Electrification and Energy Transition in Rural Vietnam: The Making of a 'For-the-People' State

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Note on Language, Names, Translation and Photographs

As a tonal language, Vietnamese has six tones (including the neutral tone), five of which are marked in the writing system with diacritics. In this dissertation, I have added the diacritics only to important Vietnamese terms and expressions, and left others, especially personal names and place names, without diacritics. In doing so I aim for better readability for the readers who may not be familiar with the language.

Vietnamese personal names are conventionally written with the family name first, followed by the middle name(s) and a given name. All personal names (including pseudonyms) appearing in this dissertation are given names.

All translations from Vietnamese in this dissertation are my own, and all photographs included here were taken by myself, except where otherwise noted.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Electrification and Energy Transition in Rural Vietnam:

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Die vorliegende Dissertation analysiert den gegenwärtigen vietnamesischen Staat durch die Linse der Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur. Es geht dabei um die Frage: Wie trägt die Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur zur Staatsbildung (state-making) bei? Basierend auf neun Monaten ethnographischer Feldforschung in einer ländlichen Kommune und bei den Mitarbeiter:innen einer Bezirksstelle des Elektrizitätswerks in der Provinz Thai Binh in den Jahren 2018 und 2019, dokumentiere ich, wie das Verhältnis zwischen Staat und Bevölkerung die Mechanismen der Stromversorgung prägt und von diesen wiederum geprägt wird. Auch wenn die laufenden Reformen in und um den Elektrizitätssektor, wie etwa strukturelle Reformen und die angestrebte Energiewende, in der Analyse des Verhältnisses von Elektrizität und Staat relevant sind, liegt der Schwerpunkt der Dissertation auf lokalen und *grassroots* Praktiken und Perspektiven.

Auf der Ebene der Infrastruktur wird in dieser Studie die menschliche Komponente des Stromnetzes beleuchtet, die die Verteilung von Elektrizität ermöglicht. Die Ethnographie zeigt auf, dass neben sozialen Beziehungen auch menschliche Körper und das persönliche Hab und Gut in die Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur eingebettet sind, um die reibungslose Stromverteilung und den Betrieb des Infrastruktursystems als Ganzes sicherzustellen. Das Konzept „Menschen als Infrastruktur" (Simone 2004) wird hier somit erweitert, um den Bereich unterhalb und jenseits des Sozialen zu erfassen –den Bereich, den ich „menschliche Infrastruktur" nenne. Darunter verstehe ich, wie menschliche Körper in das Infrastruktursystem eingebettet werden, um für dieses System zu arbeiten. Die Verflechtung von Staat und Strominfrastruktur drückt sich darin aus, dass die menschliche Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur nicht nur dem Elektrizitätssektor nutzt, sondern sie verstärkt auch die Macht des Staates und das Verhältnis zwischen dem Staat und dem Volk/den Bürger:innen.

Auf der Ebene der Staatsbildung wird in der Dissertation erläutert, wie sich die Menschen mit dem Staat im Kontext der Stromversorgung affektiv auseinandersetzen, von den gelebten Erfahrungen der Elektrifizierung bis hin zum Wunsch nach staatlich gefördertem Netzstrom. Die ländliche Elektrifizierung stärkt einen affektiven Prozess der Staatsbildung auf lokaler Ebene, wo staatliche Akteur:innen und Bürger:innen auf Basis der im Laufe der Auseinandersetzung mit Elektrizitätsinfrastrukturen entstehenden „Intensitäten der Gefühle" (d.h. Affekte) gemeinsam politische Traumwelten („make-believe spaces", Navaro-Yashin 2012) erschaffen. Sowohl in an das Netz angebundenen Gemeinden als auch in Gemeinden ohne Netzzugang repräsentiert Elektrizität

den vietnamesischen Staat mit seinem Versprechen, alle Bürger:innen an das nationale Stromnetz anzuschließen. Die affektiv aufgeladenen Begegnungen mit Elektrizität, Infrastruktur und anderen Menschen im Zusammenhang mit Stromkonsum tragen zu einer affektiven Konzeptualisierung des Staates sowie zu affektiven Beurteilungen der Legitimität des Staates bei.

In Kapitel 1 werden die wichtigsten theoretischen, empirischen und methodologischen Grundlagen der Studie erläutert. Auf der Ebene der Theorie wird die Konzeptualisierung von Elektrizität als außerordentliche Form der Energie sowie die ethnologischen Ansätze zur Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur skizziert. Nach Überlegungen zur fortwährenden Kluft in der Ethnologie zwischen symbolischen und materialistischen Ansätzen zum Thema Staat und Infrastruktur werden Herangehensweisen aus der neueren Literatur zur Theorie des Affekts als potentieller Weg diskutiert, diese Kluft zu überwinden. Als theoretischer Rahmen kann das Konzept des Affekts beleuchten, wie verkörperte Erfahrungen mit Elektrizität und der dazugehörigen Infrastruktur eine Beziehung zwischen den ländlichen Bewohner:innen und dem Staat herstellen – die in Abhängigkeit mit, aber auch parallel zu den materiellen Verbindungen zum Stromnetz und der „symbolischen Arbeit“ des sozialistischen Staates existiert.

Als wichtiger empirischer Hintergrund wird die Bedeutung der Elektrizität bei der Bildung des sozialistischen Staates Vietnam skizziert, der sich in den Worten der Verfassung von 2013 als Rechtsstaat „des Volkes, durch das Volk und für das Volk“ versteht. Seit der Gründung des vietnamesischen Staates nach der Augustrevolution 1945 nimmt die Elektrizität eine besondere Stellung in Vietnam ein. Sie hat den Auftrag, allen anderen Industrien des Landes einen Schritt voraus zu sein und gilt als Rückgrat der nationalen Wirtschaft, Herz der Modernisierung und somit auch als Symbol der postkolonialen Politik. Die ideologische Bedeutung von Elektrizität führt dazu, dass der Zugang zu Strom und die durch den Stromkonsum erzeugten Affekte eine wichtige Rolle in Prozessen der Staatsbildung auf der Grassroot-Ebene spielen. Sie erklärt auch die Bereitschaft der Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen, über viele Jahre hinweg ihre Körper und ihr Leben für das Elektrizitätssystems zu opfern, da ihre Arbeit das Vertrauen der Menschen in den Staat aufrechterhält und bestärkt.

Zudem wird im Kapitel die methodologische Basis der Studie – die Forschungsorte und Methoden der Datenerhebung – beschrieben. Multi-sited Ethnographie in Verbindung mit der erweiterten Fallmethode (extended case method) wurde als geeignete Methode gewählt, um der Elektrizität von der jüngeren Vergangenheit (Elektrifizierung) über die Gegenwart (Stromverbrauch) bis in die Zukunft (Energiewende) sowie in den gelebten Erfahrungen der Elektrifizierung von den Dörfern zum Verwaltungsapparat vor Ort, hinzu den Reformen des Sektors und zurück zur ländlichen Wirklichkeit

nachzugehen. Meine Ethnographie sammelt somit Erkenntnisse aus verschiedenen geographischen Orten, sowohl ländlich als auch städtisch; eine besondere Rolle spielen dabei die Küstenkommune Dong Phong und eine Bezirksstelle des staatlichen Elektrizitätskonzerns EVN (Vietnam Electricity) im Norden der Provinz Thai Binh. Zudem geht es um verschiedene Orte und Akteure des Wissens: Medien, Expert:innen, Archive, die Elektrizitätsindustrie auf lokaler und zentraler Ebene, Stromverbraucher:innen in Dörfern, lokale Behörden sowie den nichtstaatlichen Sektor.

Kapitel 2 trägt den Titel „People's Memories and State Narratives of the Countryside Electrified" und bietet eine Übersicht über frühe Erfahrungen der ländlichen Bevölkerung mit dem Staat mittels Elektrizität, zunächst als eine Form der kooperativen Produktion und später als eine Form der staatlichen Wohlfahrt für Haushalte. Hier analysiere ich Narrative über die ländliche Elektrifizierung – ein Programm, das vom vietnamesischen Staat und seinen internationalen Partnern als großer Erfolg bewertet wird. In den Augen der ländlichen Bewohner:innen und Beamten in Thai Binh begann die rurale Elektrifizierung mit lokalen Initiativen in den 1990er Jahren, die auf lokalen Ressourcen (sowohl Arbeit als auch Gelder) aufbauten und durch lokale Behörden koordiniert wurden. Staatsangestellten in Thai Binh zufolge war die ländliche Elektrifizierung in dieser Provinz bis Mitte der 1990er Jahren größtenteils abgeschlossen. Die offizielle Statistik für den gesamten Staat Vietnam verzeichnet in dieser Zeit einen starken Anstieg der Anzahl von Haushalten mit Zugang zu Elektrizität, von lediglich 14 Prozent im Jahr 1993 bis auf über 60 Prozent 1998. Der Staat datiert den Anfang der ländlichen Elektrifizierung jedoch erst auf 1999, nach dem Erlass eines Beschlusses des Premierministers und der anschließenden Beteiligung des staatlichen Elektrizitätskonzerns (EVN). Die Involvierung der Regierung und von EVN verdrängte die Erzählungen der ländlichen Bevölkerung über lokale Initiativen und die Beteiligung am Ausbau des Netzes; stattdessen traten die Narrative der Medien in den Vordergrund, die den Erfolg der Regierung feiern, und die das Bild von EVN als Helden, der den Strom in entlegene Gebiete bringt, verstärken.

Zudem bietet das Kapitel eine kurze Übersicht über den Verlauf der Elektrifizierung der ländlichen Gebiete. Ab Mitte der 1990er Jahre fand die ländliche Elektrifizierung mit Bewilligung des Zentralstaates statt und basierte auf der Verbesserung der Stromerzeugung und -übertragung in Form von Großkraftwerken und Hochspannungsleitungen. Die Verbesserung wurde selbst in Zeiten wirtschaftlicher Krisen und vor der Beteiligung internationaler „Entwicklungspartner" als Geldgeber umgesetzt; der vietnamesische Zentralstaat hat also schon immer in die Elektrifizierung der Nation als einer – laut Lenin – wichtigen Voraussetzung für den Kommunismus investiert. Bis zu diesem Zeitpunkt konnte man zwar den Eindruck gewinnen, dass die Zentralregierung die ländliche Elektrifizierung vernachlässigt, Unterstützung wurde allerdings von lokalen Verwaltungen gewährt, die bei der Koordinierung des Prozesses eine wichtige Rolle spielten. Nach dem Regierungsbeschluss von 1999

übernahm EVN die lokalen Stromnetze, standardisierte deren Qualität, führte einen einheitlichen Preis im gesamten Land ein und errichtete die notwendige Infrastruktur, um Strom in entlegene Gebiete zu transportieren.

Der Vergleich zwischen den Erinnerungen der lokalen Beamten und der ländlichen Bewohner:innen einerseits und der offiziellen Mediendiskurse andererseits kann als eine Art „paperreality" („Papierrealität", MacLean 2013) verstanden werden. Zudem beleuchtet er den Umgang des Staates mit der Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur auf dem Land – der Zentralstaat und die lokalen Behörden arbeiteten gemeinsam, um den „großen Plan" (Scott 1998) mittels einer Zusammenführung lokaler Bedingungen („bricolage" of conditions, Li 2007) zu verwirklichen. Indem ich die lokalen und nationalen Narrative kombiniere, argumentiere ich, dass die Elektrifizierung in Vietnam zunächst ein dezentralisierter bottom-up Prozess war, der anschließend an die zentrale Regierung überging und top-down koordiniert wurde.

Kapitel 3 trägt den Titel "'No Different from a Little City' – The Make-Believe Qualities of Local Politics" und beschäftigt sich mit der Zeit nach der Elektrifizierung, indem der Frage nachgegangen wird, wie Netzstrom in der Kommune Dong Phong für politische Zwecke verwendet wird. Die Installation von LED-beleuchteten Willkommensbögen bei verschiedenen Feierlichkeiten in Dong Phong ist eine „Mini-Bewegung", die eine „politische Ästhetik" (Larkin 2008) der Infrastruktur verkörpert, indem sie der lokalen Bevölkerung einen Eindruck von Urbanität und Modernität vermittelt. „Nicht anders als eine kleine Stadt" (*không khác gì một thành phố thu nhỏ*) – mit diesen Worten beschreiben die Bewohner:innen stolz ihre Kommune im bunten Licht dieser Willkommensbögen. Bei Feierlichkeiten zu Ehren von „Onkel Ho" (so wird Ho Chi Minh von vielen Vietnames:innen liebevoll genannt) wird elektrisches Licht und Klang als Teil der Performance der lokalen Regierung genutzt, um die Menschen zu bezaubern und für politische Affekte empfänglich zu machen. Begeistert von der festlichen Stimmung, tragen die lokalen Bewohner:innen bereitwillig zur Schaffung eines gemeinsamen kulturell-politischen Raumes durch ihre Teilnahme an öffentlichen Ereignissen bei. Sie laden zudem lokale Beamte zu privaten Feierlichkeiten wie Hochzeiten, Beerdigungen und Ehrentagen zur Feier eines hohen Lebensalters ein, und sie schätzen die Bemühungen der Beamten, den rituellen Teil des Lebens zu würdigen. Die Affekte, die bei vielfältigen Anlässen entstehen und durch die Elektrizität verstärkt werden, wachsen zu imaginierten (*make-believe*) gemeinschaftlichen Empfindungen wie Solidarität und Stolz auf die revolutionäre Tradition Vietnams zusammen, die im Laufe des Jahres immer wieder erzeugt und neu erschaffen werden. Diese imaginierten Empfindungen sind ein zentraler Baustein der Identität und der Zugehörigkeitsgefühle der Gemeinschaften in diesem „neuen Land" (*đất mới*), das erst vor einem halben Jahrhundert aus dem Meer gewonnen wurde.

Durch solche Gesten, die über ihre dienstlichen Verpflichtungen hinausgehen, tragen die lokalen Beamten dazu bei, eine wohlgesonnene Einstellung von politischer Zugehörigkeit in der Bevölkerung hervorzurufen, die zu einem gewissen Grad die Schwächen der lokalen Wirtschaft kompensiert. In den frühen 2000er Jahren wurden durch die lokale Regierung ideologisch basierte Entscheidungen über wirtschaftliche Umstrukturierungen getroffen, die zunächst Gewinne brachten, später jedoch einen großen Anteil an der gegenwärtigen Verschuldung vieler Haushalte hatten. Nach der Initiierung eines Programms des Zentralstaates zur Entwicklung ländlicher Räume (New Countryside Program, Chương trình Nông thôn mới) im Jahr 2010, das auf der neoliberalen Logik von Eigenständigkeit, Selbsthilfe und Eigenunternehmertum basierte, zogen sich die lokalen Behörden aus der wirtschaftlichen Sphäre zurück, da sie sich nun von der Verantwortung für die Existenzsicherung der lokalen Bevölkerung befreit sahen. Ihre Aktivitäten im Bereich der wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung bestehen heute vor allem in der Mobilisierung von zentralen und lokalen Finanzmitteln, um die Infrastruktur der „New Countryside" aufzubauen. Dieser Prozess erzeugt negative Affekte, da die Dorfbewohner:innen den Verdacht hegen, dass die Beamten ihrer Kommune korrupt seien. Während ihr Misstrauen gegenüber dem lokalen Staat wächst, bleibt ihr Vertrauen in die Antikorruptionsbemühungen und die unterstützende Fürsorge des Zentralstaates erhalten. Zu letzteren Zuwendungen gehören zum Beispiel die Stromversorgung und andere Zuschüsse, die – so der Verdacht – aber von den lokalen Beamten unterschlagen werden. Da in der Provinz eine Tradition des politischen Widerstands besteht, sind Gesten der Anteilnahme zu einem gewissen Grad auch eine Überlebensstrategie für die lokalen Beamten.

Kapitel 4 trägt den Titel „The Power and the Meter: Socio-Electric Relationships in a Rural Community" und beschäftigt sich mit dem Mechanismus, mittels dessen EVN sein Stromverteilungssystem in ländlichen Gebieten technisch und finanziell betreibt. Auf lokaler Ebene basiert das System überwiegend auf den Strommanagementteams (*đội quản lý điện xã*) der Kommune. Diese Teams bestehen aus gering bezahlten Elektrikern, die von EVN eingestellt werden, um jeden Monat die Stromzähler abzulesen und die Rechnungen einzutreiben. Aber in Dong Phong gehen ihre tatsächlichen Aktivitäten weit darüber hinaus. Sie fordern EVN-Kund:innen auf, genügend finanzielle Mittel zur Begleichung der Rechnungen zu Verfügung zu halten, und geben Haushalten in Not Überbrückungskredite, damit sie die monatlichen Rechnungen bezahlen können und den Netzanschluss nicht verlieren. Im Fall einer Nichtzahlung würden am Ende des Kalendermonats die Anschlüsse gesperrt und erst nach Begleichung der Rechnung – zuzüglich einer Gebühr für den erneuten Anschluss – wieder freigeschaltet werden. Die lokalen Elektriker sind keine regulären Beschäftigten von EVN, sondern sie leisten auf „informelle" Weise technische und finanzielle Dienste, die für den Betrieb des ländlichen Stromsystems notwendig sind. Dabei bringen sie ihre eigenen

sozialen und finanziellen Ressourcen ein und tragen auch die Risiken selbst. Im Gegenzug verdienen sie Geld durch Dienste, die die EVN aus ihrem Verantwortungs- und Haftungsbereich im Rahmen der Stromversorgung der Haushalte ausschließt, und sie erweitern ihre soziale Macht anhand der (begrenzten) Autorität, die EVN an sie überträgt.

Einerseits sind die sozialen Beziehungen der Elektriker:innen der Kommune mit den anderen Dorfbewohner:innen durch die geschäftlichen Beziehungen im Rahmen der Stromversorgung verflochten, wodurch ein typischer sozio-elektrischer Mechanismus geschaffen wird, der das Geschäft am Laufen hält. Andererseits sind die Interaktionen der beiden Gruppen oft durch Konflikte und Misstrauen gekennzeichnet, und diese Formen des Alltagswiderstands machen die komplexen Machtverhältnisse im Prozess der Stromversorgung, des Stromverbrauchs und der Bezahlung sichtbar.

Durch den Verbrauch und die Bezahlung von Strom werden die ländlichen Bewohner:innen in ein Netzwerk von Machtverhältnissen verwickelt, in dem ihre Handlungen von ihrem jeweiligen „Gegenüber“ induziert werden: Stromzählern, lokalen Elektrikern und dem staatlichen Energieunternehmen. Viele Nutzer:innen sind skeptisch gegenüber den Zählern und den Elektrikern. Sie können die Zähler nicht selbst kontrollieren, denn die Geräte werden außerhalb des Hauses hoch auf den Strommasten installiert, und es ist ihnen offiziell verboten, die Zähler zu berühren. Die Stromzähler sind Eigentum von EVN, das auch die Kontrolle über deren Funktionstüchtigkeit für sich beansprucht. Da der Strompreis aus Sicht der Nutzer:innen hoch ist, entsteht häufig Streit zwischen den Verbraucher:innen und den Elektriker:innen über den Stromverbrauch und somit auch über die monatlichen Kosten. Das Thema ist affektiv aufgeladen: Nutzer:innen hegen den Verdacht, dass die Zähler den Verbrauch nicht richtig messen, dass die Elektriker:innen die Zähler falsch ablesen und sogar, dass die EVN die Zähler manipuliert, sodass sie schneller laufen. Lediglich die soziale und finanzielle Macht der lokalen Elektriker:innen kann dazu beitragen, den unruhigen, widerstandsbereiten lokalen Markt zu stabilisieren und möglichst hohe Gewinne für den Staatskonzern zu erzielen. Die Konzepte von Foucault und James Scott hier zusammenbringend, können die Konflikte als Formen des Alltagswiderstands verstanden werden, die als Katalysator dienen, um die Machtverhältnisse sowie die Art und Weise, wie die Menschen im ländlichen Raum den Mechanismen von EVN zur technischen und finanziellen Governance der Elektrizität ausgesetzt sind, zum Vorschein zu bringen.

Nach der Erläuterung des Systems zur Verwaltung der Stromversorgung wendet sich der Blick in Kapitel 5 auf die Arbeit der Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen (*công nhân Điện lực*) in der Bezirksstelle des Elektrizitätswerks in Hoang Hai. Unter dem Titel „The Instrumentality of Human Infrastructure in State-Making“ beschäftigt sich das Kapitel mit dem Einsatz von Körper, Psyche und Würde der

Arbeiter:innen als Pufferelement in der Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur, um Konflikte zwischen dem Stromkonzern (der den Staat repräsentiert) und den Kund:innen abzudämpfen. Als ethnographische Grundlage dieses Kapitels schildere ich meine teilnehmende Beobachtung in der EVN-Bezirksstelle am Beispiel einer Arbeitsschicht, in der die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen wegen des Ausfalls einer Transformatorenstation im Dorf heftig beschimpft wurden. Zudem werden andere Vorfälle dargestellt, zum Beispiel, wie die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen für die Erhaltung des Stromnetzes ihre Körperkraft und Sicherheit aufs Spiel setzen oder von Stromverbraucher:innen körperlich angegriffen werden. Im letzteren Fall wurden die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen ihrer Ansicht nach angegriffen, weil die Dorfbewohner:innen ihren Kampf gegen die lokalen Behörden austragen mussten – und die in gewisser Hinsicht mit dem Staat assoziierten Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen waren ein leichteres Ziel als andere Vertreter:innen des Staates. Durch ihre Arbeit in einem Umfeld, das von Interessenskonflikten zwischen dem Stromkonzern und den Kund:innen geprägt ist, müssen die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen für Störungen oder das Versagen des Infrastruktursystems geradestehen und dienen als Zielscheibe, an der die ländliche Bevölkerung ihre „oppressive Empörung“ (*bức xúc*) über das politische System und ihr wirtschaftlich unsicheres Leben auslassen kann.

Die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen arbeiten zudem in einem Umfeld, das sich durch neoliberale Reformen im Elektrizitätssektor in einem tiefgreifenden Wandel befindet. Obwohl das Stromnetz und die Zuverlässigkeit der Netzanbindung verbessert wurden, steht EVM aufgrund der spürbar hohen Strompreise und der schlechten Qualität der Versorgung, die anfällig für plötzliche Ausfälle und Spannungsschwankungen ist, vor einer „Win-Lose“-Situation mit den Kund:innen. Aufgrund der Reformen und widersprüchlicher Vorstellungen von der Bedeutung des Stroms (als einer vom Staat zur Verfügung gestellten öffentlichen Leistung vs. einer gewinnorientiert angebotenen Ware) herrscht unter den Stromverbraucher:innen Verwirrung bezüglich ihrer Rechte und Pflichten in ihrer Beziehung mit dem Staatskonzern. Das führt dazu, dass die täglichen Auseinandersetzungen zwischen den Beschäftigten des Stromkonzerns und den Stromverbraucher:innen affektiv aufgeladen sind. Die Mitarbeiter:innen bezeichnen sich als „Schwiegertöchter aller Familien“ (*dâu trăm họ*) und drücken damit ihre mangelnde Arbeitszufriedenheit sowie den verdeckten Konflikt zwischen ihrer verkörperten manuellen Arbeit am Netz und der emotionalen Arbeit in ihrer interaktiven Service-Tätigkeit aus.

Angesichts der intimen und affektiven Integration der Arbeiter:innen in das Elektrizitätsystem schlage ich das Konzept der „menschlichen Infrastruktur“ vor. Als integraler Bestandteil des Systems fungieren die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen sowohl als Kernelement im technischen Betrieb als auch als Puffer zwischen der elektrischen Infrastruktur und den Menschen sowie zwischen dem Staat und der Bevölkerung im Kontext eines grundlegenden Systemwandels von sozialistisch-staatlich hin zu „markt-

orientiert“ und privatwirtschaftlich. Diese Funktion wird in einem verflochtenen Infrastruktur-Politik-System ausgeführt, das auf der historischen Verbindung zwischen Elektrizität und dem Staat und zwischen ländlicher Elektrifizierung und den lokalen Behörden basiert. Meine ethnographische Forschung deckt unangenehme Wahrheiten über die Instrumentalisierung der Arbeiter:innen im Rahmen der Aufrechterhaltung des Infrastruktursystems und der Überlebensfähigkeit des Staates auf.

Kapitel 6 steht unter dem Titel „The Moral Dimension of Electric Labour in State Making“ und beleuchtet die moralische Welt der Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen, ihre Zugehörigkeitsgefühle und ihre Selbstidentifikation, um ein besseres Verständnis der Situation der untersten Mitarbeiter:innen des Elektrizitätssektors zu erlangen. Die Beschäftigten des Hoang Hai Elektrizitätswerks verstehen sich als besondere Art von Arbeiter:innen. Als Beschäftigte einer staatlichen Monopolgesellschaft in einem Entwicklungsland, das sich im Übergang zur Marktwirtschaft befindet, müssen sie Eigenschaften aus verschiedenen Berufsfeldern – Sachbearbeitung, Industriearbeit, interaktive Dienstleistung – in ihren alltäglichen Interaktionen mit Kund:innen und Infrastruktur verbinden. Wie ihre bäuerlichen Kund:innen leben sie auf dem Land; die meisten von ihnen wählten den Beruf aufgrund einer Familientradition und der vergleichsweise guten Vergütung für Mitarbeiter:innen in diesem Sektor. Sie zeichnet ein gewisser Berufsethos und eine ideologische Verbindung zum Staat aus. Ihre Berufspraktiken sind letztendlich ethische Entscheidungen, die sie auf Basis ihrer hybriden Position als Mitglieder der Bauernschaft und der Industrie, ihren multiplen Loyalitäten zur lokalen Bevölkerung, zum Staat und zum Elektrizitätswerk und vor allem ihrer Selbstidentifikation als relativ autonome Mitarbeiter:innen des Elektrizitätssektors treffen.

All diese Faktoren bestimmen den individuellen Umgang der Arbeiter:innen mit der Aufgabe, die Infrastruktur zu puffern und die Beziehung zwischen Staat und Bevölkerung zu schlichten. Angesichts des Interessenskonfliktes zwischen dem Staatskonzern und den Kund:innen agieren manche Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen tendenziell zugunsten der Kund:innen, auch wenn die Gewinne des Konzerns dadurch möglicherweise verringert werden, weil sie die ländlichen Stromverbraucher:innen als „arm und gütig“ verstehen. Andere wiederum sehen keinen Grund, die Kund:innen zum Nachteil des Unternehmens zu bevorzugen, denn sie werden von ihnen oft nicht besonders gut behandelt. In beiden Fällen rechtfertigen sie ihre Entscheidungen, entweder mit dem Verweis auf das moralische Bekenntnis des Staat, dem „Volk“ zu dienen, oder auf die Geschäftsbedingungen des Stromunternehmens. Unter bestimmten Bedingungen ändern die Mitarbeiter:innen bisweilen jedoch auch ihren Umgang mit Kunden:innen, entsprechend der Affekte, die in den direkten Interaktionen erzeugt werden.

Innerhalb der Arbeitsteams beim Hoang Hai Elektrizitätswerk findet eine Art informeller Schulung statt: in Gesprächen und während Teamsitzungen geben dienstältere Beschäftigte ihre Erfahrungen und auch ihre Einstellungen zum als angemessen erachteten Umgang mit Kund:innen an jüngere Teammitglieder weiter. Durch diesen internen Beeinflussungsmechanismus lernen die Arbeiter:innen, wie es scheint, spezifische Taktiken, um sich für die Arbeit mit der Infrastruktur und den Kund:innen zu wappnen. Die Mehrheit eignet sich eine eher wohlgesonnene Ansicht gegenüber den Kund:innen an; das entspricht auch der allgemein geteilten Sichtweise des Teams und dient als Basis für Entscheidungen im Alltag. In ihrer hybriden Position zwischen den Menschen und dem Unternehmen tragen die Elektrizitätsarbeiter:innen zu positiven Kundenbeziehungen von EVN und damit auch zu einer positiven Beziehung zwischen Bevölkerung und Staat bei.

Im Kapitel 7, dem letzten ethnographischen Kapitel mit dem Titel „Electricity Sectoral Reforms and Energy Transition from Above and Below“, werden die verschiedenen Ebenen der Stromversorgung analysiert, um einen Gesamtüberblick über die Makroentwicklungen und lokalen Prozesse zu erhalten. Zunächst verlasse ich das Dorf und die Bezirksstelle des EVNs und schildere die Reformen und Restrukturierung des Elektrizitätssektors auf nationaler Ebene. Seit 2008 werden die Vermarktlichung des Staatsmonopols und die Umstellung der Energiebasis auf eine Stromversorgung mittels erneuerbarer Energien anstelle der Nutzung fossiler Ressourcen vorangetrieben. Dieser doppelte Prozess wird vom Staat Vietnam umgesetzt, aber getragen – und wohl auch gesteuert – wird er durch Darlehen und neoliberale Ideen der internationalen „Entwicklungspartner“.

Während die „Deregulierung“ des Staatsmonopols auf wenig Widerstand seitens der Bevölkerung, des Staates oder des EVN trifft, findet die Energiewende dagegen in einem ambivalenten Kontext statt, da auf unterschiedlichen Ebenen des Staates und innerhalb seiner Einrichtungen verschiedene Standpunkte vorherrschen. Es wurden zahlreiche zentrale Positionspapiere zur Energiewende veröffentlicht, die Regierung hat sich zur CO2-Neutralität bis 2050 verpflichtet und Solar- und Windkraftanlagen werden im ganzen Land errichtet. Die Infrastruktur und die Mechanismen, die für den Netzanschluss und die Verwendung dieser Anlagen nötig sind, sind jedoch noch lange nicht fertiggestellt. Einerseits scheint es den politischen Willen zu geben, den Einsatz erneuerbarer Energien zu beschleunigen, das Staatsmonopol aufzulösen und den Elektrizitätssektor zu privatisieren. Andererseits herrschen innerhalb des Staates sowie zwischen der Führungsebene und den Umsetzenden unterschiedliche Vorstellungen, die aus der lang andauernden Auseinandersetzung zwischen Veränderungsbestreben und Beharrungstendenz sowie aus der mangelnden Koordination bei der strategischen Planung resultieren.

Nach diesen Ausführungen wende ich den Blick wieder auf die lokale Situation und die Auswirkungen der Reformen auf regionaler und nationaler Ebene. Die jüngste Strompreiskrise hatte wenig sichtbare Auswirkungen auf den Konsum oder die Sichtweisen der Menschen in der Kommune Dong Phong, da die meisten von ihnen im Vergleich zu Stadtbewohner:innen nur wenig Strom verbrauchten. Die Reformen im Elektrizitätssektor haben also den Umgang der ländlichen Bevölkerung mit der Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur nicht wesentlich verändert. Als sich „grüne" Organisationen aus den Städten allerdings bemühten, die Energiewende in ländliche Gebiete zu bringen, waren die Erfahrungen der Dorfbewohner:innen anders als erwartet. Im Jahr 2012 wurde ein vierjähriges NGO-Projekt für erneuerbare Energien initiiert und die Behörden in Dong Phong versprachen, den Ort zur „ersten Kommune mit sauberer Energie" zu machen. Einige Jahren nach Ende des Projekts waren die in diesem Rahmen errichteten Anlagen aufgrund der niedrigen Qualität und mangelnder Wartung heruntergekommen. Die Menschen gingen wieder dazu über, ihren Strom ausschließlich vom Netz zu beziehen. In der entlegenen Kommune An Hao im Süden Vietnams wurde von der gleichen NGO ein ähnliches Projekt zur Bereitstellung von Strom mittels Insel-Solaranlagen für Haushalte in Kommunen ohne Netzanschluss durchgeführt. Die Solaranlagen änderten das Leben der Einwohner:innen insofern, als sie zum Laden ihrer Stromspeicher die Geräte nicht mehr über lange Strecken tragen müssen. Da die Geräte, die sie sich leisten können, meist eine geringe Kapazität haben und nur einen minimalen Stromverbrauch abdecken können, müssen sie allerdings nach wie vor in ihrem Konsum sehr diszipliniert sein. Sie sehnen sich deswegen nach dem Zugang zum Netz und der Unterstützung des Staates, denn sie wissen, dass der Staat die einzige Hoffnung für Hilfe bei der Errichtung des Netzanschlusses darstellt. In beiden Kommunen gibt es also eine sichtbare Präferenz für Netzstrom gegenüber erneuerbarer und „grüner" Energie. Zum Zeitpunkt des Abschlusses meiner Feldforschung 2019 setzten Menschen sowohl in wirtschaftlich marginalisierten Kommunen als auch in höchst politisierten Gemeinschaften ihre Hoffnungen weiterhin auf die Fürsorge des Staates, unterwarfen sich also der paternalistischen Macht des Staates und der Attraktivität der staatlich getragenen Energieinfrastruktur.

Kapitel 8 bildet den Schluss der Dissertation und bringt die ethnographischen Befunde von verschiedenen Forschungsstandorten zusammen, um eine fundierte Diagnose des Staates und der elektrischen Staatsbildung im ländlichen Vietnam darzulegen. Es wird gezeigt, dass die Staatsbildung in Vietnam die Grassroots-Ebene umfasst, wo die Elektrizitätsinfrastruktur eine Strahlkraft auf die Bevölkerung ausübt und zugleich ihre Teilnahme an affektiven politischen Ritualen und Räumen ermöglicht. Die lokalen Behörden spielen eine aktive Rolle in diesem Prozess der elektrischen Staatsbildung und die Mitarbeiter:innen des Elektrizitätssektors, ob regulär oder als saisonal befristete Arbeitskräfte beschäftigt, sind unentbehrliche Akteur:innen. Dank ihrer Beteiligung wurden

marktorientierte Reformen des Elektrizitätssektors im ländlichen Raum ausgeführt, und der Staat konnte sein Versprechen einlösen, der ländlichen Bevölkerung Infrastruktur zur Verfügung zu stellen, für die die nötigen staatlichen Ressourcen sonst gefehlt hätten. Zudem wurden mittels der Strominfrastruktur die affektiven Verflechtungen zwischen Bürger:innen und dem Staat erneuert. In der Untersuchung dieser Staat-Volk-Beziehung trägt diese Dissertation zur Betrachtung des heutigen vietnamesischen Staates aus einer neuen Perspektive bei – nämlich mit Hinblick auf Elektrizität und Infrastruktur. In der Studie geht es nicht nur darum, die damit verbundene Politik zu verstehen, sondern auch um das ethnologische Anliegen, das menschliche Element der Infrastruktur sichtbar zu machen, das als inhärenter Bestandteil des Elektrizitätssystems auf ganz unterschiedliche Art und Weise mit politischen Prozessen verflochten ist – sowohl intendiert als auch unbeabsichtigt.

Chapter One

Introduction

> *"Các cô, các chú được giao quản lý tài sản quý báu này, các cô, các chú cố gắng lên, đừng để cảnh nghèo nàn lạc hậu trở lại trên quê hương Xô-viết của chúng ta"*
>
> *"You are delegated to manage this precious asset. Try your best, and don't let poverty and backwardness return to our 'Soviet' homeland".*[1]

In 1957, Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV, Việt Nam Dân chủ Cộng hòa), addressed electricity workers at the construction site of the Vinh Power Plant (EVN 2014, 53), the "precious asset" they were building and were soon to be delegated to manage. Even though the plant's construction would take another two years, Ho Chi Minh already projected a future in which the power it generated would have swept away "poverty" and "backwardness". It now seemed to be the responsibility of the electricity staff to prevent these conditions from coming back again. Like most of the world's revolutionary leaders, President Ho looked far beyond the present to venture the image of an optimistic future for his people. His words show his belief in the power of electricity to bring about wealth, civilization and modernity.

President Ho played an important part in urging the electricity sector to take on the mission of modernization through encouragement, mobilization and not least policy-making. For example, he paid a visit to the Yen Phu Electric Power Plant in the first days the DRV government took control of Hanoi after the final defeat of French rule in 1954. In the critical moment that the independent nation emerged from its colonial past, he came to acknowledge the patriotic contribution of the electricity workers, who had maintained the production and distribution of power in Hanoi almost intact through the eight-year-long resistance war. The day of this visit, 21 December, has become the Annual Celebration Day (*"ngày truyền thống"*) of Vietnam's electricity sector (EVN 2014, 49). Given the state's commitment to electricity, as indicated by President Ho's visits, the electricity sector and its staff appear to have worked faithfully hand in hand with the Vietnamese state since its establishment.

[1] "Soviet" is the Slavic equivalent of the English "Council", referring to the communist type of government that is composed of workers and, in the case of Vietnam, peasants and sometimes soldiers. The term "Soviet" in this statement refers to local history, as the Vinh power plant is built in the capital of former Nghe Tinh province, the site of the "Soviet Nghe Tinh" uprising of 1930 to 1931 that established, in the short term, various Soviet local authorities.

The notion that electricity is "an index of civilization and state success" has been shared by decolonizing states (Chatterjee 2020, 18) wishing to catch up with the developed world, but it has been especially influential with socialist governments that uphold Lenin's mantra of communism as the totality of Soviet power and national electrification. In Vietnam, the electricity sector has always meant to be "one step ahead" of all other industries, as mentioned in most Party Congress Resolutions. At times, it should even be "some steps ahead" (Vu, et al. 1975, Government Office records). However, under the condition of a prolonged war and the central-planning economy that followed, it was not until the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms of 1986 that universal electrification started to be rolled out in the Vietnamese countryside, initially as a series of informal bottom-up initiatives. These local initiatives were approved by the state and became a great success within a few decades of 1986. Rural electrification allowed the vast majority of Vietnamese access to electric light and electrified conveniences. It also gave rise to interactions, including disputes, between the people, now consumers of electricity, and the state monopoly of electricity and its staff.

This thesis looks at the social and political processes that are taking place around electrification and the state in rural areas of Vietnam. It aims to answer a straightforward question: "How does electricity infrastructure contribute to the making of the state?" Based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted mainly in a rural commune and a district branch of the power sector between 2018 and 2019, I examine Vietnam's rural electrification in the recent past and investigate the state–people relationship that both shapes and is shaped by the mechanism of electricity distribution. While this investigation of electricity and the state necessitates a discussion of the macrolevel reforms going on in and around the electricity sector, which include structural reforms and the energy transition, this thesis remains focused on grassroots perspectives and local practices.

This thesis therefore contributes to both the anthropology of the state and the anthropology of infrastructure, of which electricity is a sub-topic. At the infrastructural level, it will highlight the human component of the electricity grid, which enables the distribution of electric power. Ethnographic evidence shows that not only social relations, but also human bodies are integrated in the electricity infrastructure and personal property appropriated by it in order to ensure the smooth distribution of electricity and the running of the infrastructural system as a whole. I will therefore extend AbdouMaliq Simone's notion "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004), both below and beyond the social, into what I call "human infrastructure", where human bodies are integrated into the infrastructural system to function for the system. At the level of state-making, the thesis will discuss state-making effects being generated from electrified lived experiences and the desire for state-sponsored grid electricity. I will show that rural electrification invigorates an affective state-making process, where state actors and people co-create the political "make-believe spaces" (Navaro-Yashin 2012) that are based on

constantly emerging sentiments. The entanglement of the state and electrical infrastructure manifests itself in the fact that the human infrastructure of electricity enhances the state's power and state–people relationship as much as it benefits the electricity sector itself.

In this introduction, I will first go through the literature on electricity and infrastructure, highlighting an enduring anthropological divide between symbolic and materialistic approaches to infrastructure and the state, before engaging with recent advances in the theory of affects as a potential way forward. I will then provide some background on Vietnam's electrification and of the Vietnamese state and outline my research methodology and positionality. The introduction closes with a summary of the individual chapters that will make up this thesis.

Electricity: an everyday extraordinary form of energy

Electricity is no longer a matter of amazement for the vast majority of the world's population. Ninety-one per cent of the world's eight billion people currently have access to electric power, which means they have at least four hours of task lighting and phone- or radio-charging every day (see Ritchie 2021). Once praised as tomorrow's miracle (Haldane in Nye 1997, 150), electricity has now become an aspect of everyday life for most people in the world through a long-running global project we call electrification.

Starting more than a century ago in Western societies (see Hughes 1993), urban and rural electrification has brought humankind into the "era of electricity" (Özden-Schilling 2015), an era filled with the transformative effects built upon electric power (see Nye 1997). Colonial societies in Asia, including French Indochina, also had access to electricity: before the end of the nineteenth century, the first cities in Vietnam were being lit by electric lamps (EVN 2014, 18–21, Endres 2023). The electric lighting of urban areas caused an enduring desire for electricity and modernity in the countryside, which was lagging behind. In the 1930s, the North Vietnamese writer Thach Lam well captured this desire in his short story "Two children" (*"Hai đứa trẻ"*), describing a group of rural dwellers "in the dark, looking forward to something bright for their daily meagre life". That "something" is encapsulated in a night train coming from Hanoi, bearing on its carriages the luxury of electric light and "seemingly a touch of life from another world", the world of "faraway Hanoi, dazzlingly bright and joyfully noisy". Every night, the main characters of the story, two teenage sisters, would not go to bed until they had seen the train swiftly passing by.

The electricity that is "*the* foundational apparatus" of modernity (Boyer 2015) has now reached most corners of the world and become an ordinary aspect of everyday life. In Vietnam, nearly 100 per cent

of the population has access to electricity. Once a spectacle of technology and politics, from magnificent lighting to powerful (and clean) machines and appliances, big or small, electricity has now become “ubiquitous” (Anusas and Ingold 2015, Özden-Schilling 2021). It has served as a “mundane”, “everyday” and even “taken-for-granted” flow of energy in most parts of the world (Winther 2008, Rupp 2016, Pink 2011).

Alongside its pervasiveness, electricity is probably the most “extraordinary” (Özden-Schilling 2021) and most interesting (Gupta 2015) form of energy human beings have ever encountered. Researchers of electricity have written extensively on its multifaceted fascination. The taming of electricity’s “mystifying physical nature” (McDonald 2008) empowers humans with the force of a thunderbolt, which in itself nonetheless remains an “elusive” and “difficult to handle” phenomenon (Abram 2022, 741–742). Neither tangible like biomass and fossil fuels, which exist in the mass, nor intangible like sunlight and wind, which are effective without infrastructure, the electric current’s paradoxical existence as both “matter and non-matter” (McDonald 2008, 4), as one of “things that are not things” (Abram 2022, 744), makes it a nearly uncontainable and incomprehensible form of energy. This paradox also leads to electricity, despite its pervasiveness, being perceived as “invisible”, “inaudible” and yet “dangerous” to its users (Boyer 2015, Winther 2008). Being both ordinary and extraordinary are two faces of the same coin that is electricity.

Electricity and electrification have become common topics of research in the human sciences, such as history, area studies, development studies and energy studies (the paragraphs above encompass the knowledge of electricity produced in these areas). Anthropologists, however, have not generally engaged with electricity until recently. In a special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Dominic Boyer (2015) records being struck, in 2013, by the absence of anthropological research on electricity and electrification. He and colleagues thus called on anthropologists to “plug in” to the broader conversation on electricity in the human sciences (Boyer 2015, 538) because “electricity needs anthropology” (Winther and Wilhite 2015). Before and around the time of this call, there had been so few anthropological works on electricity that all their authors could easily be mentioned. Tanja Winther (2008) arguably ignited the anthropological interest in electricity with an ethnography of rural electrification in Tanzania. Ronen Shamir (2013) followed with his study of electrification in Pakistan. Daniel Mains (2012) used electricity as a lens through which to examine whether the concept of neoliberalism is useful in understanding politics based on the case of Ethiopia. Works by Antina von Schnitzler (2013) and Leo Coleman (2014) drew attention to the political power of the electricity meter as a device. Electricity also occupies a chapter in a compilation by Strauss,

Rupp and Love (2013) on energy and the anthropocene.[2] Özden-Schilling (2015) has started to shed some light on the economic dimensions of electricity systems. Within a couple of years of Boyer's call, only Rupp (2016), Degani (2017), Coleman (2017) and Schwenkel (2018) had produced ethnographies of electricity from around the world. After yet another effort in "electrifying anthropology" with an edited book by Abram, Winthereik, Yarrow (2019) and their contributors, more recently, Özden-Schilling (2021) and Michael Degani (2022) issued their long-awaited monographs on the US electricity market and the Tanzanian urban grid respectively. The number of anthropological works and authors since Winther's ethnography in 2008 can still be counted easily. As Simone Abram (2022) puts it, "a particular [anthropological] focus on electricity has been slow in emerging" (742).

Electricity infrastructure and state-making

Due to the challenges of providing electricity in real time over an enormous network infrastructure, the process of electricity generation, transmission and distribution requires huge resources that, especially in less developed economies, only the state can mobilize. The notion of electricity as a "natural" monopoly has thus come enshrined in the practice of many countries, at least at the beginning of electrification (Özden-Schilling 2021). The role of the state in electricity provision is where the socialist mind and the developmentalist approach converge. Rankin (2009) reviews the historical discussions on infrastructure at the United Nations in 1950s to highlight international pressures that prescribed infrastructure, including of electricity, to be the prerequisite of development after the world wars, and mandated the UN members to provide infrastructure to their citizens. As both a public good and, more recently, a human right (Chatterjee 2020), electricity, with its capital-intensive infrastructure, let alone its quirky commodity traits, requires actions by the state and thus becomes a realm of state power.

Dialectically, indeed, electricity infrastructure makes the state. Boyer (2015) argues that in modern times the electricity grid has become a state instrument, being a tool not only of government policies, but also, more than a tool, providing the very organization of power "that allows any invention of statecraft to occur" (533). But how does an infrastructural system fulfil this mission for the state?

[2] The anthropology of electricity has an inherent link to the anthropology of energy and the energy transition. The latter has witnessed vibrant academic conversations and a surge of research projects on climate change issues, such as those found on CityIndustries' international research network https://cityindustries.org/ and the Energy Anthropology Network https://ean.hypotheses.org/, among others.

Despite the slow emergence of an anthropology of electricity, the anthropology of infrastructure, with its distinguished approaches to state power, greatly benefits the understanding of electrical state-making. These different approaches, namely the symbolic (or mentalistic) versus the materialist, have produced different accounts of what the state does with infrastructure and, vice versa, what infrastructure does to, or with, the state. On the one hand, anthropologists of both approaches largely accept Brian Larkin's conceptualization of infrastructure as constituted by "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space" (2013, 328), and Susan Leigh Star's thesis that reads "infrastructure is both relational and ecological" (Star 1999, 377). On the other hand, the two approaches differ substantially in making sense of the way this infrastructure comes to engage with state politics.

The material emphasis in infrastructure studies and analyses of technopolitics takes as their starting points a provocative thesis, one that came with the material turn in the social sciences and cumulated in Science and Technology Studies (STS). This thesis takes the position that artefacts have politics. In his seminal essay, Langdon Winner (1980) convincingly argues for the power of technical arrangements to create particular social and political effects, such as including and excluding some groups from certain social and political spaces. He famously presents the case of a series of bridges built "extraordinary low" to prevent the public buses of low-income and racial minority groups from accessing the parkways and parks of Long Island, New York, effectively prioritizing the recreation of upper- and middle-class whites who own private cars.[3] The materialist Madeleine Akrich (1992) concurs that technical objects can be, and always are, engaged in the process of making citizens, who are turned into objects of this process. Through an "inscription – description" mechanism, objects are inscribed with predetermined ideas of the world and expectations regarding users' behaviors. Users in their turn "de-scribe" these expectations and designs, by so doing both modifying the original design of the objects in a way their designers did not intend and effectively being subject to the ideas of the world inscribed in the technical objects. In this way, the electricity meter, for instance, is among the "social control" instruments that "not only define actors and relationships between them, but [...] stabilize and channel these" (220). Technological artifacts embody political functions, both as intended and beyond what was originally intended (Schraube 2021, 115).

Taking up these leads, materialist scholars have examined the technopolitics that wields the material power of infrastructure in shaping subjects and subjectivities and ordering social relations. Mitchell

[3] Langdon's political interpretation of low-hanging bridges in Long Island has been refuted as misleading or misunderstanding by a number of authors, despite the classic status of his essay. See, for example, Joerges (1999) for a review of counterarguments and an offer of his own.

(2002) holds that "[f]rom the opening of the twentieth century to its close, the politics of national development and economic growth was a politics of techno-science"; this viewpoint continues to act as an analytical lens for the anthropology of infrastructure at the beginning of the twenty-first century.[4] Von Schnitzler (2008, 2013) shows that (poorer) residents of post-apartheid Soweto acquire just as much "prepaid citizenship" as they can pay for water and electricity consumption, as a consequence of their connection being regulated by prepaid metres. "Travelling" from Victorian Britain to South Africa, the prepaid metre was intended to discipline and civilize low-income users as a material device for creating a political order. Anand (2011) describes Mumbai's residents' "politechnics" of pressuring the water pipe physically, and water management officials socially and politically, in order to claim access to urban water supplies, or what Anand calls "hydraulic citizenship" – a form of citizenship that is particularly hard to obtain for the urban poor. In rural India, the analysis of the electric "current" by Cross (2019) highlights the caste structure and social inequalities, but also stresses the "electric citizenship" that is materialized by connection to the grid. As Destrée (2021) contends, the technopolitical approach links infrastructure to questions of citizenship, rights, entitlements and governance (95).

The answers that technopolitics provides for state-making are based on the Foucauldian idea that individuals are subjected to modern techniques of government, namely forms, regulations, conventions and procedures (Miller 2005), or, to use Foucault's original concepts, discipline and governmentality. While essential for social ordering, these modern techniques only yield a "'state effect" – an abstract and "ghost-like" image of an autonomous state (Mitchell 1991, 91), and not at all "the state" per se. In this perspective, the state is not viewed as a "self-willed entity" separate from society (ibid., 86) – the source of power, including sovereignty – but only as an effect generated by government techniques and therefore cannot be seen as real. This view follows Foucault's notion of the state, which is explicit in his lectures: "The state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmentalities" (Foucault 2008, 77). Infrastructure serves as a "political terrain" (von Schnitzler 2013) on which the modern state exercises its disciplinary power through "agentive" objects, and where the state-citizen relationship is materialized through mundane practices.

Actor network theory (ANT), which started with Bruno Latour's idea of "assemblages" and was consolidated with Jane Bennett's concept of "thing-power", has pushed the issue of materiality to a further frontier. ANT conceptualizes society as assemblages of human and non-human actors whose agency is "distributive" and "composite" (Bennett 2010, 37) to an extent that the subject/object

[4] Reviewing the anthropology of infrastructure, Larkin (2013) concludes that "[s]tudies of infrastructure tend to privilege the technological" (339).

distinction is resolved, leaving no one identifiable as taking credit or being blamed for the occurrence of an event. The theory has inspired many authors working with infrastructure to explore the network of actors far beyond human control and to develop an epistemology that is less "anthropocentric". It is highly relevant to Anthropocene studies that emphasize the reciprocity of human destruction and natural and thing-made catastrophes.

Whereas I took inspiration from this body of literature in the initial phase of my own study of electricity infrastructure, my fieldwork led me on a different path of theoretical analysis. Since "[e]thnography is not simply 'data collection'; it is rich in implicit theories of culture, society, and the individual" (Agar 1980, 23), my ethnographic work unveiled my theoretical and empirical preference for the human and the social. I have found my interlocutors convincing in their perspective on the experience of energy: it is the human actors who are largely held accountable for their (lack of) electricity access and for their (dis)advantages of power. This perspective does not find any accommodation in ANT, as it essentially refuses to "flatten" the power hierarchy of humans and things. After all, critics have pointed to the neglect of power struggles and social inequalities as a crucial flaw in actor network theory (see, for example, Bloor 1999, Harding 2008, Whittle and Spicer 2008, and Hornborg 2021).

Against the dominant material turn and the Foucauldian theory of power and the state, the symbolic approach to infrastructure and politics in the Durkheimian tradition has emerged powerfully in recent years. Also referred to as "mentalistic", this approach highlights the working of infrastructure in the mental sphere of the population as a collective through its symbolic meaning and representational dimension. It has been made clear that infrastructure in the form of roads, railways, electricity grids and water systems are conceptually and empirically linked with evolutionary ways of thinking about progress, modernity and civilization (Larkin 2013, 332). They come to represent "the possibility of being modern, of having a future" (ibid., 333) and, in the postcolonial and socialist contexts, showcase "the power and beneficence" of the state in delivering its promise of modernity (Schwenkel 2018, 107). In India, Coleman (2014) finds that postcolonial "dreams of great transformations" have been cultivated since the country's independence by what he calls "symbolic labor": "more than just a materialist project of pure instrumentalities, […] planning and developmentalism also linked technology and infrastructure to belonging and national historicity through an arduous symbolic politics […]" (467). In Vietnam, similarly, the revolutionary state "struggled to assert its legitimacy and unite the country around ideas of universal infrastructures embedded in the project of socialist nation building" (Schwenkel 2018, 107). With such symbolic labor over several decades, the political effects of infrastructure go beyond representation to encompass "complicated emotional investments", stimulating feelings of desire and promise (Larkin 2013, 333), intimacies (Schwenkel 2018), and the

maintenance of hopes and expectations even in the case of failed delivery (Harvey and Knox 2012, 523).

