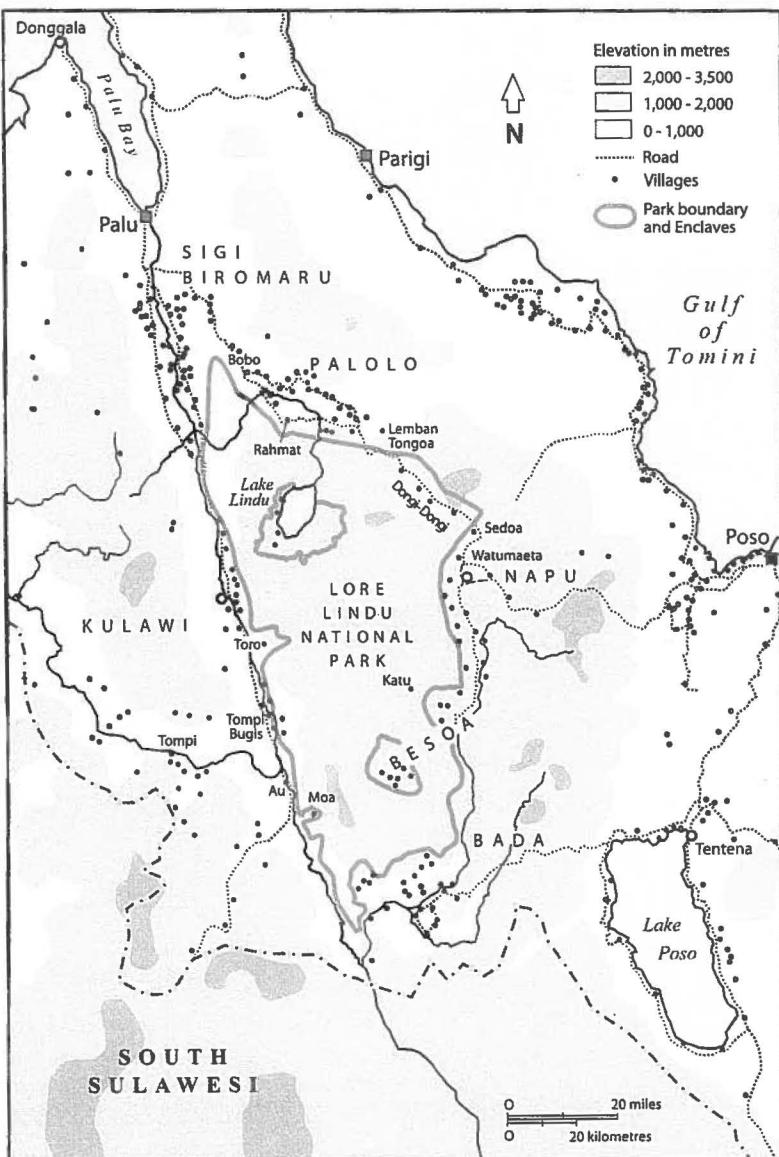


Introduction

THE WILL TO IMPROVE



MAP 2 Central Sulawesi Highlands and Lore Lindu National Park

Indonesia, a nation beset with poverty and violence, may seem a strange choice for an investigation of the will to improve. Yet talk of improvement is everywhere, in offices and villages across the archipelago. It is not just talk. Programs that set out to improve the condition of the population in a deliberate manner have shaped Indonesian landscapes, livelihoods, and identities for almost two centuries. Ironically, these programs, intertwined with other processes and relations, set the conditions for some of the problems that exist today. Programs to move populations from one place to another, better to provide for their needs; programs to rationalize the use of land, dividing farm from forest; programs to educate and modernize—all of these are implicated in contemporary sites of struggle.

The outcomes of improvement schemes are not always bad. Programs of improvement often bring changes that people want—more roads and bridges, fewer floods and diseases, less corruption and waste. My purpose in this book is not to condemn. Rather, I seek to understand the rationale of improvement schemes—what they seek to change, and the calculations they apply. I also seek to understand their effects, as they intersect with other processes shaping particular conjunctures. My title *The Will to Improve* draws attention to the inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished. It also highlights the persistence of this will—its parasitic relationship to its own shortcomings and failures. The will is stubborn, but it is no mystical *geist* or teleology. Indeed, I have often been struck by the rather mundane way it is expressed. After listening patiently to my account of the troubled history of

improvement schemes in the highlands of Sulawesi, one expert summed up his position thus: "You may be right, but we still have to do something, we can't just give up."

There is no sign that schemes for improvement are about to be abandoned. There are always experts ready to propose a better plan. I do not dismiss their efforts. Nor, however, do I offer a recipe for how improvement can be improved. I take a critical stance, one that seeks to prize open expert knowledge and expose its limits. In so doing, I hope to expand the possibilities for thinking critically about what is and what might be. I argue that the positions of critic and programmer are properly distinct. A central feature of programming is the requirement to frame problems in terms amenable to technical solutions. Programmers must screen out refractory processes to circumscribe an arena of intervention in which calculations can be applied. They address some problems, and necessarily not others. Under pressure to program better, they are not in a position to make programming itself an object of analysis. A critic can take a broader view. I believe such a view has value, although its importance should not be exaggerated. As I will show, some of the more incisive critiques of improvement are generated by people who directly experience the effects of programs launched in the name of their well-being.

In the contemporary era, challenges to improvement programs are often framed in the language of unkept promises, or in the related language of rights, increasingly codified in national and transnational laws. Yet concepts of right are also embedded in commonsense notions that have, in Kirstie McClure's words, "more to do with felt sensation, with embodied perceptions of injury or abuse." The "subject of rights," McClure observes, is "a prickly creature, wary and willful, . . . a subject suspicious of those who claim to speak in its name."¹ I will describe prickly subjects of this kind in Sulawesi, subjects who clearly understand the relationship between their current insecurities and the defects of the improving programs carried out in their name, but who have been driven to act, individually and collectively, by injuries experienced as visceral, personal attacks on their ability to sustain their own lives. When processes of class formation, the damaging effects of improvement programs, and the failure of experts to deliver on their promises coincide—as they often do, for reasons I will explain—mobilization is apt to follow. Political economy and contestation thus stand alongside the will to improve as pillars of my analysis.

In the classic tradition of anthropology, my approach in this book is to make improvement strange, the better to explore its peculiarities and its effects. The discussions of improvement taking place in village meeting halls, in debates among activists, and in the offices of donors and officials might seem so banal to me after more than a decade of research in Indonesia that they would escape attention. Yet every time I meet someone with a plan to realign landscapes and livelihoods, or improve the capacities of villagers by supplying a technology or institution they are presumed to lack, I am amazed by it. I was especially struck by the concentration of expert attention focused on one of my research sites in the highlands of Central Sulawesi, an area that has received wave after wave of intervention over a period of a century. This site is striking partly because it is so different from my other highland field site, a few hundred kilometers away, where improvement schemes have been scarce and highland farmers make their own way as best they can. It is the busy site that forms my subject matter in several chapters of this book. The wealth of documentation about improvement programs, combined with a rich set of ethnographic and historical accounts and my own fieldwork, provides a unique opportunity to examine what each program sought to change and how.² Just as important, this material enables me to track the effects of planned interventions as they have layered up one upon the next and intersected with other processes to shape the landscapes, livelihoods, and identities of the highland population.

