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**Fiona McConnell Rehearsing the State: The Political Practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile**

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**Review Symposium Edited by David Featherstone, School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow.**

Fiona McConnell's book *Rehearsing the State* combines a theoretical engagement with the spatial practices of non-state actors with detailed research on Tibetan Government-in-Exile. It develops a compelling case for the need to rethink key aspects of existing work on state spaces and an ethnographically rich account of the diverse geographies through which state/non-state relations are practiced. By employing notions of rehearsal and dramaturgy to rethink the performance of the state and exile the book develops an innovative and original set of conversations between cultural and political geography. The contributions to this symposium reflect on different aspects of the relations between political and social and cultural geography such as the relations between materiality and the state, the relations between geography, performativity and exile and the relations between positionality and political ethnography. Through doing so the symposium highlights the productiveness in both methodological and theoretical terms of developing engagements at the intersection of political and cultural geographies.

**Commentary 1**

**Rhys Jones, Department of Geography, Aberystwyth University.**

This book provides a highly nuanced, articulate and rich account of the idea of rehearsing the state or, in other words, how the notion of the state is experimented with, performed and enacted in everyday life. It is a book that contributes effectively to a broader set of ethnographically- and anthropologically-informed academic studies that have sought to draw attention to how the state does not just exist but has to be brought into being through social relations, practices and things. Far from being merely a 'political' entity, therefore, the book illustrates the many social and cultural practices and things that give some semblance of form and permanence to the state. As well as being theoretically impressive, the book is also empirically rich, drawing on an extensive amount of fieldwork undertaken on the specific case study of the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGiE), based in Dharamsala in India. The depth of the empirical research that has been undertaken is really impressive, even more so

given the author's ongoing commitment to the TGiE. I do, however, have some more critical thoughts.

My first area of critique centres on materiality. *Rehearsing the State* focuses on different aspects of statehood, from the state as a territorial form of governance, to the state as a rational and legal authority, through to the state's attempt to connect with its Tibetan citizens and its attempts at paradiplomacy. Much of the evidence that is adduced to study the TGiE tends to be focused on the way in which the state is being narrated and performed and this is understandable, given the focus of the book. I wonder, though, whether more light could have been shone on the crucial props that help to give meaning to Tibetan statehood? There is, increasingly, an attempt to think about how ideas of statehood and nationalism are grounded in a series of material things. It is these material infrastructures that bring a certain coherence to claims to statehood and nationalism, particularly, one would have thought, in situations where those claims are somewhat precarious. Would a full-on account of the materiality of the TGiE allow one to say slightly different things about how the state is rehearsed? Or it may be that there are relatively few material things that give the TGiE its form. If so, there is perhaps an argument to be made that the significance of these material things for states and nations may be overstated, given that the TGiE is able to survive in their relative absence.

My second area of critique focuses on issues of affect. Performances elicit emotions and effects, for the performers and the audience. The book does focus on these ideas, of course, and I like the way in which it makes a conceptual link between the idea of state effects (Mitchell 2006 [1999]) and state affects. It also develops a focus on how ideas of hope, aspiration, cultural security but also insecurity, particularly in relation to a future following

the Dalai Lama's death, all inform the affective qualities of the TGiE. I wonder, however, whether there was room to develop this notion a bit further by examining in more detail how specific things that are part and parcel of Tibetan statehood are associated with different affective qualities, with those varying from individual to individual and from group to group. Does the Green Book (identity documents), or the payment of the chatrel (a form of taxation), for instance, elicit different affective responses for different people? In short, is there scope to undertake a full-on affective account of the particularities of Tibetan statehood, rather than just addressing it as something that is associated with the state as a whole?

My final area of critique revolves around the extent to which we can draw broader conclusions from the case study of the TGiE. One of the main claims of the book is that examining the state in an 'unusual' context – or in a place where it is being practised under slightly unusual circumstances – can provide additional insights into the workings of the state in general. I suppose that I remain to be convinced that looking at what one could term the 'margins' of statehood *necessarily* gives one additional insights into the workings of the state, when compared with undertaking a similar study of the state in more conventional settings. For instance, would a study of the practices, performances, narratives, infrastructures and affects of the National Health Service in the UK look like provide one with similar insights to the book's study of the TGiE? Would such a study of how the NHS is 'rehearsed' give the same level of insight, different insights, or even more insights than the study of the TGiE?

These are, however, minor complaints. The author has written an excellent book that provides considerable conceptual food for thought and the study will surely act as a touchstone for years to come for all those interested in the practise of statehood.

