

Ambivalent desires: State formation and dispossession in the face of climate crisis

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we analyze the politics, experiences and dynamics of state formation in a particular context of climate crisis. Through the study of the implementation of state-led adaptation and mitigation projects in two rural localities of northern Colombia, we interrogate the ways in which these interventions shape the everyday lives of those who happen to be located in the targeted areas. We found that, in spite of the different goals and particular configurations of the adaptation and mitigation interventions, these climate projects engendered the same contradiction. They promised a resilient and environmentally sound future, but the path towards that future has not been available to everyone. Furthermore, we show that the subjects of climate interventions do not embrace state promises in the same way. Local expectations, desires and engagement with the state are ambivalent and heterogeneous, and cannot be taken as a given. This paper develops these ideas by way of three arguments. First, we argue that exclusion, dispossession and marginality are inherent to the promises of climate mitigation and adaptation in the cases we study in the Colombian Caribbean. Secondly, the goals of state-led adaptation and mitigation programs we study are at odds with the material and social conditions of the areas of implementation. And thirdly, paying attention to the dynamics of state formation in the Colombian Caribbean in relation to climate change challenges common binaries opposing state absence/presence, failure/success, and retreat/return.

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Introduction

In 2010, Colombia experienced one of the most dramatic disasters in its recent history. Record-breaking rains associated with the intensification of La Niña phenomenon caused catastrophic flooding across the country and created a profound socio-environmental crisis. More than 300 people died and the official direct victims reached 2 million (Semana, 2010; see also; Alsema, 2010). Thousands of families lost their homes and means of subsistence, rural and urban infrastructures collapsed, and thousands of hectares of productive land were submerged. Officially considered to be a consequence of global climate change, this crisis also set the stage for the advent of new state formations. A myriad of

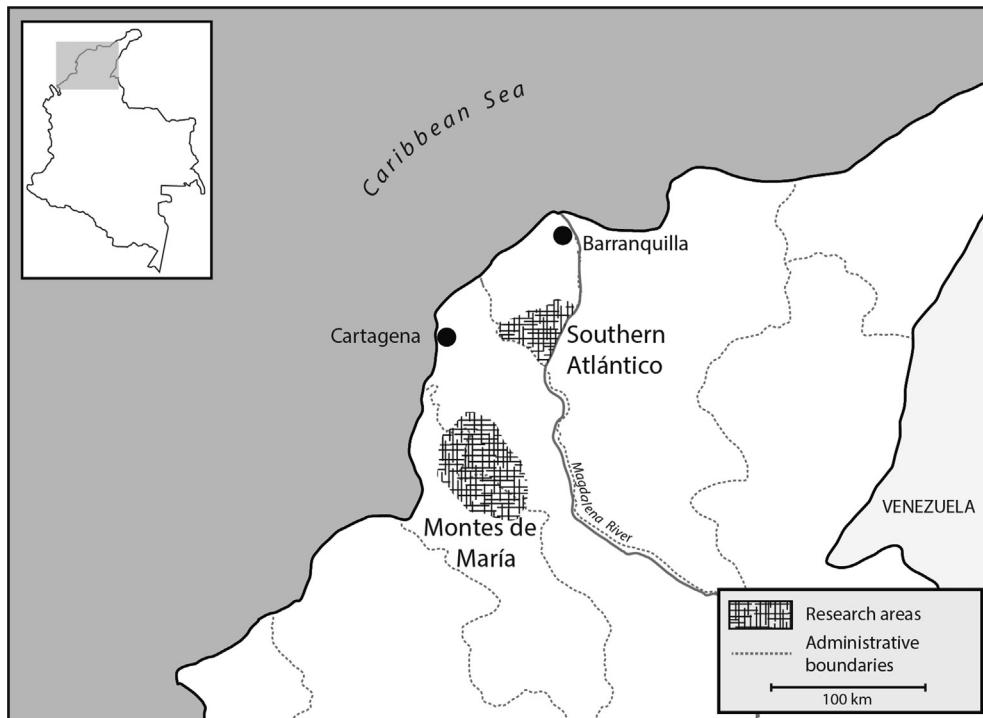
state practices, discourses and interventions were reconfigured in the aftermath of the 2010 catastrophe, including: costly state-led projects in the name of mitigation and adaptation to climate change; the incorporation of climate issues in rural and urban development agendas; and the creation of official cartographies of risk, vulnerability and climate-sensitive ecosystems.

