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On desiring and resisting the state

Natalia Buitron-Arias

<http://aotcpres.com/author/natalia-buitron-arias/>

- *Fields of desire: poverty and policy in Laos* **By Holly High**

That populations living at the margins of the state seem to want and repel, seek out and resist, the state is one of those puzzling observations that has haunted many ethnographers. Indeed, during my own fieldwork among the Shuar of Ecuador, a people who live in newly sedentary communities of the Amazonian piedmont region, I found myself pondering the circumspect and consuming attraction with which my interlocutors regarded the “developmental” but nonetheless “coercive” potential of local governments. The more Shuar villagers sought to capture state resources secured by their own participation in electoral politics, the more antagonistic towards the state they grew. In the end, I concluded that Shuar participate in electoral politics and many other state-led development projects for seemingly antithetical reasons: to have more access to the state, while ensuring that they keep it at bay.

In *Fields of Desire*, Holly High (2014) unpacks the ambivalent and problematic re-enchantment of the state by citizens living at the periphery who have least benefitted from state formation and the machinery of development. If anything, the state has utterly failed these citizens, even done violence to them. Yet the people of Don Khiaw, the pseudonym of a village-island in the Mekong River of southwest Laos, participate in road projects they know will fail, attempt to resurrect irrigation schemes they had only recently abandoned, and engage with state officers they deeply distrust. Puzzled by this, High asks, “how is it that the practice [of engaging with development and the state] persists beyond belief, beyond ideology, perhaps beyond reason?” (171). To answer this question, High explores the “fields of desire” that underpin the implementation of poverty reduction development programmes in rural Laos. The book’s key finding is that people who have become utterly cynical and disillusioned about the state nonetheless continue to demand it. This happens not simply because people are coerced, though coercion is never out of the question. Nor is it because they are mystified by the state (the ethnography High presents eludes the possibility of ideological hegemony). Rather, it is because the Laotian villagers demand the state out of a culturally embedded desire for a nurturer and protector of life, for a state that has the power to *make live*.

High’s ethnography also eludes explanations of everyday forms of resistance in the style inaugurated by James C. Scott (1976, 1985, 1986) – that is, explanations that while accounting for less visible forms of contestation to the dominant order, end up drawing further away the important question of non-revolt. Though High’s analysis also draws on fundamental aspects of Scott’s work, for example on the “hidden transcripts” of resistance (e.g. 1990), she envisions her analysis as a contribution to a theoretically dynamic body of Southeast Asian scholarship that seeks to transcend the terms of the debate posited by resistance studies. This burgeoning body of research which High glosses as “resistance to resistance studies” (7) makes up for the oft-omitted ethnographic observation in the resistance literature that people in the region resist the state at the same time that they meaningfully partake in the promises of development, often at tragic cost (e.g. Li 2014; Salemink 2012; Singh 2012; Walker 2012). [[1 \(#desiring-resisting-state-n-1\)](#)]

<http://aotcpres.com/articles/desiring-resisting-state/#desiring-resisting-state-n-1>] These researchers also seek to problematize an assumed highland preference for autarky and evasion of centralised powers.

<http://aotcpres.com/articles/desiring-resisting-state/#desiring-resisting-state-n-2>] They are keen to tell us more instead about their interlocutors' desire for connection to alterity, not in spite of, but because of a positive valuation of dependency upon foreign sources of power.

