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Locating the State: Between Region and History

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Abstract

If anthropology once concerned itself with politics in stateless societies outside Euro-America over and against prevailing Euro-American political theory, today anthropologists see the state at work everywhere. Anthropologists have sought to trouble spatial metaphors of state power that assumed, among other things, its centralization and the unitary character of sovereignty. Locating the state through an attendant question of region, we explore recent literatures on everyday state practices in Central and Eastern Europe and South Asia to show how different regional histories and configurations of knowledge continue to structure our assumptions about the state and its functions as well as the grammar of our descriptions. We suggest that the state could prove to be a useful optic for the study of region, which provides an alternative to an overly rigid local/global dichotomy that continues to shadow our theorizations.

STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE

In an earlier review of anthropological writing on the state (Brandel & Randeria 2018), we reflected on the fact that anthropology in the "West" once positioned itself as a mode of thinking about politics from stateless societies and in contradistinction with prevailing political theory but now sees the state everywhere. In Anglophone and Francophone anthropology, this approach at first took the form of a critique of political theory dominated by a state-centric view of politics as the guarantor of private property and security against the threat of civil breakdown. Examples include Radcliffe-Brown's (1940) famous argument that the sovereign state was a fiction, Gluckman's (1955) treatment of "primitive" law as law in absence of the state, Clastres's (1989) claim that thinking in terms of presence (or not) of the state arbitrarily posed stateless societies as "lacking"; or Meillasoux's (1972) assertion that the shift from control over reproduction in precolonial times to imperialist capitalist exploitation of labor was a continuation of a logic internal to society rather than a historical rupture. If research on non-Western societies was often transfigured as a concern with law and order outside of strict state forms of governance, later anthropologists working in clearly centrally administered colonial and postcolonial states described the opposition between those structures and society as the domain of culture.

The opposition between state and (civil) society, Ferguson (2006) has argued, was often put to antidemocratic and ideological uses, in which the assumed verticality of the relation between the two covertly reintroduced the paradigm of nation building that figured the local and the rural as backward spaces. Geertz (2004), for instance, argued that postcolonial polities were "complicated" because they inherited state apparatuses at odds with their "multiethnic, multireligious and multilinguistic" makeup. Geertz felt that anthropology was particularly well situated to address this "new" configuration of state power because of its experience of the workings of state power in non-Western spaces and conditions. He insisted that the preoccupation of political science and philosophy with Western states had rendered these disciplines incapable of imagining effectively managed states in the absence of a "proper nation—sovereign, single, and self-aware" (Geertz 2004, p. 579). Such a claim, however, reveals much about his imaginations of the homogeneity of European societies raised to a hyperreal benchmark for comparison. Such a distinction between society and state took another route in the work of figures like Clastres (1989, p. 5), who argued that the characterization of societies as either possessing or not possessing a state tacitly reintroduced an evolutionary conception of civilization and that the "political relation of power precedes and founds the economic relation of exploitation," whereby the "emergence of the State determines the advent of classes."

These concerns begot a critique of spatialized metaphors of governance in general, in addition to the familiar and proliferating typologies of states (the development state, the predatory state, the regulatory state, the postcolonial state, etc.). Anthropologists began to problematize the supposedly clear boundaries that marked the state as standing apart from the rest of social life through what we referred to in our earlier review as various topoi of limit. From this vantage point, the state appeared less as a domain of social action set apart and more like a point at which different potentials within social relations are activated and molded through collective practices (Kapferer 1997). In many cases, anthropologists have argued that the shifting character of anthropological knowledge reflects contemporary changes in the reality of state power in response to globalization; hence a shift in scale was necessary. In the introduction to a recent volume on the topic, Kapferer (2018, p. 7) argues that a once "dominant global system based in sovereign territorial power has yielded to economic forces, chiefly the complexities of capital, whose individualist ideologies of self-interest and of the sovereign individual have broken free from their political harnessing and subjugation to the transcendent authority and power of the state." Kapferer argues that a reduction in state sovereignty accompanied the expansion of the domain of corporate interests.

