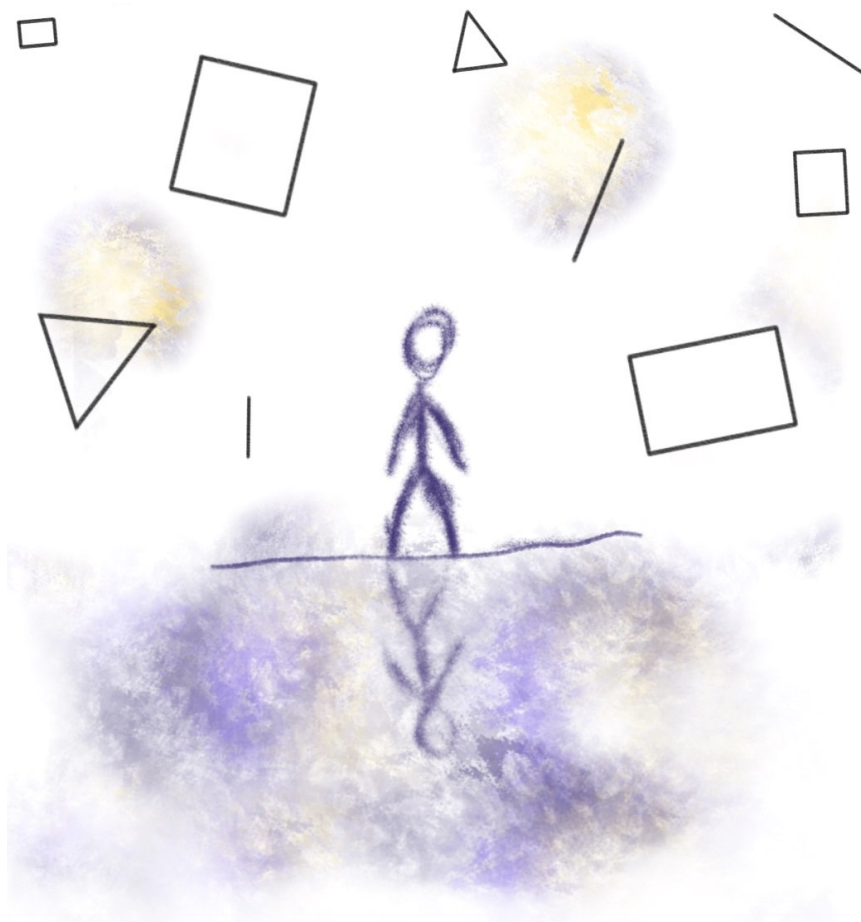


THE POLITICS OF DESIRABILITY

AN ANALYSIS OF THE ETHICAL QUESTION



Wouter Keijzer

S2017393

Commissioned title page drawing by *Art*

Picture description: drawing consisting of upper and lower side, divided by a horizontal line in the middle.

Upper side: stickman surrounded by straight-lined shapes and two coloured circles.

Mirrored side: reflecting stickman, surrounded by a rich environment of colours.

Bachelor thesis of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

Supervisor: Fatimah Akhtar Momtaz

Word count: 14.163

Date: June 21st 2021

Special thanks to: Thir for her love and support, music for keeping me in touch with myself, and the existence of words. I could not have done this without them. Also thanks to Fatimah for granting me the freedom I needed to make this thesis in the way that I wanted to, and for providing me with great feedback.

Abstract

When a person or an institution has the ability to act upon what they believe is the best possible situation - or at least a relatively good set of circumstances - through changing real-life livelihoods, they engage with the politics of desirability. That means that they are positioned within the political playing field of actors with different degrees of power to act upon what they believe is desirable. This thesis is an attempt to discover truths about the political relationship between government - and the act of governance - and those whom are influenced yet not fully involved with the processes that influence them. The analysis builds upon two types of cases: one concerns general descriptions of regimes' governance, rationales, techniques and ideologies; and the other concerns government responses to contestations to its governance. Each case is shortly analysed in regards to the concept of desirability. After presentations and short discussions of the cases, I present two different dimensions of critiques on government's dealing with the matter of desirability: contingent issues, that can be found explicitly in the cases, but can vary amongst regimes; and inherent limits, which are present, by definition, in every attempt at governance from outside. The latter critiques come down to problematising the core asset of government in the political realm of desirability. That core asset is its position of power, in which it is able to act upon its own conception of 'what is desirable' without involving conceptions and lived experience of the people most influenced by the government action; but also in which it cannot overcome its limits - deriving straight from the asset - to do justice to the open-ended, ethical question of desirability.

Table of contents

	Page
GENERAL THESIS INFORMATION	i
ABSTRACT	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
I: ON THE CONCEPT OF DESIRABILITY	3
<i>The political realm of desirability</i>	4
II: GOVERNANCE AND DESIRABILITIES	6
<i>Three colonial regimes</i>	6
<i>Colonial desirabilities</i>	7
<i>The New Order</i>	8
<i>Resettlement desirabilities</i>	8
<i>Neoliberal governance</i>	9
<i>Neoliberal desirabilities and an overview</i>	10
III: CONTESTATIONS	12
<i>The cases</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	16
IV: ISSUES WITHIN GOVERNANCE	17
<i>Issues in programs</i>	17
<i>Issues in desirability: state interests</i>	18
<i>Issues in desirability: the pursuit of well-being</i>	18
<i>Conclusion</i>	19
V: LIMITS OF GOVERNANCE	21
<i>The dimensions of limitation</i>	21
<i>The anarchist position</i>	23
<i>Conclusion</i>	24
CONCLUSION	25
REFERENCE LIST	27

Introduction

At the heart of political philosophy lies the balance between freedom and subjection, self-government and being governed. Thomas Hobbes wrote in his famous work *Leviathan* how people ought to subject themselves - or rather, be subjected - to a sovereign power, who rules over them, to escape humanity's (hypothetical) 'natural state', which is a life characterised as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1651: 78). And thus, the social contract was born. The ideology that humanity is better off subjected to a hierarchy of authority and obedience is deeply rooted in political systems and peoples' world views in many regions around the world, to this day. However, it would be a mistake to assume Hobbes' ideas as being true. Firstly, because there is no empirical basis to the strongly pessimist viewpoint, and it is thus merely a speculation; and secondly, because there have been cases in which groups of people lived autonomously without being governed by external powers such as the state, without their life being shaped as Hobbes illustrated. There is a significant amount of communities today, even in industrialised regions, where the state exerts no power over the self-governments.¹ In Northern Syria, three large democratic zones have formed since 2012, encompassing - as of 2015 - almost a million inhabitants ("Rojava": 1). This has become known as Rojava. It contains several levels of democratic collaboration, within communes and between them, with 'democratic federalism' at the highest level (Dirik 2018: 225). The movement is 'explicitly anti-nationalist, anti-statist, anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal,' complemented by a 'grassroots-democratic, ecological, women's liberation paradigm' (ibid.: 222-3). This shows that political relations often assumed as natural, good, or preventive of something 'even less desirable' than the current system, do not have to be the way they are. As many other things in life, our political and economic system are contingent, and can become subject to change.

What lies at the foundations of political matters, in the realm of freedom and subjectivity, is the concept of desirability. In a society in which government influences the lives of subjected peoples, that apparatus of power holds authority over what is believed to be desirable for all whom are subjected. This concept is an ethical and forever open-ended question, as will be argued in chapter one, which elaborates on the concept. But the motivation to give *desirability* centre stage in my thesis, lies with it being under-analysed. The content of desirability is often assumed, and the question evaded. In anthropology, it might be due to its philosophical character, or its abstractness, or its inconclusiveness; arguably often all three. Chapter two and three describe case studies literature, in which becomes clear how mentions of desirability are rarely if ever to be seen; even in a relatively Marxist and Gramscian analysis of power by Tania Li (2007).

The reason why I believe it to be under-analysed, and thus more important than the extent of attention it receives, is that it concerns the political sphere, in which some people do whilst (often many) others do not have a say in matters that influence and interfere with their lives or livelihoods; a relationship oppressing the potential of a more fulfilling life. But it also touches upon a deeply philosophical, mysterious question of when something is truly desirable: a question which's answer would have to transcend peoples' experiences and own beliefs of desirability and their desires. It is a quest for truth. But, as becomes clear in

¹ For a list of current and past (anarchist) self-governing societies, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_anarchist_communities

the next chapter, it is a futile quest. Fortunately, because it contains no objective answers, it can be used as a tool to illuminate and analyse political relations of power. The answer cannot be found, but the question remains. And the question can be ignored, silenced, manipulated, assumed and used, all in the game of power, whilst the consequences of its politics influence the lives of the subjected. And although the question itself seems abstract, it is very real in its everyday presence, influence, and its political position.

