

Participation and the State: Towards an Anthropological View of the 'New Participatory Paradigms'

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ABSTRACT: This paper reveals how certain academics approaching terms such as participation, or the state and civil society/community/masses/population, have re/conceptualized both the concepts themselves as well as the positions from which they can be studied. The paper traces the rise of critiques concerning participation in development—examining the particular issues of concern to anthropologists—before turning to the current debates taking place on the borderlines between anthropology and development. In this context, the work being produced as part of the Development Research Centre at the Institute of Development Studies in the UK is a central focus. Raising here the types of questions currently being asked about participation, the analysis addresses increasing concerns with governance, democracy as well as citizenship, and finally, anthropological views of the State, for there appears to be an emergence within participatory development of a rejection of the anti-statist development approach.

Keywords: anthropology, development, participation, state.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that 'Participation' as a development methodology has firmly entered the mainstream of development orthodoxy (see Reference, Bastian and Bastian 1996 to Cornwall 2002). In the UK some of the main proponents of this methodology have been working out of an organisation called the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). I refer to these development theorists as the 'neo-populists' (following Brown 1998:133-134). The work of the neo-populists (and other proponents of participatory development) has been strongly critiqued by anthropologists over the past three decades. The argument of this paper is that the dominant reaction of the neo-populists to the anthropological critique of participatory development has been to 'bring the

state back in.' Whilst recent work by the neo-populists shows an awareness of the anthropological critique, their 'quick fix' (return of the state) rests on a particular conception of 'state' (and by association non-state) which anthropology can also show to be problematic.

The first section of this paper reviews the critiques of participatory development which have been formulated by anthropologists. The second section shows how a recognition of these critiques by the neo-populists has led to the emergence of a new neo-populist paradigm in which they argue for the (re)inclusion of the state. The third section demonstrates the problematic nature of the view of the state held by the neo-populists, through attention to

anthropological approaches to the state. Finally this paper concludes by looking at an ethnographic example of the pervasive ambiguity of enacting the state (see Herzfeld 1992).

The neo-populist work examined in this paper comes from the Participation, Power and Social Change team at IDS. Most British writers on participation take the 'original proponent' of participation to be Robert Chambers (a long term IDS researcher, currently on the Participation, Power and Social Change team). However, his work is heavily reliant on the earlier notions of participation from Paulo Freire and the liberation theologians.

Anthropological Critiques Of Participatory Development

The first section of this paper outlines the critiques of participatory development which have been made by anthropologists. The critiques focus on six aspects of participatory development: the use of change agents, the idea of 'partnership,' the hidden nature of 'the gift,' the idea of 'community,' the role of 'experts,' and the use of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as the purveyors of participatory development.

The use of 'change agents' in participatory development (which claims to be 'bottom up') has been pointed out to be paradoxical. Midgley saw that whilst proponents of community participation attack the 'top-down' approach they "do not seem to realise that their own approach is riddled with paternalism" (1986:35); this he related particularly to the use of "change agents." Midgley criticises the moral element of the heroic community worker and points out that the very act of introducing a community worker "is an external imposition" (35-36). Green sees the claimed need for a change agent as amounting to "a denial of the poor's capacity for agency to bring about social change by themselves on their own terms" (2000:70). Stirrat points specifically to the role of mobilisers and facilitators in reinventing the "sense of community which it is believed was once there" (1996:74; see Mosse 1997 on the recreation of imagined past idyllic systems).

This paradox lies at the heart of a Freirian approach to development. Paulo Freire's work retains the Marxist quandary of false consciousness, to which

he introduces the 'dialectic educator' who possesses "the secret formula of a power to which they [the oppressed] must be initiated" (Rahnema 1992:123). The participatory development promoted by the neo-populists in the UK (see Brown 1998) is heavily reliant on the earlier work and ideas of Freire, and thus faces the same criticism (see Stirrat 1996).

Notions of 'partnership' and 'equality' in development interventions have also been questioned. Crewe and Harrison point out that the "rhetoric of partnership often disguises considerable inequalities in the power and choices of supposed institutional 'partners'" (1998:181).

In "Development as Gift," Stirrat and Henkel (1997) use Mauss's work on gift-giving to reveal that the giving and receiving of gifts reaffirms social hierarchies. Development institutions transform the donor gift (of money) into a gift of advice for the recipient, which is heavily conditional making partnerships problematic. Thus the idea of 'partnership' obfuscates inequalities. Development practitioners rarely see themselves as involved in a gift relationship, preferring 'contractual' metaphors (Eyben 2006:88-9).

A nostalgia for 'community' has long been part of populist development ideology (Robertson 1984: 142). Participatory development models have tended to treat 'community' as a homogenous, and harmonious collective (Gardner and Lewis 1996, Gujit and Shah 1998). In so doing, differences in gender, age, class/caste, or ethnicity have been obscured. In reality, as Stirrat notes, "the notion of 'the village' or 'the community' as a significant social unit is difficult to sustain" (1996:72). This 'myth of community' is based on a solidarity model of community in which it is seen as a natural social entity which can be represented (Clever 2001).

