VIOLENT NEOLIBERALISM

DEVELOPMENT, DISCOURSE, AND DISPOSSESSION IN CAMBODIA

SIMON SPRINGER
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For my Dad,

You taught me that the embers of contemplation burn longer than the inferno of rage.
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Neoliberalism has become the dominant political economic arrangement in our world today. Responding to the seemingly intractable reality of our time and in seeking to transform our outlook on the current state of affairs, Susan George (1999, np) quipped,

For the neoliberal, the market is so wise and so good that like God, the Invisible Hand can bring good out of apparent evil. Thus Thatcher once said in a speech, ‘It is our job to glory in inequality and see that talents and abilities are given vent and expression for the benefit of us all’. In other words, don’t worry about those who might be left behind in the competitive struggle. People are unequal by nature, but this is good because the contributions of the well-born, the best-educated, the toughest, will eventually benefit everyone.

Put differently, if proponents of neoliberal ideology are to be believed, the current moment signals a rising tide that lifts all boats toward a harmonious global village. Yet there is considerable room for skepticism, as embedded within such promises of utopia are the dystopian realities that exist in a number of countries, like Cambodia, where neoliberalization has not resulted in a movement toward peace, but in a profound and unmistakable encounter with violence. My favorite passage from the film *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943) seems to sum this up nicely: “Everything seems beautiful because you don’t understand. Those flying fish, they’re not leaping for joy, they’re jumping in terror. Bigger fish want to eat them. That luminous water, it takes its gleam from millions of tiny dead bodies. The glitter of putrescence. There is no beauty here, only death and decay.”

Contra the commonplace Orientalist renderings that suggest an inherently violent and authoritarian culture underpins Cambodia’s failure to consolidate peace and democracy following a UN-sponsored transition
in the early 1990s, this book advances an alternative interpretation of the country’s contemporary political economy, wherein the mundanity of neoliberalism is exposed as a malevolent harbinger of death. Neoliberalization in Cambodia has hindered the potential for social justice, exacerbated poverty and inequality, and is now increasingly thrusting thousands of Cambodians into a position of landless proletarianism. Employing a series of empirically informed theoretical dialogues, I set out to examine the intersections between development, discourse, and dispossession in contemporary Cambodia, where each of these three thematic frames is considered as a moment to reveal the violence that continues to be meted out against everyday Cambodians in an ostensibly “post-conflict” context of deepening neoliberalization. The failings of development under a patronage system linked to a democracy with no real substance, the discursive obfuscations that demonize local culture while cultivating “proper” subjects of market rule, and Cambodia’s ongoing encounters with primitive accumulation through forced eviction and a new regime of property are all revealed to inform the “exceptional” and “exemplary” violence of neoliberal reform.

What I mean by exceptional violence is that violence which appears to fall outside of the rule, usually by being so intense in its manifestation. Exceptional violence forces those who bear witness to its implications to recognize its malevolence precisely because of the sheer shock and horror that is unleashed. Consequently, exceptional violence is jarring to the senses and elicits a deep emotional response. Yet, exceptional violence is only exceptional in the reaction it provokes, and as the proverb “the exception proves the rule” hints, exceptional violence is not beyond the bounds of the normative frame, but instead actually always exists in a dialectic relationship with exemplary violence, or that violence which constitutes the rule. In both Cambodia and beyond, a critical appraisal of neoliberalism’s capacity for violence is imperative to opening political imaginations to the possibility of a transformative and peaceable politics. By establishing the necessary theoretical understanding and empirical grounding to enable such an emancipatory project, this book illuminates the multiplicity of ways in which processes of neoliberalization have become suffused with exceptional and exemplary violence. While a robust critical literature on neoliberalism exists, very few scholars have explicitly linked their critiques to violence. This is a disappointing gap in the literature, as it seems so germane and vitally important to advancing a critical appraisal. Why should we be worried about neoliberalization if we are not able to fully appreciate its deleterious effects? Foremost among these is the distinct capacity of neoliberalizing processes to result in violence.

While its roots can be traced back to “multiple beginnings, in a series of situated, sympathetic critiques of nineteenth-century laissez-faire” (Peck
the rise of neoliberalism can also be understood as a particular form of anxiety that first began as a response to the atrocities of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and the Soviet Union, and a belief that government intervention had jeopardized personal freedoms and was thus responsible for the carnage (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). Following World War II, the Mont Pelerin Society, the originary neoliberal think-tank, resurrected classical liberalism’s three basic tenets. The first of these is a concentrated focus on the individual, who is viewed as the most qualified to articulate her or his needs and desires, whereby society should be organized toward reducing barriers that impede this goal. Second, unregulated markets are considered the most effective and efficient means for promoting self-sufficiency, whereby individuals pursue their wants and needs via the mechanism of price. And finally, the belief that the state should be non-interventionist by emphasizing the maintenance of competitive markets and guaranteeing individual rights fashioned primarily around a property regime (Hackworth 2007; Plehwe and Walpen 2006). Out of the geopolitical context of the war’s aftermath, the origins of neoliberalism as a political ideology can paradoxically be interpreted as reactionary to violence. In short, neoliberals theorized that violence could be curtailed by a return to the foundations of the Enlightenment and its acknowledgment of the merits of individualism. From the perspective of contemporary critical geopolitics, this historical context is somewhat ironic insofar as structural adjustment, fiscal austerity, and free trade, the tenets of neoliberalism, are now “augmented by the direct use of military force” (Roberts et al. 2003, 887), where the US military in particular provides the “hidden fist” that enables the invisible hand of the global-free market to operate.

The relationship between capital accumulation and war is hardly new (Harvey 1985), and the peaceful separation early neoliberals sought for their economic agenda accordingly demonstrated a certain naivety. Indeed, while not all wars are capitalist, it is difficult to conceive of a circumstance wherein an economic ideology like neoliberalism could not come attendant to violence insofar as it espouses universal assumptions, seeks a global domain, and discourages heterogeneity as individuals are remade in the normative image of “neoliberal proper personhood” (Kingfisher 2007). Either the lessons of colonialism were completely lost on the Mont Pelerin Society, or they uncritically accepted its narrative appeal to the supposed higher purpose of a “white man’s burden” at face value. In much the same way, “democracy building,” a phrase that has been increasingly sullied by its rhetorical linkages to American military exercises, was also implicated in the revival of classical liberalism, as the catastrophic outcomes of authoritarianism during the two world wars allowed neoliberalism to be discursively positioned as the lone purveyor of political freedom.
Following proxy wars that engaged appeals to democracy in Korea in the 1950s, and Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s, Keynesian political and economic forces began to unravel in the late 1970s and early 1980s, allowing the theorized coalescence between free markets and democracy to gain momentum as the supposed “freedom” of neoliberalism became increasingly regarded as a salve for the global economic crisis (Brenner and Theodore 2002). As one of the most significant moments in contemporary Southeast Asian history, the war in Vietnam had as much to do with a desire to instill democracy as it did with laying the groundwork for capitalism in the region as the two concerns became inseparable in US foreign policy. As America positioned its hopes of future capitalization in the region on the back of a successful war effort, those states that refused to conform to the (neo)liberal democratic status quo were quickly regarded as “rogue,” “failed,” or were “condemned to economic backwardness in which democracy must be imposed by sanctions and/or military force… by the global community of free nations” (Canterbury 2005, 2).

America accordingly had no moral qualms in orchestrating a coup in Cambodia in 1970, as Prince Nordom Sihanouk’s government was considered “rouge” insofar as it attempted to maintain a position of neutrality so as to avoid becoming embroiled in the apocalypse that was unfurling right next door. Yet the instillation of Lon Nol’s republican government was actually preceded by an even more grotesque violation as from October 4, 1965 to August 15, 1973 American bombardiers turned Cambodia into a napalm inferno in an effort to flush out Viet Cong forces thought to be operating from within Cambodia (Owen and Kiernan 2006). The carpet bombing literally incinerated the country, leaving an estimated 600,000 Cambodians dead (Herman 1997; Kiljunen 1984). Many American’s were outraged by President Nixon’s operations in Cambodia, and on May 4, 1970, four unarmed Kent State college students protesting the ongoing atrocity half a world away were shot dead by the Ohio National Guard. The incident galvanized the countercultural movement in the United States and across much of the so-called “West,” where the seething anger of Neil Young’s song “Ohio” served as an anthem for change. While humanity genuinely seemed on the verge of a major revolution toward a more just and compassionate world as the movement promised to transform our collective capacities and political orientation into something much more peaceful, this was thwarted by the official arrival of neoliberalism on the world stage in the mid-1970s. In 1973 the first state-level neoliberal experiment played out under the auspices another American backed coup in Chile (Plehwe et al. 2006; Taylor 2002). The “successful” trial paved the way for Thatcherism in the United Kingdom and Reaganomics in the United States. Following this, more moderate forms of neoliberalism were
“rolled out” in traditionally social-democratic states such as Canada, New Zealand, and Germany (Peck and Tickell 2002). But it was Chile’s trauma that provided the model for what Naomi Klein (2007) refers to as the “shock doctrine,” where collective crises or disasters, whether naturally occurring or manufactured, are used to push through neoliberal policies at precisely the moment when societies are too disoriented to mount meaningful contestation. In short, neoliberalism effectively usurped the emancipatory discourse that activists had spent years cultivating. The only revolution was to be a neoliberal one, where unfettered capital was packaged and sold to the masses as a panacea for all of society’s social ills. Unfortunately, this message was spoken with a forked tongue, and so passed the glory of the world, where the decades that followed neoliberalism’s global roll-out can be characterized as an era of profound violence.

**Bombs Away**

America’s bombing of Cambodia threw thousands of young men and women into the waiting arms of the Khmer Rouge, who promised to end the bloodshed (Kiernan 2004). At the time, few Cambodians could have predicted the carnage Pol Pot would cultivate. In a three-year, eight-month, and twenty-one-day reign of terror that began April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge (aka the Communist Party of Kampuchea) presided over the deaths of one and a half million people in a population of seven million at the time (Banister and Johnson 1993; Heuveline 2001). My Khmer language teacher in Canada fled Cambodia in 1979, having avoided detection by Pol Pot’s forces as she walked the length of the country, from Phnom Penh to Poipet, with her husband and two small children at her side. She recalls Saloth Sar as a kind and gentle man, someone who fostered in her an enthusiasm for learning that ultimately led her to choose a career as a professor. Before he became known as Brother Number One, having transformed himself into Pol Pot, Saloth Sar was her childhood teacher. Here, in its most startling reveal, we find Hannah Arendt’s (1963) “banality of evil,” which views history’s profoundest moments of malevolence as being executed not by fanatics or sociopaths, but by ordinary people who simply accepted the premises of the state, its function as the institutionalization of power, and the erasure this brings to our ability to see the violence it unleashes as at once both exceptional and exemplary. Neoliberalism has produced a similar pattern of hackneyed malevolence in contemporary Cambodia. While it may appear perverse to compare the Khmer Rouge genocide with current Prime Minister Hun Sen’s neoliberal regime of accumulation, this book makes clear that it is in fact a perfectly reasonable analysis, and one that is actually derived from the voices of Cambodians themselves.
The Khmer Rouge were finally overthrown by Vietnamese forces on January 7, 1979, but Cambodian misery continued to fester in the form of a guerrilla insurgency, as Pol Pot’s army proceeded to terrorize the population and assail the new government in Phnom Penh throughout the 1980s (Gottesman 2003; Kiernan 1996). Meanwhile, the international community turned their backs on Cambodia during this time, largely due to the embarrassment America sustained with its war effort in Vietnam, as the Vietnamese ran Cambodia as a client state after capturing Phnom Penh. Accordingly, Cambodia became the instrument of Vietnam’s punishment, as Washington compelled the United Nations to withhold development aid and bar Cambodia from all international agreements on communications and trade (Roberts 2001). When oil prices began to collapse in late 1985, a major source of revenue for the Soviet Union dried up and its aid programs accordingly fell by the wayside. This had profound effects on recipient states like Vietnam, leading to their eventual withdrawal from Cambodia. The demise of the Soviet Union and subsequent exit of the Vietnamese saw the newly independent Phnom Penh government change gears, as it began to recognize the need to secure new international patrons (Um 1990). This did not signal a change in the country’s political orientation, as authoritarianism is not at all incompatible with neoliberalism. The authoritarian potential of the neoliberal state first comes into view when we recognize that neoliberalization involves not just a deregulating “roll-back” of state functions, but intensive re-regulation of political space and the “roll-out” of new institutional frameworks and economic management systems (Peck 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002). These mechanisms can easily be mobilized and manipulated by elites to achieve particular ends, including an invasive social agenda centered on urban order, surveillance, and policing (Wacquant 2009). Neoliberalism’s bureaucratic formation is expressed in the reorientation of states arising from specific policies and programs designed to streamline all sectoral capacities (Mudge 2008). In this understanding, neoliberalism is considered as a process of transformation that states purposefully engage in to remain economically competitive within a transnational playing field, which was precisely the concern of Cambodian elites.

The substantive focus of neoliberalism is on the transfer of public holdings over to the private sector of corporate interest. This formation of neoliberalism is thus premised on the idea that opening collectively held resources to market mediation engenders greater efficiency, but it must also be recognized that it offers significant scope for the expansion of capitalism as new opportunities for accumulation to arise. Like bees to honey, this interpretation explains why the international community came buzzing back into the Cambodian scene. With foreign capital awaiting conditions
that would guarantee security on investments, economic reform became a major factor in both the timing of and the reasoning behind the United Nations’ attempt to settle Cambodia’s ongoing civil conflict (Springer 2009). Peace in Cambodia was to be achieved through democratization and the organization of “free and fair” elections. This mandate, however, included a third principle that was rhetorically linked to the possibility of achieving the former two. Insulated from democratic choice, Cambodia was to adopt a free market economy via the construction of a policy environment in which foreign investment and a private property regime could emerge (Hendrickson 2001; Peou 2007; Springer 2010). In particular, this transformation was to be built on the back of international, regional, and bilateral assistance, which the architects of the Paris Peace Accords (PPA) argued would enhance markets, and thus somehow secure democracy and peace (United Nations 1991). Implicit in this framework was the notion that marketization would bring rationality to “anomalous” Cambodian actors, quelling their supposed penchant for “irrational” violence. Again we see a significant sense of irony play itself out with respect to neoliberal ideas, as violence became the primary selling point for Cambodia’s neoliberalization. The 1991 the PPA instituted this through the establishment of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), whereby an end to Cambodian conflict would ensue via this purported final solution to nearly 30 years of overwhelming violence.

Neoliberalism’s relationship with “postconflict” development is an integral one, a point that is becoming well recognized in much of the peacebuilding literature. In seeking to “stabilize” countries having recently experienced civil war, Roland Paris (2002) argues that the practice of international peacebuilding is an experiment in social engineering that promulgates a particular vision of how states should organize themselves internally, based on the principles of liberal democracy and market-oriented economics. To Paris (2002) this practice constitutes the transmission of standards for “appropriate behavior” from the “western-liberal” core to the “failed states” of the periphery, thus updating the colonial-era belief that the European imperial powers had a duty to “civilize” dependent populations and territories. Yet rather than procuring stability or conformity to “Western” ideals, the innovative and expanding forms of political economy generated under liberal peace-building have actually protracted conditions of instability (Duffield 1999; Paris 1997). In demonstrating this claim, Mark Duffield (1998) points to African and Eastern European contexts, where warlords have been able to forge new and viable links with international organizations and global markets, effecting a “privatization of violence” as processes of neoliberalization are embraced on very particular terms. Consequently, it is perhaps somewhat unsurprising that
despite corruption frequently being reported as a major concern of local populations and foreign aid agencies during transitions to peace, liberalization policies may actually foster corruption (Le Billon 2008). Shalmali Guttal (2005) argues that the hallmark of “postconflict” reconstruction is not the rebuilding of societies after episodes of violent conflict, crisis, and upheaval, but rather the establishment of market-based capitalism, coupled with a political regime that is willing to promote and defend neoliberalization (see also Hanlon 2004). In practice, this reorients the fledgling state’s responsibilities toward facilitating and protecting conditions for wealth creation, the bulk of which is expropriated by private actors from outside the country and/or consolidated by national elites (Guttal 2005), where corruption may figure prominently. Klein’s (2007) account corroborates this general notion, as she argues that collective world crises and disasters, whether “natural” or constructed through human actions, have been utilized as catalysts to push through unpopular neoliberal reforms on societies too disoriented by the initial “shock” to protect their own interests.

In contrast to these critical approaches, the World Bank has generated a swath of its own ideologically driven literature on the economic dimensions of conflict and “postconflict” violence (Azam et al. 2001; Collier et al. 2003; Moser and McIlwaine 2001; Moser et al. 2005; World Bank 2003). David Moore (2000) warns that the illusion of peace and ordered government encouraged by this research obliterates the continuum between humanitarianism and neoliberal “development,” thus permitting international actors to enter “postconflict” settings under the premise of altruism, while the intention to cultivate individual property rights and other aspects of neoliberalization become inextricable and irreproachable conditions of such assistance. Nonetheless, the main line of argument being advanced in the World Bank’s body of research is that war results from poverty, and poverty from misguided economic policies, so that reducing the incidence of future conflict and diminishing the potential for relapse among “postconflict” states requires an intensification of efforts to promote growth via neoliberal reforms. Martha A. Starr (2006) argues that the conceptual underpinnings of such an argument are deeply flawed on the basis of its overemphasis on individual incentives and its claim that social and economic injustices do not contribute to violent conflicts. In contrast, she argues that attention to social economics provides valuable alternative perspectives on conflict by taking its social dimensions seriously (Starr 2006). Thus, rather than proceeding from the perspective that the ravages of war-torn countries present an unprecedented opportunity to create “market friendly” conditions, research must be vigilant to the issues of social and economic justice, while also being mindful not to downplay the complexity of political economic circumstances in “postconflict”
situations (Collinson 2003; Le Billon 2000). In the Cambodian context, liberal peace and democracy building has ridden roughshod over any such concerns for social justice, arriving instead with a “shock,” where neoliberalization has gathered momentum ever since.

**Gathering Momentum**

Despite not receiving a greater degree of attention in the literature, there is a small, but growing body of literature that attempts to make connections between neoliberalism and violence more explicit, where violence is foregrounded as the locus of critique against neoliberalism (Auyero 2000; Borras and Ross 2007; Coleman 2007; Collier 2008; Manalansan 2005; Marchand 2004; Pickles and Begg 2000; Sargis and Gabbard 2005). Within my own work I have attempted to demonstrate an urgent need to build conceptually relational linkages between the violence occurring in multiple sites undergoing neoliberalization, and to identify threads of commonality within these diverse spaces so that an emancipatory agenda of transnational scope may potentially begin to emerge (Springer 2011). It is, in short, simplistic and deeply problematic to assume uniformity across the various constellations of violent geographies that are occurring in neoliberalizing contexts. Such an approach reinforces the privilege and authority of neoliberal discourse, by continuing to circulate the idea that neoliberalism as a particular model of statecraft is inevitable, a criticism J. K. Gibson-Graham (1996) makes more generally with regard to capitalism. Nevertheless, understanding the imbrications and resonances of violence within the now orthodox political economic model of neoliberalism—however disparate, protean, and variegated—is of critical importance to social justice and human liberation. Thus, the point of our critiques should not be to temper neoliberalism with concessions, moderation, and niceties, as capitalism of any sort is doomed to fail. The logics of creative destruction, uneven development, and unlimited expansion—which not only stoke the fires of malcontent and conflict, but also contradict the finite limitations of the earth—are capitalism’s undoing regardless of the form it takes (Harvey 2007). Instead, what needs to be occurring in our scholarship on neoliberalism is a more thorough radicalization of our agenda, where the purpose appropriately becomes to consign neoliberalism and all other forms of capitalism to the waste bin of history, so that the exceptional and exemplary violence of this maligned chapter of human existence become a disturbing abomination from our past, not an enduring reality of our present, or a conceded inevitability of our future. Through a conceptualization of process and fluidity then we can begin to identify how both violence and neoliberalism might be considered as moments, a reflection that makes it easier to recognize how these phenomena actually converge.
Following Karl Marx’s contention that the world is composed not of “things” but of “processes” that may on occasion crystallize into “permanences,” which are never really permanent, David Harvey (1996, 49) argues that every historical form is constituted by its fluid movement, where things do not “exist outside of or prior to the processes, flows, and relations that create, sustain, or undermine them.” From this he develops the concept of “moment,” which Harvey (1996) suggests is linked but not bounded by time or space in any simple way, and can instead be considered as conceptual tools that assist in addressing complex and overdetermined social relations. Marx (1939/1993, 99–100) identified a similar conception when he argued that “production, distribution, exchange and consumption are not identical, but they all form members of a totality, distinctions within a unity… Mutual interaction takes place between the[se] different moments. This is the case with every organic whole.” In this argument, centered as it is on fluidic categories, Nancy Hartsock (2006) recognizes the potential appeal to poststructuralists who are so frequently pitted in opposition to the supposed determinism of Marxian ideas. Poststructuralism is most notable for its concern with power relations, and Hartsock (2006) contends that what Marx was fundamentally trying to understand—and potentially transform—are these same processes, in particular those centered around the development of capitalism. It is here in the concept of “moment” that Marxism and poststructuralism become potentially reconcilable approaches to understanding the world, and it is here that I similarly want to suggest that we may locate neoliberalism as a “moment” of exceptional and exemplary violence.

The title of this book, Violent Neoliberalism, speaks to the ways in which I believe violence and neoliberalism have become entwined. Despite the hints that I have established with respect to this relationship already in this introduction, I am aware that this will not be an easy argument for some to swallow. Violence, in its typical treatment, is rendered as a “thing,” an occurrence without a history or geography. It is thought to exist only in its instantaneous release, decontextualized from the processes and practices that informed its expression, and disengaged from the narratives that have called forth its existential manifestation. Nonetheless, when we consider violence in the elucidating light of the concept of moment, we suddenly become much more aware of its spatio-temporality as we are forced to acknowledge the complexity of process, or the momentum that goes into any single “act” of violence. A moment is not a still picture, but a moving one, where

the link with time pushes analyses to explore both the past and the future possibilities the moment contains… The concept of ‘moment’, then, can
be analytically very useful in both separating out the social relations the theorist wants to concentrate on while at the same time reminding us that these social relations are in fact connected with and defined by other social relations with their own pasts and future possibilities. (Hartsock 2006, 175–176)

To treat the material expression of violence only through its directly observable manifestation is a simplistic and reductionist appraisal. This view ignores the complexity of the infinite entanglements of social relations, and further neglects the future possibilities, or what Carolyn Nordstrom (2004) calls “the tomorrow of violence.” When we bear witness to violence, what we are seeing is not a “thing,” but a moment with a past, present, and future that is determined by its elaborate relations with other moments of social process. The material “act” of violence itself is merely a nodal point, a snapshot of oppressive social relations, and one that has an enduring tendency to be marked with absolutist accounts of space and time, when, in fact, violence is temporally dispersed through a whole series of “troubling geographies” (Gregory 2006).

The existing relationship between neoliberalism and violence is directly related to the system of rule that neoliberalism constructs,justifies,and defends in advancing its hegemonies of ideology,of policy and program, of state form, of governmentality, and ultimately of discourse. Neoliberalism is a context in which the establishment, maintenance, and extension of hierarchical orderings of social relations are recreated, sustained, and intensified. Accordingly, neoliberalization must be considered as an integral part of the moment of violence in its capacity to create social divisions within the constellations of experiences that delineate place and across the stories-so-far of space (Massey 2005). Violence has a distinctive “reciprocity of reinforcement” (Iadicola and Shupe 2003, 375), where not only may inequality lead to violence, but so too may violence result in conditions of inequality. In this light, we can regard a concern for understanding the causality of violence as being a consideration that posits where neoliberalism might make its entry into this bolstering systematic exchange between inequality and violence.

The empirical record demonstrates a marked increase in inequality under neoliberalism (Wade 2003), encouraging Harvey (2005) to regard this as neoliberalism’s primary substantive achievement. Yet to ask the particular question “does neoliberalism cause violence?” is actually somewhat irrelevant. Inequality alone is about the metrics and measuring of disparity, however qualified, while the link between inequality and violence is typically treated as an assessment of the “validity” of a causal relationship, where the link may or may not be understood to take on
multiple dimensions (including temporally, spatiality, economics, politics, culture, etc.). However, the point is that inequality and violence are mutually constitutive. Inequality begets violence, and violence produces further inequalities. Therefore, if we want to disempower the abhorrent and alienating effects of either, we need to drop the calculative approaches and consider them together as an enclosed and resonating system, that is, as a particular “moment.” As Hartsock (2006, 176) argues, “[t]hinking in terms of moments can allow the theorist to take account of discontinuities and incommensurabilities without losing sight of the presence of a social system within which these features are embedded.” Although the enduring phenomenon of violence is riven by tensions, vagaries, and vicissitudes as part of its fundamental nature, within the current moment of neoliberalism, violence is all too frequently a reflection of the turbulent landscapes of globalized capitalism. Capitalism at different moments creates particular kinds of agents who become capable of certain kinds of violence that is dependent upon both their distinctive geohistorical milieu and their situation within its hierarchy. It is in this distinction that I locate my concern for understanding the associations between violence and neoliberalism. By examining the contingent histories and unique geographies that define individual neoliberalizations, scholars can begin to interpret and dissect the kaleidoscope of violence that is intercalated within neoliberalism’s broader rationality of power. In other words, it is important to recognize and start working through how the moment of violence and the moment of neoliberalism coalesce. This is precisely what this book sets out to do through an examination of neoliberalizing processes in Cambodia.

My intention is not to produce a blueprint wherein the reading is replicable in each and every context of neoliberalization. Neoliberalism should not be read as an all powerful, expansive, and self-reproducing logic, for such a view lends it the appearance of being uniform and beyond reproach. It is imperative to contest the neoliberalism-as-monolithism argument for failing to recognize space and time as open and always becoming (Springer 2011). In focusing exclusively on an extraneously convened neoliberalism, we overlook the local geographies of existing political economic circumstances and institutional frameworks, where variability, internal constitution, societal influences, and individual agency all play a role in (re)producing, circulating, and facilitating neoliberalism. To focus exclusively on external forces is to risk producing over-generalized accounts of a ubiquitous and singular neoliberalism. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that intensive focus on internal phenomena to the exclusion of relational connections across space inadequately addresses the necessary features and significant connections of neoliberalism as a global project (Peck and Tickell 2002). This “larger conversation” of neoliberalism
is considered important in relating similar constellations of experiences across various locations as a potential basis for emancipation (Brand and Wissen 2005; Featherstone 2005; Hart 2008; Routledge 2003b; Springer 2008; Willis et al. 2008). Retaining the abstraction of a “global” neoliberalism allows phenomena like poverty and inequality, which are experienced across multiple sites, to find a point of similarity. In contrast, disarticulation of the global scope of neoliberalism paralyzes attempts at building and sustaining solidarity beyond the micro-politics of the “local.” Accordingly, conceptualizing neoliberalism requires an appreciation of the elaborate exchanges between local and extralocal forces operating within the global political economy (Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck 2001). My intention then is to account for the traction of violence in the context of Cambodia as a particular hybridized and mutated instance of neoliberalization, while at the same time retaining the notion of neoliberalism as a “radical theoretical slogan” (Peck 2004, 403) that can be engaged as a reference point in contesting violence and uniting diverse struggles against the disciplining, exploitative, and dominating structures of capitalism.

Methodological Reflections

Having conducted research in Cambodia for the past ten years, I have been in the unique position of being able to observe the country’s neoliberalization process unfold. Yet this has not been a witnessing from a detached perspective, as I have been deeply engaged with Cambodians on the ground, gathering their testimonies and learning first hand how their lived experiences have seen violence continue in the post-Pol Pot era, where those most vulnerable to the strains of a burgeoning-free market economy have complained that violence has only increased under Prime Minister Hun Sen’s rule. I remain fiercely committed to such an engaged and committed position of solidarity with the poor and willingly wear my politics on my sleeve. This book accordingly challenges some of the more conservative writings within the field of Cambodian studies and pushes the envelope by openly critiquing the violence of the current economic order. Moreover, I want to emphasize that my approach is intended as a theoretical dialogue, and although signposted by empirical concerns, my intention is for this book to be read as a diagnostic rupturing of commonsense. On this I take my cue from Michel Foucault (1983, 206), who suggested “the function of any diagnosis concerning the nature of the present...must always be made in accordance with these kinds of virtual fracture which open up the space of freedom understood as a space of...possible transformation.” Consequently, I make no apologies for this diagnostic approach, as it fosters a potential space for emancipatory thinking and action.
Given my diagnostic approach, the intention of this study is to engage in a different kind of mapping exercise, a “global ethnography” of sorts. Following Burawoy (2000, 31), what I mean by “global ethnography” is that I take a methodological approach that sees “global forces and global connections as [being] constituted imaginatively, inspiring social movements to seize control over their immediate but also their more distant worlds, challenging the mythology of an inexorable, runaway world,” in this case the focus being on critiquing neoliberalism seen as a monolithic imperative. In particular then, within the global ethnographic model I focus in on the idea of “global imaginations,” which according to Burawoy (2000, 31) “demystifies globalization [or neoliberalization] as something given, natural, and eternal” and points to the production of space and the dissemination of different imaginative geographies, and how they might inspire resistance. In short, “Global imaginations reconfigure what is possible, turning globalization [or neoliberalization] from an inexorable force into a resource that opens up new vistas” (Burawoy 2000, 32). Ethnography of course literally means to write about culture, and because culture both informs and is enmeshed within a critical political economy perspective (Hart 2002; Peet 2000; Sayer 2001), this book offers theoretical interpretations of development, discourse, and dispossession as part of a global ethnography in which individual Cambodians’ understandings and experiences of violence are addressed and related to the processes being employed in their country’s neoliberalization. This has allowed me to bring forward Cambodian views on inequality and poverty, as well as their individual engagements with and perceptions of neoliberalism and development processes.

My methodological agenda can also be read as a sort of Dadaist (anti) program. What I mean by this is that “the more seriously a method takes itself—the more it claims to supersede other approaches through invocations of ‘truth’ or ‘objectivity’—the more that method must be suspect of impeding understanding rather than advancing it” (Ferrell 2008, 74). Accordingly, I maintain an intellectual unwillingness to toe the line, where in opposition to received technique the essence of inquiry becomes understood as ongoing critique. Stanley Cohen (1988, 109) argues that “the unfinished is a program based on that which does not yet exist,” which emerges as a practical and political strategy for negotiating the next moment of understanding. In this sense, the more tidy one’s research becomes, the more the vim and vigor is drained from it as “methodological closure and intellectual fastidiousness suggest stasis and stagnation,” while “raggedy methods, methods not fully conceptualized or completed, suggest intellectual life and disciplinary vitality” (Ferrell 2008, 74). Consequently, what I have produced is anything but a typical ethnographic inquiry. Instead, in being cognizant of both the central importance of social theory (Gregory
1993), and the idea that fieldwork is a critical component of an engaged geographical endeavor (Katz 1994; Kobayashi 1994), my global ethnographic approach purposefully leaves many loose ends open. I categorically reject the idea that these can all ever be neatly tied off, both because the world continues to turn, and because it allows for greater transferability of my argument. By giving the text the breathing room to be read as more than just an empirical analysis of Cambodia, the potential usefulness of its critique becomes more evident to other contexts where violent neoliberalism has reared its ugly head. Although I can converse in Khmer, which helps me in building rapport with participants, I continue to work with an interpreter in Cambodia to assist me in picking up on cultural cues, to negotiate the politics of my “outsider” status, and also as a measure of mutual learning and reciprocity. In terms of translation, I have presented the participants words exactly as they were spoken to me, either by my interpreter or by the participants themselves. In doing so I am engaging a “foreignizing translation” strategy, which highlights the translated nature of the text, as opposed to the dominant “domesticating translation” strategy that seeks to render the translation process invisible and thereby reinforces ethnocentric readings of the translated material by prioritizing the cultural and aesthetic values of the target language/audience (Venuti 2000).

The arguments presented herein are based in particular on periods of research undertaken in Cambodia in 2007 and 2010, involving in-depth interviews with well over 100 participants, including nongovernmental organization (NGO) directors, International Financial Institution staffers, politicians, diplomats, and “everyday” (read “extraordinary”) Cambodians who have found a way to live through unimaginable violence. The central research focus was on understanding perceptions and experiences of violence in contemporary Cambodia, but this criterion was not imposed on participants, as interviews were instead conducted as a flexible and reflective process. The participant exclusion and inclusion criteria used were multiple. To understand the plurality of voice in Cambodian society, interviews were conducted with interest groups that comprised both “non-expert” and “expert” participants.1 In the case of “non-expert” interviews, participants had to be Cambodian nationals, as the purpose was to ascertain a diversity of Cambodian perceptions and experiences of violence, neoliberalization, and democracy in their transitioning society. “Non-expert” participants were selected using various forms of purposeful sampling in order to achieve inclusion of a variety of interest groups, including among others, university students, teachers, market stall owners, garment factory workers, trade union leaders, street sweepers, craftspeople, journalists, homemakers, motorbike taxi drivers, nurses, monks, waitresses, farmers, lawyers, sex workers, homeless individuals, community spokespeople,
security guards, and civil service workers. The selection criteria for “expert” interviews were such that participants were initially approached via email, and chosen based on their capacity to act as both producers and intermediaries of key circulating discourses in Cambodian society, including most particularly neoliberalism, violence, and Orientalism. Most of the selected “expert” participants worked within the realm of human rights advocacy, and are thus directly related to the promotion of nonviolence. However, all of the civil society members I interviewed suggested that their organization was in some capacity working on issues relating either directly or indirectly to the promotion of nonviolence, a situation that comes as no surprise given Cambodia’s historical and contemporary violent geographies. Participants were comprised of individuals, both foreign and Cambodian, working within international financial institutions (IFIs), as well as directors of Cambodian NGOs, and politicians.

Chapter Breakdown

The aim of the book is to produce a critical political economy-meets-poststructuralist perspective on the relationship between neoliberalism and violence. Using the experience of Cambodia’s contemporary development trajectory as an empirical frame, the book seeks to expose the multiple ways in which processes of neoliberalization are shot through with structural, symbolic, and direct forms of violence. By illuminating the myriad ways in which violence is built into neoliberalizing processes, the book aims to open up a critical space for rethinking how development beyond neoliberalism might proceed by allowing the voices of those most beholden to the violence of neoliberalism to come to the fore. Employing a “global ethnography,” which connects local concerns to their broader political economic implications, the book provides a forum for collaborative, qualitative research that reveals participants’ understandings of their experiences of both development and dispossession, and their perceptions of the discourses that frame these related processes. The overarching objective is to overcome the divide that exists between the discursive legitimation of neoliberalism as a positive element in the development of societies and the stark reality of the damage wrought by the adoption of neoliberal politics and the accumulation by dispossession that comes attendant to such political economic reform. Although neoliberalization provides entrenched elites with significant capacity to line their own pockets, this necessarily comes at the expense of exacerbated conflict, distrust, and social strife across all strata of society.

Following this introduction, I begin by focusing on the politics of how development has unfolded in contemporary Cambodia. In chapter one, Violent Politics: Authority, Terror, and the New Devaraja, I argue that in the
wake of the Asian Crisis, case studies from Southeast Asia often reinforced the perception that neoliberalism is thriving in authoritarian states. Processes of intensive neoliberalization in the region have now been ongoing for over a decade, yet attempts at democratic consolidation have been tenuous, fragile, and incomplete at best, calling into question the supposed nexus between democracy and neoliberal reform. In reflecting on neoliberalization in the region, this chapter examines how and why authoritarianism is continuing to thrive in the neoliberalizing Southeast Asian state and what this means for development. Focusing in on the Cambodian context in particular, I contest the taken-for-granted and god-like connotations that have been afforded to the invisible hand of the market by revealing how neoliberalization can be considered as a form of war against both democracy and the poor. Concerned by American foreign policy strategies and its recent pivot back to Southeast Asia, I also examine how notions of “terrorism” are now being deployed as a legitimating rationale for ratcheting down democracy, silencing critics, and positioning the poor as an affront to “security” in the region.

Chapter two, Violent Kleptocracy: The Articulations of Neoliberalism and Patronage, argues that an exclusive focus on external forces risks the production of an overgeneralized account of a ubiquitous neoliberalism, which insufficiently accounts for the profusion of local variations that currently comprise the neoliberal project as a series of articulations with existing political economic circumstances. Although the international financial institutions initially promoted neoliberal economics in the global south as part of a developmental strategy, powerful elites were happy to oblige. In posing the question of “development for who?,” this chapter argues that rather than offering a policy reform that empowers the poor, neoliberalism instead reveals opportunities for well-connected officials to informally control market and material rewards, thus allowing them to enrich themselves with little regard for those whom they are meant to represent. What constitutes “actually existing” neoliberalism in Cambodia as distinctly Cambodian are the ways in which the patronage system has allowed local elites to co-opt, transform, and (re)articulate neoliberal reforms through a framework that asset strips public resources, thereby increasing people’s exposure to corruption, coercion, and violence. While experiences in the global south may look very different from neoliberalization patterns found in the global north, it is in the sense of the local appropriation of neoliberal ideas that scholars must go beyond conceiving of “neoliberalism in general” as a singular and fully realized policy regime, ideological form, or regulatory framework, and work toward conceiving a plurality of “actually existing neoliberalisms” with particular characteristics arising from mutable geohistorical outcomes embedded within national, regional, and local process of market-driven socio-spatial transformation.
From here I shift the focus toward the discourses that have been mobilized in an effort to validate neoliberalization. Chapter three, *Violent Orientalism: Imagining the “Savage Other,”* argues that the continuation of violence and authoritarianism in Cambodia’s posttransitional landscape has led many scholars, journalists, international donors, and NGOs to posit a “culture of violence” as responsible for the country’s failure to consolidate democracy. This chapter examines the culture of violence thesis to reveal it as a sweeping caricature shot through with Orientalist imaginaries that problematically contributes to a discourse that undermines the process of neoliberalization. By invoking particular imaginative geographies, the culture of violence discourse problematically erases the contingency and interconnectedness of the places in which violence occurs. While violence is certainly mediated through both culture and place, this chapter interprets place not as a confined and isolated unit, but as a relational constellation within the wider experiences of space. Such a reflection allows us to appreciate that any seemingly local, direct, or cultural expression of violence is actually imbricated in the wider, structural patterns of violence, which in the current moment of political economic orthodoxy increasingly suggests a relationship to neoliberalism. Thus, by appealing to and perpetuating the problematic notion of a culture of violence, neoliberalization in the Cambodian context proceeds as a “civilizing” enterprise, where Cambodians are discursively produced as “savage Others.”

With a similar focus on the discursive implications of neoliberal reform in Cambodia, chapter four, *Violent Symbolism: Good Governance and the Making of Neoliberal Subjects,* contends that neoliberal subject formation in Cambodia has been facilitated through the “commonsense” rhetoric of good governance, which is conceived here as a primary discursive formation in the creation of consent for neoliberalism. Neoliberal subjectification is the process whereby one memorizes the truth claims that one has heard and converts them into rules of conduct, thereby effectively locking in the rights of capital. As disciplinary rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques coagulate under neoliberal subjectification in contemporary Cambodian society through the proliferation of particular discursive formations like good governance, the structural inequalities of capital are increasingly misrecognized. This constitutes symbolic violence, which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such. This chapter argues that how we interpret the fluidity between those who produce and those constrained by neoliberal discursive formations is paramount if we are to counter problematic notions of neoliberalism as inevitable or monolithic and begin to recognize the systemic violent geographies that neoliberalism (re)produces in Cambodia and beyond.
I then shift the discussion to my final focus on the violent dispossession and evictions that have swept across Cambodia as part of neoliberalism’s logic of accumulation. In chapter five, *Violent Accumulation: The Trilateral of Logics and the Creation of Property*, I examine dispossession in Cambodia through a theoretical exegesis of the dialectics of a triadic system: capital/primitive accumulation, law/violence, and civilization/savagery, which are argued to exist in a mutually reinforcing “trilateral of logics.” This is a radical (re)appraisal of capitalism, its legal processes, and its civilizing effects that together serve to mask the originary and ongoing violences of primitive accumulation and the property system. Such obfuscation suggests that wherever the trilateral of logics is enacted, so too is the state of exception called into being, exposing us all as potential homo-sacer (life that does not count). Cambodia’s contemporary neoliberalization serves as an empirical frame in offering a window on how sovereign power configures itself around the three discursive-institutional constellations (i.e., capitalism, civilization, and law) that form the trilateral of logics. Rather than formulating prescriptive solutions, the intention here is critique and to argue that the preoccupation with strengthening Cambodia’s legal system in response to the surge of forced evictions that have swept across the country should not be read as a cure-all for this contemporary social ill, but rather as an imposition that serves to legitimize the violences of property. In this respect, the chapter examines the ways in which neoliberalization in the country has proceeded in step with the mandated implementation of a cadastral system that was put in place and spearheaded by foreign interests during the country’s UN-sponsored transition.

Chapter six, *Violent Evictions: Oral Possession and Legal Transgression*, follows along the same trajectory of critique against the violence of dispossession, but with a particular emphasis on how the unfolding of a juridico-cadastral system as part of Cambodia’s neoliberalizing agenda is at odds with local understandings of landholding, which are entrenched in notions of community consensus and existing occupation. The discrepancy between such orally recognized antecedents and the written word of law has been at the heart of the recent wave of dispossession that has swept across the country. Contra the standard critique that corruption has set the tone, this chapter argues that evictions in Cambodia are often literally underwritten by the articles of law. Whereas “possession” is a well-understood and accepted concept in Cambodia, a cultural basis rooted in what James C. Scott refers to as “orality,” coupled with a long history of subsistence agriculture, semi-nomadic lifestyles, barter economies, and—until recently—widespread land availability, have all ensured that notions of “property” are vague among the country’s majority rural poor. In drawing a firm distinction between possessions and property, where the former
is premised upon actual use and the latter is embedded in exploitation, this chapter examines how proprietorship has become the *sine qua non* of neoliberalism, which is inextricably bound to the violence of law. Such an assessment flies in the face of neoliberal logic and its fundamental rationale, which is an appeal to both the strengthening of “rule of law” and the roll-out of intensified property relations.

Building upon the conceived coalescence between neoliberalism and violence, in the conclusion I attempt to show how this study has contributed to illuminating the multiplicity of ways in which the processes of neoliberalization are suffused with violence, and how a critical appraisal of neoliberalism’s capacity for violence opens our geographical imaginations to the possibility of (re)producing space in ways that make possible a transformative and emancipatory politics. The current moment is an age of “resurgent imperialism” (Hart 2006), wherein the recognition of and desire to rescind the violent geographies of neoliberalism has become an urgent appeal that can simply no longer be ignored. We must be ever vigilant to the exclusions, inequalities, and dispossessions of neoliberalization, so that humanity as a whole does not come to represent the “banality of evil” by embracing the violence of neoliberalism. The contemporary hegemony of neoliberalism positions it as an abuser, which facilitates the abandonment of “Others” (i.e., the homeless, the poor, the marginalized, etc.) who fall outside of neoliberal versions of normativity. The widespread banishment of “Others” under neoliberalism produces a “state of exception,” wherein because of its inherently dialectic nature, exceptional violence is transformed into exemplary violence. This metamorphosis occurs as aversion for alterity intensifies under neoliberalism and its associated violence against “Others” comes to form the rule, that is, it becomes banal. Although the current conjuncture is a horrifying moment wherein victims are blamed for the violence that besets their lives under neoliberalism, ultimately we can take some measure of solace in the fact that any idea, including neoliberalism, has an inherent expiration date. In remembering this mortality we become alert to the possibilities of another possible world, an awakening that exposes the “glory” of neoliberalism as simply the *glitter of putrescence*. All around the world, from the Occupy Movement to the Arab Springs to the amazing outpouring of grassroots resistance and solidarity following Cambodia’s contested election results in July 2013, people are waking up to the violent effects of neoliberalism, and the very stench of this rotten ideology foreshadows its demise. Neoliberalism is doomed.
Part I
Development
Chapter One

Violent Politics: Authority, Terror, and the New Devaraja

Placing reflections on the cultural phenomena of the Devaraja and free market capitalism next to each other provides an interesting point of departure in thinking about how contemporary Cambodian politics are organized. For Ian W. Mabbet (1969, 223), “it is important to realize that in a society with a monistic religion where divinity is immanent, godship is not necessarily unique . . . it is a familiar everyday thing that people take for granted,” while David Graeber (2011, 44) reminds us that “Smith’s famous invisible hand was, as he says in his Theory of Moral Sentiments, the agent of Divine Providence. It was literally the hand of God.” There is something very distinctive about Cambodia’s encounter with neoliberalism given the cultural acceptance of divinity on earth that I wish to explore in this chapter, and yet at the same time, I don’t necessarily think that the reverence that elites have for capitalism, and their use of authoritarian means to support societal acceptance and veneration are entirely unique.

