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# Crossroads Studies and the State: Anthropological Perspectives

Martin Sökefeld <sup>1</sup>

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# 1. Introduction <sup>2</sup>

What is an area? What is *in* an area? In recent discussions on area studies the limits and limitations of “areas” have been hotly debated. The “geographies of knowing” produced by the conventional layout of studied areas go hand in hand with specific “geographies of ignorance”, writes Willem van Schendel (2002). As a result, he proposes a new area, “Zomia”, extending over the mountainous terrain from South East Asia via the margins of South Asia into Central Asia. Van Schendel proposed Zomia not so much to establish a new area but rather to point out the epistemological problems of any kind of fixed area in order to trigger the imagination of readers to think of other types of spatial formations that enable new kinds of insights. Knowledge simply “contained” in and by areas is always limited knowledge.

The research network Crossroads Asia, funded by the initiative of the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) to strengthen area studies in Germany, departed from this discussion and suggested not a new area (“Crossroads Asia”) but a new approach to area studies: a “Crossroads perspective” that focuses not on social and cultural processes contained within certain spatial boundaries but rather on processes that cut across borders (Mielke and Hornidge 2014). In consequence, the members of the network were very critical of using any kind of “territorial container” as analytical device or unit of study.

Yet last summer term I taught a course at my department that might be considered a cardinal sin in the context of Crossroads Asia. The title of the course was *Society and Culture of Pakistan*. Thus, the title referred to a “territorial container” that limited the contents of the course to a country, to a (nation-)state and its territory. Why did I teach such a course? It is not because, in a perspective of unacknowledged methodological nationalism, I consider the nation-state as a “natural” container of culture and society, in the sense of setting limits to cultural and social processes and relationships. On the basis of cultural relationships it would perhaps make more sense to teach a course on some cross-border area like the Punjab, taking both the Pakistani West-Punjab and the Indian East-Punjab into account, or the high mountain area in the north of Pakistan, extending into the Afghan Wakhan corridor and the southern parts of Chinese Xinjiang. The nation-state is by no means a watertight container of culture and society, but it has powerful effects: it binds very different social and cultural formations together. The state forces, sometimes violently, different people with different experiences and senses of belonging into a circumscribed space, and this has many and often grave effects on the state’s subjects. Often, their only option is to either imagine some shared commonality, often far-fetched and with very little persuasion, or to fight against it.

In its rejection of “container thinking”, emphasizing instead fluidity, mobility and the social construction of space, with its focus on the “meso” or “local” levels of society and out of the concern not to fall into the trap of another container in addition to the “area”,<sup>3</sup> the original proposal for

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<sup>2</sup> This paper grew out of reflections after six years of collaboration within the research network “Crossroads Asia”. I am heavily indebted to the German Ministry of Education and Research for very generously funding the network, but also to all the members of the network for continuous debate. Further, I thank Claus Bech Hansen, Anna Grieser, Dietrich Reetz and Conrad Schetter for their very helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> “Area” and “state” are of course not “containers” on an equal footing. In contrast to the state, which has a “life of its own”, because issues like power and sovereignty are intimately linked with it, the area is in most cases only a “representational container” that has much less importance outside of academia.

Crossroads Asia gave little importance to the state. Yet, during the first phase of the network's research we realized that "the state" is an important (f)actor to reckon with – not only because the state has a significant presence and importance in our interlocutors' eyes and the social contexts we worked in, but also because the state strongly interfered with our research (see 'Postscript' in Crossroads Asia Working Group Conflict 2012/2014).

In this paper, I will depart from a brief discussion of the failure of our project in the first phase of Crossroads Asia – a failure in the sense that we could not carry out the research initially planned because state intervention made crucial sites and people inaccessible. The role of the state and how it matters for "Crossroads Studies" is my main concern in this contribution, for it raises a number of questions: What is "the state", precisely? And how can we conceptualize the state within a "Crossroads perspective"? If we take the Crossroads perspective as emphasizing "the interdependence of multiple spatialities, such as places, scales, networks, distances, and mobilities" (Hornidge and Mielke 2015: 14), how does "the state" figure in? In this paper, I will draw mostly on anthropological discussions of conceptualizations of the state that do not take the state as it has conventionally been conceptualized, i.e. as an institution "out there", based on rules and governing a fixed territory. Instead, I will draw on theoretical perspectives that consider "the state" as a construction that arises from discourses and everyday practices and that is unruly, fragmented and contradictory. I will take the Pakistani state with(in) which we worked as my empirical example.

