

Armchair Anthropology in a Democracy Assistance Zone

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RELATIONS

Seventeen years ago, on the strength of a naïve and sophomore essay challenging the conventional international development wisdom to accommodate concepts like culture and worldview more routinely, I was admitted into a graduate anthropology program at George Washington University. Two years later, degree in hand, I left the discipline and embarked on a more practical career in foreign policy and international development, some-

ed and installed in new cultural contexts all over the world framed—at least for me—a fresh anthropological inquiry, as an international development practitioner.

As someone trained to think anthropologically, my operating assumption is that culture was where one must begin in determining how things such as legislatures, voting and the rule-of-law come to have meaning. In the field of democracy assistance, this reflex has proven both illuminating and vexing as it has simultaneously yielded insights into how cultural worldviews shape constructions of democracy and collide with democratic “scripts” driven by other

vignette illustrates the potential utility of anthropological approaches in this arena.

The Democracy Dance

From 2000–02, I served as chief-of-party for the Democracy Network Program in Macedonia, a multi-year initiative funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) aimed at strengthening the local NGO community. As a democracy practitioner and “moonlighting” anthropologist, few things interested me more than divining at least a sense of the evolving political culture in transitional Macedonia, to the extent that this was possible. For me, an important piece of this was to zero in on what drove the communication dynamics between, among and within NGOs and international donors. What motivated them to collaborate? What derailed collaboration? How was NGO leadership construed? What distinctions existed in their public and private utterances? What was the state of the “listening space”? As outsiders looking in, international donors like USAID were not always cognizant of what NGO communication dynamics meant. It was often, therefore, beyond our sphere of influence to dictate events according to the democracy scripts we brought along.

VIEWS ON POLICY

It was my impression that a communication “bias” existed among donors in their interactions with Macedonian NGOs, and that this may have reflected use by these NGOs of emergent democracy discourses for tactical reasons. The anointing of local organizations by donors as worthy of funding often proceeded on the basis of how well their representatives could articulate a generic democracy agenda. To be sure, the viability of their program proposals important, but their overall stock rose if they were able to employ the vocabulary of democratic development: some keywords being civil society, free and fair elections, democratic transition, citizen participation, policy advocacy and

lobbying. It was routine for NGOs in this environment to attempt to curry favor with donors by artfully performing the democracy dance, enticing them (particularly if their English was polished) with perfect phraseology and creative-sounding democracy initiatives. This performance aspect put the donors in a rather odd predicament: that of being impressed with our own idioms and constructions of democracy, but less inclined to dig deeper for local constructions. As a group, the democracy assistance donors did not always *invite* alternative ideas or *welcome* local “takes” on what democracy meant *for Macedonia*. Consequently, most donors elected not to “peel the onion” and were content to proceed on the basis of their institutional imperatives and their democracy agendas.

World of Macedonian NGOs

An intriguing and highly educational illustration of a communication that shed a bit of light on the political culture and perhaps resulted in a missed opportunity to partner with an NGO unfolded in early 2001. I recall taking a meeting with two representatives of a “community service” NGO based in the resort town of Ohrid who wished to secure a grant from USAID. They had been unsuccessful in a previous attempt to obtain USAID funds and had also been turned down by several other donors. As they explained what it was their organization was interested in doing (essentially, partnering with nascent neighborhood associations to “broker” relations between ordinary citizens requiring service delivery and municipal structures), it was clear, superficially at least, why they had not been able to capture donor interest. In short, the organization simply did not have the capacity or experience to undertake this project *and* there was no flicker of familiarity with the democracy agendas (and concepts) being promoted generally by the donors. This NGO could not do the democracy dance.