This symbolic and representational aspect of infrastructure allows it to do politics in ways that are different from materiality. Larkin (2013, 2018) argues for the "poetics" and the "aesthetical politics" of infrastructure, which works through forms that have been "loosened" from their functions (2013, 335). Harvey and Knox (2012) similarly conclude their essay on the "promotional and celebrational form" that is the source of the "enchantments" of infrastructure, which dazzles people and amplifies the developmental promise of a modern, better life (534). Coleman (2014) argues for the "collective consciousness" that an infrastructural object creates among social groups from his registration of the collective aspirations and movements that prepaid electricity meters give rise to in New Delhi. In this case, he argues, the individualizing "micropolitics" of discipline and governmentality cannot explain what occurs empirically. Likewise, Destrée (2021) demonstrates the infrastructural politics of collective life in a housing compound in Accra, Ghana, and reclaims "a poetics of sociality" which, from her point of view, has been pushed out of sight by the prevailing scholarly interests in technopolitics.

At the same time, the intersection between the symbolic meaning of the infrastructure and its material qualities are immanent in the works of several anthropologists. Harvey and Knox (2012), Knox (2017), Cross (2019) and Schwenkel (2018) all ground their studies in materiality but, instead of looking at the technopolitical functions of infrastructure, they recognize the infrastructural appeal of the state on the levels of aspiration and the imagination. Their works show that in certain conditions infrastructure ties citizens to the state not so much through technical functions (since the infrastructure may not function at all) as through the hope, the desire and the longing for modernity, belonging and inclusion that it represents. Knox (2017) concludes that infrastructure constitutes "the imaginative resources through which political participation is structured" (374). These works, despite their departure point at materiality, have distanced themselves from technological politics to enter the realm of symbolic and representational politics.

An affective angle on electric state-making

Anthropologists of various generations have sought for an epistemology that can bridge this divide between the "mentalistic" and "materialistic" approaches to objects of inquiry, not only to the state or to infrastructure, an epistemology that can combine the interpretive powers of both traditions. The motivation for this search comes at least from the claim of anthropologists to pursue "the holistic study of man", as Richard Adams (1978), then American Anthropologist Association's President,

emphasized in his urge for a holistic theory that enables anthropology to take on the pressing issues of the time, such as energy.

The first decades of the 21st century have seen authors in both schools of infrastructural politics resort to the same kind of tactile, bodily, ever-emergent "intensities of feeling" (Thrift 2004) called "affects" to describe and analyse their interlocutors' imagined and materialized experiences of infrastructure and the state.[5] Materialists find affects deeply material as they come from infrastructure to the body through the senses – a sensorial experience of the material. The materialist thinker Jane Bennett (2010) thinks of affect as "central to politics and ethics" (xii) and even "equate[s] affect with materiality" (xiii). Von Schnitzler (2013) claims to explore "more affective, embodied forms of political subjectivities" (672) by following the technical device of electricity meters. Knox (2017) argues that paying attention to embodied, affective engagements with materials is a better starting point than (Latour's perspective of) seeing relationships with materials as an assemblage (368). Anthropologists of the symbolic school, on the other hand, see affects as direct corporeal reactions to the appeal of the state and the collective, which explains why the appeal strikes deeply and remains strong, whether these intensities of feeling are transformed into rational thinking or not. Coleman (2014) describes the "affective surges" (a term derived from Mazarella) and affective moments that form the political collective. Larkin (2018) thinks of his notion of "political aesthetics" as being made of the ambient that infrastructure gives rise to, which induces affective and cognitive dispositions and which we feel in "tactile" ways. With particular regard to the state and to state-making, Yael Navaro-Yashin shows a blend between materiality, mentality and affect through her two major works in 2002 and 2012. From seeing the state as merely a "fantasy" that is unreal, its power only being generated through fantasizing (albeit with cynicism) (2002), she came to conceptualize the state as a "make-believe space", a "spatial-political entity" made in a material way (material crafting) and believed through phantasmatic work (2012, 5). Importantly, the phantomic makes itself present by affect transmission (ibid., 18). Although she still refers to the state as a phantom, she also sees it as a spatial-political *entity*, and her particular notion of affective "phantasmic work" is not far from Coleman's "symbolic labor" (2014), both denoting the work of making the state at a symbolic level. In my view, work on affects over the past two decades has formed a theoretical trend that can lead to the reconciliation of the material/symbolic dichotomy in infrastructural anthropology.

Among anthropologists of infrastructure who have announced their appreciation of affects and "affective forces", some have become explicit in articulating the symbolic and the material approaches

[5] An extended discussion of the concept and qualities of affect will come in Chapter Three, given the limits of space in the current Introduction.

to state power, such as Schwenkel (2018) in her work on infrastructural affective capacities (104). On the very site of the historic electricity plant in Vinh City mentioned above, she describes how the smokestack stood firm almost magically – through consecutive US bombings between 1964 and 1972 – as an intimate symbol of devotion to a socialist future in the face of aggression and violence. As a material object, the "quasi-agency" of the smokestack to act, provoke, and remain "mobilised the very collective and affective commitments necessary to sustain the promise that energy infrastructure would end the age of darkness […]" (105). Interestingly, while acknowledging the "collective" commitments (an element of the symbolic approach) to sustaining the promise of modernity, Schwenkel draws our attention to the smokestack's action of mobilizing these very commitments (an element of the materialist approach). Yet while acknowledging this affective capacity of the smokestack, she considers its agency as "quasi-", only an "as if", which makes it virtually the antithesis of ANT's notion of "distributive agency" – the agency distributed among humans and the non-human alike. In the scope of one book chapter, she has been able to convince her readership of the intimate relations between the smokestack as an infrastructural object, the urban residents and the socialist state. Affect, therefore, is the field where approaches can converge, be encompassed, and where different opinions are tested and overcome. Schwenkel's work is also the only anthropological treatment of electricity infrastructure in Vietnam that has been published internationally.[6]

Following Schwenkel and others, I argue that affect theory has great potential to understand human physical and mental experiences of infrastructural systems and objects. Drawing on the achievements of both the symbolic and materialistic anthropologies of infrastructure, I therefore continue by using an affective approach to investigate the interactions between and among electricity infrastructure, people and the state in rural Vietnam. Both theoretically and methodologically, the lens of affect elucidates the ways in which embodied experiences of electricity and its infrastructure brings rural residents into relations with the state, consequent upon but also in parallel with both material connections to the electricity grid and the "symbolic labor" of the socialist state. This approach also helps us comprehend the ethnographic evidence showing that the humans of the electricity sector have become an element of the infrastructure through their working bodies. In analysing this dimension of human experiences with infrastructure, I attempt to extend the notion of "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004) to "human infrastructure" with an emphasis on the bodies which are appropriated as an integral part of the material system.

[6] To my knowledge, nor was any anthropological contribution on electricity infrastructure published domestically until 2022.

“People as infrastructure” and human infrastructure

Based on his ethnography in inner city Johannesburg, AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) makes an analysis of how people respond to the scarcity and precarity of infrastructural services in developing societies through the idea of “people as infrastructure”. He extends the notion of infrastructure to “people’s activities” (407) and “social collaboration” (419), referring to the way in which urban residents of South Africa utilize their social relations and connections to meet urban needs, and how they themselves become conjunctions in that social-infrastructural network, collaboratively providing urban services besides, and in place of, the “half-built environment” (425). With this notion, Simone puts the emphasis on the social and the collective of human engagement with infrastructure.

From another African city, Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam, Michael Degani’s description (2017, 2022) of *vishoka* resembles in many respects people in inner-city Johannesburg, South Africa, as infrastructure. In an ambiguous relationship with the utility, these electricians arrange formal and informal electricity connections for urban dwellers, making use of the resources to which they have access, usually informal. They are people who fill in the gaps in the infrastructure and its management, and thus are indispensable for the system to run, if in a makeshift manner.

In this dissertation, I will go beyond and beneath the social to explore yet another range of infrastructure: I propose the idea “human infrastructure” based on my ethnographic research on electricity in rural Vietnam. This idea is grounded in the observation that humans working in the electricity sector offer their physical bodies to run the distribution system of electric power in crisis moments, such as infrastructural failures that cause blackouts. It comes as a consequence that, beyond material things and the social relations of the people involved, the composition of the electricity infrastructure in rural Vietnam is “human” in at least two respects. First, workers’ bodies have been always integral to the system and essential to its running. Second, this system is embedded in an affective environment, an ambience generated through human encounters with the material and with other humans. The infrastructure as ‘human’ as such makes a great political impact on rural life, humanizing state power and nourishing the relationship between the people and the state through infrastructural engagements.

The many faces of the Vietnamese state

The process of following the electricity system is also a process of unpacking the various dimensions of state power that are woven into electricity. In the specific area of rural electrification, the "global success story" (World Bank 2018) of Vietnam opens up fields for questions on the state. Is it an authoritarian state carrying out this universal electrification project as an example of high modernist "schemes to improve human condition", the type that James Scott (1998) critiques in his book *Seeing like a State*? If so, is it deemed to fail sooner or later? Or, almost on the contrary, is the Vietnamese state a socialist developmental state, which considers electrification a duty to its citizenry? If so, how does such a state govern the field of electric power: does it adhere to its 'socialist' norms, or tap into late capitalism through neoliberal reforms? In many ways the Vietnamese state exemplifies Navaro-Yashin's (2002) idea of different "faces" of the state in different fields. It begs for an in-depth ethnographic investigation and analysis.

Unlike the understudied infrastructural issues, the politics of rural Vietnam has been an object of inquiry for political scientists and anthropologists alike. James Scott brings his observations of Vietnam to his influential books *The Moral Economy of the Peasants* (1976) and *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), both of which discuss "everyday resistance" as low-key subaltern forms of agrarian politics. Building on that, Kerkvliet (2005) refines the notion of "everyday politics" by looking at the interactions between the Vietnamese state and rural people in the failed state programme of collectivized agriculture. Bearing many traits of a grand plan that Scott (1998) describes, its failure, as Kerkvliet elaborates, was a cumulative effect of the everyday, mundane, unorganized but enduring and powerful practices of peasants to resist collectivization. Through various channels, including local state officials, this underground political behavior made its way into official politics, leading to the policy of collectivizing agriculture being revoked even before the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms of 1986. The situation developed from one of everyday resistance in Scott's terms into a kind of politics that engaged both people and state in the making of policies, as well as making the state itself. But unlike Scott's and usually the 'Western' view of 'authoritarian' states, here Kerkvliet and other scholars in Vietnamese studies, such as Gainsborough (2009) and Endres (2017), have observed that the Vietnamese state maintains its dialogue with the people and keeps its channels for communication and change open.[7] In a similar vein, Fforde (2011) contends that communism in Vietnam is relatively

[7] Somehow elucidating this practice of state–people dialogues, Kerkvliet (2005) holds that "the Communist Party government's base of support remains the peasantry. Were it to lose that backing, its days would be numbered" (242). By 2019, 65.6 per cent of Vietnamese population were still residing in rural areas (Central Population and Housing Census Steering Committee 2019, 21).

"soft". From this perspective, state power is in a dialectical relationship with ordinary, everyday political practices, and state-making processes happen within local everyday life. In light of these important propositions of Vietnamese politics, this dissertation examines electrification in rural areas with the aim of making a novel contribution to the field from the perspective of infrastructure.

Electricity and the state–people relationship: country-specific aspects

Electrification is rightfully counted as one of the Vietnamese state's efforts to live up to its long-term doctrine: a state *of the People, by the People, for the People (*Nhà nước *của Nhân dân, do Nhân dân, vì Nhân dân)*. The idea of this description is believed to date back to Ho Chi Minh's thoughts about a "democratic country" where the government is founded by the people, its power belongs to the people and is meant to serve the people (Ho Chi Minh 1949 in Ho Chi Minh 2011, 232). Its wording has undergone several revisions conveyed in various documents and discourses before being formed into an exact phrase in the Vietnamese Constitution 1992, spread nationwide and reconfirmed in the latest Constitution (Constitution 2013, Article 2, Term 1).[8] It is worth noting that in 2013 the term "People" was written in capital letters for the first time in a Vietnamese Constitution, signifying this self-claimed essence of the state.

Since Vietnam's declaration of independence in 1945, the electricity sector has never been merely a technocratic tool of the government. During the war, electricity workers were always perceived as key to the survival of the electricity infrastructure, an emblem of the war of resistance and the revolutionary state. They were motivated to "sacrifice for the current" (Schwenkel 2018), offering their lives to protect power plants and their flow of energy from violent attacks, with a spirit that read "as long as humans remain alive, machines and current are kept alive" ("*Còn người là còn máy, còn dòng điện!"*) (Tran in Nguyen 2005, 172). Their sacrifice was perceived as particularly important to the spirit of people in north Vietnam who were also living and fighting under bombardments. As soon as

[8] This exact phrase *của Nhân dân, do Nhân dân, vì Nhân dân* in the Vietnamese Constitution resembles Abraham Lincoln's idea of a government "of the people, by the people, for the people" delivered in his Gettysburg Address in 1863, so much that one may wonder whether the cue could have been taken from Lincoln. Lincoln's phrase, in its turn, had been anticipated by various precedents in US history (see Haney 1944). Whether he was inspired by Lincoln or not, Ho Chi Minh never made a concise statement similar to this phrase. His thoughts on the people's ownership of Vietnamese state were prominent but usually elaborated in different terms in a language accessible to lay people, as can be found in his many writings compiled in the *Ho Chi Minh Complete Works* (2011).

electric light was restored after a bomb attack, a Hanoian worker recalled, “people shouted in joy and excitement, their cheers touched the soul of us, electricity workers” (Nguyen 2005, 175). The humans of the electricity sector and the population at large found themselves in an emotional entanglement symbolized by electric light during hardships, which together produced the meaning of the war of resistance and the state that led this war. In this way, the electricity sector and its humans played an intimate role in the historical symbolic labor of a state self-acclaimed to be “of the People, by the People and for the People”. It is no coincidence that today’s state-owned Vietnam Electricity (EVN) has adopted the highly ideological slogan “Light up the Trust” (*“Thắp sáng niềm tin”*), with the dual meaning of trust in the electricity sector and, probably more significantly, trust in the state.

Rural electricity has been one of the very fields where the idea of a ‘for-the-people’ state has proclaimed its practical basis. As the electrification of rural households “is not a profitable investment in any country” (Asian Development Bank 2011, 5), the government is allegedly committed to social causes rather than solely economic interests. Until recently, it periodically renewed the commitment to ensure that electric power was affordable for the poorest by granting subsidies every year to compensate for EVN’s deficits in the most disadvantaged communities. In 2014, with 98 per cent of rural households having access to electricity (EVN 2014), Vietnam was hailed by the World Bank as the developing country with the highest rate of rural electricity and thus offering good lessons from its success story (Siregar 2016). Government leaders then vowed to connect 100 per cent of households to the electricity grid by 2020 (Báo Nhân Dân 2014). This promise was not fully delivered, but by 2020, 99.26 per cent of rural households and 99.53 per cent of all households nationwide had access to electricity (EVN 2021).

In the course of electrification, people have been relating to modernity, electricity and electricity workers in ways that are distinct from the mainstream political discourse. On the one hand, *điện* (electricity) is perceived to be fast, as the expression *nhanh như điện* (“as fast as electricity”) exemplifies. It is also perceived as powerful: for example, when a person is said to be *tắt điện* (“switched off”) or *mất điện* (“powered off”), it means this person has suddenly lost his or her power or advantages. On the other hand, the casual, mocking proverb “*hiện đại – hại điện”* (literally “modernity costs electricity”) refers to the paradoxical relationship between the costly consumption of electricity and modern life. Then “*điên nặng điện*” (“severely crazy electricity”), a joke based on the spelling of “điện”, shows dissatisfaction with electricity services and with the electricity sector in general: in some cases, people simply call electricity officials and offices “*điên nặng*” (“severely crazy”). In Thai Binh province, where I carried out the main part of my fieldwork, it is said that *“giàu thợ điện, diện thợ may*” (“the rich are electricity workers and the fashionable are tailors”), demonstrating people’s perceptions of electricity workers as those having a lucrative occupation, far

from the war-time role model of sacrificing for the common good. These common expressions complicate the discourses and invite further investigation into the relationship between the state, the people and electricity.

Given its acclaimed achievement in rural electrification, the Vietnamese state is now expected to perform well under the high pressure of the demand for electricity to produce economic growth. According to the latest Vietnam Energy Outlook Report (EREA & DEA 2022), electricity demand per unit of GDP had increased by 43 per cent from 2010 to 2019 (92). The energy demand for the next three decades from 2020 to 2050 continues to be huge, being expected to increase from 3.4 times in the agricultural sector to as high as six times in the residential, commercial and industrial sectors, and seven times in the transport sector (ibid., 93). Among various scenarios of energy investment and management, the scenario of achieving 'net zero carbon' in 2050 in accordance with the Vietnamese government's commitment in 2021 (see more in Chapter Seven) requires a substantial degree of electrification: the share of electricity in final energy consumption has to increase from 31 per cent in 2020 to 73 per cent in 2050 (EREA & DEA 2022, 97). This will have to take place in the context of scarce energy resources, a still low-income population and the increasingly influential neoliberal rationale of "cost recovery". The electricity sector is thus under enormous pressures to reform and stay "one step ahead" of other industries.

The methodological choice of a field site: a 'new land' rich in state interactions

Given the theoretical interest in state politics and electricity, I looked for a field site that exemplifies the infrastructural and political entanglements on the ground. An opportunity came with a news article covering Dong Phong, a coastal commune of only half a century of history, which had been chosen for a non-governmental energy-transition project because of its unreliable electricity connections and the availability of a variety of energy sources.

Located in Thai Binh province, some 150 kilometers from the capital Hanoi, Dong Phong was built in the 1960s on land that had been reclaimed from salt marsh as a result of the North Vietnamese state's policy of reclaiming land from the sea and wilderness (*"khai hoang lấn biển"*). The enormous work and initial success of the commune's earliest residents was honored with a visit by President Ho Chi Minh in 1962, thus elevating the area's status to that of a "commune visited by Uncle Ho" (*"xã được Bác Hồ về thăm"*). The development of the commune has ever since received the state's attention, including infrastructural support. President Ho brought with him to Dong Phong a plan of the new commune's spatial construction (see Figure 1), which was applied to make the administrative and residential areas

as highly legible "as a chess field" ("*như bàn cờ*") that local residents could be proud of.[9] In 1995 a shrine commemorating "Uncle Ho", as he is affectionately known in Vietnam, was built in the commune with finance from the state budget. The shrine became a spiritual location for provincial and district government officials to visit and pay tributes.[10] The commune's leadership did not fail to meet the state's expectations: Dong Phong was a pioneer in several political movements that the state mobilized throughout its history, such as transitions in the economic structure ("*chuyển đổi cơ cấu kinh tế*") from rice to sedge, from sedge back to rice and then from rice to shrimps, and the New Countryside Programme (*"Chương trình Nông thôn mới"*), in which it became one of the first standardized "new countryside" communes in Thai Binh province in 2013. For these political achievements, Dong Phong drew ever more central-state delegations to visit, adding to the people's long history of pride of their home region.

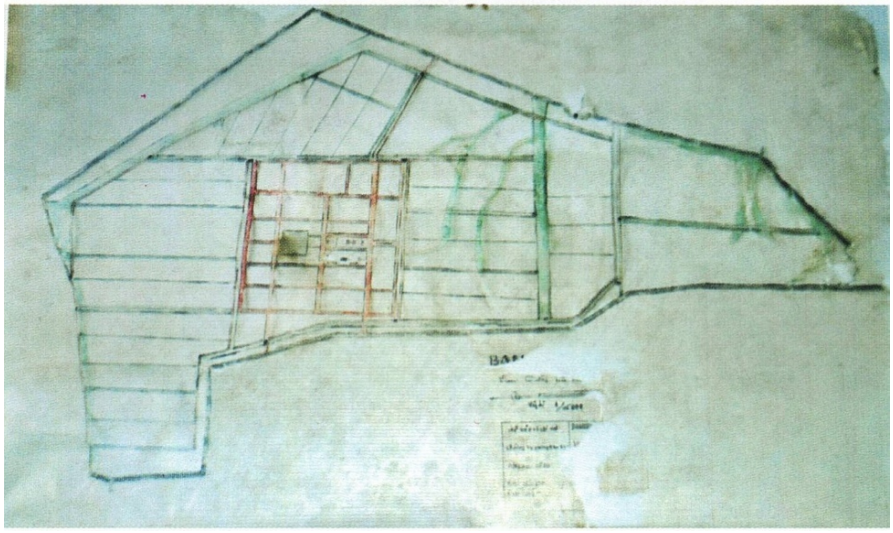

Figure 1. Design of Dong Phong commune given by President Ho in 1962

(Source: "Commune's Chronicle of Party Committee and People 1960-2015", 2017)

[9] Some taxi drivers from elsewhere who drove me to my host family praised this design as well, saying it enabled them to find the way most easily.

[10] Worshipping Uncle Ho on family altars or in shrines dedicated to him is a spiritual practice found in various regions of Vietnam. This could be seen as an expression of intertwined systems of belief: on the one hand, the long-lasting tradition of families that worship their ancestors and of the community's deification of heroes, and on the other hand what some Vietnam scholars call the "cult" of Ho Chi Minh (Ho Tai 1995, Dror 2016) or even "Uncle Hồ religion" (Ngo 2019). It is arguable that worshipping practices in Dong Phong have more traits of the latter, particularly with the imminent scale of the local Uncle Ho shrine and the scope of organized annual commemorations (for more details of commemoration events, see Chapter Three).

Today, Dong Phong is still a small-sized commune of about three thousand inhabitants in about nine hundred households. It is organized into three hamlets (*thôn*) divided by a river, two new hamlets on the southern side and one "old" village in the north, which was administratively separated from a neighboring commune to be joined to the new land in 1975. One small bridge crosses the river linking the two sides, but little is done to encourage a more robust connection. The old land and the new land still maintain certain peculiarities which, as we shall see later, are manifested in access to electricity and some economic activities.

The news article mentioned above opened up another angle to this commune, of historical importance in terms of energy. At the time of publication, the commune reportedly suffered from regular electricity blackouts, shortages of clean drinking water and environmental pollution from livestock waste (Mekong Commons 2016). For these reasons, an NGO chose Dong Phong to pilot a "local energy planning" project, which was expected to turn Dong Phong into "the first commune using clean energy in Vietnam", as its chairman stated (ibid.), once again in a bid to pioneer a new field of socio-political life. Choosing to investigate the entanglement of politics and electricity/energy infrastructure in Dong Phong, I was not only motivated by the past and present of the commune, but also by a vision of the future of how energy transition might unfold.

Multi-sited ethnography and the extended case method

The ethnography for such a complex object of inquiry as that of my research project would necessarily be "multi-sited" (Marcus 1995). In an era when a clear boundary between the "lifeworld" and the "system" no longer exists (in my study, for instance, one would wonder where the lifeworld ends and the system starts in the electrified communal events of Uncle Ho's commemoration, or in the everyday encounters between electricity workers and users), this style of ethnography emerges to "map" an object of study "whose contours, sites, and relationships are not known beforehand" (102) by following "connections, associations and putative relationships" (97). At the same time, the nature of my study calls for an extended case method (see Burawoy 1998, Eliasoph and Lichterman 1999) in order, first, to link the micro-practices and activities at grassroot levels with sectoral policies, as well as with the macro-political economy, and secondly, to extrapolate the understanding of local cases to a wider scale of infrastructural state-making. Guided by these methodological initiatives, my fieldwork from summer 2018 to summer 2019 in Vietnam had involved various geographical sites: urban Hanoi, urban Thai Binh, rural Thai Binh and rural An Giang, and various sites of knowledge: media, experts, archives, the electricity industry at the local and central levels, electricity users in villages, the local state, and the NGO sector. The subject of electricity and electrical state-making has been "mapped"

through numerous sites where it is present as such, combining flexibly the anthropological research methods of participant observation, in-depth interviewing, expert interviewing, media review, archival study and other common data-collection techniques.

Most of these sites were defined at the beginning of my fieldwork, but others could only be defined later by extending my social networks and looking for opportunities in the field. One such opportunistically chosen site, which later became a crucial location for my fieldwork, was Hoang Hai Electric Power (*Điện lực Hoàng Hải*), a district branch of the Thai Binh provincial electricity company. A senior staff member, a friend of a friend's father, offered me the chance to meet a district branch manager, with whom he had good personal relations. The manager happened to work in the Hoang Hai district branch that oversaw the distribution of electricity to Dong Phong commune, the site I had chosen previously. From here I was able to secure access to the branch's work, although the manager himself was moved to another district only some months after we first met. On this basis, I followed the flow of the current both downward to the communes and upward to the higher levels of the electricity sector. The case of Hoang Hai can be extended horizontally to understand similar district branches nationwide, as well as vertically to understand the sector's apparatus.

Somewhere near the top of this apparatus, in the EVN headquarters in Hanoi, other opportunities allowed me to conduct in-depth interviews with some heads of EVN departments and one member of the Group's management board. My connections with these high-ranking officials not only yielded insightful data, but also strengthened my access to the provincial and district levels of the electricity sector back in Thai Binh. Likewise, information obtained through archival study and media reviews or learnt from provincial electricity users enriched the discussions I had with experts in Hanoi and interlocutors elsewhere. The interrelatedness of these multiple sites is therefore imminent in the course of my ethnographic study.

Among these multiple sites, the location where I spent the major proportion of my time was rural Thai Binh, anchored in my host family in Dong Phong. From here I went around the commune, hanging out with the villagers, having formal and informal meetings with the cadres of the People's Committee, attending social events of all sorts, and travelling back and forth to Hoang Hai Electric Power whenever needed. At times I would stay in Hoang Hai township for several days to participate in electricity workers' occupational lives, accompanying them in their teamwork or in their individual site visits to the communes that neighbored Dong Phong. Here in Thai Binh, more than in any other locations, I became aware of the advantages of being both a native anthropologist and an "insider-outsider". Most hurdles were removed or were not even raised at the beginning only because I am a national, speaking the same language and looking like anyone else in my interlocutors' world. Most people I

met in Thai Binh were also hospitable partly because of my *foreignness* as someone coming from the capital city as a researcher, possibly knowledgeable of something they were unfamiliar with, though lacking knowledge but curious about their professions and their daily lives. This did not guarantee "the truth" in all the stories they told me but opened the gates that might have remained closed to a non-native researcher, or otherwise a less foreign one. On the other hand, this relative foreignness to some extent helped me maintain a naivety and an openness to the environment, allowing me as a researcher to conduct revealing participant observation and detect noteworthy nuances of the stories being told.

During my fieldwork, I chose one more rural commune for an exploration in the southwestern province of An Giang, where some of the population did not have access to grid electricity, household solar energy being promoted in its place. I selected the site with the same theoretical interest I had for Dong Phong commune, namely, to explore the entanglement between state–people interactions and the electricity/energy infrastructure. As every multi-sited ethnography has "a comparative dimension that is integral to it" (Marcus 1995, 102), my exploration of this commune was a bid to gain a comparative perspective, however limited its scale. It did not lead to an extended stay in the commune but provided an understanding of various aspects of off-grid communities with options of renewables, which was not only valuable for its own sake but also enabled me to improve my understanding of the processes taking place in Dong Phong.

Methodological limitations

The first and foremost limitation in my ethnography, if it be made explicit, would be with the very choice of my main field site, Dong Phong commune. In choosing this region, which is marked by a high frequency of state–people encounters, I have consciously focused on a territory and a population that emerged together with Vietnam's modern history and state politics. People here can be expected to have some particular attachment to the Vietnamese state, distinguished from those living in neighboring communes with a tradition reaching back to pre-colonial times, and from those in regions with even older traditions. However, the choice of such a commune as Dong Phong allowed me to investigate the state–people relationship on a fuller scale within a limited period of time. In other words, I agree with the truth in Michael Agar's assertion that "(a) theoretical interest, in short, can constrain the possible areas you might choose" (1980, 22). On the other hand, the disparities between Dong Phong and neighboring communes might have been even less significant, given the fact that the establishment of Dong Phong is but a continuity of local history. The whole of Hoang Hai district itself is a comparatively new land that came into existence only two hundred years ago as an outcome of

the sovereign state's mobilization of peasants to encroach on the sea, similar to the establishment of Dong Phong.

The second limitation belongs to a "fieldwork dilemma", the delicate issue of confidentiality and anonymity (van der Geest 2003, Vorhölter 2021). This issue, as a standard practice in anthropology and the social sciences, has recently been problematized as ineffective and as much easier said than done, particularly in the contexts of the internet and social media, and of anthropology at home (ibid.). In this regard, I found myself wondering many times in the course of writing whether using anonymity or pseudonyms makes any sense at all, and how it can be done in a meaningful way. In many cases, I found it impossible to completely disguise the places and the identities of my research participants, as some readers might easily decode the pseudonyms based on their familiarity with the research setting, while others might be interested enough to search a little on the internet. As Vorhölter (2021) observes, today "it is no longer necessary to be a detective to find out where and with whom research was conducted" (19). Even more onerous is the internal conflict of authors who successfully conceal the identities of their interlocutors by never revealing back to them what they wrote about, as part of their effort to keep confidentiality (see van der Geest 2003).

In an effort to balance the ethical requirement to "do no harm" to my research participants with the academic desire to avoid high levels of abstraction (which is needed for true anonymity, according to Vorhölter) and to preserve the authenticity and the nitty-gritty of 'real' places and people, I will apply a mixed strategy. I have therefore kept some names unchanged while using pseudonyms for some others and will not note, whether explicitly or implicitly, which kind of name I am using in any particular case. My rationale is that external researchers do not need to know all the real names of places and people to sense the authenticity of my work, the unnecessary tracing of identities is not triggered, since I have made explicit what I could, while the protection of local participants is nevertheless enhanced by this mixture of true and disguised identities.

The last limitation I mention here, among several other possible limitations which I do not have the room to discuss here, is gender. It is unjustifiable to fail to note the aspect of gender relations and power relations in either Vietnam's local political life, which is heavily male-dominated, or in the electricity sector, where technology is considered a masculine domain. Nor should I neglect to mention my own positionality as a female researcher and a female stranger in these environments. In the limited scope of this research, however, I will refer to gender issues in salient cases but could not choose to address gender questions more widely. In line with the anthropological practice of examining the gendered selves of anthropologists (see Callaway 1992, Bell, Caplan and Karim 1993), I am convinced that the ethnography would have revealed different nuances if a male researcher had

studied the same topic in the same field sites. Gender issues in the contexts of electricity and state–people relationships is certainly worth a study in its own right and might be a topic for future research.

The chapters

Following this introduction, Chapter Two, "People's Memories and State Narratives of the Countryside Electrified", offers a brief overview of the contemporary history of electricity in the villages by telling different stories of rural electrification, a program deemed hugely successful by the government and its main international partners. The comparison between memories of local officials and rural residents on the one hand and formal mainstream discourses on the other not only exemplifies a kind of "papereality" (MacLean 2013), but also illuminates the state's way of dealing with rural electricity infrastructure – the central state and the local authorities took concerted actions in an articulation of the "high modern" grand plan (Scott 1998) and the "bricolage" of existing conditions (Li 2007). Reading the local and national narratives together, I argue that electrification in rural Vietnam had been a bottom up, decentralized process before being handed over to the central government and coordinated from the top down.

Chapter Three, "'No difference from a little city': the make-believe qualities of local politics" analyses the affective making of political spaces at the local level, a process in which the state mobilizes people's participation and people readily participate. Electrified ambiences of lights and sounds play a significant role in enhancing the theatrical effects of ritual performances and "aesthetic politics", while the local state's surplus acts of care contribute substantially to convincing people of an agreeable mode of political belonging. This strategy of affective state-making proves effective even against the background of economic decline and the local authority's lack of responsiveness to economic issues.

Chapter Four, "The Power and the Meter: Socio-Electric Relationships in a Rural Community" investigates the mechanism with which the Vietnam Electricity (EVN) runs its distribution system in rural, usually poor, areas technically and financially. From below, this system is operated largely through the facilitation of local electricians who are not fully employed by EVN but provide essential, albeit informal technical and financial services for village electricity users to stay connected to the grid. The social relations among these powerful electricians and their fellow villagers have come to interweave with relations in the electricity business relations, producing a typical socio-electric mechanism that keeps the business running.

Leaving the village setting, Chapter Five, "The Instrumentality of Human Infrastructure in State-Making" follows the electricity management apparatus to describe the labor of the electricity sector at a district branch, the lowest level in the formal system. Ethnographic work with *công nhân Điện lực* (Electric Power workers) makes a case for their human bodies and mentality being appropriated as the buffer between the electricity company, in many cases representing the state, and its customers. The chapter uncovers some hard truths about the instrumentalization of laborers for the operation of the infrastructural system, as well as the state–people relationship. I propose the notion of "human infrastructure" based on the workers' intimate, affective integration into the electricity system.

Chapter Six, "The Moral Dimension of Electric Labor in State Making", unveils the moral world of electricity workers and their sense of belonging in a further effort to understand the "rank and file" of the electricity sector. As service workers interact with customers and with the infrastructure every day, their professional practices are ultimately ethical decisions made in the light of their hybrid positioning with both the peasantry and the industry, their multiple loyalty to people, the state and the company, and particularly their self-identification as relatively autonomous members of the electricity sector. Individual ways of wielding these factors in concrete situations nuance their responses to the task of buffering the infrastructure and mediating the state–people relationship.

Chapter Seven, "Electricity Sectoral Reforms and Energy Transition from Above and Below", presents an integrated view of macro-developments and local processes by circulating between different spaces. I zoom out of the village and the district to depict a centralized, "grid-tied" rationale of electrification and the energy transition, and zoom in again to scrutinize local situations in light of the reforms at the sectoral and national levels. The contradictory moves of the energy sector demonstrate the state's ambivalence between the socialist ideal of a benevolent state and the pressures toward market liberalism from global forces. Until the end of my fieldwork in 2019, people from economically marginalized areas and highly politicized communities alike had maintained their hope for the state's care, submitting themselves to its paternalistic power and the appeal of the state-sponsored energy infrastructure.

In Chapter Eight, the dissertation concludes by linking together ethnographic knowledge from these various sites to produce a grounded diagnosis of the state and electrical state-making in rural Vietnam. In so doing, it contributes to the understanding of the contemporary Vietnamese state from the novel perspective of electricity as an infrastructure. As much as an effort to understand the politics, it is also an anthropological endeavour to bring to light not only the social but more particularly the human in infrastructure, which is inherent in the infrastructural systems that become entwined with political processes in either intended or unintended ways.

Chapter Two

People's Memories and State Narratives of the Countryside Electrified

"While we may be transfixed by history, we have been puzzled by the process."

Lampland (1995, 360)

Hanoi, National Archive III, is where this chapter was kindled in the summer of 2018. After hours delving into the semi-digitalized system of this archive, I was both surprised and delighted to find a "Prime Minister's Decision on Approval of Rural Electricity Plan" dated February 1999. This decision sets forth formal targets for rural electrification until 2000 in a manner typical of central planning. What surprised me then was the year it was issued, 1999, and the deadline it set of just one year, 2000. Rural electrification seemed to have started much later than what my earliest interlocutors in Thai Binh northern province, including villagers and electricity-sector administrators, shared with me, and to have been carried out in a hasty manner compared to the usual style of making and executing a plan of such importance. Given its significance in delivering the "promise" of infrastructure (Harvey and Knox 2012, Anand, Gupta and Appel 2018) that the socialist state intrinsically made to its population, how could this national programme have commenced so late and be required to achieve its target so quickly?

I was able to verify afterwards through various sources that this document is precisely *the* decision that the government issued to launch the national programme. Furthermore, the time index of 1999 agrees with the thesis that media articles have put forward on "the 15th anniversary of rural electrification" in 2014. I had, like most ordinary readers, been impressed by the statistics on the rapid growth of the electricity grid and did not question the duration of the course. Only now that I had found the Decision did it occur to me as a matter of fact that the programme could not have started earlier than 1999 if the 15th anniversary was celebrated in 2014. But why did provincial state officials and the staff of the Thai Binh Provincial Power Company claim that their province had been electrified in the early 1990s? Why did villagers in Dong Phong commune tell me that their homes' had been electrified in 1991 or 1992, nearly a decade earlier? What could be hiding behind this discrepancy between the official documentation of the rural electrification programme as celebrated by the electricity sector and the local process that villagers and electricity workers witnessed or took part in?

This question is significant to the study of Vietnamese state-making, assuming it is viewed through the lenses of modern statecraft, simplification and legibility (Scott 1998) and the notion of "papereality", devised by David Dery (1998) and extrapolated to the Vietnamese case by Ken MacLean (2013) and

Kirsten W. Endres (2018). MacLean and Endres point to different ways in which bureaucratic documents affected the reality, but both draw our attention to the parallel existence of (at least) "two realities" (Endres 2018, 38). MacLean (2013) observes that in Vietnam false representations of reality on paper, hence "papereality", have created partial illegibility instead of "legibility" and "simplification" (Scott 1998), which disempowers the state to "see" its subjects as it desires. More than that, it creates a "government of mistrust". As it will gradually become manifest in this chapter, the prime minister's decision dated 1999, which came years after the electrification process had already started, was a kind of papereality, preventing the state's actors from seeing and acknowledging actual local processes. Endres (2018) concurs that written documents have an important place in the "tool kit of simplification techniques" (27) utilized by the Vietnamese state, like modern states elsewhere. In her ethnographic case, however, bureaucratic paperwork not only simplifies the lived social realities and governs society, it also constructs the future. The prime minister's decision probably falls into this category of paperwork, and we will see later in this chapter how it not only sets an official commencement date for rural electrification, but also creates a consequentially simplified mainstream discourse of state-led rural electrification. Both scholars call for a more thorough investigation of the formal documentation and the representational reality it creates, besides more 'informal' ethnographic accounts, if anthropologists are to understand state processes in Vietnam.

Following their suggestions, I contend that both the mundane experience of electrification and the official documents describing it, including media coverage of rural electrification, are significant for understanding what took place in rural electricity and, on a greater scale, for understanding the state. An examination of these accounts yields two propositions. First, it is arguable that the "papereality" that happens at the local level of the state (MacLean 2013) was also a practice of the central government in the early phase of rural electrification, a practice that shaped the discourse on the process in the years that followed. Second, I hope to make it clear at the end of this chapter that national electrification and rural electrification in Vietnam were two different processes, which took place simultaneously but drew the state's attention differently. Thus, one process was focused on the generation and transmission of electric power, the other on its distribution to rural areas. One, moreover, belonged to the type of "high modern" grand plan (Scott 1998) and was state-led, while the other seemed to be "pulled together from an existing repertoire, a matter of habit, accretion, and bricolage", in line with Tania Li's observation concerning various intervention projects (Li 2007, 6), and was locally led until the end of the twentieth century. These processes involved state actors at different levels in which the local process has been obscured from the public discourse that only recognizes the central, state-led program.

With an interest in the ways in which such processes have been rolled out, rather than in their technical details, this chapter reviews the modern history of rural electrification in Vietnam, focusing on the post-1975 (post-war) and pre-1999 period around the *Đổi Mới* economic reforms. It traces the discrepancies between the official documents and the stories of local interlocutors to juxtapose two accounts of rural electrification. The first is the state discourse created by the media and, less publicly known, archived official documents. The second is the collective, verbal memories of people in the grassroots. These different accounts are then reconciled, sometimes with the use of third-party sources of data, to achieve an understanding of state practices and state–people interactions in electrifying the countryside.

Electricity use in the countryside before electrification

I visited Mr. Khang in his tile-roofed house one afternoon in August 2018 and quickly discovered that serendipity had led me to one of the most important witnesses of electrification in Dong Phong. Mr. Khang returned to the commune in 1981 after six years being trained and then serving as a marine mechanic. Mechanical skills learnt in the navy made him one of the first persons in Dong Phong to access be given electricity for household use, if not *the* very first, as he himself claimed, being linked to the grid in 1981, years after the commune was connected to the national electricity grid for purposes of production.

It is fair to say that people in rural areas of North Vietnam had had long-term experience with electricity before their homes were provided with electric power. Ever since the socialist North started its first five-year socio-economic plan in 1960, electricity was regarded as a means of production by agricultural cooperatives. Under the ongoing war conditions, the electrification of rural production bore the symbolic meaning of building socialism, in accordance with Lenin's statement on the two preconditions of communism, namely soviets and electrification of the whole country (Lenin 1920). This statement several of my elder interlocutors knew by heart.

Farmers on Dong Phong's agricultural cooperative had thus been used to electricity since the 1970s in their production of sedge. Sedge is recognized locally to be an extremely labor-intensive crop that requires an amount of labor four times higher than rice does (Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Đông Phong [Dong Phong Commune's Party Executive Committee] 2017, 89). During the harvest its growers would have to work throughout the day and night to get the sedge harvested, cut/chopped, and dried under the sun as quickly as possible to achieve the best quality of sedge. In Dong Phong, farmers worked in the fields during the day to cut the sedge leaves and bring them home. The evening was when they

worked with electricity that ran the sedge-cleaving machines and lighted the common workplace. Part of the commune was therefore lit up at night for the sedge to be processed at the cooperative's workshop. Other official uses of electricity use included lighting the commune's People's Committee office, lighting the communal brick kiln, and operating the local radio loudspeaker system. Thus Dong Phong cooperative members were used to electricity in their work, but like peasants elsewhere, they did not have an electric cable or appliances at home.

While the electricity was only provided for collective uses, Mr. Khang knew he could "hook" up to the line running along the communal main road to get electricity. The verb "hook" [*câu*] is derived directly from the noun "hook", which describes the physical shape he created at one end of the wire. Not very different from a fishing hook, this end would make contact with and stick to the transmission line once it was put there. A heavy object, like a piece of brick or stone, could be placed on this "hooking" wire where convenient, to help fix the contact point and stabilize the transmission. In this way, he led electricity into his home and used it for "lighting, playing cassettes and boiling water" with a heating rod he made by himself. This process is not a big issue for him because "the one-phase power never shocks you if you do the insulation well", he said. At that time, most villagers did not dare to imitate him because "they feared death", he said. Nor did he help anyone else access electricity, despite their pleas, for fear of legal liability if someone suffered an electric shock from this risky practice. As he told me, only those who were "smart" (*khôn*) could hook up to the line the way he did.

This practice of *câu điện*, literally *electricity fishing*, was also popular in urban areas in the same period. My childhood own memories include seeing my mother and our neighbors hooking up to the lines passing by in search of one that still had electricity when the neighborhood was suffering a chronic power cut. In the early 1980s in Hanoi, my mother said, the majority of houses, including our own, would have two sources of electricity: one from the formal grid, the other from a hooked-up source, usually a line for a production facility or some privileged people, which still had the power when the lines for average citizens did not. She said it required householders to have a certain technical capacity to design an electricity system that allows switching from one source to another when needed.

In cities like Hanoi, where residents were always presumed to be able to access electricity for household use,[11] the illegal practice of *electricity fishing* was generally tolerated, given the very low

[11] An important report reviewing "25 years of development of Vietnam's electricity sector" by the Ministry of Electric Power (*Bộ Điện lực*) (1981) confirms the privilege of urban dwellers in accessing electricity, although it exaggerates the quality of the supply: "Since the electric power ran short and must be prioritized for production, it is imperative to cut down electricity for people's daily use. Electricity for lighting and daily use has been cut down mainly in the provinces, but maintained well in big cities" (38).

quality of the power supply in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As my mother recalled, "the power was usually weak, so weak that only the coil of the light bulb was seen as reddish, and sudden but prolonged cuts happened every day". In this condition, it could be considered justifiable for city-dwellers to manage the energy supply by themselves. What was more, the grid was so worn out that hooking up to it did not produce any feeling of guilt or remorse. What they were concerned about, as good citizens, was not to consume too much from the "fishing" sources or to pay too little for the consumption from their "official" source because otherwise they would see themselves as real thieves, as would the electricity inspectors. In maintaining basic living conditions in the urban setting of the 1980s, *electricity fishing* belongs to a kind of socio-economic system that has been discussed more in the context of collective rural farming but applicable widely in socialist societies, a system that, "though 'morally mildly flawed', […] had a firm ethical grounding" (Hann 2021, 17). Immersed in this system, the inspectors also acted based on their ethical considerations of the situation. Some "fishers" would be fined, but others were tolerated after conveying the severity of their living conditions, and some were able to get away with it with petty bribes. Ethical considerations entered into electricity fishing in rural areas sometime later, but in urban residential areas at the beginning of the 1980s, hooking up to the grid was not so much a legal or ethical question as a question of know-how.

In these same years, then, unlike urban dwellers, rural residents had never had electricity for their private use, nor there was an electricity management system in place. The unprecedented action of electricity fishing in the countryside could be seen as a legal violation or a minor improvisation depending on who committed it. Mr. Khang's action was apparently perceived as the latter thanks to his social status as a returning soldier (*bộ đội phục viên*) who had served his country and people for years. His military service was also remunerated with a certain amount of financial capital which his fellow villagers did not possess. He had some money at his disposal to buy enough telephone wire, the kind that was used for geological expeditions and could also be used for electricity transmission, as he explained. In this way, he was able to connect his home to the only power line that ran along the main communal road about 300 metres away. As one elderly woman recalled, those households with returning or serving army men, which she referred to as "rich households", generally had access to electricity before others.

A couple of years after 1981, Mr. Khang witnessed several more households of Dong Phong's new land drawing electricity from the main line in a manner like his own. Given the fact that cooperative managers and members, as well as commune leaders, were fellow villagers and even kin, they did not have much incentive not to tolerate this practice of taking a small part of what was strictly a common resource, especially when their low level of consumption neither affected the production of the

cooperative nor disadvantaged anyone in particular. In reality, their total consumption was really low because very few households could gather sufficient resources to install an electricity line into their homes. If they were able to connect at all, their use of electricity was also limited to lighting; household electrical appliances rather than light bulbs were not widely available.

In the context of collectivized agricultural production, the act of *electricity fishing* in Dong Phong during the 1980s can be categorized as belonging to the same "public-to-private material flow" that Yulian Konstantinov (2015, 17) discussed based on the Soviet farms of Russia's Kola peninsula. Although there are different ways to refer to similar practices in agricultural collectives, such as "institutionalized theft" (Humphrey 1983) or the more loosely defined "redistribution from below", these labels do not similarly connote the meaning of this particular practice of drawing electricity from the grid. Before *Đổi Mới* reforms, electricity in the Vietnamese communes had always been reserved for public uses without any plan or mechanism for private use, and thus it had always been a common resource that belonged to everyone but no one in particular. The act in question does not fit into the category of theft because in the emic view, "when people [are] talking about 'theft' they mean stealing from one another" (ibid., 136). Nor did the act necessarily stem from a sense of unfairness that invites "redistribution", as all households were equal in not being meant to have electric power. Indeed, it could only be fulfilled by slightly more advantageous households with disposable social and financial capitals, which simply added to their advantages over others. This flow of a resource from the public sphere to the private sphere is thus closer in meaning to a compromise needed to satisfy personal interests that had largely been forgotten in "authoritarian" socialism, as Konstantinov (2015) rightly suggests (15–17).

While serving primarily private interests, *electricity fishing* was sometimes also practiced for collective production purposes. The elderly in Dong Phong described such a practice and its tragic consequences, which were inscribed in their memories of 1974 and 1975, when Dong Phong's collectivized peasants were still planting rice alongside their sedge crop. To protect the young rice from rats, some peasants attempted to make use of the powerful electricity line to kill the rats without having to catch them by enclosing the rice fields with bare electric wire, then electrifying this boundary by connecting it to the passing transmission line. This measure, though successful, was not permitted by either the cooperative or the electricity authority, but nonetheless was practiced by those peasants who could easily reach the communal electric line from their own parts of the field. As one senior villager, eighty-year-old Mr. Vi recalled, "more knowledgeable" people, including himself, would only connect their bare wire boundary line at a certain time when they could watch over the field, but some others left it live without watching over it. Accordingly, a local man was killed in 1975 in just such a rice field, having tripped over an electric wire put across the road and fallen into the electrified field. His name

and the year he died still lived vividly in Mr. Vi's memory, as well as those of several villagers who happened to talk about someone still killing rats in the same way. Knowing about the tragic consequences did not necessarily lead to this use of electricity being ended, neither then nor now, although villagers generally deplored the practice.

From uneven accessibility to universal household electrification: people's tale

The decline of the Soviet bloc in the 1980s and Vietnam's *Đổi Mới* economic reforms in 1986 marked the starting point of the legal provision of electricity for household use in Dong Phong. It was a combination of new thinking on the household economy, the more abundant national power supply and the locally existing main power line, embedded in a changing economic and political environment that led to this critical change in the lives of rural people.

In a locally produced history of the commune, the Communist Party of Dong Phong acknowledges that, at the peak time of sedge cultivation, "the export of cleaved sedge to the Soviet Union, China, Japan and South Korea generated a revenue seven to eight times higher than rice on the same area of cultivation area" (Ban chấp hành Đảng bộ xã Đông Phong [Dong Phong Commune's Party Executive Committee] 2017, 81). In a command economy, this revenue from sedge exports mostly went into the provincial budget. It did not result proportionally in the actual incomes of cooperative members: their income was generally considered "incompatible [with their labor and] failing to motivate the laborers" (ibid., 118). In 1985 and 1986, Dong Phong peasants felt the downsizing of their former Eastern European markets directly when they found that much of their sedge could not be exported, drying up their already meagre income. The severe shortage of grain and food for subsistence as a consequence of the intensive cultivation of sedge pushed the local Communist Party unit to make an inevitable decision to convert the local main crop back to wet rice in 1987. Following this conversion of crops, the electricity supply that served the production of sedge gradually became abundant on the one hand and redundant on the other, because at the time rice cultivation did not require electricity except for the periodical operation of water pumps.

In this same year, 1987, the Communist Party of Hoang Hai District, the higher administrative unit to which Dong Phong belongs, came up with a resolution that confirmed the desperate status of the household economy (Party Committee of Dong Phong Commune 2017, 116). In itself the resolution was in alignment with the Central Communist Party's order to reform the agricultural economy. In essence this reform downplayed the role of collectivized farming and favored private household farming instead, or at least encouraged a combination of both (see Litvack and Rondinelli 1999, Chan,

Kerkvliet and Unger 1999, and St. John 2006). The household became an economic unit and had a right to be supplied with energy just as the cooperative was. The reformed economic policy alongside the available electricity infrastructure therefore offered an unparalleled opportunity for rural households to be electrified.

From this point on, the electricity grid on Dong Phong's "new land" was quickly extended and reinforced as a locally self-organized service. The only line that ran along the commune's road network started to grow "fishbone"-type branches to penetrate residential hamlets. Local materials such as pine poles and a local workforce of electricians served as the primary means of this extension, as told by one of my interlocutors:

> That was when much sedge had been cleared away and replaced with rice. There was sufficient electricity, an electricity main line, and people had a demand [for electricity]. So gradually the bimetallic wire was hung on pine poles, with a distance of 50 metres from pole to pole around the commune. Anyone who wished to use electricity could get connected. Normally people hired some workers (*thợ*) to get electricity from this line into their home.

The line and the pine poles themselves were made and managed by a local electricity team (*tổ điện xã*) composed of those who had some technical knowledge and/or skills in electricity. Originally assigned to look after the use and maintenance of electricity for agricultural cooperatives, the local electricity team was an important actor in this preliminary period of electrification, not only as technical workers, but also as a liaison between those who wished to get connected to the grid and the commune authorities. They advised those in need of access to electricity to fill out a form (*đơn*) to be submitted to the commune's authorities, stating all the responsibility and liability that could be incurred in their use of electricity. According to some members of this electricity team, the commune's authorities was only concerned about safety and would accept all requests as long as households vowed to take charge of their actions.

This local electricity team also took charge of collecting fees for power consumption. Now that many more households had been electrified and were consuming power, their consumption had to be paid for. Instead of using meters, however, according to Mr. Khang, who became one of the team members around this time, electricity bills were calculated by "*tính quạ",* or blind calculation. The electricians would come to power-consuming households and count the light bulbs, then calculate the flat monthly fee these households must pay based on the number of bulbs they had, "regardless of the different capacity of the bulbs". Lighting remained the main purpose of using electricity, and light bulbs were still the main electric appliances the households possessed.

The infrastructure of the electricity grid during the later 1980s is noteworthy. In this period the grid was hung on *pine poles* before being replaced by brick poles and square concrete poles several years later (and round concrete poles more recently)**.** Pine poles were made of casuarina trees, a local member of the pine family which used to grow widely along the coast of Vietnam, including that of Dong Phong commune. Casuarina has a slim trunk and is not at all a valuable kind of wood, so as only elderly lady described them, the *pine poles* were "thin trees or sticks rather than poles". Despite this modest free-of-charge material, an important item of the electricity infrastructure ensuring its safety was also supplied, namely ceramic wire-holders (*sứ*), or insulators. "There were also ceramic wire-holders; the *fire wire* ran on the higher ones, and the *cool wire* on the lower", described Mr. Khang in emphasizing that the grid was constructed properly. In a situation of more scarcity, only a single *fire wire* could be hung on poles without any insulators, as can still be seen today now and then in some rural parts of Vietnam.

