Anthropology

JEREMY GOULD

There is no self-evident consensus on what constitutes genuine anthropology. For some, anthropology is defined by its fieldwork-based methodology; for others, it is its non-reductionist commitment to fleshing out complex causalities from the empirical foliage of thick description. For others still, anthropology is simply a general social science of non-Western societies.

This writer's understanding of the anthropological enterprise revolves around the need for a self-reflective perspective on the nature and use of normative discourse in social interaction. My empirical work highlights the use of normative argument to legitimize the exercise of power. The focus on normative discourse highlights the realm of narrative practices, but to become meaningful these must be situated – and studied empirically – within the concrete matrices of social action. The demand for self-reflection implies incessant interrogation of one's own relationship to the value-claims of the observed actors. Although no transcendental authority is claimed for this version of anthropology, it reflects concerns common to the endeavours in the discipline.

There is, similarly, no fixed definition of democratization. As a non-specialist I reflect here on the uses of democratization most prevalent in my own observations of external pressures for state reform in some southern and eastern African countries. Hence the writer's exposure to the rhetoric of democratization stems largely from the normative discourse of Western governments and transnational agencies concerning desirable modes of institutional practice – what they often refer to as 'good governance' – in the political systems

of the region. This understanding of democratization relates specifically to a programmatic agenda of state reform promoted by transnational actors and enforced via conditions associated with foreign aid and, more recently, debt relief.

Donor-endorsed versions of democratization claim to be grounded in a liberal notion of inalienable individual rights. This encompasses, among other things: political pluralism (the freedom to form political parties); free and regular elections; an unconstrained (and privately-owned) media; and the separation of powers among the branches of the state. To some extent, the transnational narrative of democratization also includes demands for decentralizing state authority and for greater freedom of participation for 'civil society' in political processes. Of late, demands for 'pro-poor' policies on the part of the state have been incorporated as well.

The juxtaposition of a normative-instrumental political agenda with an adamantly non-normative intellectual tradition obviously works against efforts to identify areas of synergy between the two. The ensuing tale, in other words, is not about how anthropological insights might best be harnessed in the service of Bretton Woods-endorsed campaigns for state reform in highly indebted countries. Instead, the intention is to link this analysis of anthropology and democratization to a broader narrative about the tension between instrumental interests and reflexivity. This theme is not specific to the study of political change, but it comes into quite distinct focus when viewed through the eyes of an anthropologist contemplating efforts to reform the post-colonial African state.

The normative enigma of democratization

The notion of democratization has, at best, an uneasy status in the anthropological vocabulary. For a number of reasons, both extra-scientific and scholarly, many anthropologists have been ambivalent about democratization and hesitant to embrace democratization as an explanatory tool, let alone as a normative ideal for passing judgement on the maturity of politics and political processes. Part of the reason for this can be found in the normative character of 'democratization'

as a research agenda. Where the die-hard liberal protagonist claims that anthropology 'has abandoned its claim to truth and is given over to an insidious relativism' (see Shils 1992: 183), the anthropologist would ask: Where does the liberal certainty in its universal truth reside? And to the accusation that such relativism 'undermines democratic values and gives the young little reason to believe that [anthropology] can contribute anything to the betterment of society' (Shils 1992: 183), an anthropologist might respond that it is precisely through self-reflection based on the contemplation of alternative versions of 'betterment' that society can best agree upon means to address pressing problems.¹

One source of the aloofness with which anthropologists observe the rhetoric of democratization is the left-leaning liberal political sensibility endemic to the anthropological community. The core of this sensibility gelled in the radical ferment of the 1960s, when various versions of 'radical' and 'Marxist' anthropology gained academic currency. Anthropologists publicly voiced scepticism about (and overt opposition to) all aspects of Western dealings with the Third World committed in the name of democracy. Noted anthropologists, from Claude Lévi-Strauss to Eric Wolf, expressed indignation over imperialist interventions ranging from the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo to United States aggression in parts of Southeast Asia. Anthropologists were well situated to experience the ambivalence of democratization. University campuses teemed with opposition to Western interventions in the Third World. The destructive consequences of these interventions – both military and technical – were becoming increasingly apparent. Like many other social groups, anthropologists found themselves in sympathy with popular demands for greater democracy at home as a protest against heinous deeds committed in the name of democracy abroad. Thus the American legal anthropologist Laura Nader (1969: 293) argued that anthropologists needed to 'study up' to reveal the workings of power relations within American society in order to achieve greater 'democratic relevance' for the discipline.