Several scholars have debated the claim, still rather common, that this implies that the state is withdrawing or weakening and that it was being replaced by "state effects" or that it was shifting to a translocal foundation premised on the unbundling of sovereignty (Besky 2013, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Sassen 1996, Scott 2009, Sharma & Gupta 2006). Others argued that this scattering of sovereignty was better understood as characteristic of a cunning of the state to retain legitimacy and authority in response to new global pressures (Randeria 2003, 2007b). If its tactics have shifted, it is not because the state's power has receded or has been curtailed by other actors, infrastate or suprastate, private or international. This cunning of the state in late capitalist globalization is not, as we once thought, a tactic primarily of those semiperipheral states with scarce resources, whose control over their own territories, populations, or policy areas was limited (Randeria 2007b).

Whatever one's view, if anthropology's interest in the state began from a desire to distance itself from its hegemonic theorizations in political theory, the ever-greater commoditization and corporatization of every facet of social life, the cosmopolitanization of elites, and the globalization and financialization of capital have all changed the nature of the "state-finance nexus" (Harvey 2010, Kalb 2023) and, with it, the nature of state talk. In addition to the conventional arenas of state power, such as citizenship (Greenhouse et al. 2002; Ong 1999; Petryna 2002; Povinelli 1998, 2002) and the law (Nader 2002, Starr & Collier 1989), anthropologists now commonly see care (Muehlebach 2012, Stevenson 2014, Ticktin 2006), art (Brandel 2023), expertise (Boyer 2008, Mitchell 2002), kinship (Thelen & Alber 2018), witchcraft (Kapferer 2002, Siegel 2005), and humanitarianism (Cabot 2019, Fassin 2012) fundamentally as sites for the exercise of state power or resistance to it.

The present seems defined by the explanatory omnipresence of neoliberalism, whether understood as a new epoch in the history of capital or the "apotheosis of what was immanent" (Kapferer 2018, p. 11). Many have turned to Foucault's (2008) influential argument that neoliberalism functions not by simply handing governance over to the market, but rather through "permanent vigilance, activity, and intervention," "modeled on the principles of a market economy" (pp. 131–32; see also Ganti 2014). For example, some scholars have extended the critique of the modern welfare state to its contemporary reliance on biopolitical forms of governmentality (Ticktin 2006; cf. Rabinow & Rose 2006) and the resignification of unwaged labor as moral work (Muehlebach 2012). An influential intervention is Simpson's (2016) argument that "neoliberal indifference and aggression to corporeal life" abide in an enduring logic of settler sovereignty, one defined by dispossession and violence. Elsewhere there have been efforts to show how other kinds of states, particularly those outside Euro-America, tend toward this exercise of neoliberal power through the proliferation of exceptions to the usual practices of governance—thereby reforming citizenship on "interactive" terms, premised on marketability, and not on membership in states as conventionally conceived (Ong 2006). Compare this body of work with class analyses, which posit neoliberalism as a technique of transferring wealth upward and reaffirming class dominance by undermining the welfare state's social democratic safeguards (Harvey 2005). From this perspective, the recent rise in populist and neonationalist politics, at least in postsocialist Europe and the post–New Deal United States, has been understood as the working class's attempt to reappropriate its assets in reaction to its erasure by the state's turn to the market (Gingrich & Banks 2006, Kalb & Halmai 2011).

These developments also begged the return of perennial disciplinary questions, not least the extent to which anthropological knowledge is a part of the production (and not merely a reflection) of the power-laden processes it describes—colonial, capitalistic, and reinscriptive of state power. In taking stock of the seemingly ubiquitous claim that the nature and expression of state power are, and have been, undergoing an essential change in an era defined by accelerating globalization, finance capital, and technocratic bureaucracy, it is imperative to locate professional anthropology itself within, not beyond, those trends. One might ask, therefore, what, if anything, remains at

stake in, or particular to, anthropological thinking about the state at a time when we tend to see the state at work everywhere? If anthropology's historical interest in finding politics outside of globally hegemonic sites of control seems especially important for a contemporary moment, what happens when that becomes increasingly impossible?

One way to approach these very large questions—where is the state, how has our sense of it changed, and where do these changes leave anthropology—is through their embeddedness in (at times implicit) regionality. Different regions have long been associated with particular tropes in anthropological theory (Appadurai 1986). And it will be clear even from this cursory review that different ways of imaging region(s) continue to tacitly inform writings on the state and that these likewise have their own histories. Our point is not about the concept of region as such, but rather how the normativity of regional literature creates relays for questions about the state around certain clusters of concepts and vice versa. We take a handful of examples from regional literatures we know best (Central/Eastern Europe and South Asia) to show how regional configurations of knowledge continue to structure our assumptions about the state and its functions, as well as the grammar of our descriptions.

