

In the “development soup”: Conflicted ethnography in an extractive frontier

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Impending and overlapping political, economic, and ecological crises demand that scholars ensure their work is relevant and impactful beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and universities. Scholars are encouraged to be inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary, work across the humanities and social and natural sciences, and closely engage with non-academic actors and audiences. Critical scholars tend to approach non-academic interactions by working with allied movements and organizations, such as activists, civil society organizations, and non-profit groups. At times, though, they can find themselves engaged with actors that are not aligned with their interests and perspectives, such as authoritarian governments or extractive corporations. In this chapter, I argue that it is necessary to confront and face those uncomfortable interactions through a form of “conflicted ethnography.” While such exchanges must be approached cautiously and strategically, it is through them that scholars can gain a deep understanding of the topics they are investigating, and there are substantial opportunities to effect change. In the Southeast Asian nation of Laos, where the single-party government has a stronghold over politics and civil society, it can be nearly impossible to escape the reach of the state, and researchers find themselves wrapped up in what one foreign observer called the “development soup,” whether they like it or not. This chapter reflects on my experiences researching land investments in a resource extractive frontier of Laos while embedded within a government ministry. It demonstrates the importance, but also risks, of embracing contradictory positions that researchers find themselves in when engaging beyond the typical boundaries of academic scholarship.



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