

Article

Frontera Combustible

Conceptualising the State Through the Experiences of Petrol Smugglers in the Colombian/Venezuelan Borderlands of Norte de Santander/Táchira

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Abstract This paper is based on an ongoing ethnographic research project conducted in the borderlands between Colombia and Venezuela, in particular the Colombian city of Cúcuta. There is a thriving smuggling trade between the two countries caused by Venezuela's economic crisis and the extreme devaluation of goods. The area has become one of Colombia's 'hottest' regions due to the proliferation of armed gangs that make money by smuggling of contraband, especially petrol. The article aims to describe how petrol vendors, transporters and smugglers conceptualise the state and how they negotiate and interact with state actors present in the borderlands. It engages in an anthropology of the state through the ethnographic lens of organised informal workers. Starting with a theoretical framework, it criticizes attempts to do anthropology in the margins of the state for its uncomfortably Hobbesian vision of the world, and settles instead on a 'critical phenomenology of power' (Krupa and Nugent 2015) as a methodology. It goes on to introduce two *pimpinero* trade unionists and the struggles of running petrol from the border as well as of political organising. The final section analyses this struggle as 'insurgent citizenship', a citizenry's bottom up attempt to claim full access to their rights as citizens (Holston 2013), as well as ethnographically justifying the need for a conceptual borderland region. All informants' names are anonymized apart from two trade union leaders who requested not to be anonymous.

Keywords Venezuela, Colombia, smuggling, sovereignty, borders, crime, trade-unionism

Like the official and the 'extra-official,' the true and the forged were flip-sides of stately being: neither could exist without the other and this strategic confusion, together with the mystery therein, was dramatically magnified at the border dividing the two republics... a ritual, but more precisely a literalization, as if staged, of the mystique of sovereignty.

Michael Taussig, 'The Magic of the State' (1997, 18)

'Do you know what those people up there in Canudos have done?' Epaminondas Gonçalves murmurs, banging on the desk. 'They're occupying land that doesn't belong to them and living promiscuously, like animals.'

Mario Vargas Llosa, 'The War at the End of the world' (1981, 2)



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Cúcuta is a small border city in Colombia's north-eastern region of Norte de Santander, a Department that makes up a section of Colombia's 2,219km long border with Venezuela. The mountains of Venezuela loom over the city, as does Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. Living the border and all accompanied socioeconomic problems is defining of *Cúcuteño* life. So much so that the border is the first thing you are made aware of when arriving: getting off the bus at Cúcuta Transport Terminal for the first time I was greeted by a huddle of taxi drivers blocking the bus door shouting *A la orden! Frontera! Frontera! Venezuela! Frontera!* - At your service! To the border! To Venezuela! There is a perceived sense of danger in Cúcuta, an aura of paranoia and xenophobia that surrounds Venezuela and the border region in general. In neighbouring Bucaramanga, an altogether safer and better developed city, I was often told that Cúcuta was *lleno de ladrones y putas Venezolanas* - full of Venezuelan thieves and whores. Indeed, my first taxi journey took me through a central neighbourhood populated with crack cocaine addicts, sex workers and street vendors, which did nothing but solidify the paranoia. *Veneco*, slang for a Venezuelan man is used as an insult and *Veneca* has out right become a synonym for prostitute. The Colombian media's narrative shows Venezuela as a modern-day Babylon.¹ A country once of great wealth that is now in a state of near-apocalypse, serving as a constant reminder of the failure of Castro-chavista, petro-socialism and providing a safe cross-border haven for Colombian left-wing guerrilla groups such as the *Ejército Liberación Nacional* (ELN). Since several petroleum price crashes and dictatorial political mismanagement, Venezuela's petroleum reliant economy has been in freefall, leading to widespread shortage of almost everything. This discrepancy in the economies of Colombia and Venezuela leads to a thriving trade in contraband, especially petrol.

Like many Colombian border towns, Cúcuta has long been famous for its *pimpineros*, people who sell jerry cans of illegal petrol called *pimpinas* and who can be seen on the streets waving makeshift funnels at passing cars who may want to tank-up cheaply. In 2015, there was a restructuring of national smuggling laws leading to large-scale police clamp-downs that forced petrol vendors into more clandestine vending spots. Compounding this further, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has shut the border to traffic in order to prevent smuggling, and what he ultimately considers the pillage of Venezuelan resources. Ironically, armed gangs are thriving with this border closure by controlling the illegal crossing routes scattered across the border. As is said in Colombia, *a río revuelto, ganancia de Pescadores* - fishermen win big in choppy waters.

But *pimpineros* can still easily be found as contraband remains a profitable and persistent part of the culture. The Colombian state has even subsidised Colombian petrol to try and wean people off of the contraband. A local journalist described to me the day they started clamping down on the *pimpineros* and how the legal petrol stations were completely unprepared for the queues of people who normally would have been buying illegal petrol but had no option but to buy legally. The trade in contraband is seen as more of a right to work than a crime by many Cúcuteños; a mixture of Venezuelan corruption and heavily devalued goods in Venezuela leads to a vibrant smuggling trade

¹ Colombian politicians are obsessed with the possibility of Colombia becoming a new Venezuela; this is a common talking point for 'the right'. Newly inaugurated president Ivan Duque had controversial campaign posters saying *no quiero vivir como venezolano* - I don't want to live like a Venezuelan.



