

Introduction

The Everyday States of Austerity: Politics and Livelihoods in Europe

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The austerity–state nexus

This special issue addresses how working people in Southern Europe engage with austerity state formations. We argue that in order to look at people's responses to austerity, one cannot avoid delving into the ways people engage with state formations and the co-production of state functions, material relations and ideological configurations. Whether imposed by supranational institutions or voluntarily endorsed by a national elite, austerity politics were concretely implemented and legitimated by state institutions, making the austerity–state nexus a “critical junction” of social reproduction (Kalb and Tak 2006). The practice of austerity by state institutions forces people to engage with “the state” in particular ways. State formations manage the extraction and redistribution of resources, and set the material frameworks (balancing coercion and consent) through which struggles over resources and meanings are waged. In their everyday lives, people have to engage with the field of forces resulting from austerity measures. This happens when they try to find a school for their children; when they seek healthcare; when they are faced with paying taxes; when the labour market is flawed and unemployment increases; when they deal with labour insecurity and lack of income. By the same token, the consequences of austerity fall back on state institutions that try to repress and diffuse social tensions and discontent, or to deflect problems to other private institutions (e.g. charities). As a result, studying the ways people deal with and live through austerity means looking at the ways in which they engage with state institutions and ideologies.

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Drawing from extensive fieldwork experiences, the contributors to this special issue look at the relation between austerity, “states” and “people” through the following issues: What kind of experience, practices and understanding of the state emerged during the past decade of austerity? How do people invest their intellectual and physical energies to relate to austerity-wielding state forces? And what can the struggles we observe on the ground between differently situated people tell us about the forms of the state and its powers?

Following the 2008 financial meltdown, the European Union (EU) turned to stricter budgetary rules to cope with the cracks in the financial system. Political-economic elites in Europe imposed austerity policies as the solution to economic imbalances. The European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund (aka the Troika) undertook a massive bailout of banks (e.g. Spain) and countries (e.g. Greece, Portugal) with unsustainable private or public debt. The financial bailout of the European periphery came with the imposition of harsh structural reforms that radically undermined the productive economies and welfare capacities of those countries. Besides the formal Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) that imposed radical structural adjustment programmes under the international supervision of the Troika, other countries (e.g. Italy) were also pressed to adopt radical austerity measures and a programme of structural reforms. As a matter of fact, austerity politics induced a strong acceleration of neoliberal reforms that had been ongoing since the 1980s in welfare, the privatization of public assets and labour deregulation. The emergency framework of crisis and austerity put these reform processes within the non-negotiable boundaries of permissible debt that came to hijack most attempts at reversing or smoothing the process, as the case of the 2015 Greek referendum demonstrated.

Austerity entered the social arena, and attempts to impose cultural hegemony were sustained by the coercive position of “scalar dominance” that some of the institutions promoting neoliberal reforms acquired in the quickly transforming political scenario. “Scalar dominance”, according to Collinge (1999, p. 568), “concerns the power which organisations at certain spatial scales are able to exercise over organisations at other, higher or lower, scales”. The accrued power of dominant institutions such as the Troika allowed for “the forging of its permeability to economic actions by extending the spatial frameworks (repressive, monetary, infrastructural) upon which economic scale organisation depends” (Collinge 1999, p. 566).

In official discourses, the European crisis was popularly represented through loathsome scapegoating strategies that blamed indebted countries for the mismanagement of their “national economies”. Resorting to well-established stereotypes of the character of Southern European peoples, a whole range of ruthless and sexist caricatures blamed Southern Europeans

for “living above their means” or for “wasting all the money on spirits and women”.¹ Paired with the maxim about the necessity of sacrifice, this trivial nationalism applied to the economy created controversial resonances in the understanding of the sovereign role of the state and its regulatory function in reproducing social inequalities.

The articles in this special issue are grounded in the interstitial area of practices and discourses about economy, society and the state, and set out to study them in the dialectical relation they entertain with one another (Narotzky and Smith 2006, p. 10). Institutionally enforced discourses enjoy the power to uphold – with both symbolic and material resources – “one version of significance as true, fruitful, or beautiful, against other possibilities that may threaten truth, fruitfulness, or beauty” (Wolf 1990, p. 593). They thus provide crucial conditions that give shape and direction to the identities, practices, and relations that – as ethnographers – we encounter in the field. The contributions in this special issue inhabit the ambivalent space of unequal relations between differently positioned actors, and provide a comparative outlook on the contradictory experiences and understandings of state formations that take form in the everyday pursuit of a livelihood in crisis-ridden Southern Europe.

