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Anthropology in the Margins of the State

Veena Das and Deborah Poole, eds.

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Throughout anthropology's short history as a discipline, its ambiguous position on the margins of science, literature, and politics has alternately been seen as a sign of disciplinary lack or as a privileged vantage point from which to gain a critical distance. Whatever the case, being able to navigate the margins of things is a disciplinary rite of passage, reiterated through fieldwork of "improper" objects and in peripheral places. One of the strong claims of the groundbreaking volume *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* is that the anthropological analysis of marginal practices, places, and languages is essential to a robust understanding of the state. "[M]argins," the authors suggest, "are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule" (4). Thus, the volume stands as a persuasive disciplinary treatise arguing for the importance of ethnography, (with its attention to the experience of the everyday,) to the understanding of a once marginal anthropological object—the state.

This volume, the result of a 2001 seminar at the School of American Research, provides a resounding critique of received understandings of the state—as a transparent and rational bureaucratic form and as a territory with definite, if disputable, boundaries. In general, the authors are less concerned with producing an ideal type of the modern state form and more concerned with describing the way what we might call "state practices" run through everyday life on the margins. Editors Veena Das and Deborah Poole argue that, "the forms of illegibility, partial belonging, and disorder that seem to inhabit the margins of the state constitute its necessary condition as a theoretical and political object" (6). As a result Das and Poole refuse the idea that one could simply identify the regional and cultural specificities of a "universal" state form. Instead, just as medical anthropologists rethink the universal body through attention to specific bodily practices and experience, they turn to the "indeterminate character of margins to break open the solidity often attributed to the state" (20).

To conceptualize their project, the authors often turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben on the exception. While the editors, Das and Poole, critique the metaphysical forms that Agamben's argument takes, they still find in his work a powerful theoretical apparatus to describe how margins can be simultaneously

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spaces of exclusion and inclusion. That is, if politics defines its domain by excluding certain aspects of human life—and ultimately portions of the human community—that exclusion is necessarily constitutive of politics itself. In other words, the policing of what must remain “outside” the state is very much an “inside” activity. Agamben writes, “In this sense, the exception is truly, according to its etymological root, taken outside, and not simply excluded” (Agamben 1998:18). For Agamben it is the sovereign who decides on the exception, the sovereign who decides what and who will be “taken outside” the political. The exception is not easily separated from the decision, and one wonders, after reading this volume, whether waiting for a decision may be one diacritic of life in the margins.

The temporal experience of the state, and particularly the experience of awaiting a decision, is highlighted in Marianne Ferme’s chapter on “deterritorialized citizenship” in Sierra Leone. Ferme describes the case of a man who gains admittance to the U.S. through being recognized as a Sierra Leonean refugee—even though he had left Sierra Leone long before the civil war broke out.

That the flight of refugees from Sierra Leone can be, as Mohammed’s case suggests, more the product of imagination than historical fact is precisely part of the argument here: postcolonial Sierra Leone as a state is first and foremost a state of the imagination—albeit one that has “real” effects such as points of legal decision, coercion, rights of life and death, and so on. [91–92]

In Mohammed’s case the state exerts its control over space-time through decisions (or the lack of decisions) regarding the duration of passports, visas, scholarships residence and work permits, et cetera. One is always awaiting a decision, and that decision usually indicates the length of time one must wait before the next decision.

Similarly, in a chapter on the margins of the Peruvian state, Poole describes the particular agony of waiting for a decision at a checkpoint. She argues that documents presented at checkpoints in Peru oscillate between threat and guarantee. While the absence of identity documents leads to detention, documents may also be cited as the *reason* for detention. Whether one’s documents will ultimately guarantee or threaten one’s right to pass through the checkpoint cannot be known in advance. Checkpoints are places where the application of the law is constantly being negotiated and where it becomes painfully obvious that it is not the written law itself that constitutes the law of the state, but—as Talal Asad points out in his concluding essay—an “alien” authority that imposes itself from the outside. To illustrate this alien authority, Poole uses the figure of the *gamonal*, a strong-man who presides over state offices in small towns and villages, yet resorts to private justice whenever “necessary.” The everyday experience of forms of *gamonalismo* leads the Peruvian peasant to understand the state as both “disinterested and corrupt, just and coercive, participatory and removed” (61).

