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The State and Modernity as Anthropological Topics: *a Very Short Introduction*

Abstract: This paper aims to offer a brief introduction to anthropological studies of modernity and the state. I try to introduce some of the most important theoretical works in this field, built up in different ethnographic contexts ranging from Turkey to Latin America. I was trying to show some of the possibilities of the research of modernity and the state in anthropology emphasizing what anthropology can offer to wider debates on these topics. I argue that the ideas of modernity and the state are far more ambivalent than it sometimes may seem in European political theory and that anthropology can offer an insight into alternative forms of modernity and the state and into wider debates on these topics.

Key words: state, modernity, anthropology, ethnography and anthropology of the state

Notions of Modernity and the State

The very term modernity is not clearly defined. Habermas (1989) writes that the term is first used in the Latin language as "modernus" in the fifth century as the signifier of a new Christian era that was seen to be opposed to the previous, pagan one. After that early time, as Habermas argues, modernity has been usually defined in opposition to a differently understood idea of antiquity as "the result of a transition from the old to the new" (p. 3) and whenever intellectuals have raised consciousness of a new epoch, they have called their epoch modern. Rofel (1997) writes that the term modernity usually "encompasses the belief in the triumvirate of Reason, Progress, Truth; the rational planning of ideal social orders; and the standardization of knowledge and production that takes Man as the norm for understanding – in short the European Enlightenment project" (1997: 157). However, the process of modernization and current forms of "modernity" are heterogeneous and far more complex than the idea of "raising rationality" suggests.¹

¹ It would be particularly interesting to see how modernity and modernization are defined in the eastern parts of Europe that during the larger part of the twentieth cen-

Similar to the notion of modernity, it is equally hard to define the state. Borneman (1999) defines the state following Hegel as

"a system of legality and legitimacy, a specific kind of politically organized moral community. The other dimension of the state, as a bureaucratic system of norms and commands, of organizations and regulations, is more visible and perhaps easier to grasp but not necessarily a key to its legitimacy. To pursue the state's legitimacy, one must consider it as a 'temporal totality', which both takes form and authority from the cultural order and in turn tries to shape that order" (1999: 116-117).

Hegel's definition does not explicitly mention modernity, but it could be easily seen as similar to what Foucault and other authors who follow his ideas, describe as a modern state. Elvin (1996), for example, suggests that instead of defining modernity through the idea of an increase in rationality, either in economics and politics or in religion, one can define it better as a complex of more or less effectively realized concerns with power defined as "the capacity to change a structure of a system" (1996: 211). The author distinguishes three basic forms of power: first, over other human beings; second, "practical power over nature in terms of the capacity of economic production"; and third "intellectual power over nature in the form of capacity for prediction" (1996: 210). All these key types are not independent from one other, but rather are mutually connected and firmly related. Society as a whole could be defined as "modern" when the power-complex of a whole is dominant over an other. The above definitions are rather abstract and disputable, but I use them as good illustrations of the Western understanding of modernity and the state, which many anthropologists try to challenge by focusing on the "ordinary peoples practices of modernity and the state". As Harvey (1999: 25) puts it "modernism looks quite different depending on where one locates oneself and when".

Elvin's definitions above are close to Foucault's (1998) notion of social technologies as techniques through which knowledge as a tool of power is produced. In those terms, the modern state is seen as currently the most efficient institution that uses technologies of power and knowledge for the control of its people-citizens. This aim is best achieved through improvement of surveillance practices that are further developed throughout the state's institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools and bureaucracy in general. In his earlier works, and particularly in *The Order of Things* Foucault () argued that modernity "emerged against the background of a cultural order in which the medium of representations made the project of ordering all things on a common table a coherent one" (Rabinow 1989: 8). Rabinow further explains,

tury also claimed their right to authentic modernity (see Kandiyoti 2000). However, in this paper, while speaking about 'official' and scholarly understandings of these terms I will focus on Western discourses.

following Foucault, that the order of representation was qualitatively changed by the introduction of Man (I suppose Woman, too, although Rabinow does not say so) both as a subject and as an object of study, which led to the proliferation of the different range of sciences that we today know as modern.