Uneven access to electricity

While virtually everyone had a desire for electricity, access during this period varied according to their economic power. Unlike the practice of tapping into the main line before the economic reforms, the decisive factor for households being electrified in this period was not knowledge, skills or social status, but the financial capital to buy the materials and hire an electrician. Whether they could afford materials and labor costs for an extension from the main line to their houses decided their connectivity status.

Apart from individual household's economic power, local self-reliant electrification in Dong Phong also allowed different parts of its territory to access electricity at different times. In Hoang Mon village across the Lan river, some of the wealthier households only received electric power after many families in the Dong Phong's "new land" had been electrified. The most important reason for this difference was the natural obstacles of distance and topography, but historical and political reasons also played a role.

As described in Chapter 1, Hoang Mon is an "old land", part of a neighboring commune which had long existed before the establishment of Dong Phong. In 1975, this part was cut off from its former administrative unit to join the newly reclaimed territory to form the commune now called Dong Phong. The past of an old land that was adjacent to the new territory remains salient in the way local people identify their locality today. People in Hoang Mon village generally refer to the other, newly formed but politically central part of the commune as "Dong Phong", as if their village was not part of this same commune. They also keep in the back of their minds an idea that the important political

milestone of President Ho Chi Minh's visit in 1962 did not take place in their territory or because of themselves, but was made to the other part of the commune. Their later access to electricity was thus explained by combining all these reasons:

> [People in] Hoang Mon village pulled the electricity line from Dong Phong. Dong Phong is a revolutionary commune that Uncle Ho visited, so they gave [Dong Phong] electricity. At that time only three or four houses in Hoang Mon had electricity, the rest did not. Only rich families dared to spend money to bring this line to their homes.
>
> (Female, 70 years old, 25th August 2018)

As the process of electrification was enacted without a plan and therefore adapted to local conditions and local demand, one could reasonably expect these differences in accessibility. In the first place, the electricity line was installed to serve the production of sedge in the new land of Dong Phong, where the saline soil was suitable for the crop. Then the availability of workforce and materials, and now financial capital, decided where and when the extended grid was to be constructed. As Shamir (2013) suggests, "the grid is […] a generator of political and economic difference among groups and individuals" (6). Similarly, the uneven access to electricity started to create a non-egalitarian social landscape in the "revolutionary" commune of Dong Phong.

Universal household electrification

To my older interlocutors, 1991 and 1992 could rightfully be seen as the hallmark of universal electrification in Dong Phong commune, when the whole population was finally offered a facilitated opportunity to access electricity. The existing power grid constituted an axis line, and the extended "fishbone" lines (on pine poles) was further extended to connect every household under the proactive coordination of the commune's authorities. The only condition was for each household to contribute 100 kg of paddy, or an equivalent, to get a line directly into their home. Many families did not have this amount of paddy, but instead they could contribute a number of workdays to the cooperative. These workdays were converted into work points (*công điểm*), which would be deducted afterwards from their record. Virtually all households in all different parts of the commune, including Hoang Mon village, grabbed this opportunity to realize their long-held desire to have electric light. By the end of this period of some years, "the whole village had electricity", one interlocutor recalled.

Villagers' accounts of their contribution to extending the grid proves that in the early 1990s household electrification was no longer a spontaneous action but an organized process. The uneven access to electricity was effectively eased down by a concerted effort on the part of the local authorities. An

egalitarian contribution was requested from all households to access electricity regardless of the distance from their houses. The infrastructure built in this period was also of good quality because "the local authorities were not yet so corrupt as later on", as one villager commented. Also in 1991, the switch of crop from sedge to rice introduced by the authorities was completed, making it close to a miracle that electric power came at roughly the same time. In many villagers' recollections, these two events together made for double good luck: considerably less work and a literally lighted life.

In Dong Phong as in other rural communes of Vietnam, the authorities who coordinated this electrification process consist of the Communist Party unit headed by the Secretary and the People's Committee headed by the Chairman. The balance of power between the Party and the People's Committee differs from commune to commune, but generally, the Party Secretary is considered the more important in ideological leadership, while the Chairman of People's Committee has more power to do things and thus in many cases can act more effectively than the Party Secretary. Mass organizations, such as the Peasant's Association, the Women's Association and the Communist Youth Association, gather under the umbrella of the Fatherland Front to make part of this party–state system and operate on the state budget, although in theory they are independent of state institutions. With hundreds of cadres (*cán bộ*) who are also local residents, the commune's authorities form a strong apparatus both ideologically and practically (when they are "not so corrupt", as the above villager noted), that had effectively coordinated the universal electrification of the commune.

Organized as it was, in the early 1990s electrification made its way into a local publication, the commune's *Chronicle of Communist Party Unit and People*. Electricity is mentioned here as one of the six components of a basic infrastructural programme called "4Đ2T" to improve the condition of "field, road, electricity, radio, school and healthcare clinic" (*đồng, đường, điện, đài, trường, trạm*) (Ban Chap hanh Dang bo xa Dong Phong 2017, 129) that laid the bedrock of the local five-year plan. This chronicle does not identify the precise years when these infrastructural components were touched upon or completed, but it concludes that in the end of this five-year period, in 1995,

> the grid reached all the corners of the commune. 100 per cent of households had electricity for lighting, daily activities and production. Electric light illuminated all hamlets and families, bringing exuberance to the people and marking the significant change of homeland.
>
> (ibid., 130)

If this "exuberance" and "significant change" in Dong Phong are compared with the recollections of electricity professionals, it is not unreasonable to see in this process of rural electrification in the 1990s a kind of popular "movement" in the Red River Delta province of Thai Binh, albeit a silent one. Various accounts given by state officials in the Thai Binh Department of Industry and Trade and managers and

workers at the Thai Binh Power Company support the generalization of Dong Phong villagers' narratives of what is a provincial case, that not only in Dong Phong but also elsewhere in the province, electrification took place more or less at the same speed and with a similar locally coordinated model. Their accounts converge at a point that all communes in the province had been in high spirits at the prospect of getting connected in 1992, and the majority had done so within two years. An official in charge of the rural electrification of the province's Industry and Trade Department gave me a copy of his report, which reads: "98 per cent of households and 100 per cent of communes in Thai Binh accessed electricity in 1995; Thai Binh became one of the first provinces to complete rural electrification". Another official verified the fact that, by 1998, the household access rate over the whole province was nearly 100 per cent, and that his province had reached this electrification rate some years faster than many others. The main reason he cited for this progress is the "neatness" of the territory of Thai Binh, which had a higher density of population in a relatively small and flat area of the Red River delta.

In the same year, 1998, the national electricity access rate stood at 75 per cent of communes and 62.5 per cent of rural households (EVN 2014, 116). These rates are lower than the provincial rate of Thai Binh, but are already equivalent to the target set for 2000 in the 1999 Government's Decision, namely 80 per cent of communes and 60 per cent of rural households (Chính phủ [Government] 1999). These statistics essentially show that the target had been reached before it was set down on paper.

While villagers in Dong Phong could not credit the exact entities that facilitated household electrification for them except for the commune authorities, a retired manager of the Thai Binh Power Company revealed an important fact: the process in the 1990s had taken place with the state's approval, which later became the state's policy (*chủ trương*). For a better understanding of his recollection, we should remark that his view of the central state as *the state* and the communal authorities as *the locality* (*địa phương*) is common to both official and vernacular discourses.

> [It was] the state's policy. The state did not have money, but the people and the communes had. As the state agreed [about the policy] but did not have money to build the grid for selling electric power to people, the communes would build the grid and transformers to provide people with electricity. At that time the state was still investing in the pumping stations[12] of the irrigation companies, and had yet to invest in household-welfare transformer stations [*trạm dân sinh*]. So communes and people in the locality did it themselves, they erected medium voltage lines, as well as low voltage lines.
>
> (Male retired manager, interview, 20th July 2018)

[12] Each pumping station houses the necessary transformer to power the pump(s).

Part of what he said, namely that "the state agreed […] but did not have money", exposes a common mechanism at work in central–local Vietnamese politics. This mechanism rules that when the central authority "agrees at the policy level" (*đồng ý về mặt chủ trương*) with a proposal from below, it requests the proposer to continue working on it. In the same vein, this mechanism is most likely to have influenced the proposal to electrify rural households from below, which "the state" approved as long as the proposer agreed to work himself to fulfil his own request. The latter part of the statement affirms that local grids, low and medium voltage lines as well as transformers, were constructed by the *locality* and by local people who were probably the main proposers of rural electrification. According to one of the previously cited provincial officials, people's contributions to the distribution grid were made "several times" throughout the process in the forms of paddy or cash.

The responsiveness of the Vietnamese state to "pressure from below" or "mass-regarding politics" has been discussed by many authors (see Kerkvliet 1995, 400). Reviewing arguments by White (1985), Ngo (1993), Beresford (1988) and Womack (1987), Kerkvliet suggests that labels such as "dominating state" and "mobilization authoritarianism" might be misleading ways of conceptualizing Vietnamese state politics. He observed that the Vietnamese state maintains its dialogue with the people and keeps the channels open to pressure from below (Kerkvliet 1995, 2005). Along similar lines to his observation about "everyday politics" in which mundane rural practices quietly dismantled the central state's policy of collective farming, I suggest, based on interlocutors' recollections and locally produced documents, that rural electrification before 1999 could rightly be seen as a process from below in which local demand made its way up to the central level. The fact that the central state left a space for the people and local authorities to connect themselves to the grid exemplifies the successful encounters between the state's "mass-regarding politics" and the people's "everyday politics".

Impact of rural electrification: "We got smarter!"

Anthropologists of electricity have widely discussed the enormous impacts of electricity in rural areas, which range from the extension of the day and safer public spaces thanks to lighting, to changes to domestic life that include schooling, meals, entertainment and leisure, as well as reproductive activities (Nye 1997, Winther 2008, Wilhite 2012, Gupta 2015). The most impressive of all these impacts is possibly the "life after dark", which only electric power can create (Gupta 2015, 556–557). People in Dong Phong commune commonly listed "light" first when asked about the changes they experienced after household electrification.

> The main change was the light. We did not have television at the time, we did not even have enough to eat. All day long we were by the sea, scratching in the muddy beach for clams. But the light was a big change.
>
> (Male, 65 years old)

Activities such as learning, going out, working and eating were all described as being different with electric light, about which villagers did not hide their sheer satisfaction. For a couple from a poor household interviewed on 17th August 2018, the electric light alone brought them happiness and comfort:

> *Wife:* Life was very different, it [electricity] made us relaxed. How happy we were when we went out because everywhere was bright.
>
> *Husband:* It became very comfortable when you had to do something in the evening. I had to burn the oil lamp for over twenty years, I did not have that comfort until I had electricity.

For 79-year-old Mrs. Vi, who used to work as a primary school teacher, electricity was significant for the safety of the schoolchildren, who usually studied late in the evening, and their families. In the place of oil lamps that might cause fire hazards, especially when users were sleepy, the new electric bulbs freed them from such worries.

> Happy, children and parents were happy. We used to have to look after the learning children in the evening, otherwise the lamp would fall, spill out the oil, burn our bed, book and mosquito nets[13] and also people. Two or three families here had suffered that. When we had electricity, we no longer had to look after the children's learning.

People in Dong Phong shared the common joy of peasants elsewhere in the world who had access to electric light after years of darkness and immobility, but they also reflected on a peculiar change that has not been discussed in previous studies when describing the less apparent impacts of electricity, or electrification. Quite a few stated that they became "smarter" (*khôn ra*), and even more "intelligent" (*thông minh*) through learning to use electric appliances. It is not having communication devices that provided information and knowledge, or the educational opportunities made available as a result of electricity that made them "more intelligent", as might be expected. It was the appliances that they did not possess and did not know how to use before, when they were still "stupid", that brought about this new level of intellect. A woman in late middle age was not reluctant to refer to herself as a "stupid" (*ngu*) person who was becoming cleverer by using "advanced" technology such

[13] Children in Dong Phong, like those in many other rural areas at that time, had to study in bed with a mosquito net around them to protect them from insect bites in the evening.

as the radio cassette player, the television set and more recently an infrared hot pot cooker. For her, the criterion for judging improvements in cleverness is the ability to use these appliances.

Mr. Khang, who claimed to be the first person to access electricity for home use in Dong Phong, applied the same criterion to judge the changes since electrification. He saw an ongoing pattern in continuously becoming more advanced in parallel with the introduction of changing electric appliances.

> We certainly got more intelligent [*thông minh*]. It is entirely different with electricity, it innovates both human beings and daily activities. First we did not know what an electric cooker looked like, then we bought a heating coil clay cooker for cooking rice and boiling water. Gradually we got smarter [*khôn*]. The fashion renews itself day by day, and we get more advanced [*tân tiến*] day by day.

Possibly to make these intellectual advances, Mr. Khang equipped his house with all electric appliances that a relatively affluent household in Dong Phong can afford. His appliances had been "bought one by one, gradually" he said. Although his house, an old-style one-storey house with a tiled roof, looked really modest from the outside, I found at least a flat-screen television, a karaoke sound system, many light bulbs of different kinds, a refrigerator and some nice electric fans (air ventilators). Importantly, the fans worked to give me a generous amount of cool air, a situation I seldom got in other houses. While all the houses I visited that summer were equipped with electric fans, most of the time these fans were used at a low capacity or left entirely unused in the owners' effort to save energy. Mr. Khang owned many electric appliances and seemed to use them. He later led me into his kitchen, where about half a dozen old electric fans and some broken electric rice cookers were stored. From the telephone wire he purchased for electricity fishing in 1981 to the fans left idle in storage, his investment may be well be based on a firm belief in the enlightening power of electric appliances.

The state's narratives of rural electrification

In this section, I use the term *narrative* to refer to *constructed and generalized understandings* of rural electrification in Vietnam. I feel obliged to emphasize the constructed nature of the narratives I will present here, since firstly, there is not a single way of understanding a social process, especially when it is so multi-dimensional and involves such multiple actors as rural electrification. Secondly, the written sources I have accessed, including media articles and bureaucratic documents, are in themselves representations of the reality and thus have been constructed in the first place.

Within the state discourse of rural electrification, one can trace at least two narratives developing in accordance with two systems of documentation, namely the archival system and the (news) media

system. The archival system, which I have accessed, encompasses national archives and the publications of state agencies. A narrative based on archival documents might be closer to the political process, but it is also "dryer" and less accessible for the public compared to the media narrative.

The media system constitutes another, highly accessible version of the state discourse. The Vietnamese news media are essentially seen as the voice of the party–state's organs, as set out in Article 4 of the 2016 Press Law: "The press in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam is the essential medium of communication of the social life; is the official voice of Party organs, state agencies, socio-political organizations,[…]; and is the forum of the people". Compared to archival documents, media stories are more comprehensible to the public and thus provide the narrative that the general public is exposed to. These two state narratives therefore present different ways of understanding how rural electrification has taken place in recent decades.

Media narrative: the quest of a hero

An examination of hundreds of newspaper articles in the Vietnamese language that carry the phrase "rural electrification" *(điện khí hóa nông thôn)* yields the first and foremost impression that Vietnam Electricity (EVN) has been the hero of this quest. As a state monopoly, EVN was established as a corporation in 1995 to join together the many state companies in the electricity sector. Since then, it has acted in the name of the whole sector itself. In 2014, EVN celebrated the 60th anniversary of the sector and the success of "fifteen years of rural electrification" with the participation of government leaders and international partners. In 2019, the corporation again organized the 65th anniversary event with various public and internal activities. Most articles on rural electrification I can find on national media only revolve around these two events. With apparent imprints of public relations efforts, such as similar wording and information, and sometimes whole paragraphs that are similar, these articles speak EVN's voice in praising the achievements of the electricity sector in establishing rural electricity.

The second observation to be made is a significant difference in estimating the beginning of rural electrification between the 2014 and 2019 waves of articles. News pieces released in 2014 celebrate the fifteenth anniversary based on an assumption that this process commenced with the above-mentioned Government's Decision in 1999. Five years later, other celebratory articles would claim that the 10th National Assembly (*Quốc hội*) of Vietnam "set the initial ground for the whole programme" in 1997 by asking electricity companies to take over the grid from communal authorities (Toan Thang 2019). The programme was rewound two years back without mentioning the 1999 milestone. This change in time invites a hypothesis that even the principal proposer, EVN, might have

been puzzled about when their history of rural electrification started, making the official history of rural electrification even more ambivalent.

Media articles in both waves were nonetheless unanimous in telling the narrative of a "quest" to achieve rural electrification in which Vietnam Electricity is its hero. Among the four most relevant frames of political stories that the media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) suggests,[14] the quest is a frame that engages the public, as it introduces main characters acting for the "greater good of society" (120). EVN is one such character in the media's stories of electrification. It has been described as being solely entrusted with the mission to electrify a universally good life in the countryside and as having carried out this mission alone to achieve the eventual target of a 100 per cent access rate. At each milestone, 2014 and 2019, the national media highlighted EVN's efforts to electrify as many communes and households as possible as fast as possible, against the background of the government's support and the people's longing for electric power. The rural household access rates of 97 per cent in 2013 and over 99 per cent in 2019 are hailed not only as a success story, but also as a "miracle" (Ho Nhi 2019) and a "world exemplar" (Báo điện tử Chính phủ [Government Electronic Newspaper] 2014) that many other countries can learn from (Thuc Quyen 2014). The sector's improved capacity is described as a "breakthrough" and a "development leap", while its achievement in rural electrification is called "astonishing", as the corporation "hit the goal" before the deadline (Quang Thang 2019). Vietnam's electrification rate is usually compared with that in countries "with similar economic conditions" (but much lower electrification rates) to make its superiority fully visible.

The media have effectively overlooked the self-reliant move to electrification that was taking place in the Vietnamese countryside even before the EVN's participation. More than that, they go as far as to turn the rural grid into a villain that the hero must conquer. Not only "battered and failing to provide electricity" (Tạp chí Công Thương [Industry and Trade Magazine] 2014), before EVN's intervention the grid is described as "one of the obstacles to local development due to its poor infrastructure and weak management locally" (Toan Thang 2019). Viewing the grid as an obstacle rather than a springboard, the media essentially ignore the local desire for electricity and the efforts that supplied it to over sixty per cent of rural households in Vietnam before EVN's participation. The *locality,* which played the role of the coordinator of rural electrification, is now seen as an object of incompetence. Following the storyline, EVN would overcome this obstacle and bring order to the situation, thus enabling rural communities to speed up their development. EVN has been portrayed as an embodiment of "political energy, capacity, and desire for change" that represents the *quest* format (van Zoonen 2005, 110).

[14] The three other frames are "bureaucracy", "soap" and "conspiracy". See van Zoonen (2015).

This simplified narrative works to flatter EVN and indirectly its owner, the state, while dismissing the heart-felt memories of local people, whose voices are not heard in the media discourse.

Taking up a good share of the media content is an emphasis on the formula for success, expressed in the motto "State and people working together" *(Nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm)*. In 1997, the National Assembly ordered the electricity sector to "formulate a plan to build rural electricity facilities in the spirit of the 'state and people working together', and submit it to the Government for a decision" (Quang Thang 2019). Coined in the previous decade, the motto was formally adopted for the first time in a Communist Party Resolution (Bộ Chính Trị [Politburo] 1989) at the beginning of the economic reforms; moreover, it was echoed whenever the state mobilized the capital of the people to build and deliver the services it could not provide itself. It became popular in 1990s in both official documents and vernacular discourses for its simple rhythmic language and was a predecessor of and then a parallel discourse to that of "socialization" (*xã hội hóa*), another peculiar term to refer to the state's mobilisation of the people's resources in public service provision (see Nguyen 2018). The media seemed to bring the symbiotic relationship between the state and the people to the fore by reiterating this motto-cum-formula for success, but a motto alone does not provide a qualitative understanding when the authors of news articles never go into any detail regarding how people worked with the state in the process. While they regularly emphasize the state's investment of several billion U.S. dollars (much of which is a public loan, which nonetheless they did not mention), the amount of capital and labor that rural households contributed is completely absent from the media narrative. Carrying the obvious imprint of EVN's public relations work and undertaking too little independent investigation of its own, the media narrative of rural electrification made an impression as yet another cliché of state propaganda, in which the state appears as the sole actor in the process and the people as merely the recipients of the state's benevolence.

The archive-based narrative: rural electrification versus national electrification

As Philip Abrams (1977) puts it in his seminal paper, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State", an integral element of state power that makes states difficult to study is the "straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation and dictate the terms of knowledge" (62). This holds true for my own "quest" for knowledge of the state and rural electrification in Vietnam, firstly based on the fact that primary sources can only be acquired from scattered archival institutions. These institutions include, but not exhaust, the National Archive III, the National Library, the Library of the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS) and the Communications Department of Vietnam Electricity. Secondly, some of these scattered documents require certain expert's explanations to comprehend.

Needless to say, the narrative built on these bureaucratic documents is not as readily accessible to the public as the media narrative. However, it situates rural electrification in a wider context of electricity-sector development and of an extended course of national electrification since 1960, and thus could come closer to the "truth".

Since its first "five-year plan to develop the national economy" in 1960, the Vietnamese state has been consistent in positioning electricity within the economy, asserting and reaffirming that the sector must go "one step ahead" to lay the groundwork for other sectors (Vietnam Communist Party 1960, 854). With its strategy of building socialism first through heavy industries, and then through industrialization and modernization, the position of electricity remained pertinent throughout all the Party-Congress resolutions and five-year plans that followed, usually in this same wording or only slightly changed. There is sufficient evidence to argue that power generation and transmission for production, but not for distribution to households, especially in the countryside, were always high on the party-state's agenda.

During the war, the efforts to build socialism in the North were heavily disrupted and sometimes completely destroyed. Power plants and grids were constructed during this period only to be raided from the air, then rebuilt and devastated again (see Nguyen 2005, Schwenkel 2018). "By 1972, air strikes on power plants across the DRV had reduced the national energy capacity by more than 70 percent, according to estimates released by the U.S. military" (Schwenkel 2018, 102). After the war, severe shortages of spare parts, skilled workers and resources continued to hold up the generation and transmission of electric power (Bộ Điện lực [Ministry of Electric Power] 1985). Given the scarcity of resources and the emphasis on heavy industries, the state's policies of power distribution and consumption were unswervingly "prioritizing production and sparing household consumption" (ibid.) in these long decades. This lasted until 1996, when the Vietnamese Communist Party included an action point on rural electricity infrastructure in its five-year plan for the first time. I return to this point later in this section.

It was in this tight situation that the Ministry of Electric Power (*Bộ Điện lực*) proposed to develop nuclear energy in October 1975, only half a year after the country stepped out of its three-decade war of liberation. The reasons for proposing the idea was to provide "a stable source of energy for the future", which must be done not only one step ahead, as originally requested, but "some steps ahead" in order to be "compatible with the load forecast" (Vu et al. 1975, Government's Office Fonds). Archived documents reveal the slow but steady development of this idea until 2016, when the National Assembly decided to end the programme due to its cost inefficiency (but not due to the technical risks). Despite the failure of the nuclear power project, many coal-fired and gas-fired power

plants have been built down the decades in various locations to meet the rapidly increasing demand. According to a 1992 report by Electric Power Company No. 1, which managed the northern grid, power shortages ended in the north in 1987 to 1988 (EVN 2014, 602). The supply was further secured with the completion of the Hoa Binh hydropower plant in 1994, then the largest hydropower plant in Southeast Asia, and the Son La hydropower plant in 2012, which replaced Hoa Binh as the largest and remained the largest in Southeast Asia a decade later. Grand projects of power generation have been a long-term commitment on the part of the Vietnamese state.

Apart from the power plants, which created an abundance of electricity until recently, the high-voltage 500kV transmission lines linking the north and south of the country were also completed in 1994 after two years of construction, facilitating the flow of electric current more widely. As demonstrated by a high frequency of decisions, decrees, reports and other written communications (see EVN 2014), these works strictly followed the master plans for electricity that were designed and updated every five years. They were financed from the central state budget and strongly pushed by the government, headed by the then Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet. The state's activities on the path from production to power generation and transmission set a precondition for the people-led rural electrification. According to the EVN's data and the World Bank's estimate, an upsurge in household electricity access followed the completion of the Song Da hydro-power plant and the 500 kV transmission lines from only 14 per cent in 1993 to 50.7 per cent in 1996 (World Bank 2011). From 1996 to 1998, over 10 per cent more Vietnamese households were connected. The household electrification rate had "taken off", to use the World Bank's metaphor, before the central Vietnamese government became involved in the process.

The government's delayed involvement could be partly attributed to a reluctance on the part of the electricity companies, the media protagonists of rural electrification. At least five documents at the sectoral and company levels formulated between 1992 and 1995 were found in the Chronicle of Events and Documents of Vietnam's Electricity Sector (EVN 2014), which mentioned certain pilot projects for connecting rural households to the national grid. Some of these documents report the completion of the projects, but there is no assessment of the results, nor any idea of which way to go from the pilot. An expert in rural electrification provided me with important information to understand this gap in the official documents. He said that these pilot projects showed the electricity sector that it could never recover its investment in rural electrification because the connection cost was high but rural consumption was low; as a result, thus the sector's leadership did not want to become further involved in this direction. Facing this disinterest on the part of the electricity companies, the National Assembly and other state institutions "did not know what to do" apart from urging the electricity sector to act (interview, 26th July 2019). It was clear to him, and certain archived documents back his view, that it

was only when foreign financial and technical aid was channelled into the country upon the normalization of Vietnam-US relations in 1995 that the Vietnamese state started to gather the resources to embark on rural electrification itself. Also in 1995, the Electricity of Vietnam Corporation (EVN), later the Vietnam Electricity Group (but still abbreviated as EVN), was established, centralizing the management of all regional companies in the electricity sector and representing the whole sector ever since.

In 1996, for the first time, the Communist Party of Vietnam introduced a specific action point to build electricity infrastructure for rural and mountainous areas in its five-year plan, together with other basic criteria of rural infrastructure, namely "roads, communications, electricity, clean water, schools and health clinics" (Vietnam Communist Party 1996, 454). In 1997, we knew from state media that the National Assembly had asked EVN to take over the existing local grids. In 1999, and therefore only by the time 62.5 per cent of households nationwide had already connected themselves to the grid did the government issue the decision to start its rural electrification programme. Then, even upon this decision, the expert added, the programme had to wait some more years before a top cadre in EVN recognized a political opportunity in rural electrification and made the corporation work on it at full tilt. This EVN official was then promoted to be a government leader, with rural electrification as the signature of his political career. However, the central government's delayed involvement has resulted in severe issues with rural electricity, including the lack of a technical standard for the grid and the uneven, sometimes unreasonable price of electric power in rural areas, which took many more years more to deal with. State media, as the previous section has shown, see these problems as hurdles for the state-led rural electrification scheme, instead of drilling down to the reluctance that caused them in the first place.

Until the threshold of the twenty-first century, electricity distribution in rural areas had been implemented in a very different manner from work on generation and transmission; it had not been a "grand plan" of the state. The strategic planning, concerted effort and top-level political determination to achieve rural electrification had been absent. Therefore, the state's contribution to rural electricity before 1999 was not exactly in household electrification, but more in the generation and transmission of electric power, and in responding positively to *locality*'s requests to be allowed to electrify themselves. The World Bank (2011), the biggest investor in Vietnam's rural electrification, acknowledges this fact in its publication "State and people, central and local, working together", which is aimed to draw lessons from the country's success. This publication is the only official document, albeit not a state document, to estimate the costs that the people, or "consumers", paid for their electricity connection. Accordingly, between 1994 and 1997 alone, rural residents paid 66 per cent of the costs of low-voltage networks and 35 per cent of the costs of medium-voltage networks

nationwide (16). They also paid in full for the meters and service drops from the low-voltage line to their houses. Given the "strong demand" for electricity, each rural household in Vietnam paid from one to three months of their income to connect themselves to the grid (12). These statistics are not cited in any news article or state documents.

Interestingly, the title of this World Bank publication, "State and people, central and local, working together", points to the role of the local authorities, which are critical to the people's narrative of rural electrification but are obscured in the official, mainstream electrification story. Reiterating the motto "State and people working together" *[Nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm]*, and adding the second part: "central and local working together" [*trung ương và địa phương cùng làm*], this title reflects a dichotomy between the central state and the local state in this process of rural development. Its linguistic structure suggests that the local state should place itself on the other side, that of the people, in relation to the central state. It seems to represent the same reality that officials at Thai Binh's Department of Industry and Trade and villagers in Dong Phong alike perceive from their experience of the electrification "movement" in the 1990s. That is, when the central state was almost absent (since first the party-state did not prioritize household access to electricity, while the electricity sector was then reluctant to get involved), the local authorities acted on the side of the people to successfully coordinate the introduction of universal electricity.

Starting at the point that 62.5 per cent of households had connected themselves to the grid by drawing on local resources, the central state's work in the twenty years that followed could be summarized along two lines. One was connecting the remaining 40 per cent of the rural population to the grid, while the other was transferring the ownership and management of the existing low-voltage grid from the local authorities to the state corporation, Vietnam Electricity. Large investments, mostly from foreign aid and loans, have been made over this period of time to enhance the grid and even out the price of electricity that rural people consume. This central involvement is enthusiastically received among rural customers. People in Dong Phong did not stint their praise for the visible improvements since the local grid was handed over to the power company. The change of poles and wiring, the construction of new transformers and the orange uniform of the power company's staff that they see now and then around the village have meant to them minimal blackouts and brownouts and the fastest repairs possible after incidents. No one in the commune seems to be concerned about the ownership of the grid; what they care about and are much more satisfied with is the relative success of its upgrade and the subsequently much-improved quality of electric power.

Conclusion: reading all the narratives together

So far, the different narratives of rural electrification have been unbundled for the sake of clarity. In the final section of this chapter, I wish to re-bundle these narratives into one and read them all together to arrive at a narrative that is closest to the truth. The people's tales, the media narrative and the archive-based narrative together give us a thirty-year long history of rural electrification, first people-led and then state-led. For people in Thai Binh province, the first period of ten years leaves a mark in their memory. In their eyes, they electrified themselves, allowing them to live with electric light for the first time and to become "smarter" in using electric power with other appliances. However, this local but nationwide movement is not represented in the media or the national archives. The state-led period came afterwards and has now lasted about twenty years, bringing about improvements to the electricity supply and even the electricity tariff. This period of central state's involvement is appreciated, although it might be less impressive to local people than their grassroots movements to connect themselves to the grid. Drawing on the official documents and EVN's public relations work, the mainstream discourse has given the credit for electrifying the population to the work of the government and the state monopoly EVN during this period of roughly twenty years.

In the first ten-year period of rural electrification, it was the lowest level of the state – its administration in the commune, namely the *locality* – that mediated the relationship between people and state in a local process of electric state-making. When the central state had not decided what it could do and what it wanted to do in rural areas where electricity was concerned, the people's demands for improved living standards through electrification were met primarily with the coordination and support of the local authorities, which played a key role in electrifying over sixty per cent of Vietnamese rural households before 1999. The local administration had a double relationship in this process, partly with the state and partly with the people. Although rural residents did not perceive it as *the state* per se, it has drawn on the state's legitimacy to coordinate rural electrification when the central state was absent. In so doing, it exercised its state function and created a more or less egalitarian environment as desired by the socialist state.

The state–people relationship was then represented on the media by Vietnam Electricity's efforts to emphasize the benevolence of the state and to build up the company's image as the steering wheel of electrification. Its public relations work has had a great influence in obscuring the social memory of the process in rural areas, highlighting the EVN's role in the "official" electrification process and reinforcing the mainstream discourse of the for-the-people state. By investigating behind and beyond the "papereality" and reading all these narratives together, this chapter is able to offer an observation on Vietnamese statecraft in rural areas: even given the seemingly neglectful attitude of the central

state, a system of state actors was at work to mediate and represent the vital state–people relationship, and to show the state's benevolent side through the provision of an energy infrastructure.

It is, then, no exaggeration to say that *national electrification*, or electrification of the whole country in Leninist terms, and *rural electrification* are two different processes in the Vietnamese context. The Vietnamese state has practised a form of "grand plan" in the general electrification of the country while adopting a relaxed and at times even neglectful attitude when it came to distributing electricity within the countryside. It has always been proactive and determined in securing affordable energy for "building socialism" (*xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội*) through the generation and transmission of electric power for production, and this serves as a springboard for the local initiatives of rural household electrification. The central state has been both responsive in allowing people to act at their own initiative and absent from regulating this process until 1999. On the other hand, it had been able to take the opportunities that became available on the threshold of the new century to complete the task and correct its shortcomings. By 2019, over 99 per cent of rural households had electricity, all paying the same unit price, regardless of their distance from the source or the density of the grid. The Vietnamese state has shown multiple faces in this regard in the last thirty years or so, sometimes negligent and inadvertent, sometimes determined and responsive. Taking place in the context of this ambivalence of state images and practices, rural electrification manifested itself first as a grassroots movement and then as a state project that draws on both arbitration and flexibility.

Chapter Three

"No different from a little city": The Make-Believe Qualities of Local Politics

Electricity has become a matter of course in Dong Phong nowadays, but it is still not taken for granted. It is still a relatively new phenomenon of village life after three decades of electrification, as is the handing over of the communal grid to the "Electric Power" or *Điện lực,* the term local people commonly use to refer to EVN, in the last year. Unlike the established but more recently also contested view that infrastructure is generally invisible and that its use is generally mundane (Star 1999, Star and Bowker 2002), the electricity infrastructure in Dong Phong has always been a topic of concern. It is rendered visible through wires, poles, meter boxes and light bulbs installed around the village, while its usage in many cases either excites or irritates villagers about their ability to shape their own lives. Such emotions as excitement and irritation, and the more corporeal "intensities of feeling" (Thrift 2004) known as *affects,* are the villagers' primary mode of relating not only to electricity, but also to the now electrified social and political atmosphere in the commune.

Drawing on local experiences of electricity use and the articulation of state practices in such experiences, this chapter will analyse the political strategies of the local state and local people through the lens of their affects. It will show that electric light and sound in everyday life and festive events, as well as the authorities' emphasis on gestures of care, constantly create a make-believe socio-political space and compensate for the economic downside through an abundance of affects that are intensified by electricity. In this way, both local people and the local state contribute to the affective qualities of local politics, and thus participate in affective state-making. In other words, this chapter depicts the role of "electrified" affects in local statecraft and in what Navaro-Yashin (2002) describes as the "remarkable phenomenon of public participation in reproducing systems of power" (159).

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the literature on politics and state formation turned to the role of affects in political life, and particularly in the subjectification of political actors to the state. The term *affect* has been conceptualized in different ways, but, following the affect theories of Laszczkowski and Reeves (2018), I understand affect as a human "intensity of feeling" (Thrift 2004) that exists prior to the fixation of language and the mediation of culture, before being captured semantically and semiotically as an emotion. An affect is both "presubjective" and "intersubjective", or, as Mazzarella (2009) puts it, "presubjective without being presocial" (291). It is "presubjective" because it comes as a bodily, corporeal apprehension of the world before the human subject is conscious about it (Thrift 2004, 67). It is "intersubjective" because it influences groups of people that may or may not share the same space, atmosphere, or ambience and can be transmitted through

them (see Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 5-6). As soon as this intensity of feeling is recognized and named, it is no longer an affect that is mobile and emergent, but has become an emotion or a sentiment, subjective and fixed. In other words, emotion is a "closure of affect" (Massumi 2002 in Thrift 2004, 63).

The modernist discourse of politics has long downplayed the role of affects as well as emotions and sentimental intensities in "serious" democracy projects, considering them a "radical site of otherness to be policed or preserved" (Mazzarella 2009, 298). It requires a postmodernist revisiting of state theories and much empirical work to acknowledge that political processes are not necessarily rational, and that affects and/or sentiments can be part of political processes. As Stoler (2007, 9) puts it:

> …the role of the state is not only as Antonio Gramsci defined it, in the business of "educating consent." More basically, such consent is made possible […] by shaping appropriate and reasoned affect, by directing affective judgements, by severing some affective bonds and establishing others, by adjudicating what constituted moral sentiments – in short, by educating the proper distribution of sentiments and desires.

These techniques of creating consent in Stoler's words are generally called the "engineering of affect" by Thrift (2004) and as "affect management" by Mazarella (2009). While acknowledging that "affect has always been a key element of politics", Thrift drew scholarly attention to the ever-greater engineering of affect by political actors nowadays (64). Likewise, Mazzarella "venture[s] to say that modernity is and has always been structurally affective" (298) and that social projects "must be affective to be effective" (299).

In Vietnamese socialist politics, however, the role of affects and emotions has not been a matter of dispute. The "revolutionary" state, with its powerful propaganda, has always motivated its subjects to fulfil political goals through what Schwenkel (2013) calls *socialist affect*. The statecraft at work in Dong Phong commune today represents a strong continuity of this socialist tradition, especially because it is deeply rooted in the formation of the land as a territory that involved encroaching on the sea and the population as an assemblage of socially and economically disadvantaged people who moved in from various localities. The local politics necessitates the consideration of affect as "constitutive of the political itself" in particular "histories of subjectification and experience of rules", as Laszczkowski and Reeves suggest (2018, 7-8).

Navaro-Yashin (2012) takes matters a step further in understanding the crucial role of affect by putting it in the make-believe space of a de facto state, "something that exists, but not really" (28), and thus must be constantly manufacturing its own existence. I would argue from the ethnography that, although Dong Phong villagers live in a real state, their political space is de facto in the sense that it is

always in the making by local state agents and the people alike, and that it has make-believe qualities in line with what Navaro-Yashin claims about all spaces that are aligned with state practices (6). I am convinced that all political spaces, whether within a relatively endurable state or a de facto state, are make-believe and in the making in an affective sense. As an affect is not a stable sentiment but always emergent, indeterminate and potential, it must be created again and again as is done in Dong Phong for a sustainable political goal, like building a state, to be achieved.

Communal road-lighting and the local "political aesthetics"

The visibility of electric infrastructure is most prominent in Dong Phong when the day comes close to an end. That is when all roads and alleyways in the commune are lit up with the so-called *"cổng chào đèn LED"*, or "LED welcome arches" in literal Vietnamese–English translation. Night travellers can see these bright structures from afar while crossing the fields to approach the commune's territory. Once they reach the main road through the commune, they will move under the aluminium frames erected on the two sides of the road, carrying colorful light chains to make twinkling arches overhead (see Figure 2). An abrupt change from the darkness of the rice field, these arches give travellers a sense of being welcomed, and a celebratory spirit when moving under them. This spirit is exactly what Dong Phong people want to create when they contribute their money to constructing and lighting these "beautiful" arches, as they thought of them, instead of setting up simple neon streetlights. "Everyone will feel welcomed and feel our hospitability", is how the economy-and-infrastructure officer (*cán bộ kinh tế và cơ sở hạ tầng*) of the commune's People's Committee[15] summed up the meaning of these arches. In this way, electric light as an everyday infrastructure with "aesthetic qualities" (Larkin 2018, 188) has been engineered to impress people from outside the commune.

These arches of light create affects not only among non-villagers, but also among the village residents as the primary subjects. Most villagers and local state officers I talked to were glad about the colorful

[15] As the title suggests, this official should oversee economic development and the infrastructural work of the commune. Similarly, the cultural affairs officer is responsible for the socio-cultural life of the commune, and the cadastral officer is in charge of land measurement and registration. How they fulfil their mandates is, however, another issue, largely due to the commune's leadership and their self-motivation. I did not see this economy and infrastructure officer, for instance, do anything related to local economic development. Nevertheless, he usually accompanied the commune's leaders in mobilizing the funds for infrastructural construction in the framework of New Countryside programme. Conversely, the cultural affairs officer was always proactive in organizing public activities for adults and children in the commune.

lights they switched on every evening and on festive occasions kept on until very late. There is a shared excitement in seeing their commune as bright and beautiful "as a city" (*như thành phố*). It is noteworthy that the word they use, "*thành phố*", in Vietnamese, refers to a capital city, a big city, or at least a provincial capital like Thai Binh city, not to any smaller township of a district. Reasoning about the right size for comparative purposes did not seem to have any significance for their excitement. This is probably because this "city-ness" is associated with something they called "*tinh thần*", "*khí thế*" or "*không khí*" – spirit, atmosphere or vibe – rather than the size, of their land.

Figure 2. LED welcome arches on the commune's main road

What exactly is this spirit or vibe? Remarkably, villagers lacked words when they tried to describe their excitement, which to me demonstrates the clear existence of affects, something people feel but have yet to name. During the "Tet" Lunar New Year festival of 2019, two men told me how they felt towards the LED welcome arches, something that was detached from their materialist consumption of food and drink during the festivities. With some difficulty in describing their feelings, which were apparently at the "prediscursive, affective level" (Larkin 2018, 197), they later referred to the commune as "city" in order to sum up its value to them.

> *Man 1:* Having these lights on at Tet we also feel … no one cares how you eat and drink but…
>
> *Man 2:* Right, I don't need to know how much food and beer you have on Tet, but first and foremost this spirit…

Man 1: In the evening it looks bright, whew, it used to be so dark…

Man 2: Now when you come here in the evening, you see it like a city. Once you go around Dong Phong in the evening, you will want to go on and on.

Man 1: It is just that it's not as busy as a city…

Their discussion reminded me of what local state officers and other villagers said about the same topic of urbanity. In almost the same wording, the cultural officer (*cán bộ văn hóa*) of the commune's People's Committee proudly told me that Dong Phong was "no different from a little city (*thành phố thu nhỏ*)", as I could see for myself when roaming around the commune in the evening. Some other officers enthusiastically discussed the new styles of the arches they saw being built in other communes, which to them were innovations based on the predecessors in Dong Phong. Villagers of the younger generation seemed to have the same enthusiasm about the LED welcome arches. Mai, a female student at a university in Hanoi returning home for Tet, exclaimed: "The evenings are more beautiful; there's a vibe!" She and her fellow villagers' excitement at the presence of electric light was not very different from the admiration for light and modernity of the two teenage sisters in Thach Lam's short story "*Hai đứa trẻ*" ("Two Children") published in 1938. In this story, every night the two girls waited to see the brightly lit and cheerfully noisy train from Hanoi pass swiftly by their dark, isolated rural neighborhood (see more details in Chapter One).

Just half a year before the Lunar New Year of 2019, this excitement was not widely felt in Dong Phong commune. My first days in Dong Phong in summer 2018 were marked by the darkness of the various alleyways where I went for the initial household survey, as well as by a tragic death presumably caused by the lack of lighting. A man from a neighboring commune was found dead late one evening next to his motorbike in the concrete canal that separates the residential hamlets from the rice field. The villagers assumed that he had ridden at a relatively high speed without knowing (as a non-villager) or seeing the end of the alleyway and the canal running across the front of his bike. As this is a narrow canal, he must have bumped into its opposite concrete wall, fallen down and died of a fatal injury, rather than from drowning in the very swallow water. In the crowd of some hundred people who immediately gathered at the site that night were all the key staff of the commune's People's Committee, including the Chairman, and several policemen from the district. Two large and compact light bulbs were dispatched from the nearest households. I heard a man's voice in the crowd saying: "You guys (*các ông*) should have had a light bulb here. Only some thousand *dong* a month, why didn't you spend it on lighting?" I heard then some soft murmurs in reply to this virtual conviction, but apparently no argument or objection. The lack of lighting was established as such as one possible cause of the death. The liability was thus also put on the households living along that alleyway. Unlike the state-sponsored public lighting on urban roads, here in the rural area the state only pays for the

lighting of an inter-communal road that connects Dong Phong with other communes. The lighting of other roads of the commune is left to the discretion of local people.

In this dark area between the field and the hamlets, one hamlet head (*trưởng thôn*) who guided me around for the household survey had told me about the spirits that had haunted the area since the founding of the commune, including the incident of the unfortunate man dying in the electrified rat trap mentioned in Chapter Two. The light that made villagers "happy" had not reached the commune's surroundings. Here the darkness and the believing tone in the storyteller's voice amplified each other, giving me a nervous thrill that only daylight, a neon light or the colorful lights of the LED welcome arches could drive away.

The locally motivated electrification in Dong Phong manifests itself through the rapid growth of road lighting, as only one year later, in summer 2019, all the alleyways of the commune had been lit by the LED welcome arches (see Figure 5 in the end of this chapter). Local residents in each hamlet would contribute to building these arches in the first place, and to lighting them up afterwards. They pool their resources to pay the monthly bill for the road lighting, ranging from about 10 to 30 thousand Vietnamese dong (0.5 to 1.4 US dollars) for each household, depending on the area's collective economic circumstances. There is tacit competition among the hamlets over the intensity and duration of their lighting, based on an assumption that, where people are better off, they can afford more lights and light them for longer hours. The son-in-law of my host lady again emphasized that his hamlet is among the few that could leave the arch lights on every night until very late.

Much in the way that Larkin (2018) elaborated with his notion of "political aesthetics", the LED welcome arches in Dong Phong "operate aesthetically, and their aesthetic address constitutes a form of political action" (175). The choice of this mode of lighting in the village's alleyways, instead of simple white or yellow light bulbs, was made in the first place by groups of villagers and then encouraged by the local authorities. Sharing the same aesthetic opinion as that of the villagers, the commune authorities were happy that these arches made the commune's straight roads and alleyways look outstanding in the evening and thus cause such promising excitement. While not contributing any financial support, they did have an influence on the proliferation of these lighting structures throughout the commune. Commune officials said they mobilized the people to build the arches "to synchronise the look" of their home area. The villagers, on the other hand, said that they made the arches by themselves without the authorities having to mobilize them, but also admitted that the cadres "did encourage the movement". Local people and local authorities have thus reached a "consent" on this mini movement of "shaping appropriate and reasoned affect" (Stoler 2007, 9) by means of the LED arches.

Local statecraft 1: solidarity and the make-believe political space

With its history as a reclaimed territory since the 1960s, and as a newly established administrative unit since 1975, Dong Phong commune is essentially a village society in the making. Unlike longstanding villages in the north of Vietnam, the cohesion of this society is based not so much on kinship as on the "solidarity" (*đoàn kết*) of many groups of peasants, who came from various communes in the district at different points in time to "build the socialist fatherland", as well as find opportunities for themselves, such as land to farm. Implicitly defined as the tie that binds its population together, "solidarity" is the very quality that local authorities uphold throughout their various annual activities. The Party Secretary used the term *đoàn kết* several times when briefing me about his commune's history, and he repeated it in several public and private conversations later. His and his colleagues' efforts in "making" this solidarity through various techniques will be described below. Their effort might have resulted in a "believing" effect when solidarity has become a discourse, a quality that many local people mention when telling me about their communal environment.

As evidence of intra-village solidarity, villagers usually talk about how their neighbors – with most of whom they do not have a relationship of kinship – assist in their family work and join in their celebrations. The shared use of electricity and electrical appliances, especially during power cuts, is among the manifestations of this dimension of life. During power cuts, my host lady would take her rice cooker to a neighbor who owns a diesel-run power generator to have her rice cooked, because this rice cooker can save her much effort in cooking. A household that for some reasons is disconnected from the grid will ask for a line from a neighbor to power a light bulb in the evening or to run a fan, with or without a very modest payment. This practice of sharing is not considered illegal, as the neighbor who gives electricity will pay for it through his meter. The old saying about neighborhood solidarity in a time before electricity – "being together when the lamp dims out and the fire is extinguished" (*tối lửa tắt đèn có nhau*) – holds true in an era of imperfect electricity, when power cuts or disconnections happen every now and then. Such shared uses of electricity and electrical appliances both result from the existing ties among neighbors and intensify the bonds in village relationships.

Đoàn kết for people in Dong Phong connotes not only internal bonds which may exclude outsiders, but also a quality of friendship and conviviality, which could be inclusive. My host lady told me a story, which she repeated a couple of times, of how she was satisfied with this quality of life:

> When I visit my sisters in other communes, I am often surprised that people there do not greet us as people here would do. Only those who really know my sisters will talk to us. It seems to other people

> they do not have anything to do with us. My sisters say it is normal over there. Here, adults and children you don't know also greet you when they meet you on the way.

While she is a village elder who deserves this degree of respect, I also experienced this satisfaction when being greeted by unknown children on the village roads and was talked to by adults, who were usually curious about me but ready to welcome me.

Beyond the cohesion among peer villagers and the friendship and conviviality, *đoàn kết* in the local discourse also refers to the relatively peaceful relationship between the commune's authorities and the people, which has exempted the authorities from people's complaints (*khiếu kiện*) for several years, according to the commune's Communist Party Secretary. To maintain and enhance this relationship, the authorities seem to place excessive care on some symbolic aspects of the local life and by so doing emphasize the make-believe quality of the political space.

Against the indifference they show to the economic burdens that local people are struggling with (which will be discussed in the next section), the authorities of Dong Phong commune are very attentive to all the ritual ceremonies, both public and private. Within the family sphere, they attend weddings, death anniversaries and especially funerals, where Vietnamese people appreciate one's respectful presence more than at any other rituals. In two funerals I attended in the commune, the delegation of the commune's state leaders came to burn incense, bow down in front of the coffin, offer envelopes of tribute money to the bereaved, and give condolences to the mourning families. Dong Phong villagers greatly value the presence of political leaders at every funeral of the commune. Many of them quote the saying "conduct toward those who have passed away is the ultimate conduct" (*nghĩa tử là nghĩa tận*) to compliment the authorities' solemn presence at funerals. The two men who described their feelings toward the LED welcome arches also told me that funerals were part of the local "culture".

> Man 2: I don't know about other provinces, but nowhere else in Thai Binh is there such a culture as in Dong Phong, honestly. Especially funerals, right?
>
> Man 1: A funeral is [an occasion of] distinction. I must say that in no other place in this province are the funerals as solemn as they are here. All the commune leaders always come, the Chairman, the Fatherland Front, all the associations.
>
> Man 2: Very solemnly!
>
> Man 1: It's different here from other communes. In other communes, the People's Committee can come or not, the Fatherland Front can come or not, this and that association can come or not, there is no coordination. No commune can be compared to Dong Phong.
>
> Man 2: In organizing these things, the cadres of Dong Phong do it very well. Especially at funerals, [where] the organization is really solemn.

It would be necessary to recall the structure of the local state explained in Chapter Two to understand the symbolic meaning of this full attendance by the commune's authorities. As the two men's discussion revealed, funerals in rural Vietnam are usually attended by some of the local authorities, but funerals in Dong Phong are more "solemn" than that. The local authorities always send their highest representative delegation, consisting of the Secretary of the Party Unit (*Bí thư Đảng ủy xã*), the Chairman of People's Committee (*Chủ tịch Ủy ban Nhân dân xã*) and the Chairman of the Fatherland Front Committee (*Chủ tịch Ủy ban Mặt trận Tổ quốc*). Their full attendance at funerals, which are as organized as the people praised them for being, results in one of the most important "affective judgements" (Stoler 2007) of Dong Phong villagers toward their local state.

Many private ceremonies are witnesses to the attendance of state officers who are at once kin, neighbor-villagers and representatives of the local state. Take as an example the Chairman of the People's Committee, who got into debt because of the private ceremonies he had to attend. Villagers invite him to their family events based on the fact that he is a relative, a neighbor and/or a fellow villager who at the same time represents the authorities. The Chairman had to accept most of these invitations because he *is* invited. In my host lady's words, the question is: "Can he afford not to attend? If they did not respect him, they would have not invited him" (*chẳng lẽ anh ấy lại không đến? Người ta có tôn trọng mình người ta mới mời*). He is supposed to show his respect to the hosts in return by attending the ceremonies. Moreover, attending a ceremony usually means giving a cash gift, which he has to cover from his private money because these invitations are private. My host lady, who is in fact one of his aunts, told me that the Chairman has a debt of about 100 million dong (equivalent to 5,000 U.S. dollars) largely due to this voluntary-but-obligatory participation in ceremonies. His obligation comes from a dual identity similar to that of the "village headman" (Gluckman 1949) who finds himself both a representative of state power and an integral part of his network of kinship. However, unlike the village headman, the Chairman is not (yet) substantially wealthier than other villagers. He has to fulfil his part in building the solidarity between the governing authorities and the governed subjects by sacrificing some of his financial security. By so doing he secures his own political position.

In the public sphere, ceremonies in remembrance of "Uncle Ho" are where the sense of shared history and identity is entrenched, and solidarity is strengthened. The most important events in Dong Phong commune, apart from the Lunar New Year festival, which is celebrated everywhere, are the two anniversaries that can only be found here in this revolutionary "Uncle Ho-visited" commune: the anniversary of Uncle Ho's visit, and the anniversary of his death. These two events create the community's make-believe space in different ways.

The anniversary of Uncle Ho's death on the 21st day of the 7th Lunar month[16] is constituted by an incense offering rite and a communal lunch. Offering incense is the part that every citizen can attend, but the lunch is reserved for those who have registered and paid for the food beforehand. Because of this requirement to make a financial contribution, the death anniversary is not similarly attractive to all the villagers. That morning, I only saw among the attendees those who might feel the most attached to the political regime and the late iconic leader, including the communal authorities' officials, war veterans and more senior citizens (see Figure 3 in the end of this chapter). Young people were largely absent from the ceremony.

