

Sedentary Optics

Static Anti-trafficking and Mobile Victims

by Sverre Molland

Postpanopticism and the “mobility turn” within the social sciences provide important challenges to territorial constructs, such as Foucauldian panopticism and James Scott’s notion of the synoptic. According to these critiques, migration and mobility exemplify social practice that cannot easily be grasped through grid-like technologies of governing. In this paper, I take issue with these arguments by illuminating notable static and territorial ways in which migration governance is enacted. By examining anti-trafficking programs along the Lao-Thai border, I highlight how such programs make trafficking legible through static means. I argue that such grid-making practices are central to the reproduction of these programs. Furthermore, empirical specificity is central in theorizing migration governance, because it shows us how sedentary attempts at making migration legible for policy interventions must be understood in their specific context.

Can mobility be governed through static means? In what manner can objectification premised on static, demarcated space grasp what is outside its vision? Several scholars have pointed to how grid-like visions of society—such as Foucault’s earlier works on the panopticon and Scott’s notion of the synoptic—are poorly suited for analyzing the contemporary world, in which mobility increasingly has become a “way of life” for both the privileged and marginalized (Boyne 2000; Caluya 2010; Gane 2012; Urry 2007). Rather than arguing that grid-like visioning constitutes an epistemological crisis, this essay explores its productive qualities.

By examining anti-trafficking programs along the Lao-Thai border, I argue that static visioning and sedentariness are central to the functioning of these programs. Through grid-like maneuvers to objectify mobile subjects, a space is opened up that allows multiple meanings and post hoc rationalizations to operate seamlessly within anti-trafficking activities. Thus sedentary strategies of making mobile subjects (in this case, trafficked victims) legible for programmatic interventions are central to the reproduction of these programs. Furthermore, I illuminate the importance of placing specific focus on the empirical context in which technologies of migration management unfold. Laos is an important case study for such processes because of its combination of considerable cross-border migration, authoritarian rule, and aid dependency. Examining how sedentary policy practices enable their own reproduction in such contexts underscores the importance of giving theoretical

consideration to the differences between the intent and operationalization of programs.

In what follows, I will elucidate how the social sciences have witnessed a shift away from grid-like modes of theorizing policy praxis. Postpanopticism and “the mobility turn” give emphasis to how technologies of government target migrants who are moving through space as opposed to being confined by it. In contrast, this paper draws attention to the importance of the sedentary, static qualities of migration governance. I will elucidate how anti-trafficking programs along the Lao-Thai border reproduce themselves through static means by placing specific focus on how trafficking prevalence is enabled through village-based anti-trafficking activities as well as how anti-trafficking discourses are reified through sedentary awareness-raising efforts. Thus I underscore the importance of specific focus on policy formation in concrete situations.

This paper is based on more than 10 years of program and research experience involving human trafficking in the Mekong region. My research explores the social worlds of Lao migrants as well as anti-trafficking organizations along the Lao-Thai border (Molland 2013). As such, the arguments I advance in this essay are informed by my double role as a participant observer and “observant participant” (Fassin 2013). While other parts of my research explore the unfolding of cross-border migration and trafficking in the Lao-Thai context (see Molland 2012*b*), this essay places specific focus on anti-trafficking efforts. The case studies presented in this paper are based on my ongoing research on anti-trafficking as well as my former role as a project advisor for a United Nations (UN)-funded anti-trafficking program in the Mekong region.¹

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1. For example, the village-based anti-trafficking activities discussed in this paper emanate from participant observation, multiple interviews, and informal conversations that I have had with program staff over the

Getting Rid of Grids? The Crisis of Sedentary Optics

The combat against human trafficking in the Mekong region takes place within the context of development aid. Just as with conventional aid programs, anti-trafficking involves various modalities of orchestrated, governmental change. Because it is inherently a mobile phenomenon, human trafficking invites reflection on how transnational aid actors (UN agencies, non-governmental organizations [NGOs], and governments) operationalize policies and program implementation. As such, anti-trafficking raises a problematic of how policy relates to space, which echoes important epistemological shifts in the theorizing of technologies of government.

The social sciences, John Urry argues, are premised on “container models” where social, political, cultural, and economic praxis are understood as taking place within territorial units (Urry 2007). The centrality given to panopticism in explaining how power percolates through the social body (as discussed by Foucault) and how synoptic, simplified grid-making becomes a precondition for governing (as discussed by Scott) both exemplify such “container models.”² Thus both Scott and Foucault have arguably left a legacy of a highly territorialized reading of power in which a grid-like gaze becomes both an instrument of and object for the analysis of power.³ It denotes how the theorizing of government is commonly premised on a sedentary optics—that is, static, territorialized objectification of social praxis.

Sedentary optics have profoundly influenced both the social sciences and the public domain (Urry 2007). As Gupta and Ferguson have pointed out, the state is commonly thought of in terms of vertical encompassment, where social life unfolds within a territorial, confined unit coupled with the state’s capacity to project an overarching purview (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Yet the empirical backdrop of the social sciences is a world that is increasingly characterized by mobility and migrant populations. What does mobility, then, mean in terms of understanding power relationships between institutionally sanctioned, orchestrated change and mobile subjects? How can diagrammatic technologies of a “will to improve” (Li 2007b) be conceptually linked to how power operates throughout the social body, which is increasingly characterized by mobility?

years since initiating my PhD fieldwork in 2005. Some earlier reflections derive from my personal experience with these programs when I worked for the UN in Laos. The children’s forum discussed at the end of the paper is an activity that I was personally involved in organizing.

2. Their influence has been profound in understanding state practices, social engineering, and development, as witnessed by the numerous scholars who rely on their works (Escobar 1994; Ferguson 2005; Timmer 2010; Xiang 2012). Despite important ontological differences between Scott and Foucault (Ferguson 2005; Li 2005), Scott’s emphasis on the state’s “legibility” is not too far off from Foucault’s analysis of the intimate relationships between the configuration of space and power in *Discipline and Punish* (1977).

3. Indeed, nearly all examples used by both authors are “container models,” where physical space is remolded for improved legibility. As Michel de Certeau has pointed out, Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) can be considered a history of the perfection of grids (Certeau 1998).

Several scholars argue that new forms of governance do not operate according to a grid in the way discussed in either *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977) or *Seeing like a State* (Scott 1998). Statehood and governmentalities do not rest on traditional Westphalian container models of societies but rather on complex, multilayered socioeconomic relations of “complex, polymorphic, and multi-scalar regulatory geographies” (Brenner quoted in Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006:3; see also Tsing 2008). Hence a “metaphysics of fixity” ought to be complemented with a “nomadic metaphysics of flow” (Bissell 2011:2).

Several scholars argue for the “mobility turn” in the social sciences, where the mobile—as opposed to static space—must be taken as an epistemological point of departure for theorizing (Adey 2006; Bærenholdt 2013; Bissell 2011; Cresswell 2011; Richardson 2013; Salter 2013; Urry 2007). Others have argued that societal changes have culminated in “crisis of panoptic control” (Lyon, Ball, and Haggerty 2012:32) and that we have now entered a postpanoptical world (Boyne 2000; Fraser 2003; Gane 2012; Lyon, Ball, and Haggerty 2012). The latter line of reasoning has arguably been made most prominent through the works of Zygmunt Bauman on “liquid modernity” (2000) and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work on “assemblages” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; see also Deleuze 1992) and has generated a considerable literature straddling sociology, anthropology, and security and surveillance studies (Caluya 2010; Gane 2012; Haggerty and Ericson 2000).

Importantly, this shift away from panoptical modes of government is also present in the later works of Foucault (2007), where he observes how security (in contrast to discipline) turns into a technology of the probable.⁴ Gregory Feldman points out the implications for the mobile thus:

4. It is even debatable whether Foucault’s scholarly work on disciplinary power is premised on “container models.” Although *Discipline and Punish* (1977) argues for disciplinary power to be generated within territorial units, the effects of power may endure beyond them. Yet at times Foucault seems to insist that disciplinary power, in contrast to governmentality or security, is highly territorialized. In *Security, Territory and Population*, he writes, “By definition, discipline regulates everything. Discipline allows nothing to escape. Not only does it not allow things to run their course, its principle is that things, the smallest things, must not be abandoned to themselves. The smallest infraction of discipline must be taken up with all the more care for it being small” (Foucault 2007:67–68). Foucault’s double role as both contributor and deviator from grid-based theorizing of power can also be seen in the works of Scott. Although *Seeing Like a State* (1998) gives epistemic privilege to static grids, it is also possible to note alternative ways in which Scott theorizes the relationship between space and power. In his later work, Scott places considerable importance on the capacity of populations (his discussion concerns Southeast Asian upland seminomadic groups) to flee the reach of the state (Scott 2009). Within his analysis, he builds on Guattari and Deleuze’s discussion of nomadism and deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), which implies a take on the intersection between space and power that is very different from that discussed in *Seeing Like a State* (1998). Although I concur with a growing body of literature that questions the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of this argument (Barth 2010), it invites important questions in terms of the reach of power relations.

Security amounts to the management of indefinite series of mobile elements: carts, travelers, thieves, disease, tourists, migrants, criminals, terrorists, etc. If statistics is the science used to regulate the state's internal elements, then probabilities is the science with which the state tries to manage that which originates from outside its field of surveillance. (Feldman 2011a:381)

In other words, sedentary optics are premised on territorialized surveillance, whereas postpanopticism produces subjectivities in advance (Lyon, Ball, and Haggerty 2012). As will be shown, although anti-trafficking appears to echo the move toward probabilities and anticipation through the bureaucratic prism of “risk,” “vulnerability,” and profiling of migrants, it is important to grasp how this intersects with grid-like, spatial modes of governing.

A peculiar thing to note about the scholars who adhere to either postpanopticism or the “mobility turn” in the social sciences is the functionalist tone of their analysis. Contemporary societies, it is claimed, are no longer suited (functional) for Foucauldian analysis of disciplinary techniques or grid-like orchestrated change as discussed by Scott. New models, epistemologies, and theories must be brought in to ensure congruence—that is, equilibrium—between “the model of the reality [and] the reality of the model” (Bourdieu 1990a:4). Furthermore, such arguments also run the danger of what Sherry Ortner has labeled “ethnographic refusal” (Ortner 2009), because they short-circuit careful attention to how policies and programs are instrumentalized and enacted as well as the effects that emanate from them.

Within the now very large literature on mobilities and postpanopticism, sufficient attention has not been given to how technologies of government unfold in specific contexts. Thus how the mobile is governed through static means is not ontologically given but requires empirical attention. Just as program practice cannot be “read off” from its self-proclaimed rationalities (Mitchell 2003:83), dissonances between those rationalities cannot be a priori established (Cepek 2011; Ferguson 2010). Although recent scholarship has pointed to territorial modes of migration governance (see, e.g., Xiang, Yeoh, and Toyota 2013), this body of literature rarely extends to ask how this comes about through programs and implementers. As will become evident, territorialized intent must not be confused with its techniques, and the specificity of the Lao context is an important consideration for how sedentary optics manifest themselves within anti-trafficking. The concern here is not so much whether sedentary optics have become anachronistic (i.e., the call for getting “rid of grids”) or provide us with illuminating analytical tools. Instead, I investigate the empirical effects of such grid-making in concrete situations. More specifically, a key question is to consider in detail how such interfaces of optical gaze-making (in this case, anti-trafficking programs) and mobile populations work. The question is not whether anti-trafficking programs succeed or fail but exactly what is being produced when aid programs operationalize “sed-

entary optics” through their anti-trafficking activities. While I examine elsewhere how anti-trafficking affects mobile populations (Molland 2012b), what follows considers the specificity of anti-trafficking itself.

Laos and Its Development Aid Context

One of Asia's poorest countries, Laos is a recipient of considerable development assistance. At the same time, Laos is a one-party state where the government maintains an authoritarian grip on power, despite the social and economic liberalization that has taken place since the 1990s. Although international aid programs are ubiquitous in Laos, local NGOs are not allowed to operate.⁵ The Lao government presides over all aid activities, and international aid agencies ought to—at least formally—limit their operations to what is stipulated in memorandums of understanding and other formalized cooperation agreements with the government. Hence aid activities are often conditional on operating within specific localities, such as village communities and districts. Social, political, and economic activities that take place outside the spatially demarcated zone of a project are out-of-bounds for a given aid organization.

