

Do we need an (this?) anthropology of the state?

Sharma, Aradhana, and Akhil Gupta, eds. 2006.

The Anthropology of the State: A reader. Oxford: Blackwell. 410 pages, index

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When classical anthropology turned to the study of politics, it was interested in the search for, and explanation of, political order in the absence of a state. After some early leads which were not followed up in the discipline (Abélès 1990; Fallers 1974), only recently a self-conscious anthropology of the state has been emerging. The reader under review is an indicator of this emerging interest in the state by anthropologists. It is divided into six parts: an extended introduction by the editors on “Rethinking theories of the state in an age of globalisation”, and then five thematic sections on “theoretical genealogies” (with texts by Weber, Gramsci, Althusser, Abrams, Foucault and Rose), “bureaucracy and governmentality” (Mitchell, Brown, Gupta), “Planning and Development” (Scott, Ferguson), “violence, law and citizenship” (Lutz, Coutin, Bhattacharjee) and finally “popular culture” (Hall, Mbembe).

A reader under this title must essentially address the question of which particular contribution anthropologists can make to the study of the state, and show that such a contribution differs markedly from, and ideally goes beyond that of, say, philosophers, political scientists sociologists or historians. What, the editors ask, is “disciplinary distinctive in the study of the (sic!, TB) state” (p. 5) The introduction provides us with several answers. First, it is said that anthropologists focus on two aspects when studying “the” state: everyday practices (of state bureaucrats and their clients) on the one hand, and representations of the state on the other. Everyday practices are “multi-layered, contradictory, translocal” (6), they are “pluri-centered and fluid” (10), and their analysis shows that the boundary between state and society is not given once and for all but constructed, contested and deconstructed through these practices. On the other hand, the representational practices of the state: “public cultural representations and performance of statehood” (18) obscure this unboundedness and incoherence and “successfully represents (the state, TB) as coherent and singular” (10), with clear boundaries and forming the apex of society. This differentiation between the state as a bundle of practices and the state as an idea seems to me extremely useful, and furthermore, operationable in empirical research. However, it is surprising to read that the editors claim this as a particular anthropological contribution. Apart from the fact that major strands in political science would readily underwrite “the difficulties in delineating clear boundaries of ‘the state’” (8), we also learn, when reading the texts which follow in this collection, that the idea of differentiating between state-practices and state-idea was already formulated, in nuce, by the French philosopher Althusser in the early 1970s and taken up by the British sociologists Abrams a few years later. Today it figures prominently in the thinking of a least some political scientists like Migdal and Schlichte, their 2005 text on “rethinking the state” – not cited in the reader – being arguably the most coherent expression of this categorical distinction.

Secondly, it is said, “anthropology brings to the foreground the role of cultural difference in forming and informing states” (10). States, it is said, are “cultural artefacts” (5), they have a “deeply cultural nature” (6) and are the “effects of cultural processes” (10). It is difficult to understand what Sharma and Gupta mean by culture in this context. They tell us that we need to pay attention to the “dynamic, processual, contested, and contextual notions of culture itself”, and that “everyday and theoretical imaginings of the state are culturally informed, context-specific and historical” (fn. 11, p. 30) – which is so unspecific that it rather obscures than clarifies matters (apart from the fact that the use throughout the text of the category of “the” state in the singular seems to point to some common core, beyond all cultural differences.) At different points in their text, they suggest that states “that are structurally similar may nonetheless be profoundly different from each other in their meanings they have for their populations” (11), which simply transposes the definitional problem to the category of “meaning”. And when “everyday practices” as well as “representations” are subsumed under the category of culture, the notion becomes so all-encompassing to be almost meaningless. Maybe the idea is simply that while a universal model of the state (a set of core structures and ideas) has been diffused nowadays all over the world, it is differently contextualized and takes different colouring according to historical context?

Finally, an anthropological approach to the state would be ethnographically based and – implicitly – needs to be politically (“critically” is a key term) engaged. It is constituted by a microperspective and a focus on “everyday practices and representations (of particular bureaucrats) as modes through which the state comes into being...” (It requires conducting institutional ethnographies of specific state bureaucracies, inquiring into the micropolitics and daily practices of such institutions, and seeking to understand their relation to the public (elite or subaltern) that they serve.“ (27). The reviewer could not agree more, but is surprised to find that the great majority of texts assembled here do not provide us with any example of such an ethnography, even though the second part of the book (contributions 7 to 16) is – misleadingly – called “ethnographic mappings”. The great majority of texts assembled here are written by philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, historians or political activists, or, if they are written by professional anthropologists, are either highly abstract (Brown), historical (Scott), essayistic (Mbembe) or define a political (obviously “critical”) perspective for anthropology (Lutz), but are in any case not ethnographically oriented. There is no doubt that anthropologists should be familiar with the work of, say, Weber, Foucault and Gramsci, but these could hardly be considered authors from which students – the main clientele of such a book – would learn how to do an ethnography of a particular state bureaucracy. If, however, the main purpose of the reader is to provide graduate students in anthropology with background readings in social theory (which would be a legitimate objective but in which case the book should carry a different title), then the selection at least of some of the few ethnographic pieces (I counted four out of a total of 16) surprises: First, because the selection of these texts (this concerns in particular section III) appears highly arbitrary – several excellent ethnographic texts come to my mind which would compete easily with the ones chosen here –, and secondly because only two of them (Gupta and Ferguson) deal with the Global South. As arguably all the more theoretical pieces are also primarily focussed on

Western developed states, this produces a degree of ethnocentricity, if not US-centricity, which a non-American anthropologist might find difficult to accept and which squares uneasily with one of the editor's (Gupta) self-positioning as an anti-hegemonially engaged "post-colonial subject" (237).

