

Against Consensus? Anthropological Critique and the Deconstruction of International Water Policy

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Introduction: Alternatives

Participants in the *Alternative Water Forum* (AWF) hosted by the Bradford Centre for International Development in May 2003 raised a series of concerns about ongoing efforts to develop a global water ‘vision’ and coordinate international policy on water governance. In their summary of the AWF’s proceedings, Cleaver and Franks observed that although the ubiquity of some policy principles “lends support to the idea of a general water consensus... some of the principles of the consensus are contradictory, some rhetorical, [and] some contested” (2003b: 1). Indeed not only did many of the presenters in the AWF point this out, but they themselves also actively contested international water policy and its applications on a variety of conceptual, methodological and empirical grounds.

In this paper my modest aim is to provide an anthropological perspective on this debate: to examine the existing role of anthropological critique and to suggest how it might contribute further to an understanding of the issues that the contested ‘water consensus’ raises. Recent developments in anthropological theory and in particular the anthropology of policy provide ways of approaching the theory and practice of policy making that can be readily applied to international water policy. These ‘post-modern’ positions are not restricted to anthropology as an academic discipline: they originated outside of it and are already being applied to global water discourse by some development theorists and practitioners (e.g. Mehta 2000). They are, however, formulated most clearly in the anthropological literature, as are some of the problems that are associated with their application.

In addition to discussing these problems I will also attempt to draw out some of their implications for policy making. I should make it clear from the start that these are not presented as ways of filling particular ‘gaps’ in the ‘water consensus’, nor of bridging supposed divides between the theory and practice of international water policy. If anything they are more likely to work against consensus, widening existing gaps and opening up new ones. I will say more about this in the paper’s conclusion. First I will outline the history of anthropology and its development as a critical practice, necessary background to my discussion of the anthropology of policy in general and of international water policy in particular.

Anthropology as Critique

British social anthropology established itself as a discipline in the inter-war period by rejecting the evolutionism of its predecessors and accepting ‘participant observation’ and long-term fieldwork in another culture as its principal methodology. It matured when ‘comparative sociology’ was grafted onto an earlier ‘functionalism’ to form the ‘structural-functionalism’

that dominated mid-20th century anthropology in the English-speaking world (Kuper 1996). Its relation to colonialism was often awkward (Asad 1973), but it began to shake off its ahistorical approach in the years after the second world war when 'development' through 'modernization' became an international imperative. From the 1950s onwards anthropologists increasingly turned their attention to problems of social change in both rural and urban settings. The inherited method of 'fieldwork' put them in a good position to observe both resistance and innovation to change and so assess the impacts of development and other interventions.

Anthropologists and other researchers using related methods continue to play this role, though their influence has not been limited to studying the impacts of policy and related initiatives. In the 1960s and 1970s radical feminism and neo-Marxist dependency and modes of production theories led many anthropologists to question orthodox notions of modernization. This marked the first step in anthropology's conversion to critique, though it was rejected by many in the discipline's academic establishment. Anthropologists subsequently figured prominently in the 'women in development' (WID) and 'gender and development' (GAD) movements (Gardner and Lewis 1996). Although neo-Marxist theories ran into an impasse in the mid-1980s (Booth 1994), many anthropologists continue to work in and around the framework of 'globalization' and/or Wallerstein's 'world system' theory, one of the heirs of dependency theory.

The radical positions of the 1970s and early 1980s had a direct influence on the evolution of ideas of participation and empowerment and their incorporation into mainstream development practice. It is widely recognized that together with other disciplines anthropology provided both inspiration and basic techniques for the evolving participatory methodologies that are now the bread and butter of many development professionals (Chambers 1994): Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and then Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and more recently Participatory Learning and Action (PLA), to name only the best-known. As might be expected, anthropology is also playing a part in the current questioning of these methods (Cooke and Kothari 2001; IDPM 2003). Anthropology has therefore contributed not just to the examination of particular instances of policy implementation, but also to the formulation of development policy and the design of policy instruments, including tools for ensuring participation as well as monitoring and evaluating its impacts.

I have summarized this history here in order to make it clear that the international water policy debate has not escaped the influence of anthropology, conceived both as an academic discipline and as a wider domain of practice. Anthropologists, both academic and applied, are engaged in critiquing water policies and their implementation at different levels, and at least some of the papers presented at the AWF in 2003 reflected this influence (e.g. Mehta 2003). The work of David Mosse, for example, is widely cited: he has made important contributions to the ongoing debate about participation as well as producing a major study of water resources management in south India (Mosse 1994; 1995; 1997; 2003a; 2003b). I do not want to claim any special status for anthropology and anthropologists in this context, but simply to point to the role they play in research relating to water policy and its implementation. In the broader field of development studies and practice anthropologists frequently lose their disciplinary identity, while at the same time the concepts and methods of anthropology are freely employed by professionals trained in other disciplines - and vice versa.

