Politics and Space C

The state of this: Introduction to the special issue

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This special issue has undeniably been in process for some time – the first paper was published online three years ago – in part because of the impacts of Covid-19 on the everyday lives of authors, reviewers, and editors of *Environment and Planning C*. The pandemic has (among other things) emphasised the multiple ways in which our education systems, the economy, everyday habits, and the government are all tied up with one another. The assemblage of various public and private infrastructures to enact a state-based biopolitics in response to each of the viral variants occurred in front of our very eyes, as did the resistance to that biopolitics both by populations who saw state-oppression in public health measures and by the virus itself, which evolved in synchronic emergence with the cacophonous human responses. Never has the role of the more-than-human in our politics been more apparent; never has the amalgamation of the state and society been so readily on display (Mitchell, 1991). So while the special issue has been delayed, its relevance has only been made more clear.

In what follows I first trace the emergence of a literature I refer to as the 'New Statecraft', which emphasises the state as emergent from everyday performances; I then illustrate how assemblage thinking has allowed this literature to incorporate the more-than-human and material into our understanding of states, state power, and the potential to affect states and their policies. In the final section of this introduction, I introduce the five papers of this special issue, relating them to the insights of the New Statecraft, and more specifically assemblage theory.

New statecraft, who dis?

Recent work in political geography and beyond has re-worked our understanding of the state, moving away from the modernist, transcendental state that occupied much of Twentieth Century social science (Johnston, 1982). The failure of the modern state to account for the wide scope of 'the political' led to an increasing focus on forms of politics that exceeded the state (Beck, 1998). The state came to be perceived as a tired trope, a mirage of Political Science and a desperate attempt to contain the political forces that could

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not (or would not) be channelled through liberal political processes. Instead, progressive forces focused on the scale of the everyday as a site for organisation and the practice of politics beyond parties and policy. The literature on 'everyday politics' proliferated through the 2000s, drawing on a range of theoretical sources such as feminist theory (Hyndman, 2004; Sharp, 2007; Staeheli et al., 2004) and non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007). By the 2010s, studying the state in political geography became deeply unfashionable.

What was needed was an infusion of fresh thinking. A range of scholars took the 'new' literature on everyday politics and began to apply it to – somewhat counterintuitively – the concept of the state to which it had been devised as an alternative. This 'New Statecraft' literature flipped the state on its head, seeing it as emergent from everyday performances, located both within and outside the state's claimed territory. Thus, statecraft is no longer just the practices of elites but also the practices of everyday life through which the state is crafted and given a central role in social life. That is, the everyday life of state elites was put in a flat ontology with the everyday life of everyone else involved in the (re)production of the state.

Given the focus on 'crafting' in the New Statecraft, it is perhaps not surprising that the conceptual vocabulary of the humanities has predominated. Among the first political geographers in re-thinking 'state-craft' was Joe Painter (2006). Using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *prosaics*, Painter (2006, 760) highlighted that the state was far from the monolithic actor of Twentieth Century International Relations Theory; rather, 'Prosaics highlights the intrinsic heterogeneity and openness of social life and its "many-voiced" character. It challenges all authoritative monological master subjects (God, Man, the Unconscious, the Sovereign as well as the State.' That is, Bakhtin's prosaics attends to the everyday encounter with the state, a highly variegated category which includes everything from being visited at home by a midwife, to being pinged by a Covid-19 app and told to self-isolate, to being SWATed by police in your sleep. Thinking of the state in this way highlights the multiple voices through which the state expresses itself; there is no singular intention or voice that is the 'real' state. Rather, we are confronted by a muddled, self-contradicting, fragmented actor.

Another of Painter's innovations was to call our attention to the binaries that are used to delineate the state, such as state and non-state, or public and private. Specifically, his use of prosaics highlighted the blurred boundaries of the state, which relies on non-state bodies, institutions, and things to enact its authority. For example, Painter (2006) uses the ubiquitous pint glass, which in the UK bears the mark of the Crown, indicating the state's ability to regulate both alcohol consumption and the measures used therein. Other examples include the quintessential state space of the courtroom, which for its legitimacy depends on private citizens – jurors, attorneys, etc. – to co-produce justice. Bodies and objects can go from being public to private and back again as they are used differently, or according to various rhythms. Consider for example that same courtroom, where the bewigged judge represents the authority of the state; nevertheless afterhours the un-wigged judge goes home as a private citizen.