We argue that region provides an alternative to an overly rigid local/global dichotomy that continues to shadow our theorizations. If anthropological theory remains unclear about how best to respond to pressures of scale in the contemporary world, perhaps this relative lack of clarity reflects the limits of the questions we have been asking. If we started out by asking how region becomes an optic on the state, however, we came to discover that the state, in turn, becomes an optic on that region as well. Instead of identifying a "region" with a specific size or scale, region comes to be mobilized relationally, "to trace the practices of individuals, collectivities, and institutions on a variety of spatial levels" (Dhawan & Randeria 2013, p. 565; Sivaramakrishnan & Agarwal 2003). We would affirm a distinction, moreover, between region, as the historical emergence of patterns of interaction, and the imperial project of making certain configurations of territoriality appear as "natural" regions (Duara 2010). Rather than take such entities as a given, we see region as continually being made through sociopolitical, cultural, and economic processes.

TRANSFIGURATIONS OF THE STATE IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: FROM DEFAMILIARIZED "OTHERNESS" TO GLOBAL HOMOLOGIES

If anthropology as a discipline was a relative latecomer to broader theoretical conceptualizations of the state in general, this may have been the case even more markedly in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). A region with relatively little appeal or visibility and, before 1989, even less accessibility for Anglo-American anthropology, the former bloc of socialist states could nevertheless have inspired a more systematic analytical engagement with key aspects of the state as a historically determinate, relationally dynamic, multiscalar assemblage. Not much has changed since C. Hann (2002) pointed out more than two decades ago that "relatively few researchers have followed up Verdery's (1995, p. 230) call to investigate the 'mechanisms and arenas of state transformation'" (p. 5; see also Verdery 1995). It would be unfair, however, to consider this a missed opportunity altogether insofar as anthropological research on state socialism and its aftermath—the decades of messy, contradictory, and complex postsocialist transformations—raised fundamental questions about the state, even if overall only implicitly, nested in other thematic concerns, rather than systematically developing a proper anthropology of the state.

The turbulent years of the post-1989 transition[1] sparked a temporary revival of anthropological interest in CEE, including attempts to understand retrospectively the socialist state as a "sui

[1]For early anthropological critiques of the teleological linearity implied by the concept of "transition," see Burawoy & Verdery (1999) and Verdery (1996, pp. 15–16).

generis" historical formation, while acknowledging the specificities of each country (Verdery 1996, p. 11). Some of these critical-historical reconstructions appeared to reinforce the hegemonic, and outdated, political-ideological imaginary of Cold War liberalism by highlighting the repressive and coercive logics of the state in actually existing socialism: that is, the invasion of privacy, the restrictions imposed on individual freedom, or the socialization of private property. The ethnographic focus on the agents, institutions, and policies of the intrusive-excessive socialist state may have unwittingly contributed to the stereotypical image of CEE as an "Other" (Verdery 2002a; cf. Thelen 2011, p. 48) misconstrued through a glass darkly for Western liberal democratic polities (the study of which notoriously eluded anthropologists until quite late, as we argued earlier).

Kligman's (1998) work on the Ceauşescu regime's pronatalist, antiabortion politics of reproduction, for example, described in detail how terrifyingly efficient the state could be in exercising its power even in the most intimate sphere of domestic life. Granted, Romanian socialism was a somewhat extreme outlier, but what Verdery (1996) calls the "etatization" of time itself—the "immobilization of bodies" through the seizure of leisure, as well as the "mobilization of bodies" through coerced rituals of public homage—certainly contributed to the image of total control exercised over people's everyday lives (pp. 39–57). Nevertheless, the totalitarian structures of state surveillance and repression themselves had their limits. As archival ethnographies of the two most formidable secret police forces in the region, the Romanian Securitate and the East German Stasi, show, the awe and terror projected by such state apparatuses could also hide inherent weaknesses and inefficiencies (Glaeser 2010, Verdery 2014, 2018; cf. Verdery 1991). The historical anthropology of CEE was thus quick to expose the vulnerabilities of socialist regimes, which were "constantly undermined by internal resistance and hidden forms of sabotage *at all system levels*"—a far cry from stereotypical images of "an autocratic, all-powerful state" familiar from older American accounts of totalitarianism (Verdery 1996, p. 20, emphasis in original).

