CHAPTER 1

Approaching the Greater Mekong Subregion

This is a book about the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), a unit originally comprising Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Yunnan province of China and expanded in 2005 to include Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of China (Map 1.1). More accurately, it is a book that travels about the GMS—or at least a corner of it—to tell a story. The story is not really the story of the GMS itself, its origins, its development, or its prospects. Much less is it a story of all the different peoples and places within the GMS and the ways their lives are being knit together, or torn apart, as a result of GMS development. Some of these issues feature centrally in my narrative, but this narrative is most fundamentally about regionalization, a process some see as a piece of globalization—or what I will call, variously, neoliberal globalization and “actually existing globalization,” to highlight the differences between textbook representations of “win-win” integration and the realities of uneven development. I travel around the GMS, especially the corner of it referred to as the Economic Quadrangle—Burma, Laos, Thailand, and Yunnan—to tell a story about the process of economic, political, and sociocultural integration that is putatively erasing borders, or at least bending them and making them more porous. Why regionalization, and why the GMS?

Globalization, Regionalization, and the GMS

In the early 1990s, “globalization” became a buzzword in the corporate media and subsequently in scholarship (Yeung 2002a; cf. Ohmae 1990; O’Brien 1992; Friedman 2000, 2005). This much-noted and often criticized euphoria of “globalism” quickly gave way, however. In the world of practical politics, phenomena such as the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, the Argentine crisis of the early twenty-first century, and the September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon put a damper on premature celebrations of the “one world” that was being born with the end of the cold war (Bello 2002). In response to these and other issues, proponents of neoliberal globalization—global economic integration driven through reregulation of the global economy and transnational investment by the most geographically mobile
MAP 1.1 The Greater Mekong Subregion and Major Study Sites
and financialized capitalists—retreated to a modified version of the “Washington Consensus,” still advocating global economic integration, but with more concern to develop regulatory structures that are adequate to the process (Williamson 1990, 2000, 2002; Peet 2007).

Scholarly literature in the social sciences, though deeply affected by globalization euphoria, was rarely as theoretically carefree or uncritically celebratory in discussing neoliberal globalization as was the financial press, and various critical assessments have suggested that what was hailed by the media was scarcely historically novel (Wallerstein 1979, 2000; Hirst and Thompson 1999), let alone productive of a more evenly developed or unified world (Harvey 1989; Swyngedouw 1997; Bello 2002). Yet even many of the more theoretically critical studies of globalization have been, perforce, inclined to take seriously the notion that there have been significant forms of global economic integration and reorganization in recent decades (Friedmann 1995; Dicken 2007), with important consequences for various aspects of society, including the roles played by states (Taylor 2000; Brenner 2004) and the development of culture (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991; Dirlik 2007). What has evolved as the result of all this is a complex of theoretically varied studies that attempt to take seriously the changes wrought by developments such as the growth of transnational corporations, the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system, and the end of the cold war, while paying attention to the unevenness, social exclusions, forms of resistance, and reversibility of “actually existing globalization” (cf. Brenner and Theodore 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002).

This terrain of “globalization studies,” as I will refer to it, has many different areas, and my purpose in this book is only to examine a small corner of one of them—namely, studies of transnational “regionalization.” Moreover, I do not intend to engage in any systematic analysis or critique of the notion of regionalization or “regional communities” (see Sidaway 2002). Rather, I take the socially produced scale of the supranational “region” to be a useful one for critical interrogation of “actually existing globalization.” If the project of analyzing neoliberal globalization as a putative or actual process creating “one world” has proven too ambitious, perhaps some insights into actual transborder economic, political, and sociocultural integration can be gained by focusing on specific processes of integration within a specific supranational region of the world.

