A history of violence; Anthropology and the study of states

Wilson, L.

Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal

A History of Violence

Anthropology and the Study of States

Lee Wilson
University of Cambridge

It is no surprise that much of the anthropological engagement with the study of states has focused upon the homicidal tendencies of sovereign power. Conflict is often the starting point for anthropological enquiry, social relations being easier to figure from the point at which they are openly contested. Moreover, while anthropology may be a relative newcomer to the study of the state, as Graeber (2011) notes, historically the discipline has long been concerned with the matter of violent sovereign relations between rulers and ruled. Revisiting anthropological debates over Shilluk kingship, Graeber suggests it is possible to discern the 'hidden logic of sovereignty' in the attainment of divine kingship through violent means. That is, the mutually constitutive relations of war between 'sovereign power' and 'the people' or 'nation', a mutual struggle with one another through which both come to exist as political entities, an implicitly antagonistic 'elemental war [that] is prior to wars *between* nations' (Graeber 2011: 54). It is elements of this 'constitutive war' (Graeber 2011: 54) that are explored in this issue. While the title of the issue, State/Violence, draws attention to the intimate relationship between violence and the state, it is the 'the people', and their capacity for violence, that is the focus of the collected meditations.

Importantly, in this issue the state is not the main protagonist in the perpetuation of violence, but rather defines the parameters of a field of power in which complex relations between violent operators, both state and non-state, are performed and enacted. While the notion of the bounded, sovereign state remains a seductive ideal to both theorists and policymakers, it is an ideal that does not stand up well to the actualities of multiple, contested sites of power in much of the

contemporary world. Weber's emphasis on the monopolisation of means of violence as a prerequisite of statehood (1991 [1948]) achieved the status of orthodoxy in the social sciences. Internationally, the normative assumption of coherent sovereignty residing in the state frames the recognition of the domestic authority of states (Bartelson 1995). The current issue brings these assumptions sharply into question, contributing to the growing body of anthropological literature attempting to rethink conceptions of the state and sovereignty from, as it were, the ground up.

Gazit's theoretical formulation of fragmented sovereignty (2009) frames the issue, Grassiani and Ben-Ari suggesting that the relationship between the state and its citizenry cannot be understood only in terms of the presence or absence of the state. Rather, they note that the organised violence of non-state actors might be better conceptualised as a process of 'constantly testing the state, as active and continual negotiation with the state and its representatives for power, sometimes culminating in taking over the state or parts of it' (Grassiani and Ben-Ari 2011: 12). Authors thus consider the ways in which other forms of social organisation, networks of trust, loyalty and reciprocity, and legitimacy-invested agents figure in the constitution of forms of sovereign power. There are similarities with the line of argument being developed here to that proposed by Hansen and Stepputat in their consideration of sovereignty not as an ontological given, but rather as a constantly emergent process grounded in violence (see Hansen and Stepputat 2005). Where the issue differs though, and indeed where its value lies, is in its deliberate focus on the shifting dynamics of violence operators within states, and the

extent to which it begins to develop a framework for the analysis of non-state violence operators and their relationship to the state.

An interesting line of enquiry that seems to be alluded to, but remains undeveloped, is the editors' reference to the ways in which assemblages of actors 'form fragmented forms of sovereignty . . . compilations, [which] in turn, may be loosely or tightly organized and therefore capable of different degrees and modalities of action' (Grassiani and Ben-Ari 2011: 10). Whether intentional or not, reference to the notion of assemblage brings to mind DeLanda's (2006) reworking of Deleuze, work that may have some value in attempting to (re)conceptualise the practicalities of sovereign power. DeLanda's interpretation of an *assemblage*, comprised of components defined through relations of exteriority, is of a whole not reducible to the properties of its parts. An assemblage is not an aggregation of these properties, but rather the exercise of the capacities of these components. Capacities that 'depend on a component's properties but cannot be reduced to them since they involve reference to the properties of other interacting entities' (DeLanda 2006: 10). A component might then be 'unplugged' and 'plugged' into other assemblages without losing its (historically constituted) identity. What is important though is not the role a component might play, but the ways in which it interacts with other social entities. In this respect, one might conceive of sovereignty not as a stable form, an expression of a quality possessed by states, but rather, as Grassiani and Ben-Ari perhaps mean to imply, sovereignty as constituted through the relational capacities of social entities.