The Anthropology of Development and the Anthropology of Policy

The relevance of anthropology, however, does not end here. The second step in anthropology's conversion to critique began in the 1980s when 'post-modern' theory and

approaches began to fill the gap left by the decline of neo-Marxist and other conventional forms of radical critique. ‘Post-modernism’ has become the catch-all label for “the wider cultural and epistemological rejection of modernity in favour of a broader pluri-cultural range of styles, techniques and voices, including the rejection of unitary theories of progress and scientific rationality” (Gardner and Lewis 1996: xv). One of its first impacts on anthropology, deriving largely from French ‘post-structuralist’ theory and its domestication by American literary and cultural critics, was to question accepted methodology by problematizing research practice and the production of ethnographic texts (Marcus and Cushman 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; James *et al.* 1997).

This ‘self-reflexive turn’ in anthropology was matched by the development of a more overtly historical and political tradition inspired by the work of Michel Foucault (e.g. Foucault 1970; 1977; 1978). Foucault’s influence on the human sciences including contemporary anthropology cannot be overstated. One of the key Foucauldian concepts is that of ‘discourse’, used in an extended sense to refer to a historically situated set of practices that produces and reproduces relations of knowledge and power. One of the early applications of Foucault’s ideas to cultural practice, Edward Said’s study of ‘Orientalism’ (1978), has had a significant impact on anthropology’s conception of its colonial past and ethnocentric present. More importantly for our own discussion, Foucault’s work on the discourses of modernity has provided the theoretical foundations for a post-modern anthropology of development (Crush 1995; Parpart 1995; Gardner and Lewis 1996; Grillo 1997). Its founding texts include James Ferguson’s (1990) ethnography of an integrated rural development project in Lesotho and Arturo Escobar’s (1991) sweeping history and deconstruction of development discourse, which he argues has “created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World” (1995: 9).

Traditional anthropological approaches to policy have often been concerned with ensuring that anthropologists participate in policy making and that anthropological knowledge is used to improve policy (Grillo 1985). Although this remains a valid objective for many anthropologists and their professional organizations (AAA 2004), it has now been joined by more critical perspectives which are informed by current critiques. The contemporary anthropology of policy shares much of its pedigree as well as many of its concerns with the post-modern anthropology of development. One of the earliest proponents of a post-structuralist reading of development policy was Raymond Apthorpe (1985), and he has continued to focus on an analysis of the language of policy - as exhibited in development plans and other texts - as a form of power (Gasper and Apthorpe 1996; Apthorpe 1997). More recent work in the anthropology of policy, however, focuses on the Foucauldian nexus of knowledge and power, in some cases bringing in Foucault’s ideas about ‘governmentality’ (Burchell *et al.* 1991; Dean 1999).

“Anthropologists have long worked alongside policy initiatives: they have frequently witnessed the effects of policies on the subjects of their ethnographies, and the scope of their research has undoubtedly been shaped by policy formulations. Occasionally they have been invited to participate in policy making or policy evaluation. What they have seldom done, however, is to turn their professional gaze towards an analysis of the structures through which policy operates and the discourses and agencies through which it is articulated.” (Wright and Shore 1995: 27)

Wright and Shore observe that “policies are often treated as instruments of governance: rational, non-theoretical and goal-oriented tools that provide the most efficient means to

obtaining certain desired ends” (1995: 28). Against this instrumental view they argue that “policy is always informed by ideological considerations, and often codifies morality”, functioning like a Foucauldian “political technology” which masks its political origins and the relations of power that it helps to reproduce (1995: 29).

Introducing an edited volume designed to present the anthropology of policy as a “new domain of anthropological enquiry” (1997: 3), Shore and Wright argue that “policy has become a major institution of Western and international governance”, not only imposing conditions but also more subtly influencing the conduct of people’s lives (1997: 6). Whereas previous studies have tended to focus on particular areas of policy making, Shore and Wright claim to be initiating the anthropological study of policy itself “as a concept or cultural phenomenon” which can provide general insights into the workings of power (1997: 7). Whereas the independently authored chapters in their book also take the form of “ethnographic studies” of particular policy settings, Shore and Wright point out that they mostly focus on policies that can be linked to the neo-liberal ideology that has come to dominate constructions of government and governance in the West (1997: 9-10).

This projected anthropology of policy clearly parallels and can be interwoven with anthropological critiques of development discourse. It shares much the same intellectual (primarily Foucauldian) roots and is directed against much the same target - the dominant practices of power in the ‘modern’ world - and as a result can be integrated with analyses of the processes of globalization. It also risks the danger of sharing in the problems that critics have already identified in other post-modern applications. One of these is an evident fuzziness in the Foucauldian theorization of power (Merquior 1991; Cheater 1999), generating ambiguities which are often resolved by returning to its classical definition: hence the identification of policy and other discourses with political domination.

