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Capitalizing on Compensation: Hydropower Resettlement and the Commodification and Decommodification of Nature–Society Relations in Southern Laos

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Compensation programs for hydropower dam resettlement have far-reaching effects, including restructuring nature–society relations in support of capital accumulation. Although critical scholarship has shown the structural limitations of compensation programs for reducing poverty after resettlement, here we draw on the specific case of the Xepian-Xenamnoy hydroelectric dam project in the Xekong River Basin in southern Laos to explore the transformation of nature–society relations among the Heuny people. We argue that the compensation processes of valuation, abstraction, and privatization of property relations have contributed to the variegated commodification of land and other natural resources used by the Heuny. In contrast to arguments that capitalist expansion leads to ever increasing commodification, however, we demonstrate that compensation variously decommodifies other natural resources, such as certain nontimber forest products and wild fisheries, keeping other things, such as swidden fields and forest land, noncommodified. Moreover, these processes of variegated commodification are spatially variable, largely dependent on Heuny conceptions of space, thus affecting the commodification of land and other natural resources. Ultimately, by linking compensation to processes of (de)-commodification in its various forms, we suggest new ways in which capitalist social relations are being transformed and expanded through hydropower-induced resettlement. Furthermore, we call into question the ability of material compensation to restore previous livelihood and environmental conditions, as changes brought on by the compensation process itself have much deeper and profound implications when it comes to nature–society relations. *Key Words: commodification and decommodification, compensation, hydropower dams, Laos, resettlement.*

水电站大坝再安置的赔偿计画, 有着深远的影响, 包括再结构自然社会关係以支持资本积累。尽管批判学术研究已揭露赔偿计画对于降低再安置后的贫穷问题之结构性侷限, 我们仍于此运用老挝南方湄公河谷的 Xepian-Xenamnoy 水电站大坝计画之特定案例, 探讨少数民族 Heuny 的自然社会关係变迁。我们主张, 对于财产关係进行估价、抽象化和私有化之补偿计画, 已导致少数民族 Heuny 所使用的土地及其它自然资源的多样商品化。但与资本主义扩张导致不断的商品化之主张不同的是, 我们证明补偿计画对诸如若干非木材的森林产物与野生渔业等其他自然资源各别进行去商品化, 并让诸如游耕地和林地等其他事物保持非商品化。此外, 这些多样的商品化过程, 在空间上具有变异, 并大幅取决于少数民族 Heuny 对于空间的概念, 因而影响土地与其他自然资源的商品化。最终, 我们透过将补偿连结至具有多样形式的 (去) 商品化过程, 提出资本主义社会关係透过水力发电所引发的再安置进而改变与扩张的新方式。再者, 我们质疑物质补偿对于恢復过往生计和环境条件的能力, 因为补偿过程本身所带来的改变, 对自然—社会关係有着深刻且深厚的意涵。 *关键词: 商品化与去商品化, 补偿, 水电站大坝, 老挝, 再安置。*

Los programas de compensación por concepto de reasentamiento inducido por embalses para hidroenergía tienen efectos de largo alcance, incluso la reestructuración de las relaciones naturaleza-sociedad en soporte de la acumulación de capital. Aunque la erudición crítica ha mostrado las limitaciones estructurales de los programas de compensación para reducir la pobreza después del reasentamiento, aquí nos basamos en el caso específico del proyecto de la presa hidroeléctrica de Xepian-Xenamnoy en la cuenca del Río Xekong, en el sur de Laos, para explorar la transformación de las relaciones naturaleza-sociedad entre el pueblo Heuny. Sostenemos que los procesos de compensación de tasación, abstracción y privatización de las relaciones de propiedad han contribuido a la abigarrada comodificación de la tierra y de otros recursos naturales usados por los Heuny. En contraste con argumentos que sostienen que la expansión capitalista conduce a un permanente incremento de la comodificación, sin embargo, demostramos que la compensación de diversas maneras decomodifica otros recursos naturales, tales como ciertos productos forestales no maderables y la pesca silvestre, conservando otras cosas sin comodificación, tales como los campos de agricultura de roza y las tierras de bosques. Más aun, estos procesos de comodificación variada son espacialmente variables, en gran parte dependientes de las concepciones del espacio de los Heuny, afectando así la comodificación de la tierra y de otros recursos naturales. Por último, al

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ligar la compensación con procesos de (de)comodificación en sus varias formas, sugerimos nuevas maneras como las relaciones sociales capitalistas están siendo transformadas y expandidas por medio del reasentamiento inducido por la hidroenergía. Además, cuestionamos la capacidad de la compensación material para restablecer la subsistencia previa y las condiciones ambientales, en cuanto los cambios que llegan con el proceso de compensación en sí mismo tienen implicaciones más graves y profundas cuando se trata de las relaciones naturaleza-sociedad. *Palabras clave: comodificación y decomodificación, compensación, represas de hidroenergía, Laos, reasentamiento.*

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In response to decades of evidence demonstrating that involuntary resettlement due to hydropower dam development causes severe social trauma, there has been a global push for compensation programs that ensure people's livelihoods and standards of living improve after resettlement (World Commission on Dams [WCD] 2000; McCully 2001; Scudder 2005). Although some scholars have pointed to the structural flaws of most compensation programs (Cernea and McDowell 2000; Scudder 2005; Cernea and Mathur 2008), few have examined how they restructure nature–society relations. Comparing pre- and postresettlement status requires quantifying and valuing livelihoods in ways that selectively silence sociocultural livelihood practices not amenable to monetary compensation (Cernea and Mathur 2008). In this way, compensation programs that are supposed to reestablish livelihoods to a preresettlement state are partially informed by notions of commensurability rooted in neoliberal ideology (Whitington 2012). In his research on the connections between plantation development and hydropower development in central Laos, Barney (2011) argued that this transformation of livelihoods has "the effects of enclosure and displacement from common property resources . . . and the commercialization of land and labor" (317).

In this article, we seek to interrogate how compensation programs facilitate these neoliberal capitalist social relations. Specifically, we argue that large hydropower dam compensation programs variously transform livelihoods and nature–society relations through the selective and partial commodification and decommodification of land and other natural resources and that space is important for the ways in which these processes play out. Following work by geographers and others (Castree 2003; Robertson 2004; Bakker 2005; Nevins and Peluso 2008; Peluso 2012), we maintain that the expansion of capitalist social relations is usefully considered by examining processes of commodification, such as measurement, valuation, abstraction, and privatization. We show how these defining processes of commodification are enacted through hydropower compensation programs. We argue that compensation variously produces new commodified relationships to land, assets, and other natural resources by reducing their social values to a singular monetary value, rendering legible only certain kinds of agro-ecological practices that are amenable to global markets, and formalizing property rights.

Nevertheless, commodification is not a linear, totalizing, or geographically even process (Appadurai 1986; Bakker 2005), and sometimes capitalist social relations contribute to certain forms of decommodification (Henderson 2004; Hall 2014). Understanding how commodities are decommodified has received relatively little attention within the commodification literature (Kopytoff 1986; Sayer 2003; De Angelis 2004; Henderson 2004; Hall 2014). We propose that decommodification is a structural tendency within capitalist society: Over time and space, certain commodities are no longer produced as a result of shifting cultural and material landscapes, changing market demands, and state policy. A goal of this article is to explore how hydropower resettlement and compensation contributes to the decommodification of certain kinds of land and natural resources that were previously commodified and vitally important for local livelihoods. We argue that Lao development policy, which is affected by various government and nongovernment agencies; the micropolitics of compensation programs; and the sociospatial landscape produced by hydropower resettlement strongly shape these processes of decommodification.

In our analysis of how compensation facilitates variegated commodification and decommodification, we seek to better understand the ways in which these programs undermine the stated development goals of compensation in Laos, in particular the aim "to ensure that affected people are compensated and assisted to improve their pre-project incomes and living standards, and are not worse off than they would have been without the project" (Decree 192/PM 2005). By examining how state policy, commodity markets, and local agency interact in compensation programs to produce new spaces of (de)commodification, our analysis advances our understanding of how compensation reshapes nature–society relations. It also opens the possibility for a critique of compensation programs that reinforce economic practices, discourses, and legal systems associated

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with capitalist enclosures and resource exploitation. With more than 40 million people worldwide displaced by large-scale hydropower dams in the last century (WCD 2000), exploring this transformative role of compensation programs helps us better understand how capitalism restructures people's relationship to their environments through hydropower resettlement.

