Political Power and Government: Negating the Anthropomorphized State

Donald V. Kurtz

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee,
University of Texas-San Antonio

> … there is no such thing as the power of the state. There are only, in reality, powers of individuals – kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses and voters.
>
> Radcliffe-Brown (1940: iii)

> 'Power' is control over resources.
> Nicholas (1966: 52)

> The state does nothing!
> Estellie Smith (1988)

ABSTRACT

This paper reconsiders the explanatory value of the ideas expressed in the words political power and the state. Anthropologists, whom this paper is aimed at and others use these words as though everyone knows what they mean. Instead, there is almost no agreement on their meanings. One result of this confusion is the tendency for anthropologists to anthropomorphize the state as though it were a living human agent. Unfortunately this tendency masks the real sources and nature of political agency in state formations. In this essay, to clarify the ideas of political power and the state and unmask political agency in state formations, I identify the qualities of political power, redefine the state as a structure of political offices occupied by incumbents who comprise the governments of state formations, and consider how power and government agency are related to politics and political processes in state formations.

INTRODUCTION

At the time of this writing, few members of the lay public or media, social scientists in general, and, in particular, socio-cultural anthropologists whom this essay is aimed at, would argue with the statement that Bill Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, and Saddam Hussein are out of power. Nor would they disagree with the observation that George Bush, Tony Blair, and Vladimir Putin are in power. Nor would few of them likely contest the assertion that a state collects taxes, enforces laws, and might sponsor or engage in terror. Certainly none would challenge the idea that the power of a state is awesome.

Comments such as these are made all the time in everyday lay discourse, in the media, and in scholarly writings. As commonplace and seemingly logical as these statements appear to be, the use of the words *power* and *state* in scholarly and professional writings on political phenomena obscures the nature of political power and mystifies the source of the political agency that transpires in that sociopolitical category we refer to as the state. This essay attempts to rectify the misrepresentation and obfuscation, largely by anthropologists, of the explanatory value of the ideas conveyed in the words '*political power*' and 'the *state*'.

THE PROBLEM

When the words '*power*' and '*state*' are used in scholarly writings and oral discourses they are rarely questioned; everyone assumes that everyone knows what everyone else is talking about. Yet, the diversity and variety of contradictory ideas, definitions, contexts, and debates over their use and application suggests otherwise (Abrams 1988; Kurtz 1993, 2001). One might expect this lack of precision in the every-day talk among the public and in the media. But social scientists with a penchant for things political also use them with reckless abandon[1]. Consider the exaggerated declamation by Professor Ronald Cohen when he asserted that the state is:

> the most powerful organization ever developed in the history of the planet. It literally moves mountains and redirects rivers, and it has on occasion sent untold thousands, even millions, to their death (Cohen 1979: 1).

This kind of hyperbole may warm the cockles of the hearts of postmodern and other anthropologists to whom literary devices that anthropomorphize abstractions, such as power and the state, are acceptable scholarly practice. But the comment by Cohen (he is hardly postmodern) shows that they are not alone in applying the ideas of power and the state in ways that muddle the relationship between political power, the state, politics, and political process. Anthropologists who rely on social science epistemologies and aspire to methodologies that aim to explain (and understand) the human condition must be concerned with the exactness by which ideas are adduced. In this paper I shall clarify the ideas of power and the state by exploring three related problems: what are the fundamental qualities of political power, what are a state and its source of agency, and how are power and agency related to politics and political processes in those structures and organizations anthropologists refer to as states?

POLITICAL POWER

'Politics' refers to how political agents, especially leaders, acquire and use power to attain public and private goals (Swartz *et al.* 1966; Bailey 1969, 2001; Kurtz 2001). Despite the significant relationship between power and politics, the nature of political power remains elusive. Definitions and exegeses of power vary widely and too often mystify the idea even more. This may be a result of the fact that power is so fundamental to politics and produces such profound consequences for humankind that it is difficult to accept the idea that the essence of power, those capacities from which political practices and processes emanate, is quite simple and empirically verifiable. To the neglect of that section of the wisdom of 'Ockham's Razor' that argues that explanations of the unknown should begin with what is known, discussions of power commonly begin by ignoring empirical data that informs us of the fundamental capacities of power.