Rather than viewing 'participatory' interventions as emancipatory, participation has been shown to reinforce social hierarchies. Pottier has observed, in his work in participatory workshops in Magindu, Tanzania, that the language used in the workshops defined 'us' and 'them', and also legitimised "particular sets of codes, rules and roles" (1997:220). He asks whether participatory workshops bring people together (as they claim in the concept of community building), or if in fact they recreate social distance.

When participatory projects are implemented project staff takes on the role of ‘experts.’ In Mosse’s ethnography he observed that “project workers became problem solvers, suppliers of products [...], influential people with connections [...], experts or advocates” (2005:81). This was felt more strongly by Burghart when he took part in a participatory project in Nepal. He found that he was transformed into a ‘lord’ in villager understandings, and his attempts to reject this position received angry responses from village participants (Burghart 1993).

There has been an assumption that NGOs are the natural purveyors of participatory methodologies. Stirrat and Henkel make the point that it is NGOs that transform the gift of the donor into a “heavily conditional gift” (1997:66). On a more practical level the Edwards and Hulme volume *Beyond the Magic Bullet* questions the assumptions made about NGOs as cost effective, sustainable, and fostering popular participation (1996). They point out that little or no evidence is provided to support these claims. In terms of ‘NGO accountability’ they amply demonstrate a severe lack of ‘downward’ accountability in NGOs, and only a moderate ‘upward’ accountability.

This critique of NGOs has led to a call in recent years to ‘bring back the state’ (Akbar 1999; Fung and Wright 2001). It is my argument that the image of the ‘State’ in this neo-populist proposal is discordant with recent anthropological explorations of The State.

The Neo-populists and the Return of ‘The State’

To a limited extent the anthropological critiques of participatory development (outlined above) have been heard by the proponents of participatory development methodologies. In particular anthropologists working within IDS have called for research to address some of these issues:

Strikingly few accounts of participatory mechanisms in practice give us any idea about who actually participates; we get little sense of who exactly is speaking for or about whom, and how they themselves would regard their own entitlements and identities as participants. [Cornwall 2002:29]

The desire of development theorists is to place greater emphasis on practice, and what the ‘lived experience’ of participation (and citizenship) ‘tells us.’¹ However, the most notable change to the neo-populist approach has been a re-engagement with the idea of state involvement in participatory development.

During the 1980s and 1990s, versions of participation encountered in the work of the ‘neo-populists’ had in common “a feeling of unease and scepticism about the value of state-centred approaches to rural development”² (Stirrat 1996:68). In contrast the ‘new’ language of the participatory rhetoric (by no coincidence coming from within the same institution as the ‘old’ language) is very much concerned with the involvement of the state, understood in terms of ‘governance,’ ‘citizenship’ and ‘rights.’

The reappearance of the state in development thinking has predominantly come in the form of ‘empowered participatory governance,’ as presented by Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (2001). The goal of this approach is that “ordinary people can effectively participate in and influence policies that directly affect their lives” (2001:7). I wish to concentrate on how these notions are located within discussions of participatory development.

The state has emerged in discussions of participation alongside the idea of participation as a change-agent for citizens. Andrea Cornwall and John Gaventa call for a “more active and engaged citizenry... and a more responsive and effective state” (2001:32).³ Andrea Cornwall’s working paper on participation in development (2002) draws together many of the anthropological views of participation, with the move towards the inclusion of the state. Cornwall’s approach to including the state in participatory development relies heavily on the ‘creation of

1 The latter concern comes from John Gaventa, seminar 02/04/04.

2 Although Stirrat refers specifically to rural development he admits that this suspicion of the state is shared by the macro-economic orthodoxies that he avoids by using the term “rural” (87 n. 2).

3 Simultaneously, these authors display an emerging notion of scales of participation—from “phoney” to “real.”

space.' Following Lefebvre's notion of social space as produced space Cornwall examines how participation is *situated* within different spaces. She explores how new participatory mechanisms may create "new kinds of spaces between, within and beyond the domains of 'state' and 'civil society,' reconfiguring their boundaries and intersections" (Cornwall 2001:4). Cornwall explains that the primary concern of these mechanisms is to "enhancing equity." This gives rise, she claims, to a concern for more democratic institutions. With these new mechanisms in place "in some contexts, citizens become part of 'the state'" (2001:4). Cornwall relies here on a strict division between 'citizen' and 'state' to which we will return towards the end of this paper.

This work on 'spaces' and 'participatory mechanisms' shows a continued tendency for idealised stereotypes of who fills the 'spaces' of participatory mechanisms,⁴ alongside a continued blinkeredness towards other structures and processes which contribute to everyday experiences of 'poverty' (see Stirrat 1996). But beyond this, it relies on a very simplified idea of 'the state.' The final section of this paper explores anthropological approaches to 'the state' which point to a more complex and situated set of experiences than those conceptualised by the authors at IDS.