I take the GMS as a case for these purposes. The GMS can scarcely be seen as representative of regionalization, for a whole host of reasons. But then, no case of regionalization is fully or adequately representative of any other, and if we are to attempt to comprehend “actually existing globalization” as any sort of “structured unity” (see Gidwani 2008, 4), we will have to assemble many such idiosyncratic cases, finding their commonalities, differences, and articulations. The GMS is a unique case in part because—unlike some other cases of regionalization—it did not evolve out of any fully developed governmental-level fora that intended to give institutional coherence to transnational processes, as has been the case with some other regional projects such as the European Union (see Chen 2005, 185). It is also unique in that while a certain legacy of pre-existing “Mekong studies” helped to naturalize the GMS as a regional construct (see Osborne 2001), the discursive
elements of the GMS have themselves been consciously produced within the literature of a specific institution, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), to which we owe the definition of the GMS (Medhi 2004; Oehlers 2006). These, along with other aspects of the GMS, make for a very particular case through which to try to understand some of the variations associated with “actually existing globalization,” rather than a modal case that can be used to represent others. But these characteristics of the GMS also help bring to the fore specific aspects of neoliberal globalization and in this respect are helpful for enabling theorization of forces at work in different contexts of regionalization. These specific features, moreover, help inform the theoretical orientation of the chapters that follow.

**Approaches to the GMS: Institutional, Discursive, and Class-Based**

Regionalization is often differentiated from regionalism. According to David Evans, Raphael Kaplinsky, and Sherman Robinson, regionalism is driven by formal government-to-government arrangements such as economic unions and trade agreements, while regionalization “is a less ‘constructed’ and [more] market driven form of integration” (Evans, Kaplinsky, and Robinson 2006, 16). This typology roughly parallels Xiangming Chen’s distinction between formal regional integration, which is “inter-state-led” and rule-based, and informal regional integration, which is “market-state-led” and based more on “the important role of market coordination, social networks, and other non-state actors, while the state, especially the local government, plays a lesser and often complementary part” (Chen 2005, 32). As Chen notes, the GMS falls somewhere between these two types, being based in part on the expansion of cross-border trade but also featuring “a formal role of inter-state participation and the facilitating role of the Asian Development Bank” (Chen 2005, 187).

As I will note in this chapter and chapter 2, I regard all market processes as deeply and inevitably structured by state power, so in this sense the distinction between more and less formal, state-led processes of integration does not seem especially useful. Nonetheless, in choosing terminology, I will characterize the GMS development processes I analyze in this book as examples of regionalization, rather than regionalism, since they correspond less to the kinds of regionalism for which the European Union (EU) or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) often serve as models (e.g., Chen 2005, 33)—with negotiation of detailed regulations serving as inception for the formal integration process—than to less formally negotiated and regulated processes of geographic expansion based on combined private and public investment.

My purpose here is not to engage in the assessment of differing conceptions of regions and regional processes. Rather, in pursuit of somewhat different goals, I work within a conceptual framework that takes all regions—whatever their specific character—to be social constructs (see Dirlik 1993; Lewis and Wigen 1997). I use the production of the GMS as an opportunity to interrogate this construction process. But regions as social products can be approached in a variety of ways. Here I briefly note three approaches, which I call institutional, discursive, and
class-based. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses, enabling and constraining the production of certain kinds of analyses, and each has some influence on my analyses of the GMS. None are mutually exclusive of the others, although there are different strains within each family of approaches, some of which are more congenial to strains within other approaches, some less so. In this study, I primarily utilize a class-based approach. I do not do so to the exclusion of insights from either institutional or discursive analyses, and I choose to focus on class primarily for the ways such an approach can highlight agency in the production of regions, not because of any prejudice that class is the sole (or even in all cases the primary) force driving regionalization. The following sections clarify this argument.

**Institutional Approaches to Regionalization**

The term “institutional” can encompass a wide variety of specific theoretical approaches to social analysis. If there is such a thing as a core to this term, it is in the truism that all forms of institutional analysis take institutions seriously as generators and mediators of social processes. Chief among these institutions, within most institutional analyses, have been states, but other institutions, such as corporations, have also come in for sustained analysis under the heading of institutional approaches. Although institutional approaches can have a variety of theoretical moorings, a significant number that address states owe a considerable debt to Weberian social science, including the insights of a large school of contemporary neo-Weberian scholars, while a significant number that address economic institutions owe a considerable debt to both Polanyian economic anthropology and the insights of heterodox economists such as Harold Innis and Mark Granovetter (Polanyi 1944; Innis 1946; Granovetter 1985; see Barnes and Gertler 1999).

