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Guarding the Goods, Producing the State: Analysis of Narratives of Customs Officers

By focusing on narratives of customs officers from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, I examine how technological and organizational change of customs work influences governance and sovereignty of the state and how customs officers produced a specific imaginary of the state through their narratives. Supporting the contention that the transnational flow of goods and people restructures rather than undermines the state power, the Serbian and Bosnian cases reveal how technological and organizational change of customs work opened up new arenas for an expression of state sovereignty and new modes of governance. Furthermore, I analyze narratives about unauthorized actions, or shady business as customs officers call it, as a mechanism through which “the state” is discursively constructed.

Key words: customs officers, state, technological and organizational change, shady business (muljanje).

Чување робе, производња државе: анализа наратива цариника

Фокусирајући се на наративе цариника из Србије и Босне и Херцеговине, испитујем како технолошке и организацијске промене царинског рада утичу на управљање и суверенитет државе, те како цариници производе одређени имагинаријум државе својим наративима. Подржавајући тврдњу да транснационални проток робе и људи реструктурира, а не подрива моћ државе, примери из Србије и Босне и Херцеговине откривају како су технолошке и организацијске промене отвориле нове просторе за изражавање суверенитета и нових начина управљања. Поред тога, анализирам наративе о неовлашћеним радњама или о „муљању“, како их цариници називају, као механизам посредством којег је „држава“ дискурзивно конструисана.

Кључне речи: цариници, држава, технолошке и организацијске промене, „муљање“.

Introduction

This century opens on two sets of contradictory images: the power of the national state sometimes seems more visible and encroaching and sometimes less effective and less relevant. Countering assertions that the accelerated flows of persons, goods and capital, as well as the insistent presence of multi-, trans-, and su-

pranational entities signal the demise of the state (see Appadurai 1996, Hannerz 1996), scholars from a wide range of fields have come to recognize that the state remains important in ordering of social, political, and material life. The analytical problem has shifted from a search for state survival to tracking substantive shifts in state form and function (Ferguson and Gupta 2002, Trouillot 2001). Empirically sound research about customs work has the potential to contribute to knowledge about the state and reveal additional or alternative modalities of contemporary statehood.

I use form to emphasize the notion of a powerful state devoid of content, which is produced through a variety of power discourses and practices. In this way, I attempt to leave the state as both an open notion and an entity, which is not reified through analysis but is taken as the object of enquiry. In using such notion of the state I echo authors who argue that state has no institutional fixity on either theoretical or historical ground (Abrams 1988, Trouillot 2001). Thus, the state is not an apparatus but a set of discourses, practices, processes and their effects. Governmental institutions, such as customs, can be studied effectively without postulating the reality of the state. However, this theoretical position does not imply that the state is an abstraction which has coherent manifestations. By thinking about the state in this way, I want to examine how the state is produced as real through different discourses.

Customs regimes have long been central to the operation of the modern state. The operations of customs authorities enfolded within mundane modalities of commerce, policing, territoriality, and taxation, are elements of a state's bureaucratic apparatus that are largely taken for granted (Chalfin 2006, 246). However, being a definitive component of the state apparatus in its modern manifestation, customs is emerging anew as a strategic space of state making. Through the everyday procedures of customs work (counting, coding, and calculating) and the shaping of the sorts of objects, attributes, transactions, and geographic transpositions that are deemed "legible or illegible," visible or invisible, to the state these protocols have significant implications for the epistemological and ontological premises of state authority (cf. Chalfin 2006, 248). Having this in mind, I argue that customs serve as an important site for investigation of the state authority.

Consequently, this study proposes an empirically grounded understanding of customs work. It builds its argument based on the research carried out with customs officers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. During the research, I had the opportunity to carry out eight semi-structured, in-depth interviews with customs officers working on different borders and customs outposts. I conducted interviews with two customs officers from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were working on the Serbian-Bosnian border. Furthermore, one participant in the study was working on the Serbian-Hungarian border and one was working at an airport in Serbia. I managed to conduct two interviews with customs officers who were working in customs outposts in different cities in Serbia. In addition, I conducted one interview with a customs officer who was retired for two years and who had experience working on several borders. It is important to note that there were no differences between narra-

tives of Serbian and Bosnian customs officers. However, this could be result of the very small number of Bosnian customs officers included in the study.