Several authors of articles in this issue were part of a comparative research project that proposed a bottom-up approach to studying the impact of economic crisis and austerity on working people’s livelihoods (Narotzky 2020).² During the project, however, all the contributors to this issue engaged with each other at different times in the task of finding ways to account for the complex transformations that deeply affected the forms and possibilities of social reproduction. The contributors explored the reconfigurations of livelihood practices and meaning in the lives of working people, their intergenerational aspirations, and their relation to government institutions and other forms of power, in various Southern European regions and at various interacting scales.

The aim of this special issue is to expand our theorization of the austerity–state nexus. Whereas the anthropology of austerity has flourished in the past decade (e.g. Knight and Stewart 2016; Powers and Rakopoulos 2019; Raudon and Shore 2018), not many anthropologists have approached structural adjustment through people’s everyday experiences and practices of dealing with “austerity state formations”, their legitimating discourses,

1 The unfortunate comment was pronounced by Eurogroup president Jeroen Dijsselbloem in 2017 (Bertrand 2017).

2 “Grassroots Economics: Meaning, Project and Practice in the Pursuit of Livelihood” [GRECO], European Research Council Advanced Grant (IDEAS-ERC FP7, Project no. 323743), PI Susana Narotzky. The following researchers were part of the team: Patrícia Alves de Matos, Stamatis Amarianakis, Patricia Homs, Carmen Leidereiter, Giacomo Loperfido, Jaime Palomera, Antonio Maria Pusceddu, Diana Sarkis and Theodora Vetta.

(de)regulatory role and redistributive action (Alves de Matos and Pusceddu 2021; Dalakoglou and Angelopoulos 2018; Bear 2015; Koch and James 2020). It is from this specific standpoint that the articles of the special issue address the expansion of the third sector in the field of social assistance; taxation and fiscal injustice; the EU subsidy regime and prices in agriculture; public sector restructuring and the entrepreneurial ethos; the crisis of political representation; and the politics of corruption and clientelism. This diversified range of ethnographic investigations points to the relevance of historical contexts to understanding the ways in which working people engage with and conceive state powers and institutions. The historical trajectories of Southern European countries – despite some differences³ – show strong commonalities in their patterns of integration into the EU, thus allowing for fruitful ethnographic comparisons around the range of narratives and practices through which state formations are enacted and experienced. The authors of this special issue highlight the ambivalent understanding of the state as being something simultaneously ever present and outstandingly absent. This allows an emphasis on contradiction as an analytically productive category to articulate ethnographic observations with larger and more complex scales.

Everyday state formations

We start our thinking around state formations from the groundwork that has been done in anthropology over the last decades (Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gledhill 1994, 1996; Gupta 1995; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Kapferer 2005; Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005; Krupa and Nugent 2015; Kurtz 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Ong 2000; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Thelen et al. 2017). This now rich anthropological literature on state formations and on how these can be studied ethnographically, despite the pluralism and diversity of approaches, seems to agree on a number of general assumptions that emphasize the social and political complexity and variety of state formations, the internal tensions among institutional actors, and their (often uneven) articulations with supranational power agents. Anthropologists have been particularly careful in showing how state formations can be studied in ordinary and marginal contexts of social reproduction, thus revealing how the connection of state formations and global processes is reflected in everyday practices

3 The main difference is between Italy, one of the main political and economic actors of post-Second World War Europe and among the founding members of the European Economic Community (Treaty of Rome, 1957), and Greece, Spain and Portugal which only joined the EU later (Greece in 1981; Spain and Portugal in 1986).

and meanings. This ethnographic sensibility for the ordinary contexts of everyday life emphasized the molecular struggles over resources and meanings through which everyday state formations are reproduced.

