Introduction - A Double-edged Sword: Protection and State Violence
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What is This?
Introduction

A Double-edged Sword: Protection and State Violence

The Anglo-American led ‘war on terror’ has generated heated debates over the role of the state in protecting its citizen-subjects from internal and external threats. States have taken supposedly exceptional measures against perceived dangers by launching wars, overthrowing regimes and curtailing civil liberties in the name of ‘security’. At the same time, these supposedly exceptional measures have been seen by many people as destabilizing sources of oppression in their own right. While the second war in Iraq was launched in the name of restoring international order and overthrowing an undoubtedly brutal dictator, it has also brought disorder and violence into the lives of many people in the region. Similarly, while immigration controls have been tightened in the name of security, they have also brought discrimination, abuse and harassment. In this context, the measures taken by many regimes in order to protect their citizen-subjects have also created disorder, fear and violence.

Recent anthropological work on the relationships between those who speak in the name of the state and their citizen-subjects has explored the ways in which forms of rule are often produced through forceful and violent imposition, rather than straightforward consent (Das and Poole, 2004; Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). Consent to govern is given often as much for reasons of fear as it is freely chosen. Many states are formed through histories of pacification, forced assimilation and exclusion rather than the stabilizing actions of ‘civil society’. This work has made a useful and important contribution by exploring ethnographically how both seemingly ‘liberal’ and ‘non-liberal’ states are founded on violence, and depend on fear and coercion to carry out many of their most fundamental tasks (Heyman, 1999). The articles found here join in this project, and were first presented at a workshop held jointly by the Anthropology Department at Goldsmiths College and the Crisis States Programme of the Development Studies Institute at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The participants were asked to examine, among other things, how states use violence in the pursuit of control and legitimacy. In this collection, we explore one aspect of the state and its relationship to violence – the everyday experiences, manifestations and effects of the state as both a source of violence and as a provider of protection from violence – paying attention to the shifting ends of state violence as well as its means. The articles do so through in-depth examination of case studies ranging from...
the apparently well-established democracy of India, to transitional regimes in South Africa and Nicaragua, and totalitarian regimes in Maoist China and Nazi Germany.

In a now classic article on European state formation in the 17th and 18th centuries, the sociologist Charles Tilly (1985) suggests that states should be understood as providers of protection, but of protection as a double-edged commodity. For Tilly, protection evokes both the sense of a comforting presence providing shelter against enemies and images of criminal rackets, whereby the locally powerful demand tribute in order to stave off their own violence. States, Tilly argues, should be seen as agents that are perceived to provide a measure of ‘credible’ protection from internal and external threats. Crucially, for Tilly, the threats against which states claim to provide protection can be imaginary or the product of the states’ own practices and, for many people, the actions of those who speak in the name of the state are the greatest danger they face (1985: 171). In this context, to focus on the putative legitimacy of state violence is to miss the point, as legitimacy is always a matter of judgement rather than of fact, and the credibility of the actions of those who act in the name of the state is often based on their effectiveness rather than their innate justice. From this perspective, the relation between power and violence is not, as Arendt (1969) argued, oppositional, in the sense that violence destroys power, but productive, as violence is often foundational to forms of political authority.

Tilly’s analysis is instructive in understanding the relationship between persons, states and other forms of political authority. It is, in particular, a useful counter to models that either see the state–society relationship as formed through a consensual social contract, an open market in which consumers choose their states, or a community of shared norms and expectations. However, Tilly is perhaps at times guilty of a one-dimensional picture of the relationship between state violence and protection. Here the work of Walter Benjamin is insightful. In his essay ‘Critique of Violence’ Benjamin (1996) makes a useful distinction between ‘law making’ and ‘law preserving’ violence. For Benjamin, ‘law making’ violence founds and changes social orders through actions that are visibly violent, often performative, and unpredictable in timing. In contrast ‘law preserving’ violence is manifested through actions that are often seen as routinely predictable, procedural and regulated. The balance between these two forms of violence, their mutually productive nature, as well as the tensions between them, are crucial for an understanding of how states can simultaneously be a source of violence and protection. Many of the articles here concentrate more on the foundational ‘law making’ violence. ‘Law preserving’ violence, most clearly found in the rechtstaat of jurisprudence, has historically proved more difficult to achieve, and is always on the verge of breaking down into the often less benign form of ‘law making’ violence.

