

Note

- 1 Readers will recognize this sentence's origin in Althusser's (1971) germinal essay on the state.

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Where Failure Is Not an Option, Just a Bad Choice: A Comment on the (Over)stated

Hermann Rebel *Professor Emeritus, University of Arizona*

During the mid-1980s one could no longer avoid the change in discourse at North American and EU academies. Accompanying the increased pace of deal-making among university governments, corporations, state agencies and the physical sciences and engineering faculties, there were also leaders in the so-called policy sciences, with economics out front, to furnish paradigms and projected outcomes for these new bloc formations. Many of us working in such "helping" sciences as anthropology, psychology, geography or history found ourselves increasingly having futile conversations with colleagues, often claiming the space of a Left-after-1989, falling in line to espouse circular notions of agency, identity, diversity, memory, choice, "culture," et cetera, as the new bankable languages for managing post-Cold War capitalist globaliza-

tion. To this day, anyone who speaks in terms of class, structure, political economy, power, hegemony, et cetera, is, by this dispensation, deemed out of touch with the unavoidable "necessities" of current developments.

One focus for this moment of academic perestroika was, and still is, "the state." The new kid on the bloc was something called "the strong state," a tricky formula that, by claiming roots in Hobbes, Machiavelli, the neo-Stoics, Locke, Bentham, et al., and in "culture" (Britishness for example) had crossover appeal among neo-conservative, neoliberal and left academics. Promising to transcend obsolete Cold War divisions, the "strong state" actually provided a paradigm for the conservative-revolutionary Reagan-Thatcher-Kohl agenda and was eventually bought into by New Labour and Democratic politicians to survive well into the fatal Blair-Bush conjuncture. It was a sly move by which heads of state could promise "to get government off our backs" while simultaneously expanding executive and military bureaucracies (hence the "strong" state) to purge "markets" and the attendant political processes of allegedly unsustainable labour and welfare "interferences" (Gamble 1988; Panitch and Leys 1997; for a prefiguration see Donzelot 1979).

Gavin Smith's fatigue with the quality of the attention being paid to the state in related current formulations is understandable given the contortions and shadow boxing required to distract from this reactionary modernist foundation. The fact is that the historical roots of strong state conceptions are in the corporatist-absolute states of early modern Europe (Lüdtke 1990) which are now almost universally celebrated as historically necessary agents for a "disciplining for modernity" (Oestreich 1982; Raeff 1983) and the line taken by Foucault since his epistemological break in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) was very much in accord with a widespread "disciplining" perspective on the state among historians. This paradigm was never brought under sustained critical scrutiny and instead became part of strong state discourses on "governmentality" and was incorporated into very suspect and yet politically resonant models for integrating the private or local experiences of purportedly empowered and "entrepreneurial" selves into public and global action (Rose 1989).

I share Smith's frustration with what he perceives as the limited gains of such a turn compared to what has to be the more satisfying and deeper understanding offered by a sustained political economy perspective—as when the latter at least gives us an opening to *weigh analytically* what happens to people, or for that matter to "fledgling democracies," who play by governmentality rules only to find that they were set up for a confidence game

that traps them in debts they can never repay, and with fewer chairs at the table each time the music stops. At the same time, I have to say that it is not an either/or proposition and I have found that the “disciplining” and biopolitical dimensions of early modern states can be brought fully into a political economy analysis, albeit with a different outcome (Rebel 1991, 1993). It is a historical devolution that can provide insights into and cogent responses to the new normality of the current corporatist-absolutist restructurings by states everywhere. One can argue, for example, that there are interesting linkages between histories of disciplining-for-modernity and the perpetration of genocides. Having been told, after the 1980s sea change, that the Nazi Holocaust was no longer a subject for reasoned histories and was in effect outside of history (Rebel 2001), we can now be encouraged to tune out and ignore the several genocides in progress from the decades after 1945 on up to this moment. The horrors of Indonesia, Timor, the Balkans, Burundi and Rwanda, West and South Sudan to name only a few, are publicly atoned for at “after the fact” occasions when heads of states get to put on their best sad faces so that the rest of the self-disciplined gym-goers, displaying their “governmental” commitment for competition, personal success and longevity, are free to stay focused and “agentive” under all circumstances, secure in the knowledge, after all, that death just “happens” (Ortner 1997, 2006).