However not all anthropologists were radical or Marxist. Many members of the profession, including the young Clifford Geertz (1963), became involved in the post-colonial project of modernization. Interestingly, democratic politics

did not play a significant role in the discourse of modernization, either. The advice of the Columbia University anthropologist Conrad Arensberg to American development 'technicians' abroad is telling:

The overseas American will have to learn the particular distinctions of the country where he [*sic*] is working; he will be compelled to accept the local definitions of differences to some extent if he wishes his projects to succeed. It may be possible to gradually introduce some democratic procedures into these countries, but the individual worker will probably be wasting his time and ensuring the failure of his program if he demands an immediate acceptance of democratic methods. (Arensberg and Niehoff 1964: 41–2)

Beyond the ideological skirmishes of the Cold War and the profession's instinctive aversion to universalizing value claims, it is evident that democratization is a troublesome notion for anthropology. This is because, generally speaking, 'anthropologists . . . have a problem with politics' (Spencer 1997: 3). That is not to say that anthropologists have ignored political analysis. They incessantly probe the exercise of power as it is played out via dense social matrices of intense and intimate interaction. They have been particularly keen to unravel the puzzling mesh of continuity and rupture in the reproduction and transformation of power relations over time. Anthropology's fascination with the microphysics of power, and the way that power participates in the negotiation of subjectivity, both predate current articulations of these issues that sociologists and others might more commonly associate with the French philosopher Michel Foucault.

Central to anthropological research on politics is a rich literature on 'local political arenas' (defined below). But this work has rarely concerned the politics of mainstream political institutions – parties, parliaments, elections and so on; the major exception is F. G. Bailey (see for example 1969). Instead, the politics studied by anthropologists, especially over the past decade, has been on (externally-supported) state interventions in the socio-economic configurations of local communities. The core of this mode of analysis relates to development interventions and their consequences.

The politics of development is, of course, very much a politics of the state. Indeed, for many communities, the face

of the state takes the form of a development project. Yet, 'development' begets a particular kind of politics, involving very specific forms of engagement. Resistance to the oppressive or arbitrary use of power within a development intervention seldom leads to effective demands for democracy. Project designs are not the product of representative bodies, nor do project staff enjoy a popular mandate. The politics of development is articulated through a vocabulary of empowerment, consultation and participation, not one of accountability or responsible leadership.

This vocabulary reflects, in Ferguson's (1991) seminal coinage, the way in which the exercise of power in development interventions has been depoliticized. The basis of this depoliticization is, as Ferguson suggests, the way that multilateral aid bureaucracies like the World Bank dictate the goals and design of interventions. Recipient states have little sovereign power over the machinations of 'development' and cannot, therefore, be held accountable for the repercussions of the interventions. An esoteric technical language ('development speak') obscures the lack of statutory political procedure in the processing of decisions about development means and ends. Over the past decade numerous inquiries have sought to deconstruct the technical discourse of development so as to reveal the empirical intrigues of power behind the depoliticized façade, for example Marglin and Marglin (1990) and Escobar (1995).

Two streams emanate from this literature. One is a normative alignment with the 'victims' of development. A sprawling sub-literature is devoted to problems of participation and empowerment in development projects. Ironically, much of this work is funded by aid agencies, either directly or via non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that themselves rely on official funding by the donors. Perhaps for this reason, the empowerment literature largely reproduces the depoliticized character of development speak.

Another strand of analysis does, in contrast, underscore democratic politics; but the focus is the need to democratize development aid, and to create mechanisms for holding transnational elites accountable for the consequences of their actions (Escobar 1995). This perspective is not guilty of wholly ignoring large-scale power structures or the specific example of the transnational financial system. Yet, here

too, the state and the political configurations upon which it stands are scarcely subjected to critical scrutiny.

Why this reticence to confront the state? Nagengast (1994: 16) claims that anthropology has viewed the state as an 'unanalyzed given'. Trouillot (2001: 126) traces this oversight to anthropology's empiricist and methodological individualist legacy, exemplified by the founding ancestor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881–1955), who 'conceptualize[d] the state into oblivion'. Anthropologists do indeed have a methodological predisposition toward an immediate, richly contextualized empirical engagement with social processes. Intensive, long-term, localized field-work allows ethnographers to document and analyse social experiences of power and domination, authority and leadership as recounted by groups of respondents enmeshed in dense social networks. As a result, anthropologists have had much to say about patterns in the narration of political experience and about the unarticulated or unacknowledged structures of meaning informing political action.