As is true for many socialist states, the Lao state has historically demonstrated considerable sedentary intent. In the mid-1970s, detention camps were frequently used as means of social control in the aftermath of the communist takeover (Evans 2002; Stuart-Fox 1986). More recently, resettling highland ethnic groups onto the lowlands for sedentary agricultural livelihood remains a central policy, and restricting mobility has been enforced through household registration systems and the requirement, until recently, of exit visas for both international and interprovincial travel (Evans 2002; Evrard and Goudineau 2004; Molland 2012b; Rigg 2005; Stuart-Fox 1986). This being said, the government's ability to enforce these static policy objectives is a rather different matter. For example, resettlement programs have commonly resulted in unintended out-migration, and authorities are helpless to curb the considerable scale of cross-border migration to Thailand (Evrard and Goudineau 2004). Hence aid operations in Laos, including anti-trafficking activities, take place within a political context that is predisposed to frame interventions in sedentary, territorial ways without much ability to necessarily transform policy aims into prescribed outcomes. The status of Laos as a least-developed country makes it nevertheless easier for bilateral and multilateral aid donors to commit funds for humanitarian and development initiatives. It is within this context that Lao anti-trafficking must be understood.

Anti-trafficking in the Lao-Thai Context

Human trafficking—the nonconsensual recruitment of migrants for the purpose of exploiting their labor—emerged as a

5. Despite signs of liberalization of the NGO sector, government control remains an important feature of the Lao aid sector (Singh 2009).

policy concern in the late 1990s. The first legal definition of human trafficking is found in the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (UN 2000). It defines human trafficking thus:

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (UN 2000)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explicate the definition’s various legal and political implications (but for overviews, see Gallagher 2001; Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2005). However, one aspect is crucial for our subsequent discussion: the definition’s retrospective nature. Although the overarching objective of anti-trafficking is to reduce migrant exploitation, it does so by placing focus on migration trajectories that precede that exploitation. The nonconsensual recruitment of migrants for the purpose of exploitation—not the act of exploitation itself—is criminalized. Hence it is only after a migrant has been subjected to treatment deemed exploitative that it becomes possible to distinguish human trafficking from mundane labor migration. As will become evident, this has crucial implications for how anti-trafficking programs objectify trafficking within migrant communities.

Since the early 2000s, several anti-trafficking programs have been launched in Laos. Although there has been a gradual recognition that Laos is also a recipient of migrants (especially from China and Vietnam), this is somewhat overshadowed by a considerable out-migration from Lao villages to neighboring Thailand (Huijsmans 2011; Molland 2012b; Rigg 2005). As with many other aid activities in Laos, anti-trafficking activities are largely confined to rural village communities, where aid programs implement anti-trafficking in close cooperation with government agencies. As such, anti-trafficking echoes the Lao states’ purview of development, which treats village units as objects of knowledge and intervention (High 2006), not too dissimilar from Scott’s discussions in *Seeing Like a State* (1998). Considerable literature in development studies (Olivier de Sardan 2005) as well as Southeast Asian Studies (Rigg 2005; Walker 2009) demonstrates the ubiquity (as well as problems) with taking the village as a unit of analysis. Yet a “discourse of the local” (Rigg 2005) remains highly influential within both the Lao government and the aid sector.

Hence, within the anti-trafficking programs in Laos, both program intervention and data collection are often premised on spatially demarcated units (i.e., villages) as entry points for anti-trafficking. A grid-like operation of trafficking programs remains ubiquitous within the Lao anti-trafficking sector, where

one always has a project site in which anti-trafficking activities are performed (Molland 2012a). Usually, such activities involve a mixture of rural development (e.g., microcredit, fishponds, and irrigation), awareness raising, and support for returned victims of trafficking.

A trafficking project that I previously worked for exemplifies this approach. In addition to carrying out awareness-raising campaigns on the possible dangers of migrating to Thailand, rural development initiatives, such as improving irrigation to increase rice yields, are core elements of anti-trafficking work. The rationale behind such programs is that migration has to do with poverty, and by addressing livelihood problems, one mitigates motivations for out-migration (and the possibility of trafficking; Molland 2010). In addition, repatriation and reintegration services are often premised on providing vocational training or microcredit loans to entice returning migrants to take part in local economic activities, thereby “staying home” (Ginzburg 2004). As one former government colleague once told me, “If a victim returns and stays for at least 1 year in the village, then that’s success.” In this way, the aim of reducing exploitation of labor migrants collapses into a specific concern with preventing remigration. Hence “prevention” and “reintegration” strategies among trafficking programs reflect attempts at territorialization and reterritorialization, respectively. There have been many such projects over the past 15 years in Laos (Huijsmans 2011).⁶

Not all anti-trafficking is sedentary in character. Programs in Laos have expanded and diversified since the early 2000s and comprise a range of different activities. Cross-border cooperation, including specific focus on the investigation and arrest of traffickers, and the use of migration hotlines are examples of anti-trafficking that cannot necessarily be framed in static, spatial ways. And the contours of a shift toward focusing on probabilities and risk (through profiling of migrants) is evident in several anti-trafficking programs.

Yet both law enforcement approaches and migrant hotlines remain limited in terms of actual implementation.⁷ To date,

6. The sedentary nature of these anti-trafficking initiatives does not mean that anti-traffickers are static. To the contrary, similar to aid workers more generally (Stirrat 2000), they are highly mobile, moving from one project to another. After all, expatriate aid workers are—by definition—themselves migrants, which sometimes leads to strange encounters between project staff and aid recipients within programs. As one older village lady asked a former colleague during a village visit, “So, tell me, sir. Have I understood this correctly? Have you come all the way from France to tell us we’re better off staying put in our village?” Indeed, anti-trafficking premised on the “stay where you are approach” to trafficking has been subject to considerable criticism within the anti-trafficking community (Ginzburg 2002; Marshall and Thatun 2005).

7. The Asia Regional Cooperation to Prevent People Trafficking project was the first anti-trafficking program in Laos to focus on law enforcement. The program’s main strategy was premised on facilitating training workshops for investigative police. However, the impact of this strategy was clearly limited. The program design was premised on a weak

sedentary optics remain common within the Lao anti-trafficking community. When focus is placed on specific activities that are implemented among migrant communities, territorially demarcated activities remain central. In fact, they may have been reinforced, as is indicated by several NGOs expanding activities to include shelters for trafficked victims. As such, shelters constitute a territorial enlargement of new “epistemic spaces” (Weizman 2012) where anti-trafficking praxis unfolds. Therefore, what takes place within a territorial unit is commonly the programmatic starting point for anti-trafficking. I will now examine how sedentary optics and spatial practices are central to anti-trafficking activities in light of two ethnographic examples: village-based objectification of human trafficking prevalence, and awareness-raising efforts through a children’s forum on human trafficking.

Trafficking Prevalence through Presences and Absences of Migrants

At first glance, it may seem strange that a village-based trafficking program can even be initiated in Laos, given that what they ultimately attempt to ameliorate—exploitation of migrants—takes place miles away (commonly across the border in Thailand). Hence, by default, village-based anti-trafficking in the Lao context is defined by what is not there. At the same time, human trafficking is further obfuscated by the fact that research suggests that migration is often voluntary, and cases that may be considered trafficking (e.g., abusive work conditions) are usually not apparent until migrants reach their destination in Thailand (Feingold 2005; Molland 2012*b*; UNIAP, MOLSW, and UNICEF 2004). As mentioned above, the fact that trafficking is defined retrospectively makes it extremely difficult to know whether out-migration constitutes risk of trafficking or is mundane labor migration. Cross-border migration may also involve a range of different actors, from brokers to informal kin-based networks. Although considerable anecdotal evidence suggests that some of this constitutes cases of alleged trafficking, this is coupled with other evidence that suggests many migrant brokers are not complicit in coercive, deceptive, or exploitative practices (Feingold 2005; Molland 2012*b*; UNIAP, MOLSW, and UNICEF 2004). This is not to say that human trafficking is a mere fiction or that Lao migration does not entail serious forms of abuse. Indeed, several studies provide evidence of cases of violence, deceptive recruitment, partial confinement, and other forms of exploitation (Lytleton 2014;

understanding of the Lao police force. The project was housed within the immigration police, but as implementers soon discovered, this police unit had no investigate capacity, which rendered large parts of the project unimplementable from the point of view of law enforcement outcomes. My current research on migrant hotlines shows that they are either dysfunctional (either telephone numbers are disconnected or calls go unanswered) or heavily underused by Lao migrants. To date, I have documented only one case where a Lao migrant has called a hotline number that has resulted in NGO assistance.

Molland 2012*b*). Yet it is precisely the coexistence of both mundane and deceptive recruitment practices with mixed outcomes which makes anti-trafficking such an equivocal endeavor.

Thus, migration brokerage in the Lao context constitutes an ambivalent mixture of risk and safety within labor migration that is reflected in Laotian attitudes toward cross-border migration (Molland 2012*b*). Out-migration from villages is a highly ambiguous indicator of trafficking, because it is difficult to know whether it constitutes mundane migration or trafficking. Yet it is this ambiguity that makes it possible to blur distinctions between trafficking on the one hand and migration on the other.

It is precisely out-migration from rural villages that has constituted a key justification for the initiation of trafficking programs in the Lao context. As human trafficking refers to migration that results in exploitation, a village with limited or no migrants will simply not allow any entry point for an aid program to combat trafficking. However, a village with migrants opens up the possibility of anti-trafficking interventions, as some migrants may be exploited and can hence be considered trafficked victims. For this reason, it has been (and still is) commonplace for several anti-trafficking projects to launch anti-trafficking programs in village communities with high levels of out-migration. Yet, although out-migration in village communities provides an entry point for anti-trafficking programs within a territorial unit (a village), continuing absences of villagers can, over time, become a problem for the legitimacy of the project.

One project, which I call “Village Migration Aid,” illustrates these dynamics. Village Migration Aid has been one of the key anti-trafficking programs in Laos. I have been able to follow their operations since the early 2000s during my time as a project advisor for the UN during my PhD fieldwork in the mid-2000s, and during subsequent visits in recent years. Village Migration Aid initiated their anti-trafficking program in 2003 and focused on a cluster of villages within a district.⁸ Village Migration Aid had been working in this area for some time, although on other rural development projects not related to migration or trafficking. Through these projects, they had come across anecdotal stories of abuse of migrants. This impressionistic information was an important factor in deciding to establish an anti-trafficking project. Several donors had taken interest in human trafficking in the early 2000s, and Village Migration Aid had little difficulty getting their project funded by a bilateral donor.

The location they worked in was relatively close to the Lao-Thai border and had high levels of migration to Thailand. In some cases, up to 20% of the village population would migrate for work on a seasonal basis, which resembles the situation reported by other anti-trafficking programs (MOLSW and UNIAP 2001). The program had two main strategies: targeting youth with awareness-raising campaigns regarding the dangers of

8. They expanded their program into a second district the following year with a further expansion into a different province soon after.

migration to Thailand, and rural development initiatives. After some time for project implementation, several project officers were enthusiastic, whereas others revealed some level of doubt about their own project strategy.

As one anti-trafficking official—Theodor—admitted to me in private, after implementing microfinance and rural development activities in their target communities for some time, they encountered several problems.⁹ First, although deceptive recruitment took place and some migrants were subject to deplorable working conditions in Thailand, Theodore recognized a scalar problem: if the villages where Village Migration Aid was working only included a handful of trafficked victims, how could the program justify targeting the development needs of a whole village community, comprising hundreds of people, as “anti-trafficking”?

Furthermore, one of the project’s main strategies seemed to not be working very well. Theodor expressed doubt regarding the program’s strategy to improve rural development in order to remove incentives to migrate (which, in turn, would nullify the possibility of trafficking). Despite more than 1 year of implementation, the project had not affected migration levels.¹⁰ Not only did their project seem to have limited impact on mobility, but, according to Theodore, he was wondering whether the villages they worked in faced a trafficking problem at all! After all, given that so many villagers oscillated between Laos and Thailand, several of them earning remittances, there seemed to be limited evidence for large numbers of trafficked victims and abuse.