Fig. 1. Car is tanked up by *pimpinero* in the outskirts of Cúcuta. Image: author.

in which both Colombian and Venezuelan gangs operate with near impunity across the unstable border. This has implications for the Colombian peace process and despite the FARC's current demobilisation, it is other guerrillas such as the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) and the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), or gangs like *Clan de Golfo* who are fighting for territory in the border regions. The conflict caused by the rewards of smuggling leaves many internally displaced Colombians with no option other than to try and make money on the black market.

The *pimpineros* are at the end of a long economic chain and are awkwardly stuck between several sovereign powers. They are affected by decisions made in the capital cities of both Bogotá and Caracas, as well as various other non-state actors and armed gangs, making their lifeworld an ideal ethnographic lens for an anthropology of sovereignty and power. This 'geopolitical wound known as the border' (Kearney 1991, 52) provides a field site that opens up 'the intermingling of various legal and illegal flows' (van Schendel 2005, 48). What is more, there are several *pimpinero* trade unions and co-operatives created to help them negotiate the complicated and often dangerous world of the informal petrol trade. They petition the government for the provision of retraining apprenticeships, as well as providing a means of communicating with journalists and researchers such as myself. These trade unions are legally registered with the Ministry of Work and attempt to formalise the illegal.

This investigates the ways in which petrol vendors, transporters and smugglers conceptualise the state and how they negotiate and interact with state actors present in the borderlands. Starting with a theoretical framework, it criticizes attempts to do anthropology at the margins of the state for its uncomfortably Hobbesian vision of the



Fig. 2. Collection of *pimpinas* full of petrol in the house of a *pimpinero*. Image: author.

world, and settles instead for a ‘critical phenomenology of power’ (Krupa and Nugent 2015) as a theoretical influence. The second section introduces two *pimpinero* trade unionists and their struggles running petrol from the border and political organising. The final section analyses this struggle as ‘insurgent citizenship’ a citizenry’s bottom up attempt to claim full access to their rights as citizens (Holston 2013) as well as ethnographically justifying the existence of a borderland region.

I. The Margins of the State

In ‘*La Guerra del fin del Mundo* - The War at the End of the World’, Mario Vargas Llosa novelises Brazil’s battle of Canudos. A battle that in 1890 saw the army of the newly formed secular Brazilian republic attempt to quash a millenarian Christian uprising (Vargas Llosa 1981; da Cunha and Putnam 1944). The movement was led by the mystic preacher Antonio Conselheiro from a desert back-land, who preached an anti-modernist radical-traditionalism that saw the state not as ‘a vehicle of liberty but an abomination... Its innovations - civil marriage, the separation of church and state, the metric system - are not measures of progress but the satanic devices of the Antichrist’ (Stone 1984). After two failed attempts, the Brazilian army finally managed to defeat the assorted band of ex-slaves, bandits and peasants who had taken up arms. The now quasi-mythic event represents a newly formed Latin American state’s early military forays and their attempts to subsume the margins into the centre’s modernist order. Vargas Llosa, a Peruvian, wrote the novel in the 1980’s, a time in which Peru was seeing its own strain of millenarian, Marxist-Lennist, terrorism. Born in the state’s presumed peripheries and led by a charismatic, pseudo-prophetic leader, the Sendero Luminoso was seen by Vargas Llosa as a fanatical threat to the stable, rational order of the modern liberal state.

The state core versus its distant, often unruly, peripheries is a recurring motif in Latin American history and society, which reflects the Hobbesian-European roots of the Latin American state, where life outside its realm is ‘nasty, brutish and short’. In this modernist thought the state is seen as replacing ‘private vengeance with the rule of law’ (Das and Poole 2004, 4), where Hobbesian primordial wilderness and savageness sits at the boundaries of the state as well as being its point of origin (Hobbes 1998). This modernist state has three main characteristics. Firstly, it conceives itself as separate from society while also trying to improve society. Secondly, it is hyper-rational in the way it attempts to improve and manipulate society: the state is blind but through rational projects of legibility, including technologies of bureaucracy, it seeks to ‘see’ society (Scott 1999). Thirdly, the state’s power is the one true legitimate power and aims to be all pervasive within the boundaries of the nation state. Violence used by the police in the control of society, or by armies in conflict with other states, is legitimate. Violence that is ‘seen either to mimic state violence or to challenge its control’ is deemed as illegitimate (Das and Poole 2004, 4). This concrete, subjective conception of the modern nation-state has become an a priori unit of analysis within the social sciences. Unsurprisingly, given that most social-scientific research is embedded *within* the state. As Carolyn Nordstrom says, ‘Research Knowledge... was born in the womb of the state, delivered by the midwife called modernity’ (Nordstrom 2007, 207). From a state-centred perspective, ‘...anything outside the state is seen as less substantive, less powerful, less dynamic’ (Nordstrom 2007, 220).