## 2. State interference

Let me briefly narrate our initial research idea within the framework of Crossroads Asia that was thwarted by state interference. Crossroads Asia emphasized the significance of mobility in its dual sense, as physical mobility from place to place and as social mobility and mobilization, from position to position. Crossroads Asia also gave much importance to Norbert Elias' (2009) notion of *figuration* as a complex social formation centering on specific "issues" that links different actors and contexts (as well as materialities, Sökefeld 2015) and extends in time and space. From such a perspective we had intended to study movement(s) related to the planned construction of the Diamer-Bhasha dam, a "mega-project" on the river Indus in Pakistan's high mountain area of Gilgit-Baltistan. More precisely, while the huge dam – if it is ever built – will be situated just on the border between Pakistan's Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province and Gilgit-Baltistan, the resultant lake will flood large parts of Gilgit-Baltistan's Diamer district, reaching even beyond the town of Chilas. As a consequence of the Kashmir conflict, Gilgit-Baltistan is a disputed area that is not a constitutional part of Pakistan, but "only" under Pakistan's control (Sökefeld 2005), meaning that the construction of the dam affects issues of sovereignty, territoriality and political control. Although Gilgit-Baltistan is a very scantily populated area given its high-mountain topography, people will be displaced by the lake.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the dam will induce people's *physical* movement. But there is also *political* mobilization for and against the dam: For the dam because of hopes for a more regular supply of electricity, which is greatly needed, and for handsome compensations for the submerged land,<sup>5</sup> and against the dam not

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<sup>4</sup> According to estimates, the construction of the dam requires the resettlement of more than 4000 families from 31 villages (Terminski 2015: 98).

<sup>5</sup> In particular the issue of compensation has mobilized residents; see *Diamer-Bhasha project: Heftier payouts offered to residents displaced by dam*, The Express Tribune, February 23, 2015, available online at:

only by local people threatened by displacement, but also by political activists out of larger political considerations, given Gilgit-Baltistan's disputed status.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence of highly remunerative compensations, *social* mobility was also at stake.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the materiality of the dam and the resultant lake will have massive consequences. Most importantly, the Karakorum Highway will be submerged over a length of 100 kilometers<sup>8</sup> and needs to be rebuilt in higher areas in order to maintain a year-round road connection between Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan – another impact on movement. Planning research we – that is Anna Grieser, the fieldworker, and myself – knew that the dam was a contentious issue in which many actors at local, regional, national and international levels had their stakes.<sup>9</sup> We also knew that district Diamer was a difficult site for anthropological fieldwork. But still the issue of the dam seemed a perfect case for a Crossroads study based on a figurational approach.

Yet some of the stakeholders thought differently. For reasons that never became entirely clear, a bureaucrat in Gilgit-Baltistan's home department in Gilgit strongly interfered with Anna Grieser's planned fieldwork. He put intelligence agencies on her track in Chilas, the district capital, and got her yanked out of Diamer. It quickly became clear that research on the dam issue was impossible because of this sort of "state intervention" and Anna shifted her research interest to the much less controversial topic of Gilgit's urban waterscape. But even there she suffered from constant interference and control by "the agencies" and officials (see Grieser 2014, 2016a).

### 3. Conceptualizing the state

From the point of view of figurational sociology, the bureaucrats and agencies were part of the figuration of the dam which we were not allowed to study. Conventionally, departing, for instance, from Max Weber's conceptualization of the state, agencies and bureaucrats would be seen simply as parts of the state, as actors representing the state. Yet more recent conceptualizations of the state strongly contradict Weber's ideas, challenging his notion of a distinct, rational – and this largely means *predictable* – institution based on a consistent order of law that pertains to a certain territory. According to the conventional model, the state as an autonomous body stands in clear contrast to those who are governed, i.e. who are forced to submit to its order which they also regard as legitimate. Migdal and Schlichte (2005: 5) view the assumption of the autonomy of the state as the

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<http://tribune.com.pk/story/842669/diamer-bhasha-project-heftier-payouts-offered-to-residents-displaced-by-dam/> (accessed September 26, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See *Protest rallies in Diamer against Bhasha dam*, Dawn, February 2, 2006, available online at: <http://www.dawn.com/news/176874/protest-rallies-in-diamer-against-bhasha-dam> (accessed September 26, 2016)

<sup>7</sup> In fact, physical movement and social mobility seem to go hand in hand as many people planned to invest their compensations in new houses in Pakistani cities like Mansehra and Abbottabad.