The empirically rich tradition of ethnographies detailing the collectivization of property (land)—that is, the socialization of (agricultural) production and redistribution (mainly in rural contexts)—revealed similar complexities and contradictions, beyond mere country-specific variation (e.g., Bell 1984; Hann 1980; Hollos & Maday 1983; Humphrey 1977, 1998; see also Halpern & Kideckel 1983, pp. 390–91). State-led attempts at centralization and plan-mandated cooperation confronted multiple webs of local informal arrangements on the ground, resulting in compromises, the "personalization" of state property, or "conflicting complementarity" (Creed 1997, Kideckel 1993, Kligman & Verdery 2011, Sampson 1984, Verdery 2004). More importantly, Lampland's (1996) pioneering work on the commodification of labor in socialist Hungary raised important questions about the role of the state in inculcating an individualistic and utilitarian ethos consistent with the immanent logic of capitalist production, thereby calling attention to hidden continuities underlying apparent historical caesuras (cf. Burawoy 1985). The conceptual overcoming of unconsciously adopted economistic (cf. Dunn & Verdery 2011; Thelen 2011, 2012) schemas, such as the trite dichotomy of "state" versus "market" ultimately premised on a rigid separation of the political, legal, and economic spheres, should engage ethnographic research more extensively in a long-overdue dialogue with critical/relational theories of capitalism and the state. Moreover, a revisionist historical anthropology of the state's investment in accumulative strategies during actually existing socialism has much to contribute both to developing a self-reflexive awareness of unexpected global analogies beyond local variations and to connecting actual state practices to epochal socioeconomic transformations within a more comprehensive synthesis of insights from political, economic, and legal anthropology.

A recent book on the dialectical coconstitution of the state, the economy, and society in the situated realm of planned industrial labor provides a salutary example of how one could better grasp the *differentia specifica* of "everyday forms of state formation in socialism," without positing

the political as an autonomous bureaucratic sphere of "unidirectional, top down" authority (Cucu 2019). Exploring the tensions between an ostensibly rational-managerial state authority desperately pursuing efficiency maximization as well as labor discipline and the recalcitrant realities of class embodied on the shop floor reveals the fragility of the socialist state, caught up in the struggle to assert its legitimacy in the eyes of the very workers who, while nominally consubstantial with the newly formed proletarian/socialist/people's republic, "were problematic both as a category of rule and as a much-needed economic resource" (Cucu 2019, p. 17). Rather than taking the state for granted, Cucu shows how its "effects" (cf. Mitchell 1991, 1999; see also Abrams 1988, pp. 73–74) emerged, in fact, within the space of production, from a nexus of practices that were "both enabling and constraining for the exercise of state power" (Cucu 2019, p. 21). By combining the anthropology of class relations on the shop floor with a fine-grained analytical scrutiny of how central planning was translated into practice, one can even articulate a complementary critique of James Scott's notion of legibility (Cucu 2014; see also Poenaru 2017). Far from relying on standardized and quantified, and thus essentially limited, factoids, the Romanian socialist state turned its agents (managers) into veritable, though untrained, ethnographers attuned to local, informal knowledges and practices. Somewhat similarly to imperial/colonial contexts, ethnography, broadly understood as a methodological and epistemological orientation, thus played an instrumental role in enabling the state "to produce a kaleidoscopic image of the social world it intended to govern" (Cucu 2014, p. 228).

