

MAINTAINING THE BOUNDARIES OF A “TRANSNATIONAL” STATE: STATE, NGOS AND BUREAUCRATIC PRACTICE IN A SRI LANKAN BUREAUCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

The growing role of non-state agencies in the work of the state has been theorised as an indication of the transnational nature of the modern state[†]. Challenging the notion that neo-liberalism resulted in the rolling back of the state, Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue that the increasing involvement of non-state agencies points to a “new modality of government” which they refer to as “transnational governmentality” (2002: 989). They argue that transnational governmentality has disturbed the “vertical encompassment” of the spatiality of the traditional state where the state is thought of as situated above society containing localities, regions and communities within it. Gupta and Ferguson state that while the routinised practices of state bureaucracies construct an image of a hierarchical, authoritative and all encompassing state, the increasing transnational connections at different levels of the state challenge this hierarchy. They argue that non-governmental organisations with global links in particular, disturb the traditional spatial arrangement of the state by occupying and operating in the same space. Thus they assert that the bureaucratic practices that produce the vertical and encompassing characteristics of the state themselves have been transformed revealing the transnational nature of both the ‘state’ and the ‘local’ (Gupta, 1995, Gupta and Ferguson 2002).

While the penetration of non-state agencies at every level of the state bureaucracy in Sri Lanka certainly appears to indicate the validity of Ferguson and Gupta’s argument, what is interesting is how the relationship between the state and non-state agencies is contested at every level. For state bureaucrats, the idea of a vertically encompassed, territorially, culturally and politically bounded state remains an ideal.

In this paper I argue that the notion of “transnational governmentality” does not adequately explain why despite challenges to the vertical encompassment of the traditional state, maintaining the idea of a strong and powerful state is important for state bureaucrats. I argue that the response of state bureaucrats to the transnational nature of the modern state is inextricably linked to the process by which their social identities are constructed and therefore reflect the social situatedness of bureaucratic practice. Consequently, this raises important questions for analysing the state, bureaucratic practice and bureaucrats, highlighting the necessity to consider the subjectivities of those intimately linked with state and bureaucratic practices.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on one year of ethnographic field work conducted in a Probation and Child Care Unit, of a provincial Department of Probation and Child Care Services. I analyse the ‘narratives of suspicion’ regarding the role of non-state agencies in what are considered the legitimate areas of work of the state. I trace the historicity of these narratives to show how particular ideas of the “state” and “culture” are given multiple meanings and used strategically to maintain the boundary between state and non-state agencies in response to the social and political contexts inhabited by these bureaucrats.

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† The term non-state agencies is used to refer to local and international NGOs, UN agencies and other multilateral donors

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the staff of the Probation Unit, while their almost daily interactions with non-state agencies highlighted the transnational nature of the state, *claiming* or indeed *maintaining* the boundaries of the state was a central preoccupation. Ideas about what the state was, the role of the state with regard to the wellbeing of its citizens, the difference between the state and non-state actors, were implicit in the conversations at the Probation Unit. The state that the staff described was something that needed to be protected from 'external' elements that were trying to dilute its identity and legitimacy as the main provider and protector of the public. Of course this did not mean that the Probation Unit staff were unaware of the deficiencies of the state. They too had a critique of the state, but this was in terms of the failure of the state to meet its obligations rather than questioning the role of the state as the primary provider and benefactor for Sri Lankan citizens. The inadequacies of the state were usually attributed to the inferior skills of their superiors or the paucity of resources at their disposal. Nevertheless, the state was something they defended and upheld as necessary and important. The increasing influence of non-state agencies therefore, was viewed as a threat to this ideal of the state.

Non-state agencies were identified as threats due to their links and loyalties to external sources. Often described as "foreign" non-state agencies were considered not to have the best interests of the nation-state at heart. In emphasising their responsibility to mediate between the alien values being imposed by non-state agencies and "local" culture and by drawing attention to their suspicious agendas and motives, the Probation Unit staff were imagining a state with clear political, territorial and cultural boundaries. This notion of the state is important in a context where the state was not only a source of employment, but also a facilitator for the efforts of the middle class to achieve social mobility. This involves producing and maintaining a particular identity of a state bureaucrat in keeping with the distinction that the middle class needs to make with the elitist and "Westernised" upper class and the "ignorant" and "uneducated" lower class. The narratives which the Probation Unit staff drew on to distinguish themselves from non-state agency employees and to maintain the boundary between the state and non-state agencies were therefore informed by the characteristics of Sinhala nationalism where could be found ideas of neo-colonialism and a "local" culture threatened by the West[‡].

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The transnational state with its diffused understanding of the 'local' and the 'global', of multiple relationships between nations, regions and communities does not conform with the ideal state imagined by state bureaucrats. Despite everyday experiences highlighting the transnational nature of the state, Probation Unit staff strove to maintain the distinctions between the state and non-state agencies using a range of narratives that questioned the motives and agendas of these agencies. Maintaining the boundaries between the state and non-state agencies is linked to constructing a particular, socially mediated *identity* of state bureaucrats. Most accounts of the transnational state and of governmentality do not take into account the fact that the production of the state in particular ways is important not merely as an effect of state or bureaucratic practices (Mitchell, 1991), but also because it allows those working within it to construct their own subjectivities. Thus, analysing the practices of the state requires an understanding of those who constitute the state and their interests.

[‡] All the staff of this Probation Unit were Sinhalese and Buddhist and hence had a specific view of and relationship to the state. Although not covered by this study, it would be interesting to understand how bureaucrats from other communities understood the state's relationship with NGOs and its consequences for the notion of a 'vertically encompassed' state.

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