



IN FOCUS

ENGAGING ETHNOGRAPHY IN EVALUATING DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

In the past two decades the business of developing democracy promotion strategies, evaluating current practices and monitoring their impact has grown exponentially. While universalist standards modeled after accounting and audit models have been developed to track the presence or absence of formal components of Western democracy, ways of assessing the equally important, albeit more fluid and culturally-contingent, criteria associated with democratic processes and transitions, such as diplomacy, civic participation and social justice, are often ignored or not understood. Here and during the annual meeting anthropologists discuss how ethnography can contribute to understanding these dynamics.

The Ethnography of Democracy Promotion

An Opportunity and a Challenge

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Right now, ethnographers of democracy promotion are in demand. After 15 years investing in democracy in Eastern Europe, Eurasia and the Balkans, and as international attention moves toward the Middle East, a range of interested US actors, including government agencies, NGOs and private foundations, are seeking lessons learned. Though still concerned primarily with cost-effectiveness, many insiders recognize the shortcomings of audit-based evaluations which fail to capture on-the-ground reality, and are willing and eager to listen to, and build future policy around, new perspectives. An active audience exists, therefore, for anthropologically-informed analysis of the complex, transnational domain of US democracy promotion overseas.

This situation creates an opportunity—and perhaps even an obligation—for anthropologists to do some reflection of their own. My own experience over the past four years leading a research project on democracy promotion in the former Yugoslavia has brought me back to some of the core dilemmas generated in dealing with the challenges of conducting fieldwork and contributing to policymaking in the contemporary world. Here I outline the enduring importance of studying *thick* and studying *up*, and conclude that to do both effectively we need to find ways to study *with*.

Studying Thick (and Deep)

In his article “Very Bad News” in the March 24 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, Clifford Geertz subjected recent books on human catastrophe by Jared Diamond and Richard

Posner to close reading, and found them wanting. Geertz judged the authors’ views “sociologically thin and lacking psychological depth,” and recommended to readers the virtues of “monographic attention to critical examples,” exemplified by a quartet of recent works by anthropologists. Thirty-two years after transforming an Oxford philosopher’s musings on winks, blinks and twitches into a transdisciplinary epistemological revolution, Clifford Geertz is still stumping for thick description.

It is a long journey from sheep-stealing in early 20th-century Morocco (Geertz’s example) to radiation poisoning in post-Soviet Ukraine (Adriana Petryna) or deforestation in Indonesia (Anna Tsing). All four authors Geertz cites have pulled off a remarkable achievement: they have successfully “scaled-up.” Drawing on a range of sources, and using a creative mixture of writing styles not only to tackle transnational, global issues in a manner that satisfies the master of ethnographic pointillism, but also to convince major university presses that closely-textured scholarship on human disasters, highlighting social and cultural contexts, demands publication.

VIEWS ON POLICY

Is Geertz suggesting these anthropologists represent a magic formula? I think not: I interpret his review’s title as indexing also the fact that Diamond, in particular, dramatically outsells all four authors he cites. As the scope of the questions under scrutiny widens, thick description not only gets harder to do, but also harder for audiences to follow. If we confine ourselves to the solo-authored, fieldwork-centered mode of knowledge-production, we risk comparison with those who think the answer to the world’s diminishing supply of oil and coal is to prospect wider, drill deeper and pump harder. The brilliant, intuitive



Participants (from left) Paul Stubbs (Croatia), Ana Mukoska (Macedonia), Rea Maglajlic (BiH), Radmila Dudic (Serbia) and Despoina Syrri (Greece) brainstorm to identify key stakeholders and constituencies in international democracy promotion efforts in June 2005. Photo courtesy of Keith Brown

and lucky among us may continue to prosper for a while; but the overall picture will be one of involution, diminishing returns and—ultimately—darkness.

