Introduction

The Politics of Relations

[G]overnmental policy is continually constructed out of accelerations and breakings, about-turns, hesitations, and changes of course. This is not due to a native incapacity of bourgeois representatives and top-level personnel, but is the necessary expression of the structure of the State.
—Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism*

On 29 March 2010, the two-day Serbian decentralisation conference started, sponsored by international donors such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). It took place in the prestigious so-called 'Former Parliament of the Republic' building in Belgrade. In the morning, the plenary room was packed with an audience of some 200, a third of which were journalists. Microphones dotted the high table that was overshadowed by the Serbian eagle, the national coat of arms. The solid wooden panelled wall behind was draped with red-blue-white ensigns. Of the numerous welcoming speeches, the biggest stir was caused by the address of Boris Tadić, the charismatic president of Serbia and leader of the social-liberal Democratic Party (DS). The president assessed that decentralisation was one of the greatest challenges for the Serbian society that was haunted by depopulation in rural areas and a lack of resources even in the capital. The process should not be 'politicised', but should include all institutions and involve all citizens economically, concerning infrastructure and 'in all other aspects'. It would take decades to accomplish decentralisation, as Serbia could neither hark back to Yugoslav approaches nor adopt ready-made EU solutions. Following this address, Tadić posed for the cameras, and then he and most of the journalists left the room.

A short time later Mlađan Dinkić, the burly, energetic, but not-so-popular Minister of Economics and Regional Development and leader of the economic-liberal party G17plus, took the microphone. Dinkić presented a vision in which a pro-European, democratic,

and 'whole' Serbia handed over ever more power to its local self-governments. Thus, he argued, the state could 'come closer' to its people and answer their needs directly, without too much bureaucracy. He went even further and announced the upcoming relocation of national ministries to regional centres of the country. His Ministry of Economy and Regional Development would take the lead by moving to the city of Kragujevac.

This provoked reactions of mild disbelief in the audience. I was sitting next to the young Serbian OSCE staff that had helped to prepare the conference. Early in the morning they had expressed their delight that President Tadić had found time to attend, even though he had only cautiously embraced the agenda. By now, they quietly worried whether Dinkić's overly flamboyant endorsement of decentralisation might mean the premature end of it. During the following hours, jam-packed with expert presentations, I wondered about the startling parallels between how the highest echelons of the government and the ordinary citizens complained about the finance-strapped state, unresponsive bureaucracy, and its distance to the population. Throughout my fieldwork in Central Serbia, I had repeatedly heard my interlocutors talking about similar issues, albeit from a local perspective.

Four months earlier, on the cold evening of 6 December 2009, my friend Tomo had fetched me in his second-hand Audi limousine for a short ride through the Janković neighbourhood in Donje Selo where I lived during my fieldwork.[1] Tomo quickly exchanged some greetings with my landlords, to whom he was related on the paternal line, then we left. 300 metres uphill, where the asphalted section of the road ended, we parked in front of the compound where our common friend Darko lived with his family. We were invited into the main house and sat with Darko, his father Mirko, and his mother Bilja around the living room table. Darko's paternal grandfather Ivan and his disabled aunt Ceca (the old man's daughter) sat on the couch, watched TV, and listened in. Over homemade plum brandy (*rakija*) and slices of smoked ham (*pršuta*), my friends passed the time by sharing stories about the unwillingness of the state to care for the population. While Mirko, the bus driver of Donje Selo, regaled us with anecdotes about local health officials ripping off their patients, Tomo regularly interjected popular expressions like 'This country is decaying!' or 'This country totally fell apart!'[2]

When it was Tomo's turn, he related the story of one of his grandfathers, who had gone with some problem to the hospital in Moravica, where the surgeons decided to operate on his prostate.

Although the medical system provided free care, he paid €100 for the surgery, but the ailment did not subside. So he returned, was cut up again for €100, only to be told that there had actually been no problem with the prostate, but with the bladder. This time he was taken to Belgrade and successfully operated on, paying €500 on the side. Without batting an eye, Mirko commented: 'Well, what does an old man need a prostate for, he can pee sitting'. Mirko's wife and father looked slightly consternated, although they were used to his dark humour. We younger ones smiled – the joke could also be understood as being at Mirko's expense. Already close to retirement, and the father of two working sons who were expected to marry and give him grandchildren, Mirko was overdue to succeed his old father as head of the household. Mirko therefore hardly counted as a 'young man'. In order to make good on the derisory quip on Ivan, Mirko began to praise the immense patience and slyness with which his 'old man' always got something out of the bureaucracy. Mirko recounted how Ivan had made it a habit every time he went to town to stop by at the various state agencies. He annoyed them (*dosađuje*) until they helped – if Ivan had a request and was told to return in two weeks, he went back in three days, lest they told him the next time to come in four weeks. Ivan smiled and countered: 'Mirko, you are annoying' (*ti si dosadan*).[3]

These two vignettes offer two perspectives of the same issue – how to make the apparently indifferent state responsive. Following the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) and OSCE advice, the Minister and party leader Mlađan Dinkić embraced decentralisation as an apparently novel form of democratisation that facilitated the contact with and support of the citizens. He wanted to achieve this by moving the state spatially closer to the people in the provinces, startling his public in the conference hall. The aged farmer Ivan Janković, at the other end of the political pecking order, enervated provincial state officials hoping to overcome their perceived red tape, indifference, and lack of care. Neither of them stopped at the invocation of a 'secular theodicy' that some Greek citizens used to explain a 'timeless' bureaucratic disinterestedness (Herzfeld 1992, 3–10, chap.5). The upper and the lower end of the political spectrum were wrestling with the same problem of how to mobilise the politics of relations.

The Politics of Relations

Here we have the main research problem: during my fieldwork I continuously wondered about the generalised discourse that the Serbian state was distant and uncaring, and that its bureaucracy was inefficient and unresponsive. Intriguingly, this discourse was reproduced by poor citizens and by high state officials, by transnational actors like the OSCE who advocated decentralisation, in diverse media outlets, and even by local state actors and fellow social scientists. However, in my fieldwork I had come to know motivated, hardworking, caring, and professional local state actors. In this book, therefore, I take a closer look at their relational practices in municipal politics, in Local Councils, and in Centres for Social Work, in order to formulate a substantial and a formal argument.

Formally, I argue that the seemingly mundane, everyday practices in the fields of infrastructure, work provisioning and care are the most important building blocks for navigating the politics of relations in the post-socialist semi-periphery – they are demanded by citizens and regarded as important by state actors. These activities use up much of the significantly cut-down state budgets, but they are also of more general importance. Infrastructures stand for the (diminished) material promises states offer. They regenerate yearnings for a better life and future, and mark the level of faith and (dis-) trust people have in the state. Meanwhile, work and welfare embody the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion, local belonging, and shifting solidarities. Overall, resources were scarce because of the national austerity politics and state officials resorted to a 'triage', so that every inclusion of a person or project into resource flows meant the exclusion of equally needy and deserving others.

Substantially, I argue for a relational theory and method to study that elusive 'hyperobject' of the state, that 'bright promise that slowly became bogged down in the particulars, in the sticky relations between tools and objects, and in the ever-multiplying complexities of the task at hand', as Kregg Hetherington (2020, 9) characterised it in another context.[4] My approach to the politics of relations pushes recent advances towards a critical ethnography of the everyday state (Dubois 2010; Thelen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018b; Massicard 2022), by developing four encompassing axes of research, roughly following the Marxian anthropologist Eric Wolf's four 'modalities of how power is . . . woven into relations' (see Wolf 1999, 7).[5] The following four axes of research, I argue, afford a

multi-dimensional understanding of the politics of relations conceptualised as a process of becoming:

1) *embeddedness* – of state actors;
2) *boundary work* – between state and non-state;
3) *modalities* – of state practices;
4) *strategic selectivity* – of state projects in a wider field of force.

So, how do these four axes of envisioning power relations work together? Are embeddedness, boundary work, modalities and strategic selectivity hierarchically layered, nested like Russian dolls? No, they rather enfold each other, complexly aggregating micro-power situations into more macro-power conjunctures. Within the local state, all four axes of power relations are conditional upon each other. The thrust of Wolf's argument was that '[s]tructural power shapes the social field of action in such a way as to render some kinds of behaviour possible, while making others less possible or impossible' (Wolf 2001, 385). I argue that structural power – or rather what I call strategic selectivity – is important across all scales of the state process, yet it not only shapes, but it is equally shaped by embeddedness, boundary work and modalities.