This impression of a botch job is reinforced by the observation that among the four ethnographically oriented pieces, only Ferguson, Gupta and Coutin refer to any of the theoretical texts which are assembled in the first part of the book. This reference is exclusively to Foucault; furthermore, it is, apart from Ferguson, rather cursory and appears more as a kowtow towards US contemporary intellectual fashions, than a truly theoretical inspiration for a coherent problematic. A related paper by Gupta published in 2001 which is not reprinted here is a good example of this practice of fashionable but empirically unproductive referencing to Foucault: The paper is framed in terms of a surveillance-resistance paradigm, and in the beginning refers extensively to Foucault. However, as resistance is not a category of Foucault's concept of governmentality (as Gupta acknowledges himself in the course of the text), and as his ethnography rather points to the limits of surveillance, it is not clear where the usefulness of Foucault for the ethnographical analysis lies at all. In fact, the paper could be read as an implicit deconstruction of Foucault's governmentality concept, a conclusion which the author does not draw.) Be this as it may, what about a Weberian, Gramscian or Althusserian anthropology of the state? The implicit message to the reader seems to be that it either does not exist, is not possible, or is not worth bothering about.

On a more technical-editorial level, it is also irritating to note that nowhere are these foundational texts situated in relation to the historical situation in which they were written, their (mostly implicit) empirical references and their textual form. In fact, the way they are presented in this reader takes these texts out of all historical, geographical, intellectual and political contexts Surely it would be important for any American graduate student to know that Max Weber's piece on the bureaucracy was originally written in German in 1922, and not in English in 1968, as the reader suggests (cf. the acknowledgments), against the empirical background of a very particular, eg. the Prussian, bureaucracy, and that the text by Gramsci written in Italian around 1930 and not in 1971, was as a personal reflection on the causes of the fascist rise to power and the conditions of socialist revolution in Italy, and was not intended to be published. The resulting impression of intellectual provinciality is reinforced by the observation that literally all bibliographical references in this book – including the uncommented "suggestions for further reading" – are limited to English-language publications, again a strange stance for Foucault-trained self-proclaimed anti-hegemonists.

While the student reader will not learn from this book how to use social theory to develop and implement a research problematic, neither will he learn how to theorize his ethnographic findings. For the use of what the editors call ethnography appears rather limited. A key term used in this respect is that of "ethnographical vignettes" – e.g. basically adornments of the rest of the text which contains the substantial argument. Both the introduction by the editors and the text by one of them (Gupta) begin with such ethnographic vignettes. Their primary

function seems to be to establish ethnographic authority (the “I was there argument”) and to give the reader some general “authentic” feeling of the place out there – even though Gupta, in his own text, argues against claims of the “natural superiority” of “being there”. (In fact, he replaces this “empiricist” claim by a political one of the natural superiority of a “critical”, e.g. anti-hegemonic perspective by a “post-colonial subject”, e.g. himself). Why then these vignettes? In any case, their function is limited to illustrating general points which are established prior to ethnography, and do not flow out from it. In other words, these vignettes are, at best, “apt (if partial, TB) illustrations”, to use a category which Gluckman considered insufficient already back in the 1960s and to which he opposed his own approach of social situation analysis and extended case studies.

Finally, it is curious to note that while the anthropology of the state which is promoted in this book is wide open to philosophy, social theory and history, it shows no interest in, or is simply unaware of, not only in the beginnings of anthropological interest in the state (cf. Fallers and Abeles mentioned above) but also in major achievements in the sociology of organisation and of bureaucracy in the Global North. Authors like Lipsky (1980), Crozier and Friedberg (Crozier 1963; Crozier & Friedberg 1977) have produced seminal approaches which any anthropology of the state needs to engage with. Likewise, turning to particular state sectors, for example education or policing, hermeneutically and ethnographically oriented authors like Willis (1977) in Great Britain on education or Behr (1999) and others on police work, in Germany have produced analyses which no anthropology of the state can afford to ignore. The reader of this book will be left completely unaware of them.

The reviewer was left with the overall impression of a surprising loss of disciplinary identity revealed in the architecture of this book, and of a hotch-potch of texts hastily cobbled together to occupy a market slot. The state is indeed a promising object for an ethnographically oriented anthropology but it would require a different book to effectively convey this message.

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