



BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The pataphysical state

Time, debt, and transfigured legalities
in *The spirit of the laws in Mozambique*

Morten NIELSEN, *Aarhus University*

Comment on Obarrio, Juan. 2014. *The spirit of the laws in Mozambique*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Temporality is crucial for the operationalization of any law (Obarrio 2014: 173). The enactment of rules and regulations is always detached from the transgressive act that it sanctions by a temporal interval during which the perpetrator is figured as an object of meticulous legal technologies. Through the lapse of time, a set of complex and overlapping social relations, strategies, and desires are “absorbed” by legal concepts into “their abstract categories” (Gluckman 1963: 205) in order for the law to actualize its universal normativity. Still, as Michael Herzfeld once reminded us, the formal fixity of the law “obscures the labile quality of its semantics. It is not that some forms of language are context-free, but that the exercise of power lies, in part, in the ability to present it as such” (1992: 119; see also Hansen and Stepputat 2005). In this regard, the law is essentially an effect of those operations by which the temporal interval is used to confirm the universality of its legal concepts.

The spirit of the laws in Mozambique (Obarrio 2014) is an ethnography of a state machine, which operates not only in time but also essentially *as* time. Having to keep up with the fluctuating economic strategies of Euro-American neoliberal governmentality, state governance in Mozambique implies an “accelerated temporality, enhanced by the speed of flows of financialization and indebtedness” (87). Not unlike the perpetrator, whose legal subjectivity emerges as an outcome of the temporal interval between transgression and sanction, the Mozambican state machine derives its curtailed sovereignty from a fundamental “logic of debt.” Indeed, with more than 60 percent of its national budget based on foreign aid money, practices of conditionality do seem to



define the scope for maneuver for the former socialist FRELIMO government, which has been in power since the country's independence in 1975. During the period when Obarrio carried out the main part of his ethnographic fieldwork in Mozambique (2003–4), the World Bank was focusing its activities on how to implement juridical state reforms that might grant universal citizenship to all Mozambican nationals irrespective of political belonging, economic status, and place of residency. In the attempt to model the structure and aesthetics of the FRELIMO state as an inclusive democratic polity, the “customary” was reintroduced as a malleable link between the calculus of the market and the rationale of state governance. As Obarrio argues, “The spirit of the laws of current neoliberal reforms articulates the ritual imagination of the state and its practices of governance. Through the juridical reproduction of the customary (‘community’) the state harnesses aspects of the alleged magicality of the ‘natural’ state of tradition, its customs, and its rights” (2014: 25).

By promoting locality, tradition, ritual, and belief as crucial components for the making of a democratic polity, the “customary citizen” was staged as an idealized figure of national belonging; a “New Man” of the postsocialist era capable of transcending deep-seated internal socio-political tensions and steer the country toward a national future, where its rich cultural heritage could be appropriately worshipped and treasured. At the local level where “the time of the law unfolds . . . in a bureaucratic office, where a routine-like schedule takes place, day after day, hour after hour” (ibid.: 170), customary citizenship was enacted through the “minor state.” Here, the formalized aesthetics of quotidian office practices confirmed that the FRELIMO government was more than a spectral shadow figure visible only at distant ceremonies commemorating the spirit of neoliberalism. As Obarrio tells us, however, while customary citizenship was a “key technology of governance” (2014: 80), it was also a volatile temporal topography characterized by the always unpredictable “disjunctive syntheses” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) of contracted state historicities and local forms of debt-based relatedness, whose normativity was elicited only by deferral. The wobbly office chairs, stamps, and typewriters were operated by state cadres who had been active since the early post-Independence years when the revolution respired through a collective body, which, for a brief moment in time, allowed the nation-state to be equal to itself. In 2003–4, the residue of a past socialist ethos still flowed through the quotidian rituals of the minor state as fragments of a future utopia in which the state machine would be responsible for actualizing the full potentials of social life. Perhaps it was precisely because “the articulation between party and state, proper to the Socialist regime, seem(ed) not to have been completely effaced” (Obarrio 2014: 133) that the minor state had become an extension of those debt-based normativities, which sutured the social to the extent that “the inner folds of relatedness and the domestic (had) become the infrastructure of the state” (178). At the local community court, scattered colonial memories were enveloped within the seemingly timeless socialist aesthetics and through the judges’ repetitive quotidian rituals, the absence of temporal fixity activated other forms of social relatedness that were based on reciprocal obligations and unending cycles of debt.