<sup>8</sup> See *Diamer-Bhasha Dam*, International Rivers. Available online at: <https://www.internationalrivers.org/campaigns/diamer-bhasha-dam> (accessed September 26, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Initially, we planned to compare the Diamer-Bhasha Dam with the construction of the Mangla Dam which is similarly situated on the border between Azad Kashmir and Pakistan.

*sine qua non* of most political theories.<sup>10</sup> As such a notion of the state is directly linked to a territory, Weber's model of the state indeed can be considered a "container" model. Referring to India, Akhil Gupta (1995), in contrast, has pointed out that the boundary between state and society is often blurred and that the state is not an a priori of everyday experiences. He argues instead that ideas of the state arise from low and local level practices, and emphasizes the translocality of the state as a "space that is constituted by the intersection of local, regional, national, and transnational phenomena" (ibid, 392).<sup>11</sup>

While Weber's notion can be regarded as eurocentric, it is open to debate to what extent even Western states actually conform to his model (Hansen and Stepputat 2006). It is quite obvious, however, that Pakistan is a real misfit if we hold on to Weber's definition of the state which, beside the territory, centers on the successful enforcement of the monopoly on the use of violence.<sup>12</sup> The Pakistani state as conventionally conceived clearly does not successfully claim such a monopoly, and its sovereignty is unevenly (to say the least) distributed over an equally heterogeneous territory that, beside the "regular", constitutional territory of the state (in a way) comprises irregularities like the tribal areas on the Afghan border, Azad Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Perhaps in most cases Max Weber's conception refers more to normative fiction (or an ideal type, in Weber's diction) than to a social and political reality. Already more than seven decades ago, anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown strongly voiced his objection against the "reality" of the state:

„In writings on political institutions there is a good deal of discussion about the nature and the origin of the State, which is usually represented as being an entity over and above the human individuals who make up a society, having as one of its attributes something called ‚sovereignty‘, and sometimes spoken of as having a will (...) or as issuing commands. The state, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers. What does exist is an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relation. (...) There is no such thing as the power of the State; there are only, in reality, powers of individuals – kings, prime ministers, magistrates, policemen, party bosses, and voters" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: xxiii).

Reacting to this objection in his reflections on the "Difficulties of studying the state", Philip Abrams (1988) suggested that we should give up the "The State" (capitalized) as a super-imposed, unitary and bounded entity situated above society as an object of study and turn instead to the state-system<sup>13</sup> and the state-idea.<sup>14</sup> Abrams defines the state-system "a palpable nexus of practice and

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<sup>10</sup> Some authors, however, treated the autonomy of the state as a matter of degree and an empirical variable. See Skocpol 1985.

<sup>11</sup> Later in this text I will argue on the basis of ethnographic evidence for a need to distinguish between *state* and *government*. But as state is the dominant term of analysis and as there is no consistent distinction of state and government in the theoretical literature, I will use *state* for the time being.

<sup>12</sup> See Weber's definition of the state in *Economy and Society*: "Staat soll ein politischer Anstaltsbetrieb heißen, wenn und insoweit sein Verwaltungsstab erfolgreich das Monopol legitimen physischen Zwanges für die Durchführung der Ordnungen in Anspruch nimmt" (Weber 1972: 29).