Amidst this variety, if there is one thing that stands out it is the emphasis in institutional analyses on the importance of institutional structures in shaping social outcomes, above and beyond determinants such as class structures or ideologies. At their best, institutional analyses thus provide fine-grained analyses of institutional structures and strategies in places such as the bureaucracies of developmental states (Johnson 1982; Amsden 1989; Wade 1990; P. B. Evans 1995; Woo-Cumings 1999; Chang 2003) or the boardrooms of corporations (Schoenberger 1997; Barnes and Gertler 1999; Yeung 2002a).

Applied to the topic of regionalization, institutional analyses have emphasized issues such as the development of transnational, sometimes transstate, mechanisms for encouraging and regulating the growth of border-crossing economic ties (Dicken 1997; Yeung 1998; Chen 2005), as well as for generating regional political and diplomatic orders (Stubbs 2004). These analyses attend to the roles of states and transnational statist agencies such as regional associations, customs unions, and development banks in promoting specific forms of regional growth and integration. A number of analyses with this sort of orientation have addressed the GMS, some of which will be referred to in subsequent chapters.

If the strength of institutional approaches has been in their probing and sustained analyses of the difference that specific institutional structures and policies
makes, the weakness of many such analyses has been in their failure to adequately explain how such institutional structures come into existence in the first place, as well as how they are sustained or transformed over time. This, for example, has been an important liability of the otherwise robust institutionalist literature on East Asian developmental states. Authors such as Chalmers Johnson, Alice Amsden, Robert Wade, Jung-En Woo, Ha-Joon Chang, Peter Evans, and Linda Weiss have made powerful claims for the central role of developmental state institutions in the “East Asian miracle,” yet most of their analyses have only lightly sketched how bureaucracies with such capacities came into existence in the first place or how they were sustained. As a consequence, when the Asian economic crisis overtook many of the states that had been the focus of these analyses, the “developmental state” literature provided limited purchase on the reasons for “failure” among states that had only recently been seen as strong and successful (Glassman 2004b). Authors such as Johnson and Wade resorted largely to blaming the crisis—and the performance of East Asian states—on pressures from Western, U.S.-based institutions to open their markets and devolve developmental state powers to the private sector (Johnson 1998; Wade and Veneroso 1998). But while accurate enough as a description of some of what happened, such analyses did not adequately explain why these states succumbed to external pressures in the 1990s, even as their power and wealth reached new heights, when they had seemingly been resistant to the same kinds of pressures for decades before. As other sorts of analyses have shown, the orientation of many developmental states had been formed in historically distinctive contexts (Chibber 1999, 2003; Cumings 1999a, 1999b) and had been changing perceptibly for reasons beyond external pressures (Lim 1998; Kim 1999).

Put more generally, then, the weakness of many institutional analyses highlighted in these cases is their failure to adequately capture the forms of agency that shape and reshape institutions such as states and corporations. While the details of institutional structure do of course matter, these are not fixed or pregiven, and although they create channels within which policies and strategies flow for a time, these can be—and frequently are—changed when sufficiently powerful actors find it within their interests and ability to change them.

In the context of the GMS, the potential liability that such institutional approaches poses, then, is that they will pay too much attention to details of institutional structures such as the developmental bureaucracies of states within the region or the structures of transstate organizations like the ADB without paying adequate attention to the specific groups of social actors that shape and reshape these kinds of institutions in pursuit of regional integration. Given this liability, I will draw on some of the insights of institutional analyses but place greater emphasis on the roles of crucial groups of social actors—actors who move both within and beyond institutions like the GMS states and the ADB.

**Discursive Approaches to Regionalization**

As with the term “institutional,” I use the term “discursive” here to indicate a broad family of approaches. These approaches foreground the sociocultural processes through which social phenomena are produced and understood by different groups
of actors. While linguistic representations of social phenomena have been especially important in such studies, so too have other forms of representation, such as visual images in a variety of media.

