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Contextualising the commons : a note on the study of culture, power and institutions

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**CONTEXTUALISING THE COMMONS: A NOTE ON THE STUDY OF CULTURE,
POWER AND INSTITUTIONS**

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(T)he village public realm is not, pace Wade, just about getting things done

David Mosse

The point of setting up conversations between social scientists from different disciplines is to produce better analysis and understanding. ‘Conversations I’ in 1985 had some success in stimulating exchange between economists and anthropologists over understanding of rural poverty. In that case a good deal of the conversation was concerned with methodology and particularly with measurement issues, but perhaps the most important outcome was to raise questions about the conceptualisation of poverty, and it is not to claim too much for the conference to say that it contributed to the establishment of the wider conception of poverty (than in terms of ‘income poverty’ alone) that is now very generally accepted. Running through much of the discussion, as I recall it, was a sort of a confrontation between ‘nomothetic’ and ‘idiographic’ approaches to knowledge, with the economists inclined understandably to champion the former quite forcibly, and some of the anthropologists the latter.

In relation to common property regimes and common pool resources in South Asia what can we hope to achieve, in terms of improved analysis and understanding, by bringing together economists and anthropologists once again? In this case the novelty of the enterprise is less readily apparent since the development of the field has involved anthropologists and anthropologically inclined historians (or historically inclined anthropologists) as much as economists pretty much from the outset, and economists have been much less dominant in the whole discourse than they were in the case of poverty. After all, Elinor Ostrom whose voice has probably been the single most influential one in the field, is a professor of political science. The (US) National Research Council’s meetings in 1984-85 which played a significant role in the establishment of the field were inter-disciplinary, and McCay and Acheson’s edited book *The*

Question of the Commons (1987) was the outcome of even earlier meetings organised by them involving mainly anthropologists. But still the main points of reference in the field have, I believe, been Ostrom's *Governing the Commons* (1990), and more recently (and perhaps less certainly) Baland and Platteau's *Halting Degradation of Natural Resources* (1996) both of which are works of synthesis – often of field studies by anthropologists (including the present writer) - that aim to develop middle-range theories drawing on institutional analysis and couched in terms of rational choice epistemology. The same is true of what has probably been the most significant single study, highly relevant to our concerns here in view of its geographical location, Wade's *Village Republics* (1988). These are therefore works which reflect the way of thinking of mainstream, choice-theoretic economics.

They have recently been subjected to careful scrutiny, notably by Arun Agrawal (2001, 2002), whose arguments seem to have exercised a significant influence on the editors of the recent National Research Council review of progress in commons research, *The Drama of the Commons* (Ostrom et al 2002) when they wrote their concluding statement on 'Knowledge and Questions After 15 Years of Research'. Agrawal's central point was that 'The multiplicity of causal variables [in the large numbers of case studies on which Ostrom and Baland and Platteau draw, and in their own conclusions, as in those of Wade] and the lack of attention to how the observed effects of these variables depend on the state of the context has created significant gaps in explanations of how common property (CP) institutions work' (2002, p41). In his own research Agrawal has sought to demonstrate the influence of the external social, institutional and physical context, including the impacts of demography, of modes of market integration and of new technologies, and perhaps most important, how CP institutions are influenced by the nature of local-state relations. He says: 'The almost exclusive focus on the local has made the work on CP vulnerable to the same criticisms that apply to the work of anthropologists who saw their field sites as normative worlds in themselves. The attention to the locality in preference to the context within which localities are shaped has ...prevented the emergence of a better understanding of how factors such as population, market demand and state policies interact with local institutional arrangements and resource systems (2002, p58). His point is partly reflected in some other recent work. Nandini Sundar, for instance, has drawn attention to the constitution historically of the 'local', or 'the village' by the state: 'Although India's villages have been famously described as institutions that have outlived the rise and fall of successive states, these "village communities" are intrinsically affected by state formation or disintegration' (2000, p.259). Agrawal (and in this one particular, Sundar) is pointing to the limitations of the mainly anthropological work on which

those who have sought to develop middle-range theories have drawn. The conclusions that he, and the editors of the *Drama* volume in which this article of his appears, draw, concern issues of research design that will make for improvement in these general theories.

