Ideology and the self-fulfilling prophecy in conservation and social science research

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I propose an analytical model, 'zones of intermediality', designed to research socio-cultural dynamics in foreign large-scale land projects. 'Zones of intermediality' refers to the ontological grids of (inter)national-local stakeholder encounters where diverse ideologies, discourses and practices of land use and valuation are mediated. The model was constructed to analyze conceptual similarities and differences between and within stakeholder groups in such land projects. Just as local 'communities' are composed of people with varied social realities, economies, political relations, knowledge, views and perceptions, so are other stakeholder groups. Researchers are not immune to such realities. The subjectivity and epistemological rooting of the researcher impact on what he or she sees in the field and what is eventually reported in research publications. Thus, the essay argues for a reflection on these processes in view of the fact that we ourselves mediate representations of 'local' people to academic and non-academic audiences. I hope that the 'zones of intermediality' model will be useful in facilitating such reflections.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, je propose de considérer un modèle analytique dénommé 'zones d'intermédialité' conçu pour faire progresser les outils de recherche des dynamiques socioculturelles associées avec des projets d'acquisition foncière de grande envergure en Afrique continentale et à Madagascar. Le modèle 'zones d'intermédialité' s'inscrit dans des grilles ontologiques de rencontres d'intervenants (inter)nationaux à locaux dans lesquelles divers idéologies, discours et pratiques ont une influence sur l'utilisation des terres et sur l'évaluation foncière. Le modèle a été conçu pour procéder à une analyse détaillée des différences et des similarités entre et au sein de tels projets d'acquisition foncière. Au même titre que les 'communautés' locales sont constituées de personnes avec des réalités sociales, économiques et politiques différentes, et que cette diversité a un effet sur leur opinion et leurs perceptions, convient-il de préciser que ces diverses réalités s'imposent également aux autres groupes d'intervenants et même aux chercheurs qui ne sont pas indifférents à de telles réalités. Les racines subjectives et épistémologiques du chercheur influencent ce qu'il observe sur le terrain et ce qu'il rapporte ultérieurement dans ses publications. C'est pour toutes ces raisons que j'invite à une

réflexion sur ces procédés dans la mesure où nous sommes nous-mêmes amenés à influencer les représentations des gens locaux destinés à un public universitaire ou non. J'espère que le modèle 'zones d'intermédialité' facilitera de telles réflexions.

In 2010, I was invited alongside other scientists to share my reflections in this journal on the relations between social scientists and conservationists (Evers 2010: 121–122). I expressed my opinion that conservationists and social scientists appear to have a somewhat caricatured view of each other, and commented that "The only way to reconcile contrasting ethical views, concepts and impacts of conservation is through exchange and dialogue." In this essay, I would like to return to this theme and propose an analytical model which hopefully will assist in bridging what I believe to be an undue emphasis placed upon philosophical and epistemological differences at a time when exciting new research is beckoning. In doing so, I will refer to the controversial area of conservation projects in Madagascar – where on one side of the conceptual divide, researchers place conservation at the apex of their values, and on the other, principally social science researchers tend to qualify such projects as cases of 'land grabbing' or 'green grabbing'.

In 2011, with support from The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (section WOTRO Science for Global Development), we commenced a research programme on foreign large-scale land acquisitions at VU University Amsterdam with partner institutes in Africa. We have formed a transnational and multidisciplinary team of researchers – including those with expertise in history, anthropology, geography, GIS/spatial analysis, political science, ecological economics, linguistics, cognitive and communication sciences. The research (September 2011– September 2015) has four aims. First, we will analyse the global actors, networks and interests (e.g., political, economic, social, cultural, environmental) driving foreign land acquisitions, examining the role of the state, neoliberal reforms and donor interests in facilitating land access. Second, a grounded stakeholder analysis will detail local impacts, perceptions and responses to land deals. Third, we will map, through our theoretical model, 'zones of intermediality', the ontological grids of (inter)national-local stakeholder encounters where diverse ideologies, discourses and practices of land use and valuation are mediated. Fourth, we will use this model to capture commonalities between stakeholders and potential areas of contestation. The comparative

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research takes place in four settings ranging from large-scale mining in Madagascar, foreign food production in Ethiopia, REDD initiatives in Madagascar, and agricultural Chinese land investments in Uganda.

