

Scales of disaster: intimate social contracts on the margins of the postcolonial state

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Scales of disaster: Intimate social contracts on the margins of the postcolonial state

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Abstract

Geographical scholarship highlights social contracts as a valuable lens on the dynamic and contested balance of rights and responsibilities between risk governance players. We apply this lens to post-disaster response and reconstruction, which provides an ‘analytical window’ to better understand the types of relationship frameworks between the state and its citizens in postcolonial contexts. Using two post-disaster contexts, Mindanao in southern Philippines and the Andaman Islands in southern India, we uncover intimate social contracts on the margins of the postcolonial state. The article complicates structural scalar analysis of state–citizen relations, arguing that respondents in our field sites do not engage at a ‘local’ level with a sub-national social contract or at a ‘national’ level with a central social contract. Rather our empirical work demonstrates that intimate social contracts are found in the intertwining of central government policy, personal relationships and organisational abilities of local community leaders.

Keywords

geography, India, Philippines, place, space, state–citizen

The disciplines of anthropology and geography have long recognised that disasters ‘provide researchers a unique opportunity’ (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, 1999) or ‘analytical windows’ (Siddiqi, 2019) to understand wider societal organisation and political priorities (see: O’Brien et al., 2009; Pelling and Dill, 2010). While anthropologists have

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often looked to answer questions of cultural response, resistance and adaptation in the aftermath of disasters (Barrios, 2017), human geography has emphasised the politics of risk construction (e.g. O'Brien, 2012; Pelling, 1997; Wisner et al., 2004) to illustrate how disasters are not 'natural', but the outcome of political choices. This article argues that social contracts are an area of study where the interests of anthropologists and geographers in the politics of disasters converge, and which deserves further attention. As moments when underlying societal vulnerabilities are laid bare, disasters wedge open the imagery of coherent and/or consistent social contracts to reveal the messy 'who is responsible for what' in different contexts of risk and adaptation governance (Blackburn and Pelling, 2018). Thus they enable a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the ways in which rights and responsibilities of governance actors and citizens are lived and negotiated.

This article uses disasters as an 'analytical window' to explore the way social contracts are lived and experienced at a familiar, intimate scale. Examining two distinct disasters at the margins of the postcolonial state, we demonstrate that the most formative and meaningful social contract, assigning rights and responsibilities within society, cannot be assumed to lie with the formal, central state. Neither is this state–citizen social contract negotiated entirely in the domain of informal politics. Rather, we demonstrate through our ethnographies that an *intimate social contract* shaping everyday life emerges where informal local relationships interact with the multi-scaled infrastructure of formal state governance. The article demonstrates this intersection of formal and informal governance, moving beyond a view of social contracts as dualistic relations between distinct entities at discrete scales (e.g. between 'national' state and 'local' communities). Rather, the article demonstrates that social contracts must be understood as multiplicitous, blurry and dynamic webs of social interactions, lived and breathed in the everyday yet shaped and contoured by political relationships at all scales.

Drawing on evidence from Mindanao in southern Philippines and the Andaman Islands in southern India, we illustrate the need to recognise contextual sensitivity, tensions between different governance actors, and the multiple, intersecting exercise of different forms of power that produce what we call the intimate social contract. In so doing our argument outlines an approach to understanding lived social contracts that engages critically with questions of scale and place – both conceptually and methodologically – and, in constructing these embodied and felt political relations, also brings in anthropological approaches (Laszczkowski and Reeves, 2015). Taking the argument made in the introduction (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson, 2022, this volume) forward we recognise that unlike classical contractarianism, which was far more than a perceived state–citizen contract and rather a form of voluntary societal organisation, its appropriation by contemporary development discourses focuses exclusively on one perceived overarching state–citizen contract. In this article we deconstruct this idea, illustrating that a single and overarching conceptualisation of social contracts obscures the messy realities and politics of scale. Instead we draw attention to the lived experience of citizens negotiating with different kinds of governing actors, at different times and for different purposes, deriving power in different ways and at varying scales. Thus, emphasising a multitude of different 'formal' and 'informal' arrangements that are experienced simultaneously as part of an

intimate social contract. In particular, we highlight that although the immediacy of local relations can render the influence of the central state invisible (at least in the way local residents feel and articulate the powers shaping their everyday life), in fact the central state often contours and enables these local relations for political purposes.