Whether by serendipity or because I read High's monograph with South American concerns in mind, I have stumbled upon a series of interesting resonances from across the Pacific. Recent conceptualisations of power in lowland South America have moved beyond the negative characterisation of the concept inherited from Clastres, whose influence on Scott's work in Southeast Asia and generally on political anarchist theory is well known. In recent analyses, power no longer appears merely as something that Amerindians strive to eject at all costs, the better to avoid the emergence of coercive institutions, as Clastres (1989) would have it. Rather, power is also associated with regenerative capacities; the life-giving techniques that enable or subtract wellbeing, the reason why political control is often said to be exercised by shamans (e.g. Descola 1988: 823-25; Overing 2012; Santos-Granero 1993, 2015). As recent scholarship details, this understanding of productive power is key to making sense of the eagerness with which many Amazonian peoples establish relationships, often of dependence, with powerful external figures ranging from bosses to patrons and state officials, who are as controlling as they are nurturing. As such, High's re-evaluation of the state's biopolitics – the power to make live and let die (120) (see also Li 2009) – led me to speculate whether the ambivalence towards the state we detect among so many peoples living at the margins of states does not express, in intensified form, the struggle to navigate the nurturing-controlling power of external masters.

As High puts it, her monograph is a “political ethnography of desire” (1). Her aim is not only to deploy good ethnography to thicken the “objects of desire” (8) that draw people to development – prosperity, security, modernity, and so forth – but to flesh out ordinary notions of desire that may refine cross-cultural analyses and social sciences' uses of the notion (14). At first glance, High's theorisation of desire appears uncontroversial. Aligning herself with Sahlins, she takes distance from the economic view that equates desire with self-interest and natural wants. For Sahlins, as for most anthropologists, our economic interests reveal and reflect our social values and cosmological commitments rather than the other way around, leaving desires as cultural-symbolic schemes (15). But High goes a step further than this. If Sahlins seeks to explain the objects of our desire through the cultural schemes that inform them, High takes cues from Jacques Lacan (via Moore (2011)) understanding desire as that which sets cultural schemes into motion, charging them with power. This is her way of responding to Ortner's (1995) call for thicker ethnography and contextualisation in the study of resistance. High reasons that an ethnographically thick description must not only attend to “ever more detailed wholes”, but also to actual holes: “the missing or hidden parts where meaning fails, is contradictory or incomplete but nonetheless compelling” (15).

High also captures the incompleteness of cultural schemes through the Deleuzian concept of delirium. Delirium points to the particular rationalities that emerge from historically specific cosmological commitments that underpin paths of action. That is, the intricate reasons why such paths are motivating and inspire normativity even when they do not “work” in a coherent manner. So with it, High pointedly draws attention to that which appears “nuts” in cultural projects (15, 82) – the utopian promise of prosperity that comes with development programmes, coupled with persistent engagement that “becomes stronger the more they fail to be realised” (108).

The causes of poverty in rural Laos are, as we might expect, political in nature, and have been long in the making. Poverty is primarily an effect of the stabilisation of the Lao/Thai border prompted by the decline of *mandala* polities, the rise of the nation state and the control of migration. All of these processes have seen the Mekong region shift from being a prosperous heartland of commercial flows well connected to the Thai world, to being an out-of-the-way area, far from roads, markets, and the

nation's administrative centres. Interweaving family narratives and historiography, High relates the gradual marginalisation and impoverishment of Don Khiaw residents to an elitist regime of citizenship that effectively criminalises the mobilities of the rural poor (chapter 3), reclassifying travel as, for example, "people trafficking" (64). This regime of citizenship, High argues, is concomitantly produced by people's memories and fantasies of terror of "the regime", the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), which repressed Thai-leaning counterrevolutionary forces and the popular dissent that arose in the wake of the party's ascension to power in 1975. Laotian villagers routinely evoke fears of coercion as reasons for complying with officials' requests, so that one interlocutor explained: 'these days ... we don't resist them. We don't evade their policies. If we evade their policies, they'll arrest us for sure' (61).