It is noticeable that the editors of *Drama* have little to say in their conclusion about the only chapter written by a cultural anthropologist, Bonnie McCay, and one that is actually critical of their epistemology. The point that they draw from McCay's chapter, that 'Users are more likely to devise institutions governing resources if they have good information about the variables that affect the structure of the resource ..(etc)' (Ostrom et al 2002, p488) apart from being quite banal, is hardly her central point. This is actually to qualify the rational choice perspective by emphasising the 'situation' (or, she might have said, the 'context') of individual choice. As she says 'Rules, law and governance are major institutions affecting human behaviour. However, many social scientists see institutions as including not only rules but also norms and values, and at the very least as including both rules and the patterns of behaviour that may or may not be shaped by rules and lead to changes in them' (2002, p362). She continues, echoing in fact points that were made with force, notably by Pauline Peters in *The Question of the Commons* in 1987: 'A more cultural and historical approach ...sees commons questions as ones about competition and collaboration among social entities; the embeddedness of individual and social action; and the historical, political, socio-cultural, and ecological specificity of human-environment interactions and institutions' (200, p362)¹. In fact, in his other critical review article Arun Agrawal makes some very similar points, when he argues that commons scholars need to pay much more attention to how power, domination and resistance unfold within communities (Agrawal 2001).

It is this particular aspect of the 'context' of the commons that I want to focus on in this note; and such contextualisation, I suggest, should be one of the main points of re-opening conversation between economists and anthropologists, in regard to common property. There is a developing body of general theory about the commons, couched within the epistemology of choice-theoretic economics, and which has its own particular frontiers in research that economists like Pranab Bardhan are pushing out (the essay by Bardhan and Dayton-Johnson in the *Drama* book, for instance, attempts to bring greater precision to the question of how inequality influences the prospects for effective local management of the commons, by means of large-scale multivariate

research). At the same time a number of anthropologists (and others, such as Agrawal – certainly in the formulations of his 2001 article) continue to hold reservations about this whole approach, and about what it seems to miss out. Their reservations extend to critical scepticism about the attempts to ‘craft’ institutions for managing the commons such – notably – as Joint Forest Management and Water Users Associations in India. Such attempts rest, it is argued, upon a very restricted, instrumentalist perspective, that fails to take into account the fact that the commons are not just economic resources but also constitute a political arena, shot through with symbolic significance. The failure to recognise that economic resources also articulate politics and cultural meaning has meant that interventions intended to improve the ‘management’ of the commons have often failed².

What I see as the potential value in this conversation about the commons – setting the ‘more cultural and historical approach’ (McCay) against rational choice theorising, rather than evading the issue as the editors of *Drama* seem to have done – may be seen as one specific and important reflection of a wider set of questions about institutional theory. It is doubtful whether the choice-theoretic version of institutional theory – in the ‘new institutional economics’ – has succeeded, as Douglass North, at least, argued that it should, in integrating analysis either of politics or of culture (meaning the historically specific habits of thought and behaviour of a particular group of people). Taking serious account of those aspects of social life and experience that are labelled in English as ‘culture’ (in the particular sense just described) starts to expose the limitations of the universalising pretensions of choice-theoretic economics, which depend in part upon quite simplistic assumptions about the preferences that individuals are supposed to be maximising, and upon a simplified notion of human rationality. Even rather cursory empirical examination of human behaviour shows that people very often act habitually – that is, in ways which are characteristic of their ‘culture’ - and that preferences too are culturally specific. Of course these preferences and actions may be subjected to rational thought by the social actors themselves, but they are very often not. Part of the strength of the ‘old’ institutionalism of the German school or