The article is divided into five main sections. In the first, we present the analytical framing of the argument and in the second the contributions from postcolonial experience. This is followed by the two ethnographies from Mindanao in southern Philippines and the Andaman Islands in southern India to illustrate the intimate social contract lived and experienced on the margins of the postcolonial state. Fieldwork in the Philippines was done over three months between February and September 2017, in two *Puroks*¹ in the same *Barangay*,² in the Compostela Valley Province in southeastern Mindanao. In the Andaman Islands the fieldwork was conducted over three months in 2014 and includes observations during a follow-up visit in 2018. The article concludes by reflecting on the cases and the contribution of place and scale to understanding how the social contract is intimately lived and experienced.

Social contracts and disasters

Disasters are not ‘natural’ (Wisner et al., 2004) but rather ‘deeply, deeply political’ processes (Olson, 2008). Disasters lay bare underlying development failures and disparities, for example through uneven geographies of vulnerability and impact, or unequal access to post-disaster aid and rehabilitation (Wisner et al., 2004). Disasters thus provide critical moments that strip layers of ‘semantic, symbolic and process cover’ to expose the agendas and priorities of ‘authorities, governments and entire regimes’ (Olson, 2008: 167). The magnification of these failures, at a time of extreme material loss and personal grief on the part of affected persons, can test public faith in the adequacy of sovereign protection and widen the perceived gap between de facto and de jure protections (Blackburn, 2018; Pelling and Dill, 2010). If social contracts are understood to be the legitimising ground on which political authority is established (Hickey, 2012), then disasters provide that window of opportunity to study how this political authority is exercised, experienced and felt by citizens on the margins of the postcolonial state.

This article engages a geographical emphasis on scale and place as important analytical lenses to understand the ways in which political relations and state–society encounters are surfaced by disasters, and what these encounters say about social contracts. Thus, we build on previous scholarship that highlights that ‘for the anthropology of the state disaster situations provide unique opportunities to dissect conventional images of the state as a huge, powerful and monolithic entity’ (Sökefeld, 2015). Our aim here is not to assess the perceived success or failure of the state in its interactions with citizens, but rather ‘our interest lies in how people imagine their relationship with each other and the state’ (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson, 2022, this volume) and the ways in which this is lived and experienced on the margins of the postcolonial state.

The post-disaster context allows for a complex understanding of specific kinds of ‘statist encounters’ (Sharma and Gupta, 2006) that shape social contracts in people’s everyday lives. These encounters with the state are fragmented and differentiated; when

and how the state ‘comes into view’ is highly subjective (Corbridge et al., 2005: 7). Those on the margins of the postcolonial state – the poor, the marginalised – inhabit ‘the rough and tumble worlds of political society, where governmental agencies are met by wit and by stealth, and not uncommonly by violence’ (2005: 1–2). Following Das and Poole (2004), we reject the idea of a ‘universal state form’ and deliberately explore the ‘disorder that seem[s] to inhabit the margins of the state’ (2004: 6). It is the lived experience of the state close to home that is of particular relevance here, and the intimately felt social contract such experiences can generate. Hence our interest is not in the processes through which governance is conditioned and executed, but rather the affective experience and performance of social contracts from the ‘inside’. Thus we argue that the relationship with the postcolonial state is lived at the margins, in encounters that blur structural scalar divides of ‘local’ or ‘national’. While recognising that this is not an entirely novel concept – anthropologists have long argued that the state is not universal – the contribution of this article is to bring this relational scalar construction of the state into the framework of the social contract.

Our approach emphasises the affective power of encounters with power-holders and entitlement-protectors (broadly defined), as they are experienced from the ground up. We examine how social contracts – lived through formal state functions *and* informal, personal relationships – may coexist with and contradict, while also drawing legitimacy from, ‘expected’ forms of conditioned governance. Our ethnographic evidence epitomises this in the figure of community leaders, who are expected to provide state-like functions *instead* of the official state, while also being put in these positions of power through formal, legal channels.

