

Political ecologies of the state: Recent interventions and questions going forward

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Readers of *Political Geography* will be attuned to questions of state authority, power, or contestation based on classic political economic analyses of the ‘social contract,’ distributed and capillary power associated with governmentality studies, or analyses of ‘security’ and violence associated with, geopolitics, border patrol or policing. What might be less familiar to some are the connections between questions of state-making, and state consolidation and power in relation to manifold and contested ‘natures’, including attention to resource management, infrastructures, or changes. Concepts and research trajectories associated with political ecologies of the state have gained momentum over the past several decades, precisely attuned to these linkages. Indeed, the editors of *Political Geography* recently affirmed openness to work on the environment and political ecology (Benjaminsen et al., 2017). This special section includes several recent additions to these debates—offering emergent insights and highlighting focal themes of this subfield.

Nearly twenty years ago, James Scott published the influential book—*Seeing Like a State* (1998)—precisely interested in the intersections of state power and expertise, territory, and control of and management of ‘natures.’ The work clearly struck a chord, accruing over 12,000 citations to date (according to google scholar). Among other concerns, Scott highlighted state tendencies towards ecological simplification and legibility, as well as the complex dynamics whereby state expertise often overrides other knowledges, frequently resulting in policy failure. While offering detailed and rich case studies, the book nonetheless lacked focused analytical attention to some of the core political geographic concepts central to the analysis—including the very category and function of ‘states’, ‘territories’ and ‘nature/resources.’ A decade later, Paul Robbins (2008) furnished a provocation related to the need for closer engagement between insights and concepts in political geography, with the ongoing concerns of a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of political ecology. While political ecology had long been concerned with political economic analysis, and frequently engaged themes of scale, inequality, power and even the state, Robbins offered an entreaty for more careful attention to state theory and other core political geographic concerns. As he notes, closer attention to political geographic discussions of scale, territory, and power are likely fruitful bases for ongoing work in political ecology. With respect to state theory in particular, he reaffirms the need to recognize and acknowledge that states are not coherent, stable or monolithic, but contested and fractured. Emphasizing the two-way learning that such exchange might afford, he also notes the considerable potential to bring nature, and related epistemologies or governance practices, more fully into studies of state institutions, power, and scalar dynamics.

Fast-forward nearly another decade, and this special section offers a point of entry into the state of knowledge on this exchange. Researchers continue to find generative intellectual terrain around a suite of questions of relevance for ‘political ecologies of the state.’ Among them, as natures continue to undergo important changes, what opportunities are there for new governance possibilities, with what are the implications

for refashioning and contesting states? How are state territories or power intimately bound up with control over, knowledges of, or transformations of nature? How are resources, objects, and related infrastructures central to refashioning state-society relations, or the crucial boundary work required to delineate what we refer to as the 'state', and its evolving capacities (Meehan, 2014, Harris, 2012)?

In terms of some of the general insights regarding political ecologies of the state, researchers have cautioned against taking the 'state' as an ontological given, instead, suggesting that the state must be understood as an outcome or accomplishment fashioned through iterative politics, exclusions, and contestations. This point was made clearly with an analysis that questions the very category of 'Minnesota' as a territorial state invested with power relations, and contested histories, in ways that erase indigenous claims to territory and resources (Wainwright and Robertson, 2003). In terms of other examples, other works have been centrally concerned with the consolidation of the state-society boundary (per Mitchell, 1991), for instance tracing the ways that uses or knowledges of and control over 'natures' can serve to fashion and consolidate the appearance and seeming fixity of state-society boundary, giving the appearance of the 'state' as a discrete entity (Harris, 2012). Studies of this vein have also emphasized the ways that access to, and control over, particular resources (or natures) is often a preoccupation of state institutions, territorial expansion or discourses (Whitehead, Jones and Jones, 2007). For instance, oil, natural gas, or forestry control and knowledges are often crucial to state power, and territorial control might often be asserted precisely to extend or maintain control over these key resources. Recent contributions have similarly stressed that basic service infrastructures (e.g. water or sanitation) are crucial for maintaining state legitimacy, or at times become key foci for citizen politics and movements to contest the authority and validity of state institutions or leaders (Chatterjee, 2004, Meehan, 2014, McLoughlin, 2015).

All told, the growing work on political ecologies of the state and the resource-state nexus has led to a mushrooming of research keen to address the historic and geographic specificities, in addition to general conceptual innovations to consider the myriad ways that resources and the environment are central objects and interests of the state apparatus (Bridge, 2014). Material conditions (topography, conditions of particular resources), and infrastructural formations are seen as being crucial to map and speak to the uneven geography of state power (e.g. Meehan, 2013, Grundy-Warr et al., 2015), as well as to the ways that nature necessary offers challenge to the very idea and function of states (e.g. porosity of state power, and challenges to state authority from inability to control nature, Robbins, 2008). As a key example, contributions by Alatout (e.g. 2008), informed by science and technology studies, have highlighted the science and governance of water as crucial to the history of state formation and legitimation in Palestine/Israel. While many analyses focus on the state, 'society' and 'citizenship' are also necessarily correlates of interest—with contributions that highlight shifts related to citizen subjectivity (Evered and Evered, 2012) and green governmentalities (Birkenholtz, 2009), or the emergence of new 'environmental subjects' as a function of

devolved environmental governance (Agrawal, 2005). Interest in state epistemologies also remains a core interest, for instance, with contributions that have stressed how state categorization of forests fundamentally reconditions the character and composition of those landscapes, how the state is implicated in erasing and producing particular ecological knowledges (Robbins, 2008), or ways that performance of irrigation expertise among state agents is tied to complex negotiations of gender, class, and power (Zwarteveen and Ziebrand, 2014). Fusing these interests with an abiding concern for scale (both in political geography and in political ecology), a recurrent theme of these works also traces state recalibration of scales, how socio-ecological processes might fundamentally reconfigure scales (Neumann, 2009), or similarly, how scalar politics around resources might serve state and nation building goals (Harris and Alatout, 2010, see also Norman et al, 2014).