With the adoption of even greater neoliberal reforms in the wake of the Asian Crisis, for the most part, this has simply meant that public monopoly became private monopoly while the authoritarian structure of the Southeast Asian state has remained intact (Robison et al. 2005), albeit under new governments in many instances, notably Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia. This constitutes a paradox, as neoliberal ideology presents itself as being in favor of democracy (Harvey 2005). It would seem that in such transitional contexts, foreign pressures seeking the privatization of national economies and the opening of borders to trade and capital movements are far more prevalent than is support for democratization, accountability, and the economic assistance needed to ease the impacts of poverty on populations (Tetreault 2003). Some analysts of the neoliberal persuasion might attribute lamentations over this predicament as a condition of critical scholars proverbially wanting their cake and eating it too. In the neoliberal view, free markets constitute the necessary basis for freedoms
in other arenas, enabling a system in which economic and social power is dispersed and able to accommodate numerous interests, and it is thus assumed that the most ideal way to encourage democratic reform is simply to develop markets (Robison 2002). However, an alternative interpretation exists, positing that the best way to promote markets—particularly those that would be open to “western” capital—is to develop democracy as this would, in theory, dislodge the politico-business oligarchies and what is viewed as patron favoritism advanced by an entrenched central authority. Thus, while the sequencing may be debated among neoliberals, it is a moot point, as the ultimate goal is a “neoliberal democracy.”

Democracy, however, is one of the most abused and debased words in the English language (Lummis 1996), so we should ask if it has any meaning beyond mere rhetoric in a neoliberal context. Indeed, “democracy” proposes no more of a solution to neoliberals than authoritarianism if it produces regimes where populist governments might engage in policies of redistribution or nationalist adventures that obstruct the globalization of markets. Thus, the democracy-promotion policies of the international financial institutions (IFIs) have sought to construct “low-intensity democracies,” where elections do not subject rulers to populist and other pressures that might derail free market objectives (Robison 2004). In Stephen Gill’s (1995) view, “disciplinary neoliberalism” is the order of the day to ensure that through a variety of regulatory, surveillance, and policing mechanisms, neoliberal reforms are instituted and “locked in,” in spite of what the population base might desire. Alternatively, the disciplinary power of neoliberalism can be viewed as conterminous to circulating discourse, wherein neoliberal ideals are articulated, internalized, and borne out through the citational chains of the discourses it promotes as governmentality (Springer 2012). Either way, neoliberalism entails an erosion of democratic control and accountability, as through a variety of legal and constitutional devices, the economic model is insulated from popular scrutiny and demands (Overbeek 2000). This situation is precisely what transpired in Cambodia under the United Nations Transitional Authority in the early 1990s, when a “liberal democracy,” and hence a free market economy, was a mandated outcome of the country’s new constitution that was to be ratified following the peace process (Peou 2007; Springer 2010).

At the same time, privatized means and decision makers who are not accountable to the general citizenry increasingly determine the provision of public goods and services. These constrictions of welfare provision serve to intensify the politicization of citizenship and immigration issues, as citizens and “Others” come into conflict over who is inside and who is outside of what remaining protection and welfare the state provides (Peterson 2003; Sparke 2006a). Such renewed opportunities for exclusion from the
sovereign order, and hence human rights, is precisely why neoliberalism can be viewed as a state of exception (Ong 2006), (re)producing conditions of “bare life” where the poor, homeless, and marginalized are relegated to the status of homo sacer, a life included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion, or in other words, a life that has the capacity to be killed, but not sacrificed (Agamben 1998). Although failing to account for hierarchies of wealth, status, and class within the global south, whereby “local” economic and political elites constitute the sovereign rather than the exception, Giorgio Agamben’s (1998, 180) understanding that “today’s democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life” is nonetheless well taken.

In this chapter I set out to contest the taken-for-granted character of neoliberalization through a critical interrogation that reveals the ways in which it has been taken up in Southeast Asia, and particularly within the context of Cambodia, how it might be considered as a form of war against both democracy and the poor. In assessing how such a critical reading of the ways in which neoliberalism has metastasized within the Southeast Asian context, I also examine how the new global discourse of a “war on terror,” spearheaded by American foreign policy concerns, has similarly had deleterious consequences for the consolidation of democracy, and what America’s recent pivot back to Southeast Asia in terms of its geo-strategic interests might mean for the region. My concern is that this new discursive framing of “terror” and its coupling with security will be a boon for authoritarianism insofar as it gives license to certain forms of silencing and state retribution in the face of public dissent and greater demands for democratic accountability.

**Authoritarianism and the War on Democracy**

Democracy is typically associated with some modicum of accountability. This is axiomatic when we consider democracy in its most direct or radical forms, wherein groups and individuals use direct action to assert their own accountability to themselves and their communities in the hope of procuring better solutions for the issues they face. Even in those models where direct democracy is foregone in favor of more representational versions, accountability sits at the heart of the concept as the notions of “demos” (people) and “kratia” (power) together imply a sense of responsibility, wherein empowerment of the people means that any decisions that are made must be justified to the wider community. Yet when it comes to the promotion of such values at a global level, which most frequently
come coupled with a neoliberal logic, we find that those parties responsible for the dissemination of both democracy and neoliberal ideas are scarcely responsible or accountable for their actions. Indeed, accountability appears to be anathema to the IFIs as the internal structures of these organizations bear little resemblance to democratic forms. Nicola Bullard (2002) reminds us that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is completely unused to outside scrutiny and responds to most criticisms with defensive arrogance. She further contends that the IMF views transparency as simply making information accessible, while accountability means more statistical information is made available, but democracy itself does not appear to have a place in their internal lexicon (Bullard 2002). Outwardly, however, democracy is front and center in IFI discourse, as it is readily touted as an imperative human value in their public criticisms of the apparent lack thereof in countries where its reform policies have inevitably resulted in social discord and accordingly, an equally predictable violent and authoritarian retort. This of course begs the question, if the IFIs are themselves not democratic, accountable, or transparent institutions, is their authority to make judgments on issues concerning democracy really tenable?

Given the lack of introspection the IFIs display, it is not surprising that “the idea that authoritarian states could play a positive development role became attractive within the West at a time when growth rates lagged behind some Asian rates… Within Western business circles many looked approvingly at the state’s role in sweeping aside ‘distributional coalitions’ (labor, welfare, and environmental groups) and instituting low tax regimes” (Rodan et al. 2001, 14). Thus, although the relationship between liberalization and democratization is far from straightforward, (neo)liberalization lends itself well to opportunities for elite groups with strong commercial interest to influence political development away from democracy (Jönsson 2002). As Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy (2004) argue, in a context of demands for greater reform coming from the global north, in order for global south ruling classes to preserve their privileges they must confront two options: (i) the establishment of a new social compromise of their own (to align larger segments of the population with the prosperity of the wealthiest), a condition antithetical to neoliberalism; or (ii) a shift toward an increasingly authoritarian regime, a position that neoliberalism can easily accommodate. As an illustration of such assimilation, James Crotty and Gary Dymski (1999) point to political repression as a commonplace feature of neoliberalism, where the destruction of independent, democratic, and sometimes militant unions has played and continues to play a crucial role in the reform processes imposed by the IMF in the aftermath of the Asian Crisis. Furthermore, in the Southeast Asian setting, the avoidance of overt capital–labor conflict is due at least in part to
industry’s heavy reliance on female labor in the context of long-standing gender-based oppression (Gills 2002).

The neoliberal model provokes greater inequalities, decreases the share of labor, and increases the share of corporate (especially foreign) wealth in national incomes (Cox 2002; Rapley 2004). Consequently, foreign aid, whether by selectivity or conditionality, simply hastens the introduction of policies responsible for the maldistribution of national income by promoting and ensuring the adoption of neoliberal reforms. Donors are biased in favor of rewarding pro-market and trade-oriented policies on the part of aid-receiving countries, thus clearly introducing ideological and political elements about the socioeconomic order into a seemingly technocratic discussion about the prerequisites of governance (Hout 2004). Whereas an idealist approach is content to view foreign aid as a disinterested policy, divorced from the interests of a capitalist class and thus geared exclusively toward humanitarian concerns, the historical-structural context demonstrates otherwise, as the social component of foreign aid has little, if any, effect in compensating for the loss of income shares and for the slashing of social allocations in national budgets (Petras and Veltmeyer 2002). The fact that throughout East Asia brutal authoritarian regimes such as Indonesia under Soeharto and South Korea under Syngman Rhee “were encouraged, so long as they promoted political stability, were anticommunist, and protected the development of economic systems that were broadly capitalist,” confirms that contra the rhetoric of “Western” modernization, it was the threat to capitalism, not democracy, that was the principal driver of foreign policy in the region (Rodan and Hewison 2004, 386). In Cambodia, like his East Asian counterparts, Hun Sen was not required to act democratically as the country emerged from years of isolation under the Khmer Rouge and then as a Vietnamese client state; all that mattered was that his government remained committed to further neoliberalization.

This condition became evident immediately following the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) mission (February 1992 to December 1993), when Hun Sen and his Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) lost the 1993 elections to Prince Norodom Ranariddh of the FUNCINPEC party, a French acronym for National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Co-operative Cambodia (Peou 2007; Springer 2010). The international community was effectively stunned as not only Hun Sen appeared to be the likely victor given the deep patron-client networks he maintained, but also because he had been proving himself committed to a neoliberal cause for several years prior, astutely aware that as the Soviet Union collapsed he would need to shift his communist allegiance to a capitalist orientation should he wish to retain control of the country. With Hun Sen as the favored choice, this unexpected turn of
events was ultimately of little consequence, as a blind eye was turned when the CPP, still in control of the military (a major failing of UNTAC to be sure), refused to accept FUNCINPEC’s electoral victory. Threatening secession of all the land to the east of the Mekong River and the resumption of civil war, Hun Sen was allowed to force his way into a co-prime ministerial position (Peou 2000). The official explanation for UNTAC’s acceptance of an outcome inconsistent with the election results is that it was not in a position to confront the CPP militarily (Boutros-Ghali 1995). A skeptical view suggests that Cambodia was preordained as the United Nation’s successful peacekeeping model, and to avoid having the whole operation blow up in its face, the United Nations agreed to preside over the creation of an inauspicious coalition between the CPP and FUNCINPEC (Roberts 2001). Even more critical would be to posit that if the mockery Cambodian elites made of democracy and peace was so easily disregarded, then the final aspect of Cambodia’s triple transition from war to peace, authoritarianism to democracy, and command economy to free market was clearly given precedence over the other two. In line with the fundamentalist orthodoxy that ensures that democracy is only extended to the realm of the political, as a preordained economic system remains insulated from popular concern (Abrahamsen 2000), the architects of UNTAC made certain that neoliberalism, an ideology derived from a very different context in the post-Keynesian west, was a mandated requirement of Cambodia’s posttransitional government. From this perspective, it is possible to see UNTAC as concerned not with democracy per se, but rather with conferring legitimacy on a regime that had recently emerged from Vietnamese tutelage.

Such trampling of democratic norms, although publicly described as regrettable, is nonetheless given implicit support as long as such subversions run parallel to the greater project of neoliberal reform. The periodic lamentations of the international donor community represent a convenient political tool, as they encourage us to focus our view inward on the democratic shortcomings within countries rather than on the larger structural conditions. Yet this is a priori an Orientalizing gaze (Said 2003), as we are never encouraged to pull the lens back to examine how donors themselves place economics before and separate from politics. Rather than recognizing the politically constructed character of all economic relations, neoliberal economics posits a distinct separation between the economy and politics, as though states and markets are diametrically opposed principles of social organization (Robison 2004). To interpret neoliberalism as nothing more than an economic reform agenda overlooks a critical element of its strength. It is also a political doctrine that prescribes a preferred social and political order, whereby the de-politicization of policymaking
that neoliberalism envisages is a specific conception of how power should operate, and who should be exercising it (Rodan and Hewison 2004). This helps to explain why many Cambodian scholars, still preoccupied with the country’s communist past, have been slow to recognize the neoliberalization of the contemporary Cambodian state. Moreover, such a partitioning misreads (or more accurately ignores) how power is actually operationalized in a capitalist system. Accordingly, the Cambodian government is frequently accused of cronyism in reference to the cozy relationships between politicians and the agents of capital (Dixon 2002). Yet, we can rightly ask when in any capitalist system have the agents of capital not been intimately connected with politicians? Indeed, it is this very hallmark of capitalism whose character is obfuscated by the orthodox neoliberal view.

In the Indonesian context, Richard Robison (2002, 109) indicates that recent investor perspectives on the country are informed by an underlying sense of nostalgia for “the good old days” of Soeharto when things were certain, where investors are not primarily concerned with whether there is democracy or not, or even whether there is corruption or not, but instead require “a strong government, democratic or authoritarian, that provides predictability and keeps in check coalitions that might contest the terms under which they operate.” Accordingly, regime stability becomes the primary concern from a capitalist perspective because it often provides for a secure marketplace, which clearly does not always or necessarily correspond with democracy or the will of the populace. Catarina Kinnvall (2002) corroborates this point, suggesting that the global capitalist market is not necessarily always hostile toward authoritarianism or supportive of democracy, but instead actually benefits from the presence of a “strong state.” Yet pace the “strong state” thesis, neoliberalism requires precisely the opposite conditions to function, and not because of a mistaken belief that neoliberalization sees the state wither in the face of increased market power. Geographers have long recognized both a “roll-back” and a “roll-out” component of neoliberalization, which involves as much, if not more intensive, re-regulation as it does deregulation (Peck 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002). Such a reading allows for a more nuanced account of the “actually existing” neoliberalized state (Brenner and Theodore 2002), which is—at least in the case of Cambodia—symptomatic of a “weak state.”

Strong states have appropriate capacity and can legitimize themselves without recourse to explicit violence by listening to and addressing citizens’ demands, that is, through the very practice of democracy (Welsh 2002). In contrast, as a weak state with a policy orientation that lacks interest in meeting the needs of the populace, the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) predictably takes an authoritarian stance, resorting to violence to regain its footing when citizens begin to make their demands known. In Joel S.
Migdal’s (1988) rendering, there are two facets to a weak state. The first concerns “state autonomy,” or the relative distribution of power between state and society, particularly those dominant interests in the private sector of the economy. The second, drawing on the Weberian dichotomy of patrimonial and rational-bureaucratic polities, relates to “state capacity.” From this, Jane Hutchison (2001, 56) contends that “[o]n this basis, a weak state is one in which relatively little distinction is made between the personal interests and official duties of decision-makers in the executive, legislature, and/or bureaucracy and, therefore, is one in which the policy-making process is constantly stymied by particularistic demands.” Thus, if we accept the Marxian political economy critique that neoliberalism is an elite-driven project, as it so clearly seems to be (see McMichael 2000; Overbeek 2000; Carroll and Carson, 2006), neoliberalism appears more appropriate to the conditions that underline a weak state. As the desires of the capitalist class coincide with and come to dominate neoliberal policy orientations, “particularistic demands” become the insignia of the neoliberalized state. Moreover, in contrast to the notion that authoritarian regimes constitute strong states, Jomo (2003) argues that they are actually indicative of weak states, in the sense that they have an inability to secure legitimacy among the population, requiring authoritarian regimes that resort to repressive measures. The lack of consultation with the general population as to the economic character of the state, coupled with reduced access to social provisions for the poor—who still continue to constitute an overwhelming majority in most Southeast Asian states, including Cambodia—means that accountability rings hollow in the neoliberalized state. This ultimately works to further adhere neoliberalism to an authoritarian disposition as it seeks to fill the legitimacy vacuum with violence.

**Terrorism and the War on the Poor**

Given the exclusions of the poor, the implicit acceptance of violently repressing those groups who seek a decent wage, and in light of the rising inequality that neoliberalism has facilitated (Rapley 2004; Wade 2003), it is perhaps unsurprising that the process of global neoliberalization coincided with the rise of a new pattern of conflict, one that seems to be concerned with the identity group (however defined) and not the nation-state, so that sources of these “new wars” lay predominantly within rather than between states (Demmers 2004; Desai 2006; Kaldor 2006). Such conflict can be seen as a reflection of the geographic restructuring and uneven development that neoliberalism provokes (Harvey 2005). Former Keynesian patterns of redistribution are replaced with intrastate competition, as particular cities and/or regions become foci of development and investment,
while peripheral areas are ignored. Following from a geographical imagination of “indigenous-as-rural,” marginalization is furthered and differences are magnified, resulting in a pattern of conflict primarily between “underdogs” (Uvin 2003), as “topdogs” insulate themselves from reprisal through an ever-tightening security regime that utilizes both the apparatus of the state, such as authoritarian clampdowns on public space (Springer 2010), and private measures visible in the landscape, such as fenced properties patrolled by armed guards (Coleman 2004). What’s more, the violence that swells among underdogs engenders Orientalist discourses that insidiously posit “local” cultures as being responsible for the bloodshed, erasing the contingency, fluidity, and interconnectedness of the “global” political economy of violence, which licenses further neoliberal reforms, as neoliberalization is positioned as a “civilizing” enterprise in the face of such purported “savagery” (see chapter three).

This emergent securitization logic of neoliberalism also factors into contemporary assessments of global risk, which are often conceptualized as resulting from the problems of “non-governance” and “bad governance.” Contra the idea of neoliberalism as an unqualified dissolution of state power, in the aftermath of 9/11 a public discourse has emerged in the United States around the idea that certain states have too little power. Spaces that are thought of as politically well managed coincide with high degrees of economic integration and financial liberalization, thereby signaling the ostensible “need” for rolling out new governance structures in those spaces, like Cambodia, where the state is thought to have failed to administer space “effectively” (Mitchell 2010). Within the imaginative geopolitical scripting of the neoliberal moment, spaces deemed weak, disorderly, and ungoverned are also considered as sites where terrorism, organized crime, and drug trafficking may run rampant and spill across borders to threaten those domains where sovereign power, and importantly markets, are regarded as secure (Morrissey 2011). Katharyne Mitchell (2010) argues that this language of failure and threat is further implicated in the formation of new subjectivities as individuals are increasingly governed through intensified policing and security logics. The result is not only a repositioning of the “normative” vis-à-vis political subjects by “opening them up to powerful market forces and technologies of the self such as privatization, entrepreneurialism, and responsibilization” (Mitchell 2010, 290), but an intensification of an authoritarian rationale at all levels of governance.

The violent responses to protest movements challenging neoliberal policies in cities as dispersed as Genoa, Mexico City, Seoul, Stockholm, Asuncion, Lilongwe, Port Moresby, and Toronto serve as instructive examples of how the unmediated usage of public space and the very practice of democracy have come into conflict with neoliberalism and its
securitization discourse, an issue I have addressed at length within the context of Phnom Penh (Springer 2010). Such counter-hegemonic struggles can be read through the lens of what Paul Routledge (2003) calls “anti-geopolitics” insofar as protesters increasingly assert independence from the state by challenging not only its policing-cum-militarizing logics but also the amplification of geoeconomic power as neoliberalism continues its spread into various geographical contexts and institutional frameworks around the globe. The diffusion of contestation to this “new world order” is unsurprising when we appreciate how neoliberalism pivots around the extraction of economic surplus from countries incorporated into the global capitalist system in such a way that necessitates local authoritarian regimes to ensure its functionality (Canterbury 2005). Elections are held to confer a semblance of legitimacy, but democratic empowerment through processes such as policy orientation and decision making in the allocation of resources is never advanced. Instead, neoliberalization actually creates opportunities for elite groups with strong commercial interest to influence political development away from democracy (Jönsson 2002). Local elites often endorse neoliberal policies such as privatization as an opportunity to rapidly line their own pockets through informal control over the bidding process in the allocation of contracts (see chapter two). Meanwhile, international investors all too frequently concern themselves only with the economic bottom line, or the assurance that natural resources and cheap goods continue to flow regardless of the localized environmental damage and repressive labor conditions, which are treated econometrically as mere externalities.

As cities have become the primary focus of neoliberal experiments and reforms, the emergent patterns of conflict often have a distinctive urban character. This is not to suggest that processes occurring in rural areas are not implicated within the violent geographies that neoliberalism produces, not least of which in Cambodia is an increasing degree of landlessness that is driving up urbanization rates in the country. I attend to rural questions in more depth in later chapters, but at this stage I want to emphasize that the urban sphere has been a prime location of neoliberal sociospatial transformation, which has important implications for the urban poor. Neoliberalism has produced conditions of globalized urban entrepreneurialism from which Phnom Penh is clearly not exempt, having engaged in a “beautification” agenda over the last decade (Springer 2010). The (re)production of cultural spectacles, enterprise zones, waterfront development, and privatized forms of local governance reflects the powerful disciplinary effects of interurban competition as cities aggressively engage in mutually destructive place-marketing policies (Peck and Tickell 2002). Through such promotion, cities actively facilitate and subsidize the
very geographic mobility that initially rendered them vulnerable, also validating and reproducing extraneous rule systems as “capital is permitted to opt out from supporting local social production, and . . . the power of urban citizens to influence basic conditions of their everyday lives is increasingly undermined . . . [resulting in a] grim scenario of neoliberalized urban authoritarianism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 376). As the vanguards of both after-welfarist statecraft and organized resistance to neoliberalization, cities represent key sites of governance failure, economic conflict, and social turmoil. For example, “regressive welfare reforms and labor-market polarization . . . are leading to the (re)urbanization of (working and non-working) poverty, positioning cities at the bleeding edge of processes of punitive institution building, social surveillance, and authoritarian governance” (Peck and Tickell 2002, 395). Accordingly, it is no surprise that forced eviction, although contested, has become a common lived experience for the Cambodian poor.

As an expression of urban entrepreneurialism, beautification is often a top-down approach to further the neoliberal agenda, effected in the name of aesthetics and profit, where “political activity is replaced in spaces like the mall, festival marketplace, or redesigned park . . . by a highly commodified spectacle designed to sell either goods or the city as a whole” (Mitchell 2003, 138–139; see also Goss 1996). The overarching goal of neoliberal policy experiments such as beautification is “to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, 368). Thus, far from being concerned with the corporeal wellbeing of the citizenry, the beautification of Phnom Penh is little more than a sales pitch to potential investors. Beautification itself is neither necessarily conducive nor unfavorable to an open and democratic space; rather, it is the way in which beautification is implemented that makes it problematic. Speaking to the way in which neoliberalism has taken hold in Cambodia, beautification has been used as a tool of exclusion. In terms of the RGC’s approach, the beautification of Cambodia’s cities has as much to do with the removal of the poor and the homeless as it does the planting of shrubs and grass. Such (re)criminalization of the poor and the homeless represents a defilement of the logic of representation, which must form the basis of any democratic system (Mitchell 2003). Public space must allow unique individuals to join in collaborative efforts and still maintain their distinct voices (Staeheli and Thompson 1997), so that representation itself, whether of oneself or a group, may demand a physical space (Springer 2011). The logic of representation concentrates on the right of individuals and groups to make their desires and needs known and represent themselves as legitimate claimants to public considerations. Beautification, although popular
among the property-holding class in Cambodia, actually tramples over the concerns of the poor by failing to consider “underclass” residents as rightful petitioners to public interests and through negating their ownership of long-held possessions because they lack the “proper” legal documentation that confers legitimacy on property. This amounts to accumulation by dispossession and is at base a violent endeavor, made quite clear in the Cambodian context by the use of military force to buttress beautification’s ongoing removal of ostensibly “criminal” squatter camps.

Such a typical conception of poverty as crime, used by Phnom Penh elites to sell their agenda to the population, should be juxtaposed against the “violence of property” (Blomley 2003), where the erasure of the originary violence on which property is based (the original moment of accumulation by dispossession, or “primitive accumulation”) serves to legitimize the exclusionary claims of the landowning elite vis-à-vis the homeless. It is crucial to recognize the violent legal geographies of property rights that entail violent “acts” of dispossession at the founding moment, as well as enduring violent “deeds” that (re)enforce the exclusionary basis of private property (Blomley 2000). I attend to such a reading of Cambodia’s land conflicts in later chapters, but for now, it is important to appreciate beautification as gentrifying process entangled in the violence of capital. Like many countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has witnessed intensive urbanization over the last several decades, which has resulted in increasing numbers of homeless peoples in the streets of Phnom Penh. Such a development can be read as one of the numerous undesired effects of neoliberal economics, where its connection to authoritarianism and securitization are evident in the RGC’s practice of routinely rounding up and exiling the homeless from the capital and detaining them in what authorities refer to as “re-education” or “rehabilitation” centers (Botumroath Lebun 2004; Kuch Naren and Pyne 2004). Although these practices are vehemently denied by Phnom Penh authorities, extensive interviews with homeless people from June to August 2010 confirmed that they are regularly harassed by police, and often they complained of being arbitrarily arrested, detained, and beaten by police for loitering.

While the RGC’s ongoing waves of violent evictions against squatter settlements and the systemic persecution of the homeless might be interpreted as yet another manifestation of a presumed cultural proclivity for authoritarianism (Peang-Meth 1991), such a reading fails to account for the broader picture in which Cambodia’s contemporary development is framed. Instead, a culturally sensitive critical political economy alerts us to the power geometries at play (Hart 2002), so that although violent expulsions may be culturally informed, they are equally enmeshed in the machinery of capital to ensure the enforcement of property regimes in
toeing the neoliberal line (Canterbury 2005). Ultimately, because city-level neoliberalism is premised on competitive interspatial place marketing to attract potential tourism and investment, and the doctrine of neoliberalism itself hinges on the illusion of widespread prosperity, the visible presence of the poor, homeless people, and slums in urban public space are seen as unwelcome and promotionally disadvantageous inasmuch as they reveal such utopianism to be false (Coleman 2004; Hubbard 2004). In an attempt to buttress such an agenda from critique, the RGC has adopted a tendency to suggest a concern with security as both a rationale and excuse for its authoritarian responses to homelessness and squatter settlements (LICADHO 2011). This strategy appeals to the notion of securing market principles, while also taking advantage of the growing tolerance and support of authoritarian regimes by the United States in its global war on terror (Rodan and Hewison 2004). Kheang Un and Judy Ledgerwood (2002, 102) warn that there is “widespread concern that the government is using the global fear of terrorism, in the aftermath of the attacks on the United States, as a pretext to silence opposition parties.” This concern became particularly manifest following a string of some 60 arrests after 9/11, when CPP began accusing members of the opposition parties of belonging to the Cambodian Freedom Fighters (CFF), an insurgent group led by Khmer-Americans based out of California (Sodhy 2004). The group had vowed to take down the Hun Sen government, and in November 2000, Cambodia witnessed a rare showing of marked violence from below when the heavily armed CFF attacked government buildings in Phnom Penh (Langran 2001; Marston 2002).

More recently, Mam Sonando, the owner of independent news outlet Beehive Radio, was arrested in July 2012 for his involvement in a protest against a violent eviction in Kratié Province two months earlier, which were enforced to make way for a new rubber plantation as part of a 1,500-hectare land concession that the RGC signed off on. This particular eviction made national headlines as a 14-year-old girl, Heng Chantha, was fatally shot in the abdomen on May 15, 2012 when villagers clashed with soldiers and police (LICADHO 2012). During the protest Sonando was critical of Hun Sen, who in turn publically called for his arrest on June 26, 2012 when Sonando was out of the country and the RGC was preparing to host the Regional Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which included participation from non-ASEAN members—the United States, Australia, Japan, and China. Sonando returned to Cambodia during the ASEAN meeting, but authorities waited to arrest him until the meeting was finished and most international media had departed, at which point he was taken into custody on charges of insurrection and inciting people to take up weapons against the state. He faced a 20-year prison
sentence for allegedly organizing a secessionist plot, a verdict that has been widely condemned in Cambodia as being politically motivated (Peter and Narim 2012). Notably, Sonando’s arrest came two days after US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s departure from the country, which appears to be an indication that Hun Sen is not afraid to silence his critics (when the timing is right), knowing that the United States wants his cooperation on matters of regional security (Human Rights Watch 2012).

During Clinton’s visit, Cambodia’s deteriorating human rights situation was largely ignored in favor of economic concerns and an emphasis on security issues. Such implicit support for authoritarianism is not without historical precedent. Xing et al. (2002) note that following World War II, American foreign and economic policies were aimed at fostering right-wing authoritarianism as a palisade to communism, where the central theme of US postwar policy in East Asia was basically the revival of the Japan-centered capitalist regional economy, including South Korea and Taiwan. In contrast to the prevailing rhetoric of “Western” modernization, Garry Rodan and Kevin Hewison (2004) argue that the principal driver of American foreign policy is capitalism, not democracy. The Chilean coup during the “other 9/11” is also demonstrative in this regard, as in 1973, America considered Pinochet’s iron fist as necessary to replace the elected socialist government in what is widely regarded as the first state-level neoliberal experiment (Plehwe et al. 2006). The Chilean trial also proceeded with the understanding that resistance to neoliberalism was to be expected as the state moved to ensure that its policy reforms were instituted, which required the threat of immediate state violence to dissenters and those who refused to capitulate, and equally necessitated that local elites be bought into the process of neoliberalization.

The threat of communism has been largely replaced with the “war on terror,” meaning that support for authoritarian regimes by the United States has been reinvigorated (Springer 2008; Tyner 2006). This war against terrorism has brought with it a revived nexus between police and military power. Preventive arrest and detention in concert with extensive powers of surveillance generate panoptic conditions not only in the American heartland under the Patriot Act, but also in her present colonies of Iraq and Afghanistan (Gregory 2004), and even further afield in “the second front” in the war on terror, Southeast Asia (Tyner 2006). Indeed, the logic and extent of this security apparatus is global in scope, as police have used violent assaults and preemptive strikes against participants in mass demonstrations in a plenitude of national settings (Purcell 2008). Renowned political economist Cox (2002, 35) fulminates against this recent development of the present neoliberal-cum-neoimperial era, suggesting that “the manipulation of consent through the casting of military and police
action as the pursuit of high moral principles, the evoking of patriotism to exclude or marginalize dissent, and the erecting of new ‘Star Chamber’-type judicial proceedings to punish offenders, together contribute to the transformation of state and society from a politically liberal towards an authoritarian, disciplinary and repressive collectivity.” America’s renewed interest in Southeast Asia, as demonstrated by Obama’s official tour of the region in late 2012, only promises to intensify such support for authoritarianism so long as states remain willing to offer secure conditions for foreign investment. Security itself, in both conceptualization and implementation, has been thoroughly neoliberalized on both a global level and within the Cambodian context, subsumed into a rhetorical pretext for the acceptance and promotion of the political-economic status quo (Springer 2009).

The security card is played repeatedly by the RGC. For example, in November 2005, they likened their silencing and imprisonment of public figures critical of the signing of a border resolution with Vietnam to the United States’ passing of the Patriot Act (Lor Chandara and Wasson 2005). Although labeled as terrorists by the RGC, the CFF maintains it is a lawful group with 50,000 supporters in Cambodia (Sodhy 2004). Many Cambodians are unconvinced, but far from siding with the government, they believe the CPP staged the CFF attack to smoke out opposition to Hun Sen (Marston 2002). Langran (2001, 156) suggests that the insurgency serves as “a reminder of the recent and fragile nature of Cambodia’s democracy.” If the CFF is in fact a genuine opposition group and not a CPP ruse, the counterpoint to Langran could also be argued. The attack could be viewed as evidence of democracy’s functioning, as the paradox of democracy identified by Le Vine (2001) demonstrates that violence from below is often necessary for democratic renewal. Nevertheless, the fact that accusations of terrorism can now be extended at will toward any political movement that may challenge CPP authority, and can be further deployed against journalists and official opposition parties, undoubtedly has detrimental implications for Cambodian democracy.

**Conclusion**

If local elites can be convinced that liberalization, deregulation, and privatization will offer them an opportunity for enrichment, the tensions of neoliberal reform may be minimal, and, in point of fact, even beneficial among the upper classes. In the following chapter, I argue that this is precisely the case in Cambodia, where neoliberalization has become a useful part of the existing order. Such an interpretation challenges the supposed inevitability and universality that neoliberal ideology purports, and in drawing the lens in closer to offer a more fine-grained analysis, chapter
two provides an attentive reading of the “glocal” implications of neoliberalization in the Cambodian context. Indeed, we can never attribute neoliberalism to a direct calculable expression, whereby “A” plus “B” equals neoliberalism. Although this idea is prominent in the popular political imagination, to attempt such a formulaic interpretation summons ideas of a singular or pure neoliberalism, a dead letter idea that has been altogether dismissed by geographers (England and Ward 2007). Neoliberalism is a theoretical abstraction that comes up against geographical limits, and hence its “actually existing” circumstances are never paradigmatic (Brenner and Theodore 2002). In this sense, the rising tide against neoliberalism and the geographically dispersed protests that signify and support such a movement necessarily occur in terrains that always exceed neoliberalism (Hart 2008; Leitner et al. 2007). Yet it is vitally important to recognize how the geographies of contestation can be interpreted as a shared sense of betrayal with what can be broadly defined as “neoliberal policy goals.” Accordingly, there exists a growing recognition that transnational solidarity is inseparable from “local” movements, and must be built upon relational understandings of both resistance to, and the violence of neoliberalism (Featherstone 2005; Springer 2011; Wainwright and Kim 2008). Increased class tensions and the intensifying policing, surveillance, and security measures that inevitably arise from such strained relations are some of the most noticeable outcomes of a state’s neoliberalization, including in Cambodia, so while there are variegations and mutations to account for in neoliberalism’s travels, there is also a need to appreciate the similar deleterious outcomes that do in fact all too frequently arise.

The potential for a small elite to consolidate their wealth and privilege obviously does not bode well for democracy, and in contrast to the experiences of the upper class, subjectification to neoliberalism for the lower classes is much more problematic, as the benefits of neoliberalization are not as forthcoming. Poverty and inequality are still prevalent in much of Southeast Asia, and the neoliberal notion of the “trickle down effect” has ultimately failed to materialize for the poor, and particularly for those living in peripheral areas. Neoliberalism may thus actually provoke a more authoritarian outlook, as has been the case in Cambodia, where those left behind in the development trajectory of the country have come into conflict with those reaping neoliberalism’s rewards (Canterbury 2005). This situation becomes particularly acute if the changes are rapid and a legitimizing discourse for neoliberalization has not already become widely circulated, which appears to be what has occurred in Cambodia as attempts to justify neoliberal authoritarianism have evolved alongside economic reforms in the guises of beautification and security, rather than Cambodians simply accepting capitalism as being a preexisting component of the socioeconomic
landscape. In the end, it is not the accountable, democratic, strong state that is the ideal political shell for neoliberalism (Jayasuriya 2000), nor is it an absentee state that is required. Rather, neoliberalism seeks a “differently powerful” (Peck and Tickell 2002) regulatory state capable of insulating its institutions from democratic capture, which would prevent public goods from being pilfered by private interests.

David Harvey’s (2005, 176) assertion that the “neoliberal concern for the individual trumps any social democratic concern for equality, democracy, and social solidarities,” should be taken quite seriously if we are ever to abandon the nightmare of the global market, which, as a parochial expression of neocolonial thought, moves political allegiances from one God or one king toward one market (Amoroso 2002). Nonetheless, in returning to the ideas that opened this chapter, which are drawn from I. W. Mabbett’s (1969) exegesis of the Angkorian cult of the god-king, we are reminded that notions of the Devaraja continue to resonate in contemporary Cambodian society. Yet the ongoing development trajectory of the Cambodian state has ensured that the loyalties and priorities of Cambodians have shifted, where for many the highly regarded societal values of a traditional monarchical past have been replaced with a new priority that is far less forgiving. The neoliberalization of the Cambodian state has ushered in the arrival of a god-king that is at once both revered and prosaic, a god-king whose invisible hand rewards those who covet it and casts aside those who have little means to participate in its rituals. Cambodia is witnessing the birth of a new Devaraja, and its name is money.
Chapter Two
Violent Kleptocracy: The Articulations of Neoliberalism and Patronage

Neoliberalism has been conceived as a class reaction to the crisis of the 1970s (Harvey 2005), whereby the Wall Street-Treasury nexus, in conjunction with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, worked to reconstitute the global (im)balance of power by attempting to eradicate any residue of collectivism in the global south through the imposition of brutal forms of economic discipline. Yet to focus exclusively on such external forces risks producing an overgeneralized account of a ubiquitous and singular neoliberalism, which is insufficient to account for the profusion of local variations, which currently comprise the neoliberal project as a series of articulations with existing political economic circumstances. The emergent language of “neoliberalization” (England and Ward 2007) counters this, encouraging a geographical theorization insofar as it recognizes the hybridized, variegated, and mutated forms of neoliberalism as it travels around our world. Peck and Tickell (2002) initiated this more nuanced reading through their recognition of neoliberalism not as an end state, but as a diverse series of protean, promiscuous, and processual phenomena occurring both “out there” and “in here,” with differing and uneven effects, yet retaining the indication of an overarching “logic” due to its diffusion across space. Through such an understanding of neoliberalization, we can appreciate the consequences of inherited historical contexts, geographical landscapes, institutional frameworks, policy regimes, regulatory practices, and ongoing political struggles as continually redefining neoliberalism through processes of articulation (Peck 2001; Smith 2007).

Cambodia offers a unique example of neoliberalization inasmuch as this transitional process was actually a mandated outcome of the UN peace agreement of the early 1990s (United Nations 1991). The prescribed transition was predated by 30 years of war during the latter part of the twentieth century and a genocide that saw 1.5 million people perish as a result
of Khmer Rouge administration, incompetence, and execution (Kiernan 1996). Less well known is that the Pol Pot nightmare was preceded by another abomination of comparable magnitude: from October 1965 to August 1973, the United States mercilessly bombed this neutral country in an effort to flush out Viet Cong forces thought to be operating within Cambodia (Owen and Kiernan 2006). The carpet-bombing left approximately 600,000 Cambodians dead (Kiljunen 1984), throwing thousands of outraged survivors into the waiting arms of the Khmer Rouge who seized power on April 17, 1975. When Pol Pot’s army finally fell to Vietnamese forces on January 7, 1979, a decade of silence at the international level followed (Chandler 2007). Throughout the 1980s Cambodia was governed as a client state of Hanoi, and with Cold War geopolitics informing the foreign policy of global north governments, Cambodia and its holocaust were ignored. When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, the global political climate shifted and the Cambodian question could finally be addressed. The United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAC) presided over a “triple transition”: from a brutal state of war to a tenuous peace, from overt authoritarianism to an unconsolidated “democracy,” and from a command economy to a particular version of free-market neoliberal economics.

Elsewhere in the global south, neoliberal economics was marketed as a series of nostrums that, once implemented through the unfettering of market forces, would ostensibly lead to improved lives for the majority. Despite the distinct element of imposition in Cambodia’s neoliberalization, this case clearly demonstrates that powerful elites are only too happy to oblige. Neoliberalism frequently opens opportunities for well-connected government officials to informally control market and material rewards, allowing them to easily line their own pockets. It is in this sense of the local appropriation of neoliberal ideas that we must go beyond conceiving of “neoliberalism in general” as a singular and fully realized policy regime, ideological form, or regulatory framework, and work toward conceiving a plurality of “actually existing neoliberalisms,” with particular characteristics arising from mutable geohistorical outcomes that are embedded within national, regional, and local process of market-driven sociospatial transformation (Brenner and Theodore 2002). What constitutes “actually existing” neoliberalism in Cambodia as distinctly Cambodian are the ways in which the patronage system has allowed local elites to co-opt, transform, and (re)articulate neoliberal reforms through a framework that has “asset stripped” public resources (Springer 2010), thereby increasing peoples’ exposure to corruption, coercion, and violence. Neoliberalization in Cambodia has been marked by considerable struggle, contradiction, and compromise, which suggests that those scholars who insist on focusing exclusively on an extraneously convened neoliberalism (see Thavat
do so at the peril of overlooking the local geographies of existing political economic circumstances and institutional frameworks, where variability, internal constitution, societal influences, and individual agency all play a role in (re)producing, circulating, and facilitating neoliberalism. It is to such an “articulation agenda” that this chapter is tuned, whereby the local circumstances of individual neoliberalizations are understood as jointed with global processes of neoliberalism. In seeking to provide a more nuanced reading of recent work on neoliberalism in Cambodia by outlining some of its salient characteristics, I reveal a more empirical basis to theorizations of “articulated neoliberalism.”

Methodologically, it is important to acknowledge that statements made by participants in this chapter frequently reflect political positions that are at odds with the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) where particularly those who work in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and international financial institutions (IFIs) have conflicting interests which themselves often reflect neoliberal modalities. In particular, there are other forms of patronage that operate between donors and their NGO clients which, although beyond the scope of this chapter (see Springer 2010 for a discussion), are nonetheless important to consider in interpreting my findings. With respect to content, I begin this chapter by examining the RGC’s discursive positioning of populism vis-à-vis international “enemies” insofar as it offers a convenient pretext for the strains of neoliberal development. This discussion critiques the ongoing implication that the RGC maintains a “communist” disposition rather than acknowledging the kleptocratic “shadow state” practices which have been adapted to a neoliberal modality. I then turn my attention more specifically to the workings of Cambodia’s patronage system via an examination of privatization and primitive accumulation in relation to land speculation. In the next section I assess the purview that legal reform will serve as a developmental panacea, and contrast this with the realities of a judiciary firmly entrenched within patron relations. The ongoing impunity of those connected to power is the focus in the next section, where I assess the continuing constraints of the poor with regard to patronage and the inequality and (in)security it affords. In the final section I assess the implications of Cambodia’s neoliberalization alongside patronage with respect to the significant potential for both kleptocracy and violence that this articulation engenders.

Discourses of Enemy: Continuing Communism or a Neoliberal Shadow State?

The RGC positions itself as a populist government, frequently using the heavily controlled Khmer-language media (LICADHO 2008) as a
launching pad for criticisms of the IFIs and bilateral donors, which it portrays as “enemies” of Cambodian interests.¹ This discourse is in keeping with the same general premise that has existed in Cambodian politics since the Khmer Rouge era, when the incumbent regime instilled paranoia for “enemies of the revolution” among its ranks (Kiernan 1996). When used against local opponents, the notion of “enemy” (khmaang) has provided a rationale for much of the overt political violence that has characterized elections and democratic process:

[Most government officials] lived through the war, and…by having this mentality “you are the enemy” because you belong to another political party…this regime continues to kill, to intimidate the opponent….even right now they consider their competition as enemy…the ruling party continues to encourage this kind of thinking. (Interview, Pung Chiv Kek, President, LICADHÖ, July 6, 2007, Phnom Penh)

When employed against the international community, the language of “enemy” (setrov) is less accusatory, only ever voiced in Khmer, and does not suggest that this opponent will be stamped out.² Misgivings about the donor community expressed in the local media are largely a posturing by Prime Minister Hun Sen for a homegrown audience in order for the RGC to maintain a degree of popularity with its electorate, and as a scapegoat when the strains of neoliberalization become acute.

