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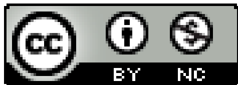

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Introduction: seeing like a City

Claire Bénit-Gbaffou

At the source of this book

This book was born from three encounters.

The first was with a book: *Reinventing Cities: Equity Planners Tell Their Stories* (Krumholz and Clavel 1994); followed by stimulating engagements with one of its authors, Pierre Clavel, to whom this book is dedicated. *Reinventing Cities*, a collection of constructed and focused testimonies of municipal planners working from inside the state to make cities more socially and spatially just, in the context of post-civil rights movements in North American cities, was possibly the most inspiring planning book I have ever read, and I use it regularly to teach my students. I discovered the book laying inconspicuously on a shelf of the University of the Witwatersrand's library, where I was starting to teach planning students – many of whom would become City, Provincial and State[1] officials trying to rebuild, restructure and transform South African spaces and societies.

Krumholz and Clavel's book was one of its kind: not a developmental nor technical planning manual, not a theoretical nor a normative planning essay with only a remote link to the realities of planning practice (Harrison 2014), and not a critical social sciences text unpacking public policies from their (outside) effects on urban societies. Rather, it engaged with the nitty-gritty of what planning meant for those who initiate it from within a bureaucracy, when driven by a strong objective, a sense of a mission, a cause. It placed the specificities of planning interventions (on affordable housing, collective transport, public space and urban regeneration) into the complex world of administrative rules and processes, fluid politics, shifting media sympathy, uneven social pressure

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and mobilisation, and the messiness of urban societies. More than any other text I had read, it provided a realistic, rich and deep basis from which to prepare my students for public office and urban intervention, and to reflect on what it means to conduct urban change 'from within the state'.

The second encounter that triggered this book came from my experience, shared with colleagues at Wits University,[2] of action-research with street trader organisations attempting to reform City policy, institutions and practices, towards a more progressive approach to street trading in Johannesburg. This experience, carried out in various degrees from 2010–21, crystallised in the aftermath of the 2013 Operation Clean Sweep in Johannesburg, where the City brutally chased thousands of street traders out of the inner city intervention that was eventually condemned by the South African Constitutional Court as 'inhumane'.

The research team that I coordinated was approached to support street trader organisations with research evidence and ideas so that alternative street trading governance models could be brought to the negotiation table by street trader organisations. We ended up accompanying street trader leadership in many engagements with different parts of the state. Together with traders, we engaged with officials in various City and Provincial departments, senior and junior bureaucrats as well as politicians. In parallel, Wits School of Architecture and Planning was asked by the City to suggest ways forward to govern urban informal economies, a context in which we were able to present and debate some ideas with other municipal officials, and to actively contribute to the policy-making process. This multi-pronged experience highlighted how little we understood of City politics, processes and practices. Public intervention was an arcana in highly fragmented and shifting institutional and political spaces. Policy decisions were 'black boxes' where it was difficult to locate key actors as well as identify key stumbling blocks (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a). The experience also reflected the limitations of studying social movement, participation processes and the dynamics from the outer borders of the state, to fully understand the actual governance of cities. It revealed the polarisation of academic literature on city government leading to a double shortcoming. On the one hand, radical critique of state local interventions tend to conceptualise 'the state' in unified terms: for the purpose of presenting some of its devastating effects on urban livelihoods and spaces, or analysing urban policy and states as not only inefficient, inconsistent or corrupt, but merely irrelevant, especially in cities of the global South (Amin and Thrift 2016). On the other hand, normative and developmental discourses may

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have more disaggregated vision of 'the state', but often from a distance and a quite institutional perspective, and are sometimes as ill-equipped as the former approach to make sense of the realities, constraints and actual policy instruments faced by even well-intentioned officials to drive urban change (Mosse 2004).

As a third encounter at the origin of this book, there is the 'post-apartheid moment' in South African Cities and in Johannesburg in particular. It is no coincidence that Krumholz and Clavel (1994) developed ideas on what constitute 'progressive cities', through testimonies of municipal planners, in a particular moment of North American urban history: after the civil rights movement had transmuted into a wave of electoral successes, with Black mayors endorsing hopes for change in several large metropolises. This was a short but intense moment, soon to be curtailed by president Reagan's financial cuts in public spending. It was during Lula's then Rousseff's presidencies that Brazilian scholarship (Abers 2019; Dowbor and Houtzager 2014) explored an original direction in social studies movements under the concept of 'institutional activism' – when social movements' activists won local, regional and national elections, entering government with the explicit mandate, and internal sense of a mission, to change society in particular for the more marginalised. Likewise, the transition out of the apartheid regime, the end of which is more difficult to date (as the African National Congress – ANC is still in power, marred by feuds and scandals and no longer holding its capacity and commitment towards social justice), opened a moment where anti-apartheid activists (and later a younger generation of 'born-free') entered 'the state' as elected officials or as bureaucrats. They did so with the clear mandate, partly self-determined and internalised, of transforming society towards what they saw as social redress and spatial justice. It is the reality of these people, intensely working from local public institutions to 'make a difference' in cities, that this book aims at understanding.

