

Editorial.

Two or three things about Embodiment and the State

Giovanni Pizza - Helle Johannessen

University of Perugia / University of Southern Denmark

To summarize the academic debates on embodiment on one hand and the state on the other is not our aim in this editorial. We shall only try to discuss some of the implications and meanings of the two main concepts: “Embodiment” and “the State”, and thereafter point to some of the possibilities for conceptualizing the relationships between the two.

On Embodiment

The concept of embodiment is in many ways a “tricky” concept, as it is easy to understand and at the same time its meaning is often quite complicated and contested. The ease of the concept is connected to the fact that it is a common word in the English language. According to the Oxford dictionary of the English language, “embodiment” is the noun referring to the verb “to embody” which means: «to make ([an] idea etc) actual or discernible; (of things) be an expression of; include; comprise». Thus, we can talk about a multinational company as an embodiment of capitalism, of a wedding ring as an embodiment of the bond between a man and a wife, or of this conference as an embodiment of ideas that occurred in our minds some years ago.

But as with so many other everyday concepts, embodiment has also been included in academic discourse and thereby discussed and defined over and over again. In this way our contribution here is a personal reflection based on our standpoints as anthropologists and thereby with a strong bias towards the use of embodiment in anthropology.

An important point in the anthropological use of the concept of embodiment is contained in an article by Thomas Csordas published in 1990 in which he suggests that embodiment be used as a paradigm for anthropology

(CSORDAS T. 1990). Csordas suggests, that «a paradigm of embodiment can be elaborated for the study of culture and the self» (*ibidem*: 5) and argues that «the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the *subject* of culture, or in other words as the existential ground of culture» (*ibidem*, italics in original). Csordas points to the works of Alfred Irving Hallowell (1892-1974) on the cultural constitution of the self, to those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) on the problematic relationship between the body and perception, and to the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) on the embodiment of social practice (*ibidem*: 5-8). In this field of paradoxical conceptual positions of self, culture, body, perception, habitus and practice, Csordas identifies embodiment as a superordinate concept that comprises and creates compatibility between phenomenology and what he calls dialectical structuralism (*ibidem*: 12).

There are two issues that we find to be of interest in this early proposal by Csordas. The first issue is that embodiment in his understanding becomes a feature that is closely tied to the human body. When Csordas so easily moves between, and links, concepts of the body, self, culture and embodiment, we believe that this reflects a personal quest to combine a cultural anthropology of the self with a philosophical exploration of the bodily grounding of perception and a social theory of the relations of social and bodily practice. In a later publication, Csordas defines embodiment in a rhetorical comparison of the relation between text and textuality to the relation between body and embodiment, which allows him to propose «...“the body” as a biological, material entity and “embodiment” as an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world» (CSORDAS T. 1994: 12). In this understanding “embodiment” becomes a concept that refers to bodily perception and experience of being-in-the-world, and it seems that this close connection between embodiment and the human body has stuck with the concept ever since. For those interested in social studies of medicine it is of course very relevant to refer to the human body, since such this entity is the subject and object of disease, treatment and healing. But we would like to point to the potentials of considering embodiment as a more encompassing concept, that not only refers to the phenomenology of perception and experience of the human body, but rather refers to the practice that makes some ideas, ideologies or power relations discernible and actual in the social and personal lives of humans.

The second issue of interest in Csordas' proposal of embodiment as a paradigm is his attempt to combine apparently incompatible perspectives of cultural anthropology, phenomenology and structural sociology into a

common theoretical frame. In this attempt he highlights the question of the relationships between the human being and the context in which he or she operates; an issue that has been discussed since the earliest days of anthropology, and that may be considered the core subject of the discipline. The debate in anthropology has changed over the years as new theoretical developments have been introduced, but it seems that there are two overall opposing perspectives with which anthropology sometimes still has to struggle. We are pointing here to that which has at times been called the structure-agency debate, and at other times the phenomenology-constructivist debate. The central issue is the question of the direction of influence. Does human agency produce society or does society produce human experience? Is perception a pre-objective, phenomenological and subjective feature, or is it constructed by social and cultural power relations?