We begin by situating hydropower development in the historical and political–economic context of rural Laos. We then develop an analytical framework for studying compensation's impact on nature–society relations by drawing on theories of nature's commodification, the capitalist state, and decommodification. Next, we introduce the Xepian–Xenamnoy hydroelectric dam project located in the Xekong River Basin of southern Laos and the associated resettlement of the ethnic Heuny (Nya Heun).[1] After presenting this case study, we discuss the Heuny's experiences with the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam's compensation program in two parts. First, we analyze how compensation programs contribute to the selective commodification and privatization of land and certain other natural resources. To understand how these processes of commodification relate to a deepening of capitalist social relations, we situate the effects of compensation within the larger context of resettlement of the Heuny, their engagement with wage labor, and commodity crop production. Second, we argue that compensation programs do not uniformly commodify everything but also contribute to the varying decommodification of certain kinds of natural resources. Finally, we conclude the article with suggestions about theoretical contributions and practical implications for future compensation programs.

The information presented is based on a collaboration. The second author has been researching and writing about the resettlement of the Heuny for nearly twenty years. He also visited some of the villages in 1995 before they were resettled the first time. During the summer of 2013, the first author conducted twenty-five qualitative interviews with Heuny leaders and community members at the main resettlement site of the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam located in Paksong District, Champassak Province. These interviews were carried out with the aid of two staff members from a Lao-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) who helped with translation and access to the resettlement site. The main consultants responsible for the Social and Environmental Impact Assessments for the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam were also interviewed. In July 2014 and July 2015, the second author conducted additional interviews with Heuny leaders.

Rural Development and Hydropower Resettlement in Laos

Hydropower development in Laos and its associated resettlement programs are integrally connected to the larger rural development paradigm pursued since the early 1990s by the Government of Laos (GoL), which is directed by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party's Central Committee Politburo. Strongly influenced by the neoliberal ideologies of its main financial backers, the World Bank (WB) and Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Politburo has argued that rural poverty is caused by a lack of access to markets and basic government services (Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Sacklokham 2005; Rigg 2005). The government has also pursued extensive land reforms through internal resettlement, the prohibition of swidden agriculture, land allocation, and land titling (Vandergeest 2003; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Sacklokham 2005; Baird and Shoemaker 2007). The Politburo and, by extension, the GoL—obliged to follow all directives coming from the Party—have argued that increasing land security through privatization and encouraging foreign investment in its natural resources is the most effective way to raise capital for reinvestment back into the country (Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Sacklokham 2005; Rigg 2005; Dwyer 2007).

Ethnic minorities practicing swidden agriculture have been particularly targeted for relocation (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Development policies and discourses have consistently cast ethnic minorities and their livelihood practices as "backward," environmentally destructive, and holding back the development of the country (Pholsena 2006). In 1990, the GoL's Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry initiated the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, which targeted 900,000 swidden cultivators in the country for resettlement, and set the stage for future land reforms and forestry policies designed to meet this target, such as the Land and Forest Allocation Program (Vandergeest 2003). Relocating ethnic minorities became a means of incorporating them into Lao national development. This internal resettlement has been widely condemned due to increased poverty, reduced health standards, and sociocultural destruction for most relocated populations (see Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Baird and Shoemaker 2007).

Although the Politburo seeks to present a unified front of state-led development, the Lao state itself is neither monolithic nor hegemonic. It is shaped by internal politics and alliances that produce a development landscape defined by legal plurality (Suhardiman

and Giordano 2014). This contested, open, contradictory nature of the Lao state does not make it any weaker, however, as various factions strengthen their positions by either appealing to the neoliberal policies of foreign donors or the Marxist/Leninist ideology of the state. It is also crucial to recognize that the Politburo goes to great effort to hide differences of opinions within the Lao state's various agencies, which makes it difficult to study how its internal politics shape its development agenda. Moreover, the Lao state is linked to regional political economies, geopolitics, and development plans, which shape the regulatory context and civil society responses to development projects (Dore, Lebel, and Molle 2012). In our discussion of Xepian–Xenamnoy and the commodification of nature, we attend to these internal and multiscalar politics of hydropower development.

Embedded in Lao rural development, hydropower took off in the 1990s. The Ministry of Energy and Mines has identified the development of its hydroelectric power sector, estimated at 18,000 megawatts, as a central strategy to grow the Lao economy and reduce poverty (Bakker 1999; International Rivers [IR] 2008; Molle, Foran, and Kakonen 2009). Proponents of hydropower in Laos maintain that developing the country's natural hydroelectric potential, with the assistance of major multinational and private investment banks (Hirsch 2001), will provide employment and raise capital for reinvestment back into the country (Lawrence 2009). Dams are also expected to bring development to rural areas by linking people to the larger market economy (Molle, Foran, and Kakonen 2009). Moreover, Laos's Politburo, as part of its reform agenda after 1986, has been promoting the idea of "producing commodities for export" (*phalit pen sin kha pheua song oke* in Lao) since the late 1980s and early 1990s (Baird 2011). This idea informs the large-scale development of export-oriented hydroelectric projects such as Xepian–Xenamnoy. Indeed, this approach has been strongly promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the WB, and the ADB (International Rivers Network [IRN] 1999; IR 2008; Lawrence 2009). Some have even suggested that Laos could become "the battery of Asia" (Hunt 2012).

As of 2015, there are plans to develop more than fifty hydropower projects in Laos. Of these projects, there are thirty-one either under construction or already in operation (EPD 2008). Most of this energy is bound for export to neighboring countries; since 2008 electricity has amounted to 30 percent of all of Laos's exports (Law No. 561/CPI 2006). Agreements between Laos and its neighbors (Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia) for the sale of electricity are tied to a regional political economy wherein foreign private investors construct and operate dam projects that produce electricity for neighboring countries' energy needs (Hirsch 2001; Wyatt 2004; Molle, Foran, and Kakonen 2009; Baird and Quastel 2015).

The development of Laos's hydropower potential has been hotly contested. At the regional level, the impoundment of the Mekong and its tributary rivers will significantly reduce wild-caught fishery production vital for rural livelihoods throughout the Lower Mekong Basin. Moreover, changes in hydrological flows are expected to increase flooding, disrupt agro-ecological systems dependent on regular flood-pulse cycles, and impede silt that provides nutrients for agricultural production in Laos and downstream countries (Molle, Foran, and Kakonen 2009). Within Laos, the impacts of existing dam projects have already brought great hardship for many people living in areas where dams have been built (IRN 1999; IR 2008; Lawrence 2009; Baird, Shoemaker, and Manorom 2015). The loss of livelihood and income sources such as common property resources and arable land have been shown to frequently lead to economic marginalization and reduced living standards (WCD 2000). Reduced food security impairs household nutrition and can lead to higher mortality rates.

The contestation of hydropower projects in Laos by diverse critics has helped to produce the regulatory and legal framework of environmental management and social development related to large-scale dams (IR 2008; Whitington 2012). The Nam Theun 2 Hydropower Project (NT2) in central Laos, in particular, has set a lasting precedent for environmental management and social development schemes, including resettlement compensation programs. In 2005, after years of study, the WB committed to providing a "deal-breaker" financial guarantee for the NT2 dam, the largest hydropower project in the country to date (Porter and Shivakumar 2011). According to Law No. 561/CPI (2006), "The NT2 project defined new environmental and social standards for a development project [that were] inseparably linked to the development of national legal and institutional provisions for environmental and social safeguards" (11). This policy was largely written by foreign consultants who were paid by the WB and ADB and drew on their industry best practice standards (Lao PDR 2005). The policy was also influenced by the Ministry of Planning and Investment's priorities, however, to ensure that environmental and social mitigation costs are not so high as to discourage foreign investment in dams.

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Importantly, the interpretation and implementation of government laws and policies pertaining to hydropower varies greatly depending on local context, including internal contradictions of the state (see Suhardiman and Giordano 2014). This is partly due to how the regulatory systems are defined by law. For example, the Decree on the Compensation and Resettlement of the Development Project 192/PM (2005), which was promulgated as a result of NT2, states that compensation programs are to be carried out primarily by project owners, with oversight by third-party contractors. When land and assets (defined as structures, crops, and trees) are surveyed, third-party contractors are to organize free, prior, and informed consultations with project-affected people. As such, local politics and geography are extremely important in the implementation of Decree 192/PM. In the case of NT2, for instance, compensation programs were conducted in fundamentally different ways depending on the impact area. On the Nakai Plateau, those resettled for the reservoir area are being compensated under an agreement that requires populations to reach certain livelihood standards before support ends. Downstream areas, however, were only allocated a particular amount of compensation, regardless of whether it would be enough to restore livelihoods or not (it was not; Lawrence 2009). Thus, despite these laws, NT2 failed to live up to promises or demands of local people or civil society. In particular, it has recently been found that NT2 has resulted in serious downstream ecological and social impacts along the Xe Bang Fai River and that these impacts have not been appropriately compensated (Baird, Shoemaker, and Manorom 2015).

