s Ph.D. at Cornell, which he received in 2001.

first labor association, known as the Amalgamated Society of Railways Servants of India and Burma.⁷⁰ Still, it was not until the late 1910s that labor unions became more active. In 1921, the Oilfield Labour Union—formed in the oilfields of Yenangyaung, having learned from a brief strike by American oil drillers there several years prior—became Burma’s first formalized labor union. The eventual leading nationalist organization, the *Dobama Asiayone*, began attempting to forge a national labor union in 1935, with the result that labor unions became important political vehicles. From the mid-1930s, then, “labour unions were led not by workers but by nationalist and political leaders and the labour movement became a part of the nationalist movement” (146). Oilfield workers themselves continued to shape nationalist politics, especially through an oilfield worker uprising in 1938, which began as a series of strikes and culminated in a march on Rangoon that galvanized student-worker solidarity within the nationalist movement (Thakin Po Hla Gyi 1938, Campbell 2012). Concurrently, in this period, union leadership directed most unions away from workplace demands towards nationalist politics, installing the labor movement, parallel to the student movement, generally within a universalizing politics of citizenship.

Student unions and labor unions are only two forms of association Kyaw Yin Hlaing identifies during the colonial period. The others are “religious organizations, political parties and organizations, ethnic associations, social welfare organizations, business organizations, professional associations, community (neighborhood) organizations, and native place organizations” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 145). Such was the range of associational life at the time. Two forms require further discussion: religious organizations and, sometimes eventually overlapping, nationalist political organizations. These two forms became the defining settings of *wunthanu* and *thakin* political logics respectively.

⁷⁰ Kyaw Yin Hlaing notes that because most railway workers were Indian, it was mainly Indians who controlled this association.

A new variety of religious organizations emerged from the turmoil following the British abolition of Burma's monarchy in 1885. Against the background of a series of rebellions catalyzed by Britain's annexation of Upper Burma that year, the *sangha* had plunged into disorder. Thibaw, Burma's last king, had designated not one, but two *thathanabaings*—the leadership position atop the *sangha*—while British authorities only appointed a *thathanabaing* in 1904 after some twenty years of pressure (Walton 2016, 23–4). The colonial government also sought to replace monastic education with secular schools administrated by the state. A lack of religious authority, coupled with a wider sense of Burmese Buddhism being at risk, led to pervasive concerns over moral decay. It was in this context that some of Burma's first mass associations came into being. Hundreds of Buddhist associations founded by lay people in towns across Burma “carried out programs for educational, moral, and religious reform,” from “drives for vegetarianism and campaigns to curtail lavish spending on rituals to efforts to teach morals to schoolboys and prisoners” (Turner 2014, 2). These voluntary associations, “with membership dues, subscription journals, and...vice-presidents and recording secretaries,” used the new technologies of print capitalism to forge communities aimed at countering a sense of moral decay. Among the largest of these associations, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA)—founded in Rangoon in 1906, and modeled on the association of the same name founded in Ceylon in 1898—sought to revitalize Buddhist life under colonial rule. A debate within the YMBA eventually led one faction to form the General Council of Buddhist Associations (GCBA), renamed in 1920 as the General Council of *Burmese* Associations. This shift marked a turn towards more explicitly nationalist politics, one implication of which is that associational life in this period was not, in fact, contrary to conventional historical narratives, always already intertwined with nationalism.⁷¹ Yet GCBA's account of itself,

⁷¹ A valuable corrective owing to the work of Alicia Turner (2014).

emphasizing the imbrication of Buddhism and nationalism, became the standard historical narrative. “The effect,” Matthew Walton points out, drawing on Alicia Turner’s work on the subject, “was to obscure the diversity of interests and objectives among Buddhist groups during the period from about 1890-1920, overlaying a nationalist orientation on activities that had been primarily directed at the protection of the *sasana*,” or the teachings and practice of Buddhism (Walton 2016, 24).

In these early decades of the twentieth century, another organizational form straddles religious and nationalist associational life: the *wunthanu athins*, sometimes translated as “loving one’s race” associations, or “nationalist or patriotic” associations (Tharaphi Than 2015, Walton 2016). Some disagreement exists over the nature of *wunthanu* associations. Although Burmese scholars have used the term to denote almost the whole scope of nationalist organizations in the period before independence,⁷² Western scholars tend to use the term to refer to GCBA-affiliated groups in rural areas. John Cady, for one, writes that the *wunthanu* associations “were set up as village political associations by the GCBA in 1921-22 in an effort to bring public questions to the attention of the rural population. At the outset, they reflected also a measurably genuine popular concern to abolish official fraud and corruption, to suppress drinking, and to act collectively for the suppression of crime” (Cady 1958, 234). A parallel account, noting the prominence of the *sangha* in this milieu, describes *wunthanu* associations as reflecting “a popular desire to see Burmese life purged of the corruption, drunkenness, and crime into which it had fallen during the period of British rule, and restored to good order, with a reformed *sangha* able to take the lead in promoting moral and social welfare” (Ling 1979, 84, cited in Walton 2016, 25). Walton emphasizes that it was often monks who constructed relations across urban and rural settings,

⁷² As in Thakin Ba Maung’s 1975 book *Wunthanu Ayehtawboun Thamaing* (“History of the *Wunthanu* Revolution”) (Thakin Ba Maung 1975).

playing significant roles in building up *wunthanu* associations. Founded in 1920, the General Council of Sangha Sameggi (GCSS), for instance, dispatched monks in the hundreds to *wunthanu* associations “to offer moral guidance and, in many cases, political training” (Walton 2016, 25).

Nationalist political organizations tend to be understood as having existed separately from the rural *wunthanu* milieu. The *Dobama Asiayone*, formally established in 1933, quickly became the most important nationalist organization. Often translated as the “We Burman Association,” the *Dobama Asiayone* grew out of student politics in the 1920s and 1930s (Cady 1958, 375–365). The students who founded the association and made it a defining force in nationalist politics referred to each other as *thakin*, the word for “lord” or “master” typically reserved for the British. The *thakins* played major roles in nationalist student politics throughout the 1930s, including the 1936 student strike through which Aung San and U Nu—then known as Thakin Aung San and Thakin Nu—rose to prominence. Thakins Ba Swe and Ba Hein turned to labor organizing, helping win higher wages in 1935 for Burmese workers in the oilfields of Yenangyaung. *Thakins* also contested the 1936 general election, putting forward 28 candidates, 3 of whom were elected. Attempts “to reach the peasants,” on the other hand, “were unrewarding because the villagers were distrustful” (376). Ultimately, the *thakins* were most successful in organizing students, gaining a devoted base of followers even in many of Burma’s leading high schools. The name and slogan of the organization clearly suggests an exclusionary Burman identity: “Burma is our country; Burmese literature is our literature; Burmese language is our language. Love our country, raise the standards of our literature, respect our language.” Kei Nemoto (2000), however, contends that *thakins* used the term *thudobama*—“their Burma” or “those Burmese”—more than *dobama*, defining themselves in some ways more inclusively in negative terms against the Burma of British rule and those Burmese people who collaborated with the British (Walton 2016, 26). By the 1950s and

1960s, it was widely acknowledged that most of Burma's postcolonial leadership, from the ruling Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) to its armed and unarmed opposition forces, had their roots in the *Dobama Asiyone* (Taylor 1988, xv). Thakins Aung San, Nu, and Ba Swe, as well as the Communist leaders Thakin Than Tun and Thakin Soe, all emerged from the *thakin* movement of the 1930s.

Historical accounts of this period often draw hard lines between the urban milieu of the *thakins* and the rural world of the *wunthanu* associations. Robert Taylor, for example, portrays the *Dobama Asiyone* as a shift towards secular nationalist politics, marking a departure from the YMBA and GCBA's emphases on Buddhism in preceding decades. Like Cady, he stresses the *thakins'* failure to seriously engage rural politics, and he locates *thakin* leadership decisively within Burma's urban, relatively affluent, and secular progressive elite. The *thakin* story, he writes, is "a familiar one in colonial Southeast Asia":

A small number of men and women, well educated in comparison with the majority of the population, at home in both their own and a major European language, living in a major cosmopolitan commercial city, and familiar with political, economic, and social movements in other parts of the world, especially within the colonial empire of which they were a part, felt a strong sense of dissatisfaction with the behavior of the indigenous political leaders who had been cooperating with the colonial rulers. They sought a new departure in politics and morality, condemning the past as both defeatist and corrupt. (Taylor 1988, xii–xiv)

Walton notes that political scientists, as well (see for example Silverstein 1996), have generally underscored distinctions between *thakin* and *wunthanu* politics, defining the former's tendency towards secularism, liberalism, and constitutionalism against the latter's putatively backwards drive to recover the social and religious world of Burmese Buddhism. For Walton, by contrast, while the two milieus "certainly had different priorities and approaches to politics," it remains "important not to forget that they were often functioning within a similar and consistent understanding of their political environment" (Walton 2016, 26). Exaggerating this divide, he

argues, “actually mischaracterizes both groups, since many members of the *Dobama Asiayone* incorporated Buddhist rhetoric and reasoning in their political ideology, while the *wunthanu athins* were also using modern political organizing techniques.”

For the purposes of this discussion, it is important neither to collapse this divide completely nor posit an absolute distinction between the *thakins* and *wunthanus*. On one hand, the differences are clear enough. The *thakin* movement, which significantly shaped the political landscape of the postcolonial nation, embraced principles such as autonomy, equality, free association, and deliberative decision-making. Its natural environment was the social world of Rangoon, a cosmopolitan port city par excellence—with its university and schools, its unions for students and workers. Elections, strikes, nascent party formations, print magazines, and a range of ideologies—communism, socialism, liberalism, fascism—were all within its scope. It was the main locus of the new, strident political imaginary of popular sovereignty. The social world of the *wunthanu* associations, by contrast, existed far from unions and electoral politics, print-capitalism and party politics. The central event of the *wunthanu* milieu was the Saya San rebellion (1930-32): a millenarian peasant revolt led by Saya San, a traditional healer, self-proclaimed prophet, and former monk who had been active in *wunthanu* associations’ anticolonial activity. To bridge the distinctions too quickly between this world and the *thakins*’ risks denying the former’s specificity, assimilating peasant insurgency and rural politics to the elite nationalism of the *thakin* milieu.

On the other hand, Walton is right to point out the divide is hardly total, given the *thakins*’ appeals to Burman Buddhism and the *wunthanus*’ orientation towards anticolonial nationalism. Saya San himself, in fact, is widely known to have joined GCBA in the 1920s. He was even elected to chair a commission studying peasant living conditions before he parted ways with GCBA in 1930 to lead the revolt that bears his name (Aung-Thwin 2011, 4–6). Moreover, economic

conditions particular to colonial Burma privileged British, Indian, and Chinese commercial interests, as Furnivall (2014) recognized with his conception of the plural society. Burmese people found themselves greatly marginalized from colonial commerce and economic life. Thus in the absence of any Burmese bourgeoisie, the social world of the *thakins* took shape largely without the commercial underpinnings of civil society in India, for instance.⁷³ This too helps explain why the *thakin-wunthanu* contrast, while recognizable enough, might not have achieved the same clarity as comparable contrasts elsewhere—as the *thakins*, in effect, amounted to a less distinctive political formation.

Rather than strictly separating or hastily collapsing these two logics, this discussion treats them as contrasting political trajectories that sometimes intermix, overlap, and blur into one another. As such, the *thakin* and *wunthanu* trajectories can be understood as no less and no more than a fitting corollary for the secular-universal and situational-differential trajectories I identify much more recently in Dawei. In secular-universal terms, the *thakin* movement projects a worldly imaginary of freedom, autonomy, and egalitarian popular sovereignty suffused by the colonial modernity of Rangoon. In more situational-differential terms, the *wunthanu* milieu ties closely to Buddhist imaginaries of moral revival and peasant survival in Burma's hinterlands—a political logic that departs from that of bourgeois secular citizenship. As an analogue for the present, these two strands of associational life map remarkably well onto the dual political trajectories I trace in Dawei. Still, none of my interlocutors in Dawei—from friends and colleagues in Dawei town, to villagers in the surrounding area—ever explicitly made reference to the *thakins* or *wunthanus*, except on the handful of occasions when I raised the issue myself, drawing bemused disinterest more than anything else. Providing at most a striking corollary, these two strands of association

⁷³ This is a feature of colonial civil society in India that Chatterjee (2004b, 2011) emphasizes in sharply distinguishing civil and political society in Indian political history.

nonetheless help situate Dawei's contemporary political landscape—even while they continue to weave in and out of the intervening decades' history of associational life.

The postcolonial period through the present

Associational life during the parliamentary socialist period (1948-1962) contrasts sharply with that of the authoritarian socialist period (1962-1988). Following independence in 1948, the parliamentary socialist period largely continued the relatively permissive environment for associations established by the colonial state. Whether by choice or not, religious organizations, student unions, and associations of foreign traders and merchants all operated with a high degree of independence from the state.⁷⁴ On the other hand, the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), the ruling party between 1948-1958, mobilized its substantial hegemonic purchase to encourage a wide swath of associations to develop affiliations with it. Independent labor, peasant, and national business associations were not compelled to affiliate with the AFPFL, but many chose to do so, with political leaders then drawing on these associations as power bases. The AFPFL also formed associations of their own, such as the All Burma Peasants' Organization, the Federation of Trades Organization (Burma), the Trade Union Congress (Burma), the Youth League, and the All Burma Women's Organization (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 150–2).

The authoritarian socialist period, inaugurated by the military coup of 1962, soon marked a clear turn away from the associational life of the parliamentary period. The 1964 National Security Act banned all political organizations beyond those of the governing Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP); the government began arresting prominent political figures outside of

⁷⁴ Kyaw Yin Hlaing suggests that Indian business associations would have aligned more closely with the state, but in effect, the choice was not their own. Burmese politicians were not interested in affiliating themselves with such associations (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 152).

the BSPP; and the government literally dynamited the student union building at Yangon University, where student leaders had begun organizing to oppose the BSPP. Like the AFPFL, meanwhile, the BSPP created its own associations: the Workers *Asiayone*, the Peasants *Asiayone*, the *Lanzin* Youth Organization, the War Veteran Organization, and more. No laws forbade business associations, but private enterprise had been outlawed almost in total, rendering most business associations functionally irrelevant. Even so, many business associations survived;⁷⁵ so too did one politically outspoken *sangha* organization, the *Yahanpyo Apwe* (the All Burma Young Monks Association). Informal, underground organizations associated with student, youth, and literary milieus also took shape in this period.⁷⁶ To the extent that some forms of independent association survived, they did so by adopting apolitical postures or by working informally (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 160), setting precedents still legible in the present. During the 1970s and 80s, however, the dominant trend was a shift towards proscribing associational life outside the state.

In the period following the collapse of the socialist government in 1988, a reconstituted military government—first known as SLORC (the State Law and Order Restoration Council, 1988-1997), then as the SPDC (the State Peace and Development Council, 1997-2010)—initially moved to restrict independent associational life, beginning with a harsh crackdown on individuals and organizations associated with the 1988 uprising that brought down the preceding government. A wave of arrests targeted critics of the government, including student leaders, and a decree outlawed assemblies of more than six people. The National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party led by Aung San Suu Kyi that became central to opposition politics after 1988, faced

⁷⁵ These include the Union of Burma Chamber of Commerce and Industry, most prominently, as well as the Mandalay Traders, Brokers, and Industrialist Association, and several hundred market associations (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 158).

⁷⁶ Kyaw Yin Hlaing cites an interview with a former member of one such association, who estimates that no fewer than forty such student and writer organizations came into being in the 1980s in different parts of the country (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 160). These organizations played significant roles in the 1988 student uprising that ultimately ended the socialist government.

strict repression; the government prohibited it from operating for much of the ensuing two decades. Hundreds of student activists fled to Myanmar's border areas. Many of them were associated with the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), one of the main student organizations involved in the 1988 uprising. Some students formed armed alliances with rebel groups in highland border areas, while others founded exiled pro-democracy organizations in Thailand and beyond. Elsewhere in the borderlands, *taingyintha* ("national races," in government usage, or more colloquially, ethnic groups) began formalizing organizations on cultural, religious, and in some cases humanitarian grounds due to armed conflict, including for example the Kachin Consultative Assembly and the Karen Development Committee. Like the parliamentary and socialist governments before them, the SLORC/SPDC created a range of their own organizations, too, such as the Maternal and Child Care Association, as well as the Union Solidarity and Development Association, an important mass organization discussed in Chapter 2. In line with market reforms in the 1990s, the government also allowed certain business associations to emerge, such as the Rice Millers and Merchants' Association and the Myanmar Federation of Fisheries (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 161–2).

While the early 1990s were characterized by narrow opportunities for independent, autonomous associational life, the government expanded and tolerated a broader space for associations beginning in the mid-1990s. International and domestic NGOs could now develop and pursue social programming, such as Metta Foundation, founded in 1997, and Alliance Myanmar, an HIV/AIDS organization. Similarly at this time, social welfare organizations emerged to address rising costs of living, especially medical, funeral, and education costs, in a state where social spending had become remarkably low (Griffiths 2020).⁷⁷ Some of these organizations, such

⁷⁷ Without international assistance beginning in the 1990s, and during a difficult shift towards a market economy, the SLORC and SPDC were unable or unwilling to allocate substantial budgetary resources for social spending, especially

as the Byamasa Foundation and the Free Funeral Service Society, became well-known. But smaller organizations typically working at the level of individual towns and villages, often called *parahita* organizations—named for the Buddhist concept of altruism—also became active in these domains, organizing fundraising and events related to tree planting, blood donation, relief from floods or other natural disasters, funerals, health and medical costs for the poor and elderly, and education for poorer children. The *parahita* organizations of this period emerged foremost in response to the economic decline of the 1990s and 2000s, though—as Michael Griffiths (2020, 108, 175) suggests—they also evoke a longer history of rural associational life best exemplified by the *wunthanu* associations of the colonial period.⁷⁸ Sometimes referred to as social work organizations (Walton 2016), *parahita* organizations exist between state administration and organized religion, often merging into one or the other as government offices and officials, or particular monasteries and monks, engage closely with or patronize them. While *parahita* organizations in some ways exemplify a universalizing ethic of compassion—“for the good of the other” is one gloss on the notion of *parahita* (Griffiths 2020)—they also clearly require the performance of specifically Buddhist values and identities. Christian and Muslim participants are rare.

It might come as little surprise, accordingly, that the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, better known by its Burmese acronym Ma Ba Tha—a *sangha* group that became the prime organizational locus of anti-Muslim sentiment in the 2010s—renamed itself the Buddha Dhamma *Parahita* Foundation in 2017 (Aung Kyaw Min 2017, cited in Griffiths 2020). Widely vilified as part of an upsurge in “Buddhist nationalism” in Myanmar’s reform period, Ma

in comparison to military expenditures. By 2009, for example, health spending accounted for 0.2% of GDP, the lowest in the world (Myanmar Health and Development Consortium n.d.). Even in the mid-2010s, following increased budgetary allocation for social spending, such spending accounted for 0.3% of total government spending (Griffiths 2020, 145).

⁷⁸ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of economic conditions in the 1990s and 2000s.

Ba Tha serves as a reminder of the fraught relation between religion and nationalist politics in Myanmar. As Walton makes clear, however, the nature of Buddhist nationalism is historically contingent—far from uniform (Walton 2017). For instance, whereas Ma Ba Tha deploys exclusionary Buddhist rhetoric largely in support of the Myanmar state against putative Muslim outsiders, the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007 saw quite a different phenomenon, with monks leading much broader demonstrations calling for an end to military rule. The 2007 protests defied attempts by the SLORC and SPDC to repress anti-government politics within the *sangha*.⁷⁹

As Myanmar relaxed restrictions on associational life from the mid-1990s onwards, a resurgence of interest in civil society was sweeping across much of the world, from the post-Soviet bloc across Asia and Africa.⁸⁰ In many places, civil society—at once naturally present, yet in need of cultivation—became a privileged domain that captured donor funding, technical expertise, and manifold attempts to reformat relations between state, market, and indeed, civil society (Li 2007, 236). In Myanmar, a shifting landscape of international and domestic NGOs, *parahita* organizations, and to an extent, *sangha* activity broke with the harshest restrictions of the past. But under an openly authoritarian government, these forms of associational life did not receive the same attention that civil society did in other countries. In Myanmar’s borderlands and diaspora, the situation was different. The student activists who had fled to the border areas and for some, eventually abroad, after the crackdown that followed the 1988 uprising, as well as the *taingyintha*

⁷⁹ Writing before the 2007 protests, Kyaw Yin Hlaing describes how the military government, beginning after 1988, “tried to deal with activist monks very severely by arresting many monks after they seized control of the country. Those that continued to organize anti-government protests were also arrested and either sent to labor camps or were shot.” Ultimately, he writes, “due to the high cost of participating in anti-government activities, most Buddhist monks stopped participating in open anti-government protests since the late 1990s. However, several Buddhist monasteries continued to provide shelter to political activists and remained critical of the government” (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 165–6). The subsequent 2007 protests demonstrated the enduring potential of anti-government politics within the *sangha*.

⁸⁰ See for example Chatterjee (1990), Taylor (1990), Comaroff and Comaroff (1999), and Li (2007), as well as grey literature contributions such as Edwards and Hulme (1996), Lewis and Wallace (2000), and Hulme and Edwards (2013).

organizations that took shape in the 1990s—these activists and organizations began to frame their work variously in terms of civil society and pro-democracy activities.⁸¹ Education programs in Thailand—especially in Chiang Mai, but also in Mae Sot and Bangkok—hosted trainings for young people, student leaders, and social movement activists from Myanmar, emphasizing human rights, democracy, and rule of law, as well as principles and ideas related to local governance, natural resource management, and civil society.⁸² Over time, financial and institutional support tended to come, on one hand, from US government funding tied to post-9/11 Bush Doctrine democratization initiatives, or on the other hand, from other funding streams associated with 1990s-era commitments to Eastern European-style democratization movements (see Prasse-Freeman 2012, Aung 2018b).⁸³ In other words, the persistence of authoritarian rule in Myanmar in the 1990s and 2000s meant that civil society as an explicit domain of activities and ideas flourished not in lowland, central Myanmar, but rather in, along, and beyond its border areas. No

⁸¹ This organizational landscape is truly vast. Prominent ethnic civil society groups working in the borderlands and in neighboring countries in this period include women’s organizations such as the Mon Women’s Organization (MWO), the Karen Women’s Organization (KWO), the Shan Women’s Action Network (SWAN), and the Kachin Women’s Association of Thailand (KWAT); health organizations such as the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) and the Shan Health Committee (SHC); youth organizations such as the Mon Youth Organization (MYO) and the Karen Youth Organization (KYO); and organizations geared towards humanitarian activity (e.g. the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, the CIDKP), environmental issues (e.g. the Karen Environmental Social Action Network, or KESAN), and human rights documentation (e.g. the Karen Human Rights Group, or KHRG). Some of these organizations are officially affiliated with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), such as the New Mon State Party (NMSP), the Karen National Union (KNU), and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). KYO and KDHW, for instance, are closely affiliated with the KNU. Others remain independent, such as KHRG. Some of this period’s more prominent overseas pro-democracy organizations, on the other hand, would include the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), the Burma Lawyers Council (BLC), the Asia-Pacific People’s Partnership on Burma (APPPB, now Progressive Voice), and the Human Rights Documentation Unit (HRDU, officially affiliated with the NCGUB). The NLD also opened party offices in border areas and in Thailand under the heading of the NLD-LA (the NLD-Liberated Areas). The ABSDF maintained offices in border areas and in Thailand, too.

⁸² Some of these training programs include the Community Development and Civic Empowerment (CDCE) program at Chiang Mai University, two schools in Chiang Mai operated by Earthrights International (ERI) focusing on environmental and human rights issues, and a legal training program for youth leaders run by the BLC in Mae Sot, where I first volunteered in 2006.

⁸³ The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the Open Society Foundation (OSF, formerly the Open Society Institute) exemplify these two related streams of funding, respectively. Both tend to understand civil society in conventionally liberal terms as a fundamentally democratizing force vis-à-vis authoritarian states.

doubt, a set of core liberal values coursed through these loci of associational life in the borderlands: above all, human rights, democracy, and rule of law, embedded in the work of civil society organizations that, by this point, were now referring to themselves as such. But these organizations, it is worth underlining, do not proclaim a disciplined, categorical commitment to classical liberalism. Better understood within Povinelli's (2002) conception of liberal diasporas, these organizations translated and mediated a mobile liberal doctrine through this broad associational landscape. In institutional and discursive terms, but in subjective terms, too—as we will shortly see with DDA—their embrace of liberal values is not a question of doctrinal discipline. At issue, rather, is a working out of political projects in often open-ended, experimental ways, ways that make for contingent and adaptive political practices and ideas within an otherwise explicit appeal to circulating liberal values.

By the late 2000s then, just before the reform period that began in 2010, certain conditions were in place to which observers would later attribute a post-2010 burgeoning of civil society: a state unable, financially, or uninterested, politically, in building any extensive welfarist governmentality; a resulting emergence of independent social welfare organizations, most at a small scale in towns and villages; and in and beyond the borderlands, a wide range of organizations and institutions already understanding themselves in terms of liberal values and civil society. These conditions notwithstanding, two events towards the end of the SLORC/SPDC period also proved critical for associational life: Cyclone Nargis in 2008 and Cyclone Giri in 2010. While laws regarding association remained some of the most restrictive worldwide, government authorities permitted widespread relief efforts led by independent, small-scale organizations. After the devastation of Nargis in particular, thousands of new groups formed to provide aid and assistance to people affected. One account even calls this moment an “associational revolution.” Creating

new associational possibilities—not only in the borderlands now, but in lowland, central Myanmar as well—this shift included political projects in Thilawa, Letpadaung, and Dawei as well:

(I)t can be said that following Cyclone Nargis the Delta region of Myanmar in some ways experienced an associational revolution, with the formation of thousands of new village groups disrupting decades-old restrictions on freedom of association. Yet this kind of disruption of norms may not be unique to the Delta. Other recent natural disasters—notably the 2010 Mandalay floods and Cyclone Giri in 2010 in Rakhine State—also sparked growth in civil society connections. Furthermore, the eruption of concerns over other issues in other places, such as the plans for special economic zones in Dawei and Thilawa, or mining rights in Letpadaung, are forcing a renegotiation of norms of freedom of association. (Wells and Kyaw Thu Aung 2014, 79)⁸⁴

With these changing associational possibilities, organizations formed in the late 2000s or early 2010s encountered shifting circumstances for associational life. The most restrictive days of the early SLORC/SPDC period were well past.

DDA is one such organization. The main founders, including Kyaw Htet, began working together in the late 2000s to establish ALC, a youth center providing art, language, and computer classes in Dawei—hence the acronym—that preceded the founding of DDA (and still exists separately from DDA). Most of DDA’s main staff today worked for ALC in those years. They describe ALC as akin to *parahita* activity, or as one staff person clarified the term to me, “social work.” With these roots in *parahita* activity, DDA also ties together Myanmar’s emergent NGO sector in the 1990s and the later associational landscape of Myanmar’s borderlands and diaspora. In the form of small grants, DDA’s earliest funding came from Paung Ku, the “civil society strengthening” initiative, formed in the late 2000s, whose founders first worked together at Alliance Myanmar. One of DDA’s founders went on to become a key staff member at Paung Ku in the early and mid-2010s. Kyaw Htet, on the other hand, studied at a civil society training program hosted at Chiang Mai University in 2010. Another DDA founder took part in a human

⁸⁴ See also Paung Ku (2010, 2013) and Aung (2013) for discussions of civil society in relation to Cyclones Nargis, Giri, and the political context of the late 2000s and early 2010s.

rights training program hosted by EarthRights International (ERI) at the same time in Chiang Mai. (It was in Chiang Mai at that time that I first met them both.) Several other DDA staff went to New Zealand as part of a recurring annual training program for Myanmar youth focused on local governance. Yet *parahita* activity, notably, is not a relic of DDA's past, a prior interest that has passed away. On the contrary, *parahita* activity remains important to DDA staff today. While living in Dawei, I witnessed and took part in donation drives for flood relief, fundraising for monastic schools, and classes at the ALC center. These were all considered *parahita* activity even if, to be sure, such activities did not occur under DDA's formal auspices, but rather were pursued in staff members' free time.

DDA thus straddles the *parahita* milieu tracing to the 1990s and Myanmar's later liberal diaspora, achieving something of a disjunctive synthesis between two contrasting political imaginaries. DDA cannot be understood without one or the other, yet the two cannot be collapsed nor absolutely distinguished—a familiar formulation by now.

3.4 Trajectories remapped

Well after their explicit formation in the last decades of colonial rule, the *thakin* and *wunthanu* trajectories continued to shape Myanmar associational life, if not always explicitly, if not always evenly. After the military's seizure of power in 1962, successive military dictatorships sought to close down most forms of free, autonomous associational life. The social worlds of rural politics briefly featured prominently in studies of Myanmar's "political culture" and postcolonial politics (Pye 1962, Nash 1965, Badgley 1970) before the onset of research restrictions that prevented extended work in rural areas. More historically oriented, subsequent scholarship on rural politics tended towards questions of peasant resistance in earlier periods (Adas 1974, 1979, Scott

1976, Lieberman 2003b, Brown 2005), with Ardeth Thawngmung's (2004) survey-based study of political legitimacy in rural areas nearly alone in its field-based engagement with rural politics in more recent decades. If the dual figures of the *thakin* and the *wunthanu* provide the dynamism of associational life in the colonial period, then it is, in effect, the *thakin* trajectory—the concern for a universalist politics of nation—that dominates the construction, even periodization, of political life in the postcolonial period, from the parliamentary socialism of (Thakin) U Nu to the successive military dictatorships that followed. The *wunthanu* trajectory, for its part, essentially disappears from the record until the present, now that new opportunities exist for research on rural politics.

These trajectories of associational life do not necessarily map cleanly onto those elsewhere in the postcolonial world. However limited a section of postcolonial society civil society might have represented in India, for instance (Chatterjee 1990, 1998a), here that limit shifts towards an extreme. Such was the repression of independent associational life after 1962, in particular, that Steinberg goes so far as to write, “Civil society died under the BSPP; perhaps, more accurately, it was murdered” (Steinberg 1997, 6).⁸⁵ As discussed, colonial commerce had also significantly excluded Burmese merchants, traders, and entrepreneurs, shrinking the potential social base for any postcolonial Burmese bourgeois elite. Many Indian and Chinese businesses, meanwhile, were all but destroyed with the BSPP's highly restrictive economic policy (Brown 2013). Moreover, if it was through postcolonial governmentality that political society, not civil society, came to mediate state-society relations on the basis of population in India and other postcolonial nations (Chatterjee 2004b), then here too Myanmar's genealogy diverges significantly. While ostensibly discrete population groups did displace abstract universalism as the latticework of postcolonial

⁸⁵ Kyaw Yin Hlaing (2007) and McCarthy (2012) provide more moderate accounts of this period, to be sure.

citizenship—namely through the taxonomy of 135 *taingyintha* (“national races,” again, or ethnic groups) who would be eligible for citizenship, excluding Rohingya people among others (Cheesman 2017)—little in the way of welfarist governmentality characterized the dictatorships of the socialist period and the SLORC/SPDC period. Ironically, it is precisely the absence of governmental social provisioning that leads to the formation of small-scale, independent *parahita* social welfare organizations through the 1990s and 2000s.

In such circumstances, it might be tempting to envision, outside of or beyond a threadbare state apparatus, a vast and autonomous domain of free associational life, one that might even approximate bourgeois secular citizenship in the mode of civil society. This would be a mistake. First, while the Myanmar state remained less governmental than states elsewhere in the postcolonial world, it increased its social provisioning substantially after 2010. In the 2010s, it was less threadbare than it used to be, particularly in the areas of health and education—precisely where *parahita* organizations tend to concentrate their work.⁸⁶ Second, *parahita* organizations do often shade into state administration, not only by carrying out social welfare activities but in the participation or patronage, very often, of state officials themselves (Griffiths 2020). Third, the political imagination of bourgeois secular citizenship is hardly all-abiding. Around the Dawei SEZ, for instance, people make claims on government in ways that exceed that imaginary. As we will see, even DDA often makes claims based on “Dawei people” and “Dawei natives,” a discrete population more than a universalist people. Even if the story of governmentality differs, here, an

⁸⁶ Reporting on the approval of the Union Budget Law for 2018-19 noted that education and health spending would amount to roughly 9% and 4.5% of the overall budget, respectively, up from only 1% allocation on health in 2011-2012. This level of expenditure brought health and education spending up to the same amount as defense spending. Still, health and education expenditures remained lower than those of regional neighbors, such as Thailand and Vietnam (Thit Nay Moe 2018).

overarching political logic is at work that, as with elsewhere in the postcolonial world, traces the limits of civil society as such.

In order to steer these questions back directly towards a postcolonial politics of infrastructure, the next chapters turn to the political projects of the Dawei area. I follow the grain of DDA's secular-universal political trajectory, describing their present political activities and ideas. I also show how that trajectory—far from a bounded political logic, stable and closed unto itself—frays at its edges, blurring into a more situational-differential logic. This varied, reticulated political landscape, I suggest, recalls and resurfaces the heteronomous character of postcolonial infrapolitics. This heteronomy corresponds to the material conditions of postcolonial capitalism, not any essential alterity of the postcolonial world.

Chapter 4

Infrapolitics (I): a secular-universal trajectory

Less than a month before DDA released the open letter criticizing the coal-fired powerplant, a press conference took place in Yangon. It was December 15th, 2011. Some hundred or so people, myself included, packed into an event hall upstairs at a large restaurant, milling about a photo exhibition featuring information about the Dawei SEZ. About a year prior, the Myanma Port Authority had signed an agreement with Italian-Thai Development (ITD) to be the lead developer of the SEZ. Although the 2008 MoU had already established the outlines of the project, the agreement with ITD sparked heightened media coverage, effectively announcing the project publicly for the first time. Interest grew, particularly given the vast scope and scale of the project. As the press conference showed, people in Dawei were taking notice as well.

We took our seats in the event hall as Kyaw Htet approached the podium, flanked by villagers, two monks, and a Christian pastor. I had met Kyaw Htet in Chiang Mai; I knew that with friends from Dawei, he had been planning to found an organization to oppose the Dawei SEZ project. I could see that this plan was coming to fruition.

From the podium, Kyaw Htet explained that the main purpose of the event was to announce the founding of the Dawei Development Association, or DDA. It would be a network, he said, based in Dawei town, that includes residents—farmers and fishers, workers and traders, community leaders of various kinds, religious leaders, other villagers—from all three of the SEZ's principle project areas: Amya, the main waterfront SEZ area; Kyaukpa, the highland village to be displaced if the dam-building project component proceeds; and the upland Karen villages along the roadlink. Kyaw Htet, and subsequently the other speakers, then began laying out core concerns

about the SEZ: concerns over displacement, with estimates indicating that over 20,000 villagers would be relocated, mainly smallholder farmers growing betel nut, cashews, rubber, and seasonal fruit; over financial compensation, with worries that pay-outs would not be enough to address the livelihood challenges farmers would face after losing their land; over labor, given frustration that Thai and Myanmar workers at the project sites were receiving different wages for the same work; and over environmental degradation, with worries about what petrochemical industries, as well as the coal-fired powerplant, would mean for the natural environment in the area. One of the monks said he urges villagers not to accept relocation plans. A farmer stressed he did not want to move, as the compensation would be too low to replace the income from his orchards. Despite worrying messages from the podium, the energy in the room was upbeat, even optimistic. The event marked a kind of opening salvo, a sign that this massive project and the forces behind it would have to grapple with a strong, organized response from people in the area.

This chapter examines the work of DDA in Dawei town and surrounding villages. I begin by introducing and summarizing the activities of DDA over time since its founding in 2011. Situating DDA relative to other political activities around Dawei in these years, I show how neither civil nor political society entirely captures the logic and imagination of DDA's work. Placing DDA's political activities more within than beyond the state, capital, and a shared normative discourse of development, I also demonstrate DDA's departure from erstwhile forms of more rebellious agrarian politics. I then shift to DDA's more recent activities. I present the meeting, the letter, and the workshop as three modest political technologies through which DDA enacts its political project, a project that demonstrates a secular-universal political trajectory. I call it secular to signal its worldly, temporal orientation: towards project planning, policy processes, and public disputes. And I call it universal to flag its normatively equalizing emphasis on transparency,

accountability, and local participation. As with Ernesto Laclau's (2005) account of popular politics, DDA's political project begins in the form of a relatively unified struggle including multiple groups against an antagonist understood as singular: the military-backed government of the 2010-2015 period. This struggle splinters over time, however, even while DDA's secular-universal trajectory continues. DDA's equalizing principles are integral to its infrapolitics, which contrasts with the secular-differential trajectory I turn to subsequently.

Within Myanmar's wider field of organizations laying claim to liberal values, DDA's secular-universal trajectory is recognizable enough. But it is also not singular, self-guided, or autonomous unto itself. It frays at its edges, blurring into other political logics; it does not accord with the notion, common to liberal political theory, of civil society emerging to diffuse the power of once-authoritarian states. This is a landscape without that telos. It is also a landscape unbound by earlier teleologies of transition: from farm to factory, peasant to proletariat, precapital to capital. Chapter 2 elaborated an alternative thought of primitive accumulation qua differential accumulation that, *pace* dominant scholarship in Southeast Asian agrarian studies, accounts for the possibility of political intervention by turning away from the determinism of economic teleologies, especially David Harvey's (2003). This chapter begins to tell the story of such political intervention, mediated by the conditions of postcolonial capitalism. It becomes possible to show how the heterogeneous political projects I encounter in Dawei, starting with DDA, are best understood as bearing a dual relation to postcolonial capitalism. On one hand, the very heterogeneity of these projects corresponds to and reflects postcolonial capitalism's dissonance and variability, contradictions that—as the next chapter argues more directly—arise from conditions of differential accumulation. On the other hand, these political projects have also proved powerful enough to change how accumulation in Dawei occurs. The whole structure of the SEZ

project—spatially, financially, politically—now bears the marks of extended political struggle. In this sense, infrapolitics in Dawei is not a superstructural scaffold erected upon a determinate economic base. Instead, DDA and others have helped set the course of political and economic transformation in Dawei.⁸⁷ It follows, I suggest, that postcolonial difference, including in contemporary postcolonial politics, reflects not an essential, pregiven alterity, but rather is created and reproduced in and through material processes,⁸⁸ including primitive accumulation and the struggles it calls forth.

4.1 Origin stories: initial upheavals and a project suspended

In late 2017, DDA hosted a visit by Walden Bello, a prominent Filipino activist and public intellectual who wanted to learn more about the SEZ project. As we sat over dinner one night, Kyaw Htet recounted for Bello how DDA began and changed over time. He emphasized that until about 2014, DDA operated mainly as a loose network. From an informal office on the first floor of an old home, Kyaw Htet and a few friends started reaching out to people in Amya, Kyaukpa, and along the roadlink in 2010. They drove out to those areas to identify and meet village leaders, head monks (Sayadaws), and pastors, exchanging information about the SEZ and what it might mean. For a lot of people, Kyaw Htet revealed, the first time they learned about the SEZ was when someone came offering them money for their land—whether explicitly or not for the SEZ, they found out the reasoning soon enough. In some cases, villagers even found bulldozers clearing their land before they received any information about the SEZ. Eventually, the formal founding of DDA came at the press conference in Yangon.

⁸⁷ Here I am again indebted to post-workerist insights drawn from advanced capitalist settings and beyond (Hardt and Negri 2009, Barchiesi 2011, Campbell 2018a).

⁸⁸ A line of thought that builds on Goswami (2004).

Bello asked how big DDA is. Kyaw Htet started laughing. He talked about the number of people working at DDA—then thirteen—but also said it’s hard sometimes to say who is and is not part of DDA. Early on, he explained, they always said that “those who want development for the Dawei region are DDA. Sometimes even the USDP government, the previous regime, some ministers said—oh, I am also DDA!” With DDA an informal network, all kinds of people across the political and economic spectrum described themselves as “members” of DDA. Around 2014 though, Kyaw Htet described DDA as becoming more like an “individual organization,” with programs run out of an established office. Former DDA “members” in Amya, Kyaukpa, and the roadlink area likewise now had the capability and resources to establish more formal and independent networks and organizations, even if, as Kyaw Htet emphasized to Bello, they continued to work together. Even today, Kyaw Htet made clear, “all of our activities are collaborations with different organizations—local organizations and other partner organizations. We never do activities alone. So now DDA is more like an individual organization, but we all still have very close connections here.”

The formation of DDA—narrated, here, as a shift from DDA being itself a loose network to one organization among others working collaboratively—punctuated the early years of the SEZ before its suspension in 2013. But the press conference itself, in the short term, set in motion a cycle of events that concluded with the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant only weeks later. Kyaw Htet lingered on these events during our dinner with Bello. They constituted a powerful origin story for DDA, a story that spoke to the speed and strength of its activities in its early years.

Two weeks after the press conference, in late December 2011, Kyaw Htet and others from DDA helped organize a trip, including journalists from Dawei, to visit Map Ta Phut. Located on Thailand’s eastern seaboard, Map Ta Phut is the largest industrial estate in mainland Southeast

Asia—the fifth largest in the world, according to one estimate—and an explicit model for the Dawei SEZ, which ITD plans to be fully ten times the size of Map Ta Phut (Song 2013). Kyaw Htet had already visited Map Ta Phut once while studying at Chiang Mai University. He knew that environmental activists and social movements, such as the Eastern People’s Network (EPN), led by residents living in the vicinity of Map Ta Phut, had criticized the estate for decades over environmental concerns, land politics, and labor standards—but especially environmental concerns. Since the 1980s, EPN had documented concentrated events like explosions, leakages, and “foul smell incidents,” as well as longer-term issues like water contamination, shore erosion, and significant local spikes in respiratory diseases and cancer incidence (see Nuntavorakarn 2011). At Map Ta Phut, Kyaw Htet and the others from Dawei met researchers, activists, people from EPN, journalists, and other local residents. The trip convinced DDA to pursue messaging and campaigning around “dirty industry,” particularly through a “No Coal in Dawei” slogan opposing the powerplant in Dawei.

In the days following their return from Map Ta Phut, Kyaw Htet explained to Bello, events moved quickly. DDA began circulating stickers, flyers, and t-shirts bearing the green-colored *No Coal* slogan. Kyaw Htet spoke of a sense of commonality, of shared purpose, in describing broad criticism of the powerplant at that point. Photocopy shops freely copied and distributed *No Coal* leaflets; betel nut shopkeepers eagerly handed out stickers to customers. Then on Independence Day, January 4, 2012, DDA organized a beach cleaning event at Maungmagan Beach, a local beach that, downshore from the SEZ project area, is always crowded on public holidays. Some seventy people—some closely affiliated with DDA, others their friends and volunteers—wore *No Coal* t-shirts while moving up and down the beach in groups, picking up trash and handing out flyers. The next day, eighteen Thai organizations held a press conference in Bangkok raising questions

about the Thai government's support for the SEZ. Two days later, the delegation featuring President Thein Sein and Prime Minister Yingluck met on site at the Dawei SEZ, where DDA was able to hand over the open letter demanding the powerplant's cancellation. The same day, they released the letter to journalists and friends in the media, who promptly amplified its content publicly. "We are concerned we will lose our well-established livelihoods and have to start new lives should thousands of us be relocated," reads the letter, signed by hundreds of Dawei-area residents (Bangkok Post 2012, Boehler 2012). Two days later—January 9, now, only 25 days after the press conference where DDA announced their founding—U Khin Maung Soe, Myanmar's Minister of Electric Power, stated in a press release that, due to potential environmental impacts, he was cancelling the coal-fired powerplant. Government officials claimed they made their decision after "listening to the people's voice" (Eh Na 2012).

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These early events—the founding of DDA, the cancellation of the powerplant—require some attention, since for many, myself included, they form the backdrop against which more recent political activities in Dawei are measured. I was living in Yangon at the time, and like many researchers and activists in Yangon, I closely followed the news about the powerplant, the campaign against it, and its cancellation, all of which found extensive coverage in Burmese- and English-language media in Myanmar and abroad. Much of this coverage celebrated the cancellation of the powerplant as the second of two victories since the post-2010 restoration of formally civilian rule in Myanmar. The first, in this narrative, was the suspension of the Myitsone dam in Myanmar's north three months prior, also following concentrated mobilization by activist groups and social movements. The *BBC*, the *Financial Times*, and *Reuters*, for instance, as well as Myanmar-focused media such as the *Irrawaddy*, all contextualized coverage of the Dawei

powerplant cancellation by noting it came after similar campaigning against the Myitsone dam (Aung Hla Tun and Jittapong 2012, BBC 2012, Boehler 2012, Robinson 2012). This coverage assimilated events in Dawei into a story of Myanmar's burgeoning civil society finding its voice in a broader transition to democracy. The *Financial Times* quoted an individual from an NGO: "A Yangon-based representative from an environmental non-government organization described the project cancellation as 'a massive victory for civil society campaigners' after their successful campaign against the Chinese-funded Myitsone dam in Myanmar's north-east" (Robinson 2012). The two decisions, the article adds, "highlight a growing push by Myanmar's nominally civilian government to implement reforms and end the country's long international isolation."

These back-to-back events—the Myitsone dam in the north, the Dawei powerplant in the south—caused a surge of excitement in Yangon's teashops, offices, and activist circles. Many of us were ready to understand these events in terms of an emergent civil society. Ironically, however, soon afterwards I began conducting research in Dawei to support DDA, and it was through this research that I began to have doubts about this narrative. Over several visits to Dawei in 2012 and 2013, I wrote a series of case studies of events and activities in Dawei for a Yangon-based organization called Paung Ku (Aung 2013). Paung Ku, founded and led by a group of Myanmar activists, supported DDA and similar organizations in Myanmar through trainings, workshops, media support, and small-scale grants, describing itself as a "civil society strengthening initiative." Paung Ku overtly understood itself as helping to build a nascent civil society within Myanmar's transition to democracy (Garner *et al.* 2013, The Irrawaddy 2016). Their position was consistent with scholarship on post-authoritarian transitions and democratization, which, in Myanmar as elsewhere, has long emphasized civil society as an important factor in producing and maintaining democratic transition (Steinberg 1997, 2016, International Crisis Group 2001, South 2004, James

2005, Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 2012, McCarthy 2012, Morgan 2015, Thin Thin Aye 2015, Bunte 2016, 2018, Ganesan 2017). In some cases, scholarship on democratic transition has provoked substantial criticism for its hubristic, triumphal teleologies, particularly with regard to the years following the fall of the Soviet Union (Burawoy and Verdery 1999, Scott 1999, Collier 2011). In Myanmar, however, even accounts that depart from this liberal telos tend towards analyzing these shifts in terms of large-scale political economic transformations (Jones 2014a, 2014b, Aung and Campbell 2016, Ford *et al.* 2016). Hence the re-scaled attention here to grounded political struggles that might unsettle these conventional narratives.