What was initially taken as a heuristic spatial optics to detect trafficking—the presence of out-migration—quickly crumbled into a distorted and inconclusive lens for trafficking identification for Theodor’s project. Out-migration transforms itself from providing the justification for implementing anti-trafficking activities to an indication of the absence of trafficking and project failure: few trafficked victims appeared to be within the village communities, and rural development initiatives failed to stem oscillatory migration.

At first glance, this may suggest that anti-trafficking programs ought to quickly come to a grinding halt. Yet, although Theodore expressed some doubt about the project’s soundness, this doubt was not necessarily shared by his colleagues. Another national staff member, Phut, was adamant that continued focus on rural development, coupled with raising awareness, was the best way to address trafficking, because it would provide job opportunities for villagers and would lessen the need

for youth to migrate.¹¹ When I pointed out to him that young villagers continued to migrate, and it was not clear whether young migrants were subject to trafficking, he replied that this was evidence that more efforts had to be put into rural development to improve livelihoods. Although Phut’s response may be interpreted as supporting a general discourse of Lao development, it may be more accurate to frame Phut’s response within a propensity to reframe failures into the need for “improved” project implementation to ensure “success” (Li 2007a); this is a point that I will return to below.

Phut’s optimism is evident in other programs. Although examples of anti-trafficking programs being discontinued exist, the opposite is often the case (Huijsmans 2011). Despite various hurdles, new activities are designed, new grant money is secured, and the continuation of earlier projects is authorized. (Theodor’s project still exists at the time of writing this article!) In this context, a larger anti-trafficking program provides useful comparison. In terms of strategy, the program is similar to Village Migration Aid, but in contrast, the larger program claimed that they witnessed large numbers of migrants returning to their villages. This program alleged in meetings that the fact that migrants returned to their home villages in Laos (due to the lure of the program’s microfinance project) was “proof” of success. The same claim was later made in print, which makes the territorialized premise for claiming success very clear.

In Nong Illueang village, Songkhone district, Savannakhet province, a chicken rearing project has become renowned in the area for its success. Firstly, its training component has been practical and sustainable, with a highly committed veterinarian trainer, and his provision of vaccines and advice on how to keep chickens alive and multiplying has attracted more and more village people to this activity, as well as bringing migrant workers home to stay with their families and involve themselves in a viable livelihood. . . . 30 individuals (of the village) have returned from Thailand since the project started after hearing about the revolving fund. All returnees have remained in the village since returning. (ILO 2008:6)

In contrast with Village Migration Aid, this larger program appeared to be successful with their strategy of enticing migrants to return to their villages, thereby evidencing the “success” of anti-trafficking prevention. But as Marcus, a project officer from another anti-trafficking project, was quick to point out, “Well, if the migrants were truly trafficked they would not be in a position to simply leave their workplaces and return to their villages. The fact that migrants returned suggests they are working in a village with lots of voluntary migration. This project is working in the wrong village!” Here we see Theodor’s optical problem is turned on its head. What some anti-traffickers claim constitutes “success” in the combat against trafficking

11. At one point, Theodore expressed open frustration with his colleagues regarding this matter, proclaiming “I’ve just come back from a project meeting, and we’ve spent two hours discussing the success of vaccinating chickens!”

9. Pseudonyms are used to protect informant confidentiality.

10. It is worth noting that these challenges point to a broader structural problem with locating anti-trafficking responses at a village level. Given the significant socioeconomic disparities between Laos and Thailand, it is virtually impossible to “level out” livelihood disparities between the two countries through village-based activities. Nor do village-based approaches address the legal and regulatory dimensions of migration. For further elaboration on this point, see Molland (2012b).

(“returning to villages”) is, for other anti-traffickers, an indication of displaced anti-trafficking. In some cases, “displaced” trafficking is understood as being a direct result of the impact of programs instituted by anti-trafficking projects. For example, a fourth anti-trafficker, Phetsamone, commented during an interview that evidence of voluntary migration in villages could be explained by the fact that traffickers now “target the north” due to the presence of all the anti-trafficking programs in southern provinces.

Thus, coming to terms with trafficking through the lens of sedentary optics allows for multiple and creative meanings to permeate. At the very moment where the presence of returning migrants turns out to be fallacious evidence of trafficking (suggesting that the returning migrants are working in a village with lots of voluntary migration), absence of trafficking takes on a life of its own as new evidence for the existence of trafficking (and thereby legitimating the existence of anti-trafficking efforts). As such, program failure becomes seemingly rectifiable (Li 2007a). To state that “they’re in the wrong village” is, at the same time, to reify trafficking (it is merely displaced). Hence reorienting programs by locating trafficking outside the program’s vision gives impetus to more (and improved) anti-trafficking measures. This is, in effect, an expansion of a grid-like optics. The fact that this larger anti-trafficking program, as well as Theodor’s project, expanded their activities is telling.

Rather than anti-trafficking bringing trafficking organizations closer to what they seek to combat, distance (“you’re in the wrong village”) allows sedentary optics to serve their own functioning. Such multiple readings of space resemble heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense (Foucault 1986), as they bring together seemingly irreconcilable spaces (i.e., mundane villages and trafficking “hotspots”) and can fruitfully be considered an active process of spatializing (Low 1996). The actual unfolding of such grid-making is multivalent and collapses strategies of objectification into tactics for objectification (Certeau 1998). As such, we may consider anti-traffickers to be grid-makers, which is even more pronounced through awareness-raising campaigns, such as the children’s forum on human trafficking to which I will now turn.

Children’s Forum on Human Trafficking

Around the same time that Theodor and his project team were contemplating the need to expand program activities, they also took part in a larger anti-trafficking event in Vientiane, Laos. Several international organizations, NGOs, and the government of Laos had joined forces in organizing a “children’s forum on human trafficking” in Vientiane. The forum’s purpose was to allow Lao children an opportunity to express their views and ultimately provide a platform for children’s participation in the combat against human trafficking.

In a spirit of interagency collaboration, other trafficking programs were invited to join in on the activities. The children’s forum was, in part, motivated by the fact that several trafficking programs placed specific focus on children. Yet its

overarching objective was to give impetus to awareness-raising efforts to combat human trafficking. Child participation, it was argued, was central to successful awareness raising.

The forum was held inside a large conference venue, where several high school students from Vientiane had been selected to participate. Despite the rhetoric of “child participation,” the forum was crowded by an adult audience representing various government bodies and international aid organizations that are involved in the fight against human trafficking. The children staged carefully scripted performances of songs and speeches as well as a vetted “Q and A” session with senior government officials on the topic of human trafficking prevention.

While this meeting went on without a glitch, the overwhelming majority of young Laotians who migrate and may be considered “risk groups” by anti-trafficking programs were left largely untouched by this event.¹² Although the children’s forum did include a range of subsequent village-based consultation sessions with young Laotians in several provinces, it reached only a tiny minority of young Laotians, predominantly those from selected schools that served the Lao urban middle class. Indeed, an important target group, victims of child trafficking, were not even present within the borders of Laos, as they are located in neighboring Thailand, where many young Lao migrate for work. To this day, most Lao adolescents have never heard about and never will hear about the children’s forum against trafficking.

Policy formation, aid programming, and institutional power have important performative qualities (Jeffrey 2012; Scott 1990; Taussig 1997), which has also been noted in regional (Hinton 1992) and Laos-specific contexts (Evans 1998; High 2010; Singh 2009). What is of particular interest is the children’s forum’s performance of a sedentary optics. It resembles what James Scott, in *Seeing Like a State* (Scott 1998), has termed miniaturization. The necessity of simplification for improved grid-like legibility for state planners explains failed state schemes. When such simplification turns out to be difficult to realize in practice, state planners are predisposed to create (Scott 1998:4) “a more easily controlled micro-order in model cities, model villages, and model farms.” Such a selective and idealized representation of a larger reality is echoed in how the children’s forum epitomizes the complexities of human mobility in contemporary Laos through a miniaturized world that can be made legible and manageable within the physical compound of a conference center: government and aid organizations directing children at will to reduce risk of trafficking. In front of an adult anti-trafficking audience, children recite trafficking definitions and strategies to avoid it. Making children recount official anti-trafficking knowledge professed by NGOs and UN agencies is more easily achieved through a children’s forum, as opposed to crafting specific migrant subjectivities at the village level. The

12. High school students were a main target group for this event, despite the fact that research suggests that migrant children who are prone to abuse in Thailand are out-of-school youth (Huijsmans and Baker 2012).

children's forum can therefore be usefully thought of as a "retreat to . . . miniaturization" (Scott 1998:4), where the ideal is expressed through model form—a symbolic expression of how things ought to be.¹³ The way in which anti-trafficking is conveyed through a static children's forum also resembles a Foucauldian panoptical gaze. The children's forum, quite literally, is a stage overseen.

Despite the children's forum's focus being one of mobility (i.e., trafficking), a performance is put on within a community hall (a "container") where a domestication of the mobile is ritually performed. As such, the children's forum does not merely denote static ways of articulating mobile phenomenon; the anti-traffickers actively produce human trafficking discourse through idle form.

One may infer that not too much should be read into such a children's forum, because such displays of children at big conference events are a common strategy for raising donor funding and publicity. Yet the children's forum was not a fund-raising event. Nor was it a public relations exercise, nor a media event. The anti-trafficking programs that took part in the children's forum were not only already well-funded; the children's forum was, in itself, a specific program activity under the auspices of awareness raising and child participation within the organizers' work plans.¹⁴ In other words, the children's forum constituted project implementation. But if donors or media were not the children's forum's primary audience, who was?

Here, the children's forum reveals something else: its exclusive character. Again, a parallel can be drawn with James Scott and his earlier works on the self-dramatization of elites, where he analyzes the Lao government's military parade celebrating the tenth anniversary of the "liberation" of Laos (Scott

1990). Similarly to how the National Day celebrations were characterized by a representational glut of government officials coupled with a glaring absence of members from the general public, the children's forum—which took place only a few hundred meters away from where the revolutionary celebrations described by Scott had taken place in the mid-1980s—had no real onlookers (i.e., the public, or "the people"). Invitations were limited to anti-trafficking actors (e.g., key government officials and representatives from the UN and NGOs) and appointed pupils from Vientiane schools. As such, the children's forum was a ritual where "the show is all actors and no audience. More accurately, the actors are the audience" (Scott 1990:59). Both the military parade and the children's forum are peculiar navel-gazing rituals that the organizers organize for themselves.

The reason why anti-trafficking programs engage in such rituals of self-affirmation no doubt has to do with the need to generate an appearance of rational project implementation (Hinton 1992:116; Stirrat 2000) as well as the need for anti-trafficking programs to establish interpretations of "success" (Mosse 2005). Yet it is notable that the main technique used to do so is premised on a stage-like configured space where youth participants recite trafficking definitions and advice on how to protect oneself in front of an audience comprising anti-trafficking officials.

While programs like Theodore's are premised on what is not directly visible or knowable within a village community, the children's forum produces anti-trafficking in miniaturized form within the controlled, demarcated space of a conference center. As such, the spatial demarcation of the children's forum represents an inverted expression of village-based anti-trafficking as it reifies an idealized expression of a selective reality. Yet, similarly to how village-based anti-trafficking reifies trafficking through distance, the children's forum is premised on distance in the form of reclusion: awareness raising and child participation are achieved through implementation away from village communities where programs operate. It is the anti-trafficking sector, not young migrants, who are the audience; and it is a conference center that provides the spatial form for its enactment. As such, anti-trafficking engages in active distance-making practices. Such easily controlled, sedentary rituals are, of course, much easier for anti-trafficking programs to carry out, and this makes them prone to repetition. In fact, in subsequent years, several children's forums have been held at a regional level in Bangkok, where selected "youth leaders" from Mekong countries have participated. Such bureaucratic rituals help to reinforce imageries of diagrammatic legibility and thereby the possibility of orchestrated, programmatic intervention by anti-trafficking programs.