Much of this scholarship was based on the seminal article by political sociologist Philip Abrams, “Notes on the difficulties of studying the state” (1988), which stressed the ideological aspect of the state-idea. Abrams asserted that “the state as a special object of social analysis does not exist as a real entity” (1988, p. 79). He highlighted the “disunity” of power and postulated that the state-idea obscured both the real class character of power and its relation to capitalist reproduction, and the disunity of political institutions in practice, their lack of coherence. To him “this sort of disunity and imbalance is of course what one would expect to find in an institutional field that is primarily a field of struggle” (1988, p. 79). As a result, the *idea* of the state acts as an ideology and should be studied as such, while we should not concede to its existence “even as an abstract-formal object” (1988, p. 79). Anthropologists, then, tended to focus on the local expressions of state institutions’ practices and people’s interactions with them, proposing a plural understanding of the state that differed from the idea of a singular centre of power, unitary and coherent. Antonio Gramsci’s theorization of the “integral state” provides an analytical alternative to the previous conceptual impasse, while offering a “relational” perspective to frame the richness and complexity of ethnographic observation.

Although often neglected among anthropologists, the concept of the “integral state” is fundamental to the understanding of the widely used notion of hegemony. John Gledhill (1994, 1996, 2009) made use of the Gramscian perspective to address the transformations of the state in the context of the “globalization debate”. With the integral state in the background, he moved towards a scalar, systemic, and relational understanding of the state, overcoming well-established tendencies towards methodological nationalism. His analysis of power was placed within the context of historical legacies of Western domination and the continuing global hegemony of northern powers, while also stressing how global processes are modified by local historical variables.

Scalar perspectives on power gathered further momentum in the anthropology of the state during the early 2000s, when debates on globalization interrogated the very meaning of the territorial state, and pushed anthropologists to address dynamic transformations and diversifications of sovereignty. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2001, pp. 126–132), for example, despite inviting anthropologists to study “state effects”, also claimed it was important to “theorize beyond the empirically obvious”, starting from the realization that a number of state practices have now been moved away from the national to infra-, supra- or trans-national sites. In other words, anthropologists were urged to study state formations “in their complex interconnections

with states and political forces on other scales”, rather than as “self-closed power containers” (Jessop 2008, p. 105). Building on this perspective, we understand the density of scale through Doreen Massey’s (1994) idea of the “global sense of place”, for which scales are not bounded and distinct but can all be in the same place at the same time. The “places” we study, in this view, should not be understood as “areas with boundaries” but, more productively, as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” that are partly – if not largely – constructed “on a far larger scale” than that (allegedly “local”) of what we would assume to be “the place itself” (1994, pp. 154–155).

Resorting to Gramsci, we are not seeking one final definition of the state. Rather, we are thinking through the fruitful methodological principles according to which Gramsci developed his theorization leading to a fundamentally relational understanding of the state. The conceptual development of the “integral state” tracks Gramsci’s attempts to examine the dialectical relationship of political society and civil society as the organic unity of a single indivisible state-form (Thomas 2009, p. 137). Gramsci’s “discovery” of the integral state unfolds through the recurring critique of the view of the state as a politico-juridical order (with emphasis on the coercive aspect), to insist instead that “by ‘State’ should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the ‘private’ apparatus of ‘hegemony’ or civil society” (Gramsci 1971, p. 261; cf. Gramsci 1975, p. 801). The apparatus of government (political society) and the “private” organizations of civil society are not indistinct articulations of the state. They stand in a dialectical relationship of identity and distinction (Gramsci 1975, p. 1028); between the two an organic unity. Moreover, the determinations that are dialectically related to this unity reproduce the relations and structures of dominance and subordination. Unification is mainly – in the last instance – accomplished in the political moment (effective power) by the ruling class. In fact, while civil society is the ground of competition among classes for the production of consent, hegemony is ultimately guaranteed in the political sphere, through control of the coercive institutions of political society. Subaltern groups exist in disaggregated form in civil society and their relation to political society is one of subordination; their struggle for hegemony is curbed unless it is fully achieved in the political sphere – that is, unless unification is accomplished in the state-form. The meaning of “subaltern groups” should not simply be conflated with “the oppressed”; it should be read as a relational category encompassing several diversified grades and forms of subordination (cf. Thomas 2015; see also Roseberry 1994). It is through the careful examination of the complex relationality between the “two great superstructural ‘planes’” of political society and civil society (Gramsci 1975,

p. 1518)⁴ that we can situate specific forms of subordination and the form of their articulation with (and adherence or reaction to) the broader hegemonic combination of coercion and consent.

The integral state should thus not be understood as a self-contained entity. Only by emphasizing its relational dimension can we appreciate the multi-scalar articulations between internal determinations of the state-form – its dialectical unity – and the uneven geographies of capital accumulation and existing relations of production. Therefore, putting austerity in the context of the broader debate on neoliberal capitalism, one should not only ask how the latter affects/shapes the articulation between structures of social reproduction and the state, but also how the state mediates or enacts the changing dynamics of accumulation and value extraction (Randeria 2003).

