

Accessing the State: Everyday Practices and Politics in the South

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Introduction

This special issue explores everyday practices and politics of accessing the state and state resources from a southern perspective. The collection of papers documents low-income residents' everyday relationships with the state, through the study of actual practices of interaction with a range of state representatives at the local level (councilors and officials, at various levels of local government). Formal and informal, legal and illegal, confrontational and cooperative, we analyze the multiple tactics of engagement with the state by low-income residents to understand the extent to which they allow access to state resources and to degrees of state recognition, even in contexts of mass poverty, informality and scarce public resources. The modes of interaction with the state also embody and frame low-income residents' representations of the state, of their expectations, and of their own citizenship. This special issue thus critically draws together a wide-ranging and important debate on governance, and the relationships it constructs between state and civil society. The main question we thus raise in this special issue is how the dynamics of governance reform, with attempted development or deepening of both decentralization and participation, affect everyday practices to access the state and the resulting politics that shape state-society relations in southern contexts.

Collectively, the articles in the special issue reflect on the ways in which low-income citizens access to the state challenges existing theories of the state and democracy. Stemming from a research programme entitled 'The Voices of the Poor in Urban Governance: Participation, Mobilisation and Politics in South African Cities'², this special issue focuses on South African cities primarily but not exclusively. Although the contexts examined have their own specificities, we argue that they provide an interesting and critical context in which to work through the debate from a Southern perspective. South African societies are specific in the huge expectations residents have in the post-apartheid state, and in the ways that ideals continue to be framed in modernist terms, as emblemized by policies of mass public housing delivery and effort towards mass access to urban services. The state, even if it is not so powerful, remains at the core of representations and expectations especially of lower income residents (Borges 2006) – mass urban protests which continue to rise in South African cities today show the disappointment of these expectations rather than a disregard, ignorance or avoidance of the State (Bénit-Gbaffou 2008, Alexander 2010). Attempts to address the gaps between expectation and public delivery have taken the form of major local government restructuring in a post-apartheid context, relying extensively on principles of good governance (decentralization, democratization as well as new public management principles). However, these expectations and experiences of confrontation of

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civil society with the state co-exist with everyday practices of negotiation, seeking of favours, and clientelism, which also shape residents' access to resources, and more broadly their representations of the state and the construction of their urban citizenship (Oldfield and Stokke 2004). The South African case is thus particularly relevant to study the interaction between the modern state and good governance ideals, and practices of 'political society'.

Governance, Democracy and the Politics of State Access

Discourses focused on decentralization and participation emphasize 'proximity', 'adaptation to local contexts', or even in some respect 'care' from a 'humanized' state, as positive elements promoting democracy and accountability, partly challenging a weberian conception of the state as neutral, universal and based on legal, policy and administrative principles. In contrast, discourses on clientelism and corruption denounce the 'personalization' and arbitrariness of existing relationships between the state and low income residents in particular. This proposed special issue attempts to unravel the theoretical and practical implications of these ambiguities, in the broader academic debate on the political dimension of participation and decentralization. Making the 'local' the main area of engagement between citizens and the state, has indeed been accused of depoliticizing democratic debates on access to and distribution of resources (Cooke and Kothari 2001), through their confinement to the local scale; through divide and rule strategies; through personal cooption of leaders as means of sedating potentially broader social movements; and through the imposition of a mainly neo-liberal agenda hidden behind the language of technicality.

The fine line between decentralization-participation and clientelism is even more striking in countries of the South, where the construction of a weberian state is either a far away ideal or has never taken off, and is now challenged by other conceptions of the state, in a context of neoliberalism and the diffusion of global principles of 'good governance'. Some authors attribute the failure of governance principles' implementation to the capture of civil society by political parties in a politics of domination that structurally disempowers low-income residents and groups (Heller 2001; Tostensen et al. 2001). In this frame, party politics are understood as a nuisance that spoil and pervert the democratic dynamics of opposition and debate. Instead, civil society stands as the main lever of action to challenge the 'power of blockage', in exceptional contexts in the form of mass resistance and confrontation, but mainly through everyday individual resistance to the implementation of state policies (Bayat 1997, Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2001, Scott 1998).