Through this analysis we also consider the scaled dimensions of social contracts. We draw on the politics of scale literature in geography, which emphasises the constructed, fluid and unstable nature of scaled power (Marston, 2000; Sheppard and McMaster, 2004; Swyngedouw, 2004). In particular, the argument extends scholarship on environmental governance as a vehicle for the reproduction and manipulation of scaled power (Lebel et al., 2005; Sage et al., 2015). For example, in the context of disasters, Blackburn (2014) demonstrates the processes through which ostensibly decentralised formal governance structures are ‘used, distorted, and shaped’ by disaster management actors in ways that retain power at the centre. The power wielded at a particular scale, then, is not inherent but produced and enabled through political relationships (Delaney and Leitner, 1997).

Drawing on this, we understand intimate social contracts as a tangible, affective product of governance and politics at all scales as they ‘touch down’ in everyday life. Methodologically, this article emphasises the embodied experience of power and authority from the bottom up, rather than taking formal scaled governance infrastructure as its analytical starting-point. Connecting scholarships on the politics of scale and social contracts – from a twinned geographical-anthropological perspective – contributes to a thickening of understanding how ‘sovereign’ power forms, operates, and is exercised over populations (see for instance Hansen, 2005). The article demonstrates that people do not experience the state as a discrete, overarching sovereign; rather, the relationship that citizens form with the state is experienced as diffuse, unexpected, multiple and overlapping.

Our aim in this article is to move beyond a normative understanding of social contracts in the classical philosophical tradition, where the existence of a state–society contract is seen to be a ‘good thing’, bringing order to the anarchic state of nature (Hickey, 2012). Rather we are interested in how social contracts are experienced at the intimate scale and how they structure and embody power on the margins of the postcolonial state. Keating (2011) has highlighted the Eurocentric nature of classical social contract thinking, which emerged within a particular social and political moment in 17th- and 18th-century western Europe. This work explores the egalitarian potential of the ‘postcolonial social contract’ – paralleling the works of feminists such as Pateman on the sexual contract, or critical race theorists such as Mills on the racial contract (Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson, 2022, this volume). At the same time, emerging literature on disasters and postcolonial social contracts shows that the feelings of inequality experienced by citizens on the margins of the state demonstrate the resilience and malleability of these contracts (Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018).

Social contracts and the postcolonial state

Social contracts are said to have been ‘rarely well operationalised’ to examine state–society relations empirically in, or across, countries (Loewe et al., 2020). Evidence on imaginaries and experiences of social contracts in distinctly postcolonial contexts – a discrete set of circumstances that include a colonial legacy, the shift from colonial social contracts to new social contracts following independence, and the aftermath of inequalities left by legacies of colonialism and neocolonialism – is particularly thin, thus making the study of social contracts in postcolonial contexts particularly salient. In many places, Western political theory and practice influenced the formation of political forms, including being imposed through colonialism – especially the emergence of the state as a society’s central organising principle.

Postcolonial societies subsequently appropriated these forms and remade them in their own cultural contexts. On one hand, ethnographies of the state emphasise that it is not a phenomena that can be objectively described; rather, ‘the state means different things to different people in different locales at different times’ (Siddiqi, 2019: 72–3). On the other hand, anthropologists also insist that the state should not simply be studied as a ‘cultural artifact in and of itself’ within its own borders, but rather examined through mechanisms of rule at different scales and spaces (Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 28). The social contract and the state may well be Western forms, but they are not merely copied; they have their own life in postcolonial contexts. Through the ethnographies from southern Philippines and South India, this paper uncovers the jostling co-construction of social contracts between local people and a range of ‘ruling’ powers: formal and informal, state and non-state.

The argument here draws on critical anthropological approaches on state theory and critical geographical approaches on the social construction of scale, to draw attention to an intimate scale where social contracts are negotiated and performed – enabling social contracts to ‘work harder as an analytical frame’ in empirical contexts (Blackburn and Pelling, 2018: 3).