Conclusion

Ulrich Beck once described anachronistic yet influential social science concepts as "zombie categories" (Beck and Gernsheim 2002). According to postpanopticism and "the mobility turn,"

13. Although it may be tempting to extend this comparison to the village-based anti-trafficking activities discussed above, important differences remain between them. Scott discusses "model villages" in the context of the need to create "microenvironments" (i.e., miniaturization) where a sense of order can be achieved (or performed). Scott relates this to "state failure" (i.e., the tendency of the state to retreat to a model-village logic in light of failure to realize grand visions and plans). The village-based anti-trafficking activities I discuss, although clearly territorialized, do not exemplify a logic of retreat or miniaturization. For example, it is not clear exactly what such interventions would be retreating from. Nor are they modelled on a specific "grand scheme" in a clear way, as discussed by Scott. In fact, it is questionable whether one can describe village-based anti-trafficking interventions as "models" at all. Although they are examples of specific spaces where aid programs attempt to craft particular attitudes and practices to reduce trafficking (such as awareness raising and income generation), this is not quite the same as idealized models. Scott also makes it clear that miniaturization is linked to a "high modernist aesthetic" where the appearance of order is paramount. This is clearly evident in the children's forum, but not in village-based activities.

14. Save the Children and the International Labour Organization (ILO) were two of the lead agencies organizing the children's forum that received multimillion-dollar funding from the Department for International Development. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), another key anti-trafficking agency in Laos, was similarly generously funded by bilateral donors at the time.

synoptic and panoptic theoretical constructs may well be considered such “zombie” concepts, because they cannot easily grasp migration and mobility through such sedentary frameworks (Urry 2007). By focusing on anti-trafficking programs in Laos, I have diverted from these critiques by examining the generative aspects of what I call sedentary optics—that is, technologies of government premised on static, territorial modes of knowing, seeing, and acting upon the world.

In this paper, I have followed several scholars who argue that governmental rationalities must not be confused with their techniques or their effects (Cepek 2011; Ferguson 2010; Mitchell 2003). Laos is a fertile ground for examining such processes, given its combination of authoritarian rule, aid dependency, and high levels of cross-border mobility. By placing specific focus on how aid programs operationalize anti-trafficking in the Lao context, I have illuminated notable sedentary modes of knowledge formation and practices within these programs.

At first glance, village-based anti-trafficking within migrant source communities may seem an impossible task, given that trafficking takes place outside these programs’ static purview. Anti-trafficking becomes dependent on other ways of making trafficking legible, such as the presence and absence of migrants in rural villages. This way, both departing and returning migrants from a territorial unit (i.e., a village) give rise to multiple justifications for project continuation. It is precisely this combination of mobile subjects and sedentary optics that allows for post hoc rationalizations and, thereby, reproduction of program activities. It is also here that we see how trafficking is reified through distance-making maneuvers. When programs confront the realization of lack of evidence of exploitation and abuse among returning migrants, this becomes evidence of trafficking elsewhere. How distance reifies trafficking is manifest through other activities, such as the children’s forum. Trafficking discourse is spatially separated away from program activities and produced through static form. Hence the children’s forum constitutes a space-making practice, which is an important generative dimension of anti-trafficking discourse.

Saying all this does not mean that migrant communities in Laos are unaffected by these processes. Anti-trafficking programs do, of course, have effects (Molland 2012*b*). For example, reintegration programs arguably constitute prime examples of Foucauldian governmentality, because they involve considerable follow-up of social workers in village communities and attempt to produce specific subjectivities (Surtees 2013). Many Lao migrants do also share anxieties regarding cross-border pursuits, to which the trafficking discourse contributes (Molland 2012*b*; Pholsena 2006). Yet the reach of anti-trafficking activities must not be overstated.

As I have shown, empirical immediateness informs neither the children’s forum nor village-based activities. The children’s forum was completely detached from the lifeworlds of young Lao migrants, and the expansion of Theodore’s program was not informed by the availability of data but by its absence. What sets all this in motion is not the articulation of those intervened upon, but a self-articulation of anti-trafficking. And sedentary

optics are, in this sense, an important asset that allows anti-traffickers to combat a mobile phenomenon through static means. In his much-cited book *Cultivating Development*, David Mosse argues that “the ethnographic question is not whether . . . a project succeeds, but how ‘success’ is produced” (Mosse 2005:8). As we have seen in the case of Lao anti-trafficking, “success” is produced through a sedentary optics.

I have illuminated the specific context of these sedentary space-making practices and suggested that they may well be specific to Laos. Yet it cannot be ruled out that similar dynamics exist elsewhere. Village-based anti-trafficking campaigns in rural communities take place in neighboring countries.¹⁵ And implementing anti-trafficking through territorial units, such as shelters for trafficking victims, has become increasingly popular among NGOs worldwide (Brunovskis and Surtees 2007). All of this does not mean that all migration governance and anti-trafficking necessarily entail sedentary technologies of objectification. As mentioned, anti-trafficking also includes risk profiling and proactive police investigations. Furthermore, new emerging discourses are emanating from anti-trafficking efforts, such as “safe migration” programs, which appear to entail accentuated postpanoptical qualities.¹⁶

Current theoretical debates that interrogate the social sciences’ territorial legacy are important, because they invite scholarly reflexivity on the ways in which space constitutes both subjects and objects of knowledge. At the same time, I argue that it is essential that such reflexivity does not prevent us from paying attention to the specific empirical context in which this unfolds. As this paper has shown, diagrammatic modes of objectification within anti-trafficking programs are alive and well. Although panoptic and synoptic theorizing may have territorialized underpinnings, they are theoretical tools that are remarkably well suited for analyzing mobility in the form of anti-trafficking responses.

Comments

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Back to the Soil

Reading Sverre Molland’s account of the “children’s forum” in Vientiane, where the great and good of Laos’ anti-trafficking

15. For example, the aforementioned ILO project implemented similar activities in Vietnam, Cambodia, and China.

16. My current research on “safe migration” programs suggests technologies of anticipation are quite significant with these activities, at least discursively. Research on “safe migration” as an emerging modality of migration governance is nascent (Molland 2012*c*).

world got together to pat their own backs, I confess that one of those cynical academic smiles of recognition crept across my lips. Similar self-congratulatory events have unfolded in places I know from my own research on migration controls. In the Senegalese capital and elsewhere in West Africa, European funders, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), NGOs, and local associations have collaborated in staging awareness-raising events on the “risks of irregular migration” toward Europe, backed by ample European funding. Molland draws our attention to the absences and presences within this genre of events—the presence of select children reciting anti-trafficking mantras in Vientiane, the distancing at play between the event venue and the realities of young (prospective) migrants targeted in campaigns—that resonate with my own experiences. Furthermore, he productively draws in James Scott’s writings on self-dramatization: the Vientiane meeting, he says, is a “ritual of self-affirmation,” where the actors are themselves the audience.

Molland’s compelling article offers important correctives to “postterritorial” studies of power, borders, and mobility, and it does so by steering what is an often Western-centric debate toward spaces of migration and control elsewhere—in this case, trafficking routes between Laos and Thailand and official attempts to curb them. While some of the “sedentary space-making practices” his text delineates may be specific to Laos, similar dynamics, as he suggests, are certainly in evidence elsewhere. As the brief comparison above indicates, the panoply of international actors, NGOs, and donors of the kind converging on Vientiane today propagate certain discourses, practices, and logics of intervention on an increasingly global scale, even though this sometimes amounts to little more than a talkfest (cf. Pécoud 2014). The IOM, in particular, has long been promoting a “migration management” agenda that melds ostensible “humanitarian” concerns with the control prerogatives of donor states, helping to control migration for current or prospective migrants’ “own good” (e.g., Brachet 2016).

In my own fieldwork in West Africa, I saw how European-funded anti-migration campaigns often had sedentary ends, as European donors sought to end irregular maritime departures toward the Spanish Canary Islands. Do not risk your life, said campaign posters. Stay at home. Your future is here. The Spanish government gave Senegal’s president millions of euros for a pet project of his called REVA (*Retour vers l’Agriculture*, or “back to agriculture,” the acronym for which evoked the French word for dream, *rêve*). His dream to take former migrants “back to the soil” was fruitless, however: tilling turned out to be few people’s dreamed-for prospect (Andersson 2014). Handicraft projects for women were initiated in seaside communities in another stab at keeping people in their place (even though this was not precisely the demographic that hoped to leave by boat). Elsewhere, as I visited the European Union-funded migration management center in neighboring Mali, television screens in reception showcased artisans happily at work. Meant to inspire visiting Malians to stay at home and learn a craft, the looped videos had only one problem: all the workers were white Westerners.

In bringing in these field notes, I wish to point to the many compelling comparisons that can be made with the “sedentary optics” of migration governance, to use Molland’s term, but also to add a note of caution regarding territory and power. While Molland’s critique of the mobility turn and “postpanopticism” is a salutary one, it is worth recalling that the scholarly focus on “sedentarism” and territorially based forms of mobility control have been with us at least since Liisa Malkki’s interventions on the “national order of things” (Malkki 1995:1). We see this, for instance, in studies of NGO efforts to keep people in their place in sub-Saharan Africa (Bakewell 2008); of how deportation campaigns offer a “territorial solution” in forcibly anchoring people to discrete places (Cornelisse 2010); or of the role that nationalism and territorially based sovereignty play in the “emplacement and displacement” of citizens (Dzenovska 2010).

Besides such studies of the politics of migration, we should also not forget how the “mobility turn” itself has been pushed in new directions, as seen in the shift toward a “regimes of mobility” framework that “neither normalises fixed relationships between people and territory nor naturalises movement” (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013:188; see also Faist 2013). In other words, while studies of migration and borders have certainly complicated territoriality in its theoretical aspects in a postmethodological nationalism vein, the empirical interest in sedentary state power does seem to have reared back in force in recent years. Molland’s ethnography, then, adds to our understanding of how such sedentary practices operate, as seen from an intriguing Southeast Asian perspective.

Another question concerns the theoretical underpinnings of “sedentary optics.” While the retooling of Scott and the synoptic is productive here, the turn toward panopticism seems, to this reader, as if it may be less so. If anything, campaigns such as those described in Molland’s compelling ethnography—in villages without “trafficking victims” or in conference venues without much of a target audience—do not seem to give off the air of an omniscient, all-powerful gaze or to have any disciplining effect on those who are gazed upon. Rather, the “miniaturization” and “self-dramatization” at work in the Vientiane event or the obfuscation by implementers of the effects of their village-level interventions seem to indicate the opposite—a lack of control and lack of relevance to local social realities, where interventions do not necessarily bring much notable effect on “target groups.”

Sedentary practices of power may, in other words, be clever short-term politics but not nearly as pervasive, persuasive, or “powerful” as they are often rhetorically presented to be by their instigators. With the risk of a Western-centric turn of phrase, while “take back control” has become the mantra for territorial sovereign power and nationalist populism in some places today, any political project to control movement territorially eventually runs up against its own incompleteness and against the fragmentation of power in a context of human mobility that cannot be fully “domesticated.”

A final note concerns the kinds of mobility that such “sedentary” or “grid-making” practices are targeting. In using the term “regimes of mobility,” Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013: 189) wanted—in a similar vein to other authors—to put focus on the “several different intersecting regimes of mobility that normalise the movements of some travellers while criminalising and entrapping the ventures of others.” It is important to recall, then, the hierarchies of mobility and control at work in settings such as the Laotian one. Territorially based controls are certainly alive and well when it comes to the racialized mobile poor, as seen in the physical barriers erected at nation-states’ edges as much as in sedentary “stay put” campaigns. Richer travellers—including those “expats” flying in to Vientiane to “help manage” migration and trafficking—rarely face such physical regimes of (im)mobility. Rather, they are subjected to more mobile controls via, for instance, advanced passenger information systems; closed-circuit television and scans; and data mining and risk profiling that jointly allow, in their “light-touch” approach, for mobility to masquerade as freedom (Bigo 2010). Perhaps the frequent rich-world bias of “mobility studies” has put too much focus on the latter kind of mobility system, and here again Molland offers important correctives from a very different empirical setting. Indeed, it is testament to his skill as an ethnographer that the reader does not lose sight of these larger complexities, whether in considering the villages bereft of migrants or the conference hall bereft of children, as he takes us “back to the soil” and digs up some of the anxious politics of mobility lurking within it.

