Angela Hobart and Bruce Kapferer (eds.) *Contesting the State: The Dynamics of Resistance and Control*. Wantage: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2012. Pp viii + 297, £59.99 (Hc.), ISBN 978-1-907774-13-3.

*Contesting the State* brings together a set of political anthropologists who seek to move beyond what they perceive to be an excessive state-centrism in recent anthropological studies of politics and society. The introductory essay argues that such studies tend to be, following the writings of Michel Foucault, ‘strongly European and North American centered’, ‘individualist’ and ‘power-centered’ (pp. 2-3). Instead, this volume advocates the paths taken by Pierre Clastres in taking ‘segmentary lineage and stateless societies’ seriously in their own terms and by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in delineating intertwined ‘state and war machine dynamics’ in all societies (pp. 3, 6). Following such an approach, any society may be studied in terms of meaningful sociocultural processes that arise when vertical state and horizontal war machine dynamics interact in different ways. An exclusive focus on state dynamics thus misses out ‘non-state disciplinary practices’ (p. 8) that exist in modern nation-state and stateless societies alike.

The primary strength of this volume lies undoubtedly in its careful sifting and analysis of sociocultural meanings and processes immanent in non-Western settings such as the Amazon basin and Sub-Saharan Africa. The cosmologies of kingship in Rwanda, Nepal, and Sri Lanka are thus seen to undergird the dynamics of state formation and civil war in those societies. An additional strength is its emphasis on the social bases of power across chapters. One learns, for example, of the kinship networks and alliances that lay at the heart of the Ba’athist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and presently shape local responses to the US invasion in that country. Taken together, *Contesting the State* promises a new approach to study states and societies beyond abstract structuralist formalisms such as power and hierarchy.

Nonetheless, the contributions to this volume frequently fail to do justice to its theoretical ambition. The time-worn problems of cultural essentialism and the reproduction of colonial perspectives, in particular, seep into a number of essays. For instance, T.M.S. Evens’ essay on the Nuer refines the earlier work of late colonial British anthropologists Meyer Fortes and E.E. Evans-Pritchard, who described the Nuer as a classic acephalous society with power distributed democratically throughout the social body. In asserting the ‘ontological priority of holistic identity’ over ‘self-identity’ (p. 31), Evens falls into an old trap of effacing individual selves and reifying a bounded notion of culture that has long been discredited. Equally problematic is Evens’ tendency to follow Fortes and Evans-Pritchard in effacing histories of colonial state formation and anti-colonial insurgency among the Nuer. It is as if all Nuer live in utter isolation from the rest of the world, including the ethnographer’s own milieu.

These problems of essentialism and reproducing colonial views of non-Western societies are amplified in Hosham Dawod’s essay on ‘tribalism’ and power in Iraq. In Ba’athist Iraq, Dawod claims, the ‘non-modernity’ of ‘tribal and ethnic sentiments’ have coexisted with modernity, ‘imbricated with each other and intimately combined’ (pp. 88-89). It is not clear why ‘tribal and ethnic sentiments’ are non-modern when, in fact, these forms of social organization have been fostered by colonial regimes in dialogue with indigenous elites in Asia and Africa. The existing literature critiquing the colonial notion of ‘tribe’ is vast. In the context of the Middle East and North Africa, Talal Asad has masterfully shown that the social-scientific penchant for seeing ‘tribes’ as primordial sociopolitical units simply perpetuates the colonial view of these societies. An analysis of kinship networks and alliances underlying state power in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or elsewhere, however useful, need not revive older colonial stereotypes.

These problems in specific essays point to a more general paradox in *Contesting the State*. On the one hand, the introductory essay states a desire to move beyond recent Euroamerican scholarship that has been purportedly tied to social scientific agendas that take the modern nation-state as a universal social form (pp. 1-3). On the other hand, however, the remaining essays focus on ‘diverse ethnographic contexts outside Europe and North America’ and reproduce older European, including colonial, understandings of non-Western societies. What emerges from the ethnographic vignettes in the volume is, above all, a portrait of the exotic in different guises. The anthropology of the exotic may certainly serve useful political and intellectual ends in Europe and North America, challenging spurious claims of a universal rationality embedded in Western political norms and practices. Evidently, the likes of Pierre Clastres and Edmund Leach, cited favorably throughout the volume, sought to do exactly that. However, such an anthropology, regardless of its stated ambitions, is necessarily limited by its inability to transcend older stereotypes of non-Western Others and to critically interrogate its own modes and methods of thinking and theorizing about human societies worldwide.

The criticisms above should not, of course, discourage potential readers from engaging with the contents of this volume. It is a vital reminder for anthropologists to embed their ethnographic analyses of politics and society in the symbolic worlds in which their subjects are embedded. It is also a timely call for thinking through ‘different kinds of complexes of power’ and ‘different kinds of social and political organizations’ other than the ideal-typical modern nation-state. Yet *Contesting the State* also reveals the problems inherent in studies based on prior assumptions of a demythologized West and its exotic, enchanted non-Western Others. Its limitations should, nonetheless, push future political anthropologists to work towards conceptual vocabularies that cut across the reified divisions between the West and non-West and, in the postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty’s terms, provincialize the hyperreal Europe embedded in this volume.

*Uday Chandra is a Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen.*