Selective attendance notwithstanding, a festive atmosphere throughout the commune was still created via the communal loudspeaker system. From early morning, the loudspeakers extended the invitation of the commune's authorities to all villagers to attend the anniversary. Most of the time was taken up by many songs about Uncle Ho's personality, merits and sad passing away. The atmosphere was charged with tender music and emotional lyrics before the event occurred, whether villagers were concerned about it or not. It would continue to be filled with live sound from Uncle Ho's shrine when the event took place, to make sure that non-attendees would also be aware of what was going on throughout the ritual. In Dong Phong, the electrified means of communication by loudspeakers has been essential in the authorities' efforts to create some common feeling, sentiment, atmosphere, or spirit, although no one could be completely sure whether the villagers were impressed and if so, how much. Affects are intersubjective and transmittable, as well as being characterized by indeterminacy and potentiality (Mazzarella 2009, 292).

To the extent that an anthropologist has herself as the first informant,[17] I have been informed by my own experience of the affects that arise in such an anniversary as that celebrating Uncle Ho's death. That morning in the summer of 2018, at the beginning of the incense-offering ritual, I was standing among about two hundred attendees in front of the shrine to spend a minute remembering the late President at the request of the master of ceremony. That was when from the loudspeaker launched into the melody of "*Hồn tử sĩ*" (Souls of Martyrs), the official music played at state-level funerals. An experience of affect struck me first-hand. The vague but also clear remembrance of the late President that had been cultivated through education since my childhood, my standing among hundreds of people, and finally this solemn but touching melody altogether caused in me a sudden trembling that

[16] Like all death anniversaries in Vietnam, that of President Ho Chi Minh is organized on the basis of the date in the lunar calendar. He passed away on 2 September 1969 in the Gregorian calendar, but the annual anniversary will fall on any day between mid-August and mid-September, being different from year to year.

[17] As Hadas Weiss (2019) reflects on her own positioning in her book *We Have Never Been Middle Class*.

ran along my cervical spine. I was not prepared to be touched by this situation in this unexpected way, but by opening myself to mingling with the environment, I was also ready to be touched. I believed at the very moment that those standing around me were also affected by the general ambience in some certain way. Feeling it through my own mind and body, I perceived first-hand how this commemoration of death can create affects as "intersubjective intensity" among ready-to-be-touched political subjects.

While "Uncle Ho"'s death anniversary could be more political than popular, the anniversary of his visit on 26th of March (in the Gregorian calendar) was very popular and generated a truly festive atmosphere, since it is organized in tandem with the traditional Longevity celebration which families organize for their elderly members each spring. The combined celebrations always include incense offerings and a music festival at Uncle Ho's shrine, followed by large meals offered in families' private spaces. On this occasion the loudspeaker system will transmit the celebratory music, filling the commune with a joyful festive atmosphere. Families celebrating their elderly members are automatically subjected to the political event of the anniversary of Uncle Ho's visit and contribute their resources in the form of meals to making it a worthwhile moment. Senior members of all the other families voluntarily join together in making this grand festival by going back and forth to celebrate their elderly neighbors, while younger generations find entertainment in traditional games, football matches and performance shows (*biểu diễn văn nghệ*) organized by the People's Committee. This strategic combination of public and private ceremonies marks the social and political identity of this commune that Uncle Ho visited (see Figure 4 in the end of this chapter). To consolidate the legitimacy of this strategy, the commune's authorities managed to get an official letter from Nam Hai district that both allows and requests "only" Dong Phong to organize the Longevity celebration on the anniversary of Uncle Ho's visit. All other communes "have to", in the Dong Phong authorities' words, organize the Longevity celebration in association with the Lunar New Year festival.

In a devoted manner, the local state apparatus mainly runs around organizing these public ceremonies and rituals, which, more than anything else, "make" the political space of Dong Phong and drive local people to "believe" in the shared qualities of their lives. Its Vice Chairman told me that the "real" work of each year could only begin at the end of March, after the anniversary of Uncle Ho's visit. He immediately appeared to regret this slipping from his mouth, but to me it felt like an unnecessary regret. It is an obvious duty of the local state, perhaps its most important duty, to align its work with the local ceremonial life, a life that by and large is plotted out by the local state itself, in many respects resembling the "cult" of Ho Chi Minh that has long been recorded (Ho Tai 1995, Dror 2016, Hoang 2016, Ngo 2019). The officers are busy enough throughout the year with two large series of events commemorating the late President, the dozens of smaller festivities that they need to organize and

the hundreds of private rituals they have to attend, showing respect and making financial gifts, sometimes from their own pockets. All these efforts are intended to create a vibrant commonality for a population without much in the way of kin ties, assuring them of the care of the local state, and helping maintain a kind of peace between the population and the authorities.

From the perspective of local people, it is their appreciation of the local state's attention to their spiritual life and their participation in the state-led communal events that demonstrates how they both "make" and "believe" in the commonality of their political space. At the level of affects, where it is difficult to verbalize the "intensities of feeling" that emerge both presubjectively and intersubjectively, local people do not talk about how they feel at rituals and public events, nor do they talk about the pride of living in a locality visited by Uncle Ho. Only their participation in the events where political messages are communicated is a manifestation of their sense of belonging and identity. Although not all participants are completely free to choose – state officers are obliged to take part – most villagers voluntarily took the roles not only of members of the audience, but also of performers, co-organizers, hosts and other organizing roles. The affects that emerge from experiencing rituals in different roles and at different levels are not necessarily named or fixed as such, but they keep the villagers attached to the commune's social life, as well as to the conscious organizers of that life – the local authorities.

Local statecraft 2: economic mobilization and (non)intervention

Given the local history of hard-earned economic subsistence, the pride of the local authorities in economic transitions of the early 2000s and their excessive care for the spiritual aspects of communal life, a paradox manifests itself in the authorities' non-interventionism in people's livelihood nowadays. The authorities' interest in household economies resembles their intervention in public lighting, that is, it should be limited to mobilizing people to pursue a direction mapped out for them by the central or local state, but not bearing its costs.

On the threshold of the twenty-first century, Dong Phong commune again became a pioneer in realizing the Central Communist Party's plan to shift the mode of agricultural production, this time from rice to aquaculture. The commune pooled its cultivable land so that one third of the area could be used for raising aquaproducts such as shrimp, fish and molluscs on a larger scale than mere subsistence, that is, on the "commodity scale" (*quy mô hàng hóa*) that suits a "market economy", in the continued cheering of the mainstream media. Farmers who raised aquaproducts in the first few years quickly became rich. This encouraged their fellow villagers to follow their example and

reinforced the confidence of the state and the local authorities in their visionary leadership. Many state leaders from Hanoi came to visit the commune, including President Tran Duc Luong, President Truong Tan Sang and Vice-Chairperson of the National Assembly Tong Thi Phong. Dong Phong again became a bright example of the revolutionary, risk-taking locality.

In 2018 and 2019 aquaculture was still being practiced, but the optimism among local farmers had long since faded away. Many households became indebted after their bank loans of several hundred million to several billion Vietnamese *dong* (ten thousand to one hundred thousand US dollars) vanished due to the massive deaths of their clams, fish or prawns. Mrs. Nhan, a married woman with two grown-up sons, was left living alone after one such failed crop of clams. Her husband and sons became migrant workers in Taiwan and Japan respectively to pay off the debt of over one billion *dong* (equivalent to fifty thousand US dollars). They managed to pay off the debt after six years of working abroad, but her husband had never come back ever since. As an illegal worker he would be expelled as soon as he showed up at the airport, though, as he said, he still wanted to earn some more money after paying off his debts. Every now and then the married couple would talk via Facebook Messenger in the evening. Every now and then, she also received his presents, which kept up her hopes about keeping family alive. Mrs. Nhan remained hopeful because she was not the only married person in Dong Phong living alone. Several other women and men also had their spouses working abroad after failed investments in aquafarming. A neighbor of Mrs. Nhan made a financial estimate of this situation of indebtedness, which I could not validate but can still be used as a reference:

> Only about ten per cent of those who cultivate their ponds can live from aquafarming. The total debt of the commune in 2004 was only three billion *dong*. One family had a debt of about ten million *dong* at most. Now the total debt is ten times higher. It is a half-dead, half-alive [*sống dở chết dở*] situation.

Given that the policy of shifting to aquaculture was a political decision enforced by the commune's authorities, I struggled to make sense of the indifference the local authority showed towards indebtedness. The same political system that urged local people to switch to commodity aquafarming now showed no sign that it acknowledged the situation, let alone made any effort to find a way out for the indebted families. Throughout my time in Dong Phong, I never heard local state officials express any concern or comment on the state of local livelihoods. It was as if they were not at all aware of the situation, or as if they were ordered not to talk about it, assuming they were aware. The most prominent task they are now undertaking with reference to the local economy is to mobilize financial contributions from the central state, external donors and local households – virtually from every possible source – to build infrastructure within and beyond the framework of the New Countryside program.

Minh T.N. Nguyen (2019) has discussed thoroughly the neoliberal logics of self-reliance, self-help and self-entrepreneurship that both the state and the people are ready to internalize through the New Countryside programme in Vietnam. Accordingly, the programme that started in 2009 with nineteen criteria aims to modernize the countryside and generate self-fashioning rural people who do not depend upon the state's provision of resources. As Nguyen comments, this programme "relies to a great extent on local mobilization of resources" (110), making rural populations responsible for their own development "without sufficient state responsibility" (111). In Dong Phong I have seen a complete version of these logics, especially on the state's side. Across Vietnam, the local state now assumed only the "facilitating role" of a "mobilizing force" (ibid.), but to Dong Phong's local state, this recently internalized role is in a stark contrast to its former coercive manner of economic control. Back in the early 2000s, the local economic structure was completely transformed through a top-down process. All farming households were forced to contribute to the consolidation land that turned all the cultivable land on the left side of the main communal road into an area exclusively for aquaculture, while all the land on the right side became an area for agriculture. Mobilized by the political leadership, peasant households learnt to raise aquatic resources, borrow capital and embark on the venture. Their initial successes brought the commune its fame and continue to do so, but in their failures with the crops later, they fell victims to the non-interventionism that came a few years after this farming transition. The commune's authorities started to adopt the notion of facilitating and mobilizing the state from the New Countryside program, and managed to mobilize enough resources to gain the title of "New Countryside commune" in 2013. Since then they have also managed to stay free from accountability for local economic conditions.

On the people's side, the "neoliberal" logics of self-reliance, self-help and self-entrepreneurship are rarely questioned. In the same way that they contributed their own money to electrify themselves (see Chapter Two), or to build and operate the LED welcome arches (see above), most Dong Phong villagers readily took to the task of establishing individual enterprises. Most people I met did not question why they were suffering from the losses and their indebtedness, nor did they try to find an answer outside themselves and their own resources. Mrs. Nhan only regretted that they had been "greedy". After a good harvest of clams, they borrowed more money to grow a bigger crop, and that was when they failed. "If we had not been so greedy, we would not have been indebted", she concluded. Yet although many people have lost their belief in making easy fortunes, they have not lost their entrepreneurial spirit. What they do is continue to work hard, worry every day about the worst (the death of their prawns or clams) but hope for the best (that most of these creatures remain alive until they are big enough to be sold). After harvesting their crops, many sadly calculated their losses and asked a question without waiting for an answer: "Am I not supposed to work?" ("*chẳng lẽ lại*

không làm"). For rural people, living without doing something on their land, no matter gain or loss, is not comprehensible. And as peasant entrepreneurs, they no longer expect any guidance from the authorities or blame them for their failed businesses.

Some people who did question the process were effectively silenced and marginalized, and they did not participate in this self-entrepreneurship "movement" at all. The man who gave me the debt statistics said he was not invited to official meetings anymore after he spoke about local economic problems in one such meeting with upper-level cadres. He has also chosen not to participate in local public life since then. Just for talking openly to me, he was harshly criticized by his wife in my presence. Feeling my astonishment, his wife then asked him in a manner of both explanation and resignation: "Why do you trouble ourselves by telling all those things? How could our voices reach the courts of heaven?" (*làm sao mà thấu đến Thiên đình được?*) Needless to say, her questions embarrassed me for the powerlessness the researcher has to make empirical changes. The woman's questions also expose the dimension of latent dissent and self-censorship in the locality.

The economic story can nevertheless be nuanced by villagers' individual efforts to find a way out of their problems. Some people have returned their allocated land or rent it out and go to work in factories in other communes or even other districts. Some choose small-scale trading over growing anything. Some combine cultivating a small plot of a rice field with a side job. They might never be mentioned as those who make their homeland the "new countryside", but they earn a safe amount of income that protects their families from falling into debt.

The state–people relationship: the local and the central

In their relationship with the local state, the majority of Dong Phong villagers walk a difficult line between on the one hand appreciating its care and taking part in the make-believe political space it promotes, and on the other hand being critical of its lack of socio-economic accountability. People's criticisms of the local state take different forms, as will be demonstrated below. Meanwhile, their relationship with the central state seems to be more straightforward, partly benefiting from the make-believe efforts of the local authorities. Before taking a closer look at the state–people relationship in Dong Phong, it is useful to consider the historical context of the province of Thai Binh, apart from the commune's peculiar history.

In 1997, Thai Binh was the hotbed of a peasant uprising, the biggest ever in the Vietnamese socialist regime. This uprising caused a deep shock to the whole political system, which had been confident about its ability to control society. In opposition to the literal meaning of its name Thai Binh, meaning

"peace", the province underwent violent conflicts when peasants in hundreds of communes became outraged at the corrupt and abusive authority over them. The central state had only two options to address this social unrest, either violent suppression with the army, or non-violent negotiation and persuasion. The provincial authorities at that time advocated military intervention, but the central state eventually chose a non-violent approach of "not bringing your gun when coming to the people" (Dinh Tuong 2012).[18] Between 1997 and 1999, key cadres in 200 out of the total of 285 communes were fired or replaced, top officials of the province were moved to other locations, and a number of peasants were sent to prison for their violent attacks on the authorities. Dong Phong did not remain outside this agitation. In 1998, although there was no violent conflict, most of the commune's cadres were also removed for their evident breaches of the laws and of "revolutionary morality". In general, as one electricity worker told me, Thai Binh people know how to deal with the authorities – they do not fear conflicts with those in power.

In Dong Phong, people's critical judgements towards the local state are revealed in various different forms. One of my first interviewees, the chief commune electrician, surprised me with his unusual degree of estrangement from the authorities. He came to the commune's office building almost immediately after being called for a meeting with me, "a researcher from Hanoi", but told me afterwards that he would never come here for a chat, a cup of tea or anything like that with commune's officials. "I avoid contact with them", he said. As someone who is in charge of both electricity and clean water in the commune, his relationship with the cadres seems to be much colder than it might be. He never talked any more about his estrangement from them, but his self-distancing from the authorities remained the same throughout my stay in the commune.

Several days later, the second commune electrician told me about his anger towards the commune's leadership. He and his wife used to be very active in communal work, but in doing so they felt they were being disrespected, mistreated and even abused. Because of this, he said they would never work with the commune's authorities again. And in the summer of the following year, in a conversation with him, the last member of the local electrician's team strongly criticized the inappropriate financial management of the local New Countryside programme. After quarrelling with some of the officials, he said he would no longer make any contribution to the programme through the commune's

[18] Note that this approach was still being referred to recently in discussing Tien Lang, Dong Tam and other recent conflicts between the local and provincial authorities and the people. Commentators question why the authorities did not learn from the good example of events at Thai Binh, why they chose violence and destroyed the relationship with people by suppressing them. Tuong Vu (2016) calls this inconsistency in authorities' dealing with the people a "flexible opportunistic manner".

authorities. Their different stories showed me personal reasons for disliking those in authority, but above all, they had in common a distrust of the local state.

I heard similar stories of distrust from other villagers, mostly stemming from the alleged corruption of local officials. They believed that the authorities had not only misappropriated financial contributions made by local people, but had also benefited from state subsidies for the commune, including those for the infrastructure within the New Countryside programme and for electricity. In the villagers' eyes, electricity is one of the areas where the local state embezzles from the central state's investment in the countryside, as well as from the people. Although most of the villagers I talked to knew that electricity infrastructure and management had been handed over from the commune to "the Electric Power" (*Điện lực*) several years ago, they continued to associate their monthly electricity bills with the local state. Some believed they have to pay more than their consumption due to the authorities' embezzlement. Others believed that the central state must have given their commune favorable treatment in terms of electricity, but that the local authorities have skimmed all this off. Negative affects emerged whenever villagers talked about the alleged embezzlements of the local authorities, but at the level of affects too it seems they cannot, or need not, give expression to every point in their statements. Villagers generally do not provide concrete evidence for their convictions.

In contrast to their distrust toward the local authorities, their faith in the central state (*trung ương*) remains strong in my interlocutors in Dong Phong commune. Many believe the central state has given local people many more subsidies than they actually received. They place their hope for justice on individual top leaders of the party-state and the government. Some link the effect of anticorruption campaigns that these leaders represent at the central level to quantifiable changes at the local level. For example, Party General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, in his determination to purify the system, helped reduce 50 to 60 per cent of the corruption committed by their local authorities. Nguyen Xuan Phuc's coming to the post of Prime Minister reduced half of the "lining fee" (*phí lót tay*), which borrowers need to pay the local (state) bank clerks to renew a bank loan, from about 3 per cent of the loan to just over 1 per cent. According to the villagers, it was only when these leaders came to power that "the situation became more or less stable, or it would have been extremely bad otherwise" (*mới ổn ổn được vậy chứ không thì chết*).

As residents of a revolutionary, "Uncle Ho-visited" commune, Dong Phong villagers have both direct and mediated encounters with the central state. In about fifteen years from 2000 to 2015, the commune received two State Presidents and one Vice Chairperson of the National Assembly. These official visits are considered to honor the commune, reaffirming and assuring them about the ties they have had with the central state since the historic visit of President Ho in 1962. In summer 2019, when

I was in the commune, the Vietnamese national television broadcast a prime-time report that depicted the commune as a successful example of adopting Uncle Ho's will to improve people's lives. After the Party Secretary claimed on air that "Dong Phong is proud of making miraculous changes", the villagers joined in to express their satisfaction. One elderly woman said of her children in what was a wealthy family: "It is real happiness to have this condition of living. It is the people's power and the party's leadership that makes it this good." And one allegedly successful farmer said, while working on his clam pond: "Compared to the time we started this aquaculture in 2001, life is now many times different. There are many cars. There are many nice houses."

Watching the television news programme, villagers laughed because in their view, the authorities, like these villagers, were at best half-lying – the old lady got a child earning a lot of money from elsewhere from some business no villager knew what, and the "successful" farmer was known to suffer serious losses in his crops in recent years. The report became a topic of satire until some days later in the village, although it was apparently an example of public participation in the make-believe political effort. Notably, such contacts with central agencies allowed local people to think that the central state had been caring about their commune's growth while still knowing that the local authorities and people were jointly "painting up" the scene (*"cứ vẽ ra vậy"*), as one villager commented.

The complicated relationship between the people, the local state and the central state has been discussed in both Vietnam and China, whose two political systems have a lot in common. In this thesis, this has also been demonstrated in part through the rural electrification process described in Chapter Two. In the first years of rural electrification, local administrations found themselves on the side of the people in order to coordinate universal household access to the grid with minimum involvement by the central government. David Koh (2001) also finds the local administration in Vietnam being used as an "important ally" of the people whenever the latter find themselves negotiating around state policies they do not want. On the other hand, Kerkvliet (2003) notes the central state's response to the people when the widespread anger of Vietnamese peasants about local corruption led to social unrest. The central state then took the side of the people in punishing the local officials and putting the local state in order. In such somewhat contradictory processes, the local administration is "caught between top and bottom" (Pham 2004), making itself the target of manipulation and attack by both people and central state. Similarly, in China Steinmüller (2010, 546) observes that people's views of the state's different levels differ according to their place in the governmental hierarchy, with the worst accusations being made against those officials who are in the closest everyday contact with ordinary people. He also observes people's perception of the multi-level government as "a funnel with several sieves" (ibid.), which leaves nothing for the farmers at the bottom. This perception is shared by many villagers I talked to in Dong Phong commune.

Given this complicated relationship between people, local state and central state, the discourse of solidarity that Dong Phong commune's authorities promote through their excessive care for the commune's spiritual life, both private and public, is a strategy of survival. This discourse helps maintain a peaceful atmosphere in the villages, preventing villagers from denouncing the local state in a public space because they will have to get over many obstacles before embarking on such an act. First, they will have to think about the care that commune cadres have delivered to their families in their rituals over the years. These can include presents and visits given at the Lunar New Year festival if their families have revolutionary supporters, war invalids, or a funeral to which they have paid tribute. Second, they have to think about the personal relationships they may have with important individuals in the authorities, such as kin ties, the conviviality with good neighbors who have been "together when the fire dims out and the lamp extinguishes", or fellowship with them as good villagers who attended all family events. Third, they have to consider the fact that, by denouncing corruption, they will break the image of solidarity of a revolutionary commune, an image they have built together with the commune's officials and fellow villagers through numerous public events, which they have also internalized and taken pride in. A commune that Uncle Ho visited will now be *"mang tiếng"* (disreputable), just like communes lacking similar prestige. It is then very likely that those involved will also advise the angry villagers not to break the peaceful surface reality of their communal life. All such considerations of interwoven public-private relationships create a soft but sturdy net that restricts local people from expressing their disgust. So far Dong Phong villagers have chosen not to publicly challenge the authority of the local state. What some do as a result of their distrust is to alienate themselves from the political arena, either physically, such as not visiting the commune's office building, or symbolically, such as joining in the public work. Meanwhile, the majority still participate in the socio-political events that the commune's authorities are devoted to organizing.

In some neighboring communes in the same district, peasants continued to organize themselves to bring their complaints about the corruption of the local authorities to Hanoi, in the belief that the central government will respond to their call. They did not choose to call on the involvement of the district and provincial authorities, mainly because they did not trust officials at these levels any more than their commune's cadres. In one case I heard about in 2019, the district chairman had to travel to Hanoi to meet the complaining peasants and to persuade them, after a lot of promises, to bring their case back to the home district. Dong Phong villagers talked to one another about those events and watched their neighbors' actions as a pointer to their own situations. The faith of local people in the central state, as well as their distrust towards the local and even provincial authorities, might be deeply rooted in experiences of how the 1997 uprising was settled.

Conclusion

This chapter has depicted the electrified political space of the newly established commune of Dong Phong and the local process of affective state-making. With the "mini movement" of LED welcome arches, the electric infrastructure has launched an aesthetic politics that inspires local villagers of the urbanity and modernity of their living environment. Electricity has also played a powerful part in the local state's work of building the commune. Lighting and sound, substantially intensified by electric power, as described above, are one of the performances that captivate people's attention and render them open to affects. The commune's authorities in Dong Phong have effectively mobilized people's participation in the most important public rituals and, by so doing, "engineered" people's affects toward the state in the making. Meanwhile, local people readily contribute to this make-believe process by taking various parts in public events and by inviting the authorities to their private celebrations. As a consequence, affects that emerge on numerous occasions accumulate into make-believe common qualities such as solidarity and pride in a revolutionary tradition, which are made and remade throughout the year.

Through the state's representation at private rituals and the mobilization of the people in social events, the local state has not only created a make-believe space for the state–people relationship: it also maintains it as an agreeable environment, despite dissent and anger. On the one hand, it is easy to observe the emotions and attitudes that several Dong Phong people have toward the local authorities whenever questions concerning the latter's socio-economic management are raised. Some do not conceal their negative emotions and actions, including their estrangement, indignation and even hatred of what they perceive to be a poorly performing and corrupt administration. Their affects have been captured at an overt level as emotions. On the other hand, it is also easy to recognize the appreciation of the state's representation at numerous public and private ceremonies in the commune. The care that the local authorities pay to the spiritual aspects of life has acted as compensation for its lack of accountability for the local economy.

In casual conversations, Dong Phong villagers still sometimes mentioned the uprising of 1997 and its consequences for local politics. They did not forget this event and the implications it had for similar situations. They also watched out for political moves in other communes of Hoang Hai district. Nor did the leaders of the Dong Phong authorities forget the event which was the springboard of their careers. Many of them, including the current Chairman and the current Party Secretary, emerged in 1998 as a new generation of state officials to replace those who had been ousted. They well understood the importance of maintaining power through the non-confrontational resolution of dissent, through, for example, a solidarity discourse and a surplus of ritual care. In this context of what is a "strong society"

that is not necessarily opposed to a “weak state”, to borrow the words of Migdal (1988), the strategy of affective engineering that the Dong Phong local state adopted might have been for them an approach of wisdom.

Figure 3. State officers (left) and villagers (right) at the anniversary of Uncle Ho's death, August 2018

Figure 4. Celebrating Longevity on the anniversary of Uncle Ho's visit, March 2019

Figure 5. LED welcome arches on the commune's alleyways

Chapter Four:

The Power and the Meter: Socio-Electric Relationships in a Rural Community

It was a summer afternoon in 2019. The living room of Mr. Hong, the chief local electrician in Dong Phong, was crowded with fellow villagers. They had come to pay their monthly electricity bills, as well as the bills for running water that Mr. Hong's private business provided them with. Mr. Hong was sitting at a desk right next to his front door with a stack of bills in front of him. One by one, he welcomed the payers from Duc Cuong hamlet, one of the three hamlets of Dong Phong commune that he directly took charge of, and retrieved their bill from the stack. Before coming here, electricity users had been informed of the amount they would have to pay for electricity via EVN's phone or chat messages, but they had not known how much to pay for water. Mr. Hong would write the cost of water usage right on the electricity bills printed by Hoang Hai Electric Power, the district branch of EVN, and give them to payers as a receipt for their payment of both utilities.

Next in line was Mrs. Lan, an elderly woman with a stern face. "Now, how much is it for both?", she asked Mr. Hong. "911 thousand [*dong*]," Mr. Hong replied. Still puzzled, Mrs. Lan insisted, "911 thousand? How much is the electricity?" "872 thousand," said the electrician, looking at the bill. "872 thousand?," Mrs. Lan said in disbelief. "I don't make this number up, sister, I also don't use your electricity. I only read the number on your meter and count the money," Mr. Hong replied. "But what happened to those meters?" Mrs. Lan insisted; "The water meter runs even when we don't use water!" "Then there must be a leak in your system", Mr. Hong said. "In this case, the bill will be even bigger next month!" "No, that meter is defective. It runs even when we don't use it!"

The conversation went on without a concession on either side, until Mrs. Lan seemed to become tired of arguing and eventually had no other option but to pay. As the total amount combines the electricity and water bills, it was not shown clearly in the end which utility she was more concerned about.

In the same room, Mr. Ly, a commune electrician team-member in charge of Chi Cuong hamlet, was also sitting with some villagers, his stack of bills in front of him. He was having a similar conversation. At a woman's question-cum-complaint, "How come is my bill this month so big? I am puzzled. We didn't use anything much!", Mr. Ly tried to test the possibilities of over-consumption.

Mr. Ly: The fridge! The power for your fridge must have cost a hundred thousand [Vietnam *dong*].

Villager: [yes, the fridge].

- Then when you go home you turn on the light, then sometimes you turn on the water heater.
- [No, I am not mad enough to turn on the water heater in this weather!]
- Maybe after coming back from the pond, it's a bit cold and you turn it on.
- [No, I told you we stayed at the pond, we didn't use electricity at home].

Mr. Ly stopped trying any further, and the conversation died down. Mr. Ly turned to another villager who was waiting and started the same procedure of collecting payments. After sitting for about ten more minutes, the first villager finally pulled out her wallet to pay and left. In a brief interval when his wife helped collect the money, Mr. Hong went to the coffee table where I was perched on an edge having a cup of tea. At my general comment, "This seems quite complicated, right?", he exclaimed in agreement: "Oh dear, come here and you will know for sure! These are only normal conversations. There is this kind of talk when we punch each other's faces. That is also … normal!" His last word triggered laughter among the villagers sitting round the table.

Leading the team of local electricians contracted by the electric power company, Mr. Hong has a lot of experience dealing with complaints and conflicts, especially during the bill-collecting sessions, which last three days a month. Most of the times the complaints are not evidence-based and thus cannot bring about any changes to the bills, not even with a punch, Mr. Hong mentioned. No matter how hard they argued, these villagers would still have to pay the bills in full. Despite their limited effects, however, complaints and conflicts are pervasive in the encounters between electricians and villagers that I observed, highlighting a subtle form of "everyday resistance" (Scott 1985) and the power relations that exist around infrastructure in the commune.

The previous chapter has highlighted the affective and symbolic contribution of electric lights and sounds to the political spaces at the communal level. In this chapter, I delve further into the electrical life of Dong Phong villagers, behind the welcoming LED gates and beyond the celebrations, to explore the way their lives come into touch with electric *power*. Here the term *power* is employed both in the sense of a source of energy and in the "Foucauldian" sense of uneven fields of relations among actors. I examine the acting out of power in the relations among electricity users, communal electricians and the electricity company – the power that swirls in and around the local electricity grid, and especially around the meter, an important grid component. From there, I hope to cast light on the mechanism and the informal processes that allow the electricity administration to penetrate rural communities, as well as on the ways in which the electricity infrastructure helps create subjects and subjection, but also resistance and conflict.

Power and resistance, mistrust and distrust

I started to sense power relations in Dong Phong's infrastructural landscape through the conflicts that were palpable in interactions between electricity consumers and communal electricians and, less directly, with the electricity company. Complaints and implicit suspicion, such as those described in the opening passage, first drew my attention to a troubled relationship between villagers and the electricity authorities. This field experience testifies to the approach to power relations that Michel Foucault (1982) suggests in his essay "The Subject and Power":

> It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used (780).

Foucault suggests using resistance as a catalyst to bring power relations to light, as well as to investigate power relations because it is more "empirical, more directly related to our present situation" than analyzing the internal rationality of power itself (ibid.). While he does not discuss resistance much in detail, we can grasp a sense of what he is saying by relying on the different terms he uses alternatively throughout the essay that refer to resistance in a power relation, such as "confrontation", "opposition", "insubordination", "antagonistic reaction" and "struggle" between "adversaries". On the other hand, we can fortunately resort to James Scott's conceptualization of "everyday forms of peasant resistance" (Scott 1985) to understand the constant conflicts observed in the encounters between electricity users and the authorities. Contextualized precisely in Southeast Asia, including rural Vietnam, this concept of everyday resistance illuminates the situation in Dong Phong commune, revealing a subtle form of resistance to the power relations that are created within the state's electricity apparatus.

It is important to differentiate resistance to the mechanism of electricity management and resistance to electric power itself. Vietnamese peasants are not against electrification. On the contrary, they fully subscribe to the necessity of electric power, which lights up their evenings, makes them "smarter" (see Chapter Two) and runs their household appliances, to the extent that their lives have become unimaginable without it: "we can't live without electricity" ("*không có điện thì chết*") is how they express its indispensability. What they are against, albeit in a subtle form of resistance, is the power of the mechanism that makes them pay for electricity every month. No matter how hard they try to

limit their consumption, the bills always seem to be unreasonably high,[19] causing them constant suspicion over how the amounts are arrived at. From there follows everyday resistance to the mechanism that imposes payment for the commodity that paradoxically they cannot imagine living without.

The subtle form of everyday resistance, as exercised in Dong Phong, can be examined in the context of scholarly discussions of "mistrust" (the "missing of trust") as an attitude and "distrust" as a behavior (Mühlfried 2018), both of which prevail in Vietnamese agrarian society. According to MacLean (2013), mistrust is a widespread phenomenon in the Vietnamese countryside, where the false information provided by local cadres "resists interpretation" (8) and requires a specific government of mistrust. This government, however, increases the illegibility of rural Vietnam instead of making it more legible, thus reinforcing the existing mistrust that has been present since at least the 1950s, the time MacLean sets as the start of his study. On one hand, social interactions around infrastructure in Dong Phong represent a similar case of mistrust and distrust. The villagers' pertinent suspicions of the way electricity and water are managed could be seen as showing this attitude of mistrust. Acts of resistance are arguably "distrusting" behavior that stem from a mistrustful attitude towards meters and the way electricians deal with them.

On the other hand, the acts of resistance in Dong Phong go beyond the realm of trust, mistrust or distrust. The kinds of complaints, suspicions and at times verbal conflicts that occur constantly in encounters between villagers and the authorized electricians not only show the non-hierarchical "missing of trust", but exemplify the confrontation with and the struggle against a hierarchy of power. Even in their latent and subtle form of mild complaints or implied questions, they signify resistance to the management mechanism imposed by the electricity authority and to the immediate agents of the power that is created by this mechanism, namely the local electricians. These complaints and questions are acts against the exercise of power in the rural electrical landscape.

Furthermore, while this chapter focuses on the covert forms of resistance observed in Dong Phong commune, it should not exclude the wider view of resistance to electricity apparatuses in other communities in the same district, which occur in different forms and at various degrees. More overt acts of resistance include the disrespect, or defiance, that is demonstrated toward communal electricians ("*láo*", meaning "insolence", as an electrician told me), cases of the theft of electricity, and instances of physical and verbal attacks on electricity workers (see Chapter Five and Chapter Six).

[19] Despite the nearly universal access to the grid, the low electricity consumption of rural residents has raised scholarly concerns over energy poverty and inequality in Vietnam. See Son and Yoon (2020), Feeny, Trinh and Zhu (2021) and Nguyen, et al. (2022).

Within the purview of the concept of "everyday resistance", these covert and overt acts show a "basic continuity" of peasant resistance to all kinds of states (Scott 1985, 302). Within this conceptual framework, resisting electricity users could even be seen as enacting a "class struggle" between themselves as members of a subordinate class and communal electricians or electricity workers as representatives of a superordinate class (Scott 1985, 290). This struggle can "bring to light power relations", in Foucault's words, and constitute a form of "everyday politics" (Kerkvliet 2005) that potentially leads to fundamental reforms, as Kerkvliet's study also shows. In this chapter, we start from Dong Phong commune by describing one of the most subtle and latent forms of resistance to the management of electricity in rural Vietnam.[20]

Local electricity administration and communal electricians

The later phase of rural electrification in the 1990s and 2000s, as described in Chapter Two, involved centralization conducted by the state monopoly Electricity Vietnam (EVN). This process took place gradually, first in the form of extending the grid to communes' centers while the management of the grid was still in the hand of the commune authorities, then by taking over the whole communal grid and upgrading the infrastructure to supply rural residents with more stable electric power. It is worth noting that EVN was not willing to take on these tasks at the beginning (see Chapter Two): building and running a costly system to supply customers who consume little and have little with which to pay is a thorny issue for any utility. Only under the increasing pressure from state institutions, the increased availability of foreign aid and the political opportunities of its leaders did EVN take on the responsibility. But on top of the capital borrowed from international financial institutions to upgrade the grid and secure the supply, EVN had to find a business model, a mode of operation, that worked for the rural market. This mode of operation also had to work to secure the Group's revenue and maintain the good remuneration that EVN's staff is entitled to.

In the Foucauldian theoretical framework of the state and politics, this mechanism that EVN adopted would not simply be one for infrastructure and business management. Behind its technocratic surface is a "mechanism of power", a mechanism for "the government of men by other men", a way in which "the conduct of individuals or groups might be directed" (Foucault 1982, 790). As soon as rural citizens become the users of grid electricity, their conduct around this form of power must be defined by this

[20] According to Caouette and Turner (2009), Scott and his "collaborator" Kerkvliet represent the school of thought that "emphasizes the role of hegemony, domination and the moral economy that often leads to more covert forms of daily resistance" (25).

mechanism, by rules and regulations, by communications with the company and its staff, by the apparatus and by the technological means that are needed to regulate their use of electricity. They are made "subjects" in "two meanings of the word" (ibid., 781). First, their identity is defined as electricity users and customers who have a contractual relationship with the power company. Second, in this identity, they are subject to the power company, as well as to the state that it represents by the "control and dependence" (ibid.) that comes with the electricity management system. EVN's work to govern the grid and its customers is indeed designed to create this mechanism of subjection, making the customers-cum-subjects act within a "possible field of action" (ibid., 790) that it provides. Resistance to this mechanism and struggles between "adversaries", EVN and its customers in this possible field of action are an essential part of the power relation between them, but this does not necessarily lead to the dissolution of this power structure. EVN is after all not the "big boss", it only creates the mechanisms whereby to execute the energy policies formulated by the upper echelons, that is, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Prime Minister and ultimately the Politburo.

To date, Vietnam's electricity apparatus has been organized largely on a territorial basis. EVN centrally governs five regional distribution corporations, namely Northern, Central, Southern, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The Northern, Central and Southern Power Corporations manage 61 provincial power companies (apart from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which have their own corporations). These provincial companies administer district branches, which cover 100 per cent of the districts nationwide. Although district branches are not categorized as "companies" but only as "branches" of the provincial companies, EVN does not call them "*chi nhánh*". Instead, they are all called "Điện lực" (Electric Power), suffixed with the district name, such as Điện lực Hoàng Hải – Hoang Hai (district) Electric Power, or Điện lực Thái Thụy – Thai Thuy (district) Electric Power.[21] This way of naming district branches implies a higher authority than that of a normal company branch. Indeed, they are organized in a similar way to a company, with a board of directors, several departments and dozens to hundreds of staff members. Covering 100 per cent of the nation's district, these "Điện lực" constitute the lowest organizational level of EVN, and their staff are considered to belong to the grassroots levels of EVN staff.

A district "Điện lực" as such would send out its staff, almost every day, to various communes in the district to look after the grid. The scale of care given by EVN staff ranges from the medium-voltage grid of 10 kilovolts and 22 kilovolts down to the low-voltage grid of 220 volts to the electricity meters of households (but not from the meters to or inside houses). These staff members would then go back

[21] In a somewhat different way of naming, local residents can use the word "Điện lực" to refer specifically to the district authority of electricity management, or generally to the national electricity monopoly as a whole.

to the branch office and leave their office at the end of the day. They may have to go out to work on night shifts if there are problems on the grid, but no EVN worker is based in the communes. When taking over the grid from communal authorities and extending it to nearly all communes in the country, EVN does not sharply increase the size of its apparatus to meet the enormous task of managing the whole territory. It delimits its formal apparatus at the district level.

Instead of allocating staff members to be based in the communes, EVN contracts two or three local people in each commune who have had some technical training to form communal management teams (*đội quản lý điện xã*). Many of these local electricians had already been involved in the commune's electricity management before the commune authorities handed over the communes' grid to EVN. In Dong Phong, Mr. Khang (Chapter Two) once worked as one of them with his qualification from the army. Then Mr. Hong, who belonged to the next generation of communal electricians, attended an "electricity management" training course in 1993 after participating in the construction of the communal grid in 1991 and 1992. He was contracted by EVN in 1996 and became a team leader. With local electricians as an extra labor force, the management of the commune's electricity is then divided into two areas and assigned differently: technical care of the grid from the meters upward (not including in-house systems) is the duty of EVN's district staff, while the financial tasks of reading the meters and collecting the payments are delegated to contracted local electricians.

In Dong Phong, as well as in all communes in Hoang Hai district, electricians would go around and read electricity meters, which are placed on the electricity poles outside their houses, on the twenty-third of the month. They send the data to the district branch via an internal system on electronic tablets provided by EVN. Some days later, they go to the branch office to get the bills that have been printed out for all the customers in their commune, and start collecting bill payments on the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth of the month. However, Dong Phong electricians would wait until the twenty-ninth for the last villagers to pay. In the afternoon of the twenty-ninth, they deposit the money collected in a bank account under the name of Hoang Hai Power branch.[22] Their monthly work is complete at this moment. From the business point of view, this procedure of reporting consumption and collecting the due payments for the company is vital for EVN's supply and management of rural electricity.

Furthermore, communal electricians are involved in bridging the gap between the local grid and district power branches beyond the contracted responsibilities. They are the "left hand" of the district electricity workers, as one of the Hoang Hai Power workers described them. The better the

[22] This bank account is nevertheless owned by the Thai Binh provincial power company, one of the few facts showing that a district *Điện lực* is less autonomous than a company.

relationship an electricity worker creates with commune electricians, the more help he gets from them. When electricity suddenly goes off, he can ask the commune electricians to have a first check before he comes, so he can prepare better for it to be fixed. He can then have the electricians there to support him when he does his job at the site. He can even ask an electrician to fix the problem himself when it is only a minor one, thus saving the time and effort of going all the way to the commune. However, what he can ask varies each time, depending on his interpersonal skills and the commune electricians' goodwill, because it always goes beyond the contractual agreements. When the relationship is not good, the district worker cannot expect much. Some commune electricians simply refuse to have good relationships with district electricity workers, while others maintain a very limited range of communication simply to avoid being asked to do extra work. And thus, they are regarded as a hand that helps when needed, but a *left* hand, because one cannot rely on it totally.

Being a communal electrician: the formal duties

Communal electricians like Mr. Hong, Mr. Toan and Mr. Ly in Dong Phong are hired by the EVN at a relatively low cost. They are paid 2,700 *dong* (about 12 US cents) to read each meter and collect the payment for it each month. As a small commune, Dong Phong has about 1,200 meters in total. In effect, each electrician is paid roughly a million *dong* (less than 50 US dollars) each month for this job. Electricians in a bigger commune can get about 70 US dollars per month due to the higher number of meters they serve, but not much more because one person cannot read too many meters in the same day or collect too many bills on some days, as required by the regulation. At other times, when there are big jobs to do at the communes, these communal electricians are expected to participate at a daily wage of 125,000 *dong* (6 US dollars), roughly equivalent to the minimum wage applied in this region. Apart from these one-off payments, EVN does not provide any social insurance or remuneration. None of the electricians I talked to, regardless of which communes they lived in, were remotely satisfied with the payment. Most of them do other jobs, big or small, apart from working for EVN as communal electricians.

One reason for their dissatisfaction lies in the fact that the duties come with hard conditions and even punitive measures. Their task is to read the meters correctly – if not, they are charged 10,000 *dong* (about 50 US cents) for a bill that must be corrected. This happens if the householder files a complaint to the district branch and a wrong reading is discovered. The ratio of successfully collected bills must also be high: it is expected to be 95 to 100 per cent every month, meaning 95 or 100 per cent of households in the village must pay their bills in full within two or three days. Quite a few Dong Phong

villagers are unable to do so, depending on their economic situations.[23] Then, how can almost 100 per cent of bills be settled every month, given EVN's lack of direct touch with consumers in the communes? In several countries with similar rural financial conditions and a similar organizational structure of electricity utilities being managed under neoliberal reforms, pre-paid meters have long been in use to reduce unpayable debts, despite the concern that this sort of meter compromises users' dignity (see Destrée 2021). In contrast, Vietnamese electricity has never attached prepaid meters to its electricity grid. All meters in use so far are postpaid (more on the use of prepaid and postpaid meters will follow in this chapter). The answer could rest importantly on the functioning of these local electrician teams.

In Dong Phong commune, Mr. Hong, chief of the communal electricity management team, offers his living room (with another small amount of EVN's payment) three days a month to the villagers to come and pay their electricity bills. Here, every month, many villagers would raise the same kind of questions and make the same kinds of complaints about the sums they have to pay. For them, the communicative style of local electricians makes all the difference. With Mr. Ly, who tried to test the possibilities of over-consumption described in the opening passage of this chapter, their conversation would end without a real answer to their question, but the villagers would feel a bit relieved after venting their concerns. With Mr. Dong, however, it could go in the other direction, because he has less patience to explain or console, especially when he is in a bad mood. Some of the conversations with him went this way:

Male villager: How come my bill is so big this month?

Mr. Hong: Yes, huge, three million seven hundred thousand.[24]

- It can't be!
- Why not? You have a *standing* air conditioner[25] [his emphasis].
- I agree that it increases the bill, but here the amount has doubled, that's way too much.
- It will rise even higher! Use as much as you want and then cry about it!

Comments like these either silence the villager or make him or her even angrier and escalate the dispute. The "punching" kind of conversation is, as Mr. Hong said, not an option he can exclude after

[23] Some may have used a lot of electricity to raise a pond of shrimps, for instance, but not be able to sell them at the time the bill falls due.

[24] Equivalent to 170 US dollars, an amount that matches to the monthly wage of a seasonal worker.

[25] Standing air conditioners, or "*điều hòa đứng*", are usually of higher capacity than wall-mounted air conditioners, or "*điều hòa treo tường"*.

all. Such cases are rare, however, as everyone in the village knows Mr. Hong is “bone-headed” and that it is better not to try and fight him. He is also known to give a typical reply that strictly refers to the meter. To questions on the amount of consumption registered, he would claim that the number is what the meter says, so, if the villager wants to complain, he or she should go “ask the meter”. To forestall questions of mistrust, he simply declares in conversations: “That’s a precise reading!”

The chief communal electrician in Dong Phong is a powerful character who can settle most of the debts as well as the complaints merely by his dominating style of communication. Every month people come to his home and pay the bills as quickly as possible, rather than waiting to be called. If complaints must be made, expect dissatisfying replies, and mind your wording if you do not want a quarrel where most of the time you cannot win (how can you win if the answer lies with an electricity meter that you do not know how it works?). Complaints are still made, of course, because people cannot accept having to pay so much money without saying anything. Their complaints are well positioned on the boundary between compliance and resistance, “where compliance ends and resistance begins” (Scott 1985, 289). They come to pay, showing conformity with the rules defined by the system they are subject to, but not without a “speech act” complaining about the “unreasonable” sum of money and thus questioning the operation of the system. This speech act, as Scott puts it, is in itself a form of resistance, where “the act and the intention are fused into one whole” (290). It is an act intended to mitigate the material loss from the use of electricity, although most of the time it fails to achieve this intended result. Therefore, every time I sat in Mr Hong’s home, I would hear his booming voice drowning out the usually softer utterances of complaining customers. At other times, I would hear him making phone calls to urge people to come and pay the exact amounts that he informs them of, even though they usually know of it beforehand via a phone or chat message from the electric power company. Most people hurry to his house after being called.

But Mr. Hong is also a very amusing man in his own way. His capacity to call things by their names without fear, as a result of his dominating style of communication, frees people from formalities and amuses them with a sense of the “truth”. Somehow, people are satisfied to hear from someone else the blunt truths about local life, many of which they dare not utter. Furthermore, he has a quick mind that can twist anything being said into something funny. His house is therefore also filled with laughter every day of the bill collection. Even those who come to complain also have to laugh with his way of mocking others. He even has the support of his wife, Mrs. Mua, a strong woman with a voice nearly as loud as her husband’s. She is frank and sharp-tongued. Together they create an entertaining atmosphere on bill collection days, where, if you do not have a problem with the bill payment, you can enjoy the companionship of fellow villagers and collect hundreds of anecdotes from in and around the commune. The stories come from those who stay after paying the bills, but also from those who

sit for long pondering how they have come to use that much electricity before eventually drawing out their wallets. The authoritative but amusing way this electrician and his wife communicate with villagers keeps the latter in a loop of moderately controlled customers-cum-villagers, who come every month to pay their dues to the utility.

Despite the pressures and entertainment on bill-payment days, there are still a number of electricity users who do not come even after receiving a phone call from the electricians. Some of them really cannot pay anything on that date, while others do not have enough to pay the whole amount. Some are even absent from the village for personal reasons. In theory, the bills of these households will go back to the district branch office. Then the householders will have to go to Hoang Hai township to pay directly at the district power branch by the very end of the month. If their bills are still not paid, these households will be cut off from the grid within some first days of the new month, for only one month of non-payment.[26] The number of such households is not small – by the end of the twenty-ninth every month, there were still at least some dozens unsettled bills on Mr. Hong's desk. Why are so few people, indeed virtually no one I knew in the village, being disconnected every month?

Being a communal electrician: the informal service

When we became closer, Mrs. Mua told me their half-secret, the one thing that all villagers and district electricity workers know but EVN would not acknowledge. That is, the electricians would lend these electricity users the amounts of money they needed to pay their bills. They would pay EVN on behalf of the users, to make the ratio of successfully collected bills reach at least 95 per cent, or 100 per cent as EVN requires. By so doing, no one has to go to the district to pay the bill at the very end of the month, no one is cut off from the electricity grid, the district electricity staff do not have to disconnect and reconnect the wire, and the electricians fulfill their tasks apparently to perfection. After fulfilling their obligations to the electricity sector at the end of the month, they will wait for their fellow villagers to pay the money back. Under the surface of the rate of 95 to 100 percent of bills successfully collected, debts to EVN are converted into debts between private persons in the village. The indebtedness due to electricity consumption, a rampant problem in many electricity markets in the Global South, is thus confined here to the commune's social relationships, a matter of no concern to the utility company.

[26] As soon as they pay, the district electricity employees will come to reconnect their home, for a fee of eighty-two thousand Vietnam *dong* or about four US dollars in the 2018–2019 period.

"We are all alike; sometimes we are short of money just like them", Mrs. Mua told me when I asked why they lent needy villagers the money to pay their bills, without any interest. The sense of being fellow villagers serves as one reason, or at least as a part of what they want to believe are reasons, for providing this kind of loan. Another reason is certainly the necessity to fulfill their obligations to EVN and probably includes contributing to the intra-village relationships they need to maintain the business. It turned out that my host lady had also joined this group of indebted electricity users once or twice, when her daughters had not earned enough to pay the bill. However, she always returned the money to Mr. Hong immediately in the following month, "unlike several others", she said. In 2018 and 2019 during my fieldwork, her family was among the more affluent villagers who spent about four hundred to five hundred thousand Vietnam *dong* (about twenty to twenty-five US dollars) a month on electricity.

When I expressed doubt about the capacity to reclaim all her loans, Mrs. Mua assured me that everyone would pay her back. She is very confident that non-payment "is not the case; they all pay us back – no one fails to do that. We are fellow villagers". Probed what happens if someone does not pay, she said: "We have our means, but no one would do that [not pay]".[27] In Dong Phong, not only Mr. Hong but Mr. Toan, the electrician in charge of Hoang Mon hamlet, also pays bills on behalf of the needy and gets the money back later. Based on an expectation of intra-village conviviality (*"tình làng nghĩa xóm"* in their way of saying), this becomes a common practice without a need to discuss it each time.

As discussed in Chapter 2, EVN only started to access rural communities in the last decade of the twentieth century. Unlike the traditional retailing market of urban areas, villages with low-income customers present themselves as a difficult terrain for a business without a formal apparatus of management at the grassroots level. By outsourcing communal electricians with strict terms and conditions of work, EVN has set up a relatively "stable mechanism" to run its business of selling electricity in the commune and beyond.In doing so they govern the relationship that rural customers have with the company, because "[t]hrough such mechanisms one can direct [...] the conduct of others" (Foucault 1982, 794). In a mixed manner of domination and subjection, this mechanism employs communal electricians as local agents to access and control the local market for electricity. Through the operation of communal electricians, it makes customers subject to the monthly cycle of

[27] Mrs. Mua had a point in her confidence here. Discussing the common (informal) practice of "*vay mượn*" (borrowing money) in Vietnam, Polese (2018) also states that "the borrower has every interest in repaying the loan as quickly as possible" because there are social and moral mechanisms for punishing those who fail to repay (62).

paying the bills, or at least managing the monthly payment to the company in some ways, in due time. It also effectively converts indebtedness from a potential business problem for EVN into private issues within the villages between communal electricians and household customers, thus protecting the company from outstanding debts. Its core actor, the communal electricians, work to stabilize the unstable and unpredictable relations between the state monopoly and its grassroots customers in a way that is convenient for both parties within the commune.

It is remarkable how, by imposing its mechanism of electricity management on the countryside, the formal electricity sector not only regulates the use of electricity and its price but uses informal intra-village relations to secure the payments for it and shifts the risks on to village actors. Although communal electricians have never been asked to act as creditors to electricity users, the mechanism that requires them to collect 95 to 100 per cent of bills every month is at least one reason why they choose to offer credit informally. This exemplifies Ledeneva's (2006, 2018) argument on informal practices in transitional economies, where on the one hand formal rules give the ground to informal practices to emerge while on the other having to rely on informal practices in order to be implemented. The informal practice of electricians offering credit has emerged from the basis of EVN's formal requirement and has become the solution for the formal requirement to be met.

The sense of being fellow villagers is not without its problems in an informal credit relationship when the indebted cannot pay off the loan. Some families I visited in Dong Phong had serious conflicts with the communal electricians when they could not pay back their small outstanding debts on time. With apparent hatred, one woman in late middle age told me about the day Mr. Hong came to cruelly break her wire with force for not paying, effectively disconnecting her household from the grid. She did not even know that Mr. Hong, a "read-the-meter-and-count-the money-guy", as he called himself, was not authorized to touch her wire without her permission. What she opposed was his "cruelty" and disrespect, despite her efforts to explain the family's financial situation. Their power consumption, as I saw myself, is truly modest, with only one light bulb placed in the threshold between the living room and the bedroom to light up both at the same time, and one television set. They use these two electrical appliances alternatively to bring some light to their living space, meaning that when the television is on with its dim light, the light bulb would be off. Poorer households like hers consume very little but seem to be prone to conflicts with the powerful communal electricians as they are less able to pay the debts they owe the electricians personally.

Although no fewer men than women came to pay bills or become indebted for not paying them, my observation was that women more often than men had overt conflicts with the local electricians. While many women in the village are reluctant to cause any friction with the powerful electricians,

many others tend to complain about the amount they have to pay, in most cases without providing any evidence, and some did indeed lead to quarrels. As these complaints and quarrels usually end with victory going to the electrician, they tend to reinforce the widespread stereotype that women act irrationally when confronted with a rational, technical issue like electricity. They also strengthen the power that electricians wield over their fellow villagers, a power they acquire based on technical know-how and their authority as EVN-recruited electricians.