Anthropological research on CEE in the turbulent decades of the postsocialist period was not concerned primarily with bringing the state back in. Still, during the 1990s, thick descriptions of ambivalent, if not hostile, reactions to post-1989 privatization and decollectivization, as well as of the conflictual processes of learning how to navigate the opaque legal institutionalization of a new regime of property and primitive accumulation, punctured the then-dominant ideological illusions and policy orthodoxies about privatization, marketization, and the putative retreat of the state to a mere nightwatchman role (e.g., Abrahams 1996; Creed 1997; Hann 2003; Verdery 1994a, 2002b, 2003). With some notable exceptions (e.g., Dunn 2004, Hann 2006, Humphrey & Mandel 2002), however, the neoliberal, or rather neo-ordoliberal (cf. Foucault 2008, pp. 75–184), turn in CEE received relatively little attention from anthropologists until recently, which prompted Hann's (2019) recent programmatic call for a Polanyian refocusing on how "market principles are institutionalized through political and legal processes" (p. 3). There have been some promising new projects about the "financialization of the state" in the region (Mikuš 2019; see also Hann & Kalb 2020), but so far they have been overshadowed by a much richer body of work in other disciplines such as political economy. To some extent, this may be due to the methodological selectivities and self-limitations of anthropology as such, though Hann's call for a Polanyian turn (to which we could add a neo-Marxian one too) should hopefully be heeded by scholars in the field.

Another crucial aspect of neo-liberalization—the structural transformation of the welfare state—would naturally lend itself to becoming a privileged topic of research for anthropologists, all the more so because CEE could then also be analyzed from a larger, "encompassing" (Tilly 1984, pp. 125–43) comparative perspective, acknowledging, for example, parallels between post-Fordism and postsocialism. Thelen and her collaborators formulated their ambitious research agenda about the changing configuration of social security at the level of the local state, primarily in rural settings, already 15 years ago (Read & Thelen 2007, Thelen 2007, Thelen et al. 2008). Their focus on the actual mechanisms, conduits, and directions of restructuring former socialist states' welfare regimes, including their (sub)regional decentralization and "privatization" (in the sense of outsourcing care to the gendered realm of domestic/familial privacy), is consistent with the belated rediscovery of the state just as it was being declared defunct by an ever-growing chorus

of pundits and consultants. Not surprisingly, in their latest volume on the state, Thelen et al. (2018) critique some postcultural turn developments in the anthropology of the state precisely for their one-sided insistence on images, representations, and discourses of the state (especially confined to marginal sites) at the cost of neglecting its actual practices.

We do not deny the ominous historical significance of certain ideologically charged languages appropriated and deployed by privileged representatives of the state, of course. Anthropologists, after all, were among the first to discover alarming biopolitical trends emerging on the ruins of state socialism—trends that prophetically foreshadowed the subsequent return of repressed forms of patriarchal domination elsewhere in Western democracies too. Gal & Kligman's (2000a,b; see also Gal 1994) pioneering work, for example, not only highlighted the paternalistic and intrusive state policies that worked against the official rhetoric of gender equality and emancipation already under socialism (cf. Verdery 1994b), but also served as an early warning against the resurgence of the politics of the body as a central site of ideological antagonism in the (il)liberal body politic. Their argument that legislative and discursive struggles centered on the politics of reproduction, coupled with ethnonationalism, held the key to understanding how political authority and the relationship between states and citizens were reconstituted in CEE served as an important early corrective to contemporary Whiggish narratives of postsocialist transition. One of the main issues raised by Gal & Kligman at the time, the call for a comparative-historical approach to the instrumental weaponization of gender by right-wing political forces, has acquired even more urgency today, with the unprecedented backlash against historical achievements long thought irreversible (e.g., birth control and women's self-determination) from Poland to Republican legislatures in the US Bible Belt states.

More generally, in a region with several regimes vying for the invidious position of spearheading the "soft authoritarian" (Adam et al. 2022) vanguard, which has artfully exploited popular resentments among the losers of neoliberal globalization (Buzalka 2021, Hann 2020, Kalb & Halmai 2011), critically minded, engaged anthropologists of CEE thus seem to have their work cut out. In an era of "anticonstitutional populism" and "autocratic legalism" (Krygier et al. 2022, Scheppele 2018), the anthropology of the postsocialist state could ill afford to continue to neglect other cognate subfields such as the anthropology of law.

