![PoLAR|online]

SPILLOVER CONVERSATION

Jennifer Curtis
University of Edinburgh

James Ferguson
Stanford University

Akhil Gupta
University of California, Los Angeles

Interview: Anthropological Research on NGOs

This interview continues a discussion that began in our November 2010 Symposium on NGOs. To continue that conversation, we asked James Ferguson [JF] and Akhil Gupta [AG] to participate in an interview conducted by new *PoLAR* author Jennifer Curtis [JC], whose article on NGOs in Ireland appeared in the symposium. Below is how their discussion proceeded.

****

JC [to JF]: It's been 20 years since *The Anti-Politics Machine*. Since then, anthropologists have engaged much more critically with development. Also, a new strand of research looking at practices within transnational NGOs and their relationships with states, international bodies, local organizations, etc. has developed. I wonder what you think of recent anthropological work on NGOs. In retrospect, are any of these approaches useful for thinking about your original study?

JF: It's important to remember that The *Anti-Politics Machine* was written about an earlier historical period, when NGOs had not yet taken on the very prominent position they now occupy in the "dev" world. The fieldwork for that book was done in the early 1980s, and it was still largely a world of bilateral aid projects funded and carried out by governments. So I didn't really have an analysis of NGOs in that book. But the NGO-ization of the world is a hugely important development, of course, and I'm very pleased that anthropologists have lately been giving it sustained ethnographic and theoretical attention.

Anthropology can play an especially important role here, I think, because our history encourages us not to swallow whole the usual Western stories about bringing enlightenment and progress (and rights) to the benighted. These stories provide the animating force for all

manner of interventions and advocacies around the world—for good and ill—but the real problem is when these "native worldviews" of NGO-land are uncritically embraced by the scholarly analyst. That happens a lot in other disciplines (ok, Political Science), but anthropologists should be able to do better, since they're trained to relativize the taken-for-granted certainties of their own societies, and they usually have a better grasp of the ironic (and often tragic) history of past efforts to (for instance) "save Africa." (I sometimes show eager undergraduates who want to go "help Africa" the original crest of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which depicts an unclothed Native American uttering the words "Come Over and Help Us!" And of course we know how that worked out.)

[Image found at http://historyproject.ucdavis.edu/ic/image_details.php?id=12420]

So it's very important that we have empirical work on what these organizations are really doing, and how they create both new dangers and new possibilities for political practice. And I think there's a lot of really good recent work that does this. For southern Africa, for instance, I like Erica Bornstein's book on religious NGOs in Zimbabwe, and also Harri Englund's book on human rights in Malawi—both of which get beyond the simple "are they good or are they bad" questions, and really show us something about how things work, and what sorts of relations of government are in fact put into play by these ostensibly "non-governmental" organizations.

At the same time, I'm sometimes surprised by how much of the "dev" world still does work in ways that recall the world I described in *The Anti-Politics Machine*. It's extraordinary to me to hear Jeffrey Sachs talking about "millennium villages," and saying how up to now we

2

never realized that the different problems of development are all inter-related, and therefore the big new idea is to have comprehensive projects that take on health, agriculture, water, etc. simultaneously. Because this is exactly the discourse of the "integrated rural development" projects of the 1970s and 1980s (like the Thaba Ts'eka Project). And we also have a kind of rerun of the old Green Revolution paradigms (which Akhil has analyzed so well)—and again, as if this is somehow something innovative that's being proposed for the first time! So I continue to be surprised at something I was already trying to make sense of in the 1980s, which is the "dev" world's extraordinary capacity for (shall we say) recycling.

JC: "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality" is one of the most cited articles ever. Why do you think it resonated so profoundly?