The business and power relations between local electricians and electricity users are indeed intertwined in a network of village relations. Like all villagers, the electricians are embedded in networks of kinship, friendship and neighborhood with those who come to pay the bills. Like everyone else, they take part in village, neighborhood and extended-family events, and organize their own events with the attendance of their fellow villagers, who are also electricity users, their water customers and possibly their money-borrowers. Mr. Toan usually hosts his hamlet's parties in the yard of his house, while Mr. Hong takes charge of the LED welcoming arches for his lane. They come to help and present money gifts at weddings, funerals, death anniversaries, longevity celebrations and all other occasions. Their social status thus also comes from their intra-village networks and their contributions to village life. It is the outcome of a complexity of interactions among the various domains in which they circulate: the technical domain of maintaining the local grid, the business domain of collecting the bills and the social domain of kinship and neighborly relations.

The informal credit that communal electricians provide has a positive effect on turning them into powerful figures within the community. It strengthens an electrician's status in his relations with his fellows, who have had or may have to borrow from him at times, and thus helps make his social relations more robust. In return, his advantage in social relations allows the electrician to reclaim the loans more effectively, reducing the financial risks associated with offering informal credit. The power of the creditor is backed up by the power of the communal electrician, albeit unauthorized, to cut off electricity access to the indebted and reconnect it when the latter behaves properly. Month after month, this informal mechanism operates within the village to maintain the formal cycle of electricity supply and payment, exemplifying the fact that "formal institutions would not work without informal relationships supporting them and making things happen" (Ledeneva 2018, 5). It becomes fair to see that hiring communal electricians and setting up local teams of management at a relatively low cost are among the wisest initiatives EVN could take in providing access to rural people and governing rural electricity.

Being a communal electrician: the returns

Many communal electricians have stayed with the job for decades since EVN started the rural electrification program, and they continue to stay despite the low pay. For readers familiar with transitional economies, it should not come as a surprise that these electricians could earn economic benefits other than the direct payment from EVN – the indirect advantages associated with the position are usually more valuable to them. In Dong Phong, Mr. Hong said he worked as a communal electrician in order to run his water business. Both he and Mr. Toan operate the water-filtration systems that the commune authority leases to them, and they collect the payments for the provision of clean water at the same time as collecting electricity bills. As if the entanglement between electricity and water was to be secured, they write the water cost directly on the printed electricity bill next to the required amount of payment for electricity, and add the two numbers together. Each villager coming to their houses is prepared to pay this sum of money, which includes the costs of both electricity and water. The cost of the water is usually smaller, sometimes considerably smaller than the electricity cost, so villagers tend to accept it as an extra cost, or a surcharge, on their use of electricity. As Mr. Hong explained, only by collecting both at the same time would the villagers pay him for the water he provided (at 5,000 *dong* or about 23 US cents a cubic meter[28]). People are afraid of being disconnected from the electricity grid, so they have to come and pay electricity bills anyway; while paying the electricity bills they have no reason to refuse to pay for the water at the same time. Without electricity as a leverage, it would be difficult for him as a fellow villager, dominating and amusing though he is, to threaten them with disconnecting the water pipe if they do not pay. Unlike electricity, water can be fetched from wells or from the river running through the commune, and it always requires much more work to cut and then reconnect a water tube than an electricity wire. It would then be nearly impossible for Mr. Toan, a much softer character than Mr. Hong, to make water customers abide by their agreement. Electricians in Dong Phong have thus wielded the power of electricity as well as their power of being electricity-bill collectors to run their private business of selling filtered water.

The job with *Điện lực* also benefits communal electricians in other ways. An electrician in a neighboring commune said he enjoyed the social connections and relationships (*quan hệ*) he had from it. The job gives him a social status, making him known to everyone in the commune, whom he meets at least

[28] Dong Phong villagers collectively decided to stay with the local privately run water systems, rather than be connected to the provincial system because that water was "more expensive for the same quality" as a villager told me. For reference, the state-owned Thai Binh Clean Water Company sold water at 7,455 *dong*/m^3 (Thai Binh Clean Water Company 2018), about 40 per cent higher than the local price.

once a month, thus giving him the opportunity to nurture the relationships he needs. An electrician in yet another commune told me that he earns most of his income from repairing electricity connections for villagers. As EVN is not responsible for the part of grid that runs from the electricity meter to the house, householders usually have to hire electricians and pay for their technical know-how. The job with EVN makes communal electricians known, automatically, as those who are qualified to do this work. The practice of communal electricians here is similar to that of Tanzanian "*vishoka*", who are hired informally to install or fix household systems with their understanding of the network, as described by Michael Degani (2017). However, while Vietnamese electricians work under contract to the electricity utility, *vishoka* do not, so in general they avoid being involved in illicit tasks that the *vishoka* frequently are.

This civil service is a good source of income for communal electricians and at the same time benefits the electricity company, as it facilitates the power consumption of end-users, reducing the pressure on the company's customer services. Although the contract with the customers makes it clear that *Điện lực* only takes care of the grid up to the meter and not from the meter to the customer's house, many customers expect the electricity company to be in charge of the whole system, including their household networks, and they complain if the company's employees refuse to repair the wiring within their houses. The taking over of this task by the local electricians is thus a solution that both sides need if the experience of consuming electricity is to run smoothly. Electricians in Dong Phong, like colleagues elsewhere, also do this sort of work whenever they are asked to do so.

Communal electricians shared some of the elements of "people as infrastructure", to cite a notion coined by AbdouMaliq Simone (2004), to the extent that they help facilitate the operation of the physical infrastructure in rural areas, maintaining the physical household grid and collecting the monthly payments, two spheres that EVN leaves to the discretion of village electricians and users. However, they are at most only a part of the existing far-reaching system that EVN has built in the countryside, which is different from the scene of makeshift urban infrastructure in inner Johannesburg, and lacking the collaborative qualities of interactions among actors that Simone describes. Even in the opposite case, their interactions with other actors in the village electricity system are quite often characterized by conflict between them, the exercise of power by the electricians and resistance, as well as submission to power by village users of electricity.

The mechanism that EVN creates, that communal electricians execute and that customers abide by is stable because its executives – the communal electricians – are formally disciplined by the company and receive sufficient informal rewards from the job to commit themselves to it. In return for their low-paid service under strict regulations, communal electricians acquire a powerful position and

associated benefits thanks to two factors. First, the job gives them social status in their community and the authority to supervise the electric lives of local people, formally regarding consumption and payment, and informally regarding all other electricity-related aspects. Second, the power of competence and knowledge that comes from their technical know-how and understanding of the local grid puts them in a privileged position in their relations with their fellow villagers. The power and privileges associated with the job are the reasons why communal electricians actively run the system, making it a stable mechanism at the level of their communes without good direct payment. As for EVN as a powerful institution, merely by associating these electricians with itself it has secured their loyalty without much financial cost. The trimming of operational costs helps EVN run more effectively in financial terms while continuing to supply rural customers with electric power that would hardly be affordable otherwise.

The electricity meter: power or scapegoat?

Faced with villagers' questions and complaints every month, electricians' replies can at best calm the former's annoyance or even suppress it, but never seems to resolve the problems. This is because the real problems are concealed in a "distinct double-layered" strategy of communication stemming from "tacit mistrust" (Mühlfried 2018, 14). Electricity users' questions commonly have double layers: by asking an electrician how the bill could be that big, they do not question their own way of consuming the power but instead implicitly question the credibility of their "adversaries" – indirectly the EVN and more directly the electrician. They are suspicious whether the meter runs correctly (or is made to run too fast), and whether the electrician writes down the correct number showing on the meter. While the etiquette of "*tình làng nghĩa xóm*" or intra-village conviviality does not allow villagers to ask these two questions bluntly, doubt became an "obsession" for quite a few of them. As one villager put it:

> Maybe we really consume a lot, maybe we really do not consume so much, but we still have to pay that amount. We only have this obsession but cannot confirm anything. In my family, we use electricity and water the same way every month, but the two meters fluctuate a lot. This is suspicious.

A rich body of scholarly literature around electricity and water meters has unveiled the devices' functional, material, social and symbolic aspects. STS scholars like Akrich (1992) and von Schnitzler (2008, 2016) view the meter as a tool of techno-politics, whereby political power and structural forces "make" citizens and define their conduct under the material power of technical objects. In Akrich's words, the meter is one of the "social control" instruments that "not only define actors and

relationships between them, but [...] stabilize and channel these" (Akrich 1992, 220). At the same time, the meter is a material site of micro-politics where political projects are mediated, negotiated and contested (von Schnitzler 2016, 11), and where a reciprocal process happens in which "objects are defined by subjects and subjects by objects" (Akrich 1992, 222). In another strand of thought, Coleman (2014) and Destrée (2021) refuse to leave meters solely in the material realm of "things". Inspired by Durkheim's and Agamben's works, they see the meter as a symbolic emblem that can mobilize collectivities and collective activism, and thus aim to reclaim the "poetics" of sociality, freedom and dignity in infrastructure through the meter. Other infrastructural anthropologists such as Winther (2008), Degani (2017) and Shin (2019) describe the meter more broadly as a functional object, a measuring device and thus an object of tampering, bypassing and rescuing. As all these layers of the meaning of electricity and water meters come together in the single site of Dong Phong commune, I am convinced that they do not necessarily exclude one another. The diversity of locations of cases – Ivory Coast (Akrich), South Africa (von Schnitzler), India (Coleman), Ghana (Destrée), Tanzania (Winther and Degani) and Japan (Shin) – may not be the factor that makes the distinction of the meaning of meters in these different contexts so exclusive. Rather, as Brian Larkin (2013) suggests, "infrastructures operate on differing levels simultaneously" and "any particular set of intellectual questions will have to select which of these levels to examine" (330). I am convinced that different accounts of meters largely result from individual authors' categorizations and selections of what they are exploring. In a similar "categorical act" (ibid.), in discussing electricity meters in Dong Phong, I choose to follow the hints of my interlocutors, acknowledging the definition power of the meter on electricity users, the "subjects" that now become "objects", but also the power center and the power relations that control the operation of the technical electricity system, including the meter itself. Puzzled and obsessed by the meter as an incomprehensible technical object, my interlocutors in Dong Phong mostly see humans and socio-political institutions as the determiners of the technical system, rather than submit to the power of things.

Anthropological works on electricity meters place importance on the physical location where the meter is fixed and the mode of payment, either prepaid or postpaid, as that raises "affective surges" to electricity users (term by Mazarella cited in Coleman 2014). Postpaid meters installed in the house, as in Japan before and around the 1950s, raise the problem of intruding into a private space whenever a meter reader, or an inspector when necessary, comes to take readings (Shin 2019). Prepaid meters installed outside the house reveal the financial situations of Ghana's customers and raise a security issue, imaginative though that might be (Destrée 2021). Location and mode of payment seem to raise questions for how the electricity companies respect the dignity of electricity users, with the latter

usually feeling indignant. In comparison, this feeling of indignation does not come to the surface with electricity users in rural Vietnam, as EVN seems to have found a middle solution.

Firstly, all household electricity meters in Vietnam are postpaid, despite the reforms of the monopoly since 2008 (see more details in Chapter 7). These were the kind of reforms that commonly introduce prepaid measuring devices to emerging markets in the Global South so as to maximize the revenue in accordance with neoliberal logics (see von Schnitzler 2008 and Coleman 2014). In Vietnam, the idea of prepaid meters was only introduced to customers some years after the reforms started (Pham Tuyen 2011), but it has never been implemented. Most recently, prepaid meters were referred to as being "in a research process" (EVN 2018). In practice, household customers, be they high or low users in rural or urban areas, have never been made to prepay for their consumption of electricity, nor for their "electric citizenship" (Özden-Schilling 2019, Cross 2019). In principle they can be cut off from the grid after only one month of non-payment, but in rural areas this happens far less frequently than it might thanks to the intra-village practice of borrowing from communal electricians.[29] As long as they are connected, electricity is supplied without interruption regardless of whether one is in credit or debt.

Since consumption is postpaid, the location of the meters is therefore very important for the financial health of the electricity company. It requires that meters are kept intact and can be read correctly, in time, without hindrance. Household electricity meters in Dong Phong, like elsewhere in rural Vietnam, are clustered on electricity poles along the village roads. They are placed a bit higher than the eye level of a normal person to avoid casual scrutiny and intrusion, but low enough for the electricians to look up and read the numbers clearly from a distance of one to two meters. Householders can also observe the running of the meter when they think they need to, but they cannot easily touch it without being seen by their neighbors. It is also convenient for the district power staff to deal with the meter's technical problems without having to intrude into private homes.

It is not that electricity meters have never been placed in the houses of Vietnamese electricity users. This was practiced in cities until the 1980s, when "tinkering consumers or hired electricians could intervene to make the meter stop running or even run backwards, which was very funny", as an urban interlocutor admitted. All urban meters were then moved out of the houses during upgrades to the grid in order to reduce such thefts. Since the rural electricity program started in the 1990s, meters

[29] In urban areas, another support mechanism exists. Without a communal electrician, one could ask a neighbour to help pay a bill which for some reason one cannot pay (being away from home, for instance) and pay it back later. Nowadays many customers allow the electricity company to take the fees directly from their bank accounts, so that they never miss a monthly payment or risk being disconnected.

have always been placed outside rural houses. This "hypervisible and public nature" of the meters, while it is "deeply humiliating" to prepaid electricity users in Ghana (Destrée 2021, 105), seems not to bother the Vietnamese villagers. Since the payment is made after the communal electricians take the readings, household users, if not planning to alter the meters, rarely find themselves interacting with the devices or becoming exposed to their neighbors' surveillance. I have not heard any villagers in Dong Phong or the neighboring communes raise a concern about meters being installed in public places: for them it is a matter of fact, as they have never seen any other option since household meters appeared in their surroundings. Coupled with the postpaid mode of payment, locating the meters here solves the questions of both customers' privacy and their management efficiency that have become crucial in many emerging electricity markets.

However, placing the meters outside the house and relatively high up the poles deprives rural customers of the ability to inspect this technical object more closely or to understand better the way it works, contributing to their sense of a lack of control over the meters. Mr. Quy, one of those who was "obsessed" by the meter, admitted the powerlessness of his position and blamed it on his lack of technical knowledge. "We also come to read the meter, but we cannot know whether it is running slow or fast", he said. "We are only normal laborers, without much knowledge of science and technology. We cannot check that." His inability to comprehend the meter is not his alone, as the electricity meter has been known as a "black box" for household electricity users (Hargreaves 2012). Now that the meter is deliberately kept out of their reach, it is also kept out of their domain of knowledge and understanding. As such, it becomes an object of black-boxing practice (Akrich 1992, Coleman 2014).

Male customers like Mr. Quy do have their suspicions and doubts but seem to restrain themselves from making direct complaints when there is no evidence. They reserve their doubts for conversations, long and short, behind the backs of the local electricians. Mr. Quy, a middle-aged seasonal construction worker, makes elaborative arguments about his doubts about the meter, but only presents them to someone who wants to hear, like a researcher. Some others file complaints to the district power branch, though with little success (more on this below in this chapter and in Chapter 6), while some react with aggression when there is a trigger (to be discussed further in Chapter 5). Whether they are men or women, electricity users do not feel they have understanding of or control over technical devices, and choose to demonstrate that in different ways.

Besides the technical incomprehension, customers' lack of control also stems from the fact that they do not own the meters, which are the companies' assets. They have been "given" the meters free of charge at the beginning of their contract with the electricity company, which usually sounds

advantageous for the electricity users. But in fact, the EVN's provision of meters means that its customers have no right to place their meters where they want and to check their quality. The contract states that customers are "forbidden" (*nghiêm cấm*) either to intervene in the grid from the meters upward (meaning no touching of "your" meter on the pole, which would look as if you wanted to tamper with it in front of your neighbors' eyes), or to move the meters. As many complainers are "puzzled about the meter", as they said, their lack of control over it prevents them from solving their puzzles. If they were the owner, they could have taken the meter to the authorities to check whether or not it runs too fast. Now that they are forbidden even to touch it, they have to accept such a dubious device deciding the levels of their bills. What about asking the electricity company to check the meter, which is a consumer right stated in the contract? One villager replied in his own figurative way by saying: "They [the company] confirm it measures correctly according to the standard. People here compare that with selling a cat that does not catch mice. When anyone in the market asks if my cat catches mice at all, I have to say 'yes' in order to sell the cat, right?" Mr. Du, a truck driver residing in Dong Phong, once requested his meter be checked, as he felt his family were paying excessive bills. The result was certainly as anticipated: the meter was found to be running correctly. He was told that the only possibility that remained was a leakage in his part of the system, anywhere from the meter to the household's electrical appliances. Although this leakage is possible, customers like Mr. Du usually hate to think about it or accept it.

Very few customers know of the regulation that forces EVN to check every meter every three years to ensure its proper performance. When a meter comes to the end of this three-year term, the district branch staff of EVN will replace it with a meter that has been checked a short time before, and take the old one to the provincial Quality-Check Center, which also belongs to EVN. With about eighty-two thousand meters working in Hoang Hai district alone, this district branch set up a whole team of twelve technical workers, called the "routine team" (*đội định kỳ*), just to fulfil this provision with the meters. This check is critical for EVN's interest because meters tend to slow down over time technically speaking, but it also helps assure customers about the meters' reliability. The remaining issue is that some vigilant customers, whether aware of this regulation or not, do not believe in in-house checks of this sort. Mr. Quy rightfully draws attention to a "lack of transparency" here, since there is no "third-party monitoring" of the meters.

The meter is clearly a powerful technical object that defines much of the electrical life in Dong Phong commune and does so technocratically. First it is the unit that registers the work of the communal electricians. It is not the number of households or individual customers, but the number of meters that is the basis for calculating how their work is paid. Secondly, it is the reference on the basis of which customers make monthly payments and the power company tracks its revenue. Third, it

appears to be an autonomous object with its own logic, something no one can intervene in, but nonetheless a "referee" that communal electricians invite to settle disputes with customers. In this respect, the electricity meter is a power that regulates the commune's electrical life.

However, there are reasons for electricity consumers in the village viewing the meter as a scapegoat rather than a "thing" like power. While agreeing to be controlled by the meter, many customers are "puzzled" about the device that the company imposes on them and requests them to follow at the cost of coercion, culminating in the threat to disconnect their household from the grid as soon as they fail to pay for one month of consumption. The villagers wanted to find humans who were responsible for their big bills. "When we ask, they say it's due to the machine. But machines are still controlled by humans. Whether the meter is transparent, that is the question of human control", Mr. Quy said. In his view, humans are accountable for what machines do. This view is dismissed by scholars of "thing power", who claim that the human-thing assemblage has a "distributive agency" and whose aim is not to find some human who is in charge of what "things" do (Bennett 2010). However, villagers like Mr. Quy think that the meter would be transparent if there were a third party to check its quality before the power company installs it. At least, to them, the commune's authorities could have acted for the villagers' benefit by playing this third-party role. Despite the omnipresent mistrust of local cadres (MacLean 2013), villagers paradoxically resort to the local authorities as the only possible referee to balance the interests of the company with those of the electricity users.[30] The electric power company and the local authorities are both seen as the groups of humans who are accountable for the operation of the electricity system in the countryside.

"*Lằng nhằng trong đấy*": "Mixing things up in that muddle"

While a few customers are "obsessed" about the working of the meter, more villagers in Dong Phong are doubtful about the credibility and efficiency of the communal electricians. Without concrete evidence, they tend to suspect that the electricians do wrong things somewhere between the common grid and the household system, right around the meter they are responsible for. Another man in his late middle age shared his opinion about the opaqueness of what electricians did with the meter, which he called a "muddle": "Electricians here rest in this insecure link [between the grid and the household system]. They don't have the power of life and death. They only have the power to mix

[30] This resonates with Tran Thi Thu Trang's observation that local authorities have become "one-stop shops" for all aspects of peasant everyday life due to the decentralization and state-ization of political power in Vietnam (T. T. Tran 2009).

things up in that muddle [*họ chỉ có quyền lằng nhằng trong đấy*]." The "muddle" that electricians create around the meter is something they, as "normal laborers", cannot comprehend. What exactly can electricians do with the meters within their limited power? Can they earn anything from it? These villagers do not have evidence of that. Logically speaking, the bills are issued by the company, and thus the payments that these electricians take will belong to the company, and not a cent less. Communal electricians should not have a personal reason for falsifying their meter readings or manipulating this junction of the grid. The question regarding whether electricians write down the correct number at first looks bizarre.

Nonetheless, the reality proves that their suspicions have a basis, as an electrician in Dong Phong declared to bill payers: "He [another electrician] reads the meter but leaves some number to avoid the higher block for you guys. Sometimes [we] take it up, sometimes [we] take it down.[31] That is fairness." By calling this up and down "fairness", he attempted to explain the discrepancy that is sometimes detected between the meter and the bill. He then quickly added: "But as for me, I do it precisely."

It turns out that electricians have a practice of writing down a number lower than that on the meter for one month, and adjusting it to "match" the correct number shown on the same meter the next month. Electricians claim that this action is taken to help lower the bill if a villager suddenly uses too much in one month, because, with the block-increase tariff, the more electricity you consume, the higher the price per unit you have to pay. For example, if a customer consumes 130 kWh in one month, 30 kWh could be left to be paid for the next month, when he only consumes 70 kWh, allowing him to enjoy the lower rate per unit for consumption below 100 kWh per month. This trick helps this customer pay a smaller amount than he or she should have to pay for the same volume of consumption. It is not clear how common this practice is among electricians, but it is likely that it is restricted to special cases where a sudden surplus of usage happens, which must also be resolved immediately in the next session of meter reading and bill collection. During a relatively short period of one or two months, on a very small number of one or two meters, most of the time their action goes undetected. In the electricians' view, this trick may not pose a criminal or moral issue, because they do not help customers to "steal" the electricity; the customers still pay for the whole amount they use, only at a lower price for a part of that whole. They also believe that EVN has earned enough from the lower price for its product as it is. EVN may thus lose some of its revenue, which cannot be demonstrated on the books or account balances, despite its stable mechanism of holding the rural

[31] Original in Vietnamese: "Có lúc thu lên, có lúc thu xuống".

market so tightly. In rural areas, the stealth of the company's revenue may happen not by tampering or bypassing the meters, but in the very process of reading them.

All this procedure only revealed itself to myself, an outsider, after the electrician made this statement, but it was apparently an open secret with the villagers. It had been so frequently used as an excuse for the imprecise reading and writing of meter data that now and then I heard even villagers reiterating this "sometimes up, sometimes down" claim to explain how their bills fluctuated to others. While they seem to accept a wrong reading of the numbers if it were to their benefit to do so, this very practice fosters their mistrust of local electricians.

Dong Phong villagers would then be even more skeptical of the whole system if they knew of an incident that happened behind closed doors between a communal electrician and the district power branch. I learnt from a member of staff of Hoang Hai Power that, during a sudden inspection, the district branch found an unpaid amount of thousands of kWh in the electrician's own meter. During several months, the electrician had read his own meter and paid less than he should have done, possibly for the same reason of avoiding the block increase rate. Because he did not bypass the meter, he may have planned to pay it back later at a lower rate when he could save a bit of consumption. It was probably his bad luck that he could never save enough to get the price down to a level that he perceived to be affordable. Thanks to this somewhat tolerable "modal of reasoning" – hiding an amount of consumption without bluntly stealing it (see Degani 2017) – the incident was settled between the two parties. Moreover, he remained a communal electrician, and no one in his commune seemed to know about the incident. His "face", or the power relationship between an electrician and his fellow villagers, is being maintained because the power company wants him to continue his job.

Villagers have launched some acts of resistance to their own advantage in this situation of their mistrust of the mode of electricity management. Apart from complaints and sometimes conflicts, most villagers keep their bills for a long time after paying them, to prove their full payment if they are ever accused of non-payment. This case happens now and then when the electricians keep a wrong record of their consumption and payment. A few others, like Mr. Thanh and his wife, Mrs. Van, the children of my host lady, decided to read the meters every month on the twenty-third after the electricians had done so and to compare their data with the bills later. This rare decision came after they found a wrong reading on their water meter, called Mr. Hong and had a hard verbal struggle with him on the phone. At first very reluctant to express their doubts about the communal electrician openly, Mrs. Van then became convinced that their own monitoring of their electricity and water meters was necessary to mitigate the loss caused by the electrician's wrong reading.

The two actual questions, i.e. whether the meters measure correctly and whether electricians deal with meters properly, which Dong Phong villagers pose whenever they complain about their bills are not as irrational as they first seem. Electricity users in the commune have justifiable reasons for suspecting that all the agents involved in the billing process, from the electricians and the power company to the meters, are obscuring some truth of the system which they cannot access due to their disadvantaged position in the network of power relations. At the same time, they lack the room for their everyday resistance to make a change to this "mechanism of subjection". By being connected to the electricity grid, they are engaged in a mode of operation, which, whether or not they question it, they still have to submit to.

Conclusion

In consuming electricity and paying for it, rural residents are in a network of power relations in which their actions are induced by their "adversaries": the meter, the electrician and the power company. They are in a constant struggle to resist the power exercised in this network from their disadvantaged position in their relation to the meter and the electricians, due to their lack of technical knowledge; in the relation to the company, due to their lack of ownership of the meter; and more generally, due to the financial obligations they are made to abide by in their electricity consumption.

On the other hand, this kind of struggle is an "immediate struggle", in Foucault's language, where they criticize the "immediate enemy", not the "chief enemy", and do not expect to find a solution to their problems (Foucault 1982, 180). Dong Phong villagers keep complaining, but they also keep paying their utility bills. Some keep asking questions about the meter and the ways in which the power company and local electricians deal with it, but they also resign themselves to the power of these adversaries. They quite often end their comments with the rhetorical question, "What else can we do?" ("*Biết làm thế nào được?*"). In abiding with the rules and regulations, there is always a degree of resistance that suggests distrust and can lead to conflicts, but in their very resistance, they are still subject to the power that is exercised on them. Mr. Thanh and his wife can monitor the electrician's reading of the meters, in a move unusual for rural customers, but they cannot monitor the measurement of the meters themselves. EVN has its own quality check centers to ensure, or be able to claim, the precision of these meters. Many other users may not even think of checking the meters which are placed outside their houses, high on the poles, and formally forbidden to be touched. Users' resistance is a catalyst bringing to light not only relations of power, but also their subjection to the mechanisms that EVN sets up to govern rural electricity both technically and financially.

There is an overlap between discipline and governmentality as forms of power exercised in rural electric life, but it is disciplinary power that appears to prevail. Much of this discipline is built into the system, from the prohibition on interfering with the measuring device, to the monthly meter reading, the monthly bill payment and immediate disconnection after the first failure to pay. The possibilities of choice and freedom also exist – the freedom enabled by postpaid meters to decide, presumably with dignity, how much electricity to consume, and the freedom even to opt out of the electricity grid, as access to electricity is not a must but a welfare service. However, the range of possible actions is limited. The grid is "an infrastructure that is difficult to participate in politically and even more difficult to opt out of" (Özden-Schilling 2019), and it is probably impossible to curb even the very modest volume of power consumption. While governmentality, in the sense of possibilities for action, is extremely limited, the discipline to curtail unwanted actions is wide-ranging.

In this rural landscape, which EVN only started to penetrate at the end of the twentieth century, local electricians work as stabilizers of its unruly business environment. With the power authorized by the company and built up personally, electricians render their own community legible and governable for the electricity company. They also fill in the loopholes of the rural financial terrain with their own resources, reducing the financial threat of indebtedness for both the company and its customers by offering their own financial and social resources. The social relationship among the fellow villagers – electricians and household customers – has come to be interwoven with electrical business relations, producing a typical socio-electric mechanism that keeps the business running.

Chapter Five

The Instrumentality of (Human) Electrical Infrastructure in State-Making

Falling in between late January and early February on the Gregorian calendar, the Lunar New Year is the most important festive occasion for Vietnamese families. The prime time of celebration is certainly New Year's Eve (*đêm giao thừa*), but for electricity workers in Hoang Hai district, this evening might be the most stressful work shift they have in a year. It was in the New Year's Eve work shift of 2019 that I had the first interactions with electricity workers in Hoang Hai, after leaving Dong Phong commune temporarily to learn about the EVN's district branch. Here, from 4 o'clock in the afternoon, workers gathered in the company's small canteen to have an early dinner before going to the communes at about five pm. Their mission was to maintain the electrical current for customers' year-end parties.

Before the meal was finished, Hoang Hai Electric Power (*Điện lực Hoàng Hải*) received news that Nam Hai commune had been on the verge of a blackout due to overloading on the system. Immediately two workers got ready to go. In an evening when "all household appliances are brought into maximum use", as the Director said, the problem had been well anticipated. Despite my first meeting with the workers, the Director did not hesitate to offer me to accompany them. He told Nam and Thang, the two departing workers, "not to react" at the site and told me "to be careful with local people", a warning I did not understand at that time. Some other people asked Nam to wear his electrician's helmet and give his civil helmet to me, saying I should not show myself as an affiliate of the company's staff, again advice I did not comprehend. With the minimum preparation for such a mission, I jumped on to Nam's motorbike behind his back. We left the company at 5.30.

Arriving in the commune a bit before 6 o'clock, I quickly understood the instructions given at the branch office. A transformer stopped working right after we arrived: its circuit breaker tripped off due to overloading and caused a blackout in some of the hamlets in the commune. Several people, most of them men, headed out of their homes and started to swear at Nam, who was now checking an electric box on the pole.

"This blackout happens every New Year's Eve – what do you f*cking guys do that makes it so bad?" one exclaimed, while others grumbled. I was shocked by the vulgarities they threw at the electricity worker.

"I pay the bill each and every month – why is it off right now? I will not pay that f*cking bill this month!" another said loudly. Men with furious faces gathered around us, while these utterances continued.

Nam did not say anything much or show his reaction within the circle of aggressive observers. Telling some of them he would bring back the necessary spare parts, he took me away from the scene. On the motorbike again, after a short while, I tried asking anxiously what the spare parts he would now need. To my astonishment he said: “I need nothing. We have to leave to disperse this crowd. We will come back later when they are no longer there”. Obviously neither the angry customers nor myself had understood his agenda.

This tactic of keeping silent and fleeing was elaborated that same evening by a more experienced worker who came to support the juniors, Kien, the vice-team leader of General Team number two: “We do best to keep our mouths shut at those times. If we say something carelessly, we could simply be beaten up. Those who have drunk much do not refrain from fighting, so say something soft if you have to, then withdraw. When the power is off people get heated”. That is particularly true when the power goes off during the most important festival of the year, just before or during their family dinner. And when the problem persists every year, it is not just one time this happens.

This Lunar New Year incident strikingly opened up the work sphere of electricity workers for me. Over the course of my fieldwork, joining them in many work shifts and some recreational gatherings, my impression from this first interaction remained and was transformed into an understanding of the realities of the electricity workers’ occupation. They are positioned in the frontline between an erratic electrical infrastructure and their customers, as well as between the political system that this infrastructure is supposed to serve and the people that are governed.

I accompanied Kien when he returned to the office at 8 o’clock that evening, but Nam and Thang stayed in the commune until midnight because the transformers kept crashing one after another. In the same evening, not only Nam Hai but several other communes in Hoang Hai district suffered the same problem of collapsed transformers, while all the workers spread themselves out to rescue the grid temporarily from a total breakdown. The transformers, with just enough capacity for the relatively low daily consumption of rural people, failed because of the increase in load during the Lunar New Year. However, the company has no plan to upgrade its machines to meet the demand at festivals. Its managers know exactly that the grid will fail in those communes from which many people migrate to work in urban areas and come back for family reunions at Tet and festivities, but they also know that higher capacity transformers will have losses on normal days when the machines are running under their designed loads. Therefore, every Lunar New Year, power outages happen and electricity workers run around to patch things up and cover up grid failures with both their tools and psychological tactics. Every time, the main strategy of the company is to maintain this intermittent supply until the festival is over and consumption falls back to a level that the system can bear.

Figure 6. Fixing an occurrence (sự cố) on Lunar New Year's Eve 2019

Vital to this strategy is the physical presence of electricity workers in the communes throughout the night to cover the system failures and assure customers that the company is taking care of the situation. Unlike their managers, the workers I worked with do not say they "serve" anyone, whether their customers or the company. The term "serving", which will be elaborated on further later in this chapter, could have been far too flowery for the harsh facts they have to cope with as the human frontier of the electrical infrastructure.

In the anthropology of the state, electricity and electrical infrastructure are commonly seen as the state's instruments, that is, as "a tool invented to accomplish a governmental agenda" (Boyer 2015, 533). However, little attention has been directed toward the instrumentality of the human component of the electrical apparatus. In a review, Mette M. High and Jessica M. Smith (2019) argue that the critiques of corporate and state power and their imbrication in energy infrastructure "have largely ignored the very people who make up these institutions", especially the rank-and-file workers (16-17). Seeking a more capacious approach, this chapter and the following one offer an analysis of electric

state-making from the perspective of labor. They focus on the workers of Hoang Hai Electric Power who are placed on the front line of the company to interact with its customers.

To start with, I argue in this chapter that electricity workers are an essential buffer between the company and electricity users, between the technical infrastructure and the humans who are supposed to use it and, in a manner particularly important for the state-making process, between the political system that the company represents and the people this system governs at the grassroots. Intrinsic to this argument is the observation that these workers constitute the electrical infrastructure itself with their corporeal and mental resources. While infrastructure is usually understood in material terms as a thing-system that conditions the lives of human beings, in developmentalism the notion has been extended to "social infrastructure" to include education, health, the legal framework and government services (Rankin 2009). In the social sciences, "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004) emphasizes the collaborative human relations involved in running society. The latter is largely discussed in the setting of developing urban areas with poor material infrastructure (see examples by Anand 2011 and Bedi 2016), where flexible and provisional human relations become a "platform providing for and reproducing life" (Simone 2004, 408).

Drawing on multifaceted experiences of electricity workers in Hoang Hai Electric Power, I venture an argument that, beyond material things or social relations, the electrical infrastructure in rural Vietnam is constituted by humans in the sense of human corporal resources – the bodies of the workers and human mental resources – as well as their psychological resilience in the face of threats and pressures while carrying out their professions. This chapter is thus a further deployment of affect and infrastructure: while Chapter Three focused on the emergence of affect and the flipping between affect and emotion, this chapter addresses affect via the bodies, and in particular the embodied occupational practices, of electricity workers. While Chapter Four described elements of "people as infrastructure" in the commune's electricians, this chapter offers the idea of "human infrastructure", referring to the human body and mentality incorporated into the infrastructural system.

This chapter first sketches out the general context of a power sector undergoing transformation, with its business philosophy, as perceived by its personnel, changing from "serving" to "selling", a transformation that does much to define the electricity company's relationship with its consumers. It proceeds with an examination of the work experiences of electricity workers, whose bodily and mental integrity is appropriated for the operation of the electricity system in emotionally charged situations. Their experiences demonstrate the instrumentalization of the human component of electrical apparatus to foster the relationship between the state and the people at the grassroots.

"A reliable tool for the Party and the Government" along the serving–selling nexus

The historical role that the Vietnamese government assumed in introducing rural electrification, presented in Chapter Two, makes the state monopoly that is the Vietnam Electricity Group (EVN) a powerful instrument in state-making. The Group manages the generation, transmission and distribution of electricity centrally with infrastructural and personnel networks on an unprecedented scale, encroaching on the rural population arguably more widely and closely than any other infrastructural system. Its network has been built gradually since the pre-reform period, when electricity was largely provided for production, to the beginning of the *Đổi Mới* reforms, when electricity was still a heavily subsidized public good, and more extensively since 1999, when the government decided to embark on rural electrification. More recently, when the second phase of the state's rural electrification programme started in 2008, the EVN accelerated its direct contact with the rural population by taking over the old grid from the local authorities and extending new parts of the grid to 100 per cent of communes (EVN 2019, 2). The scale of the Vietnamese electrical system now "ranks second in Southeast Asia and 30th of the world" (EVN 2018). In parallel with the centralization and expansion of the national grid, EVN employs up to 100,000 workers, or one eighth of the labor force of all Vietnam's state corporations, which total 800,000 (Pham Anh 2018). EVN's comprehensive network both showcases the state's power in rural areas and enhances it through the monopolistic supply of energy.

Like all the state-owned enterprises in Vietnam, EVN has undergone the transformation of business mechanisms from the socialist "state-subsidized" (*bao cấp*) model to the neoliberal "market-oriented" system since the *Đổi Mới* reforms.[32] The expansion of the grid based on international loans goes along

[32] Scholarly discussion of neoliberal reforms in Vietnam started around the mid-2000s, mainly revolving around two axes: neoliberalism in the nationally specific context as a set of economic and political policies aiming at expanding the market, promoting the privatization of economic sectors and, as a consequence, tethering the state sector and restraining the state control; and neoliberalism as modes of governance, governmentality and individual subjectification. Along the first axis, there is a divergence of opinions on the extent of influences that neoliberal institutions and actors exercise on the working of the Vietnamese state, and on whether "market socialism", "market-oriented socialism", or "socialism-oriented market economy" (*kinh tế thị trường định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa*) will quickly become undisguised capitalism (see Painter 2005, Evans and Bui 2005, Gainsborough 2010, Masina 2012, among others). Along the second axis, however, most authors concur about the neoliberal (moral) logics of self-reliance, self-advancement, self-fashioning and self-entrepreneurship that transformed Vietnamese society, communities and individuals (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012, Hien 2012, Endres 2017, Nguyen 2019), while also reflecting the continuity of socialist morality (Leshkovich 2012).

with the harsh requirements of sector restructuring, including gradually giving up its monopolistic status. EVN has been going the same way as utilities in some post-socialist countries in Africa, where the World Bank and other "development" financial institutions sponsor the modernization of the electricity grid as part of a return to the privatization of energy infrastructure and the opening up of the national market in energy (see Winther 2008, Ghanadan 2009 and Degani 2022). In striving for profit and competition missions, EVN has adopted the "market economy" viewpoint of selling electricity as a commodity and treating electricity users as customers. Meanwhile, the current state ownership and the political mandate of being "one step ahead" places an ideological, non-business function on the corporation, resulting in an ambivalent articulation between the socialist "serving" and neoliberalist "selling" logics. Travelling mentally along this serving–selling axis is how electricity personnel have managed the relationship between the company and its customers, and consequently, between the political system that the company represents and the people this system governs.

The word "serving" (*phục vụ*) appeared in my interviews with managerial staff at all levels of EVN, from the headquarters in Hanoi to the Thai Binh Power company and its district branch, Hoang Hai Power. It is no wonder that the term is present to managers when official EVN documents repeatedly confirm its subordination and instrumentality in relation to the political system. The EVN website declares its commitment to the Party and the government as an underlying value of organizational culture:

> EVN commits itself to fulfilling the tasks entrusted by the Party and the Government, to ensure a stable, safe, reliable power supply to the development of the country. EVN can *function as a reliable tool for the Party and the Government* to stabilize the macro-economic policy [and] contribute to the prosperity of the country, to enable the country to keep pace with other advanced countries in the region.
>
> (EVN 2016, emphasis mine)

Besides functioning as a "reliable tool", as stated here, EVN is committed to serving the people, working not only to "satisfy the customers" but also "for the happiness of the people" as part of its "ethical standards" (EVN (Vietnam Electricity Group) 2011). By probing further into these terms, i.e. "serving", "customers" and "people", in conversation with Mr. Ha, Director of Hoang Hai Power, I learned about the general instrumentality of the industry as perceived by management at the local level. His words will thus be quoted in length in the following section.

In this dissertation I adopt the terms "neoliberal" and "neoliberalism" to discuss changes in Vietnam in both senses, but I use it more intensively for discussing structural reforms in the electricity sector and thus more in the economic sense (see current chapter, Chapter Six and Chapter Seven).

Hoang Hai Power (*Điện lực Hoàng Hải*) is a district branch of the Thai Binh provincial power company. Following the mother-daughter model of all EVN enterprises, it is not an independent legal entity but subordinate to the provincial level, albeit with its own director, board and functional departments. The branch is a leading earner of the company because it manages the power distribution to the biggest industrial zone in Thai Binh province. Its management personnel thus play an important role in the performance of the whole provincial company and must be selected from the most trusted, best performing staff to ensure that the electricity sector's many commitments are fulfilled.

In the view of the Director of Hoang Hai Power, the modern saying "putting customers at the center of business" goes hand in hand with the old-fashioned "serving the people" mindset. While the former is a mantra of many Vietnamese enterprises today, be they state or private, the latter carries a shade of ideological commitment which only remains, however faintly, in state-owned enterprises. In the legacy of rural electrification, represented as a benevolent act by the socialist state, the workforce in the power industry retains the idea that their work is not merely a matter of business and that there is also the philanthropic goal of providing social welfare, especially for poor rural people. Although neoliberal concepts of "customers" and "commodity" are used universally in EVN today, they have not entirely ousted this "serving the people" mindset. Quite the contrary, they allow this mindset to be interwoven in interesting ways with the customer-centric business strategy, resulting in tailor-made solutions to difficult situations. Mr. Ha elaborated on this process with some examples from local businesses.

> The electricity sector always serves. For example, we plan to change the meters and have sent out notices, but on that day our staff called us from the site saying there is a wedding or a funeral in that area, [and] customers with such a request [for the power supply to be maintained]… then how dare we cut the power? Especially when it is a funeral, we have to postpone our work. Or if we know about the event in advance, we will try to come early, finish early and reconnect the line. Our work must be in a harmony with society. I think there is never this way of working in capitalist countries. They send the notice, then they cut the power and do their job. But in Vietnam it's different. That is to serve, alongside doing business.
>
> (Ha, Director of Hoang Hai Power, summer 2018)

Furthermore, the management personnel are very aware that their mission is also to meet the political and social goals of the political system, and not only to serve their customers for economic benefits in the way a private enterprise does.

> It is similar to the district authorities. When the authorities organize the 190th anniversary of Hoang Hai District, for instance, they would either phone us, send an official letter or call a meeting where they order us to ensure the non-intermittent supply of electricity for the anniversary. That's a political duty,

> isn't it, because it is directed by the district leaders. We still do the business, we sell, they pay, but maintaining the supply is an official duty. The same with political events like Party Congress at all levels, or the elections of People's Committee and National Assembly, that is when we have to keep the power always on. No matter how good the business result is, if the district authorities give us a poor mark, we cannot justify it to the company.
>
> (ibid.)

In the circumstances of a fragile electricity grid, it is not at all an easy task to guarantee non-stop, stable current over several days. But Mr. Ha seems to buy in to the idea that this means fulfilling a political duty. For him, it is unacceptable to fail to provide good power for only some important political events a year. "Business targets must be achieved, but serving one's local political duty must also be done well", he said.

Meanwhile, the "fifty-fifty" serving–selling ratio that Mr. Ha mentioned in his conversation with me could seem somewhat misleading if one were to look more closely at the reality of doing business in Hoang Hai Power. Alongside some specific "serving" events, Hoang Hai Power's management is preoccupied with the "selling" targets, as the output growth rate imposed by the company is as high as 12 per cent a year, regardless of the fact that the grid capacity falls short of this increase in consumption. The central discussion in the monthly meeting that I attended in September 2019 was about how to achieve the objectives of raising sales volumes and reducing the power loss. Solutions to increase sales included "drastically" (*quyết liệt*) minimizing the number of power cuts and "fixing problems without switching off the power", a practice the workers refer to as "live fixing" (*sửa sống*). To reduce the power loss during transmission and distribution, the imperative was to inspect the system even more closely and catch more thieves. As confirmed by some participants at the meeting, revenue and losses were usually central to their discussion every month. "Serving", or measures to serve social and political purposes better, were not touched upon in the meeting I attended.

The tension of serving and selling in transformational businesses has been noted in different settings. Wittmer (1991) addresses the dilemma over "serving the people or serving for pay" in his study of managers in the US "hybrid" organizations that exist in between the public and private sectors (considering political control and market influence), including hospitals and schools (373). An answer in terms of the public service ethic of "doing work that is helpful for others" appears to be alive in these managers, though pay is also a relatively important concern (ibid., 380). However, when market pressure increases in hybrid organizations, as in the case of the health-care sector in China in the early twenty-first century, more frequently EVN personnel have to ask themselves: "serve the people or close the sale?" Generally they choose sale over serve, just as Chinese health-care professionals have done to survive the state's financial cuts (Reynolds and McKee 2011). In a broader Chinese context,

the spirit of serving the people remains only one among the various "afterlives" of socialism, which has nonetheless devolved from an ethical requirement into a "commodified cliché" (Karl 2019, 247). A similar tendency might be observed to manifest itself in Vietnamese state-owned but hybrid-operating enterprises, including those in the electricity sector, as the "market-oriented" reforms keep on going.

While managerial personnel discuss serving and selling, the workers at Hoang Hai Power diligently carry out their daily work with the grid and their customers. Interestingly, I have never heard the word "serving" from any worker throughout my whole time working with them. Do workers not care about this serving spirit, or why more specifically do they not use this term? Closer observation of their work brings to light how the state instrument of electricity operates at the grassroots level of its human apparatus.

Routine work with the system: instrumentalization of the physical body

Hoang Hai Power has a similar organizational structure as other district branches of the Thai Binh Power Company. With total personnel of 72 people, the branch has one director, two vice-directors, several specialists and many workers. Office staff are organized into a technical section, business section, customer service, administration, and finance and accounting. Fieldworkers are organized into three teams, one team for "periodical tasks" (*đội định kỳ*) and two teams for "general tasks" (*đội tổng hợp*), working directly with the grid and the customers in 32 communes of Hoang Hai district.

Reflected in its name, the work of the "periodical" team exclusively involves checking and replacing meters on a periodical basis. Meters have to be uninstalled and taken to the provincial quality-control center every three years in order to make sure they are measuring electricity consumption precisely. This team is also in charge of installing new meters when new customers sign contracts with the company. Composed of nine workers, this team has enough periodical work to do, with 82,000 meters in the whole district.

The two "general" teams take charge of all the branch's remaining major technical and service functions. Their work is to develop and maintain the grid, fix electrical problems and ensure grid safety. They also work to cover the branch's service function, which includes pushing customers to pay monthly bills on behalf of the business section, explaining the company's policies and solving conflicts on behalf of the customer service section, as well as "catching" thieves together with the inspection team. These "general" or miscellaneous tasks require them to be highly responsive and mobile.

General Team Number Two (*Đội tổng hợp 2*), consisting of eleven workers, is the group I worked with most frequently in Hoang Hai Power. The reasons for my attachment to them include firstly the fact that this team is in charge of the grid in the south of Hoang Hai district, where my main field site of Dong Phong commune is located. Secondly, some members of the team happened to be the first to welcome me to the New Year dinner and took me for the first trip to the site that evening. Their generous sharing of their time, experiences, information and, at times, also emotions enabled me to learn a good deal about their professional and personal lives.

In the first group of tasks to cover the technical function of the branch, the workers' physical strength is used as a major labor resource because mechanical equipment is scarce, and even if available, unsuitable for rural infrastructure. Hoang Hai Power owns one medium-load truck for transporting heavy materials such as transformers and cable coils, but workers have to load and unload it manually. The provincial Thai Binh Power company possesses some vehicles that are specialized for electrical engineering, such as bucket trucks and crane trucks, but these vehicles are usually bigger than the space they are supposed to work on, such as the narrow paths leading to somewhere in the rice fields, where infrastructural items like poles and transformers are located. Therefore, they cannot be of much help beyond waiting in a wider area to transport things when needed. Furthermore, these vehicles must always be booked in advance because several other district branches may need them on the same days. Machines that are smaller in size and that fit into the rural infrastructure of Hoang Hai district are simply unavailable.

In summer 2019, workers from Hoang Hai Power spent many days replacing old transformers around the district with new ones, part of a company program to change the medium-voltage grid from 10 kV to 22 kV. This higher voltage allows the transmission of electricity with smaller losses and greater stability. Changing transformers is the heaviest of all manual tasks the personnel have to fulfil due to the weight of the machines (see Figure 7). Many transformer stations are located in the middle of the rice field to provide energy for irrigation and other production purposes, and thus no assistance can be provided by the company's vehicles. The tools the workers use for this task include some wood planks to flatten the way out for the transformer to move over the muddy field (while their own feet are in the mud and water), ropes to pull the machine by hand, back and shoulder, and a wagon to transport the machine to a wider road if the workers can manage to put it on the wagon. In one of the work shifts I accompanied, after pushing and pulling the transformer out of its station, the workers could not bring the heavy metal mass up to the wagon, whatever they tried. Instead, they had to pass some small iron wheels under it, then push and pull it again along the village road to a wider area where a crane truck was waiting. Here the old transformer was picked up by the crane and taken away. A new transformer was then brought to the station, again through the strength of the electricity

workers' shoulders and backs. Throughout this process, their technical skills seem to come second to bodily power, and their technical work with the transformers and on the grid became less prominent than the task of carrying heavy objects. Also, throughout this process, where their bodies have intimate encounters with the machines and wires, the workers seemed to become part of the infrastructural system, rather than separate from the material objects they have to carry.

Likewise, other routine maintenance work on the grid is mainly enabled by muscle power. To maintain all the four thousand poles in the district, for instance, workers have to climb to the top of many dozens of poles a day with their own hands and feet, supported by a pair of clogs and a safety belt. After checking the connections, tightening the screws, cleaning the insulators and replacing any spare parts, they will climb down one pole and climb up another. Bucket trucks are not available for this kind of work, and even if they are, there is no space for them to operate when most poles are planted on the field, surrounded by rice, maize and other crops. The shortage of machines for rural infrastructure makes their work not merely technical work, but sweatshop labor. Orange uniforms soaked in sweat is the scene I usually witness during and after their work shifts. The work that electricity workers perform based on their physical strength is vital for the maintenance of the grid in rural Vietnam, and for the continued business of the power company.

For the hard work they have done from the young age of about 20, most electricity workers cannot function fully in the team when they surpass the age of 45. Tasks such as climbing poles and carrying transformers are simply beyond their bodily power. Around this age, usually suffering from chronic back pain, they would expect to be assigned to largely bureaucratic tasks, such as delivering bills to industrial customers, monitoring the reading of meters by commune electricians, monitoring the subcontractor working on a construction project and helping the customer services section. Similarly, female workers, who are an absolute minority in the teams, are assigned logistical tasks and put in assistant positions, no matter how well they might have been trained in their technical skills. The manual workload consequently falls on to younger male workers, and at times makes them feel dissatisfied with their physically weaker colleagues. The retirement age in Vietnam was 60 for men and 55 for women at the time of my fieldwork, but many electricity workers say they should be entitled to earlier retirement due to the deterioration in their health.

In the view of electricity workers in Hoang Hai Power, the company has invested a lot in expanding and upgrading the grid, but not so much in equipping them with the necessary facilities or improving their health and safety conditions. Not only are vehicles lacking, hand tools and devices for work are provided only rarely and are of relatively low quality. "By regulation the company provides tools, but in fact we have to self-provide, because what they buy for us are of third-class quality", one of the workers said. Everyone had to invest in buying good tools, from pliers, pincers, and wrenches to drills

and others, so that they can work more efficiently. Nor does the company provide any means of transport for their work in the communes. Workers ride their own motorbikes and are paid a small sum of money for their daily trips to the communes, which total some thousand kilometers each month. For this kind of hard work, it is also compulsory that workers have an annual check-up arranged by the company to ensure that they are still fit for their duties, but this check-up is conducted deceptively, according to the workers. “They only ask us some questions and approve our health condition without even checking. We don’t like that, we also want our health to be cared for better.” Many complain about understaffing because, although the quota for personnel in Hoang Hai is one hundred people, only seventy-two may be working because the company does not want to recruit any more.

The appropriation of workers’ physical bodies and their belongings, such as hand tools and motorbikes, as means of production is one factor that helped the power company cut costs for its operations in rural areas. It is also an affective process which turns workers into an integral yet instrumental component of the electricity system itself through compulsory intimate bodily encounters with the grid materials. The intimacy they share with the rural electricity infrastructure leads to their being “instrumentally viewed as parts of the enterprise ‘machine’” (Dietz and Hoogervorst 2012, 15) as workers in early capitalism were, rather than as the company’s “precious assets”, as their state employer ironically claims.[33] What further validates their being an integral part of the system is that electricity workers, despite their clear dissatisfaction, tend to restrict their complaining with their local colleagues and accept what is going on as “inevitable failings of the system”, knowing this will not change any time soon.

[33] Sarcastically, the motto that EVN adopts, which says that “employees are considered the most precious assets to help EVN succeed” (EVN 2016), could be understood as true, word by word, given the actual working conditions in the field.

Figure 7. General Team Number Two relocates a transformer, summer 2019

Relations with customers: where the mental downside starts

Physical challenges aside, the real tension in the professional lives of electricity workers is in conflicts with rural residents who are customers of the power company. From here, what they are made to offer is not only tools and physical strength for routine maintenance work with the grid, but mental integrity and even dignity. While they represent the company to its customers, their working environment is contoured by the complicated relationship between the company and its customers that goes beyond their control.