It is from the rural population that the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) fundamentally derives its power base, even though this is also the location that receives the fewest rewards from neoliberalizing processes as uneven development proceeds. This can be explained insofar as the limited state provisions and benefits of development that do trickle down to rural areas are not considered as sourced from the state. Interviews with Cambodians indicated that such development is frequently conflated with being from the ruling party, and in particular from Hun Sen. The confusion is not incidental, as infrastructural projects always bear the monograph of Hun Sen and a party sign, despite the fact that the money typically comes directly from state coffers, and only occasionally from Hun Sen’s own pocket (Springer 2010). The CPP has become so thoroughly enmeshed with the RGC that many Cambodians no longer identify a difference between the two. This strategy of confusion works in concert with the government’s symbolic hand washing concerning neoliberalization’s negative effects, as both position neoliberalization as a hegemonic project of imposition spearheaded by foreign geopolitical machinations and foreign corporate greed, devoid of connections to the mediations of Cambodian elites, who present themselves as benevolent benefactors and the true champions of “development”—all while robbing state revenues through the “shadow state” (see Reno, 1995) they
have constructed via neoliberal reform. Of course, this is an advantageous rendering for Cambodian elites as it obfuscates the way in which neoliberalism’s ideological formation evolves through a variety of spatial settings, including its articulation with local political economic circumstances—in this case the patronage system. In chapter three I show how Cambodian donors, and indeed many scholars of Cambodia, use a mirror image of the discourse mounted by Cambodian elites, suggesting that the tensions of neoliberalization are outcomes of explicitly “local” political economic conditions, and in particular a “culture of violence,” with little consideration afforded to “global” political economic circumstances. Both positions are reductionist assessments of the political economic complexity that comprises neoliberalization in “actually existing” circumstances of articulation.

Interviews revealed that Cambodians frequently characterize Cambodia’s state form as “communist,” a claim echoed by some scholars who point to the Cambodian state’s historical legacy and bloated bureaucracy. Etcheson (2005, 143), for example, suggests that although the CPP “publicly abandoned socialism along with command-and-control economic policies [in 1989] . . . The party did not, however, abandon its internal Leninist structures and procedures, which it retains to this day.” Cambodia’s swollen bureaucracy and internal party structures are not “Leninist” but, rather, distinctly Cambodian and can be identified as one of the key characteristics of neoliberalism in the country, contrasting with the notions of “small government” that are typically associated with neoliberalism in other settings. These structures speak to Cambodia’s patronage system, which offers the foundation for the government’s legitimacy. Neoliberal ideology suggests that such patronage will be washed away as market mechanisms come to dominate all social relations. Yet the Cambodian experience demonstrates how patronage is in fact strengthened and entrenched (Slocomb, 2010). High-ranking government officials may have adopted a neoliberal configuration in Cambodia due to its latent potential to provide them not only with enrichment, but also with the ability to control the monetary channels of privatization and investment in such a way that only those connected to their systems of patronage stand to receive any direct benefit. This condition is fundamentally a question of the orientation of power in the country, which is far from being a transparent and open system of exchange: neoliberalization in Cambodia is mired in the obscurity of shadow state politics, where kickbacks are a required component of its substantive roll-out.

The case of Sokimex is demonstrative of the shadow state. This homegrown company, founded in 1990 to coincide with the country’s transition toward a free-market economy by local tycoon and close Hun Sen associate, Sok Kong, is Cambodia’s largest business conglomerate, repeatedly receiving special treatment in securing lucrative government contacts
under a veil of secrecy and nondisclosure over its accounts (Cain 2009). The company maintains a wide-ranging portfolio that includes business ventures in petroleum importing, a service-station chain, import–export services, garment manufacturing, hotels, property development, construction, transportation industries, rubber plantations, a domestic airline, an exclusive contract to supply the Cambodian military with clothing and fuel, and the exclusive concession to manage ticket sales to Angkor Wat (Cain 2009). Official leader of the opposition, Sam Rainsy, has publicly criticized Sokimex, calling it the “financial pillar for the ruling CPP,” where “you cannot make the distinction between Sokimex, the CPP, and the State. The CPP apparatchik is inextricably intertwined with the State. Sokimex was doing business not only for, but in the name of the State” (quoted in Phnom Penh Post 2000). On February 14, 2000 four Sam Rainsy Party MPs sent a letter to Hun Sen requesting clarification about Sokimex’s relationship with the government. The RGC replied by indicating that the only reason it appears to favor Sokimex is because the company has proven itself highly competent and always fulfills its contractual obligations—which is questionable given Sokimex’s record of shoddy construction projects (Phnom Penh Post 2000). While the transfer of ownership from the public to the private sector maintains the ostensible goal of making public holdings more capable, efficient, and profit generating, the Cambodian characteristics of neoliberalization modify this idea through the country’s patronage system, so that efficiency and competency are of little concern, and profit for well-connected powerbrokers becomes the primary motivation (Barton and Cheang Sokha 2007b; Un and So 2009).

The overarching contextualization of policy response in Cambodia is framed by ongoing poverty in a country, which has only recently emerged from decades of war and genocide. This violent geohistorical context constitutes the initial “shock” (Klein 2007) which permitted neoliberalization to step in as a purported panacea to Cambodia’s problems, while the Paris Peace Accords and UNTAC laid down the general legal framework in attempting to ensure an “idealized” state form through which subsequent neoliberal reforms could be implemented (see United Nations 1991).³ The agencies and institutions involved in the evaluations of policy are multiple in the Cambodian context, including the Cambodian ministries, local and international NGOs, as well as bilateral and multilateral donors. Although the relevant Cambodian ministries are typically responsible for oversight, the direction of policy and program orientation largely flows from the international donor community—only to be reinterpreted by Cambodian elites as they devise ways to ensure that their privileged positions go unchallenged. As neoliberalization is increasingly viewed as an opportunity to shore up both monetary and political power, the underlying logic of
any given reform policy must adhere to the general principle that it offers something of “value” to entrenched elites.

From Privatization to Land Grabbing: Patronage in Practice

The capacity for the Cambodian elites to entrench their positions of privilege is demonstrated by the leasing of the rights to collect admission on national monuments such as Angkor Wat and Choeung Ek to private ventures (Kea 2006) and the numerous land-swap deals involving central Phnom Penh and Siem Reap locations where institutional facilities, such as ministries and police headquarters, are exchanged for cash and privately held lands on the periphery of these cities (Wasson and Yun Samean 2006). Such transfers of public holdings to private investors have been criticized by the NGO community as examples of unpopular policies where corruption of the neoliberalization process has occurred as the bulk of financial remuneration mysteriously disappears from state ledgers and the value of public assets is purposefully underestimated (Ghai 2007; Lesley and Sam Rith 2005). Land speculation in particular has been tainted by the insignia of primitive accumulation under Cambodia’s neoliberalization, as over a period of 15 years private investors purchased an astonishing 45 percent of the country’s land area (Global Witness 2009). An interview with Sam Rainsy, Leader of the Opposition, illuminates the underlying logic:

Land disputes are related to corruption…when there is corruption at the top of the state, the leaders transfer all of the state assets to personal, individual assets, and land grabbing is related to this…. Those private hands are a small group of the top hierarchy of the former communist party…of course such a phenomenon may exist everywhere in any transitional period, but in Cambodia it has reached an unprecedented scale…they confiscate all the land and sell it to companies that can afford to pay millions of dollars. And it is the municipality who sells the land without any transparency. Most of the money lands in the pocket of small group, a small number of corrupt people. So this is a very specific approach that you cannot find in other countries. (Interview, Sam Rainsy, Official Leader of the Opposition, July 19, 2007, Phnom Penh)

What Sam Rainsy characterizes as distinctly Cambodian is how patronage shapes the privatization of land, making this a significant feature of neoliberal policy in the country. Although in my interview with Sam Rainsy he indicated that he supported a pro-market orientation, he has recently stated publicly that, should he be elected as Prime Minister, he will nationalize the millions of hectares of land that have been illegally acquired by businesspeople through land swaps and land grabs (Meas Sokchea 2008).
In contrast, Cambodia’s donors have long advocated that a cadastral property system be put in place, which means an ordering and bounding of all available space in the country into the structures of private ownership backed by legal rights and obligations. The call is for further legal reform, rather than a redistribution of the land that has been acquired through questionable means. The RGC has obliged this policy insofar as it affords a monumental opportunity for enrichment through the circuits of patronage, as this system’s networks percolate through the judiciary, ensuring that legal processes are always interpreted in ways that benefit well-connected powerbrokers (Ghai 2007; LICADHO 2007a).

Conditions of patronage in Cambodia engender considerable violence, as those without its protections are frequently forcibly removed from their lands when and where speculation determines a monetary value. Speculation alone precipitated the capture of land in Mittapheap District, Sihanoukville, where 105 families were violently evicted from their village on April 20, 2007. The land they had lived on unchallenged for the previous 20 years—thus granting them legal ownership rights under the current land law—was now an area demarcated as a “development zone” (LICADHO 2007b). Tourism in the area has increased substantially in recent years, and offshore oil exploration threatens to turn Sihanoukville into a boomtown economy, heightening speculative activities (McDermid and Cheang Sokha 2007). I interviewed evictees from this village in June 2007, and one participant, who complained of the complicity that local CPP officials had in their current situation, revealed the extent of the patronage system in Cambodia’s neoliberalizing process:

The village chief did not help us. He didn’t have any problem like us because he lives in a different place…. He came once after this happened and he just blamed us! He said it’s our fault because we did not go to inform the authorities that we live here…. The commune chief did not come at all. When there is an election, they come and ask about our problems and say they will help us, but when we have a real problem like this, no one comes to help us. They are CPP, and at election they give us money, and clothes, like a T-Shirt and promise to help us [if we vote for them], but after the election nothing. They just wait until after the election, and then destroy our homes and get rich by selling our land. (Interview, farmer and fisher, female, age 48, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)

Given pleas such as this, and the significant media attention that has been focused on land grabbing, one would like to think that investor ethics would slow the pace of violent evictions. The reality, however, is that evictions are taking place under the pretexts of “beautification” and “development” (Springer 2010), where local tycoons initially acquire the land in
question, and only subsequently offer it for lease or sale to private foreign companies (Amnesty International 2008). Nonetheless, the drive for profits outstrips concerns for human wellbeing as at least 10,000 families have been evicted from Phnom Penh over the last eight years in making way for various development projects, and many of these families never receive money or resettlement in compensation for the loss of their homes (Phnom Penh Post 2008).

**Rule of Law or Entrenchment of Violence? Accumulation through Patronage**

Interviews conducted with NGO directors and recent evictees revealed that private companies frequently exploit the services of the military and police as private armies to effect evictions. The reaction from the donor community is an ongoing call for respect of legal norms, and a deepening of the rule of law so that “less dubious” investors (meaning foreign) will want to become involved:

> There is no respect in the security force, there is no trust in the government, there is no trust in the court system, and that’s why there is no big company investor to come to Cambodia, because they do not trust in the rule of law and the court system. If the government fix that too, then you don’t need to go to US, Canada, and Europe to ask investors to Cambodia, they will come if they are sure that their interests are protected by the rule of law. (Interview, anonymous, Program Officer, Asian Development Bank, August 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

The problem with this interpretation is that the protections offered by a legal framework are primarily oriented around procuring the stability of a property system, where human security is a secondary concern. In chapter five I argue that the property system can be understood as a mechanism that confers legitimacy on processes of violent accumulation. In effect, respect for the rule of law in accordance with donor standards would only entrench the violence of Cambodia’s evictions by concealing its underlying character of primitive accumulation through rendering this process legitimate. The fundamental difference with the current situation is that observance of the rule of law, and the breakdown of the patronage system which neoliberals theorize such respect would engender, levels the playing field between Cambodian elites and their foreign counterparts in terms of access to the means of accumulation by dispossession. This is the essence of neoliberalization’s objective from the perspective of donors, whereas neoliberal reform is something Cambodian elites will only allow when it is evident that they alone stand to gain.
When the criterion of financial reward is either jeopardized or not met, there is typically a prolonged stalling process on legislation. The adoption of Cambodian children by foreigners offers an example of obstruction tactics by the RGC. In 2001 US immigration officials investigating adoptions accused Cambodian officials at the highest levels of government of complicity in scams that involved hundreds of babies and millions of US dollars (Cochrane and Sam Rith 2005). Moratoriums on adoptions from Cambodia were established by a number of countries, while members of Cambodia’s international donor community such as the United States, Canada, and France have been pressuring the RGC to establish legislation that will regulate adoptions in light of fears over human trafficking. In addition to concerns over “baby buying,” another major goal of an adoption law on the part of the donor community is to build confidence in Cambodia’s legal system and the rule of law—conditions that will enhance liberalization and investment in their view (Development Partner’s Consensus Statement on Governance 2008; Mussomeli 2007). The RGC stalled for years on this issue, because of the requirement that a “fixed price” on the processing of adoptions be established. Currently, processing fees range from being essentially free up to tens of thousands of US dollars, depending on the connections of the individual facilitating the adoption. International agencies are charged higher rates than local facilitators, and those prospective parents negotiating the process themselves are not required to pay but must bear the burden of much longer wait times and fend off ongoing requests for bribes from officials to see that their paperwork is moved through the Cambodian ministries.4 The broader implication for neoliberalization in Cambodia is that those policies that attempt to cut out the ability of the patronage system to accumulate capital are stonewalled, while those that facilitate capital accumulation within the patronage system are rushed through.

As a country heavily dependent on aid, with international donors having provided over 50 percent of the government’s annual budget for more than a decade now (Global Witness 2009), the intended audience for Cambodia’s privatization, liberalization, and deregulation policies is primarily the donor community that is requesting them. However, there are shades to this as it is not simply a case of donor demands being implemented in full whenever and wherever they are requested. The donor community frequently complains about the lack of transparency in the mechanisms through which policies are being pushed through. In particular, bidding processes on government contracts and the sale of public holdings are frequently criticized as being corrupt:

The Fund has been pushing for transparency, and if there was transparency in the [procurement of land] concessions for example, it wouldn’t be
a problem. So you debate openly, and then you have to pay for the resettlement, so there is no problem. But currently this is opaque. This is the issue, and if you look at the Fund website, we are pushing very hard for transparency. Bidding documents, sometimes you go to buy bidding documents and they say no. There is no transparency. (Interview, anonymous Cambodian, Economist, IMF, August 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Policy reform therefore proceeds as though the curtain on a stage is only partially open. The substantive acts of the protagonist (i.e., neoliberalization) that are occurring at center stage are witnessed and applauded, while the other character in this Cambodian play (i.e., patronage) is still behind the curtain and out of view. What this means is that “neoliberalism with Cambodian characteristics” is an extremely secretive affair, and the connections within the patronage system that inform neoliberalization in the country can only be speculated upon. The same small group of individuals invariably walk away with the reward of a contract or newly privatized asset in their hands, making the top of the patronage system quite apparent and well documented in a number of reports by watchdog groups (ADHOC 2008; Global Witness 2009), yet what occurs below the top rungs of patron power is murky and not well mapped, although some evidence has recently come to light to suggest that processes operate along familial lines (Global Witness 2007; Phnom Penh Post 2007).

What can be determined from Cambodia’s patronage system is that, as a long-standing, clandestine, and hierarchical mode of power relations in the country, it engenders significant violence (Slocomb 2010), which carries over into the contemporary political economy of neoliberalization. This violence proceeds through particular channels as it keeps key mediators of social relations (i.e., judges, top monks, high-ranking military and police officials, journalists and media outlets, and commune chiefs) on an unofficial “payroll.” This payroll is not simply orchestrated by the ruling CPP as a whole but, rather, through two rival patronage systems within the party, where the two key players are Hun Sen, and Party Chairman, President of the Senate, and Acting Head of State—Chea Sim (Global Witness 2009). These adversarial factions are not on equal footing, as it appears that Chea Sim is much less involved in corruption than is the Prime Minister, and accordingly has fewer supporters than Hun Sen who has control over both the military and the police. Conflicts between these two opponents have been numerous over the years, culminating in July 2004, with Chea Sim fleeing Cambodia after apparently refusing to sign controversial legislation to allow a new government to be formed following the 2003 national elections (Rand and MacIissac 2004). He returned ten days later, stating that he had required medical treatment in Thailand, but no explanation was ever offered as to why military forces surrounded his
home on the day of his departure, suggesting that Chea Sim and Hun Sen had come to an agreement concerning their differences and the conditions of his return to Cambodia (Yun Samean 2004).

**Impunity and Inequality: Human Security or Security on Investments?**

Those connected to the patronage system face considerable pressure to conform which, as the case of Heng Pov (detailed below) confirms, often entails being an agent or accomplice in the murder of political adversaries, or at least a participant in an ongoing conspiracy of silence. Heng Pov, as a former Undersecretary of State and assistant to the Minister of the Interior, as well as Police Commissioner of Phnom Penh and a personal advisor to Hun Sen, was long connected to the Prime Minister’s patronage circuits, amassing considerable wealth. What has not been determined is Heng Pov’s role in any violence. After a falling out with the Prime Minister, Cambodian authorities issued a warrant for Heng Pov’s arrest on July 21, 2006, accusing him of involvement in the 2003 assassination of Municipal Court Judge Sok Sethamony and linking him to a string of other crimes (Barton 2006). Heng Pov fled Cambodia on July 23, 2006 and raids on his home apparently uncovered counterfeit dollars, weapons, and US$1 million in cash. Heng Pov now alleges involvement by government officials in the March 30, 1997 grenade attack on a peaceful protest outside the National Assembly, and also claims that a government official ordered the July 7, 1999 murder of actress Piseth Pilika, and the July 7, 1997 assassination of then Secretary of State in the Ministry of the Interior, Hor Sok, both of whom were vocal critics of corruption within the ruling party (Gillison and Phann Ana 2006). Which side is to be believed in this dispute on who murdered who is anyone’s guess, but what is clear is that the patronage system engenders violence and provides the necessary framework and concealment to ensure it proceeds with impunity:

Nowadays, they don’t kill directly like Pol Pot…. They contract someone to kill another person for them…. in the case of my brother, Chea Vichea, the real killer is hidden because they hire someone else to kill. When someone challenges a government official, they will investigate about this person first, and then have someone else do the killing of the person who challenged them. So for example, when they killed Mr Hor Sok after the 1997 coup, they kill the people who worked in government, but today they kill people who work in the union when they speak out against the government, like my brother Chea Vichea, Ros Sovannareth, and Hy Vuthy…. the government says they give 100% freedom for the people, but the civil society groups feel this is not true…. You can say what you want to say, as long as
it isn’t critical of the government or a high-ranking official. So they kill journalists like Youk Tharidh, and the singers like Piseth Pilika and Pov Panhapich, and a high-ranking monk, Bun Thoeun, they killed him as well. (Interview, Chea Mony, President, Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, July 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

What Chea Mony’s statement reveals is how the violence of political rivalry in Cambodia has to some extent transitioned alongside neoliberalization. This particular form of violence now focuses its malevolent energies on those who challenge the logic of neoliberalization in the country, as it is neoliberalism that forms the contemporary backbone of political economic power that Cambodian elites enjoy.

Many of the Cambodian NGO directors I interviewed were acutely aware of the rising tide of inequality in the country, and viewed this as a product of Cambodia’s transitional political economy:

We have a few percentage of really, really rich, and we have many really, really poor. So you don’t have a middle class in this country…You know, the question about the quality of life, when we look at this and we compare the poorest of the poor in this country, now the fact that these rich people are so rich and that these people are so much better off than the poor are, it’s actually making the poor much worse off in terms of poverty. Even if they are making the same amount of money, they are still worse off today, whereas before you can depend on other people’s free time to lend you a hand for example when problems happen…now officially they have to work for an employer and earn an income and they spend all the money on survival. (Interview, Ou Virak, President, Cambodian Center for Human Rights, July 4, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Piled on top of intensifying socioeconomic disparity (Hayman 2007) is the country’s historical legacy of war and genocide, where people continue to function with a survival mentality. Interviews with Cambodians revealed that human security is tenuous as people are more concerned with how much rice they are going to have for dinner than they are with the patterns of wealth disparity, except when it threatens their livelihood directly through violent evictions. What Cambodia’s historical context in concert with ongoing poverty and inequality means in terms of neoliberal governmentality is that most individuals in Cambodia are already well conditioned to fending for themselves. They have never known state provisions of social welfare, and repeatedly look to the patronage system as their only potential security blanket. On the other hand, their subjectification to neoliberalism in terms of its ability to foster an entrepreneurial spirit is mixed. Individuals know how to make ends meet and often engage in
the informal sector, but this does not always translate into sophisticated economic knowledge:

I think that the trauma and violence from the past somehow has [an] impact on people from participating in . . . livelihood production [to] increase their access to [the] marketplace. So that could cause a problem for them, for example, people go to the bank right? So they will hand over their land title for their property to the bank in exchange for a loan, and while the people are still struggling with their daily lives, with trauma, with violence, I think that a lot end up losing their land, losing their property. So big institutions like the banks, people lose their land to them. I think it’s really a problem, so market economy, yes that’s good, but . . . without proper education or without helping people make a proper plan or whatever, I think its going to be the rich become richer, the poor become poorer. (Interview, Sotheara Chhim, Managing Director, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, July 23, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Neoliberal governmentality in Cambodia thus ensures that individuals are caught between a Scylla and Charybdis of violence. The poor must either look to the domination of the patronage system to ensure their livelihoods, or seek official economic channels as an alternative—where they become easy prey to usury.

A Cambodian economist with the IMF even went as far as to make excuses for this particular form of accumulation by dispossession:

Look at the lending rate, the interest rate, what you [are] getting from the private moneylenders is very high. The rate now is, the gap is smaller, but still large. Basically I think, because I also know who lends money and who borrows money, it’s roughly three to four times the commercial banks. But who do you want to blame? No one! [laughs]. How can you blame for this? You look at the history, you look at the rule of law here, if you try to give them cheap credit and you don’t have any recourse to act to force them to pay you back, so that’s the big mistake for the market, the whole market in Cambodia. So that’s the, you know, the rule of law, which donors are pushing for reform in the court system. (Interview, anonymous Cambodian economist, IMF, August 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

In other words, in order to rescind the violence of ongoing primitive accumulation in the form of predatory lending practices, Cambodia must replace it with a new form of violence, a “force” that will provide a security on investments called “law.” In effect, this is a call for a different form of concealed violence, wherein should one fail to make payments on a loan, due to economic hardship or otherwise, the law will step in to dispossess the individual of whatever meager means s/he has left, or strip them of their
spatial liberty through incarceration. Neoliberalization in this sense would see the penal system do more of the dirty work (Wacquant 2001) and thus entail a “legitimization” of the means of accumulation by dispossession through a legal framework.

**Violence, Apathy, and Greed: Klepto-Neoliberalism**

“Neoliberalism with Cambodian characteristics” is a powder keg waiting to explode, which may precipitate a repeat of the violent revolution of the 1970s should a proverbial match be dropped on the discontent that boils just beneath the surface. Ongoing violent dispossessions may very well be the trigger (Cheang Sokha 2007; Lempert 2006)—something Hun Sen well recognizes, as he frequently addresses the Cambodian media with paranoid invocations of his firm grip on political and military power (Koh Santepheap 2008; Saing Soenthirth and Yun Samean 2004) and, even more tellingly, on March 3, 2007 he declared “war on land-grabbing” to symbolically demonstrate his concern—not for the people of Cambodia, but for his own position of power (Yun Samean 2007). For now, what can be witnessed are episodic cracks in the structure that Cambodian neoliberalism has erected, where rapes, murders, and assaults have become a common lived experience for the poor as marginalization and minor differences are magnified, resulting in a pattern of conflict primarily between “underdogs” (Uvin 2003). In contrast, elites effectively insulate themselves from potential reprisal through an ever-tightening security regime, which utilizes the apparatus of the state, such as authoritarian clampdowns on public space, as well as private measures visible in the landscape, such as fenced properties patrolled by armed guards (Springer 2010). Likewise, there is some evidence to suggest that domestic violence is also on the rise:

In 1995 we presented our national survey to the government...and the results show that 15% of women suffer from domestic violence....The law drafted in 1993 was sent to Council of Ministries and was lost in red tape there for a long time because...the government still feels that domestic violence is a private matter. And in 1999 we had a women’s movement...[a] 60-day campaign against violence on women...We came up with the press conference and the statement for the Prime Minister, that we [are] concerned about domestic violence and would like to have a domestic violence law. And the Prime Minister at that time in 2000, and since 1993, he didn’t believe that we suffer a lot, so he got the Ministry of Planning to conduct the research with the Health Demographic Survey. But here they include twenty questions [on domestic violence]...and the result come up in 2000 that 25% of women in Cambodia suffer from domestic violence.
From that time our Prime Minister finally agreed that domestic violence is not a private matter. (Interview, Phally Hor, Executive Director, Project Against Domestic Violence, July 6, 2007, Phnom Penh; see also Ministry of Women’s Affairs 2005)

Although the government eventually responded to this phenomenon by acknowledging it as a social problem, the push to see a law on domestic violence passed through the National Assembly represents yet another exercise in bureaucratic foot-dragging—presumably because Cambodian elites had little to gain.

The slow pace of progress on the domestic violence law stands in stark contrast to the rapid establishment of a pseudo-legal framework for oil and gas exploration (Un and So 2009). In the 1990s oil exploration was only speculatively on the agenda, but petroleum legislation was quickly passed in 1991 (Council of Ministries 1991), coinciding with the structural changes that would ensue as Cambodia transitioned to a free-market economy under the Paris Peace Accords. Throughout the 1990s, quiet amendments were made to the existing petroleum legislation, paving the way for the dubious establishment of the Cambodian National Petroleum Authority (CNPA) in 1999, without primary legislation passed by the National Assembly. This placed direct control of the institution into the hands of Hun Sen and his deputy, Sok An (Carmichael 2003), making the institution highly politicized from the outset as exercise of this power sidelines those who are supportive of the Senate President, Chea Sim. The establishment of the CNPA by royal decree means that it operates without oversight from the Cambodian parliament or other relevant ministries. By 2006 a rush for mineral resources was underway as the Council for the Development of Cambodia, the body in charge of foreign investment, had approved US$403 million worth of investment initiatives. Global Witness (2009) has charged that concession allocations have occurred under a blanket of secrecy, where financial bonuses, totaling millions of dollars, paid to secure concessions do not show up in the 2006 or 2007 revenue reports from the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Once again, Sokimex is the company that stands to profit the most from these developments, having entered the petroleum business in May 1996 through its purchase of the state-owned oil company, Compagnie Kampuchea des Carburants, as part of the RGC’s market-oriented privatization program. The deal tasked the company with the import, storage, and distribution of petroleum in Cambodia, and gave Sokimex a stranglehold on the industry with a market share of approximately 40 percent, giving rise to further speculation concerning Sok Kong’s close ties to Hun Sen and the CPP (Cain 2009), and leading many observers to predict a looming “resource curse” (Barton and
Cheang Sokha 2007a). These patterns of corruption and patronage within the country’s extractive industries are replications of what occurred in the 1990s, when the political elite focused their attention on resource exploitation in Cambodia’s forestry sector (Global Witness 2007; Le Billon 2002). In short, “neoliberalism with Cambodian characteristics” is shaped by a kleptocratic system of nepotism, where “legitimacy” is conferred through partisan control of the military, a quasi-legal framework with a thoroughly corrupt judiciary (Sam Rith and Poynton 2007), and a labyrinthine system of patronage that extends down to the lowest levels of government in the village.

Conclusion

Neoliberalism as a conceptual category requires an appreciation for the complexity of exchanges between local and extra-local forces operating within the global political economy. It is crucial to recognize and account for the traction of neoliberalization on its travels around the globe and to attend to how neoliberalism is always necessarily co-constituted with existing economic frameworks and political circumstances. Similarly, it is important to acknowledge that an inordinate focus on either external or internal phenomena to the exclusion of relational connections across space is insufficient in addressing the necessary features and significant articulations of neoliberalism as a series of “glocal” processes. Hence, to dismiss neoliberalism as a “bogeyman” figure (Thavat 2010) demonstrates a remarkable lack of understanding for the processes of articulation whereby existing economic circumstances and institutional frameworks are reconstituted as variable societal influences circulate and thereby transform neoliberalism into its “actually existing” circumstances of neoliberalization. Worse still, such a view simplistically retrogrades the theoretical gains that geographers have made over the past decade in returning neoliberalism to an ill-conceived and ageographical “bulldozer effect” by insisting that it is a singular, monolithic, and static phenomenon. But most deleterious of all is that condescending accounts like that of Thavat (2010) make no consideration of how retaining the abstraction of neoliberalism as a “global” project—albeit one that bites down in particular locales with a high degree of contextually specificity—enables spatially diffuse phenomena like poverty and inequality to find a point of similarity. Put differently, it allows us to recognize how the structural violence of capitalism operates in diverse settings. Such disarticulation of the scope of neoliberalism effectively paralyzes attempts at building and sustaining solidarity beyond the micro-politics of the “local,” thereby undermining a potentially emancipatory basis among the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people.
In theorizing neoliberalization as an articulated, processual, hybridized, protean, variegated, promiscuous, and traveling phenomenon, as in the cutting edge in the geographical literature today (Brenner et al. 2010), the particularity of the Cambodian context suggests that the four-way relationship between neoliberalism, violence, kleptocracy, and patronage is necessarily imbued with characteristics that are unique to this given setting. My argument is thus not to make a plenary, trans-geohistorical argument that suggests that the substantive effects of neoliberalism are everywhere and always the same. Instead, I have attempted to draw out some of the articulations that neoliberalism has—in this case with violence, kleptocracy, and patronage—by locating these intersections within the specificity of a particular context. As the Cambodian state is increasingly neoliberalized in its developmental agenda, planning agencies, decision-making powers, and economic orientation, as each becomes more and more integrated into transnational circuits of capital and expertise (Sneddon 2007), violence becomes ever more woven into the fabric of Cambodian life through the existing patronage system. Patron politics, of course, predate Cambodia’s encounter with neoliberal ideas, but it is clear that such relations have since become inextricably bound-up in processes of neoliberalization. While “neoliberalism with Cambodian characteristics” points to a unique geohistorical set of power relations operating in conjunction with a wider hegemonic ideological project, this does not mean that this study can be considered relevant only to the Cambodian setting. The “in here” implications of Cambodia’s particular imbrications between neoliberalism, patronage, kleptocracy, and violence have wider “out there” relevance given the similarities of experience that countries on the losing end of colonialism have faced and now continue to encounter under global capitalism. Determining precisely how far such theorizations can be carried requires comparative analysis and detailed empirical research in other countries where articulated neoliberalisms are unfolding. Although I can speculate that patterns characterizing the relationship between neoliberalism, patronage, kleptocracy, and violence would emerge in (post)colonial locales like many African states and, particularly, other Southeast Asian nations with similar cultural histories and political legacies, this would always be checkered with contingencies and contradictions dependent on context, where at times the brutality of neoliberalism may prove to be more or less intense than is currently found in the Cambodian setting. This chapter is by no means the final appraisal, and instead should be considered as a point of departure for further grounded empirical research upon which relational geographies of affinity and solidarity might be built.
Part II

Discourse
Violence and authoritarianism continue to resonate with ruinous effects in Cambodia’s “post-conflict” landscape. Cambodia’s historical encounter with genocide coupled with enduring authoritarianism have led many scholars, journalists, international donors, and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) alike to posit a “culture of violence” as responsible for both the ongoing democratic deficit and sustained interpersonal violence in Cambodia’s posttransitional phase (see Bit 1991; Curtis 1998; Faulder 2000; Kurlantzick 1993; Lizée 1993; Roberts 2001; Sodhy 2004; Verkoren 2005). This chapter explores the imaginative geographies that produce such an Orientalizing discourse concerning violence, and seeks to illuminate its relationship with neoliberalism. Certainly, violence can be a cultural performance that is shaped by its specific context, but the culture of violence thesis simplistically reduces this to a linear relationship where “culture” alone is viewed as the basis for violence in Cambodian society. Such accounts also ignore how a new political order constructed on the principles of neoliberalism contributes to the Cambodian government’s ongoing authoritarianism and penchant for violence (Springer 2009, 2010). The method of critique the I employ here is necessarily a geographical one, where the imaginative geographies invoked by the culture of violence thesis are seen as attempting to frame violence as entirely context specific, related exclusively to particular places and having no relationship to the global political economy. I can’t help but reminded of Mark Twain’s (quoted in Melton 2002, 149) famous expression: “There are many humorous things in the world; among them, the white man’s notion that he is less savage than the other savages.” In this regard, I argue that the culture of violence thesis is both a sweeping caricature shot through with Orientalist imaginaries and a problematic discourse that underwrites the process of neoliberalization. Recent studies have shown how violence and authoritarianism figure prominently in neoliberal practice (Canterbury 2005; Giroux 2004; Rapley 2004; Springer 2009), and building on these concerns, I argue that through the culture of violence discourse,
authoritarianism and violence are configured as “barbarian” principles that only the “civilizing” logic of neoliberalism may conquer. This discourse gives license to neoliberal reforms insofar as it presents neoliberalization as a “rationalizing” enterprise in the face of what is considered “irrational” violence. Colonial-style racism and the “Great Dichotomy” of modernization theory are renewed, where the humanitarian expertise of a “civilized” west is once again called upon to tame the “savagery” of the “Other.”

I begin the chapter with a theoretical assessment of violence, its relational geographies and its connections to culture before moving on to consider how the culture of violence discourse has been applied in the Cambodian context. Empirically, this chapter draws upon interviews conducted with key members of Cambodian civil society, including directors of high-profile Cambodian NGOs and individuals working within international financial institutions (IFIs). Because neoliberalism, Orientalism, and the culture of violence thesis all resonate within society through the circulation of discourse, research participants were purposefully selected based on their capacity to act as both producers and intermediaries of such discourses. Civil society institutions are accordingly conceived as the gatekeepers of society, whose ideas are filtered down to the general population through community outreach activities. Most of the selected participants work within the realm of human rights advocacy and are thus directly related to the promotion of nonviolence. However, because Cambodia is a country with a violent recent history, all of the civil society members I interviewed suggested that in some capacity their organization was working on issues relating either directly or indirectly to the promotion of nonviolence. Many NGOs in Cambodia have adopted a neoliberal mandate, mainly to attract donors, but also because the rhetoric of a free market economy as the bastion of peace is problematically taken at face value. In this regard, the notion of redressing a culture of violence has been utilized in published materials (see Human Rights Watch 1999; LICADHO 2007a), or in some instances as an organization’s primary objective (see Working Group for Weapons Reduction 2009). To a significant extent then, the discourses that Cambodian civil society has circulated have been overly introspective about the underlying factors that have contributed to violence in both Cambodia’s past and present. Nonetheless, when confronted with questions about the culture of violence thesis, interviewees universally recognized the problematics of this discourse, and most participants were quick to admonish its implications.

**Violent Narratives and the Fictions of Neoliberalism**

Although space and place receive a great deal of attention among scholars, Massey (2005) has persuasively argued that there is a widespread theoretical
misconception concerning space and place, which are typically considered to counterpose each other. There exists an implicit imagination of different theoretical “levels”: space as the abstract versus the everydayness of place. But place is not the “Other” of space; it is not a pure construct of the local or a bounded realm of the particular in opposition to a universal and absolute global space (Escobar 2001). As such, Massey (2005) encourages us to view space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far, and place as collections of these stories, articulations within the wider power geometries of space. Violence is one of the most profound ongoing stories to influence the (re)production of space, and it may be useful to begin to think about violent narratives, which should not be taken to simply mean a story about violence. Rather, analogous to violent geographies, violent narratives should be considered as a spatial metaphor for the phenomenon of violence in direct reference to Massey’s retheorization of space and place. Out of Massey’s reconceptualization, violent narratives can be understood as being woven out of an expansive spatial logic, which at times may become acute, forming constellations that associate violence with place. Yet we must also remember that violence is only one narrative, a single geography of the multiple contours of place. So while violence bites down on our lived experiences by affixing itself to everyday geographies, violence—much like culture—is by no means restricted to place. All embodied geographies of experience (including violence) that exist in one place stretch their accounts out through other places, linking together a matrix of narratives in forming the changing landscapes of human existence (Tilley 1994). Thus, violence is not produced by “savage” or “pathological” minds, and instead comes from cultural performances derived from local sociocultural histories, and importantly, from the relational geographies of the locale. In other words, any seemingly “local” experience of violence is always also “extra-local.”

If violence has a culturally informed logic, then it thereby follows that because culture sits in places (Basso 1996; Escobar 2001), so too does violence. Yet Massey’s retheorization of space and place reveals that the grounds on which some discourses insist on bounding violence so firmly to particular places, such as the culture of violence argument, are inherently unstable. Any human activity, including violence, which occurs within a given place is not isolated, exclusive or separate from the wider geometries of space, but is instead intimately bound up in this expansive assemblage. It is only through a geographical imagination constructed on a parochial agenda and dislocated from the dynamic material underpinnings of place as forever protean and always relational, that entire cultures can be caricatured as violent. So while violence is informed by culture, it is never an exclusive preserve of a particular culture. Any discourse that suggests violence can only be read as contextually specific, as though it is bound so tightly
to particular places that a culture of violence is formed, should therefore be treated with deep skepticism. Furthermore, there is a need to acknowledge the implications of such place-based ideas concerning violence, as they have an uneasy tendency to implicate certain peoples, primarily in “non-western” spaces, as “backward” or “savage others.” Thus, while violence is certainly read through and related to place, following Massey (2005), there is an urgent need to recognize places not as confined and contained units, but as relational constellations of the wider experience of space, particularly with respect to phenomena such as violence. This retheorization of space and place enables us to understand that any seemingly “local,” direct, or cultural expression of violence is irrevocably tied to, and completely inseparable from, the wider social, political, and economic patterns of violence, otherwise known as structural violence (Galtung 1969; Iadicola and Shupe 2003), which increasingly has a neoliberal character (see Bourgois 2001; Farmer 2004; Springer 2008; Uvin 2003). So while understanding any act, violent or otherwise, begins with the meaning it is afforded by culture (Schepfer-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Stanko 2003), the relational dynamics of space and place alert us to the idea that violence conceived as fundamental to particular cultural groups is much more difficult to accept.

It is perhaps unsurprising that part of the appeal of the culture of violence thesis appears to be its striking lack of clarity. In spite of its astonishing prevalence in the Cambodia literature (see Grove 2000; Jenks Clarke 2001; McGrew et al. 2004; Moreau 1998; Peang-Meth 1991; Roberts 2001), its usage is never explicitly defined, and I was unable to elicit a suitable explanation of what the phrase “culture of violence” might mean in the Cambodian context during my fieldwork. Most studies beyond the Cambodian context only engage with the concept in passing (see Darby and MacGinty 2000; Du Toit 2001; Jarman 2004; Moser and Winton 2002; Nordstrom 1998), and while others do take the notion of a culture of violence as a major focus (Curle 1999; Elias 1997; Hamber 1999; Jackson 2004; Marks and Andersson 1990), they never offer a systematic or empirical attempt to reveal its causes, dynamics, and functions. Steenkamp (2005) recognizes that the culture of violence thesis has not been convincingly established and attempts to pick up the pieces, but her argument evolves with the same limited results. She identifies how violence can be interpreted as a multidimensional phenomenon that becomes normalized through social, economic, political, and indeed cultural processes, but fails to explain how these correlations can ever be considered as tantamount to an entire cultural group being defined as violent like the culture of violence thesis implies. Even Rupesinghe and Rubio’s (1994) edited volume entitled The Culture of Violence refuses to offer a definition, suggesting that both the concept itself and the lack of consensus on
significance do not allow for one. What is clear, however, is that the term is a gross stereotype that has little meaning beyond its capacity to qualify certain peoples and places as inherently violent, thus contributing greatly to the imagining of Cambodians as “savage Others.”

Cambodia is of course not alone in such disparaging depictions of its culture, as in keeping with geopolitical hegemony, and increasingly so in the post-9/11 context of the “war on terror,” “African,” “Asian,” and “Islamic,” cultures are said to be inherently violent. Thus, it is not the call for violence to be understood as a social process informed by culture that is problematic, but the potential to colonize this observation in such a way that enables particular geostrategic aims to gain validity. The principal method of distortion is Orientalism, which is a form of paranoia that feeds on cartographies of fear by producing “our” own world negatively through the construction of a perverse “Other.” Such imaginative geographies are constructions that fuse distance and difference together through a series of spatializations that not only mark particular people as “Other,” but configure “our” space of the familiar as separate and distinct from “their” unfamiliar space that lies beyond (Gregory 2004; Said 2003). This is precisely the discourse that colonialism mobilized to construct its authority in the past, and in the current context of the global south, Orientalism is neoliberalism’s latitude. Such linking of neoliberalism and Orientalism may seem somewhat counterintuitive, since the neoliberal doctrine conceives itself as upholding a liberal internationalism based on visions of a single human race peacefully united by a common code of conduct featuring deregulated markets, free trade, shared legal norms and states that feature civic liberties, electoral processes, and representative institutions (Gowen 2001). Yet among social scientists there is growing recognition of the mounting inequality, ongoing poverty, tendency for authoritarianism, and a litany of other social ills related to neoliberalization in a variety of contexts (see Bourdieu 1998; Bourgois 2001; Canterbury 2005; Cammack 2002; Desai 2006; Duménil and Lévy 2004b; Gill 1995; Giroux 2004; Harvey 2005; MacEwan 1999; North 2007; Peet 2002; Perreault 2006; Rapley 2004; Sparke 2004; Springer 2010; Uvin 2003; Wade 2003). These criticisms should make us more attentive to the idea that neoliberalism is not necessarily conducive to peace and may actually reinscribe violence (Springer 2008). Of course, violence is clearly not reducible to the simple suggestion that neoliberalism is exclusively to blame. This is as much of a caricature as is the suggestion that violence is reducible to culture. It is impossible to talk about direct cause and effect with regard to violence. Such an approach is exceedingly linear for a phenomenon whose complexity has confounded humanity for millennia. However, in much the same way that cultural practices and ideas can contribute to particular forms of
violence, as a political economic agenda with a global “Empire” in mind (Hardt and Negri 2000), we need to at least open ourselves to the possibility that neoliberalism may foster conditions that are conducive to the further manifestation of violence.

Brenner and Theodore (2002, 353) argue that neoliberalism is premised on a “one size fits all” model of policy implementation, which problematically assume “identical results will follow the imposition of market-oriented reforms, rather than recognizing the extraordinary variations that arise as neoliberal reform initiatives are imposed within contextually specific institutional landscapes and policy environments”. This is a spatio-temporal fiction, one that produces a unified vision of history, which in the context of the global south relegates “Others” to a traditional past, where inherited structures either yield to or resist the new, but can never produce it themselves. Neoliberalism presumes that with the conferment of reason via the supposedly iron grip of “modernity,” markets will quiet the ostensible irrationality of “Oriental” cultures of violence. Through the fetishism of place, the mobilization of popular geographical prejudices, and this supposed provision of rationality in the face of “irrational” violence, neoliberalism is given license to (re)direct public policy. If conditions in the global south or among the lower classes have deteriorated under neoliberalism, this is said to be an outcome of personal and/or cultural failures (Harvey 2005). Duffield (1996) and Tuastad (2003) have called this the “new barbarism” thesis, which explains violence through the omission of political and economic interests and contexts in its descriptions, and presents violence as a result of traits embedded in local cultures. Neoliberalism adopts the culture of violence thesis in its quest to disassociate itself from any clear relationship to violence. By doing so, the neoliberal doctrine attempts to forestall critical reflection on its effects and thereby position itself as being beyond reproach. As such, by suggesting that violence is never the sole preserve of the local, and in maintaining that any contextually specificity we can locate with respect to violence is in fact always also dislocated, we challenge the assumptions of neoliberal discourse. Massey’s (2005) retheorization of space and place as indistinct, where the former is considered as stories so far, and the latter as constellations of those stories, compels us to recognize that any and all violent narratives, as spatial phenomena, are part of a global matrix that extends beyond the local, encompassing the totality of space. From this understanding, we are obliged to look beyond explanations for violence that posit culture alone, and must begin to consider violence as multidimensional. Any holistic understanding of violence must obviously incorporate notions of culture, but it must equally take into account the social, political, economic, and gendered continuum that informs all violence (Cockburn 2004; Iadicola and Shupe 2003; McIlwaine 1999; Moser 2001).
I want to now turn our attention toward the Cambodian context in demonstrating how the culture of violence thesis has been applied during the country’s transitional period, and how this discourse has been mobilized to legitimate Cambodia’s neoliberalization. I have traced the specificities and scalar patterns of neoliberalization in Cambodia in chapters one and two, but for the purposes of the argument made in this chapter, it is more important to understand that the reification of local violence to the obfuscation of extra-local constraints (Springer 2008) continually (re)produces Cambodian spaces and places along a violent axis, one that echoes through both material and discursive space. It is in this light that I want to focus on some of the voices that have participated in the construction of the culture of violence discourse in Cambodia, and importantly give airing to the critical voices that have arisen to challenge them.

