Armchair Anthropology in a Democracy Assistance Zone

Paul J. Nuti
AAA Director of External, International and Government Relations

Seventeen years ago, on the strength of a na"ıve and sophomoric 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 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 unfold around the world. A multifaceted 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.

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 ficker 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 was 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 exportable, and how emerging political and economic institutions are in-
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