The idea of power that pervades social science literature harks back to Weber's contention that power is 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance' (1964 [1947]: 152). This translates into the adage that power is the ability of 'A' to bend 'B' to his or her will, and even force 'B' to do things that may be inimical to his

or her best interest. This idea is so common that no one questions it seriously. But regardless of its 'Ockhamist' simplicity and insight it obscures those elemental properties, attributes, or capacities that provide some with the means to force others to do things. I believe that it is possible to identify the fundamentals of political power and resolve the dilemma regarding what *precisely* enables 'A' to force 'B' to do something.

In the epigram that precedes this paper Nicholas asserted that 'power is control over resources' (1966: 52). To be more specific I contend that political power is grounded on the control of *material* and *ideo-symbolic* resources that exist in the social, cultural, and physical environments of human societies[2]. The power that agents – in particular, leaders, since politics without leaders is abject inchoateness – use to pursue their goals refers very simply to the quality and quantity of those environmentally embedded material and ideo-symbolic resources that political leaders are able to marshal to compete with other leaders or aspiring leaders. Each resource category is composed of finer distinctions regarding the capacities of the power they provide political leaders[3].

Material resources of power exist as *tangible resources* (cattle, money, pigs, cowry shells, horses, cacao beans, and the like) and *human resources*, or *supporters*. *Supporters* are represented in three categories. *Followers* represent the masses on whom leaders rely for their basic legitimacy and whose whimsical fancies they should curry or risk resistance. *Benefactors* are those who provide leaders with the bulk of their tangible resources. *Loyalists* are morally and ideologically committed to support their leaders to what might be a bitter end[4].

Ideo-symbolic resources are represented by *information, symbols* and *ideologies. Information* is the basis for the production and control of knowledge. Much of this knowledge is expressed in the form of *symbols,* through which leaders load their practices and discourses with meanings. *Ideologies* rely on symbols and information that leaders communicate to followers in various ways to mobilize them for action, such as going to war or winning an election campaign.

To reconsider Weber's proposition in light of this notion of power, 'A' can now bend 'B' to his or her will to the extent that 'A' controls and deploys sufficient *material* and/or *ideo-symbolic* resources – power – to gain his or her ends. However, if 'B' uses

his or her power to resist 'A's' power, then 'A's' success may rely on the skill by which he or she is able to marshal and deploy power to oppose 'B's' power. The quantity of power leaders control often is less important in political contests than the skill by which leaders use that power; leaders who deploy their resources skillfully and strategically are likely to succeed, in competition with agents who have more power but squander it. It behooves us to be more specific regarding which resource(s) or, combination of resources, are involved in support of a political practice. This does not always require detailed analyses of the resources of power involved, only an acknowledgement what the power one uses over another consists of.

Any argument that perceiving political power as resources is so obvious that it does not require elucidation can be challenged by considering how icons in the anthropological analysis of power ignore these factors and, thereby, contribute to the ambiguity of the nature of power. Eric Wolf and Michel Foucault are two such icons.

Wolf identified four modes of power related to his concerns with political economy, modes of production, and deployment of social labor (Wolf 1982). In ascending order of inclusiveness these modes represent the potency of *individuals*, the social interactions of *groups, tactical power*, and *structural power* (Wolf 1990, 1999). Wolf's first two modes of power, individual and group, are variations of Weber's idea of power as an attribute of a person's or group's potency or capacity in power relations to impose their will on others. The third and fourth modes of power, tactical and structural, are extensions of the first two modes. Tactical power is that by which the practices of some agents in political fields and arenas circumscribe and render the practices of other agents less likely. Structural power is that by which agents in political fields and arenas organize the settings in which political processes occur so to be able to direct the flow of power strategically. In this scheme the four modalities are not mutually exclusive; they interact in complex ways. But for Wolf structural power is most important, for it relies on the other modes of power to account for how the deployment of power within a social field works to the advantage of those who hold it.