Within the social sciences, the turn toward the discursive has been especially strongly associated with the figure of Michel Foucault. In certain respects, this is a bit surprising. Within literary criticism, for example, many of the kinds of analysis that gave the term discourse its contemporary connotations were associated more strongly with the works of authors such as the developmental psychologist Jacques Lacan, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, and literary critics such as Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said (Eagleton 2008). Although Foucault’s work certainly features strongly in this milieu, Foucault is in many respects more a thematic historian of social institutions rather than an analyst of discourse per se. Indeed, Paul Rabinow notes that there is a strong family resemblance between Foucault’s work and that of Weber (Rabinow 1984, 26–27)—a useful observation for my purposes here since it highlights an important overlap between institutional and discursive analyses.

Whatever their specific origins and projects, however, discursive analyses have shared an insistence on the notion that the significance of social phenomena is not just given by their prediscursive existence (if there is such an existence) but is structured by the ways in which groups of humans represent the world to themselves. This means, among many other things, that epistemological concepts like “truth” cannot be seen as simply involving correspondence between representation and prediscursive reality, since reality is always already available to human consciousness only through representation. In practical terms, what this mobilizes within discursive approaches is detailed interrogation of the representational structures and processes through which “truth effects” are produced (Foucault 2002).

The ontological and epistemological entailments of discursive approaches are by no means entirely straightforward and in fact raise a thicket of conceptual challenges and debates that are well beyond my brief. For my purposes, I merely note that discursive approaches sanction some of the same kind of attention to details of sociocultural production that institutional approaches sanction vis-à-vis institutional processes. It is precisely here that discursive approaches have their greatest strength. Rather than taking for granted the categories within which social reality is produced as knowable, discursive approaches have unpacked the assumptions—often, at best, contestable—through which crucial analytical categories come into existence. Thus, for example, Said’s studies of Orientalism—along with many other such studies generated by the influence of Said’s work—show how specific forms of understanding of Asian (and other) Others were historically enabled by colonial and neocolonial projects whose progenitors wished to know those Others in ways that facilitated and legitimized their subordination (Said 1978). Likewise, Tim Mitchell’s postcolonial-theory-inspired readings of the categories of classical, neoclassical, and Keynesian political economy show how specific colonial projects (including associated intellectual labor) bring into existence the very phenomena—e.g., “the market”—that they claim to be merely describing (Mitchell 2002).

If the strength of discursive approaches is thus in their attention to the representations of the world through which people come to know it, I would argue that the weakness of many such approaches—as with institutional approaches—is in
their failure to adequately address the forms of agency through which discourses are produced. As with the structures of institutions, the structures of discourse are not pregiven but need to constantly be produced and reproduced over time—frequently amidst contestation and complex processes of selective appropriation of terminology, “semantic drift,” and the like. Discursive approaches have, of course, paid some attention to forms of agency in the production of discourse, but often such forms of agency are too lightly sketched. Thus, for example, Said effectively leans his critique of Orientalism against a very general (sometimes implicit) analysis of the projects of European colonizers, recognizing the interests of these colonizers in subduing colonial subjects. But at this general level, many of the nuances of social relations—within the metropole as well as within the colony—escape analysis, sometimes with the result that colonial discourse is seen as more homogenous than it has in fact been, particularly within the social arenas of its deployment and reception. Moreover, fault lines within colonized societies that influence the reception of colonial discourse and that have considerable impact on the production of postcolonial reality can too readily escape notice within this kind of discursive approach (Ahmad 1992, 2000; cf. Anderson 1991).

It is worth noting, too, that the most bracing Foucauldian analyses consciously contribute in specific ways to the partial erasure of agency. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault notes the dramatic effect of nineteenth-century thinkers—in particular, Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche—in undermining pre-existing conceptions of the subject (Foucault 1994). While both Freud and Marx attempted to replace that pre-existing conception with their own preferred versions (id/ego/superego for Freud, *homo faber* for Marx), Foucault’s project, in this book, is to more completely undermine any transcendent sense of subjectivity by noting how the modern subject is brought into being through the discourse of biology, philology, and political economy. In a later interview, Foucault nicely captures some of the practical significance of this move by arguing that contemporary projects of political emancipation have to involve not only freeing people from structures of domination but freeing people from the conceptions of themselves within which these processes of domination are undertaken (Rabinow 1984, 22).