In this context, not only were discourses of social change and redistribution exceptionally explicit, but policy instruments were debated, invented and set up towards this aim. Scholars were largely invited to contribute, intellectually and practically, to urban policy and social reform, in dialogue with activists-turned-officials or officials-with-activism. Some scholars became officials, some officials conducted academic studies, many students trained in universities joined the local state apparatus, sometimes keeping in touch with their former lecturers. All of this contributed to blurring an often rigid boundary and to opening original spaces for debates. Moreover, in this book, many of the

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contributors have had experience as officials in local government – either as a moment in their academic career, or as movement out of local government towards academia. This inside, experiential knowledge turned into academic knowledge (Bénit-Gbaffou and Williams 2022), also gives the book a specific and original value.

This context as well as the original making of this book induced, and relied on, a position of sympathy with the (few) parts of the state that would open themselves to an academic gaze, implying research methods ranging from critical ethnography to action research; from applied consultancy or activism to more abstract theorisation. This position, close to the people and the realities of the government of post-apartheid urban change, made it difficult for us to align with, but interesting to borrow from, the literature demonising the state on the one hand and the literature celebrating its developmental capacities on the other. Such proximity of academia to urban policy reform and local state practices departs from usual critical social sciences, but capacitates researchers to observe what is otherwise not accessible to their scrutiny (Aguilera 2018; Dubois 2017). Although this positioning always run the risk of blurring academic critical distance and requires constant caution and debate (Moodley 2022), and while this moment was short-lived and exceptional in the hopes, mobilisation, debates and resources unleashed, both elements provide a unique glimpse into (local) 'states at work' that are so difficult to apprehend in usual circumstances (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). Hence, this book largely centred on South African cities, is not written primarily as a monograph, but offers an original look into state practices as they shape cities, echoing other experiences in numerous cities in the world. Testimony to this relevance are the ongoing conversations, threaded in the book, with Indian and Brazilian contexts in particular.

The focus of the book: what municipal governments do to cities, especially when aiming at progressive change

This book interrogates not so much *who* governs the city (Dahl 1961) but *what* in the city is governed (Stone 1995, 2013; Borraz and Le Galès 2010) in contemporary contexts, and, in these sections or portions of the city that are governed or are less governed, *how* government, regulation or management of urban spaces are performed and effected, interrogating the role municipal officials play therein.

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It is indeed the role that local public officials (municipal bureaucrats mainly, elected local councillors sometimes) play in urban governance that is at the core of the book. A contested, fragmented, inconsistent, incomplete and messy governance; a role they play not in isolation from the rest of society; but that they built through conflict and compromises, adaptation and iteration – enmeshed as they are in various types of interactions with their own administration, City politics, and social dynamics. But a role in which they have nevertheless a degree of agency, and whose specific actions, practices, tactics and strategies largely fall outside the radar of academic research.

The book interrogates what municipal officials do in the city with a normative question in mind: to what extent is it possible for them to initiate, to support or to drive urban policies committed to social and spatial justice? If there is 'a left art of government' (Ferguson 2011), what does it mean in practice? How is it explored, sought and constructed? This normative question does not only stem from the Johannesburg post-apartheid moment, where the drive towards 'reconstruction' and 'transformation' constituted an explicit thread in public, academic and social debates.[3] It participates in the contemporary quest for 'spaces of hope' using Harvey's term (Harvey 2000), in global and local contexts where global environmental change and the multi-dimensional crises it generates, the rise of violent or non-democratic forces and regimes, the increase of inequalities and social polarisation in an era of continued neoliberalisation, lead to deep pessimism and multiple anxieties. These dark forces are not ignored here, but they are not the book's central object, nor treated as an essential and irredeemable feature of the state and its practices. They are taken as elements of context, constraining, shaping state progressive actions.

Indeed, in the Johannesburg moment, many people working in the municipality have committed their time, energies, sometimes their souls, to try and make cities better places. We do not assess so much in this book whether they succeeded or not. Stories of failures abound: the book tells stories of small victories and half successes, looking at minute rather than structural policy and urban change. It was written at a time where this post-apartheid parenthesis is closed, where South African cities and state are in dire straits. It is a book about officials' explorations, their attempts, half-cooked strategies and fragile tactics. It is about the things that constrain or support their progressive attempts and what their attempts reveal of how Cities work more generally.

This book joins Ferguson (2011) in departing from the necessary but sometimes sterile radical critique of the state; in making neoliberalism

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or post-colonialism less of an essential feature of the state, its structural core, than an element of context and structure that shape officials' actions without necessarily determining them. It adopts the pragmatic position that state internal practices need to be understood as an instrument rather than *only* as an obstacle to social justice; that power can and should be examined not only as oppressive but also as a creative force. Where so many forces coalesce towards progressive change, in very short-lived moments such as the post-apartheid, or post-World War in Europe, post-civil rights in the US and the Lula government in Brazil, it is relevant to examine in this perspective what and how state institutions work – taking seriously Ferguson's question around what a 'left art of government' might mean.