Rather than lament the relative paucity of such ethnographically grounded critical theoretical interventions, we conclude this section with another inspiring example (Szombati 2018) of how the paradigm of relational ethnographies of rural welfare state transformation in the region can be innovatively rethought within a historically informed wider framework adequate for the formidable task of critically analyzing the threat of ethnonationalist state capture. Taking his cue from Ernst Fraenkel's (1941) influential theory of the fascist "dual state," Szombati (2018) has compellingly shown through the example of Hungary how local mayors' "antiegalitarian populist" vision of stringent workfare and the "everyday racism" successfully fomented by far-right forces to generate moral panics could be harnessed by the hegemonic regime of Viktor Orbán since 2010. The "dualization" of the state, that is, its scission into what Fraenkel termed the "normative state" (in which the administrative and judicial arms of the state operate within the limits of the rule of law) and the "prerogative state" (which operates arbitrarily, resorting to extralegal means or even not-quite-legitimate violence), may have succeeded in stifling overtly racist mass mobilization against the Roma underclass. However, doing so came at the cost of turning the racialized, ethnonationalist, postfascist imaginaries of the far right into one of the ideological linchpins of a regime that openly espouses the tenets of "graduated sovereignty" (Ong 1999) and redistributes wealth to a loyal bourgeoisie while abandoning any pretense to egalitarian welfare and social security. By pushing the neoconservative erosion of the welfare state to its logical extreme (e.g., removing the right to social security from the constitution), argues Szombati, the Orbán regime made rural

surplus populations dependent on the personal whims of local mayors, creating de facto "neo-feudal" (cf. Verdery 1996, pp. 204–28) relations, wherein the decentralized state reveals its stark essence: "a disciplinary iron cage that confines the surplus population to zones of relegation and places them under a strict regime of forced labor, moral control, and penal surveillance" (Szombati 2018, p. 163).

EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE EFFICACY OF THE STATE IN SOUTH ASIA

In an influential review of anthropological literature in and on South Asia, Khan (2015) traces how earlier anthropological writing was preoccupied with the continuity or discontinuity between colonial and postcolonial states and with a series of gatekeeper concepts such as caste, communalism, and village (Appadurai 1986). If the imperative of colonial states was to "know its subjects so as to rule them" (Khan 2015, p. 458), how had self-rule transformed the central questions for new nation-states? What constitutes their imperative now? Can we assume colonial practices of governing live on in new guises as techniques of self-knowledge, or does this perspective too quickly concede "the capacity to generate newness to nation-states and their citizenry" (Khan 2015, p. 460; cf. Hull 2012)? Since the 1970s, however, "an exhaustion with these preoccupations combined with the steady migration of people to urban centers and the explosion of political violence within them" (Khan 2015, p. 463) led scholars to turn their attention to the vulnerability and insecurity of social life among the urban poor (Gilmartin 1988, Ring 2006). Much ensuing work focused on conceptualizing the state's responsibility for the poor and marginalized subjects, whether from the vantage of the multiplicity and provisional nature of the state itself (Hansen & Stepputat 2005), in contexts such as civil wars, where sovereignty appears "no longer a state prerogative" (Klem & Maunaguru 2017). At the same time, anthropology has increasingly come to see those living at the "margins of the state" as intrinsic to its power (Das & Poole 2004)—whether those who had been understood to occupy a place of insufficient "socialization" under the law or those whom documentary practices of states seek to make legible and yet who remain illegible.

The state's near constant presence in the lives of its most vulnerable citizens remains a major perennial concern. While anthropologists now seldomly rely on talk of weak and strong states, across the writing on South Asia the question of the responsibility of the state is often coupled with increased scrutiny of its apparent failures or incapacities to address issues like poverty despite its supposed commitments to development. These accounts have tended to show that the state does not clearly demarcate actors operating on its behalf from those outside its administration (Gupta 2012). Rather, state effects are seen to be produced by labor undertaken both by those employed in the state bureaucracy or development offices and also by the subject of those programs themselves—often the poor. It has also meant expanding our sense of what counts as, or is relevant to, state power, from those highly marked scenes of governance to more everyday scenes.

One crucial body of ethnographic work has shown how the encompassing bureaucracies that tend to characterize postcolonial states inherit practices of governance from the colonial past, which take on rather different significance (Randeria 2007a, Sedhev & Haldar 2021). The state in Pakistan, for example, appears frequently as central to the lives of ordinary citizens and as a coherent administering force. Its existence is given expression in the materiality of its mass of circulating documents and encounters with them, close inspection of which reveals that the state is not, in fact, capable of simply inscribing itself onto society (Hull 2012). One might consider the use of *parchis*, scraps of paper testifying to requests for favors, and which move through networks of bureaucrats, kin, and friendship, crossing paths in administrative offices with formal petitions addressed by a complainant directly to the state. But while it could be tempting to render such practices as limitations of the state's capacity to govern qua corruption, in effect the *parchis* ground bureaucratic operations in circuits of everyday life. In other words, actual practices of bureaucracy

reveal a picture of state power that does not simply intervene on the everyday, but also a site in which something like corruption can also be used to "empower" the subjugated (Witsoe 2011).

