



The Social Life of the State: Relational Ethnography and Political Sociology

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Accepted: 26 May 2021 / Published online: 17 July 2021

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Abstract

Political sociologists have typically studied the state as a self-enclosed institution hovering above civil society. In this formulation, the state is rendered as omniscient, gazing out over a passive civil society as if it were a naturalized landscape. But in this special issue, we think about how states “see” in relation to whom and what is seen, and how these subjects and collective actors become visible in the first place. We advocate a *relational political ethnography* that views the state and civil society as inextricably intertwined and mutually co-constitutive. People’s experiences with the state shape their visions of that state, which in turn inform their strategic decisions and everyday engagements. And these decisions and engagements affect how the state views them. To put it differently, in this special issue, we explore the dialectical relationship between how the state “sees” and how it is “seen.” They are inseparable processes. As we argue here, the very unity and coherence of the state apparatus turns not just upon its self-representation but equally upon how people make sense of these representations. How people understand this apparent state in the context of their everyday lives is a crucial source of its power and authority; it explains the reproduction of the state as a social institution. We conclude by introducing the seven empirical contributions to this issue, all of which practice relational political ethnography.

Keywords The state · Political sociology · Ethnography · Relational sociology · Political ethnography · Governance

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Alyssa was nervous. This was her first time leaving jugs of water in the Sonoran Desert for undocumented migrants making the perilous journey across the US-Mexico border. Or rather, it was her first time doing it without the supervision of a more seasoned member of the group with which she volunteered. She is one of the activists discussed in Emine Fidan Elcioglu's (2020) ethnography of pro-immigrant and restrictionist activists collectively mobilizing in Arizona's borderlands. But did it make an impact? Could her group's few dozen members actually make any difference in the lives of those crossing the border? What difference did a bottle of water make?

"Look," Alyssa explained, "putting out water is not just about putting out water. I mean, it is, but it's also a symbolic thing. When we put out water, it's telling the world that these are migrants. It's a message we're sending to Border Patrol, to hunters, to Minutemen, to everyone" (ibid., 162–3). In other words, the jugs were not only about providing humanitarian aid, but a language through which activists communicated with the state. And as Elcioglu argues, their strategies were directly shaped by their perception of the state as their antagonist. Each jug was a flag planted in the desert, signaling a space safe from state intervention. How political actors viewed the state, in other words, informed their strategic decision-making. If pro-immigrant activists understood the state to be a powerful adversary, restrictionists perceived it to be weak. Their actions, therefore, were all about augmenting state power.

The distinctive realm of the political, while not limited to the formal sphere of the state, also cannot be severed from it altogether. The understandings people develop of the state – how they *see* that state – structures their strategic repertoires. This is evident in a number of the contributions to this special issue. Why, for example, do some US mobile home residents facing eviction use city council meetings to describe their suffering, whereas others use these same meetings to interrogate governmental incompetence? And yet others use them to articulate their own moral self-worth, hoping to convince council members that they are proper neoliberal subjects. Or in the case of land occupiers facing eviction in South Africa, why do some occupiers constitute themselves as a collective political subject, whereas others confront the state as atomized individuals? A similar phenomenon is on display in Chile: when the urban poor see the state as relegating them to second-class citizenship, they tend to mobilize collectively; but when they see it as simply incapable, they tend to pursue more individualized strategies. Or take India: when workers see the state as a potential path to upward mobility, they are willing to accept egregiously precarious public sector employment. In all of these cases, strategic choices are a consequence of how people view, conceptualize, and understand the state: what it is, what it does, and why it does so.