Our reasoning on the analytical importance of a dialectical and relational view of the state resonates with the proposal of a “relational approach” to the state advanced by Thelen and colleagues (2017, p. 2) to “bridg[e] the gap” in existing branches of anthropological literature, generally concentrating on either images or practices of and around the state. Drawing on the theoretical works of Nikos Poulantzas (1969) and Bob Jessop (2009), Thelen et al. aim at “keep[ing] the focus on what happens between actors”, thereby suggesting state formations be viewed as being shaped in a concrete web of relations (Thelen et al. 2017, pp. 6–7). Thinking through Gramsci, our endeavour follows a similar intellectual genealogy (Jessop 2009), with the aim of expanding the anthropological understanding of state formations through the study of their relational practices and discourses.

The articles in the special issue provide a bottom-up exploration of the everyday practice and understanding of state formations, paying attention to livelihood practices and to the interplay of contingent and structural relations that shape social reproduction. In particular, the ethnographies show the interplay between the radical reconfiguration of livelihood practices and state prerogatives impelled by austerity politics and moralities, and the problematic persistence (and re-crafting) of practices and imaginaries of the state that mobilize and reframe old and new ideological configurations. This stratification and combination of disparate “conceptions of the world”, as well as their ambivalent and contradictory enactment and mobilization in everyday practices, can usefully be grasped through the Gramscian concept of “common sense” (Gramsci 1975, pp. 1396 ff.; Liguori 2009). Particularly pertinent to the anthropological responsiveness to the contradictions, inconsistencies and ambivalences of social life (Crehan 2016), common sense

4 Regarding Gramsci’s use of the word “plane” (*piano*), Thomas (2015, p. 89) suggests “abandon[ing] the spatial metaphor and start[ing] to think civil society and political society not as geographical terrains but as particular forms of embedded socio-political relationality” (our translation).

allows the stratified and complex coexistence of popular understandings and hegemonic narratives around the state and the economy to be connected with the complex relationalities of state formations and the shifting balances of coercion and consent. At the same time, common sense discloses the combination of conformism and resistance in people's practical and imaginary engagements with "the state", while framing the social significance of such ambivalences and contradictions within wider hegemonic state projects. Far from being just "mindsets" or "representations", the ambivalences of common sense must be understood in their practical implications, as tacit and implicit material forces open to potentially different political projects (see Hall 1988).

States of ambivalence

Focusing on first-hand extensive ethnographies in Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, the contributors to this special issue provide a thought-provoking analysis of the articulations, mediations and contradictions that make "the state" a kaleidoscopic presence in the ways inequalities are experienced, understood, accepted, engaged with and contested. Their ethnographies raise crucial questions: How do political changes and institutional restructuring efforts reach the intimate sphere of the household and affect its strategies for survival? How do these changes transform folk models and axioms of interpretation that govern grassroots political-economic understandings of the world, the meaning of power and its organization and reach? And how, conversely, do these grassroots models gain social momentum, thus acquiring the possibility to interact with, influence and modify politico-economic paradigms, policies and decisions at a larger scale?

A central concern of the contributors is working people's common sense about "the state" in the context of austerity. The articles shed light on how state formations are understood and experienced through their extractive and redistributive mechanisms (e.g. taxation and welfare), and show how these aspects articulate with political or moral elaborations of the state. They focus on the various temporalities of in-crisis everyday experiences that people seize on to imagine "the state", to structure their relation to it while finding ways and strategies to make claims on it. By inhabiting ethnographically the socially situated dimension of these complex relationalities, the articles unveil the ways in which established representations of the state conceal structured systems of resource-holding powerful agents. The authors explore how common people engage these power geometries in their day-to-day lives, how they negotiate rights and entitlements with these powers, and how they seek protection and support from them. The articles offer processual and dynamic descriptions of the relations working people

entertain with institutional orders and apparatuses in the political domain in the context of austerity. They show how these relations are privatized, localized, internalized or, on the contrary, how relations in the private sphere can mimic state-like bureaucracies (Douzina-Bakalaki, this issue).