Between 2011 and 2013, the powerplant events drew the most attention in Dawei, but much else was happening besides. As I detailed in my work for Paung Ku, a range of other kinds of actions and activities took place, too—as I have already hinted at. In the highland area where ITD planned to build a dam—to create a water supply for the main lowland SEZ area—villagers in the main village that would be displaced, known as Kyaukpa, rallied around the Sayadaw at their monastery, who refused to countenance ITD’s multiple attempts to persuade them all to accept relocation and compensation plans. In Theinkun, another upland area, where the roadlink corridor cuts through KNU territory, Karen farmers founded a network of village committees to respond to road-building activities, building on prior associations formed around social welfare and religious activities. They arranged for KNU soldiers to be present during consultations with ITD, which strengthened them, they said, in their compensation negotiations over land and crops seized or destroyed for road construction. After becoming frustrated with delayed compensation payments, Karen villagers twice blockaded the roadlink for several days each time, at one point seizing ITD machinery and threatening to reoccupy road construction areas. In the same period, lowland villagers living in Amya, the main SEZ area, formed their own village committees, which they

used to obstruct the relocation process: refusing relocation terms, rejecting compensation rates, and criticizing the housing in the resettlement area. A group of scholars called the Dawei Research Association (DRA), led by a lecturer at Dawei University, also worked with DDA, Paung Ku, the Ministry of Culture, and Elizabeth Moore, the archaeologist discussed in Chapter 1, to achieve formal protection for the site of Thagara, the ancient city located within the parameters of the main SEZ project area. The newly protected status of Thagara forced project proponents to substantially remap the project area. An important project-related access road would now have to move through a different area.

Against this backdrop, the government suspended the SEZ project in November 2013—a decision that came as a surprise to many. Aye Myint, then Myanmar’s Minister of Labour, cited ITD’s financial shortcomings: a failure to attract sufficient investment. Earlier that month, Set Aung, a key official in Myanmar’s Central Bank, had shocked ITD by announcing the cancellation of their 60-year Dawei SEZ concession, which traced to the 2010 Framework Agreement between ITD and the Myanma Port Authority (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2013, Wiriyapong and Praiwan 2013). Yet the governments of Myanmar and Thailand had already established, in June 2013, a jointly owned (50-50) Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) that would give the two governments the formal responsibility of overseeing the SEZ project. In 2012, the cancellation of the powerplant and the withdrawal of Max Myanmar—ITD’s Myanmar partner, over difficulties related to land acquisition and resettlement—had already raised concerns over the viability of ITD’s leadership on the project. Arguably, the suspension of the SEZ only formalized declining government faith in ITD. The Myanmar and Thai governments moved to take greater control over the project. Following Aye Myint’s announcement, the two governments shifted towards using the SPV as a vehicle to encourage the investment the project needed to resume. Then in December 2015, four

years to the day after the press conference that founded DDA, the Japanese government agreed to lend technical support to the project in the form of project planning and feasibility studies. The agreement raised hopes that more substantial Japanese investment would follow (JBIC 2015).

Although financial challenges are most often cited as the reason for the SEZ's suspension, DDA and others in Dawei have claimed the investment environment should not be understood entirely separately from the conditions they helped create in the Dawei area. Kyaw Htet likes to stress that several factors could have created a chilling effect on investment. These include their targeting of critical infrastructures between 2011-2013, especially the powerplant; the land disputes that led Max Myanmar to withdraw; the blockades and other actions in the highlands; and even DRA's work to protect Thagara, a relatively small site that nonetheless required a significant remapping of the project overall (Aung 2013, DDA 2014). In effect, this counter-claim holds that the restructuring of the project after 2013 is best grasped not as an indifferent process of technical modification, abstracted from political contention, but rather within that field of contention. The landscape that DDA confronts today—spatially, financially, and politically, with greater government involvement—becomes legible as an outgrowth of confrontation.

These early struggles around the SEZ took place against the backdrop of the processes described in Chapter 2 in southern Myanmar: the formation of politico-business complexes that, through conflict, ceasefire, and eventually political reform dynamics, greatly extended the reach of state and capital across Tanintharyi Region, including the Dawei area. Beginning in the 1990s and intensifying more recently, domestic and transnational capital flowed into multiple gas pipelines, timber extraction, palm oil plantations, and new and expanded mines. Major businessmen like Htay Myint and Zaw Zaw—both “national entrepreneurs,” or less charitably, crony capitalists—invested in agroindustry and infrastructure, including the Dawei SEZ, while a

pro-business faction within the KNU emerged in the same post-2010 period that saw Dawei-area businessmen like U Ko Ko Maung, U Ngwe, and U Ye Htut Naing rise to local and national prominence. During this period, consecutive Chief Ministers of Tanintharyi Region won plaudits for pursuing greater political and economic openness, pushing for reformed local governance institutions, while trying to balance needs for resource revenue, infrastructure development, and job creation (Su Phyo Win 2016b).

DDA became closely interwoven with political and economic liberalization in the area. The Dawei National Party (DNP), established in advance of the 2015 national election, was founded by several of the same individuals who founded DDA, including Kyaw Htet. DNP's strategy is explicitly to link civil society and electoral politics, seeking to protect gains in the former by winning power in the latter.⁸⁹ Others involved in founding DDA went on to form Dawei Development Public Company Limited (DDPC), this time aiming to bridge civil society and the private sector.⁹⁰ With investments in trade, tourism, private education, and electricity provision, key figures in DDPC emphasize their background in DDA and other social organizations in explaining the company's attention to local development and social responsibility. DDA also works decisively within a normative discourse of development. Their name—Dawei Development Association—is evidence of this, and however banal, one notes as well two Wifi passwords at their office: “@only4developmenT\$” and “@Develop4regioN\$.” In addition, the beach-cleaning action integral to DDA's anti-powerplant campaign foregrounded the slogan “We Love Green Development.” Volunteers carried the slogan on a banner up and down the beach; it eventually made its way into a picture that, years later, is still the lead picture for DDA's Facebook page (in

⁸⁹ Interview conducted with U Aye Min, DNP Chairman, at his home in Dawei on 13 November, 2017 (U Aye Min 2017).

⁹⁰ Interview conducted with Win Htut, DDPC Executive Director, at the office of EduPark—DDPC's private education initiative—on 22 February, 2018 (Aung Zaw Hein 2018).

effect DDA's website). As we will see, moreover, DDA often confronts the question "If not the Dawei SEZ, what kind of development *does* DDA want?" The question is not simply foisted upon DDA by others. It is a question DDA chooses to articulate as an entry point to discussions over alternative development models, through which DDA advocates for sustainable agriculture, small-scale fisheries, and community-based tourism in the Dawei area. This advocacy has taken the form of policy engagement and actual private sector activity—for instance, in helping found a community-based tourism initiative in Kyaukpa. In so doing, it underlines DDA's entanglement with liberalizing political and economic conditions around Dawei.

*

Four observations are worth noting about this early phase of struggles. First, in Kyaukpa, Theinkun, and Amya, the villagers I interviewed in 2013 all understood themselves as part of DDA, folding their activities into the loose project that DDA represented. Second, the activities of DDA, as a loose and somewhat decentralized project, did more than respond to or reflect the material imperatives of accumulation; they proved powerful enough to help shape the course of accumulation itself. The political structure, financial strategy, and spatial organization of the SEZ have taken form, over time, through the push and pull of political struggle.

Third, this moment includes acts of refusal, blockades, and the targeting of critical infrastructures—power, water, and road access—without which the SEZ could not move forward: a genuinely radical range of actions and tactics. At the same time, this moment importantly differs from older conceptions of peasant politics. State and capital do not encounter bounded social worlds, governed by moral economies or otherwise. Rather, these worlds had already become densely entangled with political and economic formations in the Dawei area. Politico-business complexes owing to natural gas investments, timber extraction, agribusiness, and infrastructure

precede this moment by decades, in some cases, while more recent ceasefire dynamics, political reforms, and economic liberalization have helped state and capital reach farther than ever before around Dawei. DDA, for its part, has accommodated these changes by working within electoral politics and a changing private sector—as their linkages to DNP and DDPC attest—while assimilating normative notions of development, mediated through their own discourses of green and alternative development. In the powerplant campaign in particular, DDA articulated a largely conciliatory public discourse, prominently featuring concerns about environmental degradation, the need for “responsible” investment, and the importance of “green and sustainable development that reflects the desires and interests of local communities” (DDA 2014, 79). They also demanded that project proponents “prioritize local desires when implementing the project” and conduct environmental and social impact assessments “in accordance with international standards.” This discourse neither rejects nor refuses governmental activity and capital investment as such. Far from earlier paradigms in peasant politics—spanning avoidance and confrontation (Adas 1981), or evasion and resistance (Scott 1985)—DDA did their utmost to reach out to and form relationships with, even while making demands of, state and capital: government bodies and officials, on one hand, and ITD, on the other. They approached both as grounds of possibility, as in those from DDA who quite literally, in person, approached the government delegation at the ITD visitor center to hand over the letter demanding the powerplant cancellation. Even in Kyaukpa, villagers and the Sayadaw continued to welcome government and ITD representatives at the monastery, despite persistently refusing their relocation plans. In Theinkun and Amya, road blockades and obstruction of evictions, respectively, took shape around demands for more compensation and better resettlement offers—as in frustration with slow compensation payments, in Theinkun, and poor housing in the relocation village, in Amya.

A general politics of visibility underscores this point. From the press conference in Yangon to the beach action at Maungmagan, political activities in this moment include very demonstrative, almost performative, attempts to display and make manifest what DDA repeatedly framed as local interests and desires. In the surrounding highland areas as well, in Kyaukpa and Theinkun, villagers pointedly documented events like ITD visits and the road blockades, sending photographs to DDA and news media. Project consultations and compensation negotiations, whether with ITD, subcontractors, or the SEZ Management Committee, were also handled with great seriousness, with Karen villagers, for instance, ensuring KNU soldiers attended and supported them in meetings to negotiate compensations with ITD. Karen villagers, as well as lowland Amya villagers, treated these meetings as important opportunities to secure material gains. At this stage, villagers often rejected or refused specific terms or rates, but not in fact the project overall or even the prospect of relocation. The tendency at this point is for political activities to address state and capital as opportunities for negotiation and persuasion, for engagement and influence. They do so not in defense of bounded societies and the moral values thereof, but out of stated desires for expanded, if reformed, relations with government and business. This departure from pre-existing peasant political formations—from rebellion and evasion to everyday forms of resistance—apprehends state and capital in terms of possibility and opportunity.

Fourth, despite a prevalence of explicit civil society discourse, including by DDA and other actors in Dawei, certain features of these political projects already suggest the notion of civil society may not adequately capture the range of activities taking place. In liberal political theory, civil society describes free associational life that, while beyond state control, retains the power to substantially shape or influence state policy (Chatterjee 1990, Taylor 1990, Cohen and Arato 1992). In Hegel and Marx, civil society refers to bourgeois society, a connotation Chatterjee retains

when speaking of individuals and organizations that claim the ethical significance and universalizing writ of modern secular citizenship (Chatterjee 2004b, 2011). It is in this sense that the homogeneous construct of nation is the domain proper to civil society (Chatterjee 2004b, 36). In Dawei, however, organizations claiming the ground of civil society represent their activities, importantly and in a primary sense, as addressing Dawei-based issues on behalf of people living around Dawei. An insistent language of locality, replete with references to “Dawei people,” “Dawei natives,” and “local desires,” creates the impression of a deeply situated set of activities, apart from any homogeneous construct of nation (DDA 2014). In addition, there was no major attempt to influence policy in this early moment of mobilization. Activities did not target the policy context of investment in Dawei, which in the 2011 Dawei SEZ Law, created for the Dawei SEZ, explicitly provides for the legality of a coal-burning powerplant. In demanding the cancellation of the powerplant, and in negotiations over relocation and compensation, DDA and villagers in the area sought exceptions to legal frameworks, as well as situational compromises forged through visual and rhetorical displays of power, including appeals to local forms of identity.

It is not insignificant that DDA, among others, represents itself in terms of civil society; their later activities will tend more in that direction. Still, that which percolates under the banner of civil society at this point already much resembles those activities—forming “temporary, contextual, and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations” (Chatterjee 2008, 57)—typically theorized as political society. They brush against the grain of an emergent, coherent, universalizing civil society. Although Chatterjee regards political society as largely distinct from civil society, in Dawei the distinction does not always hold. Instead, there prevails an interpenetration between an explicit civil society discourse—in DDA’s self-representation—and a more exceptional, exclusive repertoire of political society-style politics. These are the frayed

edges between differing political trajectories in the Dawei area. Already evident in DDA's political past, they come more clearly into focus in DDA's political present of the late 2010s.

4.2 A political present: three technologies

On a Monday morning at the peak of the hot season, I awoke as usual in the two-story wooden house I was renting in Dawei along with a friend and colleague, Naing Tun. From my upstairs bedroom that morning, I could hear the noise next door: our neighbor ran a private school that kids attended in the morning before going to the government school—just one of the thousands of for-profit “tuition” education initiatives founded apart from government schools given the poor quality of the latter. I roused myself amid the call-and-response of rote memorization exercises. Before heading off to the teashop, I would have greeted Naing Tun with at least a basic “good morning,” but we barely saw each other at home. An outgoing youth activist from a mining village north of Dawei, Naing Tun maintains a schedule of meetings, workshops, and travel so intense that I learned to use dates—not days of the week, not “tomorrow” or “the day after tomorrow”—whenever I wanted to coordinate timing with him. (A conversation might run: “Hey, Naing Tun, any chance you’re free tomorrow?” “Which day is it?” “Tuesday.” “...” “The ninth.” “Ah, sorry, I’m running a workshop all day!”) Regardless, I often saw him in the DDA office. During the period I lived in Dawei, Naing Tun worked not for DDA, but for a Thai NGO that works closely with DDA, close enough that DDA’s office was effectively his own.

That morning, I didn’t linger at the teashop; I was on my way to join DDA’s regular Monday morning staff meeting. This would be the first staff meeting at their new office, a concrete home freshly built on a dirt road slightly outside the town center. When I first visited Dawei in 2012, DDA had no office. They worked from their homes and a few cafes around town. When

they moved into an office in 2014, it was a large teak house in the town center. Like many buildings in Dawei's center, it had a stateliness about it: a broad, wraparound balcony; intricate, wood-carved roof shingling; and tall windows for air circulation. It was sometimes referred to as one of Dawei's many colonial buildings. It was also in poor repair, with creaking floors (leading to much speculation about ghosts), fickle electrical wiring, and an unenviable plumbing system. It was still DDA's office when I began fieldwork, but I didn't complain when DDA moved.

Here, a discussion of three basic political technologies—the meeting, the letter, and the workshop—will trace the contours of DDA's current political activities and ideas. Indeed, a political project like DDA does not simply exist; these technologies show the work required to bring it into being, as well as shape its trajectory over time. I show how, by the time I conducted fieldwork, infrastructure—the SEZ and its critical components, especially the roadlink, as well as the studies, assessments, and policies on which they depend—had become a site for DDA to pursue liberal values, especially transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making. The pursuit of these values was often messy, however. Approximating the role of organic intellectuals, DDA's construction of a political project involved awkward acts of representation that, simply put, sometimes failed. Building a project that, at face value, represents a secular-universal politics of infrastructure, DDA also turned away from the more radical tactics they once embraced: blockades, demonstrations, obstructing relocation processes. Still, a universalizing logic hardly exhausts DDA's politics of infrastructure, as this chapter's closing sections show.

The meeting

When I arrived at DDA's new office, I took my seat on the floor upstairs with six or seven DDA staff as the meeting began. In this residential neighborhood, we could hear motorbikes and

moto-rickshaws navigating the potholed road outside. From next door, late mornings would bring an aroma that readied us for lunch: the smell of our neighbor frying chicken to be sold in the town's main market. A Muslim butcher would arrive in advance for the less agreeable work. Inside the office, the blinking lights from a small Buddhist shrine sometimes flashed across the wall if rain clouds darkened the sky; there was not a lot of artificial light in the office. When the rains did come, our corrugated tin roof made for deafening downpours. I would have to shout to Khin Thuzar, the finance manager who sat at the desk next to mine, if I wanted to be heard. Upstairs, an open floor plan at the front of the house made space for my desk and several others'; towards the back, there was a space with a plastic folding table for meetings, as well as a small bedroom that Kyaw Htet used as his office; and downstairs, we had a kitchen at the back and another open area at the front. We used that open area, which could fit upwards of thirty people, for larger meetings and workshops. Outside, a gate enclosed our modest compound, including the sheltered area for motorbikes. This neighborhood, part of a rezoning designed to expand the town's urban center, was dotted with unused plots of land and lightly forested areas. From our upper floor, coconut palms and betel nut trees punctured our view of the mountains in the distance, beyond which lay the Andaman coastline and Amya, the main project area for the Dawei SEZ.

That morning, our first in the new office, we sat around a small table on the wooden floor upstairs. Munching on a bright supply of pink wafers, we moved between Dawei language, Burmese, and a smattering of English, discussing mundane topics like the seating plan for this new office, whether to install air conditioning (no) or Wifi (yes, although the connection would often elude me), and reminders about bus tickets and a projector for an upcoming workshop on resource governance in Myeik, a town south of Dawei.⁹¹ Kyaw Htet raised two issues of collaboration with

⁹¹ Recent linguistics research identifies Dawei language, or Tavoyan, as a dialect of Burmese (McCormick 2016). Dawei and Burmese languages are not fully mutually intelligible, but the overlap is significant enough that people

other groups. OneMap is a government-affiliated initiative aiming to address land grabbing concerns in Myanmar's south by consolidating mapping data, especially around large concessions for agribusiness and infrastructure projects, including the Dawei SEZ. Facilitated in part by the Land Core Group (LCG), a Yangon-based organization that grew out of international NGOs' work on land issues, OneMap wanted DDA to host a series of multi-stakeholder dialogues to move the initiative forward. Kyaw Htet and others at DDA were skeptical of OneMap, wondering who would benefit most from centralized mapping data—and what such a tech-driven approach by government and NGOs could really accomplish. It was a solid *no* on OneMap collaboration. The other collaboration was with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Like other major conservation NGOs, WWF had aggressively developed programming recently in Myanmar's south, an area of significant biodiversity. For a time, DDA had managed to sidestep WWF's appeals to cooperate. Recently, though, DDA had decided to work with WWF on an environmental education program, which resulted in students from Dawei University visiting villages in the roadlink area to learn about environmental impacts from roadbuilding. Ko Min, the lead for this project, said the trip went well. He described it as a form of empowerment for villagers when university students come to learn from them. We agreed to talk about more possible study trips, perhaps for Myanmar Members of Parliament (MPs) and Thai universities to raise awareness about project impacts.

Much of our meeting concentrated on DDA's strategy for contesting the SEZ—"strategic areas for next steps," as I jotted in my notebook. The Thai and Myanmar governments had emphasized they wanted to resume the project soon beginning with roadlink construction, so DDA

proficient in Burmese language, such as myself, can follow spoken Dawei language relatively easily, especially after prolonged immersion. Still, when I joined meetings with friends and colleagues at DDA and elsewhere, they often spoke Burmese for my benefit. Burmese being something of a lingua franca around Dawei, given high numbers of Karen and Mon speakers as well, nearly all Dawei speakers are comfortable speaking in Burmese. A handful of DDA staff are also strong English speakers, including Kyaw Htet. I typically spoke with them in English and vice versa.

planned to focus more attention on villages along the roadlink, mainly the Theinkun area, as well as Kyaukpa, the highland village where ITD aimed to build a dam to provide water for the lowland SEZ area. Thus the roadlink area became a key focal point of DDA's SEZ strategy. Like Theinkun, Kyaukpa too is located along the roadlink, albeit in a different section of the route. Theinkun is an overwhelmingly Karen and Christian area; Kyaukpa is overwhelmingly Dawei and Buddhist. Kyaw Htet mentioned that the Kyaukpa Sayadaw, the abbot at the monastery in Kyaukpa, was in Dawei last night. Kyaw Htet reported that the Sayadaw said the Chief Minister of the regional government told investors that she can persuade Kyaukpa's villagers to accept the building of the dam—an idea that provoked much laughter in our meeting. We talked about identifying and targeting key stakeholders for the project, including the new SEZ Management Committee and the Japanese government, namely JICA (the Japan International Cooperation Agency), which had recently conducted a feasibility study of the roadlink project component. The study contained a table of likely social and economic impacts; Ma Khaing and I agreed to translate it into Burmese so that DDA could inform villagers living along the roadlink. Ma Khaing was one of the main junior staff at DDA. She had been active for a number of years prior at the ALC center that preceded the founding of DDA (see Chapter 3).

Technical and economic questions, indelibly political, occupied much of this and many DDA meetings. A discussion of who would benefit most from the SEZ—a topic DDA sometimes glossed as political economy—segued into rumors about revenue sharing negotiations for the regional government, whether the regional government would be able to exert much power in any such negotiations (likely not, according to those of us at the meeting), and the question of political decentralization within the wider national reform process. Shifting to the JICA report and its table of impacts, Kyaw Htet spoke of what he called the “technical part” of the SEZ: “almost nobody

can say,” he worried. We considered whether a working group on technical matters might be needed. What about more activities geared towards network building in general right now? Should we raise funding for this, or do we already have some we could allocate? Situation updates from people in the roadlink area, we thought, could be helpful if construction were to resume. “Let’s talk to May Lin, too,” Kyaw Htet suggested, referring to the director of the Dawei Probono Lawyers Network (DPLN). May Lin had been expressing interest in building up programming in response to the SEZ project. Towards the end of the meeting, I agreed to draft an SEZ strategy based on our meeting and other ongoing discussions within DDA.

The next day, I spent some time sketching out DDA’s SEZ strategy. I also spoke with Zaw Myat and Naing Tun for a couple of hours more before attempting to formalize the strategy as a written draft for edits. Zaw Myat—disarmingly sincere, a pious Buddhist who described himself as a reformer more than an activist, someone who much preferred Dawei’s teashops to its beer stalls—was one of DDA’s more senior staff, hence in his early thirties. Most of DDA’s SEZ-related activities fell under his remit. Naing Tun, my housemate, was not working for DDA, though he was often in the office. The Thai NGO he did work for—Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), an organization founded by Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai writer and intellectual known for promoting socially engaged Buddhism—has collaborated with DDA since 2012 on SEZ activities. With some butcher paper and colored markers, we spread out on the floor to try bringing some structure to DDA’s SEZ strategy, tentatively settling on a division between *advocacy* and *awareness* as a way to group existing and planned activities. Under *advocacy* fell—in DDA’s terms—research and data collection, community mobilization, information sharing, and more specific ideas for campaigns, public statements, news articles, and video documentaries. One item came to read “roundtable policy discussions with academics and stakeholders in Dawei: targeting community

and policymakers, maybe 2x per year, developing common understandings.” This item signals a privileged place for policy in DDA’s SEZ activities now, alongside a deliberative, procedural approach—that of roundtable discussions and cultivating “common understandings.” The *awareness* category remained less defined. Reflecting a position long shared widely within DDA, Zaw Myat and Naing Tun felt that with so much activity directed towards criticizing the SEZ, it was also necessary to promote what they saw as more positive understandings of development—an indication of DDA’s continued operation within a normative discourse of development. “If not the SEZ, then what?” was a question DDA often raised, and *awareness* came to stand as a placeholder for some of those more aspirational discussions. For now, we listed little more under *awareness* than “target audiences: government, community.”

Later that day, I wrote up a Word document summarizing DDA’s Dawei SEZ strategy to date. I hewed closely to our recent discussions, not least in terms of terminology. The main section, advocacy, appeared as follows.

(1) Advocacy

1.1 Monitoring

1.1.1 *Research and data collection*

- EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) process case study
- Fishery impacts of small port development⁹²
- DPLN research on job opportunities
- NHRC process: data collection on past human rights abuses from the DSEZ⁹³

1.1.2 *Mobilization*

- Exposure trip to Map Ta Phut, Thailand
- Forum in Dawei, July 2017
- Links to working with community members (see below)

1.1.3 *Knowledge awareness*

- Legal awareness (DPLN)

⁹² The small port is, fittingly, a small port built on an estuary at the edge of the main waterfront SEZ project area. ITD built the port to facilitate construction of the SEZ, including the actual deep-sea port that would be at the center of the main project area. Fishers living in the fishing village nearest the small port, a village called Ngapidat, had been expressing frustration that the port had made fishing more difficult in that area.

⁹³ In response to pressure from SEM, DDA, and other organizations, the Thai NHRC (National Human Rights Commission) had agreed to investigate ITD’s actions in Dawei, examining whether or to what extent human rights violations had occurred.

- Land acquisition included
- 1.1.4 *Information sharing*
 - Periodic coordination meetings with regional and international partners
- 1.1.5 *Working with community members*
 - In each area: Theinkun, Kyaukpa, Amya

1.2 Advocacy

- 1.2.1 *Campaigns*
 - We Love Dawei—event upcoming in Dawei in December⁹⁴
- 1.2.2 *Press conferences and statements about hot issues*
- 1.2.3 *Series of articles related to investment, showing real situation on the ground*
- 1.2.4 *Documentary to accompany NHRC research*
- 1.2.5 *Roundtable policy discussions with academics and stakeholders in Dawei*
 - Targeting community and policymakers
 - Maybe 2x per year
 - Developing common understandings

(2) Awareness (...)

The preliminary nature of the document is clear enough; plenty remained to be clarified. We divided *advocacy* between *monitoring* and, curiously, *advocacy*; *mobilization* and *working with community members* stayed largely undefined; and the split between *knowledge awareness* and *information sharing* was not necessarily intuitive. As for *awareness*, I noted again mainly “target audiences: government, community,” although I added some discussion of my own regarding “positive investment,” “deglobalization,” notions of “food sovereignty,” and the importance of advancing these discussions with people living in the SEZ project areas.⁹⁵

We intended the document as very much a working document, a focal point for ongoing strategizing about how best to respond to the SEZ potentially resuming. I saved it on my computer, sent it out on our DDA listserv, and made clear that any and all input and feedback would be

⁹⁴ See Chapter 5 for discussion of the We Love Dawei event.

⁹⁵ Along the lines of aspirational notions of development apart from the SEZ, I included some notes on “positive investment” related to investment moratoria discussions advanced by Paung Ku, DDA, and others at a recent workshop in Shan State; “deglobalization” and alternative development in the work of Walden Bello, as well as Focus on the Global South, the NGO he founded; mobilization around “food sovereignty” by the Transnational Institute (TNI), La Via Campesina (with which DDA has collaborated), and KPRI (the Confederation of Indonesian People’s Movements, to which I offered to connect DDA); and the need for more explicit discussions on this topic with people in Theinkun, Kyaukpa, and Amya.

welcome whether on the listserv—doubtful, as DDA conducted very little work via email—or in subsequent in-person meetings and discussions.

The document generated little discussion, however, online or otherwise. Its various lacunae and uncertainties reflected, fittingly, DDA's broader difficulty relating to the SEZ's suspension, itself full of looming uncertainty. Gone were the days when the SEZ, clearly moving forward, inspired blockades, demonstrations, and extensive media coverage. Now, it was more rare for Kyaw Htet and others from DDA to visit the villages of the project areas, especially Amya. Little was happening that called for direct, eventful responses. Meanwhile, despite strategizing around *mobilization* and *working with community members*, DDA had stepped back from its coordinating role. People in Theinkun, Kyaukpa, and Amya were no longer part of DDA per se, but rather *community members* to be *worked with* through more ambiguous relations with DDA. DDA itself now was a formal organization, with a Wifi-equipped office, staff meetings, and donors. The SEZ was not the sole focus of their activities anymore; mining and agribusiness elsewhere around Dawei had also come to the fore. From helping to obstruct roadbuilding in 2013, DDA now tended more towards *roundtable policy discussions* and promoting *legal awareness* related to *land acquisition*. With the SEZ on hold, more direct, more radical tactics fell out of DDA's political repertoire. They continued to spearhead criticism of the SEZ, including contesting its potential restart, but activities in the project areas had receded. Though hardly absent before, the mundane technology of the meeting—in this case regularized, a function of “staff,” and suggestive of a more deliberative, domesticated organizational apparatus—helps capture this shift.

I cornered Kyaw Htet in the office once to talk through some of this. It was during our move to the new office. Surrounded by boxes on the veranda of the old office, we were sweating from all the lifting, sorting, organizing, and boxing. Opting for a break, Kyaw Htet took a seat on

an old wooden chair, and I sat on the floor. I talked to him about whether he worried, at all, that DDA had retreated from a more radical politics—and more generally, how he understood DDA as having arrived at its current activities. He recognized that DDA has changed over time, departing from working more intensively in the villages of the project areas. In contrast, he described DDA's current focus as policy facilitation—a phrase I also heard repeatedly from other DDA staff—or as he elaborated, trying to “grasp the politics of process.” DDA really aims to work with “all stakeholders” now, he said, including the government, and they emphasize mechanisms that promote collaboration. He cited a mining monitoring mechanism the government had recently approved, which DDA helped design in order for villagers living around mining sites to be able to report incidents and concerns directly to government. As for the SEZ, suspended already for several years, he stressed that DDA has played an active role in monitoring and contesting EIAs for the SEZ, developing case studies on ITD for Thailand's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and participating in regional development planning processes, including government workshops and policy reviews. Did he consider DDA's activities to be activist work? Sighing, he replied, “It's difficult to say what's really activist work.” Some people see DDA as too “hardline,” he explained—strongly opposed to the SEZ at all costs. Others see DDA as too “softline,” or not critical enough of the SEZ. I had the sense that the hardline-softline distinction, for him, was both not very interesting and a source of frustration. With a shrug, he said, “we still have strong commitments,” but compared to before, “maybe our working style is different.”

This shift towards policy-oriented activities also reflects changes in Myanmar's broader political landscape, as Kyaw Htet acknowledged, too. Still, he made clear that DDA's changes in political activity have not quite followed from an orderly, rational decision-making process, much less any inevitable emergence of civil society within the context of Myanmar's reform period. By

contrast, he is wont to lament a lack of clarity since the NLD came to power in 2015. As he described it that afternoon, the political landscape was more clear before 2015, with the military and a military-backed government on one side, in his framing, and civil society on the other. “Civil society was like an enemy before,” he said, “but it was better, we were opposite—simple!” Now, though, “we have to think, it’s the NLD.” Complicating matters, the NLD had proven surprisingly hostile to civil society organizations, even as civil society organizations felt new pressure to cooperate with the government. DDA, Kyaw Htet explained, has tried to navigate this muddled and confusing political situation as best they can, trying different things to see what works. His comments resonated with those of Khin Thu, another senior DDA staff member, who later described to me the rise of the NLD and its significance for DDA as all in fact very bewildering. The last few years have been really confusing, she told me after a meeting one day—a disorderly, haphazard (*payanpataa, kamaukkama*) time overall.

DDA has felt its way across shifting political terrains, testing out various strategies and adapting to changing circumstances. Civil society was once an enemy of the government, Kyaw Htet stressed, when civil society could stand opposed, unified, against a military-backed government—a formulation that echoes Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) understanding of popular political struggles in the throes of confrontation with an obvious antagonist. For Laclau, the loss of that equivalential logic follows once that antagonist is overcome, and as we will see in the next chapter, a differential logic of addressing the demands of discrete, targeted groups can then emerge. DDA, however, has maintained its universalizing, equivalential trajectory. This trajectory, indicative of the civil society ground the organization claims, has taken shape through confusing, contingent events, including the SEZ’s suspension, rather than through any underlying process of

organizational rationalization. The meeting is one technology through which DDA has sought greater clarity amid uncertainty. The letter is another.

The letter

If the staff meeting and SEZ strategy reveal the kinds of activities DDA pursues in relation to the SEZ project—the formalistic contours of DDA’s infrapolitics—then these letters foreground DDA’s political subjectivity—the organization’s embeddedness in certain ideas and imaginaries. Like “economics in the wild” for Michel Callon (2006), DDA’s “politics in the wild” is not a pure politics.⁹⁶ It is an experimental politics, as Kyaw Htet and Khin Thu underline above: a project forged through contingent adaptation to Myanmar’s fast-changing politics of the reform period. The liberal values at the core of DDA’s demands in these letters—for transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making—evoke not a disciplined, categorical commitment to classical liberalism, but rather the vernacular, circulating set of liberal discourses common to Myanmar associational life since 1988: stated commitments to human rights, democracy, and rule of law. For Koray Çalışkan and Callon, a focus on economic performativity in the wild—directing attention from the economic to economization, or all the work needed to bring markets into being—pushes past the formalist-substantivist divide in economic anthropology (Çalışkan and Callon 2009). In parallel, I shift from politics to politicization.⁹⁷ I follow how, in response to certain aspects of the Dawei SEZ having been rendered technical, a signature of

⁹⁶ Callon writes, “Economics in the wild is not pure economics; it is mixed with engineering, life sciences, and management science – its complexity and heterogeneity constitute its strength and make it irreplaceable” (Callon 2006, 35).

⁹⁷ In so doing, I chart the political beyond the formalist-substantivist debate that also long divided political anthropology (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940, Leach 1964, Geertz 1973, Spencer 1997).

development's anti-politics of expertise (Ferguson 1994, Mitchell 2002, Li 2007), these letters seek to repoliticize these aspects through appeals to liberal values.

The letters find DDA working broadly in the mode of organic intellectuals. For Gramsci, intellectuals are located within institutions, class relations, and socially embedded forms of knowledge, such that the organic intellectual might even be grasped as a group rather than a solitary political subject (see Crehan 2002, 133).⁹⁸ The organic intellectual nurtures, clarifies, and gives form to the political ideas of subordinate classes, building political projects that traverse center and periphery, or in the Italy of his time, North and South (Levinson 2001).⁹⁹ For DDA, building and leading a political project involves representational work that aims to articulate villagers' concerns in language amenable to project proponents. Yet this movement across center and periphery, as it were, is fraught with difficulty, as these letters make clear. Three stand out.

The first letter took shape in the staff meeting that morning, based on the JICA feasibility study for the roadlink component of the SEZ project. Ma Khaing and I agreed to translate the study's table of social and economic impacts into Burmese, and that material informed a letter I drafted to JICA later that month.

⁹⁸ Arguing that for Gramsci, the intellectual "may well be a group rather than a single individual," Kate Crehan points to a passage in his prison writings where he describes the "philosophy of praxis" as a contradictory consciousness. "(I)t is consciousness full of contradictions," Gramsci writes, "in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not only grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action" (Crehan 2002, 133, citing Gramsci 2012, 405).

⁹⁹ Like Adam David Morton in working through Gramsci's passive revolution formulation, as described in Chapter 2, Crehan's discussion of Gramsci's notion of intellectuals also stresses continuities between Gramsci's prison writings and his essay "Some Aspects of the Southern Question," which he was writing at the time of his arrest. For Brett Levinson, too, Gramsci's abiding attention to uneven political geographies is crucial to understanding his theorization of the organic intellectual. "But what is the political responsibility of the organic intellectual?" Levinson asks. "Where do learning and politics meet? His job is to articulate the relation between center and periphery which he, as traveler, has gleaned...The organic intellectual intervenes into two common senses, that of the center and that of the periphery—he has no great tolerance for either of these idioms—in order to phrase their relationality...and hence to spark the ill-feeling, the entire hegemonic process..." (Levinson 2001, 72).

The day after the staff meeting, Ma Khaing and I sat down at one of our plastic folding tables to puzzle over the JICA roadlink study’s impact table. The Buddhist shrine gently flashed over our shoulders; in the hot season, there were few clouds to throw its lights more dramatically across our office walls. The JICA study, published several months prior, was titled “Data Collection Survey for Southern Economic Corridor in Myanmar: Final Report” (JICA 2016). The title poses a reminder that the roadlink component of the SEZ project promises to connect the existing Southern Economic Corridor (SEC), passing from Ho Chi Minh City to Bangkok, to Myanmar’s Andaman coast, as discussed in Chapter 2. The report assesses plans for initial and full-phase construction of the roadlink, beginning with upgrading the road that already covers some sixty percent of the route, and shifting towards completing new-build construction of the rest of the route, closer to the main SEZ project area. The report also discusses plans for a railway to run roughly along the same route, financing needs and possibilities for all of this, and (in its terms) “environmental and social considerations,” which is where the report inserts its impact table—or rather two impact tables, one presenting the full impact scoping results, and the other presenting especially important likely impacts that should be part of an eventual EIA for the roadlink. The tables amount to slightly less than three pages out of the report’s 178 total pages, already relatively small for a report of this kind. The main table of scoping results was divided into four sections called pollution abatement, natural environment, social environment, and other.¹⁰⁰

As Ma Khaing and I worked through each section to render it in Burmese, we felt the technical quality of the document in our attempt to translate it. On one hand, an abundance of unfamiliar words and phrases—unfamiliar to both of us, such as *subsidence*, *inflow of soil*, and

¹⁰⁰ The “other” section included two entries: “accidents,” referring to work-related accidents during the construction of the road, and traffic accidents once it is completed and in use; and “trans-boundary effects and climate change,” the evaluation of which interestingly includes no reference to climate change, reading only “Stimulation of the economy is expected through increased cross-border traffic and exchange between the two countries” (JICA 2016, 71).

hydrology—made translation difficult. On the other hand, we reassured each other that terms like these tend to have precise translations so long as we can find them. We were able to translate *hydrology*, for instance, after we each put out messages on Facebook to see if we knew anyone who knew the term in Burmese. (Ma Khaing’s search proved more productive more quickly than mine.) It made for a laborious process, if hardly an impossible one. We also realized, in fact, that as an initial feasibility study rather than a more detailed EIA, the report’s content was not always very complicated. *Hydrology* proves instructive with its two-sentence entry. According to the first, during construction, “Due attention must be paid on change of the flow and river bed at the area along the river and at river crossing points”; and according to the second, once the road is built, “The flow regime may possibly change when bridge structures, such as piers, etc., are constructed in water” (JICA 2016, 70). Or in simpler terms: pay attention to water, not least once things are built that might change how it flows. We found the report less in-depth than we expected it to be, a surprise in some ways confirmed by its lack of discussion of methodology, of any consultations with villagers, or how any research was analyzed and evaluated. We found ourselves scrolling through the PDF (we printed only the impact table), searching for sections on or discussions of research process and methodology, methodological terms, and so on, but to no avail.

We finished our translation of the table, sending it to Kyaw Htet by email and resolving to share it with villagers along the roadlink. Kyaw Htet suggested I draft a letter to JICA that would reference those impacts and raise questions about the research process, especially whether JICA research teams had consulted anyone living along the roadlink. I duly agreed.

I produced a first draft, solicited feedback from within DDA, made edits, and then awaited instructions. The letter is like many DDA has produced over the years. Despite the drafting process, it is titled a “community letter”: “Community letter to JICA regarding the road link assessment

and project continuation.” Openly representational, it is written in the first-person plural “we”; it purports to speak in the voice of people affected by the SEZ. It displays some of the challenges DDA encounters in positioning themselves as organic intellectuals. The first line reads, “We are villagers living along the road link that will connect the Dawei deep-sea port and special economic zone (SEZ) project to Thailand.” The letter emphasizes that negative impacts endured during construction prior to the SEZ’s suspension should be addressed before any new activities begin. It connects these impacts to issues of information, consultation, and accountability.

Negative impacts from earlier road construction activities include the following: loss of farmland and plantation areas; loss of access to farmland and plantation areas; loss of livelihood opportunities through decline in plants and animals; pollution of drinking water, rivers, and streams in the area; and noise and air pollution related to construction activities. We note as well that sharing of information has been inadequate; that consultation and compensation processes have proceeded without the clarity we deserve; and that accountability for negative impacts has been unclear from the beginning. Construction of the road link, which would be the first step in a larger restart of the Dawei SEZ project, must not be allowed to resume until these earlier impacts are resolved. (DDA 2017, 1)

The letter notes that the JICA feasibility study contains “extremely limited” discussion of potential impacts, and it presents no information on how said impacts were evaluated, or how the feasibility study was conducted. “Unfortunately,” the letter reads, “we were not consulted during research activities”—an assumption we resolved to verify before sending the letter —“which suggests that public participation might have been inadequate.” The letter also invokes Myanmar’s EIA Procedure, adopted in 2014, as well as JICA’s assessment regulations. “If activities are to move forward,” the letter concludes, “they must do so in a spirit of transparency and accountability, as called for in Myanmar’s Procedure and JICA’s own guidelines.” At the bottom of the letter, the draft reads only “For further information: 1. Name + phone; 2. Name + phone; 3. Name + phone.”

The letter seeks to politicize a document claiming technical expertise. It relocates that document in a contested field where an aggrieved community “we,” disputing the document’s

methodology and findings, calls for JICA to respect fundamental liberal values, namely transparency, accountability, and local participation. And although transparency, elsewhere, has been grasped in some ways as the cornerstone of contemporary “development dogma” (Appel 2019, 253)—criticized for what it occludes, yet appreciated for the contestation it can still make possible (Power 1997, Strathern 2000, Barry 2008, 2013, Hetherington 2011, Ballesteros 2012)—here it is best grasped alongside accountability and participation as one part of a triumvirate: the transparency, accountability, and participation triplet that, for DDA, so often forms the core of their demands. The letter is also an awkward technology of representation. It aims to direct the expected concerns of people living along the roadlink towards broadly democratic political possibilities—and it does so by attempting to condense those concerns in the language of demands that will be intelligible, perhaps even persuasive, to project proponents. However, the letter remained in draft form; the names and phone numbers at the bottom stayed blank. We brought the letter to villagers in the roadlink area (as discussed below), where it became clear that it would need more work to be submitted to JICA—work that never happened. In part, the letter’s fate is a symptom of a busy organization juggling a variety of priorities. But it signals, too, something of the fraught positioning of organic intellectuals, trying—not always successfully—to traverse uneven political terrain.

The second letter offers another entry point more focused on EIAs. Since the earliest years of the project, EIAs had been among the central objects of discussion, strategy, and dispute in the Dawei area. Multiple stories circulated. Karen villagers living along the roadlink sought out soldiers from the KNU to join meetings with researchers from Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. They did not want to be taken advantage of by the Thai researchers, who later, we learned, were in the process of collecting data for an EIA. In Amya, villagers described visits by

local researchers bearing clipboards and conducting household surveys, overseen by a Thai-speaking woman who, in translation, introduced herself and then retreated to the village head's home while the researchers conducted the surveys. Rumors abounded that a site-wide EIA had been conducted—an EIA covering the project overall, not just its component parts—but no one was entirely sure if the rumors were true or not. At the office of EarthRights International (ERI), an INGO with an office in Yangon, a staff member from Dawei once cautiously, quietly revealed to me a report of some 1,000 pages, extracting it carefully from the dark recesses of a filing cabinet. ERI often worked to support DDA's SEZ activities, made easier by the fact that the Dawei staff member, Win Tint, was along with Kyat Htet one of the founders of DDA. (I first met the two together in 2010.) The report was an assessment of some kind about the Dawei SEZ. Win Tint had received it from a friend of a friend, he said, and did not have approval to release it per se. We paged through it for a few minutes, like the pious looking upon a sacred text for the first time—or the first time for me, at least. Was it real? What did it mean? Could it be explicated? Was there anyone who could explain its secrets to us? For now, not that we knew of. Win Tint put the report back. We remained unsure whether it was the promised site-wide EIA, resolving to revisit the matter. Like so much about the SEZ, the EIA marked an area of uncertainty. It was an area that DDA and others accorded importance, yet little clear information was available.

The situation changed one afternoon a couple of weeks after Ma Khaing and I had labored over the JICA impact table. The *Tanintharyi Weekly*—the weekly news journal published in Dawei, founded and edited by close friends from DDA circles—published an article listing ten separate Dawei SEZ assessments that had been completed and submitted to Myanmar's Environmental Conservation Department (ECD) for review.¹⁰¹ I learned all of this when, returning

¹⁰¹ Although we would refer to all of these as EIAs, in fact some were titled as EIAs, while others were titled social impact assessments (SIAs) and initial environmental examinations (IEEs).

to the DDA office after lunch one day, I found Kyaw Htet, Zaw Myat, May Lin from DPLN, and another lawyer—someone I’d not met before—busily engaged in conversation in the large meeting space downstairs. It turns out that a colleague of Win Tint’s at ERI had already responded to this new information by drafting a letter on DDA and DPLN’s behalf demanding public disclosure of the reports. The letter was addressed to two Union-level Myanmar government officials and one private company: the Union Minister of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation (MONREC); the Director General of the ECD; and Myandawei Industrial Estate Company Limited (MIE), the implementing consortium led by ITD. The signatories would be DDA and DPLN, not ERI, with DDA now on the other end of a letter’s representational apparatus.

I spent the afternoon helping Zaw Myat, May Lin, and the other lawyer translate the letter into Burmese. Titled “Request to Disclose for Public Knowledge the Dawei SEZ EIAs, SIAs, and IEEs,” the letter lists the assessments mentioned in the news article and, as the main demand, calls for MIE to disclose them in line with Sections 65 and 66 of Myanmar’s 2015 Environmental Impact Assessment Procedure. The letter also requests information regarding the current status of any government review of the reports; the likelihood of their translation into Burmese language; “plans for appropriate public consultation in order for local communities and organizations to be able to provide input”; and “plans for allowing local people to appeal if the report is already approved,” all of which, the letter affirms, is required according to the 2015 EIA Procedure (DDA and DPLN 2017, 1–2). While translating the letter, we had some disagreements about strategy. With the Procedure dating to 2015, I worried that assessments based on research predating 2015 would be held to these later standards. The others were less concerned. May Lin, for instance, stressed that we would likely reject the EIAs regardless of their content; the aim, she said, was to force their disclosure so that they could be rejected. Zaw Myat, on the other hand, looked forward

to the EIAs becoming community mobilization tools. When villagers were faced in detail with likely project impacts, he felt, they would be more willing to contest the project. By contrast, I suggested it might be difficult to organize around such technical documents, or around contesting them on legal grounds. In any case, we sent the letter.

Eventually, the EIAs emerged quietly, almost imperceptibly—with a whimper not a bang. During a visa run to Bangkok, I made a routine visit to MIE’s website. I discovered that MIE had recently uploaded all ten reports to their website—whether in response to our letter or not, I did not know. I wrote to Kyaw Htet, Zaw Myat, May Lin, and others from DDA, DPLN, ERI, and SEM. Did anyone know the reports were now available? No, this was news to all of us. I downloaded the reports as quickly as possible; compared to the sluggish Wifi in Dawei, Wifi in Bangkok worked at breakneck speed. But in the short term, we made little use of the EIAs. Each report was long and, putting it mildly, not easy to understand; some were tomes of several thousand pages’ length. Although the content proved difficult to penetrate and hence use, DDA’s EIA strategy still aligned with the political values they had come to embrace: transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making. The EIA letter appeals to all three with its calls for public disclosure of the reports (transparency), adherence to the 2015 EIA Procedure (accountability), and opportunities for local communities to provide input (local participation). No direct response to the letter was forthcoming, and it is unclear the letter bore any relation to MIE making the reports available online later. Still, DDA continued to politicize the EIAs—not least in the third letter, below—by drawing attention to the 2015 Procedure, alleging shortcomings in EIA research processes, especially around public consultation, and calling for a confirmed site-wide EIA, still not conducted as required under the Procedure. This second letter, meanwhile, underscores DDA’s entanglement with political and economic liberalization—in the

Dawei area as well as nationally. Addressed to key government agencies and the SEZ project's main private-sector proponent, the letter provides another angle on DDA's shift towards policy facilitation, or "grasping the politics of process," in Kyaw Htet's phrasing.

If the first two letters address public and private SEZ proponents, the third letter returns to a broader mode of appeal: the open letter, or public statement, the same form in which DDA called for the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant in 2012. This third letter took shape over several weeks in February 2018 following news reports announcing government plans to resume the SEZ that March. DDA resolved to release a letter raising concerns about any potential project restart, and as with the "community letter" to JICA, I agreed to lead the drafting process.