Popular fears notwithstanding, High observes that the state's current efficacy hinges on the rationalisation of new forms of rule in the name of development. Consistent with the latest trends in international development assistance, the LPRP party-state has pursued a policy of decentralisation that seeks to empower district and village level authorities. But in a state that has been weakly centralised to begin with, the push for local autonomy has had the effect of demanding that rural residents "integrate more intimately with the nation state through a particular, and very 'near' form of bureaucratic practice" (19). It is in this context of intimate state regulation and curtailed mobility that poverty and poverty-reduction take on a compulsive quality, both as discourse and as practice. Don Khiaw has not only been transformed into a poor place in need of intervention by bureaucrats and development agents, but rural residents, who have entered a phase the author refers to as 'post-rebellious' (5,170), also share a pervading feeling of being poor and marginal. As High vividly describes in the fourth chapter, "Poverty becomes you."

"Any story, like any life, is about more than bread alone," Beatty (2016) tells us, and this is why while economists and planners "can quantify poverty", they cannot tell us in what ways the "struggle for life is also a struggle for meaning". High makes sense of this struggle for meaning, giving flesh to the aspirations that poverty engenders. Deng, a young woman of Don Khiaw, tells High prior to emigrating in search of amorous-economic possibilities: "I want lots of money. I want gold all over my body – my ears, my neck, my wrists. If I have lots of money, lots of gold, I will have a boyfriend, and friends." (75). We learn that for rural residents, beauty is bounty and bounty is beauty: the preference to be surrounded by lots of family and friends, public displays of gold jewellery, enlarged and lavish houses, and a super-abundance of food and offerings given at merit-making Buddhist festivals.

By implication, the experience of scarcity is understood "as an experience of lacking beauty" (73), of perceived exclusion and shame. Poverty, however, is not thought of as an unavoidable or absolute condition. Don Khiaw villagers strive for paths that lead them "beyond the inevitability of marginalisation" (80), even while these paths materialise at considerable personal cost and often lead to new forms of marginalisation. For instance, like Deng, many villagers left Don Khiaw to work illegally in Thailand at the risk of capture, corralling, exploitation and monetary confiscation. High tells us that underpinning these choices is not an austere ethics of survival, or a simple calculation of profit versus risk, but an experimental ethics suffused with a sensual desire, where love, care and self-worth are expressed through material signs.

So far so good, but is the thickening of desire and a focus on the delirious quality of human experience *only* good for revealing what anthropologists already do mighty well? That is, to show that "the splits and incoherencies ... no less than the integrations and coherencies, are equally products of cultural and historical formation" (Ortner 1995:186).

According to High, a focus on desire allows her to transcend the problem of credulity (81). Indeed, she excludes the possibility that her interlocutors "ever naively believed" in their most radical fantasies of self-transformation – as that of Deng who wished to be covered in gold. Yet "the desire

and its impossibility was nonetheless central” to the paths Deng and other people adopted (82). The missing parts of cultural schemes are just as important as those that are present. Desire stems from the gaps engendered by contradictory pushes and pulls. This insight becomes clearer as High digs deeper into the contradictory expectations with which Don Khiaw villagers regard state power.

Ambivalence characterises villagers’ perceptions of state officials. Not surprisingly, talk of the state is markedly euphemistic, confined to the intimacy of the home and peppered with everyday eating metaphors. Whilst feeding among humans is a gesture of “nurturing solidarity among unequals,” (34) which underscores the virtue of the donor – of mothers vis-à-vis children, the affluent vis-à-vis the poor – to be fed upon by rapacious beings is a nightmare. Likewise, to say that an official “eats with you” suggests that s/he is corrupt, exploitative and deceitful, “living freely from your labour without proper reciprocation” (Ibid.). But for all its terrifying appearance as “corrupt, violent and extractive”, the state is always at the centre of Lao rural residents’ aspirations when they approach it as a potential nurturer capable of care and protection (41, 104).