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Sverre Molland’s thoroughly argued and well-written article makes an important argument that builds on the mobility turn but basically shows how “mobility” itself is regulated, governed, and ultimately “demobilized.” As a point of departure, Molland takes Foucauldian panopticism and James Scott’s notion of the synoptic to point at how scholars have argued that the social practice of migration/mobility cannot be easily grasped through grid-like technologies of governing. At the core of the mobility paradigm lies the idea that mobility itself has become a way of life. Molland disagrees and, by engaging with anti-trafficking programs along the Lao-Thai border, convincingly argues “that static visioning and sedentariness are central to the functioning of these programs.” The mobile subjects that are at the heart of Molland’s analysis are trafficked victims who need to be made legible for what he refers to as programmatic interventions, and as such, they are central to the reproduction of said programs. Taking aim at notions of postpanopticism and the mobility turn itself, which puts emphasis on the way technologies of governance target migrants

moving through space as opposed to being confined by it, Molland draws attention to the “sedentary, static qualities of migration governance.”

While the migration governance that Molland investigates here refers directly to anti-trafficking program in a border area that is characterized by “village migration,” a case can be made for his argument to be extended to include other forms of migration management and governance as well. Although in my own work the migrant as an inherently trans/nationally mobile subject takes center stage, there is no denying how the migration infrastructures of receiving nations are increasingly fine-tuned to make sure that this “mobility” itself is very narrowly regulated. However, such rules and regulations generally impact individuals who are deemed to be lower skilled much more directly than those whom receiving nations think of as “talent,” as is the case in Singapore. If one examines the overall structure that governs migrant flows from countries such as India to highly developed receiving nations such as Dubai, Singapore, or even Australia, one quickly realizes how, on the one hand, such “infrastructures” are meant to facilitate the smooth in-flow as well as out-flow of migrants, while, on the other hand, making sure that those whom the state deems undesirable do not enter the country altogether. While it concerns “ostensibly” mobile subjects here, this mobility itself is constantly interrupted, constrained, and temporalized. For instance, migrant workers such as construction and domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore are “permanently” ineligible for permanent residency status. Their time as “migrant workers” is furthermore regulated by means of a maximum duration of stay or age.

The anti-trafficking programs that Molland discusses have, at their core, the objective of reducing migrant exploitation. However, it has often been a challenge for researchers to understand who has, in fact, been “trafficked” and thus who properly meets the criteria in the definition that Molland also discusses in his work. While nonconsensual recruitment seems important here, there is, in fact, a thin line where those allegedly “trafficked” could simply be construed as “mundane” labor migrants. While it does not lie within the scope of my brief comments here to discuss the dividing line between the two, if we turn our attention in more general terms to how mobility and migration are ultimately facilitated, regulated, mediated, and “demobilized,” we realize that various power relations are at the heart of this that migrants (especially those considered to be low-skilled or unskilled workers) often have little control over. Ambivalent understandings of consent, force, and “bondedness” often feature prominently in the narrations of migrant workers when they discuss the loans they took out to finance and facilitate their trajectories abroad. As my own recent research among migration agents in Chennai, India, also showed, the migration infrastructure does not simply start at the border but often already makes itself felt in the village or town where labor migrants are recruited themselves. While traffickers and migration agents seem to operate at opposing ends from anti-trafficking programs and skilled migration pro-

grams, in the end, it is mobility that governed, limited, discouraged, disrupted, and/or temporalized. Molland's important article thus allows for a rethinking of what actually constitutes the mobile (migrant) subject and how implied mobility often also points at regulated, encouraged, or even enforced sedentariness. It is this inherent contradiction and irony of a rapidly globalizing and transnationalizing world that deserves more scholarly attention and for which Molland's insightful article provides an important starting point.

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Sverre Molland raises challenging topics in his careful ethnography of the Lao state's anti-trafficking measures. His analysis invites us to rethink some assumptions about the state security practices in a globalized world and to revisit familiar methodological questions. In brief, he argues that the Lao government casts a stationary eye on would-be migrants (i.e., people who might cross, but have not yet crossed, the Thai border as potential human trafficking victims). The Lao government's grid-like approach, effected through international development programs, contradicts a chorus of scholars who insist that we have taken a "mobility turn" and thus "give emphasis to how technologies of government target migrants who are moving through space as opposed to being confined by it." To me, it seems reasonable to assume that both approaches to security are firmly in place depending on where and how one looks. Nevertheless, Molland presents an opportunity to push further on the key issues he raises.

Anthropologists and other critical scholars have long questioned the giddiness of the 1990s, when we embraced the rise of globalization and the alleged fall of the territorial state. By the turn of this century, such scholars began to insist that Apadurai's *Modernity at Large* (1996), perhaps the most compelling articulation of a deterritorialized world of flows and "-scapes," underestimated the territorial state's endurance. Or, as Michael Burawoy charged in 2000, "anthropologists can simply evacuate their villages and communities and move straight into the global arena, blissfully unperturbed by the tenacity of the nation-state" (Burawoy et al. 2000:34). Granted, the debate at that point did not focus on security practices, but perhaps we still did not hear Burawoy's message loudly enough.

In that vein, Molland presents the key challenge early in his argument, using Bissell's phraseology, "Hence a 'metaphysics of fixity' ought to be complemented with a 'nomadic metaphysics of flow.'" Although the need for metaphysics remains unclear, the formulation captures the dilemma, which social researchers seek to understand: is the state continuously trying to strengthen its borders, or is it facilitating global flows through

a range of other institutions and actors? Both, I would guess, although to varying extents depending on the state. Molland does not push too hard to resolve the dilemma himself. He sticks closely to the line that the state still matters, if by the state we mean its propensity for "sedentary optics." Curiously, though, while he draws on Foucault to underpin his argument, he leaves unattended much of Foucault's work that would help to conceptualize the dilemma in more robust and nuanced terms.

In his explications of how modern organizational forms of society and economy crystallized in certain historical moments, Foucault made clear that these forms neither sequentially replace one another nor totality dominate sovereign space: the security apparatus of *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault 2007) did not eliminate the grid-like disciplinary apparatus generally understood as the panopticon of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977). Instead, they coexist, borrow from each other, and appear more or less robustly depending on the specific situation. Moreover, Foucault articulates the inbuilt tension between the neoliberal actor and the state sovereign, with the former constantly seeking new horizons and unlimited vistas and the latter struggling to close down bounded space and maintain an all-seeing gaze from above. (There is also Foucault's later work on counter-conduct and *parrhēsia* [i.e., truth-telling], which is less relevant here but examines instabilities in sovereign authority.) Nevertheless, Molland stays with the careful argument that, in the Lao case, sedentary optics remain unchallenged, or uncomplemented, by other organizational forms.

His point is well argued as far as the Lao case is concerned. But Molland could elaborate its importance beyond the fact that it contradicts what other scholars have observed in other cases. This raises further methodological questions. Molland stresses the particularities of the Lao case to highlight the importance of ethnographic context. Fair enough, but this statement invites the question of what the context actually is and how that context relates to the actual case study. Put differently, ethnographic context and case study should not be identical lest the latter carry no relevance beyond itself. For example, scholars working on postsocialist transformations in eastern Europe in the 1990s distinguished between the conditions enabling the transformation and the ways that particular postsocialist countries negotiated it with respect to their historical particularities. The multiple cases shed light on the complexity of the broader historical change.

Thus, what is special about the Lao case except that it contradicts the conclusions of postpanoptic scholars? Is it the fact that Laos is an autocracy that appears to have shunned "globalization" (however we define that term)? If so, then other similar (but not identical) countries exist to expand the relevance of this ethnographic case. What can autocracies, or even governments with autocratic tendencies, teach us about the balance between sedentary optics and mobile forms of surveillance? We can even ask whether there are underlying similarities between autocracies and liberal democracies. I suspect there are, given that the former have often grown out of the

latter. As it happens, some European Union (EU) officials admire how well the Chinese government manages its administrative border with Hong Kong, suggesting a preference for technocratic efficiency over liberalism.

In this vein, the similarities between Lao and EU policy players are striking. The European Commission works hard to create development programs specifically designed, quoting generic policy-speak, to “cut off the root causes of migration to the EU.” While the EU blends mobile and static forms of surveillance, the dream behind its migration management agenda is a static world where people migrate to the EU only if a circulation migration program summons them to temporarily fill a hole in a member state’s labor market. EU policy officials likewise concoct empty rituals designed to reify problems that then must be solved by their preferred policy solutions. For example, where Molland encounters a children’s forum on Lao’s anti-trafficking programs, I attended numerous migration policy conferences replete with dance performances and feel-good events. These conferences featured liberal-minded participants (officials and academics) and almost no migrants whatsoever (Feldman 2011b:29–40). These conferences, likewise, let officials define the “migration problem” in ways that meet their national government’s policy agendas. Never would they allow migrants to define the problem from their standpoints.

In sum, Molland’s analysis is a lesson in the power of careful ethnographic fieldwork and the tenacity of the territorial state. Yet I am interested in learning more about the significance of the Lao case beyond its own border. The hints are clearly there.

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That the problem of human trafficking requires urgent attention is beyond doubt. Indeed, numerous individuals, (international) organizations, governments, and funding bodies are active in the field of anti-trafficking. Together this has produced a plethora of interventions, making it tempting to ask, What works, what does not, and why? Such concerns drive a good share of the knowledge production about (anti-)trafficking. Yet Dr. Sverre Molland’s work shows that, by asking whether counter-trafficking policies and practices “work,” we lose sight of the theoretically more compelling questions of how they work and why they work the way they do. This relates Molland’s work to larger questions in the ethnography of development, shedding particular light on its spatial dynamics.

Drawing on long-term ethnographic research on trafficking and anti-trafficking in Laos and Thailand, the article’s starting point is the apparent contradiction between what is, in essence, a mobile phenomenon (human trafficking) addressed through mostly place-based interventions. This contradiction is even more striking because, in the context of Lao-Thai migration, the exploitation that renders something human trafficking

takes place in Thailand, whereas interventions are typically based in villages in Laos. Hence anti-trafficking interventions are often “premised on what is not directly visible or knowable within a village community.” Nonetheless, Molland refuses to merely critique attempts to govern the mobile through static means. Such a deconstructive exercise would indeed be missing the ethnographic potential of seeking to understand how and why interventions take their particular form and shape (despite their outward contradictions) as well as what they might produce.

In the Laotian context, the particularities of international aid programming, combined with an authoritarian state with a tendency toward sedentary forms of government rooted in a recent socialist history, underpin the proliferation of place-based interventions. Such interventions are characterized by a sedentary optics, viewing a mobile phenomenon through a grid-like lens. Sedentary optics, Molland demonstrates, produce friction. This makes it possible for anti-traffickers to read the return migration of villagers as proof of success in counter-trafficking, as displacement of the trafficking problem, or as a sign of doubt as to whether there was a trafficking problem at all in the target area. Importantly, any reading can be generative of further anti-trafficking interventions, be it within the grid of the current program or precisely beyond it.

Sedentary optics may also take a performative form, Molland argues. Turning to the example of a “children’s forum” organized in the name of “awareness raising,” Molland argues that it did not reach any of its supposed target audience and (re)produced highly problematic knowledge about trafficking. Yet such events still matter, Molland insists. Staging must be read as “sedentary rituals” within the anti-trafficking community. These are both easy to reproduce and generative for further interventions precisely because such events amount to creating distance between the cleaned representational act and actual migrants’ lifeworlds.

While Molland’s work sheds important light on how practices of place-making within aid programming contribute to the defining of success and failure and ultimately to the perpetuation of particular forms of interventions, his work also raises questions. I limit myself here to three. First, despite work that shows that adult men may also become victims of human trafficking (e.g., in relation to the fishing industry), the practice remains predominantly associated with women and children. As such, trafficking discourses need also be appreciated as gendered and generational. This leads to the question of whether the sedentary optics described in the article must be marked in such terms. Normative ideas about childhood and womanhood often carry spatial connotations. This is no different in the Laotian context, I would suggest, where “the home” and “the village” are the quintessential places for children and women, thereby positioning Laotian women, and especially children, working across the border in Thailand as “out of place.” The mere absence of women and children from the village may not be evidence of trafficking according to any

formal definition but may thus still generate sufficient concern to legitimate anti-trafficking interventions. In other words, must the grid-making described be marked as a gendered and generational practice?