Broadly speaking, compensation programs in Laos are supposed to return livelihoods to preresettlement levels, generally measured in terms of health, export commodity production, and the establishment of social and cultural institutions geared toward a market economy (Decree 192/PM 2005; Lao PDR 2005). The regulatory and institutional framework for Lao hydropower development thus codifies international best practice standards, such as those outlined in the WCD (2000) report. Although scholarship on involuntary hydropower resettlement highlights structural deficits of monetary compensation to promote these development goals (Scudder 2005; Cernea and Mathur 2008), few studies have systematically examined how such programs reshape nature–society relations.

To do so requires first acknowledging that compensation programs do not exist in a vacuum separate from larger projects of environmental management and social development that accompany hydropower development. Project-related development mitigation schemes, local resource and land conflicts, state-backed land reforms, environmental management programs, and resettlement-induced mobility among other processes affect livelihoods and change people's relationship to their environments (Cernea and McDowell 2000; McCully 2001; Scudder 2005). Although our analysis is attentive to this larger context, we focus primarily on compensation programs for several reasons. Processes of compensation are often the primary interaction that resettled peoples have with government officials, private contractors, and civil society during resettlement for a hydropower project. Moreover, Whitington (2012) argued that social development programs for Lao hydropower development facilitate an institutionalized form of contestation that determines how dam developers respond to local and civil society critics. Finally, compensation programs generally treat lost land and assets as marketable commodities. In spaces where capitalist markets of commodity production and trade are not well established, providing compensation is predicated on processes of commodification.

Nature's Commodification and Decommodification

The study of nature's commodification has received a great deal of attention in recent years. For some, nature's commodification entails the ever-increasing exploitation of the environment for capital accumulation (O'Connor 1988). Others critically examine how neoliberal environmentalism attempts to utilize market mechanisms to accomplish the double duty of economic growth and ecological restoration (Prudham 2003; Robertson 2004; Castree 2008). Still others have concentrated on the ways in which nature is socially produced (Smith 2008), such that capital circulates not only around nature but increasingly through it as well (Prudham 2003). As Castree (2008) observed, in general this critical scholarship seeks to explore and deepen Polanyi's (1957) key argument that by embedding nature into a self-regulating capitalist market, "Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighborhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed" (76). This normative critique largely rests on the twofold argument that ecological functions and services will always be incompletely governed by the logic of capital (itself riddled with contradictions) and

that market exchange and price always externalize the negative social and environmental impacts of production, consumption, and waste (Prudham 2009).

To advance this critique, as we aim to do in this article, critical literature on nature's commodification has explored the myriad material, discursive, and legal means by which nature becomes commodified. There is a wide consensus that "there is no singular path to commodity status" (Prudham 2009, 126) and that commodification is nonlinear, incomplete, and frequently contested (Hall 2014). We thus follow the argument that processes of commodification are determined by the particular material and semiotic qualities of commodities within specific historical and geographical contexts (Cronon 1991; Prudham 2003; Bakker 2005; Robertson 2006; Castree 2008). Nonetheless, for the purposes of our conceptual framework, we focus on three general processes of commodification necessary to turn an object of nature into a commodity: valuation, abstraction, and privatization (Castree 2003).

First, to bring a commodity to market requires giving it a price, or the valuation of the object (Watts 2005). Where no market yet exists, this price is often determined by experts or state agents, such that valuation is shaped by the contestation of different knowledge and regulatory regimes (Robertson 2007). It is crucial to note, though, that the value of a capitalist commodity should not be conflated with its price—the two are not the same. The value of a commodity, determined by its socially necessary labor time, only represents itself as price once the money form has firmly established itself in a capitalist society (Marx 1976). Indeed, as Robertson and Wainwright (2013) pointed out, this distinction is often lost within critical political ecology scholarship, which we elaborate on later. In our analysis, we therefore pay particular attention to the specific actors involved and the power relations within the political process by which compensation programs assign price to lost land and assets.

Second, commodification requires the abstraction of a thing from its sociocultural and natural context for it to become commensurable with another thing in a different space (Cronon 1991; Castree 2003; Robertson 2006; Prudham 2009). As Nevins and Peluso (2008) pointed out, "Where Nature is the subject and object of commodification, it matters greatly what forms, scales, and qualities constitute it at various points in the commodification and exchange processes" (21). Creating a fungible, tradable commodity out of natural resources, for instance, must contend with complicated and diverse ecological systems (Robertson 2006; Sneddon 2007). For this reason, the politics of measurement and classification frequently become highly contested in nature's commodification (Robertson 2006). In the case of hydropower compensation, we explore the politics of measurement by which land and other natural resources are abstracted from their qualitatively distinct material and sociocultural spaces to justify replacing them with their so-called equivalent at resettlement sites.

Third, privatization is needed to facilitate discrete transactions of a commodity between individuals or groups (Nevins and Peluso 2008). Private property rights are never uniform (Mansfield 2007), however. In our analysis of commodification we pay attention to the larger regulatory schemes of land reform instituted by various branches of the GoL in the past several decades and how privatization has been uneven and highly contested by local actors (Vandergeest 2003). By analyzing how compensation leads to privatization, moreover, we further assess the complex relationships between commodification and privatization and how the materiality of the resource or land in question influences these processes (Bakker 2005).

Although focusing on these three processes helps us to analyze how hydropower compensation contributes to the commodification of land and other natural resources, it is also important to establish the connection between commodification and capitalism. Much of the literature on the commodification of nature explicitly or implicitly follows Polanyi's (1957) definition that commodities are objects produced for sale on the market (Castree 2003; Bakker 2005; Page 2005; Peluso 2012). By Polanyi's definition, land, labor, and money are fictitious commodities because they are not specifically produced for exchange. Commodification and market exchange do not by themselves entail a capitalist mode of production, however. For instance, if commodities are defined as simply objects produced for exchange on a market, then commodities have long existed in many noncapitalist economies (Appadurai 1986). For Marx (1976), it is the value form of the commodity that distinguishes capitalist commodities from noncapitalist ones. The key difference between these kinds of commodities is that capitalist commodities are produced not only for exchange on a market. Capitalist commodities are produced according to the law of value: They embody the surplus value of labor, which is realized through exchange and reinvested back into production to complete the cycle of capital accumulation. That is why "for bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour, or the value-form of

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the commodity, is the economic cell-form" (Marx 1976, 90). The commodity form in capitalism, in other words, is defined not simply by money, markets, and exchange but by the organizational and institutional relations of production geared toward the law of value.

Marx was, however, concerned with more than just a labor theory of value of the commodity: He saw the value form of the commodity as a product of the dialectical relationship between the social relations of production and nature (Robertson and Wainwright 2013). As such, Prudham (2009) argued that the commodification of nature in a capitalist sense is inextricably linked to the commodification of labor and the accumulation of capital. So although commodification is not a sufficient condition of capitalism, we argue in this article that nature's commodification can nonetheless facilitate the establishment, or deepening, of capitalist social relations. Indeed, the relationship between nature and capital was a key point in Marx's notion of primitive accumulation, in which the commodification of land and labor was achieved through enclosures and the social processes of proletarianization. These processes, crucial to the ongoing accumulation of capital (Harvey 2003), are also linked to discourses that normalize the commodification of nature. For instance, Peluso (2012) argued that "once some component of nature or a 'natural resource' has been enclosed, territorialized, or set aside, through coercion, cajoling or capture by other means, it is only a matter of time before those new fictitious commodities become normalized as commodities" (85). In sum, we propose that understanding the commodification of nature requires examining the material social relations of production in which commodification processes are embedded and how the discourses of commodification normalize new forms of enclosure and dispossession (De Angelis 2004). In our study, although we are attentive to how commodification through hydropower compensation is inseparable from the experiences of resettlement and the establishment of wage labor, we are unable to examine this wider context in greater detail due to space constraints.