This relationship is far from a win-win scenario ideal for businesses, largely due to the high perceived price and the low quality of the commodity that the company provides. While electricity has become a necessity for rural households as a result of rural electrification and "modernization", a majority of rural residents find it a pricy commodity, whose cost is always higher than the amount they can comfortably pay.[34] In the energy consumption survey conducted with more than eighty households in Dong Phong commune at the beginning of my field trip, only one householder said that the power

[34] The power tariff rate is perceived as high by rural customers, but not the most influential energy experts, who follow the "market mechanism", or neoliberal logic, to urge an even higher tariff as an incentive for investments in power generation and the efficient use of energy.

tariff was “suitable” for him. All others said the tariff was either “rather high” or “very high”. Also according to this survey, electricity had paradoxically replaced wood and gas to become the first chosen form of energy in rural households for its cleanliness and convenience. The uncomfortable dependence on electricity manifested itself during monthly bill-collecting days in Dong Phong, when I saw many people sitting in silence for a long time before they could open their wallets to pay their electricity bills. I also met several who could not pay and therefore asked the commune’s electricians to advance the costs, with a promise that they would pay back as soon as possible (see Chapter Four for details on informal credits for electricity). My household survey and observations demonstrate that many consumers fall short of the financial means to meet their electricity needs. A report by the World Bank, the most important creditor of the Vietnamese government in rural electrification, points out that electricity “has become relatively expensive for Vietnamese households” (Lee and Gerner 2020, 20), with up to 40 per cent of households having to pay as much as 10.8 per cent of their total income only to purchase the national average electricity consumption (RISE in Lee and Gerner 2020, 20). Meanwhile, EVN reported increasing profitability over the same period, which was well covered by the media (*VietTimes* 2015, To Uyen 2019, Ngoc An 2019, Mai Chi 2020). The gain of the electricity company in profit can hardly be of benefit to its rural customers, at least in terms of financial security.

The adverse impact of cost on customer relations is very visible in small-scale producers and service providers who have to pay a considerable amount for electricity. The higher tariff rate imposed on service providers and the relatively large sums of money that industrial users have to pay every month are reasons for their complaints and cheating. The practice of “electricity fishing” has not ceased, while much more sophisticated ways of stealing electricity have also been detected in the district territory. Thefts of power, being caught in act and consequent violence against electricity workers who detect the breaches is therefore not rare. In the monthly meeting I attended, the vice director in charge of business described in detail a new way of stealing power they had detected recently, which required closer inspections of other households in the same area. The inspection team, in turn, asked for support from other technical teams because, according to them, they cannot deal with a large number of cases and many aggressive customers.

The relationship between the Power (*Điện lực*)[35] and its rural customers is also complicated by the quality of service that the company can provide. Apart from sudden power cuts, the pre-existing issue

[35] The colloquial term “the Power” (*Điện lực*) is used commonly by both EVN staff and consumers to refer to the electricity apparatus that provides electric power, be it the district branch, the provincial company or the electricity sector in general. Otherwise, it is used specifically by the EVN staff to refer to district branches like

of insufficient voltage becomes chronic when the company sets high targets for sales growth but cannot develop the grid fast enough to carry the load. Many households buy electrical appliances only to find that they cannot be used, especially in the peak hours, like what happened to air-conditioner owners in Dong Phong. In summer 2019 a commune electrician told me that more than two hundred new air-conditioners had been installed in the commune, although the grid capacity remained the same. Consequently, these machines cannot be operated without yet another machine, a voltage booster that households have to buy. And then, whenever a voltage booster is switched on in one house, the current to other houses is weakened, making it hard to use other appliances. The same situation is common in various communes of Hoang Hai District. In trips with electricity workers to the sites, I usually heard people complain about the low voltage of electricity supplied, sometimes directly to the workers, sometimes from a distance but at a volume loud enough for electricity workers to hear. It is not uncommon, for instance, that small-scale producers witness the motors of their appliances being "burnt" by the inadequate power supply. The persistent problems of low quality versus perceptions of the high cost make the relationship between *Điện lực* and its rural customers highly problematic.

Finally, the incomplete transition from the legacy of the socialist idea of electricity as a public good to the "market-oriented" notion of electricity as a commodity affects both the company personnel and their customers. The power sector has gone a long way from charging a very cheap price for electricity coupled with the high loss of power output in the 1980s and 1990s to carefully metered consumption at considerably higher tariffs in the 2000s and the years since, even though the project to commodify electricity is unfinished. EVN personnel continue to claim that they are not working in a full market situation because the power tariff is centrally controlled by the government. Consumers are especially confused when they have to pay a large percentage of their income for electricity, accept a below-average supply and at the same time listen to the state's claims about the social aims of rural electrification (like hunger eradication and poverty reduction) and power subsidies for the poor. To form an opinion on the Power and its personnel is not a straightforward task for rural residents, who see themselves as both genuine customers who pay for their consumption and subsidized social groups who should be grateful for the service they are granted. There remains an ambiguity in the perception of rural people about the company and the state in the energy sector due to this unfinished project of making electricity a commodity when it is not.

Hoang Hai Power, which are called "the Power" (*Điện lực*) to distinguish with provincial power companies which are called "the Company" (*Công ty*).

The ambiguous relationship between the customers, the company and the state in matters of energy supply is an important feature that defines the working environment of electricity workers. It is a volatile environment without mutually accepted norms of behavior, whether market-based or based on the state's patronage. How rural customers treat the workers varies greatly according to the specific circumstances, the social skills of specific workers and especially the perception of individual customers about their power status in the company-people-state relationship. How electricity workers, in their turn, treat customers also varies according to their assessment of the situations they encounter, their individual belief in who the customers are, and their habit of wielding the power they are delegated as representatives of the company.

Buffering between the company and its customers: "being insulted"

Their simple room on the ground floor of the Hoang Hai office building is where, one August afternoon while awaiting a tropical typhoon, General Team Number Two recalled their historic tale of several members being captured and beaten by villagers in Nam Ha commune. The story started when I expressed a wish to hear from them what really happened, after hearing hints about the incident from various people. Senior team members, including team leader Manh, told the story, while the juniors listened and sometimes asked questions for clarification. The storytelling turned out to resemble a historical lesson that electricity workers voluntarily took part in for a shared understanding of their profession.

So the story goes, in winter 2012, several members of Team Two were dispatched to Nam Ha commune to replace two big transformers with smaller capacity machines. The company's rationale was to optimize the transformers' capacities, avoiding losses of electricity. However, the villagers in Dong Quach where one of the transformers was placed did not think so. They thought the electricity workers were taking "their" transformer away, based on a belief that this higher-capacity transformer had been installed there in the first place thanks to the influence of a successful fellow villager. On a normal day, this might not cause such big a problem, as the workers can explain their actions and come to a compromise if needed. However, on that day, large groups of villagers were going back home from a very intense meeting, already angry with the alleged failings of the authorities, when they caught the intruding electricity workers in the act. They quickly became outraged and would not listen to any explanation. Instead, they threw stones at the electricity workers, pulled them down from the transformer station, beat them up and then imprisoned them in a villager's house. Team leader Manh was the first to be injured, followed by his other colleagues. The former director of Hoang Hai Power who went to the site with the aim of supporting his staff was also stoned and seized in the

same house, where there was neither food nor any hygienic facility. The commune's authorities, the actual source of people's fury according to the electricity workers, were now incapable of solving the heightening crisis. Only when special envoys from the district authorities came to organize a meeting with all the villagers until late in the evening of the next day were the imprisoned workers able to seize an opportunity to flee on foot through the dark fields, disguised in raincoats instead of wearing their uniforms. Dong Quach, the name of the village, has become notorious among Hoang Hai electricity workers, an obsession looming in their profession ever since.

Such encounters with short-tempered customers like those in the Dong Quach incident and the New Year work shift that I witnessed, among other shifts I did not, leave electricity workers with a negative perception of their relations with their customers, as well as of the harsh nature of their job. Although they usually manage to run away before being attacked physically, verbal abuse is hard to avoid. "Being insulted" – "*bị chửi*", "*ăn chửi*" – is usually referred to when they talk about their work with the people. This happens to all staff, whether less or more experienced. One young worker, Thang, complained "for a brief loss [of power] they insult [us]" (*mất tí nó chửi*). Vice-team leader Kich made a similar point: "When the power is off, many people will come out to scold and insult us; that is so hard to bear". And power cuts happen frequently, so being abused verbally on a frequent basis leaves them with a serious deficit to their job satisfaction and even dignity. "No enjoyment in this electrical job – you are insulted as frequently as daily meals", Thuyen, a high skill-level worker exclaimed. Joining some other workers, Thuyen compared his job with being "a daughter-in-law of all families" (*làm dâu trăm họ*), an analogy implying the paradoxical relationship the workers seem to have with their customers. It is commonly believed that a daughter-in-law is one of the most difficult roles of a traditional Vietnamese woman. Being put in a low position in her husband's family hierarchy, she has to please everyone and is easily bullied by everyone. Bitter though it could be, she is in the same family as those bullying her, and so in the view of electricity workers, they are in the same kind of relationship with customers, who bully them, despite their efforts to please. If this everyday lack of job satisfaction does not lead to trauma in one's professional life, it can only be explained through a mental process of compensation and retaliation, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

"Being insulted" also happened to myself and my research assistant at the beginning of my fieldwork, when we visited a household we had selected randomly for the survey on power consumption mentioned above. After a short introduction from the village head, who acted as our guide in this survey, a senior man in the household suddenly became outraged and uttered brutal swear words, some directed at us, others to an unclear object. He only calmed down after a long while of the village head trying to explain that we were researchers, and some other villagers who happened to be there at the same time criticized him for being rude to visitors. He said afterwards: "I thought you were *Điện*

lực [Electric Power]". It turned out he mistook us as female staff of the power company.[36] Later I tried in vain later to learn why he had such strong negativity toward the company and its staff, to which he only murmured something unclearly. Eventually I had to accept that he would not tell me the reason even if it was really a good one. In hindsight, this unfortunate experience showed me why Hoang Hai Power's Director and staff advised me not to demonstrate my affiliation with them.

This encounter and my field experience afterwards also revealed a fact that can help explain the abuses: that is, despite seeing themselves as "daughters-in-law" to the customers' families, electricity workers remain strangers to the villagers they meet with. While most workers come from the same district or at least the same province, they usually work in communes other than their own residences, where people do not know them or their families. Their mobile work on the motorbikes following the grid also prompts no one except the commune's electricians to ask for their names. In uniforms, they are usually anonymous, impersonally referred to as "*Điện lực*" – the Electric Power. This anonymity and lack of personal relations to some extent allows rural customers to exercise violence and aggression against electricity workers, and by so doing expresses a resentment toward a business institution that supplies a low-quality, expensive commodity that, paradoxically, they cannot avoid consuming.

Buffering between the company and its customers: "live-line working"

It is worth noting that the insults do not happen with all kinds of power interruptions. They most likely happen when the power goes off unexpectedly, i.e. in failures of the electricity infrastructure that are euphemized as "occurrences" (*"sự cố"*). Scheduled cuts for maintenance or development of the grid are not called "occurrences" and are usually not a reason for conflict, because customers are usually informed about them beforehand. In unscheduled cases, the rural electricity grid could be failed by anything from low-capacity transformers to battered wires or ripped connections, adverse weather like heavy rains and especially typhoons in summer. Whenever such a failure happens, the electricity grid will turn from an *infra*-structure to a *supra*-structure, the "underneath and hidden" becoming "above and visible" (Trovalla and Trovalla 2015, 54; see also Star 1999, 382). These failures are unfortunately rather frequent, making electrical infrastructure highly visible and problematic to rural customers of the EVN.

[36] I also doubt he would allow himself to get so wild if he met with male workers of the power company. Some gender aspects around the workers' identity and professional practices will be discussed in the next chapter.

Upon sudden interruptions to the power supply, electricity workers who go out to fix such problems must prepare themselves to become an "anti-shock" component of the infrastructure that absorbs customers' disappointment and hostility. Their duty while rescuing the infrastructure is either to transform customers' hostility with tactics like explaining that this is "only an occurrence" that happens beyond anyone's control (this idea makes sense to many customers, as already observed) or suffer from it if customers are not convinced. Either way, they stand at the interface between the infrastructural system and the people, offering their mental and physical integrity in defence of the system and the company. With thousands of *sự cố* every year, Hoang Hai Power largely relies on the buffer of electricity workers to maintain its business operations and its relations with its customers.

To revive the infrastructure from these "occurrences" without further impairing the already problematic customer relationship, electricity workers have to accept personal risks. They usually work on the live line to avoid triggering customers' anger and maximizing the power consumption, despite the safety rule requiring "cutting the power off" before working with the grid. This rule is one of the six "safety requirements when working with electrical utilities" enforced by EVN and posted on the wall of Hoang Hai Power's building. The five are: obtain the task order, show the "Must not switch on" sign, install earthing equipment, wear a safety belt, and wear a helmet. Nam told me something about this practice in our ride to Nam Hai commune on New Year's Eve.

Nam: What we don't like the most is to fix a problem at night. It's more dangerous because we usually *fix it live* (*sửa sống*).

Me: Oh, why don't you cut the power off? Does it take you much effort to do that?

Nam: It takes nothing, we only need to switch the circuit breaker. But people are angry when the power is cut, so we do it live.

Me: Does the management know?

Nam: Of course. They tell us to avoid cutting the power off.

Me: How do they order you to do that, with a document or something?

Nam: No, they will never write down anything like that. They only say "restrain", but that's enough.

Nam's word was validated later in the meeting mentioned earlier, which I attended in September 2019, when the Director of Hoang Hai Power ordered his staff to increase consumption drastically by preventing occurrences and fixing grid problems "without power cut-offs". While the workers are concerned about customer satisfaction, the managers are more concerned about sales growth. No one in the meeting showed any reactions that might mean that this order was new to them. In fact, the Director's word was only a summary of what they had been doing anyway.

Following the management's hint, and fully convinced from their own experience that conflicts with customers should be avoided whenever possible, workers in Hoang Hai carry out their tasks relying on

their "professional experience" and a belief that the "low-voltage current cannot kill". The problem here is that this practice of live-line working is formally ruled out by EVN and all its daughter companies. Exercise it, and electricity workers will bear the liability for non-compliance with the safety rules should an accident happen. Eventually they are the ones who make this decision at the site, against the company's regulation, having accepted its consequences as part of their profession.

Buffering between the state and the people

Facing customers' verbal abuse and at times physical violence, electricity workers have attempted to explain why they fall victims to hostility. Many view the abusive treatment that is triggered by power outages as an outburst of the "oppressive exasperation" (*bức xúc*) that rural people commonly experience in their daily lives. Used as both noun and adjective, *bức xúc* is well explained in the Vietnamese context as "anger welled up in the face of bureaucratic entanglements or injustices" (Harms 2012, 739). In rural areas it can result from the lack of livelihoods, poor health-care conditions, the corrupt local state, or land requisitions and unfair compensation projects (which also involve corruption), to name but a few. Quan, a young worker in Team Two, believes that rural people need to "exhale" their oppressive exasperation into electricity workers' faces to survive the distress they experience from poverty and bureaucratic processes. Team leader Manh, who was stoned until he bled in the Dong Quach riot, also considered oppressive exasperation an underlying reason for this event, besides the power cut while working with transformers as the direct trigger. He recalled how technical and political factors were interwoven here.

> If only the electricity had been on that late afternoon, nothing would have happened to us. I wanted to connect the line for power because it was already late. Those circuit breakers can be changed later; who will die if we wait until tomorrow [for that]? But the managers insisted that we change them immediately. So the power was off when people [*bà con*][37] came home after an extremely *bức xúc* meeting with the commune's authorities about pesticides for their crops. In their fury they grabbed us right there. If the managers had listened to us, nothing would have happened.
>
> (Manh, team leader, August 2019)

It is notable that, besides making the point about people's exhalation of their oppressive exasperations, Manh's reflections on the event confirm McCammon and Griffin's observation, in their review of studies on frontline workers, that workers often have to "juggle" the employer's agenda with their customers' needs (McCammon and Griffin 2000, 285). In Manh's view, the workers' concern for

[37] Note his use of the word "bà con", which will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

local people's needs was not considered for the employer's agenda in the first place, leading to the detrimental outcomes they had to suffer later.

Mr. Dong, the most senior worker in the team, concluded after all the other witnesses had told their part of the story: "The lesson from events of this kind is we are really *'daughters-in-law of all families'* – they use us as a pretext (*cớ*) to do many other things. When the local authorities cause some trouble as in Dong Quach, our plight is made even worse". He shared the view with Manh that the underlying reason for the violence was political rather than technical, when the power cut aggravated people's existing *bức xúc* with the local state and generally with their living conditions. In their perspective, not only is the link between electricity, or the lack of electricity, and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of rural consumers with their lives clear, so is the link between the electricity sector and the local authorities' performance. Reiterating Thuyen's comment on their fate as "daughters-in-law", Mr. Dong held that electricity workers suffer for others' bad deeds because they are an easier target.

In the case of Dong Quach, electricity workers cannot escape using their usual tactics but remain buffer between the political system and angry customers, as both parties need their buffering role. Villagers direct their violence to electricity workers because it is less risky to retaliate on these strangers, who are associated in some way with the state, or on a general structure they are *bức xúc* with, than to confront the political system directly. When only some workers are injured, they successfully draw the attention of the political system while avoiding the criminal charge of attacking it. From the authorities' perspective, the violence against electricity workers circumvents peoples' offensives against the local authorities, allowing them to exit crises such as the dialogue that the Hoang Hai district authorities organized with the people in Dong Quach over their concerns. The conflict between the state and the people thus remains negotiable and resolvable so long as electricity workers absorb the antagonism. This is why, instead of the formulaic statement "serving the people" that managers like to make, electricity workers chose the idiom *"làm dâu trăm họ"* or "being a daughter-in-law of all families" to describe their bitter experience at work.

The situation of those working on the frontline, comparable to that of electricity workers, has been discussed in research settings in both the public and private sectors. While many authors emphasize the agency and autonomy of frontline service workers (see more on these issues in Chapter Six), most underline the uncertainties and contradictions in their working environments and concur on their role in mediating institutional contradictions and facilitating their operations (Lipsky 1980, McCammon and Griffin 2000, Durose 2007, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012, Zacka 2017, among others). Beyond sharing this role of frontline workers, electricity workers in rural Vietnam have political significance. They function as a buffer between the electrical infrastructure and the humans and between the state and the people it governs in the fundamentally changing context from socialist public to "market-

oriented" private. This function is exercised within an intertwining infrastructural-cum-political system, founded on the historical association between electricity and the state, and between rural electrification and the local authorities that has been discussed extensively in Chapter Two. Their role, therefore, could be seen as unparalleled in instrumentalizing the human component of the infrastructure in order to ensure the viability of the state.

What comes closest to this example of electricity workers in the wider literature could be the role of social workers in US hospitals, whom Heimer and Stevens (1997) describe as providing "insulation" for the "technical cores", namely the medical professionals. Utilizing their interpersonal skills, social workers transform the social complexities of patients' families in order to protect the medical professionals who run the technical processes. Electricity workers also provide this insulation service, but more than that, they are not only the insulator but, in the electrical apparatus, they *are* part of the technical core. Their work involves both interpersonal skills (the capacity to deal with people) *and* technical, mechanical skills (the capacity to deal with things). They, the human component of electrical infrastructure, serve as both the core and the buffer that run the system technically and socially. They help maintain, mediate and facilitate the relationship between the state and people at the grassroots without giving their work a political, dutiful name, and possibly without recognizing it as a contribution to state-making. In electrical metaphors, they are rightfully both social insulator and social conductor of the political-infrastructural system.

Conclusion

As an epilogue to the stories told in this chapter, I wish to offer yet another anecdote, this time one that appeared in the media, to reassert that the professional trauma of buffering and "being insulted" for failures of electrical infrastructure in times of crisis is not merely a reflection on the electricity workers. This trauma was verified by the EVN itself, ironically in an attempt to save the sector's image after a much-protested increase in the power tariff in 2019. In July 2020, my Vietnamese social media application Zalo's newsfeed showed the post by a manager at the Thai Binh Power Company, introducing a newspaper article on "Those who are insulted whenever power is off" ("*Những người cứ mất điện là bị chửi*") (Diem Hang 2020). The article featured EVN staff working in heat of 40 degrees Celsius facing insults from customers when the power supply was interrupted. At the center of the article were pictures of electricity workers soaking in sweat, their faces stained with dirt and lubricant. The news media article, and the very action of sharing it on social media, was in essence a public relations effort by the Vietnam Electricity Group. However, it uncovered hard truths about the instrumentalization of labor for the operation of the system. While the company confirmed the fact

that electricity workers had to work in an often abusive environment, it added to these abuses by making use of their images and their professional mistakes to play a mercy card in an attempt to cool down public anger. Unlike the usual media narrative of “the quest of a hero” that appears on every anniversary of the state-led rural electrification programme (see Chapter Two), in this time of crisis workers are made to show the miseries of their occupation. Time and again, when the system is under attack, whether in the field or in public setting, the mental and bodily integrity and even the dignity of electricity workers have been instrumentalized as a buffer. If electricity is a state instrument, the stories themselves demonstrate that electricity workers constitute its technical and human frontier, treating the population softly and flexibly in order to absorb the damage caused by the business and political elements.

Chapter Six

The Moral Dimension of Electrical Labor in State-Making

The previous chapter highlighted the buffering role of workers in the electrical apparatus that enables the operation of infrastructure and absorbs the oppressive popular exasperation (*bức xúc*) with the political system. This chapter is concerned with questions arising from these ethnographic accounts, including why electricity workers accept the instrumentalization of their physical and mental resources, whether they are only passive implementers or they have autonomy, agency or even freedom at work, how they make their decisions at work – usually amidst conflicts of interest – and ultimately, how these decisions impact the state–people relationship they are meant to maintain. These questions point to the task of examining the way workers make sense of their work and inevitably involve examining their normative, moral and pragmatic judgments in everyday situations; all these serve as the basis for workers to make their decisions. In other words, an inquiry into the moral dimension emerges naturally from the need to understand electricity workers' relationship with other entities around the electricity infrastructure, namely, the people, the company and the state.

This chapter draws on the established body of literature on street-level bureaucracy, the ongoing scholarly investigation of interactive frontline service workers and anthropological discussions on ethics and morality to understand electricity workers as not only instrumental or functional, but also as moral subjects, with particular ways of moral reasoning. It highlights the composition of their class identity, their hybrid ethical positioning among the entities they work with and especially the moral values they apply when exercising the discretionary power they are authorized with. These all too human considerations make important influences on the way the electricity system functions as an instrument of state-making in rural Vietnam.

Street-level bureaucrats, interactive service workers and moral subjects

Michael Lipsky's pioneering work on "street-level" bureaucracy and bureaucrats (Lipsky 1978, 1980) laid the foundations for a strand of research on public service workers. In his view, while these workers interact with citizens directly and regularly – hence the term "street-level" – they experience various kinds of work dilemmas, but also have substantial discretion to make decisions in specific circumstances, which makes them not only policy implementers but also "de facto policy makers" (Lipsky 1980, 24). Electricity workers in my ethnography share many characteristics with the street-level bureaucrats whom Lipsky describes. They work for the monopolistic supplier of electricity that is still to a large degree considered a public service, especially in rural areas. They work directly with

people amidst the company's internal resource constraints and external conflicts with customers. They also have an autonomy from managerial authority to deal with "nonvoluntary clients" – who have no alternatives but to seek essentials through public services (ibid., 43) – either with sympathy or antipathy. In their work between the company and its customers, and in the relationship between the state and the people it governs, electricity workers experience intensively all these "dilemmas" of street-level bureaucrats that Lipsky (1980) describes, including inadequate resources, involuntary clients and the tension between autonomy and control.

At the same time, electricity workers share quite a few characteristics with the more recent generation of "interactive service workers" that McCammon and Griffin (2000) describe, who interact with customers or clients in the service sector. These workers have lately drawn more scholarly attention when the public sector shrinks, while the service sector becomes the dominant and growing economic sector in not only post-industrial societies but also developing economies. When EVN transforms itself under the neoliberal turn, its workers fall into this category of laborers. They must learn to manage their own emotions and those of their customers to elicit positive responses from customers, rather than merely relying on their discretionary power as public service workers could do. In other words, they learn to fulfil the particular "emotional labor" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993, Hülsheger and Schewe 2011) that private service workers undertake to keep customers coming back (McCammon and Griffin 2000, 282). However, the fact that their company, EVN, is still the only supplier of electricity makes them a hybrid between street-level bureaucrats and interactive service workers. Customers pay for electricity as a commodity and for electricity supply as a service, but they are still "nonvoluntary" clients, who have to stay with the company to access grid electricity, no matter how they feel about it. This hybridity between a monopolistic public service and commodified goods and services paradoxically results in the verbal and physical abuses that electricity workers suffer in their job. They are now asked to practice emotional labor, suppressing their own emotions in order to absorb the negative attitudes of their customers, who cannot move away from EVN but instead mistreat its staff when they receive low-quality goods and services. Unlike public-sector staff in Ghana (Crook and Ayee 2006) and the UK (Durose 2007), who felt their relations with the public improved in the change of the public-service sector to more client-oriented ways of working, workers of EVN have felt more pressure in their customer relations since the reforms of the electricity sector.

Ethical issues then emerge unsurprisingly in the course of practicing professional tasks whenever electricity workers directly interact with customers. As "one core dilemma of the street-level work is that it requires judgment" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012, S18), electricity workers cannot avoid making judgments involving values, norms and ethical considerations in their work with people. They have to judge either the situations or the worthiness of customers or the appropriateness of their

demands, as well as consider the alternatives to decide the acts they would perform, whether within or beyond the discretionary power they have at their disposal. All the judgements, considerations and acts electricity workers make every day render them ethical or moral subjects. As Didier Fassin (2012) suggests, "from a pragmatic perspective the moral and the ethical are revealed in the course of action rather than on the occasion of formal dilemma" (15). Sharing the same viewpoint, Veena Das (2015) emphasizes the enactment of "ordinary ethics" through the "quotidian acts" of ethical subjects. Interestingly, the ethnographic accounts presented in this chapter demonstrate that electricity workers are relatively comfortable with their everyday morally imbued decisions, without necessarily experiencing the moments of moral breakdown that Throop (2012) highlights in his book chapter about moral sentiments.[38]

The forming of the moral and the ethical, on the other hand, is a process that happens before and beyond the course of action and the moment of decision-making. Bernardo Zacka (2017) urges those researching frontline workers to look beyond the moments to consider the "moral dispositions" that workers bring to their jobs. He argues that these dispositions put in place "a mode of affective attunement, a normative sensibility, and a way of conceiving of one's role and responsibilities" (ibid., 242) that workers rely on in moments of decision-making. By studying these dispositions with an ethnographic sensibility, he argues, researchers can project an interpretive grid in order to understand workers as moral subjects. In line with this approach, this chapter not only depicts the decisions that electricity workers have made, it also provides an ethnographic analysis of the moral dispositions and the interpretive grid that allow electricity workers' role in electrical state-making to be understood.

[38] It is largely based on this relative comfort and the seemingly absence of moments of moral breakdown in my observation of electricity workers that I use the two concepts of 'moral' and 'ethical' interchangeably and in a supplementary fashion in this chapter. Moments of moral breakdown, in Throop's explanation of Zigon's Heideggerian-inspired approach to morality, is an *ethical* moment, a "heightened moment of self-reflection" on the unrecognized *moral* modalities of existence (Throop 2012, 159). Such ethical moments happen when "taken-for-granted moral engagements in the world" are breached (ibid.). As far as my ethnographic work allows me to conclude, it is not by coincidence or without ethical reflection that electricity workers are distanced from moral breakdown. Given the fact that these workers must consider many factors to make a high number of decisions ethically, the comfort they usually show when talking about their decisions relating to customers is, to me, a sign that they find their moral values and their ethical decisions relatively compatible. The differentiation between the ethical and the moral is thus not a focus of my analysis. On the contrary, the compatibility of the two terms speaks a great deal about the workers' consciousness in justifying their hybrid positioning in the EVN's customer relations.

Sympathetic with people and working for the company: the hybrid positioning of electricity workers

As I argued in the previous chapter, electricity workers serve as buffers between the company and its customers, that is, between the infrastructural system and the people, to the extent that they become a human instrument of infrastructure. This chapter will broaden and deepen the examination of the social identity and background of workers, as well as their assumptions and values, to depict them from another perspective, that of moral subjects. In this perspective, workers buffer the system and the people, but also actively choose a "hybrid ethical positioning" that has been observed in other energy labor contexts (Powell 2018 in High and Smith 2019), one that enables them to fulfil the task of buffering both sides of conflicts.

The attitude of electricity workers to electricity users firstly manifests itself via the language the workers use to talk about their clients. Unlike their managers, they rarely use the neoliberal term *"khách hàng"* meaning "customers", or the formal word *"người dân"*, which has only one meaning – "people". Instead, workers frequently call electricity users *"dân",* a colloquial term that means "folks", "ordinary people", "lay people", or "fellow people". By choosing a less formal term, they define a less formal position in their relationship with people. In several cases, they also use the word *"bà con"* (literally "grandmothers and children"), which can mean both "people" and "relatives", to refer more intimately to the rural people they work with. Team leader Manh used this specific term when talking about the people who had beaten him in Dong Quach (see his quote in Chapter Five). These informal words denote a casual but somewhat warm relationship between electricity workers and rural residents.

Elaborating on their work with people, what electricity workers refer to is not "serving", as their managers alleged. As discussed in the previous chapter, many of them give their mission the name "*làm dâu trăm họ*" (being a daughter-in-law of all families), a much more bitter and telling expression about the service they provide and the abuse they suffer. The idiom expresses an attitude of having to endure all kinds of hardships and unreasonable demands without argument. At the same time, it has an important connotation of kinship and intimacy which the socialist term "serving" does not. By using this idiom, electricity workers intuitively place themselves among the rural people, thus casually defining the sort of work ethics they intend to abide by. It is an ethics of working with those people they are akin with.

Nonetheless, I would not wish to romanticize the relationship and the shared identity between electricity workers and rural customers, having heard various workers refer to people who trouble them as *"nó"*. *"Nó",* when referring to humans, means "she, he, they, her, him" or "them", in a vulgar

and sometimes disrespectful, dismissive way. In these cases, when workers refer to troublemaking customers as "*nó*", this vulgar and disrespectful sense is clear. Recalling the coarse speech thrown at the electricity workers on the New Year's Eve work shift and other incidents, we will see some similarity in the styles of language used by the workers and their customers. When speech is an "un-maskable" signifier of class origins (Charlesworth 2000, 215), this similarity denotes a shared background between two entities. The difference is where and when the workers use this style of speech: they only use it behind the customers' backs, not to their faces. This use of coarse language also exemplifies Charlesworth's statement on the world of the working class – "there is little space for the luxury of euphemization in a world that impacts upon them so directly" (ibid., 218). The relationship between electricity workers and customers in rural areas, casual and amicable though it could be, contains a tension which is also expressed casually through the spoken language.

In general, electricity workers adopt somewhat paradoxical thinking about complications in their relations with customers. Several workers see their troublemaking customers as having no good idea of where the limit should be and thus step over the boundary in an irrational way. Manh sometimes called the disrespectful attitude of customers and their mistreatment of electricity workers as "excessively democratic" (*dân chủ quá trớn*), a discourse whereby propaganda media describe some of civil society's activities. This mode of assessment implies a paternalistic view, or even a "moral superiority" (Lipsky 1980, 56) that electricity workers as "street-level bureaucrats" feel over rural customers.

At the same time, they show an empathy with customers who have adverse reactions in the face of power outages. Quite often they say: "Let's imagine ourselves and our families suffering power cuts". Even when falling victims of abusive treatment, they justify it as the release of many oppressive exasperations that rural people experience in their lives. Anthropologists have noted this particular sentiment of empathy as resulting from an individual's engagement with "beings like me", who experience joy and suffering "the same way that he or she does" (Throop 2012, 157).

However, the more important reason for their empathy is possibly their underlying assumption that most rural people have been kind and gentle and are still so.

> People are still very kind and gentle *(hiền)*, I have to admit this to you guys. The actual voltage is only 160 volts, while the standard is 220 volts. Their appliances break. They cannot cook their rice, cannot even run their ventilators. But they still pay you at the end of the month. Isn't it true that they are too kind, too gentle?
>
> (Manh, team leader, August 2019)

Manh's argument is based on the term in the contract under which the company provides electricity for household users at a voltage of 220 – 230. In his view, the company breaks the term without being

punished thanks to its monopoly position and the gentleness of rural customers. Here workers are very aware of the unequal power relations between the political authorities and the people (which contributes to their "oppressive exasperations"), as well as between the company as a monopoly and its customers. Like the "nonvoluntary clients" that Lipsky (1980) describes, electricity users in rural Vietnam subscribe to a highly desired good that cannot be obtained anywhere else but from the EVN, an unequal relationship from which they cannot withdraw. Working for the electricity sector, workers recognize this dilemma among customers and acknowledge the limitations of the system, as well as the improper practices within the industry. Sometimes during their leisure time at their office before or after the work shift, team leader Manh and other team members openly discussed this power relation in ways that were critical of their company.

> Manh: We have been talking in a position of the only supplier, we are the electricity industry. What if we put ourselves in their [the customers'] position? The electricity sector is a monopoly; people have to get electricity here only because there is nowhere else.
>
> Team member 1: The industry must change critically, or people will continue to suffer. Now that ECPay adds to the burden.[39]
>
> Team member 2: It should have reduced the inconvenience for people, instead of creating more of the same.

As soon as they see that their customers are in a very weak position compared to the company and criticize their employer, electricity workers start to express their hybrid ethical views of the world. This world view will quietly guide their act of decision-making and justify their daily decisions in ethical senses.

It is noteworthy that the most experienced staff in the team appear to promote this positioning actively. They infuse younger colleagues with ethical assessments and suggest how they ought to act. Mr. Dong, the oldest member, reminded the team that their respect and empathy toward people

[39] At the time of their discussion, ECPay had been newly introduced in some rural areas as an intermediate institution in charge of collecting bills, replacing local electricians in this task. Its employees work in a way similar to the commune's electricians: they sit in one place, and the electricity users come to pay. However, what people get after paying is not the normal clearly printed bill of the EVN district branch but only a small instantly printed receipt that comes out of a handheld electronic device. This receipt, as first experiences show, quickly becomes illegible as the ink fades away, and it is too small in size for rural customers to keep safely. Also, ECPay employees appeared neither well-trained nor familiar with local people, so mistakes frequently happen, disturbing both EVN staff and customers. On the other hand, this mode of payment virtually eradicates the informal credit mechanism that the commune's electricians run to help people pay for electricity on time (see Chapter Four for details of this credit mechanism).

would help in cases of conflict. Based on the way younger team members received his advice, without surprise or an expression of puzzlement, we can tell it was what he had shared many times.

> People's intellectual standard [*dân trí*] is now even higher than ours; don't think we are more intelligent than the people. If we fight with them in the style of "fencing the apple tree because you eat apples" ["*ăn cây táo rào cây táo"*], we will be immediately insulted. But if we talk to them properly, then "to decent words even the turnip listens" ["*nói phải củ cải cũng nghe*"]. Be empathetic, share their concerns, tell them we acknowledge them and will report their concerns to our supervisors [*lãnh đạo*]. We know our supervisors will only report upward. No one knows when it could be resolved, but when we have a proper way of talking, people will calm down.

Interestingly, he suggested that staff not defend the company in conflicts with people – not "fence the apple tree because you eat apples". Instead, respect people because of their intellectual standard and be empathetic with them, knowing the problems of the system may persist indefinitely. Together with Manh, his emphasis on this positioning makes it a dominant viewpoint within General Team Two, to the extent that it becomes an organizational value. From the perspective of organizational culture and leadership, Manh and Dong have been enacting a "moral function of guiding members of the group in how to deal with certain key situations" (Schein 1986, 16). Under their normative and moral influences, team members tend to internalize this dominant discourse and apply the advice in difficult situations, as described extensively in the previous chapter.

However, there is still room for a plurality of perspectives on customers. The dominant attitude to the customer relationship is not always practiced, especially in less experienced workers when they are frequent targets of hostility. Thanh, a younger worker, clearly adopts a more hostile attitude toward the people he works with. His attitude was expressed in a month-end work shift by his group of three (Nam, Thanh, Thuyen), when the business section of the company tasked them with disconnecting indebted households from the grid. These are households that, for whatever reason, have failed to pay before the deadline. Each of them is given a list of such households in the communes they oversee. Thanh appeared to wait for this monthly task when he said to me: "Soon we will come to *eat* them" (*"Tí xuống ăn thịt"*). At the site, we first met a young woman nursing a small child. Contrary to my expectations about the case of someone who cannot pay but wishes to keep the connection, she did not put on an expression of need and merely made some unconvincing claim that her husband had paid. What she showed most clearly was dissatisfaction. After coldly informing her that her house would be disconnected from the grid, Thanh quickly carried out the task at the meter box. He knew that he himself would have to come again to reconnect this very house to the grid after they had paid the bill and a small reconnection fee, possibly that afternoon or within the next few days, but he did not hesitate to take this action. The reason is, as he said afterwards, "each time we come to urge them to pay, they act as if we were begging them, but whenever the power is off just briefly they insult us".

His action is therefore "fair" in his eyes, based on his own feelings and experience with his customers, rather than being influenced by the dominant discourse of the team. However, his attitude is in accordance with the company's rules in such cases. His statement does not target any one specific household but refers to customers in general, this standard perception of his customers sufficing to justify the action he has the right to take.

In this same work shift, I had a chance to go out with Nam, who took me to the communes on New Year's Eve and on some other occasions after that. His opinion is that the electricity can be disconnected "flexibly". In those households that wanted to pay, he was willing to take the money as an extra service, though without any receipt because he was not supposed to collect money, and to take it back to the company on their behalf. He only disconnected the wire in one household, which, it being their last chance, had still failed to pay because no one was at home when he came. In another household, he became frustrated at learning that an ECPay's contracted employee had made this customer pay for another one by mistake. He immediately called the office workers at Hoang Hai Power to request a correction. In yet another household, he said nothing at all, seeing that the family had two meters, thus allowing their bill to be reduced, a practice that the company tried to eliminate.[40] Within his discretionary power, he could have immediately disconnected one of the two meters and reported the incident, so that the company could make the customer pay the correct amount. But unlike Thanh, Nam tends to support customers if he can. He ignored this customer's offence, which in his eyes was minor. He had once said to me earlier that the rural population of Thai Binh was poor, so if he and his colleagues could help they would do so without asking for money like "other guys in big cities". This time he again remarked on the customers' good nature, sharing team leader Manh's viewpoint: "the majority of people are gentle and kind, and even more so in the religious areas."[41] Based on the perception that people are poor and gentle and kind, Nam adopts a different attitude to the customers and makes decisions that are considerably different from Thanh's.

Although receiving the same messages from senior workers, the younger team members have different ways of dealing with customers at different times. The Durkheimian approach to ethical

[40] The company's policy is that each household is eligible for one meter, as this relates closely to the revenue it gets from household users. As the power tariff is an exponential/increasing block-rate tariff, the more a household consumes, the higher the tariff rate that will apply. This means that, if a family can somehow manage to be separated into two or three households, they can have two or three meters, and thus the amount measured by each meter will not exceed a certain low tariff level. The total payment this family has to make with two or three meters will be considerably lower than having just one meter while consuming the same amount of electricity.

[41] By "religious areas", Nam was referring to Christian communities in several communes of Tien Hai district.

values that Robbins and Sommerschuh (2016) invoke can explain this working mechanism of the team of electricity workers: these workers adopt shared values from certain common "collective experiences", such as the experience of being treated in a specific way by customers, and absorb the influence of "exemplary persons" such as Manh and Dong, but also have variations in personal values that affect their decisions (7-8). If Thanh and Nam could be seen as located at the two ends of a spectrum, most workers in General Team Two are somewhere closer to Nam in their attitudes toward their customers and in making decisions related to them. In most households I visited accompanying these workers, people appeared to have the positive feeling that their interests were being attended to. More powerful customers were satisfied that EVN workers came to hear their complaints and responded softly. Poorer, less articulate people were somewhat grateful to see the workers protect their interests. In their hybrid positioning between the people and the company, the electricity workers contributed to the bright side of EVN's customer relations and thus to a positive relationship between the people and the state.

The moral state, the company's values and the workers' dual loyalties: the interplay between the macrosocial and the microsocial

Working for the company, but fully aware of the limitations of the system, while sharing concerns with people who resemble themselves and their families, many electricity workers develop a kind of dual loyalty to both the company and the people, and sometimes act for the people's benefit, rather than abiding by the company's rules. Nam does his best to collect payments for the company at the end of the month, but does not report cases he knows about in the commune of households that keep more than one meter. It is common for workers to collect the payment on behalf of indebted households, instead of cutting them off from the grid in accordance with the company's rules. Sometimes they even help people fix minor problems inside their houses, although this is beyond their responsibility, especially when the households "look poor", meaning they lack the resources to hire freelance electricians. Several workers believe the increase in tariff rates in March 2019 (discussed in the following chapter) is excessive, as are some other policies, like forcing rural residents to pay their bills via the intermediate institution ECPay. Such beliefs and practices are the manifestation of a dual, sometimes conflicting loyalty to both the company where they are employed and the people whom they perceive as poor and gentle and kind. This dual loyalty makes up part of the interpretive grid to understand workers' "quotidian acts" – the everyday decisions they choose to make regarding their customers.

Observing the exercise of dual loyalty, one would inevitably question how workers assess their own practices from an ethical point of view. How do they exercise "moral reasoning"? Are they concerned that their practices might constitute a betrayal to the company that employs them and pays them good remuneration? The first observation is that workers do not consider what they do as jeopardizing the benefits of the company. When it comes to financial duties, they seem to reason that they have collected the last payment possible for the bills the company requires. Their help with people's household problems is seen as a private gesture which does not harm the company itself. And even the unreported multiple meters in some poor households will not make the company poorer, because, in their view, the power tariff is already high enough to compensate for these minor losses. In their encounters with electricity users, whom they perceive as poor, but gentle and kind, electricity workers usually take the side of the people. For most of the workers I had interactions with, it is likely that they would question their own moral values if they did the opposite.

To understand the moral reasoning of the electricity workers, their individual moral values must be viewed in the light of the moral dimensions of the state and the institution, in this case EVN, that defines the overarching environment for their work. Didier Fassin's elaboration of the two concepts of "moral economies" and "moral subjectivities" (Fassin 2015, 9-10) is helpful in understanding the intertwining of structural and individual morality. Accordingly, moral economies correspond to the *macrosocial* level of morality, where collective understanding, values and affects around a given issue are produced and circulated. Moral subjectivities work at the *microsocial* level, where individuals take moral decisions in concrete situations under the influence of a moral economy while at the same time they "reinforce, contest, or displace" (ibid., x) the collectively established values. The interplay between collective moral values and individual moral values is where moral dispositions are enacted, and where the "interpretive grid" in Zacka's terms (2017) can be studied.

Discussing the moral world of institutions and the state, Fassin (2015) raises the question "Can states be moral?" My answer for the current case of the Vietnamese state is "Yes, certainly". The Vietnamese state claims to attend to people, and its system of political communication makes this moral claim well known to all walks of life. Treating this state morality as a "moral economy" provides the very background for workers' "moral subjectivities", as manifested in the way workers position themselves between the company and the people. While the workers' loyalty to the people may pose some problems from the company's perspective, it has a firm backup in the state's moral values. The idea of a state "of the people, by the people and for the people" gives electricity workers an assurance that, as long as they do good for the people, their actions can be morally justified in the face of the state. This assurance is especially important when their practice compromises the company's rules. It also enables them to be critical of the company and sympathetic to its customers in discussions with their

colleagues. In their view, the company does not represent morality but simply business interest, which, paradoxically, serves to secure their salary and remuneration.

In their everyday practices, electricity workers negotiate a latent conflict of values between the increasingly neoliberal institution, EVN, and the self-acclaimed "for-the-people" state. While they take the sides of rural residents, being supported by the state's normative values, they also strive to make sure that what they do for people does not undermine the company's business. This in its turn assures them that they have abided by their work ethics, at least enough to feel comfortable in receiving salary and remuneration from the company.

Use and misuse of authorized power

There is a sophisticated interplay between moral values, the company's values and personal interests in the ways electricity workers make everyday decisions. This process usually takes place within the framework of the decision-making power they are authorized with, or the "discretionary power" named by scholars of street-level bureaucratic traditions. This power allows them not only to make decisions that are favorable for customers, but also to "teach" their involuntary clients how to behave properly (Lipsky 1980). It even enables them to pursue their own personal interests whenever their moral reasoning allows this.

In insulating the state from the people, the company from its customers, electricity workers know where their authority is, and they use it in specific cases when they see the need. For example, the act of disconnecting the power supply after the payment deadline can be suspended if the household can find enough money to hand over to the electricity workers, who come to urge them to pay, and who will pay at the company on their behalf. Under the company's rules, once the deadline has passed without payment, electricity users must be disconnected from the grid, and must come to pay at the company's offices in the district township. The amount will then include an additional fee of 81,000 VND or about 4 US dollars for the disconnecting and reconnecting service.[42] In many cases, electricity workers prefer not to take this measure, because first it causes problems for the usually poor customer households, which they may have already felt sympathetic to, and second it creates more work for themselves without any visible benefit. In reality, the practice of collecting money after the deadline is accepted as a "neat paradox" (Lipsky 1980, 19)[43] of the electricity business because it makes everyone's work easier. The finance and accounting section of the branch is happy to get more cash

[42] As of 30th October 2020, this fee increased to 98,000 VND, equivalent to 4.5 US dollars.

[43] A neat paradox is where, according to Lipsky (1980), "lower-level participants develop coping mechanisms contrary to an agency's policy but actually basic to its survival" (19).

revenue on the last days of the business month. Customer services saves the time needed to deal otherwise with too many people showing up in their office to make the payment. Not only electricity workers but also related sections of the branch see this as a pragmatic way of doing business. Again, an informal practice is exercised in parallel with the formal rules in order to maximize the company's turnover, relying on customers' willingness to pay without getting receipts and on workers' willingness to deal with cash that is not their own.

Then, the power the company confers on electricity workers can also be exercised as a means of punishment, deterrence or even retaliation if the latter perceive that the customers are not "gentle and kind" as usual, but, conversely, have a problematic attitude. Thanh is an example of a worker retaliating to the hostility he receives from customers. Nam also has the idea of "teaching" unruly customers by acts of punishment. Several days after their group's shift, which I described above, Nam told me about a new case where he had removed two meters out of three from a household because this householder had been "*láo*" (insolent) when requesting him to repair their line. Since Nam used to feel no problem with multi-meter households, his action in this case was based on an attitude he perceived as unfair, not because of the breach in the company's regulation. It is remarkable to see how what is perceived as a disrespectful attitude on the part of a customer can reverse the decision even of a worker like Nam, who I had come to believe had firmly chosen the side of people in the conflict of interest with his company.

There are many more examples of electricity workers using their authority to "teach" their involuntary customers a lesson when the latter are perceived to have excessive demands. In one instance, two workers on the inspection team, together with a group of three from General Team Two, came to check a customer's electricity meter at his own request. His complaint of abnormal bills came after cases of the detection of false meter readings elsewhere, in which the error was the company's, making the electricity workers suspect that this customer wanted to make use of the situation to trick them. In this case, after proving that the meter was running correctly, they discovered that the man was using supplied electricity for false purposes. His contract stated that the company provided electricity for production, meaning at a lower tariff rate, but in fact he used this supply for both production and his household needs. Instead of getting the compensation he hoped for, the man would now have to pay more every month because a certain percentage of his consumption would be charged at the household-use price, which is considerably higher than that for production. With an overwhelming number of people (five) and the clearly announced policy, the group of electricity workers had no difficulty in making this customer sign a note to admit his wrong-doing. The customer looked surprised, disappointed and somewhat indignant all at once. What he learnt from the result of this check might be to avoid any encounter with EVN staff next time, rather than claiming his rights as a consumer,

which he thought would benefit him. Conversely, the electricity workers appeared to be satisfied at their having put the customer back in his right place.

In encounters with customers as such, the electricity workers in General Team Two have enough authority to decide whether and how certain policies are applied. Interestingly their decisions are varied, and in many cases contradictory, suggesting they have what Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012) call “street-level agency” and “pragmatic improvisation” (S20) that goes beyond discretionary decision-making. These authors observe that the most effective street-level workers used the rules rather than followed them (S17). In a similar manner, electricity workers in Hoang Hai readily ignore some rules when they judge that they do not benefit the company much and only increase the burden considerably, either on the customers or on themselves. Even in cases where they abide by the policies, that is not necessarily evidence of their loyalty to the company. Instead, their decisions involve judgements of selves and customers based on the ethical and cultural values they internalize. The process of making these choices appears to follow “an orientation in which workers concentrate on who people are, in relation to their imagined selves, and enforce cultural abidance over legal abidance” (ibid., S17). In the view of some anthropologists of ethics, their use of power does not equate to agency: more than that, it manifests the freedom they exercise in living their ethical lives (Laidlaw 2002).

When it comes to personal interests and the misuse of authorized power, a distinction must be made (i) between peasant customers and business customers, who are usually more affluent, and (ii) between frontline workers, electrical specialists and the management. The misuse of authorized power for personal benefit is more likely to happen in the encounters between specialists, managers and business customers. Having to pay large power bills, service businesses such as restaurants and hotels may want to enjoy a lower tariff rate for their use of electricity. Some others, like industrial and agricultural producers at the start of their businesses, simply want to have quick and easy access to the three-phase electricity grid needed for production (as the standard line for household use is only two-phase). Some try to integrate their household use into production use, as in the above-cited case of inspection, because the tariff for production is the lowest compared to household use and services. These interests could be expressed discretely to the specialists who have the power to decide whether and when to make a three-phase line, and which tariff rate to impose. In a trip with one such specialist, I witnessed a case with the potential for bribery. Arriving at a small service facility, the specialist checked the contract and decided to increase the percentage of electricity use for the service, meaning the higher tariff rate would be applied on a higher percentage of use. The couple owning this small facility looked very upset at the decision. We then left them to visit another household business, but after about fifteen minutes the woman followed us, inviting the specialist to return to “have a further

talk" with her husband. In the presence of myself and the other householder, the specialist refused to return. However, with hundreds of such cases in a month, all resolved through his own decision-making power, it is highly probable that he would not always resist the temptation of making a little compromise. One of my interlocutors in the communes told me about his own experience of working with such an electrical specialist to set up a three-phase electric line for his farm. He had to offer this specialist a bribe of three million Vietnam *dong* (equivalent to 120 Euros at the time) to get the approval of Hoang Hai Power, so that he could build the line by hiring some freelance electricians who could do the job.

The branch managers can benefit from their discretionary power in a different way. Those who oversee the industrial park may get "care" from industrial producers for different reasons on different occasions in the year, in exchange for favorable treatment from the monopoly. The branch's top managers can benefit from construction partners who win the contracts to build parts of the local grid. For deciding on the winner, a commission of ten per cent is not uncommon.

Unlike the branch specialists and managers, frontline electricity workers do not have decision-making power in their relations with business partners and thus do not actively misuse their discretion in the same way, but that does not mean they are not involved altogether: some workers may be offered a small gift when the partners want to make a gesture with those who directly work at the site. These business partners are different from peasants, who are generally considered poor. They are seen as having more resources to make these offers, and thus some electricity workers do not find it unethical to accept them. This is nevertheless quite rare because most electricity workers work to oversee the communes, not the industrial park.

Furthermore, the small gifts that some electricity workers received are less likely to be seen as unethical when put in the context of the widespread misuse of authorized power in many forms both within and outside the electricity sector. Many EVN employees, whether at headquarters or in the district branches, have had to pay a bribe to get the job in the first place, on top of the condition that they have family members working or having worked for the industry, and thus a network has been available for use.[44] The staff of provincial companies and district branches know that inspectors sent now and then from the corporation will not be satisfied before being treated well. Some state

[44] This practice at EVN exemplifies a long existing phenomenon in the state sector of Vietnam. With the hope to secure employment and social status, some people agree to pay money, usually a considerable amount, to arrange a job in public institutions or state-owned enterprises. This illegal but widely known practice is colloquially called "*chạy việc*". See, for instance, newspaper articles (in Vietnamese) on the legal punishment for those brokering this kind of transaction: https://vneconomy.vn/chay-viec-tien-mat-tat-mang.htm, and https://laodong.vn/phap-luat/lua-dao-nhan-tien-chay-viec-roi-chiem-doat-gan-1-ti-dong-1116617.ldo.

authorities like public security forces also suggest year-end cash gifts. Even local media expect presents on special occasions. Surrounded by this culture of "gift-giving", and, sometimes, of blunt bribery, electricity workers do not necessarily find their acceptance of small gifts as unethical. Their business customers, be they small producers in the villages or big producers in the industrial park, are also no stranger to similar incidents of gift-giving, not only with electricity sector staff. To both sides, the fact that authorized power can be misused is perceived as a structural problem, frustrating but opening the chance for personal benefits.

