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The State as a Social Relation

An Anthropological Critique

L'Etat comme relation sociale. Une critique matérialiste anthropologique

El estado como una relación social. Una crítica materialista antropológica

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

An earlier version of this article was presented at the Critical Anthropology of Anarchy Workshop of the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. I would like to thank Holly High and the participants of the workshop for their comments on the paper. Moreover, I owe special thanks to Joanna Overing for her long standing inspiration towards a conviviality-focused critique of the state, and to David Sneath for his encouragement in pursuing the anthropology of the state as a social relation. Finally, I would like to thank Marc Berdet for his constructive comments on the article itself.

At the bottom, as I now perceived, they were all unconscious worshipers of the state. Whether the state they worshiped was the Fascist state or the incarnation of quite another dream, they thought of it as something that transcended both its citizens and their lives (Carlo Levi, 1947: Christ Stopped at Eboli)

- 1 Predating Michel Foucault's analysis of power as a conduct on conducts by more than half a century, the relational critique of the state was first clearly articulated by Gustav Landauer (b.1870), the Jewish social anarchist, pacifist and People's Commissioner for Public Education in the Councils' Republic of Bavaria, who was stoned to death by the fascist Freikorps after they sacked Munich in May 1st 1919. Landauer (1910) was the first to forward the radical perspective of the state as a social relation:

One can throw away a chair and destroy a pane of glass ; but those are idle talkers and credulous idolaters of words who regard the state as such a thing or as a fetish

that one can smash in order to destroy it. The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another – One day it will be realised that Socialism is not the invention of anything new, but the discovery of something actually present, of something that has grown...We are the state, and we shall continue to be the state until we have created the institutions that form a real community and society of men.¹

- 2 Rather than being a mechanistic spontaneous reflex of “popular rebellion”, for Landauer the revolution could only be the outcome of a long process of molecularly subtracting the state as a relation between humans: as “a mode of behaviour” at the basis of the social. Here we must pause in order to ask a most pertinent question: what did Landauer mean by the word “relation”? The answer comes from the writings of the thinker himself, who claimed that relations “become reality only in the act of being realised”.² From this processual perspective of *worldmaking*, akin to the one developed by Goodman (1978), if “we are the state” and the state is a relation, this is because we are actively performing this relation between us, rather than simply subjugating ourselves to a transcendental power from above. Thus, state and human relations lose their externality, inherent to both Bakuninist and Marxist readings of power, and acquire a new dimension of synergy: the state exists only to the extent that we are constantly making the state by becoming the state: only to the extent that we behave and relate to each other from within the *spirit* of the state.³

The phantom objectivity of the state

- 3 This perspective places Landauer squarely within the critical tradition of Etienne de La Boétie, who, as Pierre Clastres (2010: 178) reminds us, was the first to see that the endurance of the state boils down to a problem of desire: “it is not that the new man has lost his will, but that he directs it towards servitude”.⁴ This tradition of problematising the state not in terms of the desire of the few to command but in terms of the desire of the many to obey witnessed a famous resurgence in post-war Europe in the work of Wilhelm Reich (1972), who claimed that the German masses were not led astray by Hitler but actually desired fascism. And it again found support in the work of both Jacques Lacan (“so you want a new Master!”) and of Deleuze and Guattari (1984) who, rather than talking about some Frommian fear of freedom, claimed that the state is an outcome of a desire to be subjugated. It is from this critical perspective that Clastres (2010: 187) comments:

In a society divided along the vertical axis of power between the dominating and the dominated, the relations that unite men cannot unfold freely. Prince, despot or tyrant, the one who exercises power desires only the unanimous obedience of his subjects. The latter respond to his expectation, they bring into being his desire for power, not because of the terror that he would inspire in them, but because, by obeying, they bring into being their own desire for submission.

- 4 For Landauer this spirit of submission can only be the product, and can only be sustained as a result of, a prior mystification of the state. This spectacle of the state takes two forms. On the one hand, the state appears as an always already existing natural trait of human society, the inherent destiny of social organisation: the reified image of the state as an inextricable part of the human condition, as the very grammar or genotype of social relatedness. And on the other hand, the state appears as a unified mechanism with a

singular purpose and will, which rules over people much like a sovereign puppet-master runs his/her shadow theatre: the reified image of the state as a sovereign volition or plan directed and imposed from the above. From a materialist anthropological perspective, these two interlinked forms of what, borrowing from Lukacs (1971), I shall call the *phantom objectivity* of the state – the philosophical spectacle of the ontological state and the political spectacle of the programmatic state – are the necessary condition for the reproduction of the state as a social relation.