In our initial planning for the letter, some of the main points provoked little discussion. We agreed to call on "all project proponents" to "urgently reconsider plans to resume the Dawei SEZ," as problems from earlier implementation activities still had not been addressed, much less resolved, and the EIAs lacked credibility. At my urging, we also included several lines towards the end of the letter asking who would and would not benefit if the SEZ moves forward. Two other points I wanted to include, which were central to the first draft I submitted to Kyaw Htet, Zaw Myat, Naing Tun, Win Tint, and other colleagues, drew hesitation: on negotiating over relocation and financial compensation, and on the government's unrealistic employment promises. The Sunday before we released the letter, I met Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and several other SEM and ERI colleagues in the lobby of a guesthouse in Dawei to discuss the letter. The next day, more friends and colleagues—including from the Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU), another Dawei-based organization that collaborates with DDA—joined us for a meeting at the DDA office where the letter was again under discussion. At the guesthouse and the following day, Kyaw Htet's worries over the relocation and compensation lines were similar to others': he felt it was risky to discuss

them in too much depth, as it made it appear as if DDA were willing to accept the project resuming. As with the government's employment claims, he said, it would be better to simply call for timely and transparent information—a demand that would be clear and digestible, he suggested, while combining these various points into one. In addition, where I used the language of *negotiation* in the draft—urging project proponents to “negotiate openly and transparently with all stakeholders” regarding relocation, livelihoods, and employment possibilities—others suggested we shift towards a language of *participation*. Contrary to my own intuition, it was felt that *negotiation* implied a top-down process, whereas *participation* connoted—as I noted of our discussion—a “stronger, bottom-up” process. We also agreed to add several lines about alternative development strategies aside from the SEZ. While SEM colleagues pushed for a press conference to release the letter, Kyaw Htet felt we should wait. Press conferences should be for new findings or hot issues. After all, he said presciently, who could really say if the SEZ would resume the next month?

The letter was released soon thereafter. We distributed it on a number of listservs, as well as to journalists and other contacts. Naing Tun had translated it into Burmese; 36 organizations had signed onto it. Its final title was “Statement on government plans to resume the Dawei SEZ project,” and it opens by invoking a collective *we*: “We are deeply concerned by the Myanmar government's plans to resume the Dawei SEZ.” The letter continues by referring to “Dawei society,” a shorthand for all people with ties to the Dawei area—one I always found peculiar, but which DDA used often:

Dawei society—from the sea to the fields to the highlands, from Dawei town to all surrounding areas, from Dawei migrants working abroad to their friends and family in Dawei—will experience profound and long-lasting changes as a result of the SEZ. Dawei society's land and livelihoods, shared histories and traditions, ecologies and cultures, and ability to build common futures are all under threat. (Therefore) we call on all project proponents to urgently reconsider plans to resume the Dawei SEZ.

Five core demands then read as follows, each with brief elaboration beneath it:

- (1) The project must not resume unless all previous problems have been fully and completely resolved.
- (2) Conduct a site-wide EIA, as required under Myanmar law.
- (3) Provide accurate, timely, and accessible information about all aspects of project implementation.
- (4) Ensure meaningful community participation in all aspects of project decision-making.
- (5) Pursue alternative development strategies without delay, such as sustainable agriculture, fisheries, and community-based tourism. (DDA *et al.* 2018, 1–2)

Under the EIA demand, the letter echoes our earlier strategizing around the EIA letter, noting “long-standing systemic concerns over how the previous EIAs were conducted, including lack of meaningful consultation and little or no feedback opportunities.” As for relocation, compensation, and employment, the letter folds these into the third demand: “On matters such as relocation, compensation, employment opportunities, and environmental impacts, proponents must provide accurate and timely information in a way that is accessible for all people, regardless of gender, income, age, and livelihood.” As for the earlier language of negotiation, it is replaced in the fourth demand by the call for “meaningful community participation in all aspects of project decision-making.” In closing, the letter reads “Finally, Dawei society demands an open and honest reckoning over who will benefit if the SEZ project resumes. Who will gain, and who will lose? We maintain grave reservations over who really benefits from dirty industries and resource extraction: a few political, economic, and military elites.” It then lists three media contacts from DDA, TWU, and ERI, as well as the 36 organizations who agreed to be signatories.

This third letter encapsulates much of the universalizing appeal to liberal values that had come to characterize DDA’s politics in the wild by this time. On one hand, the letter is a restatement of the core principles we have seen several times now: transparency, accountability, and local participation in decision-making. Like the other two letters, the process by which this letter came to be is also significant: multiple meetings, cooperative deliberation, and a broadly

consensual filtering of political ideas towards these liberal principles. These are some of the means by which, well after the blockades and other actions of the early 2010s, DDA has continued politicizing the SEZ, including very technical aspects like the EIAs. To be sure, community letters, open letters, and deliberative mechanisms were part of DDA's political repertoire in the early 2010s, as well, but they were a smaller proportion of their work overall. With the suspension of the SEZ—in other words, for material reasons relating to political struggle—letters such as these became a proportionally more significant part of DDA's politics. As in the other letters as well, here too DDA is at work in the mode of organic intellectuals, articulating a political project that, they hope, might be able to travel across multiple political geographies—from Dawei town and the surrounding villages to the 36 signatories' locales and, no doubt, the power centers where the main project proponents reside, namely Yangon, Naypyidaw, and Bangkok.

But despite this letter's overlaps with the previous two, this letter also goes further than the others in invoking a collective subject, "Dawei society," and setting it against a narrower opposition: "a few political, economic, and military elites." The letter claims that *Dawei society* represents a broad and shared position against a limited, sectional elite. As we will see, however, DDA staff are keenly aware that *Dawei society*, far from a unified, collective subject, in fact represents a highly stratified, heterogeneous category. The language of differential benefits and opposition to a narrow elite also came in through my discretion more than DDA's. These letters attest, after all, to DDA's stark break with the by-turns evasive, rebellious, or resistant politics central to older rural politics paradigms. Again and again, DDA signals its willingness to approach politico-economic elites—public and private project proponents—as grounds of opportunity for negotiation and persuasion, or for possible *participation* in the preferred terminology of Kyaw Htet and others. The actual heterogeneity of *Dawei society*, in fact, need not preclude, but rather

demand, precisely the rhetorical invocation of a sutured, collective *we*. That such a collective subject does not, properly speaking, precede its invocation here roughly locates this letter in a performative idiom suggestive of Callon's: the political, like the market for Callon, cannot be taken for granted. It must be actively conjured into being, not least through the work of technologies that facilitate that process. Yet performative failure is also possible (Felman 1983, Derrida 1988, Butler 1997). After the meeting and the letter, the third technology—the workshop—traces more clearly the limits of DDA's shift towards a universalizing politics of infrastructure.

The workshop

Two workshops provide a different sense of DDA's work at this time. For while the main setting for the staff meeting and these three letters was DDA's office in Dawei town, it would be a mistake to understand DDA as an office-bound organization mired in the tedium of meetings, donor reports, EIAs, and letters to project proponents. On the contrary, although DDA's pace and workflow has changed considerably from the early 2010s—tending to be slower, more repetitive, less eventful, more town-based—it is still the case that DDA staff maintain busy schedules that take them to roadlink areas, such as Theinkun; Kyaukpa, the dam area; and Amya, the main SEZ project area. These visits are typically for half a day or a day, rarely overnight, and often they're for what DDA loosely describes as workshops: meetings of a broadly educational nature—for sharing or collecting information, soliciting input and feedback of one kind or another, and usually tending toward discussion of strategy or action points. Moreover, with the Myanmar government openly planning to resume the SEZ beginning with roadlink construction, visits to Theinkun and other areas along the roadlink picked up some pace during my time in Dawei. In the staff meeting

of early May, recall, Kyaw Htet and the rest of DDA had noted this approach by the government and resolved to make the roadlink a focus of DDA’s SEZ strategy.

One morning, I roused myself before dawn—before even the clamor from the “tuition” school next door—and managed to squeeze in a trip to the teashop before Zaw Myat picked me up in a rented SUV.¹⁰² We were on our way to the roadlink area for the first workshop in question. Ma Khaing and I had recently translated the JICA impact table; we had also drafted the community letter to JICA and the letter demanding public disclosure of the EIAs. The workshop, in fact, aimed to present the JICA impact findings to a group of villagers and discuss plans for further action, including on EIAs. First, though, a mishap: after picking up two colleagues from TWU at a food stall on the edge of town, we drove for about an hour until Zaw Myat realized he forgot some of the materials he wanted to distribute, including the letter to JICA. Our TWU colleagues got out to wait at a *zayat* on the side of the road: a kind of small, covered resting place commonly found along roads and in villages in Myanmar. I went back with Zaw Myat and, eventually, after gathering the materials and picking up our TWU colleagues again, we arrived late in the morning at the home of a Karen villager in the Theinkun area, roughly halfway along the roadlink between the waterfront SEZ area and the Thai border. Around twenty Karen villagers met us there, although more would come and some would leave in the next few hours. Zaw Myat and I and our colleagues from TWU laid out our materials on a table under a thatched *zayat* as green tea made the rounds. We took our seats on plastic chairs and a few mats. Cheroot smoke trailed upwards; cicada-like, the buzz of crickets filled the air; hens clucked, a rooster strutted, and stray dogs lay in the shade. Every once in a while, a vehicle large or small swept past on the road just outside the gate, sending

¹⁰² The roadlink areas are more remote than the main SEZ project area, and in the rainy season in particular, an SUV can be the difference between making the trip successfully or having to turn around. The costs, which I helped defray, are not insignificant.

up clouds of dust that halted our discussions and left us scrambling to cover our noses with our shirts. The roadlink was far from finished, but this stretch was finished enough that passenger vehicles and commercial trucks used it regularly.

A Karen villager named Saw Myint Oo welcomed us before we all introduced ourselves. The home was not Saw Myint Oo's; it belonged to an affable villager who went by U Ohn Thi ("Mr. Coconut"). His brother is a prominent Karen pastor with a church in Dawei town, close enough to my house that I could hear the church bells ringing. Saw Myint Oo was the main leader of CSLD (Community Sustainable Livelihood and Development), a Karen organization based in Theinkun that was once integrally part of DDA. Now it worked independently, yet still very closely with DDA. After Saw Myint Oo's welcome and introductions, Zaw Myat began the workshop by giving a brief update on the status of the SEZ project, shifting between Burmese and Dawei languages. He emphasized Japan's involvement—not as a principal partner, developer, or funder, but for the time being in the area of technical support through JICA's research activities. As Saw Myint Oo, U Ohn Thi, and the other attendees listened, Zaw Myat handed out and explained the translated impact table from JICA's feasibility study. He asked if anyone knew about JICA coming to conduct research; everyone said no. A few villagers said they saw some people at one point several months back. They might have been JICA researchers, but they didn't speak with them. Saw Myint Oo stepped in, speaking in Karen to make sure everyone was following along. He later switched to Burmese for us visitors from town, stressing the importance of clear information from JICA and other project proponents: "If it's not clear, if we don't know, it's difficult for us." Zaw Myat distributed copies of the *Tanintharyi Weekly* article on EIAs, explaining the letter we had prepared to demand full public disclosure of the EIAs. The attendees were not aware that any EIA research had been conducted.

A discussion followed about how best to respond to all of this. The attendees shared a concern that a new momentum was developing towards the SEZ resuming, starting with the roadlink: the feasibility study was done, the EIAs were submitted, and Japan was apparently helping to push the project forward. “Japan is coming!” someone called out; we shouldn’t wait to respond. But how? And still, all of the damage from earlier construction activities—the land seized, the crops destroyed, the water sources polluted, the compensation unpaid—received no attention in the JICA study. Saw Myint Oo spoke up again, shifting between Karen and Burmese to discuss how best to respond to the EIAs and what to do about the earlier negative impacts. Another villager—U Thein San, an outspoken villager whose wispy goatee, wizened features, and more importantly, active role in the blockades of 2013 made him one of CSLD’s main figures—worried there was so much that was difficult to understand in these studies. He felt strongly that villagers like him should have clearer, simpler, more comprehensible information not only about what to expect from the roadlink, but how the research had been conducted. So much went unexplained, he said. Who did they talk to? How do EIAs work for other projects in Myanmar, or in other countries? He suggested we all formulate a set of demands around the EIAs and resolving earlier impacts—and to call on project proponents to agree not to resume construction activities until all of those matters had been addressed. We agreed this approach was worth discussing more. As a generous lunch waited—pork curry, omelets, fresh vegetables, fish paste, rice—we brought the workshop to a close by discussing plans to reach more people along the roadlink, not least to solicit more potential demands. After lunch, Zaw Myat recorded several short interviews with villagers to document their lack of awareness about any research by JICA or others. Then we bid our goodbyes, piling back into the car with our TWU colleagues.

The second workshop took place a couple of weeks later. After another painful (to me) early-morning departure, we parked at Saw Myint Oo's home in Theinkun and, under a light rain, walked up to a large meeting hall located up behind the school, church, and football field. Zaw Myat and I, along with our DDA colleagues Khin Thu and Ma Khaing, hosted a more structured workshop this time with around thirty Karen villagers, most of whom, they said, were active in CSLD. We focused on EIAs: what are they, why are they important, and what has and has not happened so far with EIAs around the SEZ project? Interestingly, only a small handful of this group knew what an EIA is, which made me think of Saw Myint Oo's Karen-language interventions at the previous workshop. It was likely he had had to go to some lengths to explain what an EIA actually is. I wondered if Zaw Myat had described the term with enough detail or clarity that day—or perhaps that group was better-informed. At this workshop, we missed Saw Myint Oo's interventions; he was with Kyaw Htet, U Thein San, and others at a mine nearby called Heinda for a consultation with a mining company. Without him to facilitate, translate, interpret, and generally smooth our interactions, it was hard to communicate effectively. The light rain also did not stay light. It was the beginning of the rainy season now; periodic downpours made it difficult to hear. Still, we did our best to make clear at least the basics of EIAs. Khin Thu and Ma Khaing also ran an activity where people reflected on what they value and what the SEZ might mean for them. I presented on EIAs elsewhere, focusing on so-called “people's EIAs” in Myanmar and Thailand where organizations sought to challenge who conducts EIAs and how.

It was hard for us to know how much our ideas and activities were resonating; the group did not seem especially enthusiastic. Fortunately, before another bountiful lunch, Saw Myint Oo arrived with the others from Heinda, and he was able to open up our discussion more. One older villager eventually stood up, saying it seems like different companies work differently—but not

for justice, he said angrily, they are unjust. Another villager said she had actually attended an EIA meeting held by a group of researchers recently, but people worried about whether to sign the sign-in sheet. How would their attendance be used? Some spoke of advantages from the road; others said they had suffered from construction, losing land and crops without financial compensation. I had the distinct sense that whereas we from DDA had implicitly presented EIAs as potentially open and helpful processes, processes that, if reformed, could help equalize relations between project proponents and villagers, the villagers in attendance provided a different account, an account of fundamentally tilted, uneven, and unjust processes. Antagonistic rather than equalizing, from this angle, EIAs stood little chance of addressing material grievances like dispossession and remuneration. Moreover, they're designed to justify the SEZ and move it forward. So why sign the sign-in sheet? Aren't there risks involved in engaging with EIAs, in legitimating them?

The rain had let up; our stomachs were grumbling. We didn't make it to the point of soliciting demands for a stronger EIA process to put forward to project proponents. Instead, our own ideas of what to do about EIAs were shaken. We would still send the EIA letter to MONREC, ECD, and MIE. That was the second letter discussed above. But the JICA letter, the "community letter" in which we purported to speak in the voice of villagers living along the roadlink—that letter would have needed more work. It slipped from our priorities. It never made it to JICA.

After lunch, the wet grass glistened in the sunshine as we sat out and relaxed before driving back to town. U Thein San, back with Saw Myint Oo and Kyaw Htet from Heinda, was in top form as Kyaw Htet passed out tin mugs of Thai brandy stirred with honey. Stroking his goatee and perhaps performing, a little, for the visitors from town, he leaned back and held court. He spoke of suffering (*niq-nah-deh*) and sacrifice (*a'niq-a'nah-kan-hmu*). The Karen hills, for him, have long been areas of sacrifice for broader purposes and objectives—places where, he explained,

people have suffered the loss of land and felt aggrieved for many decades. Here in the Karen hills, he said, the importance of *sii-youn-hmu*’ was paramount, and I eagerly agreed. The word connotes solidarity and organization, togetherness and collective purpose. Suddenly he pivoted to World War II and Japanese reparations—\$200 million, granted to Myanmar in 1954—describing the process as a good and meaningful one. Something similar, in his opinion, should be considered after so much conflict in Karen State. “The current medicine (*hseh*),” he said, shaking his head, referring to the peace process and increasing investment, “can’t cure the community.” He claimed that before, it was possible to see. He was never afraid, not even of bullets. Clarity prevailed. But now, he said cryptically, there were many things, many technological things, and it was no longer possible to see. He shifted to a slightly different register: *pwin-lin-myin-tha-hmu*, he said leaning in now, using the somewhat formal term for transparency—it’s become weak over time (*ah-neh-deh*). I thought of Kyaw Htet and Khin Thu’s comments about how confusing, how disorderly and bewildering, recent years have felt. But U Thein San was still talking. Now, the companies come from far away, and the technology is so complicated. Sitting back again, he sighed: it’s hard to grasp it all. He couldn’t see a whole. Zaw Myat tapped me on the shoulder. Time to drive back.

4.3 Frayed logics

U Thein San’s winding monologue brought home one of the central political realities of Dawei’s infrapolitics in the late 2010s: the lack of an obvious antagonist. This was not always the case. In the early 2010s, it was plain who the villains were. They were ITD, the evil corporation that came from afar; the military-backed USDP government in Myanmar, less a genuine civilian government than “old whisky, new bottle,” as Kyaw Htet often said with a smirk; and distant but conspicuous, the Thai government explicitly aiming to outsource dirty industries. Prime Minister

Abhisit's admission about the latter loomed large in Dawei then and now—his 2010 statement, that is, that “Some industries are not suitable to be located in Thailand. This is why they decided to set up there,” in Dawei (IHT 2010). Though they were multiple, it was clear who the antagonists were. Like so many aspects of infrapolitics in Dawei, however, the basic structure of the political landscape changed after the SEZ's suspension in 2013. The Myanmar and Thai governments restructured the project to claim more governmental control and oversight; ITD exited the framework agreement only to return, poorly camouflaged, as the majority partner in MIE, now the main project proponent; Japan agreed to participate, but only through technical assistance; and the Myanmar and Thai governments both underwent shifts of their own. Thailand's military seized power in a 2014 coup, and in Myanmar, the NLD came to power with the 2015 elections. Confusing people more, the interface between villagers and the *sii-man-kein*—the project, as many villagers referred to it—was typically none of these actors. If anyone, after 2013, it tended to be one of the third-party consulting companies contracted to conduct the EIAs.

When I spoke to Kyaw Htet about all this during our move to the new office—surrounded by boxes, sweating from the heat, and indulging in a little break—he suggested that in stark contrast to the USDP government (2010-2015), the NLD government could count on some 80-90% support in the villages of the SEZ project areas. Now in power, NLD leaders sought to move the SEZ forward. To oppose the project, Kyaw Htet said, is to oppose the NLD—something few people were prepared to do. Like U Thein San, Kyaw Htet found it more difficult than before to understand and navigate the political landscape. “They don't listen,” he said of the NLD, whose unexpected animosity towards civil society paired poorly with civil society groups' sense they should engage the new government. It was then that Kyaw Htet described civil society as an enemy, once, but no longer. “Civil society was like an enemy before,” he said, “but it was better,

we were opposites—simple! Now, we have to think. It’s the NLD.” From Dawei town to the Karen highlands, the political terrain of the late 2010s made it difficult to build and sustain *sii-youn-hmu*: solidarity, organization, collective purpose. It was hard to think in binaries or totalities. It was hard to grasp it all, even to see at all, not least given the lack of *pwin-lin-myin-tha-hmu*, or transparency.

We have seen a pronounced shift towards a secular-universal logic in DDA’s infrapolitics. Gone are the radical tactics of the early 2010s: the blockades, the spirited acts of refusal, the broad-based targeting of the road, water, and electrical infrastructures without which the SEZ could not proceed. In fact, the SEZ did not proceed—even if the reasons exceed these factors—and with its suspension, DDA changed. Deliberative political technologies like the meeting, the letter, and the workshop became more prominent, for DDA, while “policy facilitation” and technical domains became more significant areas of their work. Through the meeting, the letter, and the workshop – three central, if mundane, technologies of politics—DDA has sought to politicize feasibility studies and EIAs, relocating technical expertise in a field of political claim-making. In fact, however, the liberal principles DDA often demands—transparency, accountability, and local participation—are not yet palpable; these technologies aim to bring them into being. Infrastructure, then, has become a site for reflection on liberal values. It is also a site for constructing and advancing a liberal politics, within a much broader reform period in Myanmar. Infrastructure thus links political form, on one hand, and political subjectivity, on the other. Meanwhile, infrastructure writ large and small—in the SEZ itself, as well as its own hard and soft infrastructures, from the roadlink to feasibility studies, the dam project to EIAs—is the occasion for DDA to cultivate and call forth a collective subject *we*. Such is the difficult, “directive” work of the organic intellectual, articulating a hegemonic project across unequal, dissimilar political geographies. Yet like most if not all such collective subjects, this one, “Dawei society,” contains the seeds of contradiction, with

both a universal and a particular (*we* and *Dawei society*) jostling for attention. Dawei society, in this sense, has something of the mythic about it: a collective fantasy that strains under pressure.

Indeed, DDA has pursued an overtly secular-universal political trajectory. Representing themselves as civil society, they have constructed a political project out of materials at hand: an economic zone suspended, the road and dam projects meant to support it, and the assessments meant to support them. At the same time, it is not a closed and coherent political logic that is at stake, a logic contained and transparent unto itself, one that could, for example, shore up one side of a stark opposition between civil society and political society. On the contrary, we saw how DDA's work in the early 2010s projected not a homogeneous construct of nation, but rather an insistent and situated construct of locality, with "Dawei people," "Dawei natives," and "local desires" at the forefront. Their work also sidestepped policy in pursuit of situational exceptions to legal provisions, most prominently with the demand to rule out the coal-fired powerplant, a power source explicitly protected in the Dawei SEZ law. By the late 2010s, policy engagement had entered DDA's repertoire, but the appeal to "Dawei society," ostensibly a universalizing subject, remains contradictory. These are points of instability in DDA's universalizing political project. They are reminders of DDA's own genealogy: emerging from institutional, discursive, and subjective claims to liberal values among Myanmar organizations, yet owing as well to the *parahita* milieu that evokes the *wunthanu* logic of association from decades past. These contrasting political imaginaries lodge uneasily within DDA. For while the many meetings, letters, and workshops I took part in convey a universalizing political logic, that logic frays at the edges; it is inconsistent, often unsuccessful, and limited in its reach. Recall that after the staff meeting, DDA's SEZ strategy prompted little further discussion, having at most a limited effect on DDA's SEZ programming. It provided an overview of how DDA imagines and pursues activities around the

SEZ, but their politics in the wild, as it were, remained more experimental and reactive—or in Khin Thu’s estimation, haphazard and disorderly. DDA also never sent the community letter to JICA, and the EIA letter became moot once, unbeknownst to us, MIE released the EIA reports apparently of their own accord.

Moreover, the EIA workshops in Theinkun started to show some of the Dawei-area fractures that, in the open letter raising concerns over the SEZ’s rumored restart, the performative invocation of “Dawei society” seeks to transcend. At a basic level, Saw Myint Oo repeatedly had to step in to smooth issues of communication and comprehension (see Chapter 6 for more on the political labor of translation). More problematically, the second workshop suggested contrasting political imaginations diverging over EIAs—a contrast DDA has struggled to resolve in the mode of organic intellectuals. DDA, on one hand, framed EIAs as vehicles for a policy approach that might be more open and transparent, more inclusive and less top-down. The villagers in attendance, on the other hand, spoke of fundamental injustice, material deprivation, and worries over the legitimacy EIAs might confer on the SEZ. This dissonance is characteristic of DDA’s varied interactions with villagers living in SEZ project areas. Even U Thein San, who turns to the language of transparency to eulogize the clarity of years past, thematizes Karen suffering in starkly material terms, emphasizing land dispossession and contemplating reparations—not like the current medicine, he specified. He meant rising investment in the context of peace negotiations, but it was tempting to think he meant the liberal values of DDA’s infrapolitics.

Are these points of instability and departure best grasped within or beyond DDA’s secular-universal political trajectory? If within, that trajectory would have to be understood in much more varied terms. If beyond, then they could justify recognizing a more distinct pair of political imaginaries, shoring up the stability of a civil society logic on the part of DDA. The question is

excessively abstract, though. More tangibly, are Saw Myint Oo, U Thein San, and CSLD part of DDA or not? During my case study research in the early 2010s, Saw Myint Oo described CSLD as being part of DDA. By the late 2010s, they were independent and formally separate, even though demonstrably, they remained close interlocutors. Yet even the more tangible question is ill-conceived. Consider U Thein San's monologue again, which closed on a note of regret: he could no longer grasp it all, he said with a sigh. The companies coming from afar, the technology now so complicated—a whole was no longer visible. His sigh, however wistful, suggests a provocation: that at some fundamental level, thinking in wholes was not possible anymore. DDA's infrapolitics follows the grain of his provocation. DDA's embrace of a secular-universal civil society politics is pronounced. But it is best understood as a political trajectory that is open and contingent, not something bounded and closed. In a political field that is multifarious and reticulated, it is one political logic among others—its edges blurry, shading into contrast at its limits.

4.4 Material departures

It is tempting to view DDA's shift towards an embrace of liberal values as a move, concurrently, towards abstract, universal principles at the expense of more tangible material concerns. The divergent positions on display at the EIA workshops suggest as much: while DDA pushed for more open and transparent EIAs, villagers from CSLD raised questions over their fundamental purpose. Still, to grasp liberalism as a disavowal of material politics is one thing. It is another, too much in line with its own normative political theory, to suggest material conditions are only incidental to its self-fashioning.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Chatterjee (2011, 3) writes, "How was it possible...that all the bitter and bloody struggles over colonial exploitation, racial discrimination, class conflict, the suppression of women, the marginalization of minority cultures, etc., that have dominated the real history of the modern world in the last hundred years or so, have managed not to displace in even the slightest way the stable location of modern political theory within the abstract discursive space of

As this chapter has shown, DDA's infrapolitics is a secular-universal political project borne along by increasing appeals to liberal principles. To be sure, that project strains at its edges, struggling to address material concerns. Even so, it bears an intimate relation to material conditions. DDA's foremost condition is the Dawei SEZ itself, a vast, if partially constructed, material assemblage. Fundamentally, it is in confronting the SEZ and its many perils, but also its promises, that DDA has forged its infrapolitics. DDA's secular-universal political trajectory also did not emerge as if *ex nihilo*; its contours took shape in the years following the SEZ's suspension due to grounded contestation and a shortfall in investment—eminently material reasons. Much of that contestation, spearheaded by DDA, targeted the power, water, and road infrastructures the SEZ would have needed to proceed. With the SEZ on hold, basic technologies like meetings, letters, and workshops became more central to DDA's political repertoire; appeals to transparency, accountability, and participation came to the foreground; and the more radical tactics of earlier years fell away. It is not the case that these technologies and political values were absent in the early 2010s, but without construction activities underway—without roadbuilding to disrupt, relocation to refuse, and powerplant plans to shut down—they became proportionally more significant as part of DDA's overall political project as the years went by. For reasons of material contingency, not any self-guided liberal telos, those technologies and values are now at the core of DDA's infrapolitics, a politics in the wild that signals experimental adaptation more than a singular, purposive subjectivity.

normative reasoning?" He adds that "by normative Western political theory," he means "what is broadly called liberal thought." Lisa Lowe (2015) has recently examined this "real history of the modern world," in which liberalism is returned to the "bitter and bloody struggles" through which it came to be. She insists that "liberal philosophy, culture, economics, and government have been commensurate with, and deeply implicated in, colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and empire" (2).

It is worth underlining that infrapolitics, here, exceeds a narrow politics of the subject. In its material contingencies, in its haphazard, disorderly experimentation, it is more than a relation of the subject with itself, to paraphrase Moreiras (2006). Like Scott's (1990) formulation as well, DDA's infrapolitics draws attention to that which shapes or conditions politics beyond the conventional spectrum of the political. *Pace* Scott, however, DDA's infrapolitics is not a question of an autonomous subaltern consciousness, uncontaminated by the influence of broader political and economic forces. Since its origins, DDA has consistently navigated positions of implication and entanglement, working its relation to state and capital not through the acts of avoidance or revolt canonized in peasant studies, but rather through processes of engagement and interaction with public and private project proponents. The moment when DDA handed over its open letter to the Thai-Myanmar government delegation at the ITD compound in January 2012—the open letter that helped tip the scales towards the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant—is the paradigmatic moment. It discloses how, even then, DDA already grasped state and capital as sites of opportunity, negotiation (“participation”), and persuasion. Far from working out a self-determining political project from *beyond* government agencies and private businesses, DDA's politics in the wild constantly experimented with how best to relate to, connect with, entangle themselves with state and capital *within* a political landscape that has changed dramatically with Myanmar's passive revolution of the past three decades.

DDA's infrapolitics are an artefact of changes widely recognized in neighboring countries in South and Southeast Asia, changes now possible to recognize in Myanmar, too: the spread, if uneven, of governmental power and transnational capital (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2008, Walker 2012, Li 2014). From a position of implication in these changes, DDA's infrapolitics crosscuts the ideas and experiences of dominant and subordinate classes. It is an infrapolitics that, while

claiming the position of civil society, is also reminiscent of political society's "temporary, contextual, and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations" (Chatterjee 2008, 57). Neither civil nor political society, therefore, conceptually exhausts its political form and content. In DDA's experimental, adaptive political trajectory; its strained political logics, blurring at its edges; and its contingent navigation of recent years' changing political and economic parameters, DDA's infrapolitics overflows existing attempts to capture or contain struggles like it within singular political theories—whether those of Marxist geography (Harvey 2003), postcolonial theory (Sanyal 2007, Chatterjee 2008, 2017), or renewed paradigms indebted to peasant studies (Levien 2013, Edelman *et al.* 2015, Prasse-Freeman 2015). Thus for two of the terms framing this discussion—*infrapolitics* and *political society*—the correspondence is partial at most, as DDA's political trajectory, while fraught and indeterminate, remains predominantly secular-universal in character.

As for the third term—*postcolonial capitalism*—the following chapter will press a claim already legible in this one: that the frayed, fractured, and heteronomous quality of infrapolitics around Dawei reflects the material conditions of postcolonial capitalism. In Sanyal's (2007) formulation, postcolonial capitalism contains a fundamental contradiction between *shared* desires for developmental progress—an index of the enduring normative legitimacy of development in the decolonized world—and the *heterogeneous* political and economic fields created by the ongoing accumulation of capital. DDA, the Dawei Development Association, certainly operates within a normative discourse of development. Even in raising concerns over the Dawei SEZ, DDA often phrases its own political question, as in the alternative development demand in its open letter of February 2018: if not the Dawei SEZ, what kind of development *do* we want? Their answers—sustainable agriculture, small-scale fisheries, and community-based tourism—contest prevailing

meanings of development in Myanmar, but they do not contest the normative legitimacy of development. At the same time, a fragmented political landscape emerged with the suspension of the SEZ, as DDA shifted towards policy facilitation and away from once-closer relationships with villagers in the SEZ project areas. And as the next chapter will attest, even with the SEZ on hold, the SEZ has continued to deepen hierarchies of wealth, power, and income in the villages of the project areas, creating an array of cleavages that go beyond any simple opposition between town-based activism and the rural politics of villagers.

Thus I shift away from more singular political theories of struggles around dispossession. Instead, I have begun bringing into view a postcolonial infrapolitics: a materially embedded, heterogeneous politics of infrastructure. On one hand, this formulation acknowledges how powerful infrastructures are as “symbols, promises, and vectors of modernity” in the postcolonial world (Anand 2017, 14). On the other hand, it accounts for the fragmented political struggles that can arise around infrastructures. This dual character helps explain why, while land and dispossession remain sites for radical struggles elsewhere in Myanmar (LIOH 2015, Prasse-Freeman 2015, TNI 2015), those struggles have become notable by their absence in Dawei after the initial upheavals of the early 2010s. Even DDA, itself operating decisively within a normative discourse of development, does not disavow the larger promise of developmental politics the SEZ claims to entail. Recall when the scholar-activist from The Hague, silhouetted against the Powerpoint slide emblazoned with Lenin’s “burning question”—“What is to be done?”—exhorted the workshop participants to take up a convergent, multi-sectoral struggle to reclaim “our” land and resources. Kyaw Htet, not quite listening, turned to me in the back, showing me the regional government’s new development policy on his phone—had I seen it, he whispered excitedly?

It is important to emphasize, however, that while infrapolitics in Dawei bears an intimate relation to the material conditions of postcolonial capitalism, the economic does not simply direct the political in a straightforward, mechanistic fashion. In line, instead, with post-workerist scholarship in and beyond advanced industrial settings (Hardt and Negri 2009, Barchiesi 2011, Campbell 2018a), we have seen how political struggle in Dawei has changed the character of capitalist development itself. The targeting of critical infrastructures helped bring the SEZ to a standstill; the Thai and Myanmar governments subsequently reorganized the project's management and funding structures; the main SEZ area was remapped to exclude Thagara, the ancient site DRA set out to protect; and as a result of project restructuring, DDA and CSLD, among others around Dawei, now confront a less obvious, more multiple, set of antagonists, including an NLD-led government that even DDA has hesitated to criticize. In other words, the current field of contention—spatial, financial, political—has taken shape not through some neutral process of technical intervention, but precisely in and through political struggle. Infrapolitics has done more than express deeper-lying material forces. It has helped upend and reshape those forces themselves.

Chapter 5

Infrapolitics (II): a situational-differential trajectory

One day, a protest took place along Shan Road. Shan Road—or in effect, Thai Road, introduced in Chapter 2—bisects the main SEZ project area, leading across it to Kilometer Zero, the waterfront site where in theory, at some point, a deep-sea port will take shape. Some one thousand people materialized on this road, most from villages nearby in the project area. They gathered not far from the ITD visitor center, where DDA had once approached the visiting heads of state, handing over the letter demanding the cancellation of the coal-fired powerplant. This day was different, though, as villagers assembled. They crowded together and marched past the visitor center towards Kilometer Zero. That the SEZ project should spark a protest would have surprised few if anyone after several years during which DDA, among others, had launched sustained criticism of the project. But this was a protest in favor of the project. As protesters marched, they chanted, and their slogans, emblazoned on placards, demanded the restart of the project in strident terms: “*Yeh-neq-seik-kan pyiq ya mi!*” “*Yeh-neq-seik-kan naing ya mi!*” (“The project must happen!” “The project must win!”) The protesters described themselves straightforwardly as Dawei SEZ *laa mé pyiq zay thu*: people who want the SEZ to come. Land prices were high, they said, and they were ready to sell. Those who are against them, they added darkly, are their enemies.

Although I made every effort to be on hand for moments like this during my fieldwork, I was not able to attend this protest. That’s because it happened in late 2015, about a year before I began fieldwork—and not long before the 2015 election that brought the NLD to power, nationally and in the Dawei-based Tanintharyi Regional Government. In fact, when I heard about the protest, I was surprised. Not because I couldn’t fathom a certain level of support for the project among

villagers in this area—I had a sense of that by then—but because I assumed I would have heard about such a protest when it happened, either from news media or from friends and colleagues in Dawei.

When I did hear about it, I was sitting with U Thein Tin, the village head of Mawdone Village, and several of his friends at his home. (It was late 2017 by then.) They had shared concerns that were familiar to me at that point about the difficulties they faced with the SEZ’s suspension: villages elsewhere were getting road upgrades, but not the villages of the project area; the existing road and electricity systems remained far from satisfactory, with electricity sold only from a few privately owned generators in the village; and they had had to stop planting trees for their orchards. Compensation planning still forbade any agricultural expansion—as potential attempts to manipulate the eventual compensation process, or so the logic went. So far, so predictable: I knew many villagers had these frustrations with the suspension of the SEZ. But then U Thein Tin began discussing the need for three-sided negotiations between ITD, the government, and village leaders to handle relocation and compensation. He had already formed a committee of village leaders for this purpose, he explained. He also suggested villagers should be able to buy shares in the SEZ project—since if they lose their land, he said, perhaps at least they could gain some investments. The committee and the investment idea captured my attention, but then soon enough U Tin Zaw and his friends had shifted towards recounting the protest they organized in 2015. Was I hearing correctly? They had staged a protest in support of the SEZ project? Yes, yes, they assured me—as they happily recalled how many people had joined, the slogans they used, their thinking around land prices and, more ominously, their enemies. Their intuitive turn to a friend-enemy distinction came across as a particularly striking departure from DDA’s normative commitment to

participation and inclusion. They hoped to influence the incoming government, they continued mournfully now, but two years later under the NLD, still the project was on hold.

I drove back to Dawei town, and later that day, I searched online for news coverage of the protest. Surely it would have gained some attention. But I couldn't find any sign of it. Eventually, I asked Kyaw Htet and Naing Tun whether they knew of any such protest taking place. They chuckled, rolling their eyes. Yes, it's true, they said. But their numbers were much smaller than they claim—small enough to explain the lack of media coverage, they said—and it was possible they were paid off by “the company” (ITD) to hold the protest, in hopes of some attention from the media. For Kyaw Htet and Naing Tun, the protest was a minor episode at most; I could see they paid it little mind. I wasn't able to dismiss it so easily, though. To me, it seemed an instance of something broader. Not only did many villagers living in the project area welcome the idea of the project resuming, some organized directly to make it happen. They did so sometimes openly, sometimes not; often with and through government officials and private developers; with few qualms about divisive strategies and a desire for material gains (with reference to land prices, in the case of this protest); and in no small part out of frustration with life in suspension.

5.1 Rural drives, noisy villages

This chapter examines the political activities and ideas of people living in the main SEZ project area: the low-lying coastal area northwest of Dawei town known as Amya. While the previous chapter named and detailed DDA's secular-universal political trajectory over time, here I shift from Dawei town to the villages of Amya, identifying a situational-differential trajectory. As opposed to DDA's secular-universalism—worldly and temporal, attuned towards policy, procedure, and equalizing commitments to transparency, accountability, and local participation—

the situational-differential trajectory discussed here parts ways. I call it situational-differential to foreground its tendency towards circumstantial exceptions to otherwise universalizing norms and guidelines: laws, regulations, and certain kinds of standards, as well as the principles of transparency, accountability, and participation that DDA holds dear. In the political imaginary of Amya—at the geographic heart of the SEZ project—the temporary and the provisional loom large, oriented less towards lofty notions of equality, and more towards claims on material distribution. At times opaque, murky, and mobilizing village hierarchies—not militating against them—villagers’ political projects approach a politics of distribution: struggles less over formal equality than expected shares of material wealth (Ferguson 2015, Li 2017, Ferguson and Li 2018). The watchwords of this politics are financial compensation, expanded employment, and better access to basic infrastructures, above all roads and electricity. Land figures prominently, too: land acquisition and land speculation—by powerful villagers who seek to benefit from the SEZ—are sites of continuing material claims that deepen stratification in Amya’s villages. Like DDA’s infrapolitics, however, here too villagers’ infrapolitics are not stable or bounded enough to constitute a closed political logic, one that could ground an opposition between civil society for DDA and political society for Amya. Instead, I show clear intersections between the one trajectory and the other—including striking instances of secular-universal activities and ideas in Amya—even if the abiding trajectory is in more situational-differential directions.

By detailing a political trajectory that, overall, contrasts sharply with DDA’s, this chapter advances the wider argument at hand. This argument holds infrapolitics in Dawei to be fundamentally heterogeneous, reflecting the multiple and reticulated character of postcolonial capitalism. The previous chapter already suggested as much, underscoring the frayed and fragmented qualities of infrapolitics in Dawei. This chapter takes that claim forward. Its premise,

again, is basic to Marxist thought, as qualified by Italian workerism: different material conditions shape different kinds of politics, even as political struggle can also transform material forces and processes. Here, I press the relations between material conditions and political projects, drawing out resonances between land, labor, and livelihoods on one hand, and political activities and ideas on the other. Yet more than a plain opposition between the town and the village—whose respective politics, it is true, have been shaped by differing material conditions—I also show how within the villages of Amya, the SEZ has intensified existing stratifications in such a way that the villages themselves have become sites of differentiated political projects. As with DDA’s infrapolitics, here too is a story of political interventions, mediated by the conditions of postcolonial capitalism.

Political interventions, or political inventions? Andrew Barry, by way of Ken Alder, has suggested the French Revolution might best be grasped as an engineering project, one that takes the present as “nothing more than the raw material from which to construct the future” (Alder 1997, 15, cited in Barry 2001). Timothy Mitchell (2011), for his part, has proposed thinking of politics as the assembling of machines. Scholarship on technopolitics, for Barry and Mitchell among others (see also, for example, Mitchell 2002, Barry 2006, 2013, Hecht 2009, 2011, 2012), tends to follow a certain *Dingpolitik*: making things political, to paraphrase Bruno Latour (2005a), in constructing politics as a socio-technical assemblage. Yet the socio-technical assemblages that *make up* politics around Dawei present a heterogeneous set of relations, a machine at best at odds with itself. In this chapter, I bring debates in science and technology studies (STS) to the villages of Amya, reframing key aspects of how SEZs and technopolitics are typically understood. Thinking with three ethnographic moments in Amya—a workshop on land law, a cup of tea at a villager’s home, a visit to a landless worker—I suggest that notions of technological zone, in Barry (2006), as well as flow and network, in Harvey (1991) and Latour (2005b), do not accord well

with what the Dawei SEZ actually is, its material conditions and political dimensions, and more broadly, what it is that large-scale infrastructures *do* under present conditions of accumulation. These conditions, I show here, are conditions of differential accumulation, which sustain and reproduce heterogeneity across time and space.

These conditions push me beyond conventional understandings of infrastructure. While recognizing that, in essence, infrastructures mediate exchange across space, bringing people and things into relation (Lefebvre 1991, Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001, Larkin 2008, 2013), I draw attention to the distributive entailments of infrastructure, that is, infrastructure's tendency to diffuse or dispense unevenly with material and political things: from roads, electricity, income, and land, to the normative affordances of transparency, accountability, and participation in politics. Displacing Barry's notion of the technological zone—a space of standardization and commensuration in which difference as such has been reduced—I refigure the Dawei SEZ as a distribution zone, a zone that does not reduce or overcome, but rather reproduces and remakes, a heterogeneous politico-material landscape. This is a story about what infrastructure is and does in the present, a story conditioned by postcolonial capitalism, beyond the imaginary of capitalist transition.

In the wake of more productivist pasts (Li 2010, Weeks 2011, Ferguson 2015, Ferguson and Li 2018, Finkelstein 2019), I suggest that distribution—a figure of difference, unevenness, and hierarchy—better captures the operations of large-scale infrastructures today. This is the case especially, if not only, for SEZs like the Dawei SEZ, which is premised not on labor-intensive light manufacturing, but rather capital-intensive heavy industries, geared towards the storage, processing, and transshipment, or distribution, of petrochemicals. Amid the wider rise of “distributive cities” as logistical forms of their own (Negrey *et al.* 2011, cited in Cowen 2014), the

distribution zone reveals not a telos pointing beyond productivism *tout court*, but rather new forms of politics and economy under postcolonial capitalism today. As for Amya's infrapolitics: more intervention than invention, more differential than machinic, the political trajectory I follow here charts an alternative political theory of infrastructure, in line with the heteronomous notion of infrapolitics I proposed in the previous chapter.

To reach Amya from Dawei town, one drives north for about 20 miles on the Union Road before turning left on Shan Road (Thai Road) to enter the SEZ area. Union Road is in consistently good condition; Shan Road is generally not. I usually made the drive on my motorbike. From the dense commotion of Dawei town's teashops, markets, and imposing old homes—reminders of Dawei's position at the crossroads of empires past—the scenery changes as the Union Road leads north. The panorama opens while signaling more recent market integration: paddy fields shimmering in the sunlight, plantations large and small (palm oil and rubber, respectively), and at a bend in the road, a military camp dating to the early 1990s, when Tatmadaw battalions arrived to secure the pipeline against KNU rebels. Turning left on Shan Road after about half an hour's drive, one rises and falls over low rolling hills until a bridge—deteriorating enough that, through its many gaps, I could always see the churning waters below—crosses the Dawei River. On its far bank stands the sign, its vinyl fluttering in the wind: “Welcome to Dawei Special Economic Zone.” Depending on one's destination in Amya, as well as the condition of the road, the drive can be another 20 minutes or easily an hour more.

Amya is an area where it is now difficult for DDA to work, as their continued concerns about the SEZ no longer resonate with many villagers there. That is one reason DDA was more than happy for me to conduct research in the area. Since they themselves had effectively lost touch with most people there, my research stood to help them better understand villagers' current views

on the SEZ and its possible restart. Whereas the vast majority of my fieldwork with DDA took place through participant observation, in Amya I turned towards semi-structured data collection through interviews and group discussions. This I combined with extended, unstructured periods of time spent with friends, colleagues, and friends of friends and colleagues drinking tea, watching football, visiting pagodas and food and drinks shops, wandering through fields and orchards, and driving around the project area. For while DDA staff no longer spent significant time themselves in Amya, they maintained close friendships with some villagers. These were the villagers with whom I spent the most time in Amya—whom I interviewed, eventually, and who helped arrange further interviews and discussions. EarthRights International's (ERI) Yangon office, which has long supported DDA, asked if I would share my findings and write a report on their behalf. They were in the process of developing activities focused on Myanmar's SEZs in Dawei, Kyaukphyu, and Thilawa. I agreed, eager to maximize the impacts of my research.¹⁰⁴

Despite the focused data collection I conducted in consultation with DDA and ERI, I continued participant observation with DDA primarily, but not exclusively. I also spent time with the Dawei Probono Lawyers Network (DPLN), the lawyers group that worked with DDA and ERI to draft the EIA disclosure letter discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter is informed by both sets of material: the interviews and discussions I conducted in Amya, as well as participant observation conducted here mainly with DPLN. In designing the research I would be conducting in Amya, I proposed a livelihoods framing. This framing brought together, on one hand, my own

¹⁰⁴ In most of my interviews and discussions in Amya, it was obvious to villagers that I bore a relationship with DDA. Intuitively, someone asking detailed questions about the SEZ probably would have some connection to DDA, DDA being widely known in Amya for its criticism of the SEZ over the years. I openly acknowledged my relation to DDA and ERI—even if ERI is not well-known in Amya—although I made clear that I came not as staff for either organization, but rather as a university student from the U.S. conducting research on the SEZ, especially villagers' views of it, that I would be sharing with both organizations. More than a few villagers grasped my research as a chance to make clear their stance on the project—out of frustration that DDA and other organizations were drowning out the voices of villagers themselves. Others were willing to share their views regardless.

focus on agrarian politics and economy in the shadow of the SEZ, and on the other hand, DDA, ERI, and DPLN's interests in qualitative, holistic analysis that might offer something different, in their view, than the top-down, technical assessments and feasibility studies commissioned by project proponents. "Livelihood" (*a'theq mwe wun kyaung*) also circulates easily as a discussion topic in Amya. If one asks about someone's livelihood, the answer is usually immediate: *chanthama*, or smallholder plantation farmer, typically of cash crops such as cashew nuts, betel nut, rubber, and seasonal fruits, roughly in that order. To be a *chanthama* is to be a farmer of *chan*: plantation or orchard land. *Chanthama* is the primary occupation and source of income in Amya, with *laythama*—paddy rice farmer, or farmer of *lay* land—only second among generally mixed occupations and income sources.

