

Scientific Report

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

Anthropology Of International Institutions

Paris, France, 27-30 March 2008

Convened by:

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and Shalini Randeria ^③**

1. Executive summary

This workshop was the first event bringing together European social anthropologists working on international institutions. It was intended to start formulating a European research agenda in this promising new field. Fourteen European and three American and Canadian social anthropologists met for three days of animated discussions in Paris focussing on methodological aspects of an anthropological approach to international institutions.

The discipline of social and cultural anthropology with its unique tradition of long-term fieldwork at the micro-scale is particularly well suited to study intended and unintended effects of, and responses to, the policies promoted by international institutions at the local level.

Anthropological research based on participant observation began to study the multifarious and creative ways people defend their rights at the UN level, negotiate the impact of World Bank projects, or technical cooperation programmes of the FAO and regulations on intellectual property rights under the auspices of the WTO and WIPO, which often supersede state legislation and regulation. While international institutions operate in trans-national and de-territorialized contexts they also constitute research sites in their own right, and anthropology with its attention to informal relationships and complex social processes offers a unique perspective to study them. In recent years the institutions themselves, as circuits of power where normative frameworks are produced and globally diffused, resources are distributed and knowledge circulated through trans-national expert networks, have thus also become fields of anthropological enquiry.

Unlike other disciplines studying international institutions, such as political science and sociology, anthropology has a unique methodology at its disposal that is especially well suited to study the dense social interactions, which create and diffuse meaning and norms worldwide, together with their varying local impact. Studying these institutions is a complex endeavour that requires practicing multi-sited ethnography: fieldwork is often done at different sites among transient individuals passing through, such as experts from international institutions in local settings or representatives of civil society or indigenous groups in the headquarters of the institution. Anthropologists are confronted with a plethora of written materials that are often coded legal texts and that use a semantics proper to the institution. To approach the trans-national class of experts and bureaucrats that inhabits these institutions ethnographic tools have to be mobilised and neighbouring disciplines such as linguistics and methods such as discourse analysis have to be used to analyse these documents. As well, collaborative methodologies have to be implemented to be capable to cut across issues and follow the global to local relationships.

The researchers who came together in this exploratory workshop discussed the methodological and conceptual pathways for understanding the mobilizing and normative efforts of international institutions. The challenge was, how to avoid paper giving with minimal discussion and nevertheless get insights into the details of the field research of one-another. One of the strengths of an anthropological approach lies precisely in these details that may point to inherent contradictions that reveal the whole field in a different light. Other types of research often overlook or don't want to see them. The organisers decided to pose four sets questions to the participants and to the materials they collected that were of cross-cutting interest. This approach

allowed to find a common problematic in the study of the different institutions of the international system. Each participant addressed the first question and one or two of the other questions. No written papers were circulated before the workshop. Each participant had twenty minutes for the presentation and 30 minutes for discussion:

1. The first set of questions related to the access, role and place of the anthropologist in international institutions. Participants described how they gained access to the international institutions often alternating between several roles as experts, employees, activists and anthropologists. They discussed the conditions and constraints of their research, how they determined the methods they used (interviews, observation, analysis of written and visual material etc.) and the nature of the results they obtained. It appeared as a particular problem not only to gain access to the institution but also to negotiate exit from the institution while sharing the results of the analysis with the people working in and for the institution.

2. The second set of questions of cross-cutting interest related to the words used in the institution and the concepts used by the anthropologists to analyse them. The participants pointed to the buzzwords of the moment, such as accountability, transparency and partnership and analysed their history and itinerary. They also examined the words that should not be used by the anthropologist and those that the institution cannot say. Discourses about harmony and 'ethics' prevail in the institutions blurring antagonistic positions and political interests.

3. The third set of questions related to how to observe the circuits of power in the institution. Participants showed the ambivalence of many processes in international institutions, which were experienced as essentially flawed and devoid of meaning by people who participated in them. They analysed how norms were nevertheless produced in such settings and how these norms were 'practiced' through complex 'assemblages' of agents, actors, agencies and authorities on the ground.

4. The fourth set of questions dealt with the claim to 'axiological neutrality' of the institution and the anthropologist doing the research. By looking at institutional practices anthropologists 'decentre' institutions and show them in all their complexity. They show how international institutions manage failures and contradictions by smoothing them and how they repose political questions as technical ones. Publishing the results of such analysis often raises intense criticism by the people involved. Writing about international institutions becomes thus also a process of negotiation about what constitutes a 'fact'. Participants described how objections about the 'rightness' of the ethnographic account became part of their research methodology.