¹ Peters was more blunt: ‘It is an error to suppose that an individual calculus can explain a commons system, rather, one has to understand the socially and politically embedded commons to explain the individual calculus’ (1987, p178)

² Further, as Sundar, for example, comments about these institutional innovations: ‘Rather than asking how the entire system of representative democracy can be transformed to give more power to people, donor institutions and development planners have, by focussing on village-based “participatory committees”, helped to create a discourse that diverts attention from the real issues ... (for) ... they too easily degenerate into multiple committees, compartmentalised into different management modes, serving no useful short-term or long-term purpose’ (2000, p.276).

of Veblen and Commons in the United States was that it did not treat culture as an awkward (though sometimes convenient) residual, but rather made it central in analysis.

This 'old' institutionalism has been criticised as being 'descriptive' and lacking in the formal rigour of mainstream economics and its off-shoot in the NIE, but as Hodgson has argued there was more to it than this for scholars from the German historical school, and the Americans like Veblen and Commons, at least *sought* to tackle the problem of historical specificity, and the serious limitations of attempts at producing universal theory in the face of the sheer complexity of society and the historical variation between different 'societies'. In doing so they did not retreat into empiricism, but aimed rather to develop a particular historiography, based – according to Hodgson's own exploration of the tradition of the 'old' institutionalism – on certain general propositions concerning the importance for understanding of socio-economic systems of “the laws ... that dominate the production and distribution of vital goods and services. Such laws would concern property rights, contracts, markets, corporations, employment and taxation”. These legal rules and contracts, it is held, are always and necessarily “embedded in deep, informal social strata, often involving such factors as trust, duty and obligation (so that) a formal contract always takes on the particular hue of the informal social culture in which it is embedded”. (The distinction that is made here between formal institutions and 'informal social culture' recalls that made by McCay, between 'rules' and 'patterns of behaviour'; and both recall Giddens' reference to the differences between the sort of routinised, or habitual activity that is part of people's 'practical consciousness' and that about which they are discursively conscious and may analyse and reflect upon) Further, it is clear that “The emergence of law, including property rights, is never purely and simply a matter of spontaneous development from individual interactions (but rather) is an outcome of a power struggle between citizens and the state”. Politics and power thus become of central significance in this approach³.

Turning back now to studies of common property we should consider the significance of the ways in which formal (even though not 'official') common property institutions are 'embedded in deep, informal strata' or 'informal social culture' and in wider structures of politics and power. Analysis of this 'embeddedness' is part of the province of anthropology, and a first point to make is that the idea of embeddedness should not be seen as implying that actors are in some way fixed in an unchanging social reality. The 'habits of thought and behaviour' that constitute culture,

though they have an enduring existence, are still not fixed and unchanging but always being contested and negotiated. 'Embeddedness', then, 'involves evolving and negotiated relationships between socially, historically and ecologically located people who shape and are shaped by a variety of institutions of varying degrees of formality ...' (Cleaver 2000, p362). Further, as Giddens has pointed out, persons are positioned in multiple ways, and in negotiating sometimes conflicting demands and expectations are motivated as much by the drive for ontological security as they are by direct benefit. For these reasons anthropologists are critical of the economic, instrumental rationality that is reflected in Ostrom's and in Wade's analyses, in which social norms only occupy a distant second place. This is part of the point, then, of my epigraph, taken from David Mosse's commentary upon Wade: 'the village public realm is not just about getting things done'. To elaborate the point: rights and claims to resources are embedded in cultural systems of meaning, symbols and values (cf. Peters, note 1). Thus in the particular case of access to water resources for domestic use in the region of Zimbabwe studied by Frances Cleaver, people were evidently motivated by a strong concern to avoid conflict and to maintain social solidarity and cooperation – not so as to achieve the greatest possible efficiency of resource use, but as values in themselves. 'Cooperation', she says, in this case 'is not so much about direct exchange and anticipation of benefit but about the generalised concept of the need for accommodation and reciprocity with neighbours'. These values were linked with cosmological and religious beliefs, in which it was held – for example - that the loss of social harmony incurs the wrath of the ancestors. These ideas then legitimate and reinforce 'social relations of authority, norms of respect and conflict avoidance, by linking them to the natural and supernatural worlds' (2000, p.378). Practically, the people whom Cleaver studied preferred open, inclusive village meetings, in spite of the high transactions costs associated with them, because they contributed to generalised community solidarity. They preferred 'approximate compliance' with rules, and negotiation around them, because of these deeply held values and principles, rather than (for example) making others subject to 'graduated sanctions' in the way that Ostrom describes in her 'design principles'.