A recent turn in the anthropology of the state has been to look in the margins of the state (Das and Poole 2004), such as the borders and contested territories of Colombia, in order to see ‘post-modern cracks’ that are forming in the ‘Great Westphalian Dam’ (Relyea 1998). Victoria Sanford’s study of the Colombian city Barrancabermeja starts from this standpoint. Instead of seeing the margins of the state as where the state is failing, she sees the state’s central apparatuses as ‘determined by the reconstitution of the state and its infrastructure at its margins through the army’s use of surveillance and state-sanctioned violence’ (Das and Poole 2004, 256). She says that instead of looking ‘...for a central form of power, one must seek to recognise power in its “multiplicity” of forms and study these forms as relations of force that intersect, interrelate, converge’ (Sanford 2004, 257). This chapter is a praiseworthy shift to looking at ‘power in its multiplicity of forms’ and is important, in particular because it focuses on various intersecting sovereign powers as well as the human relationships that constitute them: a task well suited to ethnography. However, problems arise in setting the ‘margins of the state’ as both an ethnographic location and theoretical starting point.

Schmitt’s Political Theology

It would be quite easy to talk about my research as being an anthropology in the margins. Firstly, because my project is in a borderland region, a region that is quite literally in the margins of the nation-state territory. Second, because the centre-margin discourse drives conceptualisations about the Colombian state, both from my informants and academics (Sanford 2004; Ramírez 2011; Tate 2015). My field site might be in the perceived margins of the state; however, it is not the job of the anthropologist to make a quantitative description of the state: where the state begins and ends, is failing or succeeding. In seeking out the margins of the state as a method for revealing the hidden workings of sovereignty, I believe anthropologists are making implicit assumptions about

the Hobbesian nature of the state and the concept of sovereignty which often contradict more contemporary post-Weberian theorisations of the state.

In *Anthropology in the Margins of the State*, Veena Das and Deborah Poole theorise the state in such a contemporary post-Weberian manner. They try to, ‘distance [themselves] from the entrenched image of the state as a rationalized administrative form of political organisation that become weakened or less fully articulated along its territorial or social margins’ (Das and Poole 2004, 1). Instead they ask us to ‘reflect on how the practices and politics of life in these areas shaped the political, regulatory, and disciplinary practices that constitute, somehow, that thing we call “the state”’ (Das and Poole 2004, 1). This is a distinctly post-Weberian conceptualisation of the state. The state is not an apparatus or a concrete institution but a process that can be studied on an ethnographic level. As Garcia Canclini says, power is starting to be seen as, ‘blocs of institutional structures, with pre-established, fixed tasks (to dominate, to manipulate), or as mechanisms for imposing order from the top downwards, but rather as a social relation diffused through all spaces’ (Canclini 1988, 474).

However, this new vision of the state is contradicted by an anthropological project that aims to do its ethnography ‘in the margins’. Victoria Sanford describes in her article on Colombia in the same collection that, ‘it is precisely because margins function like states of exception that they become important sites for understanding the way in which notions of sovereignty and exception are tied together’ (Sanford 2004, 259). Das and Poole express further this margin-as-revelation of sovereignty as an anthropology that, ‘offers a unique perspective to the understanding of the state, not because it captures exotic practices, but because it suggests that such margins are a necessary entailment of the state, much as the exception is a necessary component of the rule’ (Das and Poole 2004, 4). Carl Schmitt’s uncomfortably authoritarian and proscriptive political theory is ever present in the evocation of marginal/exceptional logic and Tracy B. Strong goes some way to describing it: ‘The necessarily extraordinary quality of sovereignty is made clear in the analogy [Schmitt] uses to explain his point...“The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology”’ (Strong 2005, xx). Schmitt sees the sovereign power of the state as an equivalent to the power of God whose miracles go against the original order of nature as defined by himself, as a way of revealing his true nature in aid of man’s salvation. In explaining the link between the miracle and exception Strong states that for Schmitt, ‘the “exception” is the *occasion for and of the revelation of the true nature of sovereignty*. Thus the sovereign does not for Schmitt only define the “exception” – he is also revealed by and in it’ (Strong 2005, xx). Despite positing a notion of the state as a non-concrete, non-apparatus, post-Weberian, entity, Das and Poole and their fellow margin-hunters are evoking a Schmittian/Hobbesian conception of the rule of law and the state. You cannot be both a margin seeker and post-Weberian.

Ideological Problems

A problem raised by several academics of the Colombian state is that the centre/margin narrative, Vargas Llosa’s ‘rebellion in the back lands’ trope, is itself a state ideology perpetuated by the state to justify its existence and to validate its militaristic attempts to pacify ‘marginal’ territories and hide dirty intertwinements with violent non-state actors.



Fig. 3. Crossing from Colombia into Venezuela. Image: author.

Clemencia Ramirez argues that in Putumayo,² it is local party politics that produces state effects and the lived experience of the state, but also that the local politicians and armed actors require the state to define themselves as ‘it is in relation to the state that they legitimise their own activities’ (Ramírez 2015, 48). The state and local actors are inextricably linked. However, in deploying a narrative of a marginal territory that needs to be assimilated, the state portrays society as something clear and distinct from itself. This makes the state seem neutral, passive, and disinterested when it is really very much active and politically driven. At the same time in Putumayo ‘state officials themselves frequently described the state as absent, drawing a distinct boundary between the central state and the local state as separate, in part this represented a larger stigmatization... of the population as criminals and guerrilla supporters, existing outside the law, to whom the rights and protections of citizenship did not apply’ (Tate 2015, 240). While a state ideology is powerful and can affect the nation-wide discourse as well as cultural imaginings of the state, academics should be cautious in deploying a discourse so readily deployed by the state itself.