## **Commentary 2**

Andrew Davies, Department of Geography & Planning, University of Liverpool

This book is a deeply ethnographic and rich study which problematizes some of the core categories of political geography and is an important text in text in the ongoing reassessment and refiguring of ‘the state’ within geography. Crucial to the book’s richness, and something which deserves to be recognised and celebrated in today’s climate of demanding faster and faster knowledge production and its associated societal ‘impact’, is the longitudinal nature of the study. Drawing upon research that started in 2005 (and importantly friendships and associations that started before that) the book is based on extensive AND intensive research practices, and this is a fundamental strength of the book, and it is important to state that this is increasingly rare in the contemporary academy. The timescale of the research extends beyond any ‘one’ research grant/proposal/deadline. The richness generated by such a deep-rooted engagement with Tibetan exile communities across the globe, but particularly in South Asia, is important as the book amply demonstrates that there is no substitute for long-term, engaged and committed research within a particular community.

This level of committed engagement does lead on to some specific questions which are worth engaging with about the author’s positionality and participation within the research process. In particular, I am interested in how some of the approaches within this book help to overcome tendencies within some of the social movements literature within geography which, through its attempts to emphasise the transformative power of engaged, participatory research, comes very close to reproducing masculinist and colonialist tensions of the researcher as a prime actor compared to the research participants. This tension emerges particularly in work taking place where Euro-American researchers undertake research in the ‘global south’ in order to help mobilise and facilitate political activism without critiquing some of the colonial power structures which they are actively re-creating.

This book potentially offers something of an alternative approach by examining how the author’s deep personal commitment to Tibet intersects with the research outputs (in this case, this monograph) and how this deep, long-lasting commitment to the subject at study both is helpful and is a hindrance to various aspects of the research. This discussion about positionality and its e/affects on the research appears unevenly throughout the book – for the most part, the book is written as a fairly ‘formal’ piece of political research with a degree of critical distance between author and subject, but occasionally, hints of Fiona’s personal position appear in some of the discussion, and the mention of the activist/academic literature is dealt with briefly in the introduction. However, I think that there could be some important rejoinders in this book’s approach that challenge some of the overblown, often masculinist, tendencies in some social movement research which over-emphasise the radical potential of research, to instead show how careful, critical and engaged political research involves constant negotiation and challenges the perceived boundary between researcher/researched in ways which are not always ‘Activist with a capital A’.

A second point where I think the book begins an engagement, but the author could say a little more in the space provided by this discussion forum, is in relation to the discussions of civil society in Chapter Six of the book, which deals with the ‘scripting’ of ideas of populations, welfare and citizenship amongst Tibetan communities in exile. As a result of the ways in

which the Tibetan Government in Exile (TGIE) seeks to create a democratic polity, the book considers civil society as a distinct zone which is closely linked to, and indeed, is actively produced by, the state-in-exile as part of its attempts to create a normatively democratic space for its citizens. In doing so, the book reaffirms somewhat the classical notions of civil society as a *gesellschaft* space, distinct from the individual/family and closely linked, but separate to, the state. This is interesting enough as a case study, given the Tibetan Government in Exile's attempts to actively create and maintain a certain idealised form of civil society in order to 'perform' as a democratic government in a non-sovereign space. However, this could, arguably, be pushed a little further by the book, which draws upon some of Partha Chatterjee's attempts to unsettle the boundaries of civil society. Chatterjee's formulation of 'political society' – a 'normatively nebulous zone' (Chatterjee 2004, 50) where communities and groups who do not fit into the state's formal accounting of 'populations' negotiate and engage with the state is intended as a challenge to universalising tendencies in the civil society literatures, specifically arguing that civil society is an elitist space for many populations in South Asia, who instead inhabit political society. Whilst these are touched upon in the book, there are potentially interesting questions raised here about the distinctiveness of Tibet in Exile's civil society – how is it actually created, challenged and maintained by a state-like organisation in a predominantly South Asian context which could extend and develop some of Chatterjee's arguments. There is probably more that could be said here about how the examining the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (and other similar actors) can interrogate some of the traditional distinctions between state/civil/political society that continue to see political activity as occupying distinct 'zones'. This is important as it challenges the idea that 'political' behaviour only happens in certain, relatively public, spaces – it would be useful to think about how the TGIE's political activities occupy more 'cultural' spaces, such as 'the home' to name only one.

In this, I am aware that I am commenting on something that is beyond the book's specific remit a little – as McConnell says, she is rather interested in how the TGIE demarcates 'specific institutions and activities as lying outside of its defined remit' (p. 133), and the book is about the TGIE's attempts to create its own sovereign space. However, I think that it is possibly useful to push beyond the state a little to examine how (non-)state's determine more or less ideal forms of civil society, as this has important consequences for how such categories function beyond the idealised enlightenment-era models of civil society and state which still underpin much political philosophy. In this, it is of course understandable why the TGIE aspires to create such a normative political sphere for its putative subjects, and why it is so desirous of performing such a 'traditional' role of being a clearly demarcated state, but I think that there is also ground to be covered in how in attempting to perform 'state-ness', this intersects with and co-produces a performance of 'civil society' in potentially more or less 'traditional' ways as well.