The confinement of “embodiment” to a phenomenological approach to the human body seems to have become paradigmatic, as studies on embodiment in the past 10-15 years have largely been concerned with the body’s subjective experience and being-in-the-world. In these studies embodiment has often been a conceptual tool to broaden the idea of the body, from an idea of the body as a corporal materiality of flesh and bones, that is so central in biomedicine, to a conception of the body as comprising corporal-subjective experience and existence in a social world. We strongly support this conceptual redefinition of the body and find it to be most important in the understanding of human lives.

Csordas as well as other scholars reminds us, however, of the need to analyse and understand the body and embodiment as being-in-the-world and not as something in itself, but as related to the wider political-economy and structural aspects of society. Many scholars have also studied bodies as political, economical and structural constructions, predominantly in a Foucauldian perspective, but as far as we understand, there have not been many attempts of combining the phenomenological and the constructivist perspectives in thorough ethnographic explorations and analyses of specific empirical settings. There have been noteworthy theoretical propositions and studies that explore the interrelatedness of structural and phenomenological features in general terms as for example in works on the relations between science and female bodies. It seems to us, however, that many studies have either focussed on embodiment as a social construction of bodies in a way that reduces the experiences and agency of the individual to puppet-like functions of structure; or have focussed on embodiment as the existential being-in-the-world in a way that reduces the social to an abstract level where it is kept blurred and unfocussed as in a haze.

As Bruce Kapferer has said: «The powerful individualist and subjectivist turn in anthropology (...) is one factor resulting in notions of the social and of society as becoming little else than empty shells of small or no analytical value» (KAPFERER B. 2005: 2-3). We find that, at this point in time, there is a need to strive for methodologies and analyses that incorporate both perspectives equally in an investigation of the processes and relations between the two. But before we move on to a further discussion of this, we need to take a closer look at the other pole, at the second concept in the title of this collection of texts: the state.

With regards to the “State”

The term “state” has a long and complex history, discussed in a wide range of sciences. We will not attempt to review such a long history, but a few brief sketches may be useful. After the medieval representations of the ruler as embodied power and government, Italian thinkers during the Renaissance, contributed greatly to the development of the word “state”. The term derives from the Latin word *status* and since medieval times referred to the standing of rulers, to the conditions of the republic: *status publicus* or *status rei publicae*, and indicated at the same time the standing of rulers (the “Prince” in Niccolò Machiavelli’s terms); the land (the defence of territory was essential); and the administrative structures and the power of the Prince. More recently, Max Weber formulated the concept of the modern state as characterized by the idea that only the state has the legal monopoly of physical constraint. The “modern state” is the entity which has the monopoly of the political, which is set in practice by rational procedures and means: the law, the bureaucracy, which allows the legality and the objectivity of the political administrative process (MATTEUCCI N. 2005).

The Weberian concept of the state is very different from the idea of the state that we find in anthropological research, which we will return to shortly. But even though one may criticize this concept of the state, it is also possible to find interesting points within the history of European philosophical-political science itself. For instance, as the philosopher Gianluca Briguglia has shown in a recent study, Western political science of the state for centuries has been using the metaphor of the *state as living body* (BRIGUGLIA G. 2006). Since we are investigating together “Embodiment” and “the State”, we cannot disregard such an intriguing metaphorical tradition used for describing the nature and function of the state. To further the point, we find in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Thomas Hobbes