What you will thus be reading is an analysis of the politics of desirability; a focus on the ethical question of desirability in the political realm, in order to illuminate inequalities that touch upon peoples' abilities to act according to what they want, believe to be good, and believe to be desirable. The main question guiding this research is this: ***In which respects is government flawed in dealing with the ethical question of desirability?*** The case study by Li (2007) functions as the main piece of literature for the analysis, for its extensive scrutiny of political relations and its diverse range of described governmentalities: precolonial, colonial, and the various postcolonial governments in Indonesia. Describing three cases of government from that ethnography is the main aim of chapter two. The latter half of that chapter analyses them through the lens of desirability, which identifies and illuminates certain constants in dealing with the ethical question. To broaden the understanding of the political relationships, chapter three discusses cases in which the government's actions are contested by those subjected to its inadequacies, whom in the cases belong to and consist of indigenous groups, and the governments' responses to those contestations. Chapter four is an elaborate critique on the governmentalities discussed, within the framework of their moral superiority; and chapter five does so whilst unassuming governments' claim to authority in the matter of desirability. The latter chapter shines light on shortcomings inherent to government in dealing with the ethical question. And finally, chapter six functions as a conclusion and overview, generating a cohesive image of desirability and its politics in the realm as described in the previous chapters.

Concerning what is and is not included in this thesis: the governments analysed function as examples of government, not as entities encompassing all the possible behaviours of government, or all ideologies. The critiques in chapter four are specific to the described and analysed cases. However, it can be argued that most of the deeper issues of the described governmentalities are broadly shared amongst many governments. Furthermore, I believe there to be issues in dealing with the ethical question that are inherent to government itself, and thus not exclusive to the used cases. And thus, through the case studies, I attempt to speak about the nature of government — though merely in dealing with the question of desirability.

Chapter one

On the concept of desirability

Claiming to know what is best for others is not a light statement. A person positions themselves above the other in the realm of possibilities, and acts on the specific one they believe to be good for or beneficial to the other. In other words, one person acts on their conception of desirability within the situation, and the other person is subjected to that conception through subjection to the person's act. When both people discuss the matter, it is less likely that the subjected person will have no say in it. But it often happens, in many shapes and forms, that one is subjected to an authority. "It's part of life."

But when acting upon one's conception of desirability, arguably the main motivation behind the belief in it, behind the conviction that it really is most (or at least quite) desirable, is precisely that belief. We rationalise our conception of desirability with arguments, but the reason that I believe it to be belief, or intuition, is that rationality doesn't say anything about desirability; rationality could possibly convince someone to believe in another course of action, but there is nothing within it that tells the value or extent of desirability. It is a human preference for one thing over another. But is one's intuition 'true'? We follow a certain conception of desirability in a specific situation, and act upon it, merely because we believe in it. But the subjected person could experience the conception that is acted upon as undesirable. In other words, the circumstances that follow from the conception could be experienced, by someone else, as undesirable. In chapter four, I reflect on situations in which government does not achieve what is thought to be desirable, but for the sake of argument, let's assume here that in this specific situation, the conception and the result of action align. What differs in the conception of desirability between the authority and subjected person, then, is a hierarchy of values, in what is believed to be the best way of living. Experience tells someone what works best for them. When someone else acts on a conception that differs significantly and subjects another person in the act, it could cause the subjected person harm, stress, worries, or just a minor inconvenience. The conceptions could also align, which would result in a beneficial situation. But there is no law that one can follow before acting to determine the extent to which desirabilities align — or, if the subjected person's experience is ignored, as their experience does not necessarily indicate that something is less objectively desirable than pictured by the person of authority, there is no law that one can follow to find the right conception, and no information that can conclusively validate the value of the acted-upon conception and the new circumstances — especially not *before* acting.

The reason behind this is that desirability is normative. Normativity concerns propositions of how things *ought* to be. Desire, on the other hand, is descriptive. That concerns peoples' emotional yearning for a specific thing, and that can be described. Desire *is*. But *desirability* concerns what is *best*, and the extent to which something *ought to be desired*, as, when something is desirable, someone would be a fool not to desire it. 'I desire this' can be absolutely true; 'this is desirable', however, cannot. It is per definition an open-ended question. And as it refers to *the best course of action*, it is an ethical question. Whether anyone can conclusively say that something is objectively desirable, would have to be proven through their superior position of authority; and that would be insufficient, at least for some people. It would have to be through their position, because there is nothing outside oneself that can generate or validate normative statements, and thus the 'oneself' in question would have to be superior to others. And that won't do.

To illustrate the inherent open-endedness, let's take an extreme example. Anyone reading this can intuitively say that being a Jew in a concentration camp in the Holocaust is undesirable, and possibly one of the least desirable situations possible. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (2011 [1959]) illustrates his personal experience. The circumstances are terrible and frightening. However, its desirability is not written in stone. Frankl was a psychiatrist specialised in logotherapy, his own version of existential analysis (ibid.: xv). In the light of *meaning*, his experience was not exclusively undesirable. Firstly, because of the wisdom he gathered about meaning during the Holocaust, and the meaning he himself gathered through the experience; and secondly, because his choice to publish his story and popularise logotherapy has improved the lives of many others.

There might be situations in which the desirability seems even less convincing, but as long as there are values through which the situation could be considered desirable, even in the slightest, it cannot be considered conclusively undesirable; or with something that seems fully desirable, there could be something identified that questions the otherwise convincing desirability. And thus, there is only our belief or intuition, and our actions based upon it.

The political realm of desirability

Although there is only intuitive desirability, its issues/problems caused by people, organisations, corporations and governments, are very real.

If one actor acts upon their conception, and that conception and its outcome concern - that is to say, intentionally refer to, and influence - the lives of others, it is per definition political. In my view, it is deeply political in practice, too. For one, because it necessarily contains a relationship of power; of claimed authority over the other person, of subjection, of possible contestation, and so on. And as the focus of this thesis is the concept's relationship with government, it encompasses *a priori* a hierarchical relationship between people.

Even in a relationship between two people, in which one is able to act upon their idea of desirability and excludes the other from the decision-making process despite influencing that person's life, it implies a political relationship with power inequality. The matter of desirability finds itself assumed and acted upon, often without the actors recognising it for what it is; an open-ended, ethical question. And in that process, the subjected people can possibly find themselves voiceless in a matter that influences them most.

This could have been told the other way around as well. Political relationships of differences in power necessitate a certain politics of desirability. As long as there is a relationship involved, in which actors act, and in which one influences the other, the question of desirability is there. Whether it is acknowledged or not. And in the realm of political action and the question of desirability, a hierarchical relationship concerns the attribution of power *over* one person by another, which is characterised by coercion, and in turn limits the subjected person's power *to* shape their life and circumstances (VeneKlasen & Miller 2007: 45). In this way, the matter of desirability concerns power *over* the question and the other person, and the *ability to act* upon one's own conception.

The focus of this thesis, government, is the body of power that directly and explicitly concerns acting upon what is best for large sums of people: 'the concern of government is the well-being of populations at large' (Li 2007: 5). In contrast, a corporation or powerful monarch would not have this

obligation per se; those actors can act on their own desires without necessarily seeking political legitimacy from its subjects, and its actions don't have to be aimed at acting upon what is most desirable, merely what is most desired by the people in power. But government is always faced with the matter of desirability. As becomes clear in the following chapters, it has a strong relationship with improvement and development. They are often the main framework through which the implicit question of desirability is viewed and answered by bodies of power. And the coherent framework, that seems to have a structural and long-lasting character in the case of Indonesia, can be regarded as ideological. It implies many assumptions and convictions about economics, justice, social relationships and 'the good life'. Furthermore, a concept just as important as the former ones is governmentality: the method and conduct of controlling government's subjects and their behaviour (Rose et al. 2006: 83). It explains what course of action it structurally takes in dealing with the matter of desirability.

In short, desirability is an open-ended, ethical question that an actor in power unavoidably interacts with when acting, and which concerns in its foundations a political relationship between people. As we deal with the phenomenon of government and some of its cases in this thesis, it provides the possibility to use desirability as a window to analyse inequalities through. Where is the matter addressed, and where are people involved or excluded in the decision-making process? And paying attention to governmentality, how does government decide what it acts upon? What is its ideology, and what does that imply? And finally, are there ways in which government is inherently flawed in dealing with the question of desirability? These are some of the questions that the next chapters will be dealing with, and together form an image of the politics of desirability as shaped and maintained by governments.

Chapter two

Governance and desirabilities

'These "to lare" [hillbillies] do not understand the meaning and purpose of the national development plans. [...] The best way to bring them down is to force them with power. Now we can see the fruits of the program, where the resettlers gradually gain a better life.'

(Li 2007: 86)

Tania Li's monograph on the governmental history of and a few empirical cases within Indonesia (2007), shows diversity in governmentality, yet makes it possible to identify certain constants. One of which is the *will to improve* (ibid.: 1). The concept is the common thread throughout the book full of case studies and analyses, and it concerns a specific governmental stance on its relationship to its citizens, in which program setbacks or failures do not alter the government's motivation to keep attempting to 'improve' the people whom it categorised as 'in need of improvement'. This chapter is a synthesis of summaries of periods of Indonesian government, and of short, general analyses of the politics of desirability to be identified in those regimes. In the latter, I identify differences and similarities in how governments approach their citizens - in particular, categories of 'farmers' and 'Natives' - in justification of their right to rule and to act, and in assumed authority over the ethical question of desirability.

Three colonial regimes

Halfway through the nineteenth century, Dutch colonial rule under the Culture System (1830's-1870) was characterised by the idea to govern 'through existing social forces, merely adjusting them to produce the desired results' (ibid.: 36). The desired results of governance over farmers were 'to discipline underproductive farmers to produce marketable surpluses, which would not only provide for their own limited needs, but also support the edifice of the state and capitalist profit' (ibid.: 37). In other words, the aim was to utilise the population, to the advantage of both the state and its economic ideology, and of the colonised people themselves. The results of this were increased authoritarianism by the state, a weakening of the peasants' economic and political position, high taxation, and peasants' alienation from the profits of their labour (ibid.: 38). Arguably, government under the Culture System acted similar to a capitalist corporation.