Both of these broad comments are, , attempts to push the author to think beyond the specific state/stateness approach of the book, but, I think are potentially useful avenues for the important and excellent work undertaken by the book to expand its remit and speak to a broader range of audiences.

### **Commentary 3**

**Amanda Rogers, Department of Geography, Swansea University**

*Rehearsing the State* is an impressive ethnographic study of how the everyday practices of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile (TGIE) work as expressions of statecraft. As the title of the book suggests, it deploys rehearsal as a way of thinking through and rationalising these activities, drawing attention to the performative attempts by the TGIE to act like a state in a situation where that ability is circumscribed territorially, politically, and legally. Throughout the book, the TGIE appears to be constantly rehearsing its own existence in ever more convoluted ways both to justify its existence and to prepare itself for an imagined, hoped for, but indefinitely postponed, return to Tibet.

The book can therefore be situated in a broader field of research that is using the language of performance to analyse geopolitical phenomena, from improvisation (Jeffrey 2013), to staging (Craggs 2014), to mimicry (McConnell et al 2012). Performance draws attention to the shifting modes of practice, materiality and imagination that constitute understandings of the state and its role, emphasizing how the organisation and operationalization of power is fragile and contingent (Weber 1998). More specifically, *Rehearsing the State* combines a Goffmanian approach with that of Butlerian performativity. Although these two lineages of work are theoretically incompatible, when reading the book as a whole, there is an increasing sense that they work together, particularly as the TGIE enacts the everyday performance of state-ness in ways that make the polity appear stable. This occurs through activities such as the Tibetan Demographic Survey, the provision of education and welfare services, the issuing of Green Books and the expectations around *chatrel* contributions. The dramaturgical and the performative often dovetail, such as in Chapter 6, where the book examines the performative evolution of the TGIE's aims, strategy, practice and policy (e.g. in developments around the Middle Way proposition) and then in Chapter 7, as the TGIE dramaturgically plays out these narratives to different audiences (India, China and the international community). In this regard, the book is deft at working across different understandings of performance to illuminate the workings of the TGIE, rather than shoehorning the TGIE's activities into one particular performative mould.

Theoretically, what I found more interesting was McConnell's use of the anthropologist Victor Turner. Turner's ideas around social drama are often underplayed in

geography (with some exceptions) and they were usefully deployed here. However, I felt that the book could have pushed further with his ideas. In brief, Turner (1987) suggests that society proceeds through dramas that emerge through situations of conflict and conflict resolution. The drama is composed of 4 phases of action: breach (the breaking of regular social relations); crisis (the breach widens to create a liminal state where norms are suspended and other modes of being are made possible); redress (ranges from personal advice and informal arbitration to formal judicial machinery); and reintegration (of a disturbed social group, or the recognition of a schism). *Rehearsing the State* is particularly interested in crisis, in the experiments that are enabled by being in a liminal state and the social or political transformations that might result. However, it is worth pausing to reflect on whether or not the TGIE has moved from social drama to ritual. Ritual often has exotic connotations but Turner also views it as a commonly practised mundane behaviour, one that is different to habit because it is a response to conflict. One of the issues the book raises is around what the TGIE is rehearsing for and whether rehearsal is indefinite. In this regard, the book's strength in highlighting the ingrained and experienced nature of the TGIE's everyday rehearsal of stateness is also, perhaps, one of its weaknesses, as increasingly the rehearsal seems to be over and the limits of the rehearsal metaphor are made apparent. Here, I wondered whether the operations of the TGIE were in fact ritualised, because in Turner's model, ritual is also designed to create some kind of transformation. It would have been interesting to push these ideas further to see if ritual offered a route through this problem of temporality that rehearsal raises.

In focusing on rehearsal more specifically, sometimes it felt as though the surprising moments of rehearsal were obscured. Although the consistency of the TGIE's rehearsal of stateness comes across strongly in McConnell's work, rehearsal is much more experimental and ambivalent in both theory and practice. In fairness, the book highlights moments of much bolder experimentation that are potentially risky - notably the introduction of democratic elections across the exile community and wider diaspora, and the Dalai Lama's ceding of political power. Failures also appear, such as when the TGIE does not provide for the exile population, or where the TGIE's systems are subverted. Yet it all feels very contained and controlled. The unexpected and the unruly, the creative dynamics of rehearsals, are less present, even though these moments can open up new avenues along which political practices can proceed. Ultimately, therefore, the rehearsal metaphor exposes the TGIE's attempts to reduce its ambivalent and precarious existence. Rehearsal is really about control.