Studying Up (and Through)

Back in 1972, Laura Nader already called into question the salience of participant-observation, suggesting (after Sol Tax) that its fetishization was driving anthropologists to focus on small-scale societies, and therefore blocking work on the most relevant problems of the world. In “Up the Anthropologist,” published in Dell Hymes’ still-timely *Rethinking Anthropology*, she laid out the methodological challenge and moral imperative of ethnography in the US, showcasing the work of students on such organizations as the Bay Area Pollution Control Agency and the California Insurance Commission. Her central point was political without being partisan: without such understanding of how complex society works, led by anthropologists as “citizen-scholars,”

a democratic citizenry cannot function effectively.

Among contemporary anthropologists who have taken up Nader’s challenge are Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Lutz: significantly both conduct research in domains seemingly fenced off by issues of security clearance and national security (Gusterson on nuclear research, Lutz on the US military-industrial complex) and yet have managed to navigate access to rich data, simultaneously advocating the need for more public anthropology. Their work is critical without being adversarial, collaborative without being co-opted, and smart without being inaccessible, thereby dissolving some of the dichotomies anthropologists have tended, in recent years, to enshrine. Similar qualities are exhibited in pioneering work on Western aid to Eastern Europe by, among others, Janine Wedel and Steven Sampson. In a recent article in *International Studies Perspectives*, Wedel sums up her methodology as “studying through ... tracking policy

discourses, prescriptions and programs and then linking them to those affected by the policies.”

Studying With

Wedel acknowledges that this is a messy business. With that judgment, I wholeheartedly agree—having been, to the audit-minded observer, messing around in my research into international democracy promotion in the former Yugoslavia since the Dayton peace accords of 1995. I set out with the generic idea of presenting to the “policy” audience my anthropological perspectives on politics, culture and identity in the Balkans. I imagined myself, in heroic individual terms, championing the people of the region: I would confound the easy certainties of journalists, diplomats and aid workers, and open their eyes to the reality that “anti-democratic” phenomena in the region—slow progress, incomplete transition or nationalist resurgence—tell us more about Western worldviews than Balkan backwardness.

In the course of study—in interviews with international and local employees of major NGOs, at workshops on a variety of linked topics, and conversations with friends and colleagues in the region—I discovered (of course) the limits of my own preconceptions—and my own ethnographic authority. International organizations in the region are often staffed by PhDs who know full well that a model of “ancient hatreds” has as much to do with serious analysis as “intelligent design.” Field officers can boast up to ten years of participant-observation in the region, moving between assignments in Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia: they take it as obvious to any but the most simple-minded that the “success stories” they generate are the products of particular relationships with funding organizations, not faithful reflections of complex reality. Local scholars see little purpose in academic “West-bashing,” which they see as doing little except providing some kind of credibility to all-too-real anti-democratic political forces in their countries.

What, then, to do, when the story you set out to tell enlightens none of those in it? My response is to seek common ground in the telling of the story with a range of democracy promotion practitioners in the Balkans: professionals who worked for the

Democracy Promotion and Anthropology

Q & A with Thomas Carothers

Thomas Carothers, senior associate and director of the Democracy and Rule of Law Project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is widely recognized as a leading international authority on democracy promotion, or the promoting of the development of democratic institutions transnationally through means of foreign assistance. At this year's AAA Annual Meeting, Carothers will headline a panel discussion, "Evaluating US Democracy Promotion: A Case for Engaged Ethnography?" on Friday, December 2. This past September, Carothers spoke with AAA Director of External, International and Government Relations Paul Nuti about the intersection of anthropology and democracy promotion.



Paul Nuti: The existence or emergence of democratic political culture in transitional contexts lies at the heart of the discussion on evaluating the impact of democracy assistance strategies. What value would a capacity to measure political culture add to democracy promotion work?

Thomas Carothers: The concept of political culture has long presented problems for democracy promoters. On the one hand, they know that political culture, however it might be defined, has an important bearing on their work. On the other hand, they find it hard to take on board because it resists clear definition and is sometimes used as a way of arguing that certain societies are ill-suited for democracy, which goes against the universalistic impulses of most democracy promoters. I am wary of the idea of developing a method for measuring political culture beyond the sorts of attitudinal assessments that are currently employed. Aid practitioners are under such pressure to find and use quantitative methods of measuring their work that they might well end up using such an instrument in mechanistic, unhelpful ways.