The intimate social contract in eastern Mindanao

As part of fieldwork done in the mountainous eastern region of Mindanao in southern Philippines, respondents were regularly asked who they believed was responsible for providing them safety and security, especially from hazard-based disasters such as Typhoon Pablo (2012), which had devastated the region just a few years earlier. The response received most often is reflected in these statements: '(The) chairman, because he is the leader of the *Purok*' (Maria, August 2017). '*Barangay* captain, as he is head of this area' (Alfonso, August 2017). 'First the [*Barangay*] captain, then the [*Purok*] chairman. The chairman will go to the captain then the captain will go to the mayor, so that we can all be safe' (Toto, July 2017).³

In the Philippines, decentralisation and neoliberal reform went hand in hand in the 1980s and 1990s, after the end of two decades of the Marcos dictatorship (Ramalho, 2019). While some scholars have questioned the effectiveness of reforms at genuinely taking power away from Manila and re-distributing it at the grassroots level (Yilmaz and Venugopal, 2013), the creation of Local Governance Units (LGUs) resulted in devolution of power and greater political organisation at a *Purok* and *Barangay* level. This 'new' and apparently more democratic social contract with the national state is based on an understanding that *Puroks* are led by chairmen and *Barangays* by captains, even if, as some argue, community leaders have limited access to resources (Blair, 2000).

The motivation for engaging in these conversations with residents was to better understand the local construction of a social contract in a politically marginal and primarily Indigenous region of the Philippines. The most common understanding of social contracts within the classical tradition is that members of a group relinquish a degree of individual autonomy to gain protection from a wider collective that assumes some measure of responsibility for them (Trnka and Trundle, 2014). 'Protection', including safety and security from hazard-based disasters, is widely seen to be the responsibility of political authorities. As these conversations help to illustrate, however, citizens usually placed the burden of responsibility for basic security on community leaders, very occasionally mentioning municipal offices. None of the respondents ever referred to government bodies in either Davao⁴ or Manila as being responsible for their safety, as would be 'expected' in a conventional state–citizen social contract (see also Bowles, 2022, this volume), thus providing evidence of a social contract experienced in intimate geographies of scale.

In eastern Mindanao the social contract was experienced at a primarily local level, in the aftermath of disaster, and in almost no instance did interviewees invoke a larger central state. Across gender, age and ethnic lines, residents believed that providing security was among the fundamental 'rights and obligations' (Hickey, 2012) of leaders they were familiar with and recognised, rather than of an abstract entity – the state.

Scholars have argued that sub-national social contracts exist, at the provincial, county, or municipal level, in parallel with national state–citizen contracts (Loewe et al., 2020); and that during times of hazard-based disasters, local governments are increasingly mobilised, as part of decentralised disaster risk planning, to reach out to vulnerable citizens (Christoplos et al., 2017). This ethnography, however, complicates such an understanding

of a social contract that is either entirely local or national. Instead it demonstrates that social contracts experienced locally are produced across all levels of government. In so doing it also challenges structural understanding of scales, showing instead that scales are constructed across different levels and sizes, including of familiarity and proximity, to enable 'rights and obligations' associated with the social contract to be realised.

In eastern Mindanao, residents interviewed in this disaster-affected neighbourhood held their *Purok* chairman or *Barangay* captain as responsible primarily for the provision of safety and security. The chairman was aware of the terms of this 'contract' and validated its existence. In one conversation, he became very animated when talking about the pressures he faced as an elected and familiar community leader:

it is my responsibility to attend to the needs of my people. Even when the government does not do its job, it is on me to make people in the *Purok* safe, even before my family. Why? Because they trust me.

The chairman is not simply drawing on the powers of a central state to exert his authority and influence. Rather, he believes this is a responsibility he has to fulfil to residents who trust him, particularly because the state apparatus seems unable to deliver security and safety. When asked about disasters (*katalagman*) or typhoons (*bagyo*), other interviewees also regularly exclaimed they did not have any expectation that the government (*gobyerno*) would provide safety. These conversations usually ended with 'there is no one we can count on but the chairman', or, 'the only person we trust is the chairman'.