Reliance on first-hand evidence implies both strengths and weaknesses for the study of aggregated processes at the level of 'regime transition' and 'state formation'. The ethnographic perspective provides a rich basis for assessing the empirical substance of state–citizen relations and for detailed deconstructions of the mechanisms of rule. Yet the demands of methodological/normative context specificity can be difficult to reconcile with the summative analysis of multidimensional political transformation on a national, much less a global scale (Trouillot 2001). Can the localized assessment of political relations link up with the analysis of qualitative change in the aggregate? Naturally this will depend on the choice of theoretical framework and its origins.

The liberal conundrum

The prevailing, mainstream usage of democratization underscores its roots in liberal political theory. Applying this to a specific context subsumes a wide range of institutions and associations within a model of political action grounded on

certain assumptions about the relative autonomy of politics with respect to other spheres of social activity, about individuality, freedom and the dictatorship of individual preference. This is problematic for anyone who consider liberal political theory to be a culture-specific perspective on social action (and human nature), the applicability of which cannot be assumed beyond the scope of its Euro-American origins, if indeed even there.

The relation of the individual to the social is a theoretical quandary upon which modern social science was founded. Anthropologists have not resolved this issue (nor can we even agree about the terms of the problem among ourselves). Yet one can safely say that anthropologists are on the average more sceptical than, say, many political scientists about claims concerning the universality of the 'rational-instrumental individual' as a general template for conceptualizing the Subject of social action (Englund 2002). Anthropologists insist that the motives and preferences of individual actors be situated in an empirical social context. This often draws accusations of particularism and relativism.

The fact is that anthropologists tend to eschew an aggregated, over-generalized view of moral personhood. Instead, when seeking to understand human behaviour they prefer above all to comprehend moral choice as an outcome of negotiated meaning among social actors involved in a specific historical and institutional situation. But to label the entire anthropological enterprise as relativistic is to miss the crucial methodological point. Most anthropologists would not reject the possibility of 'universal human qualities', or even the likelihood that certain 'norms and values' (a preference for justice, for example) could have quasi-universal appeal under normal circumstances. But this is a far cry from the quintessential liberal claim that predefined individual rights and freedoms will be compelling to social actors irrespective of and *prior to* a detailed empirical analysis of the circumstances within which social actors interact.

In this sense an agenda of inquiry harnessed to the normative *telos* of liberalism is anathema to the anthropological endeavour. This is not because anthropologists subscribe to the unassailable moral authority of communitarian values,

but because the very idea of positing pre-empirical assumptions about the strategic parameters and ideal commitments of social actors contradicts the rationale of ethnographic inquiry.

That said, there is clearly nothing in the methodological or theoretical arsenal of the anthropological discipline that counsels hostility to democratic politics. Quite the contrary: as concerned citizens anthropologists are no doubt as agreeable as anyone to ideas of accountable and responsible leadership, government based on consensus rather than coercion, and political processes that are responsive to the preferences of those affected by a given policy, decision or legislative enactment. For example, in the writer's experience many and perhaps most Zambians (among whom he has worked extensively), would also endorse such ideals. The problem is that in practice 'democratization' as discussed above does not always seem to promote these concrete democratic ends. The much heralded 'democratization' process in Zambia that brought the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) to power in 1991 with strong Western endorsement has hardly promoted democracy. A good ten years later Zambia's politico-legal system is in ferment as citizen groups and opposition politicians campaign to bring the MMD's ex-President Chiluba to trial on counts of massive embezzlement, fraud and corruption. Elsewhere, Lund (1998) recounts vividly how poorly managed processes of politico-legal liberalization in Niger produced chaos in the administration of local justice. The extent of unpredictability and confusion in the legal system was so great that it led one informant to muse plaintively, 'When will this democracy be over?' (Lund 1998: 204).

One might ask, then, if anthropology has little to contribute to the instrumental agenda of democratization, what views do anthropologists have about the factors promoting or hindering mechanisms of political accountability, equity and justice in everyday life? For insights we can turn to an emerging wave of political anthropology. Compensating for decades of indifference to state politics, these new anthropologies of the state constitute one of the most dynamic areas of intellectual activity in the discipline.

Anthropologies of the state

The impetus for a rekindled anthropological interest in state politics is above all empirical. In the 1990s the relationship between anthropologists and post-colonial state politics underwent a belated post-colonial shift. Democratization and other modes of conditionality-induced state reform played a crucial role here. Because of widespread political pluralism and liberalization of the media, the rhetoric of liberal democracy experienced an 'indigenization' in many places where anthropologists work. Somewhat unexpectedly, local political parties and social movements emerged in highly centralized polities articulating a vocabulary of liberal democratic politics, nowhere more so than in southern Africa. Of course, the indigenization of the rhetoric of democracy was not unrelated to the generous provision of 'democracy support' to pro-liberalist groups and organizations by the US and other Western governments. Nevertheless, in empirical terms, the rhetoric of democratization suddenly appeared as an indigenous cultural register lodged in popular discourse, in many instances reaching right down to the proverbial grass-roots of society.