Then, from around the 1870's until the end of that century, a relatively *laissez-faire* policy was established, named the liberal period (ibid.: 39). The government facilitated a transformation of land toward a commodity, to be leased and sold, through private rights (ibid.). The period also had a strong individualist character: 'They argued that Natives would benefit from participating in markets for land and labor. To progress, they must be set free to find their own destiny' (ibid.). Commodification and utilisation of land for the purpose of free market exchange, came with the idea that the capitalist growth would translate into well-being for the colonised 'Natives' (ibid.: 40).

The conditions which these regimes produced were hyperexploitation through capitalist practices, high taxation, and Dutch extraction of these profits to the Netherlands (ibid.: 41). The ethical period arose, centered around coloniser's guilt and their duty to improve the conditions of the Natives. There was now a

colonial understanding of their own possibly destructive impact on the population. The policy that followed did not aim to combat the capitalist exploitations, but rather limit its negative impacts, which in turn made it a more sustainable enterprise. Essentially, the government's aim was to 'educate India in moral principles, to govern it for its best advantage' (ibid.: 42), in which it thus explicitly claimed to act upon what was most desirable for the colonised. It attempted to do so through methods of technical control: experts on things such as 'health, education, agriculture and village development' (ibid.) increasingly intervened in peoples' lives, and as a result, the bureaucratic apparatus grew. Experts trained the Natives in banking, accounting, and democratic practices of village governance, to stimulate villages' 'natural autonomy', which would get the villages closer to becoming 'cost-effective instruments of welfare' (ibid.). In short, Dutch government acted on a feeling of national guilt, and its policy that followed claimed to be aimed at improving conditions for the colonised; yet it seems it sought to change its governmentality so that its citizens could be governed more effectively, rather than according to what the citizens desired, or to allow structurally for more democratic world-shaping.

Colonial desirabilities

These three periods show a certain development. Firstly, of how they approach governmentality — that is to say, how governments deal with the task of governance in terms of methods and rationale: from governance through existing forces and maximally utilising the population (ibid.: 36-37), to specific adjustments concerning property rights for economic stimulation (ibid.: 39), to 'expert' intervention into multiple aspects of daily life (ibid.: 42). But, secondly and more importantly, the development of how the Native citizens ought to be treated appropriately. In the Culture System, it seems quite explicit that the governed population's well-being was not top priority. As the practical reality showed, it left the farmers extremely exploited (ibid.: 38). The justification, besides benefits for the state itself, lies with the government's conception of *the good life*: generating situations in which farmers would create marketable surpluses, is desirable for themselves. Their lives would be improved. They would find themselves with that which would satisfy their needs (ibid.: 37). From this follows that the government assumed and acted upon their conception of the target population's needs, and on the desirability of an imagined new situation — and the desirability was founded on both paternalism and capitalism (ibid.).

The liberal period seems to have been more concerned with the Natives' well-being. Or, more accurately, its justification of privatisation and commodification lies more explicitly with their conceptions of Natives' interests. In practice it meant, similar to the Culture System, peoples' subjection to governance that acted upon its own conception of desirability; in this case, again, capitalist enterprise, here complimented by a 'free-market' economy (ibid.: 39). What differs from the first discussed colonial regime is the extent of authoritarianism in governance.

Finally, the ethical period seems most of all concerned with the population's well-being and interests. The damage of the previous periods was recognised, and the colonising government felt it had to step up; to do right by those it didn't do justice to (ibid.: 41). The question of desirability, however, remained untouched. The government's authority over acting upon its own conception of what is good and desirable remained assumed. Furthermore, it didn't deviate from supporting capitalism, which previously contributed to a great extent to the misery of the farmers' and Natives' circumstances (ibid.: 41-42). In a Culture System

fashion, the regime of the ethical period appropriated the paternal role and actively involved itself in altering peoples' daily lives. This time with an army of 'expertise' whom would educate the un-educated to become that which was expected of them (ibid.: 43).

The New Order

The period between 1965 and 1998, and its governmental regime, is called the *New Order*. In the highlands of Central Sulawesi this meant programmes of displacement from hillsides to valleys (ibid.: 79). The state categorised the hillside farmers as 'estranged people', whom had a different way of living and had to be 'socialised' (ibid.). A reason for this viewpoint and course of action was that these highlanders deviated too much from the people who fit the image of successfully developed peoples, and therefore they would 'lessen the success[ful] image of national development' (ibid.). In the Department of Social Affairs' (Depsos') eyes, the hillside farmers lacked proper and sustainable production techniques; housing, food and hygiene; cultural progress; rational conduct; knowledge of the national identity, ideology and citizenship; and openness to economic markets (ibid.: 80). Thus the program's aim was providing the farmers with conditions in which they would be able to develop what they lacked.

Around 600 families were subjugated to displacement toward the Palolo Valley. The 'targets' of the program, the hillside farmers, were coerced to comply with their 'resettlement', as the police and the army backed the program (ibid.: 86). The specific 'underdeveloped' category of the *hillbillies* justified Depsos' use of force. From 1975 on, households moved to Rahmat, a village designed for the program. Many of them died due to malaria, after which a significant amount of the farmers fled back into the hills (ibid.: 87). Furthermore, the farmers who stayed did not receive the size of land they were promised, and they would be unsuccessful in claiming more than they had received, indicating that the plans nor the rights were stable and worked-out (ibid.). With additional corruption by government officials, the situation resulted in land appropriation by the (minor) powerful on the one hand, and significant landlessness of the previously hillside farmers on the other (ibid.: 89).

Many of the farmers' attitude toward the resettlement was positive, in terms of the promise of land and houses — although they felt the threat of subjection to coercion and the stripping of their entitlements (ibid.: 91). But interviews showed that most farmers in Rahmat shared the state's concept of improvement and that they wanted to be the farmers that the program depicted (ibid.). They wanted to live the life proposed to them, and they felt no nostalgia for the hills, their previous place of living (ibid.). In Li's words, 'their critique of resettlement was not focused on what they had lost. It was focused, rather, on what the program promised but failed to deliver' (ibid.).

Resettlement desirabilities

Arguably most notable in this case is the contrast which Li mentions in that last quote: between what was planned or promised, and what became reality. Hillside farmers were subjected to the coercive authority of the state and had no say in their own 'resettlement' (ibid.: 86). The design of new circumstances was in the hands of that authority alone. The results were dreadful. Many died, which could have been prevented, as

many resettlers' ancestors found the same fate after forced resettlement down to the valleys in the colonial period (ibid.: 87). And those who lived and stayed did not fully receive that which they were promised.

Despite the consequences of failing policy, many of the resettlers themselves shared the content of the government's desirability (which consists of that which the *hillbillies* lacked in, as summed up in this section's first paragraph) — or at least the concept of development and progress (ibid.: 91). However, in terms of politics, this was just a happy coincidence. It arguably made it easier for the subjected to cope with their new environment, new way of living, and their own subjection. But whether they shared the government's conception of desirability or not, the authoritative apparatus held power over the ability to impact the lives of others in acting on its own conception. In other words, the 'target' group didn't hold a position of political power in which they would, for example, be able to approve or reject a program's course of action, which would positively (from the subjects' point of view) influence the government's policy.

The moral justification of the government's authority can again - just as in the colonial period - be found in the 'underdeveloped' character of the target group — meaning that the 'morally good' task of developing people's lives justified the government's actions. The people in question were not in circumstances which were thought to be desirable, and the people themselves did not contain everything that was wanted, needed, or desired (ibid.: 80). They were works in progress, in a process which's goal was designed by the government, and in which the people themselves were conceptualised according to the government's understanding of them within its ideology of (capitalist) development. Hence, just as in the colonial period, this political relationship concerned a monopoly on desirability.

Neoliberal governance

The 'corruption, greed and paternalism' of the New Order period was severely damaging to villagers' (resettlers') abilities to fend for themselves; it produced circumstances in which 'previously cohesive, capable, creative rural communities' became disorganised (ibid.: 239). But they could be restored, as the villages had an inherent potential to become self-managing communities once again (ibid.). The dominant view in the neoliberal period, in particular the program involving the World Bank, saw communities as capable, and as inherently valuable, but as impaired and in need of optimisation of the good that is already present (ibid.: 232, 233, 239). And thus, the Bank's goal was empowering communities and stimulating their ability to 'plan their own projects, manage conflicts, and reform the state apparatus from below' (ibid.: 230). In a neoliberal fashion, communities, especially those of poor people, were aimed to be stimulated in their responsibility — to involve themselves in financial markets and the competitions involved in those markets, and to make 'appropriate' choices (ibid.: 234). People had to fend for themselves once again - in their improved communities - to function appropriately in the political-economic regime of neoliberalism. Furthermore, the governmentality was no longer explicit exploitation and macro-management. It went down to village level planning.