The discourse of residents demonstrates that the chairmen or the captains are being held accountable, not necessarily as representatives of the state, but rather *instead* of the state. A number of residents made this clear when they made comments similar to Koko, an elderly woman who had lived in the neighbourhood, who said:

the government could not help us because this area has never experienced a disaster such as Typhoon Pablo before. What could they do? Nothing (*wala*) ... This is why we have the chairman so that he can help the community during such calamities. We know him. He is a good man.

As part of this intimate social contract, residents of the *Purok* have 'rights and obligations' towards the chairman and this relationship is more formative in people's everyday life than any formal social contract with the central state.

The intimate social contract disappears the state

Towards the end of fieldwork in September 2017, on returning to the *Purok* one afternoon after being away for a couple of weeks, it was evident that some new construction was under way. It was the chairman's relatively new house, constructed under a post-disaster reconstruction scheme rolled out by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) in 2013 (see [Siddiqi and Canuday, 2018](#)), that was being extended in earnest. Builders and construction materials for this extension were clearly visible from most parts of the neighbourhood. The chairman was adding two rooms to his house, extending it onto

public land, in clear violation of municipal regulations. This particular housing community consisted of 90 houses constructed for families relocating from a nearby village devastated by Typhoon Pablo and declared a hazardous zone. Strict building regulations had ensured all houses were uniform and open spaces were evenly distributed between homes. It was, however, clear that, since all government inspections had been successfully completed, the chairman felt he could extend the construction of his house without any blowback from municipal authorities.

Over the next few days of data gathering, even though research participants were only able to be interviewed by shouting over the noisy new construction taking place, no one considered this extension worthy of mention in any subsequent conversation. It was a fairly natural and unremarkable occurrence for residents. The special privilege that the chairman was drawing on was evidently not strange for interviewees at all. It was implicit in the intimate social contract between residents and the chairman that he was entitled to the biggest house in the neighbourhood, in exchange for the work he did for local residents.

It was the central or formal state–citizen social contract that resulted in the Local Governance Code (LGC) of 1991 being passed to devolve power and increase the authority of community leaders, such as *Purok* chairmen and *Barangay* captains. The latter are therefore accountable to residents as a result of this decentralised system enacted by the state. At the same time, however, these individuals are not held responsible for basic security of residents as representatives of the state, but rather *instead* of the state; so instead of making the formal state more present in the lives of citizens, the intimate social contract here makes it disappear. The social contract thus creates a new scale of political engagement that connects local relationships and associations to national legal frameworks.

These chairmen and captains are elected and derive power from the formal state–citizen contract that commits to decentralised political systems for citizens. Yet, as illustrated in this case study, they remain politically important and relevant because at the margins of the state they are seen to deliver support to residents and fulfil their expectations, which the central state seems unable or unwilling to do. At the margins of the state the social contract is not experienced at a ‘local’ or ‘national’ level; rather it constructs a scale that is a mishmash of central government policy, personal relationships and organisational abilities of community leaders. At the same time, however, the social contract is not only felt when hazard-based events result in disasters, requiring state intervention, but also in the experience of daily and mundane interactions – such as marital disputes or maintaining law and order. The following ethnography demonstrates how the disaster makes legible this intimate social contract.

The intimate social contract in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

This ethnography focuses on the experience of a Telugu⁵ fishing community in South Andaman district, Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI). ANI is an archipelago of 572 islands (39 inhabited) located 1000 km east of the Indian mainland in the Bay of Bengal (Murthy, 2005) – a region badly affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Despite becoming part of India in 1950, the islands remain socially and politically marginal to the Indian state. They are politically distinct as a Union Territory with strong state influence and minimal democratic representation; and socially distinct in their mixed social-cultural composition, populated by migrants from all over India plus a number of indigenous tribes (Biswas, 2009; Zehmisch, 2011). The fishing community under study is inhabited by the descendants of 86 traditional fishing families brought from the mainland under resettlement programmes between 1957 and 1976 (Roychowdhury, 2011). Prior to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami the community lived in a village close to the beach; post-tsunami they were resettled collectively in a commune of 500 permanent shelters ('tsunami houses'), 2 km inland.