In this issue, we contend that this is a first step in political sociological inquiry: how people see the state structures their social action. Returning to the case of Alyssa leaving jugs of water, the very meaning she attributed to her strategy was a function of her understanding of the state as weak. But we want to go a step further. These strategies, in turn, shape how the state sees people – as individuals or members of a population, as compliant citizens or potential threats, as worthy beneficiaries or undeserving scroungers. If James Scott (1998) asks how states "see" their subject populations, we ask how people become "seeable" to states in the first place – as individual citizens, as members of a collective organization, or as part of an amorphous population. In other words, we advocate a *relational* approach that views the state and civil society as inextricably intertwined and mutually co-constitutive. People's experiences with the state shape their visions of that state, which in turn inform their strategic decisions. And these decisions affect how the state views them.

We therefore resist any opposition between active state and passive civil society, as if the latter were a natural landscape upon which the state simply affixes its gaze. The ethnographies that comprise this issue are not of the genre of state ethnographies that treat it as a self-enclosed institution hovering above civil society. Nor are they merely accounts of political articulation “from below.” Rather, they treat these two domains as inseparable, exploring how people’s visions of the state shape policy outcomes, and how these outcomes mold people’s visions of the state. In a phrase, they are *relational political ethnographies*.

The following section discusses how sociologists and anthropologists have treated the state in their work. We then proceed to contrast the omniscient state, which renders political society passive, to a relational conception, which thinks about the two realms as co-constitutive. We proceed to develop our relational approach, expanding the scope of the political beyond straightforward approaches to resistance “from below.” Any “from above”/“from below” opposition is rendered meaningless when viewed through the lens of the relational state: these are not distinct locations in empirical space but vantage points that only assume meaning *in relation to* one another. We conclude with an overview of the seven ethnographies included in this special issue.

Visions of the State

That the role of the state in society has been of interest to sociologists for many years is hardly debatable. Indeed, the relationship between the state and society has been a key feature of sociological writing since before the discipline’s formal inception. Treatments have ranged from the state as custodian of social cohesion (Durkheim 2014 [1893], Durkheim 2019 [1898–1900]) to monopolist of violence (Weber 1978 [1922]) and from class instrument (Marx and Engels 1998 [1846], Marx and Engels 2002 [1848]) to arbiter of class antagonisms (Marx 1963 [1852]). In more recent years, this legacy of divergent conceptualizations of the state has yielded many epistemological, ideological, and methodological disagreements about political sociology’s object of analysis. For some, “the state” is a clearly bounded and autonomous entity with a causal force of its own (Evans et al. 1985; Skocpol 1979). In this telling, the state is a willful agent variably described as having two bodies (Kantorowicz 1957), a pair of hands (Bourdieu 1994) or perhaps many (Morgan and Orloff 2017), and a couple of faces (Skocpol 1979), if not multiple (Navaro-Yashin 2002).

For others, the coherence of the state cannot be taken as a given, as the line demarcating the state from society is hardly self-evident (Abrams 1988; Migdal 2001; Mitchell 1991). This boundary is itself an effect of power. For some, this constructed entity takes on a life of its own, whereas others have questioned whether there even is a bounded state to which analysts can ascribe frontiers. Is any apparent boundedness of this state a product of power (Foucault 1980, Foucault 2007; Mitchell 1999; Rose 1999)? Is it a culturally produced and historically contingent arrangement, and, if so, is there even any analytic utility in reserving the label “state” for a set of formal political institutions? Or should we expand it to include the entire terrain upon which political struggles are waged (Anderson 2017; Auyero 2006; Benzecry and Baiocchi 2017; Gramsci 1971; Poulantzas 1978; Schatz 2013; Thomas 2009)? Is there a risk that this might lead us into a “conceptual murk” from which the study of state power becomes an impossibility (Morgan and Orloff 2017:18)? The very hyphenation between the “state” and “society” is what is at stake – analytically, theoretically, and politically.