The contributors to this special issue set out to look at four Southern European states as mediators of “structural power” (Wolf 1990): that is, the power of capital to organize and orchestrate the settings and fields of action in which more localized and spatially specific forms of dominance are then exerted. Hence, the state is the key instrument in mediating and distributing the action of “structural power”, sorting its application at various scales (Randeria 2003). In this sense, the state appears as a bundle of “nodal” institutions in the process of accumulation (Collinge 1999, p. 569); not necessarily holding a dominant position in the relations of production, but one that acquires economic significance as the primary locus through which certain activities are delivered and organized in a given spatio-temporal order. In Wolf’s terms (1990, p. 586), this would place state formations in the sphere of “tactical power”, the power “to circumscribe the action of others within determinate settings”, which “controls the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interact with others”.

The authors focus on the ambivalent understanding of “the state” as something always present but also conspicuously absent. The ambivalence is represented through the tensions between the private interests of some state agents and the allegedly public interest of the institutions. In other narratives, it appears in views that oscillate between seeing the state as an external – and distant, if not hostile – entity that fails to provide, or as an intimate presence, intruding into the sphere of the private through everyday surveillance practices and technologies. Finally, the state is often invoked as an entity that must embrace its duty to care, to protect the people and guarantee their dignified existence.

For example, the ambivalent representations that Galician farmers have of the Spanish state (Martínez Álvarez, this issue) are expressed in the fluctuation between their strong request for protection and support, and their harsh critique for what they see as the betrayal of democratic promises of the post-Francoist transition. Martínez Álvarez shows how political identifications are troubled by these ambivalent feelings, and become disorderly and confused, as the farmers appear to be at pains to identify with a state that defers to “foreign forces” like the EU and multinationals.

The ambivalence about the state is experienced at the intersection of the public and private domains, where different orders of interest collide. This space of contradiction configures an analytically productive site in which ethnographic observation can be reconnected with forces and processes also operating at larger scales. The state arena emerges as a terrain of struggle where, on the one hand, global forces of capital and transnational gover-

nance rest on state institutions as mediators for the local application of their global interests, while – on the other – national state agents also try to exploit those supranational forces in their own interest (Randeria 2003). Through ethnography, the authors observe how people read, frame and try to resist (or not) these structural processes in their daily life. They address “relational modalities” (Thelen et al. 2017) with state agents and institutions that are strategically negotiated to pursue their livelihood aims.

Loperfido and Vetta’s two ethnographies show how the tensions and struggles between extraction and redistribution concern economic entitlements and (perhaps foremost) the redistribution (or “extraction”) of less “palpable” and yet crucial goods such as care, trust and security. The provisioning (or lack thereof) of such goods defines the direction and meaning of moral orientations about, and understandings of the state. Austerity emerges here as a crucial revelatory watershed: where the state was morally conceived as negative before the crisis (in Vicenza) it is rediscovered and re-evaluated as a potential source of support; in contrast, where it was previously seen as a reference for assistance (in Kozani), now that help is not forthcoming, it is recategorized as a burden, an unnecessary obstacle on the way to economic success.

The past decade of austerity witnessed the steady increase of inequality. Indeed, state formations appear to actively produce more inequality through their actions while at the same time divesting themselves of their functions, becoming absent. In Alves de Matos’ article, disenfranchised people are disappointed and frustrated by state actions that take shape against the backdrop of memories of past struggles for democracy and social justice, catalysed by the Carnation revolution. From this perspective, present-day austerity conjures shadows of the Salazarist regime. The perceived regression into the authoritarian past is reconfigured through the devolution of welfare responsibilities from the state to third-sector organizations such as Caritas. These in turn become the receptors and distributors of a new normative power to determine who are the “deserving poor”, and who are not. With this acquired power, those new actors of governance redefine poverty not as the result of structural socio-economic processes, but as a willed production of one’s disgraceful condition on the part of the poor. Being poor then becomes an individual choice in a purely neoliberal framework, while context and structure disappear. The state has no regulatory function in this model and does not try to address the causes because the causes are seen as strictly individual. As in Vicenza (Loperfido and Vetta, this issue) and Galicia (Martínez Álvarez, this issue), assistance is interpreted and resented by the interlocutors as a “moral” action on the part of welfare institutions (public and private), a calculated gift that makes them indebted to a system that simultaneously assists them and excludes them.

