

From the “state-idea” to “politically organized subjection”

Revisiting Abrams in times of crisis in Turkey and EU-Europe

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Abstract: Philip Abrams’s notion of the “state-idea” has been of immense influence in the anthropology of the state. This article suggests a contrary reading of Abrams’s “Notes on the difficulty of studying the state” (1988) that focuses instead on his notion of “politically organized subjection,” which allows us to examine contemporary statehood in crisis where political practice increasingly seems “unmasked.” The article examines such strategies of politically organizing subjection in the contexts of current EU-Europe and Turkey. It highlights the role of hegemony-building strategies that do not so much mask political practice as openly promote polarization in society, directing ideological and material efforts at strengthening leadership over the own class alliance and using both overt and structural coercion to suppress political projects opposed to neoliberal authoritarianism.

Keywords: Europe, hegemony, neoliberal authoritarianism, Philip Abrams, state-idea, Turkey

The claimed reality of the state ... is the ideological device in terms of which the political institutionalisation of power is legitimated. It is of some importance to understand how that legitimation is achieved. But it is much more important to grasp the relationship between political and non-political power. (Abrams 1988: 82)

A few years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate class in anthropology at Middle East Technical University in Ankara. One of the assigned readings referenced Philip Abrams’s (1988) argument that the belief in the state as a unified, autonomous agent acting in a common interest

was obscuring our understanding of the actual disunity and interestedness of political practice. While explaining this argument and looking at somewhat confused faces, I realized that this would not make any sense to my Turkish students, today less than ever. Who in their right mind, they seemed to be thinking, would believe in an autonomous, unified, disinterested state?

This past summer, the extent to which governments in the two social contexts discussed here—Turkey and EU-Europe—seemed to have lost all interest in maintaining *even a surface appearance* of a democratic state was stunning. Stunning was also the success of the coercion that was used in both contexts, in different



ways, in reining in the popular discontent that has been fermenting in recent years and that resulted in radically oppositional parties. The suppression of political alternatives culminated in the summer of 2015 in the violent political reaction to two events: the successful SYRIZA referendum against austerity politics imposed by EU-European governments, and the success of the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in crossing the 10 percent threshold of Turkish parliamentary elections by rallying not only the Kurdish population but also many of the people mobilized during the Gezi protests behind their leftist platform. These were two events that were initially greeted with much enthusiasm and relief by leftists in both contexts: finally, there seemed to be opposition to business as usual; finally, a popularly supported alternative. The impudence and vengefulness with which EU-European leaders agreed to a final sell-out of Greece and its people and ended any semblance of representative democracy against the coercive threat to force a GREXIT, and the ready willingness of the Turkish government to push through reelections and kindle a civil war to suppress the HDP and its support base, signal the extent to which authoritarian state practice has been stepped up to maintain the political economic regimes that have worked so very well for some and much less so for many others over the last decades. It shows the extent to which governments seem unconcerned with maintaining the illusion of a democratic, disinterested state.

What has any of this to do with Abrams? To recall, Abrams argued in his "Notes on the difficulty of studying the state"—written in 1977 and published in 1988—that both political sociology and Marxism had fallen prey, in different ways, to a reified "idea of the state."¹ He implied, moreover, that everyday ideological reifications of the state—as a unitary and transcendent agent serving a common interest—played a role in legitimating power exercised through political institutions, the state-system. Together, "state-system" and legitimating "state-idea" served "politically organized subjection"

(1988: 63). Abrams concluded that "the state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is" (1988: 87). In capitalist states, Abrams noted, this masking involved in particular the presentation of the political as a "sphere of social unification" that was "autonomous" of relations of capital and class (1988: 78). Consequently, Abrams argued, "The relationship of the state-system and the state-idea to other forms of power should and can be central concerns of political analysis. We are only making difficulties for ourselves in supposing that we have also to study the state—an entity, agent, function or relation over and above the state-system and the state idea" (1988: 82).