But "livelihoods" also speaks to more than someone's occupation and income. Ian Scoones defines livelihoods as "(a)n integrated, holistic, bottom-up perspective centered on the understanding of what people do to make a living in diverse social contexts and circumstances" (Scoones 2015, 1). Although Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway's work in the 1990s is often seen as the founding moment for livelihoods as a field of study (see Chambers and Conway 1992), a longer genealogy exists. In the early nineteenth century, William Cobbett, the English pamphleteer, politician, and farmer who opposed the enclosure of agricultural land, traversed much of central and southern England by horseback, carrying out "actual observation of rural conditions." He published these observations in his popular collection *Rural Rides*, brought out first serially then as a book in 1830 (Cobbett 2009). For Scoones, Marx's *Grundrisse* sets out important parameters for livelihoods research not long thereafter—articulating, Scoones suggests, a grounded political economy method based on multilinear, relational structural analysis. Subsequently, early contributions to geography and anthropology foregrounded reflections on

“modes of life” (Vidal de la Blache 1911) and “modes of livelihood” (Evans-Pritchard 1940) that proved influential for later livelihoods research, not least for Karl Polanyi, at work on his book *The Livelihood of Man* when he died in 1964 (Polanyi 1977). By then, the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in southern Africa had for decades been pioneering collaborative, cross-sectoral, field-based social research that located rural life within—not as remnants or apart from—wider processes of social and economic transformation: industrialization, labor migration, urbanization (Werbner 1984, Fardon 1990). The village studies tradition of the early postwar decades also emphasized integrative, cross-disciplinary research on what would now be recognized as livelihood issues (Lipton and Moore 1972, Harriss 2011). However, the rise of modernization theory in the development institutions of the postwar period—the U.N., the Bretton Woods institutions, bilateral development agencies—brought with it greater technical specialization. Singular disciplinary perspectives, especially those of neoclassical economics, marginalized more holistic work on rural life until the period of livelihoods research in the 1990s (Scoones 2015, 2–4).

Part of what appealed to my colleagues from DDA, ERI, and DPLN about the research I planned in Amya was that it promised an alternative to the knowledge work of project proponents: the thousands upon thousands of pages of impact assessments and feasibility studies that reinforced an overarching point of view—how to move the project forward. Yet the research I conducted in Amya would be far from alone in departing from this mode of knowledge. In talking with Kyaw Htet and the others, I understood that I could—and in the report for ERI, I did—locate the Amya research within an alternative knowledge tradition well-established in Dawei: that of research conducted by some of these same organizations. Consistently, that research has focused on

villagers' living conditions, how living conditions changed with the onset of the SEZ project, and villagers' ideas, understandings, and viewpoints regarding the project.

Two research reports stand out: *Local People's Understandings of the Dawei Special Economic Zone*, published in 2012 by a consortium of organizations in Dawei (SSDN and DDA 2012), and *Voices from the Ground: Concerns over the Dawei Special Economic Zone and Related Projects*, published in 2014 by DDA (DDA 2014). These too inspired the work I carried out in Amya. The 2012 report states that its objective is “to understand and disseminate the perceptions of local communities on the Dawei Special Economic Zone.” Researchers from the Southern Social Development Network (SSDN), working with DDA, “conducted research on what people knew and understood about the project and its impact on their lives.” They aimed to use the report “to advocate for their voices to be heard” (SSDN and DDA 2012, 4). Drawing on basic qualitative research, the report leads with a section called “Socio-economic status of the study area”—a livelihoods overview, in effect—before turning to the main sections titled “Local perceptions of the Dawei SEZ project” and “Feelings and worries.” DDA’s 2014 report is based on more in-depth qualitative research, as well as detailed quantitative research, namely over 1,500 randomly sampled household surveys. The surveys covered villagers’ primary occupations, income sources and amounts, land and resource needs and access, and how these have changed over time and with the SEZ. Foregrounding quotations from villagers, the report aims “to document the experience of villagers,” many of whom, “have expressed a deep sense of injustice from their treatment” (DDA 2014, 5–6). In a typical DDA appeal to state and capital for better forms of development, the report concludes, “Local people have expressed that they are not against development, but want development that is not harmful to people or the environment. The governments and other project partners should take people’s concerns seriously and work towards sustainable development by

improving the livelihood security of the local communities and ensuring environmental sustainability” (DDA 2014, 75).

Not unlike the knowledge work of project proponents, these reports also tend towards a singular, overarching point of view—raising concerns over the SEZ. At the same time, they recall the holism of the livelihoods research tradition. Yet the research tradition in Dawei pointedly adds “voice” (*a-than*). Voice, for DDA, stands out in a conceptual field that includes the ideas, understandings, viewpoints, and—especially—concerns of villagers living in the SEZ project areas. It attributes to villagers the possible expression of collective political agency, mediated by the representational apparatuses of organizations working, as I have argued, in the mode of organic intellectuals. Voice, no doubt, has long been associated with protest: within organizations, businesses, and nations, in one influential formulation (Hirschman 1970), as well as within agrarian studies in Southeast Asia (Adas 1981, Scott 1985a, Li 2014). Yet voice also stands for a problem. Whose voices count? Whose voices are audible? What if there are multiple voices, clamoring for attention? What of those voices at odds with dominant narratives? The Burmese word for voice, *a-than*, can also be translated as “noise.” What if one hears not voice—an integrated collective expression—but rather noise—something messier, more ambivalent, more dissonant? At stake is a tension in the livelihoods research tradition. On one hand, voice corresponds to a promisingly holistic, cross-sectoral, integrated research imperative pushing against the trend towards mono-disciplinary specialization indicative of postwar development knowledge. On the other hand, holism risks eliding hierarchy, imbalance, and difference as such—the conceptual field of noise—in the construction and mobilization of knowledge about changing rural societies.

Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and May Lin hoped I would find “voice” in my inquiry into Amya living conditions and their relation to the SEZ. But on my many rural drives, visiting Amya villages, what I found was closer to “noise”: multiple, often discordant narratives about the SEZ that were frequently at odds with the positions of DDA, ERI, and DPLN.¹⁰⁵ In fact, if project proponents’ knowledge work indicates one set of elite actors—the Thai and Myanmar states, ITD, and an ensemble of further government agencies, private contractors, and third-party consulting companies—then the knowledge work of DDA, ERI, and DPLN represents another mode of elite knowledge production. DDA, for one, has tended towards soliciting voice in service of specific liberal values: transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making. Although it would be a mistake to draw too close an equivalence between project proponents’ knowledge work and DDA’s, DDA’s work also presents a dominant political narrative—the dominant alternative, certainly, to that of project proponents.

This chapter demonstrates there is more than these two alternatives in play. This excess, moreover, helps explain the passage from the concerns DDA so painstakingly documented in the early 2010s before the SEZ’s suspension, to the late 2010s, when DDA’s persistent criticism of the SEZ no longer aligned with many villagers’ views on the project. Thus, while inspired by livelihoods research traditions, I nonetheless depart from their normative holisms to better address the noise I so often found. In so doing, I continue reposing the problem of the political in relation to postcolonial capitalism, contributing to wider efforts to stage postcolonial Asia and Africa as sites of innovation in the study of political modernity (Chatterjee 2004b, 2011, Ferguson 2006,

¹⁰⁵ This juxtaposition between voice and noise resembles the contrast between signal and noise in Brian Larkin’s (2008) ethnography of media and technology in northern Nigeria. For Larkin, signal stands for the transmission of messages and modalities of connection, whereas noise refers to forms of interference, instability, and breakdown. Technology is not always “successful.” Transmissions sometimes fail, and connections do not always form. Similarly in Dawei, noise points up the limits of something more connective, premised on convergence and its potential (voice). Noise refers to forms of disconnection, divergence, and political fragmentation, which in time have become an obstacle to DDA’s attempts to build and maintain a politics that contests the Dawei SEZ.

2015, Chen 2010, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, Mbembe 2017). In many ways, DDA understands its political project within normative liberal accounts of the political: existing in a free and autonomous domain, open and accessible to all, shored up by information that *should* be transparent and laws to which all actors *should* be accountable. Notwithstanding its recognizable secular-universal trajectory, I have raised questions about DDA’s self-understanding of its political project, pointing out its performative dimensions, material entanglements, imbrications with state and capital, and the fragmented political field of which it is a part. Here, I turn to political projects that are even more directly intertwined with material infrastructures large and small, pushing beyond DDA’s would-be conventional siting of the political to the “noisy” infrapolitics of Amya. Amya further unsettles normative accounts of the political, raising questions over what can or should be counted as political, where politics happens and how, and what kinds of political figures and demands are proper to politics. In attending to infrapolitics in Amya—most occurrences being far more mundane than the march *for* the SEZ along Shan Road—I build on scholarship that grasps infrastructure as a site through which to displace dominant conceptions of the political, relocating the political in terms more capacious, more generous vis-à-vis politics “in most of the world” (Chatterjee 2004b, 3).¹⁰⁶

In parallel if more locally, at issue is also a rewriting of the politics of the Dawei SEZ. For in a sense, DDA presides over an elite historiography of infrapolitics in Dawei, a historiography

¹⁰⁶ With respect to her work on infrastructure politics in postapartheid South Africa, Antina von Schnitzler writes, “Here, the political is not delimited in a sphere beyond the concerns of daily life, nor does it necessarily take the form of public deliberation or demonstration. If, as much scholarship has suggested, infrastructures are not simply neutral conduits but instead central to the constitution of modernity in a diversity of ways...an ethnographic approach to this politics of infrastructure, I suggest, similarly opens up conceptual and methodological space for an exploration of forms of the political that take shape outside of its conventional locations and mediations” (Von Schnitzler 2016, 9). Drawing on Chatterjee (2004b), von Schnitzler stresses that “(s)uch a rethinking of normative liberal accounts of the political is particularly important in postcolonial contexts, in which the formal political sphere, itself in part a legacy of colonial modes of government, is often inaccessible to large sections of the population—from the residents of informal settlements to the informally employed or those subject to ‘traditional’ authorities or clientelist relations.”

that—as the subaltern studies tradition has shown of elite histories of nationalism—risks overwriting a singular narrative upon a more contradictory, heterogeneous set of political projects. Like nationalism’s elite histories, DDA’s infrapolitics also projects specific forms and figures of the political, particular claims about what constitutes legitimate demands, motivations, and expression, and a general delimiting of the political beyond which falls much, if not all, of infrapolitics in Amya. Returning Amya’s noisy infrapolitics to the domain of the political, I offer an alternative account of the politics of the Dawei SEZ, informed by a relay, perhaps idiosyncratic, between STS scholarship and livelihoods research traditions.

5.2 From technological zone to distribution zone

One source of noise in Amya is rain. During the rainy season one morning, after another pre-dawn departure from Dawei town, I found myself in a van with a group of mostly women—lawyers at DPLN—driving through a downpour to Kawet village in Amya. I hadn’t yet conducted the more structured research with Ma Khaing, but these earlier experiences would inform that research process. Through rain-streaked windows in the van, we could see the paddy fields, plantations, and military camp as we drove north. Turning onto Shan Road, we crossed the creaking bridge and passed the SEZ welcome sign, winding our way along the muddy red road over the hills to the lowlands. Through the fog of this rainy dawn, we could make out, off to our left, the hulking contours of the workers’ dormitory built in 2011, a large apartment block that has only ever stood empty. It was boarded up not long after ITD built it. To our right, an abandoned palm oil plantation rolled over a hillside in the distance. Eventually, we came to the turnoff for Kawet. Located next to Mawdone, where U Thein Tin, the village head, boasted of the protest for the SEZ, Kawet is one of the smaller villages in Amya, with officially some one hundred

households. Upon arrival, we tried to stay dry as we darted from the van to the building where the workshop would take place, a hall in the grounds of the modest village monastery. A flipchart, markers, tape, and a tremendous quantity of tea-mix packets—the very stuff of workshops in the villages—these we shifted from the van to a table in the hall. Meanwhile, villagers filed in under umbrellas, sandals removed piled up at the doorway, and steam rose from cups of tea as we prepared to begin the workshop. Perhaps fifty men and women—but a majority of men, to DPLN’s chagrin—took seats on the tiled floor.

As it does for DDA, the workshop for DPLN denotes a space of open, accessible, and transparent exchange, often tilted in a pedagogical direction. Sharing (or collecting) information and raising awareness are two hallmarks of workshop objectives in Dawei. This morning, the information to be shared pertained to land laws: laws regarding land classification, land ownership, the buying and selling of land, and financial compensation in the case of land acquisition for government-backed projects such as the Dawei SEZ. In Amya, some land had been formally acquired for the SEZ going back to 2012, but many disputes arose. Some villagers received compensation, some did not, and some were still waiting to see if their land would be acquired and what compensation they might receive. Only one village, Kinbun, had been resettled, but if the project were to resume, most of Amya’s fifteen villages were to be displaced, including Kawet. With this workshop, May Lin, the head of DPLN, hoped to gain a better sense of villagers’ existing knowledge of land law and better equip them to navigate land acquisition and dispute processes. Her plan, she told me as we were setting up, practically shouting to be heard over the rain pounding the corrugated tin roof, was for the workshop to be the first of several for DPLN in Amya. Hopefully, it would be a point of re-entry for town-based organizations now that DDA had all but stopped working in the area.

From the outset of the workshop, however, a disconnect became clear: between DPLN's account of the normative affordances of land law—what the law should do, how it should protect villagers' land holdings—and villagers' accounts of what land law does or does not do. Naw Eleanor, a DPLN staff person, began the workshop by listing formal land classifications in Myanmar, the relevant guidelines and laws governing their use and transfer, several international guidelines related to displacement and development projects, and how to register one's land. Before long, one of the younger villagers politely intervened, apologized for not quite following, and asked somewhat incredulously whether all of this applies to land in the SEZ area. For him, he said, it's not really how it works in Amya. Eleanor clarified that for now, she wanted to start with the relevant laws and guidelines, and later we could get into specifics.

After a teabreak, May Lin stepped up to the front of the hall before the next session began. She posed a question: how many of you would move if you received compensation? A thicket of hands shot up—almost everyone's. An older villager, Htoo Chit, stood up. As others nodded their heads—he appeared to command respect—he spoke about the importance of a fair compensation process. He also made clear he wants the project to return. In terms I would hear often in Amya, he said he accepts the SEZ is a matter of “national needs” (*naing-gnan-daw lo-at-chet*), a project critical “to develop the nation” (*naing-gnan-daw pwun-pyo-aung*). Under the right conditions, he said—a question of financial compensation, it was clear, more than formal legal protections—he would be willing to move. It seemed he was far from alone in this. May Lin raised the experience of villagers in Thilawa, the area that became an SEZ near Yangon. Farmers displaced regretted accepting compensation, finding themselves later with serious livelihood difficulties without access to land. Her response provoked little reaction. Eleanor, frustrated, whispered to me that the

villagers are not thinking about “all these other things.” They are only interested in compensation, she said.

In the last session before lunch, another DPLN staff person presented in more detail about Myanmar’s land acquisition law and what recourse villagers have in cases of illegal land confiscation. She moved through a number of laws, government offices and institutions, dispute mechanisms, and the backdrop of Myanmar’s controversial 2008 constitution. Like Eleanor’s presentation, however, this one too gained limited traction. In the question and answer session, another older villager stood up, thanking DPLN for the workshop. He knew much more now, he said, about rules and regulations related to land. His question was simple. He had two plots of land with the same crops and same acreage, he explained. Yet he received very different compensation payments for each plot. Why? No one had a direct answer. It should be the same, he said, and not only for his land, but across the SEZ area. He felt that a more consistent, more uniform compensation process was strongly needed. From disputing land acquisition, he returned the discussion to compensation. Yet while suggesting that laws, guidelines, and regulations do not work as they should, he still accepted that they should be applied more equally. May Lin and her colleagues were more than happy to agree with him on the latter point. On compensation, however, they promised to return with more information about the challenges farmers encountered not only in Thilawa, after being displaced, but also in Map Ta Phut—which the villagers hadn’t heard of. Map Ta Phut, May Lin explained, is the Thai industrial estate on which ITD is modeling the Dawei SEZ.

Just before we broke for lunch, the clouds opened again; another downpour thundered upon the roof. I could just about hear Eleanor, back at the front of the hall again, trying to argue that the law should be for the benefit of ordinary people, not companies. But the villagers, verging on

disgruntled now, were still focused on compensation. Some said that next time they would prefer to hear more about compensation in Amya, rather than Thilawa or someplace in Thailand. But lunch brought the temperature back down. Over pumpkin curry, a sharp, sour soup, and cooked green vegetables—paid for from DPLN’s workshop budget, if also cooked by women DPLN hoped would be in the workshop itself—May Lin and her colleagues carried on more casually with Htoo Chit, his neighbors, and the other participants from Kawet. They discussed plans to return for another workshop now that they, DPLN, had a clearer sense of how they could be helpful to villagers there—and villagers, they hoped, now knew more about what kind of support DPLN could provide.

Tense at times, the workshop raised questions I mulled over during lunch and in the days that followed, as May Lin and her colleagues and I thought about what to do next in Amya. The next steps could be awkward, it seemed to me. Villagers’ comments suggested core disagreements about the SEZ and the political projects it requires. Does it—as DDA and DPLN are certain—call for essentially equalizing political projects, mobilized to contest the SEZ, grounded in norms of transparency, accountability, and local participation? Htoo Chit and others at the workshop appeared less certain. The villagers in attendance shared a certain normative discourse of fairness, of equal treatment, of consistent application of legal standards—of how things *should* work, in short. Some even went so far as to propose that compensation rates should be fully uniform for the same amount of land or number of crops. But they made it clear that that is not how things *do* work, as in the younger villager confused by Eleanor’s premises, or the older villager who said he received two different payments for practically the same plots of land: how could that be? Htoo Chit, meanwhile, made it obvious he is eager for the SEZ to resume. For him and more than a few others, it seemed, amid much nodding along, the project’s “national” status was almost self-

justifying. He was ready to move, as long as compensation were handled appropriately. Far from contesting the SEZ, Htoo Chit and his neighbors were certainly most invested in financial compensation, a directly material question more than one of possible formal equalities. Indeed, though the villagers at the workshop did express desire for an open, fair, and consistent compensation process—the main way, clearly, they assimilated DPLN’s presentations on land law—we will see that compensation later became a locus of much more opaque, even secretive political activities in the villages of Amya.

Htoo Chit and others’ comments at the workshop provide the outlines of an alternative account of what the Dawei SEZ is and does, an account that differs not only from DDA and DPLN’s, but also from prevailing notions in science studies and infrastructure scholarship. What *is* the Dawei SEZ, in fact? Is it—in promise or actuality—what Thomas P. Hughes would call a large technological system? For Hughes (1987, 1993), large technological systems are major infrastructure networks that, typically, begin with different standards but over time converge upon a singular, more dominant form or logic. Andrew Barry’s conception of the technological zone overlaps with Hughes’ understanding of technological systems. In Barry’s (2006) formulation, technological zones are spaces of standardization and commensuration, spaces in which various actors have reduced differences between assorted practices, procedures, and forms, establishing common standards. Technological zones often cross-cut national borders. The global oil industry, telecommunications, and financial markets all partake of technological zones of different kinds (see also Barry 2013). But of the three main kinds of technological zones Barry identifies—metrological zones, infrastructural zones, and zones of qualification—he stresses that infrastructural zones in particular are sites of powerful standardization processes, as “the development of common connection standards makes it possible to integrate systems of production

and communication” (Barry 2006, 240). In his emphasis on infrastructural zones’ robust inclination towards standardization, commensuration, and the integration of production networks beyond national borders, Barry echoes in many ways the core common sense of infrastructure scholarship: the notion that infrastructure, foremost, enables the exchange of people, things, and ideas across distance, forming the relations that make possible new social, economic, and political orders (Lefebvre 1991, Graham and Marvin 1996, 2001, Larkin 2008, 2013, Easterling 2014).

Barry foregrounds infrastructure’s standardizing capacity. At the same time, he acknowledges that standardization can “fail to perform” through something so minor as a crack in a railway track; that while common standards forge connections between people and things, they also exclude others, such as “consumers and producers who do not conform to the standard”; and that while the technical practices of businesses and international organizations are those most obviously bound up with the making and management of technological zones, so too, often enough, are those of their critics. “(W)hat are thought of as civil society organizations,” Barry specifies, “are themselves centrally involved in the creation of transnational technological zones” (244).

For DDA and DPLN, indeed, the Dawei SEZ is a technological zone. It is a space for the pursuit of common standards, whether the formal equalities of transparency, accountability, and local participation, for DDA, or for DPLN, the uniform protection that land law, international displacement guidelines, and legal dispute mechanisms should afford. Although Kyaw Htet and May Lin would be the first to concede the patchy, irregular, and inconsistent character of project decision-making and the legal environment, they regard them as problems to be fixed, a set of differences to be reduced or resolved in the quest for a more fair, more just, more equal form of development.

Interestingly, Htoo Chit and the other villagers who joined the workshop also appealed to the possibility of a compensation process that might be more fair, consistent, and evenly applied. This is one indication that infrapolitics in Amya is not radically exterior to a secular-universal political trajectory, representing a political logic that would stand fully opposed to DDA's. Yet the prevailing tendency is already away from an equalizing, standardizing notion of technological zone, as well as the infrastructural common sense that stands behind it. Htoo Chit and his neighbors continually pointed out the uneven and irregular affordances of the SEZ, most importantly with regard to the bewildering inconsistencies of the compensation processes to date. Additionally, however, I was struck by the national character of Htoo Chit's comments—emphasizing the SEZ's significance to Myanmar's wider national development—as well as his strong desire for the SEZ to swiftly resume, in stark contrast to any pursuit of a more transparent and accountable form of development (which might call into question whether the SEZ should resume). At stake was less an aspirational standardization of varying practices, procedures, and forms, creating new relations that cross-cut national borders, and more so a mundane possibility—to be seized as soon as could be—to secure shares of material wealth, located against the backdrop of a national discourse of development.

Prompted by Htoo Chit and his neighbors, I came to believe another notion of the zone is necessary, a notion I call the distribution zone. Unlike the technological zone, the distribution zone illuminates how, for some, the Dawei SEZ stands for the dissemination, unequally, of both material things—compensation, most prominently, but also land, roads, electricity, and jobs, as we will see—and political things—such as legal accountability, transparent information, and the ability to participate in politics. In place of a standardizing telos that resolves forms of difference across time and space, the distribution zone foregrounds an “elliptical” present (Berlant 2012) without

those guarantees,¹⁰⁷ a suspended present deeply situated in place, a place in which forms of difference, hierarchy, and unevenness—signs of a situational-differential political trajectory—are maintained, reproduced, and in some cases exacerbated. Greater emphasis on the distributive entailments of the zone calls attention to how infrastructures more broadly, rather than converging upon harmonious processes of circulation and exchange, can also become and remain intense vectors for conflict, contradiction, and antagonism.

More than the technological zone, the distribution zone is proper to the politics and economy of today's postcolonial world. With focuses on southern Africa and Southeast Asia, James Ferguson and Tania Li have laid out one prominent set of arguments, which holds that with the passing of earlier productivist imaginaries—those which posited a passage from farm to factory, from “traditional” livelihoods to “proper jobs” in modern factories—new political rationalities have come to the fore, premised not on the universalization of wage labor but its absence (Li 2010, 2017, Ferguson 2015, Ferguson and Li 2018). Basic income grants and other forms of direct social assistance loom large; so too do struggles waged around those forms of material distribution. This politics of distribution turns less on deliberative claims to formal, abstract equality, and more on particular claims to shares of material wealth. One finds, Ferguson (2015, 47–51) shows, demands not for “the right to a house,” but rather for a specific, actual house—for concrete material things—secured by trying to intervene in and redirect channels of material resources. An emphasis on distribution over strictly production is apposite. The Dawei SEZ, unlike the Thilawa SEZ near Yangon or most SEZs elsewhere in mainland Southeast Asia, is explicitly focused on capital-intensive heavy industries, not labor-intensive light manufacturing. With the port and petrochemical estate at the heart of Dawei SEZ planning, it is the storage,

¹⁰⁷ See Byler (2012).

processing, and transshipment of petrochemicals—the distribution, in other words, of mainly oil and natural gas—that is the core of project proponents’ vision for the SEZ.

At issue, however, is not a new telos beyond productivism to replace older imaginaries of historical transformation. As Deborah Cowen (2014) has argued, the logistical revolution of the postwar period—stretching supply chains across borders, across oceans—did make distributive economic activity an important site of surplus value generation. Yet such activity did not replace production so much as challenge the distinction between production and distribution, for distribution had become a productive site, too. Cowen’s stress on transportation in particular “as a source of value and a form of production in itself,” in her phrasing, builds on Marx’s own reflections on capital mobility, circulation, and the transport industry, which refuse simplistic distinctions between production and distribution (Cowen 2014, 100–1).¹⁰⁸ Like the “distributive cities” concept in urban studies scholarship (Negrey *et al.* 2011, Cowen 2014), the distribution zone challenges the hold of production on spatial and temporal imaginaries. The distribution zone calls for not a substitute telos of distribution, but rather closer attention to new constellations of politics and economy in the present.

The parallels with Sanyal’s (2007) account of postcolonial capitalism are striking. Like Ferguson and Li, he too argues that the farm to factory transition has lost much of its political and empirical traction, grounded in declining productivist imaginaries. In its wake, one finds typically provisional attempts to secure the means of livelihoods—income, shelter, access to basic infrastructures—through exceptions to the universalizing norms of regulations, policies, and the law itself, in line with Chatterjee’s (2004b, 2008, 2011) theorization of political society. A shared

¹⁰⁸ The transport industry, Marx insists in *Capital* Volume 2, is an “additional production process.” “The productive capital invested in this industry,” he writes, “thus adds value to the products transported, partly through the value carried over from the means of transport, partly through the value added by the work of transport” (Marx 1992, 226–7).

imperative of national development retains a strong normative legitimacy, yet conditions of accumulation create a divided, contradictory politico-material field, structured by capital and non-capital, for Sanyal, or civil and political society, for Chatterjee. Sites of accumulation like economic zones in particular increasingly value land over labor, pushing displaced laborers into insecure, informal, and precarious forms of work (Sanyal and Bhattacharyya 2009, Bhattacharya and Sanyal 2011). The zone, in this sense, is not a site of difference overcome so much as a site of difference sustained, reproduced, and distributed anew across novel political and economic terrain in the postcolonial world.¹⁰⁹

After lunch, I made sure to catch up with Maung Soe before we left Kawet. Maung Soe, a friend of Htoo Chit's, was one of the other more active participants in the workshop. The terms of discussion in the workshop struck me as very narrow, almost stifling—stuck between the law on one hand, and compensation on the other—so I wanted to hear from Maung Soe more generally on the SEZ, ITD, and the government's activities. Over green tea back in the meeting hall, Eleanor joined us as Maung Soe expanded on his views. For him, the SEZ could be a good thing. He accepts it, he said; he wants it to happen. He emphasized that Shan Road, built for the SEZ in the early 2010s before the project's suspension, had already made life easier in Amya. Despite the project being on hold, he could still use the road. And he felt the promise of employment could not be ignored. Maybe they would have to leave their villages, but—he was confident—there would be new factories and an industrial zone, and they would be able to move to a new village

¹⁰⁹ Against such a background, the law can become a dense site of political investment. In postcolonial societies where heterogeneity appears in excess—across categories of race, ethnicity, religion, caste, class, or otherwise—the law, and constitutions in particular, have in many cases become important loci of attempted commensuration, of attempted suturing over of the fractures of social division (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 2006, Chatterjee 2014). Witness the attraction of the law and the citation of the 2008 constitution on the part of DPLN, reflected to an extent in Htoo Chit and other villagers' appeals to the possibility of a fair compensation process. A desire flickered in the workshop: the law, finally, might be a tool, a mechanism, for resolving an excess of difference. If the technological zone follows the grain of that desire, the distribution zone brushes against it.

regardless. He had little trust in ITD, and so he felt it would be up to the government to take care of villagers (*k'yu saik meh*), taking responsibility (*dawun yu meh*) as necessary for relocation and compensation processes. He suggested the government could even set and enforce a minimum daily or monthly salary for villagers displaced and seeking employment in the zone—not a basic income grant, to be sure, yet something that, for Maung Soe, could protect against the vagaries of employment by “the company,” or ITD, which otherwise would simply pay as much or as little as they wanted.

Eleanor spoke up. Her friend worked for ITD on the SEZ project at one point, doing the same work as Thai staff, but the salary was totally different. Maung Soe nodded his head stoically—ITD’s wanton wage discrimination in favor of its Thai workers was common knowledge in Amya. In his view, as in the view of many others in Amya, villagers from the area should be prioritized for employment opportunities. But there was no plan that he could see. It would be better, he said, if the government could step in to manage the situation more systematically. For ITD is not really disciplined, he complained (*sii kan m'shii bu*); their management approach is too personal, too partial towards Thai workers, and how was it that they could not keep implementing the project? I tried to explain how the project was suspended, but I didn’t get too far. Time was running short; the drive back to town beckoned. We resolved to meet again at some point—perhaps at his home over tea, he suggested. I readily agreed.

In the distribution zone, multiple standards co-mingle without necessarily tending towards resolution. Different wages for different people, sorted by nationality; a management style too personalized, in lieu of more systematic management by the government—these are problems, for Maung Soe, that call for better handling. But he is certainly not against the SEZ project. He is grateful for Shan Road, cutting across Amya, and he looks forward to the prospect of factory-based

employment. Displacement and relocation appear to trouble him minimally if at all. And interestingly, although it is ITD's ill-managed, discriminatory practices that most preoccupy him, he shifts between two kinds of answers. One, the minimum salary, suggests fair and equal treatment, at least for villagers displaced by the project. The other simply counters ITD's partiality towards Thai workers with a differently partial solution: prioritizing Amya villagers for employment opportunities. Both answers, regardless, stake claims to material distribution, constructing the SEZ as a set of things to be diverted, divided, and tapped into to secure the basic livelihoods of villagers it directly affects. These are hallmarks of the noisy infrapolitics of the distribution zone.

5.3 Beyond “flow,” beyond “network”: infrapolitics (re)distributed

If this first ethnographic moment presents a mixture between more equalizing and more distributive political imaginaries—a co-mingling, in effect, of the secular-universal and the situational-differential—the second and third ethnographic moments tend more decisively in the latter direction, if without entirely relinquishing elements of the former. The shift began in the days following the Kawet workshop, days when I began to gain a clearer sense of the difficulties DDA and DPLN faced in trying to work in Amya.

Eager to talk more with Maung Soe—to visit his home to share some green tea—I checked in with Zaw Myat, DDA's SEZ point person, and May Lin about returning soon to Amya. I was met with silences, pauses, stares into the distance, and a steady stream of “well...” After some polite probing, I learned that the main issue had to do with U Sein. I met U Sein on my first visit to Dawei in 2012. He is one of the founders of DDA, like Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and a few others. But he is also unlike them in quite a few other ways. For one thing, Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and the

others who founded DDA were all young, in their 20s when they founded DDA. U Sein was not. In his 40s at that time already, U Sein also lived not in Dawei town, but in Amya. He had saved money from his job working at an airline office in town, bought several acres of land in Amya, and built a house there that became, for a time, a hub for DDA and other political activities—eventually those of the Dawei National Party (DNP), which U Sein also helped found. In contrast to the teashops, social media, beer stations, barbecue shops, and karaoke that define so much of social life for Kyaw Htet and his friends, U Sein goes to sleep early and rises early; he doesn't drink alcohol and barely touches tea; he always wears a longyi, never jeans; he moves easily in the world of weddings, funerals, and monastic ceremonies in Amya; and though he is on Facebook—this is Myanmar after all—he ridicules young people who post selfies, preferring (he suggests) a less boastful presentation of self. Yet he is hardly short on his own swagger and braggadocio. Far from a peasantized ascetic in retreat from the world, he is loud, brash, and impressively energetic, often aggrieved by one thing or another, usually in some relation to the SEZ project. In rapid, staccato, scatter-shot language—in Burmese and English, carried off with a confidence only he could possibly muster—he is awash in ribald, off-color jokes, some of which I could even understand, interspersed with endless ideas for how better to contest the SEZ. (On visa runs to Bangkok, I spent no minor amount of time at Pantip Plaza, a labyrinth of an electronics mall, trying to track down specific models of projectors and cameras U Sein wanted to use in Amya.) My lasting impression of U Sein is of him, longyi-clad, jumping side-saddle onto my motorbike, clapping my shoulder—“*Thwa leiq!*” (Go!)—and shouting bawdy gossip about village heads over the buzz of the engine as we would drive off to meet one or another friend of his in Amya.

U Sein divides opinion. In strategy meetings at the DDA office, U Sein cut a quarrelsome, combative figure, disagreeing often most forcefully over DDA's continued unwillingness to

“touch” compensation issues—since, as I found when drafting the open letter, DDA felt that working on compensation meant accepting the SEZ might resume. (Even the language of “touching” compensation—*kaing deh*, which can also mean to “handle” something—locates compensation at a slight distance, beyond oneself yet near, something one should be careful about reaching out to, something perhaps hot, taboo, or risky to take up.) U Sein took issue with DDA’s cautious distancing of themselves from compensation. He knew how much compensation meant to villagers in Amya; for him, DDA could not afford to avoid the issue without condemning themselves to irrelevance.

But if U Sein, roguish yet a founder, was always still accepted within DDA, he was not always accepted beyond DDA, including in Amya. His misgivings over the SEZ were long-held, basic in a way, and a matter of being almost personally affronted by it. He didn’t retire to Amya just to have some industrial zone land on top of his fields, he often said in so many words. Beginning in the early 2010s, he had tirelessly built relations across the villages of Amya with people he always referred to, with a little too much accuracy, as “my men”: groups of villagers, nearly exclusively male, to whom he strenuously shared his reservations about the SEZ, with varying degrees of reciprocity over time. He printed out and distributed—and as needed, translated from English—news articles about the SEZ’s impacts; he convened impromptu discussions, which he sometimes filmed with a handheld video recorder, at food and drinks shops and market stalls, urging villagers to see the faults in the SEZ project; and he was central in founding committees that, with him and without him, successfully and unsuccessfully, prevailed upon village heads and project proponents to reshape, adjust, or sometimes reject one or another aspect of the SEZ project. Not without justification, he takes credit for the activities of village committees that, in the early 2010s, disputed and refused relocation procedures that could have quite literally cleared the way

for the SEZ before those activities, if not alone, helped persuade the Myanmar government to suspend the SEZ. But unfortunately for U Sein, “his men” constitute only shifting fractions of the villages, fractions that—DDA worried, and DPLN felt convinced—were declining over time as more and more villagers tired of the project’s suspension. And those who were not his men were, perhaps increasingly, *really* not his men. Quietly, some even approached their village heads to prevent U Sein from talking to people in their villages, regarding him as a troublemaker who, consequently, implicated DDA in the trouble he makes.¹¹⁰

My attempt to return, swiftly, to follow up with Maung Soe stumbled over these issues of village hierarchies, exclusionary relations, and (in some cases) personal feuds. Naively, I was interested only in visiting Maung Soe. Although I already knew U Sein well—and knew too that he is not everywhere appreciated—it didn’t occur to me I might have to navigate his persona here, as well as the tangle of politics his persona entails: beyond the normative transparencies of public meetings and open workshops, in spaces of rumor, gossip, and earthy improprieties. Yet I understood I should always keep DDA and, in this case, DPLN informed whenever I planned to visit Amya. So at the DDA office, I told Zaw Myat my plan to go see Maung Soe again. He couldn’t quite place Maung Soe, though, so he said he wanted to check with U Sein before I drove back to Amya—the better to ensure I wouldn’t unsettle any fragile relations. I sent off a Facebook message to May Lin, thinking it was reasonable enough to check with U Sein, but May Lin demurred. She knew that from Maung Soe’s perspective, my visit would be understood as a follow-up to the DPLN workshop, and May Lin worried about conveying any association between U Sein

¹¹⁰ It might be tempting to understand U Sein within logics of patronage and clientelism. It would be difficult, however, to frame the relations he constructs as vertical (they are more horizontal), transactional (he is trying, generally, to intervene in material distributions via the SEZ project, not tie into them himself), relatively static (these relations have changed quickly over just a few years with the coming of the SEZ and then its suspension), or in any sense beyond class or capital (these relations are directly tied to a capital-intensive infrastructure project in a setting defined by multiple “classes of labor,” per Bernstein (2010)). See Appendix A.

and DPLN. No, she wanted to ensure DPLN would work with “all villagers,” not just *his men*, so she didn’t want my return visit to Maung Soe routed in any way through U Sein.

I waited. Eventually, Zaw Myat told me that as long as I went to Amya through DPLN, in effect, not DDA, it should be fine to do so without U Sein’s explicit approval. (I assumed he would tell him nonetheless.) The U Sein issue thus resolved, if murkily, May Lin green-lit my visit. She suggested I go with Ko Zin, a DPLN paralegal, and I asked Than Soe Mya to join as well—a friend from Dawei town. He and I had already driven out to the SEZ area a few times.

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Flow and *network* are two concepts that different organizations and institutions rely on in discussing and working on the Dawei SEZ. The Myanmar government seeks to construct the Dawei SEZ as both a space and mechanism of flow when it claims that, by providing an alternative to the Straits of Malacca, the SEZ “acts as a strategic hub for trade of goods flowing between the West and East Asia via Southeast Asia” (Government of Myanmar 2020). A discourse of network, on the other hand, is internal to the self-representation of organizations that understand themselves as civil society groups in Dawei. DPLN is the Dawei Probono Lawyers *Network*, while DDA framed itself initially as a loose network before stepping back and constituting itself as an independent organization of its own. As discussed in Chapter 3, DDA now sees itself as simply one part of a wider network that works on the Dawei SEZ from a variety of different angles and positions: formal organizations like DPLN, CSLD, ERI, and SEM, as well as less formal groups of villagers who live in the SEZ project areas, from the highlands of the roadlink area and Kyaukpa to the lowlands of Amya. The word network itself—*kun yeq*, although the English word is

sometimes used, too—appears regularly in emails and text messages, as well as in meetings, letters, and workshops, as a description for the various activities centered on the Dawei SEZ.¹¹¹

These uses of *flow* and *network* cannot be taken at face value, however. The wishful present tense of the Myanmar government, for instance, asserting the Dawei SEZ *acts* as a hub for trade flowing between parts of Asia, belies the basic fact that, in no uncertain terms, the Dawei SEZ does not exist, much less act, much less enable any steady or continuous movement of goods. As for *network*, we have seen the emergence of a fundamental divide in a political landscape that Kyaw Htet and his friends in other organizations still think of, wishfully, in terms of a network. Most obviously, this divide is between those who, like Htoo Chit and Maung Soe, now wish for the SEZ to return, and those who, like Kyaw Htet and his friends, continue to criticize its potential restart. Yet even less dramatic fractures and dissonance, less conspicuous instances of “noise” rather than “voice,” are notable, too: for example, between DDA’s focus on the normative affordances of transparency and accountability, and U Sein’s insistence that disregarding compensation—however messy it might be to “touch”—will render DDA irrelevant in Amya. How much difference can a network accommodate before it is stretched to a breaking point? At what point is *network* no longer a description commensurate to a series of conflicts, fractures, and antagonisms?

Scholars of science, technology, and political and economic life have long relied on notions of flow and network to make sense of trade, technopolitics, and the collective relations they can create. *Flow*, in the broadest sense, refers to steady or continuous movement: “to glide along as a stream,” per one prominent definition (OED Online 2020). As Anna Tsing (2000) has

¹¹¹ Within a wider emphasis on network-based activities in transnational advocacy politics (Keck and Sikkink 1998), scholarly research on Myanmar has also used a discourse of network to understand how civil society groups working on Myanmar’s SEZs conduct their activities and relate to each other, not only in Dawei, but in and across Myanmar’s other SEZ projects in Thilawa and Kyaukphyu (Nishimura 2017).

shown, flow marked a discourse foregrounded in much of the most influential globalization scholarship of the 1990s (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Marcus 1995, Appadurai 1996, Castells 1996, Hannerz 1996, Kearney 1996). Owing much to David Harvey's (1991) then-recent writings on "flexible accumulation" and "time-space compression," flow conjured deterritorialized, non-situated vistas between local and global, lifeworld and system. In Arjun Appadurai's (1996) formulation, global cultural flows cut across, even swept away, the structures that governed older modes of thought: center and periphery, national boundaries, consumption and production. *Network* refers to a group or system of interconnected people or things. In science and technology studies, actor-network theory is a radically constructivist theory and methodology that calls attention to the relations that constitute social and natural worlds; it famously guides Latour's (2005b) later call to reassemble the social across human-nonhuman, natural-social divides. The old vocation of sociology, Latour insists, is "the science of living together," and network, for Latour (1996, 5), evokes collective relations that transgress what he calls "axiological myths": assumptions about ordered relations, social hierarchies, scales large and small, insides and outsides, local and global. Through processes of "netting, lacing, weaving, twisting," a network "starts from irreducible, incommensurable, unconnected localities, which then...end into provisionally commensurable connections" (3).

Network, like flow, tends less towards place or position; it speaks to cross-cutting dynamics of relatively smooth, consonant, inter-connection between people and things. From incommensurable to commensurable, from unconnected localities to connections, network posits a telos reminiscent of standardization for Barry, for whom the technological zone renders commensurate different practices, procedures, and forms. It is little wonder that the work of Latour and Callon strongly informs some of the most prominent studies of infrastructure and

technopolitics, many of which focus on flows of things—oil, as well as uranium, water, cultural commodities, electricity, and heat among others—and the collective relations they create across human and more-than-human divides (Mitchell 2002, 2011, Larkin 2008, Collier 2011, Hecht 2012, Barry 2013, Von Schnitzler 2016, Anand 2017). This is the lineage, in many ways, of *Dingpolitik*, which tends to construct politics as the making of machinic assemblages.

Another lineage formed over roughly the same period, however. From decisively beyond the laboratory—and attuned to histories of empire, imperialism, and racialization—feminist and postcolonial scholarship raised questions over work that seemed to evacuate gender, place, and power from the study of science and technopolitics (Headrick 1981, Keller 1984, Harding 1986, 1993, 1998, Haraway 1989, Wajcman 1991).¹¹² Situated knowledges, for Donna Haraway (1988), and strong objectivity, for Sandra Harding (1995, 2005), reject the “god tricks” of Eurocentric philosophies of science, within a wider feminist science studies attention to located, embodied knowledge claims in science. More recently, Southeast Asia’s economic zones, agro-industries, and supply chains have figured prominently in studies that intersect with notions of flow and network, yet importantly diverge, as well. Southeast Asia’s zonal capitalism (Winters 1996), in Aihwa Ong’s (2006) account of the region’s economic zones, has seen the rise of what she calls graduated sovereignty, or “the fragmentation of national space into various noncontiguous zones” (77). Tsing (2006, 2009), on the other hand, follows the destruction of Indonesian forests and the rise of transnational markets in agricultural products, insisting that friction and heterogeneity are not overcome, but rather remain—if sometimes in new forms—across grounded sites of encounter. For Ong and Tsing, neither Barry’s telos of standardization, nor Latour’s telos of connection, provide guiding meta-theoretical procedures, explicitly or otherwise. Instead, their political

¹¹² Herself a key figure in this lineage, Sandra Harding also provides two valuable overviews of these literatures. See Harding (2009, 2011).

theorizing emphasizes difference and dissonance—fragmentation more than connection, friction more than harmony.

Here too I theorize by way of a grounded series of encounters, situated in a distribution zone where the flows it promises have not proven steady, continuous, or in fact extant at all. Nor have the collective relations brought forth tended towards increasing, inter-laced inter-connection. Rather, their trajectory is one of ruptures and discontinuities that have grown more problematic over time, hampering efforts by DDA and others to forge a larger, more unified political struggle. In Chapter 2, I reconceptualized capital accumulation as a bordering process: a force for the making of spatiotemporal difference. Capital accumulation became differential accumulation, a term owing to Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013a) argument that ongoing accumulation has created not a borderless world, but the proliferation of borders of all kinds. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013b) also raise concerns about the moment of opening, in their phrasing, that characterizes flow, network, and assemblage theory, as well: a dynamic of mutuality, of commensurability. They too shift attention to moments of closure, of rupture, fracture, and difference, which they insist can be politically explosive—or at least politically challenging. I return to their argument in the closing section of this chapter.

In Dawei, a fragmented politics of infrastructure has taken shape with time, a process that reflects in part the bordering process constitutive of and constituted by contemporary accumulation patterns—as the third ethnographic moment in this chapter will show. This fraught infrapolitics is a *Dingpolitik*, assembled through relations with hard and soft things: the SEZ itself, as well as the roads, electricity, jobs, and compensation it promises, not to mention the laws, policies, and assessments on which these sometimes depend. Yet if one focused only on DDA and its forms, figures, and technologies of the political—its meetings, letters, and workshops, its normative

political values, its struggle for formal equality waged on the terrain of policy—one might grasp infrapolitics as the assembling of a machine. That would be to forget another valence of infrapolitics, however. Infrapolitics is not simply the politics of infrastructure, a politics that in its most obvious forms belongs to DDA. It is also a politics of that which is relatively hidden or concealed, “differentially visible and political” (Anand 2017, 145), beyond the official archive—DDA’s, in effect—of the political in Dawei.

To grasp the politics of this distribution zone requires following the redistribution of infrapolitics. The politics of the Dawei SEZ should be understood not as an interlocking machinic assemblage, but as something more dispersed, disseminated, and discontinuous. This is a politics distributed not only along DDA’s conventional political spectrum, but also along the roads, paths, and fields of Amya, where a noisier, more situational infrapolitics abounds.

*

We were shouting again—this time not over the roar of a downpour, but the higher-pitched, rippling buzz of our motorbikes as we drove back to Amya to see Maung Soe. It was a little over a week since the DPLN workshop. I was gaining a clearer sense of why and how DDA had come to all but stop working in Amya, as their machinic assemblage—if that it is what politics was, before the suspension of the project—broke down, ground to a halt, and split apart, leaving the impression it may never have been so integrated in the first place. For a variety of reasons, U Sein, DDA’s main entry point in Amya, had lost traction in the villages. Fundamentally, the tide of opinion in the villages appeared to be turning towards welcoming a restart of the project, yet DDA continued to contest the project through forms, locations, and technologies increasingly distant from Amya. The dynamic was clear enough: with time, the SEZ had wrought not political connection, but disconnection, and not only between the town and the villages. Within Amya, too,

village stratification—exacerbated even during the period of the SEZ’s suspension, especially through ongoing land concentration, as we will see—hindered attempts to build more unified political projects.

The three of us had met at the DPLN office in the morning before jumping on our motorbikes to head north: Ko Zin from DPLN, Than Soe Mya, and myself. We had a couple of stops before Maung Soe’s home: first to visit two other villagers who had joined the previous week’s workshop; and second, to Htoo Chit’s home, to follow up with him as well. Htoo Chit turned out to be a relatively wealthy trader who also holds over ten acres of *chan* land. With Htoo Chit and the other two, Ko Zin wanted to debrief the workshop, ensuring they would join subsequent planned activities and bring family and friends.