Others studying societies of 'the South' (Chabal and Daloz 1999, Escobar 1995, see Fuller and Harriss 2001 for an interesting analysis) propose cultural explanations to explain the gap between the principles of modern states (accused of being 'imported' from the West, or the North, and ill-adapted to the 'realities' of Southern societies) and the practices and norms of the greatest part of civil society in their representations of the state, relying on vernacular or traditional codes that often contradict the former. The clash is not necessarily entirely dysfunctional and is often instrumentalised, as argued by Chabal and Daloz; it is, however, understood as of a cultural nature.

Our work builds on two bodies of work that try to adapt these theories to Southern realities to understand the disjuncture between the principles of good governance relying on individual human rights, personal empowerment and democratic participation, and practices of clientelism, brokerage, and *ad hoc* arrangements characterizing most of the actual relationships between low-income residents and state representatives. Chatterjee (2004), for instance, proposes the powerful opposition between ‘civil society’ that is idealized, restricted to an elite drawing on the language and principles of individual rights, and what he terms ‘political society’, referring to the majority of residents, who cannot rely on full citizenship because of their informal status in one part of their life or another, particularly in their relationship with the state. In his analysis, the majority in ‘political society’ therefore needs to use brokers and politicians to mediate with legal and administrative public frameworks or agents. Further developing this line of argument, Benjamin (2004) takes a closer look at urban societies and the ways in which the contradictions between rigid legal planning and urban realities are dealt with through a ‘porous bureaucracy’ and what he calls ‘politics by stealth’, showing that both elements allow for the city to work in spite of these tremendous gaps, and for low-income residents to access not only state resources but also local economic development.

We build as well on an anthropological and social geographical literature that considers the lived negotiation of state development practices in southern contexts. Corbridge et al (2005), for example, challenge us to understand the ways people inhabit and encounter the state as ‘a citizen, client and/or subject’. This body of works suggests the diverse and often contradictory practices of the state that shape access and notions of citizenship; an approach that considers the state as often contradictory and, thus, as experienced inconsistently. Sightings of the state are thus complex, mediated in precise contexts, and framed by memories of past experiences (2005: 8, 24). Theorising the ‘entangled geographies’ of state and society (2005:19-33) opens up analysis to narratives and spaces for manoeuvre, agency and negotiation, negotiated differently according to the bodies accessing them (Das and Poole, 2004:19). This ethnographically inspired literature on the state highlights the politics that ensue because state actions are not mapped onto inert and passive marginal populations (Das and Poole, 2004: 27; Borges 2006).

Far from being practices inherited from traditional ways of relating to the state, or formulistic instrumental outcomes of policy, we thus argue that forms of state engagement that rely on personal linkages and a politics of favours at the local level are an adaptation to local and contemporary dynamics. In optimistic dialogue with Chatterjee (2004), we build on Corbridge et al. (2005) and Robins (2008), and hypothesize that far from being contradictory, principles of local democracy allow for the development and, sometimes, the re-composition of the practices of local political societies. In this special issue, we thus explore the wide-array of ways in which the state is accessed, and the consequent politics and possibilities for deepening democracy and development in such contexts.

Entanglements in everyday politics and practices: An outline of the special issue

The papers collected here ground theoretical questions in empirical material and case studies in order to capture some of the ‘messy realities’ and actual practices of everyday engagement with the state by low-income residents in cities of the South (**Figure 1**). These rich empirical materials are used to confront and nuance dominant and emerging theories. In doing so, the papers avoid overly normative positions that make assumptions about what ‘democratic’

relationships between residents and the state 'should be'. Like Holston (2008), the issue collectively challenges a pattern of analysis that runs the risk of falling back into too simple an assessment of the relationship between 'civil society', the state, and existing political dynamics.