Given the historical connection between the modern state and the expansion and deepening of capitalist social relations (Hopkins et al. 1987; Harvey 2003), our analysis also considers the role of diverse state agencies and other actors in processes of commodification. In the most abstract sense, "the state is required by the value form in so far as there are extra-economic preconditions of the circuit of capital that must be secured by the state" (Jessop 1990, 209). This is true in the commodification of nature, where extraeconomic preconditions are necessary for processes like privatization (Mansfield 2007), scientific measurement (Robertson 2006), and regulatory regimes (Bakker 2007). As Robertson and Wainwright (2013) pointed out in their discussion of the valuation of ecosystem services, for example:

> Capitalist states must facilitate the measure of new values because they are necessarily involved in the regulation of capitalism's transformation of the natural environment. Every capitalist state is involved, in various ways, with the regulation of capitalism; today, the regulation of environmental transformation is a core part of these regulations. (11)

Nonetheless, regulations vary considerably, including those placed under the general heading of neoliberal reforms. The rollout of neoliberal reforms rarely conforms to the "ideal type" of extreme neoliberal ideology of unregulated free markets (Peck 2010). Additionally, Bakker (2007) demonstrated that reforms to resource management differ by institutions, organizations, and state governance and that the nature of reforms and regulations is also shaped by the biophysical properties of commodities. Finally, the production of expert knowledge—enacted through state mechanisms via technical discourses, institution building, and new policies—is critical for the art of governing capitalist states and the environment (Mitchell 2002; Goldman 2005).

States are not uniform, however. Consequently, in our examination of Lao hydropower, we decentralize the notion of top-down state power, even as the effects of a capitalist state satisfy the needs of transnational capital (Goldman 2005). Dwyer (2013) recently showed how displacements through land grabbing in Laos are intimately shaped by both local elites and internal dynamics within the Lao state itself. In our analysis, we seek to be attentive to the inner workings of the state that shape involuntary enclosures of resources (Hart 2006; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; Wolford et al. 2013). In Laos, the contradictory and uneven forms of governance have manifested themselves spatially, producing what Barney (2009) called a "patchworked frontier . . . [of] fragmented and overlapping mosaics of resource governance and territorial control" (147). Finally, as Li (2007, 27) argued in the case of Indonesia, local-level agency enacted through varied "sociologies of rule" can also influence how top-down projects of government play out on the ground. In Laos, for instance, Baird and Le Billon (2012, 291) demonstrated that "memories of war . . .

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are contributing to shaping contemporary rural landscapes." In this article, we thus focus on how compensation programs are shaped by both top-down policies of environmental governance and local micropolitics.

We have already mentioned that commodification processes are nonlinear, partial, and contested. Although Prudham (2009) acknowledged that the "process-oriented valence of commodification suggests the possibility of reversal, and thus of decommodification" (126), the notion of decommodification has received relatively little attention within theories of nature's commodification. We argue that there are two main reasons why greater attention should be given to the notion of decommodification: It refers to both an immanent process within capital accumulation and a socially directed movement that contests the commodification of everything. How these two seemingly contradictory processes of decommodification resolve themselves, we argue, helps to explain not only what is decommodified but the regulation and expansion of capitalism more broadly.

On the one hand, there is the suggestion that decommodification is a structural tendency of capitalism. For example, Sayer (2003) argued that consumption is a form of decommodification: It is necessary for continuous effective demand and surplus value realization. Indeed, most commodities are "terminable" in this sense (Kopytoff 1986). They are produced for one-time consumption, so that future products can be consumed again. Some kinds of commodities, however, are not fully decommodified through the act of consumption; the market in secondhand commodities now flourishes, with donated items like old clothing and unused food now making up a large industry (Henderson 2004). In his analysis of food banks, Henderson (2004) argued that the surpluses attendant with capital production of commodified food must find some way to devalue some food commodities to maintain the value of the surplus. He claimed that "the potential, if not the certainty, of decommodification is immanent within commodity society, immanent within the very nature of accumulation" (Henderson 2004, 490). Relatedly, in his study of biocapital, Sunder Rajan (2006) argued that the decommodification of biotechnology knowledge is built into the political-economic relationship between upstream research firms and downstream pharmaceutical companies. Finally, decommodification has played an important role in the development of capitalist states. Hall (2014), for instance, argued that in an ideal-type Weberian capitalist state, the sale of slaves or political sovereignty would be socially unacceptable (whether this is actually the case is an empirical question), even though such commodities were integral to the rise of the capitalist world system.

On the other hand, decommodification draws attention to the ways in which social contestation opposes commodification of public life and nature—in this sense, it is reminiscent of Polanyi's (1957) "double movement." For instance, contestations against commodification have sought to decommodify the commons, broadly defined (De Angelis 2004). The commodification of public goods, such as water and air, has already and is likely to continue to provoke public outcry against commodification that restricts basic services and goods to large swathes of society (Laxer and Soron 2006). Kopytoff (1986) argued that in a capitalist economy, where money is the universal equivalent of exchange, there is a strong drive to make everything commensurable. This universal commensurability of commodities faces cultural pressures, however, as both individuals and social groups seek to decommodify commodities by adding unique meaning and social value to them. In other words, "In any society, the individual is often caught between the cultural structure of commoditization and his [*sic*] own personal attempts to bring a value order to the universe of things" (Kopytoff 1986, 76).

What is clear from this literature on decommodification is that there is an emerging consensus that processes of commodification are immanently linked to their reversal. We want to propose several key questions to consider when analyzing decommodification. First, how does a commodity's material and semiotic character shape processes of decommodification? Second, is the commodity still produced and used but no longer defined by the value form? Third, how do state regulation and changing cultural preferences affect processes of decommodification? We address these questions in our analysis of hydropower compensation.

The Heuny and Hydropower Development

The Heuny have historically lived on the eastern side of the Bolaven Plateau in southern Laos (Wall 1975; Khamin 2000). In the 2005 Lao national census, there were 6,785 Heuny in all of Laos, the vast majority living in Champassak Province (Baird 2013, 249). The Jrou (Laven) are the other most populous ethnic group on the plateau.[2]

The Heuny historically practiced swidden agriculture. They did not have private property systems for

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land but, rather, loosely rotated their swidden fields in communal forests located within the limits of their village territorial boundaries (Baird and Shoemaker 2008). Forest land was abundant, and people moved freely to open new swidden fields; indeed, consultants hired to conduct the Social and Environmental Impact Assessment for the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam in 1995 determined that only 1 percent of forest was cultivated in any given year by the Heuny (Baird 2013). The Heuny previously relied heavily on wild-caught fish (Roberts and Baird 1995) and nontimber forest products (NTFPs). Important tradable items still include cardamom, tree resins, beeswax, rattan, yellow vine, mushrooms, and medicinal plants. Although many of the forest products are considered common property, groups like the Heuny have conceptions of tenure that vary according to resources (Baird and Shoemaker 2008).

During the Second Indochina War, many Heuny were trained as road-watchers by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency to disrupt the Ho Chi Minh Trail (Baird 2013). Not surprisingly, after the formation of a new Lao state in 1975, the Heuny who had fought against the Pathet Lao had to be careful when criticizing state policies (Khamin 2000; Baird 2013).

Hydropower Arrives to the Plateau

In the early 1990s, the Ministry of Energy and Mines proposed constructing more than ten large-scale hydroelectric dam projects on the Bolaven Plateau (Delang and Toro 2011). The GoL awarded two separate Korean companies contracts, the first to construct the Houay Ho dam and the second to develop the Xepian–Xenamnoy Hydropower Project. Both dams were situated on lands traditionally inhabited by the Heuny. The Houay Ho dam, located on the eastern escarpment of the Bolaven Plateau, was finished in 1998 and has since been widely condemned as an ecological disaster and a bad economic deal for the GoL (IRN 1999; Wyatt 2004).

In early 1994, South Korea's Dong Ah Construction Industrial Group signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the GoL to build the US$1 billion Xepian–Xenamnoy hydropower scheme. Unlike the Houay Ho dam, which blocked and diverted water from only the Houay Ho stream, the Xepian–Xenamnoy project required building multiple dams to divert water from the Houay Mak Chan and Xepian Rivers into the Xenamnoy River. Despite investing millions into initial construction preparation, the original Xepian–Xenamnoy dam developer was forced to pull out of the project in 1999 because of the 1997–1998 Asian Financial Crisis (IRN 1999).

Beginning in 1995, however, about 2,700 mostly Heuny people from eleven villages (including one Jrou village) were resettled to make room for the Xepian–Xenamnoy and Houay Ho dams despite the former dam's later cancellation. Most of these people were resettled into a government-designated focal site just north of the ethnic Jrou town of Houay Kong in Paksong District.[3] Most villagers were resettled even though their homes would not have been flooded by the future Xepian–Xenamnoy reservoir area.