The past several decades have witnessed an unprecedented increase in foreign large-scale land acquisitions. It is estimated that over 46 million hectares of land were leased out to or the subject of potential land deals with foreign investors since 2006 (Deininger et al. 2010). Other figures differ; IFPRI (International Food Policy Research Institute) calculated that 20 million hectares had been officially transferred to investors by 2009 worldwide (cf. von Braun and Meinzen-Dick 2009). They are often referred to as 'land grabs' – a label evocative of neo-colonialism – by activists and academics alike who presume that cronyism and corruption taint these acquisitions *ab initio*. However, this view overlooks the reality that many acquisitions are completed within existing legislative, regulatory and policy frameworks. Land is being leased for various purposes such as tourism, mining, infrastructure and agricultural projects. Nature, conservation and climate mitigation schemes have also been characterized as large-scale land acquisitions (Cotula et al. 2009, IIED 2009, Smaller and Mann 2009). This last category of acquisition is often termed 'green grabbing', defined as land and resources which are appropriated for environmental purposes (Fairhead et al. 2012).

Literature on such conservation projects has sharpened the divisions between social science and conservation. Social scientists tend to focus on livelihood shifts, economic changes, dislocation from land and changed human-environment relations. Such research often depicts local people as a unified, victimized, and powerless group. Conservationists argue that Madagascar's biodiversity is under severe threat, often portraying the Malagasy themselves as the main threat to "our world heritage" due to slash and burn practices. Such stereotypical images of local people do a disservice to both the Malagasy and the cause of science. This impasse in part motivated our development of the 'zones of intermediality' model.

It might be useful to ask ourselves whether some commentators haven't made undue concessions to ideology and political correctness in the rush to jump on the land-grab bandwagon or to meet the pressures of "publish or perish". Are we, as researchers, vigilantly investigating data that contradicts our own preconceptions? Are we coming to conclusions prior to checking realities properly on the ground? Rather than comfort our positions, perhaps a brief recollection of the Popper falsification theory might be in order, i.e., an examination of data that goes directly against our own assumptions. Malagasy ideas and practices are varied, intricate, evolving and somewhat transient. Research demands analysis that takes this into account.

Conservationists and social scientists in fact have a similar lexicon when speaking of large-scale acquisitions, but terms are not always vested with the same meaning. This is a good example of what we see as a prevalent variable in a 'zone of intermediality'. Intermediality initially referred to the interconnectedness of modern media of communication. As modes of expression and exchange, the different media depend on and refer to each other, both explicitly and implicitly; they interact as elements of particular communication strategies, and they are constituents of a wider cultural environment (Donsbach et al. 2008).

Culture in fact is profoundly intermedial: people use media to communicate with each other and to mind read each other's thoughts (Bloch 2008, 2011, 2012). They use words, images, text, modern media, practices, etc. to interact with a perpetually changing audience. In the current essay, the focus is on just one of the analytic elements of intermediality: the use of the same medium by various people to unravel conceptual differences between what I will refer to here as stakeholders, who can include anyone claiming a stake in a land project, from the state to local individual NGOs but also researchers who do not have a direct stake in the land deal but who through their publications (reports, articles, books, etc.) are part and parcel of the mediation processes informing audiences outside the land project and therewith fuelling perceptions and imagined communities of what the local Malagasy are like in the minds of people throughout the world (see also Tsing 2005 and *infra*). As scientists, we need to be fully aware of our substantial responsibility when the 'information' we pass on is being disseminated to audiences we may not even be aware of.