"We are workers": class identity as a moral disposition

In the political economy of Vietnam, the working class is young with regard to history and minor with regard to number. It only started to form in the beginning of the twentieth century, during the period of French colonialist exploitation (Vietnam General Confederation of Labor 2016). More than a century since then, even after the "industrialization and modernization" of the economy, in 2017 the number of workers still stood at 26.5 per cent of the total number of laborers (General Statistics Office 2019) with limited class consciousness. Most workers today are "peasants, without basic and systematic training" (Vietnam Communist Party 2008, 45). They recently became workers because they could not live from farming, or because they lost their land to predatory construction projects.

Within such a working-class background, electricity workers are a special phenomenon. The first generation of electricity workers appeared in the threshold between the 19th and 20th centuries, when the most important cities in Vietnam started to be lit by electricity. A long tradition of several generations working under colonialist rule, wars and then a socialist regime with the mandate to go "one step ahead" has created a sense of pride in those who work for the electricity sector today. Many workers I talked to at Hoang Hai Power referred to themselves as a "worker" or "Power worker" (*công nhân Điện lực*) with absolute comfort, and some even with a degree of satisfaction. This self-identification is not common in workers in other industries, whether extractive or processing industries. A survey cited by Pham Van Giang (2016) shows that less than one fourth (23.5 per cent) of Vietnamese workers are proud that they are workers. Of the remainder, many consider their jobs in factories and workshops to be only a livelihood (*cách mưu sinh*), not even an occupation (*nghề nghiệp*).

Many electricity workers talked proudly about their family tradition of working in the power industry. They normally have fathers or at least close relatives who retired as electrical staff, while many have other relatives still working in the industry. Team leader Manh's father and father-in-law are both retired electricity workers. His wife is now working at the Finance and Accounting section of the same Hoang Hai Power. Nam also has an uncle holding the position of Director of a northern provincial

company. A vice director in the district branch has a father who was a former electrical manager. Most of them are second- or third-generation workers who got into the industry via their own family connections (plus, sometimes, cash gifts), with a fair understanding of the profession. Memories of their fathers' work were recalled in several conversations with electricity workers, showing a sentimental dimension to their jobs. This family tradition is incommensurable for most workers in Vietnam today, those former peasants who only became workers in industrial zones after being disappointed with farming in their home villages. The hereditary quality of the profession can explain the attachment that electricity workers feel to their jobs (see Bedi 2016 for a similar phenomenon among taxi-drivers in Mumbai), as well as the degree of autonomy, or in other words the agency, of electricity workers, which will be discussed further below.

The pride or at least self-confidence in being an electricity worker thus comes from a perception that their position is not at all inferior to those of other social groups. They work for a leading state-owned enterprise, enjoying the state privileges of secure employment and salaries. Only 8.26 per cent of workers in the whole country belong to this category, while the number of workers in the whole country only accounts for one fourth of the total workforce (General Statistics Office 2019). This means that electricity workers belong to a very small category of laborers whose employment and payment are secured. While the salaries of state-enterprise workers are in general higher than those of workers in the non-state sector (Karadjis 2011, 55), EVN is, in particular, a prosperous enterprise that provides comparatively generous remuneration. It was in Thai Binh that I heard the saying "the rich are electricity workers and the fashionable are tailors" ("*giàu thợ điện, diện thợ may*"). Junior electricity workers in Hoang Hai earn eleven or twelve million *dong* (equivalent to 500 to 600 US dollars) a month in salaries and regular bonuses, or at least 6,000 US dollars a year, not including annual bonuses. Those with higher skill levels earn one or two hundred dollars more a month. This income is at least double the average of the Vietnamese industrial workforce, which stands below 3,000 US dollars a year (ManPowerGroup 2019, cited in many Vietnamese newspapers[45]). It is triple that of agricultural laborers, whom the Ministry of Planning and Investment claims earn an equivalent of less than 2,000 US dollars a year, even after taking the cost of living and prices into account (Le Thanh 2019). Electricity workers are aware that they are more affluent than most of their customers, especially peasants, who they are working to "serve". This awareness is one of the reasons for their compassion, as well as, sometimes, an inclination to superiority toward rural residents with whom they interact every day, for example, when teaching "nonvoluntary clients" (Lipsky 1980) a lesson.

[45] For example, on VnExpress online newspaper (in Vietnamese): https://vnexpress.net/thu-nhap-cua-lao-dong-viet-bang-mot-phan-bay-khu-vuc-4030172.html

Unlike migrant workers in industrial zones, who account for the majority of Vietnamese working class today, electricity workers such as those in Hoang Hai are not migrants by any means. Many of them were born and now live with their families in the same district where they work, while others live further away but still within commutable distance of other districts in the same province. The home region of their customers is therefore also their own home region. This is another aspect of the moral disposition based on which they decide how to exercise the power with which they are authorized on rural customers.

Electricity workers have a significant autonomy even in their relations with their branch and company managers. The first indicator of this autonomy is the way workers call their managers "leaders" (*lãnh đạo*), not "bosses" ("sếp"). "Leaders" is a socialist-style term used in state institutions and state-owned enterprises, designating a less hierarchical and dependent relationship between managers and workers than "bosses", which is used frequently in the non-state sector. For workers in Hoang Hai Power, managers are those in charge of the branch's general operations, but also those who join them every day in early morning meetings at the office and important shifts in the field, and thus are not far from them in the hierarchy. This sense of egalitarianism in Hoang Hai Power is more salient in juxtaposition with the way EVN staff at the headquarters address their superiors: while employees of Hoang Hai Power call their managers "leaders", the term "bosses" is used frequently in the EVN headquarters in Hanoi, not only by junior officials, but also by department managers in referring to their seniors. This can imply a more distant staff-manager relationship in the central office of the corporation than at the provincial and district-level offices, or, at the same time, a higher degree of "market-oriented" changes like those experienced at headquarters.

The family tradition and extended connections with people in the industry, described above, clearly play a role in the worker-manager relationship in the district. The director and vice-directors at the branch usually do not decide whether to recruit or fire personnel on their own. They are subject to influence from many directions to accept someone for work at the branch, and usually do not fire anyone because each worker has his own network reaching far beyond the district branch, which his managers would rather not interfere with. A worker's status should be considered in relation to the hereditariness of his position and the range of his connections with the provincial company and the industry in general. He can thus ask to move among district branches based on the influence of his network; he does not have to stay in the same branch when he finds it uncomfortable. Although workers see themselves as the "daughters-in-law of all families" in their relations with their customers, they are not powerless subordinates at the end of the assembly line. Belonging to a secure category of laborers, workers in Hoang Hai Power do not necessarily feel inferior to their director and vice-directors at the branch.

In terms of remuneration, electricity workers at Hoang Hai Power believe that their managers do not enjoy much more privilege than them, as every month they can see the salaries of the whole branch printed in a single spreadsheet. To receive his salary, each staff member will come to the finance and accounting office, take this spreadsheet, certify his receipt of the money by signing their name and accompanying number on the line, and in this process, certainly have a look through the other names. Seeing the income of anyone in the branch in such a list, they are assured that their official salary and bonus are not much different from those of their peers, and not much lower than those of the managers. While they are aware of the commissions the managers can earn by outsourcing contracts (for example, ten percent was mentioned as a common sum), this internally public income means the official system does not treat workers and managers very differently. This assurance of egalitarian, transparent remuneration is different from the situation in many other industries, especially in the private sector, where "managerial personnel get higher salaries" than in state-owned enterprises (Karadjis 2011, 55) and where workers hardly know how much their managers earn. Electricity workers in Hoang Hai told me about this difference with a clear expression of satisfaction about their situation.

The locally settled accommodation, the hereditary quality of their profession and their confidence in their secure jobs and incomes result in many factors in the autonomy and agency of electricity workers. These include an attachment to the profession and workplace, a safety net that they enjoy both professionally and socially, and an awareness of the social class that they are ready to identify with – that of (electricity) workers. Electricity workers do not see themselves in the dichotomy between "masters" and "commodities" that several authors on the Vietnamese working-class debate (Evans and Bui 2005, Karadjis 2011). This dichotomy may apply to blue-collar, usually migrant workers in industrial parks and export-processing zones, but it does not seem applicable to local "hereditary" state employees like EVN workers. Electricity workers are well aware of the demands of their duty to buffer the system and are at times unsatisfied with the company's treatment of human resources, but they are also content with the relative power the structure of the industry gives them. These factors contribute to the phenomenon of "hollow identity" that Nai-teh Wu (2001) similarly observes in Taiwanese workers: their class identity leads them nowhere, not to a class consciousness or a particular ideology, and thus not to a class struggle.

As well as defining their working-class identity, electricity workers are clear about why the job at EVN appeals to them and what holds them to it, given the hardships and hostile environment. Nam said workers like him would not have taken this job without being paid well enough because the job came with many dangers. For him, the payment is what he and his colleagues deserve in light of their experiences, although he is not satisfied with several policies and practices of the company. Thanh said that if someone "bought" his position here, he would have money to go to Australia as a migrant

worker to “earn some capital” (*kiếm ít vốn*). The amount of payment in Hoang Hai Power seemed insufficient to fulfil his capitalist dreams. However, he had found no one to pay him for the position, so he stayed because the job still ensured him a decent life for now. Manh, conversely, is fully confident that he can easily earn a higher income if he sets up some private business, “given my strength and capacity”, as he said. However, he is so attached to the profession that he would not leave it for money. Manh told me his father asked him on his first day of work to think again about the choice of being an electricity worker because he knew from his own experience that the job was hard. Manh answered that he had always wanted to do it. His answer remains the same today, especially given that his own and his wife’s income from the job, though not particularly high, is enough to make them feel secure. Some electricity workers work more for the income and security, others more for the family attachment and self-identification with the occupation, but they make this choice consciously, being aware of the dangers and sacrifices, as well as the remuneration and personal motives.

Given their own reasons for working, these workers adopt different approaches to their jobs, as demonstrated in their attitudes and patterns of work. While Nam and the majority of workers usually undertake the tasks without complaining, Thanh and some others tend to avoid the heavy parts of a job whenever they can. While Nam appeared to be tolerant of customers who have committed some minor violation of the company’s rules, Thanh does not see this as any reason to tolerate them. Manh, on the other hand, undertakes some of the heaviest tasks and feeds positive thinking about the job and the people they must work with to his team members. Within his authority to balance between the “heavy” and “light” parts of his work, he also manages to allocate jobs fairly to his team members in an effort to reduce the hardships they face. From the perspective of ethics and freedom, they have all made ethical and free choices in living their professional lives.

> Wherever and in so far as people’s conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free.
>
> Laidlaw (2002, 327)

Conclusion

The three concepts of “street-level bureaucrat”, “interactive service worker” and “moral subject” have been articulated in this chapter to explore the multi-faceted world of electricity workers. As both street-level bureaucrats and interactive service workers, they work with but are not limited by the discretionary power the institution gives them. As moral subjects, they practice an ordinary ethics in everyday decision-making, drawing on the state’s, the company’s and individual levels of morality.

Their identification with both the peasantry and the working class is among the moral dispositions that build up an interpretive grid for the understanding of electricity workers. Their dual loyalties and hybrid ethical positioning enable workers to stand on the frontline in order to mediate the relationships between the company, the people and the state. Satisfaction about their status and their safety net, on the other hand, keeps them in the buffering position of the electricity system and away from the class struggle.

Following the strand of argument in the previous chapter, the instrumentality of electricity workers is nuanced by the hybrid ethical positioning they adopt between the "power" and the "people", as well as by the values they uphold individually in their relations with the rural consumers they work with every day and at times of crisis. These values could be attuned but could also well be in conflict with the company's regulations and the stated values of their management. The articulation between personal values, sectoral values and the state's values makes workers' instrumentalization by no mean a monolithic pattern or a machine process. Instead, their varied everyday practice of the profession could be viewed in terms of the ethical utilization of their identities and of the power to which they are entitled and are authorized to use as personnel. By exercising everyday ethics and freedom in their professional lives, they occupy a peculiar position that is separate from the people, relatively autonomous from their managers and not necessarily bound to a specific workplace at a district branch such as Hoang Hai Power: they are "*công nhân điện lực*" – workers of the power industry.

Figure 8. A work meeting before departing for the day

Chapter Seven

Electricity Sectoral Reforms and Energy Transition from Above and Below

In March 2019, the Vietnam Electricity Group (EVN) announced an 8.36 per cent rise in electricity tariffs, after two years of their being frozen. This fueled a race at Hoang Hai Electric Power to read all eighty-two thousand electricity meters in the district just before the new price was applied on March 20th. Electricity workers from all teams rode their motorbikes to industrial customers to read their meters in one day and at the same time supervised the communal electricians' reading of household meters in all communes. Financial and customer services staff worked long hours for days to register the data collected and inform customers of their consumption immediately. All staff worked overtime, some staying overnight at the office, as any delay in their work would mean losses for the company. The numbers on their spreadsheets marked the end of the old retail price and the start of the new, higher tariff.

This "change of price" ("*đổi giá*"), as EVN called it, of 8.36 per cent was an issue of dispute, however. Among electricity workers themselves, there was a disagreement on how much total costs would increase for consumers. Some repeated the message of the company and even adjusted a little bit to mitigate the impact it caused on customers' feelings, saying it was equivalent to a "mere eighty thousand *dong* more if you consume one million *dong* of electricity per month". This rise was then equivalent to 8 per cent and did not seem to be a large amount compared to the total expenses. Meanwhile, some other workers noted that this 8.36 per cent was the rate before tax, which would be more than 9 per cent after tax, and thus the tariff was rounded up to "roughly 10 per cent higher". One electrician also held that, "as an ordinary consumer you will not feel it right now, but for big consumers like manufacturers in the industrial park this rise will set in immediately". In a site visit two days after the start date of the changed price, we met a customer who reckoned this increase would cost him three hundred Vietnam *dong* (1.5 US cents) more on each kWh he uses. His estimate made the two electricity workers I was accompanying ponder and disagree with each other again about the actual rise. At this moment, however, none of us could anticipate that just a month later this increase of 8.36 per cent would be rolled out as a "surge" of electricity expenses for many customers, causing a public image crisis for the electricity sector throughout the next two years. This crisis started when newspapers ran sensational headlines in May 2019.

> "Customers shocked by hiked electricity bills"
>
> (*Khách hàng sốc vì hóa đơn tiền điện tăng vọt*)
>
> "Electricity bills rise appallingly"

(*Hóa đơn tiền điện tăng đột biến*)

"EVN's rise of electricity tariff unjustifiable..."

(*EVN tăng giá điện: không thể biện minh...*)

"National Assembly delegates want auditing of electricity pricing"

(*Đại biểu Quốc hội muốn kiểm toán việc điều hành giá điện*)

These are just some among hundreds of news articles after the April bills of many urban customers unveiled an increase by forty, fifty and even close to one hundred per cent over the previous months' tariff. Outrage was directed at EVN in both the media and meeting halls alike. It turned out that the figure of 8.36 per cent based on a so-called "baseline price" (*giá cơ sở*) does not mean the actual increase. What matters is that the six tiers of the increasing block tariff charge higher prices for electricity consumption beyond each block of some hundred, one hundred or even only fifty kWh, making it much more costly than this nominal 8.36 per cent. Urban consumers, who tend to be charged at higher rates due to their greater use of electricity, denounced the company on both social and mass media. National Assembly delegates fiercely criticized the Chairman of EVN, demanding an independent auditing of the entire Group. The government that approved this increase now sent in inspection teams, asking the Group to recalculate the tariff rates and propose amendments. The group leaders attempted to explain, clarify and justify, but the more they spoke, the angrier the public seemed to become. Summer 2019 was a heated season for both customers who cannot not run their ventilators and air conditioners and the electricity sector that was struggling under public interrogation and condemnation.

This "change of price" and the crisis it entailed was a rupture that opened a wide window on some major issues with the electricity sector and its ongoing reforms. Since 2008, these reforms have included the marketization of the natural monopoly of which the price increase is a constituent, and the transition of energy sources for electricity generation from fossil fuels to renewables. This dual process is being carried out by the government of Vietnam, but is fueled, and arguably steered, by loans and neoliberal thinking stemming from international "development partners". This chapter will discuss the reforms, focusing on how they reflect the neoliberal changes in the energy sector and how they impact the state–people relationship. In this chapter I show that Vietnam's state institutions have appeared confused and even self-contradictory at times, but the state itself has never lost control of the situation or loosened its grip on its citizenry through electricity infrastructure. As much as it generates subjectivities in urban electricity users, the electricity grid continues to entice rural people, especially the poor, to adhere to an ideal image of the state and to desire the state's paternal care. The view presented here is a distillation of policy and media reviews, conversations with energy

experts and, most importantly, empirical experience in two remote communes in the north and south of Vietnam respectively.

Throughout this chapter I use the term "neoliberal" to refer to reforms and restructuring in the Vietnamese electricity sector without discussing the concept further (see Chapter Five for a brief discussion), taking the advantage of this "standard shorthand descriptor for the global economy" (Endres and Hann 2017, vii). Endres and Hann (2017) carefully name the socio-politics of Vietnam, and that of China, as "socialism with neoliberal characteristics", which I consider a judicious choice, given that these party-states claim to remain loyal to socialism (ibid.), albeit a "market socialism". The term "socialism with neoliberal characteristics" is thus informative of the cautious way in which the Vietnamese state deals with the tension between socialism and market reforms in the electricity sector, the topic of this chapter. In the same vein of thinking about neoliberal transitions, Collier (2011) notes the case of post-Soviet Russia on the threshold of the twenty-first century as first struggling between stabilization and liberalization, but later being "defiantly independent of foreign influence" (xii), to an extent that neoliberal reforms are questioned as to whether they are being continued or not. This chapter places the reforms, restructuring and transition of the Vietnamese electricity sector in this landscape of former and post-socialist states trying to distance themselves from the central planning mindset and draw closer to the market mechanism.

Competitive markets for a unique commodity

In her book on the American electricity market, *The Current Economy: Electricity Markets and Techno-Economics*, Özden-Schilling (2021) describes electricity as a "quirky", "extraordinary" commodity that challenges traditional economic textbooks since it does not fit in with the usual markets. As a product that cannot be "shipped" using the usual means of transport and cannot be stored like normal goods, it requires a "natural monopoly" to operate, at least in the beginning, and special efforts to build unconventional markets for trading and distributing it later. Özden-Schilling describes the efforts that make electricity a market item that is traded successfully in the US and various countries of the Global North. The same trajectory of the marketization of electricity is envisaged for the electricity sector in Vietnam, where the economy needs about a 10 per cent increase in electricity output every year, but also where the state runs short of capital to invest in electricity generation and maintain its monopoly status. Vietnam is not alone in efforts to privatize the electricity sector across the Global South, as in Tanzania (Winther 2008, Degani 2017), Ethiopia (Mains 2012), Ghana (Destrée 2021), South Africa (McDonald 2009, von Schnitzler 2013) or India (Chatterjee 2012, Coleman 2014), to name just a few countries where this process has been documented ethnographically.

Completely convinced about the necessity of reforms and the superiority of market mechanisms (albeit a "socialism-oriented" one), the Vietnamese government has embarked on a World Bank-charted itinerary to break down the monopoly and open up its national electricity market to private investment and competition. Like elsewhere in the Global South, this "donor-led vision of privatization" (Degani 2017, 301) is created primarily by international partners and donors, including, besides the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the German development agency GIZ,[46] to name the most prominent proponents of sectoral restructuring and the energy transition. Accordingly, the functions of generation, transmission and distribution have been, and will be, unbundled from the unified control of EVN and sent to market step by step. First, the generation area was made a market for all power plants, including non-state ones, to sell their outputs directly to the single buyer, EVN. This market for electricity generation took roughly six years, from 2012 to 2018, to take this form. Second, this generation market started to develop into a wholesale market as of 2019, allowing all new power plants and more buyers to take part in it (Electricity Regulatory Authority of Vietnam 2018). By 2022, it included over one hundred non-EVN power generators that account for over forty per cent of the system's total capacity and six buyers, namely EVN and five regional electricity corporations (Bộ Công Thương [Ministry of Industry and Trade] 2022). The final step will be to develop the retail market to allow end-users to buy electricity from different retailers and not only EVN, a goal to be achieved after 2024 (Cục Điều tiết Điện lực [Electricity Regulatory Authority] 2020). In the original reform plan, the transmission area was to remain under state control, but recently, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, it became clearer that transmission would be opened up to private investment and operation as well.

Raising electricity tariffs, one instance of which led to the consumer "shock" of 2019, is the very condition for building such markets for electricity, according to international partners. Only when the price is higher will the markets become lucrative enough for investors and dealers to invest in them and earn a profit. As one foreign expert explained to me, electric power had always been considered a public good and an aspect of social welfare, so its tariff was kept lower than the actual cost of production, based on the state subsidies for fossil fuels and the cross-subsidy among groups of users (see more on tariff and subsidies in V. P. Le 2020 and Le, et al. 2022). Although this demonstrates that "the Vietnamese state is a good state", he commented, it hindered the "socialization" of the sector (interview on 30th August 2019). The term "socialization" itself is a socialist version of "privatization" and is used as an official term for sectoral reforms, but the essence of both is to promote private investment in formerly state-owned sectors in part or in whole.

[46] In German, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH, (unofficially) translated into English as German Corporation for International Cooperation Ltd.

The low tariff also resulted in careless usage of electricity, according to energy experts, especially international partners in the Vietnamese Energy Partnership Group (VEPG). Vietnamese consumers are wasting too much energy, they say, and only a higher tariff can make them efficient users. In line with neoliberal voices elsewhere, VEPG experts argue that a dear price is a tool for educating consumers in being more disciplined in their consumption. Some rare studies of Vietnamese electricity consumers have recently suggested making good use of the pricing tool to curb consumption in the Vietnamese market (V. P. Le 2020). This line of argument sounds convincing for a government sagging under the heavy weight of subsidizing its low-income population. In public, this pricing tool is referred to in an ambiguous collection of so-called "consumer-side energy efficiency and demand moderation measures" (World Bank 2022), a term which only insiders of the investment and market negotiations, including Vietnamese governmental institutions and VEPG, can comprehend.

EVN is certainly not opposed to the opportunities to raise the selling price of its commodity, even at the cost of giving away a little of its retail market share due to competition. At least what has happened so far in the generation and wholesale markets demonstrates that EVN and its member corporations are still the sole players, competing against one another without losing ground to any non-state actors. It has also been confidently prepared for the retail market at the local level. Some management staff at Hoang Hai Power talked to me about the near future when their company would be deregulated, meaning it was no longer a monopoly but competing to distribute electricity. They were very certain that the company had an absolute advantage based on its existing distribution grid, and thus could not lose the competition even when there is one.

Likewise, the reforms in the market orientation of the electricity sector have faced very little if any resistance from the public. Customers have long blamed EVN's shortcomings on its monopoly status. The soaring price is attributed to the perceived facts that EVN needs to cover up losses it made in other areas of business, and that it can increase the tariff at will without fearing a loss of customers. They hope competition will bring about not only more transparent pricing but also a lower price for electricity. The formula seems simple to them: competition drives prices lower. On both the social and mass media, "the market" and "competition" have become a mantra for dealing with the problems created by the monopoly.

However, customers are generally not aware that an increased tariff, one to be increased further, is what reformists have long urged. When electricity tariffs reflect the real costs of production, transmission and distribution, as reformists advocate, without a state subsidy and a cross-subsidy between groups of customers, in accordance with Politburo Resolution No. 55-NQ/TW (2020), their bills will be substantially larger than the already increased amount. In their coverage of the electricity sector's structural reforms, the media have only focused on the market and competition but ignored

this price aspect. For some reasons,[47] not a single question was raised in the media about any adverse impact of the marketization of the electricity sector. Özden-Schilling (2021) concludes her book by asking "whether the introduction of markets into electricity's trade has been a good thing at all", to which, she states, no one can give a definite answer except for a half-joking "microeconomic theory says it improves efficiency" (169–170). A national expert from a partner of the Vietnamese government nevertheless attempted to answer at least part of the question.[48] The breaking down of the monopoly would only disillusion Vietnamese customers, he asserted: as "the price can only go higher and higher, they don't know the truth about what they are looking forward to" (interview on 26th July 2019).

A "disaggregated state" in the transition to renewable energies

The rise in electricity tariffs, as international partners in the Vietnam Energy Partnership Group (VEPG) argue, is also intended to boost investments in renewable energies. There must be enough room for (still) relatively more expensive electricity from renewable sources to integrate into the system, expanding the share of "green" energy in the production of electric power. Amidst the scarcity of fossil-fuel and hydro-energy resources and the increasing international pressure to turn to renewables, an energy transition has become an inevitable aspect of the reforms of the electricity sector, manifesting itself in a series of Resolutions (*Nghị quyết*) and Decisions (*Quyết định*) by the political system. The latest in this series, the Politburo's Resolution No. 55 on the national strategy for energy development, presents the guiding principle of "prioritizing the maximum and efficient deployment of renewable energy resources, new energy resources and clean energy resources" (Bộ Chính Trị [Politburo] 2020). Concrete actions, as the Resolution defines them, should include "formulating breakthrough mechanisms and policies to boost the growth of renewable energies [...] at a maximum level" (ibid.).

However, the transition to renewable energy is where the "disaggregation of the state" (Migdal 1994 and Koh 2001, 2008) announces itself. This view of politics in developing societies, which was initiated and developed some decades ago, still serves as an applicable tool to understand the state entities in Vietnam's energy transition. Despite the top leadership's commitment, the idea of increasing the shares of renewable energy resources has never been so warmly welcomed by the electricity sector

[47] It is tempting to consider this silence of media as compliant to hegemonic power of neoliberalist logics, but I would reserve myself from discussing theories of micro- and macro-economics in this chapter.

[48] The other part has remained concealed up to now. According to Coleman (2014), privatization of the distribution utility in India has not only led to "massive increases in electricity bills for many households", it has also altered the "political imagination of collectivity, of common interest". Similar alterations to Vietnamese social formations could be expected should reforms in the electricity sector be fulfilled.

itself. Technically speaking, the intermittent nature of renewable energies is believed to pose a threat to the operation of the grid. Advocates for renewables told me in interviews about their efforts to change the Ministry and the sector's idea that renewable energies seriously challenge the country's vulnerable grid, which still aims to reach the "N-1" reliability level (this ensures the transmission grid's resilience when one component of the system fails). Economically speaking, the "levelized cost of electricity" from renewable sources is still higher than that from conventional sources. The government did set higher feed-in tariffs for electricity from renewable sources as a tool to encourage investment in renewable energies[49] under the influence of its reform partners, but the high feed-in cost means the more EVN and its member corporations buy electricity from (usually private) renewable sources, the less profit they earn from reselling it. Both technical and economic barriers as such discourage the executives of the electricity sector from increasing the share of renewable power in their portfolios at all rapidly.

International reformers have thus suggested solutions to help make renewable energies a bigger part of the system. Under their plan, the national grid must be upgraded to absorb the electric power from intermittent sources, a digitalized "smart grid" infrastructure will be built to smoothly operate its coming in and going out and a legal framework as well as a practical mechanism for markets must be put in place, while technologies need to be improved to reduce the cost of producing electricity from renewable sources. Solutions have been defined, but the implementation process is taking too long. The past few years have witnessed the co-existence of perfectly formulated strategic documents on the energy transition with many more coal-fired power plants being built under the national Power Development Plans that the Ministry of Industry and Trade prepares in consultation with related parties.

This coexistence of different energy mindsets, a manifestation of the disaggregation of the state in the energy sector, put early renewable energy projects at risk. While waiting for the grid to be upgraded, hundreds of solar power plants have been approved in the southern and south-central provinces, where the hours of sunshine are the longest. A fever of investment in solar power occurred in 2019

[49] In 2019, when the feed-in tariff for hydropower was only 4.75 cents and for coal-fired power was from 7.2 to 8.1 cents, that for solar power was 8.38 cents and for wind power ranging from 8.5 to 9.8 cents. In 2020, the new price ranges from 7.09 US cents to 7.69 US cents per kWh applies for solar power plants that started to operate before the end of 2020. The special price of 9.35 US cents applies exceptionally for plants starting to operate before this date in Ninh Thuan province. All plants operating after this date must sell their output through competitive bidding (EVN 2020).

and 2020[50] as private investors hastened to secure their footholds in the market before the ground was occupied by others and also to take advantage of the favorable feed-in tariff. At times, my interlocutors at development agencies complained about the fact that their partners at the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the line manager of the electricity sector, were too busy assessing and approving these project proposals (allegedly with some personal benefit) to work on the awaiting legal framework for competitive electricity markets. In this regard, the Ministry contradictorily showed itself to be an enthusiast of renewables in the electricity sector. This fever resulted in problems, as could be foreseen. The biggest is that several power plants are either unable to send power up to the grid due to the absence of transmission lines, or are subject to "curtailment", meaning severe cuts in generating capacity, because the fragile grid cannot absorb so much electricity from intermittent sources. In 2020, the installed capacity of solar power plants soared to 25 per cent of the total installed capacity of the whole system, but the plants could only feed into the grid 4.3 per cent of the system's total output (EVN 2021). These power plants have been built too quickly, before supporting infrastructure, both material like the transmission grid and immaterial like EVN's welcoming attitude to renewables, are ready.

As such, quick approval of new solar-power projects contradicts the slow upgrading of infrastructure needed for their operation, especially in terms of transmission. Due to its perceived significance to national energy security, transmission was for a long time strictly defined as a state monopoly. As the Law on Electric Power (2004) states, "the state is the monopoly in transmission work" (Article 2 Point 4). This point was reiterated in the first amendment to this law in 2014. In 2017, the then chairman of EVN emphasized the importance of transmission as the system's "backbone", suggesting that the state would definitely retain its monopoly of transmission. In August of the same year, the Government's Resolution 94/2017/NĐ-CP confirmed this position by classifying the transmission and regulation of electricity as state monopolies (*độc quyền Nhà nước*). Since the state monopoly EVN has no interest in building infrastructure to buy an expensive product (and thereafter earn less profit from reselling it), the lack of transmission lines from newly built power plants to the national grid has proved a bottleneck for solar electricity. Much discussion took place between the reformers and the conventionalists about a legal corridor that would allow the electricity sector to tap into private capital and release the energy. Even so, up until January 2022, at an irregular meeting of the National Assembly, many delegates and national experts were still very reluctant to allow private investors to build transmission lines. Discussions at the meeting on 10th January, as the media reported, showed

[50] The installed capacity of solar electric power increased by 45 times from 2018 to in 2019, and 2.3 times in 2020 compared to the previous year (Le, et al. 2022, 1). This increase brought Vietnam to the eighth place globally in total solar photovoltaic capacity (REN21 2021, 120).

no sign that an amendment to the Law on Electric Power would be possible any time soon (Minh Chien and Van Duan 2022, Ngo 2022).

However, the breakthrough came just overnight. For unknown reasons (the mass media were silent this time and thus cannot provide a view), the legal amendment was endorsed the following day at the end of the meeting (Quốc hội [National Assembly] 2022).[51] The amendment allowed private investors not only to build but also to operate transmission lines from as soon as March 2022. The only activity over which the state retained its monopoly was regulation (*điều độ*), meaning operating and monitoring the grid. Given its approval amidst such vocal concerns and objections as shown in the media coverage, the amendment reflects a genuine determination at the highest level of leadership to privatize the system, and possibly to promote the integration of renewable energies. Only some years earlier, this step would have been almost unimaginable even to the leaders of EVN. Now that transmission joins generation and distribution as a target for privatization, the state monopoly has been effectively deregulated. Further steps will be taken to attract private capital, including raising the transmission fee, but such steps will only need decisions at a lower authority level in order to be realized. The bottleneck of the transmission line will be addressed by privatization, and the electricity tariff is expected to increase again.

The change to law in January 2022 was not the first dramatic act that Vietnamese political leaders undertook toward energy reform. In November 2021, the Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh had announced at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) his government's plan to reach "zero-carbon" by 2050. In addition, he committed the country to join an agreement to stop new investment in coal-fired power plants and to phase out coal power by 2040 at the latest (BBC News 2021). It is likely that he had been persuaded by his British counterpart, Boris Johnson, who during an earlier phone conversation had "encouraged the Vietnamese government to commit to net zero by 2050" (UK Government 2021), just as soon as the United Kingdom, the host country of COP26, would do. He could also have acted in the wake of a global effort to limit global warming to the vital 1.5 degrees by 2050, which requires all countries to radically reduce their emissions (see UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021 n.d.). Either way, his bold commitments have forced the Ministry of Industry and Trade to withdraw its draft of the Power Development Plan VIII (*Quy hoạch điện VIII*) from the Prime Minister's desk to rework it. While all estimates just before the conference demonstrated

[51] The lack of media coverage of this approval places a question mark over the transparency of the legislative process, especially in juxtaposition with media coverage of rigorous discussions at the meeting hall a few days before. A foreign-based critic calls this process "policy corruption" (Khac Giang 2022), while some ideological domestic newspapers defended the process and called criticisms of this kind a "distortion game" (Do 2022, Duc Tuan 2022).

that “Vietnam can only achieve ‘net zero’ in 2070 at the earliest” (A. T. Nguyen 2022), the Prime Minister’s announcement has shaken up the energy sector’s nearly complete strategic plan and placed “yet many challenges” (ibid.) in front of it to achieve the goal twenty years earlier. In this context, the legal amendment in January 2022 that legalizes private investment in electricity transmission is a fundamental step to channeling renewable energies into the electricity sector, starting the race to “net zero”. Dramatic though they are, the Prime Minister’s announcements at COP26 and this legal amendment are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, there appears to be a political determination to speed up the deployment of renewable energies, break down the state monopoly and privatize the electricity sector. On the other hand, it shows the differing visions within the state, between leadership and executives, resulting from a prolonged struggle between transition and convention and an uncoordinated course of strategic planning.

Rural consumers in structural reforms and energy transitions in electricity

Back to 2019, when the tariff increase was introduced, the different reactions to changes highlighted the segregation of customers along the urban-rural axis. Most of those making complaints on the media or directly to EVN were urban dwellers who consumed relatively high volumes of electricity. Charged with the six-block increased tariff, their actual costs in the hot summer can easily double the amount they pay in winter or spring. In comparison, in rural areas, consumers were not so upset about the change of price in general. Being asked about the electricity price and their monthly electricity expense, several people in my field site in Dong Phong commune hesitated a bit before giving a vague answer. Some eventually told me they did not pay attention to the rise, just like before it, when they did not know exactly how much a kWh cost. In many instances, they said something like “I pay the amount I am told to pay”. Despite the general perceptions about the high price of electricity, their consumption was still quite modest to make a substantial difference in their bills now, after the price had increased.

Rural residents also paid little attention to renewable energies and the so-called “energy transition” that the media and some urban groups were so excited about. Although various people in Dong Phong had known about ‘clean’ energies since 2012 through an NGO project, the concept appears tricky to comprehend or apply. At the beginning of my fieldwork, whenever I mentioned “energy” (“*năng lượng*”) as part of my research topic, local people would interpret the term as some piece of household equipment using solar power, such as the water-heating systems they simply called “energy tanks” (“*bình năng lượng*”), or the solar-power lanterns they called “energy lamps” (“*đèn năng lượng*”). They started to buy these appliances after the NGO project introduced “clean energy” facilities into the

commune, either from the project itself or from some traders who came to advertise and sell usually low-quality products. Very often they mistook me as a marketer for this kind of equipment as soon as I uttered the keyword "energy". Later, I opted to drop the energy part in my self-introduction to avoid confusing people from the beginning of our conversations. "Electricity" alone was sufficient to stimulate some negative sentiments in some people (as it might provoke one's thoughts of "*Điện lực*" – the "*Electric Power*", as in the case presented in Chapter Five), but it was at least a straightforward concept, easy for local people to grasp.

Nevertheless, the local energy transition was exactly what attracted me first about Dong Phong via media reports, and what I was curious to explore ethnographically. My research on Dong Phong started with questions such as: how do people at the grassroots experience the changes caused by sectoral reforms? Or, does energy transition take place at the local level the same way it does at the sectoral and national levels, if at all? While conventional electricity practices can be observed in almost every commune in Vietnam, Dong Phong stood out with media titles like "Vietnam's first clean energy commune" (Mekong Commons 2016) or "Coastal commune leading in green energy" (Song Tre 2018), giving me the expectation that there this more about energy changes than an electricity grid in this area.

The idea that energy is a difficult concept was remarked upon by Mr. Dinh Van Sang, the Secretary of Dong Phong's Communist Party Committee (*Bí thư Đảng ủy xã*), in our first conversation in 2018. A couple of years before that, while still serving as Chairman of the commune's People's Committee (*Chủ tịch Ủy ban nhân dân xã*), he came to the attention of some media as a progressive leader committed to developing 'clean' energy sources in his commune. Dong Phong is used to enjoying the fame of a flagship in some state-led movements, being a new land that President Ho Chi Minh visited in 1962, one of the first "New Countryside" communes of Thai Binh province, and having received several visitors at the highest level of the state (see Chapters One and Three). When the NGO came to survey several communes in the district to choose a site for a clean energy project, Dong Phong's authorities, and especially its People's Committee, with Mr. Sang as the Chairman, were again eager to embrace a new movement. The commune was then chosen as a project site, based on the urgency of environmental pollution due to waste from animal husbandry and the burning of post-cultivation waste, frequent electricity blackouts and a shortage of clean drinking water (Mekong Commons 2016, Manh Thang 2017), but also based on the abundant potential of alternative energies (interview with Mr. Sang on 14/8/2018). When the project started, Mr. Sang recalled, he and his peers could not define the term "energy" as anything other than electricity. Some years later, Chairman Sang said to the media visiting Dong Phong that they were "determined to turn Dong Phong into the first commune using clean energy in Vietnam" (Mekong Commons 2016).

Creating "the first clean energy commune": a project of local energy transition

Behind Mr. Sang's declaration to the media is one of the first and most efficient Vietnamese NGOs to be working on the environment and climate change. Leading a network of NGOs working in this field, it has consolidated its prestige as a pioneer in energy policy advocacy and community intervention. The NGO has carried out a so-called "local energy planning" process in several communes, including Dong Phong, pushing the local transition to renewable, 'clean' and 'green' energy. The principle is to involve local people in planning their use of energy based on locally available sources, making them increasingly independent of the grid and fossil fuels.

Within the project's framework, apart from the equipment and technical support provided by the NGO, Dong Phong commune's authority drew up their own local policies to build a new energy base during the project's life. All livestock-raising households receive the support of a million Vietnam *dong* (equivalent to 45 US dollars) from the commune's budget in return for building biogas digesters. More than forty households took advantage of this policy according to a vice-chairman of the People's Committee. The commune itself paid half of the cost[52] for a water-filtration system that provides clean water free of charge for communal facilities at a price that is cheap for local people. To save energy, the commune encouraged households to use LED bulbs instead of incandescent or fluorescent light bulbs, and solar-power lanterns and torches in place of normal electric lighting gadgets. The commune's officials contacted the suppliers to negotiate a good price for the products they were encouraging the villagers to use. During the project's life, they were happy to be involved in making the commune a pioneer of clean energy. In 2014, in a report on the project, Mr. Sang described it as "an overall socioeconomic development plan, not only an infrastructural project" (Hoang 2014, 3).

While "energy" is still not an easy concept, Dong Phong residents have had access to a wider range of energy sources than most city dwellers would have. Beyond electricity and gas, they have used solar power for lighting and water-heating, biogas (with biogas digesters) and biomass (with advanced cookstoves). Getting only partial financial support from the project, several households paid for the equipment to tap into more diverse energy options, calculating this would reduce their costs for energy and mitigate the impact of unreliable electricity from the grid. At the same time, they experienced the fluctuation of alternative energy sources in a way that urban "green" groups may not. Water in the heating tank was generally not warm enough for a shower due to the weak sunlight in the northern winter. Biogas was not always available, as there had been a sharp decrease in livestock-raising after

[52] The idea behind this cost-sharing is to create a sense of ownership in the project's beneficiary: by purchasing part of the item, they appreciate it better than receiving it free of charge. The practice of cost-sharing is common in development projects.

the selling price plunged in 2017. Therefore, equipment using other energy sources, like gas, electricity and biomass, must still be ready to provide support. Without an interest in the concept, several households in Dong Phong had experienced both the comfort and the challenges of the energy transition for some time.

This transition was specially designed for the communal consumption of energy. The only solar-power system in the commune was placed on the roof of the commune's administrative building to provide electricity to this building, and a water filtration system was attached on its left. With the guidance of a commune official, I climbed up to the rooftop of the two-storey building to see the solar panels. Compared to what I had seen on media, the panels had clearly deteriorated, as their metal frames had rusted, and the photovoltaic area was covered with a thick layer of dust. More disappointingly, on the day I visited, just like many other days before, all the officials working in this building were consuming electricity from the grid. The solar-power system had been idle for a long time because its inverter – a box that converts the direct current from the panels into the alternative current electrical equipment can consume – did not work anymore. The commune's administration had spent a considerable sum of money ("seven or eight million *dong*", or about three hundred and fifty US dollars) in buying a new inverter, only to find out that the new device was incompatible with the existing system. No one in the commune could deal with that, so the new inverter still lay in Mr. Sang's cabinet, and the commune's administrative building was powered by grid electricity instead of solar energy as intended.

Fortunately, the water-filtration system consisting of several water tanks connected by pipes and filtration tubes was still working, although it too looked dusty and rusty. Some villagers regularly rode their motorbikes to the facility, bringing in empty bottles and taking full bottles of drinking water back. Most families here boiled the tap water (provided locally by the commune's electricians; see Chapter Four) for drinking, but some preferred drinking the water filtered by this system. Water was sold at five thousand *dong* (about 23 US cents) for a bottle of 20 liters, the same price that had been kept for four years since the system was put into work. As I never saw many people come to buy water during my whole stay in the commune, it was unclear how this income could cover the costs of running the system with electricity from the grid, but not "free" solar energy as designed. However, no one ever calculated exactly how much power this system consumed, as it was bundled as part of the building connected to the grid.

When infrastructure in the people's committee was on its way to degradation, the clean-energy equipment in private households also broke one by one, albeit for different reasons. More than sixty household biogas systems stopped working, as these households no longer kept livestock after the pig price plummeted in 2017. All solar-power lanterns, including twenty-one lanterns provided by the project and those that households had bought on their own, went out of order some years after

purchase “because these lanterns are made in China”, as some people explained.[53] A communal biogas system, which at first provided gas for twenty-five households, was not completed as planned before breaking down. The NGO project ended before the system was finished, only for problems with smells, water and congestion occurring without anyone taking any action. This kind of gas, according to some users, also damages the gas stove more quickly than the normal gas due to the residues left after digestion. When I arrived in the commune in 2018, the remaining parts of this unfinished system were no longer in use either.

The only renewable energy equipment that seemed to have lasted were the solar water heaters. Thirteen households in the commune were receiving technical help and partial financial support from the project to build such systems on their roofs. They seemed to last, as the majority of these thirteen households were still using them at the time I came to the commune. The only issue is that the water in the tank is not warm enough for a shower in winter, otherwise householders seemed to be satisfied with their investment. The commune’s assets of the same kind, a larger solar water-heating system for the kindergarten, was also still running without any great problems.

In the anthropology of infrastructure, the construction and destruction of infrastructural works, as well as their temporality, have been well noted. Infrastructure is generally seen as “future-oriented”, promising a better life experience (Appel, et al. 2018, Harvey and Knox 2012), while at the same time encompassing ruin and decay (Gupta 2018, Howe, et al. 2016). In Dong Phong, the solar-power infrastructure once symbolized the future of clean energy that the commune was pioneering to achieve. But like all infrastructure, it cannot escape an intrinsic “paradox of ruin” (Howe, et al. 2016). As soon as it is built, it is also prone to breakdown, decay and degeneration. Infrastructure therefore requires “constant and assiduous maintenance” if it is meant to function over time (ibid., 554).

The clean-energy project in Dong Phong had paid some attention to maintenance work. A local maintenance team composed of five people, most of them the commune’s administrative officers, was set up to take care of technical issues. This team was supposed to manage these facilities when the NGO left at the end of the project. This arrangement seemed unproblematic during the project cycle, when the equipment had been newly bought, installed and used. The team never had to handle any big issues, and it still had technical support from the NGO. Only after the project ended did the equipment start to deteriorate beyond the technical capacity of the team members to fix it. None of them had any electro-technical training, even within the project framework, nor experience in working with new energy devices. Something like the inverter of a solar-power system, or just the solar-power

[53] In this commune, as well as in many other parts of the country, Chinese goods are generally regarded as of low quality.

torches that suddenly stop working, were all too complicated for them to deal with. The motivation to do the job has also faded quickly. It has been much more convenient to take electricity from the grid to operate the office building, the water-filtration system and household electrical appliances. Some years after the project, the team no longer exists in practical terms. No one is taking care of the 'clean' energy facilities set up during the project's life.

My big query at that time was whether the NGO was aware of the condition of these facilities, especially the expensive solar panels on the roof of the communal office building. Although the facilities had been handed over to the commune, I assumed an NGO concerned about the sustainability of their projects would take action in such an obvious case of failed maintenance. I estimated that it had the technical competence to deal with the problem, or at least it had contacts that could help address the technical stagnation to enable the commune to continue on its journey to clean energy. Based on my personal knowledge of the NGO's director, I guessed the problem would merely be a lack of communication. As Mr. Sang did not state clearly whether the NGO had been informed of the situation, I decided to be their messenger when I had an opportunity. That summer, I took part in a big conference in Hanoi, which was jointly organized by this NGO and some development partners. I briefly met with the director in the lobby of the conference hall, telling her about the broken switch box that had paralyzed the whole solar system in Dong Phong, expecting she would readily show some concern. She was nevertheless quite ambiguous, asking me back "Is that so?", and smiling in a puzzling way. Until summer of the following year, there had still been no repairs on the solar-power system of the Dong Phong People's Committee. No one at the commune told me the NGO had ever contacted them to check how it was working. The commune authorities did not uninstall it either, as if uninstalling of this system would just show how "fleeting" the clean-energy infrastructure could be (Howe, et al. 2016). Indeed, the decaying solar panels were left on the roof of the building, showing those who care about their idle status a "future as ruins", or the "ruins of the future" (Gupta 2018).

A lonely leader of clean energy

One year after the NGO completed its project in Dong Phong, Mr. Sang ended his term as Chairman of the Executive People's Committee and moved to the ideological branch of the commune's authorities. He now became Secretary of the local Communist Party Unit. He took with him his passion for clean energy and some energy-saving devices to the new office. During one of our meetings, Mr. Sang opened the doors of his cabinet, bringing out a blue plastic bag that contained several LED light fixtures. They were all different in design and size. He said he went to several shops around the area to collect lighting models to compare their quality and function, so that he can make a recommendation for their

use to his people. However, he was not satisfied with any of them. He and some officers then travelled to Hanoi to ask experts about the kind of equipment suitable for the salty coastal climate of Dong Phong. They did not find what they needed there either, as they felt these experts only marketed the products they had. These light fixtures remained with him after their unsuccessful chase after good devices. Knowing he was also keeping the incompatible inverter for the solar-power system in the same cabinet, I cannot help seeing the image of the Party Secretary carefully unwrapping the blue plastic bag to show me his light fixtures as the imprint of a lonely and, sadly, almost fruitless pursuit.

Also that summer, Dong Phong commune welcomed a visit by a group of NGOs called the Climate Change Working Group (CCWG), accompanied by reporters from some of the local media. The commune was still a destination for those who wanted to learn about the local energy transition. Against the background of run-down and faded-out clean-energy equipment, Secretary Sang briefed the visitors on the project's outcomes and impacts. His eloquent speech, as usual, made a perfect impression of a new land pioneering in everything it does and successfully making radical shifts, including in energy planning and consumption. After the speech, the group visited the very pig farm with the never-completed biogas system. A biogas digester had remained in place, as the farmer was still raising pigs, but only some broken parts of the pipeline were left. There was no sign of any future resumption of this work.

Joining this group in all their activities in Dong Phong, I saw puzzles on their faces and questions in their eyes. The Party Secretary's briefing and their contrary experiences on the farm that had followed had confused the visitors about the real outcomes of the local energy transition. At best, they could see that the new infrastructure had good immediate impacts on the local energy structure and practice, but quickly became useless for several reasons. Mr. Sang did mention some: the quality of the equipment is not of the best, maintenance is inadequate, the wet salty climate of this coastal area soon broke the equipment, and at the same time, the change of farming methods had an impact on the energy structure. Biogas, for instance, is no longer available when raising livestock is no longer an important livelihood. There is yet another, very important cause of this phasing out of "clean" energy which even Mr. Sang seemed to overlook: the improved reliability of electricity from the central grid.

If blackouts and cuts were frequent in 2012 to 2013 at the beginning of the project, by the time the project ended four years later, access to electricity had become substantially more reliable. In 2016, the electricity grid in Dong Phong and several other communes in Hoang Hai district underwent an overall upgrade thanks, paradoxically, to the aftermath of a typhoon. According to a then vice director of Hoang Hai Power, the typhoon had a double impact: on the one hand it wiped out the district grid almost completely, while on the other hand it offered a rare opportunity to remake the whole system. The grid in many areas was built anew entirely at the cost of hundreds of billion *dong*. "The typhoon

was an unwanted incident, but it gave us a chance to address many defects on the grid, so electricity supply has been quite stable since 2017", said the Vice Director of Hoang Hai Power (interview, 30th August 2018). People in Dong Phong did not think of this typhoon as a reason for a better grid and consequently for a better electricity supply, but it is no coincidence that many of them uttered the same compliment that the electricity supply had been good "for some years now". They also noted that the supply had improved because the power sector took care of things with "responsibility": "every year they would have one or two times of periodical repair" (Mr. Tien, interview, 13th August 2018).

The weak electricity grid, the problem that had counted as one of the reasons for this project on alternative energies in Dong Phong, was thus settled. There is no longer much practical benefit from seeking out 'clean' energy facilities and to invest in them at the beginning of their use when on-grid electricity is already secure and comparatively inexpensive. If access had not been so reliable, broken alternative-energy equipment would have been replaced with new ones, and maintenance could have been done better. Now village households stopped looking for new alternative energy equipment when the old ones broke – why buy new devices when you can use normal electric appliances conveniently? Likewise, the commune's officials were in no hurry to look for a compatible inverter for the solar panels on the roof, since their building would always have electricity from the grid. The spirit of the local energy transition faded out with the failure of equipment using alternative renewable energy, especially given the significant improvement in on-grid experiences.

As the commune's chief manager of this project, Mr. Sang is now still concerned about the inverter and the different models of LED lighting in his cabinet. He is still an inspiring speaker when it comes to clean energy, but he admits that his position right now as Secretary of the Communist Party's Committee is not the best place from which to push this "movement". A position in the Party is meant to "guide" (*chỉ đạo*) in terms of ideology and strategy, not to carry out concrete actions; the latter is a function of the People's Committee. "If I continued to sit on the People's Committee, this movement would have continued to flourish", he said; "now he [the current Chairman] is not often in this area". By saying this, he probably meant he had suggested the project be followed up, but the executive leader was not interested in doing so. The following summer, the incumbent chairman even decided to sell off the water-filtration system, one of the last working pieces of equipment, to a local private company. It was argued that in private hands the system would yield more efficiently in economic terms, as it would be run not only to sell clean water to local people but also to serve the company's workers. This did not openly provoke any adverse opinion from the villagers, only a few of whom still got water from this system, and they could still buy it anyway. Up to this point, in all the communal energy assets initiated within the project, only the solar-water heating system in the kindergarten still

functioned. With an abundant electricity supply and the dismantling of the infrastructure for "clean" energies, the current People's Committee had other priorities than make Dong Phong the first clean-energy commune, as declared in the previous term of office.

The growth of solar energy in An Hao commune

If reliable access to the electricity grid is a decisive factor that drove people in Dong Phong away from the local energy transition, what would happen in communities without access to the electric grid? Would they be more enthusiastic about renewable or decentralized energy? If so, then how will the state–people relationship in these communities diverge from the mainstream, if at all? These questions led me to the second project site of the same NGO,[54] a remote commune in a border district of An Giang Southern province.

250 kilometers from Ho Chi Minh City and 70 kilometers from the provincial township, An Hao commune shelters a population of nearly twelve thousand (nearly four times bigger than Dong Phong's population), composed of both the Kinh majority and the Khmer ethnic minority. Not all hamlets of the commune have been connected to the national electricity grid. Although EVN statistics show that one hundred per cent of communes have been electrified, in some remote communes, the grid only reaches the center, leaving out several hamlets on the periphery. People in those hamlets belong to around one million Vietnamese living without electricity from the grid (estimation by Nguyen 2021, 49). In February 2019, I visited two hamlets in this category in An Hao. Hamlet A is located on one of the "Seven Mountains" (*Bảy Núi*), an important spiritual center in southwestern Vietnam. Scattered households in this hamlet earn their living by serving the needs of pilgrims.[55] This hamlet has not been electrified yet because of its scattered population and the mountainous terrain, which present difficulties for building distribution lines. To reach the residents of the hamlet, I made the most frightening motorbike trip in my life so far, sitting behind a middle-aged man, who was also my local guide, on a narrow zigzag path between the mountainside and the canyons opposite it. Making this kind of trip was a much faster way to reach the site than hiking, and a frequent choice for pilgrims with less time to walk. The second hamlet, which I will call hamlet B, lies at the foot of the same mountain

[54] Under the umbrella of the network, this NGO has been the only organization to facilitate the energy transition at the local level so far.

