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**Article:**

Massidda, A.L. [orcid.org/0000-0001-8735-7990](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8735-7990) (2022) Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police–Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 240, \$29.95, pb. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 54 (3). pp. 553-555. ISSN 0022-216X

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022216X22000591>

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Javier Auyero and Katherine Sobering, *The Ambivalent State: Police-Criminal Collusion at the Urban Margins*

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp.240, \$29.95 pb.

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*The Ambivalent State* is a careful, thorough and solid examination of the contradictory, ambiguous, selective and ultimately criminal practices of the state in marginalised urban spaces in Argentina. More specifically, the book analyses collusion, or the clandestine relationship between police officers, drug dealers and low-income residents as they produce interpersonal violence. 'Ambivalence' is understood, in the book, in its literal sense: as the simultaneous rupture from, and enforcement of, the law (a state instrument *par excellence*) at a same given space and time. Constantly re-shaped, constructed and negotiated by grassroots actors, the ambivalent practices discussed are criminal as they entail a profound betrayal of 'what is right', leading to loss of lives, livelihoods, freedoms, and production of traumas. The state thus emerges in the study as a field of dispute or an assemblage where heterogeneous projects coexist (Bob Jessop, *The State: Past, Present and Future*, Polity, 2016), deeply affecting poor people's everyday experience.

The book works at the intersection between two bodies of data: (1) intensely-grounded ethnographic accounts of an area in Greater Buenos Aires that the authors call Arquitecto Tucci; and (2) a striking set of tape-recorded conversations linked to other locations in the country. With the first, *The Ambivalent State* builds on the findings produced by one of the authors, Javier Auyero, in a previous study, *In Harm's Way* (Princeton University Press, 2015), where him and María Fernanda Berti argued that domestic and street violence are not produced in separate realms, but that they constitute links of one same violence chain whereby private and public spheres are strongly interconnected. In addition, the tape-recorded transcriptions or *escuchas* represent a new set of data, unique to this work, which allows authors Auyero and Katherine Sobering to grasp one further dimension of the same problem: the interaction between drug dealers and police officers at ground level, which would not have been available to them otherwise. By intertwining both bodies of data, Auyero and Sobering gain a 'fine-grained, micro-interactive' (8) understanding of how low-level collusion works, even though recognising that chains of violence start higher up. In this way, they effectively convey a multi-faceted and almost tangible experience of 'what otherwise would be an abstraction' – the state (Akhil Gupta, 'Blurred Boundaries', *American Ethnologist* 22/2, 1995, cited in p. 9).

In *Urban Outcasts* (Polity, 2008) Loïc Wacquant highlights the importance of the police body for studying state penetration in neighbourhoods of social relegation. This notion, and the implicit understanding that the processes studied are strongly affected by structural forces such as disadvantage, unemployment and inequality, underpin the way in which Auyero and Sobering make sense of their intricate data (José Miguel Cruz, 'State and Criminal Violence in Latin America', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 66/325, 2016). Indeed, they read low-level collusion in the context of a deeply eroded welfare system. Once again, the complexity embedded in these processes is best grasped by reading the book as one further step in lines of analysis opened in the authors' past works. Concurrently present and absent, thus, the state surfaces in residents' everyday lives in the form of a school (*In Harm's Way*), a cash transfer programme (Auyero, *Patients of the State*, Duke University

Press, 2012), brokers' networks (Auyero, *Poor People's Politics*, 2000) or the very control performed by the police body. At the same time, it abandons residents as much as it punishes them, which becomes painfully visible in structural deprivation, stigmatisation, unemployment, and not least the lack of accountability of the police body. The consideration of these multiple dimensions further assists the authors in constructing the state as a deeply ambivalent organisation (11).

Chapter 1 contextualises the study by addressing the role of the state in producing violence, and the illicit nature of much police action. After this, the book proceeds in consecutive layers of analysis, as if producing a gradual movement of zoom-out. Chapter 2 reveals first-hand experience of violence as narrated by residents of Arquitecto Tucci, presenting what I have called the book's first body of data. There are compound deprivations in Tucci, and the chapter reads them in relation to the aforementioned chains of violence, identifying three main ways in which drug-related violence enters the home: 'invasion' (the physical presence of a gang member requesting payment), 'protection' of family members, and 'preemption' or the anxiety produced in households as young members engage in drug consumption and trade.

The next set of chapters moves on to discuss the illicit practices of the police as it emerges from the *escuchas*. Chapter 3 examines micro-scale actions such as extortion, 'planting' evidence, arrangements with drug bosses, gratuitous harassment of youth, and not least retaliation on the residents who denounce these practices. Building from it, Chapter 4 discusses the selling of arms and ammunition, and most interestingly the raiding of competitors performed by the police when requested by their illegal partners. This scales up the everyday actions presented in chapter 3, as what would be frequent but ultimately anecdotal events now become part of a structured set of practices. Consecutively, Chapter 5 reads the practices discussed in terms of collusion, analysing how collusion works in terms of exchange of information (about forthcoming raids, about the officers who ordered them) and materials, common practices of manipulation and surveillance, and relational processes. Chapter 6 zooms out further to look into the drug processing chain, from the import of primary materials to networks of kitchens and protection at the national level. It also addresses the role of political brokers in connivance with the police. Bringing this set of chapters to an end, Chapter 7 goes back to discuss collusion conceptually as it emerges from the materials presented.

It is in the Conclusion, however, that the book most explicitly calls for the incorporation of clandestine practices into a wider theorisation of the state. Distancing themselves from an understanding of social science research as a practice of inquiry tailored at producing policy recommendations, the authors suggest that to effect substantial change in contexts such as Arquitecto Tucci a thorough reform of the system itself is necessary. Furthermore, they argue that such change can only come from a concerted effort, involving the grassroots and working across party lines. In other words, following the authors' argument, what an inquiry of this nature uncovers are precisely the contradictions of the state as it presently exists, and therefore the limitations of its decision-making structures. Finally, taking into account all the tensions at stake, one would argue that future studies could also analyse their historical genealogies. Police illegitimate violence, collusion, corruption, and impunity at different levels are not fully new phenomena in Argentina. As the lingering effects of the country's dictatorship past, they are inextricably linked to the training of the Argentine police and military during the Cold War effected as part of anti-Communist campaigns (for example through Operation Condor); to a long-ingrained understanding of low-income neighbourhoods as territories of exception when it comes to law enforcement; and to the state terrorism perpetrated by the last dictatorship. Overall, by looking at collusion from the advantage point of fine-grain material, *The Ambivalent State* offers an

impressive contribution for understanding the ambiguous illicit practices of the state in marginalised urban space from the eyes of its most vulnerable actors in Argentina.