In the purpose of gaining power the state uses a whole range of techniques to increase the efficacy of its control. Borneman (1999: 97) argues that "in its laws and policy statements, the state proposes for its citizens a model life course using tools including educational institutions, housing regulations, fiscal and monetary policy, and martial laws." Scott (1998) writes that the modern state project is mainly based on four elements: the administrative ordering of nature and society; the high modernist ideology of progress based on science and technology and "interests"; an authoritative state with enough power to realize the modernist project and "a prostrate civil society that lacks the capacity to resist these plans" (1998: 5).² In these terms the modern state is radically opposed to the premodern one that was as Scott metaphorically describes it, "in many crucial respects, partially blind; it knew precious little about its subjects, their wealth, their landholdings and yields, their location, their very identity" (1998: 2). According to the same author, the whole modern state project could be described as follows: "the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large-scale social engineering, the high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build" (1998: 5).

Starting with the western idea of the state as a basic type of political organization, some anthropologists consider any organized social system as a state (Lowie, quoted in Cohen 1978) or any human group that occupies or controls a territory (Koppers, quoted in Cohen 1978). Cohen (1978) argues that the state and society are not the same and distinguishes three main types of approach to the research of state.³ The first approach is based on a stratification stressing the correlation between "the rise of states and the establishment of permanent social classes" (1978: 2) (the best articulated in Marx and Engels's theories). The second approach is a focus on the structure of government itself, which usually leads to the definition of the state as a "type of hierarchically organized polity in which there are three or more levels

² His idea of civil society as opposed to the state is criticized by some anthropologists and I will discuss it later.

³ I will not write specifically about this third approach since it is a rather odd classificatory attempt to find common features among early states (some religious specificity, for example). However, all these approaches include both industrial and pre-industrial states, but Cohen stresses that the industrial states are qualitatively different from the previous one and somehow more "state-like" than others.

of hierarchy from the center of the system to its peripheries" (1978: 3). This definition is present in the works of Fortes and Evans-Pritchard embracing some societies considered as stateless according to Gledhill (2002).⁴ According to this definition, state by its very character is a modernist institution. Wright (1978), for example, using a slightly modified, but very similar approach, defines state through regulations of information flows as well as the regulation of flows of all other material items. State regulatory systems require internally specialized, decision-making subsystems "that regulate varying exchanges among other subsystems and with other systems" (1978: 56). It seems to me that Wright actually understands bureaucracy in a broader sense as a core condition for the existence of the state. These ideas are very similar to those of Giddens (1999), who stresses the role of media development as one of the most important characteristics of modernity, for as he puts it "printing was one of the main influences upon the rise of the early modern state, and the other antecedent institutions of modernity, but when we look to the origins of high modernity it is to the increasingly intertwined development of mass printed media and electronic communication that is important" (1999: 25).⁵ However, some contemporary anthropologists' accounts, such as that of Herzfeld (1993), see bureaucracy in "a Durkheimian view of nation-statism (that) permits us to treat the rationality of bureaucratic identity management as a refraction of the sacralized national order" (1993: 35).

Anthropological Approaches to State and Modernity

All definitions of state mentioned above usually deal only with the ideology and state legal system without questioning how, as Taussig (1992: 132) puts it, "the idea of the state takes its shape in the lives and beliefs of ordinary people." Rabinow (1989) argues that

"The debates about modernity are endless: since it has no essence, and refers to so many diverse things, it seems futile – or simply part of the modernizing process – to worry extensively about abstract definitions. It would seem more heuristic and more ethnographic, to explore how the term has been understood and used by its self-proclaimed practitioners."

Navaro-Yashin (2002), writing an ethnography of contemporary Turkey, states following Abrams, that assuming the existence of the state, sociologists were reproducing what was the greatest device of modern power. According

⁴ I will return to this point in the conclusion.

⁵ Anderson's ideas about "print capitalism" are quite similar (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 153).

to Navaro-Yashin, anthropological inquiry should try to locate abstract ideas of the state that are usually found in sociological and political accounts of the question in the life of "ordinary people" and their everyday practice.