A Critical Phenomenology of Power

In fairness to Sanford, her chapter is inherently critical of prevalent state ideologies. Looking for how the state articulates sovereignty in supposed marginal and contested zones of Barrancabermeja, contradicts the statist notion that sovereignty emanates from the state core. The crux of my critique is a warning against the merging of several

² Putumayo is another Colombian borderland region situated on the southern border with both Ecuador and Peru. It was once infamous as being a Guerrilla stronghold and remains an active region for FARC dissidents (Richardson and Richardson 2002).

distinct theoretical ideas. In particular, the conflation of margins of the state (which in their most literal sense are territorial limits of the state) with states of exception which are explicitly moments of crisis, decisions made by sovereigns, and negations of the rule of law. Marginal talk becomes imbued with Schmittian legal theory and Hobbesian world views, while margins become spaces of classical Van Ganepean liminality, Foucauldian heterotopias, as well as moments of sovereign crisis all at the same time. It neither functions as a heuristic category or an analytical tool. I do not believe it is impossible for anthropologists to talk about margins of the state, but it should be extrapolated from ethnographic data and discourse, not from a theoretical starting point, or an a priori assumption.

To work around these key problems, my research is theoretically informed by Christopher Krupa and David Nugent's edited collection, *State Theory and Andean Politics* (Krupa and Nugent 2015). They ask us not to see the state as an empirical reality or an a priori category but instead as a cultural process that can be understood through phenomenological approaches. They suggest that 'we should not presume that the state has an objective existence, and then seek to trace "its" intrusions and dissipations into social fields beyond the state,' instead, they believe that we should take as a central problem to be solved 'the very productions of realness and the aura of objectivity that may surround the state' (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 10). Or as Carolyn Nordstrom tells us,

...a 'state' is a conceptual category and not an objective entity - it exists only by virtue of the fact that people believe in the laws, geographical designations, and imagined communities that designate the flow and flux of humanity and space into discrete parts. A state is an abstract notion that is given substance in being recognised as substantive (Nordstrom 2007, 220).

This presumption of substance, is what Krupa and Nugent call the 'Realist Ontology' of the state (Krupa and Nugent 2015). Instead of seeing the state as a monolithic whole, with easily defined centres and margins, I am interested in a more nuanced approach: a 'critical phenomenology of power'. Krupa and Nugent refer to 'Aggregation', the process by which 'we connect qualitatively distinct individual encounters, objects, and so on, that have nothing in common with one another and convince ourselves that they are varieties of a single, unifying experience' (Krupa and Nugent 2015, 16). From a petrol smuggler's encounter with a state bureaucrat at the Ministry of Housing, to an altercation with the anti-smuggling police, these experiences are collected into a coherent notion of the state.³ This forms a guiding principle for my research rather than a dogmatic methodology. This article thus emphasises the way in which informants describe their relations with the state and who they think the state to be, as well as their conceptualisation of the borderland and its related processes.

³ I should add that this notion of the state that is aggregated may very well be Hobbesian in nature and refer to state-centres and weak-peripheries, but what is important is that it is teased out of discourse and ethnography.



Fig. 4. A *pimpinero* fills up a motorbike. Image: author.

II. Gasolina

Cúcuta was once famous for having a *pimpinero* on ‘every street corner’ and at one point this practice was virtually decriminalised: the showing of a *pimpinero* trade union card would permit you to sell petrol on certain days. As one can imagine, the local government worried about incendiary risk, the city’s aesthetics and the pollution of public space. Due to a presidential mandate in 2015 by then president Juan Manuel Santos, it was made completely illegal and police were given more powers to seize the contraband. Shortly after, Maduro shut the border, initially for three days. Three years later it remains closed, opening only for foot passengers during the day. ‘It has been a long three days,’ one informant of mine wryly noted. Combined with the presidential mandate, the closure continues to affect the informal petrol trade. Without the ability to cross by car, the smuggling has shifted from the average person to predominantly gangs who run the illegal crossing routes. In Cúcuta one has to go to the outskirts of town or know the right person to buy petrol.

This all makes for a subject that is often difficult or even dangerous to study and as a result the field site is somewhat dispersed and hidden, meaning I have had to rely more on interviews and conversations than participant observation. Fortunately, the trade unions make excellent access points and many affiliated *pimpineros* believe it is important to engage with researchers and journalists. As a result, my data has mainly been collected through ‘hanging out’ at various cooperatives run by ex-*pimpineros* alongside conducting interviews. The following introduces two key informants and aims to provide sketches of the people who work in petrol as well as a brief insight into methods of transportation and selling.

Yuleima

Yuleima is the leader of SINTRAGASOLINA, one of the main petrol vendor trade unions, and I accompanied her on a tour of the city to visit various vending spots and to talk to *pimpineros*. I was picked up from my house in an old, beat-up car by Yuleima and two other *pimpineros*. It broke down five minutes later and while waiting on the side of the road for another ride to turn up I chatted to Yuleima and the other *pimpinero*, David, who turned out to be Yuleima's personal bodyguard.

