

# *The Encrypted State: Delusion and Displacement in the Peruvian Andes*

David Nugent, Stanford University Press 2019

Review by Robert Pantalone  
M.A. in Social and Political Thought  
at Acadia University

David Nugent's *The Encrypted State* theorizes state rule in novel terms. Departing from the conventional assumption that states are rational, regular, and ordering, Nugent questions the contradictory processes of state formation. State power, he contends, is not merely repressive but frequently makes "the chaotic, contradictory, delusional, disorganized, and irrational" appear as though they were mundane, commonplace, normal, and prosaic.<sup>166</sup> The state, therefore, engages in processes of masking which duplicitously convert violent and coercive practices into apparently neutral and anodyne ones so that it may legitimate them. To reveal these processes, Nugent turns his attention to what may seem an unusual case study: a roughly thirty-year period in the Amazonas Region of northern Peru during which time those efforts broke down in a spectacular fashion.

Beginning in the 1920s and ending during the 1950s, the archival record from this era documents a state that operates irregularly until paranoia renders it dysfunctional. Centered on the regional capital, Chachapoyas, these documents trace a transition of rule from an effective but disorganized state to an apparently conventional but inoperable one. In the former, *castas*, a cyclical succession of aristocratic families, succeeded in drafting forced labour for

---

<sup>166</sup> David Nugent, *The Encrypted State: Delusion and Displacement in the Peruvian Andes* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019), 6.

collective works but troubled Weberian theories which defined the state as possessing a monopoly on violence. That changed when an influx of capital aimed at modernizing Peru set in motion a modernization programme that swept aside the earlier order. Elites scrambled to preserve their aristocratic status within the new state which lacked the administrative and territorial capacities of the previous arrangement. As a result, there was a “war of all against all that broke out within the terrain of government” as functionaries competed for funds and undercut one another rather than pursuing shared goals.<sup>167</sup> This fracture was so extreme that planners lost their grip on reality and attempted to recruit a labour force which exceeded not only what was available but the entire population of the region itself. State officials displaced that failure onto the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA), a political party which they believed was tormenting their efforts to such a degree that mutual suspicions paralyzed their rule and internal factions began sending the encrypted memos which give Nugent’s book its title. The regional government succumbed to delusions of all-powerful enemies and officials “came to view their administration as a pale imitation of a sophisticated, complex state structure located somewhere deeply underground” even though they could not see it.<sup>168</sup>

Within just a few decades, an outwardly rational state apparatus collapsed into complete disarray. Nugent’s most original and valuable contribution is the political programme he theorizes to explain those delusions: sacropolitics. Differing from both biopolitics and necropolitics, sacropolitics is neither about “managing nor taking life but rather animating it. Sacropolitics is about bringing to life dead, dying or moribund populations and social

---

<sup>167</sup> Nugent, 155.

<sup>168</sup> Nugent, 3–4.

formations.”<sup>169</sup> It is a practice which seeks to emancipate the nation from a backward past (in Peru, a feudal social structure) and asks individuals to become new subjects who enhance themselves in the name of realizing an invigorated future. According to Nugent, to do so requires a ‘state of redemption’ which, in contrast to a state of exception, is declared not to kill with impunity in some places but to broaden the category of who can be asked to make sacrifices to encompass all subjects. The whole nation becomes a development camp in which citizens must perform acts of loyalty in order to free themselves and their community from their limits. This fantasy makes it necessary to believe in the omnipotence of the state. To realize its order, any other outlook is regarded “as wholly irrational—as motivated by fanaticism, extremism, and the desire to subvert.”<sup>170</sup> Adversaries become unintelligible from the perspective of authority and delusion therefore becomes pervasive.

*The Encrypted State* is fortuitous in that it arrives at a time when an otherwise limited case study resonates with mainstream political trends. One need only look to the United States to see an example of how. Substituting American for Peruvian content, the same dynamic plays out: a central government becomes delusional after it is stymied in an effort to build a grand nation-redeeming project (a border wall), displaces those failures onto an internal conspiracy (the ‘deep state’) and blames a backwards political structure for its frustrations (coastal elites and their ‘swamp’). Nugent’s book is also a testament to the value of the kind of detailed academic work which is increasingly endangered. It is a local, longitudinal study which yields insightful results about broad formations. The deep and close reading of archival material is undoubtedly the project’s strength and what enables its most important conclusions to emerge. But that narrow lens at times curtails the book’s

---

<sup>169</sup> Nugent, 30.