Such a notion of emancipation has its liberatory aspect in that it enables the raising of deep questions regarding taken-for-granted characteristics of humans, and as has been well understood by a long line of actors involved in social struggle, attempts to change the world necessarily involve attempts to change the agents of change (e.g., Guevara 1968). Yet notions of highly fungible human subjects, without any enduring interests or identities, are problematic in numerous ways. It is not only that, practically, humans may not be readily able in all contexts to emancipate themselves from their conceptions of themselves—as Susan Hanson and Geraldine Pratt note, identities are often quite “sticky” (Hanson and Pratt 1995)—it is also that without any conception of what would constitute enduring interests and identities of subjects (however contextual) it is questionable whether or not one can even meaningfully assert a concept of emancipation, as opposed to a more amorphous concept of change. To be free of oppression would seem to entail the liberation of certain potentials that exist beyond a merely discursively produced and highly plastic sense of self.
These kinds of considerations enter into my appropriation of discursive approaches to regionalization. On one level, discursive approaches to regions are extraordinarily powerful. No regions are simply pregiven spatial containers that exist independently of social attempts to produce them as knowable, coherent wholes (Dirlik 1993; Lewis and Wigen 1997). All regions are—as per James Sidaway’s effective transmutation of Benedict Anderson’s concept—“imagined communities” (Sidaway 2002). In a context like that of the GMS, this is especially evident, since the regional construct is not only the explicit work of the ADB but in many respects without prior scholarly precedent, given the ways in which the countries of the GMS had historically been folded into other regional constructs, such as East and Southeast Asia.

In line with the criticisms of discursive approaches noted above, however, I will try to emphasize specific forms of agency in the production and reproduction of regionalization discourse. The ADB’s production of the GMS has not been a simple, monolithic process in which GMS discourse, once established, inevitably carries its own weight or structures its own reality. Rather, conceptions of the GMS have become sites of struggle, helping to expose the various specific actors working in and through the ADB as well as those working outside of it—to either produce or undermine specific social outcomes as part of the regionalization process. GMS discourse is certainly not merely “epiphenomenal”—it is an important tool of struggle over the shape of transnational economic, political, and sociocultural integration. But neither does it simply move itself; it is mobilized and transformed by different actors within the process of struggle over the GMS. This kind of perspective on discourse will be further elaborated in my discussion of class-based approaches to regionalization.

Class-Based Approaches to Regionalization

The term “class-based” refers to a family of approaches, broadly derived from Marxist political economy, that emphasize struggles over the appropriation of surplus produced in the labor process as a major force catalyzing social change and development. Such approaches need not be—and in my view should not be—class-reductionist. That is, a commitment to the notion that class position in the struggle over appropriation of surplus is a significant underlying factor in human agency is not equivalent to anything as brash as attempting to locate the motor of history or the “primary contradiction” around which all other contradictions revolve. Class interests are one among a (limited) number of major factors that shape human behavior, and calling attention to class as a phenomenon generating enduring interests and relatively “sticky” identities is not to deny other, cross-cutting interests and identities that constitute human subjects.

In this sense of class, the material interests constituted by class position are simultaneously produced along a number of social axes. Class position is never merely a matter of position within the labor process or the market; it is also produced politically and juridically, through politics and legal structures, as well as socially and culturally, through specific practices that mark out particular groups as having specific forms of social status and identity. Class is thus simultaneously
political, economic, and cultural (Thompson 1978, 287–289), and indeed this means it is also always already gendered and racialized in historically and geographically specific ways. Moreover, it is produced not only through class struggles but through a variety of geopolitical processes that have origins in class struggles. In my analysis of the GMS, I will construe class struggles in this broad sense, including paying attention to phenomena such as the geopolitical dimensions of GMS class processes and the ethnicization of labor in the GMS.