In the remainder of this introduction I develop, first, my four research axes in their order of appearance in the social sciences. Second, I discuss the research field, and then I close with a roadmap of the book.

Towards a Relational Approach to the State

> [T]he State . . . 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 (law being often defined as the will of the State) 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 relations . . . and some are in possession of special power or authority, as chiefs or elders . . ., as legislators or judges . . .
> —Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, 'Preface', *African Political Systems*

Classical social anthropology almost completely dismissed the modern state as a research subject. This neglect has often been

attributed to a half-sentence taken from the above-quoted statement by A.R. Radcliffe-Brown: '[t]he State, in this sense, does not exist in the phenomenal world; it is a fiction of the philosophers' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, xxiii). Coming from a founding father of modern anthropology, and posited in the preface to the influential volume *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940), this was received as a damning verdict. Only fifty years on, a nascent New Anthropology of the State took up 'Anarchy Brown's' proclamation, via Philip Abrams' (1988, 77) actualisation that the state was an 'a-historical mask of legitimating illusion', and began to investigate the state as an imagination, a fantasy, a 'fetish' (Taussig 1992, 112). But, in fact Radcliffe-Brown had gone on to argue that what did exist was 'an organization, i.e. a collection of individual human beings connected by a complex system of relations' (Radcliffe-Brown 1940, xxiii). Between the 1940s and 1960s, a tightly knit network of maverick anthropologists around Max Gluckman, later known as the Manchester School of Social Anthropology, developed this brief comment into a nascent political anthropology of the embeddedness of local state actors, caught up in ambivalent and shifting webs of social relations. Following the Manchester School's extended case study approach, in this book I will shadow a small set of state and non-state actors and tackle their politics of relations as an often asymmetrical, power-laden process that produces its own power shifts and reversals.

Relationally thinking, the state, I argue, helps to overcome evolutionary stage theory, which has underpinned much of mainstream political thought at least since *African Political Systems* (Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940). Its unfounded assumption has been that sometime in the past or somewhere distant occurred a rupture between acephalous (non-state) societies and early states, as compared to modern states: In 'traditional' societies power resided in kinship, descent and alliances, but in 'modern' states power was – or should be – removed from kinship to the state system governed by rational deliberation and rule-bound bureaucracy (Alber and Thelen 2021; Koster 2021).

This fantasy about the modern bifurcation of state and kinship has been strangely productive: famously, the classical sociologist Max Weber (2002 [1922]) analysed the modern state in ideal-typical fashion as the domain of bureaucratic, rule-bound government in disregard of personal relationships and circumstances – while fearing this might flip into an 'iron cage' of unfreedom. His ideas have been popularised through Western education and informed critical

discourses about state practices around the world. Political anthropologists recorded this state critique.[6] Michael Herzfeld, echoing Weber's fear of the modern bureaucracy turning into an iron cage, argued that the 'social production of indifference' lay at the 'symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy' (Herzfeld 1992). Akhil Gupta, studying the postcolonial Indian state – and more recently Čarna Brković studying post-socialist Bosnia-Herzegovina – emphasised their interlocutors' longing for an ideal-typical bureaucracy, critiquing the lack of a transparent separation of the 'state' from 'that which is not the state' (Gupta 1995, 393; cited in Brković 2017, 28, 78). The underlying paradox is that the modern state's imagination of the 'national community' is built on metaphors of kinship, but the intermingling of the bureaucracy with actual kinship is symbolically understood as 'political incest', or 'corruption' (Herzfeld 2018). The politics of relations renders such evolutionary assumptions about the split between state and kinship strange.

During my field research, political discourse emphasised that the strengthening of 'local government' and 'bringing the state closer to the people' were means to democratise the country. Yet these ideas were not innocent: combining the two seemingly contradictory terms 'local' and 'state', the critical community researcher Cynthia Cockburn (1977, 363) drew attention to the class reproductive character of participatory and community management approaches in local government and 'the local presence of central state agencies' (see Mowbray 2016). Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan's more recent anthropological take was: 'Among interface bureaucrats . . ., those who work outside the capital and who make up what might be called the "local state" or the "state at the local level" are even more of an unknown quality. They are the state agents installed in the local arena' (Olivier de Sardan 2014, 403). While the state operates at the local level both in the capital and beyond, as Cockburn's case study from central London showed, I concur with Olivier de Sardan that '[i]n a local arena, institutions and actors, bound by "multiplex" relationships (Gluckman 1955), confront one another almost "physically"' (ibid.).

Critical geographers Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (Brenner 1999; Brenner and Elden 2009) pushed such ideas about the state as a spatio-temporal process. In their sophisticated Lefebvrian analysis, diverse scales of the state interact as they overlap, 'jump scale', or as 'wormholes' connect territorially remote spaces on a similar scale (Sheppard 2002). Scales are ideological projects with important effects (Carr and Lempert 2016), and scales of the state are legally

defined: below the transnational scale, the Serbian law recognises a national, district, local (municipal), and sub-local scale (local community). For an anthropological engagement with such scale ideology, I build on Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson's (2002, 991–92) deconstruction of the 'vertically encompassing' state, arguing that the local state enfolds those state actors' projects, infrastructures, practices, affects and effects from diverse scales tangible in a given locality. Importantly, it is often the lowest scales of the state that produce the most intense politics of relations, as its frontline officials are confronted with the population's needs and demands, deliberate over supplicants' deservingness, and shape the images of the state held by the citizens.

In Serbia, calls for decentralisation tended to obscure the local state's actual workings. Was it really as weak and needy of reform as the conference speakers in the first entry vignette stated? Or was it generally as corrupt, incompetent, and disinterested as Tomo, Mirko, and Ivan from the second vignette assumed? The current emphasis on decentralisation was related to international policy advice (Mikuš 2018; Vetta 2019) and to the social fact that the majority of the population felt disenfranchised from 'politics' (Helms 2013; Greenberg 2014; Jansen 2015). Yet, despite the importance of arguments about decentralisation, accountability, and democratisation, what interested citizens and mobilised them most was their sense of a loss of rights to social security (Brković 2017; Bonfiglioli 2019, 161–84). This needs to be kept in mind when we ask how the Local Councils and municipalities related to Dinkić's plans for democratisation. Social security questions shadowed how frontline bureaucrats interacted with the citizenry over years of spending cuts and hiring freezes. Social security issues informed what the citizens, and the state agents, wished, demanded from, criticised, praised, and did about the politics of relations. So, were there other modalities than Ivan's nagging and the bureaucrat's annoyance? In this book I will focus on these seemingly mundane but relevant political issues that are too often ignored by traditional and mainstream political science and political sociology.

We critical ethnographers of the state are in a good position to observe how everyday politics shapes societal processes and often engenders unexpected outcomes despite unequal power relationships (Gilbert 2020). We can unearth how everyday spaces, subjectivities, institutions, values, affects and practices can generate unexpected counter trends to neo-liberal state disinvestment, e.g. projects of welfare state expansion under post-socialism (Thelen and Read 2007;

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Thelen, Thiemann, and Roth 2018; see Chapter 5). Such 'transversal' moments are often precisely mediated by what has been called the 'street level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980; Evans 2010; see Chapter 4). But the outcomes of these mediations are underdetermined – wherever multiple contradictions are being waged between different forces, outcomes are uncertain (Clarke et al. 2015, 53–54). One possibility is the reproduction or deepening of inequalities.[7] The contrasting possibility is that the neo-capitalist, liberal revolution would be 'domesticated', as happened with its socialist precursor (Creed 1998). To tackle these open questions, I develop four axes of research on the politics of relations. I start with embeddedness.

Embeddedness

The first axis of research revalorises a classic relational paradigm (that, if acknowledged at all, is often only paid lip service). I would argue that any postcolonial anthropology or sociology of the state should take inspiration from the ethnographically refined and conflict-theoretical work on colonial government by the Manchester School (see Evens and Handelman 2006; Gordon 2018; Werbner 2020).

Max Gluckman (1911–1975)[8] was the 'point source of [the] network' of the Manchester School (C. Mitchell 1969), including radicals (some of whom actively participated in the anti-colonial struggle), women and people of minority status.[9] The 'Mancunians' understood African workers primarily as workers, and studied political-economic phenomena like colonialism, migration, industrialisation, ethnic and religious movements, and the (im-)probability of revolution, when most anthropologists seemed interested in aestheticised, apparently timeless structures (Werbner 2020, 12).