In their implicit emphasis on ‘law making’ violence, many of the articles in this volume are influenced by the work of Giorgio Agamben
Like Tilly and Benjamin, Agamben also sees violence as foundational to forms of power. In particular, Agamben famously argues that violence in the name of sovereignty is at the centre of the legal and political processes of the modern state. For Agamben, it is sovereign violence that founds the political community by placing what he calls ‘bare life’, embodied in *homo sacer*, outside the juridical realm. Importantly, the figure of *homo sacer* is never entirely outside the community, as its very banishment forms the basis of political authority. Violence and forceful exclusion are therefore at the heart of the processes through which the modern state is reproduced.

The articles collected here, however, deviate from Agamben in at least three ways. First, whereas he often seems to universalize from a very particular European political history, they seek to place structures of sovereignty, figures of ‘bare life’ and forms of political community within particular historical and cultural contexts. In doing so they also implicitly criticize those who might see the violence of the 20th century as the product of a uniquely modern bureaucratic sensibility (Bauman, 1991), by exploring the ways in which violence is often shot through with enchantment and spectres. Second, they explore the ways in which violence is not always imposed from the top down, but is produced at multiple diffuse sites. The location of sovereignty is never self-evident, but is dispersed across a range of competing claims. Third, they seek to explore the ways in which violence is not always perceived as a malignant imposition of a distant state, but is often seen as a comforting, if ambiguous, source of protection by local populations.

As such, one theme running through these articles is that of the historically and culturally specific repertoires of fear and protection reproduced through state violence. This is particularly well analysed in Stephan Feuchtwang’s paper on Maoist China and Nazi Germany. For Feuchtwang, in the context of the Chinese Great Leap famine and the Cultural Revolution, *homo sacer* takes the form of a ghost or a demon, on the threshold between life and death, like a living corpse. Here, ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and ‘defeated classes’ were ritually turned into ‘sub-humans’ who polluted the living and therefore represented a threat to be expelled through exorcism. Such exorcisms ensured that the ghosts of the past did not trouble the living, who inhabited the present and the revolutionary future. The means of exorcism sometimes took the form of cannibalism, where the devouring of the dangerous other came to culturally signify a strengthening of the self. Nazi Germany also had a self-strengthening mission that demonized the enemy as ‘death in life’. Here, however, the ‘self-strengthening’ was defined in terms of a programme of eugenics to strengthen the Aryan race and relied on a nationalistic mythology of the German *volk* and messianic traditions of Protestant peasant rebellions. In Nazi Germany, it was ethnic and racial categories, rather than ghostly classes, which were mobilized in defining the enemies of the people.
A racialized identification of an enemy has also been important in the imagery of state protection in post-apartheid South Africa, as shown by Thomas Blom Hansen. These enemies, in the shape of young, black males, were especially frightening because of their ordinariness, anonymity and ubiquity. Focusing on the residents of an Indian township in Durban, Hansen looks at the forms of protection deployed against these imagined threats. One strategy involved the residents of the township calling for protection through highly visible patrols (by police, ‘vigilantes’ and private security firms), security alarms, fences and the use of guard dogs. A second strategy hinged on a more secretive and opaque aspect of the police and its proxies, as a potentially omniscient and omnipresent force, a kind of ‘ghostly presence’. Benjamin’s insistence that ‘law making’ and ‘law preserving’ types of violence should be seen as inseparable, as moments intrinsic to any invocation of the law, is taken up by Hansen. He explores how the South African police force, in the name of protection of its citizen-subjects, combined these two forms of violence into a ‘spectral mixture’ that did not vanish with the arrival of democracy but was instead transformed. In particular, in post-apartheid South Africa, ‘law making’ violence, in the shape of violent encounters with suspected or ‘real’ criminals, is increasingly now in the hands of private security firms, while the more formal ‘law preserving’ violence is left to the often inefficient police force.