What this meant in terms of the ability to govern, was not only that communities were something to improve upon, but that this micro-level governance ensured that collective existence could be rendered 'intelligible and calculable' (ibid.: 232). Social relationships, however meaningful to the people involved in them, were now seen as measurable 'according to various indices, correlated with desirable ends such as good governance and economic growth, and subject to econometric analysis' (ibid.: 243). Furthermore, all

forms of social behaviour were now translated into an economic language; it now encompassed individually calculated and rational action, according to the ‘universal faculty of choice’ (ibid.: 240).

To become eligible for the Bank’s support, local governments had to show they shared the Bank’s ideology of development. The local governments were obliged to be open to internal reform and in favour of targeting the poor in their programs. In practice, it meant conforming to rigid and strict conditions ‘all the way down to village level’ (ibid.: 242). The new micro-governance resulted in strict control over individuals’ and villages’ actions; but also over their desires. The village-level program was orchestrated to ensure the ability to shape villagers’ desires so that they would - on their own - act in line with the Bank’s ideology (ibid.: 231). The rhetoric of autonomy and responsibility came thus down to shaping actors to fit functionally within a political-economic system, which’s desirabilities were assumed universal (ibid.: 243). Additionally, the rhetoric and practice of ‘participation’ arguably stimulated ‘people’s own complicity in contemporary forms of power’ (Paley 2002: 483).

This shaping of desires, however crucial to their governance, was denied in their justification of their control over villagers: ‘the CAS [World Bank’s governance organ] referred to development partners, including civil society organisations, who had requested bank support in this area’ (ibid.: 240). They positioned themselves as a facilitator of expertise and support, to aid the program’s targets, the villagers, whom intrinsically sought the Bank’s help in reforming themselves and their circumstances. And with that, the Bank presented itself as a non-coercive apparatus, and it denied its aim (and perhaps necessity) of forcing people to comply to their conception of how to live (ibid.) — denying the practical reality.

Neoliberal desirabilities and an overview

The World Bank’s governmentality has striking resemblances with its predecessors. First of all, in its recognition of the previously harmful policies — which was the foundation of the ethical period. Similarly, the Bank took up a paternal role. A second commonality with the colonial rule is the management through ‘existing social forces’ (ibid.: 36), which was characteristic of the Culture System. The neoliberal government took those social relationships and communities as both instruments and targets of change — to shape people and communities so that they could function in the economic system of capitalism, which was essential to the colonial liberal period.

Over the years, the extent to which citizens’ daily lives were controlled have varied, although the *will to govern* remained. Whilst propagating a rhetoric of responsibility, the neoliberal government came to ‘conceive of these new actors [i.e. the population] in new ways as subjects of responsibility, autonomy and seek[s] to act upon them though [sic.] shaping and utilizing their freedom’ (Rose in Paley 2002: 483). Furthermore, in the neoliberal period, large parts of life became rendered technical by the government. Subjectively meaningful relationships became scrutinised, quantified, and targets for improvement. This has resemblance with the ethical period. Besides this, the New Order period best illustrates the way in which justification, conception of the population and the sole right to rule, and the impact on governed peoples’ lives, can relate to each other. The government acted upon its conception of the target group as ‘underdeveloped’ (ibid.: 80) — a conception that can be found across all these regimes. The justifications of governance lied with the assumed desirability: circumstances that the government pursued, were to be desired by the subjected citizens, as the circumstances were imagined to be universally desirable — although

the ‘desirable’ circumstances were not made reality, and the sovereignty resulted in preventable deaths and other miseries.

But besides these governmentalities and justifications, there are also deeply connected positions on desirability to be identified in these cases of government. The ethical question is never addressed — though presumably because it would generate the question ‘who has the right to rule?’, which would destabilise its legitimacy. This meant that government held the monopoly on desirability, the ability to conceptualise the ‘good’ that would become acted upon. The neoliberal period had something notable in this respect, as it encouraged and involved ‘civil society’ to ‘assist’ with governing properly (ibid.: 236). However, this did not mean that the power became shared and the government’s authority was open to be questioned. The hands remained closed; even civil society, as a means of liberty, ‘was rendered technical, [...] bounded and defined,’ and monitored by experts (ibid.). The possibilities for involvement in shaping or changing policy - and thus involvement with changing the conception of desirability - were carefully orchestrated. Peoples’ political freedoms were controlled. And this is true of all the discussed cases of government. If there was any political freedom granted, it was with the intention of smoothening or technically improving governance; not of liberation, democracy, or even genuine reform. But as you might have noticed, the larger part of these summaries discussed governments which did not intentionally grant freedoms, but rather influenced the lives of its subjects under the justification of pursuing the citizens’ ‘development’ which would improve their ‘underdeveloped’ selves and their less desirable livelihoods. The government granted that to them, in the name of *noble goodness*.

In this process of pursuing that which is desirable, a crucial governmental instrument was shaping citizens’ desires to align them with the government’s own conception. As Li (ibid.: 5) states, ‘government operates by educating desires and configuring habits, aspirations and beliefs. It sets conditions, “artificially so arranging things so that people, following only their own self-interest, will do as they ought.”’ In other words, shaping desires, habits and beliefs is an essential operational aspect of government. And it can only do so if sovereignty over desirability is assumed — as, otherwise, it could never find the moral right.

Chapter three:

Contestations

Government's actions, significantly interfering in peoples' lives, are not always uncontested. In a similar light to the previous chapter, this chapter involves cases of *resettlement* or displacement — but here, groups of subjected peoples protest the government's course of action. These contestations are examples of when people most explicitly voice their experience of the government's course of action, and their own conceptions of what is desirable. Analysing them, then, provides insight in how governments respond to those explicit counter-desirabilities, expanding our understanding of the politics of desirability. These cases in particular involve contestations from indigenous groups, and are extreme examples of government's disregard for the people's desirabilities. This helps with concretising and making explicit ways in which government in general tends to act when its position is being questioned.

The main concern of government 'is the well-being of populations at large' (Li 2007: 5), as quoted previously. It would seem that the concept of well-being would ultimately come down to - or at least include in some degree - peoples' own experiences of the actual circumstances at hand, and thus their own desirabilities. Especially in cases where the government's course of action concerns dramatically life-changing events, such as being forcefully displaced from the hills, where you and perhaps your ancestors have lived for a long time, it would seem that ignoring or actively silencing peoples' lived experience defeats the image of prioritising their well-being. In this framework, analysing contestations illuminates quite a bit about the workings of the political relationship. The relationship mainly concerns the question of whether - or to which extent - governments silence, include or even prioritise peoples' own conceptions of desirability.

This chapter contains summaries and short analyses of four cases of governments land-grabbing and the following resettlement, and its contestations by subjected indigenous groups: three articles (Sylvain 2014; Clemmer 2009; and Lamb et al. 2017) and the Lore Lindu National Park case described by Li (2007).

The cases

From 1970 to 1980, the San peoples began settling in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana. The settlers, categorised by the Government of Botswana (GoB) as 'Remote Area Dwellers' - swaying from the dimension of their ethnicity - received government services and development resources as part of a 'poverty-alleviation program' (Sylvain 2014: 254). But in 1985, the GoB started pressuring the settlers to leave, because the occupation was believed to be harmful to the ecosystem, and the process of delivering resources to be too expensive (ibid.). They stopped the development program and used a combination of force and allurements to relocate the peoples (ibid.: 255). In response to their full removal from the reserve, the San took juridical action (supported by international NGO's) to regain access to the land. The ruling concluded that their the San's occupation was lawful, and that they had been coerced to leave; but the San would still be prohibited to enter the reserve without permit, and the GoB was still not obliged to restore its destruction of water facilities (ibid.). This was followed by an extensive battle of categorisation and recognition (or, better said, lack thereof) of the San's indigeneity, and essentialisations.

Once the San - who were previously targets of government support - voiced their desires, through juridical contention, the central body of institutions concerned with their well-being actively denied them of their demands. They sought to return to the land they had been previously 'invited to', after they had been forcefully displaced, but were met with government on the other side of the legal battle. And after the ruling in which they were judged to be right, they did not regain rights. Furthermore, when the San and their international support contested the ruling, the GoB strategically used the framework of modernisation and development as a means of denying the title of indigenous and the possible rights to resources that would come with it (ibid.: 257-8).

What this comes down to, then, is a defence mechanism by the Government of Botswana. The San's conceptions of desirabilities are battled and aimed to be rendered voiceless through the juridical system. There was no attempt to appease them and their desires to settle in the land once again. The course of action - in other words, the conception of desirability - was chosen, acted upon, and subsequently defended.

In another case, ancestral lands previously home to Western Shoshones, located in Nevada, U.S., have become utilised for gold mining (Carlin gold mine, since the 1980s exploited by Newmont Mining Corporation), storage for nuclear waste (under Yucca Mountain), and an open-pit gold mine (Cortez Gold Mine, exploited by Barrick Gold), by companies and the U.S. government (Clemmer 2009: 279-80). These places used to be part of Shoshones' meaningful rituals, and were sacred places. The Snake Mountain (Yucca Mountain) was a medium of communication between the Great Spirit and the people (ibid.: 280). The open-pit mine was on the highest peak of the Cortez Mountains, and contained 'sacred sites' (ibid.).

Many years prior to these installations, in 1863, the U.S. government and Western Shoshones signed treaties of 'peace and friendship' (ibid.: 282). These treaties facilitated the U.S. government in claiming the land and leasing it to private corporations, despite the unlawfulness of those actions.