Through its theoretical inflections and its emphasis on the contradictions of rehearsal, *Rehearsing the State* makes a valuable contribution to the emerging literature on geopolitics and performance, as well as to wider understandings of the ambivalent nature of statehood. The book uses the extraordinary situation of the TGIE to emphasise how the enactment of power is learned and perfected, further placing the ordinary operations of states under the critical microscope.

## **Response**

### **Fiona McConnell, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University.**

I'm immensely grateful to Rhys Jones, Andrew Davies and Amanda Rogers for their thoughtful and insightful reflections on *Rehearsing the State*. I could not have wished for a more productive set of engagements and they have pushed me to consider both the limitations of the book and future research avenues that the notion of rehearsal might open up. In this brief response I reflect on how I have sought to think about core political geography concepts in relation to debates in social and cultural geography, and how this could be developed further.

Firstly I am grateful to Davies for raising the issue of positionality. I was perhaps overly cautious about writing myself into the book – the fear of coming across as a navel-gazer is a strong one – but Davies' comments have prompted me to revisit scribbled reflections on positionality and the need to think critically and creatively about the politics of 'giving back'. With a British passport linking me to a state that Tibetans see as having unfulfilled postcolonial obligations and an Irish passport that invoked discussions of solidarity across freedom movements my role was certainly more ambiguous and more modest than that of an activist-researcher. As the fieldwork progressed, my role morphed into what I can only describe as a 'joiner-upper-of-dots': an outsider to the community who, part-deliberately and part-accidentally, connected ideas, debates and people. Connectivity was also important in how I approached conceptual debates in *Rehearsing the State*. In situating the book within convergences between cultural and political geography I was interested in pushing further the idea that the state is brought into being through practices that are as much socio-cultural as they are political. In particular I examined how citizenship, democracy and diplomacy are variously articulated in the context of displacement, reworked by religious imperatives and

experimented with in what is a case of extraterritorial governance. As Davies notes, more could perhaps have been done to flesh out tensions in the production of civil society as well.

In order to hone in on the interplay of spatial, temporal and performative dynamics in the practicing of stateness I employed the notion of rehearsal as a provocation to open up particular lines of enquiry. For example I used the ambiguous temporality of rehearsal to ask how modes of future-oriented temporalities – anticipatory action and prefigurative politics – are articulated at the scale of the nation and when a ‘final performance’ is anticipated but not inevitable. With regards to performance my somewhat unconventional approach was to bring together Butlerian understanding of performativity with often overlooked sociological models of dramaturgy. I am grateful to Rogers for pushing me further on my engagement with dramaturgy and her comments are prescient as I have recently gone back to Turner’s work to think through the politics of ritual in the context of diplomacy, including the question of what happens when performances go awry. Indeed the juxtaposition of stability and precarity that rehearsal’s embrace of both performativity and dramaturgical ritual enables is one that can prompt productive conversations not only between political and cultural geographers but also between geographers and anthropologists.

In thinking about rehearsal as a multi-faceted concept this highlights revealing tensions between belief and cynicism, and aspiration and frustration and has the potential to speak in interesting ways to emerging work on affective atmospheres of nationalism (Closs Stephens 2015). Nevertheless I agree with Jones that questions of materiality and affect could have been elaborated on in the book. In the inception stages I had sketched out a chapter on ‘props’ to include the materiality of identity documents and the fabric of TGiE’s physical infrastructure in India which might have better captured the precarious nature of exile stateness, and Jones’ suggestion of a more differentiated analysis of affect could have been an interesting lens through which to examine generational and political divisions within the community.

Where I diverge from Jones is in defending the utility of the margins as a productive position to think with and from. Geographers of all hues have long been drawn to the exceptional and the transgressive yet, despite the seeming ubiquity of the term, marginality is rarely defined

or interrogated. My justification for focusing on an exceptional case was not only the intrinsic spatiality and temporality of the margins – of being different from the mainstream and representing a time of change – but also an understanding of the margins as surplus, leeway and excess; as a site of creativity and innovation where norms of political legitimacy can be questioned. In this current geopolitical moment we hardly need reminding that the myth of the state is a powerful one. However it is also important that we remain open to what might seem like counter-intuitive readings of the state as a practice of critique, resistance and aspiration. By drawing attention to process and pedagogy, rehearsal encourages us to keep open the possibility of a future more hopeful than the present.

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