The resettlement plans for the dams did not adequately consider the impact that the project would have on the Heuny's livelihoods, culture, or environments. When the Houay Ho and Xepian–Xenamnoy projects were first proposed, there were still no laws or guidelines in Laos that regulated resettlement and compensation issues related to large-scale hydropower development (Goudineau 1997; Baird 2013). No compensation was paid by Dong Ah Company for the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam, and only a one-time payment of US$230,000 was paid by Houay Ho Company to construct new houses and basic infrastructure at the resettlement site (IRN 1999). The local government's primary development plan for the Heuny was to convert them from subsistence-oriented swidden farmers to cash-crop coffee growers (Khamin 2000). Coffee production at the resettlement site failed, however, because the Heuny did not have access to adequate land and coffee prices had dropped significantly on the world market. The Heuny were originally promised three hectares of land per household for farming, but when they arrived at the resettlement areas they discovered that most of the land was located on fallow farmland belonging to the original Jrou inhabitants. Moreover, after outside coffee companies were awarded concessions for land that overlapped with the areas promised to the Heuny, only 20 percent of the original land at the main resettlement site was available for their use (Delang and Toro 2011).

The Heuny who have remained at Ban Chat San continue to face desperate living conditions even after being resettled more than fifteen years ago. Basic infrastructure is either nonexistent, inadequate, or deteriorating. Ironically, there is no electricity. Most important, issues related to land remain unresolved; the Heuny still lack adequate land at the resettlement sites. Consequently, most Heuny have long since returned to their old lands even though it is officially prohibited to live there. It is

estimated that 80 to 90 percent of people originally resettled have returned either permanently or part-time to their old villages (Baird 2013). At their old homes many Heuny are pursuing coffee production as a livelihood strategy. Although there are no definite statistics on the amount of land dedicated to coffee compared to previous upland swidden fields, there is significantly more coffee production now than before the Heuny were resettled (Baird 2013).

Xepian–Xenamnoy Compensation Program

There was no activity related to the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam until 23 March 2012, when a consortium of Korean, Thai, and Lao companies joined together to form the Xepian–Xenamnoy Power Company (PNPC).[4] On 5 February 2014 the company secured financial closing after receiving backing from a group of Thai private banks; the final price tag is expected to be in excess of US$1 billion (PNPC 2014). The project is expected to produce 410 megawatts of electricity, 90 percent of which would be exported to Thailand (Allen and Overy 2014; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Map of Xepian-Xenamnoy Project location. (Color figure available online.)

Since 2012, PNPC has been preparing a compensation program for the villages that will experience project impacts. Legally the company is supposed to follow the government's 2005 Decree 192/PM on the Compensation and Resettlement of the Development Project and its related technical guidelines. Throughout 2013, PNPC started to set up the required compensation and resettlement committees, hold public consultation meetings with project-affected peoples, and put together an entitlement matrix (Decree 192/PM 2005). During this time, however, villagers were provided with few details about compensation.

In early 2013, PNPC hired the Lao Consulting Group (LCG) to conduct surveys of people's land at the resettlement sites and their coffee fields at the old villages in the Xepian–Xenamnoy project area. LCG employees worked with officials from the land authority at the district and provincial levels to carry out these surveys. All resettlement villages (except for two originally resettled for the Houay Ho dam) and future impacted villages were included in these surveys (see Figure 2). The company used Global Positioning System (GPS) technology to measure people's land at the old and new village areas. LCG then prepared documents that included photos of the land, the size and location of the land, and the owners of the land; the village headman and an official from the district land office stamped each document. These documents were referred to as temporary land titles by Heuny village leaders and were highly valued by people because PNPC told them that they must have the titles to be eligible for any compensation.

PNPC has since provided more specific information about compensation for assets other than land. Most important, the Heuny are expected to receive compensation for their coffee plantations at their old villages, and for individual coffee plants. The company has counted coffee plants and divided them into three distinct categories: new coffee, coffee plants older than two years but with little fruit, and coffee plants with a lot of fruit. Similarly, the Heuny will receive compensation for fruit trees and other planted crops, as well as for their livestock, specifically chickens, goats, cows, and pigs. PNPC has also promised to compensate for graveyards that would be flooded by the dam's reservoir. Although PNPC has provided this critical information regarding what will be compensated, as of July 2015 the final prices for any of these things remained unclear. Some of the details of what compensation will be provided also remained contested.

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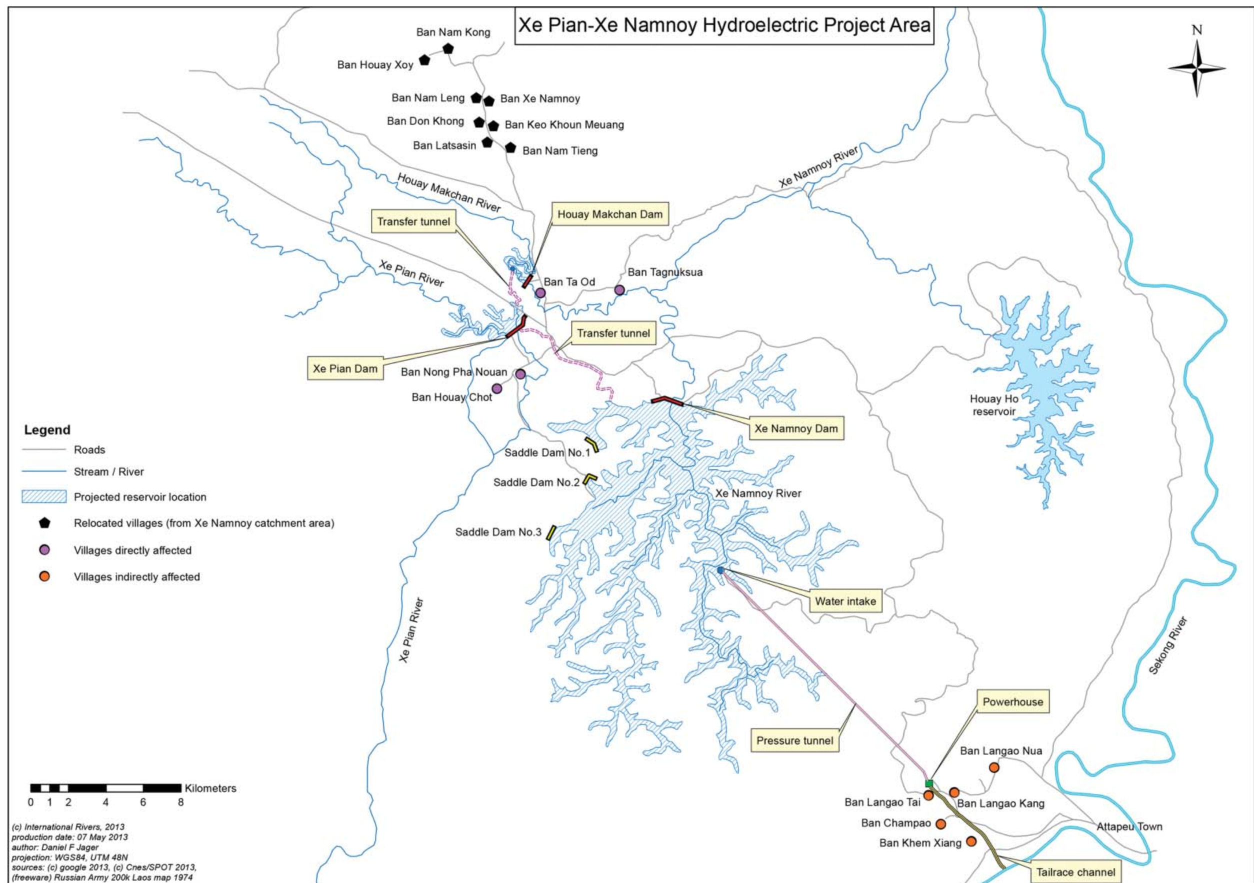

Figure 2. Map of Xepian-Xenamnoy Project and affected villages (Jager and Lee 2013). (Color figure available online.)

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Hydropower Compensation and Commodification

To provide the Heuny compensation, the PNPC compensation program treated their lands and assets as commodities. Turning land or natural resources into commodities, or capital, is in fact GoL policy (Dwyer 2007). To demonstrate how PNPC's compensation program is contributing to the variegated commodification of certain kinds of land and assets, in this section we examine several processes of commodification in detail. First, compensation has required giving land and assets monetary prices to represent their basic exchange values. Second, to do so necessitated the measurement, enumeration, and abstraction of land, assets, and sacred spaces from the larger natural and social context in which they were embedded. Third, land and assets are being treated as private property so that PNPC can provide compensation to specific individuals who are categorized as holding legal rights to the land and assets being compensated. We finish this section with a brief discussion of the relationship between commodification of Heuny land and resources and the expansion of capitalist social relations of production.