Rather than accepting them as representations of some existing state-centred ontology, Painter instead asserted that many things in political life exhibit qualities that are attributed to states. For example, in addition to the club of states populating the United Nations there is a whole array of territorial and non-territorial polities that exhibit some degree of stateness. Rather than ruling these out as deficient, it instead foregrounds the diversity of forms that UN member-states take and sees these polities (such as the Tibetan Government-in-Exile – see McConnell, 2016) as on the same spectrum of state-ness as those UN member-states. Indeed, rather than more- or less-state-like, polities on the spectrum are perhaps best conceptualised as *differently state-ish*; even 'real' states like the United States

are idiosyncratic as a result of their specific processes of political evolution (in the case of the USA, for instance, due to a constitutional system that distributes sovereignty amongst the various states as well as the Federal government).

The abstract machine of 'the state' is therefore an idealised plan that is only realised in the mind's eye; specific states (and other polities) all perform state-ness in efforts to be recognised as such and realise the political legitimacy that comes from that transcendent ideal. As Painter drew on Bakhtin's *prosaics*, McConnell et al. (2012) draw on Bhabha's concept of *mimicry*. Whereas Bhabha was describing the efforts of subaltern subjects to mimic colonisers, McConnell et al. use the term to describe polities' mimicry of the state – the implication being that the state's claims to legitimate political superiority are parallel to the claimed political superiority of the coloniser over the colonised. As Bhabha noted, there is no performance that will allow the colonised to achieve parity with the coloniser; rather, the scrutiny of their mimicry will be heightened until new, more detailed distinctions can be drawn to maintain the hierarchy.

The usage of literary theory to conceptualise the state has had the unintended effect of dematerialising performances of state-ness and shifting them into the realm of textualism. Jeffrey (2012) reverses this trend – while maintaining the humanities lens – by utilising Bourdieu's concept of *virtuosity* which shifts focus to the *embodied* practices of performers. Virtuosity highlights the ways in which actors and musicians can draw on their bodily capacities to improvise by deviating from the play or song they are performing. That is, different elements can be emphasised or repeated, making the performance unique. This both highlights the multiplicity of state performance occurring simultaneously within a given territory – returning to Bakhtin's polyvocality – but also the role of habit and the coding of bodies in performing stateness.

The 'New Statecraft' thus offers a version of the state that is performed, multiple, and emergent. How can we reconcile this fragile state with the seeming transcendence of the state in our lives? To do so requires an understanding of the state as a kind of relational space, which is not dependent only on these embodied performances but also on the relation of those embodied performances to other materials of the state – bureaucratic offices, paperwork, military equipment, and so on. By conceptualising the state as an assemblage, with human bodies and their performances just one part of the larger constellation of the state, we can imagine the state as unfolding simultaneously at a range of temporalities – from the ephemera of embodied political performance to the *longue durée* of state archives, marble monuments, and infrastructure.

Processes unfolding at these various temporalities – both anthropocentric or otherwise – can resonate with one another to tip polities into one formation or another (McConnell and Dittmer, 2018; Visoka, 2019), or even to deterritorialise the state entirely. These state-assemblages are of course also not purely endogenous in their processes of change – they can stretch across state boundaries through relations of exchange (e.g., Webber and Han, 2017) or through diplomatic relations, and these connections can be a key vector for affects. Consequently, diplomacy has been a key site at which assemblage thought has been put to work (e.g., Clark, 2021; Clark and Jones, 2019; Dittmer, 2017; Jones and Clark, 2018, 2019).

The special issue

As stated in the introduction, this special issue aims to consolidate these gains in assemblage thinking about the state, and to push them further. Their individual contributions are – pardon the pun – a multiplicity. For the purposes of this introduction, however, they are organised in relation to the above review of 'the New Statecraft'.

The state beyond the state. Sam Page's article, 'Jeremy Corbyn and the War Machine: Assemblage and affect in the 2015 UK Labour Party Leadership Contest', focuses on the surprise anointing of Jeremy Corbyn as the new leader of the UK's Labour Party in 2015. In doing so, Page uses the Deleuzean concept of the war machine to conceptualise the insurgent populism of the Corbyn phenomenon, a framing that can also be applied to the following year's Brexit revolt and Trump campaign. In this context, the war machine highlights elections as the moment in which private actors are drawn into the state assemblage; they are moments of de- and re-territorialisation. This is both the case for candidates who, depending on the result, might became state functionaries, but also for voters and campaigners, who may (for a time) become territorialised into a party and whose trace (the vote itself) enters into state assemblages as a form of legitimation. Further, as has become clear in recent years, elections are dependent on an array of private socio-technical systems, whether they are news media, social media (as discussed by Page), or voting machinery (e.g., the much-discussed Dominion Voting Systems of 2020). These are integral in channelling the affects of the election both through (potential) voters' bodies and back through the state election apparatus. Page's deployment of the 'war machine' concept provides a way to think about electoral geography and the hazards of winning state power.