**Imagining Savagery: Discourses of Denigration and the (Neo)Liberal Peace**

As an opportunity to jettison some of the lingering guilt following over a decade (1979–1991) of international apathy and abandonment in the wake of the Khmer Rouge atrocities, and to further obscure the machinations of extra-local actors in Pol Pot’s rise (Kiernan 2004), the culture of violence thesis was used to secure the necessary discursive space in which Cambodia’s transitional process would proceed. To the authors of the Paris Peace Accords, the Cambodian capacity for violence was amply demonstrated by their “policies and practices of the past,” a euphemistic reference to genocide articulated in the accords (United Nations 1991), and one that tellingly ignores the direct relationship between the carpet bombing orchestrated by the United States and the resultant anger that radicalized the population and precipitated the Khmer Rouge’s ascendancy (Kiernan 2004). Likewise, this passage neglects the inability to separate the deaths due to malnutrition and disease under Pol Pot from the desolate conditions created after American bombardiers turned Cambodia into a napalm inferno (Heuveline 2001). One Cambodian NGO administrator I interviewed was acutely aware of the discursive demonization of Cambodians to the neglect of extra-local transgressions to Cambodian peace:

Our culture . . . represents the people for a long time, not just now, so it is unfair to say we have a culture of violence. The . . . foreigner just comes to Cambodia, sees violence, takes notes and then they write a book about culture of violence without really knowing the real culture and they blame the Cambodian. . . . they just look at the time when [Pol Pot] killed people, and because he is Cambodian they just write down about the killing and don’t take the time to find out what truly happened to all the people, like when
America drop bombs….foreign countries were part of the problem too, like China, Vietnam, Thailand, and America. And the Cambodians who joined Pol Pot, they did not have a high level of education, so they were confused about joining the Khmer Rouge, they didn’t know that Pol Pot would kill people, they just wanted to make peace in Cambodia. (Interview, Lim Mony, Head of Women’s Section, ADHOC, June 29, 2007, Phnom Penh)

In contrast to such recognition, former Australian Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Kathy Sullivan, views contemporary expressions of violence in Cambodia as a consequence of an inherited culture spawned exclusively by Pol Pot’s reign, whereby the “destruction of social, political and economic institutions left a terrible legacy, and entrenched a culture of violence that still permeates life in Cambodia” (Sullivan 1998). Such a view is unsurprising given that the peace process was strictly concerned with Cambodian “policies and practices of the past,” making no room for admission of the continual supply of arms to all sides in the conflict by the Chinese or the American bombing campaign (Kiernan 2004; Kiljunen 1984).

American intransigence continues in this regard, as former US Ambassador to Cambodia, Joseph Mussomeli (2006, np), glossed over the United States’ role in Cambodia’s undoing, stating that his nation’s promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law will significantly contribute to the development of Cambodia during this time of transition from a fragile, nascent democracy. After decades of war and conflict, Cambodia retains a culture of violence, lawlessness and impunity, with women and children at greatest risk. This culture is pervasive in everyday life and is an enormous challenge to overcome.

The implication is that contemporary violent narratives are so deeply a Cambodian preserve, that only external intervention will ameliorate the issue. Lending his support to pronounced external intervention, long-time Cambodia observer Craig Etcheson argues that the international community must remain involved in Cambodia’s rehabilitation, which “entails reviving a sense of moral integrity in Cambodian society” as its “ethical underpinnings…were ruthlessly torn asunder by the Khmer Rouge, replaced by a culture of violence and impunity” (1998, 8). This sentiment, which echoes Etounga-Manguelle’s (2000) dubious call for cultural adjustment as a complement to structural adjustment in Africa, was repeated to me during an interview with a Cambodian economist at the International Monetary Fund:

Look at the issue of the rich and the poor, the gap that lead to violence especially in the provinces…the people living in the province who have
education tend to have less violence. . . . look at Siem Reap, people receive a lot of foreigners, tourism, they learn how to act, how not to be violent to each other and then they discuss, it’s just a learning process. (Interview, Anonymous, Economist, IMF, August 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Put differently, the morality of the Cambodian people is said to come not from within, but from encounters with extra-local actors, whereby “they” are expected to model themselves and their behaviors after “us” to achieve nonviolence.

The Paris Peace Accords’ myopic framework for understanding the violent narratives Cambodia has experienced over the last 40 years sets a precedent, one that allows baleful commentators like Prasso to suggest that it “should come as no surprise to those who know Cambodia’s brutal history” that the country “produced one of the most vicious, despotict dictators of the twentieth century,” as “Khmers blame their most raw, embarrassing foibles on foreigners . . . never resolving the reasons behind them or trying to find solutions from within” (1994, 71). The brutal history Cambodians are saddled with, Prasso claims, is one of “fratricide, medieval-style torture, summary justice, banditry, decapitation, and human liver eating,” which instills in Cambodians “the capacity to turn from seeming passivity to passionate rage in seconds with little reflection on the consequences” (1994, 71). Lest we think that such “irrational” behavior has begun to heed to reason, or that such “savage” peoples are capable of humanity, we are reminded that all of these violent practices continue in the present. As a conciliatory gesture to those made uneasy by her inflammatory arguments, Prasso concedes that this violence is not unique to Cambodians, as “such practices are documented in many other Asian and Middle Eastern societies,” only “Cambodia has few socially acceptable outlets for the release of tension and anger and thus . . . finds it more difficult to reconcile its heritage of violence” (1994, 71). Although all human societies have shown and continue to demonstrate such capacity for cruelty, the “tableau of queerness” (Said 2003) constructed here has a particular geographic imperative as it is applied only to “Oriental” cultures, stemming from a presumed inescapable primitivism, in which Cambodian culture is represented as savagery’s apogee. This sentiment was profoundly offensive to many of the Cambodian NGO directors I interviewed, several of whom presented their own alternative explanations for sustained violence following United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC):

I don’t think that we have a culture of violence. Yes, during peace we know that the people still use guns . . . But, I don’t want to say that it is our culture, because if you say culture it means that everybody is like that. It can’t
be culture because the society, we don’t want that ok? We don’t consider that a man beating his wife is good in society… So the violence that happens in Cambodia, it is not because of culture, I say that it is because the implementation of law is limited and corrupt at times. (Interview, Sok Sam Oeun, Executive Director, Cambodia Defenders Project, June 27, 2007, Phnom Penh)

I don’t think that violence is the culture, because people in the past, it’s not like today… it’s a consequence from the war, from the social injustice that the government today creates. During the 1960s, our people were very high and well, like Europe… a lot of people respect us… because of our economy, because of our culture, or the well education, the reputation of our people is that they behave like Europe, because we have similar French education. I don’t believe that we have a culture of violence, that is insult to the Cambodian people. (Interview, Thun Saray, President, ADHOC, July 5, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Although rejecting the Orientalism of the culture of violence thesis, Thun Saray nonetheless demonstrates the continuing salience of the discourse by appealing to European similarity and colonial legacy to lend credence to his account of a nonviolent Cambodian culture.

Other Cambodian NGO leaders gave the culture of violence argument a little more consideration before recognizing its inherent potential for denigration,

I think probably it is a new emerging culture… it’s not a kind of Cambodian culture. But I think the way social change, the way people experience trauma, this make this emerging culture come. And the unsuccessful peace, it is kind of a consequence of the legacy of the war, of the genocide, and that… make this new kind of culture appear. Because it is so frequent… because it seem to be contagious, I guess maybe they use the term culture of violence properly. Some people disagree with that, because they say we are living in a peaceful society, a loving country… so it’s unfair to say culture of violence. What they may want to say [is] that because of the past terrible experience, this kind of traditional Cambodian culture has been disintegrated and has been replaced by this culture of violence. Probably somehow they[re] correct, but… calling it as our culture is a little bit offensive… the violence, the trauma, [they] become part of life… rather than culture. (Interview, Sotheara Chhim, Managing Director, Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, July 23, 2007, Phnom Penh)

I am still asking this question because… the attitude of people change, and before the war we [did] not use [violence] like this… But it can be that when people are use to living in such a difficult period… the attitude of the people change… maybe because of the past experience that Cambodian people had encountered, that’s also a reason why violence happens today. I think it’s about the impact of history, because we [do] not have a culture of violence. What is repeating before all of Cambodia is a people who always
smile, who always peaceful…but not now, everyone has to be concerned with how they are going to earn a living, what they are going to do to live because of low salary, because the function of being a developing country…so all of these things can be an answer for [why] violence continues. It is very astonishing for us to hear this term ‘culture of violence’. (Interview, Dina Nay, Executive Director, Khmer Institute for Democracy, July 2, 2007, Phnom Penh)

These responses indicate an awareness of the relationship between violence and culture, but the embedded ontological geographies of the individual participants oblige them to refuse the imaginative geographies of the culture of violence thesis and its caricatural epistemology. Accordingly, the depiction of Cambodia’s entire culture as being defined, understood, and mediated through violence is rejected.

Neoliberalizing Peace: The Taming of Cambodia’s “Warrior Heritage”

Violence is anathema to the principles of Theravada Buddhism. Nonetheless, scholars such as Bit construct Cambodia’s socio-religious framework as an antecedent to violence by suggesting “the belief system effectively inhibits reactions to frustration by confining it to an issue in moral development to be resolved through Buddhist precepts” (1991, 66; see also Peang-Meth 1991). Set alone, this statement seems innocuous enough. However, Bit is frustrated by his own static and obedient visions of Cambodian culture, which he believes should be advancing in the interest of “progress,” by asserting that the “cultural norm to endorse harmony and accept the status quo as the proper code of conduct…does not encourage support for the creative urge to develop innovations which might move the culture forward” (1991, 31). Thus, the “status quo of passive compliance and self-protection operates to quiet any voices of dissent or acts of civil disobedience,” and as a consequence Cambodia is said to have “developed in ways which thwart the opportunities for incremental social change and has also developed a model of warrior qualities which orients its public life” (Bit 1991, 66, 106). Allegedly spawned from time immemorial, Cambodia’s “warrior heritage” is purported to display a “clear preference for the use of force in resolving conflicts [which] has precluded the development of other means of resolution,” and is claimed to be immutable insofar as it remains “largely unchanged at a deeper psychological level by the influence of events in the modern age” (Bit 1991, 7, 68). Violence, in other words, is considered as forming the very core of the Cambodian psyche. Bit’s arguments are especially troubling considering that he is Cambodian, which reveals the depth at which Orientalism may actually penetrate.
In a retelling of neoliberalism’s appeal to individual responsibility, Bit (1991, 138) links his Orientalist tropes about Khmer culture to what he views as a need for massive economic reform, arguing that:

Prospects for security and prosperity require a change in basic attitudes and approaches towards economic activity from one of passive indifference to economic opportunities and the ensuing dependency it creates to one of proactive involvement.

Cultural adjustment-cum-structural adjustment is the lynchpin of his argument, and with his book’s publication the same year as the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, Bit contributed to an emerging discourse that positioned neoliberalization as underwriting the future success of Cambodia’s transition to peace. To counter the supposedly innate “warrior heritage,” Bit established a prescriptive neoliberal overview of what Cambodians should do to bring themselves in line with the global economic orthodoxy, including taking calculated economic risks, adopting an analytic approach to economic development, initiating investment strategies, promoting individual initiative, and appealing to overseas Cambodians with Western educations to take the lead in Cambodia’s reconstruction. Marketization must precede democratization in Bit’s view, because only “as progress is made in the economic marketplace, [can] new goals of democratic and economic freedom . . . be pursued” (1991, 140).

During an interview, a Cambodian Program Officer with the Asian Development Bank offered a similar recapitulation of this standard “Asian Values” argument, where economics must precede democracy:

almost all the factions in Cambodia use the word ‘democracy’, but in practice...it is just a word...our culture is very top down, always the top decides...it [will] never be grassroots. So importing democracy to Cambodia, it would take a longer time to take root....You cannot have democracy without liberalization, and you can’t have liberalization without peace, and I think before 1989, before Cambodian begin to open up...Vietnam stop[ped] giving any assistance to Cambodia, so at that time, this government...had no choice and they had to liberalize. They allow the private ownership since then...Without this, how can they survive?...it’s not possible to manage the economy the same before Cambodia start opening up, particularly for democratic process to happen. Without democracy, you won’t have peace. (Interview, Anonymous, Program Officer, Asian Development Bank, August 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

In addition to reiterating the neoliberal mantra “there is no alternative,” this comment also sufficiently illustrates the rationality that neoliberalism assumes: peace is premised on democracy, which is premised on a
liberalized economy. Neoliberalism is accordingly configured as the bearer of peace, where only further liberalization will transform the “absolutism” of Cambodian culture to instill democracy and thus end violence. One Cambodian NGO leader I spoke with challenged the application of “Asian Values” to Cambodia and was extremely upset by the culture of violence thesis, understanding full well how such a discourse serves to undermine the agency of Cambodian actors:

Usually this phrase [culture of violence] has been mentioned by the critics...who use the ‘Asian Values’ card and that’s just stupid. Democracy doesn’t mean different things to different people, it means the people rule and make decisions, and people can make decisions anywhere in the world...As a Buddhist society it’s hollow of the expert to say that Cambodia has a culture of violence...unfortunately lots of these experts and these so-called leaders who are working in Cambodian NGOs and civil society, they tend to discount the difficulty they are facing with some of the accusations they make themselves, and that’s terrible that most of these phrases come from people like that...some of the so-called scholars are closed minded, and they don’t truly understand or know the Cambodian people...it’s really degrading...If you have that kind of preconceived notion of people, you are not going to be able to work with them, you can’t expect them to do things on their own, you cannot empower them because you don’t believe that they can be empowered. (Interview, Ou Virak, President, Cambodian Center for Human Rights, July 4, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Another Cambodian NGO director related his frustrations with the culture of violence discourse to his vexation with the neoliberalizing process itself:

I think we are a culture of friendship, rather than a culture of violence...but you know the violence can happen because of the other factor influencing, like economics, and power, and balancing, like that is causing people’s violence...I think one of the cause of violence is the gap between the rich and poor, and that is the weakness of capitalism, you know, free market economies. So that’s why the communists tried to balance things, but I don’t support either way, I support somewhere in the middle...the Khmer Rouge they wanted to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor, so that people do not live in the city, all of them had to move to the countryside...but I think it’s a crazy idea. We could [be] mixing you know, balancing between the two ways of doing it, by ensuring that the poor and vulnerable people could get benefit from the rapid economic development in Cambodia. (Interview, Chhith Sam Ath, Executive Director, NGO Forum on Cambodia, July 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

What is particularly problematic about Cambodia’s neoliberalization has been its proclivity to promote inequality (Springer 2009, 2010). The
redistribution of wealth between classes, rather than its actual creation, is neoliberalism’s primary substantive achievement (Harvey 2005), which Chhith Sam Ath ultimately views as a more tenable explanation for contemporary expressions of violence than the conjuring of imaginative geographies that view Cambodian culture as being defined by violence.

The Angkorian Present? Temporal Confusions, Spatial Fallacies, and Genetic Mutations

A predominant explanation to emerge among Cambodia observers is that Khmer culture is ill-equipped to manage political conflict in a peaceable manner. Scholars such as Vickery (1985), Peang-Meth (1991), Lizée (1993), Heder (1995), Becker (1998), and Roberts (2001) have all published works that identify a supposed cultural trait of absolutism as being the primary and intractable obstacle to greater democracy in Cambodia. Some extend the lineage of violence to the dawn of Angkor, using imaginative historical geographies to summon an unchanged ancestral past in constructing the authority of their Orientalist claims.

In perpetuating the “Great Dichotomy” of modernization theory, Roberts (2001, 53–54), for example, labels Cambodian culture “traditional,” wherein a “tradition of absolutism” is said to find its origins in Angkorian times and thus,

[viole nt] behavior can be connected to Cambodian cultural heritage... in Khmer relationships there is no mechanism or system for managing disputes. Furthermore, the intolerance of others’ opinions characteristic of political, as well as social, culture aggravates the likelihood of confrontation... The absence of institutions to resolve conflicts that derive from intolerance of ‘other’ views leads to their settlement in more violent ways.

The endeavor to sew together violence throughout the ages by entangling its threads in a Gordian knot is tenuous at best. This is not for lack of trying in the literature though. Curtis (1998, 130), for example, asserts that

If both bas reliefs at Angkor Wat and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum provide testament to Cambodia's long familiarity with violence, the Phnom Penh Post's 'Police Blotter' feature [gives] ample evidence of the further development of a 'culture of violence'.

Sodhy (2004, 169) makes much the same argument, suggesting that crimes involving violence and murder “abound in Cambodia” and “there appears to be a culture of violence in the country going back to olden times, with cannibalism still being practiced in some places.” She continues by providing a
list of violent acts, such as “random acts of violence against foreign tourists; calculated attacks against opposition politicians; and the throwing of acid in crimes of passion” (Sodhy 2004, 169), which supposedly have some sort of connection to time immemorial in Cambodia, although an explanation as to how or why this might be the case is never forthcoming. Such invocations of the past are instead fashioned as moments of revelation, where through the swiftness of analytic movement from past to present, we are encouraged to overlook the preposterous contortion of space-time. Cambodia now is configured as Cambodia then, and the Angkorian present is called into being through the suspension of temporality.

Essentialist notions are equally pronounced in the work of Peang-Meath, where Cambodian people are generalized as “intransigent,” “corrupt,” “passive,” and prone to laziness due to their supposed inclination for taking “action in spurts,” while Cambodian political leadership is said to be “obsess[ed] with total control and absolute power” (1991, 447–449). This is contradicted by Neou and Gallup who maintain that “democratic elements [can be found] in indigenous Cambodian traditions that predate the modern era” (1997, 291). Nonetheless, Roberts (2001) argues that democracy is a “Western” imposition ill-suited to Cambodia’s cultural economy, and accordingly the patron–client system, which he claims is the “traditional” political orientation of the country, is implicitly accepted. Yet such a culturalist position cannot adequately account for the sociocultural disarticulation wrought by 30 years of civil war, American bombing, and genocide. Under these conditions, how could Cambodians cling to a “traditional” sociopolitical organization in spite of the profound violence and upheaval of their lives? Chandler (2008) paints a picture of hierarchy and violence in the Angkorian era, but he also recognizes that the Khmer Rouge regime served as a historical disconnect from earlier eras of Cambodian history. It was not a complete erasure of the past and return to “Year Zero” as Pol Pot claimed, but given the mayhem of the time, how could the Khmer Rouge era be anything but a disjunction? The very social, political, and economic fabric of Cambodian life was torn apart by a murderous revolution that found its logic not in the grandeur of Angkorian kings, but in a geopolitical malaise of extreme paranoia, distorted egalitarianism, and American bombs (Kiernan 2004).

Moreover, Cambodian culture underwent profound changes through the processes and associated violences of French colonization (Osborne 1997), and thus regardless of the upheaval of the Khmer Rouge period, it is absurd to suggest that Cambodian political culture has passed through 1,200 years of history virtually unchanged. This shows a remarkably unsophisticated view of culture, presenting it as a static concept, when the anthropological work of the last two decades has made great gains
in illustrating that if there is one “true” thing to be said about culture, it is its dynamic character (Clifford 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). As such, Peang-Meth (1991, 447) makes a profound mistake in connecting his generalizations back to the Devarajas (god-kings) of Angkor when he writes:

The Khmer carry with them an ingrained memory of their early leadership in the Southeast Asian region, their capability, even invincibility, thanks to their Angkorian heritage.

If the severance from traditional modes of thought that occurred under the Khmer Rouge regime is not adequately convincing of a historical disconnection to the epoch of Angkor’s Devarajas, then the notion that such “ingrained memory” is a reappropriation of sorts should suffice in debunking such claims. This component of Cambodian identity was long forgotten by the Khmer themselves and was only revived under French colonial rule following the West’s “discovery” of Angkor Wat, when “Cambodians were informed that their ancestors had built ‘Angkor’ (as they indeed had) and that at one time Cambodia dominated a large part of mainland Southeast Asia” (Chandler 1998, 37). Nevertheless, falling prey to the same folie de grandeur that many of Cambodia’s leaders have succumbed to in their appeals to divine lineage, Peang-Meth (1991, 448) argues that contemporary Khmer people continue to “respect the social order of the Devaraja’s universe, which has no place for complacency, accommodation, or conciliation.”

The imaginative geographies that have been deployed to explain Cambodia’s encounters with violence bear all the same hallmarks as the racial explanations that suffused the colonial era. These culturalist arguments actually contribute to a discourse that, whether purposefully or inadvertently, absolves extra-local forces from any involvement or culpability in Cambodia’s geopolitical quandaries of both past and present. Diatribes against “the West” do not clear the way for an independent Cambodia as Roberts (2001) surely expects. Instead, the Orientalist character of their theme, namely that Khmer culture, and thus through a “thick description” of culture (Geertz 1973), Cambodians themselves are to blame for systemic violence and the democratic deficit, opens a Pandora’s Box of insidiousness. Cultural arguments can easily be mobilized to divert attention away from the failings of neoliberal rationality. In the Cambodian context, this deflection is made possible through the construction, articulation, and recapitulation of the culture of violence discourse. In blaming so-called local cultures as “absolutist,” “corrupt,” “hierarchical,” and/or “violent,” the neoliberal order is able to mask its own espousal and perpetuation
of these very features it seeks to vilify as quintessentially Cambodian (or “African,” “Asian,” or “Islamic”). The culture of violence discourse can similarly be invoked as a rationale for the further penetration of neoliberalization. We see this expressed in city-level interspatial competition, whereby modernization and a particular ordering of space are called upon as a remedy to Cambodian violence (Springer 2010). Thus, former Phnom Penh municipal governor, Chea Sophara, is able to suggest that his beautification scheme launched in 1999 would mark “the turning of a new page towards a culture of peace and promotion of social morality,” free from the “violence . . . that has created insecurity and turmoil in Cambodia for three decades” (quoted in Pen Khon 2000, 60, 62). Such practices are legitimized through cartographies of fear—squatter sites as dangerous, geographies of homelessness as violent—and if Cambodians can be made to learn the order and logic of their Occidental “Others” through market principles, then allegedly this violence will be swept away.

Spatial fallacy informs the Orientalist imagination, as the matrix of space itself—wherein Cambodia’s particular constellations of experiences are nested—is rendered invisible. As such, violence is considered to sit exclusively in place, surrounded by a virtual vacuum wherein the convergence and coalescence of the wider stories so far of space are completely ignored. Put differently, instead of understanding how experiences of place-based violence are always related to the broader patterns of space, Cambodian actors are essentialized as though despotism, patronage, and violence are somehow part of their biology. Former Director of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Cambodia, Rita Reddy, understood this to be emphatically the case. In a March 2000 interview with the Phnom Penh Post, she suggested, “There has been a bloody history in Cambodia—maybe it has become incorporated into their genes” (quoted in Sainsbury 2000). Reddy’s comments ignited a firestorm in the Cambodian press, and although she claims to have been misquoted, an accusation the journalist vehemently denied, she was consequently removed from her post. One Cambodian NGO leader I spoke with was sympathetic to her plight:

It might be wrong to use such a term as it was used by one of the previous UN Center for Human Rights [sic] director. She was removed for saying that Cambodia has a culture of violence. . . . I think to be fair to her. . . . she see this human rights violence happening, and she did not clarify her statement properly and she was. . . . led to this explanation which is correct, we don’t want violence and all humans have violence. . . . But I think it’s a matter of. . . . this is a post conflict country [and] it is. . . . easy to politicize, so I think we need a dialogue, rather than act aggressively or passively to what she said. . . . I think [in] her case I push for a dialogue, but instead they
It was not the suggestion of a culture of violence that saw Reddy removed from her position, as by then this notion was a well-established discourse in Cambodia. Reddy was engaging in an ongoing dialogue, and her comments simply contributed to an existing discourse that continues to hold a powerful position in representing Cambodia’s violent geographies as inherent and irrational. It would seem that to essentialize Cambodian culture is quite permissible, but to summon biology using the same Orientalist rhetoric evidently provokes a much stronger reaction. By this slight refashioning of the discourse through which the aberrance of the “Other” is proclaimed, suddenly many people are no longer beguiled by the racism that underscores it. Public outrage and Reddy’s subsequent firing appear to stem not so much from what she actually said, but from the manner in which she phrased it. Although Reddy was castigated, the implied content of meaning behind her comments remains unchanged from the popular circulating discourse: “Behind the Khmer smile,” whether determined by biology or culture, lurks timeless ferocity (Meyer 1971).

Conclusion

There is nothing quintessentially “neoliberal” about Orientalism. The entanglement of neoliberalism and Orientalism is dependent upon the context in which neoliberalization occurs. Said (1993, 9) argued that Orientalism is entwined with the project of imperialism, “supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination.” As the latest incarnation of “Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000), the principles, practices, theories, and attitudes of imperialism remain intact under neoliberalism, so we should not be surprised to discover that the discourses that support such a project similarly remain unchanged. Applied to the global south, like colonialism and modernization theory before it, neoliberalization proceeds as a “civilizing” enterprise; it is the confirmation of reason on “barbarians” who dwell beyond. Accordingly, the implications of this chapter go far beyond the Cambodian context. They speak to a “colonial present” (Gregory 2004), wherein Enlightenment-based ideologies such as neoliberalism allow the global north to continue to regard the peoples, places, and cultures of the global south as inherently violent.

Neoliberalism maintains this haughty sense of rationalism precisely because it looks to reason rather than experience as the foundation of
certainty in knowledge, a notion captured by Brenner and Theodore (2002, 353) when they argue that,

the manifold disjunctures that have accompanied the worldwide imposition of neoliberalism—between ideology and practice; doctrine and reality; vision and consequence— are not merely accidental side effects of this disciplinary project… Rather, they are among its most essential features.

In other words, the rising inequality and ongoing poverty (or structural violence) of neoliberalization are ignored (Springer 2008), and in their place a “common sense” utopianism is fabricated. In the “actually existing” circumstances of neoliberalism in Cambodia, the outcome of such myopic idealism, as one Cambodian NGO administrator recognized, is that

the Cambodian people are victimized three times. One is the danger from society violence like through rape, robbery, and killing. The second is the governor who doesn’t do anything and ignores about the people and inequality. And the third is through the international community’s speech, when they say that Cambodia has a culture of violence. (Interview, Lim Mony, Head of Women’s Section, ADHOC, June 29, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Yet the certainty of the culture of violence thesis and the absolutist vision of space and time that underscores it are in every respect a fantasy. Space and time are always becoming and invariably under construction. There are always new stories yet to be told, new connections yet to be made, and new imaginings yet to blossom. Neoliberalism attempts to negate this notion by employing analyses that suggest violence is an exclusive preserve of the local. This idea, however, is a dead letter from the outset, as it defies what Massey (2005) identifies as the relational character of space and place, wherein any place-based phenomena, including violence, are comprised from and informed by the wider narratives of space.

By employing discourses like the culture of violence thesis, neoliberalism obscures the relational quality of space and place, and accordingly attempts to distract us from the notion that any “local” expression of violence is always and invariably connected to broader imperatives. We must consider the wider structural conditions that potentially contribute to any act of violence, including factors such as high unemployment rates, vast social and economic inequalities, prevailing poverty, poor education levels, livelihood and human (in)security, colonial legacies, (post)traumatic stress following civil conflict, gender discrimination and patriarchy, institutionalized racism, and ethnic or religious enmity (Iadicola and Shupe 2003; McIlwaine 1999; Moser and McIlwaine 2004, 2006). Of course, this broader context is not always necessarily neoliberalism; however, as
the political and economic orthodoxy of our time, it is shortsighted to not at least consider the implications of neoliberalism with respect to violence. In particular, it is important to recognize and challenge the capacity of neoliberalism to mobilize rhetorics that potentially obscure its relationship to violence, however seemingly tenuous these connections might be. Certainly to recognize that there is a relationship between neoliberalism and violence is not to assume that violence is attributable to one single factor called “neoliberalism.” Yet the same caution should be applied to our understanding of the relationship between violence and culture. Massey’s (2005) reconceptualization of space as stories so far, and their collections as place, allows for an understanding of “local” violent geographies as always vagrant assemblages compiled from an “extra-local” power-geometry. From this insight grows the recognition that while violence is mediated through cultural factors in a particular place, this never equates to an entire culture being characterized by or reducible to violence. To suggest otherwise is nothing less than a form of violent Orientalism.
Chapter Four

Violent Symbolism: Good Governance and the Making of Neoliberal Subjects

In building consensus, neoliberalism has constructed a vast network of neoliberal knowledge production and diffusion, through deeply entrenched intellectuals and think tanks (Peck 2008; Weller and Singleton 2006). The rise and “rule of experts” is not only a central part of the history of modernity (Mitchell 2002), but it further helps to explain the current dominance (Sparke 2004) and governance (Sparke 2006b) of neoliberalism. The special role of intellectuals and “experts” is what Bourdieu (1989) would call symbolic power, and it is inscribed in social relations as a fundamental form of power, analogous to the power ascribed to discourse by Foucault (1990). Discourse, however, goes beyond experts’ attempts to construct knowledge and thereby implement power exclusively “from above.” Instead, the dispersion and redistribution of verbal performances is what Foucault (2002, 121) referred to as a “discursive formation,” such that “the term discourse can be defined as a group of statements that belong to a single system of formulation.” Foucault was thus able to speak of clinical discourse, natural history discourse, psychiatric discourse, and, in his series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1978–1979, a neoliberal discourse that systematically constructs subjects and the worlds of which they speak (see Foucault 2008). Foucault (1982, 1991) accordingly emphasized processes of “subjectification,” whereby individuals are made subjects through their everyday functioning as transistors (and resistors) in the circuits of knowledge via the “from below” productive power of governmentality, which imposes particular laws of “truth.” Butler picked up on this theme of subject formation, arguing that “subjectification is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction in production” (1997, 84, original emphasis). Thus, discourse affords an understanding of neoliberalism that recognizes a simultaneously top-down and bottom-up (re)production through continually
(re)articulated citational chains refracted both from discourse to subject, and from subject to discourse.

As a consequence of this reading of discourse and subjectification, the question of how much local elites buy into the process of neoliberalization for their own benefit is paramount. If neoliberal reforms such as liberalization, privatization, and deregulation are accepted as an opportunity for enrichment by local elites in authoritarian settings like posttransitional Cambodia, the tensions of neoliberal subjectification may be minimal among the upper classes as neoliberalization becomes a useful part of the existing order (Springer 2010). However, for the lower classes the process of subjectification will be much more persistent and necessarily “shocking” (Klein 2007) as the benefits of neoliberalization are not as forthcoming, making neoliberal subjectification quite tenuous in this case. It appears that Cambodia’s geohistorical malaise during the late twentieth century is precisely the sort of “shock” Klein refers to as a necessary conduit to see neoliberalization pushed through. From the mid-1960s onward Cambodia played host to nearly three decades of war. The catalyst came when America’s war in Vietnam spilled across Cambodia’s borders as the United States unleashed a ruthless bombing campaign, transforming neutral Cambodia into a napalm inferno and leaving approximately 600,000 people dead (Kiljunen 1984). This bloodshed pushed Cambodian farmers into the waiting arms of the Khmer Rouge, who, although promising to end the violence, subsequently effected one of the worst genocides in modern history after seizing power on April 17, 1975 (Chandler 1993). Pol Pot’s reign of terror was short lived as Vietnamese forces toppled his regime on January 7, 1979, but not before an estimated one and a half million people died as a result of overexertion, malnutrition, disease, and outright execution (Heuveline 2001). Unfortunately the situation in Cambodia remained bleak throughout the 1980s. With Cold War geopolitics continuing to dominate foreign policy agendas, a decade of silence on behalf of the international community ensued, as it was communist Vietnam that had brought down the Khmer Rouge regime and continued to govern Cambodia as a client state throughout the 1980s (Kiernan 1996). With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the international political climate shifted, allowing the Cambodian question to finally be answered. Democracy and peace ostensibly came to Cambodia in 1993, following a UN-sponsored transition that proceeded as much on the premise of ending the country’s so-called “civil” war as it did on procuring a climate favorable to free-market economics.  

While the historical geographies of the war in Cambodia set the stage for a neoliberal rebirth following the end of the Cold War and the return of the international community under the auspices of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), they cannot entirely
explain why neoliberal ideas now figure so prominently in the nation’s collective consciousness, particularly among Cambodia’s middle and upper classes. Nor can geohistorical conditions like genocide fully account for the new forms of violence that have emerged alongside neoliberalization in “post-conflict” settings like Cambodia. Neoliberal penetration at the level of governmentality must be convincing because if the social body does not come to accept the supposed “wisdom” of neoliberalism, tensions will erupt and may potentially boil over into violence. In this sense, resistance to neoliberalism may actually provoke a more despotic outlook as a state moves to ensure that its reforms are pushed through, particularly if the changes are rapid and a valorizing discourse for neoliberalization has not already become widely circulated. This is why effective subjectification and the production, functioning, and circulation of legitimizing discursive formations become a determinant to the degree of authoritarianism needed under neoliberalization. Yet the possibility of full acceptance is chimerical in two respects. First, not all members of a society are ever going to agree wholeheartedly with prevailing discourses, and second, “the social” never sits still. Notions of spatial uniformity and temporal stasis pervade media accounts of a fully integrated “global village,” but they rely on problematic notions of monolithism and inevitability, as though space-time has only one possible trajectory (Massey 2005). There is little acknowledgment of the discursive work that goes into the (re)production and distribution of neoliberal ideas in a diverse range of contexts (Plehwe et al. 2006). One such prominent strategy is the good governance agenda, which, in the Cambodian context, sits at the discursive frontlines of promoting neoliberalism.

In this chapter I argue that we must look to discursive formations and subjectifications to understand the uptake of neoliberal ideas as a new political economic “rationality” (Brown 2005). I further seek to give an indication, if only tendentially, of how capitalism’s structural inequalities are increasingly misrecognized as the emergent rationality of neoliberalism coagulates through subjectification. Such misrecognition, I argue, represents not only the foundation of neoliberal “commonsense,” but it is also, and not incidentally, the very essence of symbolic violence. In the first half of this chapter, I conceptualize good governance as a key component of the neoliberal development paradigm in Cambodia, where the commonsense and Orientalist discourses it invokes attempt to preclude challenges to the country’s emergent economic orthodoxy. Good governance represents a particularly illuminating instance of how hegemony and governmentality approaches to understanding neoliberal commonsense come together, being on the one hand impelled by international financial institutions (IFIs), but on the other hand taken up by particular situated actors. How we interpret the fluidity between those who produce (“captors”) and those
constrained by (“captives”) neoliberal discourse is a paramount consideration if we are to counter problematic notions of neoliberalism as a monolithic and inevitable force. In the second half of the chapter, I turn my attention to the symbolic violence of neoliberalism, where I acknowledge how commonsense ideas involve both misrecognition of neoliberalism’s violent (re)productions of space and a lack of awareness, or “a-where-ness” (Osborne 2001), for the geographies of poverty and inequality that occur under neoliberalism. The Cambodian case offers an important opportunity to recognize and interpret neoliberalism’s symbolic violence because, while processes of neoliberalization have demonstrably contributed to violence in the country (Springer 2009, 2010), neoliberalism is nonetheless promoted as a “rationalizing” force for Cambodia’s ongoing violence (Springer 2009). Approaching neoliberalism as a particular incarnation of symbolic violence gives us the necessary theoretical edifice to not only identify the misrecognition that is often willfully invoked by neoliberal proponents through discursive formations like good governance but also inscribe a heightened understanding for the violences imbued within neoliberal landscapes.

Dissecting a Neoliberal Agenda: The Rationalities, Strategies, Technologies, and Techniques of Good Governance

As an assemblage of rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques concerning the mentality of rule that facilitates “governance at a distance” (Barry et al. 1996; Larner 2000), neoliberalization has delineated a discursive field in which the exercise of power is “rationalized” (Lemke 2002), thereby encouraging both institutions and individuals to conform to the norms of the market. The language of “good governance” is key to this process, as it “rhetorically advances commonsense notions of governance by promoting sectional interests as commonly held and by appearing to be reasonable and beyond reproach, whilst actually covertly advancing liberalization” (Taylor 2004, 133–134; see also Brown and Cloke 2004; Demmers et al. 2004). Good governance thus represents a principal site of neoliberalism’s cultural/spatial translation, as intellectual mediators in such locations as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Dunford 2000) have internalized this discourse of “practical neoliberalism,” helping to convert it to an “actually existing” circumstance of neoliberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002). As a program officer with the Asian Development Bank in Cambodia told me during a 2007 interview,

If you liberalize the economy, you cannot fully, but partly improve the governance. But the governance itself, it has to be from the system themselves, and the system has to be from the people, from the top and the bottom. So even if you try to liberalize the economy, if the system doesn’t change,
you will see only very slowly any changes in good governance. Governance helps this move, but the real change would be the system itself, both for the people and those who have the power. If [you] just change the top, and don't change the bottom, you couldn't do much because if...I'll just give an example, like the Khmer Rouge, they try to kill those on the top because they're corrupt. They set up an army of rural poor to lead the country, and it's a disaster. So it has to be a combination of both grassroots level and the top. (Interview, anonymous Cambodian, program officer, Asian Development Bank, August 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

This quote captures the notion of neoliberal subjectification that has occurred via the seemingly “grassroots” development of commonsense, which is shaped by the polychromatic and often contradictory experiences of everyday life (Keil 2002). Good governance and liberalization are interpreted as mutually reinforcing, but the “real change” is required in the “system itself,” which is used to refer to revised notions of subjectivity. All classes must embrace neoliberalism; otherwise, as the interviewee quite intuitively recognizes, a failure to accomplish this process of subjectification could result in violence or revolution.

It is at the level of commonsense that the situated social positions pertaining to material interests, expectations, and life chances of individuals in the general (re)production of neoliberalism’s political-economic arrangement are remarkably pertinent. In this respect, “it seems to be appropriate to speak of ‘everyday neoliberalism’, which although influenced by intellectual discourses, is rooted also in the concrete experiences and expectations of different social groups and classes” (Bieling 2006, 219–220). Everyday life encompasses the “normative” and the “unexceptional,” which lends it the appearance of being insignificant. In Lefebvre’s (1984, 24) terms, “The quotidian is what is humble and solid, what is taken for granted and that of which all the parts follow each other in such a regular, unvarying succession that those concerned have no call to question their sequence.” This taken-for-granted sequencing ensures that the “everyday” is the space in which neoliberalism is reproduced, through routines that are frequently oppressive, yet nonetheless often go unquestioned. In this sense, everyday life as it is mediated through the continual (re)production of space (Lefebvre 1991) is also the terrain in which power is reified, manipulated, and contested (Cohen and Taylor 1992). Accordingly, neoliberalism operates in a dynamic relation with “the social,” helping to invoke and stabilize but also to alter and unsettle the parameters of agency, or the feelings, perceptions, identities, consciousnesses, and embodied conduct of individuals (de Certeau 1998).

Through this (re)production of the everyday, good governance stands at the forefront of neoliberalization, maintaining a large constituency, including IFIs, intellectuals, multilateral and bilateral donors, and international NGOs within the global north, as well as government reformers, civil
society organizations, and concerned citizens in the global south (Grindle 2004). Cambodia offers no exception to this idea, as government departments, international aid agencies, and local NGOs are overwhelmingly preoccupied with assessing deviations from good governance, as opposed to evaluating existing economic practices and their political imperatives and implications. This is partially a function of the clandestinity that the Cambodian government maintains. Yet it is also an outcome of the government’s ability to discursively link virtually all of their practices and policies to the good governance agenda, which itself is a function of the concept being exceptionally hazy. Good governance in the context of post-transitional Cambodia is rarely given an actual definition, and most documents instead offer an exceptionally long list of characteristics that we are somehow expected to believe add up to a coherent concept. McGrew et al. (2004), for example, take good governance as the central focus in their study on women’s roles in contemporary Cambodia, yet they never offer a definition and instead demonstrate good governance as a discursive formation in grouping notions of curbing corruption, reducing poverty, promoting growth, advocating sustainable development, empowering the poor, enabling participatory development, facilitating democratization, advocating free and fair elections, implementing an independent civil society, consolidating peace, and respecting rule of law into a single system.

Beyond such indeterminate and mystifying rhetoric, Abrahamsen (2000) argues that the crux of the concept is that democratic empowerment is inextricably linked to economic liberalization, and a positive outcome, or “good governance,” is only possible if the state adheres to a free-market ideology. The promotion of good governance, as it is advanced by the IFIs, namely the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), is a powerful example of how the contours of “everyday neoliberalism” are formed. During the 1990s, the IFIs refashioned their worn-out discourse on the productive effects of the free market, replacing the forcefulness of this language with a new and arguably more easily digested emphasis on poverty reduction, transparent governance, and, given the proliferation of “Asian values” debates, the slightly more problematic notions of human rights and democracy (Demmers et al. 2004). It is in this sense that commonsense notions of governance came to the fore while secretly advancing a liberalization agenda. Indeed, the notion of good governance is frequently used tautologically, “when things are going well, there must be good governance; otherwise, presumably, things would not be going well” (Jomo 2003, 4).

Abrahamsen (2000, 56) argues that the good governance agenda serves to construct economic liberalism as a force for democracy, using this simple equation: “Coercive power is perceived to reside exclusively in the state and public institutions, and any reduction in the size or reach of the state
is therefore regarded as conducive to democratization.” As the leader of a prominent human rights organization in Cambodia informed me,

Both things have to go together, free-market economy without good governance is anarchic [sic]. I don’t think you can have good governance without a free-market economy because socialist economy, they pretend to be transparent, but no democracy. With the socialist country they are always hiding behind large bureaucracy, lying to the people about what is going on in the public management level. (Interview, Thun Saray, President, ADHOC, July 5, 2007, Phnom Penh)

A large bureaucracy is considered the antithesis of both transparency and a free-market economy, and similarly transparency is conflated with democracy. Of course, the development of a market economy does not automatically produce democracy, nor is democracy reducible to transparency, so good governance relies on an implicitly culturalist argument to support its primary contention. That is, a market economy free from government interference allows investors and entrepreneurs to pursue their own self-interest and thereby energize and grow the entire economy, and with this growth comes a sense of wellbeing that fosters greater interpersonal trust and competence in people, which in turn fosters the necessary “cultural traits” for democratic citizens (Neher and Marlay 1995). In this way, good governance can be read as a discourse pursued by the global north in an attempt to define the global south in its own image.