An important aspect of DeLanda's thesis is that it

shifts the emphasis in social analysis to the processes and relations through which assemblages – read social forms – might come into being, without prior assumptions as to the forms that an assemblage might take. Thus, thinking about forms of sovereign power, it is not what sovereignty *is* that matters, but rather the relations between its constituent elements on which we need to concentrate our attention in analysis. I am not sure whether the editors had allusions to Deleuze or DeLanda in mind when writing their introduction, but it is where their thinking led me, and to which the papers that comprise the issue seem to speak.

Jacobs and Schuetze's paper examines popular justice in Mozambique, arguing that the inability of the state to fulfill its side of the social contract is the source of threat and insecurity that people experience in their lives. Jacobs and Schuetze argue that dissatisfaction and frustration find expression in the ways in which people exercise their own capacity for violence to establish some sense of societal ordering (2011: 20-21). Yet in exploring the linkages between socio-economic deprivation and human security I wonder if their analysis is a little one-sided. While pointing to the need to assert some form of social control in the face of hardship and insecurity, presumably not all feel such injustice, or react in the same way to, for example, the need to address the basic requirements of human security. Thieves that are lynched may well be stealing to feed their families. This is not just a moral point, but arguably the notion of human security as it is employed here should take into account the underlying socio-economic factors that may lead to theft becoming a viable choice of action. There is a need to understand that the factors informing vigilantism also lead people to break the law/morally transgress in ways beyond the assumption that crime is committed for personal gain. And if, as both the authors note, we need to understand the acts of perpetrators rather than simply look to the victims of such acts, then surely we also need to understand how actions may be personally sanctioned even though they transgress normative values, rules and run the risk of potentially lethal acts of moral retribution.

Drawing on Girard's thesis of scapegoating, Jacobs and Schuetze are of the mind that it is people's 'persistent feelings of insecurity [that] bring them to violently attack even petty criminals' (2011: 26). Yet one might also view this in terms of the affect of insecurity, the emotive response to obvious injustice and a fear of disorder, rather than explanation in terms of some societal need for sacrifice. In this respect collective violence in the form of popular justice cannot be seen as sporadic, and the longer-term emotional effects of living with insecurity must be understood. Thus, popular justice in the form of lynching is enacted not as a symbolic or representational act – the act of killing the thief as a symbol of society's woes, ensuring that there is a return to order through the eradication of threat – but because people are more prone to violence given long-term exposure to inequality and injustice, and the particular kinds of emotional energy these might provoke (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2009). In this regard, violence as a result of the state's inability to fulfill its part of the social contract need not be seen as a natural datum as the use of Girard implies, but rather is contingent (Keane 2004: 8-11). Importantly, if the terms of the relations could be changed, then insecurity does not necessarily result in violence.

Dekker's account of the Intafada expands on Gazit's notion of fragmented sovereignty in the light of the particular circumstances of the plurality of security actors in Palestine. The difference being that in Palestine 'non-state agents operate as actual alternatives for the state's institutions and, as such, appear to be part of a different power relationship in the sense that sovereignty is not granted to them but rather acquired' (Dekker 2011: 42). The ideal of a two-state solution, Dekker argues, is a notion born of the political elite, and Palestine lacks any sense of a common imagining of itself as a nation. The ultimate jurisdictional authority of the Israeli Defence Forces further undermines the legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority. Clan and family associations also cut across the institutional loyalty of the Palestinian authorities, as does political affiliation, and people turn to alternative networks of loyalties able to better provide economic and territorial security. The sad irony is that by 'severely cracking down on political and clan-based security structures – security initiatives from below – the two regimes [Fatah and Hamas] have each damaged the legitimacy of their rule' (Dekker 2011: 53). Without the popular mandate of Palestinian society, Dekker argues, a viable Palestinian state as currently stands might only exist as an authoritarian regime (ibid.).

Dekker's account strongly supports the case that any attempt at improving the formal provision of security and justice is far more likely to succeed if it understands how legitimacy is gained locally. Yet it also highlights the extreme difficulties of negotiating existing tensions between political rivals, clans and families in a population that is both geographically and politically riven and which has suffered so badly at the hands of an occupying Israeli state. Arguments for greater understanding of the structural conditions, cultural milieu and social processes in which security actors are embedded are one thing. Implementation of any kind of security initiative is however another matter entirely, and one is hard-pressed to envisage a possible solution to these problems in the context of the current political situation.