Figure 1: Map of South Africa including township and inner city case study sites

The first three papers in the issue focus on specific spaces of engagement between low-income residents and state representatives, and question the articulation between the modern state and good governance principles and everyday practices and representations of the state. **Claire Bénit-Gbaffou** bases her theoretical analysis of the fine line between local democracy and clientelism on the study of processes of negotiation at the micro-local level in Johannesburg, between local residents attempting to access public resources or to resist eviction, and either local councilors, state representatives or local party leaders. She proposes a more complex understanding of both participation and clientelism in order to understand the extent to which they both offer opportunities for resident groups to engage in urban politics, but, at the same time, represent a risk of sedation of all form of radical movement. **Chloé Buire** also considers new governance mechanisms, in particular highly politicised subcouncils in Cape Town, and questions the extent to which they offer another platform for residents to be heard, to access the state or to develop personal relationships with decision-makers. She contrasts the political logic of their constitution (mainly as rewards or compensation for political negotiations at the metropolitan level between different parties), and the way they work on a daily basis. Her paper reflects on the ways in which subcouncil processes are appropriated by local residents, in what could be understood as the 'core' of Cape Town 'political society'. **Margot Rubin** goes further when she argues, in her study of relationships between low-income residents and local administrative services in Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni, that corruption and favours might actually constitute a 'space of hope' for residents awaiting access to state benefits, in a context of slow service delivery, ever-lasting waiting lists, and the opacity and blockage of administrative mechanisms to access basic resources. This mode of access to public benefits through 'porous bureaucracies' however has its own shortcomings in the ways it shapes citizenship and the efficiency of public delivery.

The second set of three papers highlight how contradictory and heterogeneous 'the state' is, and how these contradictions, in time, in space or in scale, both prevent radical policy change to be implemented or lobbied for, and simultaneously open spaces of opportunities for low-income residents or groups of residents, for instance, to resist a decision or policy. **Zainab Bawa's** paper explores the local politics of access to water in low-income neighborhoods in Mumbai, India, furthering ethnographic understanding of the crucial role of local administration (especially junior bureaucrats and engineers) in facilitating access to water for lower income residents. She highlights the importance of negotiations within the state itself (between politicians from different levels of local government, political parties, and officials of different ranks), and, drawing on a comparison with Johannesburg, shows how the privatization or corporatisation of water provision curtails the opportunities for these negotiations and hence for low-income residents access to the state. Back in South Africa and drawing from an experiment of setting up water users platforms in several South African cities, **Laila Smith** also considers the complex relationships between civil society organizations, councilors and administrative officers, showing the challenges of cooperative and participatory governance. Through a narrative about the

multiple relationships between disenfranchised urban residents and various agents and institutions of the state in the city of Cape Town, **Jessica Thorn and Sophie Oldfield** reflect on the practices and politics of land occupation. They illustrate the ‘messiness’ of public policy on land issues, evident in a set of contradictions between politicians’ promises, court decisions, the administrative unfolding of land and housing processes, and public concern regarding social unrest. In doing so, the authors consider the ways in which city-land occupiers encounter each other in a settlement, through the threat of eviction, in the courts, and with other low-income communities, a set of processes that shape citizenship, representations of the state, and a broader politics of urban land.

Conclusion

Theoretically and empirically this collection of papers generates an exciting conversation. Explicitly in Zainab Bawa’s case and implicitly in the issue in general, the papers invite comparison between the Indian and the South African contexts. Many draw on the conceptual framework proposed by Partha Chatterjee (2004), exploring the actual and diverse ‘political societies’ in various contexts. For instance, Bawa argues that the concept of ‘political society’ might be too simplistic as it adopts a dual vision of state versus society – whereas all the papers show the heterogeneity, contradictions and internal negotiations within the state. Collectively, papers do not necessarily contradict Chatterjee’s framework, but rather further explore the nature of political society and its relationship to a non-unitary state, deeply influencing lower income residents’ access to the state and deeply shaped by institutional contexts, both internal (distribution of powers and functions at different scales of the state) and external (degree of privatization, corporatization or outsourcing of urban services), and dynamics of political change.

Moreover, Benit-Gbaffou explains the rise of clientelism in Johannesburg by studying the structure of council, participatory and decentralization mechanisms. Rubin shows the importance of opportunities for corruption in the housing domain due to the extreme opacity and complexity of housing policies and processes (split between various layers of government with no clarity on roles and responsibilities). Smith compares eThekweni and Cape Town political contexts to analyze why the nexus councilors-officials-residents organizations take different forms and the impact it has on the success or failure of participatory spaces such as water users platforms. She highlights existing gaps between officials and politicians – be it officials sidelining politicians because of their fears of political instability, which eventually leads to the failure of the water users platform initiative (Cape Town); or ward councilors intimidated by officials as they don’t have the technical knowledge to engage with them meaningfully (eThekweni). Oldfield and Thorn show how residents’ initiatives to secure a right to stay fail because of a state’s internal contradictions (false promises by politicians, but also political instability and change of political personnel especially at the Mayoral and Premier levels, as well as the contradiction between the judicial and the legislative arms of the state); but, nonetheless, how residents use their networks within Cape Town civil society to pressurize politicians (both positively, gaining political skills; and negatively, using politicians’ fear of a counter-mobilization in the temporary area to which the courts have ordered they are moved). Buire similarly shows how local leaders are able to use (also not to a full extent) governance platforms (in this instance, subcouncils) that have been created for merely political reasons at the metropolitan level (to reward loyalists and consolidate

