

**Thelen, Tatjana, Larissa Vettters, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (eds.). 2017. *Stategraphy. Toward a Relational Anthropology of the State*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. 170 pp. Pb.: \$27.95/£19.00. ISBN: 9781785337000.**

*Stategraphy*, an anthology edited by Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vettters and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann was released as the fourth volume of the *Studies in Social Science* series by Berghahn in 2018. Bringing together eight insightful contributions by different authors in the context of a profound introduction by the editors, in which the theoretical framework is defined, the authors set out to bridge the analytical gap between state image and state practice. They thus introduce *Stategraphy*, a term which at first doesn't roll of the tongue easily but proves to be a useful working concept of the state throughout the next 160 pages. The concepts basics are threefold: (a) based on relational modalities, exploring the (b) boundary work, and considering the (c) embeddedness of actors. The following chapters (stategraphies) apply these principles in analysing different ethnographic fields, all situated in the domain of welfare and in Europe, but each one with a different focus in the application of the analytical frame.

Thelen, Vettters, and Benda-Beckmann start by pointing out a theoretical void in the analysis of the state, even though other works have shown that a state and its concrete practice are to be distinguished from each other, resulting in an interconnected mismatch of "state image" versus "state practice", an examination for which no analytical tools exist today. Understanding the state as a complex, polymorphic net of relationships between individuals regulated by an elaborate set of rules, the approach stresses the analysis of the interactions between actors, especially state representatives. These interactions may be observed and set into context through the three above-mentioned principles of *Stategraphy*, on which the authors further elaborate; as actors have certain expectations and views of "the state", and state practice usually diverges with state image, a state is to be understood as 'created by, and experienced through, different relational modalities' (p. 8). The second analytical focus is boundary work, exploring how common dichotomies such as state/kinship are created, and what and how certain actions and interactions confirm or dissolve these seemingly opposite terms in constant negotiation. Thirdly, the embeddedness of actors is acknowledged and taken into account. As actors may be from multiple backgrounds, identify with different groups, and follow complex interests and patterns, this is crucial in evaluating states.

After having set the analytical fundament in the first part of the introduction, the following ethnographic settings are contextualised. The authors observe that the workings of the state have often been examined in non-European sites and/or in "states of crisis", thus exoticising states of the south, and running the risk of concluding in comparison with an "ideal state", which would be a fiction. Therefore, the eight contributions all discuss cases set in Europe, which offer a multitude of aspects to consider, such as the transformations after the demise of lived socialism. The common ground of the articles is the before mentioned analytical approach, and the topic all field sites share: Welfare. This issue already has a wide history of research and analysis to show for (not least through the prior works of the authors) and proposes comprehensive chances for understanding

the processes between “state image” and “state practice”: a field in which citizens and representatives are in the most direct interaction with one another. Interesting dynamics have become visible through already conducted research: state representatives have been known to apply personal moral evaluations upon their clients, while citizens have been successful in making their voices heard and developing agency in the face of the state.

Through these modalities, each authors’ chapter exhibits unique features of the location of the field, the domain of welfare, ethnographic methods, and varying stress in the implementation of the analytical framework. Chapters one to four rest upon ideas of relational modalities especially. Larissa Vettters opens with the portrayal of two cases of people tackling issues of displacement within Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina, after the Bosnian War. Between the two different approaches of citizens appear the difficulties of people trying to connect and get in touch with the state, an ever-shifting terrain, through varying identifications. Where Vettters focuses on citizens, Vincent Dubois sheds light on French “street-level” bureaucrats in interaction with members of society, evaluating claims to social benefits through home visits. Here each state representative’s individual room to manoeuvre becomes visible, through which, in this case, a neo-liberal active welfare state is substantiated, with the idea that citizens are responsible for their own social decay, and wider crises.

Also studying local social service providers, in this case in rural Russia, Rebecca Kay acknowledges the multiple levels on which state actors build and profit from relationships, within the social services and the village. She emphasises that these relationships are not at all anomalies, but bind image and practice of the state together, and how personal contacts and interactions are used to using the full, though scarce, the potential of the welfare system to benefit citizens.

Alice Forbes’ and Deborah James’ contribution on non-profit legal advisers in Great Britain further shows, that relational logic is not only helpful for actors with agency “between” state and civil society but utterly necessary in the fragmented structure of the state, to guide and support citizens. These actors narrow the constructed dichotomy of state and civil society. Rosie Read completely opposes this split in her article on hospital volunteers in two different Czech cities. She points out how little competition there is between state and civil society, and the multiplicity of additional actors shaping the alleged line of what or who belongs to the state, thus creating new forms of care.

Likewise, with a bigger focus on boundary work is chapter six, in which Tatjana Thelen, Andre Thiemann, and Duška Roth insightfully show how Serbian citizens include state-paid carers of the elderly into kin structures, and through this uphold the widespread image of the uncaring state. The last two contributions apply the third principle of analysis, embeddedness, in their stateographies. Ștefan Dorondel and Mihai Popa present how EU food aid is distributed on a local level by Romanian state representatives. By evaluating the processes of identifying eligible clients, the communications between the officials on different levels and with citizens, and through the circulation of goods, the two authors succeed in making power dynamics visible through the embeddedness of the local actors. The last chapter, by Gyöngyi Schwarcz and Alexandra Szöke, demonstrates how two mayors in rural Hungary address the spending of public funds differently and the

reactions this entails. It becomes clear that the state image is negotiated on diverse levels, and that the mayors did not act as mediators of the Hungarian state, but rather formed individual ideas of the state, creating coherence by the power invested in them through the citizens.

Throughout the contributions, the threefold stategy approach proves well-applicable and useful. Where at first sight the selection of sites seems rather widespread and heterogenic, the analytical framework creates a leitmotif and coherence, through which reflected comparison is made possible. The relational approach offers a valuable and fruitful perspective on the workings of the state while using the field of welfare as a site has the power to represent and mirror tendencies and dynamics beyond the social sector of states. It is easily imaginable to apply the stategy-approach in other contexts, such as education, law enforcement, health care or city planning.

All authors come from backgrounds of extended research and publishing in this specific field of anthropology, and it is enriching to find their various insights accumulated and clearly structured by the analytical framework within one volume. As is the goal of the *Studies in Social Analysis* series, the anthology proposes an analytical approach fit to be adapted beyond the anthropological context and may also serve as an appropriate first glance into or a profitable way to revisit the fractured, ever-shifting fields that are states.

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