I use the term 'progressive' in the sense proposed by Clavel (2010) – both simple and powerful: a City, or rather an urban policy that puts forward and pushes both redistribution and democratic participation as its core objectives – two values that generally run counter to market forces (Stone 1995). I chose this term in spite of all its imperfections, the unfortunate echoes with obsolete teleologic or positivist visions of history, confidently equating technical with social progress. Alternative concepts or terms abound, but none has the clarity of Clavel's definition. Analyses in terms of 'Just cities' (Fainstein 2011) or 'justice in cities' (Gervais-Lambony et al. 2014) are interesting contributions, but focus on (difficult-to-define) state of justice to be achieved in different urban and national contexts, rather than on processes actually trying to build more just cities. 'Transformative', 'alternative' policies or 'alterpolicies' (Béal and Rousseau 2014) invoke radical, anti-capitalist or revolutionary visions, often embedded in citizen-led initiatives, democratic experiments, identity or environment-based movements. Both bodies of work build conceptual or practical urban utopias that are very necessary in these times of political disenchantment, but sometimes underplay the importance of class inequality and redistributive policy instruments. None look at internal processes of building 'just' or 'alternative' policies from the inside – from the apparatus of local government.

For this normative enquiry, however, the book does *not* adopt a normative analysis. It observes and, to some extent, accompanies local officials' actual practices: not departing from observing what officials actually do, without slipping towards what they ought to do nor confining our analyses to what they would like to do. It relates their practices to the meaning they build in their actions, without disconnecting these practices and meanings from an analysis of the broader institutional, political, social and urban context in which they inscribe their interventions.

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Theoretical and methodological positions: urban governance, state practices, the City and the city

Placing our endeavour in a broader interrogation on urban governance of contemporary cities, we wish to present now what we mean in this book by looking at officials' *practices*, sketch what we understand by *the state* and why we think it is useful to see the *City as a (local) state*. We then stress one originality of this book: the grounding of the policy and institutional analyses in the urban, local space and the materiality of its change.

Lost in translation: urban governance, and the actual government of cities

'Governance' is used in contrast to 'government' since the 1990s, stating that the act of governing is not restricted to public institutions alone, but grounded in the conflict, negotiations, interplays between a much wider range of actors in society. The concept allows for not only expanding the gaze towards non-state actors such as mobilised business or civil society groups, but also opening analyses to a much broader and heterogeneous set of public or para-public institutions. Public institutions are no longer seen as able to drive social change in the city space on their own – even less so in developing societies where poverty is massive, resources are scarce and informal territorial organisations abound in response to state remote presence (Lund 2006). The concept of 'governance' also interrogates public institutions in their own heterogeneity, both internal and between different, sometimes competing or overlapping, state institutions – within a vision of the state whose imagined unity no longer holds.

However, while the institution or set of institutions called 'government' is no longer the only relevant site of observation to understand 'who governs' cities (Dahl 1961), the act of governing cities still requires a specific conceptualisation – which is often, arguably, lost in the translation to 'governance' (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a). The concept of government in the sense of 'capacity to govern' cities, to steer (Peters 1997), to give a direction that otherwise would not have prevailed in shaping urban spaces and social practices, that is not the direction shaped by unhinged market forces (Stone 1995), seems to have disappeared from academic interrogations on the city. Most governance studies pay more attention to the complex and shifting power network, alliances and *coups*, rather than to what these networks actually do to cities, to urban spaces, to urban lives.

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This distraction of energies away from goal-setting, towards alliance and resource-building, is not the prerogative of researchers alone. In an era of expanded social needs and insufficient public resources directed at them, it is also the curse of public officials. They spend a lot of their time looking for resources and partners while overcoming obstacles and responding to emergencies, compiling reports and application to grants for projects that are not their own, and muddling through, rather than elaborating on long- or medium-term strategies to respond to locally-grounded, specific and wicked urban problems (Rittel and Webel 1973) – even if these visions (or preferences) are obviously also shaped by existing and potential resources and alliances (Stone 1993).

This loss in translation could also be explained by the theoretical impossibility of conceptualising a clear policy objective in a multi-levelled governance era, or in the analytical framework of 'governance'. If the processes of decision-making and policy design are fluid and multi-layered, influenced by a diversity of state and non-state actors with differing interests, visions and goals, through iterative, multiple, and entangled processes, policies become political compromises or inconsistent patchworks of various agents' interests, rather than a declaration of public intent, let alone a choice between conflicting values and options (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a).

This complexification of governance (both in practice and in the research lens) and the difficulty of conceptualising the state's capacity to steer in that context, is reflected in the debates around policy design (Linder and Peters 1987), policy implementation (Winter 2006), development studies (Mosse 2004), and ethnographies of the state (Das and Poole 2004; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2004; Gupta 2012). It becomes virtually impossible, when reading dominant academic literature, to believe that any policy can be successfully implemented and achieve intended effects. Gupta (2012), for instance, in his bottom-up study of bureaucratic practices in the Indian developmental state, concludes that in spite of good intentions (the welfare and development of the poor), Indian state's policies are intrinsically arbitrary in their outcomes, caught in the web of complex administration, difficult contexts and centrifugal official agencies. Or, if states or development agencies are able to claim 'success' in their policies, it is because they frame the evaluation of their own practices in ways that make policy outcomes look as if they were intended in the first place – actually building narratives on policy objectives from practices, rather than the other way round (Mosse 2004).

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We follow Le Galès and Lorrain (2003), Bezès and Pierru (2012), in refusing this position, that is limiting our ability to question and research public policy choices in their relation to social realities. Following Stone, we do not want to give up studying policy goal-setting and political steering as key to the act of governing:

> Governing is active policy making, it is about neither what is settled, nor about broad changes taking shape outside the intentions of policy makers. Governing consists of deliberate efforts to bring about or actively prevent policy changes. It is selective in what is addressed, both in substantive terms (addressing 'this' while not addressing 'that') and in scope (falling in each instance somewhere in a range from tinkering with narrow particulars to efforts to remake large slices of city life) (Stone 2013, 4).