Tom Baker and Pauline McGuirk's article 'Out from the Shadows? Voluntary organisations and the assembled state' similarly highlights the blurred boundary between the state and other institutions, explicitly drawing on Painter's prosaic state-ness in doing so. While the 'shadow state' has long been studied in terms of the co-optation of NGOs by the state as they are folded into its social and development agendas, there has been little attention directed to how NGOs can affect state policies once they have entered into the state assemblage. After all, for Massumi (2015) the encounter is defined by the ability of those involved to both affect *and be affected*. Given the focus on policy assemblages (especially in urban geography, e.g., McCann and Ward, 2011), this omission is perhaps surprising, but also so is the fact that the transnational assemblages produced by these NGOs (in Baker and McGuirk's case, NGOs working against homelessness) have not received attention either. Assemblage thinking offers the chance to theorise the agency that NGOs wield through their relations both with each other and with the states in which they are embedded. It also offers the chance to start with everyday practices rather than with abstractions like the (shadow) state.

Multiplicitous states of bio- and geo-politics. Ben Anderson's article 'Scenes of Emergency: Dis/re-assembling the promise of the UK emergency state' documents the passage of 'state of emergency' legislation in the UK, noting how these debates were animated by a double concern around both the excess of state power and the excess of events; these led to the simultaneous and indeterminate de- and re-territorialisation of the state, as various visions of the state were conjured and injected into debate. By highlighting 'scenes' of emergency, Anderson advocates a method for revealing the state's indeterminacy – as is clear in these debates around emergency powers, where the state is portrayed as a paternal force of biopolitical power, as well as a classed and self-interested establishment. The state is neither singular nor transcendental – rather it is multiple and contingent. Anderson approaches this through the language of thresholds, or what have elsewhere been called tipping points (see McConnell and Dittmer, 2018).

Similarly, Thilo Wiertz's article, 'Biopolitics of Migration: An assemblage approach,' takes up the challenge offered by the multiplicity and polyvocality of the state. He argues that assemblage theory can allow the totalising and univeralising language of biopolitics, perhaps best articulated by Foucault and Agamben in the unitary concept of 'sovereign

power', to be pluralised and made to relate to and with empirical observations of the migration crisis. That is, the transcendental authority of the sovereign to allocate subjects between life and death is, at least in regard to the current migration crisis, a rather blunt instrument when it comes to the wide array of distinctions drawn among populations in their exposure to the state migration apparatus. Indeed, the lack of coherence to this apparatus's treatment of migrants is quintessentially a sign of the polyvocal state. Further, Wiertz argues convincingly that the neo-vitalism of the New Materialism speaks meaningfully to the force of desire, of life itself, to evade the overweening power of these state apparatuses. It therefore provides a way out of the sometimes-oppressive version of power that comes from Foucault via his concept of the apparatus or *dispositif* (Legg, 2011; see also Kurtz et al., 2021).

Finally, Jason Dittmer's article 'The State, All at Sea: Interoperability and the Global Network of Navies' focuses on the efforts by the United States to incorporate ocean space into the logic of the terrestrial state system through the Global Network of Navies (GNoN). The GNoN attempts to do this by producing a techno-political assemblage of various naval vessels and port facilities from many (but not all) states. Two maritime materialities impact this territorialisation of ocean space. First, ships at sea struggle with managing dataflows as they cannot rely on cables or other cheap, fast technologies of data mediation. The uneven investment by the world's navies in communication technologies mean that the technologically sophisticated US Navy is forced to the lowest common denominator of its allies' capabilities, shaping decisions around which navies can be included, and thus which maritime spaces can be governed. Second, the vast materiality of the sea (despite these techno-solutions) remains excessive and produces an incompleteness to the US-led territorialisation of ocean spaces. This article advances the literature on assemblage and the state by addressing the materiality of the relations that compose transnational assemblages, and the particular challenges offered by material environments to the often-dematerialising state projects of network-formation.

In conclusion, these articles together mark a significant advance in the use of assemblage theory to think through the state. Collectively, they pick up the cause of de-stabilising and teasing apart the voices and agencies of the state, allowing for dynamism and incoherence is equal measure. The state may no longer be a stable entity to theorise, but the study of the state-as-assemblage in political geography remains in rude health.

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