This logic of something being “both/and” (i.e., both disinterested *and* corrupt, just *and* coercive) is in keeping with a theory of the exception and the zone of undecidability that it entails. In the margins, the usual categories are blurred and are, as this volume demonstrates, inhabited in unexpected ways. Chapters by Victoria Sanford and Janet Roitman look to the geographical margins of states (or their physical borders with other states) to understand this zone of indistinction. Victoria Sanford argues that Colombia, rather than being a failed state which has lost its monopoly on violence, is actually reconstituting itself as a state at its margins through the “army’s use of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence, including the use of proxy paramilitary forces” (256). The fact that paramilitary and state violence become indistinguishable makes resistance less than straightforward. Refusing any simple notion of “resistance,” Sanford argues that the Colombian Peace Communities, set up as zones of nonviolence and monitored by the international human rights community, offer the possibility of “subaltern transformation of state sovereignty and citizenship” (269).

Roitman contests the idea that African states are “weak states” because they fail to conform to the Weberian model of the rational-legal state. Examining the intersection of the state with “illicit” activities presumed to be beyond its control—the emergent markets in drugs, small arms, contraband, and mercenaries in the Chad Basin—she argues that this is precisely where governmental relationships are being reconfigured. “The dismissed, dispossessed, downsized, and under- or unemployed who have taken to the bush, highways, and borders are making claims to wealth and even the very right to wealth” (197). However, although state law and regulations are flouted at every turn, Roitman argues that the presence and power of the state can still be felt. She argues that the only way to understand the paradox between the “increasing intensity of unregulated activities and the persistent efficacy of state infrastructure” (194) is to make a distinction between state power and state regulatory authority. Thus while the state may not condone or officially regulate such illicit activities, it still manages to extract tariffs from the traffickers.

With Diane Nelson’s chapter on Guatemalan indigenous communities we turn from physical margins to fractures within the self and state. Nelson seeks to understand what it means to be two-faced: how one man can be a Mayan activist and also a leader of a civil-patrol responsible for atrocities against Mayan people; how the state can be both the author of those atrocities and represent the hope for a better future. “Being duped” is the central trope of her analysis, but she refuses the standard narrative of a state that dupes its unsuspecting indigenous citizens. Rather, subject positions are not fixed as either “victim” or “perpetrator” but perpetually caught in a double bind of the exception where the perpetrator is also a victim—and vice versa.

This play between inside and outside continues in Lawrence Cohen’s chapter where “the operation,” conceived as a general form, functions to “bring inside” those excluded (on account of their passion and lack of reason) from the modern