In his seminal paper *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand*, first published in 1940, Gluckman (1958) pioneered the later extended case study method. In this piece he explained the multi-scalar spatial and historical-processual dimensions of the South African segregationist political economy, opening out his perceptive ethnography from the ritual opening of a bridge:

> The final speech was by the Regent Mshiyeni [. . ., who] said the bridge would enable them to cross the river in floodtime and would make it possible for their wives to go freely to the Ceza Hospital to have their children. He appealed to the Government, however, not to forget the main road where the river had often held him up and to build a bridge there. (Gluckman 1958, 6)

This public speech by a Zulu representative exemplifies how the colonial government was not spared from demands for social security and personal comfort by its subjects. Arguing against the study of ethnic groups as discretely bounded entities, Gluckman described how the infrastructures built by government engineers and Zulu workers were appropriated by diverse social subgroups and what that said about their multiple and asymmetrical social ties (Gluckman 1958, 1). The ethnography detailed how spatial practices (like modes of travelling on and 'celebrating' infrastructure) and bodily practices (walking, dressing, saluting, speaking, translating, eating and drinking) reproduced and challenged the power relations between colonial state officials, royal Zulu, Zulu commoners, and the anthropologist. Gluckman's text is foundational both for the anthropology of the state and the road. It also informs my research, pushing me to move beyond deductive 'apt descriptions' of state theories and to provide contextualised 'abductive' ethnographic analyses of spatio-temporal processes of state transformation from the vantage point of a small set of actors within, against or apart from the politics of relations (Burawoy 2009).

The embeddedness of local state actors such as the Zulu regent Mshiyeni was subsequently translated by the Manchester School into the 'dilemma of the village headman' (Gluckman, C. Mitchell, and Barnes 1949). A headman balanced the demands of kin and neighbours with the orders from government. Similar dilemmas are common to all local state actors. Sociologist Norman Long (2001) re-theorised the problem as 'interface positionality'. Similarly, Andrew Gilbert (2020, 6–7, 15) studied 'intervention encounters' in Bosnia-Herzegovina as highly performative everyday 'engagements across difference and inequality that are set in motion by [transnational] policies, projects and programs' where actors endowed with significant resources could find themselves dependent on less powerful ones, 'opening up pathways for the latter to influence and shape the process and outcomes of intervention projects'. In Chapter 1, I take up these inspirations. My main protagonist is the veterinarian of Donje Selo, who ventured into local politics and who juggled a dozen relational positions. Classic social anthropology outlined three options of action in the local state actors' dilemma: conforming, resignation, and rebellion. However, the vet-politician rose through what I will call 'transversal politics'.

Manchester's relational approach famously influenced James Scott's (1985; 1990) analysis of 'weapons of the weak', that is forms of resistance against unreasonable power relations performed in

'hidden transcripts', such as foot dragging, sabotage and gossip. But Manchester has been ignored by the New Anthropology of the State that became hegemonic by the mid-2000s, when Akhil Gupta and Aradhana Sharma co-edited *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*. Omitting any anthropological studies from before 1990, Gupta and Sharma argued that the state was 'produced through everyday practices and encounters and through public representations and performances' (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 27). While the New Anthropology of the State was criticised on different accounts, most relevant for the axis of embeddedness is the analytical gap between images and practices of the state.[10] In response, Tatjana Thelen, Larissa Vetters, and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (2018a, 6) have argued that the 'stability and the apparent coherence of images and the solidity of the organisational entity called "state"' were precisely reproduced through the 'embeddedness' of state actors.[11]

I agree, and add that this embeddedness shaped – and was shaped by – the strategic selectivity of state power.

Strategic Selectivity

In line with European anthropological traditions, the politics of relations combines 'detailed investigations of power relationships, everyday practices, and meanings' (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005, 14). Its second axis of research, strategic selectivity, is imbued by the critique of political economy first developed in Marx's (2015 [1867]) analysis of *Capital*, where the term 'relation' took on very specific meanings.[12] In Marx's terms, a 'Relation' (*Verhältnis*) is a large social process of reproduction and transformation that has often been translated as a condition, system or structure (Ollman 2003, 73). A Relation is produced by many internal 'relations' (*Beziehungen*) – what common sense perceives as things with a history, a context and a condition of possibility. Yet from the critical political economy perspective, each internal relation is a conflictive process which includes its own process of becoming (Ollman 2003, 13).

Based on such processual considerations, one of Marx's strategic questions in his analysis of the Paris Commune of 1870 concerned the possibility 'for the emergence of a form of state that embodies communal control over social power' (Ollman 2003, 138). The Yugoslav Marxists tried to answer the riddle with their experiments in self-government since the 1950s, as heterodox Marxists like Henri Lefebvre noted with great interest (see Chapter 2). But as Antonio Gramsci argued, informed by his experience of the Fascist

state in Italy, the relationship between communal control and state power could also be everything but emancipatory, such as when what appears as domains outside the state, like civil society or the family, become integral parts of the state hegemony (Becker et al. 2013, 68–89).

Since the 1960s, the Greek-French thinker Nicos Poulantzas, a contemporary of Lefebvre, worked through the problems of Marxian state theory. Starting from Sartrean intellectualism, Poulantzas read Gramsci, went through a phase of Althusserian structuralism, and ended by converging with Foucauldian analyses of power before his untimely death in 1979. In Poulantzas' view, state strategies are formulated along, across or against entrenched power relations. He argued that the state was neither a powerful subject looming above us, nor an instrument that could be conquered and used at will. Rather, it was a Relation that materially condensed the multiple relationships of forces between economic classes, political groups, cultural ideologies and social movements (Poulantzas 2000 [1978]; Poulantzas, Hall, and Hunt 1979).

Stuart Hall became a famous interlocutor for Poulantzas: the former advocated a 'renewal of the whole socialist project . . . [by] shifting the relations of forces – not so that Utopia comes the day after the next general election, but so that the tendencies begin to run another way' (Hall 1988, 172). Bob Jessop, Poulantzas' most dedicated interlocutor, coined the term 'strategic selectivity' to explain the relative successes and failures of state projects by different strategic groups. He understood the state 'as a strategic field formed through intersecting power networks that constitutes a favourable terrain for political manoeuvre by the hegemonic fraction' (Jessop 2008, 123, paraphrasing Poulantzas 2000, 136, 138). Jessop then gave a valuable semiotic twist to this relational argument, proposing that hegemonic 'complexity reduction involves discursively selective imaginaries and structurally selective institutions'.

Feminist-Marxist scholars working on the nexus of care in the (welfare) state pushed the debate further (Scheele and Wöhl 2018). Finding that the state's semi-autonomy from capitalist and patriarchal rule is limited, they underlined how in modern democracies financial decision making – a central precondition for any social policy – was partially removed from parliamentary deliberation to the realm of 'technocratic' government by central banks and transnational creditors such as the IMF. Furthermore, an enduring 'masculinist hegemony' wedded exalted liberal-masculinist notions of 'autonomy' and 'independence' to formal employment, while social security rights

were limited by ideas of workfare: needy people had to prove their 'deservingness' of support payments by performing their work-ability through job trainings or in public work programmes (Wöhl 2018).

In my reading, the strategic selectivity of care and reproduction emerges on all scales of the state, driven both by dominant and by less powerful actors. As such, the impact of mundane, locally circum-scribed recalcitrance on the strategic selectivity of the state cannot be overestimated. My point is akin to the argument of the agonistic theory of democracy, according to which struggle is a sine qua non for democratic outcomes (Mouffe 2013). But while agonistic democ-racy theory, in line with Poulantzas, valorises the spectacular vis-ibility of class struggles and social movements in shaping democracy, I add that the everyday, local forms of political engagement, recalci-trance and waywardness also transform the state. Thus, Chapter 5 details how social workers of the Centre for Social Work in Palanka, despite precarious financing, developed a strategic selectivity for Scandinavian models of home care and legitimated their elder care project with the prevailing discourses about aging as familial crisis. In this sense I take up strategic selectivity as the second axis of research.

The next section turns to the ideology-critical challenge to struc-turalist state theory, and discusses its permutation into the third axis of research – the (organisational) modalities of how state power becomes enacted in social relations.