An Insufficient Version of 'The State'

The entry of the state into ethnographic analysis was based on two changes in the way 'the state' was perceived. Firstly, a re-conceptualisation of the existence of the state through the work of Foucault (1977) alongside the work of Anderson (1983), Mitchell (1991) and Taussig (1992, 1997). Secondly, through explorations in perceiving the state through ethnography (see Gupta 1995; Coronil 1997; Geschiere 1997; Taussig 1997; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). A forerunner of this particular view of the state is found in the writing of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (as Taussig points out revealingly nicknamed 'Anarchy' Brown in his student years) who referred to the state as a 'fiction of the philosophers,' as not existing in a phenomenological sense as an entity "over and above the

human individuals who make up a society" (quoted in Taussig 1992:112). As such 'the state' can now be perceived as alike to myth—or as Taussig eloquently puts it: "God, the economy, and the State, abstract entities we credit with being" (1997:3, citing Philip Abrams for the concept of substituting the word God for State). A more restrained version of this concept is put forward by Mitchell, who refers to the state as 'structural effect' which should be studied "not as an actual structure, but as a powerful, metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist" (1991:94). None of these approaches should be confused with questioning the power of states themselves. Neither author takes the state as being less powerful for being so imagined or constructed: "For what the notion of State fetishism directs us to is precisely the existence and reality of the *political power* of this *fiction*, its powerful insubstantiality" (Taussig 1992:113). As Ferguson and Gupta argue, taking states as imagined (citing Anderson), constructed entities "conceptualised and made socially effective through particular imaginative and symbolic devices" (2002:981) opens these devices to study.

So how do these anthropological approaches to the state relate to the current discussion of the state and participation? The images created of the state by the neo-populists are images of real, existing structures. They lack ethnographic evidence about what 'the state' means, instead drawing on bounded notions of 'state' and 'society' which in reality are not only unclear, but "fluid and negotiable according to social context and position" (Fuller and Harriss 2001:15). It is not only that the state as it exists is not a "discrete, unitary actor" (2001:22), but the very concept of state is a "composite reality and mythicized abstraction" (Foucault 1991:103). The ideal of the state held by Fung and Wright (and followed by others) rests on a version of 'governmentality' formulated in the sixteenth century between state centralisation and religious dissidence (see Foucault 1991:88). It also heavily rests on the eighteenth century formulation of 'population' as the "ultimate end of government" (1991:100). What is presented as a secular, culturally neutral conception is deeply rooted in particular ways of perceiving the world, indeed "ways of knowing" (see Hobart 1993).

4 As in Cornwall's discussion on the transformation of spaces by the "powerless" (2002:9).

Making Complex the Division Between 'Citizen' and 'State'

Guillermo Torres is a local government delegate. In this role he takes responsibility for translating government policy to make it understandable to his electorate. He also takes the problems of his electorate to the municipality's civil servants. At least, that is what he does Monday to Friday. On Saturday he runs a neighbourhood baseball group, encouraging the neighbourhood's young men to play in the city's league. On Sundays he attends his local church, where he is well known and respected. Monday evenings he teaches local history to school children. Tuesday evenings he attends an evening class for local retirees.

Miguel Antonio is a civil servant. He lives in the same block as Guillermo. Most evenings he plays dominoes with neighbours and friends. He used to play baseball in Guillermo's team, but the lure of good food and the current soap opera won out in recent years. Miguel also sells bottles of imported whiskey on the black market, an income which pays for his cleaner and an occasional item of furniture for the front room. His black market enterprise is reliant on the motorbike he has been provided with for his work as a civil servant.

Both Guillermo and Miguel have elderly mothers. Both of their mothers rely on the same state run cafeteria for their daily lunches. The state cafeteria is an important social space for them. Regular users of the cafeteria hold poetry readings, and mark national celebrations with parties held in the cafeteria. Both of their mothers have a network of friends from the cafeteria who step in to provide support if they are ill.

The Neighbourhood Council, where Guillermo works, is responsible, among other things, for collecting fines from citizens who have broken regulations. A queue regularly forms outside the Council building of disgruntled individuals preparing to argue their case against their notification letters. Guillermo sits at his desk and addresses their cases one by one.

These brief ethnographic vignettes highlight the complex daily interactions of individuals with 'the state.' The lives of Guillermo, Miguel and their mothers are all interwoven with state structures and state services. There are no fixed boundaries between their lives as 'citizen' and their lives as 'state agents/recipients.' In the IDS literature the state is imagined as a real, existing structure. Ethnographic evidence about the state contradicts this image. Bounded notions of 'state' and 'society' are shown not to reflect ethnographic reality.

This paper has examined current debates within one area of development theory, that of the neo-populists, and has shown them rejecting earlier anti-statist viewpoints and moving towards discussions of governance, citizenship and the state. Juxtaposing this work with particular views of the state coming from within anthropology indicates emerging problems with the 'new' terminology, and thereby conception. The conclusion is that simplistic notions of 'state' versus 'civil society' need to be closely examined, and attention must be paid to the importance of historical and contextual daily *experiences* of political structures.

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