The Micropolitics of Valuation and Abstraction

The PNPC compensation program assigned prices, often for the first time, to Heuny land and other assets that will either be destroyed or become inaccessible due to the Xepian–Xenamnoy project. According to the technical guidelines for implementing the resettlement and compensation law, asset inventories and replacement costs are supposed to be determined by a joint committee of local authorities, company representatives, and project-affected persons (Lao PDR 2005). The Heuny, however, have been given little opportunity to determine the amount of cash needed to "replace" their lost coffee lands, natural resources, and other assets. A common response to our inquiries about the prices people will receive was summed up simply by the current headman of Xenamnoy village, who said, "We don't know, we have to wait and see" (personal

communication, 1 July 2013). Instead, compensation prices have been determined by a collaboration between consultants for the LCG, PNPC employees, and Lao government officials from district, provincial, and national levels. This power dynamic left many Heuny at a disadvantage when it came to determining compensation prices. According to a foreign consultant hired by PNPC, for example, the LCG consultants managing the compensation process had little understanding of Lao laws or technical guidelines. Reinforcing unequal positions of power, the LCG consultants also spoke a Thai dialect of Lao to the Heuny (who speak Lao, not Thai, as a second language) and did not provide adequate information during the consultation process (personal communication, 2 June 2013).

The PNPC compensation committee also determined prices with little if any consideration of the social value that the Heuny attach to land, assets, and other natural resources. For instance, PNPC is legally obliged to compensate people for their lost lands and assets based on replacement cost determined by prior market transactions (Decree 192/PM 2005), yet there is no history of market transactions of land in these areas. As such, the compensation process was reinforcing a market-based conception of the value of land that had no precedent in the Heuny's old villages. Similarly, Delang and Toro (2011) found that Heuny who were facing resettlement for a different dam project were being offered only 4,000 Lao Kip ($0.50) by local authorities for each of their coffee trees. As the headman of one Heuny village at this other dam site said, "We don't know how to value each tree! . . . We can harvest these trees for so long, but now they will destroy them, and pay so little for them!" (Delang and Toro 2011, 584). This statement suggests that compensation programs reward only the one-time exchange value of a tradable commodity rather than the economic productivity that certain assets and land can provide over a long period of time.

Related to this process of valuation, to justify replacing the Heuny's lost land and assets, the compensation process abstracted these things from their specific geographic and cultural contexts. This abstraction process was mediated largely through the politics of measurement and enumeration. Several Heuny villagers said that nobody knew how to properly record their assets, and so they just listed the information that the company or consultants requested. Much of this listed information did not reflect the full extent of property or other resources that are important for Heuny livelihoods and cultural beliefs, however. For example, a foreign consultant providing oversight on the compensation program said that he told Heuny at both the resettlement site and the old villages that they needed to demand compensation for their coffee trees. Although he might have recognized the importance of other kinds of natural resources or sacred spaces to the Heuny, this consultant claimed that replacing Heuny coffee trees was the most critical component of the compensation process (personal communication, 13 July 2013). Moreover, Heuny lands were measured by local authorities and LCG contractors who had access to GPS technologies, cadastral mapping techniques, and legal knowledge of the compensation law. The compensation process thus favored expert knowledge predicated on "knowing" land and nature in ways that the Heuny do not.

Through the political processes of valuation and abstraction, the compensation program reinforced the treatment of land and natural resources as commodities. By framing the value of land and assets only in terms of market replacement cost, PNPC's compensation program defines and rewards value based on exchange value rather than the sociocultural or use values that might be held by Heuny people. One Heuny woman lamented after resettlement, "I want to return to [my village] because I used to live there for a long time. I've left behind the trees that I used to collect fruits from every year. I miss them a lot. Whenever I think of them I cry a great deal" (Sayboualaven 2004, 6). This quote, echoed by many other Heuny with whom we spoke, suggests that the Heuny do not conceive of the value of their lands and assets only or even mainly in terms of money. The social value that many Heuny attach to their lands and other assets is not reducible to a monetary value. Nonetheless, this social value has been largely left uncompensated because compensation payments reward only the one-time exchange value of a commodity. The Heuny also contested this kind of commodification, however, by appealing to the cultural value of land and nature. The Heuny at Xenamnoy Village, for instance, fought for additional compensation to conduct ceremonies to honor the ancestral graveyards and spirit houses that will be lost to the future reservoir. Conceding to these demands, PNPC promised to give them 600,000 Kip (US$75), a water buffalo, and a jar of wine for these ceremonies.

Although the Heuny received the money and materials for their ceremony, their negotiations were articulated through the discourse of compensation, strengthening the legitimacy of the compensation process. Specifically, it lent credence to the idea that PNPC was willing to help the Heuny. Indeed, several

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Heuny stated that they conditionally supported the government's choice to build the dam, as long as they were given adequate compensation. They argued that PNPC or the government had the responsibility to "help" develop the Heuny, by drawing on official government discourse that casts upland swidden cultivation as backward and holding back the country's progress (Pholsena 2006). The discursive construction of "helped" versus "helper" in this case suggests that compensation redirects opposition to the project away from overt contestation and normalizes a lopsided power relation between the resettled Heuny vis-à-vis PNPC and local authorities. Much of the discontent over the project is thus silenced in debates about proper compensation, even though the PNPC compensation program rewards the Heuny with only monetary or abstract replacements incommensurable with their cultural attachments to land and natural resources. It is in this sense that the discourse of compensation helps to normalize new forms of enclosure and dispossession (De Angelis 2004).

Temporary Land Titles and Private Property Rights

Heuny notions and practices of property were also transformed during resettlement and PNPC's compensation program. Prior to compensation for the dam, the Heuny did not have formal, state-recognized land titles. Previously, land tenure for the Heuny was based on a village customary common property system. The Heuny distinguished lands between individual villages, but within villages people often rotated through cultivated land. Once land was cultivated, it became property of the people who worked on it. Once a swidden field went fallow, though, it was open for future cultivation by others.

The PNPC compensation program has formalized certain private property rights, however, by issuing land titles to people living at the old and new villages, which are required for the Heuny to receive compensation. Dwyer (2013) cited a similar relationship between land titles and compensation in northern Laos. In some ways, titles have bolstered land tenure security for the Heuny at the resettlement site of Ban Chat San. When the Heuny first arrived there and tried to use the lands that the government had given to them as part of the first compensation package for the Houay Ho and Xepian–Xenamnoy dams, neighboring Jrou people who had lived in the area for a long time did not let the Heuny use the land because it did not belong to them. When the headmen from the resettled Heuny villages approached local district authorities seeking help in resolving these land disputes, they were told that they needed to be patient while the government completed its land titling process (Delang and Toro 2011).

At the old villages, the new land titles have provided recognition of the Heuny's ownership of only a portion of their original lands, even if all of their lands are about to be taken away. That is, only land cultivated with perennial crops, especially coffee, is eligible for compensation. House land (believed to have been compensated the first time people were moved), swidden land planted with annual crops (considered to be illegal cultivation), and common forest lands used for NTFP collection (now defined as being owned by the state) are not being compensated. This process of selectively providing titles for only particular categories of land represents the first time that any Heuny land at the old village areas had ever been officially recognized by the state. In 2008, for example, more than fifty Heuny families were denied official recognition of their old village because the local state authority (himself Heuny) did not want it to appear that the government's resettlement site had failed to deliver increased living standards (Baird 2013).

The compensation process has thus created a new norm in land titling, one that effectively excludes titling much of Heuny land. The Heuny have generally not questioned the fact that only part of their actual lands were titled because they have long lived with tenure insecurity at the resettlement site, where their land had never been titled before. Nevertheless, for the many Heuny technically living illegally at their old villages, these titles finally provided some official recognition by local authorities that the Heuny had reestablished homes there. Titles issued by PNPC for compensation were thus a principal means of formalizing private property relations at both the old and new villages.

PNPC's efforts to produce titles and hold public consultation meetings with the Heuny were in large part driven by the larger political economy of financing hydropower development. Heuny lands were not mapped, measured, and titled until PNPC had a direct incentive to show that the company was following technical guidelines and safeguards to try and procure funding for their project from the ADB. Major multilateral banks like the ADB require certain safeguards like the implementation of compensation plans before they will invest in a project. To try to acquire ADB funding, the company hired consultants to organize and carry out a

resettlement and compensation plan that included Heuny in the process. Even though PNPC eventually received financing elsewhere, this process was an important step in starting the compensation program, thereby demonstrating how the multiscalar political economy of hydropower development can shape local level processes of resettlement (Dore, Lebel, and Molle 2012).