<sup>170</sup> Nugent, 47.

potential. As the volume progresses, Nugent propounds details of the state project which are historically relevant but conceptually redundant. The clearest examples come in Chapters Six and Seven which focus on *corvée* for the military service and civil engineering projects, respectively. Nugent's intent is to more fully show how excessive conscription manifests the delusional character of the Peruvian state. These chapters, however, mostly provide granular details in service of reiterating arguments that have already been described in earlier passages. While the repeated explanations reveal shared hallucinations and displacements, they do less to show how those specific projects relate to the state apparatus which is the subject of the book.

A more compact treatment of the documentary record might have yielded a volume with space to consider the sacropolitical state's intersection with other categories. Largely implicit throughout *The Encrypted State* are accounts of how sacropolitics impacted indigenous populations, the families of the poor, and the lives of women whose suffering appears only in passing mentions of the brutality of both *casta* and state power. It is unsurprising that those groups are excluded from the material on which Nugent draws: forced conscription targeted working-aged males in numbers that grossly exceeded the available labour supply. In that regard, these lacunae underscore Nugent's underlying point about how the state becomes detached from the reality which it governs by highlighting how it misidentifies population. But their absence in Nugent's book are concerning for other reasons. Although backgrounding marginal groups is the condition of the state's utterances—its ability to mask the exceptional in the banal language of bureaucratic machinations—that practice need not be reproduced in academic studies where other sources could be included. Adding those perspectives would no doubt exceed the archival methodology which Nugent has adopted, but references to texts like Diana Taylor's gender-based analysis of the Argentine state, *Disappearing Acts*,

in his construction of a theoretical framework suggests that his project is compatible with those approaches.

Broadening the investigation of the Peruvian state would also open productively onto questions of resistance that are mostly latent or referred to in general terms in *The Encrypted State*. For example, Nugent notes that some peasants opted for “permanent dislocation rather than temporary flight” in the face of conscription.<sup>171</sup> For him, this is an encounter between two political geographies: a local hierarchical stasis enforced by *casta* units and a modern one of mobility imposed by the central government. Yet, while Nugent connects the abandonment of the land with earlier resistance to colonialism, he does not contextualize it in the practices of the indigenous groups whom sacropolitics targeted. This omission is lamentable because, as Marisol de la Cadena has argued, Andean politics faces irruptions of indigenous practices which assert non-human beings who trouble the opposition of nature and humanity that founds state politics.<sup>172</sup> Seeing the state as the singular context of Peruvian politics therefore seems unnecessarily restrictive. Missed opportunities are also evident in the treatment of APRA. Nugent suggests that the opposition party was, at times, little more than a nuisance for the state, and at others a credible threat to its power. But because the reader encounters APRA almost exclusively through its archival characterization, it is impossible to discern to what degree it intentionally succeeded in unsettling the state and whether it constructed the parallel apparatuses. Shedding further light on how indigenous, Pan-American, and post-colonial movements opposed the power

---

<sup>171</sup> Nugent, 150.

<sup>172</sup> Marisol De La Cadena, “Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond ‘Politics,’” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334–370, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01061.x>.

of the delusional state would broaden the utility of Nugent's sacropolitical theory by uncovering ways those flows of power might be reversed or undone.

The question of resistance therefore uncovers the reason why Nugent's book is a valuable contribution. As noted above, the delusional state has become an urgent political issue outside of the so-called Global South. Indeed, it now confronts countries whose orders are predicated on a capacity to declare those nations backwards and in needs of salvation to justify their own political projects, much as the Peruvian state impugned its peasant population. Today the need to know and resist delusional and disordered adversaries, especially those descended from elite political structures, is a matter of global importance. Failing to understand those processes risks bringing about the same delusions that carried mid-twentieth-century Peru to crisis. Thus, as these dynamics become unmasked in new contexts, Nugent's theorization of the state and concept of sacropolitics may prove to be platforms for considering politics beyond the thoroughly-investigated specificity of his study.

## Works Cited

De La Cadena, Marisol. "Indigenous Cosmopolitics in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond 'Politics.'" *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 334–370. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01061.x>.

Nugent, David. *The Encrypted State: Delusion and Displacement in the Peruvian Andes*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2019.