Construed in this broad sense, class-based approaches have as one of their strengths that they supply not only fine-grained analyses of phenomena such as investment practices, labor processes, and geopolitical-economic struggles but, more generally, a strong sense of the forms of agency involved. This gives them purchase precisely in those areas where, I have argued above, institutional and discursive approaches are weakest. On the other hand, what I have already said indicates that, construed in an overly narrow or reductionist sense, class-based analyses can suffer from a failure to account for cross-cutting material interests and social identities beyond class, or for how the specific institutional forms and discursive practices that mediate social struggles affect their outcomes—and even, for that matter, the details of material interests and social identities themselves. My goal in utilizing a class-based approach to the GMS will be to avoid these pitfalls by mobilizing suitably nonreductionist accounts of class that can countenance its complexity, its articulation with other social structures, and its varied forms of institutional and discursive mediation.

Some reflection here on several broad theoretical approaches to class issues will help clarify my general use of the term “class-based.” First, while Weberian approaches to both class relations and state institutions have virtues, there are a variety of forms of Marxism that have both articulated a Marxist notion of class as the appropriation of surplus and tied this effectively—if contingently—to the development of specific kinds of institutions within states (Jessop 1990; Wright 2005). I lean here on Nicos Poulantzas’ notion that the state is integral to the broader social division of labor and thus is itself part of the structuring of class society—not merely a reflection or enforcer of existing class structures (Poulantzas 2000). Such a view does not preclude doing detailed studies of state institutions in the fashion of neo-Weberian approaches—indeed, it sanctions such studies, but it foregrounds the importance of tying what Poulantzas calls the “institutional materiality” of the state to ongoing class struggles. This is something I will try to do in the case of class-based analysis of the GMS, specifically by tying some of the maneuverings within key institutions in the region to specific class processes.

Second, focusing on class as a source of agency has not precluded, within Marxism, attention to the discursive production of either social understandings of the world or of class interests and identities themselves. While a variety of Marxist approaches to these issues exist, I lean generally on the formulations of Antonio Gramsci (1971), whose conception of hegemony can be—and has been—unpacked in ways that allow it to be used as a flexible tool for analyzing the relationships between forms of class power and socioculturally produced understandings of the world. Somewhat akin to Poulantzas’ understanding of the state as related to the
social division of labor, Gramsci conceives the production of social understandings as part of a class-based process of production, sometimes the work of “organic intellectuals” connected to specific class groups. In my discussion of the GMS, I will utilize this sort of approach in analyzing how specific discursive productions of the GMS by agencies such as the ADB have served to help generate class-based, hegemonic—but always contested—understandings of regionalization.

Third, and finally, it is worth noting that some of the sociocultural messiness of class can be attended to in ways that do not lean solely on Marxist conceptions—and this is the case even where class is defined in relation to appropriation of surplus. Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of the relationship between economic surplus appropriation and accumulation of other forms of capital—such as social and cultural capital—is useful here. Bourdieu challenges the notion that class and status constitute two different axes of power and interest, as is asserted in Weberian approaches. For Bourdieu, status is articulated in and through class processes, although it has different forms, since some groups gain more of their status through their possession of economic capital, while others gain more through specific forms of social or cultural capital—for example, membership in elite clubs (social capital) or possession of advanced academic degrees (cultural capital). I cannot elaborate on Bourdieu’s rich and complex conceptions here (see Bourdieu 2007), but suffice it to say that his approach opens the general possibility of considering class-based motivations for action as part and parcel of other motivations, including for example those that are often considered cultural and geopolitical. Thus it is possible to read class-based forces driving regionalization in the GMS as part and parcel of geopolitical motivations such as the interests of GMS actors in having a dominant leadership role in the development of the region. In this sense, a class-based reading of GMS development does not entail arguing that class interests trump other interests in driving outcomes; it entails seeing how class interests may be expressed in and through projects that proclaim other motivations, including elevating the status and power of specific states and institutional agencies.