The governmentality paradigm is flawed not only in its regression to a one-dimensional methodological individualism but also in that it is a clear case of a fallacy of composition by which “the whole” is presumed to be in order as long as individual parts are in order. Neither anthropologists nor historians can be served in their field or archival work nor in their synthetic formulations by such an error. Speaking from my own perspective, I teach the state as, among several other things, the means by which aristocratic family corporations outsource their inheritance management to unburden their dynastic treasuries. I also teach it, following North and Thomas (1973), as an institutionalized quality of transaction and risk management. It is interesting to point out as an aside that in North and Thomas it is precisely the governmentality-driven absolute tribute states (France, Habsburg Spain and Austria) that fail to grasp competitive modernity. This opens up a line of argument that might actually help us get a handle on a possibly “testable” empirical formulation of the “economic” as the “last instance.”

States are present in the experiences of an analyst’s host people in ways often disconnected from prior theorizing. Where states, transnational corporations, development agencies or NGOs may *intend and declare* gov-

ernmentality, the people living with such regimes invariably find themselves engaged in brutal struggles against forced resettlements, forced expropriations, forced loans, forced labour and, above all, looting everywhere. It is their struggles that demand analytical attention. Smith’s turn away from “state culture,” “production of subjects” and “mentality” perspectives is well justified, if only because these conceptions fail to appreciate people’s capacities as *readers* of the states that they have to deal with.

Notable also about Smith’s critique is his direct challenge to notions of a so-called “state of exception.” This latter derives from a response by the German legal theorist, Carl Schmitt, to a projected condition of “ungovernability” in the revolutionary turmoil after the First World War. It is well known that Schmitt served for a time near the top of the Nazi party’s legal apparatus, especially at the time of the “seizure of power” and the SA (*Sturmabteilung*) murders, so how are we to read his resurrection as part of the “strong state” solution to the threatening ungovernabilities of global capitalism? It was Schmitt who rewrote the notion of sovereignty in the framework of what he termed Decisionism, a conceptualization that requires, at the heart of a sovereign state a person who is “the Decider,” who embodies the paradox of a sovereign power simultaneously within the state, and yet also above the law and, indeed, outside the state, and whose sole call it is to suspend indefinitely the constitution in face of a threatening ungovernability. This allows him an identification of enemies, both within and without, for exclusion from the human community and for active destruction (Schmitt 1923).

I again find myself agreeing with Smith when he sees hot air balloons rising in efforts by Hansen and Stepputat (2006) and Das and Poole (2004), to combine Foucauldian biopolitics with Schmittian exclusionism-to-the-death. Their conclusions about the articulations of spaces of power and projections of sovereignty—much of it to explain layered colonial relationships—do indeed disconnect power, authority and sovereignty from the political economies in which they are entwined, leaving us without means to connect a multitude of relationships and forms tangential but not necessarily central to “the state.” Smith also objects when Ferguson and Gupta (2002) see “strong states” capable of managing their own “governmentality” and evading the fate of weak states who are subverted by development agencies’ insertion of *their* governmentality regimes. Such a view obscures what a political economy perspective recognizes as a more fruitful investigation into the role played by transnational corporations in imposing, especially on “strong states,” their terms of governmentality.

Where these approaches claim connections to aesthetic philosopher Giorgio Agamben, Smith rejects the latter in favour of the other chic aesthetician, Jacques Rancière, whose juxtaposition of “police” and “politics” intends to disclose areas where the managerial governmentality agencies of states and capitalism, citing market and other “realities,” invade and absorb public politics and in the process exclude from collective political self-determination increasing numbers of people. Rancière’s is perhaps an elegant way of saying something that has been said elsewhere but what Smith likes about it is that it offers a way to identify a present battle line for an engagement, beyond illusions of “liberation” or authenticity, with “politics of transformation,” with the “political doing” of the people encountered in the field. But if Rancière’s model depends on praxis seen “as autonomous agency directed against the given-ness of the present” (Smith), then one is left wondering not only where autonomous agency may be found outside of some metaphysics but also what qualities of recognition of present “given-ness” this model offers. The excluded here are not those who have been reduced to “bare life.” They are now instead the “have-nots,” a vaguely bounded group of merely “inferior beings.” Moreover, capitalism is now always “consumer” capitalism and finance capitalism has disappeared from the political economy.