It was early afternoon when we arrived at Maung Soe’s home. Unlike Htoo Chit’s, Maung Soe’s home was smaller, made of wood not concrete; a modest Buddhist shrine adorned it, in contrast to Htoo Chit’s larger shrine, with its extravagant electricity usage; and whereas Htoo Chit’s rusted truck stood parked outside his home, outside Maung Soe’s were only a couple of motorbikes. Still, Maung Soe is not a poor or marginal subject in Mawdone. A *chan* farmer with about five acres of land holdings—neither land-rich nor land-poor—Maung Soe is also friendly with U Thein Tin, the village head who had helped organize the protest for the SEZ. U Thein Tin joined us that afternoon with Maung Soe—it was the first time I met U Thein Tin, although he said little that day—as did a former village head, Zaw Kaung, from another village nearby. Ko Zin again debriefed the workshop and discussed plans for follow-up activities, which everyone present looked forward to, before getting back on his motorbike to return to town. The skies were darkening, but Than Soe Mya and I stuck around. I was eager for that cup of tea with Maung Soe, who welcomed us by introducing us to his two friends.

The skies opened up; now we were shouting to be heard over the downpour, bellowing our introductions between sips of hot tea. Seated cross-legged around a low wooden table, we came quickly to the SEZ project. *Hmyaw nay bi, hmyaw nay bi*, Zaw Kaung said of the SEZ project—a treacherous phrase for English speakers, translatable in terms of both hope and expectation. Did he *hope* for the project, or *expect* the project? Any ambiguity evaporated swiftly, however. He continued unequivocally, using the English word “project”: “*project louq zay jin deh*,” he said leaning across the table. “I want the project.” It was also in line with my expectations after the discussion at the workshop. Much else I would recognize as fairly common positions, as well. Zaw Kaung was not particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of having to move. Along with Maung Soe and U Thein Tin, however, he accepted the national status of the project, referring to it as a question of national need (*naing gnan daw lo ut kyeq*), echoing one of the very nationally oriented phrases Htoo Chit used at the workshop. And if the government could ensure fair compensation and address villagers’ basic needs, then yes, he said, he would move. I pressed him to clarify what he meant by basic needs. Infrastructure, he emphasized first, echoing Zaw Myo from Kawet—*a’kyay gan a sauq’ a’oo*, or electricity, roads, and bridges, he said—as well as economic and social needs, things like livelihoods and employment, he continued, and health facilities and schools. Conceivably, this was a lot, it turned out, but he framed them as interconnected issues. He stressed that the roads built for the SEZ have already proved important. Whereas it once took three hours to get to Yepyu, the town between Amya and Dawei—he was laughing now, shaking his head, thinking what the roads used to be like—they could get there now in 15 minutes, and ambulances could come too.

The drinks situation was escalating, while the rain continued outside. The hot tea had disappeared, and in its place, a small bottle of rice wine emerged—with lettering on it that, we

agreed, seemed to be Japanese. This sake, if that is what it was, we bravely mixed not only with water, but also Pepsi, as the conversation took a turn. Zaw Kaung asked if I knew any international investors who could come and invest in the SEZ. I looked at Than Soe Mya to see if I'd misheard—it seemed not. Wondering if there had been some misunderstanding, I repeated that I was just a university student, doing research on the SEZ for my Ph.D. Zaw Kaung nodded along. No, there was no misunderstanding; he understood my work. He was also just curious whether I knew of any potential investors for the SEZ. Maung Soe clarified that with so much uncertainty over the status of the project, they felt it would be good if new investors came on board. Although still no one could say what would happen, Maung Soe continued, there had been some progress on handling compensation issues.

I sat up, my turn to lean in now—I had been hoping to learn more about any updates on compensation. In the past few months, Maung Soe explained, each of the six villages prioritized for relocation, including Kawet and Mawdone,¹¹³ had formed committees of five villagers who would be responsible for taking the lead on handling compensation. Chosen by villagers themselves, he said—although he did not say how—the committee members are only representatives. In every village, he estimated, there are maybe twenty villagers active on these kinds of issues—the kind of people who would attend meetings where compensation is discussed. He also said it was the new NLD-led government that had mandated the formation of these committees—a step forward that, he hastened to add, was not about this particular government per se, but rather just the government showing at least some signs of being more systematic (*s'niq t'kyā*) in its activities. *A'mya kyī po kaung laa deh*, he said contentedly of the government's

¹¹³ Amid continually shifting claims from the Myanmar government, it should be noted, even this information about six villages being prioritized for relocation, within a larger group of villages that will eventually be relocated, was not certain and could not be fully verified.

response now: it's become a lot better. For him, the formation of committees was reassuring. There was more, though. He described three rooms at the ITD visitor center where, according to him, anyone could go inquire about compensation, or address other issues related to the project. Anyone can go? I asked, doubtfully. Yes, he said, as far as he's heard—he hadn't gone himself. These rooms too, he continued, were set up by government directive. It might even be the government in these rooms, he said, but probably company representatives, too.

I was not convinced of the extent, accessibility, or representativeness of these committees and, more generally, recent steps forward, in Maung Soe's account, regarding compensation. Yet it was heartening to have some indication that perhaps the government's response to these issues was improving. I thought of Tamok village, one of the larger villages of Amya, where several years ago, runoff from the quarry had destroyed over half of the paddy fields belonging to farmers in the village. Those farmers had struggled to survive since; they were practically desperate for financial compensation. If compensation were not only possible, but possible through tententially—if not yet actually—fair and accessible processes, that seemed encouraging. Unlikely though it appeared to me, perhaps compensation might figure as an area in which, after all, elements of the technological zone would emerge: a pursuit of common standards that ultimately resolve differences between varying practices. After we returned to Dawei, however, and in the months that followed, it became clear that was not how compensation would unfold. The logic of the distribution zone reasserted itself, as the third ethnographic moment will make clear.

From a certain perspective, the flows made possible by the Dawei SEZ should have created a network weaving together new cross-cutting political and material collectivities. This is the perspective not only of political theorizing in science studies and technopolitics scholarship, but

in other areas as well, if in different terms. To return to Harvey's (2003) dispossession thesis, Harvey contends that flows of finance capital take material shape in infrastructures that, in penetrating space, solve crises of over-accumulation while creating new possibilities for political solidarity. This thesis follows from his preceding work (Harvey 1991) on time-space compression and flexible accumulation, which as Tsing (2000) pointed out, was highly influential for anthropologists turning to globalization at the time. It reiterates, as well, his still earlier work (Harvey 1982) on the spatial fixes that capital internally, autonomously seeks out, retelling a version of network theory in the language of Marxist historicism.¹¹⁴ This thesis takes material infrastructures, bearers of finance capital's spatial fix, to be knitting together the organic unity of capital's geography, connecting anti-capitalist struggles against expanded reproduction to anti-imperial struggles against processes of dispossession.

The three stories that situate the Dawei SEZ—Thai-led regional integration, capitalist restructuring in Myanmar, and zonal accumulation patterns in Myanmar's south—already required a different, more multilinear account. So too with DDA's political trajectory, one piece of a wider, fragmented political landscape around Dawei. Here as well, by way of these rural drives—from the Kawet workshop to tea, then “sake,” at Maung Soe's—it is difficult to grasp the Dawei SEZ as engendering new inter-laced, inter-connected political and material solidarities—machinic, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, or otherwise. Rather, the direction has been towards greater tension, division, and disconnection with time. Importantly, it is not the case that Htoo Chit and Maung Soe, for instance, are simply part of a different network, premised on different flows, than that of DDA and their colleagues. On the contrary, although Htoo Chit and Maung Soe are among those villagers with whom DDA would now struggle to find common ground, they were

¹¹⁴ Harvey (1975, 2006b) is also a major contributor to scholarship in geography on the notion of uneven development. See also Das (2017).

enthusiastic participants in the activities of DPLN, an organization with which DDA worked closely during my fieldwork. DDA explicitly understands itself to be part of a network that includes DPLN. U Sein, for his part, is a core figure in DDA, yet he breaks with others in the organization over fundamental issues, especially whether to “touch” compensation. DPLN quietly refuses to work with him, seeking to work with “all villagers,” May Lin said, not just “his men.”

To be sure, the Dawei SEZ project *has* brought these individuals and organizations into relation, above all along the roads I drove so often between Dawei town and Amya. One of these roads, Shan Road, did not exist before the SEZ project; it is a material infrastructure that has helped make possible new relations. Yet to figure these relations as a network, as relations tending towards commensuration, inter-connection, or even wider solidarities, is to move past much too quickly the very challenging moments of closure—in Mezzadra and Neilson’s formulation, or here, moments of noise rather than voice—that the Dawei SEZ has also produced, and increasingly so. When, foremost, villagers express their desire for the SEZ to resume; when they figure the SEZ as a set of promised material things to be diverted and claimed, particularly around land, compensation, jobs, and basic infrastructures; and when they seek channels to negotiate directly with the government and ITD about relocation and compensation—as in Maung Soe’s comments about the new village committees and the rooms at the ITD visitor center—these are moments that diverge from the more singular, secular, and universal narrative about the politics of the Dawei SEZ over which DDA presides. These are moments that notions of flow, network, and the technological zone struggle to accommodate. They are moments that tend to express situational claims to specific material things, aside from the normative affordances of policy, guidelines, and law. They are invested less in formal equalities or the promise of common standards, and more in distributive claims that marshal and reinforce existing hierarchies. These are forms, figures, and

locations of the political beyond DDA's. As a political tendency—not an all-consuming logic—immanent to the noisy infrapolitics of Amya, this situational-differential trajectory reflects the material conditions of the area. The third ethnographic moment turns more directly to this question: of how conditions of accumulation have shaped the situational-differential trajectory at hand.

5.4 Accumulation, differentially

The usual route to the SEZ area is along Union Road, moving north from Dawei town to the eventual turnoff, on the left, onto Shan Road and into the SEZ area. But there is another route. Driving not north from town, but rather west towards the coast, one comes to Maungmagan Beach, the popular local beach where DDA organized its beach-cleaning action in advance of demanding the suspension of the coal-fired powerplant in 2012. From Maungmagan, it is possible to then drive north, in parallel to the coast, entering the SEZ area by way of a road much rougher and bumpier in the dry season, and much muddier and washed out in the rainy season, than the Union Road and Shan Road.

I usually avoided this road, preferring the faster, smoother drive via Shan Road. But towards the end of my fieldwork, I heard intriguing reports that the coastal road had improved. Villagers in Banpyi, the village at the end of the coastal road within the SEZ area, had complained bitterly to me that with the SEZ suspended, no one was willing to repair the road: not ITD or other project contractors, nor the Myanmar government. The contractors, like ITD, had been ordered to cease activities, while the regional government, despite having the necessary funds at its disposal, balked at diverting public budgetary resources towards infrastructure for the SEZ. The SEZ, at least in theory, was a private undertaking that the government should not have to pay for—not

even its basic infrastructure.¹¹⁵ Who then would have been fixing the road? I drove out one morning to investigate. It was true: the road had improved dramatically. The usually gnarled surface of the road—ruttled, rocky, and painfully slow to navigate in the dry season—had been covered over by a smooth layer of earth allowing me to glide quickly, easily along it on my motorbike. Periodically, around one or another bend in the road, or cresting one of its hills, large construction vehicles rose into view: backhoes, dump trucks, bulldozers—all of them emblazoned with the bright orange ITD logo, all busily at work on the road. Clearly, an agreement had been struck to repair the road.

This road leads farther away from the secular-universal political trajectory of organizations based in Dawei town—DDA, primarily, but DPLN and other organizations, too. Its challenge is a further redistribution of infrapolitics, disseminated now along a (generally) rough, bumpy road that bounces, lurches, and swerves towards a messier, less clear, more situational political tendency directed towards material concerns. This road eventually takes us from DPLN’s workshop and tea with Maung Soe to a visit to a landless worker, this chapter’s third main ethnographic moment. First, however, I linger on basic infrastructure, employment, and compensation, each a locus of situational-differential politics, each constructing the SEZ as a set of material opportunities to be claimed. The visit to U Myo, the landless worker, will return us to questions of accumulation.

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Road repairs, it turned out, had followed a suitably convoluted process—as Naing Tun eventually explained to me, more than a little bemused at the Gordian complexities of it all. Villagers in Banpyi, led by their village head, had managed to convince ITD to commit the labor and equipment needed to fix the road, so long as the government would provide the funding. The

¹¹⁵ See Aung (2017) for a discussion of public and private financing methods with respect to SEZs in Myanmar.

regional government finally agreed, providing for the expenditure in their annual budget. At the national level, however, the Ministry of Planning and Finance initially rejected the allocation, restating the position that private investment is more appropriate for a road that is integral to a private-sector project planned to resume. Interestingly, U Sein also intervened, interceding against the village head (not one of “his men,” for better or for worse). He was concerned that if villagers saw ITD vehicles returning to construction activities, they would think the SEZ had resumed. Given growing support for the project to resume, by this time, he worried that enthusiasm over the project’s perceived return could turn the tide of opinion even further against stopping the project for good. U Sein had for years been pushing DDA to return to grounded activities in Amya, to find ways to align their political project more closely with the material concerns of villagers. Even for him, however, the politics around the road had to be refused; the broader objective of limiting support for the SEZ writ large had to be maintained. Regardless, for reasons that remained murky—at least to Naing Tun—the objections of the national government and U Sein were overcome, or perhaps circumvented. (Rumors focused on a monk in Banpyi taking up a private collection to help fund the repairs.) The road emerged in excellent condition.

This kind of politics, opaquely interwoven with government administration, private companies, and material infrastructures, fits poorly the abstract ideals of transparency and accountability that have come to characterize so much of the work of DDA, DPLN, and other organizations well known in Dawei. Roads and other basic infrastructures are especially important sites for this divergent, more situational-differential political trajectory, which envisions less the *right* to a road or electricity, and more specific roads and actual electricity. Recall U Lay, in Chapter 1, for whom after decades of “nothing, nothing” the SEZ project now represents concrete material possibilities. Long ago, in the Pyidawtha era, the government built schools for villagers,

he said. Yet today, “we are still building roads ourselves here in the village”—a reference to this coastal road, and for him, his justification for welcoming the potential restart of the SEZ. Remember his neighbor, as well, a *chanthama*, who told me confidently “the project is good.” “Economically, socially—for us, everything,” she said, “if there is improvement, it will be good. Roads, electricity—they’ll become better, I think.” Her comments underline the progressive, future-oriented aspirations, however mundane, that infrastructure projects often tie into. Another neighbor was quite direct. “We need roads and electricity,” she said. “Please—whoever can do it for us, please come. Right now, no one comes.” Farther along the road from Banpyi, after a sharp left that takes one back to the coast, the fishing village Yegyí brushes up against the shoreline. There, ITD built a bridge for a road leading to the small port they built nearby to facilitate the construction process—a port still largely unused. The bridge makes it more difficult for Yegyí’s fishers to navigate their boats out to sea from the mangrove forests where they keep them. Even so, villagers value the road highly. Before the project—said Daw San, whose sons work in Thailand—“there was no road cutting through the village. They (ITD) came and did it, and I’m so thankful. Because of this road, *lan pan seq thweh yeh* has become good.” I suggested earlier that *lan pan seq thweh yeh*, easily translated as transportation, connectivity, or simply road access, might best be translated as communications, as friends from DDA indicated.

Again, villagers welcome the SEZ as something that disperses or disseminates basic material things—roads, here—which often have become sites for political activities and aspirations. These activities and aspirations turn on diverting, channeling, appropriating, or simply appreciating precisely those material things. This is a form of the political beyond DDA’s normative appeals to formal equality. Even for U Sein, himself much more in line than others from DDA with villagers’ concerns for material distribution, the claim upon roads as things to be

channeled through the SEZ—situationally, in a way that might advance the SEZ more broadly—is a political step too far.

Recall, too, that for U Lay’s neighbors, employment is another site for Amya’s noisy infrapolitics—if of aspiration and expectation more than activity per se. One of his neighbors, whose daughters work in Thailand, told me they “went over there to work because there is no work in the village. They want to live with their mother, but if they come back to the village, there’s no work at all.” U Lay himself felt confident about employment prospects. “If there’s work,” he said, “people will come back from Thailand. The company needs to be able to provide jobs. I don’t think the salary will be so different”—different from those in Thailand. “But even if it’s a little different, they’ll do it,” he believed—the migrants will return. Then in Yegyí, the woman whose sons work in Thailand, who spoke so gratefully about the road, told me that “if the project starts again, those who’ve gone off to Thailand will come back. We don’t want to live and work separately anymore.” Sitting next to her, her neighbor described how several years ago, her own sons found work with ITD in the initial stages of construction. “But now that the project is stalled,” she said, “my sons have gone to work in Thailand.” In Kyinza and Tamok, two of the larger villages located more centrally in the SEZ area, villagers made similar remarks. One *chanthama* in Kyinza asserted that if the project resumes, “people who’ve gone to work in Thailand will come back. They’ll get to live together with their families again.” An older *chanthama* in Tamok carefully chose less direct phrasing, speaking of his children, who work in Thailand. “For my sons and daughters,” he said, “there is no work in Myanmar, so they have to live and work abroad. If an industrial zone is built in Myanmar that is not dangerous, there will be no reason for my sons and daughters to leave.” It is not clear how employment could be a site of activity as such with the SEZ on hold. Unlike the coastal road, for example, employment is not something that could be

fixed and made usable with the project suspended.¹¹⁶ Yet it is another site of aspiration, one that figures the SEZ as a bearer of material wealth.

From the Kawet workshop to Maung Soe's home, it is clear that compensation is also an important site for the situational-differential political trajectory in Amya. To be sure, in the workshop and at Maung Soe's home, clear instances of a more secular-universal imaginary did emerge around compensation. At the workshop, villagers shared DPLN's insistence that compensation should be handled with fairness and consistency—with clear, uniform rates of compensation tied to the amount of land or number of crops (even if they noted, repeatedly, that that is not how compensation has taken place thus far). Later, Maung Soe conveyed feeling reassured by the formation of village committees tasked by the government with taking the lead on handling compensation issues in each village. He associated the committees with a more systematic approach to compensation, one possibly fairer or more standardized (though they did not say how the committees were chosen, nor how they might choose the rates they would pursue). Yet despite these partial appeals to equalizing logics of compensation—within, in some sense, the logic of the technological zone—an alternative logic, nearer to that of the distribution zone, also reasserted itself.

¹¹⁶ This is not to say that all project-related employment suddenly disappeared with the project's suspension in 2013. On the contrary, employment tailed off only gradually as the reality sank in that the project would not immediately resume. Construction workers from the Dawei area were able to maintain their wages for a time until ITD understood the suspension would be more prolonged—after which many of those construction workers quickly moved to the Bangkok area for work, like many before them from the Dawei area. Other people from the Dawei area were able to maintain employment with ITD throughout the period of the project suspension, as some basic tasks remained. I interviewed one young woman who continued to work in ITD's office at the visitor center in Amya helping to process paperwork (related to visas) for Thai ITD staff who remained part of ITD's much-reduced operations. She quit only later of her own volition, she said, to work in Dawei town as a seamstress. I also interviewed a villager who was still working as a security guard for one of ITD's storage sites for construction machinery. He too had been able to maintain employment with ITD after the project's suspension. Overall, however, ITD's workforce in Dawei did decrease dramatically in the years following 2013, if not immediately so.

A few months after villagers extolled the virtues of a fair compensation process at the DPLN workshop, it emerged that a compensation process was finally underway in Tamok, the village where several years ago, some sixty farmers' paddy fields had been destroyed by runoff from ITD's quarry. "That's fantastic!" I burst out, sitting with Kyaw Htet, knowing compensation would mean some relief for farmers whose livelihood situations had become quite difficult. I knew all too well DDA's qualms about "touching" compensation, though. Kyaw Htet certainly recognized the farmers deserve compensation, but he remained wary. And when I pressed him for details about the process, he said—with a touch of frustration—that he wasn't really sure. Nothing was clear. His impression was that the compensation figures were quite high, so villagers might not want to reveal them. The government and the villagers, he said, seemed quite satisfied to address compensation for the quarry damage quietly, and just in Tamok for the moment—*sui generis*, apart from any broader, more open, and uniform approach to compensation in Amya. In a strategy meeting at the DDA office, we considered following the Tamok process closely, monitoring it, and criticizing it if not done "correctly" (if not done *hman kan deh*, which also connotes doing something evenly, equally, fairly). We could handle it as an example to be followed or not followed, however it turned out, elsewhere in Amya. We also discussed providing legal support to Tamok villagers; perhaps we could strengthen their negotiating position. Yet the concerns about touching, handling, and attending to compensation persisted. ("So risky," Kyaw Htet said, a note of regret in his voice.) Someone proposed differentiating compensation and remedy, and pushing for the latter. Remedy, apparently, is a more properly legal concept with stronger ties to judicial mechanisms. But no, not this either. "Tricky," "difficult," hesitation to "stir things up"—the discussion continued to construct compensation as something sensitive and

complicated, a locus of opacity and potential unruliness. Again, we stepped back, resolving not to involve ourselves in the Tamok process.

Compensation foregrounded the logic of the distribution zone. It did not draw people and things into new, consonant, inter-locking relations, resolving forms of difference. Rather, it worked as a wedge that pushed people and things apart, deepening a whole series of cleavages in politics and the political. DDA construed a situational, exceptional set of claims to specific material resources as outside or beyond their own norms and forms of the political, which in their secular-universalism could not properly accommodate Tamok's noisy infrapolitics.

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As the rainy season began to dry out, Ma Khaing and I visited U Myo, a landless worker who lives in Mawdone. By this point, we had begun the more structured process of data collection. I knew U Myo somewhat well already; he often joined workshops and other events hosted by DDA. Another villager in Mawdone, Myat Thu, had introduced him to U Sein, initially because U Sein is knowledgeable about rubber cultivation. Having no land of his own, U Myo also had no rubber trees. But he wanted to know more, as he worked sometimes for daily wages on others' rubber plantations in Mawdone. Thus he became someone U Sein would consider one of "his men," although in recent years he, like others, had distanced himself from U Sein. Yet U Myo remained one of DDA's dwindling contacts in Amya. He was also, I learned, someone who had a keen grasp of the relations between land, livelihoods, and the material bases of Amya's noisy infrapolitics.

Initially, Ma Khaing and I had difficulty finding U Myo. Pulling up in the middle of Mawdone, we asked a few villagers where to find his home, but instead someone simply went to find him. He hopped side-saddle onto my motorbike and directed us to his home. We passed an

abandoned palm oil plantation where he used to live and work, he shouted over the sound of the motorbike. He got sick, at one point, and couldn't work for a few days, but the boss—the *th'htay*, he said, whomever he reported to—accused him of being lazy, fired him, and kicked him off the land. Luckily, an older woman living alone nearby allowed him and his family—him, his wife, and their three kids—to move their home onto her land, as long as they helped take care of her land, *chan* (rubber, betel nut), some chickens, and a couple of pigs. We clambered up into U Myo's thatched home on stilts, talking over lunch. I learned that U Myo's main sources of income are collecting forest products (mushrooms, bamboo, firewood) and selling them to Htoo Chit, combined with intermittent work for daily wages on neighbors' *chan*, especially around harvest times. Their household was easily among the poorest in the village, yet a small TV flickered in the background as we talked. U Myo's son, almost five, lay on his stomach watching distractedly as a family drama played out among rich Burmese people at a mansion in Yangon. I couldn't help but ask about electricity. U Myo leaned out the window, pointing to a small solar panel perched on top of a bamboo pole. It cost 50,000 kyat (\$35), he explained—a major outlay, but one that allowed, in his chosen metric, 2-3 movies per day during the dry season. Myanmar movies mostly, sometimes Thai or Indian movies, but no, not Korean series, he said chuckling—those are simply too long. What about in the rainy season? I asked. Then they go to Myat Thu's home, where a bigger solar panel can store more electricity. Myat Thu's *yo shin yone*, or movie theater, he said jokingly.

We went to see Myat Thu after lunch, but not at his movie theater. Myat Thu, a little bit older than U Myo with his young family, is a *chanthama* who also owns a small shop selling snacks and cold drinks. Over M-150s, the beloved Thai energy drink, we sat at the shop discussing the SEZ project, with rumors of the project's restart spurred on by a recent visit of NLD officials

to the village. Outwardly, party officials came to thank villagers for their electoral support, but then they started talking about borrowing money to resume the SEZ—as if they wanted villagers’ agreement, Myat Thu said. U Myo jumped in. “Development should be everyone together,” he said, “but the company is only interested in themselves.” And compensation, he continued, has been a mess—with people talking about all kinds of different rates, and then everyone just trying to get the most they can. No more joking about movie theaters; the mood had soured. I asked whether they had heard anything about the compensation committees Maung Soe mentioned. The mood darkened more; the committees were news to them. If the committees were reassuring to Maung Soe, they were not reassuring to Myat Thu and U Myo. Myat Thu frowned, as U Myo fidgeted on the bamboo bench. They didn’t know any details, they said, but it shouldn’t be like this. It must be “all the village head’s people,” U Myo said angrily, adding that it’s dangerous to talk like this—like walking on a knife edge, he said. I was reminded of the friend-enemy distinction used by the pro-SEZ protesters from the same village. The knife edge similarly suggested a political terrain premised not on participation and inclusivity, as in DDA’s normative secular-universalism, but rather on acute processes of exclusion, differentiation, and the mobilization of village hierarchy. Myat Thu added he’d heard that villagers involved in relocation plans would get a better house, even a car, in whichever relocation site is eventually built. “Maybe that’s why the NLD came to the village,” U Myo grumbled spitefully.

U Myo and Myat Thu also clarified certain dynamics around land, livelihoods, and village stratification, including processes of capital accumulation that have, in part if rarely in whole, separated some villagers from their chief means of production: land. They made clear that accumulation takes place less in spectacular moments by companies from outside, and more through longer, confusing processes interwoven with village hierarchies and state agencies. The

term U Myo and Myat Thu used for some people engaged in activities around land was *pwe za*, a term usually translated as “broker” that carries negative connotations. Like other villagers Ma Khaing and I spoke to in Amya, they described how *pwe za*, usually traders or other relatively wealthy individuals, sometimes from outside the village but quite often from within it, engaged in land speculation. They would persuade farmers to sell land at low prices before arranging another sale of the land once values had risen due to the SEZ.¹¹⁷ It was rarely clear to villagers who was acquiring land at any stage, whether private individuals, ITD or other project contractors, or state agencies of one kind or another. (Some government officials acted little differently than *pwe za*, U Myo said, annoyed.) The line between formal land acquisition—if for the project, then in theory attached to a compensation process—and outright land speculation was far from obvious to villagers. Despite hazy circumstances, more than a few villagers sold parcels of land for what seemed like good prices, unconvinced that any lucrative compensation process would take shape—only to see land prices continue to rise. Even the suspension of the SEZ was only a temporary setback. Most villagers believed the SEZ would resume, so land concentration along these lines continued, if for a time more slowly than before. With rumors of an impending restart, moreover, these dynamics had returned to the fore.

More broadly, U Myo and Myat Thu reinforced my understanding of how stratified Amya villages can be, featuring hierarchies of power and wealth, political activities entangled with state and capital at multiple scales, and reflecting a diverse range of livelihoods—from landless labor and smallholder farming to cash crop trading in regional markets. U Myo, remember, sells the forest products he collects to Htoo Chit, who trades them in larger markets located in Dawei town. Amid such stratification, Amya’s villages contain multiple relations to the project. Some villagers

¹¹⁷ Levien (2013) identifies similar dynamics around the activities of brokers (*dalals*) in the context of land struggles in India.

stand to gain handsomely if the project resumes, especially wealthier villagers who have concentrated land holdings and can sell them. Other villagers, having already lost land through ongoing land concentration processes, face deepening exclusion from the means of production, not least as there are doubts over access to agricultural land in relocation areas.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, U Myo and Myat Thu indicated that wealth and power overlap. It is, they suspected, “the village head’s people” who are trying to move the project forward by forming compensation committees. For them, those are the villagers—on the other side of the knife edge—who will gain most if the project resumes.

Initially, it was tempting to map different villagers’ views on the SEZ onto a longer trajectory of agrarian polarization in Amya. Against a backdrop of market-integrated cash crop agriculture dating as far back as the colonial period, the 1990s saw a concentrated turn to smallholder rubber production, a boom crop dynamic that has sharpened inequalities on agrarian frontiers (Hall *et al.* 2011, Li 2014). With the onset of the SEZ project, a combination of formal land acquisition and outright land speculation—a distinction villagers suggested meant little in practice—drove a new round of land consolidation, with some villagers selling land parcels and other villagers accumulating more. A polarization of positions on the SEZ might have followed. Surely wealthier, land-rich farmers would have the most to gain from the SEZ and welcome, even push for, its restart, while poorer, smaller farmers would have the least to gain, maintaining doubts over, or even mobilizing against, the project’s return.

¹¹⁸ Few villagers find themselves completely dispossessed of their main means of production, that is, land, yet most villagers do not have sufficient means to reproduce themselves without dependence on the market. Multiple classes of labor, in Henry Bernstein’s (2010) sense, intermix across on- and off-farm employment, yielding differentiated livelihood combinations that make it difficult to forge any singular politics of “the people of the land” (see Appendix A).

In fact, a more layered set of positions emerged with three main strata. Wealthier villagers with significant land holdings—around or over 5-10 acres—do largely wish for the SEZ to resume. Their intention is typically to maximize land sales or financial compensation and use that money to buy land or start businesses elsewhere, not to follow any formal relocation process. This, for instance, is the plan Htoo Chit outlined for himself. It is also the position of Maung Soe, as well as other wealthier villagers from Mawdone who, taking part in the pro-SEZ protest, were more than ready to sell their land and move elsewhere. Below that stratum, villagers who are less wealthy but not among the poorest in Amya are those who are least likely to support the return of the SEZ. Villagers like Myat Thu with his “movie theater,” for instance, do not have enough land for land sales or compensation to be overwhelmingly attractive; their current livelihoods are relatively stable, such that relocation would prove a very disruptive process; and unlike their wealthier neighbors, they lack the resources to flout formal relocation procedures and simply remake their lives and livelihoods on their own, elsewhere. As for the poorest villagers, this stratum varies. Some of the poorest villagers told me they could not resist compensation, explaining that the difficulties of their current livelihood conditions meant they were also less attached to them, thus more willing to accept relocation. Other poorer villagers, such as U Myo, fiercely rejected relocation. He knows the forests well around his home, he said; collecting and selling things to Htoo Chit is not too much trouble. And after being evicted from the palm oil plantation, he now has a stable home for his family on his older neighbor’s land. “Why would I want to move?” he asked me incredulously. “In our area, the bamboo, the mushrooms—I know where they grow. I can earn a living. But there will be difficulties with moving to another area—with water, electricity, food, and clothing.”

Yet even this more layered model, still necessarily schematic, does not capture the range of variation villagers described in their neighbors' views and positions on the project. In Banpyi one morning, for instance, Wai Lwin, a *chanthama*, told me that "People who don't get their income from *chan*—they want to move. If they live here, it's like this, and if they live there, it's like this. But people who are wealthy—here they have land. Their livelihood situation is fine. For these people, if they have to give up their land and go somewhere else, how are they going to find *lay* land, *chan* land?" Interestingly, it is clear from the flow of conversation that when he mentions people whose income doesn't come from *chan*, he is talking about landless workers—among the poorest people in Amya. Yet people working in small-scale village trade, such as motorbike repair shops, shops selling food and drinks, and beauty salons, are also less dependent on access to land in order to reproduce their livelihoods. Wealthier traders like Htoo Chit do not depend fully on land for their income, either. For people not dependent on land, Wai Lwin suggests, it doesn't matter where one lives—whether here or there, it's the same. Thus, if it is one's dependence on land that most defines one's position relative to relocation, as Wai Lwin suggests, then the people most likely to accept relocation plans do not trace necessarily to a specific income stratum. Rather, they constitute a fraction of villagers whose position cuts across village stratifications.

If it is not simply poorer villagers who, with less land access, are more willing to relocate, then symmetrically it is also not simply the wealthy (*kyan tha deq lu dwei*, Wai Lwin says) who depend on land for their livelihoods, and therefore oppose relocation. U Myo, a landless worker, very much depends on land for his livelihood, and not just land in the abstract, but knowledge of land in a specific place. ("In our area," he said, "the bamboo, the mushrooms—I know where they grow.") Villagers less poor but not among the wealthiest, meanwhile, such as Ko Htein, an older *chanthama* in Kawet, have secure enough livelihoods that they prefer not to be uprooted and worry

about what would come next. “I don’t want to move,” Ko Htein said bluntly. “With my *chan*, I can take care of anything I need.” Even employment prospects, usually a dependable topic of optimism from Amya villagers, offered not reassurance but more concern for Ko Htein. He felt certain older people would not be able to work in the industrial zone, only younger people. This stratum is that which Wai Lwin identifies as most likely to oppose relocation—villagers with access to and dependent on land for their livelihoods. But they do not, as Wai Lwin supposes, map smoothly onto the village’s wealthiest stratum of villagers. The wealthiest villagers, such as Htoo Chit, do have access to and generate significant income from their land, but they are also likely to have diversified their livelihood mixes. (Htoo Chit is a land-rich *chanthama* primarily known as a trader linked to agricultural markets in Dawei.) And in many cases, as with those who protested in favor of the SEZ, they are more than willing to sell the land they have accumulated over time, with confidence their wealth will be sufficient to change their livelihoods without following formal relocation processes.

In other words, land concentration processes have stratified villagers according to income over time, yielding varying positions relative to the SEZ. Some stand to gain significantly if the project resumes; others face mounting difficulties. But the fractions of villagers who are more or less likely to accept relocation transect those stratifications, reflecting a heterogeneity that grates against desires—DDA’s, foremost—for a unitary politics, a politics of voice in Amya. Noise prevails in Amya.

Here, then, ongoing processes of capital accumulation have not generated the convergent, solidaristic political formations that Harvey envisions arising from dispossession. These processes have not laid the basis for teleologies of standardization or networked relations. They have not produced a singular, collective voice, one that might transcend the different groups that DDA

recognizes as constitutive of Amya's internal differentiations. Instead, the zone's distributive entailments—its material promises of compensation, jobs, and infrastructure, as well as the land concentration it has driven forward—have generated divides, separations, and disconnections. With respect to land most prominently, capital accumulation is differential accumulation, or accumulation, differentially: a bordering process that (re)makes spatiotemporal difference, dividing over time not simply Dawei town from Amya, but Amya villagers among themselves. Accumulation processes have meant less a binary polarization of Amya's rich and poor, sifted into those who do and do not welcome the SEZ's return, but rather a more heterogeneous sifting of positions across multiple strata in Amya's villages.

As a result, the villages themselves have become sites of varying political projects. The pro-SEZ protest marked one locus of active support for the SEZ, if eventfully in a way that sets it apart. More quietly, villagers have attempted to negotiate directly, sometimes through committees and sometimes not, with ITD, project contractors, the regional government, and other state agencies and individuals—seeking, for instance, better compensation and access to basic infrastructure (as in the repairs to the coastal road). U Sein, meanwhile, continues meeting and marshaling “his men” to criticize the SEZ; he even pushed against the fixing of the coastal road. Htoo Chit and Maung Soe, on the other hand, welcome the SEZ's possible return, yet they happily take part in DPLN's workshops—an organization with which DDA understands itself to be working as part of a network. U Myo, moreover, still often attends DDA activities, mainly workshops in Dawei town. But far from alone among U Sein's “men,” he has distanced himself from him, while he found himself excluded from and angry at the compensation committees set up by Maung Soe and “the village head's people.” For a time, the SEZ project generated coordinated and unified forms of response, as in the committees U Sein helped develop and DDA's

activities in the early 2010s. Yet material things—land, compensation, jobs, and infrastructure, all tied back to the SEZ itself—made it difficult to maintain those political projects. DDA is now isolated from Amya; U Sein is more and more isolated in Amya. The SEZ has distributed differentiation over time.¹¹⁹

Importantly, however, this differentiation of political projects in Amya has not crystallized a set of antagonistic positions. The situation is more turbid, indistinct, and hazy than that. Reflecting, to an extent, a notably murky information environment, villagers often spoke of being uncertain and ambivalent. They were rarely one-dimensional in their views. Even U Myo and Myat Thu, among the villagers I met who were most critical of the SEZ, pointed out they are not against the project per se. They were critical of how the project has been handled, including in their own village; relocation and compensation dynamics have led to strong disagreements. They were incensed by what they saw as the cynical machinations of the village head's people. Yet both spoke from within a dominant discourse of development, acknowledging that “the region has to develop,” as U Myo put it. He also hinted that if the project were to resume, more jobs could only be a good thing, not least for people like him. Myat Thu couldn't say for sure, but it seemed to him that “if the project restarts, a lot of people will come.” He recognized there could be advantages to that. “If a lot of people come,” he continued, “there will be benefits and opportunities” (*a kyo kan za gwin*). People with shops like his would do well, it seemed to him. Then he too spoke of *lan pan seq thweh yeh*: road access, connectivity, communications more generally. This too would get better, he said. They were angered by the notion that village committees might handle

¹¹⁹ Hence the divergence from Laclau's (2005) formulation of popular political trajectories from unification against a common antagonist, an equivalential logic, to differential negotiation of demands on the basis of population groups after a popular movement takes power. Here, in contrast, a differential logic does come to the fore, but only as one piece of a broader political terrain in which an equivalential logic remains significant. See Chapter 6 for further discussion of Laclau's understanding of popular politics, social movements, and (radical) democracy.

compensation issues behind closed doors. But for them like many other villagers, the logic of the distribution zone returned to the fore. They grasped the SEZ as a site or channel of material things they might be able to divert, claim, or tap into.

5.5 Other roads

The technological zone is hardly without analytical utility. Zones of various kinds—infrastructural, metrological, or zones of qualification, in Barry's (2006) typology, exceeding national spaces in enabling the movement of oil, finance capital, and other things—often effect powerful processes of standardization, requiring alignments over time and space that can reduce differences between practices of measurement, assessment, regulation, and comparison. In this, Barry's technological zone recalls Hughes' (1987, 1993) earlier notion of large technological systems. But as Barry acknowledges, these processes can also fail, and in doing so, they can provoke criticisms that, interestingly, rely themselves on imaginaries of the need for common regulations and standardizing practices. In this chapter, I have shown how while DDA, DPLN, and similar organizations operate within the logic of the technological zone, Amya's villagers often do not. What I found in Amya is not a reduction of differences, but rather a mounting profusion of differences over time, inflected by discourses of development, nation, and national needs. Under conditions of accumulation that exacerbated village hierarchies, the SEZ became a site of distributive possibility, a site for things—land, compensation, jobs, roads, electricity—to be diverted, channeled, claimed, or reclaimed. In the distribution zone, a fractured political field became a challenge to political mobilization.

It is possible that, if the Dawei SEZ does move forward, the logic of the technological zone might emerge more frontally. In JICA's feasibility study for the roadlink corridor, for instance, it

is clear that tremendous effort remains to be expended if a road will be built cutting across the hills from the waterfront SEZ area to the border with Thailand. Some of that effort involves cutting down forests, gouging out hillsides, building bridges, and burrowing tunnels through rock. Other forms of effort involve creating and maintaining a smooth, paved surface, set within a specific range of gradient; shaping traffic lanes of consistent width, adorned with standardized signage; running electrical wires, and potentially rail lines, over roughly the same route, presided over by matching telecom towers; and the harmonization of customs procedures to minimize transport bottlenecks at the border (JICA 2016, 20–58). These are important forms of work in and for the technological zone. But they cannot be assumed, just as, more broadly, forms and processes of standardization, flow, and network cannot be assumed. In the Dawei area, a movement of inter-laced, inter-connecting relations has not so much gathered pace as fallen apart. For contingent reasons material and political—the (poor) quality of roads, the (high) cost of electricity, tailings from a quarry, friends and family gone to Bangkok, difficulties with workshops, differing political imaginations, frustrations with life in suspension—“noise” has increased around Dawei. With a fragmentation of the political terrain, it has become harder for DDA and other organizations to monopolize the politics of the SEZ, notwithstanding their ongoing attempts to contest the project and its promises.

Ironically, the promises of the distribution zone and its attendant infrapolitics may help secure the future of the technological zone in Dawei. For if the project resumes—if, for instance, the roadlink proceeds with all its standardizing procedures—then it will be, in part, because of the noisy infrapolitics in Amya. In this sense, while political projects around Dawei indelibly reflect changing material conditions, they are not straightforwardly determined by those conditions. The political, rather, is also able to substantially inform, inflect, and condition the direction of material

transformation in the area—not in or through some autonomy unto itself, but in its heteronomous imbrication with material conditions at large.¹²⁰ In the pro-SEZ protest, Amya villagers called for the project to resume, citing rising land prices. More quietly, they have pushed for compensation processes, job opportunities, and road and electricity access that assume, in many cases, the project’s return. Fundamentally, villagers have broken DDA’s hold on the political terrain of the Dawei SEZ, making possible its restart in more amenable conditions. Even so, it would be a mistake to see the project resuming as the final triumph, in a sense, of the logic of the technological zone. Even the roadlink’s smooth asphalt, pitched gradient, and harmonized customs procedures would bring with them their own distributive entailments, including the uneven dissemination of harmful social and environmental impacts.¹²¹

There is a risk of focusing too centrally on standardizing logics, while glossing over more differential, distributive entailments that capture—as DDA inadvertently makes clear—some of these sites’ most difficult, most volatile political questions. I have argued that political theorizing around infrastructure and technopolitics, grounded in notions of flow and network, does not adequately account for the rough and bumpy terrain on which such questions emerge. This is because such theorizing frequently follows moments of opening not closure, assembling constructivist notions of *Dingpolitik* that obscure the (re)making of heterogeneity in the expanded

¹²⁰ Superficially, this position differs from the notion of the “autonomy of the political” associated with Italian workerism, and the thought of Mario Tronti (2019) in particular, in the 1960s and 70s. For Tronti, the autonomy of the political stands for the partial non-determination of the political by the economic, such that worker struggles, in his understanding, could be placed at the center of historical analysis—in forcing capital to adapt, rather than the reverse. I echo Wright (2002), Campbell (2018a), and others who, following Tronti, present political struggle as a driver of historical transformation. Yet infrapolitics in Amya suggests that it is not quite in its autonomy that the political can transform material conditions and shape historical processes, but rather in its heteronomy, in its being subject to forces that exceed it. It is in these dense material entanglements, not in some sense of its autonomy, that Amya infrapolitics comes to change the conditions under which the Dawei SEZ might proceed. For Tronti too, however, it is not workers’ separation from, but rather entanglement with, the forces of production that allows him to reconstruct the priority of worker struggle in the transformation of material conditions. This is why I characterize my position here as differing only superficially from Tronti’s.

¹²¹ These issues continue to preoccupy villagers living along the roadlink, some of whom traveled to Bangkok in 2019 to raise their concerns to Thai policymakers aiming to restart roadlink construction (Mekong Butterfly 2019).

reproduction of capital. This is the terrain of differential accumulation. Emphasizing “moments of clash and entanglement,” Mezzadra and Neilson write,

Here we see how the moment of opening emphasized by many versions of network and assemblage theory, which describe important aspects of the workings of contemporary capitalism, is continuously met by moments of partial closure that are no less essential to the expansion of the frontiers of capital. The notion of differential accumulation makes us confront the continuous pull between and entangling of closure and opening that often assumes explosive and disruptive forms in labor and social struggles. (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b, 14)

Opening and closure, entanglement and exclusion: some forms of relation deny others, indeed (Giraud 2019). For the Dawei SEZ has produced entanglements, with DDA, DPLN, and similar organizations, like Htoo Chit, Maung Soe, U Myo, and Myat Thu, all entangled with electoral politics, government institutions, and private companies under the shadow of the SEZ. These entanglements are not the same, however. DDA’s secular-universal engagement with state and capital has led in one direction; the situational-differential infrapolitics of Amya have led in another direction. The two trajectories register important instances of overlaps, intersections, and blurred, hazy borders—moments of opening, to be sure—yet the tendency has been towards greater separation, disconnection, and differentiation over time. Across three main moments, in this chapter—DPLN’s land law workshop, tea at Maung Soe’s, and a visit to U Myo—I have drawn out moments of closure that, if partial, nevertheless point to deepening fissures between political projects around Dawei. And I suggest that in Dawei, tracing an alternative political theory of infrastructure is a process that might well begin by following infrapolitics heteronomously: beyond the terrain internal to normative conceptions of the political, beyond the forms, figures, and locations of DDA’s political project, along channels of uneven distribution and dispersal that, in Amya, lead elsewhere.

The rough and bumpy infrapolitics of Amya reflect material conditions that lead beyond erstwhile promises of capitalist transition. Those farm to factory promises organized attempts to understand, intervene in, and shape postcolonial politics and economy for decades. Yet in Dawei, in place of a transition from agriculture to industry, peasant to proletariat, and precapital to capital, there exists instead an extended, lateral present. In this time and space of suspension, farmers remain farmers, yet partially dispossessed; agricultural households depend on off-farm labor and income to reproduce their agricultural livelihoods; and people dream of migrant workers returning to take up jobs in a capital-intensive, petrochemical industrial zone that, if it resembles similar zones regionally and historically, will likely have few such jobs to offer. Burma's military government of the 1960s and 70s called their political and economic agenda the *Myanma Hsoshelit Lanzin*: the Burmese Way to Socialism, sometimes called the Burmese Road to Socialism. (The root of the word *lanzin*, "way," is *lan*, usually translated as "road.") Today, it appears the old road to political and economic transformation is closed. Other roads are now at stake, no longer determined by teleologies past. It is precisely this need for a new politics and knowledge of today's postcolonial economic that the materialist turn in postcolonial studies addresses (Mezzadra 2011a), encapsulated foremost in Sanyal's (2007) critique of historicism with his conception of postcolonial capitalism.¹²² Sanyal and Chatterjee's (2008) contributions to this turn suggest that novel political trajectories are at stake, alternative forms of politics and political imagination that historicist imaginaries of capitalist transition might otherwise cover over or foreclose.

The noisy infrapolitics of Amya denote one form, in one place, that a politics of postcolonial capitalism has taken. This politics welcomes, for the most part, the distributive

¹²² See again the following for further prominent examples of work addressing capital, capitalism, and postcolonialism: Young (2001), Venn (2006, 2018), Chatterjee (2008), Mellino (2011, 2012), Deshpande (2012), Harney and Moten (2015), Walker (2016), and Mitra *et al.* (2017).

possibilities of a large-scale, destructive petrochemical project. As such, there is little about this politics that is reassuring, promising, or critical in some way. It is not novel or alternative in the sense of being emancipatory or liberating. Yet it is one form of politics that has emerged to address postcolonial capitalism in the present. In the wake of older productivist futures, this politics pivots not around deliberative claims to formal, abstract equality, but rather around specific claims to material distribution: around land, jobs, compensation, and infrastructure. Within a situational-differential political trajectory, this politics often pursues contingent exceptions to equalizing norms—as with the coastal road to Banpyi—and works through village hierarchies rather than pushing to overcome them—as with the compensation committees of “the village head’s people.” In many ways, this politics is within the political rationality that Ferguson casts as distributive. It also resembles the “temporary, contextual, and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct negotiations” that Chatterjee frames as political society. Located here relative to postcolonial capitalism, infrapolitics in Amya thus helps to restage postcolonial Asia and Africa as sites of innovation in political modernity writ large.¹²³ It contains moments and aspects of a secular-universal tendency, as well, such that it does not fully harden a binary between civil and political society. The roads of Amya are rougher, less stable, and more open than this. Where they will lead is unclear. Meanwhile, the heterogeneous, reticulated political landscape they represent remains a challenge to mobilizing against the SEZ’s return.

