Bringing the Margins Back In: War Making and State-Making in the Borderlands

Abstract

This workshop will concentrate on the dynamics of contemporary conflict and state formation in unstable border areas starting from everyday practices and institutions and the way these affect the making and unmaking of political configurations. Presenters are asked to look at borderlands as actual political units that generate their own actions and outcomes. Particular attention will be paid to the explicit transboundary character of borderland practices presented from a historical or ethnographic perspective.

Scientific summary

Conventional wisdom has it that states are built from the political centre, and then gradually expand their power and knowledge over the periphery. The borderland is consequently treated as a margin, rather than an analytical unit that can be studied in its own right. As a result, we know more about the way states deal with borders than how the state – as a set of practices, norms and institutions – is actually being reproduced, transformed and given meaning by populations situated at the border (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Baud and Van Schendel, 1997). This has contributed to a deep misunderstanding of borderlands as marginal spaces, fraught with avoidance, savagery and rebellion.

A borderland perspective challenges much of this received wisdom about contemporary state formation as a centrally guided process. First, it makes clear that state formation is never a linear process, but national, regional and local identities continue to exist side by side. If the principal fiction of the nation-state is territorial, social, and economic homogeneity, then borders always challenge this construct (Horsman and Marshall, 1995; Sahlins, 1991). Second, borders are commonly characterized by a strong tendency for transgression. By constantly ignoring, contesting and subverting state power, borderland dwellers implicitly and explicitly call into question the legitimacy of the state and its ability to control its own territory (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Abraham and van Schendel, 2005). Daily practices at the border bear the potential to engender their own conventions and regulations that exist parallel, conjointly, and in opposition to state institutions.

Analytically, borderland practices can generate two distinct effects from the part of central states. On the one hand, they can provoke an authoritarian reaction, whereby the visibly contested nature of borderland societies becomes conducive for violent and exceptional forms of government. Such has happened for example in the Northeast Indian borderlands, where exceptional measures have given sweeping powers to security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations against the region's "rebellious" populations (Baruah, 2007). On the other hand, however, borderlands can also become cockpits of political creativity (Lonsdale, 1988) that force dominant political regimes into important concessions. Such has happened for example in Africa's Great Lakes region, where the constant movement of people, goods and practices across borders have involved a gradual reinterpretation of institutions of legality, state and territory –and practices at the margins have to some extent transformed the state's "centre". On the whole, state-society relations in the borderland can be believed to evolve around different tactics and strategies that involve a strong mixture of the previously discussed extremes.

Fundamental to our understanding of such state-society relations is the acknowledgement that claims to sovereignty (be it by states, self-declared brokers or traditional chiefs) are always tentative in the face of fragmented and unpredictable configurations of power. As a result, the exercise of sovereign power necessarily involves a great deal of (hidden or overt) violence (Hansen and Stepputat, 2005). Given their tendency for transgression, however, borderland practices have a strong potential to re-calibrate such state-society boundaries and the often violent relations underpinning them (Goodhand, 2008). This makes a focus on zones/periods of violent armed confrontation in the world's borderlands an extremely relevant topic of study: although the rigidity of the international system has made that armed conflict rarely modified international borders since the end of colonialism, it is not surprising that many – if not most – of today's intractable conflicts involve an important border dimension (Pugh, Cooper and Goodhand, 2004). Whether on the Northeast Indian or Afghan-Pakistani border, the northern Caucasus, the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa, or Kosovo and Bosnia in Europe, protracted conflicts in these areas have fundamentally challenged political forms associated with the (post-) modern nation-state and its project of imposing order and authority on dispersed populations (Ballentine and Sherman, 2003; Callaghy, Kassimir and Latham, 2001). Usually such

conflicts also occur in regions where the state is characterized as "weak", failed" or "collapsed". Political anthropology offers an interesting perspective on this terrain because rather than taking such categories for granted, its longitudinal and participative approach can be used to start asking fundamental questions about the changing relationships between centre and periphery, public and private, legal and illegal practices and institutions, whereby the margins are treated as essential to the centre, and the exception a necessary component of the rule (Das and Poole, 2004; Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Scott, 2009).

The questions guiding this joint reflection will consequently include:

- Which modes of accumulation, distribution and protection make borders the contemporary neuralgia points in wider regional conflict complexes? Which types of resources and strategies does this involve? And what makes these modes and resources so particularly relevant for states?

- What is the impact of contemporary peace building projects on borderlands? In what ways do international interventions in protracted conflicts recalibrate core-periphery relationships? Which opportunities do these interventions offer to borderland populations?

- What is the role of (political, economic) power brokers in fusing state and non-state institutions in the borderland in times/spaces of protracted conflict? In what ways does their navigation in different institutional settings produce alternative forms of regulatory authority during, and after protracted wars?

- What are the various levels of identification of border populations during wartime? In what ways are these identifications challenged, hardened or crystallized as a result of conflict? And how do these changing social relations transform the structure of the state in the borderland?

- What are the symbolic aspects of power demonstration, projection and contestation at the border during times of protracted political and economic crisis? How does protracted conflict affect the performance and repertoires of state representation at the border? And what does this produce in terms of state institutions and heterogeneity?

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