What is illuminating in Stone's view is that the ability for the state (and other agents) to steer cities in particular directions is not conceptualised as a characteristic of 'the state' or 'Cities' as a whole. Stone alerts us to the fact that it might be more useful to look at parts of the state, sectors or areas of the City, at specific moments or under specific urban regimes, to interrogate the capacity to govern. This idea is also explicitly raised by Borraz and Le Galès:

> Do governments always govern? What do they govern, and how? What is not governed? … Some activities of government take place routinely, such as raising taxes, planning and caring for specific groups. However, most government activities are not continuous. What is governed is a key question and it may change over time. … Some sectors are heavily governed with dense public policies and laws. By contrast, other sectors are not governed at all or weakly governed (Borraz and Le Galès 2010, 2–3).

It is useful to reframe the question of the government of city, away from a categorisation of a city as a whole (where specific cities would be more governed, or more ungovernable, than others), and away from an assessment of the state as an object (where certain states would be 'failed' and others more successful). The government of cities is rather to be approached through the study of defined sectors of intervention, specific areas in cities, or bounded sections of the state, at particular moments in time, and with various degrees of 'government' (steering) effort, focus and capacity.

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It is also helpful to differentiate officials' practices according to the degree of government of their area of intervention. An urban sector or area may be 'fully governed': steered with a policy objective, a direction, with the resources, pressure and oversight that are attached to this level of political prioritisation. It may be rather 'regulated': coordinated, with an attention to mitigate or counter structural disruptive forces (including the excesses of market dynamics). Or it could be only 'managed': a routine and minimal form of daily intervention aimed at avoiding disorder, alternating moments of tolerance or *laissez-faire* and moments of episodic, sometimes brutal, social and spatial ordering.

Investigating officials' practices: paying attention to what municipal officials do and how they work in the City and in the city

This book is interested in what officials (bureaucrats mainly, elected representatives to some extent) *do*, in conjunction or in confrontation with other actors (internal and external to the state), in local contexts and situations, that has a bearing on the way city space works. As highlighted by Dubois (2014) reflecting on Bourdieu's interest for understanding 'the state' through its actions, or by Bezès and Pierru (2012) on the contemporary relevance of studying the state 'through its interventions', this entry allows for going beyond classic, disciplinary and conceptual divisions between state-building and state-formation, state structure and public policies, state and society, administrative and political dimensions of the state. Practically, following Forester et al. (2005) investigating planners' practices, we are more interested in 'what they do', than in 'what they think', 'would like to do', 'are expected to do' or 'say they ought to do', although of course their specific worldviews, imagination, professional training and social norms are encapsulated in their actions. The point is to make use of the particular access we have been able to secure, in different ways, to different parts of the local state,[4] to go beyond studies of public discourses and public policy documents (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a) on the one hand, and beyond an external observation of state agents as they interact with the public, on the other.

Observing officials' practices reveals institutions, processes and legislations not by the book, but how they actually play out, and are sometimes played by officials. This means following officials in the way they strategise and navigate constraints and opportunities (Krumholz and Clavel 1994) of the triple front of City administration, party politics and society at large. It requires understanding the various policy instruments they use, and how these instruments are constructed, are

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implemented or side-lined, reformed and contested (Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007). It means identifying patterns and regularities in practices, in order to excavate different types of norms often conflicting with one another. This means only contrasting what officials are expected to do with what they actually do (Olivier de Sardan 2015), but also understanding the many layers of the state that officials need to respond to, and the ways in which they engage with various social groups, and how they are positioned in relation to these (Bourdieu 1993; Dubois 2014), to produce and implement their interventions on the city – at times opening spaces of informality within the state (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018b).

The point is to keep 'the city' in mind when we observe and analyse how bureaucrats work – arguing that both the materiality of urban spaces and their shifting local social dynamics cannot be forgotten at this scale of the state (Magnusson 1985), and that local officials' practices and urban policy change cannot be understood solely in terms of organisational or even field logics (Bourdieu and Christin 1990). In this respect, it is important to stress that, while some chapters analyse street-level bureaucrats regularly interfacing with residents and local spaces (Part 2 of this book), many chapters look at middle-level bureaucrats (and some, more senior bureaucrats), more seldom the subject of academic research due to difficulties of access, and whose link with urban spaces and with residents might be blurred, distant or indirect.

Most of the bureaucrats we have researched in this book are indeed in an intermediary position: understanding the rules of the political and administrative apparatus, but also connected to lower-rank bureaucrats and their difficulties on the ground. Much of the existing anthropological literature focusing on opposition between front-stage and back-stage in bureaucracies is therefore partly ill-adapted (Hahonou and Martin 2019). This intermediary level of bureaucracy is said to be vested with more potential to drive change (Barrier et al. 2015); whether this power is real (Clavel 2010) or illusory (Bourdieu 1991; Jeannot and Goodchild 2011; Laurens 2008); whether the multiplicity of the demands and norms they are entangled in offers them a capacity to negotiate, or puts them in unbearable and constant double-binds leading to either paralysis or schizophrenia. Deepening knowledge on intermediary municipal bureaucrats, we hope to build upon but also complement the interesting anthropology of the state often focusing on bureaucracies at street- or interface-level (Olivier de Sardan 2014; Dubois 2014).