There is a second aspect to my experience of the strangeness of improvement. I find an ethnographic appreciation of the complexities of rural relations to be antithetical to the position of expert. This might seem counterintuitive. Surely a person like me, after more than a decade of research, has ideas about how to translate that knowledge into effective programs to help people? Indeed, I am sometimes asked by anthropologically trained development administrators in Indonesia to provide suggestions about what they should do. More specifically, they ask me to provide them with a bridge between my research describing the dynamics of rural life, which some of them have read, and the world of projects, which they inhabit. Such a bridge eludes me. Why is it, I ask myself, that so many experts can examine Indonesia and devise programs to improve it, whereas I cannot? This is not a matter of coyness or modesty on my part. Still less am I indifferent to the problems of poverty, disease, and ecological disaster that experts seek to resolve. I believe my predicament is diagnostic. It enables

me to ask what ways of thinking, what practices and assumptions are required to translate messy conjunctures, with all the processes that run through them, into linear narratives of problems, interventions, and beneficial results.³

My reflections on improvement are conditioned, further, by my occasional work as a development consultant. I have observed the limited tolerance of elites for interventions that might actually restructure relations in favor of the poor. One example from the early 1990s will illustrate. Invited by a development agency to prepare a report on land tenure issues in a highland area, I found that a program to encourage hillside farmers to plant a new crop, cacao, was having some unintended effects. Most significantly, it was providing an opportunity for elites living on the coast to grab hillside land on the grounds that they could make efficient use of it, while the backward hill folk could not. When I exposed this problem, the project directors took it seriously. They initiated a program to help the hill farmers document their legal rights to the hillside land so it could not be stolen from them. This was a novel initiative at the time, some years before Indonesia's indigenous rights movement made talk of indigenous land rights familiar. The Indonesian legal consultant hired by the project began the uphill task of trying to persuade officials in the provincial capital that the hill farmers do indeed have legal rights to their customary land, and the Basic Agrarian Law (passed in 1960 under the populist president Sukarno) has provisions for recognizing those rights. The outcome of her efforts was a backlash. The implication of recognizing customary rights was recognized by the Governor as a threat to the status quo, and he issued a formal edict stating that there is no customary land at all in the province of Central Sulawesi. The edict is still being used to justify dispossession. Customary rights activists in the provincial capital, Palu, are still trying to get it rescinded. This incident is also diagnostic. It leads me to ask how programs of improvement are shaped by political-economic relations they cannot change; how they are constituted, that is, by what they exclude.

THE WILL TO IMPROVE

Many parties share in the will to improve. They occupy the position of trustees, a position defined by the claim to know how others should live, to know what is best for them, to know what they need. Trusteeship is defined as "the intent

which is expressed, by one source of agency, to develop the capacities of another."⁴ The objective of trusteeship is not to dominate others—it is to enhance their capacity for action, and to direct it. In Indonesia, since the nineteenth century, the list of trustees includes colonial officials and missionaries, politicians and bureaucrats, international aid donors, specialists in agriculture, hygiene, credit and conservation, and so-called nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) of various kinds. Their intentions are benevolent, even utopian. They desire to make the world better than it is. Their methods are subtle. If they resort to violence, it is in the name of a higher good—the population at large, the survival of species, the stimulation of growth. Often, their schemes operate at a distance. They structure a field of possible actions. They modify processes. They entice and induce. They make certain courses of action easier or more difficult. Many schemes appear not as an external imposition, but as the natural expression of the everyday interactions of individuals and groups. They blend seamlessly into common sense.⁵ Sometimes they stimulate a more or less radical critique. Whatever the response, the claim to expertise in optimizing the lives of others is a claim to power, one that merits careful scrutiny.

The will to improve is situated in the field of power Michel Foucault termed "government."⁶ Defined succinctly as the "conduct of conduct," government is the attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means. Distinct from discipline, which seeks to reform designated groups through detailed supervision in confined quarters (prisons, asylums, schools), the concern of government is the well-being of populations at large. Its purpose is to secure the "welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc."⁷ To achieve this purpose requires distinctive means. At the level of population, it is not possible to coerce every individual and regulate their actions in minute detail. Rather, 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*."⁸ Persuasion might be applied, as authorities attempt to gain consent. But this is not the only course. When power operates at a distance, people are not necessarily aware of how their conduct is being conducted or why, so the question of consent does not arise.

The will to govern, and more specifically, the will to improve the condition of

the population, is expansive. In Foucault's definition, it is concerned with "men in their relations, their links, their imbrication with . . . wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with all its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to . . . customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.; and lastly, men in their relation to . . . accidents and misfortunes such as famine, epidemics, death, etc."⁹ Trustees intervene in these relations in order to adjust them. They aim to foster beneficial processes and mitigate destructive ones. They may operate on population in the aggregate, or on subgroups divided by gender, location, age, income, or race, each with characteristic deficiencies that serve as points of entry for corrective interventions.

To improve populations requires the exercise of what Foucault identified as a distinct, governmental rationality—a way of thinking about government as the "right manner of disposing things" in pursuit not of one dogmatic goal but a "whole series of specific finalities" to be achieved through "multiform tactics."¹⁰ Calculation is central, because government requires that the "right manner" be defined, distinct "finalities" prioritized, and tactics finely tuned to achieve optimal results.¹¹ Calculation requires, in turn, that the processes to be governed be characterized in technical terms. Only then can specific interventions be devised.

An explicit, calculated program of intervention is not invented ab initio. It is traversed by the will to improve, but it is not the product of a singular intention or will. It draws upon and is situated within a heterogeneous assemblage or *dispositif* that combines "forms of practical knowledge, with modes of perception, practices of calculation, vocabularies, types of authority, forms of judgement, architectural forms, human capacities, non-human objects and devices, inscriptions techniques and so forth."¹² Although there are occasions when a revolutionary movement or visionary announces a grand plan for the total transformation of society—the kind of plan James Scott describes as "high modern," more often programs of intervention are pulled together from an existing repertoire, a matter of habit, accretion, and bricolage.¹³ There are of course individuals involved in devising particular interventions and programs of improvement. The position of programmers is structured by the enterprise of which they form a part. It is routinized in the practices in which they engage. What, then, are these practices?

RENDERING TECHNICAL

Two key practices are required to translate the will to improve into explicit programs. One is problematization, that is, identifying deficiencies that need to be rectified. The second is the practice I call "rendering technical," a short-hand for what is actually a whole set of practices concerned with representing "the domain to be governed as an intelligible field with specifiable limits and particular characteristics . . . defining boundaries, rendering that within them visible, assembling information about that which is included and devising techniques to mobilize the forces and entities thus revealed."¹⁴

The practices of problematization and rendering technical are not separate. As James Ferguson explained in his landmark study of development in Lesotho, the bounding and characterization of an "intelligible field" appropriate for intervention anticipates the kinds of intervention that experts have to offer.¹⁵ The identification of a problem is intimately linked to the availability of a solution. They coemerge within a governmental assemblage in which certain sorts of diagnoses, prescriptions, and techniques are available to the expert who is properly trained. Conversely, the practice of "rendering technical" confirms expertise and constitutes the boundary between those who are positioned as trustees, with the capacity to diagnose deficiencies in others, and those who are subject to expert direction. It is a boundary that has to be maintained and that can be challenged.