Wolf's stated goal was to develop a unified strategy of power to explore the relationship between ideology and power in capitalist political economies (Wolf 1990, 1999). Without much stretch,

Wolf's modes of power have a wider application across political economies and political systems other than the capitalist. They also accommodate the politics that transpire in all the state formations that have evolved as well the stateless societies represented in anthropology's ethnographic record. But even though Wolf's analysis of power is quite elegant, like Weber he does not identify the capacities of power that political agents bring to tactical and structural power strategies that may inhibit or reorganize political relations and processes. Consider how much more informative this model could have been if he had taken those specific capacities into account and assigned priorities to the resources or otherwise identified those that under certain conditions enable these agents' politics. Wolf's model presumes that some agents either have more resources than others, or use those at their disposal more skillfully than their competitors who may have more resources. But it also begs the question which resources of power are most important in a given political setting or encounter.

Foucault (1972, 1979, 1980, 1984, 1991) arguably has influenced more than any other person how anthropologists think about power; Wolf, for example, extrapolated his idea of structural power from Foucault (1984). Foucault infused his postmodern philosophical discourses on power with dramatic and epigrammatic pronouncements. But Foucault is not concerned with the essence or substance of power. He is concerned instead with what power does and the effects it produces on individuals and social categories – prisoners, homosexuals, the insane.

To Foucault, power is a force, a sphere, a moving strata, an instrument, a multiplicity of forces, all of which function as 'force relations' that affect and control individuals. Power is not a product of human agency; agents are not important to Foucault. In effect, Foucault takes power to the ultimate extreme as a post-structuralist capacity that abolishes human agency in favor of an anthropomorphized agent that comes in many shapes and forms, from many directions as a vector, an instrument, a technology, a technique, or a discourse, and produces effects, such as knowledge, reality, and regimes of truth. Ultimately, for Foucault, power is 'the overall effect that emerges from all these mobilities' (1980: 93), for it produces knowledge that becomes power which 'is everywhere … because it comes from everywhere' (1980: 93).

This thinking is novel and, like Cohen's (1979) idea of the state, provocative. But the very universality and magnitude Foucault attributes to power reduces the idea of *political power* to insignificance. But then, Foucault is not much interested in politics. Nor does he accord power any positive attributes. Instead he is hostile to power because of the pernicious effects it has on people. While there is truth in the way Foucault identifies power's effects on people, his best remembered ideas – 'knowledge is power' and 'power is everywhere' – are reductions of such complicated philosophical pronouncements that they are relegated to clichés that dilute their importance. By anthropomorphizing power Foucault impedes methods to discern, distinguish, and compare qualities and degrees of power. And his best-known and clichéd contributions to the idea of power, like Wolf's, also beg the question of the underlying capacities of the power.

The idea of the state is muddled even more than that of power because of the failure of scholars to identify it adequately and the agency so commonly attributed to it.

THE STATE

The idea of the state has been part of social science discourse for more than a century. From the beginning the term defied definition and stimulated debate. It continues to do so.

For example, over 70 years ago Titus (1931) identified 145 definitions of the state in the political science literature and questioned the practical value of the idea. When Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940) introduced the state as a serious idea into anthropology Radcliffe-Brown (1940) immediately argued that the state existed only as a fiction for philosophers. His comments led Claessen and Skalník to suggest that the state as such does not exist and therefore should not be 'reified, personified, or sacralized' (1978: 4). David Easton (1953), an eminent political scientist who became frustrated with the Hegelian vagueness of the term 'state', asserted that the 'state' represented a myth that political scientists ought to abandon. The sociologist Philip Abrams argued that the state is a 'mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is' (1988: 58). Foucault states 'frankly' that the state 'may be, after all, … no more than … a mythicized abstraction' (1991: 103). Criticism and commentary regarding the nature and reality of the state as an en-

tity and concept abound and unqualified and often confused use of the idea persists (Kurtz 1993[5]; Grinin *et al.* 2004[6]).