In all of these debates, the visionary apparatus of the state has tended to matter more than the visions of the state that are produced, reproduced, and institutionalized in everyday life. Prevailing work in political sociology has tended to privilege knowledge production *by* the state at the expense of any analysis of quotidian knowledge production *about* the state. The former perspective typically treats the dynamics of power, authority, and legitimacy as functions of the monopoly over knowledge production that the state is presumed to hold (Dean 2010; Eyal 2006; Flyvbjerg 1998; Holston 1989; Joyce 2003; Kligman 1998; O'Connor 2001; Scott 1998, Scott 1990; Tarlo 2003). But while the state may retain a monopoly over legitimate forms of knowledge production, this is a far cry from a monopoly over all such forms. Indeed, even the question of legitimacy does not occur in isolation but is the product of struggles over that legitimacy (Habermas 1975; Offe 1984). As such, any political sociology of the state must take *visions of the state* just as seriously as it takes the state's vision.

And what are these visions? As Weber (1978 [1922]) pointed out more than a century ago, the authority of the modern state is not something that is, or even can be, imposed straightforwardly upon a subject population. He was careful to discuss the state's monopoly over coercion as necessarily *legitimate*, which, as Norman Uphoff (1989, 300) points out, renders authority "hostage to subjective views." We would go further, suggesting that implicit in this conception of state power is an analysis of the relation between those who govern and those who are governed as one that cannot be taken for granted or assumed a priori. Rather, this is a relationship that must be explained. The key to this explanation is legitimacy, which is inseparable from how people collectively view the state. This explains our emphasis on vision, and our vision for studying the state.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1980) went further than Weber, adamantly rejecting any simplistic characterization of state sovereignty as mastery over violence. Central to his understanding was the role that symbols and cultural forms can play in helping to constitute state power. Pomp, ritual, and spectacle, he insisted, are not means of obscuring the foundational violence of state power. Rather, they must be taken seriously in their own right and not as some cover for the state's "actual" nature. It is precisely through rituals and spectacles that a unified image of state authority is produced (and reproduced) in the first place. Whether we are talking about police uniforms with all of their various authenticating symbols; extravagant inauguration ceremonies meant to make us feel something at the changing of the guard; or the notion that responding to the census is a patriotic duty: in all of these cases, symbols work to create a sort of Wizard of Oz state, arresting projections that suggest an organ of omnipotence lies just behind the curtain. Simultaneously, they act as cultural repertoires for state functionaries, for whom they produce a sense of routinized reassurance. This is why the symbolic registers that ensure the continued reproduction of state authority do not only matter to "its" subjects, but also to those who "are" the state: officials. This need for identification is crucial to the state's production of its own "stateness," which ensures its institutional continuity.

The centrality of this "state image" to the reproduction of state power provides an opening for ethnographers to think about the process through which this image is constructed and disseminated. Tracking the disaggregated processes and manifestations of state power allows a closer inspection of the material effects of state power. Begoña Aretxaga (2003, 399) describes the apparent materiality of the state as a "subjective dynamic that produces and reproduces the state as objects of fear and attachment, of identification or disavowal, as subjects of power, elusive, unlocatable, ever present, immensely powerful, or impotent." It is this set of subjective perceptions that continuously sustains the state as being an inescapable reality, which in turn invests its apparatus with power in the Weberian sense: a will to domination.

To put this point differently, how people “see” the state is inseparable from how the state itself “sees” them. As we argue here, the very unity and coherence of the state apparatus turns upon its self-representation as such. How people understand this apparent state in the context of their everyday lives is a crucial source of its power and authority; it explains the reproduction of the state as a social institution.

For some ethnographers, it is the state’s image of its own secrecy that secures allegiance. Michael Taussig (1992), for example, points to a lingering aura of secrecy that transforms the state into an object of awe. Similarly, Yael Navaro-Yashin (2002) points to the public anxieties and fantasies that are produced in relation to this ungraspable secrecy of the state, further reinforcing its “magical” power; or, as Diane Nelson (1999) puts it, the state becomes a fetish. For others, legitimacy goes beyond secrecy. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (Hansen 2001, 5) contend that state power is largely performative, with officials acting *as if* the state were omniscient, thereby becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other words, “the state is an organizing concept through which people...imagine the cohesion of their own society, its order and its institutions but also its hidden secrets, its sources of violence and evil” (Hansen 2001, 224). Officials produce a “language of stateness,” in their terms, the very invocation of which signals its own power.

