

# Book Review

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**Kosh, Insa Lee. *Personalizing the State: An Anthropology of Law, Politics, and Welfare in Austerity Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 274 pages.**

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Insa Lee Kosh's *Personalizing the State* is an ethnographically rooted and historically informed account of state-citizen relations as seen from the vantage point of working class citizens. Through the lived experiences of the residents, mostly women of a social housing estate in England, referred to as Park End by the author, Kosh brings to light the gendered and class character of state control in post-war Britain. Central to the book's thesis, however, is the insight into how citizens at the margins exercise their agency to personalize the state by using the state apparatus as a tool as they navigate through the class-based system of state control. In doing so, Kosh challenges several dominant narratives surrounding the state and democracy in contemporary times.

Beginning with the punitive paradox—the illiberal turn that liberal democracy has taken (7), as reflected in the increasingly disciplinary and exclusionary thrust of criminal justice policies and the accompanying popular support for them—Kosh's entry point is to explain the puzzle of democratic support for anti-democratic measures (8). Adopting an interdisciplinary lens that brings ethnography, political and legal anthropology, criminology, and political economy together, the ethnographic account reveals a complicated picture that goes beyond outright acceptance or rejection of the state authority.

The book comprises seven substantive chapters. Chapter One traces the political history of Council Estates. Established in the post-war period to provide housing to the industrial working class, Kosh sees the history of Council Estates as representative of a history of state-building aimed at class segregation and class control. In a nuanced analysis, Kosh dispels the mainstream portrayal of the post-war welfare state in Britain as inclusive and universal by pointing out

the exclusions and gendered assumptions that underpinned the paternalistic welfare state, even in its golden age of social democracy. In doing so, Kosh dismisses the contemporary punitive turn in governance as a radical break from the past, and instead emphasizes the continued legacy of gendered and class-based state coercion which has only become more pronounced in neoliberal times.

Chapter Two sheds light on the local state as it actually operates on Park End. The ethnography enables Kosh to bring to the fore the divergence in the notions of citizenship espoused by the local state and adhered to by the citizens of Park End. In contrast to liberal democracy's individualized notion of personhood, the citizens of Park End draw their ideas of a good citizen entitled to state benefits from a conception of personhood that values interdependence and mutual relations of care (64). This, however, unfortunately places them in the category of bad citizens in the perception of the state. To the extent that local moral personhood does not conform to the statist understanding of citizenship, it is seen as an emic state failure (61).

The next two chapters elaborate on the experiences of single mothers and social housing tenants as they personalize the state. Questioning the very category of single mothers as rooted in patriarchal assumptions, Kosh's ethnography reveals how the "state" has replaced the "man" (97) for the single mothers as they engage with the state to claim means-tested state welfare. The individual-centric imagination of the benefits system conflicts with their own life worlds in which notions of care and building and maintaining family homes are valued. While it forces these women to engage with the state in ways that often run counter to the law, it also further exposes them to surveillance and intrusions of the state. In doing so, the chapter highlights how "gender emerges as an instrument of class coercion for working class people" (91).

Chapter Four brings into focus how social housing tenants appropriate the official terminology of nuisance and anti-social behaviour to make themselves heard before the housing authorities to redress what they see as neighbour trouble (112). The novelty of Kosh's argument lies in suggesting that in articulating their grievances in the legal language that the state recognizes, people are not merely conduits of government policies (134). The citizens are conscious that the root of the problem lies in structural neglect of Park End by the same local authorities as they are squeezed out of the state's version of who a respectable citizen is.

Chapter Five turns the spotlight on the police to highlight how both the insufficiency and the class character of the response of the police in times of need encourages a culture of violence and vigilantism among the citizens for survival. As citizens internalize the belief in “You Do or Get Done” (143), and see police as “the biggest gang of all” (148) with “all the man power” (152), the coping mechanisms very often reveal gendered patterns. Having said that, the citizens often accord situational legitimacy to the police in bringing them into the fold to redress their family disputes (155).

Chapter Six brings into focus how Park End espouses a form of alternative politics that goes beyond the neoliberal inspired model of active citizenship that hinges on partnership with the state (163). In so far as the community leaders and local politicians, as political brokers, mediate and fight on behalf of the people of Park End to resolve local issues, often against the higher authorities, Kosh contests participatory governance as a trope of the state in neoliberal times to regulate people as suggested by Foucault’s governmentality framework.

Chapter Seven as the culminating chapter of the book draws attention to Brexit by locating it in the larger context of crisis of representation and failures of liberal democracy made worse by austerity. In the absence of institutional mechanisms that could channel their demands, Kosh sees the enthusiastic response of Park End residents, the majority of whom voted in favour of leave from EU, as a conjunctural moment in which people personalized politics by inserting everyday moralities into electoral processes by pouring their aspirations, hopes, and frustrations into their respective votes (190). To the extent that Brexit offered an opportunity to register their everyday emotions through their vote, for Park End residents the Brexit vote was an attempt to moralize politics triggered by the failures of the government to be accountable to the people on their own terms (190-191).

In Kosh’s framework, the citizens of Park End personalize the state as they make an instrumental and strategic use of state apparatus to resolve issues that challenge their moral frameworks, and not because they believe in the legitimacy of the state. This enables Kosh to end with an ethnographic paradox—how the expansion of state power to forcibly control its citizens becomes an inverse of its powers to control the means of its application or recruitment (224). Kosh calls for an emic political theory of those at the margins who see the contemporary moment in terms of a growing chasm between the state and citizens primarily because of the failure of the state to uphold its own moral duties of care.

Having said that, the central argument of the book that the popular support for authoritarianism reflects desire for a personalized state does not clearly emerge from the ethnographic account. Rather the sense that one gets is that the citizens personalize the state and to that extent support disciplinary action by the state as a coping mechanism which is very often frustrating and at the cost of their own privacy. It is difficult to decipher from the narratives of Park End residents whether given a choice between a personalized state and a morally just state, would they still prefer a personalized state?

On another note, the usage of the term broker or intermediary for activists and local politicians in Chapter Six makes sense to the extent that they get things done for the people by mediating and mobilizing support, but is also problematic as the term broker or intermediary necessarily assumes an exchange relationship at its base. The distinction is important, more so, as Kosh herself wants to distinguish the activities of the activists from the accusation by the state of partaking in clientelist politics.

Nevertheless, replete with narratives of respondents and coupled with references to existing ethnographic studies in different contexts to substantiate the arguments, *Personalizing the State* is a compelling work. The highlight of the book lies in voicing the need to take into account the perspectives of those at the margins in shaping contemporary debates and to de-stigmatize them by bringing to the fore the difficult choices, often falling within the domain of illegality as they navigate the class-based state system. The work underlines the need to bring back the moral in the political to mend state-citizen relations. To that extent, Kosh's ethnographic account offers a revisionist understanding of state-citizen relations by pushing us to pay attention to localized expressions of state-citizen relations.