Abrams' (1988) observation that the idea of the state masks political practice identifies the problem that I shall attempt to unmask here. To do so it is necessary to add one more definition of the state to an already crowded inventory of definitions. This is necessary and, I think, important because the definition that I shall provide below is unique and novel among those suggested so far (see Abrams 1988; Kurtz 1993). As we shall see, the definition I provide separates and then reconstitutes the relationship between the state, political power, and the agencies in the state that engage in politics.

THE 'STATE' UNMASKED

For an example of how the idea of the state masks political practice consider again the comment by Ronald Cohen (1979). Cohen claims that the state through its power can move mountains, redirect rivers, and send millions of people to their deaths. As Foucault did with power, Cohen used a post-structuralist epistemology (probably without being aware of it as Foucault was) that abolishes human agency to anthropomorphize the state as a political agent infused with undefined and ambiguous power. I suggest that explanation of these and similar practices that Cohen and others attribute to a post-structuralist, anthropomorphized abstraction can benefit from ideas of the state and power that are empirically verifiable and comparable.

Cohen appears to disagree with this, for he asserts that 'it is next to impossible to obtain a set of traits that applies to more than just a few (state) societies' (1979: 3, parenthesis added). This is not so. There are universal traits that are comparable in all state formations. One trait is the *political office.* It allows us to identify *the sources of the power* that drive 'state' politics and political processes. From the idea of the political office we can then extrapolate other universally comparable traits that identify *the source of political practice* that the idea of the state masks. These traits refer to the *incumbents* of the political offices that constitute the *government* of a state. These traits – office, incumbency, government – preclude the need to anthropomorphize the state as a political agent.

The political office Weber (1964 [1947]) rightfully identifies an office as the outcome of an institutionalization that segregates

statuses according to offices that provides incumbents, but not non-incumbents, with authority and power irrespective of the incumbents' competences or skills. Weber is concerned largely with the institutionalization of bureaucratic offices. State formations certainly contain bureaucratic offices that are involved in the administration of government business. But political offices differ some from the bureaucratic, professional, and other offices Weber identifies. Political offices are endowed with legality and legitimacy from secular and/or supernatural institutions that grant incumbents the authority to access material and ideational power to engage (ideally) in politics aimed at implementing public (and perhaps too frequently private) goals and conducting public business on behalf of constituencies of state formations. The institutionalization of political offices can be accounted for by data in the ethnographic record better than Weber's hypotheses to account for bureaucracy.

The political office is not common to all the political organizations identified ethnographically. Instead the political office is a product of *the evolution of politics* (Kurtz 2004). This evolution culminated in a hierarchy of differentiated and specialized offices vested with authority that grants incumbents of offices access to power that is not available to non-incumbents.

As a result of *the evolution of politics*, a political office emerged as a nascent institution when a leader who held a political status (think here of a big man whose power and influence ceases to exist with his demise or replacement) succeeded in transferring to another individual without resistance from his political community the personal authority and power he had built and accumulated from scratch[7]. Anthropologists identified the recipient of this largesse as a 'chief' and the idea of the 'office of the chief' was infused into the anthropological literature. If the incumbent of this nascent office succeeds in transferring his authority and power to a successor the political office matures and, in general, its authority and power increases. The office becomes a structurally an ideologically infallible political institution when a non-incumbent who aspires to the office challenges the right of an incumbent to hold the office but not the existence of the office itself[8]. A state comes into existence when the authority to access and deploy *certain* powers that are diffused among incumbents and others in the chiefdom becomes vested exclusively in the office of head of state.