These paper-mediated relations also fail regularly, presenting a state unable to enact policy through the law—a failure not of state power, but rather inherent in such relations. In her ethnography of the implementation of India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, Mathur (2016) traces how the making of bureaucracy requires a performance across different registers. Indeed, those who wield legal authority over the region of Uttarakhand in North India might speak of two lives of the law—its state (*sarkari*) life and real (*asli*) life—which indexes the state's need to reproduce itself as state at some distance from the fact of the enactment of the law. Its life on the ground is another matter. When a man-eating tiger comes to the small Himalayan town of Gopeshwar, the state (itself a metaphorical tiger in the register of Indian folklore) responds through a frenetic production of paper bureaucracy, the inaction of which leads the poor citizenry to contest the state's power. In response, small time bureaucrats exploit the law itself, which is written in the context of development projects to be always potentially unimplementable. Despite itself and its imagination of its own separate sphere, then, the state is unable to escape the social worlds with which it is coconstitutive.

Another trend has been to focus on the affective charge of daily interactions with the state as a way to demonstrate that sovereignty is neither unitary nor given (cf. Aretxaga 2003) Take Ali's (2019) work on how in Gilgit-Baltistan, articulations of love, loyalty, and longing for the state can also lead to feelings of betrayal, to a sense that citizen-subjects have been manipulated, that their love and loyalty are met only with insincerity or disloyalty in return. Ali argues that the contradictions that lie at the heart of state-making practices in Pakistan are most visible from the borderlands, a region often met with suspicion from Islamabad, and where the "ideological obsession with India" as an aggressor carries plain existential stakes. She suggests, moreover, that the "delusion" this ideology inculcates in the social order is comparable to (and shaped by a relationship with) the United States and its paranoia after 9/11 about impending attacks and its self-delusion about omnipotence, which led the United States to inflict new calamities all over the world. Delusion, in Ali's view, has become the "global condition of stateness" (Ali 2019, p. 6). Likewise, Khoja-Moolji (2021) examines how "kinship feelings" are mobilized by the state to legitimate violence, but also how "nonstate actors" utilize this symbolic regime to garner support for their own claims to sovereignty. For Khoja-Moolji, this contest over an affective landscape is worked out in public culture as the principal site through which sovereignty is performed. Compare too with Rashid's (2020) effort to track how the military in Pakistan cultivates "affective bonds" with soldiers and their families to secure their willingness to endure violence and grief. Rashid takes pains to show how the "militaristic state is scripted" in literature and popular songs, but also how it is "inscribed into the daily lives of people" in the form of "monuments in civilian public spaces" (p. 8). Thus, affect becomes a watchword for a critique of a picture of the state where sovereignty is taken for granted and which is demonstrated primarily through an engagement with popular culture as a medium through which claims to sovereignty—the state's and others'—are performed.

The gendered character of the "everyday state" and its subjugation of minoritized subjects have been central concerns in anthropological writings on the state (Ansari & Chambers 2022). But one might also wonder what happens when we look "below the threshold of national events," where in everyday life such elements of culture go in directions not exhausted by the state's use of them (Khan 2012). In many studies, there is a lingering sense that the everyday is invoked with a kind of obviousness as a site of mere receptivity, onto which the state's actions, desires, and failures are inscribed. But how does the state appear if one begins from the everyday if it is not assumed to be a residual category (Das 2006, Mookherjee 2015, Raheja 2022)? How might the spectacle of an omnipresent state, or its effects, "silence discussion of the more mundane social and political

power relations that produce and maintain a multitude of unrelenting and pervasive everyday insecurities, inequalities and injustices" (Lacy & Mookherjee 2020, p. 283)? How does the state rely obliquely on forms of hierarchy, like caste and religious affiliation, that govern everyday life, but which it formally renders invisible (Farrukhi 2023, 2024)? How do people know whom to hold accountable or where to address their petitions and protests (Das & Randeria 2015)? How does a dominant picture of sovereignty—for example, as creating private property—come undone from this point of view (Chaganti 2021)?