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Several months after I concluded my fieldwork, ERI and DDA held a press conference in Yangon to launch the report based on the interviews and group discussions I conducted in Amya. I was not able to return to Myanmar for the report launch, but Kyaw Htet, Win Tint, and I

¹²³ Key contributions to such an effort include again Chatterjee (2004b, 2011), Ferguson (2006, 2015), Chen (2010), Comaroff and Comaroff (2012), and Mbembe (2017).

exchanged Facebook messages and emails for a few weeks prior to the event, trying to hone the messaging around the report as plans for the launch came together.

The report's findings were clear. With villagers tiring of the project being on hold, the material promises of the SEZ—especially jobs, compensation, and better access to infrastructure—had become hugely attractive in Amya. They were so attractive, in fact, that U Thein Tin and other Mawdone villagers had staged their protest calling for the project to resume. Even in more modest terms, however, the SEZ is attractive enough that with compensation, for instance, there is no debate in Amya about whether to accept it. (Within DDA, by contrast, “touching” compensation is still considered tantamount to accepting the project's restart.) Rather, the debate in Amya is about how best to handle compensation. It could be through open and fair processes in line with domestic and international legal guidelines, through village committees set to confer directly with the government and ITD, or as in Tamok, through closed-door processes handled on a village-by-village basis, apart from any wider, systemic attempt to address compensation throughout the area—or some combination of these. There was little appetite for contesting the SEZ overall; even people like U Myo and Myat Thu thought the project could bring important benefits.

How could we address, at the event, villagers' essential support for the project to resume? Win Tint and I agreed that at the launch, we could argue that jobs, compensation, and basic infrastructure are entirely understandable desires on the part of Amya villagers, yet it is possible, even better, to secure them without the SEZ that appears to promise them. In fact—according to this message—what villagers want is not the SEZ itself, but these material things that are best to pursue in other less damaging, less destructive ways. But as DDA arranged for several Amya villagers to speak at the report launch, Kyaw Htet worried it could be difficult to draw and maintain this distinction at the event. On the day, a villager spoke predictably about wanting better roads

and electricity, a strong compensation scheme, and job opportunities. She emphasized that in Amya, road conditions remain poor, while villagers can only buy electricity from private individuals who own generators. “We are very glad about the SEZ resumption,” she said, according to one media report, “but we hope things will be better than last time.” The headline was stark: “Villagers Support Dawei SEZ” (Moe Myint 2018).

Some friends and colleagues felt the launch had not gone well, but Kyaw Htet and Win Tint acknowledged the coverage was understandable. For them, the way forward—their trajectory, beyond the “noise”—was clear: more meetings, letters, and workshops, with the goal of building and establishing a more transparent, accountable, and inclusive form of sustainable development. I admired their clarity of purpose. But I couldn’t help wondering whether, so to speak, the distribution zone would permit such a normatively equalizing political project to take root in Amya, where conditions of differential accumulation continue.

Part 3
Translations

Chapter 6

Transnational, translational: a political anthropology otherwise

“In 1921 Ilich, in dealing with organizational questions, wrote and said (more or less) thus: we have not known how to ‘translate’ our language into the European languages.”

Gramsci (1995, 450)

“The problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous ‘transition debates’ in European history) but as a problem of translation, as well.”

Chakrabarty (2007, 17)

About six months after moving to Dawei for fieldwork, I found myself somewhere else entirely: in a town on Thailand’s eastern seaboard, seated in a circle of some thirty or so people. In a shaded, sandy clearing in front of P’Kung’s home, I was straining to hear. Cars rushed by on the road just over our shoulders; the jangling treble of *mor lam* music from Thailand’s northeast drifted from another home nearby; and the wireless microphone Ma Nway was using kept suffering, as we suffered, from a loud glitch (sometimes crackling, sometimes screeching). Beyond the treetops—oddly without fruit, someone pointed out—smokestacks loomed large, continually belching something into the air as they have for more than thirty years. Or at least, P’Kung and his friends told us as Ma Nway translated, that’s how long the industrial estate has been operational. We were sitting in the shadows, almost literally, of Map Ta Phut, the largest industrial estate in mainland Southeast Asia. Map Ta Phut is ITD’s explicit model for the Dawei SEZ, which ITD plans to be 7-10 times Map Ta Phut’s size.

Who were we, and why were we here, listening—as much as we could—to P’Kung talk about Map Ta Phut? One clue is in P’Kung’s narrative. A former fisher, he described Map Ta Phut

as a series of ongoing catastrophes both intimate and social, both inscribed upon his body and collectively distributed. It was a story of his cancer and others'; of suicide attempts successful and not (his was not); of chemical explosions, unexplained smells, at least one major oil spill, premature births, and birth defects; of chemicals in the air, the water, and even their blood (as he insisted); of family and friends lost too soon, un- or under-employed, forced to move away, or worse, in a way, forced to stay, with no way out. The night before at our guesthouse, Moe Swe, a staff person at DDA, had explained the problem in Dawei was that there were not many impacts yet, especially with the SEZ project on hold, so it was hard to convince anyone to contest the project—and plenty of Amya villagers now even welcomed it, given the difficulties with its suspension. Not so in Map Ta Phut, where over decades, the impacts had been slow but severe. We needed to show people from Dawei what happened in Map Ta Phut, Moe Swe said. Maybe then DDA's concerns might gain traction again in Amya. DDA had brought villagers from Amya to Map Ta Phut—an “exposure trip,” they called it—with financial and logistical support from organizations in Yangon and Bangkok.

But the trip was not only from Dawei to Map Ta Phut. As plans for the trip grew, the Dawei-Map Ta Phut linkage remained central, but villagers, townspeople, and activists organizing around other industrial projects in Myanmar and Thailand also joined. The intention was not only for people like P’Kung to motivate challenges to industrial projects in Myanmar. Organizers also hoped for the reverse: that meeting people from Myanmar might prove encouraging for people in Thailand opposing industrial projects. Maybe, the organizers felt, cross-border linkages could reinforce political struggles on both sides of the border.

Thus, another clue to what was happening, a clue at once simple and challenging, lay in Ma Nway’s microphone, in its aural scratching and scraping as she gamely translated P’Kung’s

narrative. She was engaged in a “political labor of translation” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 273): translation between languages, certainly, but also between struggles across borders, which as Étienne Balibar (2002) reminds us, both divide and connect. Ma Nway now lives in Dawei, but she was born in Thailand to migrant workers from the Dawei area. Although her Thai is like a native speaker’s (she told me once proudly), her Burmese is less fluent. So while she is very comfortable translating between Thai and Dawei languages, she is not as comfortable translating between Thai and Burmese, and on this trip, she mostly had to translate between Thai and Burmese. For ultimately it was not only people from Amya on this trip. The group of villagers from Amya amounted to a plurality, but people from Mon State, Karen State, and Kyaukphyu came too, with Burmese becoming a lingua franca for the trip’s Myanmar participants. In addition, a handful of staff joined from the two groups that helped organize the trip: Paung Ku, the Yangon-based “civil society strengthening network,” in their parlance, and SEM, the Spirit in Education Movement, the Bangkok-based organization with roots in socially engaged Buddhism. Both groups have supported DDA’s work since the early 2010s.

Ma Nway spent most of this ten-day exposure trip translating from Thai to Burmese, but sometimes she needed help. Occasionally, she shifted into translating from Thai to Dawei instead. In those instances, P’Fai—the Thai staff person from SEM who works most closely with DDA—would translate from Thai to English, and then one of the others on the trip who was more comfortable with English and Burmese than Ma Nway would then translate into Burmese, followed by any necessary further translation into Rakhine, Mon, or Karen languages. The language environment was choppy and indirect, full of slippages, detours, and mistranslations (some humorous, some not). A photograph from P’Kung’s home stands out. P’Kung and his friends sit to one side. On the other side, P’Fai looks across at them. To P’Fai’s right sits Naing

Tun, my housemate in Dawei who works for SEM and P’Fai. P’Fai appears to be listening to P’Kung, while Naing Tun, leaning away, looks to be whispering to a few Myanmar participants (not from Amya) on his right, presumably in Burmese. In the center is Ma Nway. She grips the microphone with one hand, gesticulating with the other. She strains to communicate, caught between multiple languages and multiple struggles, caught in a political labor of translation.

This chapter travels with DDA beyond Dawei. After opening by elaborating on the political labor of translation, I first describe and summarize the exposure trip to Thailand. It provides an occasion, I suggest, to revisit and reconsider—and carefully mark the limits of—the normative cultural holism that long prevailed in Southeast Asian Studies. Second, I examine a conflict that emerged during the trip around a villager from Amya. This conflict, in turn, indicates a need to move beyond the “beyond ‘culture’” transnational anthropologies that, especially in the 1990s, sought to respond to earlier cultural holisms. Third, I turn to the notion of the untranslatable through two moments, one on the exposure trip and the other at a regional forum in Yangon. The forum raises questions about Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) equivalential conception of populism and social movements. The untranslatable, meanwhile, for Mezzadra and Neilson (2013a, 25), can play a powerful role “in tearing established political subjectivities away from themselves and opening new horizons for the production of the common.”

6.1 Transnational, translational: political labor in and beyond language

This chapter demonstrates something crucial about infrapolitics “in” Dawei: this infrapolitics is not only *in* Dawei but also *of* a larger system of capitalist production, distribution, and exchange. Here, I describe DDA’s own circulation within this system, following Kyaw Htet,

Moe Swe, and others as they join wider struggles around infrastructure projects well beyond Dawei—in Thailand and Cambodia, as well as elsewhere in Myanmar.

It is not necessarily straightforward to pursue a political anthropology within this system of circulations. This system places in question units such as “the Dawei area,” southern Myanmar, Myanmar itself, and Southeast Asia, while “global” as a unit of analysis can obscure more than it reveals—a claim in which materials from Southeast Asia have figured prominently (Ong and Collier 2005, Ong 2006, Tsing 2006, 2009). However, unlike earlier cultural holisms born of the study of Southeast Asia, *and* unlike later transnational anthropologies of globalization—for which ethnography, in George Marcus’ (1995) seminal article, must be both in and of the world system—this chapter responds to DDA’s emplacement within wider systems of politics and political economy by seeking neither a re-embedded political anthropology nor an anthropology “beyond ‘culture’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Instead, this chapter thinks with Homi Bhabha’s (1994) coupling of the transnational and the translational, advancing a translational understanding of border-crossing infrapolitics. Building on scholarship on the politics of translation (Rafael 1988, Asad 1993, Spivak 1993, Bhabha 1994, Sakai 1997, Chakrabarty 2007, Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a), this chapter grasps translation as producing not equivalence from difference, but rather new and reconstituted forms of heterogeneity.¹²⁴ I argue the same of DDA’s infrapolitics beyond Dawei: their participation in larger struggles around infrastructure projects does not overcome or resolve, but rather reinscribe and remake, important forms of political and material difference.

Anyone familiar with political struggles and social movements in Myanmar and Thailand will have an awareness of how central translation is to political activity. Even events in Dawei

¹²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007) cites Meaghan Morris’ perceptive account of Naoki Sakai’s conception of translation. “Sakai,” Morris writes, “clearly shares with other theorists a conception of translation as a practice producing difference out of incommensurability (rather than equivalence out of difference) and of the ‘matter’ of translation as heterogeneous all the way down” (Sakai 1997, xii).

sometimes require moving between Dawei, Burmese, Mon, English, Thai, and (both, in fact) Karen languages, depending on the setting and participants. Events in Yangon and Bangkok, meanwhile, often bring together organizations and movements from across Myanmar, Thailand, and Southeast Asia to develop and pursue common agendas around issues such as land politics, resource extraction, infrastructure projects, and investment policies, to name a few such issues of broad coordination. These events can require translation between a dozen languages or more, requiring the use of microphones, earpieces, and audio crackling across numerous frequency channels. In the rear of Yangon's conference rooms on most Saturday mornings in the 2010s—prime timing for fora of all kinds—simultaneous interpreters could be found whispering frantically into their microphones from behind hastily constructed barriers designed to minimize audio interference between different interpreters. For large organizations, the best translators are in high (and high-paying) demand. Smaller organizations like DDA tend to handle their own translation needs through consecutive, not simultaneous, interpretation, often using a relatively widely spoken language—Burmese, for instance—to mediate between less widely spoken languages—Mon and Karen languages, for instance.

The political salience of translation, moreover, has not declined so much as increased in recent years. In Myanmar, greater capital investment following trade liberalization in the early 2010s has provoked more occasions for political organization across space, as more investments large-scale and otherwise—from the Dawei SEZ and major dam projects to smaller industrial zones, mines, plantations, and fisheries—have motivated activist groups and social movements to build larger and broader political struggles (Aung 2013, Buschmann 2018, Chachavalpongpun *et al.* 2020). As we have seen, capital accumulation can be understood as a bordering technology, a force for the production of spatial and temporal difference. From this perspective, investment

projects such as these require political responses that work across multiplying forms of heterogeneity. This is an organizational question of accounting for and negotiating difference—as difficult and cumbersome as it can be—that is often expressed in language. “In a world of proliferating borders, the task of the translator and the task of the political organizer often tend to converge” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 273).

But this organizational question is not only one of language. Translation in a conventional sense, as linguistic conversion between languages, is not only what is at issue. Mezzadra and Neilson invoke Gramsci’s discussion of Lenin in Notebook Eleven of Gramsci’s prison writings. In the early 1920s, Lenin worried that, per Gramsci’s paraphrasing, “in dealing with organizational questions...we have not known how to ‘translate’ our language into the European languages” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 270). Mezzadra and Neilson point out that, in the speech Gramsci discusses, Lenin’s concern is over a resolution on “organizational structures” adopted by the Communist International in 1921. Lenin worries the resolution will not be adequately understood by foreigners not for linguistic reasons—“not because it is written in Russian—it has been excellently translated into all languages,” Lenin specifies—but because, he argues, “it is too Russian,” that is, “everything in it is based on Russian conditions.” Overall, he says, “we have not learnt how to present our experience to foreigners” (Lenin 1965). Mezzadra and Neilson argue that the reference to Lenin in Gramsci—himself a trained linguist (Lo Piparo 1979, Ives 2004)—helps explain Gramsci’s thought of the political concept of translation, a broad concern over the relation between theoretical concepts and material situations. Elsewhere in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci writes,

Every truth, even if it is universal, and even if it can be expressed by a mathematical formula of an abstract kind (for the tribe of the theoreticians), owes its effectiveness to its being expressed in the language appropriate to specific concrete situations. If it cannot be

expressed in such specific terms, it is a Byzantine and scholastic abstraction, good only for phrase-mongers to toy with. (Gramsci 2012, 201)

Ultimately, Mezzadra and Neilson read Gramsci as displacing a narrowly linguistic notion of translation in favor of a richer concept of translation between theory and materiality, which they understand as a question of social praxis. “This moment of clash between concepts and the materiality of specific concrete situations,” they write, “requires translation and a theory of translatability that goes way beyond a merely linguistic approach to this problem. For Gramsci, translation is above all a social praxis, involving a kind of labor that works through linguistic borders but is never exhausted by this task” (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013a, 271). At stake is “not the translatability of languages but the deep rooting of struggles in heterogeneous material networks and settings” (307). Here too, I advance a translational approach in which translation stands not only for movement between languages but also movement between struggles, as individuals, activists, organizations, and movements translate between political activities and ideas across multiple concrete situations.

In pursuing a translational approach, I move away from certain modes of analysis that govern political anthropologies past and present. These include, as we will see, a juxtaposition between insides and outsides, in the normative cultural holisms long characteristic of Southeast Asian Studies; and the logic of equivalence that organizes studies of populism as a political strategy. Translationally, by contrast, I present a cross-cutting, transversal set of political activities that is supranational, yet still indelibly traversed by and (re)productive of political and material differences. Moreover, I pursue an alternative political anthropology adequate to this set of activities. Such an anthropology, I suggest, must be a political anthropology otherwise but not other, “‘otherwise’ than modernity but not outside it” (Bhabha 1994, 26). Accordingly, I attend to and foreground what I see not as radical alterity, but as differential, multiplying forms of politics

that, like the borders they cross, entail both relation and separation—a structure of connection and division evident from the beginning of the exposure trip.

6.2 Beyond cultural holism

The exposure trip began in the dense humidity of late July. Naing Tun had spent months preparing travel documents and buying tickets for everyone, including passports for the Amya villagers who had never traveled internationally before, nor traveled by airplane. First, the trip's Myanmar participants converged in Yangon by plane, mainly, from Rakhine, Mon, and Karen States, as well as from Dawei. Naing Tun and several Paung Ku staff then flew with everyone to Bangkok's Don Muang Airport, where P'Fai met the group and helped everyone navigate passport control. Piling into vans, they drove the short distance to WeTrain, a guesthouse and conference center near Don Muang where we stayed for the first few days of the trip.

In Bangkok already on a visa run, I met the group at WeTrain when they arrived in the early afternoon. With everyone looking frazzled as we carried luggage inside, Naing Tun muttered that passport control had not gone smoothly. "We clearly stood out," he said, nodding at everyone entering the building. "For a lot of them, it's their first time outside of Myanmar. You see, they're wearing longyis and sandals—people don't dress like this in Thailand," at least not in an international airport. "We all had passports and visas," he continued, "but"—he gave me a significant look—"we didn't really have money." After hassling with the immigration officials, P'Fai eventually ensured that everyone made it through. Regardless, I wrote in my notes that night that a tone had been set, whereby border-crossing entailed not only onward passage but also the specter of prohibition: of denial, disconnection, and difference reinscribed.

The trip lasted ten days. After two days at WeTrain to acclimatize and prepare, first we drove east to Rayong, where Map Ta Phut's smokestacks dominate the horizon; next back west and then south to Prachuap Khiri Khan, where villagers' struggles against a powerplant project had proven successful; then north and east again to an organic farm in Chachoengsao, to Bangkok's northeast, where the farm stood for sustainable agriculture and alternative development; and last to Wongsanit Ashram, also northeast of Bangkok, a retreat center established by the Thai activist and intellectual Sulak Sivaraksa, the founder of SEM. At the ashram, we reflected on our visits to Rayong, Prachuap, and Chachoengsao, and we made plans for further coordination and cooperation. Afterwards, we returned to Don Muang to fly back to Yangon and then onwards. Kyaw Htet joined us for the final two days at the ashram, otherwise P'Fai, Naing Tun, Ma Shwe Yi from Paung Ku, and two DDA colleagues—Moe Swe and Khin Thu, whom we met in Chapter 4—were the main leaders of the trip. Even so, it was often Ma Nway at the center of things, sometimes literally, persevering as the lead translator.

Tangled cartographies, political and economic

The trip was a whirlwind of late nights, early mornings, and hours in vans on Thailand's highways, admired by all. The drives from Rayong to Prachuap and Prachuap to Chachoengsao were some seven hours each, but unlike plane rides, the trip's Myanmar participants were well-accustomed to long hours in cramped vehicles, and usually on far worse roads. In the vans, we played tinny Myanmar pop music from our phones, humming distractedly as fields, towns, and cities swept past; murmured idly or clamored boisterously, depending on our energy levels, about the last stop or the next one, or otherwise, family life, football, social media controversies, and political gossip (yes, I'd also heard the rumors about Aung San Suu Kyi's plan to visit Dawei);

dozed at length, certainly, heads lolling as days turned to night; and sometimes snapped pictures, like when Bangkok's skyline loomed into view, its buildings alight against a translucent night sky. In a guesthouse dorm room one night, one group stayed up on the balcony, arguing passionately the (de)merits of the Dawei SEZ. Another group huddled in the corner inside, talking in hushed tones about the difficulties of starting a family. Otherwise, night-time was phone time, or for many, borrowed phone time: for calling loved ones, sending messages, and of course, scrolling Facebook—by way of a few smartphones on hand.

The trip was exhausting, with packed schedules at each stop. As we met farmers, villagers, activists, and other *day-tha' kan-dwei*—"local people," in its most common English translation—Ma Nway worked perhaps hardest to move us between languages, to move us between struggles, and to move us across borders, only for some borders to reappear or transfigure. I was busy, too. I volunteered to handle "documentation" for SEM and Paung Ku, that is, to take detailed notes at every stop along the way. SEM and Paung Ku then used my notes as the basis for preparing reports to their donors, which had to be in English. So as Ma Nway translated from Thai to Burmese, for the most part, I translated from Burmese to English when typing away on my laptop. In some cases, our Thai hosts spoke English. Then Naing Tun, whose English is excellent and whose Burmese is more comfortable than Ma Nway's, would translate from English to Burmese.

SEM and DDA had similar, if not the same, goals for the trip, while Paung Ku also played a facilitating role, more on which shortly. Unlike DDA, SEM presents itself as fighting against the Dawei SEZ project, opposing it wholly, aiming for its cancellation. For P'Fai and Naing Tun, the trip first and foremost sought to arouse outright opposition to the SEZ's potential restart on the part of the trip's Amya participants. DDA, by contrast, as we know, does not reject the SEZ categorically—however much Kyaw Htet and other staff are personally opposed to it—but rather

calls for greater transparency, accountability, and local participation in whatever form it might take. Thus on this trip, Khin Thu and Moe Swe aimed less to provoke a wholesale rejection of the Dawei SEZ by the villagers from Amya, and more for the trip to raise questions about large-scale industrial projects—issues like land acquisition, working conditions, environmental regulations, the roles of government and business, and impacts to local people, all of which *even Thailand*, so to speak (as Kyaw Htet pressed home in the final two days at the ashram), has found it difficult to manage on major projects like these. While SEM aimed for a more oppositional response to the trip, both SEM and DDA hoped that at least the trip’s Amya participants might come away less sanguine about the SEZ’s planned restart, and more willing to consider working with DDA to address potential concerns.

As ever in its absence more than its presence, in its possible resumption not with us here in Thailand but over there back beyond the border, the Dawei SEZ shaped our discussions more than anything else. When we asked, at Map Ta Phut, if or how P’Kung and his friends ever demanded better treatment from the government or corporations; at Prachuap, what kind of organizational structure allowed for such a long-term struggle against the nearby powerplant; and at Chachoengsao, how long it took to develop and certify organic farming methods, and begin turning profits, it was often the Dawei SEZ that participants had in mind—its imbrications with state and capital, the collective mobilization it might soon require, and the alternatives to it that may be possible. But it was not only the Dawei SEZ casting a shadow. Two villagers from Karen State were trying to fight a mining project backed by Thai investors; a youth activist from Mon State had been talking to friends about organizing protests against an industrial zone, designed for cross-border trade; and two Rakhine activists were eager for ideas about how to contest the port and SEZ project planned for Kyaukphyu, the terminus of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

in western Myanmar. These projects too underlay our discussions. Our hosts, meanwhile, introduced us to the projects they have faced: the vast Map Ta Phut estate, where dozens of international petrochemical companies operate refineries, power stations, and iron and steel facilities, including Union Carbide, which moved to Map Ta Phut in the years following the Bhopal disaster in India; the plans for a coal-fired powerplant in Prachuap, modeled on a notorious powerplant in northern Thailand, and designed to complement Thailand's growing gas imports from Myanmar in the early 2000s; and the farm in Chachoengsao, which farmers continue to present as an alternative form of development to powerplant projects also proposed in that area.

None of these projects, nor the struggles they called forth—whether those in Myanmar or Thailand—begins or ends as somehow local, self-contained, bounded unto themselves. Each, rather, is the product of translocal, and in many cases transnational, processes intertwined with states and capital, mobile processes that have created, reproduced, and transformed geographic spaces over varying periods of time, with varying degrees of success.

Map Ta Phut is the most obvious example. At the WeTrain center in Bangkok as we geared up for our trip, two researchers from the Eastern People's Network (EPN)—a group led by residents living in the Map Ta Phut area—situated the Map Ta Phut estate within broad spatial and temporal processes. They explained how Japan, the U.S., and European countries were the main investors as the Thai government began planning the area for petrochemical industries in the 1980s. Following the offshore discovery of natural gas in the Gulf of Thailand, this investment took the form of private investment and bilateral development assistance, at a time when Thailand aimed to capture mobile capital moving into Southeast Asia from the so-called Asian Tiger economies, then growing rapidly in Asia's east and northeast. Map Ta Phut became not only mainland Southeast Asia's largest industrial estate, but also one of the largest in the world,

supplying power and petrochemical products to the whole of Thailand, Thailand's regional neighbors, and countries farther away. The researchers were familiar with the Dawei SEZ. They emphasized that ITD models the Dawei project on Map Ta Phut, but at a remarkable 7-10 times its scale.

The participants picked up on the relations and similarities between these various projects—not just between Map Ta Phut and the Dawei SEZ, but between Map Ta Phut and projects elsewhere in Myanmar. A villager from Amya asked what the companies or the government did for workers and local communities in the Map Ta Phut area. Was there any compensation for them, for instance? A Rakhine activist from Kyaukphyu asked which have been the most harmful industries in the estate. And who does the estate actually benefit? But the discussion did also cover more direct relations between Map Ta Phut and Dawei. One of the researchers stressed that by the late 2000s, environmental governance in Thailand had improved in response to green activist groups and social movements—not least in the context of Map Ta Phut itself. In 2009, after the EPN brought a lawsuit alleging inadequate health assessments for a planned expansion of Map Ta Phut, the Thai judiciary ordered a stop to 65 initiatives within the estate. The researcher emphasized that only months later, Thailand's Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva went on television to justify the Thai government's support for the Dawei SEZ, a Map Ta Phut-like project except orders of magnitude larger. "Some industries are not suitable to be located in Thailand," Abhisit explained. "This is why they decided to set up there," in Dawei.

Obvious as Map Ta Phut might be, even smaller-scale projects like the powerplant proposed in Prachuap are enmeshed in much wider political and economic processes. After we arrived in Prachuap, following the long drive from Rayong, we met Bee twice—first that night and then again the following morning. Bee rose to prominence as powerplant plans waxed and waned

in Prachuap, becoming widely acknowledged as the leader of the movement opposing them. “Just go to Youtube,” P’Fai said with a smile, introducing her at a meeting room in our guesthouse. “You will learn all about her.”

In a deep, energetic voice that broke often into laughter, she explained via Ma Nway what had happened in the area. In the early 2000s, a company backed by Thaksin Shinawatra, then Thailand’s Prime Minister, began devising plans not only for a coal-fired powerplant, but also social responsibility activities, such as providing funding for schools in the area. That was when residents began to take notice. Some of her friends and neighbors accepted the powerplant plans, while others had questions and concerns. She found herself in the latter group. They contacted students who had visited the infamous Mae Mo powerplant in Lampang, in Thailand’s north. The students cautioned Bee and her friends that health and environmental impacts from powerplants can be severe. One report suggested the powerplant in Prachuap would be even larger than Mae Mo, among the largest coal-fired powerplants in Asia. Thailand had begun aggressively addressing its energy supply, even importing natural gas from Myanmar by this time—by way of one of the gas pipelines cutting across the area north of Dawei. They learned about all this and more, Bee said, insisting they were (and still are) villagers, not any kind of NGO. They learned who was with them and against them in the area; they learned how to reach out to and form relations with students, researchers, and other people like them doing similar work elsewhere; and they learned how to build and sustain activities over time. Beginning to write letters, hold public meetings, and organize demonstrations, they clashed with police and with hired vigilantes. The threat of violence was not idle: one of her friends was attacked and killed. Bee’s own home was shot up on four occasions—to send a threat or kill her, she still wasn’t sure. Thaksin, she said, tried to buy off her

and her supporters, but she refused and ended up in prison. They were able to do enough, however: eventually the powerplant plans were shelved, and Bee was released from prison.

Over long rides and many discussions—especially in the evenings, at whichever guesthouse where we were staying, when we would gather in groups and informally, chewing over what we had learned thus far—the trip afforded ample opportunities for reflection. My substantial body of “documentation,” however, attests less to any clarifying process of explanation, and much more to a dizzying vertigo of comparisons, based on constellations of industrial projects and political activities that we grappled with in our discussions. Based on Ma Nway’s translations, my notes from our meetings with Bee alone contain references to Map Ta Phut, Prachuap, Chachoengsao, a powerplant in Mon State, the Dawei and Kyaukphyu SEZ projects, the powerplant in Lampang, the gas pipeline cutting across the area north of Dawei, an industrial zone in Yangon, a training program in Chiang Mai, and the feminist organizing strategies of widows in Uganda (a comparison drawn by a Paung Ku staff person between Bee’s activities and those of Ugandan feminists). In this sprawling, tangled cartography, some locations, projects, and struggles bear direct relations—for instance, between the Map Ta Phut estate and the Dawei SEZ, or between the gas pipeline, the Lampang powerplant, and the powerplant plans for Prachuap. Other points on this map arose in conversation due simply to their similarities—Prachuap and, if distantly, Uganda—while still others emerged as studies in contrasts. Hence our discussion of how the Lampang powerplant went ahead, the Prachuap powerplant did not, and the Dawei and Kyaukphyu SEZs remain under consideration.

Again and again, we grappled with specific powerplants, industrial zones, pipelines, and more, locating them historically and geographically in changing fields of political and economic power. Even more so, however, we tried to understand the kinds of political projects that emerged

in response: how and why they came to be, how they grew and changed with time, how they defined success and won (or lost), how they managed challenges they encountered, how they built relations with others that, in many cases, helped sustain them. The political projects we encountered linked Bangkok and Map Ta Phut, Prachuap and Lampang, and through this trip itself, multiple locations in Myanmar with multiple locations in Thailand.

Cultural holism: a normative tradition and its limits

The trip's tangled cartographies may come as little surprise. They may seem expected, especially in a region of Thai-led economic integration dating to the late 1980s. Yet a long-standing tradition of cultural and political thought in the study of Southeast Asia—the dominant tradition until recently—would once have struggled to make sense of an ethnographic object like this trip. The trip, geared towards border-crossing infrapolitics and relational political projects, underlines the importance of a political anthropology otherwise than this tradition. It is a tradition of normative cultural holism that disavows heterogeneity—rooted in the work, most prominently, of J.S. Furnivall, Clifford Geertz, and Benedict Anderson.

Furnivall was the most important of the colonial scholar-administrators to work in Burma. A towering figure in the study of Southeast Asia—Anderson (1998, 4) credits “the great Burma scholar” Furnivall with founding the very idea of “Southeast Asia” as a unit of study—Furnivall published *Colonial Policy and Practice* in 1948 (Furnivall 2014), his best-known work. In it, he characterizes colonialism as having destroyed “Old Burma,” with labor importation under colonial economy polarizing and disintegrating this pre-existing unity. The plural society follows: “a medley of peoples—European, Chinese, Indian, and native” who “meet, but only in the marketplace.” In fact, “they mix but they do not combine,” such that “there is a plural society, with

different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit” (304-305). For Furnivall, the plural society is a problematic formation, a sign of social breakdown.¹²⁵ It arises as a problem demanding an answer—a problem of difference and heterogeneity, on one hand, and insufficient unity, on the other. In response, Furnivall longs for a coherent social whole, a common cultural politics—the “uniform social culture” that colonialism destroyed. Nationalism promises such a binding power. The splintering forces of colonial rule “can be brought under control only by recognizing the validity of some quasi-religious principle accepted by all concerned as of superior validity to economic motives, and...this can be found only in the principle of Nationalism” (506).

If Furnivall yearns for a holism lost, then Geertz imagines a re-embedded political anthropology, restored to a holistic cultural setting. Both address a perceived excess of heterogeneity. Fresh from his fieldwork in Java in the 1950s, Geertz turned to comparative politics within the University of Chicago Committee for the Comparative Study of New Nations. In a series of essays (Geertz 1963, 1973, 193–341), he envisions an “integrative revolution” in the decolonizing world that would reconcile a “direct conflict between primordial and civil sentiments” (Geertz 1963, 111). Primordial attachments, deeply marked, refer to “given” identifications with race, ethnicity, and language—“congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on.” Civil sentiments, unmarked, refer to the generic political culture of modern states—detached, dispassionate, impersonal. Within the Parsonian-Weberian modernization theory that influenced the Committee so heavily, Geertz counterposes a heterogeneous primordialism to a generic civil modernity. “The same problems,” he writes, having referred to India’s linguistic diversity, are “...literally pandemic to the new states, as the countless references to ‘dual’ or ‘plural’ or

¹²⁵ Much in contrast to the Anglo-American thought of *pluralism*.

‘multiple’ societies, to ‘mosaic’ or ‘composite’ social structures, to ‘states’ that are not ‘nations’ and ‘nations’ that are not ‘states,’ to ‘tribalism,’ ‘parochialism,’ and ‘communalism,’ ...demonstrate” (106). Yet for Geertz, civil modernity does not require purifying the new states of archaic attachments, which will stoke renewed identification along those lines. Rather, the primordial and the civil should be balanced, or indeed, integrated, within the cultural and political wholes of the new states. The task of social science, then, is not to abstract the civil from the primordial. The task is to plunge the civil back into the new states’ political cultures—their problematic heterogeneities notwithstanding.

Geertz is not always seen as a Southeast Asianist. Yet his eventual development of an interpretive, meaning-based concept of culture owed much to the displays of religion, ritual, and power he encountered in Indonesia (Geertz 1960, 1973, 1980).¹²⁶ And his break with existing political anthropology underscored, in a sense, the earlier importance of Edmund Leach’s work in Myanmar’s highlands—work that remains generative in Kachin Studies, Burma/Myanmar Studies, and Southeast Asian Studies (Robinne and Sadan 2007, U Chit Hlaing 2008, Lee 2009, Scott 2009).¹²⁷ The substantivism of his “integrative revolution” also resonates with other conceptions of concentrated, holistic power structures frequently seen as characteristic of political organization in Southeast Asia, such as the “exemplary center” (Heine-Geldern 1956), “mandala”

¹²⁶ In her review of culture theory in Southeast Asian Studies, Mary Margaret Steedly (1999) goes so far as to suggest that, due to Geertz’s work in particular, Southeast Asia is “arguably the best place to look for culture.”

¹²⁷ In his work for the Committee, Geertz was trapped in the contradictions of modernization theory—between the primordial and the civil, for instance. But unusually, Geertz and the Committee saw decolonization, and by extension politics more broadly, as fundamentally social and cultural processes. In this, they broke with the functionalist paradigm that prevailed in political anthropology from the 1940s through the 1960s, a paradigm that held that, almost without exception, the political could and should be separated from the cultural (Spencer 1997). For Leach (Leach 1964, 16), for one, “Culture provides the form, the ‘dress’ of the social situation...But the structure is largely independent of its cultural form.” Meyer Fortes, E.E. Evans-Pritchard (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), and F.G. Bailey (Bailey 1969) advanced similar formulations in this period, forming one side of the formalist-substantivist debate that also characterized economic anthropology at the time.

states (Wolters 1999), the “galactic polity” (Tambiah 1977b), and—Geertz again—the “theater state” (Geertz 1980) (see Steedly 1999, 434–5).

It is fitting, then, that arguably the key figure in modern Southeast Asian Studies, Benedict Anderson—the third figure here—would maintain this investment in holistic conceptions of power and politics, beginning with his earliest delineation of a “Javanese tradition of political thought,” published in 1972. He attends closely to attempts to gather, accumulate, and possess political power—to *concentrate* political power—moving from the rituals and regalia of “Old Java” to the rallies, marches, and speeches of Sukarno (Anderson 1990, 22–8). *Contra* Western conceptions of political power, Anderson grasps Javanese political power as inherently homogeneous, organized around conceptions of unity, the center, and the control thereof. If this interpretive position recalls Geertz’s substantivist holism, then Anderson’s emergent understanding of nationalism resembles Furnivall’s—in what he sees, echoing Furnivall, as nationalism’s promise of unification.

The urge to oneness, so central to Javanese political attitudes, helps to explain the deep psychological power of the idea of nationalism in Java. Far more than a political credo, nationalism expresses a fundamental drive to solidarity and unity in the face of disintegration of traditional society under colonial capitalism, and other powerful external forces, from the late nineteenth century on. (37)

Anticipating his argument that nations exist in empty, homogeneous time, in universalist social imaginaries (Anderson 1983), here Anderson already grasps nationalism as an answer to the “disintegration” of an earlier social unity (“traditional society”) due to the market dictates of colonialism. In his later work, moreover, he differentiates a politics of ethnicity from a politics of nation, doing so by distinguishing between bound and unbound serialities (Anderson 1998). Unbound seriality is most apparent in the equivalential work of print capitalism, such as newspapers and novels. Bound seriality corresponds to ethnicity and ethnic politics. It originates in governmentality, in elections and censuses, “exemplified by finite series like Asian-Americans,

beurs, and Tutsis.” While unbound seriality ties into a redemptive vision of nationalism—more important than ever amid the “bad nationalisms” that proliferated with the fall of the Soviet Union—bound seriality represents an objectifying, narrow, essentializing field of politics. A corruption of classical nationalism’s universal ideals, ethnic politics’ “identitarian conception of ethnicity...lacks any universal grounding” (45).

Heterogeneity recurs as a problem: in the “medley of peoples” “living side by side, but separately,” in Furnivall’s plural society; the primordial attachments of “blood, speech, custom, and so on,” demanding reconciliation in Geertz’s integrative revolution; and the bound serialities of “Asian-Americans, *beurs*, and Tutsis,” in Anderson’s critique of ethnic politics. This tradition constructs heterogeneity as a problem to be overcome or reconciled within cultural wholes—within the empty, homogeneous time of the nation, most prominently.

The holism running through this tradition of thought tends towards constructions of boundedness, even if this tradition does not deny long-range historical inter-connections, nor the ravages of colonial rule. In each formulation, colonialism disintegrates former social unities, and historical agency is a jolt that comes from afar. The powers of empire, emanating from the European metropole, disturb and transform—as tragedy or otherwise—static “traditional societies,” as in Anderson’s early essay. The challenge, across this current of thought, is to recover and re-integrate cultural wholes in the classical mode of the nation.

Geertz’s culturalist reading of politics contrasted sharply with British functionalism in political anthropology. But its holism was also consistent with an important line of thought in American cultural anthropology. This thought takes its objects to be discrete cultures existing separately—a dynamic that, in Geertz, emerges only more strongly in his symbolic anthropology. Michel-Rolph Trouillot ties this concept of culture to disciplinary specialization. “Man the symbol

maker,” he writes, “was freed from the physical realities of his being and of his world. Culture was left on its own even within anthropology. Its boundaries became thicker; its negative reference to race blurrier” (2003, 103).¹²⁸ Geertz extended the life of this culture concept: “Anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict and Ralph Linton emphasized the ‘wholeness’ of distinct cultures, a theme later revived by the work of Clifford Geertz.” It is this conception of cultures as discrete, bounded wholes—as texts abstracted from con-texts, “freed” from worldly reality—that makes it possible, infamously, for Geertz to barely reference the anti-Communist massacres of 1965 in Indonesia in his essay on Balinese cockfights.

This tradition of cultural holism long prevailed in the study of culture and politics in Southeast Asia. But in anthropology, other lines of thought took shape as early as the 1940s. The Manchester School, born of Max Gluckman and the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, insisted on locating places and processes within larger fields of power and politics. Talal Asad (1973) demanded that anthropology, not simply its objects of study, be understood as a product of colonial rule. Marxist anthropologists emphasized histories of inter-connection in coming to grips with processes of cultural and political transformation, with the rise of capitalism, colonialism, or the entanglement of the two (Mintz 1977, 1985, Nash 1981, Wolf 1982). Eric Wolf’s (1982) critique of cultural holism is the best known, decrying the notion of cultures as bounded objects that, like billiard balls, can hit or spin off of each other.

Its universalism notwithstanding, this tradition’s construction of difference as an object of disavowal—consistent with an understanding of cultures as bounded wholes—does reveal a position with its own specificity. Reflecting on Anderson’s rejection of ethnic politics, Chatterjee (2011) argues his politics is a utopian politics, a politics of an available universalism, a politics of

¹²⁸ Geertz’s culturalism, indeed, can be read as replacing “race” with “culture” as the explanatory variable for backwardness in the context of modernization theory (Trouillot 2003).

those who can say “my Europe,” as Anderson can and does.¹²⁹ For those who cannot say “my Europe”—a formulation unavailable as we moved around Thailand—the disavowal of difference does not come so easily, nor the recurring appeal to classical nationalism.

6.3 Beyond “beyond ‘culture’”

One way of naming those forms of analysis that move beyond or exceed the thought of cultures as bounded wholes is to gather them under the heading of conjunctural approaches. This is an analytical tradition with a rich heritage (Li 2014, 17–8). It is grounded in Marx’s own method, which for Tania Li, summarizing succinctly, “examines the multiple relations that constitute concrete, historical forms.” It is also a living tradition in the work of those who follow Marx’s method, attending to capital accumulation and its contradictions, contestation and struggle; in feminist, postcolonial, and Gramscian scholarship, wherein race, ethnicity, and gender condition access to resources and accumulation processes; in the work of geographers, following Henri Lefebvre, who—like Gillian Hart (2004, 98, 97)—decline to “take as given discrete objects, identities, places, and events,” addressing instead “how multiple forces come together in practice to produce particular dynamics or trajectories”; and in anthropology, as noted, the work of the Manchester School, postcolonial anthropology, and Marxist anthropologists, who attend to events and processes as they are constituted historically in contested fields of force.¹³⁰

Li suggests that conjunctural analysis tends to be the work not so much of grounded social actors, but rather scholars with access to data and resources who are better positioned to identify

¹²⁹ Not an idealist politics, Chatterjee specifies, as Anderson is too much a materialist in his conception of print capitalism to be accused of reinscribing an idealism (Chatterjee 2011, 133–4).

¹³⁰ This summation borrows from Li’s. For conjunctural approaches such as these, see for example Nugent (2002), Roseberry (1989), and Kalb (1997); Yanagisako (2002), Hall (1996), Moore (2005), and Smith (1999a); and Lefebvre (1991), Massey (1993), Pred and Watts (1992), and Hart (2002, 2006).

and track spatiotemporal connections. Yet I have suggested DDA can be understood as organic intellectuals who cultivate and represent political analysis of this kind. Their leadership of this exposure trip underscores their work along these lines. So too the Eastern People's Network (EPN), who located Map Ta Phut within a shifting geography of Japanese, U.S., and European capital flows, a force field confronted by their own long-term political struggle. Then there was Bee, in Prachuap, who came to contest the powerplant project there not as an isolated object or event, but rather as a concrete process constructed out of historical relations to other industrial and energy projects elsewhere, from central and northern Thailand to Yangon and Myanmar's offshore gas fields. Indeed, the trip and its participants repeatedly produced exemplary conjunctural analyses. Typical of conjunctural thought broadly, these analyses tended not to separate insides from outsides, nor preceding fixities from later, altered states—as if that which comes from outside or afar disturbs, or impacts, a unitary, authentic, and static prior condition. Instead, the participants on the trip identified, struggled with, and planned to struggle against always already entangled and inter-connected processes: the multiple relations that constitute concrete, historical forms.

In these shifting, colliding constellations of forces, however, it is not the case that, analytically, an absence of bounded wholes means that these processes were understood as random and direction-less, flat or even in their historical construction and tangible effects.¹³¹ Beyond boundedness and cultural holism lies not a formless hyperspace of deterritorialized, impersonal flows. Rather, this trip foregrounds the ongoing (re)production of political and material differences precisely from constellations of forces that exceed—that demonstrate the inadequacy of—an analytics of bounded cultural wholes. While this trip moves in a space beyond cultural holism, then, it also, and just as importantly, moves in a space that is beyond “beyond ‘culture,’” that is,

¹³¹ “A conjuncture is dynamic, but it is not random,” Li (2014, 16) writes. “There is path dependence. It is not the case that anything goes.”

beyond anthropologies of globalization that conjure noncultural, nonsituated futurist vistas, between local and global, lifeworld and system—with the assumption, too often, that static cultural units are the opposite of new, chaotic, fractal mobile flows. These are anthropologies for which, *contra* the fiction of unitary cultures in fixed places, capitalist modernity demands instead a turn to an analysis of flows, which—rippling across registers technological, mediatized, financial, and more—tend to challenge and transcend older politics of difference. A certain conflict that emerged during the trip suggests these anthropologies are also inadequate to the transnational, translational, struggles of this trip.

U Zaw Lin and the clerks (so-called)

The night we arrived in Rayong, after our first few days at the WeTrain center in Bangkok, the handful of us who had helped organize the trip had our nightly meeting to discuss the trip thus far (our nightly facilitation meeting, we called it). We dragged some chairs together on the grass in front of the guesthouse where we were staying. P’Fai and Naing Tun were there from SEM, Ma Shwe Yi from Paung Ku, and Moe Swe and Khin Thu from DDA. One issue that came up would prove difficult to handle in the coming days: the situation of U Zaw Lin, a village medic who was the most vocal of the Amya villagers on the trip. U Zaw Lin was one of those villagers whom U Sein referred to as “his men”: the groups of villagers in Amya with whom U Sein communicated, and sometimes acted, with regard to the SEZ project. U Sein had not joined the trip to Thailand, but he had arranged for U Zaw Lin and several of his friends and neighbors to join.

Collectively, we spent much of our facilitation meeting worrying about U Zaw Lin and, by extension, the quieter Amya villagers who tended to defer to him. Why? On one hand, the group from Amya had participated less than others so far; we had heard less from them than from others

in the information sessions meant to introduce the trip and the places we would be visiting. On the other hand, when we did hear from this group, it was usually only U Zaw Lin who spoke, and his questions had—let’s say—a particular bent. He was especially interested in issues surrounding financial compensation: how to get it, how to get more of it, and what to do with it. He asked repeatedly, for instance, how much financial compensation had been made available in Map Ta Phut and how those figures had come about, namely for people displaced or otherwise impacted by the petrochemical estate. As we discussed how we might better integrate the Amya group—through different seating arrangements, for instance—Ma Shwe Yi raised concerns about the focus on compensation, and the fact that we had heard little, by then, from the group aside from U Zaw Lin. And Moe Swe repeated a lament I had often heard from DDA: there are so many—too many—groups in Amya, that is, a variety of different relationships to the project, as well as ingrained forms of village hierarchy, which helped make it difficult for DDA to work there. “Too many groups,” in effect, also meant too many villagers who, like U Zaw Lin, did not share DDA’s concerns about the SEZ. These were villagers who associated the project with the promise of material gains, such as compensation.

“Well, what can we do, though?” Naing Tun asked. He still felt it had been important to have U Sein arrange for people like U Zaw Lin to join the trip, to build some lines of communication if only to be able to share information. And anyway, he said, about the group issue, it’s just the case that “some people in the community are deferred to, will make their opinions known more than others, will be listened to more than others. It’s not necessarily their fault or that they are bad people, that’s just how it is there.” For him, the groupness of Amya, with its hierarchical social structure, was something that would be difficult to change, difficult to address, at least on this trip. In any case, we too, Naing Tun continued, needed to understand U Zaw Lin’s

perspective. The situation in the villages is not good, he explained, especially in Yegyí, the fishing village U Zaw Lin comes from. Naing Tun used a striking phrase. In the villages, he said, they have a hunger for development: *pwun pyo yeh ngaq muq*—a phrase of a certain intensity, connoting pangs of hunger, *suffering* pangs of hunger, for development.

We spent the next day meeting P’Kung and his friends and driving around the outskirts of Map Ta Phut. Our discussions that day, the narratives we heard—they were difficult to hear: those stories about cancer, suicide, and birth defects; about chemical explosions and oil spills; and about friends who moved away, those who had to stay, and those who survived, or in many cases did not, the ongoing calamity that is Map Ta Phut. That evening, we regrouped in a meeting room at the guesthouse. While Khin Thu took notes on a flipchart, Ma Shwe Yi had everyone go around and say, individually, how they felt about what they had seen, what they had heard. Feelings of anger and sadness, of worry and concern predominated (although U Zaw Lin said only that he didn’t feel anything). Ma Shwe Yi also facilitated an exercise called “River of Life” where everyone was encouraged to look back and reflect on the past ten or twenty years in their own lives—noting good things and bad things, struggles and achievements. The exercise wasn’t directly related to the trip, or P’Kung and his friends. Still, it was an attempt to nurture a level of introspection that might, Ma Shwe Yi explained, help lead everyone to engage more thoughtfully with the information and experiences they encountered on the trip. At the facilitation meeting later that night, there was a sense that the day had been difficult but productive, perhaps even a turning point of sorts. Naing Tun and Ma Shwe Yi felt they had seen a change in the conversation, a shift towards a greater appreciation for the risks of the Dawei SEZ, being modeled on Map Ta Phut.