Many Heuny themselves also had incentives to make legible a privatized relationship to land. Some villages' political standing within the local government has been weak because of their prior complicity with the CIA during the Lao civil war. This political history had negatively influenced these villages' treatment during the initial resettlement for the Xepian–Xenamnoy project. In contrast, two villages that were originally supposed to resettle in the 1990s were allowed to remain on their traditional lands because they had fought for the communist Pathet Lao. Consequently, those Heuny who were resettled in the 1990s have been more likely to cooperate with outside consultants and local district authorities to record their lands and their assets. Only by doing so would they be eligible for future compensation. The micronegotiations among the Heuny, consultants, and PNPC were thus heavily influenced by the political memories of the revolutionary years (Baird and Le Billon 2012; Baird 2013).

Commodifying Nature and Capitalist Social Relations

Having surveyed three processes of commodification—valuation, abstraction, and privatization—enacted through the PNPC compensation program, we now turn to the relationship between these processes and deepening capitalist social relations. Specifically, we examine the establishment of land markets, wage labor, and commodity crop production for a global market. First of all, titling for compensation has bolstered the nascent market for land at the resettlement site. As discussed previously, the conflicts over land between ethnic Jrou and the Heuny at the resettlement sites helped to reinforce private property as the only legitimate claim to land. With the titles issued by PNPC for compensation, the Heuny now have more legitimate claims to land ownership, which might facilitate the sale of land. With new titles, one Heuny man from Xenamnoy Village said that he wanted to sell his land at the resettlement site before it was taken away completely by a nearby coffee plantation (personal communication, 2 July 2013).

In contrast, the privatization of land at the old villages has not created a market for land because people have yet to buy or sell land in these areas. Land at the old villages has never had exchange value and, as mentioned earlier, only through the compensation program has it been given a monetary value for the first time. Interestingly, we were also told that the old rules of common property continue to be followed at the old villages. Not only have Heuny consistently returned to the land that they originally occupied (Baird 2013), but they also consider this land to be nontransferrable. The old villages continue to resonate with the Heuny's old way of life, whereas the resettlement village has become a place of hardship and wage labor (Baird 2013). Personal memories and cultural attachments to land have sustained the prior property relations at the old villages, whereas the land conflicts, enclosures, and political pressure at the new villages have all actively contributed to making private property the only legitimate way to make claims to land there.

At the Ban Chat San resettlement site, where land for the Heuny is scarce, most Heuny have been forced to seek out wage labor on nearby coffee plantations instead of producing their own coffee. After the first compensation program for the Houay Ho project, most Heuny did not receive enough land to support themselves, so they began to sell their labor on nearby Jrou farms. Over time, local Lao elites have also taken much of the land originally promised to the Heuny (who did not have tenure security) to establish large-scale coffee plantations, where Heuny now work for wages. It has largely been due to the hardship of wage labor that many Heuny have returned to their old villages to grow coffee where land is more abundant.

It is through this relationship between wage labor at the resettlement site and coffee production at the old villages that the PNPC compensation program fosters production for capitalist markets. Some of the land at the old village areas originally dedicated to swidden cultivation has been transformed into coffee plantations. Although several people with whom we spoke said that they were expanding coffee production for more income, we were also told that people were cultivating new fields to receive greater compensation from PNPC. One Heuny man said that even if he lost access to his new coffee fields, he thought that he would be eligible for more monetary compensation (personal communication, 13 July 2013). The promise of compensation for coffee fields and plants at the old villages has therefore spurred, for some people, an expansion of commodity production of coffee for export.

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Compensation has not by itself produced new capitalist social relations, but when considered within the context of ongoing economic and social processes at Ban Chat San and the Heuny's old villages, the commodification of land, natural resources, and assets has nonetheless contributed to new enclosures, land markets, wage labor, and commodity production. In this sense we argue that compensation transforms nature–society relations geared toward capital accumulation. Yet these processes have been spatially distinct, because the Heuny actively separate the old villages and resettlement sites in regard to conceptions of property and the production of commodities. In other words, the Heuny's changing relationship to nature is shaped by the specific geographical political economies and conceptions of space at these two locations. Finally, the effects of compensation outlined here are not a direct result of a monolithic state apparatus. Rather, they have been produced as a result of the micropolitics of PNPC's compensation program, discourses of compensation, and multiscalar political economies of Lao hydropower development.

Table 1. Compensation list for old villages in Xepian-Xenamnoy Dam Project Area

Compensated	Not compensated (not necessarily decommodified)
Coffee fields (*souan*)	All land that is not *souan*
Coffee trees	Swidden fields
Fruit trees	Wild fish
Livestock coops	Communal fish pond
Livestock (chicken, pigs, water buffalo, cows)	Houses
Planted bamboo shoots	Wild bamboo[a]
Flooded grave sites	Wild grass (*khem*)
	Wild rattan
	Wild vine (*hem*)
	Wild cardamom
	Striped flower (*dok mai bai lai*)
	Rosewood
	Wild animals and birds
	Graves that will be flooded
	Graves on island

[a]The distinction between wild and domesticated is prevalent throughout Xepian Xenamnoy Company's compensation program.

Decommodifying Nature–Society Relations

Both in Laos and more generally, hydropower-induced resettlement has been referred to as a process of primitive accumulation (Barney 2009; Glassman 2010; Webber 2012), which is often defined as an ever increasing level of commodification (e.g., Harvey 2003). The case of the Heuny and the PNPC compensation program, however, demonstrates that commodification is a variable and nonlinear process. At the same time that the Heuny's lands, coffee fields, fruit trees, and livestock have been treated as commodities, many other important lands as well as natural products and livelihood practices have been systematically excluded from the compensation process (see Table 1). Apart from not being slated to receive any compensation for their lost swidden fields and forest lands, villagers are also not expected to receive any compensation for any of their previously commodified NTFPs or wild-caught fish. With the flooding of their old villages, many of these important places and items will be either inundated or made inaccessible by the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam's reservoirs. With no compensation and the loss of access to these places, many NTFPs and some fisheries previously treated as commodities will be effectively decommodified in the sense that they will be both politically and physically removed from production and the sphere of exchange. This is largely due to the way that the compensation decree has been constructed and facilitated by the consultants and PNPC through their implementation process. We acknowledge, though, that these commodities are not capitalist commodities per se, having never been produced for value. Rather, they fit a Polanyian definition of commodities as items produced principally for exchange. We explore the implications of this distinction in our conclusion.

Importantly, swidden fields and forest lands will remain *noncommodified*, but Heuny customary claims to these lands have been delegitimized because they have not been included in the compensation process. The political claims to this land, contra arguments about expanding state territoriality (cf. Goldman 2005), are variable: PNPC wants to manage the watershed area surrounding the future reservoir areas to avoid excessive siltation. As such, several Heuny said that they have been told by PNPC authorities to stop growing coffee near the reservoir and to seek wage labor opportunities at the resettlement site. Local authorities, on the other hand, are eager to exploit the timber resources around the future project area. A foreign consultant for the project

explained that when the district authorities were viewing the map of the future reservoir area at a planning meeting with PNPC, their top priority was mapping with GPS and boundary markers the areas in which they could cut timber (personal communication, 29 July 2013). We might interpret the lack of compensation for Heuny forest and swidden land not as a form of decommodification (because they were never commodified) but rather as an effort to limit Heuny claims to land that PNPC, local authorities, and the Lao state have competing plans for. This shows that enclosures are highly variable depending on the political actors involved and that state territoriality is far from uniform (Dwyer 2013).

In contrast to the forest and swidden lands that have been excluded from the compensation process and thus remain noncommodified, many assets and resources of the Heuny will be decommodified. In particular, NTFPs often continue to be the Heuny's main kind of traded commodity sold for money, yet they have been deemed ineligible for PNPC's compensation. The main kinds of NTFPs collected by the Heuny are wild cardamom, rattan, bamboo shoots, wild grasses and vines, rosewood, and a precious flower (*dok mai bai lai*). Unlike land at their old villages that had never been bought or sold, and therefore had no exchange value, Heuny with whom we spoke knew the precise monetary value for these NTFPs. Nevertheless, in the asset inventories prepared by PNPC to determine compensation for the Heuny's lost access to their old lands, they were not even listed. Furthermore, the Heuny have long practiced a complex system of communal management of pond fisheries in their old village territories. Each year members of the Heuny community come together to dig pits at the edges of ponds so that when the water evaporates during the dry season the fish become trapped in the pits. These pits are property held by individual members of the community, who sometimes treat these fish as commodities. Heuny sell fish from these pits at local markets when there is more than enough to satisfy local needs. As such, fish often provide a valuable source of monetary income. Despite the labor and time put into this form of communal resource, though, the PNPC compensation program is not planning to provide any compensation for the loss of these productive fisheries. In this sense, a natural resource managed through communal forms of property, but nevertheless commodified in that it is often produced for exchange, is being selectively decommodified as the Heuny receive no monetary compensation and as the ponds are made inaccessible by the dam's future reservoir. The decommodification of fisheries through hydropower compensation programs has significant implications for Laos and the Lower Mekong Basin more generally, given the high productivity of wild-caught fisheries and their importance for riparian livelihoods (Santasombat 2011).