A third into the twentieth century, Western Shoshones, with the support of an attorney, sought legal grants to their desired rights to occupy the land that the government had claimed. Years later, in 1946, the U.S. government created the Indian Claims Commission (ICC), which would function to hear process claims of 'American Indians' against the U.S. government (ibid.: 285). Notably, the intent of providing any monetary compensation to individual Indians was 'to encourage the "progress of the Indians who desire to be rehabilitated at the white man's level in the white man's economy"' (ibid.).

Moreover, the ICC's legal rationality came down to providing groups with a 'lose-lose tradeoff' (ibid.: 286). Groups could, at the maximum, seek monetary compensation for the land they had lost, with which they would lose the right to claim land; or they could 'give up any kind of compensation' (ibid.).

The article focuses on the Shoshones' strategy to deviate from the framework offered to them, but my concern here is the government's course of action. And that, again, concerns legal defence of actions planned and executed in the past, of which the benefits still outweigh the costs for the U.S. government. The well-being-machine was not concerned with the Western Shoshones' experience and meaning of the land, but rather with its (possible) utility. It offered those who sought to reclaim rights over land a helping hand, which merely guided them to a sketchy back-alley. And in that 'support', the rationality was - within the realm of white supremacy and capitalism - pursuing 'development' of the American Indians, identifiable in the motivation behind monetary compensation. Thus, here, again, the government's sole right to rule over desirability was aimed to be uncompromised.

The third case concerns the relatively new settlement of Khsem, Cambodia, consisting of the previously 'landless or land poor' (Lamb et al. 2017: 1222). Many of them belong to the Khmer community, who had been evicted on two occasions from their homeland which had become encroached by a Vietnamese-owned rubber plantation (ibid.: 1221). The evictions involved corporate and state authorities burning down cropland and 266 homes (ibid.: 1222-3). Following this traumatic event, men fled into the woods to avoid violent (military) retaliation (ibid.: 1223). Women were able to go into the village to collect belongings that survived the evictions, while men - as stated by authorities - would be shot, were they to do the same. Political action to contest the desirability of the evictions was gendered in the same way. The government decided who were and who weren't allowed to voice themselves in the matter of desirability. Men became more policed, and women - uncontested by authorities in their voicing - marched through the capital city (ibid.). Not only was their expression allowed, but also more strategic than if they were male: they could 'show the difficulty they face better than men do' (ibid.: 1224). As a result of these protests, the region's governor offered them an unspecified Social Land Concession (SLC), and after sharing their updated demands (including their lawful return to the same land they had been evicted from), they received a 750 hectare SLC in their homeland (ibid.: 1225).

Problematic about this concession was that the amount of families allowed to settle at the SLC was unspecified. This, and the fact they now lived in a government-controlled SLC, required a new relationship to the state. The rebuilding process of the community came down to 'a negotiated production of gendered roles and refounding state relations' (ibid.: 1228). Governance within the community, and the political relationship to government representatives, became a man's job (the committee consisted of eight highly educated men), whilst women had stood on the front line of political action to obtain the SLC (ibid.: 1229).

To illuminate the politics of desirability: the protest was successful, and they were granted what they fought for. In the process of fighting, however, not all voices were equally tolerated; men were threatened, whilst women were allowed to voice their experiences. In the political act of sharing their desirabilities, they had no choice but to abide by the state's gendered distinctions and demarcations of allowed behaviour. The governor offered them what they stated to desire, though, and signed an agreement. The SLC-agreement meant that not only the houses had to be physically rebuilt, but also the community's relationship to the state. Lamb et al. (ibid.: 1230) share important insight into the state's possible consideration: the rebuilding of state relations contributed to the constant process of (re)building the state itself. If the state is not considered as a homogenous entity, but rather as fractured, and in need for peoples' recognition of its authority over land (and the power to act upon its conception of desirability), a stronger and controlled relationship with 'internal refugees' (ibid.: 1225), settled in Khsem, would be beneficial in strengthening the state and its legitimacy (ibid.: 1230). Drawing on Gledhill (2009), this reinforcement of the state could have taken place - in this case - through the process of making the 'translocal [and thus not entirely observable] institution more visible in local practices' (Gupta in Gledhill 2009: 17). In other words, the 'imagined' state became more concrete.

In other words, whilst the contestation was recognised and validated, in the sense that the state offered a land concession, that action by the state does not necessarily mean it conceded its position in the political playing field of desirability. Rather, it stopped the public protest, and utilised the rebuilding process for controlled rebuilding recognition of legitimacy.

The last case finds itself surrounding Indonesia's Lore Lindu National Park. Situated in Central Sulawesi, the government acted in favour of conservation practices, which - with 2000 households in 60 surrounding

villages being dependent on cultivation and harvesting within the park for income (Li 2007: 127) - came down to attempts of 'optimising the relations between "men and things"' (ibid.: 123). This would be labeled as 'integrated conservation and development' (ibid.); interventions to alter landscapes, livelihoods, and desires. In 1990, law prohibited settlement and agricultural use of land within park borders (ibid.: 124). The promise of development justified - from the government's view - the choice to not compensate the park border villagers in other ways, as development was seen as a form of compensation (ibid.: 127-8). To be eligible for the 'development' through project benefits, households had to abide by conservation rules (ibid.: 131).

Opposition to the park's conservation governance grew the following years, due to government organs' failure to achieve its project goals, but also due to factors such as landlessness as a result of migrations, and increased political freedom of expression as a result of regime change (ibid.: 142). The Katu people started occupying land in the park, and quickly faced threats of eviction. They battled, with NGO support, for recognition of rightful settlement, with the argument that they were an indigenous community 'with the right to use and manage their customary domain' which they presented to be a sustainable system of practices (ibid.: 145). The village population, becoming 'critical, mobilised and informed', now had significant political power, and persuaded - opposing the officials in support of resettlement (eviction) - the park Director to stay (ibid.: 147). This victory was celebrated across Indonesia (ibid.), and encouraged other villagers surrounding the park to reclaim land as well, as the Katu's swidden practices were 'standard for the area' (ibid.: 150). And thus, in 2001, 1050 households claimed 4000 hectares of land in the park, calling themselves the Free Farmers Forum (FFF). They now occupied land within the Dongi-Dongi valley (ibid.).

Essential about the FFF is that they put the community outside of paternalistic governance from the state, positioning themselves 'outside the administrative grid in which every Indonesian citizen is supposed to be enmeshed' (ibid.: 158). They occupied it illegally. Only the Katu occupation was recognised as rightful by the park Director. The Farmers' motivations to occupy pointed at the many failed government interventions into their lives to deliver what it had promised (ibid.: 159). If the programs or projects had succeeded, the villagers would have been fine with the interventions; but they received insufficient benefits. Dongi-Dongi had everything that was previously promised but not delivered to them (ibid.: 166).

Authorities attempted to resettle the Farmers, but had not found an acceptable location to provide them with; the ones they found were 'inaccessible', and already occupied by other people, as investigated by 'forum leaders and NGO supporters' (ibid.: 163). The contestation's contestation was not limited to efforts of park authorities. The battle over power involved parties committed to conservation and ones supporting the occupation, who battled using assumptions of intentions, ideas of 'underdevelopment', responsibility and autonomy (ibid.: 176-80).

To analyse the park's case, it seems that one person in a position of power granted one group - the Katu, expressing their desired course of action and circumstances concerning livelihoods - the right to occupy land in the area subjected to conservation. What followed was a large group of people, in similar circumstances, having a common background in subjection to failed government resettlement schemes, illegally occupying land and forming a self-governing community. And the self-governing Dongi-Dongi occupation succeeded where government schemes failed. Previously, the Depsos resettlement program (discussed at the start of the previous chapter), which was set out to support landless and poor people, mainly benefitted government officials and village elites (ibid.: 183). Furthermore, in the Free Farmers Forum, Li

saw political consciousness not merely in political leaders, tasked with governance, but in many settlers, yielding a willingness to act upon their conceptions of desirability ‘for their families’ (ibid.: 184). In short, not only were the government’s schemes and its prohibition of park occupation contested, but also external governance itself.

Conclusion

Government responses to contestations vary greatly. In one case, freedom of expression and violent repression were gendered; in other cases, there was seemingly no threat of physical violence at all. Yet all cases involve an initial coerced eviction or resettlement, or at least prohibited use of territory that people considered their rightful homeland, followed by counter-action. The protestors’ intention was reclaiming land. The cases differ not only in specific government responses to them, but also in political liberties — or, better said, they differ in ways of protest. The first two contestations were positioned within the law, through a legal battle for recognition; the third case, of Khmer women, centered around physical marches through the capital; and the fourth case involved large-scale illegal settlement. All of these utilised their political power to protest, some in bolder ways than others.

It seems to be the case that the extent of political power exercised by the protestors, influences government response. The legal cases concerned battles in which both the state’s and the indigenous groups’ position were fixed. Threats to the state’s power over desirability, and its legitimacy, were to be found within the legal battle. Therefore, it could comfortably deny the groups’ demands, and strategically counter their argumentations. The physical marches of the Khmer women, gathering significant attention and thus enlarging their political influence, saw their demands met. The governor was initially hesitant to allow them the right to return to their land, but the protestors countered the offer with their new demands and received what they asked for. In the Dongi-Dongi case, too, many people were mobilised and informed — politically engaged and capable. The government’s aim was still resettlement of the FFF, but it could not make an offer the Farmers would accept.