This new 'tsunami village', constructed in the ten years post-tsunami, has two distinct areas: 'up' and 'down' (so-called by local residents). 'Up' is inhabited by 'public workers', meaning those employed in government contracts (ranging from civil servants to construction workers), and a mix of ethno-linguistic groups (Bengali, Tamil, Ranchee, Malayalam, and others). 'Down' is inhabited solely by the Telugu fishing community – this area is the focus of the study. All households in 'down' originate from the same fishing village in Andhra Pradesh and the community is notable for its relative introversion and homogeneity, both in terms of regional origin and livelihood base. Unlike the typically heterogeneous social composition of other (non-tribal) settlements in the Andamans, this fishing village is more akin to Hindu caste-based kinship groups found on the mainland, and the Telugu fishers have a strong tradition of informal local governance.

The intimate social contract: traditional local governance

Despite the strong presence of the formal, central state across ANI, another social contract was felt to provide more direct forms of social security and protection by fishermen in the village: that of the traditional village council⁶ and parallel fisherwomen's council that govern village affairs. These networks operate akin to a traditional *panchayat* system on the mainland (Kruks-Wisner, 2011).

The fishermen's village council meets regularly and performs a range of social and financial security functions. Local residents explained that its roles include taking important collective decisions on behalf of the community, such as the timing and coordination of fishing, and operating a fund-raising system to support community members in times of need, such as emergency travel to the mainland or caring for sick relatives. The council also arbitrates and sets punishments for minor misdemeanours. The law-and-order role of the fishermen's *panchayat* (which includes, as in this case, divorce) was described by the fishermen's council president as follows:

Say you and your husband have a fight or some problem in your home, then you contact the President or Secretary of your village panchayat. Once you tell them they will try to clear it... The panchayat comes into play when there's some problem in your home and then they take decisions for that ... for reconciliation or separation and all that... The whole village has one panchayat.

Most significantly in terms of intimate social contracts, the village president explained that while the village system is not officially condoned by the *Gram Panchayat* (PRI) and local police, its authority is recognised and largely respected. Matters are referred outside the village only when necessary, for example due to in-fighting on the council. He described the relationship between the village council and PRI or police as follows:

Translator: The main panchayat of the village [Gram Panchayat] ... does it give the right to this [traditional] panchayat to take decisions? [Answer: No] But you do take decisions?

Answer: See, there is a difference between the two. Whatever problem we have, we don't go there ... outside, whatever problem is there, they go there to solve their problems. Since the time we came to Andaman, in fact since our forefathers' times in mainland, village politics work only this way ... so even after coming here we continue to run the same panchayat. No problems.

While the council will occasionally help to resolve conflicts in other villages for a fee, the fishermen do not have significant interaction with other communities: 'We're living in harmony [together] with everyone, but won't go to solve somebody else's problems' (fishermen's council president). The village demonstrates an intimate social contract with their kin, both within the village and connected to their village of origin on the mainland. The president explained that no other village on the island has a comparable system of self-governance.

The disaster made legible the intimate social contract

This intimate social contract was magnified post-tsunami via the assertion of the collective voice of the fishermen in the negotiation of their resettlement. Unusually, the fishermen were resettled as a cohesive block to 'down'. The fishermen's council also afforded them greater control over the specific allocation of housing; they negotiated a lottery process whereby two households could enter the lottery as one unit, avoiding the separation of joint families.

The data suggest that the fishing community in 'down' have remained relatively more socially cohesive compared to 'up' and other resettled villages nearby. The mixed communities in 'up' were allocated houses at random and often at significant distance from their agricultural land. Residents in non-fishing villages reported a 'loss of love' in their community, and a sense of no longer knowing their neighbours. One resident of a non-fishing village explained that:

Before the tsunami it was a different scenario, everyone stayed in one place, if anyone needed anything they could come running and get it, now that's not the case, even if someone dies there's no one to look [...] This is the story. Even if someone fights and gets hurt/dies no one goes to interfere. They won't try to stop the fight but see how they can increase the fights [meaning: fuel the fire]; they'll see from the side and carry on with their lives.