Indian state. Cohen reflects on three kinds of surgeries in contemporary India: hijira (sex-change) operations, kidney-selling operations, and family-planning operations. Focusing first on organ transplantation he describes how populations become “bioavailable” insofar as their bodily tissue is made available for redistribution. Technical shifts in medicine have made it possible to stabilize large populations as bioavailable. Yet to be “operable,” in Cohen’s terms, is to be the person for whom the operation functions as a counter-gift to the state, one that secures a mode of belonging or citizenship. That is, the operation, as a general form, allows members of the passionate masses to enter what Cohen calls “as-if modernity.” He writes, “The operation is thus necessary to remake one’s mindful body in accordance with the demands of developmental modernity, to remake one as if one were a modern, bourgeois subject” (172). Those who have sought an operation become “exceptional” citizens (both passionate and ascetic) and participate in new forms of political recognition mediated through invasive medical technology. Cohen’s “as-if modernity” is always haunted by the passion, irrationality and ultimately the illegibility of the masses. Perhaps the most significant contribution of the volume is the way it draws our attention to the force of such “illegibility” as a trope and practice of the state—thus destabilizing the entrenched idea that the state is somehow “about” its legibility, rationality, or orderliness. To illustrate the illegibility of state practices Pradeep Jeganathan, in his chapter, reflects on the presence of military checkpoints in Sri Lanka. Checkpoints are marginal spaces because the individual’s identity, citizenship, and relation to violence are put into question and can be decided with reference to an identity card that it is customary for all Sri Lankans to carry. As Jeganathan points out, no law states that the card *must* be carried. Yet, most Sri Lankans, anticipating the questions at a checkpoint, now carry them on their person at all times. Jeganathan calls this the “illegible, illegal demand of the checkpoint” (75). What is to be decided there and on what basis is never made fully clear nor is it fully legal.

This mixture of secrecy and illegibility takes a different form in South Africa. While it is widely held that the AIDS epidemic in South Africa will affect the long-term legitimacy of democratic governance in the region, Adam Ashforth argues in his chapter that, in fact, the fear of AIDS *as witchcraft* poses a much more significant challenge to the postapartheid state. His claim is that for people living within the witchcraft paradigm the legitimacy of the government depends in part on its ability to discipline witchcraft practitioners. But life within the paradigm of witchcraft is lived “in terms of a presumption of malice” which makes it hard to build the networks of trust upon which civil society depends. And since witchcraft operates in secret, people tend to harbor a great deal of skepticism regarding the putative transparency of bureaucratic structures.

In her own chapter Veena Das thoroughly disrupts any notion of transparent state structures by showing the way the signature of the state (especially as it appears in written documents such as death certificates) creates an “aura of legal operation” even around overtly illegal (and often violent) acts. She argues that it would be

helpful to see the state “as a form of regulation that oscillates between a rational mode and a magical mode of being” (225). The “magic” of the signature derives in part from the illegibility of the state, “the unreadability of its rules and regulations,” as well as from the life that signature acquires in the practices of the community. Thus, a document that records the “lie of the state” concerning its involvement in the riots after the assassination of Indira Gandhi is eventually required by relief agencies as “proof” of their victim status. Das argues that “it is precisely because the documents can be forged and used out of context, and because the bureaucratic-legal processes are not legible even to those responsible for implementing them, that the state can penetrate the life of the community and yet remain elusive” (245).

In his wide-ranging conclusion, Talal Asad figures this illegibility as the “*alien* authority . . . that constitutes the law of the state” (287). These are the unwritten and unspoken laws of the state that operate between the (written) law and its application. Thus, while the law in modern liberal states conceives of all citizens as equivalents, in reality decisions are constantly being made in which “the law” chooses between putatively equivalent subjects. He writes that “suspicion (like doubt) occupies the space between the law and its application. In that sense, all judicial and policing systems of the modern state presuppose organized suspicion, incorporate margins of uncertainty” (285).

One of the lasting contributions of this volume is its ability to hold open the space between the law and its application long enough to glimpse the structures and forces which are at play. The question of what is to be hoped for, and what possibilities there are to reconfigure that space which is often violent and unjust informs the work of each of these authors. As Veena Das suggests, any question of justice and rights must arise “not from the moral space of innocent victimhood but from the rough-and-tumble of everyday life” (251). This is where they envision their contribution to scholarship on the state, as well as their break from Agamben—in the turn from the metaphysical to the everyday.

This volume stands as a pathbreaking, always provocative attempt to rethink the state through its margins. *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* identifies and richly describes the structure of the exception in state practices in the margins. In so doing, the “state” itself comes to have an emergent quality, never positively defined but held open as a place maker for the “political, regulatory and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call ‘the state’” (3). It is in the marginal process of becoming that the state’s work is done and undone.

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