In the interviews, research participants were asked to describe their daily work practices in as much detail as possible and to discuss their experience of customs work. Interviewing customs officers from different states who work on different borders and customs outposts can provide better insights into the prevailing understandings of borders, the state and customs work. This does not mean that I provide a more truthful generalization about customs work, the state and borders. My argument is instead that a diverse research sample provides a better understanding of potentially general trends in specific contexts.

The policing of cross-border trade has undergone a veritable transformation in many countries (see Cote Boucher 2015, Chaflin 2007). However, customs officers have not only been at the receiving end of technological and organizational change (Cote-Boucher 2015, 52). Customs officers actively negotiate and engage with these transformations. Through analysis of narratives, the processes of reaffirmation, construction and reproduction of the state can be captured. The final goal is not to find a simple answer to the question of what the state is, but rather to provide insights into the ways in which the state emerges as a historical construction, the temporary result of different social, political and symbolic processes. Thus, it is important to pay attention to how the state comes into being, becomes “real” through narratives and representations.

Technological change of customs work

Some of the changes in customs work could be understood by taking into account William Walters's insights about mobile worlds. Walters states that mobile worlds are open worlds, but this openness, i.e. this form of freedom that is associated with the political construction of extended social and economic spaces, renders them vulnerable (Walters 2004, 245). The danger is posed by the proliferation of illicit and clandestine mobilities – the movement of “illegal” immigrants, drugs, bio-hazards, contraband, weapons, terrorists, and so on. This concern with clandestine movement is evident in the stories of customs officers whom I interviewed. Elaborating on why customs work is important, Zoran,¹ who is currently working on the Serbian-Bosnian border, said:

Primarily, customs is important because of security. On the one hand you need to protect the state against terrorism. There are dangerous materials, drugs and weapons which terrorists could use. On the other hand you need to protect the health of its citizens.

I would like to make two points here. First, if we see securitization as pervasive throughout society as Choutin (2014, 3) suggests, we could see how the rea-

¹ In order to protect anonymity of my interviewees, I have changed their names and some biographical details.

soning of these customs officers reflects it. Williams explains securitization as a social process through which issues become “securitized”, treated as security issues, through these speech-acts which do not simply describe an existing security situation, but bring it into being as a security situation by successfully representing it as such (Williams 2003, 513). I do not want to as to speculate or not whether customs officers really believed that their duty is protection of the state against terrorism. Following Williams, my argument is that through describing the importance of their duties primarily in terms of security, customs officers discursively constructed the security issue as a social problem. Not only did customs officers discursively construct security as social problem, they also legitimized their work through the discourse of security.

Another point that I would like to highlight is that of the customs officers’ perceiving of potential threats as threats to the society and the state. Ole Waever and his colleagues speak of “societal security” emphasizing that the focus of insecurity has shifted from the geopolitical space of interstate relations to the threats to society itself (Waever, 1996). In Zoran’s quote we could see that the potential threats are not coming from other states. The focus is put on the threats to society and state coming from dangerous goods and terrorists who could use those dangerous goods.

In helping fight these threats, technology was often mentioned as very important. Various electronic devices and gadgets have been introduced into the work of the customs officers. These devices include different scanners for goods, optic cameras, Geiger counters, etc. Most of the customs officers praised the technological advances, claiming that it made their jobs easier. As an interviewee put it:

Technology progressed, informational systems progressed, electronic devices too, and all of that helped in carrying out security measures. There are devices for scanning goods, optic cables, so that we don’t need to open every truck on the border. I have an optic camera which I can use to examine goods on the border and make the flow of goods faster.

From this quote we could see that customs authorities need to strike a balance between the dual mandates of facilitation of trade on the one hand and control and security on the other. We find these modes of governance in combination, operating in tandem, and also in tension with each other. As Branko, who is currently working at a customs outpost in one city in the north of Serbia, told me:

We have those new scanners, they are very dangerous. And they don’t even tell us that they are dangerous. You can get really sick if you use them. They are also very complicated to use sometimes. Sometimes they make procedures very long. So you need to choose: you’re either gonna make the flow of goods faster or control it. But let’s be honest, you can’t control everything. Nevertheless, what you control – you really control.