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Seeing the City as (local) state, rather than (only) opposed to the State

The term 'the state', for this book, refers to all public institutions considered not as homogeneous or unified, but sharing at least two broad common features, different from any other institution: the mandate to deliver public goods and services, and a form of accountability to the public.

As clearly put by Olivier de Sardan (2014), the state, whatever the political regime and level of development, is expected to deliver public and collective goods and services – a 'delivering state', which is not equivalent to the classic 'developmental state' conceptualised at national level. The nature of these public and collective goods and services varies in space and shifts over time (from territorial, collective and individual security to the wellbeing of the population, as argued by Foucault for modern Europe). In most contemporary cities, it is at the municipal level that access to basic services (water, sanitation, electricity, roads – the list differing depending on national contexts and their level of decentralisation) are generally expected to be delivered, through the production, maintenance, and expansion, of urban infrastructures and networks. 'The state' is therefore, for this book, not synonymous with the national, central state, as opposed to decentralised local authorities. Rather, local governments municipalities are considered part of 'the state' – and this local level of 'the state' is actually the level of the state this book mostly focuses on.

It is to be noted that the dominant political science tradition opposes 'the State' to 'local authorities' and in particular urban municipalities (Le Galès 2020), starting from Weber (1966) who defines 'the City', at least its European medieval incarnation, as framed in an essential confrontation, opposition, rebellion or subversion of national States' emerging sovereignty. More recent work on globalising cities (Brenner 2004) also give central space to this opposition, even if arguing that Cities have become the terrain and the scale of reconfigured State action in a neoliberalising era. This opposition, that possibly conflates national State institutions with the concept of 'the state', is also central for researchers who attempt to 'see[ing] like a city', in reference to Scott's book *Seeing Like a State* (1998). Magnusson (2011), Valverde (2011), Amin and Thrift (2016), who all title their work *Seeing like a city*, argue for a different way of understanding who governs cities, departing from the political notion of 'the state' by which they understand, in a shortcut that we precisely aim at unpacking in this book, an ideal, consistent and unified, national sovereignty.

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Of course, there is no doubt that local authorities and central States are in tension when it comes to defining their respective prerogatives, mandates and resources; and that municipalities are not the reproduction at a local scale of central States, as their reduction or their projection – they have their own polity. But we chose in this book not to focus on the City-State relations, as it is only one element, among many, of what officials do when partaking in urban governance. What is more, given the richness of research on 'the state' and its internal workings that have precisely questioned its consistency, unity, ability to govern, and historicised as well as politicised the question of sovereignty as a construct, we find it more useful for our purpose to explore how this blossoming reflection and literature on 'the state' is also relevant to understand 'the City'. We explore what it means to see Cities like (local) states, rather than building from the essential opposition between local authorities and national States. Said differently, we offer to 'see like a City', with a capital C. Unlike Magnusson (2011), who argues that 'seeing like a city' (with a small c) entails looking at all local institutions, public or not, that take the city as their object (that he calls the 'local state' in previous work: 1985). Unlike Amin and Thrift (2016, quoted in Le Galès 2020), for whom 'seeing like a city' means looking at every urban institution except for municipal ones, considered meaningless to understand how cities are actually shaped. They might well be, but it depends on what one seeks to understand in and about cities.

Few authors actually explicitly assume seeing Cities like (local) states. Most do so implicitly (Boudreau 2019), slipping from interrogating state to Cities' interventions (Robinson and Attuyer 2021). Others subsume regional or local government under what they call 'the subnational state' (Parnell and Pieterse 2010; Heller 2019). In this book, we explore what seeing the City as (local) state may mean, and what this opens to, based on a conception of the 'state' as multi-layered, multi-scaled, marked by stark inconsistencies and contradictions or even centrifugal movement, but also by constant efforts, endeavours, attempts, to bring about degrees of consistency and reach.

Coming back to the work of Olivier de Sardan on the state, the specificity of this institution is not only that it embodies citizens' expectations of delivery of collective goods and services. Contrary to Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan's assumption (2019) that state bureaucracies are organisations like others, state bureaucracies in general, and local state bureaucracies in particular, are submitted to specific sets of norms, over and above those governing conducts in other organisations' bureaucracies. Not only are state bureaucrats part of an

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administrative hierarchy to whom they need to be responsive and accountable, they are also subjected to pressing political demands that create their own, often informal but nonetheless essential, norms: the need to avoid the discontent not only of administrative managers but also of various political bosses, sensitive to a degree to citizens' claims (Laurens 2008).

Directly or indirectly (depending on their position in the bureaucratic hierarchy), state officials' practices are therefore shaped broadly by a degree of responsiveness to political pressures and social mobilisations that regularly emerge in societies. The dual nature of public authorities (political and administrative), does create specific sets of norms within the state. It is possibly even more the case at the local scale given the proximity of the represented, at least in democratic countries, and the direct visibility of social disorder to local authorities. In democratic countries such as the ones we are engaging with in this book (as imperfect and fragile these democratic regimes may be), this has been framed as two different and essential demands placed on local government, pulling in often different directions (Pierre 1999): a demand for democracy (responsiveness to, interaction with social demands; ability to peacefully resolve social conflicts and distribution of resources) and a demand for efficiency (the ability to deliver public and collective goods and services with a degree of continuity and quality). These are the two essential elements that urban governments are to respond to and to balance differently depending on cities, times and spaces.