In her ethnographic account Navaro-Yashin describes two main approaches to anthropological understandings of the state. The first one relies on the tradition of Marxism and some readings of Foucault's discourse analysis, and the second one is based on Žižek's and Sloterdijk's works. Authors writing in the first tradition, such as Michael Taussig and Benedict Anderson, argue that the idea of the state is actually the imagination of the people who produce it by living as it really exists without the consciousness of the falsity of their fantasies. Taussig's (1992: 111-112; cf. Taussig 1997) work is concerned with the notion of state which as "the greatest fetish" of modern society, by which he means

"a certain aura of might as figured by the Leviathan in Hobbes' rendering as the "mortal god", or, in a quite different mode, by Hegel's intricately argued vision of the state as not merely the embodiment of reason, of the Idea, but also an impressively organic unity, something much greater than the sum of its parts" (cf. the definition given by Borneman 1999).

In other words, the idea of the state is actually the imagination of the people who produce it by living as if it really exists without the consciousness of the falsity of their fantasies and as such it should be reconstructed in order for its fetishistic character to be reviled.

Navaro-Yashin, following to the some extent Anderson⁶ and Taussig, argues that people "reify and reinstate" the state through their everyday practices. The author argues that

"the notion of the state acquires its power not only through ideological enforcement in real social institutions such as the army and the school, but also through quotidian, and seemingly spontaneous events and occasions, among them bidding farewell to soldiers and watching soccer" (2002: 135).

However, Navaro-Yashin's approach is closest to the works of Žižek and Sloterdijk who argue that people are not just passive victims of their false consciousnesses that enable a state's power to exist, but they are usually fully aware of a state's power and ideology, but nevertheless they continue to behave as if they are unaware of both. Navaro-Yashin's ethnographic account shows

⁶ Anderson (1991) argues that nations were formed in a specific historical moment of capitalism that enabled the wide distribution of newspapers in one dominant language helping people of a community to develop ideas of common belonging to a nation.

that people in Turkey are not just aware of state power and ideology, but they are also aware of their own cynicism toward the state, which becomes their ordinary habitus. However, Navaro-Yashin is careful not to make the people with whom she was working look like they do not believe in the very existence of the state. Rather it seems to me that they do not believe in the state 'modern' ideology of equality of all their citizens, which is as Harvey (1996) argues, one of the basic ideological principles of the modern state as opposed to the pre-modern hierarchical structures based on inequality. I would suggest that it would be better to say that Turkish citizens do not believe that their state is modern, although they do not articulate their view in those terms, but rather speak about the general corruption of state officials and personal benefits as the only true motive for engaging in politics. It could be said that a fantasy of the state is a "fantasy with teeth", as Green (2005) writes about yet another political fantasy (namely, that of the 'Balkans') that could not just be deconstructed and abandoned so simply. As Navaro-Yashin argues herself

"I will argue that the signifier 'state' can remain intact, in spite of public consciousness against it, because a material and tangible world has been organized around it. The state has to be dealt with, in everyday life, as an object because it functions as though it were. A whole economy has been mobilized around this symbol. Even when we have come intellectually to disentangle the state, we need to keep on treating it as reality, because there exists a reality that has been activated through this symbol" (2002: 171).

However, it is not just the very materiality of the state that makes state fantasy so indestructible, but also the whole bureaucratic practice embodied in the work of statesmen, generals, mafia dealers, journalists and other people of power who produce truths about the existence of the state and help "ordinary people" to normalize the idea of the state through their everyday habits (*cf.* Foucault 1998).

The idea of modernity is closely connected with the idea of the West as a holistic category and with the process of westernization. However, some anthropologists criticize the conception which makes a clear distinction between the idea of culture as a pre-modern category and the state as a modern one. As Navaro-Yashin (2002) puts it

"the category 'Westernization', as a category of historical analysis, is a positivist notion that assumes an original distinction and incommensurability between a constructed 'East' and 'West'. It is interesting that there should be such an implicit overlap between modernizationist/Orientalist constructs of 'Westernization' and postmodernist/post-Orientalist references to modernity. The concept of Westernization, like the notions of major historical rupture with modernity, is based on the assumption by default that an essential separate 'culture' existed prior to the development or the shift" (2002: 10).