The next day, however, the mood shifted. As we began the long drive to Prachuap, I could see P’Fai was upset, and Ma Shwe Yi too. I leaned over to P’Fai, asking if everything was okay—

and she showed me a hasty set of Facebook messages on her phone. U Zaw Lin, apparently, had messaged U Sein, who in turn messaged P’Fai. U Zaw Lin was upset about the River of Life exercise in particular, which he saw as pointless. More broadly, he complained that he had joined this trip to learn about development, not all the problems everyone had been talking about. He was critical of Ma Shwe Yi, whose activities—she also led daily stretching and yoga sessions—were detracting from the purposes of the trip, he felt. Disparagingly, he referred to Ma Shwe Yi as an office clerk, according to U Sein’s message—that is, as someone who just works in an office in Yangon, an activist in that mere professional sense, as opposed to someone from a village, like U Zaw Lin, who can grasp what is important about a project like the Dawei SEZ (a set of distinctions P’Fai and I pieced together in subsequent messages with U Sein). The upshot was that U Zaw Lin was threatening to leave the trip early and take with him the other villagers from Amya.

As it turned out, U Zaw Lin—and the other villagers from Amya—did not leave the trip, but Ma Shwe Yi did. She had been planning to do so anyway, she said, to get back to Yangon for a workshop. It was still hard to shake the feeling that had she not done so, the trip might have really fallen apart, or at least lost a core group of participants for whom the trip had been designed. Disgruntled, U Zaw Lin stayed, and the trip went ahead.

*

U Zaw Lin wasn’t entirely unknown to DDA, SEM, and me before the trip. As one of U Sein’s men, as it were, he was someone we would see around at trainings, workshops, meetings, and other gatherings in Dawei town and the surrounding villages. But he wasn’t someone we knew well. As the trip wound down and we considered how best to follow up, we decided we should stay in touch with him in Amya. So long as he was up for it, which—if not enthusiastically, when we proposed it on the trip—he was.

In Amya, the feeling was different. When I visited him in the following months, sometimes with other colleagues and sometimes without them, he was like a different person: brighter, happier, more willing to open up and engage—a contrast to the personality he presented on the exposure trip. It also turned out he is a much-loved cook, in Amya, and rightly so, with an emphasis on the seafood available along the coast. When P’Fai, Naing Tun, and I first went to visit him a couple of weeks after the trip, he was presiding over a couple of grills and a series of very large pots suspended over charcoal in the back of a monastery in Amya—while shouting orders, jovially, to the group of villagers who were helping him cook, including the other Amya villagers who had joined the trip. That day, we caught up over lunch and then tea in the afternoon, a prelude to the visits I made subsequently.

As I came to know U Zaw Lin better, I found that while his disposition, in Amya, contrasted sharply with his disposition on the trip, his ideas and imagination, the way he understood the SEZ project, the exposure trip, and what was at stake, remained consistent. Three topics stood out from our discussions. First, he made clear that when U Sein encouraged him to join the trip, he had hesitated. After all, he had never left Myanmar before; he didn’t even have a passport. But U Sein, eager to convince him, told him everything would be taken care of, and traveling around Thailand, he would learn what development really means—and even better, how to achieve it, U Zaw Lin explained, recalling his exchanges with U Sein. He found the trip wanting in these terms, focused too much on all kinds of problems with projects like Map Ta Phut. He barely learned anything he was interested in, he said, while all the personal exercises, the yoga sessions, the facilitation from Ma Shwe Yi—all this was a distraction at best. He had a background in the military, where he had received training as a medic; he was far more predisposed towards the military’s political party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), than the NLD. For him, I came to learn,

there was no problem with strong, centralized state authorities pursuing large-scale infrastructure projects. The concerns DDA tended to highlight around transparency, accountability, and local participation in project decision-making were not of interest to him. What was of interest were urgent possibilities of material gain, which he understood like many others in Amya primarily in terms of financial compensation, but also employment opportunities and better basic infrastructure. I thought often of the phrase Naing Tun used: hunger for development.

Second, U Zaw Lin's hunger for development, so to speak, did not come from nowhere. It came largely from living in one of Amya's poorer villages. In the sandy clearing in front of his home, one afternoon, as squid sizzled over charcoal, he emphasized that existing and past economic opportunities in Amya were just far from sufficient. In Amya, a lowland area of fields and forests, timber extraction had never taken off. Some small-scale mines existed for a time, but never to the extent they did in the highlands around Dawei. While smallholder cash crop farming remained the main source of income—and not only since rubber cultivation increased sharply in the 1990s, but for decades prior as well—the prices, he felt, were simply not high enough, especially with market pressure from lower-priced Thai agricultural products that are also sold in the Dawei area. In his fishing village, too, he explained that prices stayed low because of the much larger seafood industry in Thailand. Local buyers demanded low prices, given the low prices in Thailand. Even so, fishers often tried to sell their products across the border, in Thailand's larger markets.¹³² It struck me that what stood out, for U Zaw Lin, about the SEZ project was not quite its promise of connectivity or integration, as if Amya had once been—or still was—disconnected from the world. The mines, even those few that had operated in Amya; the cash crop economy; the seafood trade—all of these already pointed to Amya's long-standing place within larger market

¹³² This too wasn't quite new. Naing Tun had told me stories about his own family, in a coastal village north of Dawei, making the arduous, days-long journey on foot across the hills to sell coastal products at the border.

geographies. What U Zaw Lin saw, instead, in the promise of the SEZ, was the possibility of a shift or change in pre-existing forms of relation, a shift towards the possibility of claiming a better, larger share of material wealth. Consistent with the politics of distribution we have seen in Amya, it was not connection as such to broader flows of goods and capital that attracted U Zaw Lin—connections of a kind that predated the SEZ, here—but rather the prospect of those flows taking a new shape, such that they might afford, distribute, or indeed enable larger claims on greater material wealth in Amya.

Third, it became clear that U Zaw Lin’s sociopolitical world—as in Amya more broadly, situational and differential, materialist and hierarchical, a function of “too many groups,” as Moe Swe had lamented—was not only situated in Amya. He also talked about being an active part of other social and political projects. In addition to the military and the USDP, these included the Dawei Nationalities Party (DNP), founded by U Sein among others; the Dawei Nationalities Conference, held later that year by the DNP; the Dawei Association,¹³³ with its branches in Yangon and Mawlamyine, among elsewhere, which connect transplants from Dawei to the Dawei area itself; and the Dawei-area activities of the Association for the Protection of Race and Religion (commonly known by its Burmese-language acronym, Ma Ba Tha). Ma Ba Tha, whose activities in Dawei remained limited, it should be noted, is a movement associated with ultra-nationalist Buddhism; founded in 2013, its stated purpose is “to defend Buddhist Myanmar from alleged Islamization” (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2019). The DNP, for its part, which contested the 2015 and 2020 national elections, formally aims to strengthen local control over natural resource management, while promoting Dawei language, culture, and literature, for instance through the Dawei Nationalities Conference. By its own account and those of the media, the DNP has its origins in

¹³³ Not to be mistaken for the Dawei Development Association, i.e., DDA.

efforts to confront and contest the Dawei SEZ project in the early 2010s.¹³⁴ Indeed, these social and political projects are vectors for ethnic governmentality and particularist ultra-nationalism, and they emerged during the period of intensified trade liberalization and political reforms that took shape in the 2010s.

U Zaw Lin pointed towards a sociopolitical world at odds, in many ways, not only with the exposure trip's goals but with DDA and SEM's activities and ideas more broadly. This is one version of the contrast between the secular-universal and situational-differential political trajectories I repeatedly encountered in Dawei—a contrast that we can now say traveled with and hampered DDA as they sought to connect and collaborate with, reinforce and be reinforced by, other struggles around infrastructure beyond Dawei.

Recursive movements: towards the lateral and the transversal

The conflict with U Zaw Lin, a conflict that registers deeper fissures in the political landscape DDA seeks to navigate, is not necessarily the kind of story one might expect from a transnational political project like this exposure trip, itself situated in and against large-scale infrastructure projects constructed from important flows of goods and capital. I have suggested that an earlier thought of normative cultural holism, prominent until recently in the study of politics in Southeast Asia, would have found it difficult to grasp the trip's border-crossing infrapolitics, aimed at the building and reinforcing of relational political projects, forged in and through tangled political and economic cartographies. Yet it is also the case that a thought constructed, sometimes explicitly, against that tradition of normative cultural holism—a body of work committed to a “beyond ‘culture’” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) understanding of globalization—is inadequate as

¹³⁴ I interviewed the DNP's founder, U Aye Min, at his home in Dawei in November 2017.

well to the transnational political projects this trip sought to nurture. For if the trip suggests a need to move beyond holisms past, so too did the conflict with U Zaw Lin neither reflect nor confirm the noncultural, nonsituated understanding of the global intrinsic to the “beyond ‘culture’” scholarship.

These two bodies of work—the thought of cultural holism and the thought of the global beyond culture—are nominally opposed. Ironically, however, they share a conceptual matrix. Both are invested in the identification of problems of excess difference and heterogeneity, which they counterpose to lost or otherwise desirable forms of unity, whether the unity of bounded cultural wholes or the global ecumene of newly interconnected public spheres. This chapter has already seen a critique of the former. The preceding chapter began a critique of the latter, pointing up the symmetrical insufficiencies of flow and network as analytics. Here, I take forward that critique of the latter. I suggest that a translational political anthropology—lateral and transversal; sensitive to the recursive and reflexive moments in a conjuncture; open to the reproduction, not only disappearance, of political and material difference—might better address the transnational political projects in question on this trip.

The phrase “beyond ‘culture’” owes to Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson’s (1992) article of the same name (see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997). As a broad formulation, however, it speaks to some of the most prominent work on globalization beginning in the late 1980s.¹³⁵ Arjun Appadurai’s interventions stand out. His essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (Appadurai 1990) first familiarized the notion of global cultural flows and their

¹³⁵ Some of this scholarship was invested in grappling with the changing contours of global capitalism, often framed as a series of epochal breaks by way of David Harvey’s (1991) thematization of postmodernity—a matter of post-Fordism, time-space compression, and flexible accumulation (Kearney 1995, 1996, Marcus 1995, Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). Other scholarship in this vein focused attention less on capital than on culture, albeit culture reformulated in an age of again unprecedented, apparently, movement and mobility, mediated by novel forms of flow (see Tsing 2000).

attendant “-scapes”: ethnoscaples, technoscapes, mediascapes, ideoscapes, financescapes. Tsunami-like, these -scapes traverse and wash away older, more structured, more bounded heuristics—from center and periphery to consumption and production, and from the strictures of national boundaries to the logics of modernization theory. In what he conceptualizes, subsequently, as a new transnational anthropology (Appadurai 1996), notions of disjuncture and difference stand for a fractal, chaotic, disordered postmodernity, indicative of “disorganized capitalism” (Offe 1985, Lash and Urry 1987). His work in this period (see also Appadurai 1986, 1988) tends to hold up static units (past) as the simple converse of mobile flows (present), while opposing an incipient, universalizing, and indelibly postnational global public sphere to the resurgent primordia of ethnic politics and particularist nationalisms. Other influential globalist scholarship shared in this attempt to move past an anthropology of separate, bounded cultures, finding in new cultural flows, for instance, either growing dialogue between former centers and peripheries (Hannerz 1989, 1996) or the implosion of center-periphery frameworks in transnational, postmodern hyperspace (Kearney 1996).

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) share Appadurai’s rejection of the spatial and cultural divisions long central to anthropology. For them, however, the passing of bounded social worlds is a matter of “partial erosion,” less so Appadurai’s broad distinction between bounded worlds past and interconnected worlds present. This partial erosion, moreover, “must be situated within the highly spatialized terms of a global capitalist economy” (11). *Contra* the tendency in Appadurai’s formulations, capitalist spatialization in their understanding continues to produce situated forms of difference—social, cultural, economic—across interconnected, interdependent spaces. This acknowledgement takes the form of a caveat, however. The broader task, as they see it, is still to

call into question “a spatialized understanding of cultural difference.”¹³⁶ In Gupta and Ferguson’s telling, nations and states are no longer primary loci for imagining place; at issue, now, are “the displaced and decentered identities that mark what is often called the postmodern condition,” a gesture to Harvey’s thought of time-space compression and flexible accumulation. Thus can Tsing (2000), for one, see their “beyond ‘culture’” framing as indicative of globalization scholarship’s wider tendency towards singular, nonsituated futurisms, which risk obscuring capitalism’s differential, heterogeneous affordances. Across this work, the normative privileging of an emergent public sphere that is shared, interconnected, global—over and against figures of difference and heterogeneity, such as the lingering primordia of the ethnic and the national, in Appadurai—makes of this scholarship an echo, ironically, of the earlier thought of normative cultural holism.

Tsing’s critique moves in another direction. It emerged within a body of work that came slightly later than the globalization scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s. For Tsing, alongside Aihwa Ong, among others, the global conjures not a flattened, deterritorialized hyperspace, but rather constellations of situated, dissonant encounters (Ong 1999, 2006, Tsing 2000, 2006, Ong and Collier 2005). Southeast Asia looms large. From the region’s supply chains to its agro-industries, from its economic zones to its governing of ethnicity, states and capital tend to be seen as taking form in and through the productive navigation of difference. These forms consist of political and economic techniques attuned precisely to the reproduction and management—more than the normative disavowal—of difference, techniques understood for instance in terms of zonal capitalism (Winters 1996), graduated sovereignty (Ong 2000), and supply chain heterogeneity (Tsing 2009). Even for Tsing (see namely Tsing 2006), however, notions of connection,

¹³⁶ A problem that persisted, they argue, with the cultural critique project of Marcus and Fischer (1986).

interaction, and engagement predominate. This conceptual matrix is mediated by a discourse of friction and instability, but it tends towards the construction of a shared—albeit fragile, albeit diverse—space of worldly possibility, thus reproducing in a way the core ethico-politics of the globalist scholarship it criticizes. Ong (2006, 2007), meanwhile, takes issue with epochal distinctions between a contemporary world—global, postmodern, neoliberal—and that which precedes it. She notices how, in neoliberal Southeast Asia, authoritarian politics intermix with cultural ethics and norms; ethnic governmentality balances relations between Malay Muslims and the Chinese minority in Malaysia; and in general, states govern different spaces and populations very differently, a variegated governing that makes exceptions for mobile capital, skilled and unskilled labor, and fraught configurations of ethnic difference. Ulrich Beck (1994), Ong (2007) notes, finds a recursive relation, not a dramatic temporal break, between modernity and cultural norms. What she calls a lateral approach bypasses generalizing formulations stressing the novelty of the global, the contemporary, the neoliberal. Cutting across situated techniques and formations, a lateral approach attends to unstable alignments and reflexive constellations—not just fractal disjuncture, but recombination and reconfiguration. This argument echoes concerns about globalization scholarship in general, and Appadurai’s work specifically—wherein a past that is static, localized, and culturally fixed is juxtaposed with a present that is mobile and complex, unsituated and noncultural, and global as such (Tsing 2000, Friedman 2003, Heyman and Campbell 2009).

Recall, here, U Zaw Lin’s political implications and entanglements—his political location and how it came to light. The Myanmar military and USDP, the Dawei Nationalities Party and the Dawei Nationalities Conference, and the Dawei Association and Ma Ba Tha collectively attest to political projects rooted in authoritarian politics, ethnic governmentality, and particularist

nationalism, all of which sit awkwardly, at best, alongside the secular-universal project pursued by DDA. His clash with that project, moreover, precedes the exposure trip, but the trip brought it to a point of conflict; the trip made for the reproduction and even deepening of an important political difference, namely between the situational-differential and secular-universal trajectories I found repeatedly in Dawei. Why deepening? Because after the trip, we followed up with U Zaw Lin to better understand his views and build, even strengthen, lines of communication with him, his friends, and his neighbors. By doing so, we reinforced his political location, as well as the differential, heterogeneous political terrain it reveals. I discussed this with P’Fai; we worried about legitimizing political views we disagreed with, from U Zaw Lin’s focus on compensation and his interest in the SEZ project, to his involvement with the military and Ma Ba Tha. But the possibility of bridging these divides—of transcending the difference he disclosed—won out. We remained in communication. We remained in disagreement.

Accordingly, the exposure trip and its worlds evoke those flexible, mobile formations that suggest an alternative sense of the global: recursive and reflexive, not transcending or overcoming disavowed forms of difference or heterogeneity, but rather recombining and reconfiguring constellations of authoritarian development and ethnic governmentality, of differential political terrains and situated cultural politics. Beyond cultural holism and beyond “beyond ‘culture,’” in this sense, the trip and its participants practiced not only the conjunctural analysis we have seen, but also a lateral, transversal mode of bypassing decisive distinctions between past and present, here and there. Notably, none of the locations on this trip—Map Ta Phut, Prachuap, and Dawei, for instance—were understood as bounded isolates, then or now, from the perspective of the trip’s participants. Instead, they were seen as locations formed, processually, over extended periods of time through restless forms of relation, from those of capital mobility to those of energy and

infrastructure projects. This is not “epochal analysis,” as Raymond Williams (1977) explains of conjunctural thought, but an account that combines how things came to be, as well as the features and lineaments—the structures and infrastructures—that define their formations in the present.

6.4 The untranslatable: two moments

From Thailand’s east to its south and back to its center, the trip had taken us—or so it felt—far and wide. Our locations had to do with infrastructure. Even the highways we traveled, so fast, so smooth, and so adored by the trip’s participants, seemed to speak to—speak of—the collective fantasies we were wrestling with. These were fantasies of relation—political and material—whose affordances, still, were uncertain. Would it be possible to struggle together? What if these promises of relation in fact placed us farther apart? We had already learned that talk of genuine degradation, of all those friends of P’Kung’s who were no longer there, for instance, did not resonate evenly. One participant had left the trip (if according to plan, she said); another participant stayed, but unhappily. A set of political contrasts, reinforced and in some ways intensified, were plain to see. Rudolf Mrázek has suggested that infrastructures are sensory apparatuses. For Mrázek, Brian Larkin (2013, 337) reminds us, infrastructure “is not just a technical object but a language to be learned, a way of tuning into the desire and sense of possibility expressed in the very materials of infrastructure.” What happens, then, if that language is not shared, or if it is a language people learn differently?

On the last leg of the trip, we returned to the highway in the evening on our way to Wongsanit Ashram, set up by SEM’s founder, Sulak Sivaraksa, in the 1980s. In one of our vans, P’Fai and I talked with Naing Tun about some minor translation issues. Ma Nway, Naing Tun worried, had been having trouble with some of the more technical vocabulary in Prachuap and

then at the organic farm in Chachoengsao, which we had just left. He was concerned that some of the trip's participants had started to tune out—that they weren't grasping some of the information, and thus were not being drawn into, nor inspired by, the activist work and political struggles they were witnessing, such as Bee's activities in Prachuap. P'Fai reassured him: over the coming two days at the ashram, we would only have one visitor, an activist named Samak who has helped lead a fight against an SEZ project in Pak Bara, in Thailand's deep south. Aside from our session with him, our activities at the ashram would take place in Burmese—with no need for translation, she said. Ma Nway could take a rest.

These activities did take place in Burmese. They emphasized reflecting on, learning from, and developing action plans based on the visits we had made to Map Ta Phut, Prachuap, and Chachoengsao. Yet a version of translation remained necessary. On our second day at the ashram—our last day of the exposure trip—we broke into groups to consider two questions. What is the meaning of development? And what kind of development do we want? We were in a round building on the grounds of the ashram; we had been sitting on the floor in a circle. Flags from around the world hung from the ceiling—a whole arrangement meant to convey a shared, equivalential, even global sensibility. But as we might expect, the groups' answers to these questions were not quite the same. The first group described development as a socioeconomic (*luhmu sibwayeh*) process, covering issues like health and livelihoods. Led by two youth—one from Amya, one from Kyaukpa—they looked forward to a form of development that would “fulfill our needs” without “negative impacts to local people.” The second group, led by an activist from Kyaukphyu, distinguished between physical (*youq paing saing ya*) and mental (*seiq paing saing ya*) notions of development. They said the former—better roads, electricity, and infrastructure, they specified—would mean little without encouraging the latter, which they described in terms

of having good practice and principles, of being disciplined (*see kan shii deh*). The third group, led by U Zaw Lin, had what he called a simple (*youq shin*) approach to development. Roads and electricity, mobile phones and better fishing boats, more technology in schools, the growth of industries and natural resource management, especially natural gas—these simple things, this gradual development, he explained, was what they discussed.

This was not a particularly dramatic moment, this presentation of differing answers about the meaning of development. The first two answers point to notions of the social and the mental; they make clear that economic or otherwise material understandings of development do not exhaust a sense of the idea—which cannot be considered alone, and which, as an actual process, should “fulfill our needs.” The third answer, characteristic of U Zaw Lin, stays close to a direct, material understanding of development; it does not circumscribe this notion of development in the way the others do.

I thought again of that phrase: hunger for development—and I looked over to Ma Nway. She wasn’t resting. Quietly translating, she was sitting with P’Fai and Samak, who had stuck around. I noticed what I thought were their bemused expressions. In his session with us, Samak had not directly addressed how to define development, but he talked about small goals, about celebrating minor victories—and on the other hand, still cultivating larger visions. We should think about changing society, he said, not just having an SEZ or not. Samak and I chatted later with P’Fai (who translated for me). The first and second groups made sense to Samak and P’Fai, clearly, but the third group—I could tell it’s not how they would have defined development. Still, we were relieved that U Zaw Lin had not left the trip, even though Ma Shwe Yi had. And after a last afternoon spent discussing potential plans for the future, we wrapped up and prepared to return to the airport the following day. The exposure trip was over.

The idea of the untranslatable might suggest something powerful or exceptional, something unusual that defies exchange between languages. Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) attach this power to the notion. “(W)e attribute a special role to the encounter with the untranslatable,” they write, “in tearing established political subjectivities away from themselves and opening new horizons for the production of the common” (25). But Barbara Cassin, editor of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (Cassin 2004), locates the untranslatable at the heart of language itself, understood not as something shared but something uneasily, unevenly reproduced and inhabited. Cassin, Emily Apter explains, has always “ascribed the ‘untranslatable’ to the interminability of translating: the idea that one can never have done with translation.” In her work on classical philosophy, Cassin “tethered the untranslatable to the instability of meaning and sense-making” (Apter 2004, vii). In this sense, the untranslatable does not signify something impossible to translate; it is not an end or limit point of translation. It suggests, in a more general sense, that which defies simple translation, and which in so doing, calls forth and incites an un-ending return to translation. Naoki Sakai, whom Mezzadra and Neilson invoke, advances a similar insight. The untranslatable, for Sakai (1997, 14), “cannot exist prior to the act of translation”; it is not something that prevents but rather provokes—that stimulates, excites—ongoing translation. “It is translation that gives birth to the untranslatable,” Sakai argues. Mezzadra and Neilson turn to this notion of the untranslatable in shifting towards broader notions of translation. This is translation not only in language, but between heterogeneous struggles and subjectivities which, without transcendental arbiters—without the possibility of simple exchange—continually navigate and encounter shifting and recombining constellations of difference. The untranslatable, they explain,

is not simply an obstacle but also a knot of intense social relations where processes of collective subjectivation are necessarily confronted with material differences that continue to proliferate and emerge anew despite the communicational possibilities of translation. It is not a paradox that it is precisely in this encounter with the untranslatable that processes

of networking and establishing links between struggles are confronted with their highest potentialities and their most forbidding limits. (2013a, 308)

We confronted a version of this as we brought the exposure trip to a close, as a mundane, fairly prosaic divergence over meanings of development ended the trip. This was not an intense encounter with alterity as such, but rather a sign of an unstable meaning, where—as translation continued, of necessity—a process of collective subjectivation was “necessarily confronted with material differences that continue to proliferate and emerge anew despite the communicational possibilities of translation.”

*

A second moment came after the exposure trip ended. Following a couple of months back in Dawei, much of which was spent on follow-up activities with U Zaw Lin and others who had joined the exposure trip, a few of us went to Yangon to join a regional forum on SEZs, including Kyaw Htet and Naing Tun, and P’Fai from SEM. The forum was a collaborative effort, co-organized by DDA and the Tavoyan Women’s Union (TWU, whom we met in Chapter 3), from Dawei; Paung Ku, from Yangon; SEM and several other groups from Thailand; and a handful of organizations active in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. We spent that Saturday and Sunday packed together in a Yangon hotel conference room, practicing a version of the translational politics seen so often at big meetings in Yangon during the 2010s. Moving between Burmese, Thai, Khmer, Lao, and English languages, we settled on one of those systems of earpieces and microphones, frequency channels and hushed interpretation. Smaller groups, such as the groups working in Khmer and Lao, huddled together with their earpieces in different parts of the room. Having volunteered to be documentarian, again, I looked over the program as we began. It noted that the forum’s co-organizers aimed, mainly, “to exchange information, share experience, analyze key issues, and seek potential cooperation in working together” (Paung Ku *et al.* 2017, 2). To exchange,

share, cooperate, co-organize, and work together—these were the notional building blocks of an attempt to build a larger, more coordinated struggle around SEZs at a regional level.

Still, I was struck by certain mismatches on display. One of the co-organizers, a research group that had taken an active leading role, advanced an overt Marxist critique of SEZs in the region. This critique used a language of value extraction, land expropriation, and labor exploitation, a language little reflected in the activities and contributions of other co-organizers working in and around SEZs, such as DDA. For these organizations, a language of rights was much more prominent, as in this statement from the program: “(I)t is important for people in the region to be informed and updated on SEZ implementation both nationally and regionally to ensure all their rights will be protected and respected” (Paung Ku *et al.* 2017, 1). These languages sometimes clashed at the level of political practice and organization. One researcher, whom I had met several times in Thailand and Myanmar, worked with Cambodian activists fighting SEZ projects in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville. At the forum, they issued a powerful call for—in their terms—transnational solidarity against the free-market paradigm promoted by SEZs. Yet the discussion that followed—crackling through our earpieces—made clear that, beyond differing political vocabularies, many of the forum’s co-organizers did not understand themselves as opposing SEZ projects, much less standing in solidarity against free-market paradigms. For these groups, including DDA and TWU, SEZs were sites for the cultivation of a different kind of political project: not for fighting against SEZ projects per se, but rather for intervening in how they are conceived, implemented, and managed. They are sites for nurturing those values we have encountered continually: transparency, accountability, and local participation. After the researcher spoke, TWU’s director, Ei Phyu, said that the “main concern is accountability and responsibility issues...Whoever is in charge, we don’t have accountability.” Kyaw Htet spoke of access to

information and local participation. “People’s right to information, right to participate, democratic standards—in previous times, before, they could not participate. We need to ensure they can.”

I was surprised that this difference—in effect, between opposing SEZs and shifting how they are managed—went little remarked upon. The director of the group that sponsored the researcher’s work in Cambodia made no mention of these contrasting political imaginaries when she summed up the session afterwards. Or more specifically, she spoke on one hand in terms of rights and rights violations, and on the other hand, of land expropriation and worker exploitation, without noting any dissonance between the political subjectivities these languages imply. It seemed to me that to acknowledge this contrast—as contrast—would also have been to take notice of something difficult: that sets of differences in political practice and ideas, with varying historical and material grounds, distributed across the region, could prove very challenging to bridge. I posed a question along these lines during the question-and-answer session, a question that I thought might hint at some of these differences. “What do we do when people support the project in these areas? For instance, when people in Dawei are happy for infrastructure development?” I was frustrated at the assumption that opposition to these SEZ projects could be taken for granted. In Dawei, it plainly could not be. The researcher responded that this is a question about the need for alternative notions of development, for different kinds of investment—in small-scale local industries, for example—and for sharing experiences across borders, not least with people in places like Sihanoukville. In the tea break afterwards, he told me that, for him, the question I raised is a question of desire, of villagers’ desires, something that can only be addressed through long-term, grounded struggle. Unfortunately, he said, this was not practically within the purview of the regional forum.

I couldn't help but think this desire failed to translate, in a setting such as this. It would not convert, the researcher explained privately, into the forum's language of exchange, sharing, co-organizing, and cooperation. Yet it marked a point that, publicly, only called for more translation, for more sharing of experiences—as in the researcher's public answer to my question. We could not have done with translation, in Cassin's sense. Translation, in this way, points up those “knot(s) of intense social relations” where for Mezzadra and Neilson, attempts to construct broad, collective political projects—“processes of collective subjectivation”—continue to encounter and, sometimes, run aground against, political and material differences that these political projects do not so much transcend as reproduce or multiply, necessitating a turn and return to translation. Mezzadra and Neilson refer to this thorny terrain in terms of “translating the common,” or sometimes “bordering the common,” formulations they use to push against analytics that, in their view, move too quickly past the structuring differences that make up, and can unmake, collective political projects.

One such analytic comes from Ernesto Laclau. In cultural studies and political theory, his concept of articulation has proved influential within debates over populism, social movements, and radical democracy. Since his work in the 1970s (see e.g. Laclau 1977), articulation allowed Laclau to challenge an economic reductionist thought of capitalist ideology then dominant in orthodox Marxian analysis. The concept helped him place class relations in wider social and political terms, enabling a larger theory of the linkages between class struggle and popular social movements, especially in Latin America. Yet a universalizing sense of the national frame haunts his understanding of these dynamics. Hence his explanation, for instance, of how the “‘German working class,’ or ‘Italian,’ ‘English’ etc., has then an irreducible specificity because it is the condensation of a multiplicity of condensations which cannot be reduced abstract to Marxism-

Leninism” (1977, 109). And in his later work, he criticizes the “proliferation of particularisms” in popular social movements, framing particularity without “appeal to a universality transcending it” as “a self-defeating enterprise” (Laclau 1996, 26). Thus, in his writings on populism (see Laclau 2005), he stresses transcendentalizing rhetorical structures that resolve heterogeneous sets of popular demands within chains of equivalence. A normative social unity lurks in this formulation.¹³⁷ This rhetorical transit between articulation and equivalence strives to suture a social totality, yet as Stuart Hall (1986b, 56) once worried of Laclau’s work, “there is no reason why anything is or isn’t potentially articulable with anything.” Laclau’s “discursive position,” a fundamentally equivalential conception, “is often in danger of losing its reference to material practice and historical conditions.”

This is a reservation Mezzadra and Neilson frame as a concern over bordering. We can frame it as a concern over translation, as well. This is a concern that seeks to account not only for connection but division, not only relation but separation, not only equivalence but multiplying differences, not a normative transcendence so much as that which might not quite articulate, link, connect, translate. Recall that borders, for Balibar (2002), connect as they divide; and translation, for Sakai (1997), can be understood as generating not equivalence from difference, but difference from incommensurability. At stake is not a radical, intransigent concept of alterity, but rather an otherwise that is not outside, figures of difference that recover and reinstall an inner, incessant necessity of translation.

On the concluding day of the forum, a Thai activist provided a recap of our activities. The question-and-answer session that followed began mildly with discussions of grievance

¹³⁷ Mezzadra and Neilson point out that for Laclau, cited here with Chantal Mouffe (2014, 98), “the ‘impossible object’ of society as a fully sutured totality is always at stake in the constitution of the social, which can only exist ‘as an effort to construct that impossible object’” (2013a, 286).

mechanisms and legal implications before someone described as “a community member from Cambodia” intervened. Standing up on the far side of the room, she spoke quickly, loudly, intensely. My earpiece suddenly buzzing after the dry exchanges in English, I kept typing “inaudible” in my notes—as the forum’s documentarian—while the translator struggled to keep up. The speaker had been involved in a land conflict over an SEZ in periurban Cambodia. Her comments came across, as translated contributions can, in a way that was choppy, broken, uneven. They suggest a patchwork of images that do not always follow each other, although a thread is discernible. “I want to share my experiences,” she began, according to the translator.

First our land was taken by the company, the conflict with the (inaudible) violence to other people. We didn’t get anything. For us, for me, as the victim, we have been sued by the court—farmer, teacher, after protest—I got nothing. I was accused by the court, first about incitement. And now I keep protesting, but I got nothing. I lost my land, my house, my job as a teacher. The SEZ is not special for me at all, just special for the rich and powerful people. For me, as the poor people, we got nothing. We lost land, house, job, our people—in our community, people go to fishing boats in Thailand, because our land has been grabbed. The government said it was a way to provide jobs, but not at all. We lost our living standard, the community that used to live together.

The speaker continued for some time; it was a much longer comment than any other at the forum. In its pathos, its non-technical language, and its recourse to lived experience, it broke through the innocuous tenor of the forum. There were tears as she spoke; there were hugs afterwards. Towards the end, she appealed to “all the people in Myanmar.”

So, please, I would like to send this message to all the people in Myanmar. I know you (inaudible) development, but please make sure it’s for people. We want the development for people, for the living standard to be better, not our development, there will be tears for people, not just in our case, but in every development area. This is the similar situation to them on the ground. At my place, factories are built, but people do not recruit there for the factories. The people in the community, misery and misery—not recruited to work in the factories—how about the older people in the community, how can we earn income, earn enough, to support our family? We used to live in one big family. Now our community has migrated everywhere.

This is a narrative of the unbecoming of a “community that used to live together,” that “used to live in one big family,” that now “has migrated everywhere.” It is a story of destruction and dispersion, where an SEZ project brings not relation nor connectivity so much as separation, division, disconnection. In a periurban area, it is not a question of a bounded isolate having been acted upon externally. At the intersection of dispossession and displacement, popular politics and repression, and mobilities of capital and labor, it also evokes not fractal disorganization so much as “multiple relations that constitute concrete, historical forms” (Li 2014, 17). But the appeal to “all the people in Myanmar” did not quite translate. It did not lead, for instance, to a different discussion about SEZs in Myanmar, but rather to more retranslation into calls for transparency, accountability, and local participation. The tears dried up, the moment passed, and the forum went on. In a setting concerned with popular politics, social movements, and democratic politics, heterogeneous political projects did not promise to resolve themselves into equivalential chains, through rhetoric or otherwise. But neither did moments that escaped such resolution simply jar, as monadic particularities, or pure figures of alterity. Instead, they made for ongoing translation and retranslation, within a vexed process of collective subjectivation.

This is not a claim that the forum failed. It is a claim about the potentials and limits of collective struggle. “The relation of translation that we find crucial to the composition of the common,” Mezzadra and Neilson write, “involves a constant feedback of the energies and struggles involved in the building of commons. The material constitution of the common cannot be assimilated to the logic of the universal and the particular.” To speak of translating the common, then, “is not only to point to how it produces commons but also to mark how it simultaneously connects and divides the singularities that constitute it” (2013a, 291).

6.5 Ruins of the future, otherwise

I conclude in a muddy and muddled place. It stands, while decaying, at the tidewater threshold between land and sea, forest and beach, solid and liquid. Its hulking concrete frame suggests something solid and powerful. Yet the holes, where windows should be; the graffiti, splashed across mold-streaked walls; and the cracked glass, scattered across damp, sandy, broken-up floors, where small plants poke through, suggest something fragile and vulnerable, entangled in human and non-human natures. It evokes something new but also old, stretched ambiguously between futures of prosperity and poverty, progress and ruination. We encountered it in translation, mistranslation, and retranslation.

About halfway through the exposure trip, after our time in Prachuap with Bee, we took to the road for our drive up to Chachoengsao. But Bee followed us on her motorbike, first, because she had something to show us before we got on the highway. About a half hour north of Prachuap, it was the site for the powerplant project that Bee—organizing as just a villager, with other villagers, she insisted—had helped fight to a standstill. Or rather, it was what remained of its planned operations center: that lumbering concrete structure now being reclaimed by the forest with the sea just beyond. “Hin Krut Power Plant Project”: the faded blue paint was still legible above the building’s entrance.

As we climbed out of the vans, Bee was energetic as ever, proud to show us this place that testified so powerfully, so tangibly, to her victory. She busily pointed out what was what while Ma Nway gamely sought to keep up with translation. There were bursts of laughter at one point when she said that the main building was made large enough to accommodate forty toilets. (“Maybe offices?” someone speculated behind me. “It’s big, but not big enough for that many toilets!”) We fanned out, taking pictures, taking selfies, wandering around the abandoned structures. In some

places, dry leaves and broken glass crunched underfoot; in others, we splashed through sandy puddles as land began to meet sea. The mold festered in the shadows. Shafts of sunlight spotlighted the graffiti. The windows, empty, and many walls, unfinished, left boundaries unclear and disorienting. Moving around in small groups, we spoke quietly. The toilet translation notwithstanding, the place seemed to invite contemplation, even reverence. Some of us gravitated towards the far side of the complex, where we could see the forest give way to the beach. Through the empty windows, the sea glistened in the sunshine.

Our encounter with these ruins suggested something different than the ruins in reverse that lie scattered and lost across the spectral landscape of the main project area in Dawei. Bee presented these ruins to us as signs of hard-won success. A friend of hers had been killed; her own home had been shot up multiple times; and she was locked away in prison, over the course of this struggle. The temporality suggested by this would-be operations center promised a progressive, industrial, infrastructurally robust future to some, such as those who wished to see it come to fruition. To others, like Bee, it suggested once-looming degradation. The crumbling structure foregrounded this hinge between dreamworld and catastrophe, progress and ruination. In Dawei, by contrast, the bridges and water towers, covered in rust; the workers dormitory, unfinished; the port, eerily abandoned; the quarry, once booming, now silent; the resettlement village, with no villagers—these too were ruins of a future, not the past. But they were ruins in reverse: reminders of a future that many villagers, like U Zaw Lin, still wish to see fulfilled. Not for everyone is the breakdown, the ruination, of linear, modernist time an object of desire, much less an organizing principle of political struggle.

Bhabha reminds us that Benjamin valorizes the disruption of a mechanistic, dialectical temporality of modernity. This disrupted dialectic is what Benjamin sees in Baudelaire's lyric

poetry. “Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill,” Benjamin writes (Bhabha 1994, 26). For Benjamin, Bhabha explains, there is something promising, something redemptive, about that disruption: “that stillness is Utopia,” Bhabha writes. But “for those who live... ‘otherwise’ than modernity but not outside it, the Utopian moment is not the necessary horizon of hope.” Modernity can remain a site of affective investment. Still, it might best be grasped as a problem not of transition—of historical movement through a progressive, developmental teleology, the universalizing telos of empty, homogeneous time—but of translation. “The problem of capitalist modernity,” Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, in one of this chapter’s epigraphs, “cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous ‘transition debates’ in European history) but as a problem of translation” (2007, 17). Translation, *pace* transition, holds open the possibility of multiple, differing relations to and conceptions of historical time and thus capitalist modernity. Here, translation suggests a notion of difference that does not somehow exist before or beyond the time-space of modernity. Rather, translation evokes the production, reproduction, and reconfiguration of difference historically and spatially, economically and politically, in and through encounters with the movement of goods and capital, labor and commodities, empires and ideas. Translation, in this way, colors these encounters as more translucent than transparent. Not everything filters through; differences remain and reappear. It shares conceptual ground with the materialist turn in postcolonial studies, where postcolonial capitalism stands for the reproduction and maintenance of heterogeneity—in contrast to older transition paradigms—across capitalist modernity in, as it were, most of the world.

This chapter has advanced a transnational, translational understanding of border-crossing infrapolitics. It follows DDA, among other organizations, as they reach out to and take part in

political struggles over infrastructure projects that far exceed Dawei. Yet the resulting political anthropology departs from two key paradigms: a re-embedded political anthropology associated with the thought of cultural holism, and an anthropology “beyond ‘culture’” that flourished with the globalist discourse of the 1990s. Here, I seek to move beyond cultural holism and beyond “beyond ‘culture,’” pursuing a translational political anthropology that, unlike these paradigms, does not normatively disavow the (re)making of heterogeneity at the intersection of politics and economy. Rather, this translational political anthropology entails a cross-cutting, transversal mode of analysis sensitive to the making and remaking of political and material difference: such as dissonant political subjectivities, making difficult the construction of a collective politics—and infrastructure projects that connect but also disconnect, that relate but also separate, like the SEZ that destroyed, that dispersed, the social world of the “community member” from Cambodia.

The muddy, muddled remains of the Hin Krut Power Plant Project reminded me of something essential about the Dawei SEZ project: its production of confusions in space and time. In Dawei, the SEZ project was supposed to effect a transition from agriculture to industry, through orderly temporal progress, but instead there took shape an extended, expansive present, strewn with all manner of things unfinished, incomplete, decaying—the bridges and water towers, the dormitory, the port. Like the ruins in Dawei, those in Prachuap seemed to run time against itself; things once hard and smooth, made of steel and concrete, seemed to unwind, unspool, into damp earth and sandy puddles, amid spreading rust and mold. For some, like Bee, bringing historical time into crisis—bringing the law of the dialectic to a standstill—will feel like an extraordinary victory. But that is not the case for everyone. After wandering around the ruins with Bee, we piled back into the vans for the long drive back north. It was that night that, as we rounded the southern edge of Bangkok, many of us found ourselves reaching quickly for our phones. The lights of the

city had suddenly swung into view, shining against the night sky—more translucent than transparent. Holding up our phones, we captured something of that dreamworld. On our phones if not only there, we carried it with us as we drove north, as we moved on, and as we moved and still move, separately and together.

Conclusion

Slow fires and situational drift: quasi-modernism in the borderlands

One afternoon, a message came through from Kyaw Htet while I was at the DDA office. He was going to drive out to Amya and Kyaukpa the next day, with plans to visit a few people. Any interest in joining?

With the project so long on hold, and as DDA continued to find it difficult working in Amya, there was often little to do—at least with respect to the SEZ project. It's not that *no* activities were taking place, of course. DDA was in the process of reorganizing its SEZ strategy, with focuses on research and data collection; awareness raising and information sharing; and “working with community members” in Amya, Kyaukpa, and along the roadlink, in Theinkun. The exposure trip to Thailand was part of this strategy. Still, as rumors came and went about financing, as talk of a restart continued to ebb and flow, and as years passed by without any tangible shift towards the project resuming, DDA's SEZ activities could feel aimless sometimes—a little abstract, almost without a clear referent, as the project's absent presence continued to weigh heavily. “Oh, who knows really,” Kyaw Htet would say, when asked whether the project might return. Boredom flitted around the edges of their work. At the same time, doing nothing was not an option. The prospect of the project's restart did demand preparation; it called for at least some organizational work. So it was that Kyaw Htet and others from DDA—Zaw Myat, U Sein—often enough drove out to and around the SEZ project areas: sharing updates, planning activities, checking in, and just generally maintaining contact. A kind of “phatic labor” (Elyachar 2010), these rural drives (see Chapter 4) helped tend to and sustain communicative channels. They reinforced social infrastructures that, DDA hoped, would support DDA's activities, in the case of the SEZ's return.

That day, we drove by motorbike first to Amya, where we had lunch with U Sein and stopped off to check in with a few others. Then we drove up to Kyaukpa to see the Sayadaw, the abbot of the monastery there. The immediate cause was a group of activists from Thailand set to arrive in coming days. We were making plans for them to visit these project areas. But this drive, like many others, also underscored something at once obvious and elusive: that preparing for the project's possible return requires work. This is a subjunctive politics, geared towards a specific future possibility (Ahmann 2019). Yet DDA, of course, is not alone in its subjunctive orientation. ITD also expends effort to maintain and prepare for the possibility that the project might resume. Here, I return to the sensations, materiality, and experience of a project suspended, tracking—after an interlude—the mundane subjunctive work of DDA and ITD around three “sites” in Amya: a quarry, a road, and a shoreline.

Enduring projects

What does it mean for a project such as this to endure, at least minimally, over time—for its possibility to remain, after so many years of being on hold? As early as 2012, over a year before the Myanmar government's formal suspension of it, rumors circulated that with serious financing yet to materialize the project had already run aground, that construction had already stopped. But on my first visit to the area at that time, I found an almost frenetic level of activity, as if ITD and its partners sought maximum progress before this window of time closed. Along the roadlink, dirt flew and trees fell as bulldozers and backhoes carved a muddy strip of earth through the highlands. In Kyaukpa, ITD staff made repeated visits to villagers—they were desperate, villagers said—with the aim of convincing them to accept relocation and compensation offers for the dam project. In the project area for the waterfront SEZ, ITD's bright, shining visitor center busily hosted visitors,

including potential investors. Through its polished windows, one could see dark fresh earth newly cleared for the SEZ across the flood plain, some 200 square kilometers broad. The dormitory and resettlement village were under construction, ITD banners fluttering in the wind. The iron skeletons of other structures—factories, storage facilities, management offices—shone in the sunlight and glistened in the rain, nothing like the rusted ruins in reverse they became.

In Yangon at the time, friends in social movement and activist circles kept asking me: isn't the project finished, already? No no, or not yet, at least, I kept replying, as I sent pictures around of the mud-stained backhoes, the tense meetings in Kyaukpa, the bustle of the visitor center. Years later, well after the project's suspension in 2013, successive governments kept trying to revive it, especially by way of a soft loan provided by the Thai government. The military-backed USDP government (2010-2015) tried to restart the project; so too did the NLD government (2015-2020). But the offer of the soft loan took a long time to gain the approval of the Myanmar parliament, after which a new round of feasibility studies and impact assessments took more time still. Then in early 2021, only weeks before the military coup, ITD suffered a new indignity when the Myanmar government cancelled its latest agreement with the company, citing its failure to make concession payments. By the time of the coup, no construction had restarted. One high-level advisor to the NLD—no fan of the project himself—had given me the occasion to learn a memorable phrase in Burmese: he called it a “blood-sucking zombie of a project.” It simply would not die. Even after the coup, amid renewed speculation that now, surely, the project was well and truly off the table, colleagues in Dawei were wont to remind everyone, including me, of when the project really began to take shape: under the direct rule of the military with the 2008 Memorandum of Understanding. There was no reason to believe that, with military rule again, conditions were not *more* favorable for the project. It is not necessarily the project's many weaknesses that stand

out—its vulnerability to confrontation, its vicissitudes over time—but rather its surprising durability, the fact that after so many years, it remains a possibility at all.

I have argued that, in Dawei, politics is best understood as a project: open-ended and indeterminate, impure and reflexive, a politics in the wild like Michel Callon's (2006) economics in the wild. Politics here is not something that is simply given or exists; it requires work, including specific activities and techniques, to be made and remade, maintained and reproduced. Certainly, politics in this sense is like another project, the Dawei SEZ, itself open-ended and unfinished. This project, too—I suggest here—needs at least some work to reproduce itself, or more precisely, to maintain the possibility of itself after so many years of suspension.