The 'zones of intermediality' model addresses the above problematic, focusing specifically on how diverse, culturally-informed stakeholder approaches to the environment are mediated in the context of foreign large-scale land acquisitions. In 'zones of intermediality' various cultural paradigms and land claims meet on the same playing field, and imperatives of local cultural references, practices and discourses encounter those of external actors. The grid of stakeholder engagement in land deals is anything but static; language, lexicons, positions, and postures are deployed interchangeably and for various reasons. A village elder may draw upon the discourses of an NGO to refer to 'synergies', while a conservation group might frame new utopias to local communities – formerly the arena of politicians or religious leaders. Although signs may have become interchangeable, with various actors using a common terminology, what is signified may be entirely different. The same holds true for researchers rooted in divergent epistemological paradigms.

Intermediality necessarily entails media analysis, partly due to the effective use of media by conservation groups to explain and legitimize their work to audiences far beyond local settings. Conservationists also regularly publish their work in academic journals and other publications. Modern communication tools indeed have become most important in justification models of land projects. The increasing frequency of contacts across social strata and geographical regions has multiplied the veins present in physical, social and ideational landscapes. During our research into foreign large-scale land acquisitions, we have observed and are focussing on analysis of some of these mediated ideologies, discourses and practices as they pertain to land use and valuation. Such information is never a neutral knowledge stream but a mediation coloured by political, ideological and particular interests of the messenger.

To date, the Arena model has been the preferred tool to analyze stakeholder interaction in conservation and development programmes. The model was developed by Norman Long (Long 1989, Long and Long 1992, Arce and Long 2000). Researchers adhering to this model have an actor oriented lens in which they depart from a set of central principles: "agency and social actors, the notion of multiple realities and arenas where different life-worlds and discourses meet, the idea of interface encounters in terms of discontinuities of interests,

values, knowledge and power, and structured heterogeneity" (Long 1989: 82). Olivier de Sardan groups this model under the social logic approach with a methodological interactionalism point of departure (reminiscent of Goffman (1959) and Blumer (1986)) and praises the model as a milestone in the Anthropology of Development (de Sardan 2005: 13) while deploring its lack of innovation over the last twenty years.

Our approach is designed to address the dichotomy between local and international conservationists' views. Our aim is to distil complexities of cultural variation and "life-worlds and discourses" within each group of stakeholders: not all villagers or conservationists share ideal-typical discourses and lived-realities. There is considerable variation within such groups, not in the least due to power dynamics which can alter and mutate realities, discourses and practices on a daily basis between people within a certain category. Mediation, however, (agendas, messages and audiences) is highly contextual and conducted through political processes of social navigation (cf. Vigh 2009), imagination and interaction between and within stakeholder groups. The Arena model doesn't sufficiently integrate an analysis of the role of media in the justification, legitimating and implementation of conservation projects.

Tsing (2005) also draws our attention to the problem of juxtaposing stakeholder positions as such groups are the result of what she refers to in her book Friction as 'scale-making': "Scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary. I argue that scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as, taken for granted. Scales are claimed and contested in cultural and political projects" (Tsing 2005: 58). She gives a particularly pervasive example of 'scale-making' when certain definitions of 'community' (which had often little empirical reality on the ground) were created to meet the eye of the beholder, the funding agency of a forest conservation project in Indonesia. Note that researchers indeed are also engaged in 'scale-making' when they publish on the local groups or 'communities' are described in their publications.

In this regard, Tsing asks: "When 'community' is dreamed up and imposed by outsiders, what happens to local assessments and dreams?" (Tsing 2005: 264). As she aptly points out, village elites (Manggur elders) displayed considerable acumen in assuming the cultural paradigms of the international conservationists running the project: "In their cosmopolitan efforts to connect with powerful outsiders, village leaders may endorse forms of knowledge that are wrong or biased when considered in the context of local practices. Manggur elders have been quite capable in making their stories about the Manggur forest match middle class dreams – and in the process, further their own leadership strategies." Tsing rightly warns us however that such instrumental acquisition and use of knowledge is not just in the air.