Having previously sold petrol himself, David took a two-month, intensive body-guarding course and now works in protection, which itself is funded by the government due to Yuleima's status as a defender of human rights. He showed me his pistol and concealed carry license as well as his SINTRAGASOLINA membership card. At one time this card allowed him to sell Venezuelan petrol legally on certain days as part of a quota scheme from the local government. We drove to various vending spots around the town, some more covert than others and everyone knew Yuleima. When they realised I was with her everyone was keen to let me take photos and tell me about the difficulties of a life selling illegal petrol.

Yuleima explained to me that when a jerry can is bought by gangs in Venezuela it is worth around \$1000cop. They buy this by the truck-load with the help of corrupt Venezuelan National Guardsmen. Once it is moved across the river it becomes valued at around \$15000cop where it is sold to the *transportadores*, or transporters, who are normally affiliated with the *pimpineros*. Our two drivers on this tour of Cúcuta were both 'officially' registered as transporters with SINTRAGASOLINA. The *pimpineros* buy it from them for around \$17000cop and depending on how they manage to sell it to the public, may make \$2-3000cop per jerry can. It is clear that those who gain the most are the gangs who have the monopoly of force to control illegal border crossing routes known as *trochas*, and are thus able to take petrol on a short journey across the river. As Yuleima told me, 'we are the least favoured link in the chain, we earn the least but are the most clamped down upon by the police.' *Pimpineros* often make the claim that the gangs who cross the river do so only with the complicity of the state and that the *pimpineros* were merely an easy target and a scapegoat.

Prior to the restructuring of the contraband law there had been no need to be so covert, and a collection of jerry cans by the side of the road had indicated that someone was selling petrol. Now *pimpineros* can face prison time or seizure of property for possessing contraband. Despite this, formalised vending spots still exist in the outskirts of Cúcuta where the police are less concerned or have less control. These petrol spots, or *puestos*, are organised by SINTRAGASOLINA that operates in Cúcuta and who supply official bibs. Yuleima showed me one of the shiny official looking plaques for a *puesto* in *La Parada*, a busy stretch of shops lining the motorway just before Venezuela, at the main border crossing bridge, *Puente Internacional Simón Bolívar*. Due to the high level of traffic it used to be one of the most desirable vending spots and often led to territorial disputes that got violent. The negotiating and mediating of these disputes was one of reasons for SINTRAGASOLINA's formation in 2009. The trade union is funded solely by its members' monthly fees and is made up of both vendors and petrol transporters. Although petrol vending is an illegal activity, the trade union is legal and ratified with Colombia's Ministry of Work. This trade union, which could be seen as an attempt to

make the illegal formal, exists to negotiate with the armed groups supplying the petrol as well as petition the government to provide opportunities for education and retraining.

There currently exists *la Programa de Reconversión Sociolaboral*, a vocational retraining scheme that has existed since 2011 but has been in negotiation between various trade unions and the local government since 2005. A mixture of state entities, including local and national government, provide substantial funding for small business and cooperative ideas. The goal being to not only to provide vocational retraining but also resocialisation for people who have spent their entire lives in contraband. In Cúcuta there currently exist three functioning cooperatives in the scheme, a motorbike repair workshop, a cooking oil recycling shop and the newest, a courier service. Although they are all initially well-funded Yuleima claims they are not provided with the business education needed to run such enterprises and all are struggling. What is interesting is how this has all been made possible by the slow and delicate collective action, and trade union organising, that has been going on since long before 2005.

Osman

The chain of petrol does not just end up in Cúcuta in the *pimpinas* of Sintragasolina members. It travels across all of Norte de Santander's eight thousand or so square miles. On the far eastern side of the department is the second largest urban hub of Ocaña where Yuleima's colleague Osman runs an affiliated co-operative called COOPETRAEXGASDE who also run a motorbike repair workshop.

One of the things people always tell you about Ocaña is the strong presence of paramilitaries, frequent kidnappings, and extortion. Recent clashes between guerrilla groups the *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) and *Ejército Liberación Nacional* (ELN) make the surrounding region often inaccessible. I was surprised when he wanted to meet in a street-side café in the centre of town he had brought his eleven-year-old daughter with him to have ice cream. Osman retired from the trade a few years ago and now dedicates himself to running the cooperative. I had been keen to learn more about the movement, transportation and logistics of smuggled petrol. During my time in Ocaña I had seen *Pimpinas* of petrol on sale for \$6000cop a whole one and a half times more expensive than the \$4000cop average in Cúcuta (although still cheaper than the legal petrol stations that comes in at a national average of around \$8000cop). Ocaña is five hours away from the border, so I presumed it was an issue of transportation that led to the price hike. Osman told me matter of factly that it is 'because here there are many customs officers, military checkpoints, the army, the police, the paramilitaries, all the illegal groups that we have to pay off... at one point we were paying four-million pesos a month to paramilitary groups between Ocaña and Cúcuta, at least \$20,000cop for every barrel.' I asked Osman what happens if you refuse to pay off the paramilitaries: 'if we refuse to pay we run the risk of losing our cargo, and they set fire to our cars. For this reason, many of us, good friends of mine, are dead.' He sipped on his *tinto* a typically Colombian little cup of weak, sugary coffee and his daughter licked her ice cream and happily watched us talk. 'The police and the army here are determined to give us *lead*,' he continued, 'that's why there are more *pimpineros* in prison here than there are in Cúcuta.'