JF: Well, it's always hard to say why a particular piece gets picked up at a particular time. I think maybe one reason is that we tried to show that understanding a host of mundane contemporary political processes in fact involved some quite general theoretical questions—about what the state is, how government takes place, the spatial assumptions embedded in our everyday language of politics, and so on. A lot of discussions of NGOs and the politics that surround them tended to be relegated to the domain of the "applied" (as if practical politics is somehow atheoretical!), and we insisted on seeing quotidian governmental practices as theoretically interesting. So that might be part of it. Then, too, we tapped into (and built on) the important interdisciplinary discussions about space and its socio-political construction, and maybe that helped to make a connection between the ethnography of on-the-ground political practices (which has such a long and rich tradition in political anthropology) and that interesting theoretical literature on space.

And, of course the Foucauldian literature on governmentality also commanded a lot of interest at that time, but anthropologists were always a little uneasy with the tendency of that lit. to produce rather spare, diagrammatic accounts of governmental rationalities that weren't easy to link with the anthropological taste for situated concrete practices (as in the work of people like Tania Li and Donald Moore). So I think the article may again have had a kind of bridging role, taking the Foucauldian distinction between the state (as an institutional apparatus) and government (as a set of practices aimed at "the conduct of conduct") and using that as a way to encourage ethnographic studies of governmental practices that cut across lines like state-society of national-international. So it wasn't a matter of opposing the study of Foucauldian rationalities to the thick ethnography of concrete practices—it was rather a way of using a Foucauldian insight to pose questions that anthropologists could see how to address ethnographically.

I think there's also just a huge interest these days in applying ethnographic inquiry to the modern state—in many disciplines, but of course especially in anthropology. When Akhil and I first came into the discipline, "political anthropology" was a rather small subfield, and anthropological discussions of the state were still largely about pre-modern states. Now it seems almost any ethnographer, whatever the topic or area, is going to have to address questions of the state, citizenship, rights, NGOs, the law, and so on, so the concerns that have traditionally been at the heart of a journal like *PoLAR* now seem to be very central ones for the field as a whole. So the universe of anthropologists who are interested in the problem of government is a significantly expanded one.

AG: I completely agree with what Jim has to say. There are a couple of things that I would like to add to his answer. "Spatializing States" had an interesting history: it was turned down by one interdisciplinary journal that had solicited it, and then when we had the freedom to decide where we would really like to send it, we sent it to the *American Ethnologist*, which published it pretty much in its original form! Its citational history is also interesting. It was not much cited in the first couple of years after it was published, but it took off slowly. I can think of a few reasons for that. As Jim says, people were struggling (as we were) to reconcile the literatures on the state and governmentality.

In his lecture on governmentality, Foucault had appeared to quite roundly reject the study of the state in favor of governmentality. So many people felt that they had to choose between studying "the state" or studying governmentality. In "Spatializing States", we propose a way in which to do both, and to treat both as important in their own right, without reducing or subsuming one to the other. The other thing unusual about the article was that we were trying to make a difficult and subtle argument about how everyday practices of state bureaucracies produced spatiality, particularly ideas of verticality and encompassment. Rather than see space as a container in which state activities were distributed, we were trying to demonstrate that these activities themselves generated ideas of space that created and reinforced the "state effect." Some geographers were trying to make analogous arguments about the spaces of capital, about capital generating forms of spatiality, but I do not think there were too many instances of people showing state institutions as being generative of spatial practices and ideas in the same manner.

Finally, I think the article struck a nerve in trespassing the borders of the nation-state. Much of the work on the state and on governmentality (still) operates with the implicit notion that the unit of analysis is, or should be, the nation-state. "Spatializing States" forwards an analysis of the state and of governmentality that is truly transnational.

JC: These are really interesting points. In my own work, I too have been struck by what you tactfully call "the 'dev' world's extraordinary capacity for (shall we say) recycling," as well as the tendency to present this recycling as innovation. I went to Belfast initially to study the peace process, but "facts on the ground" led me to study the large indigenous development sector, which represented itself as crucial to that process. This representation was broadly accepted in political and popular thinking—a huge peace and reconciliation fund from the European Union had been created to support this work, and a large number of community-based organizations legitimated their activities by claiming the role of "civil society actors" promoting democratization, conflict transformation, human rights, reconciliation, etc. Historical research showed how prior development logics had been reiterated in my fieldsite over time, but each incarnation was labeled "new"... The claims I encountered emerged in the 1990s, but echoed 1950s claims about "participatory development", civil society and democratization, albeit recalibrated for post-Cold War global politics (cf. UN 1955).