<sup>13</sup> Abrams' conceptualization does not imply that the state-system is necessarily systematic. His choice of the term is probably due to the prevalence of systems-theory at the time of his writing (1977), although Abrams was no adherent of systems theory. In his opinion, systems theory does not explain the state but "explains it away" (Abrams 1988: 85, endnote 18).

institutional structure centered in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society”, while the state-idea is a misrepresentation that does the ideological work of disguising the disunity of state institutions and practices.<sup>15</sup> The state-idea thus serves as a hegemonic idea that masks actual power relations and produces the belief in the legitimacy of the state system. Pointing, like Gupta, to the fact that, at the empirical level, state, society and economy – the trinity of the modern social world – are deeply intertwined and cannot be separated, Timothy Mitchell (2006) argues that their apparent separation is produced through techniques of spatial and temporal ordering to which individuals are subjected and through which the appearance and idea of the state as an “apparatus,” as an autonomous actor external to society, is produced. Among other things, Mitchell points to the technique of bordering that produces this “state effect”: By establishing a territorial boundary to enclose a population and exercising absolute control over movement across it, governmental powers define and help constitute a national entity: “Setting up and policing a frontier involves a variety of fairly modern social practices – continuous barbed-wire fencing, passports, immigration laws, inspections, currency control, and so on. These mundane arrangements (...) help manufacture an almost transcendental entity, the nation-state” (Mitchell 2006: 180). Emphasizing that this transcendental entity goes beyond conscious and rational conceptualization to include affects and non-rational psychic states, Navarro-Yashin (2002: 4f.) writes about the *fantasies* of the state.

These interventions strongly speak against the simple equation of the state with a container conceived in spatial terms: Speaking with Mitchell, we can say that the idea of the (territorial) container, produced, among other things, by bordering practices and related discourses, is a significant element of the state-idea that, however, masks actual relationships that often cut across borders. Yet while the analytical distinction of state-idea and state-system is helpful, we certainly should not give up studying the state-idea in favor of studying only the state-system, as Abrams suggested.

#### 4. A figurative approach towards the state

I suppose that I do not have to argue here for the importance of the state (both idea and system) for the social worlds that we study. Even if in the conflict section of the Crossroads Asia network we did originally not focus on the state as primary actor of disputes, the significance of “the state” at multiple levels of conflict could not be overlooked. If we briefly return to our initial project, there was “the state” in the shape of the bureaucrat who stopped Anna Grieser’s progress to Diامر and of “the agencies” that subsequently monitored her steps. But of course “the state” was not only impinging on the researcher; it was part of the scene, the issue we intended to study: “the state” took steps towards building the dam, negotiating its funding in the international arena and land compensations with the local people, and so on. Even after Anna Grieser had shifted her research focus from the massive “mega project” of the Diامر-Bhasha Dam to more mundane forms of using

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<sup>14</sup> Without acknowledging Abrams’ conceptualization, this was later paralleled by Migdal and Schlichte’s (2005) distinction of seeing the state and doing the state.

<sup>15</sup> Given our everyday experiences of the disunity of the state, the belief in its unitary character is indeed “most striking” (Gupta 2012: 44).

and regulating water resources in Gilgit's urban area, she had to confront the state not only embodied in the agencies that attempted to monitor all her research activities (Grieser 2014, 2016a), but of course also in the shape of the local administration of water, of officers and line men, quite comparable to the local-level "encounters with the state" that are emphasized by Akhil Gupta. Interestingly, "the state" (the agencies) again tried to rigorously restrict her encounters with "the state" (i.e. with various sections of the local administration).

In line with the overall conceptual approach of the Crossroads network, I suggest a figurative approach to the state. To be sure, I do not mean to suggest simply conceiving of the state as a figuration. In Norbert Elias' conceptualization, a figuration does not start from 'entities' but from issues, like that of playing cards or football, or the issue of a conflict. A figuration is not an essentialization of "the game" but the particular and concrete act of playing a game by specific actors in a specific context; it is a process linking together action and structural conditions. The state in itself is not an issue (if we leave aside the theoretical issue of its conceptualization) but it is part of many issues. The most general issue is the issue of government understood in the Foucauldian sense, which aims not only at safeguarding or reproducing sovereignty, but also at the "care" for a population.<sup>16</sup> In a way, the shift that Foucault observed in the execution of power since the 17th century prefigures the dissolution of the unity of the state and the blurring of the boundary between state and society.<sup>17</sup> The sovereign is no longer external to the society over which he exerts power but becomes part of it (Foucault 2005). In Elias' terms we can say that state and society have to be conceptualized as being part of the same figuration.<sup>18</sup> Government in this sense entails the multiplication of its instruments, strategies and purposes. In fact, governmentality is almost ever-extending, addressing issues that have not previously been within the purview of government.<sup>19</sup> Thus, there is not one issue of government but a multitude of issues like water, health, education, transport, security and the like, that partly overlap and interlink, but that may also contradict one another because they are not taken care of by one single homogeneous and united actor. Further, the multiplication of the instruments and purposes of government result in a spill-over effect, beyond state institutions, blurring the boundary between state and society. Indeed the very fact that governing is not done by the state institutions alone, but also by non-state actors like "non-governmental organizations" obscures the boundaries further.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This certainly does not mean that the population is necessarily well cared for. But government still has to be explained and legitimized in terms of the public good (or the "national interest", though Foucault did not write much about the significance of the "nation" in this context) and not simply in terms of its own perpetuation.