All this helps explain how I will use a particular kind of class-based approach in examining regionalization. In a general sense, there is already a vast literature examining how the material interests of class actors push them to geographically expand their operations in search of more surplus and a “spatial fix” for over-accumulation tendencies (Harvey 2006), and there is also abundant literature tying this search for a “spatial fix” to various kinds of geopolitical maneuvering, including the exercise of imperial power (Harvey 2003). I wish to build on these kinds of approaches by examining how a specific regional project, the GMS, is animated by these kinds of forces, but how it is also simultaneously institutionally structured and discursively produced. Class interests constitute a crucial underlying force in generating the GMS project, while also generating various patterns of uneven development within the GMS. But class interests, processes, and struggles can be more fully understood if their articulations with institutional structures, discourses, and various cross-cutting material interests and social identities are explored as part of class analysis. This is the project I will undertake in examining the GMS.
A Path Not Taken: Neoclassical Political Economy and Regionalization

It will not have escaped the attention of alert readers that I have not so far mentioned what has been the most prevalent theoretical approach to regionalization in major development institutions connected to regionalization—namely, what I will call neoclassical political economy approaches, inclusive of both neoclassical political economy and its highly political neoliberal version. This is not a matter of oversight. While no author can avoid the general influence of neoliberal hegemony—indeed, the fact that this is a study of regionalization and “actually existing globalization” is testimony to the power of both neoliberal globalization processes and neoliberal conceptions of those processes—this study is posed against neoclassical political economy approaches in two explicit ways.

First, while all approaches to social analysis have strengths and weaknesses, my contention is that in certain of its core principles neoclassical political economy approaches contain more weaknesses than strengths. Among other things, the neoclassical insistence on an asocial conception of “the market” as an arena with its own independent laws of motion, influenced only externally by forces such as “politics” or “culture,” is a nonstarter. The preconception of a “market” as an abstract arena independent of politics and culture precludes examination of important issues such as how markets are politically produced—not merely “intervened” in after the fact by states. It also precludes examination of how markets are discursively produced and thematized (see Mirowski 1989; Mitchell 2002), and in fact sets up neoclassical economics itself as a scientific practice beyond discourse, assigned the role of accurately representing how abstract markets function, which in turn precludes seeing neoclassical economics as part of the discursive production of markets and the rationalization of specific market outcomes. Perhaps most significantly, neoclassical political economy precludes serious analysis of class, except in the narrow and restrictive sense of “rent-seeking” by actors in a position to subvert the “normal” functioning of markets (see Sheppard and Glassman forthcoming). In these respects, neoclassical political economy approaches seem to me conceptually inadequate to the tasks I have outlined above.

But neoclassical political economy approaches are also antithetical to my project in this book in a second way. Specifically, neoclassical political economy approaches have been integral aspects of “actually existing globalization” and regionalization, producing understandings of those processes that are part of the production of neoliberal hegemony. The current study is antagonistic to such a project not only analytically but in a broad political sense. While I am not generally antagonistic to “globalization” or “regionalization”—indeed, I strongly favor a whole host of transnational projects (see Glassman 2009a; Glassman, Park, and Choi 2008), including many that are “economic”—I side with those who believe that neoliberal globalization reflects the interests of certain fractions of capital and other minority social groups (such as privileged middle classes) and involves specific, deeply politicized forms of geographic expansion by these capitalists, at the expense of most others in society. Neoclassical political economy—though it is not necessarily intended by all who practice it as apologia for this process—has tended
to rationalize neoliberal globalization, presenting it as the “natural” expression of market forces as they are released from the “artificial” inhibitions imposed by “interventionist” states of either the national capitalist or communist variety. This study of the GMS takes the quite different view that “globalization” and “regionalization” are not driven by abstract market processes, have no inevitable forms, and will be produced in the specific forms they take—for better or worse—by class and other social struggles. To pick one or another approach to regionalization is also to pick a particular position within such struggles. While my position is not antagonistic to regionalization per se, or even to the production of something called the GMS, it is in fact antagonistic to a process dominated by the interests of the most geographically mobile capitalists, the most privileged middle classes, and the most powerful state actors. Such domination by the most powerful may not be an inevitable outcome of GMS development, for reasons that I will begin to address in the next chapter, but to challenge such an outcome, in my view, commends bringing into view precisely those elements of GMS development that are precluded from serious consideration within neoclassical political economy.