Modalities

> [T]he task of studying the state would thus seem to be primarily a matter of lifting the ideological mask so as to perceive the reality of state power – class power – in terms of which the structuring is achieved: and secondly, a matter of identifying the apparatuses – functions and personnel – in and through which state power is located and exercised.
> —Philip Abrams, 'Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)'

Philip Abrams, whose ideology critique of State theory was aimed especially at contemporary Marxist theorists like Poulantzas, con-tended that, in the (capitalist) state, power lay ultimately with the capitalist classes. However, the conclusions Abrams drew inspired a different research stream. His article, first published in 1977, became a common reference point for the culturalist New Anthropology of the State. The adjective 'capitalist' was dropped, and the image of the state tended to be reified. How did this come about? In the late 1980s, Marxist and Weberian structural class analyses of the state had

largely run their course. Inspired by Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and others and 'in the search for conceptual alternatives to overcome this theoretical stalemate, notions of ideology . . . and culture . . . took center stage' (Thelen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018a, 3). Following Abrams' claim that the state was the mask of political practice, he had continued to argue '[t]here *is*, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies at different times. And its modes, effects and variations are also susceptible to research' (Abrams 1988, 82).

Michael Taussig was one of the first anthropologists to develop this part of Abrams' discussion. Taussig was fascinated by the 'fetish' of the state, which he saw as a highly ambivalent 'coming together of reason-and-violence in the State' that created its 'auratic and quasi-sacred quality' (Taussig 1992, 116). State violence and its terrorist effects also provided the leitmotif for an influential overview article on 'maddening states' (Aretxaga 2003). Since then we have had a continuous stream of strong research on the intermingling of state reason and violence, its ideological effects and affective consequences (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Gilbert 2020; Chao 2022).

However, in a review article on narrative analysis in recent anthropology, William Roseberry complained about the

> now-standard misreading of Philip Abrams's essay on sociological understandings of the state (1988) as arguing that states do not exist. But Abrams argued instead that sociologists had been lulled by the obvious ontological reality of the state into treating it as a false concrete, ignoring the complex process of 'politically organised subjection' that lay behind its 'mask'. (Roseberry 1997, 931)

Roseberry referenced here the proliferating attempts to lift the state 'mask' by deconstructing the bounded image of the state-as-subject. Such analyses found rather chaotic sets of institutions, actors, policies and interests beneath it.[13] The more de-constructivist bend to this argument posited the almost complete dissolution of the state into floating signifiers, multiple 'faces of the state' constantly made, unmade and remade in 'the habits of everyday life'. The real space of the state, Yael Navaro-Yashin suggested, lay in its everyday ideological constructions, 'rather than in the hallways of public institutions or the postures of official personalities' (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 122).

In line with a more re-constructivist reading of the state fetish, Navaro-Yashin went on to argue that we should not idealise resistance against the state, for that risked 'over-looking the . . . phenomenon of public participation in reproducing systems of

power' (Navaro-Yashin 2002, 158–59). As the effects of state power were experienced by everyday people, they in turn (re)produced the imagined, bounded state in apparent opposition to society (Taussig 1992, 132; Gupta 1995, 378; Yang 2005, 487). In this vein Akhil Gupta wrote an influential article about a loosely related set of local state practices in northern rural India bound together by popular and media images of the 'corrupt' state. Gupta claimed that corruption was the 'mechanism through which "the state" itself is discursively constituted' (Gupta 1995, 376). Corruption discourses became a potential political weapon, because they tapped into widespread ways of thinking and talking about the state – and acting in relation to it. Corruption was a hegemonic modality.

However, in his 2012 monograph *Red Tape*, Akhil Gupta more broadly urged us to 'focus on the *modalities* that enable the state' (Gupta 2012, 106–7, my emphasis). In this context, anthropologists analysing state power have produced many rather monomorphic images like the 'states of contention' in Eastern Europe (Gledhill 2005), the 'cunning state' in India (Randeria and Grunder 2011), or the 'bulldozer state' in China's borderlands (Bellér-Hann 2014). Others constructed more dialectical imagery, like the 'oligarchic-corporate state' (Kapferer 2005) or the 'states at work' in Africa (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). Besides corruption, I also document state modalities such as 'football activism', economic care, governing through infrastructure, humanitarian reason and social daughter care.

To push the debate on state transformation further, I follow how two (or more) modalities can sediment upon and conflict with each other. Larissa Vetters (2018) has shown for Bosnia-Herzegovina's town of Mostar how the citizens acted towards their administration in two opposed modalities – either enacting personalistic ties or claiming humanitarian reason. In Chapter 4 I will show how within the Centre for Social Work in Moravica the state actors struggled over which modality should become hegemonic: inclusive distribution vs. exclusive protection. Drawing on these insights, I look at the frictions between modalities within a state relation, taking up the study of (organisational) modalities as the third axis of my anthropology of the state.

Modalities impact on relations within and beyond the imagined boundaries of the state – an aspect examined in analyses of (tactical) boundary work.

Boundary Work

The question of what constituted the inside and the outside of state power was posed by Michel Foucault, although he professed no interest in state theory as such. In his *Security, Territory and Population* (Foucault 2009 [1977–78]), considered as his turning point towards questions of the modern state, Foucault claimed 'I do, I want to, and I must pass up on state theory – just as one would with an undigestable meal' (cited in Jessop 2008, 147). For a long time Foucault had studied the capillary diffusion of power throughout society, ranging from kingly power (sovereignty) to the discipline in prisons, city poor houses and early capitalist factories (Foucault 1977). Yet, as much as he was fascinated by micro-power and resistance, only a few years later he studied the emergence of the large-scale biopolitics and the 'art of government', or 'governmentality', in eighteenth-century France (Foucault 2008 [1978–79]).

Indeed, Foucault thought that 'government' had saved the (medieval) state and later both limited the modern state and made it possible in tactics vis-a-vis society:

> [T]his governmentality that is at the same time both external and internal to the state . . . is the tactics of government that allow the continual definition of what should or should not fall within the state's domain, what is public and what private, what is and is not within the state's competence. (Foucault 2009, 109)

Timothy Mitchell (1991, 90) developed Foucault's relational insights into governmental tactics further and argued that we need to study the boundary work of the state, because 'the state-society divide is not a simple border between two free-standing objects or domains, but a complex distinction internal to these realms of practice'.

In his work on cultural intimacy and the Nation State in Greece, Michael Herzfeld turned such ideas around and studied ethnographically how the state was differently constructed depending on the situationally switching positionality of a person. In Herzfeld's research, the state appeared as an emic category of practice, tactically employed by actors to further their goals. In the face of an 'outsider's' critique the state could be defended (Herzfeld 1998, 32, 65). That is, if an observer was included in a relation with a state person, she defended against outsiders the 'cultural intimacy' with a friend who happened to be a state official. Yet, if the same person felt excluded she could criticise the difference between official images of bureaucratic detachment and actual friendly practices as 'corruption' (Herzfeld 1998, 54–55).

Manchester's insights into personalised and bureaucratic demands on interface bureaucrats prefigured such analyses. Norman Long had studied how in a Mexican *ejido* (village community) the state was predominantly perceived as disinterested, cunning and thieving. Nonetheless, the evaluation situationally depended on the negotiated relations between state actors and villagers. Thus, when an agricultural extension officer named Roberto expressed the villagers' state critique himself in order to gain their *confianza* (trust), the villagers overcame their scepticism and hoped for state help. But Roberto failed to deliver the promised services because he was quickly transferred by his alert boss, and the villagers resumed their suspended critical state discourse (Long 2001, chapter 9). Nonetheless, for a moment the state actor had discursively stepped outside his role, tactically appropriated a non-state point of view, and initiated a more collaborative relation. Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan systematised this insight in their 'states at work' paradigm, asking

> how public servants spend their time, how teachers are being trained and socialised into their jobs, how judges, policemen and teachers define their role in society, how they see their future and how they negotiate all the conflicting demands made of them, by their clients, their relatives and superiors, and the outside agencies. (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014, 4)

The axis 'boundary work' thus studies how practices of interface actors can tactically cut through and redraw the internal state-society divide, both materially and discursively. In this sense, claims on government voiced by 'everyday' people can also be couched as 'care for the state' (Rajković 2017). I employ the axis of boundary work in Chapter 2, where I consider the shifting contributions of local councillors and the population to road building projects. The voluntary council members, who generally used documents very scantily, at one point reified their budget into a 'boundary object' (Star and Griesemer 1989), uniting behind one infrastructural project against the citizens' opposition on the other side of the tactically reified state–village boundary.

We begin to see how the four axes of research – embeddedness, strategic selectivity, modalities, and boundary work – developed in conversation with each other, how they shed light on complementary problems, and how as axes of power they shape each other in friction and alignment, transforming the politics of relations. With these theoretical-methodological tools, we can compare our insights

and deepen our understanding of the state wherever its effects are tangible – in the cities and villages of the Global South and North, and in the post-socialist Semi-periphery.