Within the truly proliferating and multi-disciplinary literature on the state, and while each book contributor borrowed from different schools of thoughts, we share a double positioning. The first one is a distance towards two equally normative, and polarised, understandings of the state. The state is often depicted as malevolent, manipulative, oppressive, in much of the neo-Marxist and the post-structuralist traditions, radically critiquing its capitalistic (or, now, neoliberal) essence, or its modernist and imperialist (or, now, post-colonial) nature. On the other side of the spectrum, the state is seen, perhaps as a misreading of a Weberian approach, as the driver of development, the grantor of public good, a somehow neutral instrument that needs to be fixed to produce social development: in much of the grey, developmental literature but also in the recent reflections on the developmental state. Our analyses of state practices are located in between these two ideal-types, with an obvious interest for testing the idea of 'the developmental state'[5] at the local level (Parnell and Pieterse 2010), quite prominent in the post-apartheid context, but with the overall awareness, theoretically and

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empirically-grounded, that both oppressive and developmental rationalities exist simultaneously within the state. Practically, our collective position is also to pay particular attention to the productive dimension of the exercise of power at the city scale, whether its effects are socially progressive or regressive (Ferguson 2011).

A second common position within the book is taking stock of the state's heterogeneity, but not ending there. This heterogeneity of the state has been amply theorised (Das and Poole 2004), in its illusionary nature (Abrams 1988), its elusiveness (Mitchell 2011), its contradictions and messiness (Gupta 2012; de Herdt and Olivier de Sardan 2015), and its multiple limits and incapacities (Murray Li 1985; Gupta 2012). This conceptual deconstruction is paralleled by the actual transformations of the state at the end of the twentieth century, through a double movement, seeking increased efficiency on the one hand and democratisation on the other. Globally circulating (even if locally variegated) neoliberal reforms have largely reshaped the state under the principles of New Public Management, in the name of efficiency and alignment to business logics: multiplying agencies, contractors, delegations to non-state agents to operate and deliver what used to be or was conceived as public services, while the state would be confined to a role of strategic direction and oversight over execution (Hibou 2012). Almost simultaneously, and not always disjointed (even if with opposite ideological inspirations), pressures for democratisation, decentralisation and citizen participation (Heller 2001) have led to a second type of proliferation of state institutions: the emergence or consolidation of other scales of the state and political arenas where public intervention is debated, negotiated or disputed.

In developing countries, this double shift is accompanied by (as much as it also reshapes) another key feature of existing states – their bifurcated nature (Mamdani 1996), inherited from colonial legacies and reproduced in post-colonial societies marked by stark socio-economic contrasts, where heterogeneous systems and modes of government are being framed and reframed for different spaces and different social groups (Fourchard 2018). Attempts at state reform, in particular through international aid, seem to rather expand such bifurcations by creating 'islands of efficiency' (Bierschenk 2014), 'pockets of effectiveness' (Roll 2014) within disempowered bureaucracies, or at least resourced and temporary arms of the state (Dasgupta and Williams 2022), that are partly disconnected from both the rest of the administration, and sometimes from the societies they are supposed to serve (Mosse 2004; Murray Li 2007; Tendler 1997).

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To sum up, theoretical shifts outlining the essential heterogeneity of the state are paralleled by empirical trends where state institutions multiply, spread out and take a vast variety of forms that may both expand the state's realm and reach over society, by 'governing by discharge', governing at a distance (Hibou 1999), but also rendering the state far more opaque, disjointed and untraceable.

Despite this literature being key to deconstructing abstract ideas of the state, and enriching the way it can be understood and analysed; stating this heterogeneity and messiness today is not sufficient to define the contemporary state. This statement has even become disempowering for both analysis and political action, invisibilising actual policy choices, erasing ideas of individual and collective agency, let alone democratic accountability; dissolving what remains a very specific object into an overall vision of society marked by complexity and diversity. Sets of heterogeneous state departments and agencies might not, indeed, constitute a consistent 'system'. Even if they do – and it is not to be underestimated, in the gaze of its officials and the citizens defined by its interventions, as well as a myth necessary for social movements and legal action to unfold (Abrams 1988) – they are nevertheless marked by constant and recurrent attempts by political and bureaucratic leadership to reassert authority, control and unity upon them. Hence, the state could be better understood as the permanent and repeated tension between the centrifugal forces of a complex set of departments and state agencies developing autonomy, and repeated attempts from official leadership to (re)assert control and consistency. This chronic (internal) struggle doubles and parallels the (external) struggle of governing societies, in their attempt to escape being governed (Kooiman 2008), particularly where societies are marked by a high level of poverty and informality (Chatterjee 2004; Fourchard 2018), and where state formation is highly conflictual.