When considering the extension of alimentary and kinship metaphors to external figures of power, the Lowland South American material offers stimulating resonances with High’s descriptions. I ruminate on these resonances briefly in the hope that they illuminate the source of ambivalence the state awakens. As is well known, alimentary idioms are potent ways of politically telling apart kin from “others” in many parts of Amazonia, or as Vilaça (2002) succinctly puts it, of making “kin out of others.” Eating encompasses both commensal sharing, “eating with” and “giving food” to kin or “becoming-kin,” and cannibal and predatory forms of appropriation of non-kin and powerful others. In the context of increasing traffic and involvement with the local state, Shuar people for example are ever more anxious about the direction of the eating: who feeds on who. Their dealings with government officials throw into sharp relief an underlying logic of predation, a negative form of asymmetry. The logic of the political game for many Shuar villagers can thus be summarised as “either prey upon the state’s bounty or else become its prey.” Keen to avoid being devoured by the state, Shuar, much the same as High describes for the villagers of Don Khiaw, override the familiar distinction between seemingly legitimate state activities (e.g. taxes, school fees, tolls) and “less legitimate” ones such as corruption and extortion, since both amount to “extraction-as-usual” (89).

Even more pertinent to the attitudes of Don Khiaw villagers, who make claims on the pity and virtue of state officers vis-à-vis whom they position themselves as subordinates, is the finding that acts of alimentary nurturing are the hallmark of asymmetric relations in much of the Amazonian region: parent-child, captor-captive, pet-master (Fausto 2008; Fausto & Costa 2013). This configuration extends to supralocal realms as well. The Paumari, for instance, as Bonilla (2005; 2009) observes, choose to position themselves as pets in relation to nonindigenous bosses, transforming a predatory relation into one of protection and care, thereby preferring submission to devouring. Theorising the empowering potentials of subjection, a few authors concur that submissive strategies cannot simply be interpreted as a form of passivity but should be considered, rather, as a specific form of native agency and even resistance in contexts of significant power asymmetries (Rival 1998, 2002; Bonilla 2005:59; Fausto 2007:93; Costa 2009; Walker 2012:156). By eliciting care, the weaker party turns the more powerful one into an “unwitting provider” (Brightman et al. 2016:15). Seen from the perspective of the provider, however, the process of nurturing, especially in the form of feeding, is a process of “control and appropriation”, a “central mechanism for producing mastery relations” (Ibid.:15-16).

This brief comparison raises the important question of whether people at the weak end of asymmetric relations also establish such an intimate link between nurturance and control. In other words, does eliciting care from others necessarily entail being controlled by them? High’s ethnography suggests that the situation may be more complex. While Lao rural residents seek out the regenerative and protective powers of the state, they also value domestic self-reliance and remain cautious regarding state aid, especially when the state demands something in return, as in “food-for-work” relief

programmes (126). She observes, for example, that to find food for one's self (e.g. growing rice, gathering wild foods) is a highly cherished activity by contrast with employment, where another "can eat from your labour"(36).

Yet dissociating nurturance from control becomes particularly tricky in relations of subjection to the state. The residents of Don Khiaw learn this the hard way when, after having been pressured to participate in ill-designed aid projects, the poorest of them have their loans exposed and their assets seized by civil servants (118). We learn that "care ceded by an external agent involves a particular kind of humility, humiliation and risk" (124). High captures the fraught nature of this subject position, the particular emotional configuration of care, at once intimate and subject to formal control, with the Lacanian concept of *extimacy*. Extimacy is "the intimate incorporation of an external entity" (123). Applied to the state, extimacy draws attention to the fact that no matter how external, extractive and immoral the state appears, residents of Don Khiaw continue to engage intimately with it as a "potential dispenser of relief and assistance" (22). With the concept, High also points to the intimate politics of poverty, which is typically a politics of sheer bodily survival (Ibid.), leaving me shuddering at the idea that it is precisely by artificially fashioning a politics of survival that some development agents legitimise extraction and control.