Equipped with this theoretical arsenal, the next section hones in on the processes and scales of political-economic transformation in my research field.

Research Field

For Socialist Yugoslavia (1944–1991), the beginning of the end came in 1987–1989, when Slobodan Milošević consecutively usurped all power centres in Serbia by orchestrating mass protests against the 'bureaucratisation' and self-interestedness of his own League of Communists' old nomenclature (Vladisavljević 2008). Nationalist and militaristic movements emerged, including fringe groups practising 'neocortical defence' to strengthen the 'parasecurity' of the Serbian nation (they would have their comeback in the self-care movements of the post-Milošević years) (Petrović-Šteger 2013; 2016). Serbia's strongman throughout the 1990s, Milošević pushed the state-criminal dissolution of Yugoslavia, involving wars and genocide, huge refugee streams, the introduction of wild capitalism, an international embargo and hyper-inflation. The majority of the population was deeply impoverished and experienced the violence, corruption and disinvestment from social security as inscribed into their bodies: in the 1990s almost half of Serbia's population was on sedatives (Petrović-Šteger 2016, 120–21). It appeared to be a 'Serbian Dreamtime', in which obscure elite machinations left bewildered ordinary people stuck in the 'muck' of space and time (M. Živković 2011).

After years of societal mobilisations, on 5 October 2000 a 'liberal revolution' overturned Milošević. The heterogeneous revolutionary block, made up of some fifteen political factions including G17plus and led by the Democratic Party (DS), took power and raised hopes for a 'normalisation' of the situation.[14] However, within two and a half years hopes were squashed through the application of liberal economic wisdom, internal conflicts, political compromise with parts of the old regime and the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (DS) in 2003.[15] Jessica Greenberg (2014) has detailed how former revolutionary student activists affiliated with the movement Otpor (resistance) developed a 'politics of disillusionment' in this post-revolutionary moment, by focusing on bureaucratic reform.[16]

The 2000s were characterised by a second wave of privatisation after the first, unofficial privatisations during the 1990s. Except for strategic military production, subsidised prestige industries like Fiat and labour intensive, low-wage supply chains such as textiles and monocrop agriculture, production waned. In a nutshell, the neo-liberal privatisation strategy caused the dismantling of industrial complexes, deepened the inequality and social insecurity of the population and contributed to what has provocatively been called the 'desert of post-socialism' (Horvat and Štiks 2015). Ethnographers paid much attention to how ordinary urbanites navigated the effects of the violent breakup of Yugoslavia into weak, nationalist and financialised states (see Razsa 2015; Mattioli 2020). Reacting to Marxist and Feminist concerns about care and the state, some highlighted the neo-liberal and patriarchal transformations of social security and the ensuing care deficit (see Brković 2017). And yet, while almost half of the population live in villages, only few political ethnographies were conducted in rural areas (see Naumović 2013).

To rectify this urban bias, the present study was conducted between 2009 and 2013 in a rural-urban region in central Serbia encompassing two villages (Donje and Gornje Selo) and two urban settlements (Moravica and Palanka). For nineteen months I lived in rural Donje Selo, fifteen months of which in the compound of Rajka and Slavo Janković, their daughter-in-law, son, and two grand-daughters (see Chapters 1–3), while for five weeks I lived in urban Palanka (see Chapter 5). Donje Selo was connected by an asphalt road with Moravica to the west and via Gornje Selo to Palanka in the north. These were not 'bounded' communities, but grounded points of intersection of political relations on several scales, from the transnational to the sub-local scale of the state.

Next, zooming in on my research field I will indicate how on each scale internal negotiations were combined with external interventions.[17] I do not aim to represent their full complexity, but will focus on actors and projects with repercussions on the politics of relations as examined in the following chapters.

Transnational Scale

In 2006, following the (peaceful) secession of Montenegro, Serbia became the sole legal successor of socialist Yugoslavia that had once enjoyed international prestige for straddling the East-West divide and as a founding member of the postcolonial Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). NAM and Yugoslavia lost their constructive

transnational roles at the end of the Cold War (see Gupta 1992; Stubbs 2023).

Many people still vividly remember the days when their 'red passport' had 'put Yugoslavia on the map', when they could travel freely to wherever they wanted and consume as they pleased (Jansen 2009). This freedom of movement ended with the post-Yugoslav wars (1991–1995, 1999), as sanctions were imposed on rump Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) by the United Nations (UN). Travel limitations for Serb citizens by the EU remained in force until 2009. From 2000, the EU also more directly influenced political relations in Serbia. As a precondition for future EU membership, it imposed its 'harmonization of legislation' towards the *acquis communautaire*. This conditionality went hand in hand with public EU accession metaphors of the 'journey' into the common 'house' and the reunion with the European 'family' (Petrović 2015). Accession negotiations began in 2012 and were not concluded at the time of writing.

Transnational governmental organisations like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have long been active in the region. The UN's Bretton-Woods organisations like the World Bank (WB) and the IMF had an especially significant influence on liberal economic policy formulation and the creeping semi-peripheral debt dependency since the 1960s (A. Živković 2015). From the 1990s, one locally active UN organisation has been the refugee agency UNHCR, which in collaboration with international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) like the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) ran refugee camps for people displaced by the wars, working in cooperation with the Serbian Centres for Social Work (Centri za Socijalni Rad, CSW). UNHCR and DRC also aided former refugees in building family homes and provided micro-credits for prospective small entrepreneurs.

Other active INGOs in Serbia were the American USAID, British DFID, German GIZ and KfW, and Norwegian NORAD. Their support of municipal infrastructure projects enticed the head of the Department for Local Economic Development of Moravica to lump them, in an interview in 2010, under the umbrella term 'foreign donors'. DFID and NORAD significantly restructured the national organisation of social work, making it more bureaucratic and less proactive (see Chapter 4), while putting a premium on creative short-term project development to the detriment of long-term service funding (see Chapter 5). In the entry vignette from the National Decentralization conference I showed how the OSCE influenced the national discourse.

Map 0.1. *Position of the research field in the wider region*
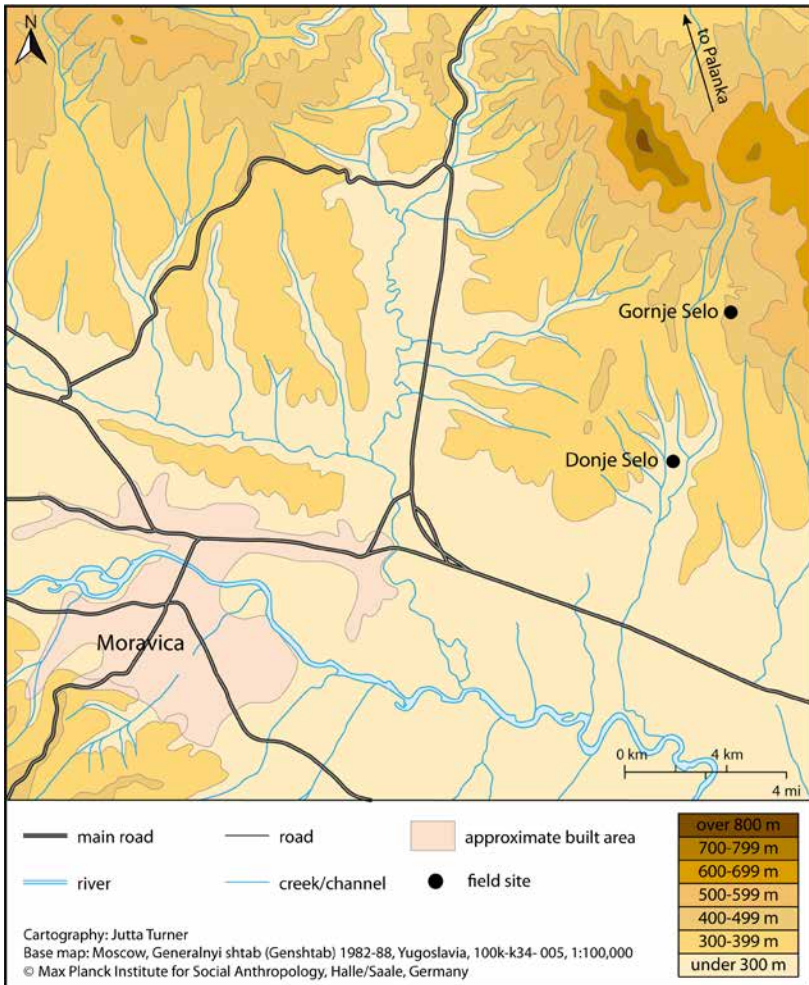*(Cartographer: Jutta Turner)*

National Scale

The Republic of Serbia is a semi-peripheral Southeast European state, outside of international organisations like the EU or NATO, and surrounded by eight states that are similarly weak economically (see Map 0.1). Its territory is 77,000 km² (without Kosovo), the population 7 million, of which more than one million live in the

capital Belgrade. The parliamentary election cycle is every four years by general, direct, free and secret ballot, but the duration of governments has been two years on average. In 2023 Serbia had 18 national ministries, several of which had branches in the local self-government territories. Importantly for my discussion in Chapters 3 to 5, the Ministry of Work, Employment, and Social Policy (MWSP)[18] regulated, supervised and co-financed the CSW.

