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Seeing the state again

(Critical review)

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We would like to start by saying that we are extremely grateful to Craig Jeffrey for organising this set of reviews. Thanks also to Paul and Jennifer, Joanne, Sharad, and Joe for writing such instructive commentaries. Our critics suggest that the ethnographies that are at the heart of *Seeing the State* are more fully thought through than our theories of the state, stateness and visuality, and we are bound to agree. We also accept that we should have made more of the 'sighting' metaphor. This is a point that all of our reviewers make, in different and yet overlapping ways: distinct modes of seeing (Joe); the links between sight and the other senses (Joe, Joanne and Sharad); feminist theory and the masking of front-stage encounters (Joanne); mirroring effects (Paul and Jennifer). We also recognise that important questions need to be asked about the ontological status of 'the state', or that set of governmental practices that produce the 'state effect'. Before we attend to some of these challenges, however, or to the more directly political questions raised by Joanne and Sharad, it might be helpful to say what we hoped to achieve when we wrote *Seeing the State*.

Seeing the State was provoked, on the one hand, by a body of work produced by scholars including Arturo Escobar, James Scott, James Ferguson and Partha Chatterjee. In different ways, their work sought to challenge the ambitions of developmental states or the practices of development more broadly. Ferguson and Chatterjee are especially strong on the depoliticising instincts of 'development'. At the same time, we wanted to engage with a set of governmental practices in India that have been proposed by 'the new public administration'. These practices are bound up with precisely those ideas of repetitive participation and good governance, and of the merits of civil society, that Chatterjee takes aim at. They are avowedly developmental. The complexity of *Seeing the State* – whether it works or not – derives from the fact that these two points of entry are constantly in tension.

The starting point of *Seeing the State* is the suggestion that poorer men and women are now being afforded more direct sightlines of the state. In part, this is a result of India's deepening democracy. The more specific claim is that a new suite of decentralised and participatory development projects/forms of governance (including the Employment Assurance Scheme, Village Education Councils, Joint Forest Management, *Panchayati Raj*, and citizen scorecards) are promoting more active forms of citizenship among India's subaltern communities. They are also said to be promoting improved human development and gender equality scores in India.

Seeing the State accepts that the introduction into India of some of these new technologies of rule was prompted in part by external agencies, including the World Bank. Indeed, one of its most consistent arguments is that the sightings of the state made by poorer people in India not only take shape with reference to the everyday encounters that Joe Painter so usefully describes. They are also fashioned with regard to the sightings of the state made by lower-level government officers (and/or others in local quasi- or shadow-states) *and* by those more privileged architects of rule who sit in State capitals, New Delhi, London and Washington DC. One way of reading *Seeing the State* is to see it as an extended commentary on development studies, a changing body of theory and policy that is treated throughout as a contested technology of rule. But a major part of this commentary is devoted to the work of those who are most profoundly critical of the new public administration. Here is one link to James Scott and Arturo Escobar. More especially, or so we had hoped, here is our portal

into an extraordinary body of work produced by James Ferguson and Partha Chatterjee. If anything, it is Chatterjee's work which looms largest in *Seeing the State*. In *The Politics of the Governed*, Chatterjee (2004) argues that only a small minority of people in 'most of the [ex-colonial] world' come to think of themselves as free-standing citizens, who can make use of unfettered reason and the law in properly civil societies. For the most part, such men and women live in the rough and tumble worlds of political society. It is then "unscrupulously charitable" to maintain that large populations of the governed can be empowered by the agendas of participatory development or good governance.

Our aim in *Seeing the State* was to push hard at this suggestion, and to question the politics that might seem to emanate from within it. *Seeing the State* is a distinctly political book. (Sharad Chari recognises this when he suggests that one key to the book is its Postscript [on development ethics and the ethics of critique]). The long empirical sections of *Seeing the State* are marshalled to speak back to the competing sets of claims that swirl around the new public administration. There is an epistemological issue here, as well. *Seeing the State* is sceptical of generalised theories of the state or citizenship. But this is not simply because of 'geography', although Joe Painter usefully picks up this theme (The book itself is organised around comparative empirical research in five localities of Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal). It is also because of the limits of 'pure theory'. It is significant, perhaps, that only one of the commentaries picks up on, or begins to challenge, the research design that underpins *Seeing the State*, and which was the product of a lengthy series of meetings, experiments and negotiations, both among team members and with others. And yet when it comes to the strong theoretical–political claims made by Chatterjee and Ferguson, or indeed by the new public administration, how else are we seriously to advance debate, and possibly public policy, if not by continued theoretical labour and by hard-won empirical research?

We hope this will not be misunderstood. We are not calling for a return to brute empiricism. Nor are we challenging Joe Painter's very helpful suggestion that our empirical work on 'state encounters' could have been deepened. We should have devoted more labour to thinking through the production of categories like fear, hope and desperation, or of a fuller range of senses (the taste of tea and the sound of ceiling fans being so evocative of the places we worked). What we mean to suggest is this: that there is a tendency in some parts

of human geography to read works rather too much in terms of their theoretical acuity and rather less in regard to empirical robustness, when the two are always closely linked.