Also drawing on Anderson's notion of imagined communities, Weston argues that in Guatemala, in the face of its inability to provide justice for its citizens, the state is 'unimagined' through its declining legitimacy. Writing of the mobilisation of civil auto-defence patrols, he notes that up to one million Maya men were made to patrol their own communities. An issue that I found surprising was the lack of any real consideration of gender in this paper, a factor often neglected in the analysis of political violence. While civil patrols and vigilantism are two sources through which ambiguities regarding state powers are mapped onto the state (Weston 2011: 82), one wonders if notions of familial or community duty correspond in any way to social constructions of masculinity and the roles and responsibilities of men, and if these were utilized in the recruitment of members of local security forces?

Vivod, in her account of the Serbian Special Operations Unit (*Jedinica za Specijalne Operacije,* JSO), makes the important point that the state is not maintained through force alone. Part of the paramilitary apparatus created to support the Serbian government, in 2001 the Special Operations Unit led an armed mutiny against the government. However, the serving Cabinet chose at the time not to deal with the actions as an armed insurrection, but rather to negotiate with JSO as if they

had staged a strike action. That they did so, Vivod argues, was not just because were JSO was 'stronger than the state'. It was not a Weberian monopoly of the instruments of coercion that the government lacked, but rather, in Bourdieu's sense, 'statist capital'. In contrast to the government, JSO were widely celebrated, and because of their mythic qualities enjoyed the support of the security apparatus. The decision not to act against JSO in 2001 was taken because of the symbolic capital that they were able to muster, a decision that was later to cost the Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić his life, the leader of JSO assassinating him in 2003.

In their account of the violence that wracked North Maluku between 1999 and 2 000, Timmer and Hermkens nicely illustrate the critical importance of historically grounding the analysis of conflict. In the space opened up by decentralisation after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the Sultan of Ternate was able to make state-like claims to the extension of his customary authority that was a trigger point for the violent events that followed. Emphasising the importance of the interplay between culture and identity in the conflict, Timmer and Hermkens propose that too often conflict is analysed in rationalist terms in which identity is informed by ethnic, political or religious affiliation (2011: 59). The authority of the Sultanate of Ternate was recognisable locally because it drew on symbolic capital congruent with narratives of personhood and place. In Vivod's terms, one might even see these claims, framed in terms of local custom and tradition, as having greater 'statist capital' at a local level than the authoritative claims of the Indonesian state. The historical and cultural trajectories of the Sultanate thus made possible

a kind of figure ground reversal in which the broader framework of the Indonesian state was relegated to the background by the ways in which these trajectories were perceived.

In considering the 'people's' capacity for violence in relation to the state, this issue makes an excellent contribution to the task of rethinking formations of violence in the contemporary world. If the state is considered as an assemblage of the relationships between social entities – the exercise of the capacities of its components – then it follows that the task of changing the relationship between state/violence is one of changing the terms of these relations. Critical to this task is reconceptualising violence as a culturally sanctioned and socially contingent phenomenon, not a natural datum, and the violent proclivities of states as more than just an inevitable, Hobbesian dilemma. This issue of *Etnofoor* provides a welcome stimulus to and much food for thought in this undertaking.

References

Bartelson, J.
1995   *A Genealogy of Sovereignty*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Dekker, M.
2011   Building a Nation under Occupation: Fragmented Sovereignty, Security Sector Reform, and the Issue of Legitimacy in the Context of Occupation. *Etnofoor* 23(2): 37-55.
DeLanda, Manuel
2006   *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*. London and New York: Continuum.

Gazit, Nir

2009   Social Agency, Spatial Practices and Power: The Micro-Foundations of Fragmented Sovereignty in the Occupied Territories. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 22(1): 83-104.

Graeber, D.

2011   The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk: On Violence, Utopia, and the Human Condition, or, Elements for an Archaeology of Sovereignty. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1(1): 1-62.

Grassiani, Erella and Eyal Ben-Ari

2011   Introduction: Violence Operators between State and Non-State Actors. *Etnofoor* 23(2): 7-15.

Hansen, T.B. and F. Stepputat (eds.)

2005   *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Jacobs, C. and C. Schuetze

2012   Violence against Violence: In Search of Security and Justice. *Etnofoor* 23(2): 17-36.

Keane, J.

2004   *Violence and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Navaro-Yashin, Y.

2009   Affective Spaces, Melancholic Objects: Ruination and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15(1): 1-18.

Timmer, J. and A.-K. Hermkens

2011   Conflicting States: Violent Politics in North Maluku, Indonesia. *Etnofoor* 23(2): 57-77.

Weber, M.

1991 [1948] Politics as a Vocation. In: H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge. Pp. 77-128.

Weston, G.

2011   (Un)imagining the State: Guatemalan Lynching and the Erosion of the State's Monopoly of Violence. *Etnofoor* 23(2): 79-98.