State, Civil Society, and Elites: Ethnographies of Space, Power, and Governance

Day 1 – Stream 2: Times: 10.00-12.30; 14.00-15.30; 16.00-17.30 (Popper Room)

Rapporteurs: Prof. Prem Kumar Rajaram, Prof. Alexandra Kowalski
Participants and discussants: Razvan Dumitru (Prof. Lale Yalcin-Heckmann), Larissa Vetters (Prof. Alexandra Kowalski), Andrea Weiss (Prof. Lale Yalcin-Heckmann), Mateusz Laszczkowski (Prof. Douglas Holmes), Theodora Vetta (Prof. Csilla Konczei), Diana Szanto (Prof. David Berliner)

All papers included in this panel can easily be grouped under the headline of anthropology of elites: these ethnographies describe the various ways in which elites attempt to appropriate the state, the civil sector, the geographical space, and even everyday concepts and notions which then reappear in their public discourses and assist them in acquiring or preserving power. While it is quite common in anthropological literature to highlight fragmentation and ruptures among different interest groups, here most authors describe the invert process, where 'circular' elites join forces in order to implement the same political projects across fields and ideological differences.

Authors in the panel are for instance concerned with issues related to the emergence of new elites in post-socialist Moldova, who in order to promote images of themselves as politically active and outstanding individuals use and appropriate concepts such as 'success', 'youth' and 'self-made person'. Furthermore, they explore the links between notions of 'community' and the ongoing (re)conceptualization of statehood in post-conflict administrative life in the town of Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Also, they contextualize geopolitical framing as a mode of place-making and politics of space in the case of Mingrelia (Georgia), showing through ethnographic examples how localisation is achieved via geopolitical references, and how very concrete persons, events, and places become interwoven with each other. Another paper argues that the construction of Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan, and the production of a 'state effect' that came along with it, are best understood as a form of political practice as well as a central performance of power, where materializing the future helps to suspend the present in a kind of a limbo which gives current power-arrangements the prospect of endurance. Additionally, they problematize the usefulness as an analytical tool of the NGO-state dichotomy in understanding the welfare reform in post communist Serbia, arguing that instead of looking at it as the arena of a 'clash', we gain more insight into social realities by analyzing phenomena through a focus on circulating elites that are implementing the same political project through two sectors. Finally, they highlight the mechanisms and contradictions of a paradoxical merger between local and international idioms in post-war Sierra Leone, by presenting a case study in which transnational donor agencies, human rights activists, as well as local authorities and secrete society leaders from the provinces get entangled in a joint effort that is envisioned as an opportunity to 'reshape a society from scratch'.

Razvan Dumitru: "The Young and Successful": Reshaping the Public Sphere in Moldova

My thesis looks at how people's families, businesses, identities and language usages – i.e. their life-worlds - are experienced at the edges of the former Soviet Union and the European Union. I look at ways in which individuals construct strategies based on their existential conditions, yet in a close dialogue with different and sometimes contradictory moralities.
Disputes over linguistic and national identity have long remained unsettled as discourses and political alliances have been succeeding each other, thereby redefining the relation between politics and public space in contemporary Moldova. This paper looks into how a group of a few individuals, part of Moldova's new generations, became involved in actively shaping this public space. The public apex of their actions was the so-called twitter

revolution, which affected the course of Moldovan political life in the spring of 2009. Drawing on the cultural archeology of the ideas of youth and individual heroism as a patriotic duty formed during the Soviet era (Pilkington 1994), this paper ethnographically details how a few individuals made use of the post-1990s concepts of success and of "self-made" personhood to promote images of politically active and successful individuals within Moldova. This new image takes advantage of both the moral imperative constructed about "youth" by decades-long Soviet propaganda and the popular images of individual success displayed in the increasingly consumer-oriented society.