David Mosse makes some very similar points – whilst also going beyond them - in his studies of tank irrigated villages in Tamil Nadu: 'Rule enforcement is about village unity, and unity itself is a source of prosperity ... (and it is expressed by the term *kattupatu*, meaning order and discipline)' (2003, p.168). But 'rule enforcement', it is clear, is not to be understood here any

³ Hodgson (2001) *loc cit*, note 2, p.301, p.304 and p.312. Hodgson notes the continuities with Marx's approach, but argues that "the analysis goes further than Marx, by grounding property relations in shared

more than in the Zimbabwe case, in terms of rigid compliance: 'Rules are invariably not followed, and do not govern practice ...rules of water use are more often publicly expressed as accepted norms or official codes, than privately followed as guides to behaviour...The concept of rule-governed behaviour, therefore, conceals the way in which individuals with the necessary skill, power or authority manage to break the rules and yet demonstrate (or argue for) conformity to them and thereby win over group support for private causes' (2003, p.161-3). Or again, 'tank resources are not primarily managed in ways which maximise economic utility and ensure accountability, but in ways which minimise social conflict and serve to enhance the prestige and credibility of existing leadership' (2003, p.173) – which ensures *kattupatu*. So when Mosse talks of the village public realm – of which the tank is a prominent component - as 'not being just about getting things done', he refers to a whole range of symbolic (discursive and 'cultural') and practical (political) action that is concerned with 'rule' or the exercise of dominance, and with resistance to it. Hence the title of his book *The Rule of Water*: water, in these south Indian systems of tank irrigation is both subject to 'rule' rather than being 'managed', and also an instrument or aspect of rule. There is an implicit reference to the argument expressed in and made familiar by the title of an old paper of Walter Neale's 'Land is to Rule' (in Frykenberg 1967). As Mosse says at one point 'Land and water in Tamil Nadu are not only exploitable resources but also media through which a variety of social relations have been structured' (2003, p.167).

In relation to this general argument the core of Mosse's book is a fascinating comparison of two almost adjacent tank villages, that are nonetheless quite radically contrasted with each other. It also represents an excellent illustration of my general argument concerning the cultural and political embeddedness of formal institutions. One village has formal rules of water allocation and distribution (those referred to in my quotations in the last paragraph) and a system for rationing it in times of shortage, administered by village menials known as *nirpaccis* who are all (untouchable) Pallars, and whose servile role is the reciprocal of Maravar dominance. The other village has none of these institutions and an acknowledged *lack* of order or *kattupatu*. Whereas in the first village hierarchy persists and 'power and authority are articulated through public institutions [notably tanks and temples] and their rules" in the second 'power operates through more diffuse private networks of alliance, patronage, and personal obligation, or appeals to the external authority of the state' (2003, p.203). In some ways the second village appears almost anarchic as the allocation of water there is subject to 'manipulative self-interested competition'. Yet another aspect of the difference between the villages is that income from tank-related

habits and by also emphasising the concept of culture" (p.309).

resources is more likely to be put back into maintenance in the second village than in the first. In the first village such income is more likely to be put into the temples that are another element in the dominance exercised by the Maravars. The breakdown of hierarchy in the second village has to do with the contestation of Maravar dominance there over the last two centuries by Utaiyars, and with ecological differences from the first village that affect the cropping pattern and make for different demands for water access.