Second, it is true that the Laos-based anti-trafficking community is preoccupied with the plight of Laotian migrants in Thailand, yet every so often, reports appear on trafficking taking place on Laotian soil. This concerns trafficking in the context of internal migration (e.g., the domestic sex industry), but also in relation to cross-border migration destined for Laos (e.g., Vietnamese nationals working in Laos). Clearly, in the case of trafficking within Laos, some of the contradictions described in the article do not apply. What, then, is the purchase (if any) of a sedentary optics in explaining the curious omission of anti-trafficking work on Laotian soil, especially since, in these instances, it can actually be made visible and knowable?

Third, Molland's positioning vis-à-vis the phenomena studied is unique. As a former member of staff of the UN office in Laos, he was involved in some of the interventions discussed. This provided him with not only a first-hand account of events but also a good network among the anti-trafficking community in Laos (and beyond). From this unique position, Molland is also very well placed to shed light on how the anti-trafficking sector works as a reflexive community. In other words, how does it learn? How do people working within the anti-trafficking community deal with the contradictions that they are confronted with? The article sheds light on some ad hoc reasoning on the part of anti-traffickers, but what about the longer term? No doubt Molland has shared and discussed some of his earlier published work with (former) colleagues and, of course, has his own trajectory of moving in, out, and through the anti-trafficking sector to reflect on. Delving deeper into such questions, and particularly over a longer period of time, as Molland is so well placed to do, would provide further insight into why a sector such as development aid appears predisposed to reproduction despite critique.

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There was a time when anthropology had to change its analytical and descriptive ways, because "groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically unself-conscious, or culturally homogeneous" (Appadurai 1996:48). Furthermore, "Globalization has radically pulled culture apart from place. It has visibly dislodged it from particular locales. The signs of this disembedding are everywhere" (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:11). These statements had much resonance at the time. But the premise that, before this, peoples and cultures were embedded, anthropology had assumed the isomorphism of culture and place, or ethnic groups were culturally homogeneous does not hold up to historical scrutiny.

Robert Lowie (1920, 1927) and William McLeod (1928), for instance, never suggested anything of the sort and instead described diversity, complexity, historicity, and conflict as ordinary states of affairs that had to be situated and specified. Their work was, to some extent, ignored, in part because they were comparative ethnologists who assumed a fundamental equivalence among all human groups. By about 1930, the ethnological focus was replaced by a general consensus on ethnography (Stocking 1992). Some of the excesses of an ethnographic focus (e.g., expecting that an ethnic group coheres as a case regarding culture and social organization) may have justified the caricatures of previous anthropology with which I opened. But for the most part, the imagery is a form of strategic essentialism that allows a dissenting writer and his audience to imagine that they are on the cusp of the future and that those not joining the bandwagon are the misguided old guard. The notion invents a historical divide through social categories.

My initial response to the apparent shift in optics from sedentary toward mobile is to suggest that this issue cannot be resolved scientifically. Thomas Kuhn (1970) suggests that paradigms tend to shift when the anomalies have accumulated to the point of challenging previously shared expectations about the world. But there are other possible responses. In physics, there was, for the longest time, some debate on whether light was a particle or a wave. But then there was a split between classical physics and quantum physics, and each camp has the instruments to scientifically measure and thus prove their interpretation. The two sides do not have to agree on the world. Understanding, experience, and empirical reference are united and reinforced through communities that share particular expectations about the world and about the nature of truth.

Rather than agree to disagree within social science, we are told that sedentary optics are inadequate and that mobile optics are a better fit with the contemporary world. But on this front, nothing can objectively distinguish hard-nosed empiricism from blind faith. This is the human predicament. We are dependent for our understanding and experience on representation, interpretation, and social affirmation. Direct experience of the objective world is humanly impossible. But humans have been experimenting with and exploring the world—social life, plants, animals, landscape, unseen forces, and so on—for tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of years. That is, even if direct experience of the objective world is impossible, humans are and have long been curious, experimental, interested, and worldly.

Postpanopticism and the mobility turn that Molland calls attention to offer new journeys of discovery, through reading, regarding the character of social life and of politics. Rather than having to discover the world on their own and from scratch, people rely on advice, information, affirmation, and suggestion from particular others. In the most general terms, the process is foundational to human cognition and sociality and has been for perhaps 300,000 years (Enfield and Levinson 2006; Power, Finnegan, and Callan 2017; Tomasello 2014).

One part is the ability to distinguish deception from truth. Humans are uniquely susceptible to deception, because they are social creatures dependent on representation, interpretation, and social affirmation. Neurologist Oliver Sacks (1987:83–84) accidentally found out that only people with particular mental abnormalities are not gullible to deception through the use of language and emotion. The rest of us are the so-called normal people. This is one reason that there is such interest in, and market for, categorical assurances that people are not mistaken in their understanding and experience.

From playing different roles as ethnographer, analyst, and participant in UN-sponsored anti-trafficking interventions in Laos and Thailand, Molland knows enough cases and positions to be skeptical of any simplistic understanding of the situation and to insist on empirical specificity. I appreciate his case and have no quarrel with it. The projects that Molland describes and analyses are anchored to particular rhetoric of alarm and rescue that translate internationally across great distances and do not require any familiarity with situations in Laos or with that of Lao people working in Thailand. The imagery of anti-trafficking efforts appears rather far-fetched, “completely detached from the lifeworlds of young Lao migrants.” Curiously, the effort is a success, in the sense of sustaining certain networks. The imagery of social science may be similarly far-fetched; the choice between sedentary and mobile optics on governance is unduly reductionist regarding social life as much as cognition. But to the extent that it enables virtual communities based on particular shared understandings of the world, then this too must be recognized as a success.

The proponents of the mobility turn and postpanopticism (and earlier modernity and globalization) share an understanding of intellectual history or evolution in terms of a ladder with discrete steps, similar to how art history is told through a predictable sequence of “isms.” The alternative perspective on history and evolution is anchored to “the bush,” innumerable branches and twigs with no particular sense of progressive directionality (Gould 1991; Kuklick 2008; Wengrow and Graeber 2015). I find Molland’s assessment of recent social theory and humanitarian interventions reasonable and stimulating. My response to the claim that history is happening through a shift in analytical optics is to ask how we can know this and why it matters, in relation to cognition, experience, evolution, and the implications of diversity.

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Sverre Molland’s paper is valuable in its appraisal of anti-trafficking maneuvers in Laos, a poor country, still largely rural and landlocked, within a mosaic of diverse ethnicities, divergent economies, and conflicted politics. Mobility is increasing internally as folk are beckoned and pressured out of forested

hills to more open landscapes or drawn to urban hubs. Hundreds of thousands go to Thailand, a center of gravity hosting more than four million cross-border migrants largely in work sectors that its own citizens avoid. It is no surprise that so many follow time-worn trails away from home. John Galbraith noted decades ago that migration is the oldest strategy to deal with poverty.

Not so long ago, a significant source of foreign income for Laos was tariffs paid on air traffic flyovers. Nowadays, more conventional development assistance is a major contributor, and considerable numbers of professionals weaned on development work in Thailand have also crossed borders to assist Laos out of its “lesser-developed” status. Just as numerous agencies shifted from village agriculture projects to promoting safe sex when HIV dominated the funding landscape, anti-trafficking support has somewhat returned focus to rural livelihoods. The logic is simple: millions of people move as regional economic growth offers a vast range of opportunities that include work site eddies, where rule of law is uneven at best. Migration sometimes “goes bad” through physically abusive and/or mentally dispiriting exploitation.

Molland shows us the illogic of trying to reduce such exploitation by jump-starting village-based entrepreneur enterprises. They simply cannot compete with the siren call of “a better life” farther afield. In fact, recognizing the benefits of a mobile workforce, regional integration policies have made legal movement easier, and studies show that, in the process, migrants do, in fact, sometimes gain marketable skills to be used on their return. But Molland aims to do more than demonstrate the ill fit of anti-trafficking initiatives. He suggests that these approaches rely on limited horizons, that they are conceptually lead-bound, and that they are unequal to dealing with volatile mobility, let alone with the complexities that arise when nurtured aspirations, impulsive desires, and predatory impulses converge. Despite insightful nuances, the paper’s resolute attention to grids offers minimal theoretical corrective, given that a social theory of flows flounders without adequate analysis of both boundedness and continuity (Eriksen 2007:154).

Sedentary optics is a neat phrase. But its repetition serves to underscore the article’s own heuristic limits, especially the focus on activities within Laos. This geo-fixity is odd given that the movement being described is to other places. Approaches operating at a different scale and tenor—not necessarily aligned but nonetheless part of a broader register responsive to this mobility—are mentioned but quickly parked. The suggestion that territorialized attention begins with small-scale units seems, on the one hand, unremarkable given that the notion of a rural source relies on this, and on the other hand, insufficient to warrant disregard of alternative scales and dynamics. Numerous projects have sought to address selective dangers inherent in the hyperstimulated movement within the greater Mekong subregion both in transit (information dissemination at borders) and at destinations (work site interventions). The Thai government is active in repatriation for reasons that, in part, are linked to global

slavery reports produced by the United States. The IOM and ILO have regional safe migration projects. Various NGOs have sought to link both source and destination. They may not be very effective. Nevertheless, it seems overly restrictive to confine analysis of anti-trafficking rubrics to the village level. Molland importantly demonstrates that source communities can be an overly emphasized traction point as anti-trafficking “prevention” struggles to corral mobile people. But to suggest that this scaffolding reflects and reproduces conceptual difficulty in grasping “flows” is a more tenuous stretch. Brief caveats to larger scales notwithstanding, problematizing this predominance only partially illuminates a complex amalgam. Alternative framings, such as the Lao government’s regional and bilateral agreements on labor migration and migrant health, or regional discussions around the “portability” of migrant health insurance, engage broader horizons that dilute the primacy of conventional village “grids.” Rather, the fixity being suggested is at best contingent, hardly deterministic for either state or nonstate actors, just as village or home is important but obviously not the only frame of reference to migrants themselves. There is a bigger set of dynamics and a larger set of players—an assemblage, if you will—that warrants inclusion before we can be persuaded that panopticism and legibility produce ongoing rigidity.

Likewise, the conceptual thrust seems at odds with what I take to be the intent of the argument: that is, that we need more nimble approaches to adequately comprehend or apprehend trafficking. There are other ways the data offer insights—not all the product of a “fixed lens” per se. The discussion of whether an intervention is missing the point because migrants returned and few indicated exploitation makes light of the possibility that forewarning might have preempted such outcomes. Here I think Foucault’s concern with effects and latter-day insistence that fixity does not hold—“we are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed” (1986:22)—warrants more than an ambivalent footnote. These days, anticipating and mitigating risk is a huge part of development thinking from the World Bank on down. But it is awkwardly implemented as a practice almost everywhere. The article critiques the microcredit and school student spectacle for unjustified attention and lack of demonstrable relevance. But from another vantage point, a process of sensitization to potential dilemmas is taking place in an “unfixed” way as the resonant effects of circulating anti-trafficking information. Are none of the players aware of this? Is this important or ultimately effective? How do we measure who “might” have been exploited were interventions not in place? The problem with discussing a metric for preemption, for linking the near and the far, is the multitude of “risk” variables and the diversity of “safety” information along the way. Close-up and longitudinal studies are needed, and maybe Molland has some answers. But it strikes me that a more agile perspective—with a nod to Apudurai’s “process” geographies—is needed to begin with.

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Coproduction of Sedentary and Mobile Optics

“Sedentary Optics” explores, through the lens of anti-trafficking programs in Laos, the issue of the intersection of increasingly mobile lives with territorial and territorializing tendencies. Sedentary optics, for Sverre Molland, are “technologies of government premised on static, territorial modes of knowing, seeing, and acting upon the world.” These tendencies are to be found in state policies, in the programs of development agencies, and in academic framings. We may have, as Molland says, “now entered a postpanoptical world” where “technologies of government target migrants who are moving through space as opposed to being confined by it,” but migration governance emphasizes the static and the sedentary.

Two paradoxes shape the discussion. First, that anti-trafficking interventions in Laos (and elsewhere) are designed to prevent migration, but it is only after migration that the fact of trafficking can be ascertained. So, how can trafficking be prevented if it becomes apparent only after a person has been trafficked? And following from this, and second, that villages with low levels of out-migration can be trafficking success stories, or simply places where trafficking is not a problem, or, worse, indications that trafficking has been displaced elsewhere. To cap it all, it is difficult to know what is trafficking and what is “mundane” labor migration. Following the work of scholars such as Tania Li and David Mosse, Sverre Molland draws a distinction between territorializing intent and territorializing outcomes. Thus, he writes, “the question is not whether anti-trafficking programs succeed or fail but exactly what is being produced when aid programs operationalize ‘sedentary optics’ through their anti-trafficking activities.”