This is precisely how Cambodia’s transition proceeded right from its outset, as it was the United Nations who established the framework not only for the UNTAC mission but also for the new Cambodian constitution, which was mandated to conform to (neo)liberal democratic principles (Peou 2000; Springer 2010). Yet, while good governance ultimately seeks to co-opt and assimilate elites in the global south into a broader transnational historic bloc, so that they come to share the assumptions and class interests of the dominant fractions centered in the core (Taylor 2004), the agenda itself is nonetheless advanced through an “everyday” passive revolution-type transformation. This rendering conforms to the view that neoliberalism is a class-based project that sees a transnational elite (re)constituting its power (Duménil and Lévy 2004a; Harvey 2005), yet it also recognizes that enacting good governance is not simply a top-down activity that strips global south elites of their agency. Thus, understanding neoliberalism through its discursive formations is not an econometric calculus of a formulaic result, but a transitory moment of multiple geographical particularisms that are mutually imbricated through the continually evolving discourses of a human society constantly in motion. In short, a discourse approach to neoliberalism eschews the question of locational causality, replacing it with the
openness and proteanism of continual citational chains arranged within a mutable and relationally articulated discourse.

The actual circumstances of neoliberalization often serve the interest of entrenched elites and their local and international class interests, where good governance positions neoliberalism in such a way that it may be criticized based on the failures of the adopters, while the ideology itself remains firmly insulated from censure (North 2007). A Cambodian economist with the IMF’s Phnom Penh office demonstrated this notion to me in an interview,

I think [inequality] is natural for a country such as Cambodia transiting from a planned economy to a free-market economy. Not everyone has the same access to income, access to employment etc. However, I think the area of concern is [that] inequality in Cambodia is more significant compared with other countries, which were in similar states of transition….I think that its because of the government in Cambodia, because some people have more privilege and access to resources, and some have more lucrative business deals with the government than others would have access to. Both the rule of law and the governance could have been better. I don’t know what we could do with this failure, but it seems to be the experience of a country when you liberalize the economy. The extent of the inequality depends on how you manage the process of liberalizing the economy. But for the case of Cambodia I think inequality, [and the reason why] the gap is significant, is because of the governance. (Interview, anonymous Cambodian, economist, IMF, August 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Inequality is initially considered a “natural” outcome of liberalization in Cambodia, but as the interviewee continues talking he begins to recognize how social and political factors are entwined with economics through “privilege,” “access,” and “business deals” with government officials, which distort the neoliberal notion of markets proceeding in a lacunate space. Ultimately though, “bad governance” is to blame, good governance is repositioned as a panacea, and the neoliberal doctrine goes unchallenged despite its recognizable apolitical, asocial, and aspatial fallacies. The perceived failure of Cambodian adopters to achieve good governance legitimizes the further promotion of neoliberal policy objectives and the continued administration of IFIs. Through discursive appeals to normativity based on ideological notions of proper conduct and personhood (Kingfisher 2007), good governance furthers subjectification and neoliberalism’s penetration of the everyday. Thus, good governance “provides a new tool-kit, an instrument of control, an additional conditionality for the time when the traditional blame-the-victim defense again becomes necessary. It further offers the opportunity both to instill Western political values in borrowing countries and to fault them if things go wrong” (George and Sabelli 1994, 142). In this way, good governance has effectively normalized the right of the global
north to intervene, control, and reshape the practices and ways of life in the
global south (Abrahamsen 2000). Good governance as such can be viewed
as simply the most recent manifestation of Orientalism in a long line of
“projects,” including colonialism, modernization, and development (Crush
1995; Escobar 1995; Rist 1997), whereby the progress of the global south
“Other” is gauged against the norm of the global north “Self” (Said 2003).

In making such “normative progress,” the Cambodian government’s
official development organization, the Council for the Development of
Cambodia (2004, xiii), developed the Rectangular Strategy for Growth,
Employment, Equity and Efficiency, which situates “good governance
[as] the most important pre-requisite condition to achieve sustainable
economic development with equity and social justice.” Figure 4.1, which

![Figure 4.1](image-url)

**Figure 4.1** The rectangular strategy for growth, employment, equity, and effi-
ciency in Cambodia.

*Note: SMEs refers to small and medium-sized enterprises.

*Source: Redrawn from Hun Sen (2008).*
represents the visual centerpiece of the Rectangular Strategy, is suggestive of just how much of the country’s political-economic space good governance now claims; like the McGrew et al. (2004) study, almost nothing escapes its formulation. The notion of reform figures prominently in the Rectangular Strategy diagram, including legal and judicial, land, fisheries, forestry, and public administrative sectors. What is not immediately obvious is the content of the proposed reforms; nor is this actually addressed in the Rectangular Strategy documents, other than through vapid rhetorical jargon. The Executive Director of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, who maintains very close ties with the government, was nonetheless able to offer some insight:

The good governance program with the government is a very good foundation. It is very comprehensive, and the government strategy is called ‘rectangular strategy,’ and running around the core is good governance. So it has four angles possible to develop the country using the good governance. One is called private sector development, another is called agricultural, another one is employment generation through infrastructure, and another one is human resource. In each detail, they highlight how to improve public service through privatization and how to change government attitude to service provider, so they provide like good salary, and liberalization. (Interview, Chap Sotharith, Executive Director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, July 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Beyond Chap Sotharith’s reading that emphasizes privatization and liberalization, we can further deconstruct the implications of good governance reform through the figure’s key phrases like “favorable macroeconomic and financial environment,” “Cambodia’s integration into the region and the world,” and “private sector development and employment,” which all signal a rationality acutely attuned to the strategies, technologies, and techniques of contemporary capitalist relations that, when taken together, lay the neoliberal character of good governance in Cambodia bare. In essence, Cambodia’s good governance agenda seeks to construct rule-based systems of “best practice” that provide certainty and predictability for investors through “peace, political stability, and social order” (Council for the Development of Cambodia 2004, xv), which effectively insulates technocratic decision makers from popular feedback. Although the Rectangular Strategy suggests it promotes “continued adherence to the values of social justice, human welfare and empowerment of the people” (Council for the Development of Cambodia 2004, 67) and will further function to “reduce corruption, eliminate the culture of impunity, and strengthen the culture of peace and the primacy of law” (Hun Sen 2004, np), such cheerful sloganeering is little more than a discursive smokescreen for intensified
neoliberalization. These sentiments are meant to appeal as commonsense to citizens and their concerns for human rights, but in actual practice good governance, to the Cambodian government’s own admission, is above all concerned with “encourag[ing] macroeconomic stability, shifting resources to more efficient sectors, and integrating [Cambodia] within the global economy” so that a more secure business environment may emerge wherein contracts will be enforced (Council for the Development of Cambodia 2004, 16).

Good governance has proven to be a discursive formation that is hard to resist in both political and academic circles, stemming from its presentation as nonpolitical, nonideological, and sanguine (Demmers et al. 2004). This may be due to the observation that tackling issues of corruption, transparency, and mismanagement is obviously not a bad thing in itself. However, conferring the IFIs and global north governments with the ability to determine what constitutes good governance and the power to implement such prescriptions onto sovereign states is, as Taylor (2004) notes, deeply flawed based on who is advocating it, how it is being advocated, what exactly constitutes good governance, and whose interests it serves. To be sure, “[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class which is the ruling material force in society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force” (Marx and Engels 1970, 64, original emphases), an understanding set forth in The German Ideology, but one that also corresponds with Foucault’s (1980, 1990, 1991) discussions of power/knowledge and his notion of governmentality. In the current moment, neoliberalism is made powerful through its discursive formations (like good governance), and their capacity to create and legitimate expertise, instantiated through both policy regimes and state reforms. Rather than swallowing good governance’s bitter pill as placebo then, we instead need to think critically about how the language of good governance obfuscates our ability to recognize not only a covert agenda to reconfigure states and markets in ways that make them most attractive to international capital, but also, and importantly, the symbolic violence that is bound up in such neoliberal discursive formations, a point to which I now turn.

From Good Governance to Symbolic Violence: The Terror (as Usual) of Neoliberalism

Recognition of the transformative practices through which capitalist expansion became tied to legitimating discourses is essential to understanding the power of neoliberalism (Gill 1995). Mainstream analyses of conflict theory largely focus on “local” origins of conflict, invoking Orientalist ideas of “backward” cultural practices and a “primordial”
enmity of “static” cultural groups as the best explanations for violence, while completely rejecting the influence of ideology and economic practice (see Huntington 1996; Kaplan 2000). Neoliberalism is rarely called into question and is either explicitly promoted (see Fukuyama 1992) or implicitly accepted (see Sen 1999) as both the essential condition of human development and the panacea for violence. Such ideas are circulated in Cambodian civil society, where one NGO director told me that good governance was the principal solution to contemporary expression of violence in the country:

I think that poverty has a connection to violence, among other factors, like I mentioned, inequality is also part of violence, which leads to poverty also. It’s all related to each other…for example, if there is good governance there would not be big inequality in society. For my institution, we think that good governance is something where development has fair transparency in management and also good service to the people. I believe that capitalism and free markets are very important to having good governance. So good governance has a very big impact on violence, if there is good governance in the local governments then violence would decrease…with the regional integration into the ASEAN [Association of Southeast Asian Nations] countries, which is they want to promote good governance, decrease violence, and make the Asian market really good condition. So seeing the Cambodian situation at the moment…there is a need to build a strong political will to bring reform, like [good] governance, to be able for Cambodia to integrate into the region and into the global economy. (Interview, Dina Nay, Executive Director, Khmer Institute for Democracy, July 2, 2007, Phnom Penh)

This statement aids in our understanding of how neoliberal subjectification and “everyday neoliberalism” are sanctioned and constructed through discursive formations, as the participant relies upon a circular “commonsense” logic where good governance is positioned as the alpha and omega of any solution to contemporary social problems. Moreover, the idea that capitalism is somehow tantamount to nonviolence seems to pivot around a conceptualization that sees markets as a social leveler, rather than as a mechanism that concentrates the accumulation of wealth into fewer hands. Other interviewees were not so convinced:

In Cambodia we don’t have this kind of equality. You have no social equality. You have no equality for access to medical care. You have no equality access to education here. Nothing here! No equality! So if there is no equality in Cambodia, we are not ready yet to open the door to the rest of the world. Because to open the door and be able to say ‘Oh, I’m also member of The WTO [World Trade Organization], I’m also member of ASEAN, I’m also member of UN, I’m also member of this and that’, yeah its good for the
face, for the international name, but do you look at your family inside the
country? There are a lot of problems here. You only give privilege to the rich.
Of course the rich would benefit more from a free market! But the majority,
80 percent, they suffer more [from opening the economy], so what kind of
democracy [is this] if you only make development for 20 percent and let the
80 percent suffer? This is what happened to Cambodia. No, definitely not
ready to join such a kind of international economy. (Interview, Pung Chiv
Kek, President, LICADHO, July 6, 2007, Phnom Penh)

The contrast between these two participants’ sentiments points towards the
discursive legitimation that is required for neoliberalization to take hold. While Pung Chiv Kek recognizes that joining multinational associations
is only an ostensible form of legitimacy that guarantees nothing, Dina Nay
seems to have internalized neoliberal logic, as the prestige and globalism
of those institutions promoting good governance lend themselves well to
unqualified, unreflexive support. Such validation is not inconsequential,
as the unnoticed domination that everyday ideas maintain over subjects
can unfortunately lend itself to accepting social injustice.

Bourdieu (2001) introduced the idea of symbolic violence to account for
the tacit and seemingly unconscious modes of sociocultural domination
occurring within the social matrix of “everyday” power relations, which is
meant to reflect neither a form of complicity nor free adherence. Rather,
symbolic violence maintains its efficacy through the misrecognition of vio-
lence, which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as
such. For its part, misrecognition is not to be confused with influence, as
“[i]t is not a logic of ‘communicative interaction’ where some make propa-
ganda aimed at others that is operative here. It is much more powerful and
insidious than that: being born in a social world, we accept a whole range
of postulates, axioms, which go without saying and require no inculcating”
(Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004, 273). While the principles of symbolic vio-
lence and misrecognition are useful to political economy perspectives on
power relations and social inequality inasmuch as they prevent “the gener-
ative link between structural forces and individual action from becoming
overly mechanical and predictable . . . [by] persuad[ing] victims that their
own actions are the cause of their own predicament and . . . the logical out-
come of the natural order of things” (Bourgois 2002, 223), the contention
that “communicative interaction” is unimportant is misplaced. This may
be splitting hairs, as I think Bourdieu and Wacquant’s primary concern
is to unsettle any kind of linear progression of ideas from “dominant” to
“subordinate,” and to disrupt this binary in the process; nonetheless, it is
worthwhile to be reminded that Foucault has amply demonstrated that
all power goes with saying. To Foucault (1980, 89) the exercise of power
and the sanction of particular knowledges are coterminous, where “power
must be analyzed as something which circulates.” Like Bourdieu, Foucault recognizes the fallibility of dichotomous understandings of power, but his interpretations also explicitly acknowledge the power of discourse to influence the affairs of human beings by altering the terms of their self-understanding. The mechanisms through which this self-understanding is accomplished consist of what Foucault (1978, 304) called “normalizing power,” which is continually (re)produced by the “omnipresence of the mechanisms of discipline” underpinning society.

It is the discursive formations of neoliberalism, packaged in commonsense languages like good governance, that facilitate penetration at the level of the subject, making the formation of a political rationality possible (Brown 2005). Foucault (1978, 1990) has demonstrated how the subject is subjected to relations of power as she or he is individualized, categorized, classified, hierarchized, normalized, surveilled, and provoked to self-surveillance. As such, neoliberal subjectification is the process whereby one memorizes the truth claims that one has heard and converts them into rules of conduct (Foucault 1988). In Cambodia this often takes the form of the supposed “necessity” of the free market, premised on a dichotomous “either/or” political imagination that sees the wholesale embrace of capitalism as the only alternative to communism, which is considered inextricable from genocide:

After the Soviet Union fall down, collapse, there are no options, we have to join the free market. . . . So the government introduce the foreign investment law in 1989, and we start like that toward a free-market economy, and then the [structural] adjustment so that we can see the flow of foreign investor start from 1989. . . . then they draft the new constitution, with big advice from most important men in the in the world. What the recommendation is, you have to go to free-market economy. . . . Cambodia lost two million people. They were killed because of wrong perception. The Khmer Rouge disagree with a free-market system. It’s very dangerous to do this. Also, why then did the Soviet Union collapse? Why did China move to a free market economy? Why Vietnam also move to free market? Because they cannot stay in the socialist system where everybody equal; this doesn’t work. . . . I learn the Marxist theory about the exploitation of capitalists, about the surplus of labour, about the creation of new class because capitalists create big gap and become richer, but the reality is . . . it doesn’t work, my brother, it doesn’t work. We have to have the free market. (Interview, Chap Sotharith, Executive Director, Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, July 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Yet not everyone within Cambodian society is becoming a “properly” neoliberalized subject, as the following dissenting views suggest; some individuals have been able to see through the rhetoric:
Cambodia is not prepared enough to be changing from communist, command economy to free-market economy. In this case it has resulted in a lot of disaster.... They say the overarching goal of the ADB [Asian Development Bank] and World Bank is reducing poverty, but what they are doing is promoting capital investment rather than that directly. So they always use the nice word, but the way they act, or their implementation is not really what they say. For example, they talk about peace but they have to go through a lot of other activity like investment in order to achieve this, so they have another political agenda, which the country will have to implement.... The World Bank is crazy, ADB also, you know they promote economic growth to eliminate poverty but it doesn’t make any sense. They don’t achieve that, but the word they use is very nice. If you pick up the key word, everything is there, public growth, poverty reduction. Everything is in their objective, but the way they achieve that is minimal. (Interview, Chhith Sam Ath, Executive Director, NGO Forum on Cambodia, July 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

I don’t think these organizations want to tell the world that they have been working in Cambodia for over fifteen years and not really improving much. I am very skeptical about the World Bank and IMF. I am skeptical about some of this aid money. I am skeptical about the donors as well. So why right now is the gap between the rich and the poor so wide? And why has it been wide since the UNTAC when the free market arrived?.... I don’t think the World Bank act that correctly in the past, and I think their policies have increased the problems in Cambodia. They can continue the pro-poverty, pro-poor [discourse] but in fact social deliveries have been cut, and they are substituting what the government is supposed to do. I think their policy is in the end creating a dependency on the World Bank. But really they are not promoting pro-poor, so it’s a smell good, taste good type of thing, but it’s not good for your body. (Interview, Ou Virak, President, Cambodian Center for Human Rights, July 4, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Although failing to conform to neoliberal normalization, these sentiments are indicative of how rhetorical appeals to benevolent ideas attempt to lock in the rights of capital. Thus, while IFI policies are said to be aligned to pro-poor objectives, there is a decipherable capitalist undercurrent premised on the minimization of uncertainty for investors and a recognized dependency on donors that places Cambodian institutions and administrators under the constant surveillance of what Gill (1995) calls “disciplinary neoliberalism.” As these disciplinary mechanisms coagulate under neoliberalization, the structural inequalities of capital are increasingly misrecognized.

An economist with the IMF’s Cambodian branch demonstrates how good governance is a key discourse in facilitating misrecognition of neoliberal violence:

I think good governance is the center to all the problems that you mentioned, about the Phnom Penh City Hall trying to evict the people, about
the land grabbing, about inequality, about lasting peace and stability in Cambodia, all depend on good governance. Bad governance implies bad administration. Bad administration implies bad kind of negative society, and it will breed a lot of undesired consequences like violence. So the question about people to protest, or not protest, these are all to do with good governance. If good governance is used, and everything is rule-based, people won’t want to go and protest you know? (Interview, Anonymous Cambodian, economist, IMF, August 10, 2007, Phnom Penh)

Neoliberalism is completely erased as a possible explanation for why new forms of violence continue to evolve in “postconflict” Cambodia. The neoliberal logics of social service roll-back, regulatory reform roll-outs, and in particular the interspatial competition and urban entrepreneurialism that underscores both crackdowns on public protest and evictions in Cambodia are not considered part of the problem. Despite the construction of Cambodia’s property regime being very much rule based, rules that actually privilege the rich with “proper” documentation for their land to the detriment of the poor who remain uninformed and unconvinced about requiring “proof,” it is a “lack of rules” and “bad governance” that are positioned as the principal difficulties. In the final analysis the ideology is unquestionably correct, so the implementation of governance must be exclusively to blame. The structural underpinnings of violence are not considered part of the picture that contributes to “local” expressions of violence in Cambodia, despite the empirical realities suggesting otherwise (see Springer 2010). As the new “planetary vulgate,” Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001, 1) argue that neoliberalism presents itself as monolithic by “universalizing the particularisms bound up with a singular historical experience by making them misrecognized as such and recognized as universal.” But there is a double function at play, as neoliberalism equally particularizes the universalisms bound up within common experiences of violence by making them misrecognized as such and recognized as particular. In short, neoliberalism is symbolic violence par excellence.

Bourdieu (1989, 2001) has argued that violence is everywhere in social practice, and neoliberalism as both constituted by and constitutive of “the social” does not escape this spatial analogy. To suggest that violence is taking place everywhere within the social realm is to recognize that the geographies of violence are expansive stretching across multiple sites to reveal the inherent dynamism of space. Yet symbolic violence functions to obscure this notion by procuring a lack of a-where-ness in society insofar as it obfuscates the spatial clues left by violence in the social landscape. Symbolic violence is misrecognized precisely because of its familiarity, its banality, its “everydayness,” which renders it invisible. When such a
“liminal space of death” (Taussig 1987) comes into being under the “terror of neoliberalism” (Giroux 2004), it confounds, mystifies, and bewilders everyday life, moving epistemic understandings to a threshold where violence becomes normative by taking on a certain uncertainty (you know it happens, but you do not know how or why it occurs), which intensifies the despotism of neoliberal power. Such “terror as usual” is concealed as a public secret because human beings have an enormous capacity to absorb the vile and hold misery and horror at arm’s length, even when it occurs very close to home (Taussig 1992). That the source of such anomie is continually misrecognized is an omertà of sorts, one made possible by neoliberal discursive formations like good governance, which should impel us to question at what point neoliberalism as a bystander becomes neoliberalism as a coconspirator to violence.

It is not surprising that scapegoats are being sought out as conflicts multiply and poverty continues to rise after more than two decades of neoliberal policy fixes (Bendana 2004). In this sense, good governance marks a significant part of the erasure of neoliberalism’s “everyday” geographies of violence, poverty, and inequality in posttransitional Cambodia, by informing us that these structural failings are the exclusive outcomes of the corrupt practices of local elites, rather than part and parcel of neoliberal economics:

The gap between rich and poor has increased because of corruption. Widespread corruption. Rampant corruption. Government corruption…. this is not a market economy, this is a jungle economy, with no rule of law, with rampant corruption, with all kinds of abuses….Nobody likes corruption, except those who benefit from it. Most of the people don’t like injustice, and they want a more just society, so this will happen; it’s a matter of time. All around the world authoritarian regimes have fallen one by one, so one day the winds of freedom will reach Cambodia. This is the trend, this is history, the historical trend and Cambodia is too small, too tiny to go against the world trend towards the free market and democracy….Any dictatorship holds their people hostage and blackmails the international community: ‘If you don’t help us, if you don’t provide assistance to us, the poor, the innocent will suffer more because we hold the power. Everything must go through us, so you must provide assistance, not to us, but through us to the people you want to help’. So the international community wants to help the Cambodian people but they have no alternative; they must go through the Cambodian government, and the Cambodian government taken advantage of this to divert funds, to misuse at least a portion of the assistance for the benefit of a few corrupt leaders….if you do not go deep enough and understand how the CPP [Cambodian People’s Party] manipulates, [and] you give them money, then you legalize, you legitimize, you endorse a government that is doing a lot of harm to the country, and this
is opposite your intent to do, to help Cambodia. (Interview, Sam Rainsy, official leader of the opposition, Sam Rainsy Party, July 19, 2007, Phnom Penh)

While there can be no doubt that corruption has had deleterious effects on Cambodia’s processes of neoliberalization to the point of exacerbating social inequalities, Sam Rainsy’s suggestion that Cambodia’s donor community has purely altruistic motivations is surely a sanguine assessment. This appraisal speaks to his positionality as the official opposition leader and his desire to portray himself to the international donor community as a more agreeable, less corrupt alternative to the ruling Cambodian People’s Party. Moreover, the suggestion that Cambodia’s increasing gap between the rich and the poor is exclusively the result of corruption—rather than, to at least some degree, a feature of market forces—is misguided if not disingenuous. Capitalism positions hierarchy as the natural order of human existence (Springer 2014), so in an insidious perpetuation of social Darwinism, neoliberalism actively promotes inequality through the discursive production of an individualist binary between “hard work” and “laziness.” As such, inequality has received little attention outside of criticisms from within the academy, and it is only recently that the issue has been even cursorily addressed by the IFIs.

The World Bank Report 2006: Equity and Development (World Bank 2006) marks the first time the Bank treated inequality as the primary substantive focus for investigation, and perhaps unsurprisingly then, the report is a considerable source of tension among those working within the Bank. An official with the World Bank’s Cambodia office told me the report was odd in that it marked a different tenor in international thinking,

what we had with the recent inequality report was a lot of debate, including within the World Bank team about whether it was important in Cambodia….generally there has been a retreat from the kind of neoliberal, slightly doctrinaire approach of the 1980s. I think the 1990s were a period of adjustment, thinking through, and recognizing what was inadequate and what were failures in those models…and one of those issues…was inequality….In Cambodia…there were huge divisions in the team about this. I mean my country manager was very confused by it….we thought [the World Bank Report 2006] gave us a lot of ideas, we could draw on to do a report on Cambodia. But….we saw completely differently on this issue of whether inequality actually mattered here….we had some really huge arguments, and there were drafts and there were e-mails sent saying ‘If this goes out I will publicly distance myself from it’, and you know, ‘If that means I have to leave the Bank, so be it’. And my manager was yelling at people saying ‘This can’t come out, this would supply The Cambodia Daily with months worth of embarrassing headlines’. (Interview, anonymous
This quote hints at how in the 1990s structural adjustment programs (SAPs) were recast in a more digestible language of good governance as was argued above. Poverty and violence are easy to “fix” under this language, because the problems are easily cast as “local” in origin and therefore do not call for any deeper reflection than the roll-out of more governance. Casting inequality within this same logic of good governance is a much more difficult proposition.

The reflexivity that emerged in the 1990s and led to a rethinking of SAPs, according to this World Bank official, acknowledged growing inequality as part of the failures. That such recognition could come so close to the surface of the Bank’s official public discourse has evidently caused some considerable concern for embarrassment within the institution. This fear is likely due to the fact that a “suitable” discourse has not yet been found to account for inequality outside of the unspoken advocacy of a highly inegalitarian social order. It is hard to suggest inequality is a preserve of local contexts and cultures when the spatiality of inequality is so easily recognizable as functioning not only within, but also between countries. As such, the World Bank Report 2006 offers a whitewash couched in technocratic jargon that obscures inequality’s potential for violence and conflict:

In the World Bank Report 2006, inequality is blamed on either the “bad ideas” or the “connections” of individuals, where the overarching concern is not for improved social conditions but for the efficiency of markets. Meanwhile, Sharing Growth: Equity and Development in Cambodia (World Bank 2007), produced by the Cambodian Office of the World Bank, is admitted to be an unintelligible hodgepodge:
The Bank’s apparent suspension of reflexivity is symptomatic of the process of neoliberal subjectification, which constitutes the wider patterns of neoliberalism as symbolic violence. In place of reflexivity (knowing better), symbolic violence represents a continuum between anti-reflexivity (not wanting to know) and reflexive anti-reflexivity (knowing better, but deciding not to know). The Human Development Report (UNDP 2002) admitted that during the 1990s income per head fell in 54 developing countries, and the gap between rich and poor widened significantly as a result. The years in question are also those that saw extensive neoliberal reforms pushed through under the auspices of the then newly minted good governance agenda. Reflexivity would impel us to posit that perhaps one had something to do with the other. But to the IFIs such a question has not been forthcoming, as the problem was not the reforms but rather “institutional factors” (Bendana 2004). Thus, even when it appears as though neoliberalism is, at the very least, partially to blame for deteriorating social conditions, reflexive anti-reflexivity steps in the way and the mantra for further good governance is chanted, summoning forth new rationalities for collaboration between civil society and business sectors, new strategies to create atmospheres conducive to investment, new technologies and mathematical formulas to reconcile growth with uneven distribution, and new techniques for improved management. In other words, rather than contribute to a critical rethinking and transformative overhaul, the most powerful institutional advocates of neoliberalism simply retune its discursive formulation.

Conclusion

Good governance is frequently regarded as a catalyst to rescinding violence and authoritarianism in Cambodia. There is a grain of truth to this insofar as good governance intends to instill neoliberal values at the level of governmentality. As neoliberalized subjects are produced and the nomos of capitalism becomes internalized, overt authoritarianism may diminish precisely because the logic of capital no longer requires manifestly coercive action to effect its rationality. But the degree to which authoritarianism is visible within an existing system of capital does not change the inherently violent character of capitalism itself, whether neoliberal or otherwise. Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004, 21–22) argue that there is a “need to understand violence as encompassing all forms of ‘controlling processes’ that assault basic human freedoms and individual or collective survival.
Our task is to recognize these gray zones of violence which are, by definition, not obvious.” In other words, we must endeavor to recognize and overcome symbolic violence by fleshing out its geographies and thereby reinscribe the political economy and social landscape with a revitalized sense of *a-where-ness*.

Good governance is a key discourse in procuring the misrecognition of neoliberalism’s violent geographies in posttransitional Cambodia through a whitewashing rhetoric that links neoliberal reforms to a whole range of meritorious and emancipatory projects. It is this commonsense appeal and nebulous quality that make good governance such a difficult target for critique. Yet good governance deserves our suspicion because the rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques it employs attempt to refuse *a-where-ness* by promoting Orientalism and formulating violence as a “barbarian” practice that happens “out there.” Violence, however, is never an isolated phenomenon. As an ontological and epistemic expression that gives meaning to the world, violence is imbricated in the production of space (Bourdieu 1989; Springer 2011), where space, for its part, is a kaleidoscopic, protean, and relational assemblage of innumerable sites both “out there” and “in here” (Massey 2005). Thus, the patterns of violence are irreducible to linear modalities of cause and effect, and instead they constitute and are constituted by the complex and protean entanglements of political, economic, and cultural landscapes that together compose the social-spatial world. Nonetheless, violence often readily takes on conventions, becoming stylized and meaningful in its perpetuation (Malkki 1995). The commonsense of neoliberalism and its performance in posttransitional Cambodia is one such stylized convention, and it is precisely because symbolic violence is always informed by particular discursive formations like good governance that Foucault (1996) can claim violence as rational, even if it is misrecognized as such. The symbolic violence of neoliberalism thus serves a particular rational project insofar as it both performs a reconstitution of class power yet attempts to hide this performativity through the discursive formations it employs.

Performative politics, however, are never the exclusive preserve of hegemonic imperatives. Accordingly, performativity offers significant promise for a poststructural politics of change, which to Butler (1997, 100) involves “[t]he possibility of decontextualizing and re-contextualizing…terms through radical acts of public misappropriation [which] constitute the basis of an ironic hopefulness that the conventional relation between [interpretation and meaning] might become tenuous and even broken over time.” Through such practices, the fixed meanings of prevailing discursive formations might be unsettled and reinscribed, while subaltern, repudiated, or silenced discourses might be deployed and made meaningful in spaces
they have previously been prohibited. In addition, challenges to enduring subjectivities might be consciously deployed through newly realized discursive formations and practices of subjects (Youdell 2006). The potential to disrupt and overcome neoliberalism cannot be taken for granted, and neoliberalism’s performative constitution will only begin to break down when neoliberal subjectification no longer makes sense in the everyday “conduct of conduct” (Foucault 1991). This process occurs as concentrated attention to, recognition of, and a-where-ness for neoliberalism’s discursive formations become realized. Deconstructing good governance and circulating a new critical understanding of its imperatives are thus a potentially enabling endeavor in overcoming neoliberal subjectification in posttransitional Cambodia and other sites where this discursive formation promotes and procures misrecognition. This type of “discursive agency,” which Butler (1997) calls the capacity to name and thereby constitute what results from subjectification, marks a disruption in the circuitous pathways of discursive reproduction. By thinking of agency as discursive—as the product of being inaugurated in and by discourse and so able to join or disentangle its citational chains—Butler (1997) moves beyond an understanding of agency and intent that is the property of an a priori, rational, self-aware subject, but retains a subject who can nonetheless act with intent.

Discourse and its effects ultimately surpass the free will of an agent, but similar to Foucault’s (1988) technologies of the self, “the performatively constituted subject can still deploy discursive performatives that have the potential to be constitutive” (Youdell 2006, 512). Thus, the effects of neoliberal discursive formations will eventually reach a saturation point wherein their concealed incantations of inequality and poverty can no longer be mystified via symbolic violence. Through increased tensions between the rich and poor, and the intensification of policing, surveillance, and “security” measures that arise from such strained relations, as has become increasingly manifest in posttransitional Cambodia (Springer 2010), neoliberal modalities will slowly become recognizable and undesirable in the everyday lives of individuals, invoking new discursive performatives that may provoke a chain reaction of awakening from the spell of the prevailing commonsense. This process may not necessarily occur on a rational and self-aware level for many Cambodians, but this is of little consequence. As the mutations of new subjectivities contort and twist subjectification away from neoliberalism, transformed discursive formations will circulate and begin to usurp the existing orthodoxy. There are shades of this already emerging in contemporary Cambodia, as can be seen in the dissenting views of Pung Chiv Kek, Chhith Sam Ath, and Ou Virak quoted above, all of whom in their own way offer a critical reinterpretation
of the prevailing common sense. So while there may not be a perceptible moment where we can declare the end of neoliberalism as we knew it—nor will neoliberalism simply disappear if we just stop calling its resonant material effects by this name as is Gibson-Graham’s (1996) formulation—the transitory understandings of discourse advanced by Butler and Foucault and the protean nature of space and time demonstrate how in reading neoliberalism through its discursive formations we do not inevitably and always reinscribe its power through fetishization in the way that monolithism arguments do.
Part III
Dispossession
Chapter Five
Violent Accumulation: The Trilateral of Logics and the Creation of Property

In reflecting on the origins of property, Karl Marx ([1867] 1976, 873–874, emphasis added) once famously wrote that

primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote about the past. Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living…. Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the later sort finally had nothing to sell except their own skins. And from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labor, have up to now, nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they have long ceased to work. Such insipid childishness is everyday preached to us in the defense of property.

In the same spirit of critique, Leo Tolstoy ([1900] 2004, 30, 32) also wanted to demonstrate the violence that forms the foundation of the institution of property, suggesting that

history shows that property in land did not arise from any wish to make the cultivator’s tenure more secure but resulted from the seizure of communal lands by conquerors and its distribution to those who served the conqueror… the fruit of their toil is unjustly and violently taken from the workers, and then the law steps in, and these very articles which have been taken from the workmen unjustly and by violence are declared to be the absolute property of those who have taken them.

The words of Marx and Tolstoy eloquently capture the chief methodologies of primitive accumulation, hinting at its foundations in law,
civilization, and sovereign rule. A number of “classical” anarchists including Kropotkin, Godwin, Parsons, Proudhon, and Reclus similarly recognized this originary nature of capitalism. Yet rather than a pre-capitalist point of departure, Luxemburg ([1913] 1951), Perelman (2000), and, more recently, geographers Harvey (2003), Glassman (2006), and Hart (2006) contended that the miasmic processes of primitive accumulation must be understood as ongoing features of a capitalist mode of production, ingrained within its very logic. Harvey has renamed primitive accumulation “accumulation by dispossession” to better capture the continuity of capitalism’s most enduring feature: violence.

In present-day Cambodia such violence is palpable, as the tenor of accumulation by dispossession is shot through the various processes of neoliberalization that the country has implemented under international tutelage since the United Nations-sponsored transition of the early 1990s (Springer 2010). Speculation has run amok in recent years, where dubious land title procurements and forced evictions are emblematic of the country’s tumultuous neoliberalization and the violence that has characterized this process. Over the past 20 years, private investors have purchased an astonishing percentage of Cambodia’s land area (Global Witness 2009). The consequence of this speculative industry is that the number of land conflicts has risen steadily since the 2001 land law came into effect, a trend that is supported by nongovernmental organization (NGO) monitoring (LICADHO 2009) and the reporting of the Cambodian courts (Supreme National Economic Council 2007). This chapter seeks to advance conceptual insight into the nature of sovereign power by employing an anarchist lens to examine the violent accumulation Cambodians are increasingly subjected to as a result of their state’s deepening neoliberalization. When considered without resorting to terse ideological dictum, anarchism effectively facilitates a radical (re)appraisal of capitalism, its legal processes, and civilizing effects, which together serve to mask the originary and ongoing violence of primitive accumulation and the property system. Although my arguments are theoretically driven, they are not intended to blindly serve an a priori anarchist doctrine—an oxymoron from the outset. Rather, they arise from a decade of engaging in volunteer work and grounded empirical research in Cambodia and by learning firsthand how deadly the state—in whatever guise—has been for Cambodians. In short, my anarchist position is informed by my experiences in Cambodia, where both the left (communism under Pol Pot) and the right (neoliberalism under Hun Sen) of the traditional political spectrum have been abysmal failures.

The seemingly inexorable pace of violent evictions and pestilent land grabbing by high-ranking officials represents a profound departure from earlier spatialities in Cambodia. In the country’s pre-capitalist era,
subsistence agriculture, barter economies, seminomadic lifestyles, and widespread land availability all ensured that notions of land “entitlement” were tenuous. The historical record demonstrates that legal formalization of land ownership throughout Southeast Asia only came alongside capitalism’s profit-oriented outlook (McCloud 1995). In Cambodia, the land-holding structure is further complicated by both the Khmer Rouge’s policies of forced ex-urbanization and the post-Pol Pot era when dislocated families sought to return to their original dwellings and reunite communities that had been torn apart. Where and when return was impossible, Cambodians settled into preoccupied yet vacant plots. Within the immediate post-Khmer Rouge polity, there was no expectation placed on land ownership, as communal living was adopted to reflect pre-Khmer Rouge organizing principles. Changes to the land tenure system were introduced in 1989 as part of the government’s attempt to make the country more attractive to foreign capital as the Cold War ended (St. John 1997), yet public use of state-owned land went unchallenged throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s. It was not until 2001 that significant land reform was implemented and widespread land conflict became known. New legislation that year emboldened politicians and military personnel to begin appropriating large swathes of arable land. In the ensuing years, dispossession has forced tens of thousands of Cambodians off state land that continues to be legally privatized or accumulated via “extralegal” means by high-ranking officials. In almost all instances, these dispossession have been backed by organized impunity for Cambodia’s modern aristocracy, comprised of the Prime Minister Hun Sen and his inner circle of clients (Global Witness 2007). Evictees have virtually no recourse, as their “ownership” claims are not reflected in official documentation or legal entitlement but in traditional understandings relating to occupation, community consensus, and actual use. Although violent evictions in Cambodia are often simultaneously both permitted and forbidden by law, they are always seen as legitimate within the logic of capital, which in contemporary practice, and via historical example, has trumped all other concerns both in Cambodia and on the larger world stage. Consequently, the preoccupation with strengthening the legal system in Cambodia is not a benevolent act for the betterment of Cambodian society. Rather, its primary function is the imposition of a “grid” of property rights (Blomley 2003) that serves to legitimize the violences of property, and thus reinforce a “trilateral of logics,” which represents the coalescence of capitalism, law, and civilization.

I begin by offering a detailed definition of the “trilateral of logics” before tracing the epistemologies and methodologies of my anarchist position. I then offer a critical appraisal of primitive accumulation, revealing it
as the dialectic “Other” of capitalism. Next, I seek to illuminate sovereign exceptionalism via a discussion of biopolitics, the ban, and the production of bare life. This is followed by an analysis that sutures together law, property, and violence in revealing their mutual constitution. I then bring the trilateral of logics into unison by examining the related notions of “property as theft” and “development as eviction.” Last, I examine Agamben’s claim that the concentration camp is the paradigmatic expression of modernity but ultimately argue for a more hopeful outlook before offering some final thoughts in the conclusion.

**An Exceptional Trilateral and the Epistemology of Anarchism**

What I mean by a *trilateral of logics* is that the logic of capital is never singular but always exists in a mutually reinforcing triad that also includes the logics of law and civilization. Each component of the trilateral of capitalism, law, and civilization relies on the other two parts and, importantly, their respective “exceptions” (primitive accumulation, violence, and savagery), where none can exist where one is absent. The implication is that the trilateral is really a sextet; only at any given moment, three parts of the system—the exceptions—are represented much in the same manner as the dark matter of physics, meaning that they are “invisible” insofar as they are obscured through “commonsense” understandings. I employ a dialectical approach that sees fusion between supposed opposites (i.e., capitalism—primitive accumulation, law—violence, and civilization—savagery), which clarifies a veiled integral relationship between two antipodes that are normally considered distinct (Hegel 1967). As Agamben (1998) explained, an exception is not limited to determining what is inside from what is outside but rather traces a threshold between the two, where outside and inside, the normative and its other, are twisted into a complex topology of power that enables the validity of the sovereign order. The intersection of the convergent topologies between the trilateral of logics and its exceptions is what Gregory (2007)—following Agamben’s (1998, 7) account of “a hidden point of intersection between juridical institutional and the bio-political models of power”—called a “vanishing point”; that is, the space where sovereign power and biopower coincide and *homo sacer*, or “life exposed to death,” is produced as the embodiment of bare life. This process is visualized in Figure 5.1, where the two sides of the diagram are meant to represent a single system. Although the left side, or the “dark matter of the state,” typically goes unnoticed and is made banal through the innumerable discursive and psychological processes that condition people to accept sovereign authority, it is actually co-constitutive of the
Figure 5.1  Trilateral of logics.

Source: Author.
right side, or the “matter of the state.” My argument encourages the conceptual folding together of this diagram along the line of the “threshold,” so that the various components of sovereign power become recognized as a mutually reinforcing complex.

Accordingly, it is along the threshold that the “visible geographies” of the trilateral of logics coalesce with its “invisible geographies.” The state of exception comes into being in this merger, which is the capacity of sovereign power to act beyond the examples of the rules it has established (i.e., capitalism, civilization, and law) to encompass exceptions to these rules (i.e., primitive accumulation, savagery, and violence). The state of exception invests the state with an absolute authority that transcends the rule of law and all other established rules, precisely because there is no other source of final or absolute authority (Agamben 1998). The state of exception is thus the monopoly of violence both through law and beyond law; that is, it is a fortiori sovereign power itself (Schmitt [1922] 2006). Through sovereign-legal means, capitalism and its civilizing-cum-valorizing projects (i.e., colonialism, state formation, modernization, development, and now neoliberalization) are elevated to a position that always exceeds law; they are positioned as being beyond reproach. As Gregory (2007, 211) recognized, “Colonialism frequently operates under the imprimatur of law, both in the past and the present, and its violent assaults on land, liberty and life are regularly authorized and articulated through legal formula-ries. The legislative and interpretive fields, the actions of rulers and judges, are thus suffused with violence.” Appreciating Gregory’s argument, and inspired by the anarchic strain of poststructuralist thought, my argument proceeds as an anarchist critique of capitalism, law, civilization, and the modern nation-state, which, following Anderson (1991) and Billig (1995), is understood as a smaller-scale replica of the colonial state. Although differing in their distribution and diffusion across space, both colonial and national-state power express the same violent principles of a privileged few wielding influence over others and imposing a singular identity on antecedent ways of imagining belonging. Just as the colonial state sought and was frequently able to impose a monopoly on violence (state of exception), the struggle to create the nation-state is likewise a struggle for the monopoly of the means of violence (Harris 2004). What is created in both instances—a colonial state or nation-state—is itself a means of violence. In recognizing this congruency, to be “post-colonial” in any meaningful sense then is to also be “post-statist” or anarchic, wherein the authority, hierarchies, and violence on which these twin state projects have been built are rejected tout court.

Given the atrocities perpetrated under Pol Pot’s rule, and in particular the entire population’s forced resettlement to the countryside, Cambodia
might appear to be a particularly problematic location to make arguments for the nullification of property and law. Yet my arguments are in favor not of a reconfiguration of hierarchy through reinterpretations of the state, law, and property, as was the project of the Khmer Rouge, but to rescind hierarchy entirely, where emancipation means anarchy (Springer 2011). My direct use of the word anarchy will undoubtedly be viewed as polemic in some quarters, which opens me to a particular type of straw-person argument constructed by those who, whether knowingly or not, stoke the funeral pyre for emancipatory politics by refusing to liberate their own political imagination from the prison (the camp?) of state-based politics. The typical variation of this position will be to focus on anarchism as the advocation of violence, a position that I find antithetical to anarchism precisely because all violence involves a form of authority over another individual and is thus a disavowal of freedom, not its promotion. The suffix archy is from the Greek and denotes a system of rule or government (i.e., monarchy—rule by one, patriarchy—rule by men). An-archy, then, in its most basic form, is a negation of any and all authority, the rule by none. In short, I understand anarchism as a critique not only of the discourses and institutionalization of authority, but also of the institutionalization and authority of particular discourses.