There is a second dimension to rendering technical, equally central to my analysis. Questions that are rendered technical are simultaneously rendered nonpolitical. For the most part, experts tasked with improvement exclude the structure of political-economic relations from their diagnoses and prescriptions. They focus more on the capacities of the poor than on the practices through which one social group impoverishes another. This feature led James Ferguson to describe the apparatus of planned development as an "antipolitics machine" that "insistently repos[es] political questions of land, resources, jobs, or wages as technical 'problems' responsive to the technical 'development' intervention."¹⁶ Antipolitics of this kind is subliminal and routine. Experts are trained to frame problems in technical terms. This is their job. Their claim to expertise depends on their capacity to diagnose problems in ways that match the kinds of solution that fall within their repertoire. Yet the

practice of excluding or, as Ferguson put it, “reposing political questions” in technical terms is itself an intervention with far-reaching effects. As I will show throughout this book, this exclusion both limits and shapes what improvement becomes.

A third dimension to improvement might also be labeled antipolitics: the design of programs as a deliberate measure to contain a challenge to the status quo. In Britain in 1847, for example, an observer argued for special programs for paupers because they were “the class of men injured by society who consequently rebel against it.”¹⁷ Another argued, “Assisting the poor is a means of government, a potent way of containing the most difficult section of the population and improving all the other sections.”¹⁸ In the Netherlands, it was a subsistence crisis in 1816–17 combined with the French Revolution—a ready reminder of the dangers posed by poverty and despair—that prompted the scholar-administrator Van den Bosch to devise programs to teach rural paupers how to work. These were programs he later adapted and transposed to the Netherlands East Indies, as I explain in chapter 1.¹⁹ Social welfare programs in the global North arose from the convergence of expert concerns about the condition of the population, and the challenge of organized labor.

The transnational practice of development as it emerged in the 1950s responded to the threat posed by popular mobilization in the global South, witness the subtitle to Walter Rostow’s book *The Stages of Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*.²⁰ It was intimately linked to counterinsurgency and the cold war, a battle for hearts and minds waged through promises to solve the problem of hungry bellies. In Southeast Asia in the 1960s, the U.S. concern with falling dominoes prompted support for repressive regimes prepared to squash a communist threat. In Indonesia, Suharto’s role in engineering the massacre of up to half a million alleged communists in 1965 was rewarded by lavish support from international aid donors that helped sustain the New Order regime for more than three decades (1965–98). The New Order concept of development was an explicit attempt to contain the challenge presented by a mobilized peasantry demanding land reform and turn them into a “floating mass” that would vote as instructed, and concentrate on improved farming and other technical matters.²¹

Notwithstanding instances in which improvement is deployed to contain a political challenge, I do not argue that improvement is merely a tactic to

maintain the dominance of particular classes, or to assert control by the global North over the South—an interpretation common to dependency theory and its variants.²² Rather than assume a hidden agenda, I take seriously the proposition that the will to improve can be taken at its word. This is another important lesson learned from Ferguson’s *Anti-politics Machine*. Interests are part of the machine, but they are not its master term. There are indeed hybrids, in which improvement schemes serve to enrich a ruling group or secure their control over people and territory. There are instances of bad faith. There are sound reasons to be skeptical of some of the claims made in the name of improvement. But for several centuries trustees have endeavored to secure the welfare of populations and carried out programs that cannot be explained except in these terms.

In my view, the rush to identify hidden motives of profit or domination narrows analysis unnecessarily, making much of what happens in the name of improvement obscure.²³ Trustees charged with the welfare of populations cannot support only the interests of a select group. They must attempt to balance all sorts of relations between “men and things.” To govern, as Foucault made clear, is to seek not one dogmatic goal, but “a whole series of specific finalities.” Diverse “finalities” may be incompatible, yielding interventions that are in tension with one another, or downright contradictory. As I will explain in chapter 1, concerns to secure orderly rule, entrepreneurial profit, revenues to support the state apparatus, and native improvement jostled awkwardly for more than a century in the Netherlands East Indies. In this colony as in others, they were the subject of continuous debate among colonial officials, missionaries, politicians, commercial lobbies, and critics of various persuasions. There was no unitary purpose to colonial rule.

In the Sulawesi highlands, my focus in chapters 2 to 6, some trustees have promoted capitalism in the earnest belief that “efficient” markets bring prosperity to the poor. Others have promoted subsistence, community self-help, and cooperation. Several schemes have focused on public health, education, and forest conservation. The profits to be gleaned from such schemes, if any, are modest and indirect. Indeed, many improvement schemes have no foreseeable prospect of yielding profits for anyone. If profit were the issue, no international donor or agriculture department would have invested in the rugged hills of Central Sulawesi. From the optic of profits, the transnational

endeavor to conserve tropical rainforests is quite mysterious. One can make a link with bio-prospecting and pharmaceutical corporations, but it is tenuous. In the highlands of Sulawesi, conservationists attempting to protect the Lore Lindu National Park recognize that bio-prospectors have not materialized, and indeed, they may not come. They defend the park because, in their view, a park has a place in the proper management of relations between “men and things” and benefits the population at large. Similarly, the World Bank’s billion-dollar scheme to make village planning more participatory and transparent, my focus in chapter 7, might help prepare villagers for the expansion of global capital, but the link, if any, is indirect.

POLITICS AS PROVOCATION

Although rendering contentious issues technical is a routine practice for experts, I insist that this operation should be seen as a project, not a secure accomplishment. Questions that experts exclude, misrecognize, or attempt to contain do not go away. On this point I diverge from scholars who emphasize the capacity of expert schemes to absorb critique, their effective *achievement* of depoliticization. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, among others, argue that expert knowledge takes “what is essentially a political problem, removing it from the realm of political discourse, and recasting it in the neutral language of science.” They find expertise closed, self-referencing and secure once a “technical matrix” has been established. Resistance, or failure to achieve a program’s stated aims, comes to be “construed as further proof of the need to reinforce and extend the power of the experts.” Thus “what we get is not a true conflict of interpretations about the ultimate worth or meaning of efficiency, productivity, or normalization, but rather what might be called a conflict of implementations.”²⁴ Similarly, Timothy Mitchell describes discursive practices that translate issues of poverty, landlessness, and hunger into problems of public health to be solved by technical interventions in social relations and hygiene. In his account, experts rule: much of the time, they succeed in disguising their failures and continue to devise new programs with their authority unchallenged.²⁵ Ferguson offers the qualified observation that development “may also very effectively squash political challenges to the system” by its insistent reposing of political questions in technical term.²⁶ Nikolas Rose

stresses the “switch points” where critical scrutiny of governmental programs is absorbed back into the realm of expertise, and “an opening turns into a closure.”²⁷

Closure, as these scholars have shown, is indeed a feature of expert discourses. Such discourses are devoid of reference to questions they cannot address, or that might cast doubt upon the completeness of their diagnoses or the feasibility of their solutions. In particular, as Ferguson and Mitchell stress, they exclude what I call political-economic questions—questions about control over the means of production, and the structures of law and force that support systemic inequalities. I am fascinated by the question of how these questions are screened out in the constitution of improvement as a technical domain, and I examine this operation in detail in several chapters of this book. Yet I am equally interested in the “switch” in the opposite direction: in the conditions under which expert discourse is punctured by a challenge it cannot contain; moments when the targets of expert schemes reveal, in word or deed, their own critical analysis of the problems that confront them. I make a conjuncture of this kind the focus of my analysis in chapters 4 and 5.