The authors approach the “everyday states” as ambivalent mediators within “national” economies among class interests, popular demands, and regimes of privilege and rent, and between domestic and international economies. In Greece, as Streinzer shows, the ways in which citizens think and speak of taxation are constantly overshadowed by the pervasive presence of the sovereign debt. With few exceptions, this thoroughly changes the understanding of taxation as “the other face of redistribution”, and weakens institutionally promoted narratives that encourage transparent tax return declaration. As a result, tax money is perceived to go abroad to repay the debt, instead of going back to local populations (Loperfido and Vetta, this issue; Streinzer, this issue; Tsoulfidis and Zouboulakis 2016). On the one hand, the disconnection of people from the state makes them refuse to pay what will not be redistributed to them. On the other hand, the identification of people with the state makes them feel anger because of foreign plunder, humiliation in their sovereignty, and also responsible for the sovereign debt situation. Sarkis and Amarianakis (2020, p. 226) have argued that these dynamics tend to jeopardize established representations of state power, turning the country – in the minds of many – into “a debt colony”. The transfer of resources via fiscal relations is no longer perceived as remaining within the circle of resources underpinning national social reproduction, thus impairing the mutual identification between citizens and state institutions.

Following decades of neoliberal fiscal policies, austerity enforced a major shift in the public perception of the temporality and function of “public debt”, from a future-oriented vehicle ultimately increasing national wealth to be paid off in the long term, to a mortifying burden and collective obligation for present and future generations that had to be urgently reduced and repaid to avoid further financial and economic distress (Bear 2015). In this frame, sovereign debt and austerity generated a structural friction between the redistributive and the extractive functions of the state, radically reorienting its political scope from long-term redistributive practices to short-term extractive policies. The articles of this special issue provide detailed ethnographic expressions of this temporal reorientation of state policies, unravelling the social tensions at the intersection of the remembered past, the lived present, and the imagined future.

These changes affected the perception of the political sphere, triggering contentious attempts to search for alternative spaces and projects, or adjust strategically to transformations engendered by the repeated restructurings of the economic and political order. Within this frame, Douzina-Bakalaki helps us understand how neoliberal reconfigurations of state responsibilities do not necessarily erode state-like bureaucratic formalisms, but rather disperse regulation among non-state actors, who often operate in state-like ways (see Aretxaga 2003; Koch and James 2020; Trouillot 2001). The case of a private healthcare “solidarity” initiative in Northern Greece, shows how

the state – even when it has withdrawn from welfare provisioning – remains nevertheless crucial in defining the field of action, by setting the standards for third-sector welfare bureaucracy, one of the most important functions of regulation without intervention that the neoliberal state accomplishes. Douzina-Bakalaki's ethnography records the proliferation of the “language of stateness” (Hansen and Stepputat 2001) outside state institutions.

Austerity politics has generated anger but also resignation among citizens dissatisfied with the political elite. The perception of state failure or “indifference” in tackling social disparities has thus further deepened the crisis of political representation. Through the analysis of a local scandal of political corruption, Pusceddu examines how anger and resentment shape the everyday perception of politics in a southern Italian city. Looking at the crisis (and metamorphosis) of conventional repertoires of political mobilization – from the horizontal solidarities of mass organizations (trade unions and political parties) to the vertical relations of a clientelistic type, Pusceddu stresses how the “feelings of disconnection” between the political elite and popular classes translate into the search for regenerative ruptures – such as the “call for Trumpism”. At the same time, working people try to rebuild meaningful connections by reacting to the feelings of disaffection and neglect, in order to pursue their aspirations or navigate their difficulties. By doing so, they also make moral claims around what the state should provide, while seeking to make things work through the combination of different connections as well.

The disjuncture between what one's rights/entitlements are, and what they ought to be is “almost always accompanied by a powerful surfeit of emotions” (Krupa and Nugent 2015, p. 3), which can socially translate into anger and resentment (Pusceddu, this issue), disillusion as well as discomfort (Loperfido and Vetta, this issue), irony (Douzina-Bakalaki, this issue), fury or sympathy (Streinzer, this issue), despair (Alves de Matos, this issue), unease and frustration, but also hope (Martínez Álvarez, this issue) towards the state. These feelings are generated within a complex field of forces where remembered pasts, imagined futures, and the experience of the present live in tension with one another, and are rhetorically remade in the effort to overcome contradiction and make one's life project liveable. The articles provide ethnographic explorations of this ambivalent region of political practices and emotions through the comparison of “what rights are” (legally), what they “ought to be” (legitimately) and, finally, how they are enacted concretely; in other words, comparison of what is inscribed in the law, what people think “the state” should provide, and what it in fact provides.