The cultural and political perceptions of these commodities help to explain the selective decommodification of NTFPs and fisheries. A clear distinction is made in the compensation process between commodities that are deemed "wild" and those that are considered "domesticated" by actors involved in the compensation process. For example, the Heuny will receive compensation for a wild grass known as *khem* if they planted it in their village but not if they collect it from the forest. The Heuny, though, consider land and natural resources that have been invested with labor as their property, such as wild resin trees that they have tapped. We can see how decommodification is thus shaped by cultural views (Singh 2012): Items that are outside the village boundary, and seen as "wild" by state and corporate actors, are not considered to be worth commodifying. Compensation reinforces a specific conceptualization of commodities: Domesticated land, livestock, and assets are recognized, whereas NTFPs and some kinds of fisheries have been decommodified.

Moreover, compensation rewards land uses that are geared toward specific kinds of commodity production that are determined by political objectives at multiple scales. Coffee trees are being compensated because they fit with larger Lao state objectives to increase economic growth through cash crop production (Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Sacklokham 2005; Rigg 2005; Dwyer 2007). At the same time, certain kinds of things, such as NTFPs and fisheries, are decommodified because they do not fit in with larger ideas of productive land use or within dominant discourses of Lao rural development (Chamberlain 2000; Vandergeest 2003; Rigg 2005). As we already mentioned, livelihood practices of upland ethnic minorities have long been considered "backward" and holding back Laos's development (Pholsena 2006). Livelihoods based on wild-caught fisheries and NTFP collection, although geared toward some kinds of commodity production, do not fit with the dominant discourses of modern Lao development, of either the Marxist/Leninist or neoliberal varieties. The materiality of some commodities also affects the outcomes of compensation programs (Sneddon 2007). Some things are more easily transported, abstracted, and produced on a mass scale than others. Many kinds of wild-caught fish, such as those trapped through the

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Heuny's pond system, are not easily mass-produced like coffee because their biophysical properties are not amenable to mass production or distribution.

Compensation programs thus contribute to decommodification in ways that are influenced by cultural perceptions, state-led policy, and the materiality of commodities themselves. We see, however, how micropolitics and power relations within the compensation process shape decommodification. The varied priorities of government officials, foreign consultants, and the Heuny all played a role in what was decommodified. Some products that were treated as commodities by the Heuny before were not treated as commodities in the compensation process. These things, particularly NTFPs, will be flooded or made inaccessible by the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam's reservoirs, and the Heuny will no longer have the means to produce (forage for) products that functioned as important commodities in their economic and social system.

Conclusion

The Heuny's changing livelihoods and relationship to land and other natural resources offer unique insight into how hydropower-induced resettlement and compensation can reorganize nature–society relations and space to facilitate new economic and social relations. For over fifteen years, the Heuny have been forced by necessity and disciplined by outside interventions at various levels to shift their livelihoods and strategies for living. We want to conclude by drawing out three ways in which our research contributes to debates about the commodification of nature and how these contributions might inform future hydropower development projects.

First, we have shown that programs of compensation, specifically the newest efforts of the PNPC, have further contributed to the commodification of certain kinds of nature. Following work from the commodification of nature literature (Cronon 1991; Castree 2003; Prudham 2003; Bakker 2005; Robertson 2006), our analysis focused on the valuation, abstraction, and privatization of Heuny land and natural resources. Several observations can be made about the relationship between compensation and commodification. Importantly, the case of the Heuny confirms what many others have argued: Commodification is a nonlinear, often contested, and variegated process. The micropolitics of PNPC's compensation program are linked to the power imbalances between various groups involved, local memories of war, and differing conceptions of value and space. These micropolitics of compensation were also shaped by multiscalar political economies of hydropower development, such as ADB funding, and development discourses that are linked to the national project of rural development and the promotion of industry and production for export.

Second, we sought to address a call to theorize the relationship between commodification and capitalism broadly defined (Prudham 2009). The production of commodities for market exchange is not a sufficient condition for capitalist social relations. Previous work on the commodification of nature has followed a Polanyian approach to commodities—anything produced for exchange is considered a commodity. Nevertheless, as Polanyi (1957) himself argued, to understand the transformation to a capitalist society requires more than following the production of commodities: It is necessary to explore how social relations become embedded within the logics of a self-regulating market. Much of the work on nature's commodification would benefit from a greater focus on how the specific processes of commodification are linked to the institutional and political arrangements geared toward capital accumulation. In the case of the Heuny, we have argued that the commodification of land and assets through compensation has deepened capitalist social relations defined by enclosures, land markets, wage labor, and commodity production. We also found that the Heuny's old and new villages have distinct cultural meanings and political economies that influence how PNPC's compensation program changes nature–society relations differently in these locations.

Third, we have advanced a hypothesis that compensation also decommodifies some kinds of nature, particularly NTFPs and wild-caught fish. Increasingly, decommodification is recognized as an immanent process of capital accumulation, and our case study offers important insights about this process. Crucially, our findings suggest that certain commodities must meet specific material and cultural conditions for capital accumulation, otherwise they might be decommodified. If we take for granted that capitalist states are geared toward ever-increasing capital accumulation (Jessop 1990; Robertson and Wainwright 2013), there is the possibility that states will seek to promote the production of some kinds of natural commodities that satisfy requirements of capital circulation like compound growth and spatial expansion. The political production of neoliberal natures, in other words, favors commodities through which capital can flow more readily (Prudham 2003). Moreover, some commodities

do not meet the normative imaginary of modern commodities. Wild-caught fisheries and forest products, for example, are considered "backward" in normative discourses of the Lao state (Singh 2012). Cash crops like rubber and coffee, and the harnessing of river systems for hydroelectricity, are considered more "modern" (Bakker 1999). These processes of decommodification are dynamic, contested, and not uniform: They are shaped by the specific historical–geographic context and the micropolitics of the processes of commodification. Finally, unlike other literature (e.g., Kopytoff 1986; Henderson 2004; Sunder Rajan 2006), our analysis of decommodification focused on noncapitalist commodities. Future research should consider comparing how different kinds of commodities—defined by different social relations of production—affect the dynamics of the decommodification process.

Our research implies that compensation processes associated with development projects such as the Xepian–Xenamnoy dam are much more complicated and socially altering than what has commonly been recognized in the development literature. Compensation processes should not just be thought about in terms of restoring livelihoods to previous material levels; they fundamentally alter nature–society relations in particular contexts. These changes call into question the premise of providing "replacement" compensation, as well as the more general modernist and market-oriented models of development that inform most compensation programs (Cernea and McDowell 2000; Scudder 2005). Ultimately, adequately taking these various processes into account will require a much more detailed understanding of people's social relations and relations with nature, especially when working with people defined globally as indigenous peoples like the Heuny.

Recognizing this complexity is of the utmost importance for thinking about contesting hydropower dams. For the Heuny, who are politically marginalized because of their ethnicity and war history, compensation became a safer way to express discontent over resettlement than outright opposition. The discourse of compensation, however, leads to debates over "square meters and money" rather than the larger injustices associated with forced resettlement (Harms 2012, 737). This implies that all actors involved in resettlement for development need to be more critical about the effects of their actions: Their language of compensation and associated powers of expertise can dramatically change the outcomes of resettlement. Ultimately, the changes in nature–society relations wrought by compensation programs must be much better recognized, acknowledged, and planned for in future hydropower resettlement in Laos and farther afield.

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Notes

1. The Heuny are known as the Nya Heun in the Lao language.
2. The Jrou are known as the Laven in the Lao language.
3. Focal site projects were a key land reform measure introduced in the mid-1990s that the GoL used to relocate ethnic minorities into more concentrated villages to more easily deliver infrastructure and welfare services (Ducourtieux, Laffort, and Sacklokham 2005; Baird and Shoemaker 2007).
4. The company is composed of Korea's SK Engineering and Construction (26 percent of shares), Korea Western Power (25 percent of shares), Thailand's Ratchaburi Electricity Generating Holding, PCL (25 percent of shares), and the Lao Holding State Enterprise (24 percent of shares; PNPC 2014).

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