From the perspective proposed by Foucault, openings and closures are intimately linked. He describes the interface between the will to govern and what he calls a strategy of struggle as one of “permanent provocation.”²⁸ He writes:

For a relationship of confrontation, from the moment it is not a struggle to the death, the fixing of a power relationship becomes a target—at one time its fulfillment and its suspension. And in return the strategy of struggle also constitutes a frontier for the relationship of power, the line at which, instead of manipulating and inducing actions in a calculated manner, one must be content with reacting to them after the event. . . . In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal.²⁹

As I see it, the unsettled meaning of the terms *politics* and *the political* hinge on this element of linking and reversal.³⁰ Is politics the name for a relation of power, or a practice of contestation? At what point does one slide into the other?

In order to pin down the relation of “perpetual reversal” that Foucault describes in rather abstract terms and to make it the subject of empirical investi-

tigation, I have settled on a terminology that distinguishes between what I call the practice of government, in which a concept of improvement becomes technical as it is attached to calculated programs for its realization,³¹ and what I call the practice of politics—the expression, in word or deed, of a critical challenge. Challenge often starts out as refusal of the way things are. It opens up a front of struggle. This front may or may not be closed as newly identified problems are rendered technical and calculations applied. Government, from this perspective, is a response to the practice of politics that shapes, challenges, and provokes it. The practice of politics stands at the limit of the calculated attempt to direct conduct. It is not the only limit, however. In the next section, I examine the limit presented by force.

GOVERNMENTALITY, SOVEREIGNTY, AND DISCIPLINE

Foucault's essay "Governmentality" makes a useful distinction between the purpose of government—the well-being of populations—and the purpose of sovereignty. Sovereignty, he argues, is circular: its purpose is the confirmation and extension of the might of the sovereign, demonstrated in the size of the realm, the number of subjects, and the riches accumulated.³² A sovereign's authority to issue commands, punish enemies, deduct taxes, and bestow gifts is absolute. A sovereign can choose who will live or die and wreak havoc with impunity. To govern, in contrast, is "to be condemned to seek an authority for one's authority."³³ When violence is used, it must be justified by a notion of improvement. Its purpose cannot be mere plunder or domination.

Although Foucault's essay on governmentality suggests a teleological unfolding toward government as a superior form of rule originating and taken to its highest form in Europe—an ethnocentric replay of modernization theory—the essay offers a second, more interesting possibility: that the analytic of governmentality be used to examine how practices of rule articulate elements of government, sovereignty, and discipline. At some historical conjunctures a sovereign's might is best confirmed—and secured—by ensuring the well-being of the population and augmenting its prosperity. Although the right of a sovereign may be absolute, sovereigns have often been judged good or bad according to their capacity to secure the welfare of their people. In India in the

eighteenth century, for example, indigenous rulers kept sophisticated accounts and engaged in programs to increase the wealth of their realms. Their goal was not appropriation alone. "Popular prosperity," writes David Ludden, "was measurable and seen as the responsibility of rulers . . . who could be judged accordingly."³⁴

In colonial contexts, as Achille Mbembe eloquently reminds us, rule was based on conquest. There was no liberal regime of rights to balance the sovereign's absolute authority to command and deduct. For Mbembe, "arbitrariness and intrinsic unconditionality" were the "distinctive feature of colonial sovereignty."³⁵ Yet violence was not the whole story. Merchant-colonial regimes were attracted by the prospect of hit-and-run profits, but in the long term, these could not be sustained. As Richard Grove explains, the greedy extractivism of the British and Dutch East India Companies caused ecological destruction and the dislocation of populations. The resulting droughts, famines, and rebellions threatened both profit and rule. Doctors and scientists on the staff of these companies were among the first to think systematically about the relations between "men and things" as an arena of intervention, and mobilized to persuade their employers to do likewise.³⁶ In the colonies as in the metropoles, when the complexity of the processes sustaining the population came into view, a governmental rationality concerned with balancing various ends had to follow.³⁷ So too did the concern to govern with economy—economy of funds, economy of force, and the minimum necessary intervention to achieve a given set of finalities.

As late colonial regimes came to include, among their objectives, providing native populations with the benefits of improvement and orderly rule, new calculations were required. Although David Scott identifies in Sri Lanka a clean break between mercantile colonialism in which the aim was to secure "extractive-effects on colonial bodies" and the late-colonial concern to achieve "governing-effects on colonial conduct,"³⁸ in many colonial contexts old and new objectives were combined in awkward amalgams, and means were also hybrid. Lord Lugard's "Dual Mandate" for nineteenth-century British rule in Africa was a case in point.³⁹ When scientific knowledge was hitched to imperial designs, experts argued that more efficient production "would necessarily confer the greatest good on the greatest number."⁴⁰ Yet the authority of ex-

perts, as Richard Drayton points out, did not stand alone. It was backed by the coercive might of the sovereign as “mobilizer of collective efforts, force and legitimacy.”⁴¹

Discipline, similarly, was not displaced by government but reserved for subgroups of colonial and metropolitan populations deemed to merit or require detailed supervision. “Despotism,” the political philosopher and employee of the British East India Company J. S. Mill famously declared, “is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.”⁴² Similar arguments were made in the colonial metropoles to justify disciplinary regimes for defective populations—children, paupers, “lower orders,” racialized others, women, prisoners, and people suffering from particular illnesses. They were excluded from the exercise of rights granted to other citizens on the grounds that they were incapable—or not yet capable—of exercising the attendant responsibilities. For some of these groups, experts justified subjection to intrusive discipline as a means to prepare them to take their place in the general population. They would graduate. For others, tutelage was permanent.⁴³ If one were to conduct a head count, Barry Hindess suggests, the “liberal government of unfreedom” was far more common, even in the metropoles, than the ideology of liberalism suggests.⁴⁴

In the colonies, there was intense debate about which subgroups were more or less improvable, or whether racial others would ever become mature enough to be governed in a liberal manner. The consequences of these debates were profound, as were the contradictions. Although native difference and deficiency supplied an important rationale for colonial intervention, as Gerald Sider observes, beginning with Columbus, colonial powers were caught between “the impossibility and the necessity of creating the other as the other—the different, the alien—and incorporating the other within a single social and cultural system of domination.”⁴⁵ If the colonized were utterly different from their colonial masters, the promise to bring improvement was an empty one. Discipline could not be improving, it was merely extractive. Alternatively, if colonizers and colonized were essentially the same, successful trusteeship would eliminate the distinction that justified colonial rule. Either way, the will to improve was in tension with the right to rule.⁴⁶ Colonial sovereignty and government were, in this sense, incompatible.

Colonial regimes addressed the contradiction between difference and im-

provement in various ways, all of them unsatisfactory. One, explored by Gary Wilder, was the “structure of permanent deferral,” as native society was both “rationalized and racialized,” its subjects “destined to become rights-bearing individuals, but always too immature to exercise those rights.”⁴⁷ Natives were consigned, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, to a “waiting room.”⁴⁸ A second tactic was division: natives were sorted into categories that were more or less improvable, elites generally falling into the first category, layering a class logic upon a racial one.⁴⁹ But improved subjects, educated natives, made colonial authorities and settlers very nervous. They threatened the basis of the colonial right to rule. “Not quite / not white,” they were inappropriate, the object of a profound ambivalence that translated into the elaborate schemes for boundary maintenance explored by Ann Stoler.⁵⁰ The fate of people deemed to be unimprovable was serious indeed: in white settler colonies, groups defined as “hopeless cases” were exterminated, or left to die out by attrition, their “manifest destiny” according to theories of natural selection.⁵¹ A third tactic was to argue that improvement for natives did not mean becoming like their colonial masters, it meant being true to their own indigenous traditions. It was the task of trustees to improve native life ways by restoring them to their authentic state.⁵² Intervention was needed to teach (or oblige) natives to be truly themselves. All three tactics were deployed in the Netherlands East Indies, as I will later explain, with the third—the perfection of authentic otherness—especially well developed.