Information and ideas do not flow smoothly and not everyone has equal access thereto (cf. Ribot and Peluso (2003) on access theory). Tsing therefore cautions against Manichean over-simplifications of local and global (in the same vein as Mosse (1994, 2005) and Appandurai (1996)): "I find myself doing it. Yet we know that these dichotomies are unhelpful. They draw us into an imaginary in which the global is homogeneous precisely because we oppose it to the heterogeneity we

identify as locality. By letting the global appear homogeneous, we open the door to its predictability and evolutionary status as the latest stage of macronarratives. We know the dichotomy between global and local detail isn't helping us. We long to find cultural specificity and contingency within the blob, but we can't figure out how to find it without, once again, picking out locality" (Tsing 2005: 58). Tsing's point is well taken, but it is noteworthy that even the local is often depicted as homogeneous in the 'scale making' process of particular types of research: ranging from 'the locals as victims' paradigm to the 'locals as culprits of environmental destruction' paradigm.

Our analytical tool is designed to research these variations of knowledge, views and practices between stakeholders and within stakeholder groups. Just as local 'communities' are composed of people with varied social realities, economies, political relations, knowledge, views and perceptions, so are other stakeholder groups (cf. Evers 2002, 2006). Researchers indeed are not immune to such realities and the subjectivity, and epistemological rooting of the researcher impacts on what he or she sees in the field and what is eventually written down in the research publications.

To summarize, one of the missions of social science research is to penetrate the deeper understandings (and quantitative implications) of interacting cultural practices and discourses. Griswold (1987, 1992, 1993) convincingly argues that most research fails to deal with the problem of meaning analysis altogether. Mohr (1998) thinks that this can be remedied by an approach similar to ours: "The best rule of thumb in this situation is to locate and evaluate the relevant domain of practical activity in which the identified system of cultural meanings is embedded. Differences in practice produce (and are produced by) differences in meaning. Therefore, the goal of an empirical analysis should be to assess how the various cultural elements are differentially implicated in alternative forms of practice" (Mohr 1998: 366). Thus, land use indeed is the embodied practice of discursive and non-discursive expressions of what for example the value of land is, and what concepts like development, conservation and land mean for the stakeholding individuals.

Odden (2011) provides practical references as to how to research the dissemination of knowledge and views in his article dealing with levelling mechanisms of primary schools on the differential distribution of competence in honorific language. This type of research gives us a tool to delve deeper into meaning structures via for example lexicon tests (which can be also orally). Mohr also takes this approach to heart by reiterating his plea for the practice approach (cf. Bourdieu 1977, 1984): "The argument is that any cultural system is structured as an embodiment of the range of activities, social conflicts, and moral dilemmas that individuals are compelled to engage with as they go about negotiating the sorts of everyday events that confront them in their lives. This insight has direct implications for the measuring of meaning structures." (Mohr 1998: 353) Thus when determining a certain set of key cultural concepts (ideally through anthropological fieldwork), it is crucial to ask how they are related to one another, while assessing the question of what type of practical utility such cultural concepts play within a concrete institutional context. This is crucial information to be able to distil local variation, ideological flows and processes of 'scale-making'.

CONCLUSION

As we are particularly concerned with the role of researchers as mediators about conservation projects, it is important to move beyond simple dichotomies of the local versus international stakeholders because impacts and assessments thereof might be viewed and experienced very differently by local stakeholders. As physical landscape changes so may land practices and assessments. In the same way, ideas of the landscape might evolve as land access and practices change. Analysing land access, practices and mapping meaning of cultural interaction between people coming from varied cultural paradigms, it is crucial that we measure who thinks what and why, and how this impacts on their ideologies, discourses, practices, and navigations in the land projects. We have been assigned the mandate to develop our 'zones of intermediality' model to better track and identify these processes, with a view to designing more effective ways of looking at dispute resolution and mediation. In this essay, I hoped to caution against the lure of clinging to pre-conceived ideological stances at the expense of careful research, which does little to advance the cause of science or to facilitate meaningful dialogue and cooperation between related disciplines. We are confident that our research into 'zones of intermediality' constitutes a step towards avoiding that pitfall while developing a scientific approach to the complex issue of large-scale land acquisitions.

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