How does the minor state machine operate? What temporal operations do administrative rituals need to perform in order for the state as “something akin to a relative” (Obarrio 2014: 206) to effectively stitch together the social? Debt, Obarrio argues, is the general form of social relatedness that holds the community together:



"It is the collectively shared acquiescence to an original debt without origin, owed to another, to a lineage and its spirit, to the dead ancestors" (200). And while exact equivalences might never be established, the norm of indebtedness pivots around an implicit promise of just reciprocation. Without being able to establish exact equivalences, there is always something that remains: a relational residue, which cannot be contained by the circulations of exchanges that flow through the minor state. This residue or "leftover" is precisely the desire for more sociality—more relatedness!—activated by the unfulfilled promise of just reciprocation. It might be, however, that there is more to the leftover than a relational desire, which ultimately ends up stabilizing the social. For does not the "minor state" seem to consistently distort its own temporal cadence through the never-ending series of political reforms? How else to account for the continuous but fragmented articulations of a socialist normative sensitivity at a time when the "customary" seems to contradict the revolutionary activism of the once frontline Marxist-Leninist FRELIMO party? Rather than merely exuding a relational desire, then, it might be that the "minor state" operates by carefully transfiguring its internal temporal composition so that, say, a socialist ethos comes to reverberate most acutely through the social fabric when it is relegated to a historical past that the present has successfully conquered. Borrowing a concept from the work of Alfred Jarry (1963; 1996; see also Bök 1997; Deleuze 1998), a forerunner of the surrealist movement of the 1920s, it might be argued that the minor state operates by *pataphysically* transfiguring its temporal cadence:

Envisaged as an avant-garde pseudo-science, the aim of "pataphysics" was to destabilize the underpinnings of conventional metaphysics from within (Deleuze 1998: 91). According to Jarry, scientific knowledge is so deceptive that it cannot be corrected through the production of further knowledge. Logical axioms carry at their core anomalies, which are consistently effaced in order for science to claim the generality of any standard. Instead of eradicating scientific anomalies, however, Jarry wanted to consider the broader existential purchase of accentuating their unique qualities. As a science of the laws governing exceptions, pataphysics thus traces the anomalies and aberrations within the metaphysical system that it allegedly contradicts "in order to perturb the entropy of its banal order" (Bök 1997: 54). The "pataphysician" does not criticize scientific knowledge from the outside, as it were, but attempts instead to disrupt metaphysics by generating radical mutations within it: "Pataphysics misreads metaphysics in order to . . . deflect it . . . until such a philosophy of exceptions goes even as far as to misread itself" (Bök 1997: 86).

In order for the minor state to withstand in an unstable political landscape without fixed ideological landmarks, it pataphysically distorts its own "banal order" from within. For is not the reason for the present-day implementation of the "customary" to work precisely that it occurs through the political aesthetics of vanguard socialism? In the dilapidated building of the local Community Council, the minor state pataphysically misreads itself:

The minor state stood as an icon that signaled toward a previous political regime that still remained and yet also had been fading away at varying speeds within the nation. Indeed, the minor state illustrates this political afterlife in a present that reproduces features . . . that were first iterated under Socialism. This historical past was folded within the house's ruined walls. (Obarrio 2014: 129)

As a dead language that is no longer in use, the socialist aesthetics creates distortive anagrams within the living language of contemporary neoliberal community politics (cf. Deleuze 1998: 96–97). It disrupts the rhythmic cadence of progressive neoliberal governmentality and pataphysically activates a revolutionary force that is no longer capable of guiding Mozambique toward a national utopian future. But within the “ruined walls” of the Community Council, the “customary” is pataphysically invested with the revolutionary aesthetics of a historical event, which endures within the present as a “gift of justice” (Obarrio 2014: 180–83). Hence, it is not merely the relational and, indeed, open-endedness of the state that allows the social to assert its moral economy through quotidian exchanges at the Community Council. In this particular environment, where “the intimacy (of national subjects) becomes the intimacy of the state itself (ibid.: 219), sociality is a manifest form of the pataphysical state, which carefully distorts its own temporal cadence from within.

References

- Bök, Christian. 1997. “Pataphysics: The poetics of an imaginary science.” PhD diss. York University. North York, Ontario.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. “An unrecognized precursor to Heidegger: Alfred Jarry.” In *Essays critical and clinical*, 91–98. London: Verso.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1983. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gluckman, Max. 1963. *Order and rebellion in tribal Africa*. London: Cohen & West.
- Hansen, Thomas Blom, and Finn Stepputat. 2005. “Introduction.” In *Sovereign bodies: Citizens, migrants, and states in the postcolonial world*, edited by Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, 1–38. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1992. *The social production of indifference: Exploring the symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy*. Oxford: Berg.
- Jarry, Alfred. 1963. “What is pataphysics.” *Evergreen Review* 13: 131–51.
- . 1996. *Exploits and opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*. Boston: Exact Change.
- Obarrio, Juan. 2014. *The spirit of the laws in Mozambique*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Morten Nielsen
Department of Anthropology
Aarhus University
Moesgård Allé 20
Building 4236, Room 142
8270 Højbjerg
Denmark
etnomn@cas.au.dk