With this in mind, I contend that a state may be defined profitably as a formation constituted of a hierarchical structure of related abstract *offices*. Formally, the structure of offices that constitute a state formation is characterized by a single office at the apex of the structure. This office constitutes the executive office of the head of state[9]. It is distinguished from other state offices (and those of chiefs) by the exclusive authority it gives the incumbent to command the armed forces, execute the laws, and to manage and redistribute the revenues (Gibbon 1897; Mair 1962[10]; Polanyi 1966; Cohen Y. A. 1969; Kurtz 1993, 2001)[11]. Offices ranked lower in this hierarchy comprise the state's bureaucracy. In the course of the evolution of the state these offices become vested with authority, usually delegated by the head of state, to use power for purposes designated by the nature of the office, such as to collect taxes, build roads, adjudicate disputes, rally the support of the Gods, root out trouble-makers, quell rebellions, care for the needy, and the like. The authorities vested in these offices will be culturally specific to the time and place of a given state formation, and their ranking and relationship in a state hierarchy may change over time[12]. But regardless of the state formation and its time and place, to be in power, as I mentioned earlier, simply means that an individual who is the incumbent of an office has therefore the legal and probably the legitimate authority to access and use power to carry out the obligations of the office; to be out of power means simply that an individual no longer is the incumbent of a political office and has no legal authority to the power the office provides.

This perspective confirms Professor Estellie Smith's (1988) epigrammatic assertion at the beginning of this essay that, 'The state does nothing'. It cannot. It is a mask for an agency that can emanate only from agents – human beings – who are the incumbents of the offices that constitute the state. The politics and political processes that anthropologists so commonly identify with the state derive in practice from the agency of culturally specific and identifiable *incumbents* of the offices that constitute the *government* of the state.

Incumbents and Government. In the decades preceding and immediately following World War II, British social anthropologists did a good job describing the structures and functions of the governments of pre-capitalist/pre-industrial states, largely African, that

were incorporated into the British Empire. Concerns with changes or political processes by the governments of these states in ways other than those that accommodated the interests of the Empire were not fashionable. Instead, British social anthropologists developed a plethora of typologies to determine the characteristics of these formations (Kurtz 2001). M. G. Smith (1960) continued to think of state government as a structure. But in a novel break with the structural-functional paradigm that pervaded British social anthropology, Smith opened the door for the perception of government as a process carried out by the incumbents of the offices that constitute the state.

Smith identified government as a *process* concerned with the management and control of the public affairs of a political community. The process of government was conducted through its two components: *administration* and *politics*. *Administration* referred to how the state bureaucracy conducted public business and coordinated political activities. *Politics* was concerned with how differentially specialized human agents, individuals and larger collectivities – senates, moots, councils, committees, parliaments – pursued public goals, initiated policy, and regulated public business.

Smith was perhaps the first anthropologist to lower the mask that obscured those practices commonly attributed to the state and suggested that it was the incumbents of the offices of state governments who had the authority to access and deploy the power that could send thousands to their deaths. Unfortunately, this perspective did not assume its rightfully prominent place in the discourses among anthropologists that accounted for political agency in state formations. Instead, the idea of an anthropomorphized state acquired the cachet of a master narrative by which anthropologists continue to account for an agency that rightfully belongs to human practice. Even Foucault who, recall, was so influential in how anthropologists think about power could not change this predilection when he introduced in his later writing the neologism, 'governmentality', to account for the role of government in politics (Foucault 1991). Foucault concluded through a historical analysis from the Middle Ages to the present that government as an apparatus of power aimed at specific goals and outcomes has rendered the idea of the power of the state unimportant. These ideas lead us now to the third problem posed earlier: how power and agency are related to politics and political process in state formations?