Another difficulty is the kind of oversimplification that Grillo (1997) accuses Escobar of when describing ‘development’ as a monolithic enterprise which opposes ‘developers’ and their victims. A similar problem afflicted Foucault’s own attempts to describe successive European discourses: their characterization and periodization has been much criticized by other historians. Instead Grillo recommends that the anthropology of development should be increasingly “multi-vocal” and “multi-sited” (1997: 26), a recommendation which anthropologists and others have had no difficulty in following by studying the nuances of development discourse in a variety of institutional contexts (e.g. Fisher 1997; Crewe and Harrison 1998). A similar recommendation can also be made for the anthropology of policy, which should be based on ethnographies of policies - in the plural.

An Anthropology of International Water Policy?

The anthropology of policy, as outlined and qualified above, can be readily applied to the study of international water policy. Indeed we already possess various elements of this; analyses of particular aspects of global policy and partial ethnographies from different points of view. In this section I will indicate some of the issues that are already being or perhaps should be tackled, highlighting what I think are significant gaps in our current knowledge and practice. This is to be understood as no more than a preliminary attempt: I will not try to undertake detailed analysis myself or specify how it might be carried out. This will be a task for future research and action.

The title of this seminar, *The Water Consensus - Identifying the Gaps*, raises one set of issues. One of the tasks given to speakers was to “outline the policy making process that helps to form this consensus”; another was to “highlight the gaps in the water consensus”. As we have seen, participants in the AWF were highly critical of the “international water consensus” as it appears in recent policy documents, questioning many of its assumptions as well as the translation of these into practice. Rather less attention, though, was paid to an examination of the ways in which the consensus - in so far as there is one - has been produced *and* contested and what the effects of this have been (cf. the first section of Berkoff’s paper: “Is there an International Consensus”, 2003: 1-2), though some aspects of this question have since been discussed in the literature (e.g. Black 2004; Mehta 2004). This was despite the fact that the AWF itself was conceived as forum for contesting the international process and its emerging conclusions, a task which most of the participants appear to have applied themselves to with relish.

The idea of ‘consensus’ and the view that this is something that can be achieved through a (perhaps rational and linear) ‘process’ should be subjected to critical scrutiny rather than taken for granted. As well as asking questions about the authorship of policy and the interests that it appears to serve (*Who makes the policy and how and why? Who is included and who is excluded? Who are the winners and who are the losers?*), the basic notions and language of policy making must also be interrogated - whether we are dealing with international water policy or other policies and plans. There are obvious parallels, for example, between the kinds of questions that we might ask about ‘consensus’ and those which are already being asked about the rhetoric of ‘participation’ and the codified set of techniques and tools (‘participatory methodologies’) that are designed to enhance participation and lead to greater ‘empowerment’ of the ‘disempowered’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2002; Kesby 2003; Williams 2003). Apthorpe’s work (e.g. 1997) provides one model for examining discourses of this kind; Mehta’s (2000; 2003) sociological deconstruction of the narratives of ‘water scarcity’ and ‘crisis’ exemplifies another approach.

Water governance has become an important theme in attempts to coordinate global policy, including ongoing efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP 2004). Awareness of this wider context raises the question of whether and to what degree an anthropology of international water policy can be undertaken in isolation from the analysis of other development discourses, including that of participation. One answer to this question is that ethnographies of international water policy must be situated in their wider context, and that the widest frame of all is provided by the neo-liberal discourses that currently dominate constructions of government and governance in the West (as argued by Shore and Wright 1997; see above). One way of doing this is to link the analysis of international water policy to studies of other policy domains, and ultimately to the deconstruction of global discourses of governance and development. This includes connecting with existing work on environmental policy (Keeley and Scoones 1999; Holmes and Scoones 2000) and recent analyses of poverty policy (e.g. Gardner and Lewis 2000; McGee and Brock 2001; Brock *et al.* 2001).