<sup>17</sup> „But the state, no more probably today than at any other time in its history, does not have this unity, this individuality, this rigorous functionality, not, to speak frankly, this importance; maybe, after all, the state is no more than a composite reality and a mythicized abstraction, whose importance is a lot more limited than many of us think. Maybe what is really important for our modernity – that is, for our present – is not so much the *étatisation* of society, as the 'governmentalization' of the state" (Foucault 1991: 103).

<sup>18</sup> On Elias' figuration concept and the state see also Kuhlmann 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere I have for instance referred to the extension of government into the realm of "natural" disasters which earlier had been simply a matter of God and fate (Sökefeld 2012-13).

<sup>20</sup> From a Foucauldian perspective, the term „NGO“ is a real misnomer as such organizations are in fact part of processes of governing. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the organizations of the Aga Khan Development Network, that in some areas in a way duplicate state administration in fields like health and education, are particularly important non-state agencies of government that nevertheless closely cooperate with state institutions.



## 5. State and government

In the foregoing, I have shown how we detect a blurring of state and society on the analytical, theoretical level. Let us now contrast this with the empirical level. For from the emic perspective, i.e. from the point of view of citizens, the concept of state appears quite effective: people indeed often perceive “the state” as an apparatus that is distinct from or opposed to society (Obeid 2010: 337). Akhil Gupta writes that people in rural India encounter the state in their everyday relationships with government bureaucracies. But do they? Do people equate (or confuse) in a rather Weberian sense the bureaucrat with the state? How do they speak about the state? Interestingly, Gupta opens his article with an example where he writes that his village people habitually talk about “corruption” and “the state”, giving the vernacular term for corruption but not for the state (Gupta 1995: 375). How do people in his village talk about and refer to the state? In my reading it seems that Gupta mostly mixes *state* and *government* (e.g. *ibid.* 390).<sup>21</sup>

Among the citizens in Pakistan, there is surprisingly little everyday talk about the state. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the English word “state” or its Urdu equivalent (*riyāsat*) are rarely used. In contrast, people talk all the time about the “government” (*hukumat*, less frequently: *sarkār*) taken in the conventional, non-Foucauldian sense. In fact, quotidian institutions are attributed to the government and not to the state. In Pakistan and in Gilgit-Baltistan there are government high schools or hospitals, for instance, but neither state schools nor state hospitals. Local discourse is quite specific. Thus, local, sympathetic commentators attributed Anna Grieser’s difficulties not to the state but to the government, or, more specifically, to particular persons in the administration and agencies.

Grieser’s experiences reveal that there are different usages of “government”: Often it is used inclusively, referring to both elected incumbents like the Chief Minister, the Members of the Legislative Assembly and to non-elected officials, while it is also used to refer only to the elected government. In either case, government refers to those institutions that have a practical impact on people’s lives, which can, at least in principle, be approached or encountered by the people, just like a government school. Tellingly, people routinely complain about the government, the agencies, the administration or specific officers, i.e. about the innumerable elements of the *state-system*, but they rarely complain about “the state” (i.e. “Pakistan”).<sup>22</sup> In Pakistan “the State” indeed appears as Mitchell’s transcendental entity mentioned above, i.e. one that is far removed from the neglect of services and the grave deficiencies of everyday life. In Gilgit-Baltistan, a region which, due to its disputed status derived from the Kashmir conflict, suffers from a number of political disabilities, the huge contrast between the daily shortcomings of the “state-system” and celebratory invocations of “the state”, for instance in the festivities on Pakistan’s independence day on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, or other national holidays, is particularly striking. Here it becomes clear that the state-idea is closely linked to the idea of the nation which on such occasions is celebrated through its symbols and

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<sup>21</sup> At one point Gupta recognizes that his interlocutor distinguishes „the regime and the bureaucracy” (1995: 391), but this is not reflected in his analysis.