There is much to commend the paper and, as a geographer, I found particularly rewarding the way in which Sverre Molland engages with the empirical and explanatory nexus of space, movement, leaving, and remaining through the lens of anti-trafficking programs in Laos. I think, however, that there is also a third paradox germane to the paper’s argument, namely, rural villagers in Laos, Thailand, and elsewhere in Asia, for that matter, are becoming increasingly mobile. And yet, while migrants may leave in growing numbers and for longer periods, they do not abandon completely their natal villages. Indeed, villages are often sustained by absence. It is because some people leave that others are able to stay.

This means that the sedentary and mobile optics should not be set up in opposition. Empirically, they are not binary, but coproduced. To understand the tendency to stay, we need to appreciate how and why people leave.

Looking across the Mekong to Thailand, and notwithstanding half a century of extraordinary social and economic

transformation, the smallholder appears surprisingly resilient. The number of smallholders has increased and the size of smallholdings has decreased, rather than the other way around, as the farm-size transition would suggest. In 1978, there were 4.4 million farms in Thailand extending over an average of 3.7 ha; in 2013, the respective figures were 5.9 million and 3.1 ha. Many holdings are now too small to provide a livelihood. The result is that individual lives and livelihoods are constituted in households that are multisited and pluriactive. Production, reproduction, work, and care are framed within social contexts that are often mobile and no longer coresidential but where, nonetheless, a land base continues to remain important, at least for the time being. The sedentary frames mobility.

At the moment, I am engaged in a project in three villages in northeast Thailand, and labor from Laos is sometimes part of the farm equation. (But I have no reason to think this labor is trafficked.) What I find interesting, reflecting on Sverre Molland's paper, is the way in which villagers rationalize styles of living, modes of production, and forms of labor that, when viewed from the household or family standpoint, evidently encompass both sedentary and mobile tendencies or optics. To cherry-pick some extracts from our interviews,

On sedentary tendencies:

1. [I continue to farm rice] so we don't have to buy food. We want to have a store of rice to eat and secure our food needs. If we have to buy just one kilogram of rice, it's gone so quickly, and if one day we don't have any money, where would we find our food?
2. If I sold my rice land, where would we get our food from? At least if we farm rice we still have rice to eat. I see people here who have sold their farm land, but none of them can get their farmland back. No matter how many rai we have now, it's our parents' land, and I won't sell it.
3. Selling your farm is like cutting off your hands and your feet. Land is a part of our life. Even though you might not get a job, [at least] you still have rice to eat.

On mobile tendencies:

1. These two kids of mine work in factories. They go to work [in the factories] as usual [but also] work on the farm in the rice farming season. [They] take days off from work to farm rice when it's needed.
2. When my generation fades out, it will be hard to find anyone to keep rice farming. I'm at the age of 50 years—this generation could be the last [farming generation] perhaps.
3. I don't want them to work [on the farm] and face hardship like me. That's why I sent them to school to study.

4. Today we work at many jobs to cover all we need. That's why we have to have supplementary jobs [to farming] and many ways of earning [a living].

I think there is a contradiction in much government policy and in international development programs in Asia. On the one hand, the village is reified and becomes, as Sverre Molland says, the key site for intervention—so creating the spatial grid that comprises a sedentary optic. But many interventions, direct and indirect, serve partially to unpick the spatial sanctity of the village. Agencies, for example, are intent on finding ways to encourage smallholders to “exit” agriculture, because this is seen as necessary to modernize farming. Education often gives young people the skills—and the desire—to look beyond the village. Farming and village-based work are rarely sufficient to deliver an acceptable and sustainable livelihood. And the infrastructural interventions that drive the emergence of the greater Mekong subregion are aimed at creating an increasingly connected, friction-free zone of interaction.

All these interventions and processes make mobility for many almost inevitable. But this does not lead to a simple sedentary-to-mobile transition path. Land provides security to set against the precarity of much nonfarm work, whether labor is trafficked or not. And while anti-trafficking programs may problematize mobility, the discourse of the “left behind” implicitly problematizes the sedentary. Like the parable of the blind men and an elephant, a singular optic does not explain the whole. As Sverre Molland says in the final paragraph of his paper, “it is essential that such [scholarly] reflexivity [regarding the social sciences' territorial legacy] does not prevent us from paying attention to the specific empirical context in which this unfolds.”

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I fully agree that the notions of panopticism and the synoptic remain valid today. Big data and artificial intelligence may well make the world more panoptic than ever before. I also agree that the sedentary bias is prevalent in how governments think and work in regulating social life. The question is whether the sedentary bias is inherent to anti-trafficking programs, or whether it is contingent on the context. Furthermore, are the static means used in global anti-trafficking campaigns the same as what Foucault and Scott attributed to national states, or do they imply a different type of power relation?

I can imagine that the Lao government, and especially international organizations, happily support mobility-focused initiatives, such as handing out equipment to children to trace their movements, mobilizing volunteers to watch out for children and young women on the move, working with transport

companies, and sharing information between countries. The fact that the activities described in the article are place-bound seems to be more a continuity of how government and its associated programs operate than a reflection of the nature of anti-trafficking campaigns.

Why do the anti-trafficking initiatives criminalize the recruitment of migrants for the purpose of exploitation in the village instead of the act of exploitation itself in the destination? It is ironic that, “although the overarching objective of anti-trafficking is to reduce migrant exploitation, it does so by placing focus on migration trajectories that precede it.” Indeed, there are many more incidents of exploitation and deception that take place locally than through human trafficking. The case of trafficking for sex work demonstrates this irony clearly. The allegation that increasing numbers of women were trafficked from eastern Europe to the West as prostitutes in the early 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, was a main reason that had pushed human trafficking into the agendas of international organizations and governments in the West (Wong 2005). The moral anxiety about sex work is still a main driving force behind anti-trafficking campaigns. At the same time, however, there is growing recognition that sex work is a form of labor. Sex workers’ choice is a matter of right, and they are entitled to labor protection as other workers are. This leads to a peculiar scenario. We are supposed to assume that a local sex worker has chosen the job, and we must respect his or her decision, whereas a migrant sex worker could have been trafficked and need rescue. The moral anxiety about the commodification of sex shifted its target from sex work itself to trafficking for sex work.

Anti-trafficking campaigns are fundamentally driven by what Fassin calls “humanitarian reason” (2012). An increasingly common perspective in making sense of the world after the Cold War, humanitarian reason is centrally concerned with moral judgement rather than with structural inequality, with personal dignity rather than with political entitlement. The world is simplified into black and white moral tales. The indignation about human misery is genuine, and the desire to rescue is acute. But the problem is that misery is a symptom, and the root causes remain in entrenched, multifaceted, structural inequalities. Furthermore, the processes of how one becomes a sex worker and how a migrant ends up being “trafficked” can be highly complex. The distinction between the villain and the victim is not always straightforward. As such, “static” abuses are too real and therefore too complex for putting across strong moral messages. It is static phenomena that fall outside of the purview of anti-trafficking programs, rather than mobile subjects, that become the blind spots. Details on the move, in comparison, are opaque, and essentialized moral claims can be made. This sedentary bias, which problematizes mobility, obviously differs from that of the nation-state. Anti-trafficking programs focus on mobility not because they aim to make the society legible by emplacing people but because they desire to fulfill a simple moral concern in a complex world.

The practical strategies of spatialization adopted by anti-trafficking programs are also different from the attempts of nation-states to territorialize populations. The former are nimble and mobile, fundamentally premised on deterritorialized power relations. For instance, the anti-trafficking discourse reinforces itself, as the article noted, partly through reasoning such as, “if this village does not have trafficking problems, then the next village must have them.” Underlying this reasoning is not a logic of territorialization but a logic of deterritorialization. The aim here is not to pin down problems at the village level; the point is to move from one village to another effortlessly. In this strategy of flexible spatialization, a village is not a container or even a place; it is an abstract space that is meaningful only when it serves the purpose of the global program.

The article argues that anti-trafficking campaigns adopt “sedentary optics” that are “static, territorial modes of knowing, seeing, and acting upon the world.” The ethnographic data, however, also show how anti-trafficking programs manage to act upon the world without knowing the world. The programs are driven by compassion rather than evidence. They chase illusive, moving targets rather than tackle systemic problems. As such, the campaigns sustain themselves through the deterritorialized, global circulation of discourses and images. It is as part of this type of power relation that the static means, as described in the article, are deployed contingently and selectively.

Reply

I would like to express my gratitude to all the commentators for their critical and constructive remarks and the time that they have devoted to engage with my paper. Nearly all of the commentators point to how several of the characteristics that I describe apply to other contexts (Andersson, to Africa; Baas, to Singapore and India; Feldman, to Europe; and Rigg, to Thailand) and to other forms of migration (Andersson, to border control; Feldman, to circular migration; and Lyttleton, to health). This underscores the relevance of sedentary optics, as I outline in my paper, yet at the same time raises questions for further discussion. These include, What is distinct and/or unique about the kind of territorial migration governance my paper describes? How do the specificity of anti-trafficking and/or Laos account for the sedentary governmental techniques I portray? How does my analysis intersect with hierarchies and differentiation within migration governance? How applicable is Foucault’s work to my case study and the broader epistemological stakes this entails? I shall deal with each in turn.

Feldman and Andersson are quite right to point out that territorial modes of governance have been observed in anthropological literature for quite some time. Andersson highlights examples from his own research on European-funded projects with “sedentary ends,” thereby questioning what novelty my eth-

nographic material from Laos may present. This point is well taken. As I delineate, a large body of literature explores the relationship between sedentariness and governance. Yet the point of my paper is not to merely provide another example of territorial governance but to show how and why it takes the form that it does. Beyond demonstrating sedentary ways in which trafficking is governed, my paper examines how this furnishes post hoc rationalizations for anti-trafficking programs and practitioners that, in turn, enable their reproduction. Although I agree that what I observe in Laos shares similarities with observations from elsewhere, I also think that some caution must be observed, because one risks ending up comparing apples and oranges. It is here that the specificity of Laos as well as the particularities of anti-trafficking are important.

When contrasted with border control and circular migration programs in a European context, for example, anti-trafficking differs in several respects. Although governments are involved in anti-trafficking, it is dominated by UN agencies and NGOs. While humanitarian aid organizations are implicated in a European context (see Fassin 2005), they do not play a central role, as they do in anti-trafficking.¹⁷ As Baas and Biao point out in their commentaries, anti-trafficking's nominal aim is not to prevent movement per se but to reduce exploitation of migrants. Throughout my experience working for and researching anti-trafficking programs since the early 2000s, I have rarely come across anti-trafficking practitioners who claim that they want to prevent people from migrating. Hence the intent behind such programs cannot easily be reduced to merely preventing migration. Yet, as I show in my paper, anti-trafficking is nonetheless underpinned by sedentary forms of governance. Because trafficking is defined in terms of migratory outcomes in a post hoc manner, village-based anti-trafficking becomes a speculative endeavor in which the presence and absence of villagers furnish all sorts of interpretations of success and failure. This is, I contend, central to the reproduction of Lao anti-trafficking programs and is rather different from the examples referred to from Europe and elsewhere. Hence, rather than being another case of migration governance with "sedentary ends," it would be more accurate to say that Lao anti-trafficking operates with sedentary techniques, albeit with mixed outcomes. This is why I emphasize in my paper, following the works of Tania Li (2007a) and David Mosse (2005), that it is crucial to distinguish between the intent, capacity, and outcomes when examining program logics. To reiterate, the aim of my paper is not simply to show evidence of how sedentary logics operate in anti-trafficking but, as Huijsmans points out, rather to show how this ties in with the institutional reproduction of program activities. I maintain that this kind of perspective is warranted. In this context, I am grateful for Rigg's suggestion, based on his own fieldwork, that we may think of the mobile and sedentary as constitutive of each other.

17. For example, a unique feature of the UN protocol on human trafficking was the strong involvement of NGOs in its development (Gallagher 2001; Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2005).