The social protection system, in shambles since the 1990s, was consolidated following the ousting of Milošević in 2000. From 2001 to 2004, the economist Gordana Matković from the liberal think tank 'Center for Liberal-Democratic Studies' was Minister of Social Affairs and deftly combined neo-liberal with social justice concerns, organising regional conferences on social care to stimulate reform projects from below that she financed through a new Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF; active from 2003 to 2010). Subsequent ministers were less energetic and the care system showed elements of 'inertia by stealth' (Stubbs and Zrinščak 2022). SIF was an UNDP 'inspired' and internationally funded programme which sponsored local social work projects in public-private partnerships (Vetta 2019, 169–86). The social workers in Moravica and Palanka had had success with SIF in the past, but during my research they complained about changing donor preferences, which misidentified local needs (Chapters 4 and 5).

Local Scale

My research area lay 100 kilometres south of the capital in central Serbia (see Map 0.1), at the southern fringes of the Šumadija region, the core of Serbian statehood since the early nineteenth-century secession wars against the Ottoman Empire (Pavlowitch 2002, 26–40). The shape and size of local self-government had changed repeatedly (see Interlude). But while after 1990 most East European countries promoted decentralisation and increased the number of local government areas, Serbia maintained the number and size of its local self-government (*lokalna samouprava*) areas and some local responsibilities even revolved to the national scale of the state in the constitution of 1990 (Šević 2001).[19] According to the Law on the Territorial Organization of the Republic of Serbia of 2007, valid during my research, Serbia was divided into Central Serbia and two provinces, Vojvodina and Kosovo.[20] There were two types of local self-government: municipalities (*opštine*) and cities (*gradovi*). Municipalities 'represent a natural and geographic entity, an

Map 0.2. *The* grad *(city municipality) Moravica (Cartographer: Jutta Turner)*

economically connected area . . . with a city centre as a gravitational centre' (Tošić 2009, 73). *Gradovi* were more complex municipalities and received a higher share of the budget. There were 150 municipalities, with 10,000–100,000 inhabitants, and 24 *gradovi* with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Tošić 2009, 76). Three of my research sites lay in *grad* Moravica – the urban agglomeration Moravica (70,000 inhabitants), the village Donje Selo (1000 inhabitants) and the rural spa Gornje Selo (600 inhabitants) (see Map 0.2).

Grad Moravica covered an area of 600 km² and was relatively densely populated, with 120,000 inhabitants. Palanka (25,000

inhabitants) lay in Palanka municipality (45,000 inhabitants) to the north of Moravica.[21] The four organs of the *grad* Moravica were the parliament (*skupština*), the mayor (*gradonačelnik*), the council (*gradsko veće*) and the administration (*gradska uprava*) (Zakon o Lokalnoj Samoupravi 2021, Article 65). The parliament, which was elected every four years, designated the mayor, who presided over the council. The latter controlled the administration.[22] I interacted mostly with the administration for social activities (*uprava za društvene delatnosti*), which locally supervised the working of the CSW. Of the 17 municipal institutions (*ustanove*) half provided social security relevant services. Among these were the urban House of Culture, the library, several kindergartens, and the polyclinic. The administrative entities also controlled nine public enterprises.[23]

I chose the CSW of Moravica and Palanka as my primary urban field sites, because the 'polyvalent' CSWs provided a wide variety of welfare services and catered to town and villages. Social workers from Moravica covered Donje and Gornje Selo on irregular field trips, and I sought to capture their interactions with the population both in their institution and outside 'in the field' (*na terenu*). Although CSWs had been founded by the local governments during socialism (Zaviršek 2008) and were still co-supervised by the municipal administration for social activities, their main finance and regulation was provided by the national MWSP. The shared responsibilities were evident in the contributions to the budgets. In Palanka, for instance, the municipality bore one quarter of the yearly budget of €150,000 – the expenses for the infrastructure (offices, archive, car), running costs (electricity, heating, fuel, office supplies), and the payments of municipally granted social benefits as well as the social workers hired to administer them. The bulk of the budget – the salaries for most of its 15 workers, the social benefits and the disability benefits – derived from the MWSP (CSW 2008a, 2008b).

Sub-local Scale

The local self-governments (municipalities, cities) were typically subdivided into dozens of Local Communities (*Mesna Zajednica*, pl. ~e, MZ) in order to 'satisfy the needs of the community members' (Zakon o Lokalnoj Samoupravi 2021, Article 72). A MZ was run by the Council of the Local Community (*Savet Mesne Zajednice*). These MZs were stipulated in the last Yugoslav constitution of 1974 as subunits of municipalities, and represented the 'sub-local' scale of the state. The MZs were my rural local state research site. The

analysis of them in Chapters 1 to 3 highlights the decentralised, electoral and in that sense democratic legacy of the socialist state. An MZ can encompass one or more village territories. Thus, in *grad* Moravica there were about 50 villages administered in 30 MZs. From the Constitution of 1990 until the Law on Local Government of 2002, MZs enjoyed only 'customary' status. Their gradual revival started in 2002, and by 2007 they had become a mandatory form of sub-municipal local governance in rural areas again (Pavlović Krizanić 2008, 138–39).

Local councillors were elected every four years. The constituencies of rural MZ could not pay high taxes, and because the redistribution of state finance was skewed towards urban population centres, they often had to resort to self-help to meet their needs: 'villages have to take care of their own infrastructure and other needs (waterworks, roads, graveyards, culture, sports, etc.)' (Pavlović Krizanić 2008, 154). Areas like schooling, social aid, medical help or psychological counselling were regarded as predominantly municipal responsibilities.[24] The next subsection provides a tour of MZ Donje Selo.

A Tour of Donje Selo

The village begins at the northern edge of Moravica's fertile plains and rises gradually from 200 metres to 500 metres above sea level.[25] The approximately 1000 villagers lived in a dozen scattered neighbourhoods along a small creek valley, predominantly on the top of hill ridges divided by mountain streams discharging into the creek (see Map 0.2). One way to reach Donje Selo was by public transport. The bus left five times a day from the formerly heavily industrialised Moravica. After leaving the city, it drove eastwards on the highway on the left bank of the river, passing intensively tended vegetable fields interspersed with family homes, scrap yards, canteens and hotels. After a twenty-minute ride, the bus reached the first stop in Donje Selo, at the junction where the village's only restaurant catered for its customers. The bus turned left here and followed the village road, winding northwards past fields, orchards, and forests along the creek valley. After a ten-minute ride, the passengers passed a football pitch and a church and graveyard. To reach the village centre, they got off at the 'School Donje Selo' stop (Map 0.3, item 1).