Critiques of modernism in Turkey usually connect power with modernity itself and "its institutions" such as the state and anthropology, both seen as oppressive toward authentic "culture(s)" (Navaro-Yashin 2002). Furthermore, Turkish secularists see their life-style as neutral and an Islamist life-style as cultural. Secular Istanbul, much like white Europeans, tended to think at the time that their ways were not cultural as they themselves "had transcended culture". "They were modern; they were civilized; they had attained global norms, leaving behind a local aberration" (2002: 29). In one word, secularists are modern and Islamists are cultural. For secularists, modernization is opposed to a lack of education, underdevelopment, lack of industry and attachment to cultural traditions. In "the debate" both sides use the same items with specific symbolic values, such as that of clothes, and especially women's clothes, in negotiating national identity and revealing their "modernity" or "traditionality".⁷ In that discourse "the modern woman" could be distinguished from "the backward Islamist woman", "in the discourse of the secular mainstream textile companies, according to what she consumed and especially what she wore" (2002: 86). Critiques of modernity are critical of shopping habits and consider their buyers as rich people who are "slaves of the trade marks" as opposed to the Islamist entrepreneurs who are supposed to run business according to Islam's tradition of non-profit trade.

This way of thinking is actually typical for modern intellectuals, and it is quite similar to the traditional anthropology which separates an "etic" and "emic" position in research, the former purporting to offer an objective, value-free description of the physical world, while the later describing how people of particular cultures perceive the same world (Ingold 2000). "Ordinary people" in Turkey internalized Western notions of culture and modernity as based on ideas of science and progress. As Ingold explains, humanity in Western discourses, "by the capacity of reason (...) distinguish[es] itself from the knowledge practices of people in 'other cultures' whose thought is supposed to remain somewhat bound by the constraints and conventions of tradition" (2000: 15).

This idea about the modernity of "ordinary people" described by Navaro-Yashin (2002) is amazingly similar to the ideas of modernization explained by social theorists that see modernization as a repressive process over the local cultures connected with the emergence of the national state. "Indeed, what was called modernization was the project of early republican reforms. And to be modern in this particular historical contingency, one had to have a 'nation'.

⁷ As Comaroff and Comaroff (1993) show, the gender politics of modernity is a very complicated issue. Modernization is seen primarily as a male domain, but women are usually used as bearers of tradition (and pre-modernity) and at the same time as one of the most beneficiary categories of modernization.

The projects of Westernization and Turkish nationalism, then, did not contradict but complemented one another in the official version" (Navaro-Yashin 2000: 50). Connection between modern states and nationalism is well-documented in anthropological literature. However, as Herzfeld (1993) shows, the very idea of nation as it is usually based on national ideologies, and on blood kinship, is basically as anti-modern as it is non-rational.⁸ Hence, the modern state usually finds itself in a contradictory position, for to "appropriate for its own purposes the local idioms of morality, custom, and the solidarity of kinship, it dismisses the local renditions themselves as conservative survival, as picturesque traditions, and as familism, respectively – all serious obstacles to the European nation-state's rationalist vision of modernity" (1993: 7). In that specific light it is interesting to see how people conceptualize ideas of nation and civil society. In the Turkish example, discussed at length above, secularists and Islamists use the idea of civil society in very different ways. Islamists see modernization and secularisation as "imposed from above" and opposed to the "real nature" of Turkish people, and suggest the Islamic tradition at the time of the Prophet Muhammad as more democratic than the contemporary Turkish state. This is clearly in opposition to Habermas' humanistic Eurocentric ideas that see democracy as closely connected to the European secular modernist project.⁹ But, paradoxically, the secularist modernist project in Europe was seen as quite different in Western and Eastern Europe, which was seen as 'less modern' than Western Europe, although it was far more strictly secular than Western Europe. It is then very interesting to see how recent changes in the political organization of former socialists are actually perceived by people who lived in the countries in question, since current changes are often found in different official discourses perceived as Westernization and modernization. Pine (2002) shows that for people in rural Poland, with whom she was working with at the beginning and in the mid 1990s, current political changes are viewed as moving back from already gained positions of modernity. However, their attitudes toward modernity are highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they see new modern products coming from the West as a treat to their specific national-traditional way of life, which they are not willful to abandon for any type of modernity (socialist