The structure of “permanent deferral” continues to pervade contemporary development agendas. Planned development is premised upon the improvability of the “target group” but also posits a boundary that clearly separates those who need to be developed from those who will do the developing. Deficient subjects can be identified and improved only from the outside; as Stacy Pigg observes, to know one, one cannot be one.⁵³ In many postcolonies, racial difference transmuted rather easily into divides constructed around locality, class, and status, in which city-based trustees distinguished by their education and technical know-how joined with the transnational development apparatus to expound on how deficient, tradition-bound villagers should live.

Late colonial and postcolonial states share in the “institutionalized configuration of power” defined by David Ludden as a “development regime”: (1) ruling powers that claim progress as a goal, (2) a “people” whose conditions

must be improved, (3) an ideology of science that proffers principles and techniques to effect and measure progress, and (4) self-declared, enlightened leaders who would use state power for development and compete for power with claims of their ability to effect progress.⁵⁴ Like their colonial predecessors, contemporary national development regimes sometimes resort to violence to achieve their objectives, but regular use of violence indicates weakness. It suggests that “the people” do not want the improvements on offer, finding them inefficient, damaging, or simply irrelevant. Although rejection is often attributed to the people’s failure to understand what is good for them, some level of popular acquiescence is necessary for a development regime to retain a credible claim to be advancing popular well-being. For the transnational development apparatus (donors, development banks, consultants, and non-governmental agencies), acquiescence is crucial. Lacking access to the means of violence, they can operate only by educating the desires and reforming the practices of their target population. For example, in the neoliberal development program promoted by the World Bank, which I describe in chapter 7, experts seek to render their target group entrepreneurial, participatory, responsible, and corruption-averse. These characteristics cannot be imposed—they can only be promoted by setting conditions to encourage people to behave as they ought.

All the elements of Foucault’s triad continue to be in play in the global North and South alike. Minimally, control over territory, the classic concern of sovereignty, is a prerequisite for government. So too with law: law as a tactic to govern conduct is effective only because it is backed by the threat of punishment. If it was not so, few of us would pay our taxes. Arguably, despotism appropriately describes the punitive approach of welfare (now welfare) regimes in the global North that coerce people into improved behavior by threatening to withdraw their means of survival. Although they are supported by expert rationales, from the perspective of the victims these regimes differ little from the despotism of sovereigns who can take away life and liberty upon a whim. In Indonesia, as in the sub-Saharan postcolonies described by Mbembe, and the oil state of Nigeria described by Michael Watts, individuals, corporations, and other groupings operating with or without official sanction seize land, plunder resources, and imperil lives with impunity.⁵⁵ They are in league with the army and police, and with thugs and militias. Yet explanations of this

state of affairs in terms of the failure to progress along a linear trajectory toward modern forms of rule overlook an important fact: the corporations protected by private militias include transnational enterprises listed on public stock-markets, valued at millions of dollars. Like the sovereigns of old, though differently dressed, contemporary transnational corporations, supported by self-described liberal regimes, take what they want because they can. They select victims at their convenience and write the rules to legitimate their actions. Thus the deductive powers associated with sovereignty are not subsumed within government; they coexist in awkward articulations, presenting contradictions I explore in several of the chapters to follow.

GOVERNMENTALITY’S LIMITS

To govern means to act on the actions of subjects who retain the capacity to act otherwise.⁵⁶ When violence is used, even when the rationale is improvement, the absolute authority of a sovereign to mete out punishment is brought into play. Violence stands at the limit where government and sovereignty articulate. I have already described another limit on government—the limit posed by politics, the ever-present possibility that a governmental intervention will be challenged by critics rejecting its diagnoses and prescriptions. Here I want to describe two further limits to government.

One is the limit posed by the target of government: population. Men in their relations, their links, their imbrication are not easy to manage. Men in their relations with wealth, resources, means of subsistence, recognized by Marx and others as the fulcrum of class-based injustice and political mobilization, must somehow become the target of technologies to secure optimal arrangements—a point to which I return below. Climate, epidemics, “territory with all its specific qualities”—these are not passive objects. They are, as Bruno Latour reminds us, actants, dynamic forces that constantly surprise those who would harness and control them.⁵⁷ Men in “their customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” are no less refractory. The relations and processes with which government is concerned present intrinsic limits to the capacity of experts to improve things. There is inevitably an excess. There are processes and relations that cannot be reconfigured according to plan.

The second is the limit presented by the available forms of knowledge and

technique. Foucault observed that governmentality's principal form of knowledge is political economy, by which he meant the liberal art of governing the polity in an economical manner—intervening in the delicate balance of social and economic processes no more, and no less, than is required to optimize them. The political economy of Adam Smith focused on the invisible hand of the market, understood as the hugely complex and largely self-regulating way in which economic processes coordinate the infinite range of individual wills. Just as experts should tread lightly in attempting to regulate the sphere that came to be known as “the economy,” the art of government directed toward the population must recognize the delicate balance of its vital processes.⁵⁸ Programs of improvement must respect “the integrity and autonomous dynamics of the social body.”⁵⁹ The social sciences emerged together with this new concept of population and its correlate, society. Their task was to devise a theoretical knowledge of the processes immanent in populations, a knowledge from which calculated interventions might follow.⁶⁰

From the perspective of liberals such as Adam Smith, a claim of omniscience or the attempt to regulate society in totalizing fashion was counterproductive. Graham Burchell points out that the problem of excessive regulation was already evident in the eighteenth century, when critics did not fault rulers for their despotism: “You must not do this, you do not have the right.” Rather, critics faulted rulers for their claims to omniscience and totalizing direction: “You must not do this because you do not and cannot know what you are doing.”⁶¹ As James Scott observes, the claim to totalizing knowledge combined with despotism is especially noxious. He exposes both the futility and the violence of detailed schemes of social engineering in which experts attempt to obliterate existing relations to build upon a clean slate.⁶²

Rather than exercise total control, the objective of government is to sustain and optimize the processes upon which life depends. But beneficial outcomes cannot be guaranteed. Being “irreducibly utopian,” governmental interventions can never achieve all they seek.⁶³ An important reason promised improvements are not delivered is that the diagnosis is incomplete. As I argued earlier, it cannot be complete if key political-economic processes are excluded from the bounded, knowable, technical domain. Further, governmental interventions routinely produce effects that are contradictory, even perverse. Indeed, the messiness of the world, its intractability to government, is caused, in

part at least, by the overlapping of various governmental programs in historical sequence or, concurrently, one program at cross-purposes with another. Failures invite new interventions to correct newly identified—or newly created—deficiencies. The limits of each governmental intervention shape its successor. New thinking about how to govern arises not only from inspired ideas, but from the pragmatic observation of how things work out in practice.

The limits of government outlined here point to the limits of governmentality as an analytic—a way of understanding how power works, and what it does. To complement the insights of Foucault, I turn to Marx for a more robust way of theorizing the processes that animate the relations between “men and things.” To attend to the ways people become mobilized to contest the truths in the name of which they are governed, and to change the conditions under which they live, I turn to Antonio Gramsci. My purpose in making these moves is not to construct a supertheory, an improbably seamless amalgam. Rather, I tolerate the untidiness and tension introduced by different theoretical traditions because of the distinct questions they pose, and the tools they offer to guide my analysis.