The bus stop was in front of a whitewashed monument commemorating the fallen *partizan* fighters of World War II. This memorial had been inaugurated in the 1970s by the late partisan general Janković. It was tended by his remote relative Zoran Janković, for a
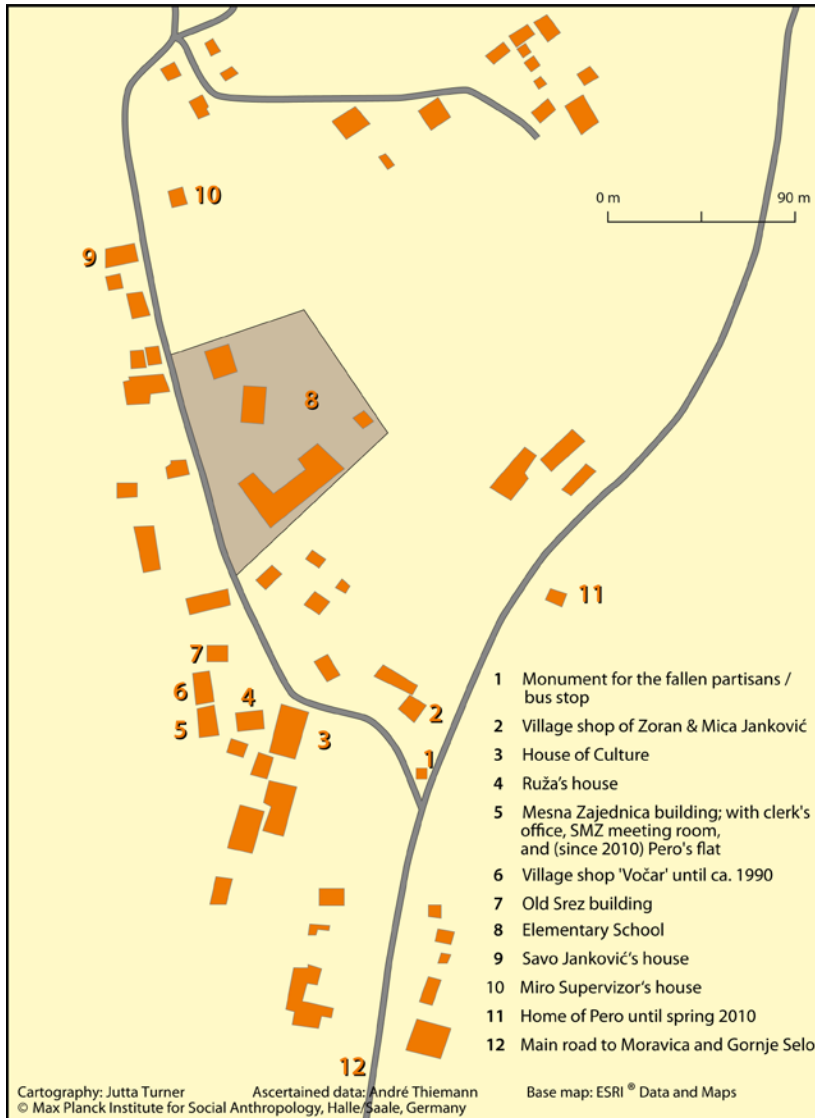
Map 0.3. *The Centre of Donje Selo (Cartographer: Jutta Turner)*

remuneration from *grad* Moravica. Zoran Janković and his extended family inhabited the two adjacent households. Their grocery shop (Map 0.3, item 2) was a focal point of male sociability and provided goods for half the village.[26]

The village centre, also known as Janković neighbourhood (*zaseok Jankovići*) consisted of 45 households dotted along the street. Walking

Figure 0.1. *The building of the Local Council – MZ © André Thiemann*

uphill from the bus stop one first reached the House of Culture (Map 0.3, item 3). This was built during socialism by collaborative village labour and was managed by the MZ. Today, it was hardly ever open. Behind it, several houses formed a semi-circle. From left to right these were a private home, the MZ building, the former 'Voćar' shop,[27] and the 'Old *Srez*' building[28] (Map 0.3, items 4–7). Three of these houses had been built in the 1950s by the villagers as teachers' homes, while the 'Old *Srez*' had been used back then as a school classroom. During the 1980s they were jointly used by the agricultural cooperative and by the MZ, and in the 1990s refugees were housed in them.

The MZ building (figure 0.1) was renovated in 2002, after the local refugee centre had been dissolved (see Chapter 3). Near the main entrance hung a wrapped, frayed Serbian flag. The central office room was the workspace of the MZ clerk (*šef mesne kancelarije*), who since the 1970s had been employed by the '*grad* administration for common and cooperative work' (*gradska uprava za opšte i zajedničke poslove*). The MZ clerk, a native of the village, provided decentralised bureaucratic services to his fellow citizens. He issued birth, marriage, death and citizenship certificates, and, if required, informed the urban CSW about villagers in need. He also assisted

the MZ, providing it with a telephone and writing its minutes. The MZ clerk used a smallish second room as storage space for his files. A third room was reserved for the MZ meetings and hosted some trophies of the village football club.

The second entrance to the left of the building led to a one-room flat which was used free of charge by a villager (who had come as a refugee in the 1990s). The MZ building was therefore a local state space par excellence. It blended the everyday interactions between the sub-local scale of the state in the shape of the MZ, the local scale of the state embodied by the clerk, and the citizens represented by the man living there and other co-villagers regularly dropping by to get paperwork done.

Thirty metres up the road from the MZ building lay the primary school (grades 1–8) (Map 0.3, item 8).[29] It is the last stop on the 'tour', and a good example of a local state institution that was highly valued and encompassed interactions on several scales. The school drew approximately 100 pupils from the village and two smaller neighbouring communities including Gornje Selo. The director was responsible to the national Ministry of Education and to the *grad* administration for social activities in Moravica. Moreover, she was married to the brother of the bus driver Mirko from the entry vignette, and felt an intense moral-economic pressure to collaborate closely with the MZ. The latter supported school renovations and activities through finance, materials, and works, and the football club held its annual meeting in a classroom, as I observed in 2010.

The school building had a small school library, several classrooms, a teachers' room and a director's room, and a preschool. In 2009, twice weekly an ambulant dentist operated in its renovated basement. The basement was also used for special occasions like a 'Healthy Food' showcase organised by teachers, pupils, and parents; or it was used as a polling centre by the national election commission. Next to the school building was a concrete sports field, where the village youth played basketball in the evenings and occasionally shared a joint. On one side of the sports field was the toilet and heating block, and on the other side the gym used for recreational activities in the evenings. After the end of my fieldwork the gym was rebuilt from scratch (see Chapter 1). Finally, there was a former schoolhouse, which had housed a refugee family, was later used as a storage space and then removed.

These were the major nodes of the meshwork of local state institutions and effects accessible to all villagers: the House of Culture, the MZ clerk's office, the MZ meeting room, the school, dentist,

and sport facilities. The politics of relations was negotiated by the personal, material and discursive circulation of power through these nodes. The final short section provides a roadmap to the book, accenting the research axes from which it approaches the politics of relations.

Roadmap

This book makes the prolonged argument that by following a small set of actors in an extended case study across space and time, one can unpack intersecting state transformation processes and their effects. It also provides a set of interlaced, theoretical-methodological tools to do this in a relational and comparative way – by investigating negotiations of embeddedness, tactics of boundary work, organisational modalities, and the anthropologically turned strategic selectivity. Roughly following Henri Lefebvre's regressive-progressive method (Lefebvre 1970, 18–40), each chapter tracks back from the ethnographic problem in the present to the past, and from there forward to its possible futures, asking how the politics of relations is produced, reproduced and transformed.

The book has two parts with five empirical chapters, preludes to each part, an interlude, an introduction and a conclusion. The bulk of Part I, 'The Local Council', is made up of the empirical Chapters 1 to 3 and focuses on sub-local statecraft in Donje Selo, the village where I resided and which was not a bounded or a static community, but was entangled in wider relations of socio-cultural, political and economic transformations. Chapter 3 also serves as a segue to Part II, by combining perspectives from rural, sub-local politics and urban, local-scale social work. Part II, 'The Centre for Social Work', consists of a prelude on ethnographic theories of social security and care, followed by two ethnographic chapters based on fieldwork with the social workers of the CSWs in Moravac and Palanka, respectively.

The prelude to Part I describes my ethnographic position and the mixed-methods design I used.

Chapter 1, 'Embeddedness: Between Government and Representation', tackles the axis of embeddedness, following the making of local politicians in Donje Selo. Like many village men they were invested in football, and the ethnography follows a common work action at the football club's pitch to prepare for the yearly village celebration, which exposed the dilemma of mediating between governmental and representational demands. Besides observing the classic

options – to conform, resign and rebel – the chapter also develops the notion of transversal politics as performed by the local veterinarian who drew his fellow villagers into culturally productive positions by redistributing resources into sports infrastructures and agriculture and by providing workplaces. Finally, the chapter traces how the vet's souring relationship with his parents' neighbours was voiced in the widely circulating discourses on corruption.

This is followed by an interlude on historical oscillations in the scale and scope of village self-government, providing background information for the transformations of sub-local politics in Donje Selo since the 1970s (Chapter 2) and since the 1990s (Chapter 3).

Chapter 2 shows how Donje Selo's new MZ politicians, elected in 2009, explored liberal-democratic practices of representation in response to critiques about state corruption. Developing the second axis of research, boundary work, the chapter shows how the MZ's efforts at inclusive self-government played out in the field of infrastructural politics, through the case study of a road building conflict when the MZ budget served as a 'boundary object' tactically uniting the local councillors against critiques from villagers with other priorities. Over time, the internal boundary between the village and the state was repeatedly redrawn during events like village elections and disputes, leading former outsiders ('ordinary villagers') to plot the lustration and purification of the MZ, only to be later frustrated that they could find neither evidence for malfeasance nor resources for their own projects. Such boundary work shaped the processual rhythms of local politics.

