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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/Idées 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 Zalom 2006). Though there is some talk of "moral hazard" in these pieces, generally no link is made between

the two crises. Yet I believe (with Žižek) that it is our responsibility to make such a link.

The gist of my intervention was that when we explore “the state as a phenomenological reality” (Aretxaga 2003:398)—“as a social imaginary that comes into being through practices and discourses” (Gupta, this volume)—we need to do so while persistently understanding such imaginaries alongside another moment or level of reality that is not obviously accessible through the lens of current practice or discourse. Anthropologists have tended to call this second lens (mistakenly I think) the realm of “political economy” and in the hands of its major practitioners it has involved the careful characterization of fields of force and articulated relations *in their historical and geographical specificity* (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Mintz 1985; Roseberry 1989; Sider 2003; Wolf 2001). (Sadly) two things need to be said about this: (1) neither these studies, nor my own, denigrate or leave out the notion “culture,” though they may understand it in terms uncondusive to those more reconstructed in their ways; and (2) the reason why this work is exhaustive is at least in part to do with the extensive range of features that the authors consider crucial in conditioning possibility. Though such an understanding of “reality” may sit in tense relationship to approaches that stress the way in which discursive regimes and social imaginaries produce and condition possibilities, the two are not inimical as Rebel notes and as his and the work of Bariteau and Bernier make clear.

If the goals of a revindicative politics¹ are well served by anthropologists limiting their expertise to the confines of “culture” to which Parsons relegated them, then we have no problem. But surely events of the last year alone require that we cannot confine ourselves to these limits of naïveté (Gluckman 1964) without occluding crucial elements of reality. Specifically, we cannot hope to grasp what the role of the state (in any of its multiple scales and manifestations) is vis-à-vis the populace without taking into account its relation to national and global capitalism. Writers usually well respected by anthropologists have recently made interventions that surely we neglect at our peril (Grandin 2007; Harvey 2003; Patnaik 2005). In the past 12 months, even for those hitherto disinclined to concern themselves with such things, it has become strikingly obvious that the state’s “articulation” with monopoly finance capitalism has made it what one old Canadian called “a predator state” (Galbraith 2008). But why employ abstractions? We are talking about the political class servicing finance capitalists (and vice versa), and though this might be especially obvious in the core states it is no less true of sundry capitalist class fractions across a broad spectrum of state forms.

And yet, there is a crucial tension here. “There is no question that the legitimacy of the modern state is now clearly and firmly grounded in a concept of popular sovereignty ... Autocrats, military dictatorships, one-party regimes—all rule, or so they must say, on behalf of the people” (Chatterjee 2004:27). So we can quite reasonably note, as the various authors I cited do, that the sites where many anthropologists work are ones where the state plays a significant part in everyday life in terms both of survival and terror and that, because it is simultaneously remote and ubiquitous, ordinary people endow it with coherence and mystique.² But, having said this, should we not also explore the implications of the reverse: the fact that states are reliant on a similar mystification of “the people.” And if intellectuals should be cautious about colluding with their informants in speaking of “the state” should they not also be cautious about colluding with the state in references to “the people” or “the poor.” Though now, two years later, I would modify my use of Rancière, the gist of my argument is that a possible intervention towards a revindicative politics may lie in breaking with this homogenizing of the popular.

I suspect that if we do this, we will discover that it is not those who are prepared to negotiate with the dominant bloc within the terms of their own hegemony that offer the crucial lever—not the “New Social Movements,” civil society or what Chatterjee (2008) calls “political society”—but rather those who lie outside a hegemonic project that is necessarily *selective* in view of the capital concentrating strategies of dominant blocs. It is a population that is both normatively and relative to the needs of the productivist state (Lefebvre 1977) *surplus* (Smith In press). *Les anthropologues ont fait quelque chose d’une carrière d’être les intellectuels qui étudient le subalterne : mais des quels de nos outils avons-nous qui pourraient nous aider à engager avec « le compte des incomptés »* (the part of those who have no part) (Rancière 1999:121)?

Notes

- 1 I realize that “revindicative” is not to be found in the English dictionary, but I use the term here because it captures an element of the dialectics of politics that I cannot find in another word in English. I take it from the Spanish *revindicar*.
- 2 Though it has to be said that at either end of the spectrum of rich and poor, it is scarcely mentioned in everyday life—if “everyday life” is a useful term for either context.

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