(1588-1679) traits of a discourse on the bodily life of the state expressed not only in metaphorical terms. Machiavelli (in 1515) thus describes the state as a body regulated by the balance and stability of its “humours” (BRIGUGLIA G. 2006: 77-110), and this metaphor is not only a fragment of a naturalistic rhetoric - it is related to the medical practice of the time, which helps Machiavelli to develop a dynamic philosophy of conflict and transformation processes represented in terms of health, disease and effectiveness of cures. Machiavelli is inviting us to study the state as a *form of life* (by means of the body metaphor), during wars, in struggles, in instability, and he is elaborating an art of effectiveness, based on the ability of managing and transforming relations of force. In that sense the bodily metaphor is not used only as a cognitive device or a rhetoric suggestion about the physiology or pathology of politics, but as a framework for reasoning on specific and concrete situations of conflict in which the sovereign powers of the state, are embodied and enacted. Similarly, according to Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* (1651) the metaphor of the body-state is conceived also in theological terms: the naturalization of the state is processed in terms of an embodiment of divine authority identified with the state. The direction Hobbes takes is clear, if we quote the titles of his treatises: *De Corpore*, *De Homine*, *De Cive*: body, man, citizen. That is to say that human beings share a biological body but also a state body, which is their second nature, that as citizens.

Through such short sketches in the history of the term “state” and of the metaphorical tradition of the “embodied” state, we would like to underline how it is possible to disarticulate the Weberian idea of the fixed unity and rationality of the state with a critical re-reading of political philosophy. Ethnographies of the complex evidence of the state in everyday life have placed much stress on the fragmentation and microphysical presence of the state (ARETXAGA B. 2003). But this fragmentation should not be reified as the dissolution of the state, as the so-called “crisis of the state”. It is more an attempt to see how the state is “living” in the practices of everyday life, that is in embodiment processes.

In an early attempt of overcoming that dichotomy, the Italian marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) suggested that the “state-ness” in everyday life be studied. Gramsci tried to go beyond the separation between the state and civil society, and in his practical theory of hegemony we find a broad field of state activities. «State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies its dominance but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules» (GRAMSCI A. 1975: 1765). In the theory of hegemony, as conceived by Gramsci, a specific ideology is not simply a set of defining rules and sanctions, nor the

establishment of a dominant view of the world, based on the power of coercion, but an ideology is constantly working culturally and “sentimentally” in order to inform how the world and reality are (MAGEO J. - KNAUFT B. M. 2002: 5). For Gramsci the state takes on the task of elaborating «a new human type» (GRAMSCI A. 1975: 2146), by transforming the body and producing the idea of subjectivities. The state acts, therefore, in a mutual intimate dialogue with its citizens, and Gramsci is suggesting that if «“State” means the conscious direction of the great national multitude, it follows that a sentimental and ideological “contact” with such multitudes is necessary» (*ibidem*: 1122). In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci also reflects on the concrete performances and physical actions of intellectuals and state bureaucrats, who are considered the reproducers of state life through their gestures (as in writing for instance), and he suggests that one should study how the state lives in the hands, arms, legs, in the elements of the body. Perceptions, actions and gestures, are to be detected in daily life, and a Gramscian anthropology of the state should also be an ethnography of the body techniques and embodiment processes of the agents of the state and its “citizens” - the body techniques (including intellectual work) by means of which the state is done, undone, and re-done daily in a process of reciprocal dialectics.

In the wake of these Gramscian suggestions, we can consider the “enlarged” state as being fragmented into daily life, and this is in fact one of the main suggestions resulting from a contemporary anthropology of the state (HERZFELD M. 1997, DAS V. - POOLE D. eds. 2004, SHARMA A. - GUPTA A. 2006). The state is nowadays investigated as an ensemble of power relations, a set of practices, processes and experiences (ARETXAGA B. 2003), and the effects of which are fragmented into many different institutional fields of practices - school, family, medicine, heritage... Or it is identified with state-like institutions that see their sovereignty as the power to dictate what life is and what death is, if not who may live and who must die, as the church, terrorism or mafia have done or continue to do in different ways.