CAPITALISM AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

In medieval England, the verb to *improve* meant to turn agricultural land to a profit, an operation often associated with enclosing “waste” or common land.⁶⁴ Enclosure is simultaneously an act of dispossession. It is central to the process Marx called primitive accumulation. Backed by a legal regime supporting the concept of private property, enclosure turns land into an asset that can be monopolized by an individual farmer, or a corporation. Possession of private property enables rural producers to become entrepreneurs who not only meet market demands, but accumulate land and capital. People who do not succeed in privatizing land, because they are slow to start, or unable to hold onto what they have in the face of violent exclusion or competition, are deprived of access to the means of production. They are obliged to become wage laborers, exploited by those whose command over capital enables them to pay workers less than the full value of their labor.

The transformational sequence appropriation-displacement-exploitation-accumulation, the core process explored by Marx in *Capital*, is operative in

agrarian settings in many parts of the global South. In the highlands of Central Sulawesi that I will describe, farmers hold a concept of improvement very similar to that of medieval England: they recognize an investment of labor that increases the productivity of land as a form of enclosure that creates private rights. There too, some farmers have been more successful at accumulating land and capital than others. Yet the scale and rapidity of the appropriation-displacement sequence exposed by Marx has increased greatly in recent years. Tens of thousands of people who retained direct access to land a decade ago now find themselves landless. To understand why this is happening, I need the analytical tools Marx supplied. I also need to understand how the conditions for this transformation were set. This means examining the ways in which government and capitalism intersect. There are four elements to this intersection.

First and most obviously, capitalist relations serve double duty as a vehicle of extraction and a vehicle for imparting the habits of diligence, responsibility and the careful weighing of costs and benefits that characterize, in liberal thinking, the ideal, autonomous subject of rights.⁶⁵ It is, in part, recognition of the “improving” effects of capitalist discipline upon sections of the population deemed to lack these habits that prevents experts from proposing the restructuring of relations of production as a solution to poverty. Competition, the experts argue, spurs efficiency.

Second, as Marx recognized, capitalism is not an autonomous system. Primitive accumulation is a violent process. The laws that support private property, enforce exclusion, and produce “free” labor are violence by other means. In metropoles and colonies alike, the profits that accrue to capital have been subsidized by investments in infrastructure supplied by ruling regimes from the public purse. It takes intervention to keep capitalist economies growing. Experts justify intervention as a measure to optimize the general good. Even though they do not stand to profit directly from capitalist enterprise, they promote growth because they are convinced it is beneficial to the population at large. Yet interventions that set the conditions for growth simultaneously set the conditions for some sections of the population to be dispossessed. Winners and losers do not emerge naturally through the magic of the market, they are selected.⁶⁶

Third, optimizing requires that experts pay attention to the displacement and impoverishment that are co-produced with growth. This is not an after-

thought. Intervention is a condition of growth in the capitalist mode. The deliberate creation of markets for land and labor provokes what Polanyi called a “countermovement”—a demand for intervention grounded in the recognition that “leaving the fate of soil and people to the market would be tantamount to annihilating them.” Demands for social protection have a broad constituency as variously situated groups concur on the need to alleviate misery and mitigate disruption and disarray.⁶⁷ Managing the fallout from capitalism’s advance is one of the tasks assigned to trustees. Trusteeship does not translate into any permanent solution to problems of disorder and decay—indeed, as Michael Cowen and Robert Shenton stress, it cannot, since there cannot be security for everyone caught in capitalism’s wake.⁶⁸ Trustees promising improvement must distance themselves from complicity in chaos and destruction. Their interventions are “always the cure, never the cause.”⁶⁹ Trustees cannot address—indeed, may not acknowledge—the contradictory forces with which they are engaged. Thus attempts to render “men in their relations to . . . wealth, resources, means of subsistence” technical and governable are chronically incomplete. Capitalism and improvement are locked in an awkward embrace.

Fourth, trustees use a particular population’s failure to improve (to turn nature’s bounty to a profit), or to conserve (to protect nature for the common good) as rationales for their dispossession, and as the justification to assign resources to people who will make better use of them.⁷⁰ In the colonial period dispossession was backed by what Richard Drayton calls the myth of the profligate native: “Whoever was on the spot was wasting its resources, and . . . might legitimately be expelled, or submitted to European tutelage.”⁷¹ This myth is alive and well in national bureaucracies and transnational agencies promoting agricultural development and conservation. It continues to be used to justify dispossession, as I will show.

The intersection of capitalist processes and programs of improvement is a striking feature of the transformations currently occurring in the Sulawesi hills I describe in the middle of the book. Officials have assigned land used by highlanders since time immemorial to corporations promising to boost production, and to conservation agencies enclosing nature to save it from farmers’ abuse. Displacement is also occurring as an unintended effect of programs designed to promote the welfare of highlanders, notably by reset-

tling them out of the hills into valleys, better to provide them with roads and services. The land base for valley settlement, however, is insufficient. Unable to survive in the valleys and excluded from the forest, highlanders have become landless, and they have mobilized to reclaim their due. To explain how this mobilization came about I need to draw upon another set of concepts gleaned from the tradition of Antonio Gramsci.

CRITICAL POSITIONS

Critique, writes Nikolas Rose, has the potential to “reshape and expand the terms of political debate, enabling different questions to be asked, enlarging spaces of legitimate contestation, modifying the relations of the different participants to the truths in the name of which they govern or are governed.”⁷² The critic I picture, from Rose’s account, is the academic whose primary medium for learning about and changing the world is text. In contrast, the critic conjured by Gramsci is an activist, interested both in studying and in helping to produce conjunctures at which social groups come to see themselves as collectivities, develop critical insight, and mobilize to confront their adversaries. There are also the “prickly subjects” I mentioned earlier—the targets of improvement schemes, who occupy an important place in my account.

A follower of Marx, Gramsci considered the fundamental groups driving social transformation to be classes differentiated by their access to the means of production. Yet he understood that the actual social groups engaged in situated struggles are far more diverse, reflections of their fragmentary experiences, attachments, and embedded cultural ideas. Thus for him, the question of how a collective, critical practice emerges could not be answered with reference to abstract concepts such as capital and labor. It had to be addressed concretely, taking into account the multiple positions that people occupy, and the diverse powers they encounter.⁷³ Building on Gramsci’s work, Stuart Hall proposes an understanding of identity as the product of articulation. Rather than view identity as the fixed ground from which insights and actions follow, he argues that new interests, new positionings of self and others, and new meanings emerge contingently in the course of struggle. Thus a Gramscian approach yields an understanding of the practice of politics and the critical

insights on which it depends as specific, situated, and embodied. An example may help to illustrate the kind of analysis this approach enables.

In 2001, Freddy, a young man from Lake Lindu in Central Sulawesi, recounted to me how he had “learned to practice politics” (*belajar berpolitik*). What this meant, for him, was learning to figure out for himself what was wrong and right in the world, and how to carry that assessment forward to bring about change. His epiphany occurred a few years earlier, when an NGO based in the provincial capital Palu began helping the people of his village organize to contest the construction of a hydroelectric dam that would flood their land and forcibly evict them. Home from Java, where he had worked and studied for some years, he was sent by the village Headman to observe the activities of this NGO, and report back on what kinds of trouble they were fomenting. So he started to attend their meetings, listening from the back, and came to the gradual realization that much of what they said about the importance of livelihoods, conservation, and the legitimacy of customary land rights made perfect sense. In contrast, the more he listened to officials promoting the dam as a step toward “development” in the province as well as a better future for the villagers, the less credible he found them.