This chapter is not intended as a comprehensive overview of the historical geographies of Cambodia’s property regime, nor does it serve as fine-grained empirical account of the neoliberalization of the Cambodian state, which I have unpacked in detail in chapters one and two. Likewise, this chapter does not offer a proposal as to the “final product” of an anarchist (re)vision of social organization in Cambodia. The banality of sovereign violence explored here positions all end-state politics (neoliberal, Marxian, or otherwise) as indefensible, where spatio-temporality itself collapses such utopian fantasies into dystopian realities. I thus refuse the notion of an end-state precisely because, in a social world that never sits still, identity politics are ultimately insurmountable. I instead want to suggest that the Marxian drive to revolution should be reformulated as perpetual vigilance toward and sustained critique of commonsense logics so that deference to “authority,” and the hierarchies that sustain such submission, might be eroded. In this sense, following Call (2002), I see anarchism as having no definitive end-state, where resistance should instead be considered a permanent “means without end” (Agamben 2000a). So although I am cognizant of Marx’s ([1888] 1994, 101) criticism that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it,” precisely because “changing the world presupposes changing the representation of the world, and a representation of the world can only be obtained when one has sufficiently interpreted it” (Heidegger 1971, 35), the focus
of my argument is explanation, not implementation. This is in keeping with the diagnostic approach, following Foucault (1983), that informs this book. We should not underestimate the power of transformative discourse. Knowledge never merely represents but instead serves some purpose, intervening in the constitution of the world it seeks to describe (Butler 1997). Therefore, although this chapter is effectively silent on how a (post)anarchic alternative society might be constructed, this does not undermine the essence of its critique, as it allows us to further decipher the symbolic impressions of capitalism, law, civilization, and the state and thereby dispute their shared rationality.

**Blood, Fire, and Zombification: Primitive Accumulation as Capitalism’s Dialectic “Other”**

In recounting capitalism’s origins, Marx recognized that the capitalist societies of Western Europe had grown out of the economic structure of feudal society, wherein the dissolution of the latter emancipated the elements of the former. Yet far from the idealized picture painted by the originators of classical political economy on the essential “rightness” of capitalism, Marx revealed how the immediate producers and workers could only sell their labor after ceasing to be slaves or serfs and escaping from the regime of the guilds and their restrictive labor regulations:

> These newly free men became sellers of themselves only after they had been robbed of their own means of production, and all the guarantees of existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements. And this history of their expropriation, is written in the annals of [hu]mankind in letters of blood and fire. (Marx [1867] 1976, 875)

Although feudalistic systems were profuse outside of Europe at the time when capitalism began to adopt its colonial bent, in Cambodia the monarchy was not easily constructed as an enemy from which capitalism could offer liberation. Cambodia’s monarchical tradition was founded on the principles of the *Devaraja*, the cult of the divine god-king (Chandler 2007), meaning that the monarch was revered as celestial, and any maintenance of authority in land or otherwise was seen as inheritance of this divinity (Ricklefs 1967). Therefore, capitalism’s discourse of “emancipation” was much more difficult to instill, as there was no archvillain to pit the invented necessity of capitalism against. In the context of Cambodia, the use of violence as such would necessarily have to be much more overt if the capitalist crusade was to be won.

Colonialism was, of course, only an early chapter in the continuing story of capitalism’s geographical diffusion, but to Marx ([1867] 1976, 916) it
was nonetheless a process that was unmistakably built on “brute force,” a condition that ominously foreshadows its contemporary incarnation as neoliberalism. Luxemburg ([1913] 1951, 365) demonstrated the rationality behind such brutality, arguing that the accumulation of capital “depends in all respects on noncapitalist strata and social organizations existing side by side with [capitalism]” and that this character has an expansionary logic insofar as capitalism eventually requires the means of production and the labor power of the entire globe for unfettered accumulation. The rise of colonialism under capitalism, in her view, was inevitable due to the overwhelming majority of resources and labor power still existing within “the orbit of pre-capitalist production—this being the historical milieu of accumulation,” which, according to capitalism’s own logic, required it to “go all out to obtain ascendancy over these territories and social organizations” (Luxemburg [1913] 1951, 365). Furthermore, she viewed particular places and their economies as always combining capitalist and noncapitalist modes of production. Accordingly, Luxemburg ([1913] 1951, 365) argued that capitalism is able to seek out new strata for conquest; those places with higher degrees of non-capitalist production will see higher degrees of violence as accumulation proceeds, precisely because “primitive conditions allow of a greater drive and of far more ruthless measures than could be tolerated under purely capitalist social conditions.” Thus, Vickery’s (1986) suggestion that the colonialism of French Indochina was somehow less cruel because the Cambodian monarch had appealed to France to establish a protectorate in 1863, thereby saving the country from dissolution at the hands of aggressive neighbors, is a disreputable erasure of the violence that went into French colonial rule and in particular its construction of a cadastral property system. As an example of imperial violence and early primitive accumulation in Cambodia, we can look to June 17, 1884, when France changed the terms of the protectorate, forcing King Norodom to accept administrative, judicial, and commercial reform and to hand over direct control of the Khmer kingdom, whereby Article IX of this convention indicates that “the land of the Kingdom, up to that day the exclusive property of the Crown, will cease to be inalienable. The French and Cambodian authorities will proceed to establish private property in Cambodia” (quoted in Thion 1992, 29). Yet this new property system did not entirely transform traditional land-holding practice, as Cambodians continued to clear forested land for cultivation regardless of title, and occupation for actual use became roughly the equivalent of Western notions of “ownership” (Russell 1997), suggesting that an articulation of modes of production had occurred.

Post-Marxian scholars like Rey (1973) adopted this notion of articulation of modes of production and took the dependency theory of Frank
(1969) to task for considering the whole world capitalist from the moment Europe embarked on its colonial path. Articulation put a whole new spin on the academy’s (in)ability to explain the “underdevelopment” of the global south (Wolpe 1980). Harvey (2003) contended that the disadvantage of this post-dependency approach is that it views accumulation as being somehow “outside” of capitalism as a closed system, yet he still found relevance in Luxemburg’s theorization of capital stabilizing itself through its externalities, and drew a parallel to Hegel’s (1967) inner dialectic of capitalism. In poststructuralist terms, “we might say that capitalism always creates its own ‘Other’,” Harvey (2003, 141–142) mused, where “capitalism can either make use of some pre-existing outside (non-capitalist social formations or some sector within capitalism . . . that has not yet been proletarianized) or it can actively manufacture it.” Such understanding reveals the extent to which the historical geographies of capitalism were shaped by the “organic relation” between expanded reproduction and violent processes of dispossession; and from this, said Harvey (2003), dialectics allow us to further appreciate that market liberalization will not result in a state of harmony wherein everyone is better off. Instead, it will produce ever-greater levels of social inequality, as has been demonstrated over the last 30 years under neoliberalism (Harvey 2005).

The primary components of accumulation by dispossession identified by Harvey (2003) are unmistakably evident in present-day Cambodia: the violent expulsion of peasants through land privatization, the conversion of common property rights into exclusive property rights, the suppression of alternative and indigenous forms of production and consumption, the commodification of labor, the appropriation of natural resources, the monetization of exchange and taxation, the continuation of slavery through the sex industry, and the proliferation of usury. Accordingly, if the dialectics of capital saw it prey on its “Other” under colonial and national state-making projects, then the Cambodian example makes it very clear that what we are witnessing today in the aftermath of two world wars and the subsequent unraveling of Keynesian economics can be read as simply another chapter in capitalism’s enduring malevolence, written once more in the very same “letters of blood and fire.” Analogous to the idea that neoliberalism represents the frontline in class power’s reconstitution (Harvey 2005), De Angelis (2004) viewed neoliberalism as a form of “new enclosures” designed to appropriate and dissolve the social commons. Thus, the logic of primitive accumulation feeding off noncapitalist strata remains intact, but even more so, the “Other” of capital is actively produced as accumulation by dispossession.

Although neoliberal rhetoric would have us believe that its reinvigorated project is not unlike the resurrection of Christ, offering salvation
for all members of society, the empirical realities of Cambodia make no mistake that neoliberalization is a vindictive and soulless corpse (Springer 2010). Neoliberalization represents a zombification of capital (Peck 2010b), characterized by an insatiable appetite for the most rudimentary characteristic of capitalism: violent accumulation. In feeding off its externalities, largely by drawing the global south deeper into its dialectical logic, this new regime of accumulation by dispossession is occurring in contexts, like Cambodia, where the feudal stage had been usurped by colonialism. Yet the historico-geographical legacies of colonialism might explain why we are so clearly able to recognize primitive accumulation and its violences in transitional contexts for what they are, because as Marx ([1867] 1976, 916) noted, “[F]orce is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power.” Awareness for dispossession under colonialism might also explain why many indigenous groups have so resoundingly rejected the “emancipatory” rhetorics of neoliberalism and are actively organizing against its violent delivery (Postero 2005).

**Illuminating the Dark Matter of Sovereignty: Biopolitics, the Ban, and the Production of Bare Life**

The extent to which anarchist thought informs biopolitics is revealing. When Foucault (2008) began contemplating the application of political power on all aspects of human life, including the power over death, although never cited, it seems clear that French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s ([1851] 2007, 294) philosophy on governance served as inspiration:

> To be governed is to be at every operation, at every transaction, noted, registered, enrolled, taxed, stamped, measured, numbered, assessed, licensed, authorized, admonished, forbidden, reformed, corrected, punished. It is, under the pretext of public utility, and in the name of the general interest, to be placed under contribution, trained, ransomed, exploited, monopolized, extorted, squeezed, mystified, robbed; then, at the slightest resistance, the first word of complaint, to be repressed, fined, despised, harassed, tracked, abused, clubbed, disarmed, choked, imprisoned, judged, condemned, shot, deported, sacrificed, sold, betrayed; and, to crown all, mocked, ridiculed, outraged, dishonored. That is government; that is its justice; that is its morality.

From this appraisal, one might say that biopolitics was always and everywhere the stuff of the modern state in both its national and colonial forms. Inasmuch as Proudhon’s insights reveal the coincidence of sovereign power and biopower, they also signal the state of exception, or the state’s dark matter. As it is theorized in physics, dark matter is not incidental, accounting for the vast majority of the mass in the observable universe. Represented
in modern states by primitive accumulation, violence, and the discursive production of savagery (see Figure 5.1), dark matter is not inconsequential to sovereignty either. Within the rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques of governance (Barry et al. 1996), dark matter accounts for much more of the mass of the state than its visible components. That the majority of the state’s functioning appears invisible can be understood as the very locus of its power, which Foucault hinted at when he defined government as the “conduct of conduct,” or governmentality (Lemke 2001). It is the condition of being constantly surveilled by the state’s “technologies of power” that ensures capitulation to government, not because of the sovereign’s threat of death as in traditional modes of power but, as Foucault (1988) recognized, because the processes of subject formation ensure that individuals memorize particular “truth” claims (i.e., the “rightness” of law, civilization, and capitalism—the visible spectrum of sovereignty) and convert them into rules of conduct. Applying this principle to the violent expulsions on which property is premised, Blomley (2000, 90) argued that violence no longer needs to be meted out for the property regime to be operative, as “the violences of regulation are increasingly internalized in modern society . . . the policing of the self becomes a reflexive act.” Government constitutes itself in this reflexive processing of truth, emphasizing that “society must be defended” against its internal enemies (Foucault 2003) via the regulation of the body (Foucault 1990) and by way of political technologies such as procedures, institutions, and legal forms (Lemke 2001), which foster particular political rationalities, thereby enabling people to be governed as subjects (Foucault 1988).

Processes of neoliberal subjectification and its associated disciplinary rationalities, strategies, technologies, and techniques are well underway in neoliberalizing Cambodia, wherein subjects internalize and continually “perform” the ideology of the state through a myriad of discursive formations (as is described in chapter four). Under such conditions of intensifying “auto-correction” to the logics of capitalism, civilization, and law, the dark matter of the Cambodian state becomes ever more “misrecognized” (Bourdieu 2001). Put differently, properly made state subjects are either unwilling or unable to recognize primitive accumulation, savagery, and violence as inherent components of the state’s composition. Such misrecognition is precisely why Adam Smith’s version of capitalism does not recognize ongoing primitive accumulation and instead banishes accumulation by dispossession to the annals of time immemorial as “previous accumulation” (Perelman 2000). The revival of classical economics further suggests that biopolitical subject formation has only intensified under neoliberalism (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), allowing what was once a fringe utopian idea to materialize as a divergent yet related series of neoliberalizations
(Peck 2008) as more states, including Cambodia, come to embrace neo-
liberal modalities. But when considered through the lens of Agamben, 
Smith’s abandonment of primitive accumulation to the past is arresting.
The relation of the ban is a relation of exception, and as Agamben (1998, 
21) maintained, “[S/h]e who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set 
outside the law and made indifferent to it but rather abandoned by it, 
that is, exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, 
outside and inside, become indistinguishable. It is literally not possible to 
say whether the one who has been banned is outside or inside the juridical 
order.” Accordingly, in the same way that savagery and violence designate a 
threshold between their respective dialectical others of civilization and law 
within the trilateral of logics, so too does primitive accumulation represent 
both an exception from the juridico-capitalist order and the command and 
insignia of the sovereign.

By exposing sovereign power’s trilateral of logics through an illumina-
tion of its perverse rationality, that is, its dark matter, we call the state back 
into the light where its grotesque contortions are revealed as Leviathan. 
The full implications of this sentiment were made evident to me by the 
evictees of Spean Ches Village, Sihanoukville, who on April 20, 2007 
saw their homes burned, their possessions stolen, their people shot, their 
animals slaughtered, and their children terrorized when some 150 Royal 
Cambodian Armed Forces personnel and military police armed with guns, 
electric batons, shields, tear gas, and a bulldozer stormed their village, 
forcing 105 families from their land (Cambodian Human Rights Action 
Committee 2009). A constant and notably unprompted refrain from par-
ticipants was an analogy between life under the contemporary state and 
life under the Khmer Rouge:

The police are corrupt; they get money so they don’t care about us. They 
take our motorbikes, they take everything, like our chickens, dogs, our 
generators, everything. They are like robbers! They burn our clothing, 
burn our homes, and steal everything. These people are worse than 
the Khmer Rouge. They make my life more difficult than during the 
Pol Pot time. (Interview, Farmer/Fisher, female, age 48, June 20, 2007, 
Sihanoukville)

Life is very difficult here, more difficult than during the Pol Pot time. In 
the Pol Pot time they kill us but at least we have food to eat. Now they try to 
kill us and we have no food either. With Pol Pot we have land and can grow 
food, now we have no land so we cannot even feed ourselves. (Interview, 
Farmer/Fisher, male, age 44, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)

Now my life is much worse than the Pol Pot time, because these people are 
so cruel, they act like we are not even human. They destroy our houses and 
steal everything from us. During Pol Pot, no, we just don’t have enough to
The common thread is the vanishing point between biopower and sovereign power, as life under both regimes ensures particular Cambodians are reduced to bare life or *hominis sacri*, a people who can be killed, but not sacrificed, as their lives and thus so too their deaths do not count (Agamben 1998). The difference is that whereas Pol Pot’s policies targeted affluent and educated Cambodians who were singled out as “enemies of the revolution” (Kiernan 1996), Hun Sen’s regime targets the poor who have little recourse to resist eviction, whether through legal means or otherwise. As these quotations suggest, for many Cambodians who make up the majority rural poor, their daily lives did not change in a radical sense under Pol Pot, as they have always lived with very little security. Exposure to bare life under the Khmer Rouge came via malnutrition, medical neglect, and the paranoia that was instilled through a looming threat that at any moment they could be identified as a dissenter and sent to Security Prison 21 (S-21), Pol Pot’s notorious interrogation and torture facility (Chandler 2000). In contrast, primitive accumulation is the sine qua non of the neoliberalizing Cambodian state’s dark matter, and it is through dispossession that the production of bare life occurs in contemporary Cambodia.

**Accumulation by Dispossession as the State of Exception: The Integrality of Law, Property, and Violence**

The notion that the bulk of Cambodia’s current problems rest on a lack of rule of law is a well-traversed line of argument in the literature (see Etcheson 2005; Un 2009). On the global stage, this argument was popularized by De Soto (2000), who argued that the greatest “failure” of the global south is the lack of rule of law to uphold private property and provide a framework for enterprise. De Soto’s brand of common sense has won him accolades from the global capitalist intelligentsia, yet he and his followers are unsurprisingly oblivious to the explicit and implicit violences of law and property and instead take neoliberalism as a panacea for all societal ills. Cambodian civil society organizations have recapitulated this line of thinking (see ADHOC 2010; LICADHO 2007b), and interviews confirmed its prevalence, revealing the depth to which it influences public perceptions of Cambodia’s contemporary political economy:

Lack of enforcement of the law [is Cambodia’s biggest problem]. People can get away with their dishonest activity, their criminal act. I mean there are no sanctions…it’s like if the kid committed any wrongdoing and you
don’t condemn that, it encourage[s] him to go more...from [land]grabbing another place, to [land]grabbing another place. So I think because of the lack of enforcement of the law, that’s why land disputes happen. (Interview, Anonymous Cambodian, Program Officer, Asian Development Bank, August 3, 2007, Phnom Penh)

The violence that happens in Cambodia...is because the implementation of law is limited and corrupt at times. If we are not scared by law enforcement, then we do not care about what we do right?...it is normal in society if the law enforcement is weak, then violence will happen. (Interview, Sok Sam Oeun, Executive Director, Cambodian Defenders Project Director, June 27, 2007, Phnom Penh)

People resort to violence because there is no, or a very poor alternative to violence. If there is no rule of law, no court, no justice, you have to take justice into your own hands....In Canada, you have the police [who] would arrest any suspect immediately, but here it’s a kind of vigilante justice. So [the reason why violence is a problem] is a lack of rule of law. (Interview, Sam Rainsy, Official Opposition Leader, Sam Rainsy Party, July 19, 2007, Phnom Penh)

These views, which see a failure to implement the rule of law as the primary obstacle to greater democracy and peace in Cambodia, fail to recognize the connection between violence and law and in particular how the institutionalization of violence through law is the foundation of the property system (Blomley 2000, 2003).

Precisely because a property regime functions to legitimize a founding act of violence, primitive accumulation as it were, then so too must property be conceived as violence. The presumed line between validation and expression is always blurry, and any apparently preexisting phenomenon (i.e., property) is necessarily an artifact of its performative constitution (i.e., primitive accumulation; Butler 1997). In other words, property is impossible without accumulation by dispossession, and both are impossible without organized violence. Accordingly, Blomley (2003) recognized law as the glue that binds this bloody trinity of property, accumulation by dispossession, and violence together and argues that violent geographies must be recognized at all three levels of legal formation: origin, legitimation, and enforcement. Writing a century earlier, Tolstoy ([1900] 2004) arrived at much the same conclusion, suggesting that the essence of legislation does not rest in the idea of the collective will of the people or rights but in the fact that those who wield organized violence can compel others to obey them.

Yet law successfully deflects attention away from its violent character and, as a consequence, “the particular ‘force’ of law exists in this capacity of law to maintain itself in relation to an exteriority” (Agamben 1998, 18). To Agamben the structure of sovereignty and the legal framework
that defines it are constructed through a relation of exception, wherein the essence of state authority is not the monopoly to sanction but the monopoly to decide, which demonstrates that the state does not require law to create law. What is principally at issue here is the production of the very space in which a juridico-institutional order can acquire legitimacy. The space created and defined by the state of exception is not limited to identifying that which is inside and outside its domain but instead “traces a threshold” between the two:

on the basis of which outside and inside...enter into those complex topological relations that make the validity of the juridical order possible. The “ordering of space” that is...constitutive of the sovereign nomos is therefore not only a “taking of land” (Landesnahme)...but above all a “taking of the outside” an exception (Ausnahme). In its archetypal form, the state of exception is therefore the principle of every juridical localization. (Agamben 1998, 19)

Through Agamben we can begin to understand how primitive accumulation comprises the very creation of both the sovereign (“taking of land”) and the state of exception (“taking of the outside”) and how sovereignty and exception concurrently constitute primitive accumulation. Because capitalism’s originary violence as primitive accumulation is continually reproduced in contemporary Cambodia as accumulation by dispossession, we might productively consider capitalism in the country as an ongoing campaign to create a sovereign state of exception.

Moreover, the corollary to the notion that law can be created without legal means is the idea that the basis of authority is always violence, whether explicitly enforced or implicitly threatened; however, because of the relation of exception that law maintains with respect to violence, “law is possible only to the extent that it has such an outside against which to define itself. That constitutive outside is at once radically set apart and deeply embedded within law” (Blomley 2003, 124). Consequently, law is not only organized violence but also a form of “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 2001) insofar as it is a political tool that renders particular violences legitimate and invisible and such that the coupling of law and violence becomes seemingly oxymoronic as our political imaginations are frozen toward the possibility of violence being internal to law (Keane 1996). We can see this freezing occur through the unfolding thoughts of the spokesperson for Group 78, a community under continuous threat of eviction because of its “prime” waterfront location in Phnom Penh:

I’m very worried about this situation, but in this country we have the law, so I depend on rule of law....It is a problem though that the government
Faith is initially placed in law, followed by recognition of how violence is entwined with law through its processes, in this case primitive accumulation. Yet this thawing of the participant’s political imagination is fleeting, and he ultimately returns to the icebound idea that rule of law will function in the service of social justice. Thus, in arguing that “the major challenge for Cambodia is to establish the rule of law and create the effective property rights which are a prerequisite for a market economy,” Russell (1997, 101) unknowingly demonstrated the trilateral of logics, whereby the legal construction of a property system is tied to the functioning of capitalism, both of which underpin the advancement of civilization (i.e., “development”). Clearly, this interpretation has nothing to do with the intention of his argument, the weight of which is firmly in favor of securing the rule of law so that neoliberalization can proceed more smoothly. This is because Russell’s political rationality, like that of the Group 78 representative, is preoccupied with the “visible geographies” of the Cambodian state’s matter. Both view the exceptions of violence, savagery, and primitive accumulation as existing outside of the order of the state, rather than as fundamental to its composition.

La Grande Danse Macabre: Property as Theft, Development as Eviction

In the first half of 2008, a total of 60 land disputes across Cambodia came to a head through evictions, protests, violence, or court cases and, of these, Amnesty International (2008, 1) suggested that only “thirteen appear to have been forced evictions.” The organization based this curious assessment of Cambodia’s evictions on the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1997) definition, which determines “forced evictions” to be “the permanent or temporary removal against the will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection.” The implication is that law, if enforced, will offer appropriate protection for evictees. This is, however, a sanguine interpretation
that ignores the dialectic between law and violence. The Amnesty report further pointed to the UN Special Rapporteur’s (Kothari 2007, 3) *Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-Based Evictions and Displacement*, which states “[t]he prohibition of forced evictions does not apply to evictions carried out both in accordance with the law and in conformity with the provisions of international human rights treaties.” Although this statement is intended to lend validity to evictions occurring through legal processes and thus win our favor for the implementation of law, there is an unanticipated double function at play, as a critical reading of this statement exposes how evictions can only be deemed “forced” if they occur in the absence of law and thus how the law is able to legitimize violent processes.

Benjamin ([1921] 1986) was well aware of this duplicitous character of law, and in his *Critique of Violence* he sought to expose the incessant tendency for violence to be obscured in its institutionalized forms. His conclusion was to condemn the juridico-political order based on the concealment of its violence through executive and administrative channels. Similar concern for the institutionalization of violence shaped “classical” anarchist thought on capitalism. Reclus, for example, considered capitalism pathological to human societies, and viewing property as theft, he reasoned that to “steal it back” was an emancipatory act (Fleming 1988). Although it is not practical for poor Cambodians to engage their evictors in the sense Reclus advocates, particularly given the weaponry that is employed to dispossess them, we can nonetheless see how a view of property as theft arises through their experiences of eviction:

They did not explain to us why they try to make us leave, they just yell and tell us to leave and point their guns at us. . . . Then they come back with soldiers and police on 20 April 2007, and they all had guns to make us leave our homes. We know that the land is worth a higher price, so they know this too and it’s like they come and rob us. They are like robbers. (Interview, Farmer/Fisher, female, age 43, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)

They take my land away so how am I going to feed a family, how can I get money? They robbed me of everything. I have nothing, no land, no house. Right now I feel like a slave to get money for living, so how about when I have a wife and children? They will be a slave the same as me. (Interview, Farmer/Fisher, male, age 26, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)

They steal our motorbikes, and all our things, and destroy our houses and everything without even asking or explaining anything to us . . . they start shooting . . . to threaten us, maybe not to kill us this time, but to make us scared like what a robber would do so that they could take all our things. I was very afraid, but I had to stay . . . because I have nowhere else to go and wanted to keep my land . . . they burned my house, stole my chickens, my pigs, they stole everything from me. (Interview, Farmer/Fisher, male, age 45, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)
In these accounts the connections between property and its originary violence become horrifyingly clear, yet a profound disassociation between violence and property (and law more generally) remains within both contemporary social theory and political discourse (Blomley 2000). It is this assumed incommensurability that animates the power of the sovereign. So although law constructs violence as though it is outside its domain, it is in fact a relation of exception, one that traces a twisted topology between them, so that law and violence are never actually opposed and instead “hold each other in a deadly embrace” (Gregory 2007, 211). This relationship between the dialectics of sovereignty/bare life and the dialectics of law/violence is well documented by Agamben (1998), but there are also parallels that can be drawn with the dialectics of civilization/savagery as well, and it was again the “classical” anarchists who pointed the way.

In a passage composed in the dusk of the nineteenth century, yet the relevance of which suggests that it could have been penned to describe the current manifestations of violence under neoliberalism, Reclus (1884, 638) wrote:

The supposed period of tranquility in which we live is really an age of cruelty and violence....Chief among the consequences of the existing social system are murder, maladies, and death. Accustomed order is maintained by rude deeds and brute force, yet [these] things that happen every day and every hour pass unperceived....Far from desiring to replace an era of happiness and peace by an age of disorder and warfare, our sole aim is to put an end to the endless series of calamities, which has hitherto been called by common consent ‘The Progress of Civilization’.

As with so many other variants of anarchist thought, some poststructuralist scholars have picked up on the current of critique against civilization. Said ([1978] 2003, 1993) in particular has demonstrated the unremitting ties between civilization and imperialism, arguing that the resultant imaginative geographies of this conspiratorial pairing never only function at a metaphysical level, as the construction of savagery ensures that the “Other” is never left alone by the othering process. Instead, the “savage Other” is irrevocably drawn into the very constitution of civilization’s geographies through a relation of exception.

How we define ourselves in relation to others who think differently is the process through which civilization is traced, marking the threshold not only between civilization and savagery but also between law and violence, sovereignty, and bare life. Thus, the UN Special Rapporteur’s notion that evictions and displacement can be categorized as “development-based” demonstrates the functioning of the trilateral of logics, where legal logic necessarily coincides with civilizational logic. To be genuinely
“development-based,” evictions must be legal, and to be “legal” evictions should be undertaken in the name of development. Hence, the erasure of the exceptions of savagery and violence from the processes of ongoing primitive accumulation is a mutually reinforcing phenomenon. So although Amnesty International bases its public appeals on the notion that rich and powerful individuals involved in Cambodia’s land disputes are silencing opponents through the manipulation of the criminal justice system, as though some sort of perversion of law and the development process is occurring, what they fail to realize is that such depravity is the very heart of both development and law. Although corruption is undoubtedly playing some role in the dispossession of the poor, the vast majority of the land disputes and evictions in Cambodia are proceeding through legal means. If only 13 of the 60 evictions in the first half of 2008 could be deemed “forced,” as Amnesty International (2008) suggested, then that means that over 78 percent of the land grabs and evictions during this time were considered legal and thus “developmental,” thereby protecting the perpetuation of violent accumulation from censure.

To Gregory (2004), it is this sinister tonality of law—forged within what is seemingly a mundane set of cultural practices—that licenses the unleashing of exemplary violence and calls “the colonial present” into being. Echoing Marx’s view of how history is made, Gregory (2004, 10) compels us not to gloss over colonialism’s erasures but to actively remember the “exactions, suppressions, and complicities that colonialism forced upon the peoples it subjugated, and the way in which it withdrew from them their right to make their own history, ensuring that they did so empathically not under conditions of their own choosing.” Although Gregory hinted at the notion that the colonial present is embodied in all modern states, he did not explicitly acknowledge that there is no fundamental difference between colonization and state-making other than the scale on which these parallel projects operate, so that any substantively anticolonial imagination or postcolonial positionality is also post-statist or anarchic (Anderson 2005). Nonetheless, the brilliance of Gregory’s (2004) exposition is that it not only alerts us to the ongoing relationship between the dialectics of civilization/savagery, law/violence, and sovereignty/bare life, but also encourages us to push our analysis even further to incorporate the dialectics of capitalism/primitive accumulation, thus revealing a grande danse macabre. Many “classical” anarchists saw similar relational patterns, arguing that the capitalist system originated in the forcible seizure of common rights by a few, who in converting these into vested privileges were eventually able to entrench them as statute law and government. Capitalists are maintained, fostered, and perpetuated by law. “In fact, capital is law, statute law, and law is capital” (Parsons 1887, 107). Capitalism, right from its genesis up to its present manifestation under neoliberalism, is therefore immutably bound to
the formations of law and civilization, a trilateral of logics that makes up sovereign power.

**Of Black Flags: Modernity, Muselmanner, and the Inevitability of the Camp?**

During the American Civil War, the black flag was a well-known portent of ruthless combat, indicating that no prisoners would be taken, no lives would be spared, and no quarter would be afforded to the enemy (Goodrich 1999). Arguably, it is for this same reason that the captors of Guantanamo Bay adopted it as their ensign, signifying that while they were holding detainees, they had taken no prisoners as these lives did not count and thus they had kept their oath. In many ways, the return of the camp with the global “war on terror” represents an ominous warning (Minca 2005), a raising of the black flag, one large enough to cast a shadow over all of humanity. But has the camp really made a reappearance, or has it been ignominiously with us since the time of Pol Pot’s S-21, Hitler’s Auschwitz, Stalin’s Gulag, the Second Boer War, Cuba’s insurrection against Spain, Canada’s residential school system, America’s “Trail of Tears,” and possibly even before? To Agamben (1998, 6) the camp is “the decisive event of modernity,” where such politicization of bare life constitutes the birth of sovereignty itself. This is shown, Agamben (1998, 15) argued, “by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is . . . martial law and the state of siege.” Because the originary violence of primitive accumulation is continually reproduced under capitalism as a relation of exception through repeated processes of accumulation by dispossession, we can understand capitalism as an ongoing campaign that imposes martial law and maintains a state of siege. The business of capitalism then is the very production of *hominis sacri*, and it is for this reason that Agamben (1998, 180) argued that “today’s democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development, not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life.” Although overstated insofar as Cambodian and other local elites are well connected to the transnationalization of capital (Glassman 1999; Springer 2010), and thus committed to accumulation by dispossession, Agamben’s point is well taken inasmuch as the position of the global south’s poor majority in the anatomy of capitalism can be productively understood as being maintained through a state of exception.

The invigoration of primitive accumulation under neoliberalism in present-day Cambodia represents an extension of capitalism’s violent
geographies of exception; however, because the structure of the ban functions as much on an exclusive-inclusion (the sovereign) as it does on an inclusive-exclusion (the exception)—effectively blurring to indistinction the line between those lives that count and those that do not (the threshold between life and death)—the sovereign power “requires a material and mappable space within which violence becomes the constitutive element of both the torturer and the victim” (Minca 2005, 407). Thus, what is most terrifying is the realization that the sovereign trilateral of logics represents the production of the camp not only in Cambodia but also on a global scale, where the zombification of capital has much the same effect on human beings. We all become prospective Muselmanner, undead figures located in a space of indistinction between human and inhuman, where each of us exists as “a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions” (Amery 1998, 9). The entire “necropolitical” (Mbembe 2003) apparatus of the trilateral of logics—civilization as the production of savagery, capitalism as ongoing primitive accumulation, and law as the apotheosis of violence—strips us of our humanity, producing an “anonymous mass” of living dead, where we are all made “remnants of Auschwitz” (Agamben 2000b), residues of S-21.

In this light, and in applying an anarchist critique to Cambodia’s historical geographies of violence, what Pol Pot’s revolution did was simply lay the violent character of the state and its legal framework bare. By practicing capital punishment in an overt and immediate sense, where it is no longer hidden behind the obfuscations of law to preserve notions of “civility”—as is the practice of most governments—the sovereign power in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge revealed the fundamental component of all modern sovereign power: bio/necropolitics. As a consequence, some have argued that beyond S-21, Pol Pot effectively transformed the entirety of Cambodia into a camp (Etcheson 2005; Kiernan 1996). Yet metaphorically speaking, what the Khmer Rouge had really done was strip the paint from the walls to reveal a cage as a cage. This idea is in no way meant to downplay the suffering and ongoing trauma of the victims, and the intended meaning should not be misconstrued. My argument, following Agamben (1998), is that the possibility of the camp—as a space of exception—is made flesh by modern states, where the camp is understood as an inner dialectic of sovereignty. Put differently, all states are engaged in the power over life and death (bio/necropolitics); they only differ in terms of the degree to which this fact of sovereign power is made overt. As Benjamin ([1921] 1986, 286) argued, “violence…is the origin of law.” This point is made explicit in the death penalty and is embodied in the activities of the key executive institution of the modern state, the police, and their sovereign authority to use “deadly force” when and where they
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dee a necessary. So although the death penalty, for example, is codified and enacted through law and therefore deemed a “legitimate” function of sovereign power, Pol Pot simply did away with such codification and enactment, effecting his sovereign power directly, killing without “due process.” Both acts of murder—with or without due process—are equally violent, as they both result in the loss of human life, so to say that one is better or worse than the other is not only a profound ethical failure; it is an implicit recapitulation of violence through the acceptance of sovereign power.

To be clear, I have no sympathies for any form of state power; hence, I have forwarded an anarchist position. My argument is that all state power is of the same chord, and whereas most governments (including the Hun Sen administration) hide their violence behind the obfuscations of law, Pol Pot elicits such revulsion on the world stage precisely because, like the Nazis, the sovereign violence of his regime became so obvious. Yet the sovereign violence of the Khmer Rouge was cut from the same cloth as the sovereign violence that underpins all states, both colonial and national. Thus, I simply seek to acknowledge that what at first glance appears as exceptional violence in fact comes to form the rule; it becomes exemplary. Accordingly, my argument encourages the opening of our political imaginations to the “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu 2001), “constant state of emergency” (Benjamin [1921] 1986), “banality of evil” (Arendt 1963), “fascination of the abomination” (Conrad 1969), “pathologies of power” (Farmer 2003), “impossibility of witnessing” (Agamben 2000b), “vanishing points” (Gregory 2007), and, finally, what I have called “dark matter,” that together make up the omnicidal system of our times. In contemporary Cambodia, the dark matter of the trilateral of logics proceeds as a neoliberalization that celebrates the monetization of daily life, champions anomie, places social justice on the auction block, privileges dispossession, allows authority in all its institutionalized guises to function in its own self-interest, and ultimately produces Muselmanner:

These people...hire the police and army to [evict] us, so they only care about money. Now everyone in Cambodia loves money more than being a human. They don't care about anyone else they just want more money. The village chief, the commune chief, they don't care about us either, they just come to take care of their own land and forget about us. No one helps us except the people in this village, we help each other. (Interview, Homemaker, female, age 52, June 21, 2007, Sihanoukville)

Although the ways in which neoliberalization reduces human beings to bare life are unnerving, the participant’s final sentiment reveals that the political picture need not be as bleak as it seems and that we should never allow our dismay to paralyze either our potential for mutual aid or the
possibility of emancipation (Kropotkin [1902] 2008). Through a recognition of the dark matter of states, and by employing a theoretical edifice centered on anarchism, we can begin to view the state of exception that has become so emblematic of neoliberalism’s violent exclusions not as a permanent and paradigmatic outcome of political modernity, as is Agamben’s (1998) belief, but as a momentary potentiality, the realization of which is an occasion for political struggle (Gregory 2006). By tempering Agamben’s (1998) pessimism for the permanence of the camp, and aligning our geographical imaginations to the potential of transformative politics, we can reinvent the black flag of no quarter’s hostility with the black flag of anarchism’s liberationist spirit.

Conclusion

In making a recalcitrant argument that casts aspersions on the institutions of property, law, and the state, I open myself to the inevitable Hobbesian rebuttal that questions the nature of the human animal. The specter of Hobbes is particularly acute in the literature on Cambodia, where all manner of Orientalism, misanthropy, and nihilism have been used to explain enduring expressions of violence in the country (see chapter two for a critique). More generally, sovereignty, law, and by extension, property are repeatedly said to be necessary because, if aggression is programmed into us—as we are told is emphatically the case—and if communalism of some kind is also ingrained—which I acknowledge—is not statism both a necessary expression of our spatiality and a bulwark against our pugnacious tendencies? In both instances these sentiments underestimate humanity and reinforce the authority of oppressive systems of rule. Goldman ([1910] 1969, 61–62) rebuked both violence and statism by drawing an analogy between the state and the cages in which animals are kept:

The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet, how can anyone speak of it today, with every soul in a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed? John Burroughs has stated that experimental study of animals in captivity is absolutely useless. Their character, their habits, their appetites undergo a complete transformation when torn from their soil in field and forest. With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of its potentialities?

Goldman revealed the debilitating violence of “enclosure,” which we should interpret in its double meaning as both internment and primitive accumulation. The functioning of the (capitalist) state through accumulation by dispossession is the paralysis of human capabilities; it adversely
affects human potential by reorganizing our communal ideals in the service of individualism. Although packaged in a discourse that speaks to unleashing human inventiveness, what capitalism is most concerned with is creative destruction (Harvey 2003) through the propagation and entrenchment of the trilateral logic of sovereign power.

Within the trilateral of logics, civilization is conceived precisely insofar as society operates in the service of capital, where both are seen as rationalizing agents, bound under the codes and contracts of the juridico-institutional order as law. Cambodia’s recent experiences consequently allow us to see with more clarity how the dispossession of land and the construction of a property regime are rendered legitimate through the concept of civilization, and particularly through its exception, the construction of a “savage Other.” That is, when primitive accumulation is enacted against ostensibly “savage” peoples said to be in need of civilization, the violence visited on them is rendered “progressive” and we are encouraged not to think of this as violence at all. As Blomley (2000, 89) argued, “law’s violence—construed as rational and regulated—is seen as not only necessary because of the anomic violence beyond law, but also as different. Similarly, liberal property regimes (and their implied violences) are often legitimized by comparing them with the violent spaces where property is absent.” Thus, through discursive appeals to rationality, the notion of civilization—and by extension capital and law—obfuscates the violence undertaken in their name. This continues to be the modus operandi of imperialism everywhere (Said 1993). Civilizational discourse, as a process of legitimation, holds true as much for the colonial state as it does for its mirror image in the nation-state, where the effective coordinates for figuring out who is “civilized” and who is “savage” turn out to be little more than a code for state appropriation (Scott 2009). Consequently, we must reject commonsense views of violence as somehow essential, universal, or psychobiological and that only civilization enabled us to overcome our cruel impulses. In fact, the opposite appears true that our cruelty is largely a product of civilization and its discontents (Zerzan 2005). Mainstream anthropology has largely abandoned the Hobbesian hypothesis that posits violence as a residual of our evolutionary origins as a species (Gowdy 1998; Sahlins 2003). The expression of violence in Cambodia, as it is elsewhere, is above all shaped by shared social structures, ideologies, histories, and geographies, and thus, more than anything, it is reimagining these processes along nonviolent axes that will open pathways toward sustained peace (Springer 2011).

The nonviolent premise of anarchism offers not only a radical critique of the violences of capitalism, law, civilization, and sovereignty but also a productive outlet for emancipatory politics. Anarchism, despite the
oft-repeated mischaracterization, is not about destroying all forms of organization. It is instead an appreciation for the decentralization and diffusion of power rooted in the ethics of difference (Mueller 2003), which is neither denied, essentialized, nor exoticized but embraced as potentially transformative and is thus about creating new forms of organization. Yet through the continual reproduction of the trilateral of capitalism, law, and civilization, we are actively discouraged from considering what the latent possibilities of human creativity might hold under anarchism, once we are finally liberated from the pervasive logic of financial gain and material reward and freed from the hidden and direct violences of sovereignty. Neoliberalization is the continuation of the processes that began with the “invention of capitalism” (Perelman 2000), but what is new is its amplification of the hold that the trilateral of logics has on our political imaginations. Consequently, much like the rhetorical “war on terror,” neoliberalization discursively persuades the wholesale acceptance of the vanishing point, wherein compassion for homo sacer and awareness for the deadly geographies of the exception undergo an erasure from our collective conscience. But we cannot lose sight of the shared humanity of all members of human society. In spite of the pronouncements of the state, its territorial logic, its insidious discourses of nationalism and civilization, and its enactments of law—all of which serve to segregate our collectivism as a single species and partition our good will into stringent categories of belonging—each and every single life counts. We must not forget that it is the exception of sovereignty, homines sacri, who are most exposed to the violence of the state and, further, as the Cambodian situation confirms, that one’s place as homo sacer is secured by capitalism’s ongoing reproduction as primitive accumulation. Law and civilization further the legitimization of accumulation by dispossession, and wherever they are performed, violence is enacted through the state of exception, exposing us all to bare life.

Law can be both indifferent toward and an active participant in the processes of violent accumulation, as is the case in contemporary Cambodia. Hence, to put our faith in the legal system fixing the problem of property in Cambodia, or elsewhere, is to put faith in property solving property, which is, of course, a contradiction. To the question “What is property?” Proudhon (1890 [1970], 223) answered, “property is not self-existent. An extraneous cause—either force or fraud—is necessary to its life and action. In other words, property is not equal to property: it is a negation—a delusion—nothing.” But the historical geographies of capitalism suggest property is something, its existence in space is manifest, and its enclosures intensify with each passing day. Thus, when Russell (1997, 101) wrote, “[t]here now exists an opportunity for the Cambodian people to refine
their legal system and other major institutions. Such changes cannot be made in isolation from the lessons and the legacies of the country’s history,” we must in the second instance take him at his word and in the first reject the myopia of his proposal. In understanding property, we must look to its “extraneous cause,” its histories, its legacies, and its geographies, and in that examination we might come to understand, like Hegel, like Marx, like Agamben, and like so many “classical” anarchists, that what is so often thought to be an exterior is actually a constitutive interior. Property is violence, both in the annals of its history and in the unfolding of its present. To recognize this synchronicity is to reappropriate knowledge and decipher a long-sealed truth, a revelation that might finally allow us to reclaim the role of history under conditions of our own choosing.
Chapter Six
Violent Evictions: Oral Possession and Legal Transgression

Ambrose Bierce’s (1906/2003, 138) *The Devil’s Dictionary* is a marvelous treasure of cynical wisdom, where I couldn’t help but be impressed by the following entry and its sarcastic take on law:

SATAN, n. One of the Creator’s lamentable mistakes, repented in sackcloth and ashes. Being instated as an archangel, Satan made himself multifariously objectionable and was finally expelled from Heaven. Halfway in his descent he paused, bent his head in thought a moment and at last went back. “There is one favor that I should like to ask,” said he.

“What, wretch! You his appointed adversary, charged from the dawn of eternity with hatred of his soul—you ask for the right to make his laws?”

“Pardon; what I have to ask is that he be permitted to make them himself.” It was so ordered.

The passage demonstrates with clarity how we willingly dupe ourselves into accepting an arbitrary set of codes, a condition that draws us ever deeper into a quagmire of legalese, where we are constantly second-guessing our interactions with others. The power of law, at least in part, extends from its near indecipherable complexity, which is played out through its very codification as the written word. In *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy* Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1839, 52) recognized the power of writing, when the Cardinal proclaims “True, This! Beneath the rule of men entirely great, The pen is mightier than the sword.” Beyond these literary portrayals, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that similar ideas have evolved in political theory.

