

## **In Service of the Public Good? Towards the Ethnography of the State**

Eva Nadai  
Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit/FHNW  
[eva.nadai@fhnw.ch](mailto:eva.nadai@fhnw.ch)

Christoph Maeder  
Pädagogische Hochschule Zürich  
[christoph.maeder@phzh.ch](mailto:christoph.maeder@phzh.ch)

*Workshop Proposal for the SSA Conference Common Good and Self-Interest*

The power and pervasiveness of the state is a prominent topic in public debates, yet a blind spot in much of sociological theory. As a number of theorists remarked in one way or the other the state is a social entity, which is hard to pin down. According to Jessop (2001: 167) it is “the site of a paradox”, by being an “institutional ensemble among others” but at the same time being responsible for “maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is a part”. On the one hand it seems to exert sovereignty with a will expressed in its laws, on the other hand it “does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is the fiction of philosophers” (Trouillot 2001: 126). Recent sociological theory tends to dethrone the state as a uniform actor and a subject with an own will, let alone as the unquestionable servant of the common good. Instead sociologists emphasize its fragmented and somewhat imaginary nature. Bourdieu, for instance, describes the state as a well-founded illusion, which only exists because everyone believes in its reality (Bourdieu 2014: 14). The state becomes real in the everyday world through diplomas, professional qualifications, welfare payments or even time regimes (e.g. school-year, public holidays and the like). Moreover, the state as embodiment of the “res publica” is a narrative arising out of the self-descriptions of political actors and cannot be taken at face value. So the sociological theory of the state is challenged by, on the one hand, experiences and images of the state as a powerful actor and, on the other hand, conceptions of the state as having an illusionary, deceptive, almost religious character. Critical sociologists therefore call for empirical studies of the state that are “historically specific, institutionally sensitive and action-oriented” (Jessop 2001: 166).

Ethnography, we believe, has a lot to offer in this respect. Ethnographic approaches to the state start with the assumption of its significance, based on substantive assertions and ideas about the social order. But the state must be instantiated, communicated and represented in words, symbols and practices on different levels of the social. From the “street-level bureaucracy” (Lipsky 1980), where we encounter the state “at the counter” (Dubois 2005) up to the ideological level or the “metarécits” (Lyotard 1984) we experience a constant flow of practices attributed to, or originating from the state, which are entering our daily lives and shape our very existence. There is hardly any realm of the social, which is not regulated or heavily affected by the state. The state plays a major role in welfare, education, health, economy, science, environmental policies, the production of safety and risk, the formation of social inequality, the making of national identities etc. – the Leviathan is alive and growing wherever we look.

The proposed workshop aims at bringing together ethnographic research in and about the realm of state(s). The focus is on research that contributes to a wider picture of this institution and its workings between serving the public good and pursuing specific group interests by delivering “on the ground”-descriptions of the state as an ensemble of situated practices. Ethnographic research in a strict sense, i.e. involving prolonged fieldwork including participant observation, will be privileged. But we also welcome papers based on an ethnographic approach in the sense of reconstructing the abstract social entity of the state from examining “actual activities of actual people” (Smith 2005) without necessarily comprising observation. Papers will be collected by a call for papers and by invitation; the organizers of the workshop will also contribute with their own research. Papers may be presented in German, French or English.

## References

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2014. *Über den Staat: Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1989-1992*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Dubois, Vincent. 2005. Le guichet des organismes sociaux ou l'institution des pauvres. In: Ion, Jacques (ed.) *Le travail social en débat(s)*. Paris: La Découverte, 205-218.
- Lipsky, Michael. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracies. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russel Sage.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1984. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Smith, Dorothy E.. 2005. *Institutional Ethnography. A Sociology for People*. Lanham: AltaMira.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2001. "The Anthropology of the State in the Age of Globalization. Close Encounters of the Deceptive Kind." *Current Anthropology*. 42 (1):125-138.