

especially in the context of supranational humanitarian organisations.

### Janus-Faced Nature

In her work on Guatemala, Diane M Nelson uses the imagery of the sideshow to explore the Janus-faced nature of the state and its citizens. Nelson argues that doubling experiences of the sideshow, its immediate and popular accessibility concurrent with the mobility and legitimate yet deceptive entertainment a sideshow offers, not only helps capture binary dichotomies of the distant and immediate, exotic and the banal, desire and identification in the relation of the citizenry to the state, but also the simultaneous embodiment and transcendence of the state-effect in and through the practices of its citizenry. Adam Ashforth's work explores how the invocation of AIDS as witchcraft in post-apartheid South Africa problematises the understanding of public power and democratic transformation, where the state at one level has to negotiate "witchcraft" in the public imagination and at another level has to control the spread of the HIV. Using the site of three surgical procedures – sex-change, kidney-sale and family planning – Lawrence Cohen maps how not only the state is instantiated at these sites of operability, but also how individual relations to the body politic are defined in terms of these sites. In the next essay, Janet Roitman analyses the "informal" or "bush" economy in the Chad basin of the African continent where she finds the contradictory existence of dispossession and wealth creation. Roitman makes a distinction between state power and state regulatory authority to explicate her analysis which shows the presence of both capillary effects of state-power, as described by Foucault and practices of an unregulated economy as well as violence as legitimate markers of sovereignty. Such an understanding, Roitman contends, challenges accounts of African "weak-states" that draw upon Weberian models of the modern rational state.

In her essay 'The Signature of the State: The Paradox of Illegibility', Veena Das seeks to theorise the state as present in the rational-bureaucratic as also in the deployment and embodiment of the legal in its daily performative practices, through the idea of a Derridean signature. Das contends that, similar to the act of writing which contains within itself the gap between rules and their performative aspects, the forms of governance instituted

# In the Margins of the State

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## Anthropology in the Margins of the State

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RAHUL MUKHOPADHYAY

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In this collection of essays on what constitutes an anthropology of the state at its territorial and conceptual margins, the ethnographies revolve around the fundamental assumption of the politico-philosophical origins of the modern state as posited against a premodern "state of nature". The introductory essay by Veena Das and Deborah Poole outlines the three approaches to mark this dichotomy by different ethnographies: "unruly subjects" vis-à-vis the lawful subjects of the state; "legibility" and "illegibility" of the state's mapping and documentation practices over its territories and citizenry; and the concept of biopower to define the politicisation of the social and thereby construct the state and its margins. The essay also underscores how most of the authors, drawing upon the works of Walter Benjamin, Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, invoke a concept of the margin as an exception – "a threat held in abeyance and a state into which any citizen could fall".

In the first essay Deborah Poole attempts to constitute an understanding of the margin in both the spatially real and the discursive ideological by showing the lived tension between threat and guarantee of the marginal populace in Peru. Using the imagery of the 'gamonal', a parasitic tundra plant, Poole attempts to capture a notion of power that traverses both that of the public, legitimate and statal and that of the private, extrajudicial in the peripheries of the Peruvian state. Pradeep Jeganathan's essay, 'Checkpoint: Anthropology, Identity and the State' unravels how "violence" as an anthropological object has only an emergent visibility, the legitimacy of which is marked as a potential/anticipation through its index underlined by the state – the checkpoint. In the third essay of the collection, Mariane C Ferme uses the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics to show how both the shadow-states of Africa and their citizenry produce a state-effect in their practices of territoriality and population management. Similar to Poole's examination of arbitrariness of law in the Peruvian state, Ferme traces a contradiction in the African state of Sierra Leone to its colonial antecedent. On the one hand, the arbitrary power of the state is seen to assume a socialised character as imagined by both the representatives of the state and its citizens. On the other, the very same arbitrariness of state power is redefined in the practices of state actors to seek alternative subjectivities and citizenship options,

by the state engender the possibilities of how such forms are interpreted, manifested and deployed in practice, and therefore the new forms in which the state itself is reconstituted. Das also uses the notion of “excuses” as an interesting metaphor where human passions are attributed to non-state agents in an effort to construct the state apparatus as rational-objective, just and tolerant. The last essay by Victoria Sanford is based on ethnography in a civil-war torn Colombia, where the presence of continued violence and displacement of Colombians in a political complex of diverse actors like the army, paramilitaries and guerrillas is invoked to show how such violence and displacement are strategies of war rather than unintended consequences, and how they both contest and reconstitute the state at its margins. In his summative conclusion, Talal Asad attempts a brief genealogy of the modern nation state and shows how the nature of abstraction resorted to by the state and its practices involve an ambiguity that is constitutive of the margins of the state. The important question of whether the concept of margin pervades the entire modern state or is limited to specific legal, territorial and administrative demarcations is raised by Asad.

### State of Exception

What therefore appears as a common theme across the essays is the notion of sovereignty as the ability of the state to define a “state of exception” and thereby legitimise violence both within the juridical and the extrajudicial. Ethnographic explorations of this margin is sought in everyday practices of extrajudicial figures who, in their particular position of lying both within and beyond the state, blur the distinctions between the legal and the extralegal that is embodied in the present nation state. While it is the task of anthropology to outline broader theoretical issues from their socio-political specificities, some of the essays, for example, Jeganathan’s, appear to engage in a deliberate reversal with a hint of the exotic without contributing substantially to the basic arguments of the volume. This point can be better understood when one juxtaposes Ferme’s essay, especially the latter section, which, according to me, encapsulates the principal arguments of the volume and its underlying methodology. With ethnographic details richly elaborated, Ferme problematises the deterritorialisation and

reterritorialisation underlying immigrant movement interspersed with the politico-economic of both the immediately local and national as well as that of the transnational and international. Magically weaving disparate and temporally-spatially separated life histories of displaced Sierra Leoneans, Ferme engages with and educates the main themes of an anthropology at the margins of the state and the realisation of the “state-effect” – biopolitical management of geographies and populations, methods of identification and documentation, with their underlying notion of subjectivities, and the practices of both the state and its citizens that both blur and reconstruct the borders of modern nation states.

While an ethnography of plurality of regulatory regimes at the margins enables a reading of agency that is not only evident in acts of subaltern resistance, but also in everyday practices of survival and seeking of justice or legitimacy, one needs to be careful that such a reading also has the possibility of normalising the anomalies, the margins and the concomitant socio-political struggles at these margins. A related issue would be whether the excessive focus on violence and the extrajudicial political complexes at the local, regional, national, international level can merely translate into a reading of cultures of violence. Though another common theme of singularisation, transforming of interactions between the state and its citizenry at different junctures at an individuated level, finds resonance as a key marker of state practice at the margins, the notion of “exception” and the ability to decide on the exception that is invoked to underline this individuation demands further examination. As bureaucratic and juridical procedures of modern nation states make imperative an individualised interface with its citizenry, the significance of the above reading to further an argument of specific state practices at the margins appears open to question. Finally, extending the argument of Asad in the concluding essay, in the competing and interspersed regimes of authority – political and economic – can one define an unequivocal terrain as that marked by the state, and if so, what are its characteristics, and should we not look at critiquing them in the context of these characteristics rather than that of the Weberian ideal type? **EW**

Email: [rmukho123@rediffmail.com](mailto:rmukho123@rediffmail.com)