Larissa Vetters: Statistics, Statutes and State-building – Enacting the State in Administrative Encounters and the Nature of Vernacular Politics in Post-War Bosnia and Herzegovina

In this presentation I will look at politico-administrative life in postwar Mostar, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), from three different angles to explore the links between notions of community, politics and the ongoing (re)conceptualization of statehood in this divided city. After giving a brief overview of post-war developments in Mostar, I consider how legal and administrative reforms enforced by the international community (IC) in the name of liberal democratic state-building affect the constitution of political community in Mostar. Then I move to struggles over the administration's territorial re-organisation and investigate the *mjesna zajednica* (neighbourhood office - MZ) at the lowest level of the administrative structure as a site of vernacular politics in which citizens' hopes and desires for a 'caring' state become intertwined with ethno-national party politics in an intimate-public setting. Finally, I take administrative procedures of residence registration and data collection (statistics) as a "statist" technique in which territory, population and public authority are constituted as each others' counterparts and thus generate an image, and simultaneously a practice of the state. In the context of Mostar's neighbourhood offices I trace how such procedures are appropriated and negotiated by street-level bureaucrats and citizens in everyday interactions. Here, attention is drawn to a notion of community that centers on the term of '*naši ljudi*' (our people, one of us) and how this flexible and socially contingent notion structures administrative encounters but is in turn also shaped by administrative acts. Recognition of the ways in which the social intimacy of '*naši ljudi*' is infused into official counting and categorizing practices in diverse administrative settings, I argue, constitutes a sense of cultural intimacy. The shared understanding of how social intimacy works in administrative procedure creates a sense of coherence in citizen's encounters with the state, even in a divided society. Such a state does not necessarily have to be imagined as a uniform nation state with one homogeneous society/political community, rather an apt metaphor might be the „familial state" in which ambiguity, shifting boundaries and conflicting interests are recognized as constitutive elements of a precarious but enduring statehood. In presenting evidence from these three politico-administrative arenas ranging from the level of neighbourhood intimacy to international involvement in local governance, I am primarily interested in drawing out the importance of the administrative field for conceptualizing the entangled nature of politics, community and statehood in contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Andrea Weiss: The (Court) Case of Vladimer Vaxania or Complexities of Georgian State-Making in the Periphery

This paper interprets the summer 2009 court case of Vladimer Vaxania, who is a dazzling local figure in Zugdidi. Based on ethnographic material collected during his trial the paper

puts different interpretations of the court case by the interested public at the centre of analysis of state-making processes in the West Georgian periphery of Mingrelia. Vladimer Vaxania was officially charged with illegal possession of weapons and with interference into journalists' work, but at the same time the common interpretation by the interested public revealed that other issues were suspected to stand behind the trial. In the wider context the position of Mingrelians as a group with a strong regional identity and its own language played a role. Attached to this regional identity fear and suspicion of possible Russian interference was prominent, which was particularly fostered by the fact that Vaxania had spent many years in Russia and was considered to have influential ties there and that he was the co-author of a Mingrelian dictionary. At the same time Vaxania had plans for an economic project, the construction of a port, which apparently was not approved by the local ruling elite. By deploying the ethnography of the case I argue that in order to understand state-making in Mingrelia the dynamics between a suspicion-ridden ethnic connotation and political mechanisms to eliminate potential political rivals.

Mateusz Laszczkowski: Building the Future: Materiality, Temporality and Politics at Astana

