Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police–Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins*

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The Ambivalent State is a careful, thorough and solid examination of the contradictory, ambiguous, selective and ultimately criminal practices of the state in marginalised urban spaces in Argentina. More specifically, the book analyses collusion, or the clandestine relationship between police officers, drug dealers and low-income residents, as they produce interpersonal violence. 'Ambivalence' is understood, in the book, in its literal sense: as the simultaneous rupture from, and enforcement of, the law (a state instrument *par excellence*) at the same given space and time. Constantly re-shaped, constructed and negotiated by grassroots actors, the ambivalent practices discussed are criminal as they entail a profound betrayal of 'what is right', leading to loss of lives, livelihoods, freedoms and production of traumas. The state thus emerges in the study as a field of dispute or an assemblage where heterogeneous projects coexist (Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present and Future*, Polity, 2016), deeply affecting poor people's everyday experiences.

The book works at the intersection of two bodies of data: (1) an intensely grounded ethnographic account of an area in Greater Buenos Aires that the author calls 'Arquitecto Tucci'; and (2) a striking set of transcriptions of wiretapped conversations linked to other locations in the country. With the first, *The Ambivalent State* builds on the findings produced by one of the authors, Javier Auyero, in a previous study, *In Harm's Way* (Princeton University Press, 2015), in which he and María Fernanda Berti argued that domestic and street violence are not produced in separate realms, but that they constitute links of the same violence chain whereby private and public spheres are strongly interconnected. In addition, the transcriptions of the wiretaps ('*escuchas*' in Spanish) represent a new set of data, unique to this work, which allows authors Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering to grasp one further dimension of the same problem: the interaction between drug dealers and police officers at ground level, which would not have been available to them otherwise. By intertwining the two bodies of data, Auyero and Sobering gain a 'fine-grained, micro-interactive' (p. 8) understanding of how low-level collusion works, even though recognising that chains of violence start higher up. In this way, they effectively convey a multi-faceted and almost tangible experience of 'what otherwise would be an abstraction' – the state (Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, *The Anthropology of the State*, Blackwell, 2006, cited on p. 9).

In *Urban Outcasts* (Polity, 2008) Loïc Wacquant highlights the importance of the police for the study of state penetration in neighbourhoods of social exclusion. In turn, José Miguel Cruz argues that processes like those addressed in this study are strongly affected by structural forces such as disadvantage, unemployment

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and inequality (see, for example, 'State and Criminal Violence in Latin America', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 66 (2016), pp. 325–96). Auyero and Sobering engage both Wacquant and Cruz's notions to make sense of their complex data. Indeed, they read low-level collusion in the context of a deeply eroded welfare system. Once again, the complexity embedded in these processes is best grasped by reading the book as one further step in lines of analysis opened in the authors' past works. Concurrently present and absent, thus, the state surfaces in residents' everyday lives in the form of a school (*In Harm's Way*), a cash transfer programme (Auyero, *Patients of the State*, Duke University Press, 2012), brokers' networks (Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*, Duke University Press, 2000) or the very control exerted by the police. At the same time, the state abandons residents as much as it punishes them, which becomes painfully visible in structural deprivation, stigmatisation, unemployment and, not least, the lack of police accountability. The consideration of these multiple dimensions further assists the authors in constructing the state as a profoundly ambivalent organisation (p. 11).

Chapter 1 contextualises the study by addressing the role of the state in producing violence and the illicit nature of much police action. After this, the book proceeds in consecutive layers of analysis, as if gradually zooming out. Chapter 2 reveals the first-hand experience of violence narrated by residents of Arquitecto Tucci, presenting what I call the book's first body of data. There are compound deprivations in Tucci, and the chapter reads them in relation to the aforementioned chains of violence, identifying three main ways in which drug-related violence enters the home: 'invasion' (the physical presence of a gang member requesting payment), 'protection' of family members, and 'pre-emption', or the anxiety produced in households as young members engage in drug consumption and trade.

The next set of chapters moves on to discuss the illicit practices of the police as they emerge from the *escuchas*. Chapter 3 examines micro-scale actions such as extorsion, 'planting' evidence, arrangements with drug bosses, gratuitous harassment of young people and retaliation towards the residents who make official complaints about these practices. Building on the previous chapter, Chapter 4 discusses the selling of arms and ammunition and, most interestingly, the raiding of competitors carried out by the police at the request of their illicit partners. This scales up the everyday actions presented in Chapter 3, as what would be frequent but ultimately anecdotal events now become part of a structured set of practices. Chapter 5 then reads the practices discussed in terms of collusion, analysing how it works in terms of exchange of information (about upcoming raids, about the officers who ordered them) and materials, common practices of manipulation and surveillance, and relational processes. Chapter 6 zooms out further to look into the drug-processing chain, from the import of primary materials to networks of kitchens and protection at the national level. It also addresses the role of political brokers who act in connivance with the police. Bringing this set of chapters to an end, Chapter 7 discusses collusion conceptually as it emerges from the materials presented.

In the Conclusions the book explicitly calls for the incorporation of clandestine practices into a wider theorisation of the state. Distancing themselves from understanding social science research as the practice of inquiry tailored to producing policy recommendations, the authors suggest that to effect substantial change in

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contexts such as Arquitecto Tucci a thorough reform of the system itself is necessary. Furthermore, they argue that such change can come only from a concerted effort involving the grassroots and working across party lines. In other words, following the authors' argument, an inquiry of this nature uncovers precisely the state's contradictions as it exists at present and, therefore, the limitations of its decision-making structures. Finally, future studies could analyse the historical genealogies of all the tensions that are at stake here. Illegitimate police violence, collusion, corruption and impunity at different levels are not entirely new phenomena in Argentina. As the lingering effects of the country's dictatorial past, they are inextricably linked to the training of the Argentine police and military during the Cold War effected as part of anti-Communist campaigns (for example, through Operation Condor); to a long-ingrained understanding of low-income neighbourhoods as territories of exception when it comes to law enforcement; and to the state terrorism perpetrated by the last dictatorship. Overall, by looking at collusion from the vantage point of fine-grained material, *The Ambivalent State* offers an impressive contribution to understanding the ambiguous illicit practices of the state in marginalised urban space in the eyes of its most vulnerable actors in Argentina.

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Susana Sosenski, *Robachicos: Historia del secuestro infantil en México (1900–1960)*

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Forced disappearances are a distressingly regular news item in Mexico, with the registered tally close to 100,000 people. According to a United Nations report (Committee on Enforced Disappearances, 12 April 2022), the problem has worsened over the past five years and increasingly involves children, with criminal organisations the main culprits. Intending to offer a historical perspective on the current crisis of child safety, Mexican historian Susana Sosenski has produced an absorbing and sophisticated study in *Robachicos*, a term that means 'child-snatchers' and evokes both actual abductors and their mythical or fictional counterparts. Indeed, the book is both an examination of a real phenomenon and an analysis of a popular bogy, mindful of the hazy line between the two.

It is also a well-wrought exercise in interdisciplinary history. As Sosenski writes in her introduction, she broaches 'cultural history and social history, the history of crime and of fear, the application of justice and the role of the media, infancy and the city' (p. 13). She takes cues from scholars of communications and anthropology. Her interweaving of all these strands is one of the monograph's strengths,

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