The authors, however, call attention to the fact that this “imagination of rights” is embedded in shared memories of concrete historical events, which were often events of tensions and struggles between classes, within and around the state. By exposing this relation between memory, histo-

ry, experience and imagination to anthropological scrutiny, the articles approach relations to state formations against the backdrop of socially shared memories of “the state” *as it was*. These memories can also be strategically reworked and readjusted to make them consistent with present claims (Loperfido and Vetta; Martínez Álvarez; Pusceddu, this issue). In this sense, the countries of Southern Europe in which the ethnographies were based share a relatively homogeneous field of political memories. They all experienced an authoritarian past (albeit at different times and for different durations), backed by paternalist ideologies (both industrial and political), the configuration of which was historically mediated by the church (Catholic and Orthodox), throughout multiple scales, from the grassroots level to the highest institutions of state power. Thus, memories of past resistance and everyday solidarity as a result of the events of rupture and liberation following the collapse of authoritarian regimes provide a language to address what is perceived as a regression to the repressive and hierarchical conditions of the past. Against the imaginary backdrop of democratic transitions, the current dismantling of incomplete welfare systems and labour rights, the re-centring of family welfare, labour precarization, the expansion of charity, and the need to rediscover, reinvent and rearrange old forms of mutuality, is recast as a return to the past. By the same token, these betrayed expectations overshadow references to the authoritarian pasts and, most importantly, get to constitute the emotionally charged repertoire of symbols and metaphors defining a sense of loss. Against the background of these major historical ruptures and transitions of the past, the equalization of rights, democratization, entitlements and social protection by the state are remembered and often idealized, nurturing contrastive discourses about the present. Therefore, the often idealized view of “the state” *as it was* provides the lens to account for generally negative experiences of the state as a pervasive and intrusive presence (Streinzer, this issue), as an ambivalent presence (Martínez Álvarez; Pusceddu, this issue), as a productive absence (Loperfido and Vetta, this issue), or only operating through the proxy presence of third-sector bureaucracies (Alves de Matos; Douzina-Bakalaki; Loperfido and Vetta, this issue). There has, obviously, been a shift, from reciprocal social security (between generations, between those with jobs and those without, between those who are well off and those who are not), towards more punctual forms of intervention, intended as bare assistance to the poor in need. However, the contributors set out to look at the ways in which their interlocutors relationally co-produce “the state” as a space of claims and entitlements.

Conclusion

In this introduction, we have argued for a relational and multi-scalar approach to the experience, practices and understanding of state formations that emerged during the past decade of austerity. The contributions to the special issue start from a basic fact: in order to make a living in a context of austerity – a context imposed by powerful agents – working people have to deal with “the state”. Looking closely at how austerity works – through which constraints, rules and ideologies it becomes operative – we are inevitably pushed to engage more closely with “the state” and its active enactment of austerity. People engage with the myriad of practices and discourses, coercion, regulations, mediations and so on that make up the relational complexities of state formations. These practices are material relations – they are about doing things, accessing resources and so on – that compel people to engage with state agents and institutions in ways that make the iniquities of austerity politics directly relevant to their social reproduction and the ways they think about the meaning of a life worth living. Through their everyday engagement with the austerity–state nexus, and through practices and ways of earning a livelihood – we argued – people are co-producing “the state” and austerity. We have framed this dialectical co-production through Gramsci’s concept of the “integral state”, which helped us to think of state formations as the organic unity of political society and civil society. The ethnographies in this special issue detail how working people navigate their powerlessness by confronting the politics and moralities of austerity, emphasizing ambivalences and contradictions as the persistent ways through which “the state” is experienced, understood, and acted upon.

The contributions point out the multifaceted forms of ambivalence towards state formations and their articulations. They try to disentangle the mixed feelings of the interlocutors, by exposing the ways in which the latter react to macro processes of political and economic restructuring through grounded memories of past struggles for equality, generally relating to historical processes of democratization. All the above allows to conceive “the state” as a complex field of forces, or as an articulation of fields of struggle, dispersed through time, space and scale, where differently situated actors relate to one another hierarchically and compete over resources. In conclusion, the articles collected in this special issue make a strong case for the study of the austerity–state nexus, detailing how this can be ethnographically explored and how it can expand our understanding of the everyday states of austerity.

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