From this perspective, it seems that the initial response to contestation is in line with the initial course of action. The government’s rationality is concerned with defending what it has caused. And, arguably, in cases where where government did grant people the rights they were protesting for, it was because it was the most rational course of action. The SLC offered to the Khmer is the best example of this. Granting them a bordered area within the space they used to live, would result in an end of the marches, and in the process of rebuilding it could strengthen state legitimacy.

Whilst it is the government’s task, it would not be convincing to say that it acted upon its conception of desirability anchored in the well-being of these people. It acted upon its own desirabilities: of an imagined picture of the settlement’s costs (financially and ecologically); of corporate interests; of defending state legitimacy of its authority; and, in the Dongi-Dongi case, of conservation. Indeed, it might even be said that the interpersonal matter of desirability is largely ignored, in the sense that these cases concern political battles in which none of the protestors’ expressions of desirability are genuinely heard by states. The intent was defence, and where it couldn’t, it attempted to limit damage and utilise it for its own benefit (of building legitimacy). The authority had to be protected.

This, as is discussed in the next chapter, is one of the possible issues *within* governance.

Chapter four

Issues *within* governance

Reading these cases and their analyses, especially as an anthropologist, can bring to mind many problems that the respective governments are guilty of. Exploiting its population, *educating* the *underdeveloped* peoples so they would function as they ought, and many cases of forced resettlement in the pursuit of corporate and state interests, are some of these problems. There are different categories of issues. The biggest division is between contingent and inherent ones. Chapter five deals with the inherent limits of government and the practice of governance in dealing with the ethical matter of desirability.

This chapter focuses on contingent issues. *Issues*, because they are, at least from the perspective I take in this thesis, cases where government did not do justice, but where they potentially could have done less injustice. The next chapter's '*limits*' signifies that lack of potential, and thus the impossibility of achieving justice toward desirability, were it to be pursued.

Contingent issues in the discussed cases can also be put into different categories. I will use the following categorisations, as they seem most useful and accurate to me: issues in programs (i.e. issues in the process of government's pursuit of achieving its goals); issues in desirability where well-being is *not* prioritised; and issues in desirability where well-being *is* or *seems to be* prioritised. This is also the chronology of this chapter, in which I discuss some of the possible issues categorisable in these boxes. After that discussion follows a short critique, leading to the foundations of chapter five.

Issues in programs

In Li's monograph (2007), one of the main focuses is the division between programs' aims and their realisations. Multiple government projects failed. As stated before, farmers in Rahmat in the New Order period shared the government's conception of development, and they wanted to find themselves in the circumstances pictured by the government; but it ended up benefitting the privileged and wealthy most, and left many villagers landless (ibid.: 89, 91). The failure can be attributed to multiple causes. The environment and the people targeted of intervention are difficult, if not impossible to govern: 'there are processes and relations that cannot be reconfigured according to plan' (ibid.: 17). It is often the case, too, that important factors are left out in the designing process, such as issues of the larger political-economic system and its practices (ibid.: 18). This is very clear in the colonial regimes, and is less but still identifiably evident in the discussed periods after, where an ideology of improving circumstances of dispossessed people finds itself entangled to the endorsement of capitalist practices (ibid.: 31). Another aspect to this latter phenomenon, and perhaps an issue of its own, is government's ability to pursue multiple, contradictory end goals. An example is supporting corporate interests, improving circumstances of the poor and landless, and ensuring state profit through governance (ibid.: 9), which resulted in hyperexploitation of the poor (ibid.: 41).

The last issue to be discussed here is contestations. People's conscious, explicit resistance to being governed, or to certain interventions into their lives, form a threat to the government's ability to act out its tasks. Acts of disobedience are obstacles to the process of pursuing planned goals, as, in the cases of

governance discussed in this thesis, subjects ought to comply to their subjection and to the changes they're subjected to.

Issues in desirability: state interests

The following section analyses the phenomenon of government programs and their practical implementations that clearly do not prioritise the population's well-being. The focus is not on the implementability, but on their issues concerning the open-ended, ethical question of desirability.

To put it bluntly, the discussed contestations all followed from interventions that seem to have excluded people's well-being in the process of shaping the programs. These initial interventions, for example the long period of land-grabbing by the U.S. government in Nevada, did not engage, in the process of conceptualising the desirabilities of the possible to-be-realised circumstances, people's own worldviews. The fact that Yucca Mountain contained sacred sites for the Western Shoshones sees no traces in the government's decision to utilise it as a place for nuclear waste storage. Furthermore, government responses to contestations were aimed at defending their initial intervention. People's actions of voicing their own critiques and desires did not result in their voices being heard and considered, but rather combatted through the framework of rational conduct. Where people were granted what they protested for, it was because it was the most rational course of action.

In these cases of contestation - and arguably in some regimes discussed in chapter two - government alone acts on what they believe to be desirable, yet not desirable for people subjected to the projects. At least, I assume here that desirabilities that do not include or prioritise the well-being of people targeted and influenced in the interventions, do not involve any potential desirabilities of subjected people. In other words, I believe it cannot be said that those projects concern desirabilities in the general sense, in its task of pursuing circumstances desirable for its population. Rather, these cases involve government rationalities aimed at pursuing certain specific, exclusive desirabilities. For corporations, its actions are desirable; when highly valuing the state and its hegemony, too, those interventions can be seen as desirable; but the dimension of subjected peoples' circumstances are not taken into consideration. And thus, clearly, government does not do justice to the matter of desirability here, as the lives most influenced by its course of action are kept out of the framework.

Issues in desirability: the pursuit of well-being

In other cases, the conception of desirability that is acted upon does seem to revolve around - or at least include - general well-being. Indonesia's colonial ethical period shows this most explicitly. Destructive interferences of the past into people's lives were recognised and acknowledged, and what followed was the government attempting to do justice to those whom it failed, through more extensive governance (ibid.: 41-42). The subjected lives were rendered more technical than before, and programs, with their measures, found their basis in the rationalisation and calculation of people's livelihoods and relationships (ibid.: 43). The New Order can also be seen to pursue its population's well-being through programs of development and education. People themselves were insufficient in their desires and habits, as were their circumstances, which are both strongly connected to each other. Perhaps the neoliberal period illustrates best that, even though it

may seem like it in those former two regimes, well-being is not pursued in people's own terms, but rather merely that of the government. The World Bank's conditions to be eligible for financial and expert support, and the underlying ideology, show the high valuation of people's participation in the global financial market. And thus, the main issue in the pursuit of people's well-being, is that these governments merely acted upon *their own conceptions*.

But as this chapter's point of focus is cases of *contingent* issues (and the one above is *inherent*, as will be elaborated on in the next chapter), my task is to illuminate some of the problems that can be found regarding desirability in cases where well-being does seem to be prioritised — all of which are interconnected. Perhaps these, or some of them, are not *contingent* at all; but I will leave that question open, whilst assuming that they are.

The first is the categorisation of specific people as 'in need of development', which functions as the backbone of motivation or justification. This itself creates a division between the educator, or the facilitator of development, and the target group. The group's subjection to this categorisation and following relationship of power is not consensual, even though their lives are significantly influenced and interfered with. This categorisation and nonconsensuality can be seen as two sides of the same problem: the initial involuntary subjection to power. Furthermore, the matter of desirability is depoliticised, meaning that the content of the programs' aims and methods are not open for discussion: 'questions [of governance] that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical' (ibid.: 7). Desirability is truly assumed by the actor in a position of power over the other. Monopoly over the matter is shielded in the state's control over political liberties. In many cases, people could not lawfully challenge their coercion, and where there are signs of political freedom, those are strictly moderated. The use of 'civil society' in the neoliberal era, for example, cannot be regarded as genuine attempt at political liberation: along with the promotion of 'democracy,' it is 'closely linked to the advancement of market economies and the United States' global interests by donor agencies' (Paley 2002: 482). In line with this, is the last issue, which, again, is interconnected to the previous ones: the lack of democratic enquiry. It is not a long stretch to state that well-being cannot be done justice if the processes exclude the interests and lived experiences of the subjected people. And thus, in short, while governments pursued people's well-being, they excluded those desires and conceptions of desirability.

Conclusion

Desirabilities - with their essential ethical dimension - are throughout this essay not considered as such by the respective governments. The ethical side is ignored and desirability assumed, with only controlled political space for involvement. Especially the contestations show that civil desirabilities are not considered as valuable on their own. This conception of the power relationship allows the state to defend its power until it is no longer rational to do so.

If someone were to suggest that establishing or reshaping a government - which would get rid of these discussed issues as much as possible, and thus includes to the most functional degree people's own conception of what their well-being would mean - would be better and more desirable, few would disagree. When accustomed to the concept of a parliamentary capitalist democracy, these issues seem to be 'issues'; unwanted. As this thesis is positioned from my own worldview - valuing genuine autonomy and ability to shape one's life, as long as people don't use it to limit that of others - I will not disagree either. However, this

position also implies critique on the politics of desirability in the 'free world', in the nation-states that seem most concerned with people's political involvement. Perhaps a significant number of people would say that the relatively wealthy countries of Western and Northern Europe qualify as these 'free countries.' For one, these regimes could be criticised from the same angle of contingent issues in policy-making as the discussed cases in this thesis, although their violations (of disregard) toward the ethical question might be less extensive. But what I have attempted to lay the foundations for throughout this work, is a framework allowing illumination and elaboration of issues in dealing with the matter of desirability that are *inherent to government*, the limits of ability. The next, final chapter discusses these characteristics that lead directly from the concept of government itself.