POLITICAL POWER AND STATE AGENCY: POLITICS AND POLITICAL PROCESS

Anthropologists and other scholars, as well as the lay public and media (who can more easily be forgiven their proclivities), commonly attribute the deployment of an ambiguous and generalized (and sometimes anthropomorphized) idea of political power to an even more ambiguous and anthropomorphized entity they identify as the state. This practice has become so common that anthropologists have allowed the discourse related to the idea of the state to mask both the source of state agency and the nature of the power those agencies accumulate and deploy. To account for these state-driven practices anthropologists evoke dramatic postmodern/literary pronouncements – moving mountains, redirecting rivers, sending millions to their deaths. But, for those anthropologists who still adhere to scientific epistemologies, propositions, and research strategies to explain political phenomena in state formations, these sensational assertions detract from the very explanation and understanding of the politics related to state formations that we seek.

To exemplify this practice, let us return to Cohen's (1979) comment cited above. A more precise but no less dramatic pronouncement that restates Cohen's comment in light of the preceding discussion might read as follows:

> The governments of state formations are the most powerful political organizational structures that have evolved in the history of the planet. The material and ideational power that state governments control and can deploy literarily has allowed them to move mountains and redirect rivers, and on occasion, to send untold thousands, even millions, to their deaths.

A more detailed commentary might address the specific offices of government that are responsible for events, such as a war that might send untold millions to their death, and the specific power agencies deploy to accomplish these goals. For example, it is the prerogative of the heads of most state formations to decide (often with the advice of other incumbents) to declare war. The head of state and closely allied subordinate incumbents most likely would rely on potent symbols (a day of infamy, weapons of mass destruction, presents of shields and *macquauitl* [fasces of an Aztec king's

authority represented by feathers and war clubs[13]]) and symbolically charged authoritarian ideologies (freedom from tyranny, a world safe for democracy, a civilizing mission, the need for sacrificial victims) to justify a declaration of war and the allocation of the necessary material power – money, technology, men – to execute it.

Moving mountains and redirecting rivers would require other agencies. In the United States, for example, moving and redirecting these geological formations might be the responsibility of incumbents appointed by the head of state to offices in the department of interior. Which ever incumbent had that responsibility would have authority promulgated by other incumbents of government – the senate not the state – to allocate legally the authority perhaps to the army corps of engineers (which also might farm out the obligation to other, perhaps private, agencies) to deploy the material power to attack the designated mountains and rivers. To attribute these actions to 'the state' masks more complex, detailed, and nuanced processes.

Lest I appear to damn my colleagues for sins of commission of which I too am guilty, let me comment on my own misguided scholarly assertions regarding political practices in the Aztec state (Kurtz 1973, 1984). I have stated that the Aztec state seeks legitimacy, polices markets, enforces laws, exacts tribute, promotes a national language, engages in terror, educates children, resettles people, and – need I say more? I did support some of these statements with details that acknowledged the role of government. For example, I pointed out that Aztec markets were policed by officials appointed by the head of state to insure peace and fair trading in the markets (Kurtz 1973; Sahagun 1952, bk. 3). I also stated that mandatory public education was decreed by the legal code of Montezuma I (Kurtz 1984; Sahagun 1969, bk. 6). These practices did not need to be imputed to an anthropomorphized state, but I too was caught up in the prevailing master narrative.

But my most egregiously misdirected comment was that the Aztec state sought legitimacy (Kurtz 1984). Only governments through the actions and practices of the incumbents of their offices can strive to become legitimate. This is because the state, under stood to be a formation of offices, is a relatively immutable and persistent institution. Governments on the other hand come and go frequently.

Consider for a moment the state associated with Nazi Germany's Third Reich. The structure and organization of government offices that characterized the Third Reich were not appreciably different from governments that preceded it, such as the Weimar Republic, and the democratic formations that followed it (Pinson 1954). The state persisted with little structural change; the Nazi government and its Third Reich did not.

Some of the practices I attributed to the Aztec state approximate the drama Cohen attributed to the anthropomorphized states that could move mountains, redirect rivers, and kill people. They are equally wrong and misdirected. But these assertions demonstrate how the discourse that drives the master narrative associated with the study of the state so easily seduces scholars to anthropomorphize an abstraction.