This answer not only illustrates tensions between the facilitation and the control of goods, but also changes in customs oversight. Customs substitutes one sort of oversight – knowing generally and vastly – for knowing deeply and specifi-

cally. The goods that are checked are going through serious controls. What emerges here is a new way of looking “over” – a gaze much more lateral than vertical, further confounding the conventions of governmental oversight (cf. Ferguson and Gupta, 2002).

Customs work has not been transformed only because of the new technological devices that customs officers use, but also by introducing new computer and informational systems. I would argue that more than scanners or optic cables, new computer networks changed the customs border management and opened up new possibilities in facilitation of border controls. I would like to list two ethnographic examples that could support that argument.

During the interview Zoran took my notebook and started drawing the organizational structure of customs administration in Serbia. In the smallest circles he put the names of different border crossings; he linked them to bigger circles in which he wrote names of customs outposts (he linked each border crossing with the jurisdictionally responsible customs outpost). In the central and the biggest circle he wrote customs administration and HOST. When I asked him to specify what HOST is, he told me that it is a computer network which connects all customs outposts and customs offices. According to him, HOST makes all documentation regarding customs easily available for control. This created a sense only technology not only made the flow of goods easy and simple to control, but also strengthened the control of customs work. As one of his colleagues put it:

The informational system is connected on the state level. I need to use my personal password and number to log into the system. I need to put in the information about what I have done during my shift: how many cars or trucks I checked, what I checked, what I found. All of that needs to be available to my superiors.

In addition, information technology created possibilities for a new form of governing at a distance. By using and increasingly relying on information technologies, Serbian and Bosnian customs administrations entered a period of restructuring based on a customs-at-a-distance model. I had an opportunity to have a glimpse into how the informational system works. As Dane showed me, all the information needs to be received before the arrival of trains at the border. The introduction of electronic declarations in customs work transformed everyday work routines. ‘Commercial’ officers now spend several hours a day in front of computer screens, reviewing customs declarations. Although increasing the scope of customs’ power, this is very much a form of government at a distance (Chafin 2007, 1615). The pre-arrival information requirement extends customs’ authority outward in time and space as importers are made responsible to customs even before goods reach the borders. Here, the bounds of customs’ authority are enlarged, moving beyond the territory of the state, even as customs officers remain within it. After explaining to me how the informational system works, Dane told me:

It is a very good system. We sold this system to the Dutch customs and to someone else, I can’t remember to whom. But I think it functions better there than here.

These comments indicate that border management is turned into a commodified service within a market economy. What we have here is the transformation of sovereignty – specifically sovereignty service wrapped into an e-customs product – into an alienable and transactable commodity (cf. Chaflin 2006, 260). When talking about similar programs being developed and later sold in the case of Senegal, Chaflin states that the state of origin, in the course of transferring a component of its own sovereign capacitation, takes on a multinational corporate form (Chaflin 2006, 258). The means of making state sovereignty emerge as fungible entities whose value is realized in the course of exchange and deliberately produced by a state for the transfer to other states for profit (Chaflin 2006, 258). In this form of national branding, the state becomes known internationally in its corporate, rather than in its political form.

Organizational change of customs work

Customs work has not been changed only due to technological advances, but also because of the reorganization of the service. After the war and the dissolution of SFR Yugoslavia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have established their own national customs administrations. Consequently, new national customs laws were introduced. Speaking about these changes, Dane, who works at the Serbian-Hungarian border, told me:

Well, customs law changed, border controls changed according to the new law. Customs law is changing depending on the position of the state. Before we had one principle. If the state is liberal, then the border controls are more liberal. If the organization of the state is stricter, then the border controls are stricter. In accordance with the changes in the state, the border controls are changing.

While in some cases the changes in customs work were perceived as a result of the influence of trans- and supranational organizations (Chaflin, 2007), for customs officers whom I interviewed these changes were initially the results of changes in the state system. According to the new laws, customs service and work had been reorganized. Sloba, a retired customs officer, told me:

In Yugoslavia everyone was doing everything. Every customs officer was checking goods, checking documentation, conducting investigations against smuggling and so on. But later I changed multiple positions. I was customs supervisor, inspector against smuggling, I was reviewing documents.