This leads Smith to a weaker position about what might be done. He asserts the present is not much different from historical experiences, since 1789, of citizens and proletarians fighting against exclusion from “political capacity and control over their livelihoods.” But in the present “given-ness,” literally millions of people are being excluded not just from control over livelihoods but from livelihood as such. While the class struggle in the classical sense continues inside the reigning consumer stupor, there is something else going on as well; namely, people are caught up everywhere, from the Middle East to New Orleans’ ninth ward, in accelerating rounds of primary accumulation processes that require mass expropriations to the point of annihilation.

When the hegemonic discourses for post-1989 global engagement were being theorized during the early 1990s—with Rwandan corpses clogging lake outflows—genocides were seen as inevitable, worthy only of minimal attention and presented invariably as “ethnic conflict.” The message was clear: they had to run their course but could not be allowed to cross borders. Clean-up was to be left in the hands of NGOs and missionaries (Nolan et al. 1994). “Strong states” and their “disciplined” populations have the new task of containing and managing the genocidal primary accumulation necessary for global

markets in real estate, oil and minerals, and other securitizable assets. That confronts us with scientific-analytical, to say nothing of “activist,” tasks few are prepared for. Perhaps that is what Sydney Mintz was talking about several years ago in his keynote address at the American Anthropological Association meetings where he counselled us to “count the babies, count the flies.”

Agamben’s examination of the “state of exception” is worth a longer look because in the present “given-ness” he identifies what are arguably new obstacles to a “transformative” historical anthropology. Not only does he perceive, following Walter Benjamin, a problem with the simultaneously internal and external position of the sovereign Decider who declares a state of exception only to become enmeshed in the ungovernable consequences of his own making, in a spiralling into the unlivable solecism of a “state of exception” that can never end. Agamben also holds up to us the condition of those who have been identified either for direct extermination or for less visible erosion out of the system. The *homo sacer* figure, the one summarily excluded from human life, is an outlaw marked for death but this exclusion remains, in a second solecism, *within* the state’s order. It is here where governmentality and genocide meet: those who fail to live by the terms of requisite self-discipline, who choose not to be served by the expert advice which is all the state is prepared to give, can, in good conscience, be let go to erode out, but their going must be contained, managed, kept from disturbing the performance of those next door who are governmentally adequate and being all they can be.

There is much more to say but I am beyond my allotted space. Agamben helps to open possible agendas for both research and active engagement past counting babies and flies or, for that matter, past studying the unrelenting production of “subjects” *willing* to ignore the babies and the flies. We need effective analyses of everyday forms of states (our own included) to discover those hegemonically simultaneous economic, social, narrative and, yes, figural formations that hold together such states where a class of *necessarily* dehumanized citizens is part of a normalized “state of exception,” the latter requiring a perpetual moral hardening against those deemed incapable of or injurious to the life permitted by such states’ obviously pathological and finally self-destructive power projections. We may be (over)stated, wishing to be done with “the state,” but the latter is evidently far from done with us.

Hermann Rebel, University of Arizona. E-mail: hrebel@u.arizona.edu

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Reply to Respondents

Gavin Smith *University of Toronto*

Les commentaires des quatre répondants sont énormément plus perspicaces que ma provocation originale et, en conséquence, elles augmenteront la compréhension de l'état de la question à propos les études de l'état. Malheureusement, en raison d'une série de malentendus, je crois qu'il faut modifier le format normal de la section Ideas/Idees afin de clarifier mon intervention originale avec une courte réponse.

As I wrote the original piece, I suppose I was saying to myself, "the world we live in is facing an acute crisis. My question is, are our current approaches an adequate response to that crisis?" For me that crisis is directly a result of the kind of society in which we live, one in which "daily life depends on commodities whose production and circulation are achieved through the normatively sanctioned pursuit of profit through capital" (Harvey 2001:312). Some of my students would call this "(largely unreconstructed) left-social[ism]." Be that as it may, since I wrote, the tragedy has turned to farce (Zizek 2009) in a way that would seem to me to be not entirely disconnected from the essential features to which Harvey refers.

Responding, I think, to the same sense of crisis that motivated my piece, a number of writers have sought to push us to defamiliarize the normative world associated with capitalist liberal democracy (Agamben 2005; Brown 2006; Butler 2009). These are framed around what Butler calls "norms of recognisability" (2009:7). Meanwhile, in the past year, a vast array of books and articles have surfaced dealing with what Zizek calls "the farce," some by anthropologists (Ho 2009; Tett 2009; Wade 2009; see also Zaloom 2006). Though there is some talk of "moral hazard" in these pieces, generally no link is made between