Chapter five

Limits of governance

All governments, by their definition and made more convincing by their practiced reality, are in multiple respects flawed in dealing with the (in this thesis much-discussed) matter of desirability. Such a statement, however, does not imply a specific valuation of government in general. Whether their benefits outweigh the costs, or whether a parliamentary democracy is more desirable than alternatives, are not subjects in this discussion. What matters here, is the respects in which governments are all inherently flawed in doing justice to the specific yet fundamental question of ‘what is desirable?’

As becomes clear, or has perhaps already become clear to you, is that the core limit of government is the phenomenon of generating a conception of desirability detached from people’s lived reality and without people’s own valued input, and subsequently acting upon it, impacting those lives. If you were to value the impacted lives as meaningful, important and equally worthy of existence and agency, the government’s core limit is deeply problematic, for aforementioned (and obvious) reasons.

The problematic political relationship that is fundamental to the core limit contains multiple dimensions. They are described in this chapter as if they are detached, but they are very much interconnected. Additionally, the extent to which they are present (and thus problematic) in governments is contingent — they are present in all, yet in differing degrees. But no matter the specific structure and practice of governments, they inherently contain these limits. The only way for them to not have those limits is when they cease to exist and make way for genuine self-government.

The dimensions of limitation

The first dimension of government’s limit in dealing with the question of desirability, is *hierarchy*. In other words, there is a relationship involving inequalities in political power. In government, there are those who decide and who instruct those who execute; and on the other side, those whose lives are impacted. In a hierarchical relationship, there can per definition never be a situation in which the political process of intervention-making concerns co-creation by policy makers and those most impacted by the policy. And for the question of desirability to be done justice, conscious and planned intervention ought to include or perhaps even revolve around desirability as understood by the target group. Especially when intervention is done in the name of their well-being, as the content of that well-being (again, when valuing the subjected people’s lives) cannot be conceptualised justly by a body of governance excluding people’s own conceptions.

The reason hierarchy is a limit in itself is that, firstly, it means that government has the sole right to grant people political freedoms to express their desires and conceptions of desirability, and thus has power over whom it includes in which decision-making process. This is an evident problem, as in the realm of desirability a skewed relationship of power over who gets to voice and to which extent supposes crucial inequalities. Secondly, the hierarchy ensures that a level playing field, in which everyone’s voices are taken into consideration to the extent that is necessary in a specific matter, is rendered impossible. If people are able to voice their conceptions appropriately, and it subsequently influences the decision-making process

appropriately and thus fully democratically, it has not been a process of governance. When there is no hierarchical relationship, there is no question of government; and in a hierarchy, desirability is neglected.

Another viewpoint on the limit sees the triad of *development*, *improvement* and *education*; in other words, the calculated alteration of people's desires, habits and beliefs. This is the process of *shaping* people. In the cases discussed, these three can be seen as one and the same. Development suggests improvement, and that is done through the reshaping of people themselves: education. What can also be seen is that this justification or motivation is twofold. On the one hand, it is an end goal in itself. Improvement is per definition good, and when caring for people's well-being, it is seen as desirable. Forming the population according to a more desirable potential image, generated by the government, is thus a constant goal to be pursued, as one of its inherent tasks is that of *shaping* (Li 2007: 5). On the other hand, it is instrumental. A governing body needs its population to cooperate, accept its interference, and to subdue themselves so that it can carry out its tasks. To achieve that, it must shape people's desires, habits and beliefs to the necessary extent.

The conscious, planned execution of reshaping people also comes down to calculatedly *manipulating people's conceptions of desirability*. In the political playing field, this means a process of homogenising people's positioning toward things with the aim of supporting government tasks. When desirability is considered as a meaningful, impactful and important ethical question, which regimes have not done in the discussed cases (and which perhaps no government can do without hindering its functioning), the concept of *shaping* means to kill subjected people in their position in the ethical matter. They are a priori rendered as less valid and less valuable than governments, by governments, every time there is a case in which the powerful body claims authority to control and alter people's behaviour and thoughts. Simply put, the people whom the intervention concerns are not considered an equal partner when a government consciously attempts to change them.

In turn, this task inherent to governance (ibid.) reinforces the stark division of power, and is a constant process of defending the state's monopoly over the matter of desirability. It functions as a goal in itself, an instrument for smoothening governance, and, importantly, as an instrument in strengthening the (hierarchical) political relationship between the body of governance and those who are governed. Additionally, from a functionalist standpoint, even clearly failed development programs enable states to enact political control in rural areas (Gledhill 2009: 18), supporting the theory of development projects as means of empowering the state (as implied by Lamb et al. 2017: 1230) and thus strengthening its hierarchical position.

The third dimension is the inability to act upon people's well-being. As stated earlier, pursuing people's well-being whilst excluding them from the process of conceptualising what constitutes as 'improvement' and thus as desirable, is fundamentally problematic in the light of desirability. With a hierarchy in place, weaponed with the instrument of *shaping*, it is impossible to co-create a genuine conception of what is believed to be desirable in a free, level political playing field. The only way to achieve an authentic understanding of people's desires and convictions, and to generate a generally acceptable conception of desirability, is through democracy. And with these limits in place, if there were to arise such a genuine understanding which can then be acted upon using political power, there is no government present, but rather self-government.

What might be notable about these limits, is that they assume a certain ‘right’ way to deal with the ethical question. I do not argue whether there is a practical possibility of achieving a just way of dealing with it. Furthermore, I also do not argue that all of these specific limits can be overcome in another political sphere. Instead, when looking at the concept at hand - an ethical and thus open-ended question, that involves a political relationship and the control of certain people over others - it is possible to identify that any inequality in influence over the matter has the potential to be problematic. Because it is open-ended, assumptions that impact others by acting upon it does not do justice — whether it can be done justice or not. With this reasoning in mind, I believe that a genuinely democratic political process is - in the realm of the matter of desirability - more desirable. And that statement in turn can be regarded as defeating its own purpose: assuming the desirability of a certain political structure. But when we take the ethical question of desirability to be fundamental to the political realm, to be the absolute core, it might be convincing to state that it is more just to approach the open-ended question with the inclusion of people’s voices whom the interventions concern, than to exclude them. To expand, there is (beside practicalities, which are not relevant here) no valid reason for some actors to have more power over the decision-process than others; and thus genuine democracy is less limited in dealing with the matter than a government.

The anarchist position

These critiques all concern a problematisation of political inequality. The difference in power, meaning the rule of certain people over others, turns out to be this analysis’ core limit in government’s dealing with the ethical matter of desirability. And in the realm of political positioning, this core critique and its contents - hierarchy, shaping subjects, and the insurmountable difference in understanding of what ‘well-being’ means - align with the political philosophy of anarchism. That is to say, when analysing the politics of desirability in the way that has been done in this thesis, the point of arrival is essentially anarchist. This is due to the approach to the matter. If claimed authority over desirability becomes unassumed, paired with the valuation of subjected people’s experiences and conceptions as meaningful and of no less value than that of others, arrival at anarchist critique of the state and of governance is inevitable. This contrasts Hobbes’ approach to the question, for example, as he believed the ‘natural state’ of people to be one of constant conflict (Hobbes 1651: 78). To avoid this, people *had* to subjugate to a sovereign power; and thus, he saw people’s experiences and conceptions of desirability as subordinate to that of the ruler’s.

But with my approach to the analysis, the anarchist perspective seems self-evident, or at least somewhat convincing, precisely because it directly aligns with both the approach and the resulting critiques. Literally, anarchy, derived from the greek word *anarchia*, means ‘the government of no-one’ (Kinna 2019: 9). It is, among other things, a philosophy considering the governance of man over man to be fundamentally unjust and essentially slavery (Proudhon in Guérin 1971: 16). Thus, all anarchists oppose authority (Woodcock 1977 [1962]: 7). And when looking at these cases, and additionally considering the less-unjust ‘free countries,’ anarchist critique is on monarchies as much as on ‘democratic’ states, as they share a common foundation of exploitation and domination (although a transition from the former to the latter is seen as positive change; Proudhon & Bakunin in Guérin 1971: 20-21). To illustrate critique on democratic

states: ‘Het algemeen stemrecht [...] is een uitnemend middel om het volk te onderdrukken en te ruïneren uit naam en onder de mom van een zogenaamde volkswil’ (Bakunin in Guérin 1971: 18).²

In addition to that critique on the state and governance, ‘the anarchist sees progress not in terms of a steady increase in material wealth and complexity of living, but rather in terms of the moralizing of society by the abolition of authority, inequality, and economic exploitation’ (Woodcock 1977 [1962]: 26). Moreover, anarchism generally includes opposition to *shaping* processes by people in positions of authority, and the individual and collective task of cleansing oneself from them (Guérin 1971: 28).