⁸ It is also symptomatic that early anthropologists see kinship in tribal societies as based on blood, while modern-western kinship system as based on contract (Herzfeld 1993).

⁹ It is very interesting to notice that all these definition stress inequality and hierarchy as one of the core features of the state, while, as Harvey (1996) argues, ideology of the state is based on the modernist idea of democratic equality guaranteed to all citizens of the state as opposed to the pre-modern hierarchical structures based on inequality. In the paper I will return to the state ideology once again.

or new capitalist), instead retreating to the small-scale domestic economy in a process of privatization which is seen as backward and pre-modern. They see their previous life in socialism, not capitalism as is common among scholars, as essentially a modern political order. From that account, it is clear that people's attitudes toward the state are ambivalent, selective and contextual, reproducing different images of the state depending on their current socio-economic position. While living in the socialist state they at the same time used every trick to mock the state (for example, by stealing materials for the workplace, finishing their own private business during the work-time, or just not working), but at the same time they sincerely appreciate advantages brought by the introduction of the socialist state (free education and health care, full employment, etc).

Something similar is noticed by Herzfeld (1997) in the Cretan villages in the second half of the twentieth century. He writes that:

"the villagers' view of the state is indeed a considerable embarrassment, for the state appears to them as the antithesis of trust and as an alien source of authority. The prominence of the state's legal institutions in their lives signals a fall from social harmony, and the state itself is the target of all sorts of criminality – tax evasion, bribery, perjury – that villagers represent as fair revenge for its interfering" (1997: 34).

Paradoxically, exactly these signs of sinfulness are what in villagers' opinions make state and nation worth defending. People do not fight for "abstract perfection but for an intimacy that lies behind" (1997: 34). These subversive forms of behavior are "normalized" as part of people's every day practice in dealing with the state.

Alternative modernities could be developed in different parts of the world. Writing about factory discipline in China, Rofel (1999) argues that "whatever counts as the modern episteme – should we even want to employ such a singular term – derives from the ways in which China and other 'local' places interpret modernity. There is no singular transnational standard, with its local digestions" (1999: 175). China's modern state project is shaped by the specific history of the country which gives meanings to the modernization processes. Rofel gives an example of the state's attempt to employ a Taylorist model of factory production that was "obstructed" (from the managers' points of view) by people's previous experience of their previous use of factory space. Rofel concludes that the modernization process in China is not the same as it is in Western Europe since it is shaped by specific cultural circumstances of place in which people behave according to their previous experience. As Rofel concludes "modernity, then, is an empty set category, a site of continuous hegemonic power plays and thus shifting meanings" (1999: 174-175).

Conclusion

Speaking about the "western" bias of anthropology, Gledhill (2000) argues that Europeans in the nineteenth century developed a very specific conception of the "modern state" that shaped their ideas about society and culture in general. He quoted Radcliffe-Brown who writes that the political organization of society is "that aspect of the total organization which is concerned with the control and regulation of the use of physical force" (2000: 10). This definition is based on Weber's definition of "political community" as "a community whose social action is aimed at subordinating to orderly domination by the participants a 'territory' and the conduct of persons within it, through readiness to resort to physical force, including normally force of arms" (quoted in Gledhill 2000: 10). Gledhill explains that this definition emerges from Weber's attempts to define basic features of the modern state, and that Radcliffe-Brown's definition was just an extended version of Weber's in order to be able to include "stateless societies", such as African segmentary ones in the same definition. This approach could make the difference between diverse forms of social life hazy. Both Radcliffe-Brown and Evans-Prichard assume that a stateless society must have the same characteristics as modern states in which politics is a category that could be analytically separated from religion, kinship, etc. As Gledhill explains, "perceived autonomy of the 'political' in Western societies is one of the key *ideological* dimensions of Western 'modernity' – not something we should take as an objective fact, but a way of *representing* power relations that obscure their social foundations and the way they work in practice" (2000: 12). Gledhill describes two anthropological case studies from northern Peru and Chiapas that show that local communities, in those cases, that of peasants, can develop alternative forms of modernity by challenging state control imposed over them and by developing their own political institutions.