One of the foundational components of anarchist thought, as outlined by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1865/2011), was the distinction drawn between property and possession. Proudhon related property to the Roman
law concept of “sovereign right,” where a proprietor could “use and abuse” his property as he wished, so long as he retained state-sanctioned title.1 In short, property in Proudhon’s reading can be defined as a juridico-institutional means for exploitation. More recently, Hardt and Negri (2009, 5) have argued that the predominant contemporary form of sovereignty “is completely embedded within and supported by legal systems and institutions of governance,” which is a formal organization of power “characterized not only by the rule of law but also equally by the rule of property.” This integral relationship between sovereignty and property compels us to acknowledge that the origination of homo sacer, as an accursed figure of Roman law (Schmitt 1922/2006), came not simply through his exclusion from civil rights before the law, but specifically through his very lack of proprietary means. The figure of homo sacer is, according to Agamben (1998, 7), the embodiment of bare life, or “life exposed to death,” precisely because he may be killed, but not sacrificed. Hominis sacri are therefore defined by lives, and so too deaths, that do not count. No longer regarded as a “deep” metaphysical or transcendental entity before the sovereign laws of God, the individual is now, before the sovereign laws of man, considered a “superficial” entity endowed with property, defined not by being, but by having (Hardt and Negri 2009). In other words, to have political significance before the law and to be included in the sovereign order, that is, “to count,” one must hold property.

Proudhon contrasted this supposedly God-given, sovereign right of property—viewed as an affront to the liberty, equality, and security of the community—with possession, which cannot be mobilized for exploitation as it is based on actual use. So a house that one lives in is regarded as a possession, while a house that is rented becomes a means for exploiting others and is thus considered property. While property attempts to mobilize the means of production as a natural, sovereign right of an individual (i.e., a proprietor), Proudhon (1840/2011) argued that this was an illegitimate form of use that constituted a form of theft from the commons. This is not to say that a means of production should not exist, which is of course impossible, but rather that such means should not belong to a sovereign proprietor as a so-called “natural right.” Instead, everyone connected to the said means of production should share in the bounty and surpluses it produces. Moreover, this is not to suggest that everything should be shared. Your possessions are your own based upon their continuing actual use. So for example, if you have a plot of land that you maintain to sustain your existence, it is your possession based on its actual use. If you employ others at wages to work on this land for your own profit, or simply speculate on its value without actually using it, it becomes property. If a group collectively works on the plot of land and all involved benefit from its use, it remains a
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possession, but is expressed in a collectivized form. Property is thus defined by its mechanism of exploitation, which makes it fundamentally different from possession insofar as it relies on coercion, exclusion, hierarchy, and most notably, enforcement (or law) to maintain its viability.

This anarchist notion of actual use as the only valid form of title is also a hallmark of so-called “primitive” or “preliterate” societies (Clastres 1974/2007; Scott 2009). It similarly remains widespread in contemporary Cambodia, where literacy rates are still relatively low compared to other countries (UNDP 2009), and the unfolding of a juridico-cadastral system is at odds with local understandings of space, which are entrenched in community consensus and existing occupation. In contrast to such traditional spatializations, changes to the land tenure system in Cambodia were introduced when the Cold War ended in 1989, as the Cambodian government attempted to make the country more attractive to foreign capital (St. John 1997). Despite this preparatory development, public use of state-owned land went unchallenged throughout the 1980s and much of the 1990s (Slocomb 2010). Yet the capstone to Cambodia’s political economic transformation and rapid neoliberalization (Springer 2010) was the promulgation of the Cambodian Land Law in 2001, and with its enactment, significant land reform was implemented and widespread land conflict ensued. This new piece of legislation is clearly the most important written document vis-à-vis land in the country, as it outlines the legal framework upon which property may evolve. Yet the interpretation of the 2001 Land Law with respect to existing ideas of actual use has created significant confusion within the Cambodian public sphere, particularly among those who have faced so-called “illegal” eviction. Consequently, high-ranking government officials and military personnel have become emboldened by what they view as a carte blanche to capital accumulation in the form of land.

Such conflict has not gone unnoticed by a range of civil society actors. Yet rather than challenging the legislation that has gravely worsened the strife of the Cambodian poor by spawning a seemingly endless wave of forced evictions, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) community and the World Bank in particular have looked to formal land registration and marketization as key means to improve land tenure security in Cambodia. Unfortunately instead of mitigating land conflict, this approach has significantly increased the vulnerability of Cambodians to landlessness by intensifying the need for written certification to prove “ownership.” With the refashioning of traditional landholding patterns through a market-based model, the motivation to acquire land in Cambodia is no longer concerned with sustenance, but is instead now primarily related to profit, where speculators seek to “get ahead” (i.e., to gain ascendency or to exploit) via the accumulation of land transformed into property. In recent
years vast amounts of land have been converted to tree plantations across Southeast Asia (Hall 2011), which has resulted in significant labor fragmentation and displacement that intensifies urbanization as rural peoples are stripped of their foothold on the land that has traditionally sustained them (Li 2011). In Cambodia this pattern unfolds through well-positioned power brokers who have begun dispossession—literally nullifying the possessions of everyday Cambodians—en masse by imposing their own supposed proprietorship.

Whereas possession is a well-understood and accepted concept in present-day Cambodia, a cultural basis rooted in what Scott (2009, 221) refers to as “orality”—rather than “illiteracy,” which calls attention to “a different and potentially positive medium of cultural life as opposed to a mere deficiency”—coupled with a long history of subsistence agriculture, seminomadic lifestyles, barter economies, and—until recently—widespread land availability have all ensured that notions of property are nothing if not vague among the country’s majority rural poor. These circumstances are not dissimilar to the patterns found elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where the historical record confirms that legal formalization of land ownership was largely contemporaneous to the coming of a profit-oriented outlook initiated by European colonialism (McCloud 1995). The key difference is that in Cambodia the concept of “actual use” over “proprietorship” has arguably even more validity, as patterns of landholding were complicated by forced exurbanization under the Khmer Rouge and the post-Pol Pot resettlement patterns that saw thousands of individuals and families attempt to return to their homes, only to find them destroyed (Tyner 2008). The devastation wrought by years of war not only necessitated settlement into vacant plots previously occupied by victims of the genocide, but also encouraged the readoption of communal living by extended families to reflect pre-Khmer Rouge organizing principles. In such a context marked by alternative spatialities based on actual use, we can view the creation of property as an explicit imposition. Likewise, it is within such a geographical context that the integral pairing of primitive accumulation and law seeks to find traction. The objective is clear: forcibly evict those individuals presently occupying a desired parcel of land and simultaneously legitimize this violent and exclusionary claim to space through a litany of “official” written documents that make little sense to all but those who spend several years studying a codified set of precepts, conventions, and precedents, and virtually no sense to those who come from a cultural milieu characterized by orality. This is at once the methodology of primitive accumulation and the harsh power of law. The consequence of this unholy union is that, despite the common characterization of Cambodia’s eviction cases as “illegal,” most disposessions actually proceed through the written articles of law.
Recent accounts of land conflict have argued for class and power to take center stage in analyses of agrarian change (Khan 2004), and while I agree on the importance of such a focus, I am keen to modify this slightly in emphasizing violence and law, and particularly their intersections. This shift in focus follows Peluso and Lund (2011, 667), who recognize the relationship between class structure and land control as the lynchpin of agrarian studies, yet are keen to highlight a series of emergent frontiers, including “new legal and violent means of challenging previous land controls.” Moreover, the conflict between orality and law is not unique to Cambodia, and I hope to demonstrate a wider resonance to my argument than my chosen case study. One can easily draw a connection to the plight of First Nations peoples in British Columbia, where Sparke (2006, 16) has demonstrated how oral traditions have been cast as illegitimate in “a Western juridical field that conventionally accepts only written and cartographic documentation of territory.” Similarly, the contemporary situation in Cambodia is not without historical precedent in other locations where agrarian change has been underpinned by primitive accumulation. For example, Terzibasoğlu (2004, 159) argues that within the context of late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Anatolia, existing oral traditions and landholding practices were “sidelined in the face of land registration and the increasing primacy of title to land as proven by official deeds.” As Marxist historian E. P. Thompson (1975) has observed in his account of the British Black Act, these legal struggles are indicative of how law often works not to codify customary practices, but to criminalize them. The processes of agrarian reform that see antecedent systems of landholding transformed into property regimes through land titling accordingly signify a profound shift in the existing moral economy of those locations being drawn into a capitalist order.

Against the historical backdrop of colonial power, a number of critical studies have interrogated the contemporary context of liberal peacebuilding in the wake of so-called civil wars (Cramer 2006), emphasizing the detrimental results that come from framing “peace” as inextricably linked to the securing of markets (Paris and Sisk 2009; Pugh et al. 2008). Within this literature attention has centered on “greed” and “grievance,” where scholars like Collier and Hoeffler (2004) have examined the role of pre-existing egalitarianism and social cohesion in any prospect for peace. On the other side of this debate are scholars like Harrison and Huntington (2001), who—in advancing a capitalist morality—complain that existing cultural mores and traditional norms act as impediments to economic liberalization and “development.” While Thompson (1971) was correct in originating the concept of a “moral economy” to counter the notion that there was no legitimizing rationale behind popular rebellion as a response
to economic hardship—or as Scott (1976) demonstrated, to agrarian reform—what is fundamentally at issue is not simply a grievance rooted in a particular cultural understanding. Rather, what is needed is an appreciation of the underpinning principle of capitalism itself, namely primitive accumulation, which is always and necessarily violent (Marx 1867/1976; Wood 2002). Similarly, recent writing on land grabbing has recognized how this particular brand of violence draws distinct parallels with the violence that is central to processes of state formation (Grajales 2011) and the legal frameworks that sustain governmental control (Scott 2009). Through political technologies, institutions, and legal forms—most notably property—government attempts to convey a message that “society must be defended” against its enemies, or those “Others” who would threaten its ostensibly peaceful order (Foucault 2003). As the violence of law is both sanctioned and mystified through such technological and institutional procedures, particular political rationalities are (trans)formed, thereby enabling people to be governed as subjects (Foucault 1988). The supposed “rightness of property” therein becomes ingrained, and as with all historical forms of enclosure, property regimes accordingly help to create and sustain a discrete geo-body constructed not only by technocratic regimes for managing land, but also through a biopolitical project that geographically bounds subjectivities to capitalism (Malhi 2011).

I begin this chapter by contextualizing Cambodia’s recent upsurge in dispossession by situating this phenomenon within the ongoing evolution of the country’s landholding practices and by interrogating the most recent legislation on property. I then seek to illuminate how accumulative practices proceed through the power of the written word, which is not to suggest a lack of materiality, but is instead attentive to the spatio-temporality of dispossession by recognizing law as an assemblage co-constituted by violent “acts” and written “deeds.” This is followed by an analysis of the written word of law, where I attempt to reveal the arbitrary, violent, and harsh principles that guarantee its sovereign authority. Finally, before offering some final thoughts in the conclusion, I examine the ethical vacancy of property as a system that not only ignores orally recognized antecedents, but polemically advances a capitalist “moral order.”

The Law of the Land: Acquisition by Plough, Sword, and Pen

The epidemic of dispossession that has swept across Cambodia in recent years is framed within the context of the country’s deepening neoliberalization. Cambodia’s neoliberalizing processes have been, on the one hand, led by the aims and ideals of the international donor community since the UN-sponsored transition of the early 1990s (Springer 2010) and, on the other
hand, readily taken up by local elites as a kleptocratic means to enhance both their wealth and their hold on political power (see chapter two). The result of widespread liberalization, privatization, and deregulation is a speculative industry that has produced a swath of land title assignments, procured through questionable means, and a corresponding number of bloody evictions and violent land grabs. Both NGO monitoring (CHRAC 2009, 2010; LICADHO 2009) and the reporting of the Cambodian courts (Supreme National Economic Council 2007) confirm that the number of land conflicts has risen steadily since the 2001 Land Law came into effect, while over the past 15 years, private investors have purchased an astounding 45 percent of Cambodia’s total land area (Global Witness 2009). LICADHO (2009), one of the most prominent human rights organizations in the country, reports that in the 13 Cambodian provinces where it maintains offices, over 250,000 people have been affected by land grabbing and forced evictions since 2003. In 2008 alone, according to a report by Amnesty International (2008b), a further 150,000 Cambodians were at risk of forced relocation nationwide. During the first half of 2010, more than 3,500 Cambodian families—totaling around 17,000 people—were affected by land grabbing in 13 provinces (Human Rights Watch 2011). A report by Bridges Across Borders and Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (2009) further reveals that many vulnerable households have been arbitrarily excluded from the land titling system, effectively denying these families protection against land grabbing and any chance of adequate compensation for their expropriated land, circumstances that both exacerbate and actively produce conditions of poverty.

In almost all instances, these dispossessions have been backed by systematic impunity for Cambodia’s ruling class, comprised of Prime Minister, Hun Sen, and his inner circle of clients (Global Witness 2007), which has unsurprisingly angered a growing number of Cambodians:

If Hun Sen keeps on going with the land-grabbing, then it will happen like the 1970s. Lon Nol’s regime [fell] because of the same thing. So now the victims that I work with say if anyone leads a force to fight against the rich men, they will go into the forest [like the Khmer Rouge did] and if someone provides them with the rifles and weapons, they will struggle to fight. They want to kill them like the Khmer Rouge because they get angry. Around the country the people who are affected by the land-grabbing, like the indigenous people, one time they had the bows and arrows to fight with the police. They went to hide their group in the forest and when the police tried to arrest them, they shoot the police. . . . Maybe the leaders that have a lot of bodyguards and a lot of military in their hands think that nobody can do anything to them. . . . but if he’s a good Prime Minister, no need for bodyguards. . . . If he makes good things for the public, the public will protect him. (Interview, Sia Phearum, Secretariat Director, Housing Rights Task Force, August 5, 2010, Phnom Penh)
While Hun Sen’s paranoia is well documented in his frequent addresses to the nation that assert his iron grip on power (Cheang Sokha 2007; Koh Santepheap 2008), and through his symbolic gesture of declaring “war on land-grabbing” in early 2007 (Yun Samean 2007), the implications vis-à-vis law have been negligible. Evictees continue to have virtually no recourse, as their “ownership” claims are not reflected in official documentation or legal entitlement, but in traditional understandings of possession relating to actual use.

Given the extent to which violence has been a defining feature of Cambodia’s recent past (see Chandler 2007; Kiernan 2008), the guiding principle behind Cambodia’s contemporary neoliberalizing processes might be summed up by the axiom, “when there is blood on the streets, buy property.” Yet this is only part of the story, as—from the vantage point of capitalism—there was first a need to create property in its absence, which quite literally meant writing it into existence. Although Cambodia had developed its own sophisticated writing system long before the arrival of Europeans, dating back to at least 611 AD, written Khmer was not widely used outside of literary works and only became standardized, recognized as the “official national language,” and widely disseminated following the country’s independence from France in 1953 (Herbert and Milner 1989). So while the most ancient legal codes known, which date back several millennia, were written to enable emergent states and their class elites to both legitimate and exercise class-based power over the nonliterate (Clastres 1974/2007), the application of the written word to property really only began to make “sense” in Cambodia when the idea of property—as it is known today and in the terms of exploitation that I have defined it—arrived via its colonial encounter with France (1863–1953). Prior to the arrival of the French, under traditional Khmer feudalism and in keeping with Cambodia’s monarchical tradition of Devaraja, the cult of the divine God-king (Chandler 2007), land was vested directly in the sovereign as a divine inheritance (Ricklefs 1967). Yet within the observance of Devaraja, wherein the monarch is revered as celestial, actual use was nonetheless widely acknowledged through the traditional Cambodian concept of “acquisition by the plough” (Russell 1997). This is not to romanticize or suggest a benign character to pre-capitalist social relations, as the feudal system in Cambodia was characterized by a rigid spatio-hierarchical structure. The population was divided between the urban minority in the capital, the residents of small towns (kompong), rice-growing villages surrounding the towns, and the inhabitants of the wilderness (prei) villages (Chandler 2007). Within this spatial matrix, the God-king and his bureaucracy represented the apex of power, while peoples living in peripheral areas and landless slaves signified the nadir. In the case of the latter, it
is thought that many worked the large estates held by the king and a few important nobles (Thion 1992), and it is here that we can see a historical antecedent to the contemporary making of homo sacer in Cambodia as the propertyless “Other.”

While all land, at least in theory, belonged to the sovereign during Cambodia’s feudal stage, in practice the cultivation the land, or possession, was afforded recognition. The 1884 Land Act, implemented by the colonial administration, changed the land holding structure in the country by introducing the concept of exclusionary “ownership” in land, which served as a guarantee for the investments of French settlers, stating that “the land of the Kingdom, up to that day the exclusive property of the Crown will cease to be inalienable. The French and Cambodian authorities will proceed to establish private property in Cambodia” (cited in Thion 1992, 29). A cadastral mapping and registration system soon followed in 1912, which was reinforced with exclusive and definitive ownership rights decreed under Article 74 of the 1920 Civil Code which indicated “the rights of possession in matters of real estate only converts to the rights of ownership after being listed on the Register” (cited in Russell 1997, 103). While the “acquisition by the plough” was seemingly maintained through Article 723 of the 1920 Civil Code, which specified that “in matters of real estate, the holder becomes legitimate when there is peaceful possession of unregistered land, in public and in good faith, continuously and unequivocally, for five consecutive years,” in the actual practice of law, written documentation of registration in land began usurping any sense of “good faith” in orality.

Within the last 150 years, Cambodia’s form of government has changed repeatedly, from the traditional Khmer feudal system, to the French colonial administration, to a constitutional monarchy, to a republic, to agrarian socialism, to a Vietnamese client government, to an independent state, to a UN transitional authority, and finally to the supposedly “democratic” system government we see today. The implication of such variation in government is that the landholding structure also went through dramatic changes. While it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a fine-grained analysis of the land tenure changes under each of Cambodia’s successive regimes, the summary shown in Table 6.1 affords a sense of how legislation on landholding has changed considerably during a relatively short period, culminating in the most recent legislation, passed by the National Assembly on July 20, 2001 and formally adopted by the Cambodian Senate on August 13, 2001. Alongside this newly promulgated Land Law, the Cambodian government launched a Systematic Land Registration (SLR) program that aimed to provide support for the privatization of land by integrating the poor into a formalized cadastral registration system. Corresponding with a desire to open the country to global flows of capital, the World Bank
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<td>1863–1953</td>
<td>French colonial administration</td>
<td>1884 <em>Land Act</em> 1912 Cadastral Authority 1920 Civil Code</td>
<td>• Established alienation of land as private property</td>
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<td>• Mapping and land registration system introduced</td>
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<td>• Reinforced exclusive and definitive ownership rights</td>
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<td>• “Acquisition by the plough” maintained in principle</td>
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<td>1953–1970</td>
<td>People’s Socialist Community (independent rule)</td>
<td>1956 Constitution</td>
<td>• Specifically provided for the protection of private property rights</td>
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<td>• Beginnings of legal land accumulation</td>
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<td>1975–1979</td>
<td>Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge regime)</td>
<td>1976 Constitution</td>
<td>• Abolition of private property and destruction of all records</td>
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<td>• Agrarian collectives introduced</td>
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<td>1979–1989</td>
<td>People’s Republic of Kampuchea (Vietnamese occupation)</td>
<td>1981 Constitution 1985 Sub-decree No. 6</td>
<td>• Land vested in the state</td>
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<td>• Policies of collectivization and solidarity groups</td>
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<td>• Prohibited purchase, sale or rent of land</td>
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• Granted ownership rights over houses to the people  
• Abolition of ownership rights existing prior to 1979  
• Definition of three categories of land use (housing, cultivation, and concession) and set limits for individual allocation |
• Ownership rights restricted to housing only  
• “Temporary possession” rights eligible for conversion to exclusive ownership after a period of 5 years’ uncontested use  
• Nonutilization of land for a period of 3 years constitutes abandonment |
| 1993–present    | The Kingdom of Cambodia (independent rule)  | 1993 Constitution, 2001 Land Law, 2010 Foreign Ownership Law | • Broader interpretation of legal ownership rights with regard to tenure security  
• Extended private ownership rights to residential and agricultural land  
• Ownership requires certified government document known as a “title certificate”—“temporary possession” and “acquisition by the plough” nullified  
• Creation of a single Cadastral Registry to record all land in the country  
• No limits set on nonutilization—opened land to speculative economy  
• Ownership rights on housing extended to foreigners |

Source: Adapted from Russell (1997) and Sar Sovann (2002).
has been a primary driver of land registration in Cambodia, contributing a major component to the SLR in the form of its Land Management and Administration Project (LMAP) launched in early 2002. The stated aim of the LMAP was to improve land tenure security and the promotion of land markets by establishing institutions and a regulatory framework for land administration, followed by the issuance and registration of titles in targeted provinces (World Bank 2011). So (2009) suggests that while the SLR offered opportunities to convert oral claims into written documentation, the program ultimately failed because villagers did not exchange land titles when land was bought and sold, meaning that updated cadastral records quickly fell into disuse. Villagers neglected to swap deeds because they believed maintaining harmonious relations with commune chiefs, who had traditionally overseen land exchanges, better protected their claims. What this suggests is that poor Cambodians had little understanding for the significance of both land titles and the recently adopted Land Law, as their understanding of land holding continued to be rooted in notions of possession as opposed to property.

One of the most peculiar passages in the 2001 Land Law appears in Article 38, which states that “in order to transform into ownership of immovable property, the possession shall be unambiguous, non-violent, notorious to the public, continuous and in good faith.” Aside from the continuing dubiousness of “good faith” and notoriety with respect to orality versus written documentation, Article 38 appears to only recognize the nonviolent acquisition of property. This is of course scarcely the case in existing practice, as the violence meted out in legally dispossessing the Cambodian poor is easily recognized as violence, a quality that is acknowledged and well documented among both domestic and international human rights organizations (Amnesty International 2008a; CHRAC 2009, 2010; Kothari 2007; LICADHO 2009). Law ostensibly resolves this apparent paradox through the very logic of its own constitution, or at least that is what we (the subjects of law) are encouraged to believe. This is because law denies the violence of its origins (Benjamin 1921/1986), as well as the disorder engendered by its ordering, by proclaiming the force it deploys to be “legitimate” (Sarat and Kearns 1992). Violence thus constitutes law in three particular senses: first, it gives law—as the regulator of coercion and force—a reason for being (Hobbes 1651/2008); second, it supplies the occasion and method for founding legal orders (Derrida 1992); and third, it provides a means through which the law acts (Weber 1919/2002). In short, the law seeks to achieve the monopoly of violence. Rooted in such understandings, the 2001 Land Law accordingly proceeds as an erasure that operates through an ongoing and codified sense of denial, as it completely obscures the violent origins of property as primitive accumulation.
(Blomley 2003; Tolstoy 1990/2004). Put differently, law turns a blind eye to the violent seizure of possessions premised upon actual use (“acquisition by the plough”), and in this neglect it thereby legitimizes the institution of property (at its originary moment of primitive accumulation, “acquisition by the sword,” and once evolved into an entrenched legal institution, “acquisition by the pen”).

This whitewash is made explicit in Article 38 of the 2001 *Land Law* when nonviolence is qualified as follows:

> The possessor shall occupy the land non-violently means that any possession originated through violence is not considered [to] conform to the law. However, if violence is used against third parties that try to get the immovable property without right to do it, such violence does not interfere on the possession initially peacefully acquired.

A critical reading of this qualification reveals two related erasures: first, the originary violence of property (primitive accumulation) is ignored as it is assumed that peaceful acquisition of property is possible, specifically through law. Second, it sanctions the use of violence by those deemed by law to be the “true” proprietors. The law responds to such criticisms through *ipse-dixitism*, meaning it simply asserts that its own violence is legitimate (i.e., the sovereign principle of the monopoly of force), so that it should not be considered and is consequently no longer seen as violence. Thus, if violent dispossession occurs through the strictures of law, that is, if it acts only upon and through the written deeds of ownership it produces, it is considered neither violent nor in contravention of law. In other words, the stroke of the law’s pen underwrites and thereby attempts to erase the violence of property from view (Blomley 2003).

**Accumulation by Textualization: The Spatio-Temporality of Dispossession**

Poststructuralist and postcolonial authors have, through the application of Foucault’s (1970) conceptualization of discourse, amply demonstrated a nexus between speech performances, the written word, and a variety of other textual formations (see Butler 1997; Said 1978/2003). Heightened awareness for the power of discourse has similarly led scholars to become more acutely aware of how the world is represented (Duncan and Ley 1993), and the authorial positionality of so-called “experts” (Mitchell 2002). Although contributing much to this general framework of understanding, Derrida (2001) has nonetheless sought to emphasize the difference between speech and writing insofar as the written word is an
enduring textual form that remains effective, despite the absence, death, or lack of immediate presence of its author. In applying this to law, we can recognize how orality is superseded by the written word, even in situations where possession is documented by the physical presence of human beings on land. The present pattern of systemic dispossession in Cambodia repeatedly demonstrates that actual occupation and use is of little consequence, as a written document indicating ownership trumps any and all other concerns. But while “we need to attend to the link between words and violent acts,” Blomley (2000, 96) appropriately reminds us that “a legal claim that is purely textual is not sufficient. It must be enacted on the ground.” So while powerful, state-based elites use the formal authority afforded by written texts to justify (at least to themselves) their practices of dispossession, even when relying on oral traditions and normative practices, such actors have little difficulty organizing power in such ways as to effect deprivation, subjugation, and exploitation. This is the nature of sovereign authority, violence is always at its disposal. The power of writing vis-à-vis property then is the power to obscure sovereign violence, as the written word allows for the reinterpretation of violence on the sovereign’s own terms by sanctioning, securing, and structuring it within the discourse of law. The etymology of law itself hints at the importance of the written word and the permanence it offers, coming from the Old Norse lag, meaning “something laid down or fixed.”

The situation in Spean Ches village, Sihanoukville clearly demonstrates that violent acts backed by sovereign authority, such as forced expulsion, intimidation, surveillance, imprisonment, shooting, and dispossession are integral components of the performance of property. In the early morning hours of April 20, 2007, more than 100 heavily armed military, municipal, and civil police blocked access to the village and ordered the residents to leave immediately (CHRAC 2009). Having nowhere else to go, villagers obviously refused. Over the next several hours the number of armed police swelled to more than 300 personnel, armed with AK47s, truncheons, electric batons, and tear gas. The siege began with police firing warning shots into the air, and while this successfully terrorized the village children who ran to the nearby beach to escape, many of the teenage and adult males fought back with stones, sticks, and knives, but were quickly subdued and arrested (Amnesty International 2008b). Those residents who refused to come outside were literally flushed, burned, smoked, and crushed out of their homes as police lit fires, used water cannons, and drove an excavator through their dwellings. Police themselves documented the violence of the eviction with photographs, which a sympathetic officer leaked to the villagers, who subsequently shared them with me asking that I “show them to the world.” Before noon the entire village was razed and their belongings
were looted or destroyed, including fishing nets, 16 motorcycles, and two generators.

In demonstrating how evicted peoples, or those who do not have, are rendered as *hominés sacri*, villagers recounted the eviction in Spean Ches as an extremely violent and merciless assault:

On 20 April 2007, the police come to surprise us. No one gave us any warning about this. They came at 6:00am, and there were about 150 soldiers, military police, and police; three kinds of different uniforms. They have an ambulance come with them, because they know they were going to hurt people. Why would they bring this here if they didn’t want to hurt us?... They threaten with gun, shoot at us, and destroy our houses. They evict us using water, spraying us from a truck. And if someone is inside they come out, and they use the machine [excavator] to destroy the house, and start fires, and when the people get outside they catch and start hitting and shooting. They didn’t ask us to leave that day, they didn’t talk, they just come and use violence against the villagers.... When they start at 6:00am the people shout loudly to announce please let us live here and talk to us nicely. But they don’t listen, when they see us trying to talk to them and shouting for them to stop, they just shoot. And then after we are all very scared, they stop and sit and eat their lunch. Then after lunchtime they call more army people to come and use the gun, and they block the road so other people cannot come to the village to see what they do to us. Some journalist and human rights organizations try to come, but they don’t allow them near our place.... They don’t care where we go after this. They didn’t tell us where to go, just to leave, so all we could do is live on the side of the road here. I couldn’t even bring any clothes or anything that I own. I lost everything.... They hurt a lot of people, they don’t care. They hurt men, women, and children. They didn’t kill anyone, but they hit an old man and he was bleeding a lot through the nose and had to go to hospital. (Interview, Farmer and Fisher, Female, Age 43, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)
because it wasn’t normal. . . . One child they hit, her father was carrying her and they went to hit him with the stick but they hit the baby instead and broke her arm. The arm is not normal anymore. She can’t move it. . . . They hit the men. They hit the women. They even hit people on the head. These are not good men, they are crazy. (Interview, Farmer/Fisher, Female, Age 48, June 20, 2007, Sihanoukville)

While these testimonies clearly indicate that it is not just textual “deeds” that make property available to action, but also the material and often violent “acts” of local social actors (Blomley 2000), in this case the Cambodian police, it is important to recognize just how much the written word reinforces the availability of violence as a resource for law. This does not negate the idea that one of the fundamental mechanics of law is how it materially spatializes violence by sanctioning acts of exclusion, confinement and expulsion (Delaney 1998). Instead, it gives charge to the notion that once the physical violence of primitive accumulation settles and begins to fade from view (i.e., it is conceptually rendered “primitive”), the law of property remains, where so too does violence—poised to be unleashed through the juridical arm of enforcement when and where law’s written codification of property is challenged, transgressed, or disavowed. This is why Perelman (2000), Glassman (2006), Hart (2006) and others have argued for a conceptualization of so-called “primitive” accumulation that is properly attuned to and cognizant of its ongoing effects. It is because of this recognition of primitive accumulation as a contemporary and continuing tenet of capitalism that Harvey (2003) has redubbed it as “accumulation by dispossession.”

The majority of the villagers had either been born in Spean Ches or had lived on the land for the last 25 years, having cleared the forest themselves, cultivating the land into small farms. When I visited the village in June 2007, residents told me they chose the site after the fall of the Khmer Rouge because it was vacant at the time, offered easy access to fresh water, and was close to the sea so they could fish. The village had been registered with the Commune Council of Mittapheap district in the mid-1980s, but only 17 of the resident 105 families ever received written land titles, largely owing to a culture of orality, where “acquisition by the plough” and actual use continue to reflect Cambodian understandings of possession. Although oral claims can be converted into written certifications through commune chiefs, who play an essential role in Cambodia’s political economy of rule, representing the fulcrum between villagers’ exposure to predatory capital accumulation and the confirmation of legal title, they typically charge large amounts of money for certifying the claims of villagers. The courts consider these certifications, yet the weight of a commune chief’s evidence
depends on complex and contextually situated factors, where some evictions may be successfully headed off as powerful interests mobilize in support of villagers, and others will proceed unimpeded. Unfortunately, as was the case in Spean Ches, villagers often cannot afford the fees required by commune chiefs to acquire legal title, a very common complaint among poor, marginalized, and recently evicted Cambodians (CHRAC 2010; LICADHO 2009).

When I returned to the former village site three years later, in July 2010, I found residents still living in makeshift shacks along the side of the road adjacent to the land where their homes once stood. After three years in limbo, villagers repeatedly informed me that they had little hope in facing off with those who held certificates of “ownership,” and little faith in the law:

The first time the commune chief invited me to talk to him [was] in 2007 before the eviction and [he] told me that the land I was living on is the property of other people, I asked him “why are you the one talking with me and not the owner?” I never saw the owner of the land come to talk to me and what happens now is that they know this land is worth a lot of money and it is by the beach. You see these hotels coming up? So now they make this new Land Law and issue this certificate to say you own the land but to be able to buy this certificate, you have to know the top ranking officials and he will write for you. So this is what happened, someone got the idea that they can easily take this land and make money off of it to sell later on and all they have to do is know Hun Sen or someone in the courts and get him to write the certificate that says now they own the land. And now they can take it from the people, easy. This is what I told to the commune chief…. but the authority they blamed me for not making the certificate after living there for so long. I had no money and no time because at nighttime I went out to the sea to fish and nobody talked about this issue…. If we need the certificate, why did the commune chief not make the certificate when we first moved on this land? (Interview, Fisher and former Farmer, Female, Age 51, July 24, 2010, Spean Ches)

I don’t understand why the government [uses] guns and burns the houses of the people… why doesn’t the government love its people? The government says that Khmer love Khmer but why they don’t allow the people to live on their own land? During the eviction, the [land registration] documents were burned when they burn our houses, so now they come to do census and we have no proof…. But the land value increases so they grabbed the land from us. It used to be a land with the forest, and the people had to remove the trees, so we are the ones who cleared the land. Nobody claimed the property, no need to say this is property of one, and this is property of another. I’ve been here for a long time and cleared the land to build the house, and at that time, nobody came to tell me “this is my land,” and now they come to take the land and say that it is theirs. Now they just lie. The rich person knows the top ranking official, so they go and pay them some
money and they make the certificate that says that they own the land. So this is like using the law to steal from the people. (Interview, Porridge Seller, Female, Age 43, July 24, 2010, Spean Ches).

These sentiments suggest significant conceptual clarity in appreciating law’s relationship with power and violence, precisely because they have seen first hand how law has not only failed them, but also harmed them. In other words, the dispossessed are able to recognize the essence of law for what it is: the obscured application of organized violence to compel widespread obedience to the whims of the powerful (Tolstoy 1900/2004). They are able to do this precisely because evictees have lived through and experienced law in its most fundamental form. So while at a societal level the idea of law goes largely unquestioned, those subjected to the explicit violence of law are able to easily recognize its arbitrary nature. And yet, lamentably, once the power of law’s violence has been demonstrated through processes such as forced eviction, the threat of law’s application is often sufficient to mold a sense of ignominy and deference before law.

The lack of written documentation had not been an issue of concern to the majority of the villagers, as their usage was “continuous and in good faith” for over 25 years. As such, the timing of this eviction is revealing: coastal land prices began soaring in 2005 due to both oil exploration in the Gulf of Thailand just off the coast of Sihanoukville (Global Witness 2009), and a boom in the tourist industry as the islands off the coast were leased to private companies to develop upscale resorts (McDermid and Cheang Sokha 2007). Beachfront property, only a few hundred meters from the village, was subsequently earmarked for the development of five-star hotels (CHRAC 2009). These happenings signal a shift towards profit-oriented speculation, where acquired land is transformed into property, an institution capitalism regards as a principal resource in securing one’s advantage over others. What is unfortunately not well understood is just how coercive property actually is. Hay (1992, 169, my emphasis) argues, “The coercive impact of law is the [most] important element for those who, in fact, are the most direct victims of its violence, the poor,” where “the legitimation of the word [of law] is most compelling to those predisposed to believe it, who share it, who articulate it.” This is why law functions at the nexus between discourse and text, continually refracted through citational chains to support it replication, but it is law’s anchoring in the written word that endows it with “truth.” This criticism alone is not enough to condemn law, nor is it enough to enable us to recognize law as violence (Benjamin 1921/1986). To achieve this sort of critical insight, we must continually be reminded that law is, as the Spean Ches eviction demonstrates, literally written by and for those who are the beneficiaries
rather than the victims of its violence. Put differently, while it is a common
critique to suggest that what is happening in contemporary Cambodia is
a result of the corruption of law (see CHRAC 2009; Un 2009), this view
fails to appreciate that law is both the will of the sovereign and subject to
the interpretation of those most empowered by its ordering.

So Let It be Written: The Law is Arbitrary, Violent, and Harsh

Article 30 of the 2001 Land Law has been at the center of property debates
in Cambodia, as it indicates that “any person who, for no less than five
years prior to the promulgation of this law, enjoyed peaceful, uncontested
possession of immovable property that can lawfully be privately possessed,
has the right to request a definitive title of ownership.” This particular arti-
cle is typically interpreted to mean that any five-year span of uncontested
use translates into ownership. However, as the law states, uncontested use
must have been for a minimum five-year period prior to the promulga-
tion of this law, meaning usage must have originated no later than 1996.
Following implementation of this law the legal validity afforded to actual
use of the land has been revoked as a means to entitlement. So for example,
a family who has been living on a parcel of land uncontested since 1997 up
to the time of this writing in 2014 has no legal entitlement without official
written documentation, regardless of the witness testimonies they can pro-
duce attesting to the truthfulness of their claim to actual usage. Moreover,
Article 30 explicitly states: “has the right to request definitive title of owner-
ship.” This does not mean the deed will actually be given, but is a decision
to be arbitrarily decided by the courts. My use of the word “arbitrary” here
is not inconsequential or unconsidered. In contemporary usage arbitrary
usually refers to two related ideas, the first being those outcomes based on
random choice or personal whim, while the second relates to unrestrained
and autocratic use of authority. The words “arbitration” and “arbitrary” are
both derived from the Latin arbiter, meaning “judge” or “supreme ruler.”
Taken together, these etymological and contemporary connotations reveal
the illusory-cum-sovereign nature of legal arbitration, and so too should
compel us to recognize the violence which sustains the interpretive power
and thus the “authority” of law.

Residents of Sambok Chab commune in central Phnom Penh learned
this lesson the hard way on June 6, 2006, when they were sub jected to
one of the largest and most violent forced evictions since the 2001 Land
Law took effect (Amnesty International 2008a; LICADHO 2009). Many
of the evictees received no compensation and were effectively rendered
homeless, while others, still not wanting to leave their homes, eventually
received new plots of land in Andong village, 22 kilometers from the city
center, because they had some kind of formal written documentation indicating their usage:

The government gave me land to live here [at Andong] because I lived at Sambok Chab for over 10 years and have papers to show this, so they exchange for this land here.... They evict me from Sambok Chab because they say it is government land now. I don't know what they want to do with that land... the government did not explain this, they just tell us to move out. I didn't want to come here, but they forced us to come here. They tell us that if we don't agree to come here, that we will have nowhere to live because they are taking the land in Sambok Chab. If we don't agree to come, we have no choice, they will force us anyway. If we come here, then we get land. If we disagree and still try to stay there, they will force us out and not give us any land. The police did not hit us or use violence against my family because we agreed to come, but for some people who disagree, they use violence to make them move. This is not fair for them to use violence against the people. (Interview, Homemaker, Female, Age 55, June 11, 2007, Andong)

We lived in Sambok Chab for over 10 years, since 1996 we lived there. No one told us before that we could not live there, so we made a house, but now they tell us the land [does] not belong to us. The lawyer told us that the Land Law says that if you live somewhere for 5 years and nobody says anything to you, you can keep the land, but right now we cannot do anything. Nobody wants to listen to us or help us, so we just move. If we try to go against their policy, they will put us in jail. Three people who went against this policy are now in jail. They did not do anything wrong, they just did not want to move out and kept staying there. It is not fair to take them to the jail, but the city hall tell them that they are person who tried to destroy the public order so that's why they take them to jail. (Interview, Photographer, Male, Age 30, June 11, 2007, Andong)

As this participant reveals, law enforcement officials forcibly and arbitrarily detained several community members for transgressing “public order” (Amnesty International 2008b). But what is meant by “enforcement” and “order”? We can begin to understand by first recognizing that law is maintained as an apparatus of violence that disturbs, interrupts, and rearranges preexisting relations and practices in the name of an allegedly superior order (Benjamin 1921/1986). That order demonstrates its “superiority” in ferocious displays of force, and in subjugating, colonizing, and “civilizing” acts of violence (Sarat and Kearns 1992), all of which can accordingly be understood as preserving the order of the property regime itself (Springer 2010). So through the clarity of deconstruction, as opposed to the obfuscation of rhetoric, we can appreciate that what is to be understood about “enforcement” and “order” is that those who resist law’s violence come to know it intimately. Yet unlike the people of Sambok Chab,
Cambodia’s evictees are frequently not so fortunate, coming not only to know law’s violence, but to be placed entirely at its mercy, having been abandoned by it. By being propertyless, by not *having*, the dispossessed are exposed as *homines sacri*, lives that do not count before the law, precisely because the burden of proof to actual usage in forced eviction cases falls entirely on the occupant, which, with the cards stacked against them in a system that privileges the written word over oral testimony, is a nearly impossible task.

In most instances, as *Article 30* of the 2001 *Land Law* predicts, evictees will be squared off against another individual who holds a written document of ownership:

> In case the granting of a definitive title to ownership is subject to an opposition, the claimant has to prove that he himself [sic] fulfills the conditions of peaceful, uncontested possession for no less than five years over the contested immovable property or to prove that he purchased the immovable property from the original possessor or his legal beneficiary or from the person to whom the ownership was transferred, or from their successors.

Proof in this sense refers to the occupant being able to offer some form of written documentation, which seems like a severe demand given that Cambodian society is still predominantly rooted in orality. Yet the Latin phrase *dura lex sed lex* (the law is harsh, but it is the law) reminds us that such severity is not to be forgotten, “For, in its severity, the law is at the same time writing. Writing is on the side of the law; the law lives in writing; and knowing the one means that unfamiliarity with the other is no longer possible. Hence all law is written…writing directly bespeaks the power of the law” (Clastres 1974/2007, 177). In effect then, the intention of *Article 30* is not to support the legitimacy of actual use and the cultural basis of Cambodian orality, but to discredit it:

> The problem is that evicted people stayed for a long time already but they don’t have the land title because it’s expensive….So when the government comes and says “this land is land of the government,” you have to go away, even if the people say they’ve stayed there for a long time already. So if this private [business]person would like to get this land, they bribe the official and they get the land title. And when they go to the court, the court never implements the *Land Law* properly because if they implement the *Land Law*, then they would come and interview the neighbors and the local authority to find out if the families have lived there for a long time. And they can see if they’ve planted, for example, mangoes because mangoes take 5 or 6 years to grow. Ask questions and investigate! But they never do that. (Interview, Pung Chiv Kek, President, LICADHO, August 5, 2010, Phnom Penh)
The interpretation of the law, which is the *arbitrary* right of the sovereign, is that the written word takes precedent over any claim to possession that might come to light through conducting an investigation that seeks to establish the facts by collecting oral testimonies. In short, the dictum “so let it be written, so let it be done” represents the crux of law vis-à-vis property, where should possession not be written through the criteria set by the juridico-institutional order, as in practices of actual use based on mutual and orally communicated recognition, the law works to ensure that such forms of ownership are undone.

In this sense, the Cambodian government’s SLR program and the associated LMAP of the World Bank only intensified the burden of *written* proof that is now placed on Cambodians. While initially these projects were justified as a means to convert orality into legality, there is significant cause for cynicism. With forced evictions on the rise, Cambodian human rights groups increasingly complained that many poor and vulnerable households had been *arbitrarily* excluded from the titling process, denying them an opportunity to legalize their land claims. Such exclusions were said to have deprived these households protection against land-grabbing and adequate compensation for their expropriated land, often thrusting them into conditions of extreme poverty (Bridges Across Borders et al. 2011). In August 2009, the World Bank finally acknowledged publicly that the project’s “Involuntary Resettlement” safeguards had been breached, to which the Cambodian government responded by abruptly ending its agreement with the Bank on LMAP. Amidst intense criticism and intensified eviction related violence, the World Bank charged its Inspection Panel to investigate the failure of the LMAP. The findings were damning, suggesting that there were both breaches in operational policies and a failure to properly design, implement, and supervise the project, which directly contributed to the tribulations that poor Cambodians are now facing. The Bank was said to have failed to act on information when problems arising were first bought to its attention, and actions taken since were deemed “too late to prevent the harms now being done” (Inspection Panel 2010, vi, original emphasis).

The World Bank’s focus on land reform is derived from an almost purely economic model of markets (Khan 2004), which draws parallels to the “new institutional economics” (NIE) and its ontological argument that idealizes and *a priori* assumes markets as given, natural, and universal (Ankarloo and Palermo 2004). Although employing neoclassical tools to explain capitalist institutions, NIE recognizes particular asymmetries and imperfections in the operation of markets and therefore seeks to extend its view of economics through a focus on the legal frameworks that motivate economic activity. The motivation is to provide solutions to market failures
by introducing nonmarket institutions, which consists of legitimating state intervention in the economy insofar as it can create and enforce a “proper” legal environment for capitalism (Hart 2002). Working within the NIE framework, North et al. (2009, xi) attempt to show “how societies have used the control of political, economic, religious, and educational activities to limit and contain violence over the last ten thousand years” by focusing particularly on the role of institutions in patterning “social orders,” which they suggest mitigate violence. Within Cambodian studies, Peou (2007) has used a similar approach, employing what he calls a “complex realist institutionalism” to explain the limits of international democracy assistance for peacebuilding. While Peou’s study is appropriately critical of neoliberal institutionalism, I take a much more radical approach to democracy (Springer 2011) and accordingly have reservations with the potential hierarchies that remain hidden within all institutions, including even the most progressive attempts at institutionalizing peace and democracy. Yet what is most notable with respect to land-grabbing in particular is that—like North et al. (2011) and the entire NIE literature—the World Bank overlooks the possibility of “extra-economic coercion” (Hart 2002), which is to deny the historical origins of capitalism as primitive accumulation.