Yet the illusory and phantasmagoric nature of the state’s self-image has proven an elusive object of sociological analysis, with this aspect of state power typically left to anthropologists and political theorists (Das and Poole 2004; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Wedeen 2019). But in this special issue, we contend that an interpretive sociology is up to the task. In more ways than one, then, this special issue is less concerned with breaking new ground than with rejuvenating an ongoing and exciting conversation in order to broaden the scope of the “political” in political sociology.

Toward a Relational Political Ethnography

This special issue then shifts focus away from the state’s processes of formation, its institutional dynamics, and its knowledge-making practices. It deemphasizes an omniscient state that “sees” its subject populations, instead training its analytic lens on how people and collective organizations “see” the state, asking with Lisa Wedeen (2008) how these different visions of the state structure political action (see also Brissette 2016). Analyzing the state as a symbolic as well as material force, we seek to highlight how official discourses, public performances, and routine practices construct collective notions of the “nature” of the state – its capacities, possibilities, and limitations (Wedeen 2008). In doing so, we seek to reorient the subfield of political sociology away from the study of a self-enclosed entity called “the state” and toward a richer analysis of the social life of this state (Aretxaga 2003; Elcioglu 2017; Trouillot 2001). More specifically, we want to know how people perceive it, how this transforms their subjectivities as political actors, and how it shapes their capacities for political engagement, ranging from formal to informal, and from compliant to resistant.

To be clear, this is not to bend the stick and swap in a “from below” perspective for the “from above” vantage point currently dominant in political sociology. Thinking about the relationship between the state and society as emergent, rather than in terms of a predetermined downward or upward arrow, allows one to reject both perspectives as partial standpoints that only make sense *in relation to* one another. “From above,” we ask how the social actors claiming to represent the state perform their “stateness” (Siegel 1998); and “from below,” we

ask how subject populations experience this state, accept it, question it, and even produce it. And of course, neither site can be considered in isolation from the other; only a *relational* approach will do.

So, for instance, in some of the contributions to this special issue, residents engage with street-level bureaucrats (Lara-Millán 2014, 2021; Lipsky 1980; Seim 2017, 2020), whom they consistently encounter in their everyday lives, ranging from immigration officials surveilling refugees in Brazil to police monitoring urban squatters in Chile and South Africa. But in contrast to Lipsky's original formulation, we approach these quotidian encounters from the perspective of the governed, asking how these points of contact affect their own perceptions of the state, and how this affects their willingness and capacity for political engagement. Put simply, we ask how the state's "vision" is affected by the collective vision of those it sees. In so doing, we leave to the side the question of the state apparatus' ontological status, instead focusing on its material, discursive, and psychic effects (cf. Trouillot 2001, 126). In other words, we explore what Timothy Mitchell (1999) calls the "state effect": the appearance of the state as a coherent and separate entity.

Our emphasis, to be clear, is not *just* on the production of these visions and effects as an end in themselves. We are hardly interested in a semiotic analysis of state power. Instead, we argue that perceptions of the state structure subsequent political action, both individual and collective, in specific and contextual ways. We all know that perceptions matter, but the point of this special issue is to demonstrate how, when, and why certain perceptions come to matter over others; how, when, and why certain perceptions catalyze political action; and most importantly, how these actions impact how the state "sees" them. In doing so, we emphasize the need and the efficacy of a properly *dialectical* approach to understanding state-society relations.