This paper looks at Astana, the capital city of Kazakhstan since 1997, as a project. There are two main correlated points that I want to make in it: one concerns the attractiveness of Astana as a place to live in or visit, and the other is about the political effects of the temporality and materiality of the capital's construction. Analyzing discourses, imagery, and the architectural makeup of the Kazakhstani capital, I argue that Astana is manufactured as a site set apart from the mundane reality of contemporary Kazakhstan by a double distinction of temporality and materiality. To achieve that, Astana is designed as a complex symbolic system with a fractal-like structure of reference and a particular optic. The emerging heterotopia exerts a certain charm upon people's imaginations, setting in motion a self-reproducing and accumulative circuit of what I shall call 'the symbolic capital of the capital'. What the project offers is a sense of order and direction in the life of the society, a sense of a 'greater whole' as a response to the crisis of the socio-political order in the previous decade. Moreover, it promises material and moral improvement which should allow the Kazakhstanis to 'catch-up' with the world according to partly implicit normative notions of what a 'modern' society looks like.
I argue, essentially, that the construction of Astana amounts to a 'state effect' in Timothy Mitchell's sense: it presents the citizenry-public with a performance-proof of the existence, functioning, development, and by the same token legitimacy of the state. However, with Bruce Grant, I argue furthermore that this process is not simply about masking the arbitrariness of power arrangements with a hypostasis of the state, i.e. with a void decoy. To the contrary, the construction of Astana and the consubstantial production of a 'state effect' are an extraordinarily important form of political practice, and a central performance of power. By materializing the future, it suspends the present as a sort of a limbo where the current power-arrangements can last.

Theodora Vetta: NGOs and the State: Clash or Class? Circulating Élites of 'Good Governance' in Serbia

Along with the rising importance of NGOs in the development arena since the early 1990s, many authors have discussed their role as promoters of neo-liberal governmentality. However, their relation to the state is most often perceived as one of a clash according to the argument that neoliberal globalization diminishes the power and sovereignty of nation-states. This paper aims to problematize the analytical tool of the NGO-state dichotomy in

understanding the welfare reform in post communist Serbia. Instead of a clash we gain more insight into social realities if we analyze these phenomena in terms of circulating elites, implementing the same political project through the two sectors, mediating between the transnational aid network and local regimes of governance within the framework of 'good governance'. Moving away from rhetorics of 'death of fordism' and states' victimization in the 'globalization era', it is essential to focus on historical continuities, social alliances and processes of class formation in order to understand current transformations.

Diana Szanto: NGOization and the Language of Human Rights in Post-Conflict, Development-led Reconsolidation in Sierra Leone

Almost ten years after the devastating civil war in Sierra Leone the whole country is burning in an overall development fever. International donor organizations, INGOs and local civil organizations abound in development projects, most of which are calling for a deep „attitudinal change" in tune with the ruling party's election slogan. To many (international and local) actors the post conflict era provides an opportunity for reshaping a society almost from scratch. However, many are the complaints regarding surviving or reemerging "old patterns" that are hindering or slowing down the necessary change these actors hope for. The author argues however that instead of a post-war "blank sheet", present day Sierra Leone forms an intricate web of historically determined interactions between local and international political and cultural influences, of which the war was but one episode. International aid is today in the center of these interactions. Development agents do not only operate in this given context but they also actively contribute to shaping it, in the way Ferguson predicts, by politicizing relations, while on the surface depoliticizing eminently political actions. In this way overt development objectives and their hidden effects often contradict each other. One such unpronounced effect observable in the landscape of the vibrant Sierra Leonean civil society today is a fierce competition for scarce resources brought in by external actors, resulting in internal division and quickly moving frontiers between ally and enemy camps. This is all the more interesting as the loudest voiced development goal of the civil sector (and indeed of the whole society) is "unity". "Unity" or the principle of "one voice" mobilizes deeply historical and cultural symbols, evoking local political imagination. It is at the same time a concept simple enough to be adhered to by powerful international donors. Divergence, conflicting interests and predatory strategies are increasingly concealed by a combination of a falsely unproblematic Human Rights discourse promulgated by international donors and NGOs on the one hand, and a widely shared vernacular perception valuing public consensus on the other. The author highlights the mechanisms and the contradictions of this paradoxical merger between local and international idioms by presenting and analyzing a case study in which transnational donor agencies, Human Rights activists from Freetown, as well as traditional authorities and secrete societies leaders from the provinces get entangled.