I nevertheless enjoyed talking with the two representatives and chose not to dismiss their request, agreeing to meet with them again at some point. Meanwhile, members of my local staff had noted this meeting and advised me that this NGO

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A neighborhood meeting in Bitola, Macedonia. The USAID Office of Transition Initiatives has supported civic action and space for community activities in its democracy promotion efforts. Photo courtesy USAID

what saddened to abandon anthropology, but concerned that I might never find a meaningful way to apply it to my work in international politics. Right on cue, however, the Berlin Wall fell and things got really interesting. Suddenly, the paramount ideological assumption that had triumphed in the Cold War—that some calibration of democracy and free markets was best suited to allocate political and economic goods—became an exportable commodity, and democratic development emerged as a viable career track. How and under what circumstances this commodity was export-

institutional and foreign policy concerns. A consequence is that I have found myself in professional situations where I must reconcile the instincts of the inner anthropologist with the demands of being a democratic development practitioner, often to an unsatisfying result. In any case, it is beyond clear that anthropological takes on democracy—more specifically, ethnographic inquiries into power relations, citizenship, informal institutions and discourse—are increasingly vital to an understanding of how democratic processes unfolded around the world. A multifaceted

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should not receive a grant because it was an “old school” organization, run by former communists and socialists. In their view, such an organization would never be able to extricate itself from its patron-client, crony-ridden pedigree and supporting it would not reflect well on the Democracy Network program. I considered this but proceeded anyway to meet with the two representatives again, at their invitation, in Ohrid two months later. The “meeting” resembled a full-court press by a wealthy lobbyist on a lawmaker, complete with a VIP visit to a religious festival, a tour of several spectacular Orthodox monasteries on Lake Ohrid, a four-course meal at the finest hotel in Ohrid, a meet-and-greet with top municipal officials in Ohrid, and as a parting gift, an extraordinary black-and-white portrait of Josip Broz Tito, the late dictator of what was Yugoslavia.

Setting aside the blatant attempts to influence the grant-making process, I had several fascinating conversations that day about the “old days” of the former-Yugoslavia when there were indeed citizen entities, roughly equivalent to what would now be called neighborhood associations, operating throughout the country. These groups performed a myriad of functions along the lines of the activities this NGO wished to carry out, serving principally as a conduit for

citizens in their dealings with local government. While the nostalgia for these historical artifacts was palpable and impressive, it was the way they were described as precursors to modern NGOs that caught my attention. These defunct organizations seemed to represent an indigenous construction of a democratic institution, a local expression of democratic political culture, *not* in donor parlance, but certainly in the view of these two representatives from the “old school” NGO. It was a rare moment of clarity in reconciling local meaning with prevailing democratic development agendas.

The important point is that the donor community could not accommodate this NGO (and perhaps others) partly because it could not—at least at this particular moment—reflect back what the donors valued and prioritized. This marked a classic collision between a culturally-inflected interpretation of a democratic form and a rigid, externally-rendered democracy script. In retrospect, I have wondered how much could have been learned about local constructions of power, citizenship and democracy had donors been both more accommodating, and more skilled at “peeling the onion.” ☐

Portions of this article are adapted from “Towards Reflective Practice: Understanding and Negotiating Democracy in Macedonia,” a chapter in the forthcoming edited volume of essays Transacting Transition: The Micro-politics of Democracy Promotion in the Former-Yugoslavia (2006).

Sovereign Cliques

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mixes of state and private, of macro and micro, of local or national and global, of top down versus bottom up, and of centralized versus decentralized that today configure many transnational policy processes. Anthropologists are thus well positioned to track the interactions between public policy and private interests and the mixing of state, non-governmental and business networks that is becoming increasingly prevalent around the globe.

The value of a theoretical and methodological framework that can both dissect and connect the local and global and state and private is

difficult to overstate in a multilayered and rapidly changing world. Today many in the world are perplexed by the ambiguous, shifting and overlapping of roles in policy and democratization processes. Analysis of relationships among actors, both individual and collective revealed by network analysis, enables an ethnographer to see different levels and arenas of activity in one frame of study and to observe in a snapshot how they are interwoven. ☐

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