The main border crossing point for buying freshly smuggled petrol is a town called Puerto Santander that sits north of Cúcuta. There is little police presence in the town and it is a hive of criminal gangs and smuggling activity. This is where *pimpineros* and transporters from Ocaña often buy petrol. When asking about unwanted associations between paramilitaries and *pimpineros* he told me about how the gangs at Puerto Santander sometime insist on payment in base cocaine, or at least they give a discount if base is used as a currency for payment. This turns a *pimpinero* from a socially acceptable actor, who (il)licitly (van Schendel and Abraham 2005) makes-do in difficult times, into a narco-trafficker, stained by the taboo of cocaine and attracting unwanted heat from security forces.

On the journey from the border back to Ocaña there are other ways to make a little extra profit. A 55-gallon barrel is worth \$90,000cop at Puerto Santander (that is about \$1600cop per gallon sized *pimpina*). However, not only are there all the gangs to pay off, but evading police and army checkpoints means they have to hole up in safe houses causing the journey to take up to three days (when it could normally be done in one). This labour time, risk, and expenditure on extortion means that by the time the *pimpinero* is back in Ocaña with the barrel, the petrol is valued at around \$260,000cop. That is a profit of around \$170,000cop per barrel and a near three times increase in value. If they do not want to run the risk of encountering state security forces, who will either seize their petrol or solicit bribes, they have the option of routing their cargo in a northward leaning arch by Tibú and through the guerrilla-controlled parts of Catatumbo. Catatumbo has become a byword for internal armed conflict and deservedly so: it is one of Colombia's 'hottest' regions, and reasonn why Cúcuta has so many internally displaced people living within its slums. However, it is because of this assortment of warring guerrilla groups that there is less chance of coming across state forces. The down side is that the guerrillas take a heftier fee than state forces and paramilitaries, and the average total for 'tax' per barrel is \$30,000cop. This is the tight-rope line that Ocañaero petrol vendors walk every time they transport barrels of petrol from the border. Definitely a riskier task than in Cúcuta, but with a chance of nearly tripling your investment, the rewards make it worth it.

On the face of it Yuleima shows us how an illegal activity is made licit through the formalised and legal channels of trade unionism and Osman's stories reveal how the smuggling game carries on deep into the nation state's territory. There are also deeper and less obvious tensions between various different trade unions and local government which become revealed through studying the slow and unsteady implementation of various government social policies. However, these ethnographic vignettes still give us insights into how those involved in contraband petrol conceptualise the state and how they negotiate and interact with state actors. Transporting petrol within Colombia is as much a part of their jobs as actually selling it and as Willem van Schendel says, 'studying flows in borderlands allows us to explore the perspective of the transporters of unauthorised goods in greater detail, something that remains lacking in existing literature' (van Schendel 2005, 47). At the same time their testimonies show us that the processes that constitute the state's territory do not coincide neatly with the marginal borderline limits. The human infrastructure that maintains the border, as well as the smuggling game itself, occurs deep into the nation-state territory, and borders cannot be studied by solely looking at the line drawn in the sand.

III. Combustible Border

In both state and academic discourse there is an overconceptualisation and fetishization of the border and its penetration, we are hooked on what Michael Taussig would call 'the fix of the Nation-State, the erotic fetish power of borders' (Taussig 1992, 8). Taussig quotes Jean Ganêt as saying, 'the crossing of borders and the excitement it arouses in me... were to enable me to apprehend directly the essence of the nation I was entering. I would penetrate less into a country than to the interior of an image' (Taussig 1992, 8). Anthropologists have always to some extent dealt with penetrating boundaries (Barth 1998). The early colonial practitioners of anthropology and ethnology took up the task of neatly defining the socio-spatial boundaries between ethnic groups. While some academic disciplines highlighted similarities in groups, at anthropology's core was in effect a project of differentiation, delineation and ethnic categorisation, what Ernest Gellner refers to as a 'sedentrist metaphysics', the 'assumption that there is and must be an inalienable and primordial link between a people/culture and a particular place' (Gellner 2013, 14). Hannerz argues that, anthropologists 'make it their particular business to cross borders for the purpose of portraying what is on the other side' (Hannerz 2010, 541). There is an allure to borders that doesn't just exist in statist thinking but in the roots of anthropology. But the border itself isn't the important object of study so much as the historical and social processes that maintain it and the people who live around and through it.

Borderlands

Cúcuta hasn't always been a border town. During Spanish Colonial rule the Viceroyalty of New Granada included both modern day Venezuela and Colombia. In 1777 the General Captaincy of Venezuela was formed and made Cúcuta a border town, although only between two colonial administrative regions rather than two countries. That changed in 1817 when Simón Bolívar established the (contested) Venezuelan Republic. In 1821, the constitution of Cúcuta was signed and brought into being the mega-state of Gran Colombia that, like the viceroyalty, included both Venezuela and Colombia. One can still visit the ruins of the church five minutes from the Venezuelan border where this historic document was signed and until recently it was even a busy vending spot for *pimpineros*. Cúcuta was once again no longer on a border but situated historically and socially right in the centre of a grand, modern republic. After a war with Peru and fighting between centralists and federalists, the dream of Bolívar fell apart and in 1831 Gran Colombia disbanded leaving more or less the borders we know today. This separated the two republics and made Cúcuta a border city yet again (LaRosa and Mejía 2017; Meléndez Sánchez 2016).