The campaign against the dam occurred under the New Order regime, when individuals who had critical insights shared them frequently in the form of cynical jokes and asides but did not articulate them in public forums or engage in collective action. NGOs such as the ones assisting Freddy’s village were threatened by the authorities and accused of being communist. But seeing the dedication of the NGO’s young staff, and absorbing some of their intellectual energy, he became convinced that learning to practice politics was a positive step. He described his feeling as one of awakening from a long and lazy sleep. He began to look with new eyes at the people around him in his village and in the state apparatus who were too afraid to engage in political debate. When I met him in 2001, after the fall of Suharto, he felt the possibilities for practicing politics had opened up, but people were slow to grasp them. They had to unlearn habits of quiescence cultivated through three decades of New Order doublethink and doubletalk and start to think of politics positively, as an entitlement.

Throughout the struggle for independence and especially in the period 1945

to 1965, until the army-led coup that ushered in the massacre of half a million people labeled communists, many Indonesians had been active in conducting politics and vigorous in debating the shape of the nation. There were mass mobilizations of workers, peasants, women, youth, regional, and religious communities, all engaged in struggles over the distribution of resources and the recognition of differences (cultural, historical, regional, religious) that supplied points of distinction and alliance. But Sukarno, the first president, retreated into the paternalism of “Guided Democracy,” paving the way for his successor, Suharto, to declare politics an unhelpful distraction to the work of development. Politics became a dirty word. The goal of Suharto’s regime was to secure a stable state of nonpolitics in which nothing “untoward” or “excessive” would happen—the condition of eerie stillness memorably described in John Pemberton’s ethnography about Java.⁷⁴

In the hostile conditions of the New Order, reclaiming politics and giving it a positive inflection was no mean feat. To understand how it was achieved by a young man in a highland village in Sulawesi, we must examine both the process through which his political positioning emerged and the particular shape it took. Together with his compatriots, Freddy came to see himself as a member of an indigenous group defending its territory against the state—an identity he did not carry with him when he left the village to pursue his studies years before. That identity emerged when a set of ideas to which he was exposed by the NGOs supporting his village helped him to make sense of his situation, locate allies and opponents, and organize.⁷⁵ Identities, as Stuart Hall argues, “are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.” They are “unstable points of identification or suture . . . Not an essence but a positioning.”⁷⁶

In this book, I explore the positionings that enable people to practice a critical politics. I also explore positionings formed through the will to improve: the position of trustee, and the position of deficient subject whose conduct is to be conducted. Gramsci did not examine the position of trustee, which stands in an awkward relation to that of the “organic intellectual” whose job is to help subalterns to understand their oppression and mobilize to challenge it. Yet the work of the intellectual and the trustee are not entirely distinct. As I will show, Indonesian activists engaged in a critical politics find numerous deficiencies in the population they aim to support. Their support becomes technical, a

matter of instructing people in the proper practice of politics. They too are programmers. They share in the will to improve, and more specifically, the will to empower. Their vision of improvement involves people actively claiming the rights and taking on the duties of democratic citizenship.⁷⁷

The value of a Gramscian approach, for my purposes, is the focus on how and why particular, situated subjects mobilize to contest their oppression. This was not a question elaborated by Foucault. Conversely, Foucault has the edge on explicit theorization of how power shapes the conditions in which lives are lived. Although Gramscians turn to the concept of hegemony for this purpose, Gramsci’s formulations were notoriously enigmatic and fragmented. In her critical review of the use of Gramsci by anthropologists, Kate Crehan argues that the term *hegemony* for Gramsci “simply names the problem—that of how the power relations underpinning various forms of inequality are produced and reproduced.”⁷⁸ He used it not to describe a fixed condition, but rather as a way of talking about “how power is lived in particular times and places,” always, he thought, an amalgam of coercion and consent.⁷⁹

Foucault shared the concern to examine how power is lived but approached it differently. Gramsci understood consent to be linked to consciousness. Foucault understood subjects to be formed by practices of which they might be unaware, and to which their consent is neither given nor withheld. Further, Foucault highlighted the ways in which power enables as much as it constrains or coerces. It works through practices that are, for the most part, mundane and routine. Thus the binary that is compatible with a Gramscian analytic—people either consent to the exercise of power or they resist it—was not useful to Foucault.⁸⁰ I do not find it necessary to choose between Gramsci and Foucault on this point. Some practices render power visible; they trigger conscious reactions adequately described in terms such as resistance, accommodation, or consent. Other modes of power are more diffuse, as are peoples’ responses to them. John Allen put this point eloquently when he observed that power “often makes its presence felt through a variety of modes playing across one another. The erosion of choice, the closure of possibilities, the manipulation of outcomes, the threat of force, the assent of authority or the inviting gestures of a seductive presence, and the combinations thereof.”⁸¹

Powers that are multiple cannot be totalizing and seamless. For me this is a crucial observation. The multiplicity of power, the many ways that practices

position people, the various modes “playing across one another” produce gaps and contradictions. Subjects formed in these matrices—subjects like Freddy—encounter inconsistencies that provide grist for critical insights. Further, powers once experienced as diffuse, or indeed not experienced as powers at all, can become the subject of a critical consciousness. Indeed, exposing how power works, unsettling truths so that they could be scrutinized and contested was as central to the political agenda of Foucault as it was for Gramsci.⁸² Foucault did not elaborate on how such insights might become collective, although the connection is easily made. To the extent that practices of government form groups rather than isolated individuals, critical insight is potentially shared. One of the inadvertent effects of programs of improvement—the dam at Lake Lindu, for example—is to produce social groups capable of identifying common interests and mobilizing to change their situation.⁸³ Such collectivities have their own internal class, ethnic, and gender fractures. Their encounter with attempts to improve them forms the basis of their political ideas and actions. Scholars working in a Foucauldian mode have often observed the “strategic reversibility” of power relations, as diagnoses of deficiencies imposed from above become “repossessed” as demands from below, backed by a sense of entitlement.⁸⁴ Bringing insights from Foucault and Gramsci together enables me to extend this observation, and to put the point more starkly: improvement programs may inadvertently stimulate a political challenge. The way they do this, moreover, is situated and contingent. Floods and diseases, topography, the variable fertility of the soil, prices on world markets, the location of a road—any of these may stimulate critical analysis by puncturing expert schemes and exposing their flaws.

Studies that draw their inspiration from Foucault tend to be anemic on the practice of politics.⁸⁵ In Rose’s *Powers of Freedom*, for example, discussion of politics is confined to the conclusion, “Beyond Government.” There Rose argues that “analysis of the forms of contestation might help us understand the ways in which something new is created, a difference is introduced into history in the form of a politics.” This is not, he says, to “seek to identify particular agents of a radical politics—be they classes, races, or genders—or to distinguish once and for all the forces of reaction from those of progression in terms of fixed identities. Rather, one would examine the ways in which creativity arises out of the situation of human beings engaged in particular relations

of force and meaning, and what is made out of the possibilities of that location.”⁸⁶ I find this a very clear statement of a critical research agenda worthy of attention, but it is not one that Rose himself pursues. The reasons for this are both theoretical and methodological.