The abstract of the paper by Brock *et al.* (2001) on ‘Power, Knowledge and Political Spaces in the Framing of Poverty Policy’ is worth quoting here in full:

“This paper explores the dynamics of the making and shaping of poverty policy. It takes as its starting point a critique of linear versions of policy-making, highlighting the complex interplay of power, knowledge and agency in poverty policy processes. We argue in *Section One* that the policy process involves a complex configuration of

interests between a range of differently positioned actors, whose agency matters, but whose interactions are shaped by power relations. Making sense of contemporary poverty policy requires a closer exploration of the dynamics within and beyond the arenas in which policies are made and shaped. It also requires an understanding of how particular ways of thinking about poverty have gained ascendancy, coming to determine the frame through which poverty is defined, measured and tackled. To do so calls for an historical perspective, one that situates contemporary poverty policy with regard to antecedent visions and versions. *Section Two* of this paper thus provides an overview of differing narratives on the causes of and solutions to poverty, especially as they have emerged in dominant development discourses. Making sense of participation in the policy process requires that we identify and explore ‘policy spaces’ in which alternative versions of poverty may be expressed by a variety of voices, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that surround them. In *Section Three* of this paper, we examine two broad kinds of policy spaces - those that are found in invited forums of participation created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions and actors, and those more autonomous spaces created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action on poverty related issues. By examining how different narratives of poverty and different actors interact in such spaces - as well as how they may be excluded from them - we can better understand the ways in which power and knowledge frame the policy process.” (2001: iii)

I have reproduced this summary because it illustrates both the wider analytical framework in which an anthropology of international water policy might be situated and also the kind of analysis that this anthropology might undertake of its own policy domain. It provides, in effect, a template for the anthropology of policy; close in many respects to the recommendations of Shore and Wright (1997). This can be tested by substituting ‘water’ for ‘poverty’ throughout the text of the abstract. Readers can decide for themselves whether the AWF was a ‘forum of participation’ created ‘from above’ or ‘from below’.

There is perhaps also something disturbing about the ease with which this analytic ‘template’ can be fitted to different domains and levels of policy. There are indeed a number of problems with this approach. If the anthropology of international water policy is simply folded into more general critiques of governance and neo-liberal discourse then there is a danger that it will be exposed to criticism similar to Grillo’s (1997: 20) attack on Escobar’s oversimplifying “myth of development”. This is one reason why it may be better to aim for multiple ethnographies of water policy and practice rather than a monolithic global critique. Effective analysis undoubtedly lies somewhere between the delineation of grand discursive formations and the ‘actor-oriented’ perspective favoured by Long (2001) and others.

Another problem with the latter approach is that there is a tendency to ascribe agency to dominating paradigms and lay the blame for all of their effects on their presumed authors (whether these comprise a class, transnational corporations, or other individual or collective agents). However, the study of causes and effects should follow the example of Ferguson’s (1990) pioneering ethnography and allow for both intended and unintended consequences - a basic principle that is sometimes lost in Foucauldian analyses despite their avowed allegiance to a decentered conception of power. Cleaver and Franks’ (2003a) paper for the AWF on “How Institutions Elude Design” provides a good illustration of the accidents of history at work in the context of river basin management in Usangu, Tanzania. After Ferguson, it is worth remembering that development and other interventions may also have unintended *political* consequences - and that this provides no justification for ascribing political intent to the discourses they derive from or to the agents that have authored them.

Conclusion: Against Consensus?

Apart from indicating ways in which research might proceed, what does all this mean for policy itself? There are at least two ways in which anthropology might intentionally subvert practice and work against the development of an international 'water consensus'. One of these is through the active engagement of anthropologists (and others influenced by anthropological practice) in supporting challenges to the consensus - whether from 'above', 'below', or sideways. This refers to the kind of political engagement recommended by both Ferguson (1990) and Escobar (1995). Although Grillo describes these as appeals for "a rather feeble and restricted form of politically correct anthropology" (1997: 19), there can be little doubt that many anthropologists, however liberal or radical their politics, are actively engaged in both making and contesting policy, sometimes on their own account and sometimes on behalf of others. I hasten to add, though, that I consider this preliminary paper to represent no more than a feeble challenge to the 'water consensus'.

The second way in which anthropology challenges this consensus has already been outlined above. A critical anthropology must question the rhetoric of 'consensus' as part of a critique of the discourse of international water policy and other discourses of governance and development to which it is linked. If there are gaps to be filled, then these are not in the 'water consensus' itself but in the practice of anthropological critique and - in this particular case - its application to the study of global water governance. In this and at least one other respect (sketched above) post-modern anthropology works against the 'water consensus'. As I have already pointed out though, there are many anthropologists working within the traditional framework of applied anthropology who may well be intent on influencing international water policy through their evaluations of its local impacts, but not hell-bent on deconstructing it. All the same policy makers should be afraid, not only of the unpredictable outcomes of their policies, but also of the unintended consequences of the actions and writings of innocent anthropologists.

Acknowledgements

For unwittingly providing me with the opportunity to write and think about the subject matter of this paper I am very grateful to David Sneath and all the M.Phil. students currently studying 'Anthropology and Development: Theory and Practice' in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. I would also like to thank Susan Drucker-Brown and Richard Irvine for responding to my circular message about 'water matters' and Marilyn Strathern for pointing me in the direction of recent work on the anthropology of policy. Naturally none of them should be held accountable for the uses I have made of their observations and good advice.

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