And as you say, recognising these discursive practices is not about the moral value of development—and for me it was a necessary first step for beginning to look closely at how nongovernmental politics actually worked (Feher 2007). I think that although, as you point out, *The Anti-Politics Machine* came out of particular period, it still influences scholarship because the critique moved analysis beyond the "dev" world's frame of reference (say,

assessing development in terms of "effectiveness") to its discursive formations, and their political consequences. Similarly, I think "Spatializing States" helped re-situate anthropological analysis of states by moving away from received frames of reference such as state and civil society, or, as you note, national-international. This is particularly helpful for thinking about how NGOs work, and in what sense they are and are not "nongovernmental"...

JF: Yes, the idea of "civil society" does a lot of mischief, as NGOs (who are usually small groups of educated people, often with international funding) often manage to pose as "society" or "the grassroots" or "the poorest of the poor" or whatever. Democratic politics always involves a kind of play-acting, of course, since "the people" are never actually in the room, but only "represented" by those who claim to stand for them. But this is why the ethnographic view is so important, to get beyond cartoon figures like "civil society," "the community," and so on, and develop a richer sense of who is actually engaged here, and what are they trying to do. And your comment also reminds us that there's nothing particularly recent (or "neoliberal") about the vogue for "community participation" -- that's a discourse that goes way back, achieving especially high visibility in late British colonialism (in the 1950s, as you say), and MacNamara-era (1970s) "rural development" ("popular participation" was one of the big "new ideas" pursued by the Thaba Ts'eka project in Lesotho).

JC: Mischief is a good word for it! And even when what we call development does begin with "the people," as Paley described in Chile or as happened in Belfast in the 1970s, it was usually transformed into "development" over time. Similarly, "civil society" is a handy vehicle for states or other entities can use funding to transform opponents into "representatives". It's also interesting to trace who gets into the room when democracy happens -- in some situations, say a civil conflict with "unacceptable" casualty levels, there are imperatives to get people into the room who wouldn't ordinarily be admitted. Of course, that's only one situation in which development funding can legitimize or create new political elites who can be negotiated with more easily -- or let's face it, make some influential but troublesome people a little more interested in negotiating. (Of course, this can have unexpected consequences or cut both ways, depending on a lot of other factors; but often grassroots movements don't end up as the way activists planned.) Anyway, the "civil society" concept is particularly vexing at times, especially since in the late 1980s and early 1990s some political theorists promoted it as analytically valid without raising some important questions about its normative assumptions and functions; of course, its use as a slogan, in both political and academic rhetoric, was queried by some...

AG: A small and interesting footnote here: In the 1950s, the big new development idea in India was "community development." It involved looking at development holistically, taking economic, cultural, and political development as one piece, and at involving the village community in its own development by encouraging civic participation, community education, etc. It presents another striking example of the recycling of development ideas.

JC: Akhil mentions the 1950s "community development" initiatives in India. This idea was promoted in the UN policy I spoke of earlier: holistic "community development" was the medium through which civil society actors democratized states. In turn, the history of "community development" in postcolonies was used to legitimate importing the idea to

1970s Belfast -- with the whole UN promotion part omitted from that history. The ways development recycling is transnational and historical is politically interesting in a lot of registers, and I am still working on tracing the "community development" paradigm to understand its sources and effects in my own fieldsite, so Akhil's footnote is very helpful!

My next question to you both: Some work on NGOs and development takes up a longstanding project of political anthropology -- that is, critiquing norms embedded in political theory. For example, Paley's work on NGOs in Chile shows states invoking "civil society" to limit contestation. Do you think this form of critique remains an important project for political anthropology?