The new laws also introduced new branches of customs such as protection of intellectual property, customs investigations, risk analysis and internal controls. Although some of the initial changes were the result of the changes in the state system, such as protection of private property, I would argue that the subsequent changes were the result of influences from various supra- and transnational organizations. Customs operations are being synchronized with wider transnational trends. Customs is responsible for implementing the accords of an array of supra- and international organizations, ranging from the World Customs Organization (WCO) to

the World Trade Organization (WTO) and World Health Organization (WHO). Both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina are also partners in numerous bilateral customs and trade agreements. To become familiar with globally sanctioned procedures, customs officers at all levels of the service commonly participated in international initiatives. In order to make customs officers familiar with the new procedures and organizational structures of customs, various lectures and seminars were organized for them. These seminars and lectures were held by representatives of organizations to whose standards Serbian and Bosnian customs were supposed to comply. International protocols were very much perceived by customs officers to demonstrate their membership in a supranational order and to legitimate the state authority. Srdjan, who is currently working at a customs outpost, told me:

Our customs administration is a signatory of cooperation [agreements] with different national customs administrations and international organizations. We need to follow procedures that they prescribe. If the World Customs Organization changes tariff numbers of certain goods, we need to accept that. If the state wants to function it needs to follow other states and organizations.

As we can see from Srdjan's quote, standardized forms of practices serve as a language of recognition between states. In addition, we could also see that while upholding the authority of the state, customs administration has come to depend on supranational and transnational regulatory orders for the standards they pursue. Here, the authority of the state is derived from its ability to comply with the standards of other states and organizations.

However, despite that customs officers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina see trainings and seminars held by customs officers from different European countries and the United States as a way to legitimize state authority, most of the customs officers were somewhat insulted by these trainings. One of the customs officers told me:

After we changed the customs law in 2002, Englishmen and Swedes would come to give us lectures about security and train us how to fight terrorism. I mean, they would come here to lecture us and we² had the Congress on European Security back in 1977! We were someone, and now...

This loss of status associated with the loss of state was quite pronounced in narratives of customs officers I have interviewed. These shared discourses about "before" are not only ideological representations of the socialist system, they are also actively used in explaining the position of the "new" state. As this ethnographic example demonstrates, ideas about the state were also linked with how customs officers understood their "new" position in relationship to the "West".

Customs administrations have also come to depend on the involvement of various private actors in facilitation of trade and control. Customs authority became

² He is referring to Yugoslavia

partially subcontracted to private companies. Private companies' employees guard all entrances except the main ones at the airport and customs outposts when the border checkpoints are closed.³ A customs officer, who is currently working at the airport, told me:

Now we have increased security, it gets on my nerves. Before, we had customs officers who were standing in front of the entrance, but now the state does not have enough money. At the entrances we have private companies' employees. But they need to go through our and the police's security checks.

As we can see, customs moved from being the ultimate source of the state's authority to an agent of control for others actors. Customs officers are no longer the only authority that controls entrances; however they now control employees of private companies that work at these entrances as well. In such circumstances, customs' delegation of governance functions is bound up with a more comprehensive deconcentration of power (Hibou 2005, 37), in which customs operations are increasingly outsourced. Under such arrangements, states rule through auxiliary agencies and intermediaries, often blurring the boundary between public and private actors and interests. Authority of customs has not been outsourced solely to private security agencies, but also to private trade companies. Dane, who works on the Serbian-Hungarian border, described what this looks like:

Sometimes companies themselves check goods. Those are trustworthy companies. Usually these companies are not from Serbia, but from abroad. They can open trucks themselves, unseal customs seals, examine goods themselves. Sometimes they call us to be present when they do that. That is usually when they suspect that something is wrong with the goods or that some of the goods are missing.

Beatrice Hibou writes that negotiations are always at the center of the process of delegation and control which characterizes this mode of increasingly private indirect government (Hibou 2004, 15). We can see that although private companies have the authority to conduct customs control, in certain cases they asked customs officers to be present during the procedures of examination. Different authorization rights are negotiated between private companies and customs authorities.