We are inspired by prior work in this domain by sociologists like Javier Auyero and, more recently, Fidan Elcioglu, but we aim to complicate sociological stories around perceptions of the state by showing how these perceptions are inseparable from the state's own perception. How people see the state affects how they are seen by the state. In Elcioglu's work (Elcioglu 2017; Elcioglu 2020), for instance, she compellingly shows how competing visions of the state differentially affect the mobilization of both anti-immigrant and immigrants' rights groups working on the US-Mexico border. How people come to understand the state – to "see" it – affects not only how they might interact with it in a formal capacity, but likewise, how they might attempt to evade its gaze. And in all cases, do residents act as if "the state" is a coherent antagonist, or conversely, as if it were a beneficent partner in achieving security and wellbeing?

These are the key questions underpinning the contributions to this special issue. Whether engaging in formal dialogue with the state – from city council meetings to town halls, from local housing offices to court rooms – or in a more informal back-and-forth, in all of the cases considered here, how people come to view the state – how they construct their *vision of the state* – affects how they actively relate to this state, which in turn, affects how this state sees them. This will open up ways to understand not just *how* people resist, obey, dismiss, fear, desire, and loathe states but *why* they do so – an analytical question that gets overlooked if we do not take into account the intersubjective dynamic of state-society relations.

As such, neither vision can be treated in isolation; it is the interaction and mutual co-constitution of these visions that helps us understand the cases described here. Contributing authors make sense of interactions between state actors and residents to examine how an abstract entity called "the state" is mediated, enacted, and interpreted on the ground. Just as the vector flows from how residents see the state to how the state sees them, we can also reverse

the directionality, investigating how “state acts” (Bourdieu 2012) affect individual lives, material conditions of living, modes of social organization, or representations of the world (Auyero 2012; Auyero 2001; Benzecry and Baiocchi 2017; Dubois 2014). Treating these two vectors together, as inextricably intertwined in a ceaseless dialectic, is our aim.

This analytic need not be reserved for those cases in which people are in constant contact with formal representatives of the state. It equally applies to cases in which “wasted lives” (Bauman 2004) populate zones of social abandonment (Biehl 2013; McIntyre and Nast 2011; Povinelli 2011; Pratt 2005), sites from which the state would seem to be absent altogether. But as contributors to this special issue demonstrate, while residents may describe feeling forsaken by the state, this is hardly identical to being out of contact with this state, let alone beyond the state’s gaze. While certainly instances of strategic benign neglect exist, we argue that these are exceptional; in nearly every case, residents perceive themselves to be in contact with some aspect of the state. To put the same point differently, even when state actors might not “see” residents, residents see the state – even in extreme cases, as when people actively attempt to avoid being seen altogether (Scott 2009). More often, people do interact with “the state,” but often in subtle ways. As recent scholarship on the “informalization of the state” (Boudreau 2017; Boudreau and Davis 2017) reveals, a complex network of actors enacts tasks we tend to associate with the state proper, though it would be a mistake to reduce these actors to a coherent entity that governs populations from on high. In such spaces, actors negotiate relationally to secure services, housing, rights, and even help produce legitimacy itself. Many of these “state” actors may not even formally be state officials, but instead exercise authority from institutional locations *beyond* the state, as parastatal or even technically nonstatal (Elyachar 2005; Lund 2006). Some contributors to this issue treat this “outsourcing” of state functions to entities ranging from non-governmental and community-based organizations to non-state actors who receive official accreditation to fulfill a governmental mandate.

In either situation – that is, whether we examine cases in which people are continuously governed by agents ranging from street-level bureaucrats to elected officials, or at the opposite extreme, contexts in which residents feel abandoned by the state – we contend that people’s perceptions of the state – “their” state – structures their political action, from claims-making to a rejection of that state’s very legitimacy. It is for that reason that all of the contributors to this special issue draw upon ethnography, a method uniquely positioned to make sense of people’s lifeworlds, worldviews, and political logics. Only in reconstructing the social life of the state – people’s *visions* of the state – can we begin to elaborate a properly *relational* theory of that state, one that conceives of governance not as a straightforward projection of policy aims onto populations from on high but through constant (and often contentious) interaction with residents on the ground. And that is precisely what each of the following contributions aims to do.