<sup>22</sup> I am referring here to everyday discourse, not to more specific political discourse like that of nationalists in Gilgit-Baltistan who reject Pakistan’s control of the area and therefore also complain about “the state” (Sökefeld 1999). Concerning everyday discourse, I have to admit that this has changed to some extent in recent years. When people complain about a particular shortcoming that is attributed to the government, they often close by exclaiming with a sigh: “This is Pakistan!” This, however, is not specific to Gilgit-Baltistan but can be heard in Pakistan as well.

heroes. People are proud of their state and their nation but, with the exception of enthusiastic party soldiers, not at all of their government.

Tentatively we could say that by distinguishing government and state, people in Gilgit-Baltistan distinguish the state-system from the state-idea. This is of course not an unequivocal and clear-cut distinction that is neatly congruent with Abrams' theoretical distinction, but it helps to realize that both aspects matter in local perspective.

Bringing Foucault in again, we have to realize that in Pakistan, caring benevolence is attributed to and expected from the state, not from the government. Thus, Foucault's terminology is a bit confusing here. In Pakistan, the state-idea is intimately linked to the idea of "goodness"; the state-idea has strong paternalistic aspects: The state needs to be honored like one's father and at least in principle one should be ready to sacrifice oneself for it. Government, in contrast, is seen from the emic point of view as the body which almost always fails to fulfil the expectations put into the idea of the state.<sup>23</sup> Honor and respect for the government are rare.

If we take issues of *governing* (rather than *government*) as figurations, we realize that we first have to take the state-system, or elements of it, into account. Thus, in analyzing the figuration of urban water supply, Anna Grieser had to deal with different governmental departments like the Public Works Department, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or the Water and Sanitation Department (WASA), which do not neatly melt into one body of "government". In fact, practices and goals of EPA and WASA may at times be quite contradictory. Also individual officers cannot be simply equated with their department. Some of them are related to residents in a particular part of the town who, on the basis of kinship, may expect and even demand preferential treatment in terms of water supply which cannot be refused. This is another level of blurring and entanglement of "state" and "society", which the label "corruption" would capture only very inadequately. Thus, we are confronted with a highly complex figuration of different actors and concerns that are multiply interwoven and that form a very specific "waterscape" (Grieser 2016b). Yet, apart from the different departments and their personnel as part of the state-system, the state-idea may also play a role when, on the basis of promises that the state cares for their needs, people take the government to task. Thus, while the state-idea may on one hand work as a cover to mask relations of subordination and even exploitation, it may also serve as a basis to raise demands and voice protest against government. In any case, not only elements of the state-system are part of a figuration, but also the state-idea with the values, symbols, ideologies and expectations that are linked to it.

## 6. Don't reduce the state to a container

In Gilgit-Baltistan, the state-idea as container is very important. Being disputed between India and Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan is not a regular ("constitutional") section of Pakistan's territorial container. Yet in spite of almost seventy years of deferment, most people in Gilgit-Baltistan still demand and long for the full accession of the region to Pakistan although this would most probably not bring much improvement in terms of the services of Pakistan's state-system – Pakistan consists of parts *with* constitutional rights that are even more neglected than Gilgit-Baltistan. The wish for full accession is to a large extent an issue of identity and recognition, that is to say, it is an issue of

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<sup>23</sup> In Foucault's understanding, government is of course much less a body than a process.

identification with Pakistan's state-idea. On the other hand, beyond the state-idea the container does not always matter much, the "container" is by no means watertight and sacrosanct as long as the idea is not challenged. Following political considerations, actors of the state-system/ government may variously open or close the container. A current case in point is the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, a huge network of Chinese investments in Pakistan that will bind Pakistan much closer to its north-eastern neighbor and give China even greater influence on politics and economy in Pakistan. In this context, the political status of Gilgit-Baltistan has again become a heated topic potentially leading to a reform of Gilgit-Baltistan's status, which would aim to legally and politically protect Chinese investments in the area (Sökefeld, forthcoming). Thus, the government will perhaps change the political status of Gilgit-Baltistan not in response to the longstanding demands of the citizens of Gilgit-Baltistan, but in response to the requirements of Chinese economic and political interests.<sup>24</sup> The container leaks in terms of sovereignty that is partly outsourced (Hansen and Stepputat 2006) beyond its territory, to China.