Falling into Hibou's (2004, 3) category of private intermediaries, private companies are "deputized" to different degrees to carry out customs duties. For instance, Dane said that the private companies which are in charge of luxury goods have the most authorization. Companies that trade in luxury goods, such as perfumes and expensive watches can conduct the whole process of examination by themselves; other companies have less authorization in conducting customs procedures.

³Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have two types of border checkpoints. The so called "small border checkpoints" are open twelve hours a day. The international border checkpoints are open twenty four hours.

These examples of outsourcing of customs authorities to private agencies and private companies show that border crossings are spaces of intersection and interdependence that are equally requiring flexible forms of rule. Customs operates not only through direct oversight, but also through different forms of indirect control. This enables customs authorities to pursue a bifurcated mode of governance: direct and indirect, dedicated and delegated (Chaflin 2006, 261).

Contrary to the Canadian case about which Cote Boucher (2015) writes, customs officers in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina did not feel that technological and organizational changes influenced their discretionary powers in any way. Despite the loss of their monopoly over decision-making in customs release and border policing decisions, it does not follow that the need for discretion has been eliminated in customs matters. They felt that they still have great leeway in decision making. One of the customs officers said:

Every person that crosses the border line needs to declare to the customs officers what goods he or she has. On the other hand, a customs officer is obliged to look at the goods, but there is work experience and a customs officer can trust someone or not. It is a personal attitude, but we know what someone can bring into the country or take out of the country.

However, they felt that it is expected of them to perform more complex customs tasks. Branko, who is currently working on the Serbian-Bosnian border, expressed resentment about this situation:

You would not believe what they force us to know! It is unbelievable! These procedures, new informational systems, I need to know how to clear every kind of good; I need to know what someone can bring into the country. I finished high school, they expect from me to know stuff like I am holding a PhD!

As some regulations are added and others removed or modified, as technologies are introduced and new border programs and priorities adopted, the breadth of knowledge required is vast and oft-changing (cf. Cote Boucher, 2015). Technological and organizational changes result in complexity with which customs officers often find difficult to cope.

Shady business (muljanje)

During coding of the interviews I conducted, I noticed that when customs officers talked about “difference between practice and theory” in their work they used the word “muljanje” (shady business). I agree that translations should aim to preserve the colloquial language and phrases used by participants as expressions that hold cultural meanings which are important for the analysis (cf. Hennink et. al. 2011, 215). The expression muljanje refers to engaging in unauthorized actions, actions that are neither legal nor illegal. If someone is engaging in muljanje, that means that he or she is doing something in the gray zone or that they are trying to deceive someone else. The best phrase to translate muljanje is shady business.

Throughout the analysis I will use the phrase *shady business*, but I will retain the expression *muljanje* in brackets because it ensures that the cultural dimension of the data continues to be reflected throughout the analysis. In this subsection I would like to explore what customs officers referred to when they used the expression *shady business* (*muljanje*) and furthermore what we can learn about their imaginaries of the state from it.

When I asked my informants what the duties of customs officers are, they would usually say protection of the state and control of goods that are being imported and exported. Afterwards they would, to a varying degree, explain how they are supposed to do that. Customs officers referred to that as a “theory” of customs work. Quite disappointingly, they would add that there is “a big difference between theory and practice”. When I asked one of the customs officers what he means by that, he answered:

Customs are supposed to protect the state from an illegal and uncontrollable flow of goods. But there is a lot of *shady business* (*muljanja*). If someone in the family is employed in the customs, you cannot be a customs officer. If you are a customs officer you can't be married to someone who owns a freight company. But that is happening. I had one guy who was working with me who had something with one woman who owns a freight company. She always went to him when she needed to clear some goods.

Practices such as this customs officer described often served to explain what is “wrong with the state”. Timothy Mitchell argues that the very conception of “the state” as a set of reified and disembodied structures is an *effect* of state practices themselves (Mitchell, 1991). Such reading of the state allows for seeing it as coherent, although it might be a result of disembodied practices. Thus, I do not want to argue that because some practices of customs officers are *shady*, customs officers struggle with imagining the state as coherent and unitary. Because they often reified the state in their narratives, they did not question the practices themselves, but rather used these narratives to “diagnose” the condition in which the state is or which it should be.