- 5 Thus, if Michael Taussig (1992) is right to note that some of the greatest critics of power, like Adorno and Benjamin, failed to relate to the fetishistic dimensions of the state, the same cannot be said of Landauer. From his perspective, the materiality of the state as a social relation is rooted in its being performed by and between humans in everyday life on the condition that it is imagined both as an internal inescapable trait of “human nature” and as an external agentive totality whose power of sovereign decision lies radically and fundamentally outwith everyday life. In his own words, the reproduction of the state “would not be possible without this reification of what are in fact fluid and spiritual relations” (Landauer 1910: 103).
- 6 It is in this sense that we must consider the state as fetish. Not as a fiction *à la* Radcliffe-Brown, but as a concrete relation whose force lies with the fact that it is always already conceived as radically alien to itself. Paraphrasing Taussig (1992), I would thus like to argue that the transformation of the state into the State, with a capitalised s, is achieved through the former, as a social relation, being dressed in the mask of an entity imbued with the double qualities of natural reason and political will.
- 7 The phantom objectivity of the state, as “an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature” (Lukacs 1971: 1), is conditioned on its simultaneous imagination as: a) an internal necessity imposed by the need of species-survival (natural reason) ; b) an external totality imposed from the above on human life (political will). However, this is an operation of mystification that cannot be simply reduced to a problem of false consciousness. Far from a mere ideological/superstructural cover-up, it forms the core of our symbolic reality (*the state is out there*) as far as it is actually *productive* of the structural real that sustains it (*we are the state*). The fantasy of the state (Navaro-Yashin 2002), and at the same time the phantasmagoria of the doubly reified state is precisely what allows social actors to turn a blind eye to their own involvement and complicity in performing and reproducing the state, in their everyday lives. It is what allows us not to face the way our desire shapes reality. *L'État c'est l'Autre*: this is the inverted democratic formula of statism, which from a materialist anthropological perspective bears uncanny affinities to Rimbaud's famous *Je est un Autre*.
- 8 State fetishism is thus based on a fundamental misrecognition of the self as other, a mesmerising identification of the multiple to the one. For in the terms of Alain Badiou (2005: 105), “the state solely exercises its domination according to a law destined to form-one out of parts of the situation”. The phantom objectivity of the state forces the partial and contradictory objects of the social into a fetishistic disavowal of their disjunctive nature, and effectuates their totalisation as an integrated unity, a phantasmagoric One that encloses them by adding a whole next to their fragments, *als ob* it was their true sum or inclusion (Deleuze & Guattari, 1984).
- 9 This function of the return-to-the-One embodied by the fetishised state is exemplified in the corpus of western literature concerning “emergencies”. Rather than approaching

emergencies from the all too often rehearsed perspective of Giorgio Agamben, I would here like to argue that events such as epidemics, earthquakes and floods or droughts and shipwrecks are rendered “cases of necessity” to the degree that they are acclaimed as ultimate validations of the phantasmic reality of the “internal necessity” and the “external totality” of the state. The re-presentation of social relations under such exceptional circumstances gives us two choices, or plots, which engulf the social in the eternal return of the state:

- 10 A. The positive plot: The blighted individuals organise themselves as a state and thus salvage their lives and humanity until the return of the state or until they manage to return to the state, based on their ability to organise themselves as a state. This is what I shall call Xenophon’s “Anabasis” scenario. The year is 401 BCE and thousand Greek mercenaries accompanying the wannabe usurper Cyrus the Younger in his expedition against King Artaxerxes find themselves stranded in Cunaxa, at the midst of the Persian Empire. With Cyrus killed in battle and their own generals treacherously assassinated by a local satrap, the ten thousand should have disintegrated, gone native, be taken slaves or simply perish. But being the embodiment of the democratic ideal, they march on. Self-organised and disciplined like a “marching republic”, the mobile polis of the ten thousand finally reaches the shores of the Black Sea, upon the sight of which the mercenaries cry their famous *thalatta thalatta* (Nussbaum 1967); a reflection on the inherent connectedness of the republican polity, sea-borne merchant trade and military *esprit de corps*, as the three pillars of classical Greek imperialism.
- 11 B. The negative plot: the blighted individuals fail to organise themselves as a state and collapse into chaos and cannibalistic violence until the state proper finally arrives and salvages the remaining humanity of the survivors. This is what we can call William Golding’s “Lord of the Flies” scenario. In the didactic novel (and its various film adaptations) everything collapses when the marooned children turn savage. The cause of this collapse is usually identified with their tribalisation and scorn of the famous conch-based democratic hierarchy embodied in the positive characters of the book (Ralph and Piggy). But perhaps it can be more subtly located in the neglect of more and more children to wear their socks knee-high; the ultimate embodied symbol of colonial civilisation and order. When after a series of atrocities the Royal Navy finally sails in, its regalia-covered captain exclaims that he expected British children to have put up a better show. In the presence of the Navy desire/chaos (Jack) is reduced to impotence while logic/order (Ralph) weeps for the end of innocence, as the state salvages the remnants of humanity.
- 12 By appearing as both destiny and original essence of the social, the state thus functions as an apparatus of capture of the potentialities of social relatedness. What it encloses is no less than the capacity to be social, i.e. to engage in a reciprocal and convivial worldmaking (Overing 1990). In this sense, its attributes of “internal necessity” and “external totality” function as two pinches between which the possibility of statelessness is rendered unthinkable and unintelligible. And to this operation of enclosure contribute equally, with the same catastrophic ferocity, both liberal intellectuals who think not so much *for* but *with* the state, entrapped in it as a way of reflecting on and inhabiting the world, and various leftist and anarchist high priests of resentment who think they can “bring down” the state, through the exercise of force, as if it was a pane of glass. Not being able to think without a fetish in their head, they, in their perpetual return to the One, render the fantasy of the state the only thinkable condition of humanity.

Conclusion

- 13 The challenge for an anthropology of the state is to think *about* it without thinking *with* it. This cannot be achieved through a repetition of 1970s Marxist dogmatism, which reduced the ethnographic subtlety of the state-relation to a universal timeless class-struggle exegesis. Nor can it be an exercise in postmodernist abstraction, as exemplified in the work of Timothy Mitchell (1990, 1991), which reduces the state to a mere metaphoric effect or fantasy. Nor, finally, can it be achieved by searching for the “mistake” or original sin that led to the “fall”, i.e. the creation of some sort of *Urstaat*. For if there was indeed a fall, this has never ceased being repeated, reproduced and refuelled in thousand everyday acts and gestures - an eternal return of the state-relation. Many a molecular everyday “fall”, many an everyday reproduction of the state as a social relation and as the mystification of this relation: this is the object of the anthropological critique of the state.
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NOTES

1. The particular form and translation of Landauer's quote by Doreen Dotan is taken from the site Post-Leftist anarchism and Landauer (<http://doreenellenbelldotan.info/PostLeftAnarchismAndLandauer.htm>). Kuhn (2010) provides an alternative translation and format, which perhaps reflect a more literal aspect of the passage.
2. As Gabriel Kuhn (2010: 13) has noted in his editor's preface to the first authoritative collection of Landauer's writings in English, "realisation" here is a translation from the German *Verwirklichung*, meaning "to make something real" rather than "to grasp something": it is a term of action not of intellectual comprehension.
3. The discussion of the notion of the spirit [*Geist*] in Landauer's writings is extensive, see in particular Yassour (1989).
4. For a discussion of La Boétie by Landauer see Kuhn's edited collection (2010: 143-176).

ABSTRACTS

Based on the theoretical legacy of Gustav Landauer, this polemic proposes an anthropological critique of the state, which approaches the latter not as Leviathan composed of the bodies of its subjects, nor as mere fiction, but as a social relation and at the same time as a mystification of this relation, which allows it to endure as a pervading apparatus of capture of social relatedness.

En s'inspirant de l'héritage théorique de Gustav Landauer, cet article polémique propose une critique de l'État, du point de vue d'une anthropologie matérialiste. Il s'agit de considérer celui-ci, non pas comme un Léviathan constitué par les corps de ses sujets ou comme une simple fiction, mais comme une relation sociale et la mystification simultanée de celle-ci, qui permettent à l'État de s'imposer durablement, en tant qu'instrument de capture des liaisons sociales.

Basado en el legado teórico de Gustav Landauer, esta polémica propone una crítica materialista antropológica del Estado, tematizándolo no como el Leviatán compuesto por los cuerpos de sus sujetos, ni como mera ficción, sino como una relación social, a la vez que mistificación de esta relación, que le permite perdurar como un extenso aparato de captura de tramas sociales.

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