JF: Yes, I do think that this traditional notion of critique remains important, and anthropology has a key role to play, especially in questioning the taken-for-granted values of liberal political theory, as it's one of the few sites where that happens nowadays, I think. But I'm actually less interested in the sort of critique that simply opposes, denounces, or negates than in the sort that shows how things work. One of the best things in the Paley book, for instance, is her account of political opinion polling. But her point isn't just that opinion polls are simplistic and don't do a good job of describing how people really think about politics (which is the traditional anthropological objection).

Instead, she asks "what does all this polling DO?", what effects does it produce, what facts does it create? And this leads to a much richer and more consequential sort of analysis. I think we need to ask these sorts of questions about all sorts of concepts, those we are "for" as much as those we're "against" (so the ideas and practices of things like, say, democracy and feminism, for instance, need the same sort of vigilant skepticism that we've brought to things like neoliberalism or development). And that's the more challenging Foucauldian move, it seems to me: not just giving critical scrutiny to the norms of your political opponents, but giving that same scrutiny to your own norms—not to destroy them, but to get a better idea of where the issues and dangers are in one's own positioning.

AG: I agree with Jim, that critique in the traditional sense is both absolutely necessary and limiting. Just to give you an example, the political theorist Partha Chatterjee has argued persuasively that the notion of "civil society" in fact excludes the majority of people in a country like India. These people are not "citizens" who participate in the rational debates that mark parliament and the press; rather, they are "denizens" whose form of political participation is to hold rallies that stop traffic on the streets. He labels this group of people as belonging not to "civil society," but to "political society." So, here you have an alternative to the worlds of government and NGOs. It is partly critique that makes one realize the insufficiency of the analytical framework, and partly close observation of the lived realities of a world that does not conform to the theory. This is where ethnographic work is so important, because it has the potential to disturb our theoretical models, not just through the work of critique, but also in the sense that Jim is pointing to, namely by helping us to ask, "What does this form of political participation do?" The point is to ask what it accomplishes, and what effects it has on "civil society" and "the state," and on our theories about civil society and the state.

JC: Akhil, your article, "Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State," challenged anthropologists for their paucity of attention to

how "the state has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life." Since then, anthropologists have begun to more consciously study states. Are there any broad approaches or particular ethnographies that stand out for you in this work?

AG: At the AAA Meetings in 1989, I had organized a panel entitled "Ethnography of the State" in which I presented a paper entitled, "Is an Ethnography of the State Possible?" There I had articulated the reasons for why I thought anthropologists needed to be doing such work. I restated this in *Blurred Boundaries*, but despite the fact that that article first appeared in print in 1995, not much had changed in the interim six years.

I am happy to say that I can no longer make that claim. When a new version of "Blurred Boundaries" appears later this year in my book, *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Duke UP), it will have many references to new work on the state, and to work on corruption in particular. In fact, just taking the three themes of my forthcoming book—corruption, forms of state writing, and governmentality—there are several new ethnographic works on each of these themes. It would be hard to single out particular texts. My impression is that there are still very few texts whose entire focus is state institutions or state agencies.

However, there are an increasing number of works where a chapter in a larger project, or an article in a scholarly journal, deals with these themes. Ilana Feldman's book, *Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917-1967A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria* (Princeton 2007), is probably still only the first full-length ethnography. Dieter Haller and Cris Shore's *Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives* is a good reader for those interested in the anthropology of the state. There have been some interesting articles on forms of bureaucratic writing, by Matthew Hull, Yael Navaro-Yashin, and in a volume edited by Annelise Riles. (Duke 2008) is exemplary for its devotion to bureaucracy as its subject matter, and for its fine ethno-historical sensibility. On corruption, there's Daniel Jordan Smith's book, *A Culture of Corruption* (Princeton 2008).