Through all the ethnographic examples I have used in this paper I have tried to show that ideas of modernity and state are far more ambivalent, even among people who live in European countries, than it would seem at first glance. In short, it could be said that there are many modernities, even within Europe, that are assumed to be "gatekeepers of the modern project" and that European hegemonistic projects do not simply replace 'traditional' culture with modern ones.¹⁰ People living in different places develop and understand modernity in different ways, with state and official institutions holding a different place in their lives than is imagined to be the case within European modernist projects.

¹⁰ The notion of tradition itself is very modernist one, which does not exist before modernity since there was no modernity to which it could be opposed (*cf.* Latour 1993).

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Država i modernost kao antropološke teme

Ovaj rad ima za cilj da da kratak uvod u antropološke studije modernosti i države. Autorka je pokušala da predstavi neke od najvažnijih teorijskih radova u ovoj oblasti koji se zasnivaju na istraživanju različitih etnografskih konteksta. Posebno je bilo važno naglasiti neke od mogućnosti antropološkog istraživanja modernosti i države, koji mogu da doprinesu debati koja se na ovu temu vodi u društvenim naukama. Uobičajena razumevanja države i modernosti se najčešće zasnivaju na proučavanju ideologije i državnog legalnog sistema ne dovodeći u pitanje načine na koje ideja države poprima svoj oblik u životima i verovanjima običnih ljudi. Soga je, prema Rabinovu nepohodno da etnografsko istraživanje države i modernosti istraži načine na koji se ovi pojmovi koriste i razmeju od strane onih koji sebe kroz njih defenišu (ili u slučaju države: češće, prema njima). Tako je glavni argument ovog rada taj da su koncepti modernosti i države daleko ambivalentniji nego što to neki put izgleda u političkoj teoriji, a antropološka istraživanja mogu da donesu važne uvide u alternativne forme modernosti i države, pomerajući njihov uobičajena ontološka značenja.

Ključne reči: država, modernost, antropologija, etnografija i antropologija države

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L'Etat et la modernité en tant que thèmes anthropologiques

Ce travail a pour objectif de faire une brève introduction aux études anthropologiques de l'Etat et de la modernité. L'auteure a tenté de présenter certains des travaux théoriques les plus importants dans ce domaine, basés sur l'étude de contextes ethnographiques différents. Il nous a paru particulièrement important de mettre en valeur

certaines possibilités de l'étude anthropologique de l'Etat et de la modernité, pouvant contribuer au débat mené dans les sciences humaines. Les acceptions habituelles de l'Etat et de la modernité sont le plus souvent basées sur l'étude de l'idéologie et du système juridique de l'Etat sans remettre en question les manières dont l'idée de l'Etat prend forme dans les vies et les croyances des gens ordinaires. C'est pourquoi, selon Rabinov, il est nécessaire que l'étude ethnographique de l'Etat et de la modernité explore les manières dont ces notions sont utilisées et comprises par ceux qui se définissent à travers elles (ou dans le cas de l'Etat: plus fréquemment par rapport à elles). C'est ainsi que l'argument principal de ce travail est que les concepts de l'Etat et de la modernité sont bien plus ambivalents qu'il n'y paraît généralement dans la théorie politique, et les études anthropologiques peuvent offrir d'importantes conclusions sur les formes alternatives de la modernité et de l'Etat, produisant ainsi un certain glissement des significations ontologiques habituelles.

Mots-clés: Etat, modernité, anthropologie, ethnographie et anthropologie de l'Etat.