I have been arguing that the practice of politics is best examined through a Gramscian approach alert to the constellations of power in particular times and places, and the overdetermined, messy situations in which creativity arises. This is a research strategy fully compatible with the analytic of governmentality, as I will show. However, it is strategy Rose rejects, as he wants to separate studies of governmentality from what he calls sociologies of rule—studies of the ways in which rule is actually accomplished, in all their complexity.⁸⁷ To study government, he says, is not to start from “the apparently obvious historical or sociological questions: what happened and why. It is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques.”⁸⁸ On similar grounds, Foucault argued that to study the genealogy of an institutional complex such as incarceration is quite distinct from ethnographic study of the “witches’ brew” of practices that actually transpire inside prisons.⁸⁹

I agree that study of the rationale of governmental schemes and the study of social history are distinct kinds of inquiry, and they require distinct sets of tools. My point is that we should not privilege one over the other. Further, I argue that bringing them into dialogue offers insights into how programs of government are constituted and contested. Rather than conduct two separate analyses, I make the intersection of governmental programs with the world they would transform my principal subject in this book. To explain how I propose to examine that intersection, I turn now to a discussion of method.

TOWARD AN ETHNOGRAPHIC METHOD

My research strategy brings together the two kinds of study Rose would keep apart: analysis of governmental interventions (their genealogy, their diagnoses and prescriptions, their constitutive exclusions) and analysis of what happens when those interventions become entangled with the processes they would regulate and improve. This strategy takes me beyond the plan, the map, and

the administrative apparatus, into conjunctures where attempts to achieve the “right disposition of things” encounter—and produce—a witches’ brew of processes, practices, and struggles that exceed their scope.

To examine the “beyond” of programming does not mean replacing a false object of study (the program) with a true one (the world). Foucault readily admitted that nothing happens as laid down in programmers’ schemes. Yet he insisted that they are not simply utopias “in the heads of a few projectors.” They are not “abortive schemas for the creation of a reality. They are fragments of reality.” They “induce a whole series of effects in the real.” They “crystallize into institutions, they inform individual behavior, they act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things.”⁹⁰ I take up this insight to argue that programs, and the messy consequences of programs, are equally real, and both merit attention.⁹¹

To examine the effects of programs at particular conjunctures does not mean attempting to grasp all things at once. An ethnographic study is always selective. Nor does it mean treating places as isolates, complete unto themselves. Quite the opposite, since, as Doreen Massey explains, “What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus.”⁹² Thus I explore how governmental interventions configure ways of thinking and acting not by operating alone, but by working as part of a constellation. I attend to particular histories, landscapes, memories, and embedded cultural ideas, better to grasp how power is lived, produced, and contested.

My writing strategy tacks back and forth between examination of the emergence of a new target of governmental intervention and exploration of the effects of that intervention as it intersects with other forces and vectors on historically configured terrain. I conduct detailed readings of program documents and set them in the context of their constitutive exclusions. I use ethnographic and historical sources to expose the refractory processes screened out as programmers construct an arena amenable to management and calculation. I examine the fractures in that technical domain, uneasy collaborations between trustees and their target groups, and the compromised position of experts who promise improvements they cannot deliver. I attend to formal practices of planning, and to the “subterranean practices” through which pro-

grams are adjusted to respond to contingencies and reversals.⁹³ These practices include, among others, looking away when rules are broken, failing to gather or to use information that undermines the linear narrative of the plan, and constructing data to demonstrate unerring “success.”⁹⁴ I explore the challenges presented by people at the receiving end of all this attention, as they weigh the costs and benefits of improvement schemes in relation to situated struggles over land, livelihood, and claims to place. I do not position them as heroes contesting power from the outside but show, rather, how their struggles have been formed within its matrices. I examine the ways political challenges are closed down by new programs of government, sometimes to be opened again in the moments of reversal intrinsic to power as a relation of “permanent provocation.”

I begin in chapter 1 with an overview of how contradictions intrinsic to the will to improve played out in Indonesia over a period of two centuries, as one governmental assemblage yielded to the next. In chapter 2, I examine the first round of improvement schemes that were implemented in the highlands of Central Sulawesi, teasing out what it was that trustees sought to change, the techniques they devised, and the outcomes that emerged. In chapter 3, I focus on the processes of capital and identity formation that were stimulated by these projects, or intersected with them to produce the conditions in which violent conflict would erupt. In chapter 4, I examine a second set of improvement schemes that attempted to achieve “integrated conservation and development” in the sixty or more villages surrounding the Lore Lindu National Park. In chapter 5, I focus on political challenge, tracking how and why a group of farmers mobilized to contest the authority of the many trustees who had devised projects to help them and took action to bring about improvement on their own terms. In chapter 6, I examine a further intervention provoked by the challenge to the park: an attempt to use an elaborate system of managed consultation to persuade park border villagers to “buy in” to conservation. In chapter 7, I zoom out from Sulawesi to interrogate a billion-dollar, nationwide project of the World Bank intended to foster practices of transparency and accountability in the provision of rural infrastructure, and the use of mediation to manage the conflicts that emerge, according to World Bank social experts, as an inevitable byproduct of economic advance.

Focus and selection are necessary in order to make an argument, but I have

endeavored not to reduce complexity or force everything neatly into a fixed framework. Rather, I see the specifics of my various study sites, their untidiness, as a provocation that enables me to put pressure on the conceptual repertoire I have adopted and confront theory with the world it would explain. Careful study of specific conjunctures—the kind of work conducted by anthropologists and social historians, among others—opens a space for theoretical work of a kind that is rather different from that of scholars engaged in the immanent critique of theoretical texts, or the production of general models. My hope is that readers interested primarily in governmentality will learn something by examining practices of government through the lens of an anthropologist committed to what Sherry Ortner calls an “ethnographic stance.” This approach produces understanding “through richness, texture, and detail, rather than parsimony, refinement, and (in the sense used by mathematicians) elegance.”⁹⁵ Conversely, I hope that readers interested primarily in Indonesia will find that thinking about the will to improve offers a new perspective on familiar terrain: so much of Indonesia’s history has been shaped by this will, more or less directly. Finally, I hope that readers involved in enterprises such as rural development and environmental management find, in my account, grist for their own critical thinking about programs of improvement, their prospects, and their limits.

I.

CONTRADICTORY POSITIONS

This chapter explores two of the contradictions I outlined in the introduction, contradictions deeply embedded in the will to improve. The first is the contradiction between the promotion of capitalist processes and concern to improve the condition of the dispossessed. I examine how this contradiction played out through a series of governmental assemblages, each with its characteristic diagnoses and prescriptions, its preferred way of balancing profits, native welfare, and other “specific finalities.” The second is the way that programs of improvement designed to reduce the distance between trustees and deficient subjects actually reinscribe the boundary that positions them on opposite sides of an unbridgeable divide. This boundary is the contradictory foundation that makes colonial and contemporary improvement programs thinkable, anxious and doggedly persistent. Yet it is not self-evident. It is produced through situated practices that can be critically explored.

My examination in this chapter takes the form of a history of government, teasing out the problems that various authorities sought to address, the techniques they deployed, their contradictions, and their effects. It is an overview, covering in schematic form a period of two centuries (1800–2000), with particular emphasis on the island of Java, the focus of colonial attention before the Netherlands East Indies Empire was “rounded out” in the period 1900–1910. Subsequent chapters, focused on the highlands of Sulawesi, examine governmental programs of the colonial and contemporary periods at much closer range.

Although I have arranged the parts of the chapter in chronological order,