The masking move of a state-idea has probably never been very strong in Turkey's recent history, but clearly this has been even less true in the past few years, which were marked by the corruption scandals leading up to the communal elections of 2014 and the subsequent purges of followers of Fethullah Gülen, reputedly former allies of the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP), from the police. They also included the SOMA massacre, where over 300 miners died as a consequence of the neoliberal regime of capital accumulation that the AKP had done much to set up. More recently, the state violence used against the Kurdish population and other opponents of the AKP regime show the extent to which the latter and its de facto leader, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, are willing to go to maintain power. The AKP-intended adoption of a presidential system for which a majority of parliamentary votes is needed is widely recognized as a strategy serving this purpose. The state-system here seems to be a plaything in the hands of powerful social forces and a far cry from generating a state-idea along the lines that Abrams describes.

But the state-system has also lost much of its seeming independence in the eyes of citizens in precisely those states that informed Abrams's argument at the time—the liberal democratic, wealthy welfare states of Europe. The current

crisis—or rather, its political “management”—has very publicly undermined any notion of autonomy of the state from class (capitalist) forces. Financial interests have thrown EU-Europe into disarray, and politicians have catered to them in the form of stringent austerity politics and enforced privatizations, with disastrous economic and social consequences.² This has increased widespread disillusionment about representative democracy and “the state” it is associated with.³

Revisiting Abrams today thus forces us to historicize and particularize his argument, which was implicitly informed by a particular social and historical context of Europe. As Abrams (1988: 75) points out, the state-idea is constructed through the political institutions of the state-system. It is not a free-floating construct. I suggest that in the wealthy capitalist parts of Europe in which Abrams wrote his “Notes,” the *idea* of the state as a “unified” and “transcendent” agent acting in a “common interest” arose from the material foundations of institutions of national representation, of representative democracy, and of social welfare. Together, these institutions produced the sense of a relation of representation between distinct unified and integrated entities where one (the state) acted in the interest of the other (the nation).

These material foundations of the state-idea have since been fundamentally shaken in EU-Europe by the transnationalization⁴ and neoliberalization⁵ of the state-system (e.g., Altvater and Mahnkopf 2007; Jessop 2002), which has long been registered as “legitimacy” problems of states in particular on the supranational and national levels and has culminated in the disillusionment in the wake of the crisis. The response to this progressive “unmasking” of the state is dual in nature: on the one hand, Europe has long seen the rise of a neo-nationalist populism that typically builds on a double agenda, both anti-immigrant and anti-EU (e.g., Gingrich 2006). Movements such as PEGIDA in Germany are also characterized by a great suspicion of politicians and the media more generally. Such neo-nationalist politics has received more fuel in the current crisis. On the

other hand, the austerity politics administered during the crisis has seen the strengthening of occupy-style movements in Europe, in particular in the crisis countries, and more recently the formation of related political parties. Their politics is typically anti-neoliberal and sometimes anticapitalist. Both types of protest share the feeling of being unrepresented in the state, that their voices are not being heard and interests not taken care of. They no longer share in the illusions of the state-idea—or at least not in the illusion that existing state-systems embody this idea. But it is the former—populist parties and politics of the right—that has been gaining ground, while leftist alternatives have been quite successfully undermined politically.

The way in which this has been achieved is a good example of “politically organized subjection,” an expression that Abrams coined but did not explain. I interpret it as the capacity to ensure cohesion of an unequal and antagonistic society through the stabilization of inequalities and the suppression of alternative political projects. In what follows, I focus in particular on the suppression of alternatives to an authoritarian neoliberalism in EU-Europe and Turkey.⁶

“Politically organized subjection” in authoritarian neoliberalism

Armies and prisons ... as well as the whole process of fiscal exaction ... are all forceful enough. But it is their association with the idea of the state and the invocation of that idea that silences protest. (Abrams 1988: 77)

If the state-idea has indeed been crucial in the political organization of subjection, as Abrams posits, how then is the latter secured with apparent success in “unmasked” states? In order to understand this, we need a deeper analysis of how power is exercised by social forces via the state-system. We need to *go beyond* the state-idea—without completely abandoning Abrams’s insights.