Beyond the chronic rivalry between the political and administrative arms of local government (Lodge and Wegrich 2012), a classic focus in public administration literature, the heterogeneity between different departments within a City, with their specific mandates, officials' skills and professional training, appears less theorised. Jones (1995) asserts, for instance, that it is hardly surprising if legal, finance or economic departments are focused on attracting investment and promoting business-friendly policies, while community services, welfare or housing departments are pushing for redistributive policies. Bourdieu offers the metaphor of the 'right' and the 'left hand' of the state (1993), similarly opposing 'regalian' to 'welfare' functions of the state, but complexifying

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this opposition by adding a vertical dimension, an increasing rift between low and high state nobility; the lower-level bureaucrats anchored in social interactions and sensitive to 'the misery of the world', versus higher-level technocrats disconnected from social needs. For Bourdieu (1993), in a neoliberalising era, the left hand of the state is becoming powerless, increasingly delegitimised and disempowered, and compelled to service the right hand. For Jones (1995), this dichotomy is less contextual, more essential to the state: unity in state intervention is to be constructed by political leadership at the top municipal level, which can mitigate professional, technical and functional rationalities of each department and create consistency to drive municipal interventions. Beyond individual leadership though, specific historical junctures may also provide narratives powerful enough to become common ground throughout state administrations and agencies – the civil rights revolution in the North American cities of the 1970s, the post-apartheid redistributive and transformative ideal in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the participatory and workers democratic moment in Brazil in the 2000s, the contemporary municipalist moment in some European countries (Béal and Rousseau 2014).

Seeing the State in the city, seeing the State from the city, the urban, the local

A specificity of this book is to look at state practices at and from the local scale (rather than the national scale as most ethnographies of the state do), and also, through and around the materiality of the urban spaces they affect. This location of our research at local government level is not arbitrary, nor innocuous.

The local level of government is firstly a space in the state where policy conception and implementation collide – where local councillors and bureaucrats directly feel the impact and social effects of their policy interventions, planning regulation, project development, that their government (at local but also regional and national levels) is driving. Local officials (bureaucrats and politicians) are policy-makers who are also implementers; they are executioners who also have an understanding and often a say on policy and regulations, narrowing the (in)famous 'policy-implementation gap' that is sometimes a misleading shortcut to explain policy failure (Bénit-Gbaffou 2018a). Although the issue of restricted local resources and mandates might curtail their ability to act, the proximity and immediacy of the social effects of public action is theirs to deal with. While this does not necessarily lead to more 'horizontality'

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and democracy (Magnusson 2011), it gives a particular flavour to their practices in the city, its spaces and its inhabitants. They might be able to directly witness the results of their collective and sometimes individual action, at a scale that also seems within human reach, and therefore adapt or reform it. This gives a sense of possibility and opportunity to officials' practice, in the midst of many constraints and obstacles to effective public action.

The second interest in observing the state from the local scale, and in particular the urban municipal (or metropolitan) scale, is that unlike national or regional scales of public action, the city is the locus of intervention of multiple levels of the state (local, regional and national, sometimes supranational institutions) – where they intersect, coalesce, compete or conflict. The local (and the city) is the space where, more than elsewhere, the complex interface 'on the ground' of different, contradictory or at least heterogeneous public interventions can be seen stemming from different levels, departments and agencies of the state, with uneven attempts or success at coordinating these interventions. For officials in the local state, this may bring both a form of political pragmatism and a variety of avenues for action, that render the study of their practices particularly insightful. It can be argued that the urban context we focus upon, and in particular the metropolitan context, may multiply the resources available, both economically and socially; it may enhance the ability to play within the heterogeneous state, politically use its contradictions, garner political and budgetary support. It raises the potential to rely on a diversified civil society and build a variety of networks, for mobilisation and expertise, in order to pressurise or to support multiple political constituencies at various scales.

Beyond the question of the local scale or level of observation, this book seeks to interrogate state practices in their grounding in, interactions with and effects on a material space, and more particularly urban spaces, at the metropolitan and neighbourhood levels. It shares its grounding in space materiality with other planners and political geographers (Boudreau 2019), yet seeks to keep focusing on the 'black box' of the local state – investigating how it is that municipal officials act upon urban space, and adjust their interventions to the messy and contested implementation of their visions: keeping a view from 'the inside' of the state.

It is an endeavour to taking city spaces as the core object upon which policies, practices and projects act in order to change society. Indeed, it is easy to slip into debates and analyses that lose sight of the materiality of urban spaces and the contextual nature of the practices and policies studied. Such an oblivion is common in state and policy studies,

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where the complexities of policy processes, institutional apparatus and power networks often result in the leaving aside of the particular spaces and societies upon which they are acting. This endeavour, constantly reminded to authors and brought back in earlier versions of this book, implies first a selectivity in the urban policies and practices observed. With only a few exceptions, most chapters either start with a particular space on which public intervention focuses, or highlight the contextual and spatially-anchored dimensions of the practices and policies analysed. It implies, secondly, to spatialise the analysis of officials' practices, and attempt to ground them in particular spaces and scales, at times in the very materiality of urban landscapes, to understand how the specificities of contexts shape practices, from policy to implementation. What this spatialisation produces is often a nuanced understanding of policies, far from broad-brushed discourses on neoliberal policies or inclusive grand projects; but also of officials' practices, their making and their effects, away from abstract understanding of officials' choices. Officials' practices are linked in fact to very specific, local, contextualised situations which they need to confront and respond to: 'porous bureaucracies' (Benjamin 2004) are also locally-grounded ones, finding echoes and entering in resonance with public discourses displayed at other scales of the state.

