

51. The Modern State as a Cultural Model

Convenor:

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It has been exceedingly difficult for anthropology to grasp the modern state. The influence of Gramsci and Foucault in anthropology has made matters worse because it has led ethnographers to define prematurely the state as the problem, even in circumstances where the state may be the solution. Off the record (and less frequent in their publications), anthropologists may tell stories about informants being fed up with corrupt officials, with the lack of social policies, and with the disregard for citizenship rights they encounter. An ethnographic record that was more complete on this point would permit us to draw conclusions about what kind of folk models of the modern state are in circulation. After all, without a model of and for the proper functioning of the state, people could not make assertions about inadequate state practices. In this workshop, ethnographic testimonies about the modern state as a cultural model will be collected. A particular focus is the connection between world-level models of the modern state and local ideals of good governance.

From “Welfare State“ to “Welfare Community“: Notes on the Politics of Persuasion.

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If Max Weber argued that one of the distinguishing features of modern statehood is the monopoly over violence, he said so before European states emerged as the primary agents responsible for national well-being. Anthropologists, meanwhile, have spent much time studying state authority, its modalities of power, and the forms of resistance it generates, but have largely ignored the ways in which European states came into being and continue to exist as historically specific attempts to collectively manage the life, health, and welfare of nations. This oversight must be addressed, particularly in light of the deep-seated transformations emerging as European states are under increased pressure to rid themselves of what critics call “state monopolies” over the care and welfare of populations.

One of the central ways through which “welfare state reform” is made possible and thinkable all over Europe today is via public debates and collective musings on the form, function, and responsibilities of the state. Based on over a year of ethnographic fieldwork in Milan, Italy, this paper tracks the way in which different models of state and state action are mobilized and circulated by public and private actors. These models are never formulated in the abstract, but are articulated vis-à-vis an ideal-typical, quasi-utopian concept that is much more widely used in Italy today “that of the “welfare

community,? which is seen as both the condition of possibility and effect of contemporary restructuring of the state. It is the emergence of this concept, used widely by critics and defenders of the state, that this analyses of the state need to focus on, because it is the perceived limits and boundaries of the ?community? that best indicate shifting ideas about the location of state responsibility. And it is the moments where ?the community? fails that different models of state action and so-called ?state externalization? are articulated. Very broadly, the two models of the state propagated rely implicitly on ideas of the state as ?father/mother,? versus ideas of the state as ?manager,? and on ideas of the ?nation as family,? versus ideas of the ?nation as company.?

The State, Civil Society and the Information Society in Hungary: Contested Visions of the Future

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Although Hungarian civil society is ostensibly developing according to models ?imported? from the European Union, my fieldwork as a volunteer at a large NGO revealed a bitter debate over the meaning and role of the state vis-à-vis society in a post-socialist, pre-accession country. I was able to explore how the relationship between state and civil society, and the diverse groups of the population that make it up, reflects a variety of deeply embedded and historically specific notions of what the state is, and how the engagement between the state and citizens works. Focussing on the struggle over control of access to the ?Information Society,? a concept heavily loaded with significance in terms of national identity and the future, I will highlight through a series of ethnographic examples how ideas of the state, modernity, progress and democracy in the period immediately before Hungary?s accession to the EU are bound up in implicit beliefs, stemming directly from notions of the socialist past in Hungary, and the actual form of the transition to ?Europe? and ?western democracy.? This approach reveals why certain ideas have become so aggressively contested, allowing for a more direct interrogation of concepts such as the state in a post-socialist context.

Cultural Models of the Malian State: The Tension Between Liberal Ideals and Local Expectations.

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Current liberal political models of good governance defend a vision in which the heavily centralized and authoritarian post-colonial state is to be transformed

through decentralization, democratization and privatization. The development of local economical and political initiatives at a grass roots level suggests that this approach also corresponds to popular aspirations. The analysis of perceptions of the Malian state in rural areas with respect to decentralization both supports and contradicts this perspective. In a continuity with precolonial and colonial polities the state is associated both with the negative image of a predator while its violent power allows it to play the positive role of a strong mediator in local conflicts. In the current context of multi-party democracy and decentralization people in the new rural municipalities welcome the end of excessive state violence, but often express the need for external mediators, while state agents are reluctant to intervene. I argue that this situation can be grasped as a contradiction between at least three cultural models of the state: the liberal state endorsed by the international development community, an idealized decentralized state which national elites associate with the political heritage of the medieval empire of Mali, and finally the rural perspective of the weakened predator/mediator State.

“The People Spoke“: Visions of a Better Government in Cameroon
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This paper will examine Cameroonian ideas about the ideal government as expressed in a call-in radio program broadcast during the 1994 World Cup. As the Indomitable Lions, the national football team, was doing badly the airwaves were opened up for people to suggest solutions on how to improve the performance of the national team. People used the opportunity to indict the government's mismanagement of the team and using football as a metaphor for the country-- to criticize the government in general. In the process they also articulated visions of how the government and their country should function. In their criticisms they often called upon their knowledge of the wider world and their ideals showed that in many ways they subscribe to universal values of democracy and equity.

The Modern State as Cultural Model: Historical Traces.
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During the twentieth century a number of significant developments have given shape to a cultural model that by now is global in scope. The first of these developments is a long struggle for political and social recognition. This

type of recognition has been institutionalized and codified as citizenship rights. Another development has been the emergence of a polity that is conceived as impersonal, as a genuine *res publica*. The third development has led to a general notion of legitimate progress, that is, of progress as the only legitimate goal of the polity. Taken together, these developments and their results make up the cultural model of the modern state. While this model inevitably will be related to particular polities such as specific nation-states, the model itself is not confined to any one polity. It is global. It is so on at least two accounts: partly because it functions as a point of reference in particular settings and political contestations; partly because it also provides the model for a group of political responses to capitalist globalization. This doubleness will be discussed with the help of macro-ethnographical examples.