This suggestion might seem counterintuitive given the ways in which Abrams's argument on the "state-idea" has been popularized in the anthropology of the state.⁷ It was often interpreted as a call for studying the state-idea *rather than* the state or even the state-system. In my reading, however, Abrams's agenda in introducing the state-idea was to criticize reified understandings in scholarship, not to reorient inquiry to the study of such reification. Yes, Abrams called for more attention to the ways in which reifications of the state served the legitimation of power. His primary concern, however, was with a better understanding of how subjection is "politically organized," not least through the state-system. An understanding of legitimation via the state-idea was important for this but not sufficient.

If we take "politically organized subjection" rather than the state-idea as the hinge of his argument, Abrams's "Notes" allow us to bring a critical political economic perspective back into the anthropology of the state that has of late been shaped predominantly by governmentality and constructivist approaches. This, I believe, is very important if anthropology wants to gain a deeper understanding of the contradictions of statehood and inequalities today.

My first suggestion here is that we pay closer attention to current dynamics in hegemony-building strategies, and thus to concretize Abrams's interest in "political power" with Gramsci. And with this I do not mean the "idealist" reception of Gramsci that has predominantly informed anthropological writing (Crehan 2002: 176), but the "political economic" Gramsci who understood the making of hegemony as a process whereby a dominant group sought support from subordinate ones through both ideological and material means, as hegemony is both ethico-political and economic, that is, "based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity" (Gramsci 2000: 211–212). Leadership of such a class alliance allows for the establishing of control (however temporary and partial) over the organization of social relations—not least over

relations of re/production and capital accumulation—in particular but not only through the state-system (what Gramsci terms "political society") and institutions of civil society (Gramsci 2000: 205–206, 235). Hegemony is tied to the construction of "a *strategic measure* of popular consent" (Hall 1988: 7; emphasis added) but can also be partially achieved through coercion. Thus, consent need not be all-encompassing of society for hegemonic leadership to be effective, as the following also shows.

My second suggestion is that we pay more attention to the ways in which the very construction of the state-system serves "politically organized subjection."⁸ My perspective here aligns with current studies of "authoritarian neoliberalism" that have shown that the latter involves not only obvious coercion but also "the reconfiguring of state and institutional power in an attempt to insulate certain policies and institutional practices from social and political dissent" (Bruff 2014:115).

The current strengthening of the authoritarian dimension of neoliberal politics might signal not so much a decline of hegemony or a general loss of interest of dominant classes in obtaining consent as a shift in strategies of hegemony building.⁹ Instead of following the typical liberal democratic hegemonic strategy that seeks to encompass most of the population—even oppositional forces—to further the idea that the state represents everyone's interests and to neutralize opposition, governments in the contexts discussed here seem to have increasingly turned to strategies that accept and promote polarization in society when faced with alternative political projects.

Let me give an example. In 2013, when the Gezi protests were starting to catch on in Turkey, then-President Gül and then-Prime Minister Erdoğan—both from the governing AKP, though increasingly opposed to each other—reacted quite differently. Gül suggested conversation with the protestors, and in particular the Gezi platform. Erdoğan decried that they were all marauders and decided that they should be met with police repression. This latter strategy con-

tributed to the broadening of the protests in the following weeks and months and their shift from an anti-neoliberal to an anti-AKP emphasis.

Gül’s strategy was a hegemony-building strategy typical of liberal democracies: set up a committee, include your opponents pro forma in the decision-making, deliberate, drag it out forever, hope that nothing substantial will have to be changed in the end, and save the face of the transcendent, disinterested state. Erdoğan’s strategy, in contrast, was the hegemony-building strategy that I suggest is common in the unmasked state: accept the polarization of society, focus your hegemony-building material and ideological strategies on your own camp, and use repression for the others. And it seems to have worked: in the communal elections following Gezi, in the spring of 2014, the AKP once again won the majority of votes, and this despite the corruption and political scandals leaked over social media in the preceding weeks.