One could reasonably argue that this theoretical blind spot is a primary reason behind the LMAP fiasco. Yet analysis within the human rights sector has repeatedly pointed to violations of law as the primary culprit in eviction related violence (CHRAC 2009; LICADHO 2007a), an argument popularized by property rights poster child De Soto (2000), who contends that the greatest “failure” of the global south is the lack of rule of law to uphold private property. In this view, the World Bank’s culpability in the violence is framed as good intentions gone awry due to local breaches of law, a belief that will surely be compounded following the Banks’s August 2011 announcement that future funding to Cambodia has been frozen due to ongoing irregularities. No mention is made of how the World Bank actively spearheaded the conditions in which primitive accumulation could escalate as land became increasingly commodified, even as the Inspection Panel (2010) identified a lack of support for poor communities due to incomplete or inadequate implementation of the project, which left residents vulnerable to claims on their land. Similarly, little attention is paid to the way in which it is the purview of the sovereign, as the creator of law, to continually (re)interpret this law on its own, arbitrary terms. Orality accordingly helps to define the propertyless homo sacer, where the inability to write is a key criterion for the sovereign’s coding of “savagery” in opposition to its own supposed “civility” expressed as law.

Harris (2004) argues the law provides a comprehensive framework for recalibrating land on the sovereign’s terms and without reference to
indigenous antecedents. It is this very process of recalibration that the SLR and LMAP sought to engage by creating a structure for property law, wherein notions of possession would be progressively rescinded. So while it is typical to critique Cambodia’s evictions as “illegal” perversions of law (Amnesty International 2008b; CHRAC 2010; LICADHO 2009), in most instances this well-meaning appraisal is factually incorrect. While the 2001 Land Law revokes the oral antecedent of “acquisition by the plough” as well as the provision of converting “temporary possession” into property via five years of uncontested use, the SLR and LMAP were purposefully designed to facilitate and disseminate awareness for conditions wherein, following an initial period of allowable registration, oral precedents would no longer be honored. Article 6 of the 2001 Land Law specifically indicates that “Only legal possession can lead to ownership,” where legal possession is now categorically defined as a written certificate of entitlement, endowed by the Cadastral Authority. Article 34 further designates residents without such written title as “illegal occupants,” where not only is compensation unwarranted by law, but it is completely within the scope of law to forcibly remove such individuals. Thus, the insistence that forced evictions in Cambodia are necessarily “illegal” is both naive and unhelpful. What is actually needed is a more critical appreciation of law’s violence.

Subverting Orality with Morality: The Polemics of Property

Having lived on their land uncontested for five years (and in many cases much longer) prior to the enactment of the Land Law in 2001, the evictees of Spean Ches, discussed above, have a strong case for legal ownership. Yet when villagers attempted to use their orality as a measure of “good faith” to persuade the Cambodian courts to hear their side of the story and recognize that their possessions were “notorious to the public,” this effort was unsurprisingly thwarted without qualification, as their lives did not count because of their perceived—or more accurately preconceived—lack of proprietorship:

I feel hopeless because when I try to submit the paper to the court, they do not allow and push me away. They said if I want to do, they will file a case against the people in the village. In Cambodia, when you are poor you get hurt, and can just look and cry when the rich people take the land, because no one will do anything. The rich people don’t offer to buy the land, they just look and say “this is my land,” and then take. And when I try to go to the court for help, they not accept this, they threaten that they will file a case against everyone in the village because we don’t have papers to prove we own the land. (Interview, Farmer and Fisher, Female, Age 38, June 21, 2007, Spean Ches)
This participant has vividly captured the heart of primitive accumulation that has informed the parallel projects of colonialism, state formation, and the property system since their synchronous dawn (see chapter five). By noting that the villagers lack the papers to prove ownership and hence the court’s refusal to hear their case, this participant has learned firsthand how vital the written word actually is to law, where writing represents the very pivot upon which accumulation by dispossession turns. Beyond looking and saying “this is my land,” the colonialism-state-property complex writes this expression of ownership down, and in this “act” of writing (literally a legal act), the sovereign power of law is born.

Undeterred by legal intimidation, the people of Spean Ches sought the help of a local human rights organization, only to be faced with the undoubtedly frustrating obstacle of persuading a lawyer that their oral histories should be taken into account. Predictably, given her inculcation in the precepts of law, the lawyer assigned to represent the community had a much different view of the circumstances, forwarding an emphatically legalistic view where the power and authority of written documentation were privileged over the orality of the people she was meant to represent:

Of course they stay there a long time, but they stay on the road, not the land, and after city hall fixed the road, they moved to stay over there. The owner of land has a certificate to show he owns the land for over 5 years already. The people say they stay there 10 or 20 years, but they don’t have any proof. This is difficult for them to have any proof, but all the people live on the road. Of course they live there in 1985, but not on the land, on the road. Only 17 families that live over there have a certificate from the authorities saying that they live over there, all the other families don’t have any papers…. I don’t believe the rich owner of the land, but I don’t believe the people either. But they are my clients so I have to believe them. The people told me this, they told me that they lived on the road before. This is the government’s responsibility, not the owner of the land. Some of the people say they don’t have the certificate because they lost it in the fire [when their homes were burned by police during the eviction], or it was too expensive to make, but this is just the people talking. The way we investigated only 17 families have paper for the land, so the government is only responsible for those 17 families…. This is not the fault of the owner, it is the fault of the people because they use to live on the road. (Interview, Human Rights Lawyer, Female, Age 27, June 21, 2007, Sihanoukville)

The legal-property-writing nexus is so entrenched in this lawyer’s thinking that she appears to express more sympathy for the so-called “owner” (i.e., the evictor), than for the evicted community. Likewise, the inordinate focus placed on the location of where the evictees’ former dwellings were situated–framed by the lawyer as the most important factor in
determining this case—further speaks to the discrediting of actual use as a legitimate form of land possession. No consideration is given to the fact that the land now in question was located immediately behind the former houses situated along the road, and was used extensively for wood collection, rice fields, vegetable plots, and animal pens. Therefore, regardless of the physical situation of their dwellings, it is irrefutable that the people of Spean Ches village “lived” on this land, as it nourished their bodies and sustained their lives.

This sort of privileging discourse that surrounds property and the ostensible entitlement to it raises the questions of ethics, and where the poor are situated within its matrix of morality. Property is so often regarded as being intrinsic to human thought and action, serving as the regulative idea behind both the state and the rule of law. Yet such a conceptualization is not a historical foundation drawn from the depths of time immemorial. Rather, property is better understood as an ongoing practice of citationality, through which “it produces the effects it names” (Butler 1993, 2) and wherein such performativity envisions ethical obligations that constitute a particular type of “moral order” (Hardt and Negri 2009). Locke, “the protocapitalist thinker par excellence” (Gidwani 2008, 24), helped to articulate the foundations of capitalist morality by specifying the value-creating practices that capitalism evokes vis-à-vis property claims. Locke rejected the idea that morality is a relative human construct contingent upon both time and space, and so in attempting to rationalize colonial dispossession in the Americas, he advanced the idea that property is a God-given, natural right and should belong to those who can put it to its “best possible use,” which in his mind meant enclosure (Locke 1690/1980). Locke argued in favor of the capitalization of land, which was considered “valuable” because it could be used to produce saleable commodities. It is therefore important to note that there is a substantial difference between an argument based on “best possible use” and an argument based on actual use. The former is a labor theory of property that enters in particular normative ideas about what constitutes the most productive use with particular respect to the functioning of capitalism (Gidwani 2008), while the latter makes no such distinctions and aligns ideas of use to possession, which Proudhon placed entirely outside of capitalist relations in accordance with his anarchist philosophy. He rejected Locke’s assumed natural right of property, arguing that possession cannot be justified by supposing a God-given, sovereign right:

The proprietor, the robber, the hero, the sovereign—for all these titles are synonymous—imposes his will as law, and suffers neither contradiction nor control; that is, he pretends to be the legislative and the executive power at
Proudhon’s intellectual project was thus antithetical to that of Locke, arguing against the capitalization of land in the form of rent, commodification, the production of marketable goods or otherwise.

Moreover, as has been pointed out by Marxist theorists, capitalist rationalizations of property as belonging to those who can put it to its “best possible use” threaten—in an internally contradictory manner—to undermine specifically capitalist property, since the ownership of the productive capital and the goods produced in capitalist production processes do not fall to those who actually work and make use of the productive capital (see Rosdolsky 1992). The moral logic of capitalism vis-à-vis property can accordingly be considered oxymoronic precisely because the guiding template of “best possible use” is imperfectly fashioned from an uneven and exploitative social formation. Nonetheless, because capitalism (particularly under neoliberalism) is similarly entwined within a discursive metanarrative that attempts to advance an omnipresent framework (Springer 2010), it can consequently also be read as an ethics embedded in normative assumptions that produce a rigid code. This capitalist protocol is based upon a supposedly “objective” right and wrong that takes one particular vision of spatio-economic organization (i.e., property) among innumerable competing possibilities and attempts to impose and uphold it as a universal standard by which the actions of everyone—in all spaces and at all times—should be judged. But judged by whom? When we ask this question, we reveal that the supposed “ethics” of property is nothing more than the arbitrary morality of the sovereign. As with all morals, those that underwrite property serve the purpose of authority, attempting to define and direct the choices we make, where in spite of individual volition, they must not be violated because they are considered absolute and inflexible. Property simply is, and we are not meant to be able to detect its intolerant functions or exploitative foundations.

To Levinas (1969), ethics are not concerned with the justifiability of human action. If typical understandings of ethics—“moral ethics” in Levinas’s view—are concerned with goodness and right conduct where normative and universal standards are raised, then Levinasian ethics are concerned with undoing such normative and universal standards. This distinction between ethics and morality that Levinas alerts us to is important precisely because capitalism claims a particular morality for itself, and yet this morality—when subjected to a critique that makes clear its underlying violence—is far removed from what many would consider ethical. Ethics,
for Levinas, “is the *mise en question* of liberty, spontaneity, and cognitive emprise of the ego that seeks to reduce all otherness to itself” (Critchley 1993, 5). The ethical is therefore not the construction of normative values, but an empathetic embrace of alterity that enables “access to external being” (Levinas 1963/1997, 293). Ethics, understood in these terms, is therefore at once both solidarity with the “Other” and the aesthetics of critique. By “aesthetics,” I follow Rancière (2006, 13), and mean to say the delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.

So when property—as a distinct, spatialized “moral order”—advances the particular economic model of capitalism through the auspices of law, it in fact also relies upon polemics in building consensus around predetermined spatial properties and temporal possibilities. Such spatial fixity and temporal stasis promotes the invisibility of the violence that sustains property and stifles dissent, so that property literally functions by *silencing* the disaffected and dispossessed. Thus, through the very apparatus it maintains, property necessarily has deleterious consequences for cultures rooted in orality.

While the 2001 *Land Law* appeals to “good faith,” this is revealed as mere rhetoric when we recognize that the polemicist, the law, and the sovereign are all one and the same:

> The polemicist . . . proceeds encased in privileges that he possesses in advance and will never agree to question. On principle, he possesses rights authorizing him to wage war and making that struggle a just undertaking; the person he confronts is not a partner in the search for truth, but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then, the game does not consist of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak, but of abolishing him, as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue. (Foucault 1984, 381–382)

Through the “distribution of the sensible,” or the established order that determines what can be sensed, thought or felt (Rancière 2006), the configurations of domination and subjection that property enables go unchallenged, facilitating the structural blindness necessary for property to function and disallowing the orality upon which other spatio-temporal epistemologies are based. And yet there is hope in the aesthetics of critique to forge a new and “infinitely demanding” ethics of commitment.
(Critchley 2007) that does not call us to action based on the *authorial* command of “good” versus “evil,” but is instead rooted in the constant critique and reflexive interrogation of our own positionality vis-à-vis the plight of the propertyless “Other,” which might—when nihilism is replaced with empathy—allow for the creative invention of new forms of affinity beyond the politics of difference (Day 2005).

**Conclusion**

What is legal is not necessarily ethical, and what is ethical is not necessarily legal. This is a hard lesson learned as the discourse that surrounds law continually attempts to conflate these two very distinct concepts. To be clear, my argument is not that *all* forced evictions are legal, and it should be acknowledged that some incidents in Cambodia are actually illegal as adjudicated by the Cambodian courts inasmuch as they are determined to violate some aspect of the rules set forth in the 2001 *Land Law*. The fact that local human rights organizations, the international donor community, or various scholars point the finger and suggest a particular incidence of eviction in Cambodia is illegal is entirely meaningless and misunderstands the nature of sovereign power. The authoritative decision of the legality or illegality of a forced eviction is not in the hands of concerned observers or popular perception, which suggests a certain vigilantism. Rather, such pronouncement is exclusively in the hands of the Cambodian court as the institution vested with the sovereign authority to arbitrate the law. The courts may accordingly willingly accept forged land titles, which actually renders these fake documents *legal*. This is not to say that land titles (fake or otherwise) are fair, just, unproblematic, or ethical but such is the contradiction of law and its reflection of the interests of the powerful. The determination of legality being vested in particular institutions and individuals simply speaks to the arbitrary nature of sovereign power, which is both law-positing and law-preserving, meaning sovereignty is simultaneously the creator and the protector of the prevailing political and legal order. It matters not if land is obtained through force, theft, fraud, violence or “unlawful” means, so long as the courts recognize the outcome, the act of legally sanctioning unscrupulous activity is what explicitly *makes* it legal. This is what primitive accumulation is all about.

In examining the contemporary realities of land-grabbing, forced eviction, and the creation of a juridico-cadastral system in Cambodia, this article has sought to recognize how the transformation of appropriation (the taking of possessions) into property (a mechanism for exploitation) is fundamentally made possible through the written word of law. Thus, despite the mantric calls for increased “rule of law” in Cambodia (see
Etcheson 2005; LICADHO 2007a), it is for good reason that such preoccupation should not be considered a benign concern for the improvement of Cambodian society, but rather, an imposition that serves to entrench property rights (see chapter five). To put it bluntly, law is the imprimatur of the conqueror, while the written word is its mystifying guarantee. It is the presumptions and strictures of law that make it possible to render the Cambodian poor as *hominæ sacræ*, lives that do not count, which positions them as “squatters” on land they possess, and therefore legitimizes the mobilization of force against them when their interests (i.e., livelihood and life itself) come into conflict with the interests of capital (i.e., speculation, greed, and accumulation). As Weber (1919/2002) notes, law would not be law without the monopoly and mobilization of violence that guarantees sovereignty. Thus, for Cambodia to be considered as a “functional” state within the contemporary milieu of Westphalian (neo)liberalism, it must reproduce the forms of violence that sustain existing power relationships, namely and most importantly property. This might prompt us to consider which is a more frightening proposition, a “failed” state where violence is explicitly recognized as illegitimate and thus may potentially be overcome by solidarity, resistance, affinity, and the will to transform social relations into something altogether more collectivist and egalitarian, or a “functioning” state wherein nationalist sentiment disrupts negations of sovereign authority and the law that supports it, so that violence becomes an entrenched, codified, and banal mediation of social affairs? In the former, we can easily recognize and understand dispossession as a perverse and malevolent violation, whereby warlords and bullies expunge individuals of their personal belongings and force them from their land (Cramer 2006). In the later, the idea of sovereign authority transforms bullies and warlords into “statesmen” or “stateswomen,” wherein the ensuing dispossession becomes literally *underwritten* by law.

It is this “silent and daily functioning” of sovereignty, law, and property, processes of euphemizing conquerors, legitimizing violence, and overwriting possession, that makes them “extremely difficult to recognize, analyze, and challenge” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 5). And yet we can easily appreciate the privileged position of property in our political imagination when we examine possession and property in their negative sense. When one speaks of dispossession it is well understood that they mean the taking of something, usually land, from someone else who is already and actively using it. But what does it mean to *dispose* property? The term is scarcely recognized as a legitimate word. This should tell us something important about the logic of property itself, and the ingrained platitudes that encourage us to view it as an inalienable, natural, or God-given right. Dispossession, while frequently considered regretful and at times even worthy of our sympathy,
is nonetheless given an air of legitimacy, as the process of deprivation does
not necessarily transgress law. Disproperty, in contrast, appears as a mis-
nomer, precisely because it contradicts an institution that is closely bound
to notions of sovereignty and very clearly backed by the force (i.e., the vio-
ence) of law. In this light I want to conclude with Godwin’s (1793/1842,
310) eloquent words, which although written over two centuries ago about
a context very different from contemporary Cambodia, nonetheless still
hold true:

Law we sometimes call the wisdom of our ancestors. But this is a strange
imposition. It was as frequently the dictate of their passion, of timidity, jeal-
ousy, a monopolizing spirit, and a lust of power that knew no bounds. Are
we not obliged perpetually to revise and remodel this misnamed wisdom of
our ancestors? To correct it by a detection of their ignorance, and a censure
of their intolerance?

By questioning the precept of *dura lex sed lex* and reflecting upon the pro-
cesses through which primitive accumulation is sanctioned, we are able
to reveal the intimate relations between property, violence, and law. Such
a critical position runs counter to the ignorance and intolerance of the
contemporary “moral order,” yet it embeds Cambodians more thoroughly
within a framework of egalitarianism, collectivism, and actual use, prac-
tices that have been—until the recent advent of property—orally handed
down to them through countless generations.
I started this book with Susan George (1999, np), so it seems apt that I return to her astute words in drawing things to a close: “Finally, please remember that neoliberalism may be insatiable but it is not invulnerable. . . . We have the numbers on our side, because there are far more losers than winners in the neoliberal game. . . . Solidarity no longer means aid, or not just aid, but finding the hidden synergies in each other’s struggles so that our numerical force and the power of our ideas become overwhelming.” The power behind her message is of course not exclusive and such agency and resilience can similarly be found in the Cambodian proverb “grab one vine and the rest of the plant will shake.” In both instances, the message seems clear enough: oppression is never absolute and when we have the courage to resist, there are lines of flight that can offer transformation and potential emancipation. The supposed neoliberal monolith can be reduced to rubble, a process that begins when we start to realize what we are up against. This book has been an exercise in “knowing your enemy,” and so I want to conclude by demonstrating the mortality of neoliberalism.

As an area of research, neoliberalism has picked up a great deal of steam among social scientists in recent years. From initial explorations focusing on the implications for state reform (Acuña and Smith 1994; Gill 1995; Pastor and Wise 1997; Peck 2001; Remmer 1998; Roberts 1995), neoliberalism has expanded prodigiously into a field of academic inquiry that now sees scholars examining the imbrications between neoliberalism and cities, citizenship, nature, nationalism, sexuality and gender, subjectivity, discourse, democracy and authoritarianism, development, health, and education to name but a few (Adam 2005; Bakker 2005; Bond and Dor 2003; Brenner and Theodore 2002; Craig and Potter 2006; Desai 2006; Gill 2008; Hackworth 2007; Harms 2007; Heynen et al. 2007; Hill and Kumar 2008; Katz 2005; Leitner et al. 2007; Ong 2006; Oza 2006; Power 2003; Rofel 2007; Scott-Marshall 2007; Sparke 2006a; ). Although early treatments had a tendency to regard neoliberalism as a ubiquitous,
singular, and monolithic end-state, neoliberalizations (in the plural) are increasingly understood as relational, variegated, and inherently contradictory processes contingent upon contextual specificity and articulation with existing political economic landscapes. Individual neoliberalizations then can be productively understood as particular geohistorical configurations, with a multitude of both differences and similarities between sites of contact in terms of how the grand abstraction of “neoliberalism-in-general” has been introduced, resisted, and challenged (England and Ward 2007; Hart 2008; Peck 2004). Within the existing literature there are four principal understandings through which neoliberalism/neoliberalization has been approached: (1) neoliberalism as an ideological hegemonic project (Cox 2002; Duménil and Lévy 2004; Harvey 2005; McMichael 2000; Plehwe et al. 2006; Sparke 2004); (2) neoliberalism as policy and program (Klepeis and Vance 2003; Martinez and Garcia 2000; Pastor and Wise 1997); (3) neoliberalism as state form (Peck 2001; Peck and Tickell 2002); and (4) neoliberalism as governmentality (Barry et al. 1996; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Lemke 2002). These four divergent theorizations can be productively understood as mutually reinforcing if we treat neoliberalism as a discourse, a task that necessarily involves reconciling political economy approaches with poststructuralism, in spite of their epistemological, ontological, and methodological differences (Springer 2012). Precisely because it “remains politically important to constantly draw attention to the links between those in positions of power and the inequalities witnessed in geographically dispersed yet socially interconnected areas of the world” (Ward and England 2007, 2), theorizing neoliberalism as a circulating discourse, an ongoing subjectification that is interpreted, contested, and reconstituted in a multiplicity of ways, is of paramount importance.

It was only over the course of a number of false starts, setbacks, and hiccups, that neoliberalism as a fringe utopian idea (Peck 2008) was able to begin to emerge as an orthodox doctrine that has coagulated as a divergent yet related series of neoliberalizations (Hart 2008; Ward and England 2007). Part of the “success” of neoliberalism as the lingua franca global discourse is that it is premised on a series of nostrums that once implemented predict that free market forces will lead to a prosperous future for the global south, where all of the world’s peoples will come to live in a unified and harmonious “global village.” In other words, the invisible hand is a false prophet of emancipation, proselytizing peace as it wages war. Over the course of this book I have attempted to show how neoliberalization in Cambodia has been enmeshed in a field of ongoing violent conflict, a patterning that has become a routinized system of human rights abuses and adversarial politics. But while the contextual specificities of Cambodia’s particular experiences with violence, neoliberalization, and democratic
processes are undoubtedly a major concern, I also understand the violent geographies of neoliberalism as having a relational quality that stretches across multiple sites, having been woven through particular discourses and (re)productions of space (Lefebvre 1991). Such an acknowledgment brings a wider resonance to my argument, where Cambodia provides a window on the patterns of violence that are associated with the sociospatial transformations that are occurring in a range of sites undergoing neoliberalizing processes all across the globe. While the intonations, tempos, and rhythms of neoliberalism will invariably have some measure of idiosyncrasy in different contexts, the song itself remains the same. Hidden beneath the allure of sirens, neoliberalism is actually a cacophony of violence, authoritarianism, and conflict, where there is profound dissonance between what it promises and what it ultimately delivers.

In the past, the development of countries has been measured in terms of economic growth, an interpretation that is favorable to capitalism, and particularly its most unfettered form. Increasingly though, such a limited reading of what is actually at stake has been criticized as failing to grasp the inequalities and exclusions that lie beneath econometrics as it fails to capture people’s actual lived experiences. Issues such as egalitarian development, democracy, participation, ethics, and human rights now suffuse development theory, which brings a more human face to its proceedings (Elliott 2002). While both democracy and social justice have become entrenched as important themes, the subject of violence represents a relatively new direction in the development studies literature, garnering attention only in recent years (Bourgois 2001; Cramer 2002; Escobar 2004; Kay 2001; McIlwaine and Moser 2003; Moser 2001; Panda and Agarwal 2005; Pickup et al. 2001; Wayne et al. 2002; Van der Wusten 2005). With this rising interest in the subject of violence, which might be considered to run parallel to the rise of violence in our world, it is increasingly understood that violent geographies undermine the development of nations, both in terms of traditional development issues such as economic growth (Ayres 1998), and also in relation to more contemporary notions of development such as sustainability and empowerment (Craig et al. 1998; Moser and Holland 1997). In many countries attempting to consolidate democracy following periods of political conflict, development is often conceived of as having been hindered because state-sponsored violence and interpersonal direct violence have not abated (Berdal and Keen 1997; Canterbury 2005; Farmer 2004; Nordstrom 2004; Pearce 1998; Poppovic and Pinheiro 1995; Scheper-Hughes 1996; Steenkamp 2005). This is a finding that should lead us to call into question the concept of “development,” or at the very least impel us to question the political economic orthodoxy that currently underscores the contemporary development process, and how this doctrine
characterizes the “democracies” that have emerged. The recognition that violence continues to proliferate in both nascent and consolidating democracies suggests a fundamental conflict between the egalitarian ideals and liberationist spirit that fuel support for democratic reform, and the realities of the neoliberalized version of democracy that is currently espoused on the world stage as a bastion of peace and the only path to prosperity.

In contrast to such idyllic proclamations, an increasing number of scholars have joined in the chorus of criticism against neoliberal policies due to their dogmatic focus on economic liberalization to the neglect and peril of social justice (Craig and Potter 2006; Duménil and Lévy 2004; England and Ward 2007; Hackworth 2007; Peck 2010; Plehwe et al. 2006; Rapley 2004; Smith et al. 2008). There is a growing recognition that the structural adjustment policies (SAPs) imposed on the global south by the international financial institutions (IFIs), and that neoliberalization more generally may actually foster conditions of increased impoverishment that subsequently provide manifold opportunities for violent conflict (Bourdieu 1998; Bourgois 2001; Bush 2007; Demmers 2004; Farmer 2004; Uvin 2003; Vanderschueren 1996; Welsh 2002). Some scholars have categorically argued that SAPs (now PRGFs) are directly responsible for the increasing levels of violence in the global south (Adewumi 1996; Mohan et al. 2000). These understandings may be dismissed by those academics on the political Right who remain staunch supporters of free market economics, but regardless of one’s political leanings, the historical record demonstrates that the years under neoliberalism have been characterized by intermittent crises and deepening divisions between the world’s nations on ethno-religious grounds. Although in some instances poverty has arguably been alleviated or at least not gotten any worse under neoliberalism, in many more geographical contexts poverty has remained painfully acute, while inequality has unilaterally increased both within and between cities, states, and regions (Harvey 2005; UNDP 2002; Wade 2003). In light of the promises of neoliberalism, where we are all called upon to place our faith in the notion that a “rising tide lifts all boats,” the failure of its assurances to materialize has opened up multiple possibilities for violence to flourish. It is the imperative to take these possibilities seriously that have provided the impetus for this book.

Drawing on a polychromatic conceptualization of neoliberalization, this book has placed its emphasis in understanding the imbrications and resonances of violence within the now orthodox political economic model of neoliberalism—disparate, protean, and variegated as it is. My efforts of course are not an initial foray, as many of the studies on neoliberalism cited above recognize the potential for violence within neoliberal reforms and their resultant institutional landscapes. There is a small, but growing body of literature that attempts to make such connections more explicit,
where violence is foregrounded as the locus of critique against neoliberalism (Borras and Ross 2007; Bumiller 2008; Coleman 2007; Collier 2008; Demmers 2004; Farmer 2004; Gillespie 2006; Giroux 2004; Goldstein 2005; Manalansan 2005; Marchand 2004; Olivera 2006; Sánchez-Prado 2006; Sandbrook and Romano 2004; Sargis and Gabbard 2005; Springer 2011; Uvin 2003; Vasudevan et al. 2008). However, few of these treatments of the relationship between neoliberalism and violence have attended in any significant manner to the contextual specificity of individual neoliberalizations, and instead, most studies seem content to replicate the notion of an externally imposed and monolithic neoliberalism in general, an approach that ultimately fails to capture the historical and geographical differences of how violence under neoliberalization has been experienced.

In contrast, while this book has demonstrated an urgent need to build conceptually relational linkages between the violence occurring in multiple sites undergoing neoliberalization, and to identify threads of commonality within these diverse spaces so that an emancipatory agenda of transnational scope may potentially begin to emerge, it is nonetheless simplistic and deeply problematic to assume uniformity across the various constellations of violent geographies that are occurring in neoliberalizing contexts. Such an approach reinforces the privilege and authority of neoliberalism as discourse, by continuing to circulate the idea that neoliberalism as a particular model of statecraft is inevitable, a criticism Gibson-Graham (1996) made more generally with regard to capitalism. Moreover, the point of our critiques should not be to temper neoliberalism with concessions, moderation, and niceties, as capitalism of any sort is doomed to fail. The logics of creative destruction, uneven development, and unlimited expansion, which not only stoke the fires of malcontent and conflict, but also contradict the finite limitations of the earth, are capitalism’s undoing regardless of the form it takes (Harvey 2007). Hence, what instead needs to be occurring in our scholarship on neoliberalism is a more thorough radicalization of our agenda, where the purpose appropriately becomes to consign neoliberalism and all other forms of capitalism to the waste bin of history, so that the exceptional and exemplary violences of this maligned chapter of human existence become a haunting abomination from our past, not an enduring reality of our present, or a conceded inevitability of our future. The literature on neoliberalism and violence must begin to move in a direction that simultaneously attends to the contingencies and specificities of how “local” expressions of violence are articulated between existing political economic landscapes and newly internalized, imposed, and instituted “global” neoliberal reform initiatives, while also remaining cognizant to the ways in which the violence of neoliberalization is relationally connected and (re)produced across space.
One of the most succinct summaries of neoliberalism I have ever encountered, and easily the most whimsical, comes from public intellectual Naomi Klein. In an interview with geographer Neil Smith, she explained the difference between capitalism and neoliberalism as follows:

The period after the Great Depression and the postwar period was capitalism in its seductive phase. It was capitalism that knew there were rival suitors and it came with flowers and chocolates like health care programmes and unemployment insurance, minimum wages, and all kinds of goodies precisely because it was part of this seductive dance to keep people from sliding into the hands of the socialists or, God forbid, the communists. Neoliberalism is really just capitalism in its boorish phase, capitalism on the couch in an undershirt saying, “what are you going to do, leave me?” (Klein and Smith 2008, 584)

The image of an unkempt, middle-aged man sitting in his underpants, provoking his complaining partner to leave him while retaining a certainty that no such event will ever occur is an entertaining analogy because of its peculiarity. Yet beyond such amusement, Klein has offered an analogy that should trouble us deeply as it speaks to the sense of complacency and tolerance for mistreatment that many of us, at least outwardly, appear to have convinced ourselves to accept. It speaks to the notion that “there is no alternative,” and to the joyless relationship we seem to have with this political economic system, an orthodoxy that “for better or for worse” and “come what may” appears to be here to stay.

But what is not spoken in Klein’s account, nor is it foregrounded in most contemporary treatments of neoliberalism in the literature, is that neoliberalism has gone beyond the “boorish” phase of our relationship. It has become so entrenched and comfortable in its place at the head of the table, that neoliberalism has now turned abusive (Bumiller 2008). Our silence on this unfolding violent matrimony is what allows this abuser to become more and more sure in the application of its dominion, and more and more brazen in the execution of its “necropolitical” agenda (Mbembe 2003). To continue to embrace the maligned doctrine of neoliberalism and the malevolence it unleashes is to stay the course of battery, exploitation, and assault, and to abandon those most embattled by its exclusions, and most scarred by its exceptional violence (i.e., the poor, the marginalized, the homeless, the dispossessed etc.) to the full fury of its wrath. Thankfully many critical scholars have been vocal in their calls for the indictment of neoliberal ideas (Birch and Mykhnenko 2010; England and Ward 2007; Harvey 2005; Leitner et al. 2007; Peck 2010; Smith et al. 2008), but we are not yet at a point where we can declare a distinct qualitative break from the past. Even though the legitimacy of neoliberalism has come under
intensifying scrutiny since the onset of the most recent financial crisis in late 2008, and neoliberalism may be “dead” inasmuch as it has run out of politically viable ideas (Smith 2008), it nonetheless remains “animated by technocratic forms of muscle memory, deep instincts of self-preservation, and spasmodic bursts of social violence” (Peck et al. 2010, 105). Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010, 2038) argue that what has emerged might be understood as a “neoliberalism version 3.0,” wherein those sites that are already neoliberalized are extended as neoliberalization “seeks new paths, bonds, appeal, and power” by drawing upon and reworking the results of earlier phases of neoliberalism while deepening the agenda of applying market-based solutions.

The continuing implications and exclusions of neoliberalism should call us to action; it should provoke us to intervene and invigorate our collective strength with a desire to make right such terrible wrongs. But beyond this imperative for compassion, a politics of affinity that never takes for granted our shared humanity (Day 2005), lies the danger of complacency, the shadow of indifference, and the menace of detachment among those of us who have not yet been subjected to our homes being forcibly taken by armed bandits known as police, to our children’s curiosity languishing because a basic education is an expense we cannot shoulder, or to our spouses dying in our arms having been denied adequate health care. My point here is not to raise an abstract “what if,” as should by now be clear, each of these scenarios has been revealed to me with distressing regularity during the course of my ongoing research in Cambodia. What those of us still on the winning side of neoliberalism do not account for or anticipate—and let there be no mistake that this is a system that most assuredly creates winners and losers—is that in this abandonment of our “Others,” we produce a relation of inclusive-exclusion. The relation of the ban is nothing if not ambiguous, and to abandon someone is not simply to forsake them. As Giorgio Agamben (1998, 72) explains, “What has been banned is delivered over to its own separateness and, at the same time, consigned to the mercy of the one who abandons it—at once excluded and included, removed and at the same time captured.” In other words, to ban is to produce a “state of exception,” wherein the “exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule” (Agamben 1998, 14). Consequently, the violence of the exception becomes the example.

To Agamben (1993, 10) the example escapes the paradox of the universal and the particular because “in any context where it exerts its force, the example is characterized by the fact that it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one
singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all.” So even though neoliberalism unfolds as neoliberalization—which is characterized by hybridization as articulation between actually existing political economic circumstances and neoliberal ideals results in a variegated series of contextually specific outcomes—the incidence and diffusion of neoliberal ideas present clues to a pervasive “metalogic” (Peck and Tickell 2002). Hence, the force of violence that is exerted through each unique neoliberalizing process is of a particular, exceptional kind. As Claudio Minca (2006, 388) argues, “the progressive normalization of a series of geographies of exception” has produced a new biopolitical nomos characterized by its gruesomeness. It is through this very construction of a new normative frame—wherein miasma and malice become the rule—that the exceptional violence of neoliberalism is transformed into exemplary violence. Yet the moment of violence itself is always of one kind: it destroys human lives and capabilities. Therefore, it is our precognitive emotional response to violence that qualifies how it is understood, as either exceptional or exemplary.

Exceptional violence always runs the risk of becoming exemplary, or so routinized, quotidian, ordinary, and banal that we no longer feel an affective response to its appearance because it is the norm. We may recognize it as violence, but we remain unmoved. However, exemplary violence is most effective when it is no longer recognized as violence, a malignant form of unconsciousness that Pierre Bourdieu (2001) referred to as “symbolic violence.” It is here in the mundanity of the everyday that we find meaning in Hannah Arendt’s (1963) “banality of evil.” History’s profoundest moments of malevolence are not executed by fanatics or sociopaths, but by ordinary people, by you and by me, as we come to simply accept the premises of the existing order or “rule.” The banality of evil is thus an erasure that deprives us of our ability to see violence as at once both exceptional and exemplary. As Agamben (1998, 14) explains, an exception “does not limit itself to distinguishing what is inside from what is outside but instead traces a threshold (the state of exception) between the two, on the basis of which outside and inside, the normal situation and chaos, enter into those complex topological relations.” The exception and the example accordingly always exist in a dialectic relationship, and it is for this reason that the ongoing abandonment of the “Other” under neoliberalism comes to define the very sovereignty of neoliberalism as a political economic order.

Violent Neoliberalism signifies the increasingly fantastic character of violence as our political imaginaries knowingly and unknowingly come to embrace the anomie and social disarticulation of neoliberalism’s dystopia of individualism. Within neoliberalism’s imaginative geographies of a global village, what is not spoken is the desire for a certain and particular
homogeneity, an impulse to remake the “Other” in “our” image, whereby the space of “the peculiar,” “the exotic,” “the bizarre” is continually (re)produced through the relation of the ban. But this is a relation that Agamben (1998, 21) knows well to be one where “outside and inside, become indistinguishable,” and thus, as with all fantasies and desires, at the heart of neoliberalism’s chimera of strength and confidence lurks a deep sense of anxiety (Gregory 1995). This is not a disquiet without consequence, but one that licenses particular violent geographies in ensuring that the “tableau of queerness” (Said 1978/2003) never disrupts its visions of global sovereignty. And it is here that we find another sense of the fantastic, a fantastic of heightened intensity and extraordinary degree, where the sheer volume of violence that pervades our contemporary world signals the looming specter of the “banality of evil.” This is a clichéd, hackneyed, and mundane force, an evil whose potential resides within each and every one of us, and whose belligerence is cultivated, harvested, and consumed under the premises of neoliberalism. Fantasy and reality collide under neoliberalization, and our participation in this process allows for the normative entrenchment of violence against the marginalized, the dispossessed, the poor, the downtrodden, the homeless, the unemployed, the disaffected, and the “Other.” Yet this necrogeography of fantastic violence is not the conclusion of neoliberalism’s violent fantasy; rather, it is its genesis. In this somber realization, and in echoing Marx, critical scholarship must not merely seek to interpret the world; it must seek to change it by aligning its theory and practice on all occasions and in all instances to the service of social justice. By seeking to illuminate the multiplicity of ways in which the processes of neoliberalization are suffused with both exceptional and exemplary violence, we open our geographical imaginations to the possibility of (re)producing space in ways that make possible a transformative and emancipatory politics. This “age of resurgent imperialism” (Hart 2006), this era of “the colonial present” (Gregory 2004), and this epoch of “Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2000) demand such courage of our scholarship. As members of the collectivity we call humanity, we each have a moral obligation to stand up and speak out, not only for fear that any single one of us might be “next,” but more importantly, as an act of solidarity with those who the violence of neoliberalism has already come for, and those who have been silenced by the complacency of a stifled collective imagination that views neoliberalism as a monolithic and inexorable force.

The world as we see it today, where the violence of neoliberalism proceeds with reckless abandon, is neither necessary nor inevitable. By increasing the collective recognition for the cruelty that neoliberalism unleashes, we set in motion a process of awakening from the enchantment of market logic, a process that breaks the spell of anomie and aims
to sound neoliberalism’s death knell. For the last two decades the vines of Cambodian life have become evermore entangled in a routinized system of marked-based violence wherein “the tragedy of Cambodian history” has continued unabated into the present (Chandler 1993). Yet in the face of the banality of evil that pervades Cambodia’s neoliberalization, there is room for optimism. The seed of hope has deep roots in this stricken land, and Cambodians are nothing if not a resilient people. As exceptional violence comes to form the rule, Cambodians become more acutely aware that there is something rotten in the Kingdom of Cambodia, and consequently more willing to stand up for themselves and their communities. Every time they refuse to sit idle before their would-be evictors, have the courage to protest their exclusion from democratic process, strike against an exploitative employer who denies a fair wage, or resist being framed as violent savages incapable of agency, the rhizomes of emancipation grow stronger and the plant begins to shake. Although the stench of profit over people in Cambodia may continue to offend our senses for some time to come, the very presence of its loathsome odor indicates that the power of neoliberalism is decomposing, a condition that offers fertilizer for the hidden synergies of solidarity and resistance. As it turns out, there may yet be a single truth to be told about neoliberalism: its mortality.
Notes

Introduction—Sic Transit Gloria Mundi: There’s Something Rotten in the State of Cambodia

1. My use of scare quotes around these two categories follows Timothy Mitchell (2002), where in particular I want to problematize the hierarchy and authority imbued in the notion of “expert.”

2 Violent Kleptocracy: The Articulations of Neoliberalism and Patronage

1. I refer particularly to “Western” donors, as the RGC has been largely uncritical of money arriving from Asia, which has risen considerably in recent years.

2. The first sense of “enemy” (khmaang) is used to refer to adversaries in battle or war, whereas the second sense (setrov) is used in a more general sense of opposition.

3. Cambodian elites were not oblivious to this “shock.” The 1980s were characterized by de facto privatization. Prior to UNTAC, the RGC was already committed to economic reform including revised marketing, land tenure, investment, and taxation legislation designed to attract foreign capital, as well as reductions on subsidies and the privatization of state holdings (Slocomb 2010).

4. These observations are based on my own family’s experience of adopting a Cambodian child in early 2007.

5. A reading of the “police blotter” section in any issue of the Phnom Penh Post will confirm this claim.

4 Violent Symbolism: Good Governance and the Making of Neoliberal Subjects

1. For an extended discussion of marketization in Cambodia throughout the country’s transitional process, see Springer (2010a).

2. I have deconstructed the implications of “order,” “stability,” and “security” in the context of Cambodia’s neoliberalization elsewhere, arguing that these discursive devices function to palisade the interests of capital and shield the government’s authoritarian disposition and explicit use of violence from both
local public censure and international accountability (see Springer 2009, 2010).

3. Poster (1984, 37–38) observes that, according to Althusser, “In works after 1845, The German Ideology and Capital, Marx and Engels…shed their Hegelian skins and established the science of historical materialism by theorizing the object (the mode of production) without resort to the subject, an achievement that appears to parallel that of Foucault. Althusser maintains a commitment to science in a way that the Nietzschean Foucault does not; but in eliminating the metaphysical support of the rational subject their work bears some similarity.”

5 Violent Accumulation: The Trilateral of Logics and the Creation of Property

1. Noncapitalist states like Cuba and the former Soviet Union are included because at one time they experienced a capitalist mode of production, whether as colonized or colonizer.

2. My use of “commonsense” throughout comes from Harvey’s (2005, 39) recognition for its construction “out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the ‘good sense’ that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Commonsense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices.”

3. To Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi (1959, 103), Muselmänner “form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass…of no-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty really to suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death.” Accordingly, Muselmänner are like zombies, seemingly still alive, yet dead in spirit, crushed by extreme subjection to violence. The genesis of its usage in the camps is unknown, but the term might come from the literal meaning of the Arabic word muslim, “the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God,” the original sovereign (Agamben 2000b).

4. Although Pol Pot’s regime raises the question of capitalism within the trilateral of logics, Cambodia passed through a capitalist stage both under and following colonialism. Moreover, part of the fault of the Khmer Rouge revolution—and communism more generally—is that they look exclusively to one part of the trilateral (capitalism) as problematic and continue to want to work within the confines of law and civilization, thus promoting statism.

5. Freud ([1930] 1962) sits somewhere between these two views, identifying violence as a primitive instinct that was only subdued through civilization but also acknowledging that the individual’s quest for instinctual freedom is impeded by civilization’s demand for conformity, hence the enduring discontent.

6 Violent Evictions: Oral Possession and Legal Transgression

1. It was only males who were afforded such rights, which in itself tells us something about the discriminatory origins of property.
2. I was unable to obtain permission to include the image, as the photographer remains anonymous owing to concerns for his safety and possible retaliation. Fortunately, villagers also shared these photos with LICADHO, who have posted them to their website at: http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/album/view_photo.php?cat=36.

3. Or as Adam Smith (1776/2007) was keen to refer to it, “previous” accumulation.

4. As the first person in history to declare, “I am an anarchist,” Proudhon (1840/2011, 241) is also considered a preeminent godfather of socialism. His ideas were so influential in late nineteenth-century France that it is impossible to disentangle his critique of property from the libertarian movement that resulted in the Paris Commune of 1871 (Archer 1997).

Conclusions—Memento Mori: The Mortality of Neoliberalism

1. Although in the late 1990s enhanced structural adjustment facilities (ESAFs) and structural adjustment credits (SAC) were abolished, the replacement for the much-maligned SAPs, Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), is quite simply SAPs under a new name, so while the language has changed, the imperatives of privatization, liberalization, and deregulation remain firmly entrenched.
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