

Theorising State Practices in Urban Governance in/ from Cities of the South

A WISER session facilitated by Claire Benit-Gbaffou, Sarah Charlton, Anne Pitcher

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Structure of the session

Introduction by facilitators

- Presentation of the key questions
- Contextualisation in the South
- Facilitators brief presentation of own research

Key Questions

1) Theoretical Challenges to understanding the Post-Colonial State

To begin we borrow from Akhil Gupta: "How come post colonial states with 'the will to improve' (that is from Li) are 'failing' to do so (Gupta) in significant ways, or at least have outcomes that often are complex, unexpected or contradictory?" Theories of the post colonial state tend to either view the state with deep suspicion (alliance with business elites and interests; machinery with an unsound desire to control, tendencies to capture resources and use violence in illegitimate ways), or with a degree of confidence (welfare or developmental state, constructing strong bureaucracies and organisations, rising democratic accountability). This theoretical bifurcation distracts us from conceptualizing the state as the outcome and also the instigator of a more multi-faceted, complex and mixed set of intentions, strategies, and results – many of which are what is experienced in particular in urban politics and in residents' everyday lives.

2) De-centering the State

The forces of urbanization, transnational networks of power, and the growth of International non-governmental organisations and international financial institutions, or what Ferguson has termed "horizontal contemporaries to the state" have de-centered and de-territorialized the post-colonial state in fundamental ways. Emerging theories, especially from anthropology, present a more porous and de-centered state, one that is in constant construction through the daily engagements of states and citizens (state-in-society, the state from its margins, porous bureaucracies). But also, the agents, functions, and organization of "the state" vary dramatically across space. How do we conceptualize and differentiate states across and within different urban spaces, for example, or frame their variegated encounters with activists?

Key readings

Those marked with * are essential

Auyero

Auyero, Javier. "From the Client's Point(s) of View': How Poor People Perceive and Evaluate Political Clientelism." *Theory and Society* 28, no. 2 (April 1, 1999): 297–334.

Challenges our normative understanding of clientelism - in a tradition of Urban Latin American studies, by exploring 'the clients points of view'. does not negate the domination clients are under, but unpacks their agency. Also illustrates the various understandings of the state and society within the same 'community' according to the individual relation to the 'broker' or local patron – how these relations shape people's understandings of the state and of social agency.

Bahre and Lecocq

Bähre, E. and Lecocq, B. (2007). The Drama of Development: The Skirmishes Behind High Modernist Schemes in Africa. *African Studies*. Vol 66, Issue 1. Special Issue: The Drama of Development

Bähre and Lecocq's article is an introduction to a special issue of African Studies. They argue that the contributions in the special issue reveal the limits of state power (in various African contexts) but more importantly the variations in outcomes at the intersection of development, community and the state. Deviating from Scott and aligning more with their interpretation of Li they posit that 'confusion, chaos and uncertainty' are typical characteristics of development: the 'skirmishes' between state and community in the development terrain have different outcomes, some of these can be violent, some are predominantly negative for recipients, others positively transforming or life-enhancing. A close examination of particular situations is therefore needed to move beyond the domination/ resistance/ compliance paradigm, to understand better how the interface is shaped.

***Chatterjee, chapter 3**

Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press, 2004, "Chapter 3 The Politics of the Governed."

Posits the concept of 'political society' (as opposed to civil society, the minority of full right bearing citizens) as a mode of governmentality of 'the majority of the world' – residents whose life is shaped to some extent by informality (in access to housing, services, economic activities). Political society is grounded in a democratic society where the mass of the poor (and informal) can use their political right to vote as a means to precariously frame some temporary access to state resources (mostly through arrangements with local bureaucrats and politicians).

***Goh and Bunnell**

Goh, Daniel P.S., and Tim Bunnell. "Recentring Southeast Asian Cities: Recentring Southeast Asian Cities." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 3 (May 2013): 825–33.