The contribution in this special section by Clarke-Sather (2017) is an example of how closer engagement with social theory lends nuance to work on political ecologies of the state. As he elaborates, engaging Foucault's understanding of *aleatory* power, state power and modern state formation are at times tightly coupled with questions of risk. Following Foucault, the aleatory draws attention to the fact that the management and distribution of risk is at times a crucial means of exercising state power—in his examples, the state is interested in distributing risk related to ongoing scarcity of food (*scarcity dearness*) in order to limit risk associated with acute food scarcity that might lead to starvation (*scarcity scourge*). Applying these insights to water scarcity and technologies in the context of China, Clarke-Sather shows that state promotion of rainwater harvesting helps to improve citizen capacities to manage drought in a decentralized fashion. By providing households with water storage in cellars, this led to decentralized power/ knowledge, and with it a shifting configuration of risk. Households then manage their own water to overcome shortages on an ongoing basis. As a result, Sather-Clarke's analysis shows water distribution/management technologies have different outcomes for power, at times with power invested more centrally with the state (*centrifugal power*) and other times more distributed among households (*centripetal power*). Focus on the aleatory provides a useful lens to think through the different configurations of power/knowledge in the context of water scarcity, and with it shifting state-society relations.

Building on the growing traditions of 'more than human' geographies, as well as allied debates related to multiple ontologies from anthropology, geography, and indigenous studies/scholars, Theriault's (2017) contribution provides a different lens through which to approach shifting socio-natural assemblages. With a case study of forestry in the Philippines, Theriault describes the influence of more than human 'beings' in conditioning human land use and transformation of the forest. Specifically, illnesses are at times attributed to overharvesting, while other forest 'spirits' make themselves known through dreams to punish or ward off certain behaviors. Failing to take these invisible beings and dream spirits seriously in our analyses, Theriault suggests, would miss an important basis for many Palawan land and resource decisions. For political ecology in

particular, and state theory more generally, failure to attend to these ontological multiplicities, including the supernatural and associated more-than-human assemblages, may miss crucial socio-ecological and management dynamics. These pathways might also be critical to understand why certain bureaucratic interventions in resource management fail. More fundamentally, engaging with multiple ontologies and the diverse associated worldings is fundamental to a broadened understanding of politics, and with it, the broader project of decolonizing knowledges in general, and political ecologies in particular. As such, Theriault makes clear that it is of crucial importance to engage with more-than-human realities and multiple ontologies. Not doing risk naturalizing colonial knowledges/ ontologies, and with it further sidelining and ignoring complex relations important for Palawan socio-natural relations.

Finally, the contribution by Kelly-Richards and Banister (2017) is interested in spaces of informality not as sites of state control and power (as other theorists have offered) but rather as spaces where state power is ambiguous and contested. The account of water access and infrastructures in the *colonias* of Nogales proceeds with attention to specific material conditions, such as topography and infrastructure, to emphasize the manifold ways that these informal spaces and relations are uneven and unpredictable. As a result, the relations of power are partial and ambiguous. As they summarize, the unevenness of the urban grid, the waiting for water and drainage, and the frequent deferral of services are all constitutive of daily life in the *colonias*. Arguably these are precisely the same relations that constitute the state (rather than simply being effects of the state). As their narrative traces, the complex relations of flows, forces, and containment that are manifest in an uneven landscape of pipes and services, are also what lend the practice and substance of statecraft the same characteristics—the state is always uneven, ambiguous and partial. Just as residents in the *colonias* are often left waiting, the state itself is never completed, but always in a state of becoming and deferral—‘as an emergent effect of the processes of inclusion and exclusion, an effect constantly destabilized by Nogales’s precarious physical geography and uneven urban services grid (page X).’

All three articles deal centrally with the nature and substance of (state) power, contested knowledges, while also giving due attention to the materiality/biophysicality of resource conditions. To questions of *power*, Clarke-Sather offers new analytics associated with aleatory, highlighting the centrality of risk to complex renegotiations around power/knowledges (in this case, with different interventions and water related infrastructures and technologies constituting state power as *centripetal* or *centrifugal*). Theriault offers compelling evidence that failure to attend to multiple ontologies in our work necessarily reaffirms colonial power- knowledges and relations, resulting in further marginalization of Palawan people, knowledges and natures. His provocation invites us to consider what it would mean to acknowledge spirits, and invisible entities more fully in our frameworks and understandings? What would it also mean to not only consider natures in terms of the materiality of what we can see and touch, but also to highlight those natures that are dreamt, felt, or otherwise experienced (echoing some related



themes in recent work on emotional and affective ecologies, cf. Sultana, 2015). Finally, more centrally on questions of materiality and biophysicality that have long been a hallmark of work in political ecology, this theme is centrally highlighted by Sather and Kelly-Richards and Banister (but also highlighted in relation to infrastructural networks and risk in China in the piece by Clarke-Sather). For the context of Sonora, the biophysicality and topography of the place presents a serious obstacle both to extending water and other services to residents, but also to consolidating and cementing state power. All told, and as these contributions attest, work on political ecologies of the state is an exciting and insightful field.

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