Overview of Articles

Our special issue comprises seven ethnographies that do this work of interpretation and shed light on the ways in which “the state” circulates in public discourse and gets “enmeshed” in everyday life (Das 2007: 2). But they go beyond the fact of this process of meaning-making, asking how understandings of the state produced in practice in turn affect state visions. In other words, they explore how the ways people see the state shapes how the state sees them, taking a resolutely relational approach to political sociology. The papers in this issue display an

allegiance to ethnographic methodology but trace mechanisms in diverse social and political contexts through which perceptions of the state have tangible effects in political practice.

For instance, Esther Sullivan draws on ethnographic fieldwork in mobile home parks across three states to identify different ways residents facing eviction mobilize in city council meetings. How residents viewed these meetings ultimately shaped their mode of engagement with the state. When they understood this public sphere to be a site in which to testify to the extent of their suffering, they acted as supplicants to the state. They were largely ignored, and their eviction was quickly approved. Likewise, when they conceived of the public sphere as a venue in which to emphasize governmental fraud and incompetence, they were similarly ignored. The city council was effortlessly able to demonstrate both its own compliance and the local government's limited capacity, and the residents were evicted. But in a third case, residents saw the public sphere as a site upon which to articulate their moral worth as self-educated consumers of government aid rather than asking for a handout, which accorded nicely with the city council's neoliberal mode of governance. While they too were ultimately evicted, the council was receptive to this approach, granting every resident relocation funding.

Zachary Levenson draws on ethnographic fieldwork in a very different context of residents facing collective eviction: land occupations in Cape Town, South Africa. He asks how the municipal government decides which occupations to evict and which to tolerate. As in Sullivan's cases, how residents viewed the state shaped their strategic approach to occupation, which in turn affected how the state viewed residents. When they viewed the state as an ally in acquiring homes, they comported themselves as atomized recipients of housing. This facilitated the eruption of an intense factionalism, which was read by a judge as opportunism, and they were evicted. But in a second occupation, when residents viewed the state as their adversary, they mobilized collectively. A judge read this second occupation as people lacking any alternative accommodation, ultimately granting them the right to stay put. Instead of arguing that evictions are a direct consequence of how the state "sees" its populations, Levenson shows how land occupiers *became* populations by organizing themselves in various ways.

Writing about housing for urban poor in a very different context, Carter Koppelman explores Chile's much lauded and seemingly inclusive housing policies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Santiago, Koppelman tells a more complicated story and explores how beneficiaries of social housing "see" the state. He identifies two competing state images that emerge from everyday encounters between residents and agents of housing provision: while residents articulated the existence of a denigrating state that relegated them to second-class citizenship, housing officials challenged this view by presenting the alternative image of an incapable state, unable to guarantee dignified housing due to a lack of capacity. These images, as Koppelman shows, ultimately structure residents' political responses to "inclusion in indignity." While the denigrating state-image elicited collective action, the incapable state diffused this action in favor of private and individualized strategies for home improvement. Once again, how residents saw the state shaped their political responses to this state, which in turn informed how they were seen by the state.

Moving beyond questions of land and housing, Vrinda Marwah asks why precariously employed public sector workers in Punjab remain hopeful about their employment status despite facing worsening job security. Through extensive fieldwork carried out with women working as public health advocates, she unpacks "remunerated volunteers'" visions of the Indian state as bearer of what she calls "promissory capital." Marwah finds that these workers are convinced that their positions are tickets to more secure public sector jobs. While this is of

course rarely (if ever!) the case, workers view the state as characterized by both plurality and potentiality. The fragmented, multiscalar nature of the state opens up multiple sites for alliances, and while these do not tend to yield job security, they do feel included by the hopeful responses they receive from prospective advocates. And the state's potentiality is enacted through a recurrent bait-and-switch, in which government officials consistently swap out specific guarantees for a generalized sense of promise. Together, these comprise promissory capital, which, when sufficiently accumulated by the state, guarantees its own legitimacy.