For Hannah Appel (2019), capitalism writ large is a project. The claim is a way of drawing attention to capitalism's "licit life": its appearance of being smooth, orderly, and rule-bound, made to seem—through a tremendous amount of work—"as if" it is standardized and replicable, disembedded from the messiness of the social. The claim is not a denial of capitalism's embodied frictions—its volatilities and disorder, its contradictions and antagonisms, its entanglements with the social. It is an argument, rather, that whereas anthropological critique tends to stop by pointing out social complexity, it is also possible to go further: to trace the work required for capitalism to displace, simplify, or smooth out these frictions, enough to reproduce itself across time and space. This argument seeks to exceed the critique of capitalism associated with Anna Tsing—to do more than point out how capitalism remains a site of friction and difference (Tsing 2000, 2006, 2009). Yet Tsing, too, tracks the ongoing-ness of capitalism, its durability and persistence, its tendency to reestablish itself and cohere even in unlikely circumstances. Hence the turn to "salvage accumulation" processes that pick over and renew themselves in spaces of damage and decay, and indeed to forms of life—human and more-than-human—that also claw back livability at the brink

of destruction (Tsing 2015, Tsing *et al.* 2017, 2020). Capitalism need not reproduce itself by displacing—or simplifying, or smoothing over—social frictions and difference, contradiction and antagonism. It thrives in its reproduction of difference, in heterogeneous worlds.

Yet heterogeneity and ruin intertwine powerfully in the reproduction of capitalism. “Difference is not always good; it is also the coexistence of prosperity and precarity,” Tsing (2016, 330) cautions. Despite this—because of this—“We need new forms of criticism...that move us beyond the argument that capitalist development squashes difference.”

The endurance of the Dawei project sometimes called forth certain forms of effort. Across a decade of visits to Dawei, including the 18 months I lived there, it often seemed like substances, shapes, and formations in and around the Dawei SEZ project areas were on their way to becoming other things. This was never a question of formless flux, but rather, as we have seen, tangled political and economic cartographies that intersect in Dawei. For a time, before the project’s suspension, this was a matter of construction: scaffolding and cranes, dump trucks and bulldozers—these worked over built and natural worlds to begin making one of the world’s largest infrastructure projects. Yet as the project unraveled and ground to a halt by 2013, construction turned to disuse and then decay, interspersed with sporadic attempts to maintain certain parts of these built and natural worlds. Roads in the SEZ area would wash away, with the monsoon, then return, reshaped; shorelines and riverbanks receded or disappeared, then reappeared, reinforced; seasonally, tailings from the quarry would cascade across paddy fields below, only for the quarry’s structural integrity to be reexamined and—or so villagers were told—strengthened. Pickup trucks featuring ITD’s orange logo still sped around these areas every so often, but they were more absent than present. Not everything entered into their maintenance and repair work (Strebel *et al.* 2019). Half-built bridges and water towers lay rusting across the main project area; an illicit trade in sand,

extracted from riverbeds and beaches, started to support other construction projects near and far; dust clouds floated across a fluctuating landscape; farmers and forests started to reclaim land that was acquired and cleared but not used; and streams and tidal flats became bellwethers of toxicity, monitored—casually, at least—for their colors and plant and animal life.

Fire is a form of rapid oxidation, Elizabeth Povinelli (2017) reminds us. Rust is a form of slow oxidation, which turns iron to ash. Slow fires are scattered around the landscape of the SEZ area, but they are hardly spectacular. For many people living in their vicinity, these rusting structures, these ruins in reverse, elicit shrugs more than anything else. They are signs of duration, not to mention the boredom and monotony, of a project long on hold. In many ways, they index the spectacle this zone no longer presents, the speed by which it does not abide. In this expansive, elliptical present of suspension, the chronopolitics of the zone is akin to a quasi-event, in a world at once building and crumbling. The zone lives at the threshold of figuration; “in the fog of becoming; in a potential realm where something might happen if and when the conditions for support and endurance emerge” (Povinelli *et al.* 2014). The emergence and endurance of an otherwise, in “these precipice conditions,” is “nothing inherently good or evil, just or unjust.” Here too, much depends on what emerges and endures, on which densities of material and political form—embankments, in Povinelli’s (2021) sense—are able to take shape and solidify, shored up through maintenance work, phatic labor, and subjunctive politics.

For Kyaw Htet and DDA, efforts of attention are not always easy to marshal. They must endure this project that endures, but sustaining a political project is difficult in this fog of becoming, between duration and decay. Guy Debord, himself among the foremost critics of the aesthetics of decay, claimed to work not “toward the spectacle of the end of the world, but towards the end of the world of the spectacle” (Debord 2002). In writings tied to the Letterist International

(LI)—a forerunner of the Situationist International—*dérive*, or drift, refers to a practice, a walking and wandering geared towards attention to “varied ambiances.” It means moving across landscapes—generally urban—in such a way as for people to “let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there” (Debord 1958). A response to the lethargy of advanced capitalism, as the LI saw it, drift came to be associated with possibilities like surprise, chance, and volatility. Yet its temporal horizon is less the event than quasi-events: slow times, minor occurrences, unstable processes—that which simmers below, behind, or beyond the spectacle and its economy of appearance.

For DDA, to drive was often to drift—out across the project areas of the SEZ: with friends and colleagues, from village to village, site to site, from meetings and discussions to homes and teashops, to swim, eat, drink, argue, and organize. The landscape entailed regular, if amateur, commentary, as in habitual remarks on the colors of streams, the bend of the shoreline, the depth of the tidal flats, and roads passable or not, repaired or reshaped or not. These instabilities, felt and observed, tie into repertoires of stabilization, with activities geared towards notions of support, reinforcement, building and maintaining (organizational ties and political relations), and holding in place some connections while (re)constructing others. Suspension and its sensations called forth these iterative acts focused on durability, load-bearing, endurance. DDA sought to sustain itself—but so too did ITD and the possibility of the project.

Three embankments

The quarry

Visors down: we pulled our helmets’ clear plastic shields over our faces, as it was rainy season, but lately dry. Plenty of mud, dust, and sand would be flying. Driving out to see U Sein,

we were not the only ones—as we generally were not—protecting ourselves against these threshold substances as we moved across the landscape. This was a landscape continually lifted and resettled, lifted and resettled, and held for a time in suspension, “disperse(d) into the particulate populace of air” (Choy and Zee 2015, 213). This twofold condition of suspension—of the project, of the landscape—engendered a specific range of gestures that Kyaw Htet and I were well accustomed to. On our drive to U Sein’s village, through dust clouds of our own and others’, we saw some of these gestures and performed some ourselves: lifting one’s hand to cover one’s nose and mouth, if (in our case) the visor proved insufficient; doing the same with one’s shirt; wiping the visor as necessary at speed or otherwise; and coughing when needed to clear out the lungs. This atmospheric surround tended to push our attention vertically, as we looked up to the plume and the cloud, or downwards, relatively, to shield our faces.

We picked up U Sein at his home and then drove to one of our regular lunch spots: a series of thatched seating areas in his village where the proprietor, who used to work in Thailand, serves Thai food. The content of our discussion almost doesn’t matter. (It included things like village plans for an upcoming festival, and a necklace Kyaw Htet received from—he said—a solidarity group that visited from Papua, that is, issues generally not directly related to DDA or the SEZ.) What mattered was that discussion took place, and that it presented an occasion—for checking in and keeping in touch, for looking after these lines of communicative sociality. But one thing we touched on that day did relate directly to the SEZ: the quarry. It turned out that once again, farmers living in the village below the quarry were concerned about it overflowing down the mountain and onto their land. They had been reassured—albeit by whom was not entirely clear—that the quarry had been reinforced during the dry season, but several farmers’ fields gave them reason enough to

worry. The fields were still covered in the thickened, congealed mud that had swept down and across them the previous rainy season.

I had a sense for this concern. I often visited Tamok, the village below the quarry. Once, U Hsay Maung, a paddy farmer, spent the better part of an afternoon telling me about the paddy fields, the runoff from the quarry, and villagers' attempts to secure financial compensation for the damaged fields. (DDA drafted complaint letters about the quarry on behalf of Tamok villagers, which they sent to the government almost every year.) Lately, a confusion in time had become problematic. U Hsay Maung believed that if the project were to resume, it should only do so after farmers like himself and his neighbors received compensation. But the company, he said, referring to ITD, insisted they would only pay compensation as and when the project resumed, at which point they would operate the quarry again. Otherwise, they refused to pay compensation related to a project that, in the strict sense, did not exist—and might not ever exist again. No restart until compensation; no compensation until restart. This was a dispute about plotting the potential near future. It presents conflicting subjunctive positions. *Shouq deh gwa!* said U Hsay Maung, describing the situation as mixed up, jumbled. He threw his hand in the air—it was frustrating, clearly. For six years, he hadn't been able to bring a paddy crop to harvest.

On the back of his motorbike, I rode with him towards the edge of the village, where dense stands of smallholder betel nut and rubber plantations give way to the wider expanse of paddy fields. A road cuts through the fields. On either side of it, the paddy fields did not look like paddy fields. They appeared to be something else. Light brown earth, dry and cracked, stretched away into the distance. The tailings from the quarry had covered them in an even layer of waste. Onwards along the road, we wound our way up the mountain that had been destroyed, in part, to create the quarry. The quarry made for a blasted-out shoulder that produced some 3,000 tons of rock before

the project's suspension. Shouting over the sound of the motorbike, I tried to ask U Hsay Maung what the rock was used for. I don't think he heard me, but there were three uses, I learned later: for building roads, for constructing buildings, and for building the small port, on the other side of the project area, which ITD used to load and unload construction materials by sea.

It was hard to imagine that level of activity as U Hsay Maung and I pulled up at the shoulder, looking out over the ruined fields below. A breeze whistled through the undergrowth; the buzzing of insects seemed to amplify the silence. Piles of rocks lay here and there around a pit perhaps ten to fifteen feet deep and flat along its bottom. It was hardly a yawning excavation, but the destruction it wrought was obvious. Sweeping his hand out over the path from the quarry down to the fields, U Hsay Maung said the tailings could be up to his knees in the fields, and even his waist, before they solidified. He pressed his hands to his hips to demonstrate. Looking around, he didn't seem reassured that ITD had done anything to prevent all that happening again. Then we moved to another edge of the shoulder, and from there we could see a small production facility below—not in the path of any tailings, clearly. A solitary white truck, its ITD logo obvious, stood parked in front of it. It suggested ITD had not completely abandoned the site, but had they reinforced the quarry? We couldn't tell. With the project on hold, it was difficult to say what would stay in place, and what would slip away.

The road

Lunch was over. Kyaw Htet and I jumped back on our motorbikes. From U Sein's village, shaded and compact, we drove out into the center of the main SEZ project area, those vast tidal flats that we crossed so often along its packed dirt roads. The open vista is hemmed in by mountains to the north and east, and rolling hills to the south. Off to its northern end was Tamok, its paddy

fields covered in tailings. To the south was Yegyí, where villagers and ITD have shaped and reshaped the coastline in recent years. For now, our next stop was Kyaukpa, the highland village where ITD tried for years to convince villagers to relocate—in order to construct a dam—only for villagers to maintain their refusal. We went to talk to the Sayadaw about the group of Thai activists that would be visiting.

Coming north out of U Sein's village, we hung a right to drive east, away from the coast, on the main road passing east-west through the SEZ area. This was the road widely known as Shan Road, which signals the project's relationship to Thailand geographically, if also politically and economically. That is, one could easily call it Thai Road, thanks to the interchangeability, here, between "Shan" and "Thai" in Burmese language. It is in fact the roadlink component of the SEZ project. To stay on this road would mean arriving eventually at the Thai border, after taking 5-8 hours to cover about 80 miles, depending on the season, depending on conditions. Even in the main project area, it can be hard and rutted during the dry season, or loose during the rainy season, its edges disappearing into fields, forests, and streams. Within the main project area and on the segment leading to Kyaukpa, ITD does work to maintain this road. With its bulldozers, backhoes, and dump trucks, ITD for years after 2013 maintained a visible presence almost only by keeping up basic work on the road. Steeper, winding sections are easily carried away during the heavy rains of the seasonal monsoon, requiring regular reconstruction. But I was often struck by how relatively flat sections also changed shape noticeably over short periods of time. Kyaw Htet and I used to joke about how no one never passed through the SEZ area twice in the same way. To reinforce and rebuild the road was not really to recreate the same route, with the same width, slope, and trajectory. Rather, it was a matter of making something different, but not dramatically different,

something that for a time, at least, with some new structural support, might hold up, hold on, and hold in, even as it strains and bulges and sometimes gives way.

Visors down, we sped east towards Kyaukpa. We passed plenty of structures and infrastructures, buildings and bridges, and iron and steel that bore the marks, unattended, of slow fires creeping across them. ITD could hardly maintain everything in the SEZ project areas after its suspension. But Shan Road held ITD's attention. The roadlink provided access; it needed to be maintained. To shore up its rock, sand, and dirt was to tend to the possibility the project might resume—to sustain the idea that the project, after all, might prove durable. To an extent, ITD's subjunctive work also grounded DDA's. It kept up the material infrastructure along which Kyaw Htet and I, that afternoon, tended to DDA's social infrastructure.

In different ways and with differing urgencies, the quarry and the road presented ongoing problems about things out of place: the tailings in the paddy fields, the road carried off during the rains. To return, restore, and secure these things out of place, if necessary in differing forms, was an imperative largely shared by ITD, DDA, and U Hsay Maung and other villagers. No one wanted the road to disappear; no one, supposedly, wanted tailings from the quarry washing down across the fields (hence ITD's claim they were reinforcing the quarry—a claim difficult to verify, to be sure). Things in place, boundaries restored, tailings secured: these sites of breakdown and repair suggest a claim on some level of industrial and environmental control, a quasi-modernism that under-writes the material life of this extended, distended quasi-event.

This quasi-modernism evokes a dream we have encountered before in Dawei, for instance in the remark by Ko Tun at the very beginning. The project is just a dream, he said: a fantasy, which might never come to be, yet also an aspiration, which guides expectations for many villagers like himself, and ITD, too. This dreamworld underscores how industrial modernity and

developmental time, however hollow their promises and destructive their actualities, live on ethnographically in many parts of the world (Ferguson 1999, Appel 2018a). Yet despite increasingly unpredictable and hazardous ecological conditions due to human activity, efforts to promote flexible forms of infrastructural “resilience” and “vital systems security” (Collier and Lakoff 2015)—or to abandon “self-devouring growth” (Livingston 2019) more broadly—have been fleeting. At issue is a version of what Kim Fortun (2014, 309) calls late industrialism: “a world still gripped by industrial order yet also beyond it, technically, ecologically, conceptually.” The difference is that breakdown and repair in Dawei owes not to the decline of a long-standing industrial modernity, but rather to the decay of a promise of a long-deferred industrial modernity, a future that, for Ko Tun, at least, weighs on the present like a dream. A fantasy of industrial and environmental control remains amid the uncertainties of late capitalism and a changing climate. A confusing time-space—things out of place, time holding still—called forth a work of fixing and repair, returning and restoring, maintaining and securing. A “holding pattern” (Zee 2017) of a kind, this is work that seeks to manage the uncertainty of this time and this place, to keep some control over shifting built and natural worlds. Quasi-modernist, this work aims less for totalizing mastery than minor interventions. It sits between a drive for order and a need to be reflexive and provisional in an atmosphere of uncertainty—not least over whether the project will resume.

The shoreline

The Sayadaw, of course, had no problem with the upcoming visit of the group from Thailand. After Kyaw Htet and I arrived via Shan Road, he told us he would be happy to welcome them to Kyaukpa, where his monastery had become such a focal point for political activity in the period before the project’s suspension. There had been so many offers from ITD for relocation and

compensation, each of them refused. The dam, which would have created a reservoir to supply water to the planned industrial zone in Amya, remained unbuilt. The spray-painted message “No dam!” appears and reappears on rock outcrops along the road up to Kyaukpa.

On our way back down the road, we stopped off to buy some Thai sausage from Ko Thet, a teenager from Kyaukpa who had joined the exposure trip to Thailand. We chatted as he grilled the pork, asking what we were up to in Kyaukpa. Kyaw Htet mentioned the visitors coming from Thailand. While it’s easy enough to call the Sayadaw by phone, he said—mobile reception is not bad in the village—even short visits can be helpful just for keeping in touch. Ko Thet nodded. Keeping in touch; holding things in place; maintaining communicative sociality—it was good to check in with Ko Thet, too, Kyaw Htet said as we got back on our motorbikes. We ate farther down the road, where we pulled off at a spot I hadn’t noticed before. I followed Kyaw Htet through the forest to the edge of a stream, winding its way from the highlands. Munching on pork, we sat on some rocks. Kyaw Htet peered out over the water; it glinted in the afternoon sunlight. Surprised, he remarked on its color, a deep blue-green. He explained that, like the SEZ, a mine farther up the watershed had been suspended; he wondered if the depth and clarity of the water owed to this, a river purified of pollutants. It was a reminder that entangled existence has no necessary politics (Povinelli 2021); some relations exclude others (Giraud 2019). While some entanglements are life-giving sites of care and collective struggle, others are dangerous sites of toxic machinery, viral exposure, and lethal abandonment. The politics of a set of relations—of a specific embankment—derives from its conjunctural location. In Dawei, the relations held up by DDA’s phatic labor, geared towards confrontation with the SEZ, are not equivalent to ITD’s earth-moving, road-fixing work of reinforcement, aimed not at contesting but rather protecting the possibility of the SEZ.

Back west along the road lies Yegyí, the fishing village where an inlet meets the sea in a tidewater mangrove forest. Kyaw Htet and I didn't make it there that day—it was time to get back to town—but we were there regularly enough. Recently, I had gone with U Sein. Unlike our lunch with Kyaw Htet and the drive up to Kyaukpa, here there was not even the pretext of planning for visitors. It was just a casual visit. (“Hanging out and catching up,” I jotted in my notes.) Sitting under a tree by Yegyí's monastery, U Sein was talking with a villager named Ko Moe Gyi about crab fishing when the conversation shifted to Talaw, a village that used to sit across the inlet from Yegyí. Talaw had been destroyed in recent years; it no longer existed. At some point, a fire had broken out and burned down several buildings. A fever had also spread, supposedly due to groundwater contamination. The currents along Talaw's shoreline became unusually strong; they eroded the village's beachfront area, which was important for its fishers. Villagers there had also been taking sand from the beach to make bricks, an income-generating scheme that contributed to erosion. To Ko Moe Gyi, Talaw presented an omen—a straw in the wind, sand in the current.

The brick-making scheme stood out to Ko Moe Gyi. It was something villagers in Yegyí did too, at least until recently. The village head banned the practice to stem the erosion of the shoreline, incurring the wrath of those who lost that income. Ko Moe Gyi and U Sein stressed that it was the right decision. Was erosion a serious issue here too? I asked. Eyes wide, Ko Moe Gyi pointed in the direction of the shore—we could see it through the homes scattered at its edge. The shore used to extend seventy or eighty meters farther out into the water, he insisted. You'd barely be able to see it from here. There used to be more trees along the shore anchoring the sand and shading the water, he explained. This meant better fishing conditions nearer to shore—unlike now, when fishers have to go out to the islands far off shore, and sometimes even beyond them. It can take 8-9 hours to get there and back. The problem—and this did come from the SEZ project—is

that when ITD began building the small port in the inlet that separates Yegyi from Talaw, they uprooted many of those trees to build the road to the port. A bridge on that road, now falling apart, also makes it difficult for fishers, who keep their boats in the mangrove forest, to navigate out into the open water. With the shoreline in retreat and fishing conditions in decline, Ko Moe Gyi said, the village head did well to ban the brick-making scheme—anything to stabilize the shoreline. But the bridge? DDA had helped write an appeal to ITD to repair it. ITD kept promising to take care of it, U Sein said, but they were still waiting. Villagers themselves kept tending to the banks around the bridge to maintain access to the sea.

The not-yet

By the early 2020s, the bulldozers and backhoes had long ago fallen silent. The ITD trucks that once traversed the area so regularly had largely disappeared. The visitor center on the waterfront was locked up. Herds of water buffalo passed through all those decaying, half-built structures—no walls, no roofs, just rusting iron skeletons—as if they weren't even there. It was difficult to believe the project might resume, especially after the coup. From friends in Dawei, news now had less to do with about the project's potential return, and more to do with the street battles that convulsed the town in the weeks after the coup, the protesters killed at the barricades by cops and soldiers, and the armed groups that later formed in the area as part of a shift towards armed struggle across the country. Yet Kyaw Htet was insistent: a project restart remains possible—it was the military after all that first formalized the project in 2008. Villagers like Ko Tun, meanwhile, for whom the project remains a dream, still welcomed the promise above all of jobs, compensation, and better basic infrastructure. And as villagers waited, the government maintained a veneer of optimism—if before the coup. “We will now focus our efforts on finding

new partners to unlock the potential of the Dawei Special Economic Zone,” the government stated when terminating its agreement with ITD in 2021 (Dawei SEZ MC 2021).

Dipesh Chakrabarty famously argues that historicism, or the developmental, homogeneous time claimed by liberal empire, “came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying ‘not yet’ to somebody else” (2007, 8). In John Stuart Mill’s writings, Chakrabarty explains, Indians or Africans had to wait, in a kind of “waiting room of history,” for “some historical time of development and civilization...to elapse before they could be considered prepared” for the task of self-government. For Ann Stoler, a temporal structure of deferral remains integral to imperial formations in the present, which she describes as “states of deferral that mete out promissory notes that are not exceptions to their operation but constitutive of them” (2008, 193). Infrastructural time, Appel (2018b) argues, partakes of a similar temporal structure, wrapping futurity and deferral together in a bewildering, purgatorial admixture. This is how Ko Tun and many other villagers relate to developmental time: through the tense of the not-yet. While developmental time signals the mythic, utopian time-space of modernity, forged in liberal empire, the not-yet points to its manifest social worlds. Those worlds are building and crumbling, on the threshold of figuration, and fraught with uncertainty. They are heterogeneous in a way that blends modernist promises and non-linear time. In Dawei, heterogeneous time is not about premodern exceptions, but rather the differential worlds of postcolonial capitalism—in all its multiple, dissonant, contradictory actuality.

To be sure, difference is not simply good; heterogeneity need not be celebrated. Under contemporary accumulation processes, “diversity is often the diversity of ruin” (Tsing 2016, 330). This insight is at the core of the story I have presented in Dawei, which recasts primitive accumulation as a bordering technology, a force for the reproduction—not overcoming—of spatial

and temporal difference. This understanding of accumulation as differential accumulation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013b, 2013a) derives not only from the time I have spent in Dawei. It also owes to the alternative thought of primitive accumulation that I specify, draw out, and place in conversation with my interlocutors in Dawei. Spanning indigenous studies, postcolonial theory, and radical Black and feminist thought, this alternate thought locates the making and remaking of material difference at the core, not the periphery, of primitive accumulation past and present (see e.g. Robinson 2000, Federici 2004, Gilmore 2007, Sanyal 2007, Coulthard 2014). This thought centers the reproduction of difference from which value is extracted, placing intertwined disparities—racialized and gendered, colonial and postcolonial—at the heart of global capitalism.

This appreciation of capitalism's tendency towards differentiation does not then simply valorize social messiness or complexity, cultural difference or alternative modernities (see Kasir and Gill 2018). Even so, it stands apart from the story of "uneven development," which—as Chakrabarty (2007) draws our attention to—reflects a historicist belief in a sweeping transition from the premodern to modernity, with unevenness intrinsic to, internal to, an autonomous logic of modern capital. Understanding accumulation as a differential process, full of dissonance and variability, full of spatio-temporal difference, moves us beyond the historicist foreclosures of more singular, determinist histories of capital. Conjunctural locations become open to, subject to, the possibility of political intervention. For in Dawei, indeed—despite that not-yet sense of futures long deferred—much remains undecided. Much depends on which thresholds of political and material form can gain shape, (re)stabilize, and endure in an atmosphere of uncertainty. The two political trajectories I have explicated at length, as well as the exposure trip to Thailand, attest to a belief in political openness and possibility, to historical under-determination, even as a fog of becoming shrouds this extended, suspended present.

Attending to the making and remaking of difference, meanwhile—exceeding the one-sidedness of a mythic, utopian time-space of modernity—means navigating choppy methodological waters. Mezzadra and Neilson call this “border as method,” but Marx’s notes on method remain. “The tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit (*Grenze*) appears as a barrier to be overcome,” Marx (1973, 408) writes in the *Grundrisse*, using—as Mezzadra and Neilson note—the same word *Grenze* that can refer to a political border. That capital aims to push past existing limits is a familiar claim. “(C)apital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship, as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life,” Marx continues. Still, the passage that follows is sometimes forgotten.

...But from the fact that capital posits every such limit as a barrier and hence gets *ideally* beyond it, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome it, and, since every such barrier contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome but just as constantly posited. Furthermore. The universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive to its own suspension.¹³⁸ (Marx 1973, 410)

In Myanmar’s southern borderlands, an economic zone has long promised to push beyond existing limits, beyond existing borders. Yet its drive to do so has not *really* overcome those limits. Barriers overcome have returned over time. Its suspension—a quasi-event, engendering a quasi-modernism—is not the same as the final suspension envisioned by Marx. But as slow fires burn in this borderland, so much hangs in the balance. It is possible this suspension might endure.

¹³⁸ Here and in the quotation preceding, emphases in original.

Appendix A

Land, livelihoods, and stratification in Amya

This appendix provides a summary and analysis of the livelihoods research I conducted in Amya, the main SEZ project area. I shared these findings with, then wrote a report for, EarthRights International (ERI) based on these findings (ERI 2018).

Amya is roughly co-extensive with the demarcation zone for the main SEZ area. It comprises a lowland rectangular area about 25 kilometers long and 10 kilometers wide, for a total of some 250 square kilometers in total. Consisting of fifteen villages, with populations ranging from several hundred to over three thousand, Amya will see the relocation of all but a handful of villages if the SEZ resumes, according to shifting claims by the Myanmar government and ITD. DDA's 2014 report, based on randomly sampled household surveys conducted in all villages in Amya,¹³⁹ found that 35% of households surveyed reported smallholder cash crop farming as their primary occupation—*chan* farming, that is, primarily of cashew nuts, rubber, betel nut, and seasonal fruits. 31% cited paddy rice farming, 7% daily wages, 5% livestock rearing, and 19% “other,” including but not limited to non-farm employment in shops selling food and drinks, machinery repair shops, beauty salons, fishing, and market shops, which sell things like household items and agricultural supplies (DDA 2014, 19–21). Yet as found in the research I conducted in Amya, few households depend solely on one kind of livelihood or crop. The majority depend on

¹³⁹ DDA researchers, in fact, conducted surveys in each of the three SEZ project areas: Amya, Kyaukpa, and the roadlink area. The livelihoods data in the 2014 report thus refers not only to Amya, but also to the other two areas. However, Amya is much larger than the other areas in terms of its number of villages, number of households, and raw population. As a result, I believe it is accurate to characterize the report's findings as representing Amya well, if not precisely. In every village visited, researchers' random sampling method was straightforward, if also a significant undertaking: surveying one of every three households in the village. The report supports the findings of the research I conducted later, qualitative rather than quantitative, which found *chan* farming to be the leading primary occupation within livelihood mixes that often combine on- and off-farm labor, with migrant remittances being an important source of many households' incomes.

livelihood mixes combining multiple kinds of crops, as well as sometimes on- and off-farm employment (ERI 2018, 24). Labor migration to the Bangkok area is significant. Migrant remittances are behind only *chan* harvests, livestock, and paddy rice harvests as a source of households' reported income (DDA 2014, 25).

DDA's income distribution findings indicate that Amya sees low levels of poverty compared to elsewhere in Myanmar. While 47% of households reported an income of under 23 lakh per year (\$1,662, or \$4.50 per day for the household), 26% reported income of between 23 and 47 lakh per year (\$3,397, or \$9.30 per day for the household), and 22% reported income of over 47 lakh per year (DDA 2014, 25). On the whole, these figures are lower than average rural incomes in neighboring Thailand—if not by very much, in fact.¹⁴⁰ Still, they are consistent with data showing Tanintharyi Region, in which Amya and the Dawei area are located, to have poverty rates low enough to be comparable to those of Yangon and Mandalay Regions, that is, the lowest poverty rates in Myanmar (Myanmar Central Statistical Organization *et al.* 2020, 4).

My relatively structured data collection process in Amya followed DDA's 2014 report by several years; DDA's research had been the last such sustained research process in Amya. I conducted 32 interviews and 17 group discussions, reaching a total of 131 people.¹⁴¹ Several

¹⁴⁰ Drawing on data from Thailand's 2007 Household Statistical Survey, Andrew Walker (2010) suggests that a household income of 60,000-120,000 Thai baht per year (\$1,891-\$3,783 per year) makes a Thai farming household "middle-income," the most common income range in rural Thailand. Poor households, in this schematic, earn less than 60,000 baht per year; upper-middle incomes range from 120,000 to 360,000 baht per year (\$11,354 per year); and rich households earn over 360,000 baht per year. Per DDA's 2014 data, then, roughly just under half (48%) of all households surveyed in Dawei SEZ project areas would qualify as middle-income or above in Thailand—as of the 2007 data cited by Walker, at least—while symmetrically, just under half (47%) would qualify as poor.

¹⁴¹ I had planned to begin with a series of household surveys, in order to be able to compare findings with DDA's survey results. However, in conversation with Kyaw Htet and others, I decided against conducting surveys, a time- and labor-intensive process that, more importantly, would have grated against a certain sense of research fatigue that I found in Amya. The 2012 and 2014 research processes carried a large research footprint, so to speak; villagers had become weary of extended, and in some ways invasive, research processes that, clearly, were directed ultimately towards concerns about the project, whereas many villagers now wished for the project to resume. Qualitative research based on interviews and group discussions, I felt, and we agreed, would be more appropriate by mid-2017, when I began implementing this data collection process.

interviews took place in Dawei town, but in consultation with DDA and ERI, the vast majority took place in six villages in Amya: Wetchaung and Kamaungchaung, the two villages near the turn-off from the Union Road; Hteingyi and Paradut, two larger villages closer to the center of Amya; and Mudu and Ngapidat, both nearer the waterfront. Ngapidat, a small fishing village, sits at the edge of the beach. It is the only village of the six that is not slated for relocation. Ma Khaing, the staff at DDA whom I'd helped translate parts of the JICA study, joined the research project as my research assistant, primarily helping to arrange and confirm locations and times for interviews.¹⁴² Within a livelihoods perspective, our aim was to document villagers' current livelihood situations, how those situations relate to and have changed with the SEZ recently and over time—despite its suspension, the SEZ has continued to affect villagers' livelihoods in certain ways—and what opinions and expectations villagers now have regarding the potential restart of the SEZ project. This information, DDA and ERI felt, would enable a better grasp of how or to what extent political re-organization in Amya might be possible amid rumors of the SEZ resuming.

Four themes organized the research: information access, livelihoods itself, employment, and gender. Working across our different interests, similar if not the same, we agreed on the importance of livelihoods and gender as thematic areas, while I pushed to include employment, and they pushed to include information access. Though a holistic, collective notion of “voice,” meanwhile, was central to DDA and ERI's interest in this research (see Chapter 5), they also saw this research as a chance to build a quasi-sociological understanding of the various “groups” that constitute the villages of Amya—for as Kyaw Htet was wont to say of Amya, describing DDA's difficulties working there in recent years, “Ah, there are too many groups!” I took this interest in

¹⁴² These we pursued through non-probability sampling, namely snowball and purposive sampling by way of increasing personal contacts, taking into account diversity and expertise (according to income, gender, age, and experience, for instance) (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).

groups as license to explore forms of difference and hierarchy as questions of possible political organization, informed by Henry Bernstein's (2010) concept of agrarian "classes of labor." For Bernstein, the concept captures how agrarian livelihoods have become "extremely heterogeneous in their composition and characteristics," especially as increasing numbers of small-scale farmers depend—directly but also indirectly—on selling their labor power to secure daily reproduction (Bernstein 2010, 115). Small farmers, he writes, "might not be dispossessed of *all* means of reproducing themselves... But nor do most of them possess *sufficient* means to reproduce themselves," leading to layered, stratified, and differential livelihood combinations. Politically, this differentiation makes it difficult "to forge a unity of all 'the people of the land'" (111, 120).

In leading the research with Ma Khaing, I worried about the limits of semi-structured interviews and group discussions as ethnographic methods.¹⁴³ Our research interactions with villagers often felt rigid, channeled through the four themes developed with DDA and ERI. I was also not able to arrange to live in Amya,¹⁴⁴ and as the rainy season wore on, there were times we hesitated to drive to the area by motorbike. Ma Khaing and I sometimes rented a car, instead, such that we passed through and arrived in Amya in ways more heavy-handed than I would have liked. I wondered about the quality and value of the data we collected; a few times, I considered prematurely ending the research exercise altogether. Still, it was reassuring to recall these data would be only small pieces within a larger set of ethnographic materials, based on extensive participant observation with DDA and other organizations, including DPLN. And this research,

¹⁴³ Charles L. Briggs (2007), building on his earlier sociolinguistic work on interviews, communication, and communicability as such (1984, 1986), provides a helpful overview of the limits of interviews as ethnographic methods, a set of concerns addressed more critically in sociology (Hyman 1954, Cicourel 1974; see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2002, 2003) and feminist scholarship (Smith 1987, DeVault 1999) than in anthropology (see however Mertz 1993, Trinch 2003).

¹⁴⁴ A Sayadaw in one of the larger villages in Amya—not one of the villages where I eventually conducted interviews and group discussions—did invite me to live and teach English in his village, but his relations are tenuous with other villagers and villages in Amya, as well as with organizations based in Dawei town. Friends at DDA suggested it might be best not to accept his offer.

too, took the form of a certain participant observation. I better understood, by carrying it out, what kind of knowledge DDA and ERI value for political mobilization and how they go about producing it. DDA in particular, with its 2012 and 2014 research reports, has long maintained a close relation between research and its larger political project, using qualitative and quantitative data to understand, navigate, and mobilize political “voice” in the villages of the SEZ project areas. This research allowed me to take part in, while reflecting on, just such a search for voice, notwithstanding its strict, sometimes cumbersome, research framework and interactions, its vexed movement between town and village. Like DDA, I too had to navigate that movement, gaining a sharper appreciation for its political implications.

Our main findings included the following (ERI 2018, 1–4). First, regarding *information access*, villagers described an information environment that is opaque, confusing, and sometimes contradictory, with even basic information regarding relocation plans, land acquisition, and incoming industries highly unclear. Villagers with more power and authority—likely wealthier, closer to the village head, better educated, more land-rich, and men rather than women—access information more quickly and easily. Limited knowledge about the project, villagers reported, made it difficult to develop clear and informed opinions about the SEZ and its potential restart. Second, addressing *livelihoods*, our main area of inquiry, villagers noted impacts from the early stages of the SEZ project that included land confiscations, farmland and forested land destroyed or made inaccessible by construction activities, and pollution and degradation of water sources. In an area where villagers depend on access to land, water, and forests to reproduce their livelihoods, these impacts—unresolved and worsening—remain sources of difficulty for many villagers’ everyday living conditions. Most villagers emphasized that, under these conditions, a fair and equal compensation process is a matter of pressing concern—itsself a sign that, with a discourse of

fairness and equality, a secular-universal political imaginary is not entirely without traction in Amya. To an extent, land acquisition has also continued, as well as outright land speculation. A resulting process of land concentration has meant more villagers hold less and less land, while relatively few land-rich villagers have accumulated more holdings in recent years. Relatively land-rich villagers' expectation—as in the protest along Shan Road—is that the project will resume, and they will be able to sell their land holdings for higher prices at that time. In a context of market-integrated cash crop agriculture where few, if any, villagers possess the full means to reproduce themselves, villagers described as well frequently mixed livelihoods composed of on- and off-farm labor and income, including migrant labor and remittances.

Third, regarding *employment*, the backdrop of migrant labor is crucial. It was clear that one of the Myanmar government's central justifications for the SEZ—creating jobs that would allow Dawei migrants working elsewhere to return to the area—resonated powerfully with villagers in Amya. Villagers estimated that up to fifty percent of some villages' working-age populations, especially women and men under the age of forty, have moved to Bangkok's outskirts for work. Labor migration to Bangkok hardly began with the SEZ, yet in some villages the SEZ has led more people to leave by increasing their livelihood difficulties. Still, the idea that the SEZ might enable friends and family members to return is one that many villagers find convincing, despite evidence from the Thilawa SEZ near Yangon, the Map Ta Phut estate in Thailand, and regional historical examples, which suggests Dawei SEZ jobs are much more likely for migrants, managers, and engineers, rather than people who come from the SEZ area.¹⁴⁵ Nevertheless, villagers expressed

¹⁴⁵ In a visit to Thilawa during my fieldwork, I conducted interviews with farmers displaced by the SEZ. They expressed frustration that merely seventeen of the several hundred people displaced by the project's first phase had gained employment in the SEZ, and even so only in very undesirable, low-wage jobs—primarily as cleaners and security guards. Yet all people displaced had lost access to the agricultural land that once formed the basis of their livelihoods. Thai activist groups, meanwhile, insist the Map Ta Phut industrial estate, Thailand's largest and ITD's model for the Dawei SEZ, maintains an unwritten policy of refusing to hire people from the surrounding areas. This allows them to control information locally about what is and is not happening inside the estate, not least with regard

concerns about whether Amya villagers could or would be prioritized for job opportunities, whether wage discrimination—widely acknowledged—might continue between Thai and Myanmar workers, and which villagers in practice might be best placed to secure SEZ jobs: men or women, older or younger people, people with more or less education? Several older villagers worried that, if relocated to a village without access to land, as in all relocation plans under discussion, they were not sure if or how they could maintain their livelihoods.

Fourth, *gender* cross-cuts the other themes. Villagers reported that men, more than women, are likely to have better access to project-related information; that certain livelihoods associated with women, such as collecting and selling shellfish from mangrove forests, will face particular difficulties if the SEZ resumes; that boys tend to spend more years in school than girls, preparing them better to adapt to changing livelihood conditions in the area; that around land acquisition and compensation issues, men exert more power and influence than women; and that if SEZ jobs prioritize technical skills and capacities, men may be more likely than women to gain employment. Women expressed concerns that with positions of power in Amya held mainly by men—working in trade, village administration, *parahita* activities, and religious activities—the SEZ risks aggravating existing gender hierarchies in the villages.

The research found gender to be one of three key areas of village stratification, none of which is fully exclusive of the others. The second is wealth, pertaining not only to farm and non-farm income, including migrant remittances, but also land holdings, number of crops, and material assets like motorbikes and in some cases electricity generators and even fishing boats. The third,

to hazardous materials, leaks, pollution, health impacts, and so on. Finally, Tania Li has shown how since the colonial period in Indonesia, attempts to concentrate large labor forces, especially for plantation economies, have consistently relied on migrant labor, not local labor. Local laborers were seen as lazy, uneducated, and unruly—harder to discipline overall, with higher wage demands, as well (Alatas 1977, Stoler 1985, Breman 1990; cited in Li 2011, 286, 2014, 170).

more protean, is power (*in ah*, or *aw za*). Villagers specified that the most powerful villagers are those closest to—friendly with, to greater or lesser degrees—whoever is village head at the time. Now elected at the village level, village heads link villages to administration at the level of the village tract (a collection of villages) and the township (a collection of village tracts), the next two higher levels of rural administration above the village. With the NLD newly in office, however, village heads operated in a more fluid political situation than in years past, when the military and then the military-backed civilian party, the USDP, channeled resources and exerted control through vertical administrative linkages. Although villagers still grasped village heads as important conduits for accessing and negotiating flows of resources—related to land acquisition and compensation here, foremost—they were hardly alone as powerful villagers. Former village heads, wealthy traders, land-rich farmers, prominent monks and their supporters, and to shifting degrees, people connected to DDA and other external organizations are among the other powerful villagers in Amya.¹⁴⁶

Ma Khaing and I tried diligently to construct a basic economic history of Amya, especially regarding the rise of cash crop agriculture, but it proved a difficult task. In fact, villagers conveyed

¹⁴⁶ I share Walker's (2012) intuition that patronage and clientelism are effectively outdated modes of analysis regarding agrarian politics and economy—if in northern Thailand, for him, and the Dawei area, here. In his seminal account of patron-client patterns in rural politics, James C. Scott (1972) argues that in Southeast Asia, it was the commercialization of agriculture, above all, that eroded long-standing patron-client political bonds in the 20th century. Patronage, in this formulation, stands for a distinctly pre-capitalist mode of politics that, relatively static, is based on stable vertical relations rather than horizontal solidarities, that is, class solidarities. The breakdown of vertical subsistence protections, for Scott, a matter of commercialization but also global economic conditions, such as the depression of the 1930s, laid the basis for peasant rebellions in the 1930s and onwards in Burma and Vietnam, most prominently. In contemporary Amya, by contrast, market integration is not new, as Amya's economic history reveals; mixed and differential livelihood combinations often secure reproduction through market mechanisms. Politics is not pre-capitalist, nor (per se) pre-class; "classes of labor," in Bernstein's sense, are an important aspect of Amya's agrarian political economy. Especially in recent years, moreover, whatever might have remained of more vertical relations secured and reproduced through the military and the USDP has declined in the face of a new political fluidity best captured in the NLD's rise to power. Nevertheless, even if clientelism as such is no longer a convincing mode of analysis, its fundamental conditions having expired, elements of that which it bore along do remain, for instance vertically oriented, relatively transactional forms of politics geared towards securing material resources. I argue here that these forms of politics are best understood not in terms of clientelism, but rather in terms of a situational-differential political trajectory focused on claims on material distribution.

markedly little traces of any nostalgia for—or in many ways, even basic interest in—village life in the past, whether for cultivation for or beyond the market, for the rhythms of domestic and social life, or for the religious and spiritual ceremonies, rituals, and sites, pagodas and otherwise, for which people in Dawei town, including DDA staff, consider Amya to be important. Attempts to stimulate discussion about long-term livelihood changes in Amya faltered repeatedly as villagers mainly shrugged their shoulders, confirming little more than that while rubber cultivation is relatively new, dating to the 1990s, villagers in Amya have cultivated cashews, betel nut, and seasonal fruits for generations (ERI 2018, 36–7). Two interviews did indicate that cashew and betel nut cultivation dates back at least to the colonial period, when colonial trade patterns meant agricultural products like these would have moved up and down the Andaman coast, in some cases into Thailand, and potentially onwards to other locations in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and China. The Dawei area (then Tavoy) and Tanintharyi more broadly (then Tenasserim) also saw attempts by the colonial state to rationalize land and resource management, especially with regard to forestry for the extraction and trade in teak (Bryant 1996, 1997). This was the period during which the colonial state tried to initiate mining enterprises based out of Dawei, but with notably little success until World War I caused a demand spike for tungsten, used in munitions, that finally made Dawei into a mining hub (Coleridge Beadon 1919, Hall 1960).

This relatively long history of market integration and commercialized resource extraction in the area around Amya makes it difficult to frame Amya as being, in some sense, before or beyond capitalist relations. Yet commodity production and markets comfortably predate capitalism (Polanyi 1957, Wood 2002a). What distinguishes capitalism more precisely can be traced to two partially conflicting approaches. In what Derek Hall (2012) calls the “classical” approach, capitalism exists when the separation of producers from the means of production—the

moment of primitive accumulation, strictly defined as such by Marx (1990)—has forced producers to sell their labor in order to survive, while capitalists own the means of production as private property.¹⁴⁷ A second approach owes to Ellen Meiksins Wood, who argues that it is market dependence that most specifically characterizes capitalism—a condition possible “well short of complete dispossession” (Wood 2002b, 54). Agricultural producers, for Wood, can remain in possession of land, yet depend on producing competitively to secure the inputs needed for reproduction. Wood invokes Robert Brenner (1976, 1977), for whom, in her reading, “the distinctive dynamics of capitalism come into play when producers become market-dependent, and therefore subject to the imperatives of competition, which happens even without their complete separation from the means of production, when their access to the means of subsistence becomes dependent on the market” (Wood 2002a, 60).

The classical approach posits a more complete, if recurring, break between capitalism and that which precedes it. Wood’s approach, by contrast, while sensitive to the persistence of primitive accumulation, better accommodates situations like those that Bernstein argues are increasing. Bernstein’s account resonates with the research I conducted in Amya, where combinations of subsistence and non-subsistence production, and on- and off-farm employment, mix within a heterogeneous setting that sits poorly within familiar teleologies of capitalist completion: from farm to factory, agriculture to industry, peasant to proletariat, and precapital to capital. Bernstein, insightfully, redirects attention to the growing number of small farmers who are not dispossessed of all means of production, even though what they retain is insufficient to reproduce themselves. As a result, some sale of labor power, their own or others’ in their

¹⁴⁷ One could cite many examples here. Hall cites the approaches of Massimo De Angelis (2001), Jim Glassman (2006), Michael Perelman (2000), and Michael Webber (2008).

household, locally or through longer-distance labor migration, becomes integral to farmers' mixed and differential livelihood combinations.

Notwithstanding longer histories of market-integrated cash crop cultivation, rubber cultivation marked a shift in Amya, a lowland area where neither teak extraction nor mining had ever played a significant direct role in villagers' livelihoods.¹⁴⁸ Smallholder rubber production in Amya precedes the 1990s; it is possible, in principle, that it dates to the earliest importation of rubber plants to southern Myanmar from Calcutta and Ceylon in the late 19th century (Keong 1973). But with Myanmar's wider turn to capitalist restructuring in the 1990s, smallholder production increased substantially alongside larger-scale government-backed production (Kenney-Lazar *et al.* 2018). One interviewee explained that the government strongly encouraged rubber production, villagers responded enthusiastically by integrating the new boom crop into their livelihood mixes, and by the mid-2000s, rubber had become a core component of agrarian economy in Amya, bolstered by rubber's rising prices until the late 2000s.¹⁴⁹ While rubber prices fell sharply thereafter, villagers reported that the price has stabilized again.

If rubber is one boom crop of recent decades in Amya, palm oil is another. Unlike these other cash crops, however, palm oil does not have a longer history in Amya, or indeed anywhere else in Myanmar. As discussed in Chapter 2, palm oil emerged suddenly as a boom crop in the late 1990s in a context of counterinsurgency and capitalist restructuring in southern Myanmar. Unlike

¹⁴⁸ To an extent, commercialized resource extraction in the Dawei vicinity strengthened the trade patterns from which Amya cultivators of cashews and betel nuts benefited. We also found evidence in comments from villagers that Amya villagers took part in the boom and bust employment cycles of the nearby mines, working as miners while employment expanded and returning to Amya when it declined. Yet once the mines became very profitable, most workers came from much farther away, namely China and India (Hall 1960, 160). In Amya itself, a coastal lowland of fields and forests, neither teak nor mining ever became significant economic undertakings.

¹⁴⁹ Amya smallholders' eager integration of rubber into their livelihood mixes echoes a dynamic captured elsewhere in Southeast Asia as well. In Indonesia, for instance, cash crop booms have been readily taken up and advanced by indigenous smallholders, contributing to land consolidation processes driven not simply by state and capital from outside or afar, but also from within indigenous communities by smallholders themselves (Hall *et al.* 2011, Li 2014).

rubber, palm oil is no smallholder affair; it is the prerogative of state institutions, major corporations, and agro-industrial production methods. Remarkably, by the end of 2013, 1.9 million acres of land in Tanintharyi—fully one-fifth of Tanintharyi’s total land area—had been granted to public and private enterprises for palm oil production (Woods 2019). In Amya, several palm oil plantations once owned and operated by state enterprises are no longer operational. Villagers assumed the plantations closed due to the SEZ project and will eventually make way for it. To drive across Amya, however, is still, with the SEZ on hold, to find oneself often in proximity to these plantations, fenced off and abandoned, their hulking green trees arrayed so orderly, so rationally, an ode to the standardizing capacity of industrial modernity. Yet like so much else in the SEZ area, the trees too are stuck in an indeterminate present, waiting to be dispensed with, living the suspension of earlier, convergent, more standardizing teleologies.

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