This first meeting raised a number of issues that the participants wish to pursue and they decided to work towards creating a European Research Network on the Anthropology of International Institutions that will associate also those colleagues who had manifested their interest in the workshop but had been unable to attend. Part of the participants will meet again in July 2008 at a panel they organised at the World Congress of Anthropology in Kunming China. The coordinators will submit a proposal for the ESF Research Networking Programme by October 2008.

2. Scientific content of the event

When we asked Prof. Kattel, the scientific observer from the European Science Foundation, professor of administrative studies, for his feedback on this workshop, he expressed his surprise at the ways in which we, anthropologists, attempted to make sense of international institutions: starting from ‘intriguing’ case-studies on a low level of abstraction, providing what he saw as ‘an ideology free discourse’ about these institutions, telling stories about their human basis where other disciplines seem to be limited by their own established discourses and taken in by the means with which they construct the object of their research.

His feedback sums up quite nicely the central problematic that the anthropologists assembled in this workshop were attempting to tackle. They were asking what are international institutions actually doing? What are the effects of the grand projects of a humanitarian nature that these institutions promote? How are international norms socially produced and constructed? By focussing on how international institutions appear once they are examined with anthropological research methods that take into account the micro-social processes, the complexities of agency and interests, the participants pointed to the disarticulation between practices of and in these institutions and their rationalising models. They showed how in spite of an impressive amount of ignorance and un-information in expert committees and assemblies of government representatives norms are negotiated and set, how the most dramatic circumstances like torture and war crime provoke boredom and a feeling of dullness in the UN committees that should help to eradicate them, how the extreme attention paid to process seems to overshadow the actual content negotiated in international procedures. The objective of these anthropological field-studies was not primarily, however, to pinpoint the dis-functionalities of the international system, but to address the practices and effects of international governance, the complexities of its intended and unintended consequences, of structured and unstructured ignorance, the contents but also the gaps, voids, ambiguities and contradictions. They question the modalities of partnership with civil society that are promoted by international institutions and the possibilities to stabilize the flow of meanings that are produced globally as well as the political impacts of the mechanisms and instruments there agreed.

The different institutions of the international system studied by the participants have by no means the same impact on the national and local level. Institutions such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank can enforce their norms and decisions through binding and constraining mechanisms, whereas other institutions especially in the UN system are governing through soft law, ‘project law’ and voluntary engagements. In the presentations, however, features of international governance became apparent, that all of these institutions seemed to have in common. Their mechanisms of consultation and control framed in terms of partnership, transparency and accountability create new games of power in the field of ethical politics redefining political conflicts in terms of moral and juridical standards. Tales of ‘harmony’ reign in the prevalent discourses but they do not necessarily solve the underlying conflicts in reality as they cover up differentials of power, resources and economic interests. International institutions produce reified discourses, global norms and standards that emphasize consensus while creating ambivalence of meaning.

Participants in the workshop proposed to read backwards the documents produced by these institutions, describing them as assemblages of discourses and practices, following their trajectories and histories. Coherent policy narratives in the institutions studied are often produced without a master plan from existing repertoire created in preceding sessions and meetings by a large variety of actors from governments, international administrations, NGOs and corporations. Drafts are tamed until they become acceptable and polite, cleansed from their conflictive elements and rendered “technical”.

By making the “assemblage” intelligible the anthropologists are constructing limits to an assemblage that would otherwise be unending. By analysing not only the social life of documents in the headquarters of international institutions but also how they are used in projects on the ground, the participants showed how seemingly technical issues get re-politicized in the life of the projects. What is experienced as anti-politics, as the dissolving of conflict in a discourse of harmony, is thus less an essence than a recurring practice of international institutions that has to be studied “at work”. What happens to differentials of power and resources if conflicts over resources are dissolved instead of solved, who profits and who is left behind? In this world constructed by words, participants found it particularly challenging to engage with institutional knowledge production and to observe the consequences of the thought work of international institutions at the local and state level. Discourses and concepts used on the international level travel to the most remote local sites and structure political intervention and policy making. They appear in government programmes and NGO project applications and lead a life of their own. One of the themes the participants of this workshop thus decided to pursue together across the international system are the words and institutional semantics of the institutions and their itineraries, histories and effects on the ground.

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field

The workshop was the very first opportunity for most of the European anthropologists working on international institutions to meet face to face. In spite of the wide variety of international institutions they studied they immediately found common ground and were able to discern mechanisms, vocabulary and impacts these institutions had in common. It seems promising to pursue this effort and to focus on the study of governance through different scales, and on institutional semantics as the first themes for future cooperation. It is particularly useful when engaging as anthropologists in this field of research, to clarify the methodological and conceptual challenges it represents and to engage more strongly in inter-disciplinary trans-national modalities of scientific exchange.