Fundamental to these points of view is a deep valuation of the individual, paired with faith in the masses, and thus in people themselves (ibid.: 27). What follows from these explicitly anarchist critiques, and what is at the same time an assumption they build upon, is that no one but you can represent yourself and your desires, habits and beliefs. This creates a fourth dimension to the limits of governance: the inherently flawed phenomenon of political representation. This comes down to the normative statement of ‘no one can act on your behalf.’ Whilst this is not necessarily shown in these cases, or its persuasiveness set in stone, it does help in understanding the broader anarchist rationale.

In short, both my approach to the ethical question and the critiques of government that follow from it, align with anarchist thought. The approach I have taken in the analysis is one in which inequalities in influence over which conception of desirability is acted upon are seen as deeply problematic, because of a high valuation of people’s lives, livelihoods and experiences. The resulting critiques, too, are anarchist, in the sense that *rule* of certain people *over* others cannot be considered just in the light of desirability. State, government, authority and hierarchy are ethically inadequate — shown through analyses on the politics of desirability.

Conclusion

In critiquing issues inherent to government, in the matter of desirability, lies a different approach in viewing authority than in the previous chapter. The issues in governance were not only contingent, but also did not question the state’s authority over others. The claim to rule over the ethical matter, with its monopoly, was questioned in this chapter, and subsequently categorised as the core limit of governance. State sovereignty became un-assumed. And whenever that is done, multiple limits become clear. The body of power, claiming the right to act upon the well-being of others, is in essence met with unbeatable obstacles in dealing with the ethical question. A more just approach to the matter would centre around the desirabilities of the people most concerned with the effects of the interventions — which cannot be done within the limits of the state. And thus, when genuinely valuing people and their abilities, analysis of the politics of desirability directly leads to an anarchist perspective.

² Rough translation: ‘Universal suffrage [...] is an excellent means of oppressing and ruining the people in the name and under the guise of a so-called popular will’ (the in-text quote is in Dutch, which is the language of the copy I have)

Conclusion

'Highlanders were Christianized, educated by missions, moved out of the hills and forests, labeled primitive, made to farm in new ways, intimidated by officials, faced with "choices" about whether or not to sell their land, made to feel poor as they watched others advance, told to be grateful for development assistance, informed about conservation, and invited to "participate" in a micromanaged process designed to consolidate their own dispossession. Much of this transpired, moreover, in the name of their well-being.'

(Li 2007: 228)

What is at stake when dealing with the ethical question of desirability is not merely a person's (material) livelihood and environmental circumstances, but also a potential active interference into a person's deeply personal task of finding one's way in life, of shaping oneself and finding out what works best. There are infinite ways of filling in that question of how to live, what to pursue, and so on. As is shown in this thesis, governments act upon a conception of how to live, and what is believed to be desirable, to be generalised and implemented into the lives of many. Existential interference in general happens in many ways in life, and is necessary to some degree; but that doesn't say anything about the desirability of it. What we can identify is government's shortcomings - and inherent, for that matter - in dealing with that existential aspect of people; of shaping a life. Finding out which goals are worthy of pursuit; what matters most in life; what one wants and needs in daily life and in the longer term; and so on. Those knowledges and their pursuit can be disturbed, manipulated (per definition, according to Li (ibid.: 5)), enhanced, 'improved' — but always controlled. And its outcomes can be for the worse or for the better, depending on the perspective's approach to answering the question of desirability. But it does not matter here whether it can be desirable; what matters here is government's inherent lack of ability to do justice to the question of personal, existential desirability.

This existential aspect is only one way of looking at the matter. But what it comes down to, is that people's lives are subjected to a body of governance that acts upon its own conceptions of 'what is desirable' and holds on to its monopoly in the political realm of desirability. The ethical question involves some of the deepest possible individual quests, and a government acts as if the question is no such thing. Rather, government action can be seen as political attempts to keep the matter of desirability a non-question, a matter of technical and rational governance.

This is true in varying degrees when looking at different regimes. Chapter two of this paper laid the foundations for analysis of desirability, after the concept had been elaborated on in chapter one. Additionally, chapter two illustrated some ways governmentalities can vary across time, and the extents to which people's everyday lives are impacted or controlled. Chapter three's contestations broadened the varieties of government action and of ways people were able to counter land-grabbing. But both chapters also showed strong commonalities in government rationality and its position in the politics of desirability. In the cases, desirability is never considered an open-ended ethical question, and subjected people's own desirabilities - when those are uncontrolled by the state - are obstacles to governance. Desirability is assumed and acted upon, and subsequently defended.

When looking at the issues to be found in the cases, there were different kinds; contingent (which contained issues in the government's execution of program plans; issues in which it did not prioritise well-

being; and issues where it did prioritise well-being, but where state monopoly over desirability remained internally unquestioned), and inherent. Governments can take on many forms, have many different aims and methods of pursuing those aims, and have different relationships to their populations; but all of them are fundamentally confined in their limits of doing justice to the ethical matter. The extents to which they assume desirabilities, and pursue state interest, and grant or deny political freedoms, can vary a great deal — yet none of them are able to transcend their limits without disintegrating. Because of the political structures and mechanisms inherent to government - hierarchy, maintaining power over the ability to act upon desirability, shaping individuals in their population - it is impossible to pursue improvement in people's genuine well-being. All the government can do is assume and act, as rising above the issues would require a different political organisation of power.

Thomas Hobbes' idea of a mass consensus toward subjection to a sovereign political power, on which the phenomenon of government is built (though globally, regimes have generally become more democratic over time), differs from this thesis' approach in one big aspect: valuation of people themselves. Without such a thing, and thus with an image of 'natural' life to be horrid, the matter of desirability is not a question at all, but rather something to be acted upon in the best technical way. Similar to the self-government of the Rojava as described in the introduction, the Dongi-Dongi case showed not only that people can be willing to self-govern, and to do so relatively successfully; but also that Hobbes' description of life as 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' (Hobbes 1651: 78) can be made reality under government supervision, and even as a direct result of its interventions. Many of those occupying the Dongi-Dongi Valley were previously victims of Depsos' resettlement programs which caused death (to malaria) and exploitation (Li 2007: 87, 159). To escape and to preserve themselves, they positioned themselves outside of state influence.

State influence was not always resisted in the cases discussed, and even less did subjected people not share the government's general ideas of development and improvement. The farmers occupying land in the park 'wanted to be "made orderly by the government," as long as the rule was just' (Li 2007: 228). This thesis falls short to a large extent in one aspect: situations in which people consent with their subjection. It would add nuance to the critique and balance the negative valuation of governance. But my approach to the matter has been consciously narrow. In the light of desirability, these possible alignments in conceptions are *happy accidents*. The discussed cases have shown government action that lead to exploitation and oppression, which some people contested, and were met with continued state defence of state power and of previously executed action. Besides this fact - that no illustrated cases involved full compliance and consent - it is the essence of government to not revolve around the concept of consent. Subjected people have not consented to their governance because government does not require such consent before intervening in people's lives. As stated before, sharing the government's conception of desirability is beneficial for people themselves; but for the government, it is irrelevant (beside the technical benefit of the population's cooperation) whether people share it, as it is considered a technical rather than ethical question. That is why I have taken this approach to the workings of government. And eventually, it should not matter what governments' specific motivations and rationales are, when analysing their methods of dealing with the question of desirability. Because at the core, they are significantly flawed in dealing with the real and lived ethical question of desirability.

Reference list

- Clemmer, R.O. (2009) 'Land Rights, Claims, and Western Shoshones: The Ideology of Loss and the Bureaucracy of Enforcement.' *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 32-2: 279–311.
- Dirik, D. (2018) 'The Revolution of Smiling Women: Stateless Democracy and Power in Rojava' in: O.U. Rutazibwa & R. Shilliam (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Postcolonial Politics* London, Routledge: 222-238.
- Frankl, V. (2011 [1959]) *Man's Search for Meaning: the Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust* London, Rider.
- Gledhill, J. (2009) 'Power in Political Anthropology' *Journal of Power* 2-1: 9-34.
- Guérin, D. (1971) *Het Anarchisme* Utrecht/Antwerpen, A.W. Bruna & Zoon.
- Hobbes, T. (1651) 'Leviathan' <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf>, accessed on June 11th 2021.
- Kinna, R. (2019) 'Context: Anarchism and the international.' in: Kinna, R. *The Government of No One* London, Penguin Books Ltd.: 9-41.
- Lamb, V., L. Schoenberger, C. Middleton and B. Un (2017) 'Gendered Eviction, Protest and Recovery: a Feminist Political Ecology Engagement with Land Grabbing in Rural Cambodia.' *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 44-6: 1215-1234.
- Li, T.M. (2007) *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* Durham & London, Duke University Press.
- Paley, J. (2002) 'Toward an Anthropology of Democracy.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 469-496.
- "Rojava" (2015) *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 26-1: 1-15.
- Rose, N., P. O'Malley & M. Valverde (2006) 'Governmentality' *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 2-1: 83-104.
- Sylvain, R. (2014) 'Essentialism and the Indigenous Politics of Recognition in Southern Africa.' *American Anthropologist* 116-2: 251-264.
- VeneKlasen, L., & Miller, V. (2007) *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*. Warwickshire, Practical Action Publishing.
- Woodcock, G. (1977 [1962]) *Anarchism* Aylesbury, Hazell Watson & Viney Ltd.