A possible caveat to the above argument might be that archaeological research on some state formations is not conducive to identifying the offices of state and their incumbents. But to my knowledge since the Mayan hieroglyphics were deciphered there are no archaeological state formations in either the Old or New Worlds (Crete may be an exception [Claessen, personal communication]) to which we are unable to attribute at least the name of the King. Where there is a king there is a government. Even if specific offices cannot be distinguished, as may be a problem still for Mayan states, it is still more epistemologically and scientifically responsible to refer to a government agency than to an anthropomorphized state agency. If we insist on relying on the idea of the state to account for politics where a government obviously exists, we will foreclose on any inclination to search for and identify the precise offices of government that are responsible for the state's political practices.

Finally, my criticism of the state does not mean that the 'state' is a meaningless entity and concept. The identity of a state is undeniably a paramount symbol that is so loaded with meaning and drenched with ideology that it has for many become a 'living' entity. But of more practical importance, the state as an entity, *de facto* initially and, subsequently in recent modern times, *de jure,* provides a historical and legal continuity between the governments of existing and previous state formations. For example, recent international law allows extant governments to hold governments of

previous state formations accountable for their actions. As news reports remind us, incumbents of state offices in Hitler's Nazi Germany, Argentina's *junta* in its dirty war, Milosevic's Serbia-biased Yugoslavia, and Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile may be legally liable and subject to prosecution by subsequent governments for crimes committed in the name of the state they represented. These examples may justifiably acknowledge the idea of the state as a legal entity. But they also demonstrate sharply that when the idea of state is unmasked responsibility and accountability for moral and ethical transgressions in the use of power in state formations become transparent and readily attributed to agents of government.

CONCLUSION

It is seductive to think of power as the ability of one to bend another to his or her will, to structure fields of action, to come from everywhere and impinge upon individuals in pernicious ways. Similarly it is beguiling – even exciting – to think of the state as an anthropomorphized entity with special access to this power. But we gain little insight into the intricacies of politics and political process in state formations if we rely on an ambiguous political power deployed by an abstract and anthropomorphized state devoid of human agency to explain why mountains may be moved, markets policed, or how governments attain legitimacy. Power may be everywhere. But it is effective only when it is put into practice by human agents – kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses, voters (among others) – who, as the above epigram by Radcliffe-Brown (1940) reminds us, are the proper agents of power. The idea of the state as a human agent is so gross in its explanatory potential that it tells us next to nothing about politics and political process.

Despite these arguments against the idea of an anthropomorphized state, readers may have ascertained that this essay contains a subtext that addresses a perennial and probably unsolvable problem in philosophy[14] and in anthropology, namely the relative status of a collectivity as opposed to that of an individual person. In accounting for political agency in state formations the problem may be framed by asking if the proper focus of analysis is the collectivity (the state) or the individual (incumbents of state offices)? In

anthropology Harris (1968) identified this conundrum as the paradigmatic division between those anthropologists who are predisposed to an eclectic, particularist, and idealist research strategy (ethnographers/individuals) and those who are predisposed to a generalizing, theoretical, and material research strategy (ethnologists/collectivities). It is true that in anthropology adherents to each predisposition do not communicate well and their paradigmatic commitment probably will determine their approach to this problem. On the other hand, some anthropologists who adhere to a more eclectic theoretical formulation that is neither idealist nor materialist exclusively (recall that for Harris (1980) there was only one acceptable theory: cultural materialism) may choose a response to the problem that is issue specific. For those scholars who adhere to this latter position the moral that I propose a reader take from this essay suggests only that better explanations of politics and political processes in state formations are achieved when they are attributed to government and the power its incumbents can deploy by virtue of their status in a political office.

It is true that government may represent another collectivity. But it is only within government that individuals become incumbents of identifiable offices that authorize the use of power that allows the *administration* and *politics* through which government operates as a process. The idea of government permits the human face of an incumbent of a political office to be identified with the *public business* that is at the heart of politics and political processes. To iterate, the idea of government does not foreclose, as the idea of the state does, the search for a more precise political agency to account for the deployment of power in state politics and political processes.