I hesitate to classify the literature according to certain theoretical tendencies or orientations. The corpus of material is still too slim to start classifying it in some way. From my perspective, even now, there is far too little work on the state, given its importance to the everyday lives of people in most contexts.

Another area, which Jim and I did not emphasize as much in our paper on state spatialization, has to do with the ethnography of industry. Jim has advanced some thoughts on this topic in his work on oil extraction and the jumping of scales, and I too now have started ethnographic work on service industries. There is, of course, a longer history of ethnographies of capitalism, and most of them focus on workers. The latest demonstration of the power of ethnography is found in Karen Ho's brilliant book, *Liquidated*. There has also been a lot of interest in the pharmaceutical industry and transnational medical corporations, and there is renewed interest and emergent work on extractive industries such as oil and coal. However, given its centrality to the daily lives of people all over the globe, I feel that there is altogether too little ethnographic attention devoted to industry, corporations, and "the private sector." If we want to understand forms of governmentality, or the intermeshing of capitalist (ir)rationalities and biopolitics, or how rural life across the

globe is being transformed by agribusiness, then it is essential to have much more detailed ethnographic research on traditional industries as well as emergent service industries.

JF: Akhil makes a very good point. Anthropologists are no longer looking for the most exotic possible "other," but there are still huge areas of social life (like middle-income people working in service and other industries) that seem to be taken as too "ordinary" to be of much anthropological interest. I remember back in the 1990s, in *Anthropological Location*, we noted that the traditional anthropological interest in spatially-contained, face-to-face communities didn't seem to apply to (as we put it) "office dwellers crammed together for large parts of the day." A lot has changed since then, but there's also a lot that hasn't.

JC: Thank you both for taking time to share your thoughts with *PoLAR* readers and with me. As individuals and co-authors, you have produced innovative and influential insights in political anthropology. Your reflections on this work, and its reception within and beyond the discipline, are really interesting, and also help situate the articles in this special issue. The discipline's engagement with the study of states, NGOs and transnational processes is relatively recent, and these themes merit further study. I hope our discussion is helpful for anthropologists considering the political dimensions of NGO work—and future directions for the anthropology of politics.

JF: Thanks for all your work on this.

References

Chatterjee, Partha
2001   On Civil and Political Society in Post-colonial Democracies. *In Civil Society: History and Possibilities*. Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds. pp. 165–178. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Feldman, Ilana
2008   Governing Gaza: Bureaucracy, Authority, and the Work of Rule, 1917–1967. Durham: Duke University Press.

Feher, Michel
2007   The Governed in Politics. *In* Nongovernmental Politic*s*. Michel Feher, ed. Pp. 12–26. New York: Zone Books.

Ferguson, James
2005   Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa. American Anthropologist 107(3):377–382.

1990   The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ferguson, James, and Akhil Gupta
2002   Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal
         Governmentality. American Ethnologist 29(4):981–1002.

Gupta, Akhil.
2011   Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India. Durham: Duke
         University Press.

1995   Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of
         Politics, and the Imagined State. *American Ethnologist* 22(2):375–402.

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson, eds.
1997   Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science. Berkeley:
         University of California Press.

Haller, Dieter and Chris Shore, eds.
2005   Corruption: Anthropological Perspectives. London: Pluto Press.

Ho, Karen Zouwen
2009   Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hull, Matthew
2008   Ruled by Records: The Expropriation of Land and the Misappropriation of Lists in
         Islamabad. American Ethnologist 35(4):501–518.

Navaro-Yashin, Yael
2007   Make-Believe Papers, Legal Forms and the Counterfeit. Anthropological Theory
         7(1):79–98.

Paley, Julia
2001   Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile.
         Berkeley: University of California Press.

Riles, Annelise, ed.
2006   Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan
         Press.

Smith, Daniel J
2007   A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria.
         Princeton: Princeton University Press.

UN [United Nations]
1955   Social Progress through Community Development. New York: United Nations.