Society was polarized, and the strategy of the Erdoğan-led AKP was not to foster the image of a unified state for all of the people, but to explicitly make politics for and build hegemony on only the 50 percent that already supported the AKP and write off the rest.¹⁰ Conservative ideology and material benefits were important dimensions of gaining the “strategic measure” of consent, but coercion was also used (Ercan and Oğuz 2015). And this authoritarian conservative turn could, in the polarized political context, become itself a means for maintaining AKP hegemony (that is, for the solidification of the necessary support base, including “subordinate” populations). The end to the “peace process” with the PKK and violence visited upon the Kurdish population in the wake of the electoral success of the HDP is the most recent, and tragic, example of a strategy that uses repression and terror to maintain a hegemonic alliance.

Or take another example—EU-Europe in the summer of 2015. Greece is approaching bankruptcy; a forced exit from the Eurozone looms on the horizon. The SYRIZA government has been “negotiating” with leaders of the EU and national governments for months. Its goal is an

end to the enforced austerity. The EU-European leaders do not budge from their positions and in part rally behind the German government, which has upheld for years the dictate that Greece needs to “save,” no matter what the costs. At stake is not just money in an immediate sense; at stake are the current leftist alternatives to the neoliberal EU regime of capital accumulation. It is not just SYRIZA; there is also PO-DEMOS. There are protest movements of all sorts; discontent is widespread. SYRIZA calls for a referendum on the last austerity demands of Europe. The demands are rejected, overwhelmingly. Surely, EU-Europe’s leaders must respond? Surely, they must seek to reconcile? To reseek the favor of the Greek people for the European project as they envision it? Not so. Germany’s Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble floats the GREXIT option. The austerity package now on the table is even more stringent. It is de facto violence exercised against the majority of the Greek population. Moreover, it demands that any proposed legislation must first be approved by the creditor group before it is even shown to the Greek Parliament. And SYRIZA accepts austerity and a final end to the appearance of national sovereignty rather than the GREXIT which, the government fears, would precipitate an even larger social catastrophe. It gives in to coercion. This is presented by some of the EU-European leaders as the beginning of a reestablishment of trust and sold to the electorate in Germany and elsewhere as a means to save citizens’ tax money. According to polls, Schäuble’s tough stance has the support of the majority of German citizens.

While hegemony-building strategies are focused here on cementing relations within established alliances to maintain the majority needed, coercion is used to discipline anyone who opposes. This includes overtly coercive state institutions—the police, punitive law, even the army in Turkey’s current context—but it also includes structurally coercive mechanisms that are established through changes in the very organization of the state-system. Both forms of coercion serve to contain oppositional political projects

that challenge (however vaguely) “authoritarian neoliberalism.”

In the case of Turkey, the AKP has pursued increasingly authoritarian policies since its first reelection in 2007. This has included the establishing of control over and use of the coercive institutions of the state-system as well as the media for the repression of dissidents. More recently, President Erdoğan has pushed the transformation of the constitution toward a presidential system in the effort to maintain power. This goal was undermined by the HDP’s passing of the 10 percent threshold in the national elections of June 2015. The violence in Turkey against the Kurdish population before the AKP-pushed repeat elections of November 2015 was openly acknowledged as a means to regain the majority needed to transform Turkey “formally” into a presidential system. Erdoğan himself stated in the midst of violence in September 2015 that “the situation today would be very different if a political party [meaning the AKP] had gained 400 seats [needed to change the constitution to a presidential system]” in the elections.¹¹ It is thus in part through the violent reorganization of the state-system that AKP hegemony (and Erdoğan’s immunity from legal inquiries on corruption charges) is to be shored up, albeit in the face of increasing opposition.

In EU-Europe, coercive mechanisms operating through the very constitution of the state-system have for the last decades been at the center of state making. We might call the strategy that was pursued here since around the time of the Maastricht Treaty in the early 1990s “uneven rescaling.”¹² Some governmental functions were upscaled to the supranational tier of the EU, constraining governance that nominally remained anchored on the national level. The Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) is the best example of this: monetary policy has been rescaled to the supranational level, while labor market and welfare policies continue to formally constitute a national domain. Fiscal policy, in turn, is situated in what Werner Bonefeld (2005) calls a “twilight” zone: the EU conducts fiscal policy at the same time as fiscal sovereignty