This brings us to some of the more specific complaints or suggestions made by our critics. One criticism is that *Seeing the State* comes close to reifying the state, treating it as an external object or something opposed to 'society'. This might be true on occasions, although we tried hard to give a sense of the contested, everyday, diffuse and sometimes blurred set of governmental practices that produce 'the state' or state effect. The truth is that we found it hard to write a book that sought to challenge monolithic accounts of the state without at times using 'the state' as shorthand. Paul and Jennifer recognise this difficulty, but they go on to question our claim that 'poorer people often see that state because the state has chosen to see them'. "As though the state could choose and look", they say. But we made this claim precisely in regard to a set of governmental practices whereby 'the state' – again in shorthand – names members of a population group (scheduled castes, *adivasis*, below poverty line), and then comes to see them in very tangible ways (for example, to deliver jobs, income support or certificates). It is not the generalised claim that Robbins and Rice suppose.

A related claim is that we should have made more of Timothy Mitchell's arguments about the "appearance [or production] of a state separate from society" (Robbins and Rice). Maybe so, although we had hoped that our long discussions of how governmental agencies work in Districts like Vaishali, Bihar or Midnapore, West Bengal might have gone some way to allay concern. (Nor are we convinced that the passage from Mitchell that is quoted by Paul and Jenny is crystal clear). Meantime, Joe Painter asks "whether 'the state' can really be said to pre-exist our encounters with it". Is 'it' in any sense an ontological object? In our view 'it' is, not as a singularity, of course, but as a set of legal and ritualised practices that exercise determinate effects on citizens, subjects and populations. It might be true that *someone* has to encounter a border or customs post for that part of the state apparatus to become 'actualised', as Joe puts it, but a world without someone is not a world that any of us could recognise. For all of us, on a daily basis, that which we name as the state surely does exist independently of us and affects our behaviour.

How 'the state' is constituted, managed and contested then become key questions for politics and public policy. As most of our critics note, *Seeing the State* advances a pragmatic (or possibilist) account of politics and empowerment, at least for a majority of the field areas where we worked. This does not always sit well. Sharad Chari begins his review by noting that he is "of a far less pragmatic persuasion than the authors". For her part, Joanne Sharp takes issue with the accounts of participation that we describe in a CPI-M dominated area in Midnapore (the stage managing of meetings, and so on), and, seemingly, with our own apparent endorsement of these "paternalistic views of 'poorer people'". She also accuses us of bracketing off postcolonial questioning of voice and power as "naïve or extreme"; indeed "postcolonialism [is] oddly missing in the book".

These challenges are welcome, for, as we said before, *Seeing the State* is meant to provoke political discussion. Joanne suggests that we are too quick to acclaim forms of participation that are really very shallow, and she might be right. These are legitimate and important areas of debate that need to be addressed urgently and on a firmly empirical footing. That said, however, *Seeing the State* tried to make a set of broader arguments about politics and the morality of critique. It sought in some degree to defend its own pragmatism, and it was at pains to endorse Max Weber's suggestion that academic critics have to take responsibility for "the consequences and effects of thinking and acting in certain ways". We realise that our critics only have 2000 words to make their arguments, and that we had 100,000 to make our case in *Seeing the State*. Nevertheless, we had hoped to make the argument that the CPI-M's interventions around participatory development in Midnapore are not *simply* paternalistic. They have also taken shape with regard to a wider set of political objectives that are hard to manage and which necessarily involve trade-offs. The question of how voices are raised is a complicated one and it's not clear that a simple injunction to let the poorest speak for themselves goes very far to address the political realities we described in our field areas. Since this does not happen very often, the question that various political parties and activist groups are grappling with is 'how can matters be improved?'. Some government officers and development agencies are asking similar questions. Practical, political questions. (We might add in this regard that our research project evolved in the field 'away' from the more directed focus on 'poorer people' that we first had in mind. Very much in opposition to the World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* project, for all its fine intent, we

came to the view that there is no necessary one-to-one correspondence between a project that engages with issues of governance that are of key concern to those facing social and political marginalisation, and a methodology that primarily or exclusively privileges subaltern voices).

Finally, we are surprised by Joanne's suggestion that we have not engaged seriously with postcolonialism or even with postdevelopmentalism. To the contrary, we would argue that *Seeing the State* presents one of the most sustained commentaries to date on the work of Partha Chatterjee (see chapters 6 and 8 especially) and James Ferguson (chapters 8 and 9). Moreover, it is perhaps instructive that Sharad Chari follows up his challenge to our pragmatism with the declaration that he will henceforth confine his remarks to our theoretical shortcomings. Those remarks are helpful in all sorts of ways, and we are especially indebted to him for his powerful clarifications of 'biopower' and the fragile construction of 'individuals'. What they do not respond to is the insistent invitation in *Seeing the State* to think politically about forms of governmentality and governance that cannot be wished away. For us, this remains the start and end point of that text, however imperfect the road travelled along the way.