With his emphasis on governmentality, biopolitics and the capillary dispersal of power throughout society, Foucault almost pushed the question of sovereignty out of political theory. But sovereignty returned in particular with the writings of Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2005) who insists on the primacy of legal-institutional power. With his concept, derived from Carl Schmitt, of the sovereign as 'the one who decides on the state of exception', he contends that "sovereign violence (...) has not disappeared with the emergence of modern biopolitical governance" (Hansen and Stepputat 2005: 17). Yet with this very abstract and centralistic conception, Agamben cannot reach into the intricacies and the ethnography of fragmented political life. What is more, sovereignty is often dispersed and needs to be approached in a more differentiated way. Accordingly, Humphrey speaks of "localized forms of sovereignty" (2007: 420) and Hansen and Stepputat regard sovereignty of the state as an "aspiration that seeks to create itself in the face of internally fragmented, unevenly distributed and unpredictable configurations of political authority that exercise more or less legitimate violence on a territory" (2005: 3). For Pakistan, the spatial extension of sovereignty conceived in these terms, i.e. as "more or less legitimate violence", certainly does not match the territory in a neat, Weberian congruency. There are diverse contenders of the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Pakistani government on its territory. Beside Chinese encroachments, think also about Baluch separatists, Taliban who dispute the Pakistani government's legitimacy in religious terms, or the drone strikes of the US government that challenge Pakistan's ability or willingness to eradicate terrorism on its own territory – that is, the state's ability to enforce a monopoly on the use of violence. In addition, the Durand Line, which separates Pakistan from Afghanistan, shows that Pakistan's territorial borders are not everywhere as tight as they ideally should be according to conventional models of the state (Schetter 2013). In terms of sovereignty, then, Pakistan, as a container, is heavily perforated.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Chinese pressure sees Pakistan mull constitutional status of Gilgit-Baltistan", The Express Tribune, January 7, 2016. Online at: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1023523/chinese-pressure-sees-pakistan-mull-constitutional-status-of-gilgit-baltistan/> (accessed September 20, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> In order to counter the widespread but simplified image that Pakistan's sovereignty is punctured only from the outside, by other powers encroaching on its territory, I should remark in parenthesis that the government of Pakistan also tries to extend a kind of sovereignty beyond its own territorial borders, keeping tabs on its citizens that live elsewhere, for instance by offering them a form of belonging beyond formal citizenship. Emigrants from Pakistan that have naturalized in their country of residence are offered the status of "Former Citizen of Pakistan" that confers them certain rights like the permission to buy property in Pakistan which plain

Yet still, the activists against the construction of the Diamer-Bhasha Dam give much importance to the container idea and would like to seal the container. They are mostly Gilgit-Baltistan nationalists who hold the opinion that Pakistan has no legitimate powers within Gilgit-Baltistan as the area is not part of Pakistan's constitutional-territorial container (see Sökefeld 2005). They accuse Pakistan of violating the container's borders by planning to build a dam that would mostly affect a territory that lies beyond. Again, by building the dam, the container would be punctured by the state-system.

It becomes clear, then, that we should not squarely equate the state with a container. While the container may be an important element of the state-idea, the walls and borders of the container are often negotiated and made penetrable by the state-system – in addition to cultural flows that, even by walled state-borders, can never be contained. The importance given to the container idea may be subjected to the mundane interests of power as played out within the entanglements of the state-system. We may come to the conclusion that the container idea is an important element of Timothy Mitchell's *state effect* that masks actual leakages, which are opened in the interest of power and economic gain. It may also be an instrument used in power struggles; an instrument employed particularly to claim or to dismiss claims of legitimacy. Using a thus informed concept of the state in our analysis, we do not fall into the trap of "container thinking".