The two villages differ, however, in other respects as well as these, and in an effort to sort out the significance of different factors, Mosse undertook a survey of 89 tanks in 79 villages within the area of the same tank system. He found a clear pattern: villages on red soils in the upper part of the catchment were generally characterised by strong collective action (as in the first village that he described and analysed in detail); while in villages on the water retentive black soils in the lower part of the catchment, where tanks have a less critical role to play in the agricultural economy, the institutions of collective action were much weaker. In other words, in a way that is actually very similar to that described by Robert Wade in his analysis of variations in collective action across different villages in the canal irrigation system that he studied in Kurnool, the pattern of collective action is an expression of ecological variation and of its implications for the costs and benefits of cooperation. But for Mosse this is not all there is to it. He argues that the significance of ecological variation is culturally and politically mediated: in short, the villages in the upper catchment are '*kattupatu* villages' and those in the lower catchment are not. Mosse sums up: 'The difference between the two areas is not that self-interested farmers are rationally constrained to follow rules in one local ecology, and not in another. Rather it is that in one set of villages power and authority tend to be articulated through tanks as public institutions (along with the temple, service roles etc) while in the other set power operates through more diffuse private networks of patronage, alliance and personal obligation' (2003, p.234). It is possible that a similar argument also holds in regard to the area analysed by Robert Wade. Certainly there are strong hints in his work⁴ that the existence of the local water management institutions that he describes goes along with Reddy dominance, and that where this dominance has been challenged the institutions are much less likely to be found.

The key points that follow from this brief discussion of Mosse's work are that commons questions, clearly, are 'about competition and collaboration among social entities' (McCay). The

⁴ I refer here to impressions that I gained long ago from inspection of some of Robert Wade's data. He has recently, in private conversation, accepted the point as a reasonable hypothesis.

commons are not just, or even primarily, seen by their users as economic resources, but they are elements in and an arena for struggles over power and authority, with powerful symbolic significance. So when state agencies or NGOs intervene, in attempts to improve the management of the commons, by 'crafting' institutions such as Water Users' Associations they may well create intensified competition over resources and heighten dispute over social position and authority. This is very clearly shown in Mosse's account of a Water Users' Association set up in Chengalpattu District in Tamil Nadu, under the aegis of a European Community programme. The society became an arena of contention between dominant caste Mudaliars and Dalits, none of whom, he says 'appear to have seriously considered the society as a basis for achieving equitable access to common resources' (2003, p.281). Rather, it is clear from the account that the WUA should be seen as a political institution 'whose functioning cannot be modelled narrowly in terms of economic interests in water' (2003, p.288).

The 'context', then, of common pool resources – neglected, according to Agrawal, in much of the existing research – is in part a political and symbolic field. These considerations obviously complicate the search for middle-range general theory about the governance of the commons because they reflect the considerable 'historical, political, socio-cultural and ecological specificity of human-environment interactions'. McCay goes on to say in her own conclusion that 'My argument is simple, although its implications for research are not. Explaining how people relate and respond to common-pool resources requires knowing more about their "situations" and how property rights and other institutions have been specified within those historical, ecological and cultural situations' (2002, p.393). The considerable complications that this perspective entails do not, however, render the search for middle-range theory pointless or impossible, for power structures and ideas about power can be studied empirically and certain generalisations drawn, as Mosse has shown. In the context of Indian society, as can be demonstrated in relation to other phenomena – such as the functioning of labour markets, or the character of political regimes at state level⁵ – the strength of, or the extent of the persistence of hierarchy or traditional dominance exercises particular influence, and it is possible to incorporate it into middle-range theorising. The rather restrictive assumptions, however, that are made in existing attempts at this in regard to the commons, will have to be relaxed – or, in other words, research should take a leaf from the book of the 'old' institutionalism.

⁵ Efforts appear in Harriss 1991 (labour markets), and 1999 (political regimes across Indian states)

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