But beyond survival, the state is also the object of the most extravagant and utopian demands. To come to grips with these demands, High points to a long-running cultural schema she calls "stranger-power", which she sees as a much larger pattern of what Sahlins first identified as the "stranger-king" political model. In the original model, Sahlins (2008) explores the common ethnographic finding that power is associated with alterity, an actual stranger or "an element experienced as fundamentally foreign" (122). In a later version of the argument, Sahlins (2015:11) has suggested that by virtue of their dependence for life and livelihood on metahumans, that is, superhuman potencies such as spirits, gods, marvellous beasts or other powerful foreigners, everyone, including those people living in typically non-state political formations, has "always known inequality as a condition of their social existence." They have all along lived "in something like a state ... well *avant la lettre*."

Suggestive as this argument may be, one does wonder if Sahlins does not too quickly generalise all kinds of relations with metahumans as asymmetric relations between unequal terms. Similarly, whether or not he is right to conflate asymmetry with inequality. Though Sahlins takes Amazonia as an example, I am not persuaded that we can assimilate the very personal and immanent relationships some Amerindians create with metahumans with the sort of transcendent character that spiritual powers and the state appear to have in his model. These differences matter when comparing the sorts of relationships peoples living at the periphery develop with the state. To understand why, I think it's useful to interrogate High's model of "stranger-power" with Amazonian material.

High's argument is that in Laos, as in much of Southeast Asia, a longstanding cultural and political orientation connects efficacy to foreign power. A large mythic corpus, the transformative potential of faraway journeys, and the special value attributed to gifts and remittances coming from abroad all attest to an imaginary investment in the "power of alterity" (175). In Don Khiaw, the state is always reified and externalised as *an other*, even when local people occupy official roles (115), as indicated by the common use of the pronoun "they" to refer to officials, a linguistic device which we might see as enabling a sort of "state effect" (Mitchell 1991) from below. High thus argues that the state can capture "desire and utopian fantasies about the improvement it promises to deliver because it stands for this kind of external foreign power" (124).

Much as with the Southeast Asian people High has in mind in her model, many Lowland South American peoples have been described as symbolically dependent on relations with the outside and driven by a "powerful cultural desire" to engage with alterity. This desire is certainly helpful for understanding the intensity with which they seek to harness state resources and powers. But for all their attraction to the state, nothing in their attitudes resembles the way villagers of Don Khiaw reify

the state of Laos. For Shuar people, the powers of local governments remain wholly personal and multifarious, embodied as they are in the persons of variously located brokers, bosses and patrons, more or less subject to domestication and control from the bottom-up (Buitron-Arias 2016). A remarkable consequence of this personalisation of power is a tendency to fragment and therefore subvert the very image of unity that external, hierarchical powers might wish to convey. In her commentary on James Ferguson's *declarations of dependence* (2013), Bonilla (2013:247) for instance shows that even when the Paumari adopt a submissive attitude, they opt for multiplying their relations of dependency, for example by dissolving their debts across multiple bosses, in such a way as "to dissolve" and "horizontalize" hierarchy as best they can. So unlike the state in Laos, which appears to rural residents as transcendent, "separate from and above society," (93) the externality of the state for many Amerindians does not entail, as Viveiros de Castro aptly puts it, "an instituting exteriorization of the One, or a 'projective' unification of the Exterior either" (2010:49).

These different orientations to political authority among peoples who appear otherwise similar in their desire for connection to external power is a valuable caution against models that take the attraction to foreignness as illustration of "a more general condition of human political order" (123). The political means and historical conditions states use to take on the role of the "ultimate master" for their subjects is an important anthropological question. By exploring the state-society relationship as it comes to exist on the ground, High makes an important first step in approaching it. Though she takes seriously her interlocutors' reification of the state, she is also careful not to essentialise or simplify the positions of the rural populace or those of the officialdom. This emerges eloquently in her analysis of the grand narrative of "mutual aid" in development practice and discourse. The state co-opts and demands mutual aid, for example, by requisitioning labour from the rural population for development schemes, commonly described in the language of mutual aid as if cooperation was an intrinsic quality of village life. But the language of state aid and its promise of development is similarly "co-opted and demanded by rural residents as a rightful critique of the state" (168) when, for example, it fails to protect the population by supplying money and rice in times of crisis. Mutual aid is a village ideal that can lead to recriminations when it fails, when state-loyalty and the logic of productivity and efficiency replace local person-centred work-parties that gather in the spirit of sociability to create efficacy (beauty and bounty) (162-63). Thus, mutual aid is neither "a spontaneous act of moral autarky" nor a "hegemonic imposition in the service of some elites" (156). It is rather a "shared delirium" capturing villagers and officials alike, though in markedly different ways.