One area where these concerns have come together is in feminist scholarship on policing in the borderlands.[2] Such work responds to increasing militarization and surveillance of border regions and rampant human rights violations and to the chauvinistic nationalist populist politics that has taken hold of the state armature. Distinguished from the frontier or the state's territorial limit, borderlands are figured as a "zone of potentiality" (Aggarwal 2004, Banerjee & Chaudhury 2011, Bhan 2014, Gohain 2020, Gupta 2022, Kikon 2019, Longkumer 2020, Saraf 2020). If borders are central to the way states take themselves to be territorially circumscribed, if they are signs of the battle between competing claims to sovereignty, borderlands appear as zones of ongoing dispute, unstable and fragmentary (Cons 2016, Cons & Sanyal 2013). Border crossings at different scales, internal and external, thus generate anxieties because of their capacity to create new borderlands (Ibrahim & Kothiyal 2022).

The inhabitants of such spaces, in many cases characterized in official discourses as "frontier peasants" or "savage mountaineers" disloyal to the state, make a life by traversing treacherous territory to secure food, land, and livelihoods. Sur (2021) argues that these are not only sites for studying state violence, but also places of kinship-making, religious practice, and rapidly changing ecologies as well as places of longing, despair, fear, and nostalgia. Writing of an agrarian borderland in West Bengal, where a "variegated national security geography" "relies on heteropatriarchal gender norms and the discourse of the family to produce unequal minority citizens and secure their subordinated inclusion, while concealing the terms of this relation of power as such," Ghosh (2022, p. 61; see also Ghosh 2011, 2017) shows how it is precisely everyday life that falls out of many accounts of such contexts, including how, for example, intimacy is made and maintained. Ibrahim's (2021) rich ethnography in the border district of Kutch suggests that we look beyond the obvious sites of policing to what it means to "live a secure and well-ordered life" (p. 4) to the replication of institutional forms within the family itself. Ibrahim uses the language of "adjacent sovereignty" to describe how the force of state institutions is derived from "local, even familial, sovereignty that operate[s] in this borderland" (Ibrahim 2021, pp. 42–43). If the mutual imbrication of state and kinship is well-known in the ethnographic literature of South Asia, at least where they align to enforce gender and caste-based norms, Ibrahim shows that policing is not always so predictable.

CONCLUSION

The comparison of two regional literatures allows us to avoid overly general tropes about the state and its reach by focusing on the specific processes and practices that enact it. Starting from these regions allows us to sidestep the ways that Western European and North American states are often continually taken as default expressions, as paradigmatic cases against which others lack or lag (Chakrabarty 2000); if both regions have classically been defined in contrastive terms with the "West," different questions come into refrain here.

In the CEE case, we saw how earlier anthropological work was concerned with unmasking the public myth of state omnipotence, but that this gave way after 1989 to a worry that overemphasis

[2] Compare with the literature on policing in cities (Satyogi 2019).

on civil society and the market came at the expense of necessary attention to state power. In the case of South Asia, worries about the continuity of colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies have largely been eclipsed by questions about how people lay claims on the state and thereby articulate various visions of social and economic transformation despite strong reservations about the actual existing state. In both cases, we saw how a more expansive view of the political, not as a discrete domain but as spilling out of institutions (Spencer 2007), has at the same time left open the question of what sorts of programs, practices, or effects are ultimately studied under the sign of the state and which are assigned subdisciplines of their own. Particularly striking in this regard is the parsing of the law from the state or how, in South Asia at least, the shift in emphasis in the literature on the state from the agrarian to the urban has excluded state effects in the former by consigning them to the anthropology of development (Aga 2021, Mosse 2005).

In the end, we are left with the feeling that a greater willingness to trespass (sub)disciplinary bounds will continue to be required in the future. While we have limited ourselves here largely to anthropological writing, we remain convinced as ever of the need to reconceptualize disciplinarity itself in response to the world. We have tried to demonstrate, moreover, that starting from regional configurations of knowledge about the state that eschew constant reference to Western coordinates allows conversations to come into view beyond those prescribed by metropolitan protocols of reading (Brandel et al. 2018).

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