**Plan of the Book**

I have outlined here an argument for adopting a class-based approach to analysis of GMS development, regionalization, and “actually existing globalization” more generally. It is an argument that includes recognition of the importance of institutions that regulate regionalization and discursive processes that produce the object of regulation and knowledge about it. The argument has been for a class-based approach in the broadest sense, and the approach outlined so far has been nothing if not very broad. Class-based approaches to regionalization, of course, require more specific analytical tools, and in chapter 2 I will elaborate a more detailed argument for using particular kinds of class-based analysis in assessing the growth of supranational regions. After this, I will turn to a geographical-historical analysis of the GMS and its development, showing how a class-based approach can help explain some of the development phenomena, including their sociospatial unevenness.

In chapter 3 I address the material and discursive production of the GMS by the ADB. I argue that as ideology, the ADB’s neoclassical rendition of GMS integration is both productive and misleading. It is productive in that it naturalizes and helps consolidate a hegemonic understanding of regionalization. This makes certain kinds of sociospatially uneven development seem inevitable—and even desirable—rather than contingent and socially contestable. Moreover, ADB rhetoric produces the GMS in a particular form, highlighting its putative origins in the interests of actors within the region and downplaying its generation by, and articulation with, forces outside the region, including the Japanese actors that have crucial influence within the ADB itself.

In chapters 4 through 6, I build on this “deconstruction” of the ADB’s GMS by re-constructing the GMS within a class-based approach. In chapter 4, I analyze the interests and actions of various Thai participants in GMS development dating back to the 1980s. The actors involved are numerous and varied in their capacities,
and the engagement of these various actors shows that GMS development is by no means the simple result of powerful transnational capitalists expanding the geographic range of their operations. Yet the sociospatial results of GMS development to date indicate that however willingly and aggressively smaller capitalists and traders participate in regionalization, it is in fact the most powerful and geographically mobile capitalists—including some who are Thai—that set the terms of integration while reaping disproportionate benefit.

In chapter 5, I examine the roles of various Chinese actors in GMS integration, including both actors in Yunnan and others from both the Chinese national state and the overseas Chinese investor community. The role of the Yunnan provincial government and Yunnanese capitalists in GMS development is substantial and especially interesting, given that the provincial government has been granted considerable autonomy by Beijing in designing forms of GMS participation. This confirms, in a slightly different way than the Thai case, that regionalization is not solely the project of the most powerful and geographically expansive actors. Yet here, too, it will be argued that Yunnan’s participation in GMS integration is deeply shaped by forces beyond the direct control of most Yunnanese themselves, reflecting longer-term projects of both the national state and various groups of foreign investors.

In chapter 6, I take up more briefly two different kinds of cases that illustrate more overtly the serious limits of any notion that GMS integration is a relatively egalitarian process providing opportunities for all participants. First, I look at the ways the Lao state is participating in GMS development. To a considerable extent, this has been limited to authorizing dam building and electricity generation, with potential benefits for the more privileged Lao who can directly control the resulting revenue streams and less obvious benefits for others—particularly those displaced by the dams. Even the Lao state officials involved in these projects, however, can be seen as participating from a position of considerable weakness and limitation, given the serious financial and geopolitical constraints faced by the Lao state in its relations with China and Thailand.

Second, and illustrating a context of even greater constraint, I examine the role of migrant Burmese workers in the production of the GMS. These workers, leaving Burma because of both economic needs and political repression, provide the backbone for much of the labor process in Thailand—both the labor process that is actually occurring at present and the labor process that is being envisioned as part of GMS expansion. While GMS projects do in fact provide opportunities for these workers, the notion that such opportunities provide decent prospects for human betterment only makes sense against the backdrop of the sordid treatment of Burmese workers by government and private sector actors throughout the region—especially in Burma and Thailand. This case, then, like the case of the Lao state, shows that while regionalization is in fact produced by a variety of actors, not just the most transnational capitalists, it is produced by these actors within a deeply power-laden field and with quite different consequences for the various participants.

In the final chapter, chapter 7, I pull together pieces of the geographical-historical analysis with several summary observations about uneven development and “actually existing globalization” in the GMS.