## 7. Conclusion

From a figurational "Crossroads perspective", we should conceptualize the state neither as a singular actor, a body distinct and opposed to or above society (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), nor as a container that confines a society and neatly demarcates and separates it from other societies that are conceptualized spatially as its "neighbors". While in political discourse the state is no doubt often invoked as such - as an entity above society linked to a clearly demarcated container-territory - we cannot be content with pinpointing only to such a state-idea. In our analysis we have to come to terms with the actual, empirical manifestations of both idea and system in political discourse and practice. Yet, for a figurational approach to the state, the precise analysis of the invocation of the territorial state-idea, its contents and context, both by actors of the state-system and by opposed ("non-state") actors, may be of particular importance. Analyzing how such a state-idea is conjured up either to disguise relations of domination or to lay bare entanglements of power and interests is an important step for the understanding of political figurations. The cultural form of the state is an empirical phenomenon, Timothy Mitchell (1991: 81) emphasized. Thus, I think, we can continue to teach, now and then, courses like the one on Pakistan that I taught last semester. We must convey the message, however, that while the container idea of the state - often forcefully employed to tie people together - may be very powerful, the "container system" is very leaky. Moreover, specific flip sides of ignorance are inherent to our "geographies of knowing", and only by acknowledging these can we further push the boundaries of knowledge and arrive at a better understanding of the state in its multiple facets.

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foreigners do not enjoy (see <https://www.nadra.gov.pk/index.php/products/cards/poc>, accessed October 31, 2016). With such a policy, Pakistan, like many other states, in part deterritorializes itself.

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## Information on the competence network Crossroads Asia

The competence network Crossroads Asia was established in 2011 to generate novel perspectives on interdisciplinary Area Studies research. Comprised of six research institutions with regional expertise covering Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Nepal, Northern India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Xinjiang, the network aims to further an understanding of the interactions of individuals with a connection to places from eastern Iran to western China and from the Aral Sea to northern India. In doing so, it intends to contribute to overcoming the neglect of non-‘Western’ epistemologies, insights and forms of knowledge generation, as well as to close certain gaps between systematic disciplines and Area Studies.

The research within the network has centered on figurations, defined as specific causal and functional connections making up constellations (e.g., familial, religious, or economic networks). During the first funding phase of the project (2011-14), micro-level empirical research focused on figurations related to three thematic concepts: conflict, migration and development. Since early 2015, the network has begun a second funding phase in which there is a synthesizing of earlier research. We are beginning in-depth analyses of how spatial realities are constructed by the movement of people, goods and ideas, as well as how these emerging constructions – with their limiting borders and boundaries – enable and constrain mobility. Physical and social mobility, as well as imagined/mental mobility, are all considered in this context. Our overarching research questions include: What, in particular movement, makes borders and boundaries take on significance? In turn, what causes their meaning to be altered or even lost? Within and across limiting components (e.g., geographic, political, socio-cultural and/or ethnic borders and boundaries), which factors contribute to im(mobility)?

Based on this extensive research and diverse analyses thereof, we are aiming to collectively elaborate a Crossroads Perspective for understanding complex webs of ties and their spatial dimensions. This non-prescriptive selection of conceptual and methodological tools for rethinking how to conduct research on fluid, dynamic and complex phenomena will be articulated at our conferences and workshops, in publications including an Area Studies textbook, and in teaching, including at the new ‘Global and Area Studies’ graduate program at the Humboldt Universität Berlin, one of the network institutes. The Crossroads Perspective will consist of a methodological approach (‘Follow the Figuration’), as well as an ethical component, to guide Area Studies researchers in reflecting on their position in relation to their subjects, as well as the tangible impacts of the research they conduct. The Crossroads Perspective will also contain a tool-kit of concepts which have proven resilient in our empirical analysis of, for example, bordering processes in Kashmir; cross-border bazaar trade between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and China; and Baloch networks rooted in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran.

The competence network understands itself as a mediator between the academic study of Crossroads Asia and efforts to meet the high demand for information on this area in politics and the public. Findings of the project will feed back into academic teaching, research outside the limits of the competence network, and public relations efforts. Further information on Crossroads Asia is available at [www.crossroads-asia.de](http://www.crossroads-asia.de).

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