PN: As a non-anthropologist democracy expert, do you have a general sense of how the discipline of anthropology might inform the evaluation of democracy assistance?

TC: Evaluations of democracy assistance too often are rather superficial exercises that attempt to measure quantifiable, short-term changes in specific institutions without adequately exploring a wider range of questions about the impact of the aid intervention. How was the aid intervention perceived and experienced locally? What were the indirect effects of the intervention on people and organizations beyond the immediate target institution? What sorts of long-term changes were produced? Evaluators measuring for example how many public hearings a parliament held and how many people attended the hearings as a result of a program to increase parliamentary contact with citizens are likely not tackling a whole set of broader, deeper questions that are highly germane to understanding how the aid intervention affected the society in question. With their commitment to in-depth, relational, long-term understanding of other societies, anthropologists could add highly valuable perspectives to evaluations of democracy aid.

PN: In recent months, some in the social science community have noted that the current approach to democracy building in Iraq and Afghanistan would benefit from anthropological research of the local context. What do you think?

TC: When democracy promoters try to help post-conflict societies rebuild their political systems, questions about who the main power actors are, what their interests are, and how they are dealing with each other in the new environment are crucial. But assessing the terrain of power actors and relationships in a society coming out of years of fundamental conflict is a daunting task, as evidenced by the profound difficulties of the ongoing processes of political reconstruction in Afghanistan and Iraq. If anthropological research could help elucidate these power issues in ways that would be timely and accessible to the practitioners on the ground it would be welcome, though some policymakers at higher levels remain resistant to what they perceive as overly pessimistic accounts by outside experts.

UN, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and various USAID subcontractors, as well as program officers at the Mott Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, who have funded our project. What I have encountered in my interactions with these informed and committed professionals is shared interest in converting individual experience into effective institutional learning, and frustration that the deadline-driven, grant-seeking world of democracy promotion offers no space for the analysis and reflection that would make that possible. This is also the case for a generation of talented, young, scholarly-minded professionals from the region, many of whom are tired of doing what Paul Nuti has acutely called the “democracy dance” to secure their livelihood, when they could be conducting illuminating, critical “insider” research into the experience of “being democratized.”

So now I am studying with. In addition to the anthropologists already mentioned, I seek to emulate the work of Julia Paley, who

details how she shared ethnographic methods with public health activists in Chile in *Marketing Democracy* (2001), and Kay Warren’s current SSRC-supported project, examining Japanese foreign aid in close dialogue with its planners and implementers. Beyond disciplinary boundaries, I also take inspiration from Watson Institute colleagues James Blight and Janet Lang, pioneers of what they call “critical oral history.” As outlined briefly in the preface to their book *The Fog of War* (2005)—itself a collaboration with Robert McNamara, a leading policymaker during the Viet Nam war as secretary of defense between 1961 and 1968, and Errol Morris, who directed the 2003 documentary *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S McNamara*—this approach seeks to capture and distill the special knowledge of participants in historical events by bringing together in dialogue scholars, decision-makers and documents, through painstakingly prepared and carefully structured conferences. The triangulation of perspectives

yields, in Blight and Lang’s view, new understandings of past mistakes, often the product of faulty assumptions and a failure of empathy, with the promise of educating future leaders.

In democracy promotion in the former Yugoslavia, obviously, the personalities are less well-known, the events less fraught and distant in time, and the documentary record less authoritative. It is refreshing, though, to find oneself scaling-down a methodology, rather than scaling-up. Studying with makes it feasible to study thick and study through. It provides not only a concrete way to carry out the central ethnographic project of complex, nuanced story-telling, but also, by bringing the stakeholders in that story into the telling, to increase the prospects of its being heard and acted upon. □

Keith Brown is editor of the forthcoming Transacting Transition: The Micropolitics of Democracy Promotion in the Former Yugoslavia. Further information can be found at www.watsoninstitute.org/muabet