Attending to the mutual posturing and mirroring of gestures which often assume contrastive valences, High accounts for long-term patterns of engagement, the repetitiousness of a certain kind of politics which involves manifold parties, and also for the cycles of experimentalism that emerge within broader cultural schemas. It is notable that High does not exploit this approach to understand change and transformation, as much as she relies on it to explain continuity and reproduction. The experimentalism of Don Khiaw villagers remains circumscribed to a post-rebellious framework, even though she admits that different potentialities for political engagement may be in embryo form.

Considering High's analytical emphasis on the generativity of desire, I also thought it surprising that she does not tell us more about the specific objects and ways of desiring of different people: parents and children, old and young, men and women. Judging from the adult-centred perspective of the analysis, one wonders in fact if her focus on a highly hypothetical "socially shared unconscious" does not come at the price of flattening intergenerational differences and the processual nature of subject formation. What would happen if High were to take a child developmental approach to the construction of desire? In my opinion, such an approach would be suitable not only for the sake of ethnographic but also of theoretical precision. For all the thought-provoking deployment of psychoanalytical literature, High gives the impression of drawing on one or another theory of desire (Lacan's, Deleuze's, Devereux's, Žižek's) more out of inspiration than out of commitment to their explanations of the human psyche. For instance, she insists that desire is not a synonym of hope or

aspiration but a concept that points to the “unconscious as social, structured and generative” (171). In this, she does not fully explain how desire is socialised or what gives rise to (or resists) cultural meanings and social ideologies.

One would hope that providing answers to these questions might open up these theories to empirical scrutiny, shed light on the psychological and social building blocks of desire, or on the expectation for care and nurture from strangers, for that matter. Perhaps, engaging such questions might even pave the way for exciting cross-cultural comparisons and new engagements with wider psychological literature. To give but a few examples, engagement with recent work on mutualism and the evolutionary origins of human cooperation (Tomasello et al. 2012; Bowles & Gintis 2011) could yield clues as to what makes “mutual aid” so “catchy” a concept (Sperber 1985, 1996), allowing it to traverse the household, the village and the nation and create a “shared delirium.” Stimulating areas of research could also emerge from engaging cognitive linguistics – I am thinking here of the work of George Lakoff (2016) on kinship metaphors, for example his proposal that “Strict Father” and “Nurturant Parent” models underpin conservative and liberal American politics respectively.

Whatever the prospects of comparative research, in bridging the anthropology of development, the state and the person, High accomplishes more than captivating ethnography. She also nurtures the desire for asking profound questions about human beings’ ambivalent relationship to regenerative power.

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[1]A similar call to resist the analytical lens of resistance was made by Michael Brown as early as 1991, in relation to Amazonia, and more generally in 1996. See also Abu-Lughod (1990) and Ortner (1995). [📌 \(#to-desiring-resisting-state-n-1\)](#)

[2] High develops this critique in relation to lowland Lao speakers, that is people who have long been integrated into more or less centralised polities whereas Scott's (2009) observations concerned the inhabitants of Upland Southeast Asia (Zomia) who have historically avoided governments based in the population centres of the lowlands. High's argument, however, is more generally about the ways in which marginal rural people desire the modern state, and is thus better seen in dialogue with Scott's broader work on peasant resistance. [#to-desiring-resisting-state-n-2](#)

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