alliances, as well as expand political control over local areas), but nevertheless have created opportunities for lobbying the state.

In respect to a broader power dynamic between state and the poor, not all authors share the same optimism regarding the ability of low-income residents to navigate and use, for their own or a collective benefit, the state's contradictions and complexities. Rubin and Smith show how inaccessible and opaque the state is, respectively in the fields of housing and of water – the former stressing how this opacity is perceived by low-income residents as corruption, whilst the latter intervention in water governance attempts at least to 'educate' a few (residents, councilors and officials) to better navigate the system. In contrast, Oldfield and Thorn, Bawa, Benit-Gbaffou, and Buire rather emphasize how the complexity of the state multiplies and diversifies opportunities lower income residents find to access the state.

Also apparent in this collection of papers is the contrasting nature of 'civil society' in Indian and South African cities. Zainab Bawa mentions the conservatism of Mumbai civil society, which, she argues, generally objects to politicians' attempts to connect informal (illegal) settlements to water networks, in the name of legality, order and property rights. Drawing on South African case studies, most of the other authors understand civil society as grounded in low-income areas and more sensitive to the interests of the poor living in informal conditions – for instance, fighting against the criminalization of the poor and for their access to the state and its resources in spite of their informality, either from a pragmatic, local perspective, or from a broader, radical and oppositional perspective. But the contrast lies not only between Indian and South African urban societies. Benit-Gbaffou and Rubin side more with Bawa in their analysis of the limited nature of the poor's access to state resources and their inability to really challenge state's distribution of resources, not to say policies. In their case studies, social movements are weak, community organizations fragmented and fending for their own, narrow interests at the detriment of broader contestation of state policies and practices (for instance, housing evictions, housing allocation). Their analysis fits quite well with Chatterjee's anxiety that 'political society', because of its linkages to and dependence on local politics, is generally unable to initiate radical change and sustained contention.

In contrast, papers from Oldfield and Thorn as well as Buire emphasize the creativity and resistance of local leaders and communities³, rather than their internal divisions and political weakness (that make them easier to manipulate and to be 'divided and ruled'). Smith's paper stands in-between, as she also stresses the contrast between radical social movements refusing to engage in the water users platform initiative since they see it as state-dominated platform advertising the commodification of water, and individuals or local community organizations eager to understand better how to navigate the water provision system. Smith is optimistic that better knowledge can create and strengthen low-income residents' ability to challenge the state; while radical social movements (in her case study) contend that this type of engagement with the state leads to political sedation and an impossible-to-contest entanglement with state institutions and actors. This debate resonates with the Marx-Engels dispute over the validity of working class housing reform in the nineteenth century – in which the latter argued that a slight improvement

³ For the former it might partly be linked by the unity of a community sharing the same status of informal dwellers and threatened by collective eviction.

of workers housing condition would only take them further away from revolution and a radical contestation and change of the housing provision system⁴.

Certainly, what is called ‘civil society’ in South African cities seems different from Chatterjee’s conceptual understanding, based on Indian contexts: a minority and an elite, mostly conservative in its action – interested in consolidating property rights – possibly heavily dominated by internationally funded NGOs which have to be in line with global institutions reformist positions. In the South African cases mentioned here, civil society appears potentially more radical, possibly leading to policy change and fending for ‘the majority of the people’ rather than a small conservative elite, even if elements of conservatism and selfishness indubitably exist in South African civil society. Collectively, the special issue highlights, in turn, how Chatterjee’s conceptual framework makes it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the social change which lies at the core of South African urban dynamics, if not as an everyday reality at least as a political horizon.

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⁴ See Huchzermeyer M, (forthcoming), for a stimulating parallel between this debate and contemporary urban debates on housing in Kenya.

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Figure 1