Thus, instead of treating *shady business* (*muljanje*) as a dysfunctional aspect of customs organization, I see it as a trope through which the state is discursively constructed. The discourse of *shady business* turns out to be one of the key arenas through which the state comes to be imagined. By focusing on the discursive construction of the state, I wish to draw attention to the powerful representations by which the state is symbolically represented to its employees.

As Akhil Gupta argues in his analysis of discourses about corruption, that the “*system*” of corruption is not just a brute collection of practices whose most widespread execution occurs on the local level, it is also a discursive field that enables a phenomenon to be labeled, practiced, decried and denounced (Gupta 1995, 385). I would like to emphasize the idea of corruption as a system, not only because I agree with Gupta's interpretation, but also because my informants also see *shady business* (*muljanje*) as such. Kale, who is currently working at the airport, told me:

One colleague of mine noticed when he was checking cars on the border that something is wrong with one of the cars. He had the same car, so he noticed, I probably wouldn't. Anyway, he saw that the passenger's legroom was than it should be for some reason. He decided to check the car. It turns out that the guy who was driving tried to smuggle drugs hidden in that part of the car. My colleague did the whole check, then he spent hours writing the report and you know what happened? The police came, they started asking questions. Then he needed to file a report to them. I mean, they must be involved in some of this shady business (*muljanje*). In the state everyone should work as one, but... He decided not to check cars again, unless he was told to do it.

The state constructed a system consisting of widely disparate institutions with little or no coordination among them. Abrams claims that the state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity. According to him, this is not just disunity between the political and the economic but equally a profound disunity within the political (Abrams 1988, 79). State institutions are manifestly divided against one another, volatile and confused. What is constituted out of their collective practice is a series of ephemerally unified postures in relation to transient issues with no sustained consistency of purpose (Abrams 1988, 72). Kale's quote illustrates a rupture between the idea of the state as unified entity and actual practices of different state institutions. Different institutions conspicuously fail to display a unity of practice.

Customs officers were also aware that they are associated with corruption and shady business (*muljanjem*). I will describe two ethnographic examples that support that. After each interview, I offered the customs officers a bottle of homemade brandy (*rakija*) as a sign of gratitude for their help in my research. This type of brandy is rarely brought because most people produce it themselves. In the social and cultural context I was doing my analysis it is used as a gift which has more symbolic than economic value (cf. Malinovski 1979). Thus, I found it to be an appropriate expression of my gratitude. However, this often caused unease among customs officers. After I tried to give the bottle of *rakija* to one of the customs officers he told me:

And now what should I do? Should I accept it? Everyone knows that customs officers are corrupted and involved in shady business! Should I admit it and take it?

Another situation where a customs officer expressed concern with customs officers being associated with shady business and corruption happened during the interview. I wanted to find out more about his perception of shady business and what he refers to when he talks about it. He told me:

You know that most famous joke about customs officers? Let me tell you. One of the customs officers was supposed to get married and his colleagues talked about what they should buy him. One of the colleagues said that maybe they should let him work the night shift on the border. Another colleague said – but it would be too much!

By definition, corruption is a violation of norms and standards of conduct, and therefore the other face of a discourse of corruption is a discourse of accountability (Gupta 1995, 388). Herzfeld puts the emphasis in the right place when he says that accountability is a socially produced, culturally saturated amalgam of ideas about person, presence and polity (Herzfeld 1992, 47). The struggle for legitimacy, or efforts to disassociate from such discourses, could be interpreted in terms of the effort to construct the state symbolically in a particular manner. The manner in which customs officers negotiate the tension inherent in their location both helps to create certain representations of the state and powerfully shape assessments of it, thereby affecting its legitimacy (cf. Gupta, 1995).