In this article, we delve into the politics, experiences, and dynamics of state formation at this particular conjuncture of climate crisis. We interrogate how the implementation of specific state projects intended to tackle this crisis shape the everyday lives of those who happen to be located in the areas of intervention. In order to study this issue, we focus on mitigation and adaptation initiatives, the two “principal policy approaches to global climate change” (Jennings, 2011, p. 238). We examine the particular concretions of state “presence” and “absence” in the implementation of climate mitigation and adaptation projects in two rural localities of the Colombian Caribbean region [Map 1]. The first locality, Southern Atlántico, was the most dramatically affected area by the La Niña phenomenon in 2010. As a consequence, it became a priority zone for post-disaster adaptation programs. The second locality,

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Map 1. Southern Atlántico and Montes de María subregions in the Colombian Caribbean.

Montes de María, has been constructed by official and public discourse as a post-conflict region where rural development programs have successfully addressed climate mitigation challenges, thereby establishing a promising green economy. In spite of their different goals and particular configurations, these climate policies engender the same contradiction. They promised a resilient and environmentally sound future, but the path towards that future has not been available to everyone. Exclusion and marginality, as we explain in this chapter, are inherent to the promises of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Our analysis of state interventions in these areas, therefore, exposes the tensions and contradictions that underlie new state formations in the face of global climate change.

We will develop three arguments. First, we argue that state promises of a resilient solution to the crisis are ironically predicated on the dispossession of rural populations. As our case studies show, the resulting *subtle* and *everyday* forms of dispossession make a case for understanding dispossession, not only as a precondition for capitalist accumulation, but also as an “ensuing, derivative condition of enforced deprivation of land, rights, livelihood, desire, or modes of belonging” (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 5). Second, the goals of state-led adaptation and mitigation programs are at odds with the material and social conditions of the areas of implementation. The state maintains this discrepancy through the production of fictitious scenarios of prosperity and welfare that link both the local and the global in very problematic and unrealistic ways. Third, the usual binaries through which the role of the state is understood in relation to climate change, and to nature more broadly, -absence/presence, failure/success and retreat/return—stand at odds with the necessity to closely understand particular state formations. For example, notions of the return of the state in a time of climate crisis implicate a prior moment of state absence, which does not account for the dynamics of state formation in the Colombian Caribbean. Rather, the advent of the climatic state is yet another moment in a longer history of continuous state interventions that oscillate between success and failure.

The rest of the paper will be organized in five parts. The first section clarifies our approach to the state in the context of the climate change crisis, focusing on the potential of an ethnographic approach to the study of state formations. The second and third parts will explore a post-disaster adaptation scheme, as well as the fictions, contradictions, and discrepancies of a mitigation project, respectively. The fourth part is a historical and ethnographic reflection on the ways in which people imagine and experience the state, often juxtaposing nostalgic memories of a prosperous past with the uncertain and gloomy futures of climate change programs. The last part will provide some concluding remarks on the contradictory dynamics of state desires in the face of climate crisis.

Approaching the state

Our understanding of mitigation and adaptation projects in the Colombian Caribbean region draws on a dialogue between local experiences of the state and the critical literature on processes of state formation and their connections to particular productions of nature. By state formation, we refer here to the geographical configurations and the historical continuum along which the practices, discourses, symbols, and languages of the state are constantly made and remade (Corrigan, 1994; Eilenberg, 2012; Hansen & Stepputat, 2001). We approach nature and the state, therefore, as multiscalar continually emerging and historically contingent realities (Whitehead, Jones, Jones, 2006: 14), and discuss how a “climatized nature” (Ulloa, 2012: 17) becomes an important locus of state formation (Asher & Ojeda, 2009). Through an ethnographic approach, we turn our attention to the multiple and concrete ways in which the/a national state—as personified and crystallized in government officials, institutions, development programs and post-disaster interventions—is experienced by local populations in their everyday lives. In doing so, we trace the concrete ways in which state imaginaries and practices undermine the unified version of what the state is or should be.

Although we are aware that, as Gupta suggests, “the state is

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