Cúcuta has always been floating somewhere between frontier borderland and central state-core, the border that defines it existing ephemerally in various intensities throughout its history. The cultures of the region, that is Departamento de Norte de Santander (Colombia) and Estado Táchira (Venezuela), are markedly similar most obviously in language and food. People here often feel as having more in common with each other than with citizens from their own countries, it goes some way to explain a neighbourly culture of contraband. Moving away from a life of smuggling is not just about vocational retraining, dismantling gangs or dispersing vendors with brute force, but changing a cross border culture that goes back to times before the border existed. As

Simón Bolívar said of the river Táchira when uniting Gran Colombia, ‘this is a river, not a border!’

Against the wishes of Bolívar, the border is currently probably the hardest it has ever been in its history and there are increased attempts by security forces on both sides to prevent smuggling and control the movement of people. Although logistically impossible for the state to control the whole border, Migration Colombia and the Venezuelan National guard have a huge active presence at the legal crossing points. However, in statist discourse on illegal flows of contraband, there is a pre-disposition to place all of the agency on the flows themselves. The flows,

...are described as permeating borders, subverting border controls, penetrating state territories, seeking markets, and finding customers. Borders, on the other hand, are presented as passive, vulnerable, and reactive. Whatever changes occur at state borders are in response to proactive, indeed aggressive, attempts by proponents of illegal flows to violate them (van Schendel and Abraham 2005, 40).

However, the border is just as dynamic and processual as the ‘flows’ of contraband. The border agencies are not just merely posted on a one-dimensional border line that lies at the margins of the nation. They instead operate throughout the state territory and actively engage with those who have transgressed the sanctity of the border. Amongst the many illegal crossing routes controlled by paramilitaries, there are only two legal crossing points in Cúcuta that are maned by customs and migration authorities. But as we see with Osman’s three-day long journeys with illicit goods, contraband is being seized by agencies operating throughout the region. And it is not just that these processes are happening throughout the borderlands, but that they are processes augmented by non-state actors. The paramilitaries who control the illegal crossing routes are not making the border more permeable but rather tightening access for financial gain and in the process reinforcing the nations boundaries. In transport terminals throughout the region, bus operators scared of losing their licence act as proxy migration officers by kicking Venezuelans who do not have the right documents to travel further into Colombia off the bus. Osman had his cargo seized at times by both police and paramilitaries. The police, especially POLFA are often described by informants as ‘just another gang.’ Are these not cases of the border, not only being enforced within the nation state, but also by non-state actors? If anything, the border is defended and maintained more so in the border region than on the borderline itself. The ethnography (and history) shows we should be envisioning a borderland area that has a border line as its primary structuring foundation while at the same time being careful not to reify the borderland we delineate, lest we partake in an act of statist cartography ourselves. We must be careful not to make our ‘borderlands appear like replicas of the nation states they circumscribe’ (Piliavsky 2013, 40).

Insurgent Citizenship

If we take Sian Lazar’s cue to view informal trade unionism through the lens of citizenship we see a citizenry’s bottom up attempt to claim full access to their rights as citizens, by using the social-forms and radical-practices of syndicalism to make themselves visible, legible and accessible to state powers (Lazar 2012a; Lazar 2012b). I

argue that an ethnography of community organising and citizenship claim-making, what James Holsten calls 'insurgent citizenship' (Holsten 2013), avoids the unnecessary a priori assumptions that occur when one traces the state's projections of power outwards to its peripheral margins and planting one's ethnographic enquiry in zones of presumed state weakness.

A simple definition of citizenship would describe it as membership in a political group but is also 'constituted through a set of practices associated with participations in politics' and is 'something that cannot be assumed to exist but that must be created' (Lazar 2013, 6). Aihwa Ong further emphasises the importance of creating political subjectivities, considering 'citizenship a cultural process of "subject-ification," in the Foucauldian sense of self-making and being-made by power relations' (Ong *et al.* 1996, 737). This is a process of citizen-making that can be 'analysed through the exploration of a series of encounters between people and state officials of policy' (Lazar 2013, 10). In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott claims that the state is in effect blind and has developed techniques to make its citizens 'legible' and ultimately 'controllable' (Scott 1999). I think that citizenship claim-making is in many ways similar, but it is the citizens themselves who wish to become visible to the state. In the context of the social movements of Latin America, and especially the trade unions of Cúcuta, the concept of 'insurgent citizenship' rings most true as a description of the processes taking place (Holston 2013). It sees the citizen/partial-citizen as having a degree of agency to decide the definition of their own citizenship through their political and social organising. Movements of insurgent citizenship are concerned with 'people largely excluded from the resources of the state and are based on social demands that may not be constitutionally defined but that people perceive as entitlements of general citizenship' (Holston 2013, p.96).

This very much describes *pimpinero* syndicates whose representatives claim unfairly being locked out of state welfare and unfair police persecution, despite no other modes of employment existing. Their movement to get the government to provide education and vocational retraining is in part thanks to the strange situation in Norte de Santander where totally legal trade unions (ratified by the Ministry of Work) exist for a trade that is totally illegal, while at the same time receiving state funded armed security. The mayor's office along with the chamber of commerce works with the *pimpineros* to create small business ideas that they can turn into profitable cooperatives and the police use public relations resources to help publicise the projects. As Holston says, 'the organization of these demands into social movements frequently results in new legislation, producing unprecedented participation of new kinds of citizens in making law and even in administering urban reform and local government' (Holston 2013, 96).