remains nominally with the nation-states. The effect is that austerity policies and pressure to create competitive labor markets are entrenched on national levels through supranational frameworks that are largely insulated from political claims making (Bonefeld 2005: 98). Bastiaan van Apeldoorn thus concludes that the “essence of this hegemonic class project has been the creation of a transnational space for capital in which the latter’s rule is established precisely by preserving the formal sovereignty of nation-states” (2014: 189). How this uneven rescaling of the state-system can operate coercively has become particularly clear in the current crisis, and here especially with the punitive disciplining of SYRIZA. But the current crisis has also seen the exercise of overt coercion, such as in the case of the punitive demonstration laws in Spain that do not hide the intention of political repression. Such overt coercion remains anchored on the level of nation-states (a point that is relevant for the construction of a national state-idea, as discussed below).

In brief, I suggest that alternative political projects—alternative to neoliberal capitalism and authoritarianism—are suppressed in “unmasked states” by a polarizing hegemonic strategy on the part of governments, in their linkages to key factions of capital, that binds parts of subordinate populations into the dominant political project of authoritarian neoliberalism through ideological and material means while using both overt and structural coercion to discipline opponents via the state-system. I am not arguing that parts of the population continue to be duped by the state-idea while others are not. Rather, it seems that ideology and material concessions can be active in shoring up consent for state practices that are indeed unmasked—the question here becomes whose interests (material and otherwise) are being served.

Prospects

Can this strategy work? Is the organization of political subjection through coercion sustain-

able? Abrams’s argument would suggest that the unmasked state is an inherently instable one; for him, force must be legitimated to quell protest. The cases of current EU-Europe and Turkey clearly seem to support this point, though what the instability might result in is less clear. The political strategies to organize subjection in the unmasked state are leading to increasingly volatile situations. However, this in itself must not mean that the power to organize subjection in authoritarian neoliberalism is in decline. The point is that we are not (yet?) facing a general decline in hegemony but a strategy of hegemony building that accepts polarization and represses (but does not prevent) protest. This strategy is likely to become unsustainable only once the support from within the hegemonic alliance is waning, though even then the result might be violence spiraling out of control rather than a return to liberal democratic strategies of containment.

The prospect of such support waning finds a limit in the success of the populist right in occupying the political economic terrain that was once articulated through a leftist language of class and that it successfully frames through neo-nationalist, culturalized rhetoric. The political strategies discussed here contribute to the success of such national and culturalized political imaginaries in significant ways. Both uneven rescaling and the strategic use of nationalist ideologies for building polarized hegemony are today reproducing a *national* state-idea by continuously focusing people’s claims making on the national state. This is where the material foundations of the state-idea continue to be formally located—all while the transnationalization of the state-system as well as of capital accumulation ensures that this is not where decisions are actually made or where systemic constraints for such decisions are located. Here the state-idea continues a shadowy existence as a *normative* construct that includes not so much assumptions about what the state *is* as about what the state *should be* or what it should do for whom.

Such nationally focused politics constitutes, however, a fundamental barrier to the construction of alternatives to neoliberal capitalism and

the authoritarian state practices that support it. A critical anthropology might thus do well to question what kinds of analyses, including of the state, can support ongoing attempts at re-imagining the political beyond the national. There can be no alternative to authoritarian neoliberalism in one country.

Postscript

This article was completed in the fall of 2015. In the months since, the crisis has deepened, and so have the attempts to politically organize subjection through changes in the state-system and the political management of consent and coercion. Violence in Turkey has spiraled out of control. Hundreds of civilians have died in the Southeast and in the attacks in Ankara and Istanbul. President Erdoğan has called for an expanded legal definition of terrorism, one that subsumes the supposed contribution—“with the pen”—of members of parliament, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), academics, or journalists that are critical of the state violence against the Kurdish population. Many of these critics are already subject to legal charges, disciplinary procedures, and imprisonment. EU-European governments have kept a complicit silence on these developments in their attempt to refortify Europe in the face of the human catastrophe of the refugee crisis. And they marginalized the Greek government from decisions on its responses, some instead proposing the exclusion of Greece from the Schengen area, which has already effectively broken down. Populist nationalisms everywhere have proven successful in driving these politics—just as the developments show that a political alternative cannot be founded in nationalist retrenchment (Ankara, 21 March 2016).