4. Final programme

Thursday 27 March 2008

Morning Arrival

14.00-14.10 **Words of Welcome**

Marc Abélès (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

14.10-14.25 **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**

Rainer Kattel (University of Tallinn, Estonia, ESF Standing Committee for Social Sciences)

14.25-14.40 **Introduction,**

Birgit Müller (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

The Role, Place and Access of the Anthropologist to the International Institution

Chair: Christina Garsten (SCORE, Stockholm, SE)

14.40-15.00 **Studying Up Too, or what to do with utopianism in the analysis of international organizations**

Ellen Hertz (Institut d'Ethnologie, Neuchâtel, CH)

15.00-15.20 *Coffee break*

15.20-16.10 **Observing Electoral Observers in Kyrgyzstan. Participatory Observation in the World of Democratic Assistance Programmes**

Boris Petric (LAIOS, Marseille, FR)

16.10-16.35 **An Anthropologist's perspective on the WTO Dispute Settlement Panel**

Paul Dima Ehongo (Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Juridique, Paris, FR)

16.35 -18.00 **General Discussion**

20.00 *Informal get-together and Dinner (Irène Bellier's house)*

Friday 28 March 2008

Observing Circuits of Power

Chair: Irène Bellier (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

09.00-09.35 **The UN Committee against Torture: the Ethnography of Doubt and Absence**

Tobias Kelly (Social Anthropology, Edinburgh, UK)

09.35-10.10 **Practices of Knowledge Production at the Special Court for Sierra Leone: Towards an Ethnography of International Criminal Justice**
Gerhard Anders (Institute of Social Anthropology, Zurich, CH)

10.10-10.30 *Coffee break*

10.30 -11.05 **The Absent Presence. Multi-stakeholder Dialogue on Biotechnology in the FAO**
Birgit Müller (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

11.05-11.40 **The Interplay between the World Bank, the Inspection Panel and the State in India**
Shalini Randeria (Ethnologisches Seminar Zurich, CH)

11.40-12.30 **General Discussion**
12.30-14.00 *Lunch*

The Words of the Institution — the Words of the Anthropologist

Chair: Shalini Randeria (Ethnologisches Seminar Zürich, CH)

14.00-14.35 **Fashioning the World: Organizational Buzzwords for Global Scenarios**
Christina Garsten (SCORE, Stockholm, SE)

14.35-15.10 **Time matrixed reason in organisational action: documenting macro-economic facticity at the IMF**
Richard Harper (Socio-Digital Systems, Microsoft Research, Cambridge, UK)

15.10-15.30 *Coffee break*

15.30-16.05 **Negotiating Access to the WTO**
Marc Abélès (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

16.05-16.40 **From “free prior and informed consent” to “consultation”: How Indigenous peoples representatives become experts at (and of) UN agencies**
Irène Bellier (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

16.40-18.00 **General Discussion**

20.00 *Informal get-together and Dinner (Birgit Müller's house)*

Saturday 29 March 2008

Dealing with Written Material: what is in a Fact?

Chair: Birgit Müller (LAIOS-CNRS, Paris, FR)

09.00-09.35 **The Negotiation of Anthropological Knowledge in International Institutions**

David Mosse (Anthropology Department, SOAS, London, UK)

09.35-10.10 **Time, Space and Memory: the Building Blocks of Development Projects**

Scott Guggenheim (EASES, The World Bank, Washington, US)

10.10-10.30 *Coffee break*

10.30-11.05 **Reading through the Assemblage: what is in a Document?**

Tania Li (University Toronto, CA)

11.05-11.40 **“The Objective”:** how Decisions get made amongst International Institutions

Amy Pollard (Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge, UK)

11.40-12.30 **General Discussion**

12.30-14.00 *Lunch*

(Re-)distribution of Knowledge and Resources

Chair: Tania Li (University Toronto, CA)

14.00-14.35 **The United Nations Development Programme between Memory and Forgetting: the Institutional Construction of Social Suffering**

Laïtitia Atlani-Duault (Université de Nanterre, FR)

14.35-15.10 **Gloss: The Thin Veneer of Knowledge and Power of Internationals in Post-War Bosnia**

Kimberley Coles (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Readlands, US)

15.10-15.45 **General Discussion**

15.45-16.00 *Coffee break*

16.00-18.00 **Perspectives for Future Cooperation**

18.00 *End of Workshop*

19.00 *Dinner*

Sunday 30 March 2008

Morning Departure

5. Statistical information on participants (age structure, gender repartition, countries of origin, etc.)

French 6
Suisse 3
USA 2
Canadian 1
Swedish 1
British 4

Female 9
Male 8

Age not available

6. The Final list of participants

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