The state is alive also outside the confines of its national borders and governments, and also in its internal struggles for local identities, which are ironically and apparently against the state. We could adhere to what Veena Das and Deborah Poole say when they write in *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*:

«Our analytical and descriptive strategy was to distance ourselves from the entrenched image of the state as a rationalized administrative form of political organization that becomes weakened or less fully articulated along its

territorial or social margins. Instead, we asked seminar participants to reflect on how the practices and politics of life in these areas shaped the political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call “the state”» (DAS V. - POOLE D. eds. 2004: 3).

State-ness in everyday practice

The following chapters can be considered as a contribution to a discussion at the crossroads between medicine and politics, and their overall theme is to explore ways in which to combine the two well-developed perspectives of embodiment, on the one hand, and the state and other institutional structures, on the other, into a coherent analytical gaze encompassing both. In which analytical frameworks can we grasp the interrelatedness between the two, and what strategies can we outline for research of the relational processes? We believe that a combination of the two perspectives will provide for a stronger position of the social studies of medicine. We want social studies of medicine to avoid being positioned as either a voice for patients' experiences as something that exist only in the body-minds of the patients, or as a social critique that is obsessed with abstract discussions of power, discourse and docile bodies being worked upon by authoritative voices of medicine, law or discipline.

With reference to the original English meaning of the term “embodiment”, as well as, to newer insights from the anthropology of the state, we find that the idea of “stateness” in everyday practice is a good starting point for the identification of the relationship between embodiment and the state: «The sphere of everyday practices is the primary arena in which people learn something about the state» (SHARMA A. - GUPTA A. 2006: 11). We therefore propose studies that pay close attention to bodily based practice of persons and various institutions of the state, and to how the concrete practice of the one may spur the concrete practice of the other. An approach along these lines would lead us to insights of ways in which the state enters our bodies as well as how bodies create and recreate the state: in the course of everyday practice, in the central institutions of state bureaucracy, and in sites that are marginal and apparently removed from bureaucratic state procedures.

The complexity of the political aspects concerning embodiment calls for a meeting between studies of healing and studies of politics, a meeting that may involve rethinking of concepts such as agency, intimacy, power, embodiment and the state. Such a meeting between studies of healing and

politics also implies a consideration of the intimacy of state powers on such diverse bodily experiences as those of nationality, citizenship, science, violence, illness, dance or spirit possession. We believe that this collection of works could stimulate further thinking along these lines, and we are proud to introduce here chapters that focus on these questions in relation to concrete empirical settings.

We are grateful to the Authors for their interesting contributions, and hope that fruitful debates may arise as the articles unfold the richness of bodily practice and the complexity of “state-ness” in everyday life.

Bibliography

- ARETXAGA B. (2003), *Maddening states*, “Annual Review of Anthropology”, n. 32, 2003, pp. 393-410.
- BRIGUGLIA G. (2006), *Il corpo vivente dello Stato. Una metafora politica*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano.
- CSORDAS T. J. (1990), *Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology*, “Ethos. Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology”, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 5-47.
- CSORDAS T. J. (ed.) (1994), *Embodiment and Experience. The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- DAS V. - POOLE D. (eds.) (2004), *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, School of American Research Press - James Currey, Santa Fe-Oxford.
- GRAMSCI A. (1975), *Quaderni del carcere*, a cura di Valentino GERRATANA, Einaudi, Torino.
- HERZFELD M. (1997), *Cultural Intimacy. Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, New York-London, Routledge [New Edition 2005].
- KAPFERER B. (ed.) (2005), *The Retreat of the Social: The Rise and Rise of Reductionism*, Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford.
- MAGEO J. M. - KNAUFT B. M. (2002), *Introduction: theorizing power and the self*, pp. 1-25, in MAGEO J. M. (eds.) (2002), *Power and the Self*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- MATTEUCCI N. (2005 [1984]), *Lo Stato*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- SHARMA A. - GUPTA A. (2006), *Introduction: Rethinking Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization*, pp. 1-41, in SHARMA A. - GUPTA A. (eds.) (2006), *The Anthropology of the State. A Reader*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden (USA), Oxford (UK), Carlton, Victoria (Australia).