I agree entirely and consider this an informative suggestion for further inquiry.

This takes us to the question of the particularities of Laos and local context. As the examples I describe, such as the children forum, are in evidence elsewhere, what then is there to learn from my Lao case study? I agree that there is certainly a global dimension to this kind of event (UNICEF seems to be particularly fond of this kind of bureaucratic decorative performance). Yet none of the commentators highlight similarities to my other, main ethnographic case study of village-based anti-trafficking. I do not have direct ethnographic familiarity with all of the commentators' field sites, so allow me to respond with reference from the vantage point of Southeast Asia.

As I point out in my paper, there may well be similar sedentary processes taking place elsewhere. At the same time, there are important differences. For example, the village-based rural development activities that I discuss in my paper have been central to Lao anti-trafficking practice for years. Although similar activities are found in neighboring countries, they are comparably less common and have certainly not been able to sustain themselves in the way I have seen in Laos. For example, across the border in Thailand, anti-trafficking interventions revolve around police investigations (with increasing use of surveillance techniques, sometimes in collaboration with Western countries), and some NGOs are involved in "raid and rescue" operations of alleged trafficked victims (subject to intense, heated debates among other practitioners and academics). Similarly, I recall programs in the early 2000s in Cambodia that involved "community watch" initiatives in the combat against "sex trafficking." It is politically much easier for an NGO to operate a trafficking hotline and outreach services (both deterritorial interventions) in neighboring Cambodia and Thailand. Currently, several organizations are collaborating with technology companies and the fishery industry in Thailand to monitor trafficking and labor exploitation of Myanmar migrants on Thai fishing boats. All of these examples are kinds of anti-trafficking that are not necessarily operating according to a sedentary logic, yet they are all out-of-bounds in Laos. Although police work is also formally taking place in Laos, it is a public secret among anti-trafficking practitioners that actual implementation is negligible or nonexistent. Thai police officials from the immigration police and one of their specialized anti-trafficking units have openly admitted to me that, despite an official claim of "cross-border cooperation" with Lao authorities, actual cooperation is minimal. These contrasts can, in part, be explained by the radical differences in political contexts. For example, Cambodian-based anti-trafficking has operated for years with far more freedom of operation than is possible in Laos, where all aid activities must go through state institutions (which are infamous for their red tape and idleness).

Hence one does not need to travel very far to discover anti-trafficking programs that look rather different from the ones that I describe. In Laos—with its combination of huge out-migration in a context of social, cultural, and linguistic similarities with Thailand (which makes it hard to distinguish

“voluntary” migration from alleged trafficking); its authoritarian government (which limits the flexibility of aid programs and shuts down other forms of operating); and its status as a least-developed country (which creates a malleable and lenient acceptance of aid funding)—it is important to appreciate the nuances of not only why anti-trafficking takes the shape it does but, most importantly, why it produces itself over long periods of time.

Recognizing the specificity of the Lao context, Huijsmans asks the pertinent question, How does the Lao anti-trafficking community learn? I can only address this provisionally here. Although anti-trafficking practitioners can often be scathing in private about the difficulties of anti-trafficking program implementation in Laos, they seem to struggle with translating such informal insights into programmatic form. I am certainly not suggesting that this is unique to Laos, but the aforementioned aid context may mean that these challenges are more accentuated in a Lao context, especially compared with its neighbors. This being said, I am not sure whether a focus on “learning” as such is the most fruitful approach to understand Lao anti-trafficking, because it seems to me to presuppose a linear progression, as if anti-traffickers operate according to a self-corrective logic. My paper suggests that learning as such is not central to how programs sustain themselves.

Both Baas and Andersson point out how migration policy often constitutes regimes of governance and the importance of hierarchies within migration. These are important points, because they extend focus beyond how migration governance is enacted toward who is targeted and why. As Fassin has shown, the governing of borders is intimately related with the production of social boundaries (Fassin 2011*b*). Briefly, I would point out that there are two main ways that this operates in the specific context that I discuss. As my paper makes clear, anti-trafficking reduces target populations down to individuals who are deemed at risk of trafficking and those who are considered “mundane migrants.” Although one would assume that this would result in the former becoming specific targets for program interventions, this is not quite the case. For example, rural livelihood activities under the rubric of anti-trafficking interventions are typically village-based and not framed around specific individuals deemed “at risk.” The other main way in which village communities that are targets for anti-trafficking are differentiated in terms of migration management is reflected in villagers’ ability to obtain (and pay for) legal travel documents. Although villagers differ in their ability to pay for such documents, rural Laos is not differentiated as a social group as such from the vantage point of border control. Instead, the main form of differentiation is through the various modes of border crossing (the use of passports and border documents vs. undocumented crossings). A point that I am not addressing in my paper is how the Lao-Thai border constitutes a spatial cascading legal entity, where different kinds of travel evoke different forms of social status. Laotians with a passport can travel for longer periods of time throughout Thailand and can, in principle, obtain work permits; a border pass allows

shorter visitation in border provinces but renders farther travel illegal. In addition to undocumented travel, a range of pseudo-legal forms of border crossing exist that are not officially sanctioned by the central government but are endorsed by local village chiefs on both sides of the border. While large parts of the Thai border are populated with Thai nationals who are culturally, socially, and linguistically related to the Lao, this is not the case in central Thailand. As such, hierarchies of mobility comprise fascinating cascading regimes of legality and sociality. Related to this, Huijsmans asks how sedentary optics may be gendered and generational. It is certainly the case that both “children” and “women” often operate as generic proxy labels for “vulnerability” within anti-trafficking. The children’s forum that I discuss is an obvious example of that. However, over the years, the preoccupation with “women and children” has actually lessened within anti-trafficking. I do not have space to address the reasons for this change here.

Although several commentators point to the applicability of my use of James Scott’s work, questions are raised in terms of how I deploy Foucault’s work in my analysis. As Andersson and Biao rightly point out, governing through absences does not appear to mirror an omnipresent power in the way discussed by Foucault. Although it was never my intention to provide a comprehensive exposition of either Scott or Foucault, my elucidation could have been clearer. As mentioned above, my use of Foucault (and Scott) has less to do with whether one can evidence panoptical power emanating from these programs at the village level and more to do with considering the legacy of the sedentary underpinnings in Foucault’s theorizing. The anti-trafficking that I describe may indeed not be an omnipresent form of panoptical governance. I am not suggesting otherwise. Yet as I show, it does create a sense of omnipresence and coherence for implementers. So, when Andersson points out that such anti-trafficking appears to indicate a “lack of control,” my response is in the affirmative: yet this is precisely what allows programs to carry on. As Biao points out in his response, not knowing is important for sustaining program activities, and it is the interplay between sedentary, territorialized ways of seeing and acting upon the world and the attempt to govern a mobile phenomenon that makes this possible.

Lyttleton and Feldman also wonder whether my analysis limits itself by its focus on Foucault’s earlier work. I only hint at Foucault’s later work, such as *Security, Territory, Population* (Foucault 2007), and I agree that the concept of risk and the coexistence and intermingling of different kinds of governmental logics are relevant. However, I suggest that Lao-based anti-trafficking may not be the most fruitful lens through which to investigate them. For example, in recent years, increasing focus has been placed on “safe migration” programs (which are mentioned by Lyttleton), which happens to be the subject of my main research project at the time of writing. I can only tangentially comment on it here.

Within safe migration programs, the prominence of risk and the hybridity of governance logics are more obvious, compared with the anti-trafficking that I discuss in this paper.

In its formal articulation, safe migration places explicit focus on how programs can furnish migration, and a key way in which this is instrumentalized is through progressive awareness raising (such as “predeparture” training for migrants). This involves attempts to mold particular forms of subjectivities before migration (migrants with the right skills, attitudes, and knowledge). Such activities share characteristics with Foucauldian disciplinary power but, at the same time, are premised on a logic of security in the ways in which subjectivities are molded in advance. There are clear deterritorial dimensions to how these activities are operationalized (such as cross-border tracing and referral mechanisms and the use of social media platforms and networks). However, these kinds of activities largely take place outside the remit of anti-trafficking programs. Furthermore, although some Lao-based organizations claim to implement “safe migration” activities, activities to date are either minimal or entirely absent. This stands in stark contrast to, for example, program activities among migrant communities from Myanmar, which involve numerous migrant self-help groups working through networks of aid organizations as well as the ubiquitous use of social media communication platforms. This radically alters how migration governance is enacted in relation to space.

All of this takes us back to specificity. Together with Jonsson, I maintain that context is important in order to appreciate the kind of dynamics that are at play in order to avoid broad-brush generalizations. Anti-trafficking in Laos is not quite the same as the health interventions that Lytleton refers to in the Thai context. Although border sites are central for certain anti-trafficking activities along both the Myanmar and Cambodian borders, activities along the Lao border remain minimal.¹⁸ Lytleton also asks whether actors are “aware” of risk, or whether activities are “important or ultimately effective.” To me, such questions seem to reflect a program evaluation logic (“Do interventions work?”), whereas what I try to show is that, by asking how interventions work, we are able to see that anti-trafficking activities do not depend on effectiveness to sustain themselves.

This takes me back to Bia’s commentary, which raises the possibility that my case study does not reflect territorial forms of governance at all. I can see how displaced anti-trafficking may be construed as “deterritorial” in the sense that activities move on to another village. However, I am less inclined to follow the suggestion that this renders sedentary anti-trafficking irrelevant. First, the anti-trafficking programs that I discuss do not actually abandon their original village sites. They expand into new ones. The reasoning for not departing earlier villages has, in part, to do with path dependency in aid programming. Second, actual program activities remain territorial and sedentary in nature: fish ponds are built, irrigation systems are

devised, microcredit programs are initiated, and chickens are vaccinated. To me, it seems apt to describe these—to borrow a phrase from Huijsmans—as “place-based interventions.” Hence it is simply empirically incorrect to suggest that Lao-based anti-trafficking projects “chase illusive, moving targets.” (I can assure the readers of this paper that aid programs in Laos, including anti-trafficking programs, are anything but fast moving!)

Finally, Biao suggests (and Jonsson implies) that anti-trafficking ought to be understood in light of a humanitarian reason. I concur. Yet although a humanitarian discourse of suffering (which replaces a technocratic, positivist concern with “evidence” with compassion and morals) is certainly an important part of anti-trafficking, it is nonetheless only one aspect of this sector and may not be applicable in quite the broad-brush way suggested in the comments. For example, different donors will engage a “humanitarian reason” rather differently. NGOs who receive a lot of their funds through private donations are certainly prone to engage in various forms of “aid porn,” which privileges visceral identification with victims over any form of consequentialist reasoning. However, this is very different from obtaining funding through a tendering process from, for example, bilateral donors such as the US Agency for International Development, the Department for International Development, or the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation. Here, the full weight of a technical-rational development discourse takes hold of the process, forcing programs to account for how project goals are intertwined with outcomes, outputs, and impact. I have personally been present in meetings where donors interrogate recipients (e.g., an NGO) on matters relating to “evidence” (How many migrate? How many of them are trafficked? How many return due to your vocational training program?). This kind of anti-trafficking discourse has a lot more in common with a will to improve, as discussed by Tania Murray Li (Li 2007b), than with what Didier Fassin outlines in his compelling book *Humanitarian Reason* (Fassin 2011a). This being said, I do concede that anti-trafficking programs are coconstitutive of both a humanitarian discourse and a development discourse, and the interface between these two discourses deserves further scrutiny.

Finally, I am very grateful for Jonsson’s engagement and how he connects my ethnography to broader questions relating to epistemology and why “a shift in analytical optics” matters. The question draws attention to the fact that sedentary optics refers to two separate yet intertwined points. On the one hand, it invites reflection on how epistemology is shaped by its spatial presuppositions. At the same time, it draws attention to how space, government, and knowledge production interrelate. Several years ago, Bourdieu warned against the dangers of adopting a “scholastic point of view” (Bourdieu 1990b). What I have attempted to do in this paper is to bring ethnographic attention to how it is analytically useful to interrogate these two different realms of knowledge production, the scholastic and the governmental. To me, sedentary optics makes a small but useful contribution to that end.

—Sverre Molland

18. Although some NGOs publicly claim to work along the Lao-Thai border, my recent field trips find no evidence that this is actually implemented.

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