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Notes

1. He refers here to the Poulantzas-Miliband debate and notes that its protagonists “have both perceived the non-entity of the state and failed to cling to the logic of that perception” (Abrams 1988: 69).
2. The memorandum subsequent to the Greek referendum on the “reforms” to be implemented by the SYRIZA government reportedly included one done deal of privatization: 14 profitable Greek airports were to be sold to the German company FRAPORT, while the remaining 30 non-profitable airports were to remain with the Greek state.
3. According to a recent representative study on what the authors define as left-extremist views in German society, 60 percent believe that the current political system is not a real democracy, as “the economy” rather than “citizens” are shaping politics, and 30 percent hold that democracy is impossible within a capitalist system. And this in a country that supposedly won in the crisis—though we would do well to look at class rather than national lines when it comes to identifying the concrete winners of the crisis and of the politics of debt and austerity in its wake. Figures are from a press release on the research results of Klaus Schroeder and Monika Deutz-Schroeder published on the website of the Freie Universität Berlin. See http://www.fu-berlin.de/presse/informationen/fup/2015/fup_15_044-studie-linksextremismus/index.html.
4. With transnationalization, I refer here to the development of institutional structures that integrate nation-states without obliterating them.
5. I understand neoliberalism as a class project (Harvey 2005)—of undermining working class power and restoring capital accumulation—that has been pursued in part through the transformation of state-systems. Practices of neoliberalizing states encompass among others supply-side politics, push for privatization and commodification, support for financialization, and (other) practices of accumulation by dispossession, “flexibilization” of labor markets and other means to check the power of labor, and authoritarian and expert-based governance. This has fundamental implications for relations of inequality, including but not limited to those of class.
6. I do not intend to present these two current empirical instances as either exceptional or as universally generalizable. Rather I want to draw attention to processes that have themselves been obscured by an overemphasis on the state-idea in the study of the state, processes that have been very visible in the social contexts that have been the center of my work and life over the past years and that I therefore discuss here.
7. Google Scholar shows that Abrams’s article has been cited 1,224 times (as of July 2015), and that the most influential of these works are anthropological and/or ethnographic. Abrams is usually cited for his notion of the state-idea, which was likely picked up so enthusiastically by anthropologists because it allowed for the state to be studied as (locally) constructed meaning and thus promised access to an object of study that was extremely elusive for ethnographers.
8. For this, we need to go beyond the everyday interactions of people with state bureaucracy that have informed many ethnographies of the state. Anthropology need not limit itself to a study of those dimensions of state practice that are visible to participant observation but should also examine the wider systemic role of state-sys-

tems in the organization of unequal social relations, through whatever methods suitable to that.

9. As Ian Bruff argues, “under authoritarian neoliberalism dominant social groups are less interested in neutralizing resistance and dissent via concessions and forms of compromise that maintain their hegemony, favoring instead the explicit exclusion and marginalization of subordinate social groups through the constitutionally and legally engineered self-disempowerment of nominally democratic institutions” (2014: 116). While I agree with the overall line of this argument, it is important to see that there is still an attempt by ruling elites in particular to seek consent of *parts of* subordinate groups for maintaining political power, which contributes to strong political polarization in society and might be sufficient to maintain hegemony.
10. This was a strategy Erdoğan had initially pursued—the success of the AKP was initially built on its capacity to establish alliances with traditionally opposed social forces, such as among the Kurdish population and liberals. The AKP has moved away from this in subsequent years, and the current moment shows a complete break with this hegemonic strategy.
11. More specifically, on the occasion of a PKK bombing in Dağlica that killed 16 soldiers and around the time when the Kurdish town Cizre, which had voted in majority for the HDP, was under siege by the Turkish military, costing many civilian lives.
12. Peck and Tickell (2002) have shown, among others, that the politics of scale and rescaling was a fundamental dimension of the entrenchment of neoliberal regimes.

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