A collective experience

This book practically results from a collective research programme, 'Practices of the State in Urban Governance' (PSUG), that I coordinated from 2014–18, supported by the South African National Research Foundation.[6] Based at the Wits School of Architecture and Planning, in the Centre for Urbanism and the Built Environment Studies (CUBES), it brought together about 15 researchers and doctoral students, mostly from the planning discipline but also political studies, in South Africa and in France. The programme's results were built across the years and regularly presented and debated with researchers from France, South Africa, Brazil and India.

One element of this programme worth stressing is that it deliberately invited participants who had worked in South African municipalities, and in particular sought and supported PhD candidates with professional experience in local government, planning agencies or NGOs working therewith. This specificity, with the support of a PhD exchange programme between the Universities of Wits and Sheffield (UK),[7] led to specific reflexions on the articulation between experiential and academic

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knowledge (central to the planning discipline, but not limited to it), and the specific mentoring that building the latter based on the former required (Bénit-Gbaffou and Williams 2022). While this epistemological analysis is not central to the book, dialogue between the two types of knowledge is reflected therein, with several contributions from former planners-turned-scholars (Klug, Charlton), and from academics with an experience in local government (Harrison, Smith). It also features numerous chapters written by PhD candidates or early career researchers, who framed their thesis topic around the specific focus of the programme – aiming at understanding local officials' practices and visions of the city in order to transform it.

Structure of the book – three combined approaches

The book combines three approaches that structure the book.

The first focuses on officials' agency in local government, observed directly or through their own reflexions, and what this agency reveals of City structure. Such agency is, implicitly or not, studied through the prism of 'institutional activism' (Abers 2019), where officials proactively pursuing a cause and a project (and in so doing, pushing the boundaries of public institutions), reveal through their practice the way governmental institutions work, by navigating its constraints and constructing its opportunities. These officials, mostly belonging to middle and high ranks of the municipal bureaucracy (let alone the case of local councillors, the focus of Chapter 5), are straddling policy and implementation, strategic and operational, political and administrative, realms of intervention – making their experience particularly valuable in understanding how cities are governed.

The second approach interrogates the porosity of the state at City level, and through the crafting of locally specific policy instruments to govern cities, unpacks processes of formalisation of society and informalisation of the state. While it builds on a classic view of the 'state from its margins' (Das and Poole 2004), it is not confined to the lower, street level of bureaucracy, rather following policy circulations between local and national levels of the state. The section excavates how these iterative movements, mutual influences and rescaling processes contribute to state-formation ('a historical process whose outcome is a largely unconscious and contradictory process of conflicts, negotiations and compromises between diverse groups'), but also state-building (a 'conscious effort at creating an apparatus of control') (Berman and

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Lonsdale 1992, 5). Its anchoring at the local scale of analysis emphasises the role of situated contexts, to frame (bottom-up) policies and explain the specific echoes (top-down) policies may have in a locality.

The third section analyses state intervention in the city through the internal politics of policy instruments (Uitermark 2005; Lascoumes and Le Gales 2007): deciphering state rationalities and political dynamics through the multi-pronged and contested definition of instruments to intervene on specific urban issues. As New Public Management tends to deprive the state of directly operating in the city, focusing its interventions on delegating and monitoring what agencies, contractors, or other institutions do on their behalf (Hibou 2012), the section reflects more precisely on the construction of knowledge and ignorance in local government, as an increasing part of officials' daily activities seem to be focusing on framing, capturing, monitoring and circulating various data sets, while they lose direct operational capacity, experience and capacity to adjust to local situations. By analysing state rationalities and its politics of knowledge, the section analyses officials' practical capacity to govern cities.

Notes

1 Throughout this book, we refer to 'the State' (capital S) to refer to the national, central institution of the state. 'The state' (small s) refers to the concept. Likewise, 'the City' (capital C) indicates the municipal or metropolitan institution, while 'the city' (small c) refers to the urban area.
2 Available at: https://www.wits.ac.za/cubes/projects/street-trading--urban-governance/. Accessed 23 June 2023.
3 The dominant term for a post-apartheid urbanism was initially 'reconstruction', in reference to the 1994 ANC Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a national policy aiming at constructing public housing and infrastructures in under-resourced and under-equipped segregated areas. Soon, however, and as reference to RDP became scarcer after the national 'neoliberal turn' at the end of the 1990s, the dominant term became the 'transformation' of society and cities – referring to the redistribution of resources from the rich to the poor, but also and perhaps primarily, to the racial change in power, institutions, bureaucracies, political and economic leadership.
4 This question of access obviously introduces a bias, but the multiplicity of types of access to different sections of the state limits to some extent this bias upon which each different contributor was able to reflect. A more general and cross-cutting methodological and epistemological reflection is still to be developed, beyond the scope of this book.
5 In the broader sense (not restricted to the Asian model and its authoritarian state figure) of 'the state' being a key player, although not disconnected from society, in framing and driving developmental objectives.
6 Available at: https://www.wits.ac.za/cubes/projects/practices-of-the-state-in-urban-governance/. Accessed 24 June 2023.
7 The programme, supported by RCUK Newton Fund/NRF South Africa, was titled 'Developing Research Capacity for Inclusive Urban Governance: A Sheffield-Witwatersrand PhD training partnership' (Award Number: ES/N013816/1), and ran from November 2015–April 2019.

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