The relatively high social capital in ‘down’ was emphasised by one Telugu fisher family who had opted to be resettled with the ‘public workers’ in ‘up’. They described ‘up’ as a lonely place with little interaction, and lamented their decision to separate from the fishermen:

There’s no fun here [laughs] [...] Everyone [here] is just interested in themselves, their food, their work ... no visiting each other’s homes.... [...] It’s like the sky and the earth, it’s a lot of difference. Like, we go down to meet people from time to time, our relatives there. Here no one is ‘ours’; it is all languages and all castes together.

It must be noted that non-fishers living as a mixed community was not a new phenomenon post-tsunami; different languages, religions and castes lived close to each other both before *and* after the tsunami. The degree of social capital in ‘down’ is not a product of cultural homogeneity but of having been resettled as a collective. Collective resettlement has helped retain a sense of familiarity, freedom and solidarity from their previous village, reproducing a familiar sense of togetherness, wholeness and neighbourliness. ‘Up’, however, contains a diversity of people who were previously dispersed across the district, mixed together first in temporary housing and then again when they were finally resettled in permanent housing. As a result, while for fishermen their current spatial proximity has retained an existing geography close to home, for non-fishermen the process of resettlement has severed ties of familiarity and co-dependence, so that for them the same spatial proximity has generated alienation, frustration and mistrust.

The protection of pre-existing social capital in the collective resettlement of ‘down’ played an important role in protecting the internal governance structure. While the village’s physical geography of ‘home’ had changed, its inner social-political workings remained. This case illustrates the power of the village council to project a collective voice with which to mobilise group rights for the whole community. It is unclear whether or not this represents genuine consensus amongst all community members. Nevertheless, the material benefits leveraged by the fishermen (elaborated further below) via their governance structure is strongly indicative of contractarian thinking in their ‘political community’ (see [Burnyeat and Sheild Johansson, 2022](#), this volume): an intimate social contract based on relations of trust and co-dependency between individual households and the village council, and that between households.

The intimate social contract scaling up to the state

Both ethnographies illustrate the intertwining of the intimate social contract and the more formal political-institutional landscape within which they (co)exist. In South Andaman, at the time of research in 2014, the island-level head of the PRI (the *Pramukh*) was a former head of the fishing council. He was a popular leader – particularly among the fishermen – and had been in post for several years. This has several implications. First, his leadership affords the fishing community considerable political capital, since the fishermen tend to vote as a collective block. Being able to reliably mobilise this voting block is a significant boost in election times. Second, this political leverage very likely offers a level of formal

protection to the fishermen's informal, internal law-and-order system, without which it might not be permitted the same autonomy by police. This protection is aided further by the fact that the local administration – and ANI MP – belonged to the same political party; hence courting the favour of the fishermen is in the collective political interests of the formal government powers.

This case indicates the cross-cutting between traditional and formal governance and a form of state–citizen engagement that cannot be captured as either 'local' or 'national'. The fishermen's traditional government system is respected and trusted; however this is contingent on – supported and legitimised by – formal political connections. This is thus also indicative of the cross-cutting nature of social contracts. They are not exclusive nor self-contained; rather, informal leaders use their political connections with formal leaders to bolster their power, and vice versa. Yet it also indicates that formal leadership is by no means coincident with the way that lines of accountability are perceived and felt, and the degree of trust within the community itself. Those lines of power are constructed through far more ephemeral relations. These findings echo Hansen and Stepputat's observations around the messy, 'always emergent' nature of authority being continually moulded and formed particularly in postcolonial societies (2006: 295).

It is likely that the retention of political capital also enabled the village to leverage greater material gains than other communities during the reconstruction years. Residents in 'down' have made a range of individual modifications to their build-by-numbers 'tsunami houses', and by 2014 (five years after resettlement) there were a number of tea stalls, small shops and tailoring services run by (mostly) local women. A larger *chai* shop at the entrance to 'down' was a regular meeting spot for elderly residents and housewives. By 2018, they had constructed their own temple. In 'up', meanwhile, the only obvious meeting place was a child development centre, where parents dropped their children after school, with a far fewer number of small-scale enterprises.

This accelerated recovery trajectory can be attributed to a combination of political capital and external assistance. Both are enabled – at the same time strengthened by, and in themselves re-strengthening – the powerful intimate social contract that exists between 'down' residents and the fishermen's council that advocates on their behalf.