[55] It is important to note that these service householders are not exactly engaged in tourism, because, as they said, the visitors they cater to are "not tourists" but usually lower-income individuals with spiritual beliefs associated with the geographical region. In other areas of Vietnam, tourism and pilgrimage often go hand in hand.

range but on the other side, with infertile sandy soil and no spiritual importance. Many residents here belong to the Khmer ethnic minority, but all of them are originally poor people who have in-migrated from other hamlets in the same area. They came to seek a piece of land, infertile though it is, for residence and cultivation, since they could not acquire one in their homeland. Hamlet B has only been populated for about three decades since the 1990s, following this local wave of migration. It has not been electrified because of its distance from An Hao commune's administrative center, which is located on the opposite side of the mountain, but, at least as importantly, also because of its very low income and density of population. It is one of the areas that "do not get priority to connect when economic criteria are not met" (Tran, Nguyen and Nguyen 2017), despite the state policy of achieving universal electrification.

Both hamlets were the site of a "green energy" project run by the NGO, but the kinds of equipment installed in each hamlet were different. In hamlet A, several households had installed solar photovoltaic panels before this project arrived. They bought the panels with extra income from selling services to pilgrims, but the system's output was small due to the high price of the equipment. The project brought in solar panels at a substantially lower cost than the market price, which can be reduced even more for poorer households. Many households buy these panels, some to start electrifying their home, some to increase the power output of existing systems. To support their community, the NGO installed several solar-energy light pillars along the path up to the part of the mountain visited by worshippers. These pillars contain not only light bulbs and solar panels, but more importantly the batteries to light the bulbs up at night. As most houses in the hamlet are located along this path, the light would facilitate their businesses, as well as their evening activities.

In hamlet B, conversely, most residents did not possess solar panels before the project started in 2017. The panels that the project supplied to the hamlet small in size, each generating 110W per hour (0.11kWh). Some had been given free of charge to the poorest households, but most were offered for purchase at a subsidized price payable in ten instalments. The number of panels each household owns depended on its financial circumstances. Some households only had one panel and a small battery, enough for an electric fan and a compact light bulb in good weather conditions. One of the better-off families in the hamlet owned three panels that provided energy for six light bulbs, four cell phones, one television set and some electric ventilators. By 2019, an overwhelming majority of the total of 130 households in the hamlet had access to electricity from their home solar-power systems, simple and modest though they were.

These stand-alone power systems require users to have some technical know-how and to be careful what they did with them, possibly even more so than users of electricity from the grid. First, they must know the basics of operating a system consisting of solar panels, batteries, an inverter and a

transformer, all of them connected by wire through small knobs to transfer the current. The equipment must be used and maintained correctly, or it will quickly deteriorate. The use of batteries, in particular, is highly demanding. They have to buy distilled water to add to the batteries periodically and bring them to full charge with grid electricity once a month during the rainy season to ensure its longevity. Second, they have to know the kinds of electrical appliances that not only consume as little energy as possible, but also go with the specific voltage of the current. For example, if their battery generates an output voltage of 12 volts, they must purchase the kind of light bulbs, television sets and ventilators that can be used at 12 volts. If they purchase any normal appliances run at the standard voltage of 220 volts, they will have to use them through a transformer, which takes an enormous volume of power to increase the voltage by about eighteen times. Most families here have electrical appliances that can be powered at a low voltage directly from the batteries. The only item they cannot currently deal with is cell phones, for charging which a small transformer is needed to boost the voltage.

Third, they need to be able to estimate their electricity consumption and plan their family's activities in such a way that the power generated during hours of sunshine is sufficient for the whole day. A man in hamlet B gave me an overview of what a family schedule should look like:

> The family would spend early morning at home, having breakfast and watching a news program on television from six thirty to seven or shortly afterwards. Then they go to work. The solar panels work and store the power in the battery. At noon they return home to have lunch and rest, turn on the electric fan, maybe watch some movie on TV, and go out again at about one thirty. The solar panels work in the afternoon too. Then, at five, people go home and turn on the light, the fan, the television and have dinner. They go to bed at eight. They have to take care that the power is enough for early in the morning of the next day.
>
> (Interview, 23rd February 2019)

During the rainy season, people will be even more cautious in their use of electrical appliances, especially when it rains for four or five days in a row. "We have to calculate [our consumption] to ensure we have enough for a number of days", one villager said. Unlike consumers of electricity from the grid, those with decentralized electricity do not have to pay monthly bills and need not watch the meter. However, they have to train themselves to grasp the technical basics of the system enough to run it and maintain it. They have to discipline themselves much more to become efficient consumers of electric power and manage their own demand, because renewable power is not available all the time. Reflecting on Dong Phong, this pressure could have been a reason for villagers to suspend the use of their "clean energy" equipment, given the presence of the electricity grid.

The practice of solar-energy consumption in An Hao commune contrasts with the romanticized image of decentralized electricity. It is elsewhere believed that users of stand-alone power systems are free

from the state and capitalist forces, actively deciding how they live their energy and social lives (Forde 2020) because off-grid infrastructures are claimed to be "more progressive, efficient and democratic than 'grid-based' alternatives" (Cross 2017, 208). Evidence in An Hao commune demonstrates that the freedom of off-grid energy-users is conditioned at least by economic and technical contexts. Users might not be subject to the state and capitalist forces via the technopolitical grid, but when their energy use is conditioned by their lower incomes and limited equipment, they are heavily subject to the availability and intensity of sun, wind and other natural phenomena. They might not be disciplined by an electricity meter, but certainly are by the capacity of their power-generating systems, which is usually low in poor areas like An Hao commune. There is no escape from "technologies of power" and "technologies of the self" (Foucault 1988) once people with scarce resources decide they want to be part of an electrified society, even when they belong to the latter through decentralized systems powered by renewables.

Figure 9. A low-voltage television set is the central appliance in the household system

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Longing for the grid, longing for the state

Both hamlets have yet to connect to the national electricity grid, but residents here had managed to tap into electric power even before owning solar panels. They refused to accept the darkness and complete lack of comfort when the area around them had been electrified. Their way of electrifying themselves was to use accumulators, or rechargeable lead-acid batteries, to "store" electricity and bring it home. First, they would carry these batteries on their motorbikes, or bikes, to a service point in the electrified neighborhood in the morning, leave them there to charge, and bring them back in the

afternoon. Then the power would be used little by little, for some essential needs, usually for several days until it was used up. The battery then had to be taken away again for recharging. In the rainy season, villagers would suffer more from the lack of electricity because in the rain the dirt road becomes too slippery to transport such a heavy object as a battery on a bike. However hard it is, this practice appeared to be a creative way of dealing with their marginalized living conditions.[56]

To many residents of hamlet B, the time batteries were their only source of electricity seemed to be just yesterday. They mentioned it in a self-pitying way, and at the same time with a sort of relief that their lives are no longer so hard. Now they can manage their demand for light, fans and televisions, the three basic appliances of all households in the hamlet, usually with one or two panels rated at 110 watts each, or from 30 to 60 kWh a month. The requirement is to schedule usage correctly, adapt to both the sun and the battery, and not use electricity any more than was essential. Their power consumption as such is no less than that of twenty-five per cent of households in on-grid communities (see Chapter 4), who consumed less than 50 kWh a month (data of 2014**,** Ha-Duong and Nguyen 2021, 57). A man owning two panels to generate the power for two light bulbs, one fan and one television told me "It's sufficient; I think the *energy* is sufficient".

Like all the other residents in this hamlet, he called electricity from solar panels "energy" (*năng lượng*). The word originates from and is a short form of the term "solar energy" (*năng lượng mặt trời*). Appliances and equipment that use or make use of solar energy will be labelled with this word, such as "energy lantern" (*đèn năng lượng*) or "energy battery" (*pin năng lượng*, referring to solar photovoltaic panels).[57] This "energy" allows them to run basic household appliances that with lead-acid batteries they could not. They thank the project for this reason. "I really did not think I could have a television someday. Then I learnt that we could have a television, we could also have fans, all [electric appliances] are possible. I'm glad!" commented Mr. Dzung, who owned three solar panels, one of the biggest systems in hamlet B.

Interestingly, local people largely regarded the "green" energy project as a state project and an effort to care supplied by the commune's authorities. It comes as a countrywide principle that NGOs cannot

[56] This experience with batteries still facilitates their usage of solar power systems, as the battery is a central piece of equipment in their system. Without a grid connection, they have to store their own power in batteries for evening use. Conversely, a battery is not compulsory for solar-power users in urban areas, as they can hook up to the grid when the system cannot generate enough electricity and even send electricity back to the grid when there is a surplus of power. What urbanites constantly need is a voltage transformer to make their power compatible with the grid, which people in these two hamlets do not have to use so much.

[57] This specific term is in itself a mixture of "battery" and "solar panel".

access communities without the approval of local government or work at the grassroots level without the authorities' say-so. This principle strictly applies to "sensitive" (*nhạy cảm*) border areas and ethnic minority or religious regions, so in hamlet A and hamlet B, it is easy to mistake an NGO project for a state project due to the co-presence of both parties. Only the chiefs and vice-chiefs of the two hamlets seemed to have been correctly informed about the cooperation between the NGO and the commune's authorities in this project, while others assumed it is the "commune" (*xã*, meaning the commune's authorities) that the solar panels come from. According to one hamlet officer, "only the [People's] Committee knows where on *his* territory people lack electricity, where to allocate the things". Thus, "it is the Committee that brings this project to us" (interview, 23rd February 2019). In this regard, the identity of the project is blurred in favor of the local state; an NGO energy project has worked effectively to build up the local government's legitimacy and tighten people's attachment to the state.

Although the villagers were grateful to the project and the state at the same time, they were nevertheless not completely satisfied. As the grid is absent from their lives, it becomes present in their desires and emphasizes their isolation and marginalization. People in both hamlets refer to grid electricity as "live electricity" ("*điện sống"*), and distinguish it from the "energy" they are consuming. *Live electricity* is what runs along the wire and pole system that people in neighboring hamlets have, not what is produced in their own homes and stored in their own batteries. The adjective "live" makes a juxtaposition between this constantly running electric current from the grid and the "energy" they are consuming: the latter does not run, it is of a different nature and possibly of an inferior quality. This "energy" already makes their lives easier than before, but it still goes with many inconveniences. For example, in the rainy season, they must save energy very carefully to maintain the light for several wet days in a row. The power generated on rainy days is usually not sufficient to charge the batteries fully, so they still have to take them to charge them with "live electricity" once a month to maintain their longevity. One man already mentioned claimed that the energy he had was sufficient for his use, but he also expressed dissatisfaction that the battery must be taken a long way to maintain. And in general, they would love to use power more freely (*"thoải mái",* as they said), with appliances that consume more power, such as refrigerators, rice cookers or wide-screen television sets, which they still cannot do. They are glad to have "energy", but "live electricity" is what they wish for. Unlike some Western consumers, who choose to go off the grid as a rejection of capitalist lifestyle (Abram, Winthereik and Yarrow 2019, 11), off-grid communities in remote areas of Vietnam do not have a choice. They share some of the characteristics with other off-grid communities in India and Papua New Guinea that Cross (2019) describes: looking up at a "grid-like standard of electricity", they see their lives with electricity from solar power systems more like a "second-class alternative" (80). Like rural residents in Cajamarca, Peru, they still aspire for grid power, despite having locally generated electricity (Love and Garwood 2013, 159). In these specific circumstances, Cross (2017) correctly

concludes: “off the grid, grids do not disappear into the background but become the object of heightened attention” (205).

Speaking about this aspiration, the vice-chief of hamlet B told me about the current situation with electrification of his hamlet. It will not be possible without state intervention, he said. In his opinion, the state and *Điện lực* (EVN) are two different entities, almost opposite in nature. *Điện lực* had sent some teams to survey the area, but had taken no action for a long time. He does not have any hope in *Điện lực*, knowing the investment they would have to make here is too big compared to the profit they could earn. In his own estimate, it costs at least four billion Vietnam *dong*, equivalent to 180,000 US dollars, to build a mainline to the hamlet. “They are a *private* company, they will not invest billions to get a few thousand back from here. If I were them, I would not do it either”. While mistaking the state monopoly EVN for a private enterprise, he was nevertheless correct about the neoliberal logics of cost recovery on which EVN operates.

In addition, this is a huge amount of money even for everyone in the hamlet, too much beyond the capacity of the whole community. Their only hope is that the state “jumps in”. It is not clear whether this could be a case at all, as the district and the provincial People’s Councils have discussed it several times without coming to a decision, but at least they have discussed the possibility. Meanwhile he envisaged a plan whereby the state would take charge of the cost, the people would contribute some funding[58] and *Điện lực* would build it. No matter how desperately they want connection to the grid, “we people cannot do this, only when the state takes a hand could it be done”, he reiterated. Incapable of bringing *live electricity* to the hamlet, he and his people long for the care of the state, that is, a selfless and benevolent state, unlike *Điện lực*.

Before and beyond the scope of the “green” energy project they imagined being given by the state, local people already relied heavily on assistance from the state or organized by the state system. People showed their satisfaction with recent changes to their lives. For example, they were granted five-year health insurance cards, so that they could access health-care services that they could not afford otherwise. Several poor households got loans from social welfare banks at a favorable interest rate and a term of up to five years, and could also apply for a second term after the first. The hamlets’ and commune’s officers have been very active in using their personal relationships and diplomacy to call for donations from elsewhere for the welfare of local people. Dozens of wells and houses have

[58] It is worth noting this point, namely that people everywhere are expected to contribute to financing public work, if not completely, then partly, in the spirit of “Nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm” (the state and people working together). This spirit was high in the rural electrification processes described in Chapter Two.

been built for the poorest with donated funding. The care of the state system is real to the communities and renders itself meaningful to the marginalized here.

The energy gap in off-grid communities

It would be hard to find anyone else in either hamlet as satisfied with solar power as Mr. Tien, the chief of hamlet A. He has the biggest solar-power system in the area and typifies the successful use of renewable energy. As early as 2002, he started to build his system by going to Ho Chi Minh City to purchase one solar panel rated at 220 watts. For several years, he continued to accumulate more. When the NGO started its project in 2016, he already owned six panels. As the price of the panels provided within the project was much lower than the market price, he bought six more at once, bringing the total output of his system to 1,920 watts (1.92 kilowatt per hour). This output, supported by a series of high-capacity batteries, allows him to use a transformer to boost the voltage to the standard 220 volts, compatible with all popular electrical appliances. With this current voltage, he proudly said he had "live electricity" ("*điện sống*"). Thus he extended the concept of "live electricity" to cover power generated by his own system, because it meets the voltage standard of the grid electricity, and its output meets his requirements around the clock.

The abundance of electricity facilitates his business of selling food and renting out rooms to pilgrims. He has a food shop with many tables and chairs enough for hundreds of guests, five rooms for rent, several with separate bathrooms, is equipped with forty light bulbs, and has many electric fans for his guests and all the necessary household appliances for his own family. He also has a pumped watering system for his orchard. He earns a good income from this complex of services. For example, he charges 5,000 Vietnam *dong* for charging each cellphone, and thus earns as much as four hundred to five hundred thousand *dong* (from 18 to 22 US dollars) a day from this alone. Mr. Tien appeared perfectly satisfied with the solar power system, an asset that generates not only electric power, but also a very good income for his family.

Mr. Tien does not seem to bother about connecting to the grid, as he has enough electricity from the stand-alone system for the needs of his family and business. The fact is his business has a comparative advantage over other service households that do not have as high a capacity of electric power and as many electrical appliances as his premises. He is satisfied with the status quo and not so eager for a future of grid connection, when he will lose his advantage in the competition for business. The desire to be connected and the longing for the state's benevolence is not so present for a successful businessperson like him.

Between households with only one solar panel of 110 watts and households with several panels that generate up to 1,900 watts, the energy gap is not only very evident between on-grid and off-grid communities, but is also visible in off-grid hamlets in the southern province of An Giang. Improved technology of renewable energy enables virtually everyone to access electricity, but it does not solve the problems of energy inequality. Effectiveness depending on the user's size of investment and technical know-how, it allows for a severe discrepancy in energy consumption between neighboring households.

There is thus a difference in how people with different socio-economic circumstances, at least in hamlet A and hamlet B, long for the state. The poorer they are, it seems, the higher their trust and hope in this paternal entity. With limited investment in renewable energy, they look forward to having electricity from the grid to ensure their energy consumption, knowing that this grid connection cannot materialize without state subsidies. They seem to have no other viable option but to maintain their hope as long as the state continues to spread its promises of care, including over universal electrification, via the mass media and the local administrative system.

Conclusion

Unlike developing states that promote off-grid rural electrification, like India (Cross 2017, 2019), Mozambique (Kirshner and Power 2019) or Peru (Love and Garwood 2013), the Vietnamese state does not favor decentralized electrification. Especially after the issuing of the Prime Minister's Decision 2081/QĐ-TTg on rural, mountainous and island supply in the period 2013-2020, off-grid solar applications were "increasingly reduced" (Sanseverino, et al. 2020, 8). To be fair, stand-alone and community-scale renewable power systems are not excluded in policy documents, but they are only found actually existing in remote areas off the national grid (ibid.), which had already reached 100 per cent of communes and 99.6 per cent of households by 2020 (Phan 2020). Most such systems are financed from foreign aid and corporate social responsibility programs (Pham 2014, Tran, Nguyen and Nguyen 2017), not the state budget. Meanwhile, the aim of connecting one hundred per cent of households to the grid has always been on the state's agenda, despite some possible delays in "the last mile" largely because of the lack of capital.[59] The then Minister of Industry and Trade, Tran Tuan

[59] In 2018 the government estimated that about 21,000 households, accounting for 0.07 per cent of the total number of households (standing at 26.870,079 by 01/04/2019, according to the General Statistics Office), were electrified with stand-alone or community-scale power systems (Thủ tướng Chính phủ [Prime Minister] 2018). This small percentage of households was usually absent from the messages on electrification that the government sent out to rural communities.

Anh, confirmed in a National Assembly meeting that sufficient capital would be provided to achieve this goal by 2025 (Phan 2020). Amplified by the mass media, the state's promise of grid electricity allows still isolated communities like hamlet A and hamlet B in An Hao commune to maintain their hopes for the day being connected to the national network and waving goodbye to stand-alone power systems.

Beside the state's emphasis on the central grid, the low levels of investment in the quality and maintenance of alternative energy facilities contributes to consumers' preferences for grid-supplied electricity in both northern Dong Phong and southwestern An Hao. At the time of my fieldwork, the project in An Hao commune was still ongoing, so it was not at all clear how the facilities would be maintained, but the little investment in solar panels had already strictly limited user's experiences. In Dong Phong, there had not been sufficient follow-up after the project ended, leaving energy assets running down to the point of falling apart. Dissatisfaction with alternative energy infrastructures and improved grid electricity are among the factors that drive people here to be subject again to the electricity grid. Mirroring Dominic Boyer's remark, these cases illuminate the limits of "Western" discourses on the energy transition, which assume "a fluid, unproblematic, unviolent transition [...] without interrogating the magnitude and methods of energy usage that carbon statecraft institutionalized" (2011, 5). The energy transition in Dong Phong commune started when the transitioning communities continued to exist in low economic conditions and with weak technical capacities, so the NGO-powered transition process has been wired back to the "institutionalized" mode of energy usage – namely electricity from the centralized grid – as soon as the NGO leaves, and grid electricity becomes available. The fact that local "green" or "clean" energy initiatives like those in Dong Phong or An Hao only flourish provisionally in the absence of the grid also evidences the appeal of centralized electricity. At the sectoral level, the transition process also experiences rewinding moments when the number of coal-fired power plants keeps increasing from one electricity master plan to the next. The energy transition in Vietnam's electricity sector has thus not been a one-way journey but a complicated tug of war.

A dilemma for these communities is that even the grid that they long for cannot solve the energy inequality or energy poverty that they experience off-grid. It is not feasible for the poor in these communities to pay a good amount of money to consume as much electricity as wish, even when they pour in it a large share of their earnings. The best chance is that they will join one-fourth of the whole population in consuming no more than 50 kWh a month, which is already the actual volume they are

consuming now from a home system consisting of two solar panels, and at a much lower cost.[60] Even that does not take into account the prospective increases in grid electricity tariffs through market reforms. In economic terms, the connection to the grid is unlikely to benefit poor communities any more than existing decentralized energy systems. Nevertheless, no one in the two hamlets expressed a wish to be assisted in upgrading the household energy system so that they have more electric power to consume or to electrify their farming and businesses in an independent manner. What they wish for is to be connected to the national grid, almost unanimously.

Therefore, it is the symbolic connection to a national community, the "enchantment of political integration" (Harvey and Knox 2012), that the grid offers and the state promises that undermines the prospect of stand-alone systems and intensifies the longing for centralized electricity. Unlike the solar home system, which is confined to the scope of a household, the grid as a network infrastructure allows for the "flow and exchange [...] over space" (Larkin 2013, 326), over "great distances" (Cross 2017, 201), and thus allows for some form of "electric citizenship" (Özden-Schilling 2019) once one is connected to it. The aspiration for *live electricity* (*điện sống*) is amplified by the state's idea of an ever-growing, nationally unified network that already reaches 99.6 per cent of households. Left in the last 0.4 per cent, those who remain off-grid see the grid as both a material and a symbolic connection, which will not only facilitate their electricity consumption but also include them in the electrified society.[61] They will continue to be charmed by the grid until it reaches them, or until the state changes its mind and shifts to a decentralization of Vietnam's whole energy infrastructure.

Such changes, though unlikely any time soon, should not be ruled out from the prospect of the electricity sector. They can happen abruptly, if not very quickly, in the same manner that the marketization of some core parts of the grid or the transition away from coal-fired power plants have happened. After years of stagnating in the "political and intellectual battle" between stabilization and liberalization, to echo a point made by Collier (2011) on neoliberal reforms in Russia, the Vietnamese state seems to have made the critical decision to speed up its journey to market, competition and renewables. The socialist state, it is now safe to argue, has brought its neoliberal characteristics (Endres and Hann 2017) into mainstream politics, making them the dominant features, at least in the energy sector. If neoliberal reforms do not necessarily make the state blind to the need for social protection

[60] In my rough calculations, the cost of 1 kWh generated by a solar home system does not exceed 200 Vietnam *dong* averaged out over ten years, which is at least seven times lower than the price of electricity from the grid. Meanwhile, the longevity of the system can easily exceed ten years, making the cost even lower.

[61] It is a paradox to those who remain off-grid in An Hao commune that, in the commune's territory, only eight kilometres from hamlet B, the huge solar farm called Sao Mai, completed at the end of 2020, feeds 400 million kWh annually to the national grid (N. Tran 2021) without electrifying the communities on their doorstep.

(Collier 2011, 3), electricity consumers in rural Vietnam can still hope for, first, the on-grid electrification of the whole population that the state has always promised, and second, a relatively affordable power tariff.[62] It is only unclear at the moment, from current laws and policies on sectoral reforms, how the state plans to meet these expectations.

[62] As I wrote these lines, EVN announced it would not raise the electricity tariff in 2022, keeping it the same price for the fourth consecutive year since March 2019, and thus accepting the scenario of the Group making "zero profit". In response to this announcement, which is considered good news for industrial and household consumers, energy experts warned of the difficulties of mobilizing private investment in the electricity sector (Anh Minh 2022).

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Whenever a festive occasion comes close, the on-grid communities of Dong Phong commune get a special joy from their LED welcome arches (*cổng chào đèn LED*), a joy that off-grid communities such as An Hao in southern Vietnam have never experienced. In anticipation of the Lunar New Year 2019, one such occasion, many groups of Dong Phong male villagers spent hours doing maintenance work for the LED welcome arches on their alleyways, using any tools they can bring from home. They were preparing for the forthcoming long nights when these arches would tirelessly radiate the colorful light that made their alleys "beautiful" (*đẹp*). The maintenance job was carried out with laughter and jokes in an atmosphere of festivity and communality. A common dinner for the households located along each alleyway would be prepared for the evening, after the maintenance of light structures. With the prospect of this dinner, the job was not only enjoyable for the men, but also a good opportunity for all the members of their small communities to socialize. This procedure of self-organizing to maintain the LED welcome arches, having a meal together and then enjoying the beauty and stimulation from the colorful lights in the next few nights has been part of the life of Dong Phong villagers for some years now as an effect of their good access to the national electricity grid. Their sense of community has truly been invigorated via this procedure of common lighting, no matter how much or how little individual households pay for their domestic consumption. Economic concerns aside, this sense of community and festivity, entangled with the aesthetic quality of the living areas that grid electricity nourishes, is something people in An Hao commune are still longing for.

Figure 10. Maintaining LED welcome arches before the Lunar New Year, 2019

In the previous chapters, I have elaborated on the convenient use of grid electricity (Chapter Three), the enchanting effects of the grid on politicized and/or marginalized communities regarding their political and economic integration (see Harvey and Knox 2012), and on the reality of energy inequality and poverty, even when rural residents have access to the grid (Chapter Seven). I also elaborated on other factors that drive the preference for grid electricity in Vietnamese rural communities (over dispersed and usually renewable sources of energy). These factors include emotional and aesthetic reasons, and also intra-village conviviality through electricity consumption, as in the case of the LED welcome arches in Dong Phong. These reasons work on the level of affects, through the affectively charged engagement that people have with electricity, and similarly, with the infrastructure that distributes this electricity. Likewise, on the ground of affects or the "intensities of feeling" (Thrift 2004) generated by the experience of electricity, many popular movements related to the grid and electrical appliances have taken place in rural Vietnam. These include the nation-wide movement of rural electrification in the 1990s, the local movement of setting up LED welcome arches in Dong Phong and its neighboring communes, and the recent "mini movement" to install air conditioners in rural houses, even though most of these machines can hardly run when they are most needed due to the low voltage, as Dong Phong local electricians noted. The fact that locally initiated actions associated with electricity can proliferate and become popular at considerable scales tells us a great deal about the appeal of grid electricity.

Once people had access to electricity and to electrical appliances through these "movements", many other issues with electricity distribution emerge that complicate the relationship between the related parties, namely the people as electricity users, the company as electricity distributor and the state proclaiming its "for-the-people" nature and thus its normative role as the sponsor of the electricity supply. Complicated as they are, these issues essentially develop around the perception of electricity as either a public good or a commodity, which consequentially determined the EVN's mode of operating its electricity distribution apparatus.

Established in 1995 to kick off the reforms in the energy sector, Vietnam Electricity Group (EVN) is itself a product of neoliberal rationality. In financial terms, it has operated independently of the state budget and largely without state subsidies, except for its easy access to overseas development aid and foreign capital like that provided by World Bank and other development partners. This exception is by itself sufficient to create an uneven playing field for state and non-state sectors of the economy, as private enterprises usually claim, but far from enough to protect EVN from heavy losses should it fail to abide by the market rules of minimizing costs and maximizing profits. Although EVN regularly reiterates the political mandate that it is "one step ahead" of other industries and is "serving" political objectives, its aim at the same time is largely to achieve the targets of high revenues and low power losses, just like

any other private enterprise. Interviews with EVN managers at central and local offices confirmed to me what was already implicit in their websites and the company's internal publications, namely that EVN staff perceive electricity as a commodity. Moreover, they regard it as a special commodity whose price must be higher per unit the more of it people consume. EVN's way of addressing electricity users has changed uniformly nationwide from "the people" (*nhân dân*) to "customers" (*khách hàng*). For EVN, electricity is a matter of business.

In the perceptions of rural customers, however, electricity is still a public good, a matter of care, largely as a result of the state's discourse of rural electrification (see Chapter Two). People in Dong Phong express gratitude for the state when it comes to the improved quality of electricity, and people in the off-grid communities of An Hao long for the state's intervention in connecting them to the grid. In this model of patronage relations, residents of rural Vietnam do not perceive electricity as a human right they can demand, compared to their counterparts in some other countries. From India, for example, Chatterjee (2020) cites a 2013 judgement by the High Court of Tamil Nadu, which ruled that access to electricity is a "human right" due to its impacts on education, health and equality (19). Unfamiliar with this language of rights (which until recently was under media censorship), many people in rural Vietnam see electricity more like "a gift to be handed down […] to a grateful population" (ibid.). In that sense, in their eyes electricity represents the care of the morally charged socialist state for its citizens. They believe it should be a (public) good that they should be able to afford. While the company and its staff have long seen themselves working under market mechanisms, their customers still find it hard, even unreasonable, to accept "market-oriented" electricity tariffs. This contradiction creates an important part of the conflict between EVN and its customers and has been discussed extensively in the different chapters of this thesis.

The other part of this conflict was created by the dilemma the state itself faces in defining electricity as a public good or as a commodity. The central government expects EVN to operate its business independently while reserving the right to control the price of electricity centrally in an effort to regulate this market-driven commodity. However, this control is largely normative: the government has to accept the unpopular increases in electricity tariffs every few years because it is incapable of covering the deficits that EVN claims to suffer otherwise. It also vows to connect the whole population to the electricity grid, but cannot deliver on its promise for the last mile because no party is willing to bear the inevitable financial loss. The subsidy for extremely poor families that consume no more than 50 kWh a month is still maintained, but it is becoming increasingly irrelevant because, with the cap of 50 kWh, this benefit paradoxically keeps the poor subject to energy inequality and under the poverty line. While the state does not explicitly abandon the socialist notion of electricity as a public good because it contributes to its own legitimacy, in practice it leaves the rural population to cope with

increasingly unaffordable electricity tariffs, and sometimes lack of access to electricity itself. For those submitting to the state ideology of socialism, the ambivalence they experience with commodified electricity remains unresolved.

Understanding the Vietnamese state from below

In this research, I have chosen to investigate the relationship between the state and the people in rural Vietnam specifically because of the state's claim to be "of the people, by the people, for the people" and the consequential discourse of the state–people relationship, instead of the relationship between the state and society. I have applied the lens of affect in this investigation for its theoretical advantage to reconcile materialistic and symbolic approaches to the state (see Chapter One), not least for the empirical reason that the socialist state of Vietnam has a long history of masterfully engineering emotions and affects to create popular consent, especially through political communications and mobilization. The findings from this investigation of electric infrastructure and state-making echoed Laszczkowski's and Reeves' remark that the state is not set apart from 'society' but should be understood as "thriving in embodied, affective resonances within and between persons and things" (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 10). As I have made clear in various chapters of this thesis, the state of Vietnam and its relationship with the people thrive in affective encounters, interactions and entanglements between humans and electricity, in both aspects of material infrastructure and symbolic appeals.

With an electricity access rate of 99.6 per cent of households, achieved in about three decades, rural electrification is among the most pronounced instances of a good relationship between the Vietnamese state and the people. It is usually portrayed on mainstream media as evidence of both the nature of a moral state that attends to people's needs and the ability of that state to deliver welfare to the whole population. However, the people's perspective on this story is absent in this mainstream discourse, for which reason it became the starting point of my research. From here, my study shows that the building of the Vietnamese state takes place at the very grassroots, where electricity infrastructure allures and also allows the population to carry out rural electrification and participate in affective political rituals. The local state played and continues to play an active role in these processes, either by coordinating the electrification movement in its early period, through devotedly organizing ritual events to create the "make-believe" political space of the village, or even by serving as an antagonist of the central state in which where people place their trust.

As an approach to studying the state, the suggestion that the Vietnamese state could be "disaggregated" between the central and the local (Koh 2001, 300) is useful in the sense that the

central state and the local administration work at different levels and in different ways. However, the idea that this disaggregated state is inefficient or even "sick" (281) does not seem to hold true for electric state-making. The local state, such as the Dong Phong commune, has efficiently built the central state from below by attending to the local demand for electricity when the central authorities seem to be neglecting it, then tirelessly engineering people's affective engagements in "socialist ritual[s]" (Malarney 1996, 553) that are made more intense by the electrical effects, not only for the viability of the state but also as a survival strategy by the local state's leaders themselves. Furthermore, my research shows that the familiar idea that the local state is an important ally of the Vietnamese people (Koh 2001, Kerkvliet 2005) should also be updated. It manifested itself as true in the early period of electrification, but became less so in more recent developments of the electricity infrastructure. After EVN took over the local electricity grid, the commune's administration returned to its awkward position between the state and the people, "caught between top and bottom" (Pham 2004, 96) and even suspected by local residents of Dong Phong and elsewhere for embezzling the subsidies that the state gives its rural citizens. Alongside the symbolic care it delivers in public (socialist) and private rituals, the local administration remains subordinated to the central government and an untrusted partner of local people. It has been charged with negative affective judgments in its everyday activities, which are not politically symbolic but "socio-economic in nature" (Koh 2001, 281), especially since it refused to take responsibility for the local economy under the neoliberal rationality of the New Countryside programme (see Chapter Three).

The political system of Vietnam works in a way that drives not only local administrations but also NGOs to build the state. In both Dong Phong commune and An Hao commune, but especially the latter, the NGO's effort to create a local energy transition has been channelled into supplementing the state's energy supply for its citizens. In both communes, the NGO had to go through the gatekeeping of the local administration to reach the local communities, which is a required condition for NGOs to work in any locality of Vietnam. Its work was then embedded into the local state's programme of social development. Both the NGO and the local authorities consider this a success because their agenda has been achieved – the NGO can implement its project with local support, while the local authorities can add it to their profile of improving their residents' living standards. Remarkably, the beneficiaries of NGO projects of this kind include not only local people but also the political system, as the latter takes credit from NGO initiatives and (usually) the foreign development aid that flows in through NGOs. This central–local state system is organized in such a way that both the local state authorities and non-state partners like NGOs do not jeopardize the power of the central state, but work to strengthen its legitimacy in rural communities for the sake of their own success.

During the COVID years of 2021 and 2022, I heard "good news" on another bid by Dong Phong to make space for political beliefs from its Chairman of People's Committee. The commune was honored by being awarded the state's First-Class Labor Order (*Huân chương Lao động hạng Nhất*),[63] conferred at the same time its new primary school was completed and inaugurated. More importantly, a large new temple to "Uncle Ho" was under construction on the site of the older, now demolished shrine, with a total budget of over one hundred billion (*hơn một trăm tỉ*) Vietnamese *dong*, equivalent to nearly five million US dollars. Granted by the central state, this budget is an enormous amount for a construction project in a small commune of three thousand people. It is apparently a bold bid to transform the "Uncle Ho cult" and its vibrancy in the small territory of this new land (see Chapter Three) into a truly "political religion" (see Dror 2016) capable of influencing the whole coastal region of Thai Binh province, where Christianity and Buddhism have long exposed the population to their mixed influences. The question of how political religion(s) continue to be exercised in rural communities deserves an investigation in its own right in a further study.

Figure 11. New construction of Uncle Ho Temple in the completion phase, March 2023

(Photo credit: Chairman of Dong Phong People's Committee)

[63] The Vietnamese Law on Emulation and Commendation (*Luật Thi đua Khen thưởng*) defines the Labour Order as the state's award "conferred or posthumously conferred on individuals and conferred on collectives that have a continuous record of outstanding achievements in labour, creativity or national construction" (Term 42). There are three classes to the Order, the First Class being the most honourable.

It would be superfluous to stress how excited the local authorities were at this development. In both years they were happy and kept busy organizing several other rituals to receive the medal and break the foundations for the new Uncle Ho temple, then monitoring the construction process and welcoming visiting delegations. Their devotion to the local "make-believe" political space has eventually elicited a response in the form of the state's enthusiasm in turning their homeland into a political (religious) center while at the same time effectively consolidating their local leadership.

Energy sector and electricity company: the power of a formal-informal structure

In the background of the electric state-making process, the infrastructural system itself is run by power and resistance in both its electrical and social meanings. This thesis has shown how structural power is played out in the operation of rural electricity: the power of knowledge and social capital has been exercised to obtain paralegal access prior to rural electrification (for example, in the practice of *câu điện, electricity fishing,* described in Chapter Two). Thus commune electricians harness their social networks and the limited power authorized by EVN to regulate consumption and payment in the village (Chapter Four); EVN's electricity workers wield their discrete power on electricity users; and they also use the power of their professional identities and networks to safely position themselves in the electricity sector's apparatus (Chapter Five and Six). Then there is the overarching power of the state monopoly in distributing electricity as a commodity at a specific quality and a specific price, which in many cases are unpopular with its customers. Against these forms of power, there has been everyday resistance amounting to conflicts between the villagers and the commune's electricians, the company and its customers, the electricity workers and the company's customers, and the workers and the company. Pervasive though it is, this form of resistance is a catalyst bringing to light the power relations (Foucault 1982) between these parties; it is not a force balancing the power difference or overturning the domination of EVN in rural electricity distribution.

In this terrain of power and conflicts, and in the contradiction between the notions of electricity as a commodity or as a public good, the electricity company has on the one hand established a field of action (ibid.) for related parties, a mechanism of rural electricity distribution with fixed rules and regulations. On the other hand, it has also encouraged or implicitly accepted a set of informal practices needed for the running of formal procedures, largely to obtain maximum revenue from the rural market (see Chapters Four, Five and Six). This formal-informal mechanism and the consequentially maximized revenue is crucial for the company's ability to deliver electricity to far-flung, low-income villages via the national grid with improved reliability and always with post-paid meters, a performance not only appreciated by its creditors as one of the best among developing countries (World Bank 2018),

but also noted by its rural customers. Remarkably, this mechanism is not created solely by the electricity company itself, but largely by other parties to get along with its formal rules. Commune electricians in Dong Phong provide informal credit for electricity users in order to meet the company's requirement of a minimum of success in its collection of payments. Electricity workers buy their own tools to ensure work efficiency and choose to work with live lines to avoid triggering the anger of customers, despite the company's formal requirement that the affected lines be cut for safety reasons. The managers of district branches verbally encourage this latter practice because it helps maintain the level of electricity consumption, as well as encouraging electricity workers to collect payments from customers without giving them receipts. As a powerful monopoly, the company emphasized its formal rules while letting informal processes run in parallel at the people's own risk. As James Scott (1998) astutely noted, a formal scheme "is always and to some considerable degree parasitic on informal processes, which the formal scheme does not recognise, without which it could not exist, and which it alone cannot create or maintain" (310).

While the state still emphasizes the ideological dimension of electricity, the Vietnam Electricity Group (EVN) has successfully transformed its way of doing business in accordance with the market-oriented and/or neoliberal rule of cost recovery. Power losses were curbed, and electricity tariffs periodically increased, creating profits for EVN in several consecutive years, despite electricity users' complaints. In late 2022, for the first time EVN declared a considerable deficit, attributing it mainly to the price of input fuels, which sharply increased as a consequence of the war in Ukraine (Anh Minh, 2022). The government responded by approving a new, higher price range for retail electricity, clearing the way for a new "change of price" for EVN. According to EVN, the existing tariffs, which have been applied for four years since the last increase in March 2019, have fallen too short of covering the costs of electricity generation, transmission and distribution, let alone leaving any profit for the company.

Workers in the electricity sector: the human component of electricity infrastructure

If the state and the electricity sector, as the ethnography shows, engage in a structural way with the electricity infrastructure and electricity users, the human parties in this research, i.e. the electricity workers, communal electricians and electricity users in the villages, engage with electricity as well as the state in deeply affective ways. The electricity workers in particular have completely embodied interactions with the infrastructure and emotionally charged encounters with their company's rural customers. The hybridity of the Vietnamese economy that is experiencing "industrialization" (*công nghiệp hóa*), "modernization" (*hiện đại hóa*), and neoliberalization at the same time places a special emphasis on the hybridity of these workers' identities, self-conceptions and practices. They practice a

dual loyalty to their company and to the people, taking sides flexibly in cases where the company's and customers' interests are in conflict. They combine the embodied manual labor of workers in industrializing economies with first, the emotional labor of the interactive service workers of service economies, and secondly and simultaneously, with the significant discrete power of "street-level" state agents. They act as both the technical core of the electricity infrastructure and the buffer between it and electricity users, as well as between the people and the state. This hybridity and the conflicts over their identity and positioning heighten the affective aspect of workers' entanglement with the infrastructure and the people, which constitutes a viable "social life of the state, that is, how it is perceived, represented and imagined […]" (Andreetta et al. 2022, 2).

A consideration of theoretical concepts of forms of labor will help clarify the intensity of work fulfilled by Vietnamese electricity workers. In their theoretical discussion of the temporality of infrastructure, Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly and Budds (2021) refer to the form of labor that electricity workers of EVN similarly engage in as "infrastructural labor", distinct from the notion of "people as infrastructure" that AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) suggests. Simone emphasizes the employment of social relations to provide a temporary infrastructure, corresponding to the way in which a Vietnamese commune's electricians perform their role based on their social capital and the seasonal contract with EVN (see Chapter Four). Meanwhile, the notion of embodied infrastructural labor is "as much about materiality as it is about the body, and the wider social relations and political worlds generated" (Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly and Budds 2021, 677). The notion of labor now extends to cover the bodies of laborers and the materiality of infrastructure, the social relations and the political worlds that laborers and infrastructure generate in their encounters. These dimensions of labor are all present in the place of electricity workers in the industrializing economy of Vietnam.

Their work nevertheless demonstrates one more dimension of labor that is typically found in post-industrial service economies, i.e., the "emotional labor" (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993, Hülsheger and Schewe 2011) that is performed by interactive service workers (for a description of this category of laborer, see McCammon and Griffin 2000). As those working directly with customers, electricity workers not only offer embodied manual labor for infrastructural systems, but also have to manage the emotions of their customers, as well as their own, during face-to-face encounters. Being abused verbally and at times physically, and suffering unfair treatment as the "daughters-in-law of all families", are common aspects of their daily work. Drawing on theoretical concepts of forms of labor and ethnographic data on the bodily and emotional experiences of electricity workers, I suggested the notion of "human infrastructure", emphasizing the all-out affective engagement of workers with and for the infrastructure, its users and the socio-political system at large.

In 2021, two years after I left Hoang Hai Electric Power, where I had spent many hours in participant observation, some workers in General Team Two informed me that they had been moved to a newly established team called the Service Team (*Đội Dịch vụ*), together with some members of General Team One and some others from the periodical team. This new team worked to fix households' problems at customers' request, but charged a service fee to do so. As EVN's traditional scope of work is limited at the meter box, this extension of service into households' own spaces probably means three things. First, it is a preparatory step for EVN to separate its distribution and transmission wings at the district level in accordance with the reform protocol, with the former covering not only distribution but also maintenance, thereby maximizing both income and competitiveness. Second, at the grassroots, it could mean a phasing out of the communes' electricians, their services becoming increasingly redundant now that EVN not only has ECPay collecting its bill payments (see Chapter Six), but also formal repair services that the communes' electricians used to provide informally. And third, the new service team could mean even better access to the population through the electricity grid, now that the EVN apparatus is organized sufficiently to go beyond meter boxes and enter people's homes. Electricity-sector workers will again perform their role as the human component of that infrastructure, itself a state instrument, improving the legibility of the population through their direct work with electricity users in every household.

Rural electricity users – "the people" in the relationship with the state

While complaining about the price and sometimes the quality of electricity supply, people in rural Vietnam find it hard to imagine their lives without this form of energy, so both voluntarily and involuntarily they submit to electricity from the centralized grid. At their level of income, the cost and quality of grid electricity provided by the state monopoly EVN make it the most suitable choice for them. Even when grid electricity is not their only option, energy from other sources, such as standalone solar systems, community solar panels or biogas, has yet to become attractive enough for rural users due to the usually low-capacity equipment they can afford and the lack of maintenance and repair. In other words, the energy transition is far from having been sustained in rural areas. The rural population finds itself heavily dependent on the state-sponsored infrastructure of an electricity grid, which distributes not only the commodity but also the state's political power.

Remarkably, both access and a lack of access to grid electricity seem to reinforce the population's submission to the state, though in different ways. In Dong Phong, affects are engineered to contribute to common cultural and political spaces at the local level with electrified activities. The sense of commonality and shared excitement which are felt in anniversaries related to Uncle Ho, in care rituals

by the local state and in each alleyway lit by LED welcome arches induced local people to participate either actively or passively but tangibly in the abstract process of affective state-making. Meanwhile, the lack of similar activities enabled by electricity accentuates the longing for the state in the off-grid communities of An Hao. Four years after my visit, I learned from a local officer that they are still off-grid and that the long-running discussion between the local state, EVN and community representatives on who will bear the cost for their access has still not come to an end. It is a paradox to them that, in the commune's own territory, only eight kilometers from hamlet B, the huge solar farm at Sao Mai, completed at the end of 2020, annually feeds 400 million kWh into the national grid (N. Tran 2021) without electrifying the very local communities nearby. But people's hopes have not faded away: on the contrary, they are rejuvenated when they not only see that the generation of electricity has come so close, but also witness the encroachment of the state-sponsored road system into their marginal hamlets, albeit at a very slow pace. When the road has been built, they believe, electricity will follow. Their story shows that rural populations continue to be enchanted by the electricity infrastructure and the state's promises, whether or not they have actual access to the grid and thus take part in different forms of affective state-making.

Ethnography thus reveals the submission of rural populations to the symbolic power of the state, the sovereignty that seems to care for people and includes communities in an electrified society. The technopolitical dimension of the state–people relationship, constructed by means of electricity meters and EVN's system of selling power and collecting bills, is nevertheless resisted. Although their consumption of electric power inevitably makes them subject to rule by the meters and the company's regulations, users refuse to accept these rules completely. They have serious doubts about the meters, question the company's trustworthiness, have conflicts with local electricians and, as a way of releasing their feelings of *buc xuc* ("oppressed exasperation", see Harms 2012, 739), abuse the electricity workers, who represent for them not only the company, but to some extent also the state. In the rural residents' experience of electricity and the state, there has been a clash between – which also means co-existence between – the symbolic political appeal of the state through electricity and the materialistic, technopolitical burden of electricity consumption.

In Dong Phong commune, the history and tradition of the territory has particular impacts on the way people imagine their relationship with the state and take part in the local process of state-making. It is possible that people in other communes with different histories and traditions, which include different religious beliefs, may have different imaginations of their relationship with the state and experience the role of electricity in state-making somewhat differently. The people-state relationship also depends on the particular ways the local state mobilizes the population to build political and cultural spaces. However, the basic aspects of rural life that I have described in this thesis, such as the

structure of the local state that coordinates this life, the local state's lack of involvement in the local economy, rural people's practices of consuming electricity from the grid, EVN's mechanism of managing the rural market, the modes of interaction between rural consumers and EVN's workers, and generally people's perceptions of the central state as generated by encounters with the centralized electricity supply, have more in common than not. Further investigations in other localities will shed light on the peculiarities and potentially important nuances on the understanding of electrified state-making present throughout this current research.

The state–people relationship around and beyond electricity infrastructure

In this thesis, I have presented several aspects of my answer to the research question set out at the beginning, i.e., how electricity infrastructure contributes to the making of the state. I have hopefully made it clear that people have been heavily reliant on grid electricity, that their electricity consumption is disciplined by EVN's distribution mechanism, and that their (affective) engagements with the grid and the state monopoly make them increasingly subject to the infrastructural power of the state. "Market-oriented" reforms in the electricity sector have altered the perception of electricity among the company and the electricity users, and deepened the conflicts in their relationship; but informal practices and the instrumentalization of "human infrastructure", namely, the electricity workers, have buffered the clashes between the infrastructure and its users, as well as between the political system and the people it governs. The relationship between the state and the people has therefore not suffered much from recent reforms in energy. Rural residents still have an understanding of the state as a patron that delivers care through successful rural electrification and that, on the other hand, cannot intervene too hard in the way EVN runs its business. In this process, the electricity grid has become the site where rural people have frequent emotionally charged interactions with various sections of the authorities (infrastructural authorities and local political authorities) and different levels of the state (local state and central state), a site for affective investment, as Degani (2022) has observed in the case of urban Tanzania.

Affective investment in the grid has made the electricity infrastructure, and thus the state, constantly visible in rural communities, whether or not they have access to the grid, and in both failures and successful deliveries of the service alike. Also, drawing on the bodily, ethical and emotional engagements of electricity workers with the grid and its users, my work sheds light on the humans in the electricity system, the workers who are commonly obscured by the technical and mechanical qualities of the infrastructure, but, in a transitioning economy, are both highly attached to the infrastructure and instrumentalized to condition its everyday running. Highlighting the constant

visibility of electricity and the affective engagements of infrastructural workers as such, my work has made ethnographic and theoretical contributions to the scholarly understanding of infrastructure from a heterogenous entry point.

While I was searching for answers to the original question about electricity infrastructure and the state, witnessing the reforms to the electricity sector and the broader economic, social and political reforms in the country, another question arose: can a socialist state, which claims to be "of the people, by the people and for the people", be neoliberal at the same time? Or, to put it more precisely, can a neoliberalized state remain a 'for-the-people' socialist state? There is no simple answer to this kind of question; the evidence is that several scholars (Gainsborough 2010, Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012, Masina 2012, Endres and Hann 2017) have discussed the "neoliberal characteristics" of the Vietnamese political economy in a particularly cautious manner. With a view to Vietnam's electricity sector, however, the answer to these questions seems to be positive.

The first and foremost basis for a positive answer rests with the people themselves. They do not necessarily feel "abandoned by the state" amidst "market-oriented" or neoliberal reforms, as citizens in European neoliberal societies have commonly felt (Latour 2007, 28). On-grid communities show their appreciation for the improvements to the electricity supply, which came as a result of international development credits, and increasingly rely on the electric power that the state monopoly provides. The increases in block tariffs make consumers complain and possibly consume power a bit more cautiously, but have not alienated them from the centralized grid. The "increasing block" itself is perceived as a trait of socialism, as it keeps the nominal cost of electricity lowest for the poorest in society, a claim that Vietnamese electricity users easily accept. Unlike electricity users in economies undergoing similar reforms elsewhere, the Vietnamese never had to use a prepaid meter and have rarely been disconnected from the grid thanks to informal practices that are exercised in parallel with the formal mechanism. Neoliberal reforms of the electricity sector, especially in opening up the retail market to competition, still have to go some way until they are complete, and have not caused much damage to people's ideals of the benevolent state in socialism.

Off-grid residents in An Hao commune, similarly, do not feel the "despair" that has been noted over "interminable delays" of infrastructural projects (Ramakrishnan, O'Reilly and Budds 2021, 676). They are aware of the high costs of connecting their far-flung territory to the grid and thus even appear sympathetic to related parties, including the local state and the central state, neither of which has secured the financial resources to connect them any time soon. They seem to have settled, mentally, between the parallel operation of the socialist perception of a caring state and the neoliberal concern with costs and revenues. Political communication is significant in engineering such a consent, but another important factor that maintains this positive thinking in the off-grid communities of An Hao

commune is the availability of solar power-generated electricity. Installation supported technically by an NGO, their household standalone systems generate a modest volume of power that keeps them calm while waiting for access to the grid. With the aid of regulations made at the central level and coordination provided at the local level, the state has arranged things so that such NGO work can contribute to improving local living standards and the state–people relationship at the same time, even when the state cannot deliver the "last mile" to the electricity grid. With regard to the electricity supply, the state has had ways of assuring rural residents, both on-grid and off-grid, about its care.

Up to now, Vietnam has provided a unique, very interesting case for the anthropology of electricity and the anthropology of the state. This is not because it is among the very few countries left in the world led by a communist party and declaring itself a socialist state, but because it has reached a degree of economic and political success in the hybrid "market socialism" within and beyond the electricity sector. Over the world, deregulation or market liberalization, terms that represent capitalization and/or neoliberalization, usually mean privatization of the state's economic sector, the retreat of the public sector and consequently the undermining of state legitimacy amongst a citizen body that feels "abandoned", as "a State that fails to protect is no longer legitimate" (Latour 2007, 28). So far, "market-oriented" reforms in Vietnam's rural electricity sector have in part meant wielding capitalist forces to deliver the infrastructural promises that the state lacks the resources to deliver. By doing so, it renews and reproduces the affective entanglements between citizens and the state via electricity infrastructure, thus consolidating the state–people relationship. The Vietnamese state makes an interesting case for study because of the paradox it currently represents, as journalist Bill Hayton (2022) writes in one of the most recent books about the country: "Vietnam has harnessed the power of capitalism while remaining an overtly communist state" (263).

This paradox requires a look beyond the "patterned, recurrent and interconnected traces of neoliberalisation" (Peck and Theodore 2019) if one wishes to understand all that makes the relationship between the state and the people in Vietnam resilient. No matter what form this formula of state-making could take, it will be seriously flawed if it does not include the affective engagements and judgments the people have had in their relations with the state and that the Vietnamese state has striven to engineer over time.

On the other hand, it is too early to be certain about what comes out of electricity infrastructure and the state–people relationship when a socialist state juggles its ideology with capitalism and neoliberalism. The next increase in electricity tariffs has been heralded to take place during 2023. Before the price crisis of 2019 can be forgotten, how far this coming increase and changes of this kind will continue to affect the state's legitimacy, and how successful the state will be in proclaiming its "for-the-people" ethics, are hardly predictable. My work on electric and electrified state-making in

rural Vietnam reflects the spirit of ethnography, which, in João Biehl's words, is concerned with "resisting synthetic ends and making openings rather than absolute truths" (Biehl 2013, 594). It has sought to make meaningful openings that invite further thoughts and anthropological work on the entanglements of electricity infrastructure, humans and politics.

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