In the early 2000's, there existed eleven trade unions and associations that represented the interests and rights to work of *pimpineros*. Around 2005, these associations grouped together to form Cooperativo Multiactivo de Pimpineros de Norte Santander (COOMULPINORT), the bigger, more successful competitor to SINTRAGASOLINA. Like SINTRAGASOLINA, COOMULPINORT was active in negotiations to develop the *Programa de Reconversión Sociolaboral*. Unlike SINTRAGASOLINA, it is itself a cooperative that runs *legal* petrol stations that sell *legal* Colombian petrol. It has about a 50% share of this market and all profits go back into benefits for its members such as

education and healthcare. To be a member of any of these organisations you firstly cannot belong to any other similar organisation and you must have been officially registered as a *pimpinero* by the census of 2015. In this sense, *pimpinero* is as much a legal classificatory category as the better known *victima* or *desplazado*. Many *pimpineros* are also displaced persons or victims, often taking up petrol due to losing their jobs or land due to. This is not a rebellious evasion of the state but rather making themselves visible to the state through community organisation, ‘insurgent citizenship’. A population that was once seen as wholly illegal is now seen as a vulnerable population just as deserving of help as others. There is a mimicking of these official forms that allows for channels of communication with the state and self-representation. These social forms that they choose to adopt project an image outwards. From branded vests, to smartly printed vending spot plaques, to official membership cards, all of this produces an aura of authenticity that contributes to their actual authenticity. It mimics state institutions and already established organisations.

Interesting parallels can also be drawn between the Cocalero movement in Putamayo that is chronicled by María Clemencia Ramírez’s ethnography *Between the Guerrillas and the State*. A social movement of coca growing *campesinos* that formed unions, demanding to be seen as more than criminals and claim help from the state in transitioning to legal activities. Ramírez argues that rather than being counter hegemonic, the Cocaleros wish to partake in the hegemonic process of citizenship and democracy and thus, ‘autonomy, far from being incompatible with hegemony, is a form of hegemonic construction’ (Ramírez 2011, 9). The movement, ‘sought to interact with and exert its influence on the hegemonic state discourse of democracy’ (Ramírez 2011, 10). In this sense, the *pimpineros* are very much the same, that is to say they are not revolutionaries but instead want to take part in civic life with the benefits of citizenship. What sets the *pimpineros* apart from the Cocaleros is both central and local government’s willingness to collaborate with them. As the chief police commander of the border regions told me, ‘if we arrested everyone working with petrol, there would be no one in Cúcuta left.’

Conclusion

This article has attempted to describe how petrol vendors, transporters and smugglers conceptualise the state and how they negotiate and interact with what they see as state actors. As the War of Canudos and its novelisation by Vargas Llosa showed us, the state core and periphery is a mythic component of the Latin American state (Vargas Llosa 1981; da Cunha and Putnam 1944). As well as being a myth deployed by the state itself in ideological self-justifications (Ramírez 2015; Tate 2015). However, this provides an uncomfortable theoretical premise for anthropologists. In seeking to do anthropology in the margins of the state, anthropologists are taking the margin-centre mythic dichotomy and ideology as a theoretical given rather than a premise to be validated through ethnography. Anthropologists are also at risk of conforming to a neo-Hobbesian world view, as well as blurring distinct theoretical concepts (states of exception, state-failure, borderlands, frontiers, social marginality etc.) into a hodgepodge of marginal thinking. My research thus does not claim to be situated in a zone of state failure or margins, rather it focuses on people who through the quotidian life of running contraband, community organising and ‘insurgent citizenship’ (Holston 2013) come to encounter,

navigate, evade and negotiate with what they claim to be the state and give form to a borderland concept populated with a network of various sovereign actors.

The Battle of Canudos can give us a final metaphor to understand the borderlands of Cúcuta. When the battle-weary soldiers returned home to Rio after defeating the millenarian uprising, they had nowhere to stay. They found a hill outside of the city where they set up camp. It reminded them of a hill they had camped on while at war that they had dubbed ‘favela hill’ due to its infestation of a weed with that name. Thus this populated hill in Rio became baptised as the first favela (Cath 2012; McGuirk 2014). This story that recounts a modern Latin American state’s formative years and early military forays also has contained in it the birth of something wholly non-modern and informal: the favela settlement. Not modernism but essential to and a product of it. The barbarian apposite to civilization. States cannot be easily divided into zones of core or margin as much as the economy of Cúcuta cannot be divided into informal and formal. The relationship the *pimpineros* have with what they perceive as the state and other armed groups shows that the boundaries between illicit and licit, illegal and legal, state and non-state are often fuzzy, if not non-existent, and certainly do not exist on a ‘clear continuum’ (Lazar 2012a, 16). As governments, national boundaries and regimes change the definition of smuggling changes too. A *pimpinero* works in a trade that is illegal but licit, at times semi-formalised or with bodyguards provided by the state, and at other times connected with a far murkier paramilitary underworld. The very concept of illegality is a “floating, kaleidoscopic phenomenon, continually changing in response to shifting circumstances and opportunities’ (Daniels 2004, 503).

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