This is an 8 page intro to a symposium on SE Asian Cities in IJURR. Goh and Bunnell's main point is that much research on cities in Asia and elsewhere has been dominated by "metrocentricity" or rather, a focus on global cities as opposed to focusing on less prominent or so-called "secondary" cities. The tendency to focus on megacities in Asia has taken place because they are the most globally connected and therefore have characteristics that invite comparisons with the West. But

this has come at a cost. There is a tendency in the literature to juxtapose the wealthy areas to the slums; formal to informal; to trade off the influence of transnational capital or the developmental state versus grassroots activism in the slums. With the spread of administrative decentralization, however, it is now more important to focus on a variety of cities because as political authority fragments so does the ability to exercise agency. Decentered cities contain or enclose popular politics, reproducing a fragmentation among social movements that mirrors the diversity of urban space.

***Gupta's intro of *Red Tape* / paper on corruption**

Gupta, Akhil. "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State." *American Ethnologist* 22, no. 2 (May 1, 1995): 375–402.

Poses the question from the paradox of seeing well intentioned bureaucrats and politicians committed to development, with increasing resources and capacity to act; and yet the persistence of mass poverty, inequality and structural violence in India. In the introduction Gupta starts theorising on the 'systematic arbitrariness of bureaucratic outcomes in its provision of care', contesting a Foucauldian view of the state bureaucracy as 'rationalised power in a disciplinary society'; producing 'bare lives' (agamben) where structural violence done to the poor on an everyday basis becomes an accepted condition.

***Li**

Li, Tania Murray. "Beyond 'the State' and Failed Schemes." *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 383–94.

Takes seriously the 'will to improve' in developmental states, questions the 'failure' of developmental schemes (a la Scott) and proposes to study what these schemes 'do' rather than analyse them in terms of failure.

Michelle Ann Miller

Miller, Michelle Ann. "Decentralizing Indonesian City Spaces as New 'Centers': Decentralizing Indonesian City Spaces as New 'centers.'" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37, no. 3 (May 2013): 834–48.

Miller argues against two contrasting claims in the literature: first, the argument that Indonesian cities are just mimicking the West and second that there is an "Asian model" with specific features that are distinguishable from those of the West. She concedes that urban forms such as gated communities, shopping malls, and a penchant for urban planning may have arisen in the West, but Indonesian also borrow from each other and rely on transnational models that may come from the Middle East, from Islam, etc. These multiple influences make cities in Indonesia a hodgepodge of different multiscalar, many layered urban forms with their own tensions and contradictions. Significant among these is decentralization which has on the one hand granted more autonomy to different actors at the local level but also opened up a grey area of opportunities with regard to the exercise of political authority and produced highly uneven urban spaces across the country. One sees dramatic decline in one region versus high level branding of world class cities in another.

***Robins**

Robins, S. (2003). Whose Modernity? Indigenous Modernities and Land Claims after Apartheid. *Development and Change*. 34(2): 265-258

Robins' first point is that contrary to a typical post-development critique, state initiated development interventions can be appropriated and transformed in complex ways which constitute

neither rejection nor straightforward acceptance of them by intended recipients. The second point is a challenge to Ferguson, arguing that undertaking development is an uncertain and precarious project for states as it can fail and undermine authority. The state and its development projects are not as powerful as often assumed, and peoples' responses can be more powerful or have more agency than assumed. The empirical work he draws on is SA rural.

***Roy**

Roy, Ananya (2009) "Why India Cannot Plan Its Cities: Informality, Insurgence, and the Idiom of Urbanization" *Planning Theory*, 8:1, 76-87.

Studies informality as a creation of the state and exposes states' own 'informal practices'. Posits these state informal practices as intentional (state engaged in a neoliberal/ accumulation or speculative project on urban land in particular), but states that this use of informality ('un-mapping', opaque information) might well render the state unable to plan and to eventually govern.

Von Holdt

Von Holdt, Karl. "South Africa: The Transition to Violent Democracy." *Review of African Political Economy* 40, no. 138 (2013): 589-604.

Looks at the paradox of a SA nascent democracy, with state institutions expressing rupture with the apartheid past, and yet increasingly resorting to violence to regulate access to resources. Uses rational theory literature (North et al) to explain factionalism, instability and recourse to intra-state violence for shifting elites to maintain or access to rents.