

OFF-CENTERED STATES:

POLITICAL FORMATION AND DEFORMATION IN THE ANDES

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The Andean region has become a site of unprecedented global concern and curiosity in recent years. Governments that represent diverse and often unorthodox followings, and that claim variously to lead or constrain a continental anti-neoliberal vanguard, have made the Andean region a powerful signifier, of hope and fear, for political observers around the world. Indeed, constituencies located at multiple sites and scales—local, regional and transnational—have looked to the states of the Andean region to implement deeply held if often conflicting ideas about social justice, economic prosperity and individual wellbeing. But from which locations do these constituencies look, and toward what do they cast their gaze? The last decade has been witness to major restructuring initiatives that have generated contradictory waves of governmental contraction and expansion. These restructuring initiatives have been associated with shifting and uneven distributions of political, economic and social tasks within and between public and private sectors, and have been accompanied by widespread debate over the meaning of citizenship. Among the most important consequences of these experiments in restructuring has been a loss of certainty about how political life is to be organized, and who is to be entrusted with the task of organizing it. This in turn has produced ambiguity about what the state is, where it is located, and what it means to participate in political life.

It is in this context that the present conference aims to critically reexamine processes of state making in the Andes, past and present, focusing primarily on the everyday, extra-official, and frequently invisible or partially concealed permutations of rule in the lives of Andean people. In doing so, we propose to draw upon and extend into Andean studies the work of various theorists who have understood the state primarily as a *claim* upon legitimate domination, and have investigated the assemblages of social relations that variously compose, disassemble, and recompose around such claims. This approach pushes

us to consider how acts of governance may intersect with official institutions of government but never be entirely determined by them or bound to their authorized agendas. As such, our work with concrete cases aims to understand the more privatized, localized, and internalized manifestations of state as something other than simply an add-on to the politically ‘real’—the sanctioned and bureaucratic institutions of power that bear the seal of state. Rather, our focus is on claims to the right to rule, as these are enacted in specific contexts, in which a materially-grounded political imaginary and notions of proper state-citizen relations are formed and worked through.

It is our contention that national-territorial models of state formation, be they conceptualized in terms of core/ periphery morphologies, centralization/ decentralization tensions, or relations between bureaucratic centers and their margins, obscure our understanding of the multiplicity of ways in which state power is insinuated into the fabric of everyday life in the Andes. We seek instead to examine Andean states both *as* off-centered political fields and *from* off-centered locations of analysis. What kinds of actors have sought to carry out political projects under the umbrella of ‘state’? How are these attempts legitimated (if at all), and what challenges or competitions arise from them? How do local performances of statecraft coordinate or conflict with national political structures and articulate with newly enhanced regional and municipal governmental institutions?

By framing the conference around the notion of “off-centered states,” we also seek to draw attention to the production of political subjects, and to foreground questions of political subjection. We are interested in particular in shifting frontiers of citizenship, and in distinctions between normative and incomplete or deviant citizens, whether they are defined according to race, language, gender, class or other criteria. Amid expanded rhetorical assertions of democracy and inclusion, what locations of identity, personhood, and place are being newly marginalized or “off-centered?” What consequences attend to these dislocations in relation to purported functions of state, such as health care, security, education, and juridical process?

We foresee four main clusters of inquiry in the investigations to follow:

First, we want to encourage the development of what might be called a *critical phenomenology of the state*. Our aim here is to attend closely to the social space of lived governmental encounters and to ask about the conditions that make the state appear present in everyday social relations, as well as how it is

apprehended—granted objective status, known, “seen” and experienced as such—by governed populations. How are the often ambiguous distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate rule reconciled as state projects get enacted through vernacular political systems, as unauthorized agents appropriate the lexicon of state to advance their own political and economic projects, and in zones of ‘graded’ or ‘fragmented’ sovereignty (such as indigenous communities, haciendas, capitalist production sites, private clinics, and so on)?

Second, we want to focus attention on the broader morphology of statecraft by mapping governing structures and textures in ways that extend beyond simply tracking the centrifugal tentacles of bureaucratic reach, or that posit “limits” to a reified state. How might we trace out, instead, competing networks of claims to political legitimacy and conditions of subjection, overlapping zones of official and unofficial governmental practice, and the rippling effects of state action into private, domestic, and affective relations?

Third, we want to open up an investigation into the role of fantasy and imagination in generating the idea of the state. By means of which sets of practices—material, discursive, ritual and performative—do people come to accept states as real and enduring parts of the social landscape? What everyday objects and encounters do people regard as embodying the state, and how are these objects and relations produced, assembled, circulated and consumed? Which conditions of economy, society and politics enable the reproduction of state-generating practices, and in which conditions does the “magic” of the state dissipate? How does that magic come to inhabit alternative sets of practices, alternative claims to the right to govern?

The **fourth** area of inquiry attempts to cut across national-territorial models of state power by focusing on cross-border processes of statecraft in regional and international context. Here we attend to the role of trans-national powers such as global capital, counter-insurgency movements and security operations, NGOs and rights organizations in local governance and their influence over and articulation with various levels of state practice.