While, in South Africa, private security firms are taking on many of the features of ‘law making’ violence, often thought to be the monopoly of the state, Alpa Shah demonstrates the contested boundaries between the forms of violence produced by the state and the ‘terrorist’ Naxalite movement, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), in the newly formed state of Jharkhand in India. Shah shows the continuities in both people and function between the state and the ‘terrorist’. Like representatives of the state before it, the MCC gained support in the local area not through the sharing of common values, but through having greater control over what she terms a ‘market for protection’, in which the state was merely another key player. In doing so Shah expands on Georg Elwert’s (1999) term ‘markets of violence’, describing those arenas of long-term violent interaction where different organizations employ violence as a strategy to bargain for power and material benefits. The protection the MCC offered was, as Tilly argues, a ‘double-edged commodity’ – it was both protection to access the informal economy of the state but also protection from the possibilities of its own activities. Like private security firms in South Africa and the state in Jharkhand, the MCC sold protection with visible and invisible qualities, enabling it to take greater control over rural Jharkhand. As in South Africa, these qualities also produced fears of the consequences of non-cooperation among the potential supporters of the MCC, which exacerbated its spectral or invisible qualities. As Michael Taussig (1984) has famously suggested, fear is often greater in the absence of the thing that causes it than in its
presence, and thrives on the ambiguity, obscurity and confusion that is caused by many perceived threats. Fear of the MCC was dependent on its clandestine structure, its hidden resources, its secrecy (made most evident in breaches of secrecy), the generation of rumours and its capacity for violence. Fear was as much of the protector as the threat from which the protector claimed to offer shelter.

While Shah argues that in Jharkhand the operations of the MCC held strong parallels with the Indian state, and as such questions the boundary drawn between the state and the ‘terrorist’, Rodgers asks important questions about the similarities and differences in the forms of sovereignty operated by the state and youth gangs in 1990s Nicaragua. In the aftermath of the supposedly ‘strong’ state produced by the leftist Sandinista government in the 1980s, the 1990s represented what many have seen as a ‘crisis of governance’, marked by a mixture of ‘neo-liberal’ reform and the rise of non-state violence. Rodgers shows, however, that the apparent ‘roll-back’ of the Nicaraguan state did not create a lack of order, as many would assume. Rather, much of the institutional organizing of collective life in Nicaragua took place through forms of ‘social sovereignty’, in the form of youth gangs. However, Rodgers cautions us against seeing the existence of seemingly competing forms of order as evidence of a ‘weak’ state. Rather than being ‘weak’, Rodgers argues that state sovereignty and social sovereignty can viably coexist, since in Nicaragua the state no longer seeks to exercise coercion evenly across its territory, according to the classic Weberian model (Weber, 1946), but rather instrumentally exercises its violence in a manner that serves only a limited range of specific purposes, and in doing so seeks to separate different categories of citizen-subject.

Addressing related transformations, Simpson’s article shows how the ‘neo-liberal’ restructuring of the Indian state in the 1990s has created a vast and legally ambiguous intermediate zone between the state and society, occupied by Hindu nationalist organizations, where the possibility of violence is incubated. In particular, he argues that the state of Gujarat has been transformed into a ‘Hindu’ state, supported by the myth of Muslim subversion. Economic and political liberalization have created sets of patron–client relationships whereby elites can mobilize political violence against Muslims, while simultaneously disavowing any connection. In doing so, Simpson points to a profound instability in the Gujarati state, whereby those supposedly at its subversive margins, namely Muslims, are in fact central to the reproduction of both the purpose and the structures of forms of governance. As suggested in the article by Feuchtwang, such instabilities can have profoundly violent consequences, as they mean that the enemy is always potentially present and the violence of the state, nominally protecting its self-defined citizen-subjects, can always turn in on itself, resulting in the destruction of that which it seeks to defend. When read alongside those of Rodgers and Hansen, Simpson’s article also reveals the ways in which any notion of ‘weak’ or ‘strong’ states, which depend on a zero-sum notion of
the relationship between state and society, misunderstands the ways in which states relate to and depend upon multiple social and political formations in order to carry out their most fundamental tasks.

The articles in this collection, then, explore the ways in which, while state protection may be used to create order, it also creates disorder. While violence is used in the name of ‘security’ of populations, it also creates immense fear. Crucially, fear is not just created by the unwelcome presence of an authoritarian state. Indifference can be as disordering as unwanted attention. In this context, submission to the rule of the state is as much due to apprehension as it is freely given. The use of violent forms of protection by the state is therefore simultaneously an anomaly and the norm, at once emancipatory and repressive. Fear and consent become fused under the umbrella of state protection. Rather than seeing the practices of the modern state as inherently pathological or benign, it is only in grasping the ways in which protection and violence are intertwined that we can begin to understand the meanings and impacts of the violence perpetrated in the name of the state.

References


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