Anthropologists and social scientists at large have obscured the empirically determined capacities of political power and masked political agency in the guise of an anthropomorphized state. In this essay I have tried to clarify the imprecise, even sloppy, use by anthropologists (including myself) and other social scientists of the ideas, *political power* and the *state.* I have suggested alternatives to account for agency in state formations that do not degrade our ability to comprehend the power of a state's s government and how and why that power is used by specific and identifiable incumbents of government to attain public and private goals and ends.

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NOTES

[1] I have asked impromptu and in other ways learned colleagues and friends (mostly political junkies) who use these terms in their writings and discourses what they mean by the terms 'the state' and 'power'. They rarely are able to provide a clear or coherent idea.

[2] The idea that resources are the foundation of political power is not new (Lasswell and Kaplan 1950; Dahl 1961; Nicholas 1966). But the construction of power I present here is novel. For example, I distinguish sharply material and ideo-symbolic domains of political power. Others do not, and Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), in a curiously redundant misdirection, identify power as a resource of political power.

[3] See Kurtz (2001) for a more detailed analysis of the material and ideational power domains of power.

[4] Military forces and their technological hardware, important sources of political power, present a paradox here. They can be conceptualized as both a tangible and a human resource.

[5] Some ideas of the state that authors from a variety of disciplines have identified include: a moral spirit, the source of legitimate force, a structure of class domination, a structure of voluntary associations, a type of social order, a variety of polities, a group of persons, a society, a concrete subject ('I am the State!'), a community of men, a specialized decision making organization, government, bureaucracy, a structure dedicated to maintaining social order, a nation, and so forth (see Kurtz 1993 for references).

[6] The authors of this work begin its *Introduction* with the reminder of the absence of any agreed upon definition of that state and the factors that distinguish the state from pre-state polities (Grinin *et al*. 2004: i).

[7] This hypothesis asserts a process that contradicts the more dramatic conflict hypothesis proffered by some archaeologists. They suggest that chiefs come into existence and attain power when strong leaders seize control of the means of production and distribution (Earle 1991).

[8] See Kurtz (2004) for an explanation of this complex process. Also see Gluckman (1963) for background to these ideas.

[9] Van der Vliet (1987) points out that many of the classic Greece *polis*-states (6th century B.C.E.) were governed by councils, and Estelie Smith (1988: personal communication) reminded me that in theory the Soviet Union was supposed to be governed by a troika. I suggest that the occupancy of the office of head of state by more than one person is characteristic of inchoate states whose governments have

not successfully subverted alternative sources of power and authority within their political communities.

[10] Mair identifies this crystallization of functions somewhat differently. She points out that in state formations authorities of government 'punish disobedience against themselves (and) try cases in disputes between persons … collect taxes …, (and) organize public activities, of which the most conspicuous is warfare' (Mair 1962: 125, parentheses added).

[11] These powers and authorities are more clearly evident in the early agricultural state formations with which anthropologists are familiar. Checks and balances in contemporary state formations tend to obscure these powers in the offices of heads of state. But they still exist (see Kurtz 2001), and in some contemporary modern state formations, such as the United States, they are replicated at lower levels of government. For example, governors of lower states may commute prison sentences, call out the national guard, and submit, veto, or approve legislation regarding taxes.

[12] Individuals who are not incumbents of offices obviously can have and control political power. They include candidates for offices, revolutionaries, terrorists and others who want to replace an existing government with a version of their own. The occupancy of a political office usually provides the incumbents more power and, more importantly, the legal and legitimate right to use that power in relations with other governments.

[13] These last three items refer to symbols Aztec kings sent to heads of other states to indicate that a state of war now existed between them (Berdan 1982: 107).

[14] Thanks to Dr. Thom Keyes for pointing out to me the broader, philosophical dimensions of this problem.

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