

A politics of Critique and Hope: A hopeful development between cruel optimism and cynical pessimism

Kia ora koutou. I'm so happy to be here. Seeing the call for this theme on a politics of critique and hope was really timely for me as I spend a lot of time on critique and not much on thinking about hope. And more and more, I think that in this period - of what Manu yesterday called unknowing, of a defining moment where global climate change and financial crises call into question the future of humanity itself - asking ourselves what does hope look like now is a serious question to engage with. So I want to spend a few minutes thinking about this question of hope, and I'll suggest that we might think about a politics of critical hope, a politics that is attuned to our own and other's hopeful imaginaries and practices in all their tensions and ambiguities.

Now hope can be really problematic. And I have some sympathies with authors who suggest that we need to let go of all hope to move forward, that hope induces inertia and disappointment. I think we need to ask what we mean when we say hope. A flurry of writing theorising hope in the mid-20th Century contrasted hope with fascism's use of fear, and sought to create space for collective possibility by rethinking our common sense of humanity. In recent years, we see different mobilisations of the discourse of hope that are far less socio-politically oriented - Zembylas talks about these (**SLIDE 2**)- the naive hoper which is akin to the naive development worker who doesn't get it, the hokey hoper - which I call the Oprah winfrey hope, intertwined with the neoliberal emphasis on the individual as the agent of change that links hope to the exercise of choice, personal control, psychological empowerment. Some term this a privatisation of hope. Lauren Berlant calls it a cruel optimism that offers a whole lot of promises that can't be fulfilled because they ignore conditions of possibility. Mythical hope - I hope we can all just come together as one. And hope deferred. This is the academic one I think. Taussig warned about a strange comfort in being hopeless and therefore certain of a last instance pessimism, a "temptation to link lack of hope with being profound."

Critical hope, on the other hand (**S3**) offers a way to bring the cynic and the idealist together - where hope cannot be disaggregated from criticality.

But hope is not something that I found much of when I started working in Cambodia's land conflict areas in the mid-2000s. Cambodia's periphery are violent sites of state-supported dispossession. In Cambodia's post-conflict period since the 1980s, more than half of the country's arable land has been converted into economic land concessions for domestic and global corporate investment. People who have settled on the land after Cambodia's genocide find themselves living in the middle of a state-supported concession that ushers in new forms of surveillance. Homes are razed. Crops are destroyed. People are killed. Fear is pervasive.

S4: One man said to me, "It's like we are in a prison without walls. Fear layers memories of trauma from past civil conflict with current threats and occasional physical violence. My colleague Laura Schoenberger and I are currently writing about the way fear works as a governing mechanism in this space. Fear encourages people to stay quiet. As many people tell me, 'an egg can't hit a stone'. Fear has real effects in everyday life and makes it very difficult for people to have any hope that things will be different.

But fear is never total. We can take heart from post-war hope theorists like Ernst Bloch, feminist theorists like Gibson-Graham and affect theorists like Ben Anderson to think about how the affective realm can never be fully captured by capital and state power – affect, as the emotional aspects of life that are beyond words, beyond fully conscious thought – can never be pre-determined, they are produced in our encounters with other people and things, hope is relational. So there is always a possibility for things to be otherwise. Bloch sees hope as the ground of not-yet. **(S5)** Something is ‘not-yet’ in that it might not happen, and in the way it makes the present into a ‘not yet’, an openness to the unexpected, to turning points, to cracks in linear continuity. So I’m interested in moments, and practices that make space for possibility, that rupture fear with hope. Drawing from Les Back **(S6)**, If we think about critical hope as a not-yet, that is multiplicitous, how might we as development practitioners and researchers attune ourselves to recognise the moments of rupture, the cracks of linear continuity that generate space for hoping, and the labour of hoping that people are engaged in to widen and sustain these cracks, what he terms the islands of hope.

Currently, my co-author and I are thinking of this generation of positive affect in two ways – One focus is the practices that are attuned to subverting fear and generating hope and bravery within collectives of people in land conflict areas through everyday practices such as communing over food and drink, dance and humour, a kind of ‘internal’ generation of positive affect that allows people to keep mobilising. And I’m also interested in moments of rupture in the dominant land imaginary that emerge from beyond collective organising – such as through shifts in state policy or changes in world markets – unexpected things that create space for alternative ways of imagining and relating to land, and give space for hope, and I ask how people make sense of and hold onto these moments.

To give one example, in 2012 prior to the national Election, the Cambodian government announced a sudden change to land policy - a pre-election land titling campaign to break up agribusiness concessions in areas previously ignored by the state. The government recruited several thousand university student volunteers to travel to the far reaches of the country to survey land for smallholders to gain individual land title **(S7)**. I started talking with people in the areas where the student surveyors were slated to go. The interesting thing about my discussions with people was that people were hopeful. They were well aware that for Hun Sen it was a political ploy, that the process may be captured by elite, and they weren’t sure that the land titles would give them land tenure security.

What the land titling campaign did was open possibilities. The possibilities lay not just in the act of bringing the state into the excluded uplands, but in the student volunteers. The students represented contradictory subjectivities - they were at once youthful, uncorrupted, needing care, giving care through staying in the villages and helping out at harvest time. And at the same time they were incredibly powerful as they were intimately connected to the Prime Minister Hun Sen, who holds personalised power in Cambodia, wearing military uniforms, carrying GPS units - so offered the possibility of real power – and change that local governments couldn’t provide. In a context where many people tell me the government has abandoned them, this was the possibility of a caring state.

The students also had considerable discretionary power on the ground because the land titling campaign was remarkably sparse in its directives over what forms of land use would be suited for title – a one pager with four bullet points. The lack of clarity in the campaign created openings for smallholders to convince the students of their particular imaginaries of the land and the potential for those imaginaries to be codified. Rural people described to me the ways they catered to the students' bodily needs by giving them soft drinks and cooking them meals. Some communities recognised the potential for students to get bribed by corrupt officials, and actually organised rosters to accompany the students, directing them towards particular plots. Some communities even blocked the road to prevent the students from leaving, physically capturing their hopeful bodies.

So if we see hope as a relational phenomenon that engenders a sense of multiplicity and possibility, the youth volunteers provided bodies that could be imbued with the hopes of rural people for a smallholder-focused future, a future in which rural families might stave off the companies, grow something on their land and secure it for the next generation. This rupture mattered, I argue, because it introduced new possibilities for a rural life that might become.