Chapter 3 shadows the MZ's dealings with a needy villager who was deemed non-deserving by the urban CSW. It analyses how long after a war ends and a humanitarian crisis cycle subsides, humanitarian reason can resurface to inform local state action. In 2008, the personal crisis situation of a former refugee deemed too young for a pension, too long-term unemployed for unemployment benefits, and too fit for social aid, triggered care by the MZ for 'our refugee'. Acting on widespread yearning for social citizenship, the MZ combined modalities such as neighbourly help, MZ emergency support and municipal public works and tried to 'jump scale' to the CSW. Paradoxically, when the social workers were finally interpellated to act and social benefits flowed, the safety net of 'our refugee' unravelled through shifts in boundary work between seemingly good neighbourly vs. bad state care.

The prelude to Part II portrays a social worker's emphasis of professional fieldwork over bureaucratic paperwork and how it

resonated with Mancunian ethnographies of welfare relations and with recent ethnographies of social security and care.

Chapter 4 unfolds the case of a needy family, the Milovići of Gornje Selo, and develops the third axis of research – modalities – elucidating the friction between 'inclusive distribution' and 'exclusive protection', two modalities of organising welfare provisioning. Drawing on foundational texts of the Yugoslav social work profession, the chapter unearths how social workers – in their relationships with the needy, with colleagues and with superiors – made social policy through 'bureaucratic errors', under-implementing increasingly exclusionary social policy concerning material benefits or over-implementing new prerogatives for child-fostering. This focus on the friction between modalities allows to trace how waves of bureaucratisation and professionalisation sedimented in and transformed social policy, showing how the street-level bureaucratic process of re-assembling professional fieldwork and bureaucratic paperwork shaped the welfare state's transformation.

In Chapter 5, local state help was not elicited, it came as a surprise. Unfolding the fourth axis of research – strategic selectivity – the chapter analyses the translation of transnational policies into an elder care at home programme by the CSW in Palanka. This new programme became deeply embedded in the senior citizens' medical routines and kin relations, yet the emerging social-daughter-care relationships were but little acknowledged by the elderly, the caregivers and the social workers who retained the conventional discursive separation between the state and kin, while intimately intertwining them in practice. The project, strategically-selectively couched in kinship discourse to access meagre national and local scale budgets, could inform a 'radical contemporary politics', but there existed only limited possibilities for its up-scaling.

The Conclusion draws together the research results and looks at new fields for the relational ethnography of power and the state.

Notes

1. Toponyms and personal names have been anonymised to guarantee the confidentiality of my interlocutors.
2. '*Ova zemlja propada / Ova zemlja je propala skroz*'.
3. Ivan repeatedly received subsidies for his family farm (from the Municipal Department for Economic Development), care allowance (from the Centre for Social Work), and, since his wife's death, a family pension for his disabled daughter (from the municipal branch of the Serbian Pension

Fund). An agricultural advisor remembered Ivan well, but she had no nice words to spare on the subject.

 4. Hetherington (2020) referred to the reform state of Paraguay in the 2010s, a.k.a. the 'Government of Beans' that was bogged down struggling against the entrenched 'Soy State'.

 5. Studying the material force of ruling ideas, Eric Wolf drew in his last book on his early teacher Norbert Elias and on other sociological classics and distinguished between individual, interactional, tactical/organisational, and structural power. I take inspiration from Wolf's elegant theoretical-methodological suggestion, and his injunction to realise a historical, comparative, and cumulative anthropology of power (Wolf 2001, 387, 397). However, I lump individual and interactional power into the 'embeddedness' of actors, and I split 'tactical/organisational power' into (tactical) 'boundary work' and (organisational) 'modalities'. Wolf's 'structural power', in which he combined Marxian relations of production and Foucauldian governance, resonates with my 'strategic selectivity'.

 6. A telling form of (mis)translation happened in May 2014, when the then Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić (SNS) cited Max Weber on the possible connection between a rational work ethic and the rise of capitalism to legitimate his government's downsizing of state employment and the prolongation of the bureaucrats' working day (see Fuster 2014).

 7. In Francoist Spain, the local state performed, reproduced and deepened prevailing power asymmetries (Narotzky and Smith 2006, 56–74). On the reproduction of hierarchies by the local state in post-socialist Eastern Europe, see Thelen et al. (2011).

 8. Max Gluckman, a South-African socialist with Lithuanian Jewish roots, excelled in the 'very British' anthropology of Oxford where he held a research stipend in 1934–1936 and a lectureship in 1947–1949. He conducted fieldwork in Zululand between 1936 and 1938 and subsequently with the Lozi while heading the RLI, and founded the Anthropology department at Manchester in 1949.

 9. For example, Jaap van Velsen smuggled weapons for the anticolonial black revolutionary forces in Rhodesia (personal communication by his student Nina Glick-Schiller).

10. Critics took Sharma and Gupta to task for ignoring the history of anthropological theory and for being empirically superficial (Bierschenk 2009) or found fault in their 'neo-pluralist orthodoxy' that was evaluated as politically conservative (Marcus 2008).

11. They also outlined modalities and boundary work as two further axes of research (Thelen, Vetters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018a, 10–12).

12. One analyst of the narrative strategy in Karl Marx's *Capital* (2015 [1867]) has argued that capital was represented as a 'relation . . ., mapping the connections between apparently disconnected practices that must operate in tandem to produce a particular aggregate pattern of social behaviour' (Pepperell 2010, 102). Marx's underlying 'philosophy of internal

relations' treats the relations in which anything stands as essential parts of what it is, so that a significant change in any of these relations registers as a qualitative change in the system of which it is a part (Ollman 2003, 5).

13. Studies of discursive power usefully framed it as producing the state effect (T. Mitchell 1991; Trouillot 2001).

14. The main political options were social-liberal, liberal conservative, nationalist conservative and social fascist. New Left and socialist-democratic parties reappeared from 2015.

15. President Đinđić was assassinated by criminals aligned to factions of the armed forces.

16. While the students' hopes for an emancipatory societal transformation diminished, they acquired 'democratic expertise' and adopted procedural democracy, e.g. within student politics and civil society activism (Greenberg 2014, 1–12). Otpor briefly turned into a political party after 2000 but merged with the DS when it could not pass the 5 percent threshold in the elections of 2003.

17. I omit the legally defined district scale (*okrug*), for it had few resources and little tangible impact.

18. In 2014, the MWSP was renamed and is now known as the 'Ministry for Work, Employment, Veterans and Social Policy'. Because my field research finished in September 2013, I retain the erstwhile title.

19. Petéri (2008) provided measures of the divergence of local government sizes in Eastern Europe. Serbian local governments, with an average of 52,000 inhabitants, were the largest. Hungary's were rather small, with 3200 inhabitants, while in Romania they approximated the statistical means with 7600 inhabitants (Petéri 2008, 8).

20. Kosovo declared independence in 2008. Serbian diplomacy tries to prevent its international recognition.

21. Palanka municipality was of average size, with a low population density of less than 100 inhabitants/ km².

22. There were nine administrative entities: finance, urbanism, local taxes, inspections, common and collective works, social activities, and professional support for the parliament, the council, and the mayor.

23. For example, the communal enterprise Green Spaces (*Gradsko Zelenilo*) managed the parks and cemeteries, while the Communal Works authority KOMUNALAC planned, built, and reconstructed municipal roads. These enterprises provided public services and infrastructure, and were expected to work profitably.

24. Policing was organised at the municipal and national scale – the nearest police unit was stationed in Moravica.

25. The territory of the MZ Donje Selo slightly exceeds the average south of Belgrade of 15 km².

26. There was one other shop in the village, three kilometres down the road in the direction of Moravica.

27. *Voćar* translated as Fruit-Grower. Until the 1990s the fruit-growing sec-

tion of the municipal agricultural-industrial cooperative PIK had oper-
ated such buying up and storage stations throughout the municipality. It
now sheltered a telephone junction box.

28. The semi-derelict 'Old *Srez*' was the oldest communal building of the vil-
lage, built in the late nineteenth century. The MZ tried in vain to obtain
funding for its renovation as a historical monument. It was demolished
in 2013.

29. A few hundred metres further up the Janković street was my hosts'
house.