Teasing out similar questions of legitimacy in the Philippines, Marco Garrido interrogates how members of Manila's upper and middle classes form "state-ideals" that shift over time. He begins with a puzzle: how is it that the very class fractions that led the movement for democratization in the 1980s were the sturdiest bastion of support for the election of "illiberal" populist Rodrigo Duterte in 2016? Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, Garrido argues that wealthier Filipinos grew disillusioned with democracy, which they came to view as a source of disorder: corruption and crime to be sure but also the privileging of popular classes' demands over their own. Duterte's "disciplinary" politics were therefore appealing to them. But these politics did not emerge in a vacuum; only by understanding his broader context of reception can we make sense of his sudden rise. And this context was itself articulated over the preceding decades by middle-class residents who saw the Filipino state as a source of disorder in need of discipline.

Beyond questions of collective mobilization and political legitimacy, this special issue emphasizes how an ethnographic appraisal of governance is a window into the dynamic consolidation of citizen-subjects. To this end, Gowri Vijayakumar explores how marginalized people navigate their engagement with the state in strategic and unpredictable ways. Sociologists commonly theorize this engagement as structured by the state, reducing it to a choice between resistance and collaboration. But as Vijayakumar shows in her ethnographic study of HIV prevention programs in Bangalore, the Indian state does not straightforwardly discipline the sexuality of unruly subjects from on high. Often these subjects – sex workers, sexual minorities, transgender people – draw upon state resources to collectively articulate respectable identities without sacrificing their sense of sexual selfhood. Furthermore, Vijayakumar theorizes the role that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play in relation to the state, taking marching orders from a state agency by drawing upon NGO resources to implement HIV prevention programs. At this juncture of the state and civil society, people's options are not limited to sexual surveillance or fighting back; instead, they frequently collectively articulate novel forms of sexual respectability.

Working with a similarly keen eye on the micro-mechanisms of power, in her paper, Katherine Jensen argues that the Brazilian state's formal policy environments do not unilaterally determine the meanings that immigrants attribute to refugee status. Existing scholarship represents the contexts in which immigrants are received as definitively established by the state. But Jensen shifts her ethnographic lens to refugees' own experiences of these legal contexts of reception, demonstrating the extent to which researchers presuppose what they must instead demonstrate, namely that contexts of reception automatically lead to incorporation and a sense of belonging. Instead, she shows how socio-legal context and subjectivity are co-constitutive. In the Brazilian case, Jensen explores the salience of forced migrants' apathy toward refugee status. This indifference, she argues, develops from the lack of opacity inherent in what amounts to a complicated bureaucratic process. But we can only detect this apathy if we think relationally about how contexts of reception are produced instead of taking them as a given.

Finally, in an afterword, Javier Auyero argues for a political ethnography, insisting that this method is uniquely positioned to make sense of how people experience the state in their everyday lives. The state is not a bounded set of institutions hovering above civil society, periodically exercising its power from on high; rather, as he writes, people *live* the state. How people see the state ultimately shapes how they make claims on that state, how they engage, challenge, resist, collaborate with, draw upon, hail, and evade that state – which only then affects how the state sees them. In other words, the state does not limit the domain of politics in advance; politics is always a politics of everyday life, a politics produced at the relational juncture of state and society. And it is through political ethnography that we can begin to map the terrain of these forces and relations.

The point we wish to emphasize with this special issue is that reading political motive into everyday action is one form of doing “political ethnography.” But seeing *beyond* the seemingly political and into the rationalities and knowledges that inform social action can tell us a lot about how citizens see themselves, the state, and the relationship between the two – namely, how the state “sees” its subjects.

Acknowledgements The editors would like to acknowledge the sage advice of Javier Auyero, who has been supportive of this project from the jump, as well as Claudio Benzecry and Andrew Deener for believing in our vision of the state.

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