Social contracts and the politics of scale

Over the last twenty years there has been considerable work in human geography emphasising that the scale at which political action takes place is constructed by a complex set of processes and actions that cannot simply be labelled according to size or level (local, national or global) (Howitt, 2000). Since the 'central institutional locus of the political is the state', it has especially been argued that equating local politics with local branches of the state and national politics with central branches of the state is 'over-simplicity' (Cox, 1998). Instead, rather than taking (local/national/global) scale as a given, it should be understood as a way of framing different conceptions and understandings of the political (Delaney and Leitner, 1997).

In this article, the 'politics of scale' takes the form of competing political imaginations and an interplay between formal and informal governance forms. In eastern Mindano and

South Andaman, despite their marginality, a top-down central state exercises enough power to set the framework for citizen–authority interactions through local authorities and community leaders. This arrangement, reliant on traditional forms of governance and political community, works well for the national state as it conveniently places the responsibility for safety and security on individual leaders or informal relationships (see [Bowles, 2022](#), this volume) that assume culpability even when they have scarce access to formal channels of support at the political margins of the state. Yet this social contract also demonstrates that the leaders in these intimate geographies (still carrying significant responsibility) are at the same time able to make these spaces of engagement work for them by drawing on central state authority and local relationships. The state is known to construct ‘scales to accomplish particular policy results and political ends’ ([Judd, 1998: 34](#)). As demonstrated by these ethnographies, it is not just how scales are constructed but also recognising which scales are allowed to be constructed (and which are not) that is critical to an understanding of this intimate social contract. In Mindanao and South Andaman, the central state maintains its grip on power by contouring both formal (state) and informal (non-state) social contracts.

This article brings together the everyday interactions between states and citizens on the margins, from anthropology of the state, into conversation with scholarship on the lived experience of social contract at an intimate scale. It shows that social contracts are not ‘one size fits all’ and cannot be assumed to encompass all individuals equally; rather, and more commonly, social contracts are multiple, overlapping and contradictory. Despite the waning of classic contractarianism, social contracts remain relevant because of the questions they invite around the form, performance and leverage of social relationships in the everyday, and the malleability and contextuality of those relationships. Such questions are particularly vital in postcolonial contexts, to unpack the layers and contradictions between multiple forms of sovereignty and recognise the cultural specificity of political arrangements that shape unique intimate social contracts.

This article has used disasters as a window to demonstrate and complicate the scalar dimensions and complex ‘webbing’ of social contracts: how at once the central state–society social contract adapts to the local reality (in eastern Mindanao and South Andaman, through its absence), and the way intimate social contracts manifest and are lived and felt in the everyday. Evidence from Mindanao crystallised the fact that the reliance on local community leaders in the context of disasters has very high stakes – quite literally, life and death. While the resettlement of people to ‘up’ and ‘down’, and the difference between who settled where, made visible the formation of social contracts in a new place in South Andaman. Our empirical work thus highlights the ways in which people’s vulnerability to hazards makes them draw upon social contracts more evidently in post-disaster contexts.

Finally, analysing the politics of scale makes it possible to see clearly the ways in which the central state is able to evade its part of the social contract and pass its responsibility on to local actors, while contouring the extent and reach of their power. At the same time, these ethnographies also invite us to think of the feelings and perceptions local residents draw on to animate this intimately lived social contract, providing a framework for future work on the emotional geographies of social contracts.

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Notes

1. A *Purok* is the smallest unit of governance composed of a number of households with an average of 50 or more, depending on a particular geographical location or cluster of houses.
2. *Barangay* is the local term for *Barrio* (or neighbourhood).
3. The article uses pseudonyms throughout to ensure anonymity of all research participants.
4. The capital city of Mindanao.
5. Ethno-linguistic group originating from the state of Andhra Pradesh, South India.
6. This council was referred to by a range of names during interviews, likely a combined product of inconsistent translation and an apparent local reluctance to use the term 'traditional *panchayat*' (this can be a political term on the mainland). The terms 'village council' or 'fishermen's council' are favoured here. This gendering reflects its membership and leadership being exclusively male.

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