I find it important that the customs officers did not refer to certain practices or actions as corrupted, but rather as shady business (*muljanje*). Expectations of “right” behavior, standards of accountability and norms of conduct for state officials come from social groups as well from “the state” (Gupta 1995, 388). Sometimes these standards and norms converge, but more often they do not. Thus, there are always divergent and conflicting assessments of whether a particular course of action is “corrupt” (Gupta 1995, 388). By using the expression shady business (*muljanje*) customs officers tried to negotiate discourses of accountability.

As I already mentioned, shady business refers to the gray zone, the zone which is imagined as neither “inside” nor “outside” of the state. It shows that there is no position strictly outside or inside of the state because what is being contested is the terrain of the ideological field. Here I would like to give an example of practices that could also reflect this. Kale, who is currently working at the airport, told me:

Every customs officer has his or her number and password. You use these when you need to log in into the central network. You have your own number and you are not supposed to give it to someone else. But that is happening. People are doing shady business. Sometimes even the bosses tell you that you should allow someone else to use it.

We should not look at the state as coherent and unitary, but rather as a set of practices. Thus, instead of looking at the representations of shady work (*muljanje*) as practices outside of the state realm, they should be seen as a mechanism through which the state is being discursively constructed. This brings me to one very important point I would like to make regarding the analysis of shady business. Shady business could be seen as a form of corruption, a set of unlawful activities and actions that are in the “grey zone” of rules. Such activities and practices fit well into stereotypical representations of Eastern Europe which are present in the public discourse. However, in academia we can also see the presence of the discourse that Eastern European states represent “states in transition” where such practices exist because the state is not functional (Wallace & Latcheva 2006). I strongly oppose this view. This idea presupposes some kind of transition from a non-regulated state to a regulated state which treats the state as some kind of condition that should be achieved. Belief among social scientists that these practices exist because the state is not regulated feeds the idea that the state should be coherent and unitary. Thus, instead of feeding sociological imagination about the state, I tried to look at these practices as a mechanism through which state is constructed.

Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate how customs officers conceptualize the state and their own work as customs officers. I was interested in how people who are state employees, whose job is policing of the border, imagine and perceive what the state is. In addition, I was interested in how they talk about their job as customs officers. By doing so, I tried to contribute to the existing knowledge about the state and customs work by providing an analysis of these issues in a specific ethnographic context.

Customs officers emphasized over and over how their work changed due to technological and organizational change. Framing the importance of their work through the discourse of security, customs officers discursively constructed the issue of security. However, what appears to be at stake in customs work is not only the mandate of security, but also of facilitation of the flow of goods. Customs authorities need to strike a balance between the dual mandates of facilitation and trade on the one hand and control and security on the other. Technology was deemed as very important in managing this dual mandate. Usage of different technological devices helps customs officers to examine goods faster, but also to detect “threats” more easily. In addition, technology opened up new possibilities for governance at a distance. Technology also spawned an opportunity for turning border management into a commodified service. New informational systems that were created for the management of national borders were later sold to customs authorities of other countries. I argue that this represents a transformation of sovereignty into an alienable and transactable commodity.

However, technology was not the only thing that transformed customs work. Reorganization of customs work was equally portrayed as important for changes in customs work. After the dissolution of SFR Yugoslavia new national customs administrations were established. For customs officers whom I interviewed initial changes were the result of changes in the state system. I would argue that subsequent changes were the result of influences of various supra- and transnational organizations. Participation in protocols by various international organizations was very much perceived by customs officers to demonstrate their membership in a supranational order and to legitimate the state authority. Organizational change also included the outsourcing of customs authority to private companies. Under such arrangements, states rule through auxiliary agencies and intermediaries, often blurring the boundary between public and private actors and interests. While customs officers did not perceive that technological and organizational changes influenced their discretion power, they resulted in complexity which customs officers found difficult to cope with.

In order to further explore how customs officers imagined the state I analyzed how they talked about shady practices. Shady business (*muljanje*), as customs officers referred to these practices, is engaging in unauthorized actions, actions that are neither legal nor illegal. Instead of treating these practices as a dysfunctional aspect of customs work, I see them as a mechanism through which the state is discour-

sively constructed. Such an approach offers a critique of the conceptualization of the state as a monolithic and unitary entity. It also shows that there is no Archimedean point from which we can apprehend the state, only numerous situated knowledges.

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