The upshot has not been at last an anthropological discovery of liberalization and democratization as empirical givens or explanatory models for ethnographic analysis. Anthropologists vent little enthusiasm for democratization as a self-fulfilling liberal narrative of the modern state. Yet increasingly we have been obliged to accept that the social manifestations of power observed in the field are inextricably tied up with the dynamics and 'effects' of the state (see for example Mitchell 1999). Rather than a reversion to normative universalism, however, what is emerging is a growing ethnographic interest in 'liberalism' and 'democracy' as rhetorical elements and legitimizing narratives in the contestation of power between and among the various state and non-state actors.

The rising anthropological interest in empirical states has been paralleled by a growing puzzlement about how 'the state' should be theorized. The closer one looks at local configurations of power in the wake of the 'third wave', the more ephemeral 'the state' appears. On one level, as Lund

(2002) argues, actors and institutions are intensely preoccupied with the state; and yet it is increasingly difficult to locate a single source of public authority. This too must be seen in context. The privatization of state assets and social services has led to a widespread deregulation of social life. Viewed from the perspective of ordinary citizens, it is evident that state institutions can no longer claim an effective monopoly over legitimate violence or over the administration of justice (Hansen and Stepputat 2001). The progressive deregulation and arbitrary devolution of state authority has called the very *idea* of the state into question. Or more precisely, the cogency of the state idea has not so much declined as multiplied. The image of an absolute state authority that dominated generations of colonial and post-colonial actors lives on in the social imaginary, but its empirical referent has become indistinct. 'The state' of recent anthropological interest is less an efficacious regulatory force, than a quasi-mythical entity with which competing actors attempt to associate, and thus legitimize, their claims to public authority.

There are two ways in which recent anthropological engagements with the state can fertilize debates about democratic politics. First, ethnographic study reveals how local actors translate notions like democracy, liberalization or human rights within specific social contexts. Second, anthropological analysis deconstructs mechanisms of rule and hierarchy in local political relations, thus providing a litmus test of the validity of political claims promoted at more aggregated levels of society. There are several areas of empirical investigation – corresponding to various aspects of state–society relations – where recent anthropological findings provide insights into these relations. The remainder of this chapter discusses just two of them, very briefly: identity politics (registers of citizenship), and issues of public authority in local political arenas (legitimacy).

Identity politics

Political pluralization in Africa, as elsewhere, has heightened political competition and multiplied the issues around which

support for parties and agendas can be mobilized. The bulk of the attention addressed to this phenomenon has accentuated the politicization of 'ethnicity'. Ethnic politics is commonly stigmatized as 'uncivil' and thus anathema to democratization, in that it promotes divisive rather than inclusive social solidarities. Karlström (1999: 110), however, argues that since ethnic-based solidarities are unlikely to weaken in the near future, 'the analytical task will be to try and understand the conditions under which they can perform [a] mediating role constructively and the circumstances under which they become divisive and destructive'. Karlström's analysis of the political trajectories of Buganda royalism in Uganda – a rather special case, granted – suggests that the Ugandan government's policy of ethnic accommodation may well have defused civil conflict. It thereby secures the political stability upon which President Museveni's National Resistance Movement is striving to consolidate its version of 'no-party democracy' – something that conventional models of liberal democracy in the West have difficulty in embracing.

Karlström's primary interest is not in ethnicity *per se* but in the conceptualization of 'civil society' in an Africa context. The broader issue at stake is the multitude of ways that different categories of citizens position themselves in relationship to the state. Clearly, membership in a group defined by language, territory or custom can be an important rallying-point for political mobilization. Werbner, however, suggests that the importance of 'ethnic' identities has been greatly exaggerated: They are in fact 'merely a small fraction of the many identities mobilised in the postcolonial politics of everyday life' (Werbner 1996: 1). Increasingly, anthropologists have been broadening their purview to interrogate other registers of political selfhood. The marker that has attracted most attention is probably that of citizenship.

Citizenship is central to most understandings of democratic politics, embodying as it does a normative standard for assessing the quality of the relationship between subject and authority. Conventionally, citizenship is discussed as an element of state–society relations. In place of the conventional, jural notion of citizenship, anthropologists tend to stress its historically contingent, dynamic and contested nature. Rather than engage with the core juridical issues of

constitutional politics, anthropologists have been more interested in the margins of political selfhood – in transnational situations such as those involving migrants, or vigilantism, and transborder residents, or in situations where countervailing authorities compete with the state for the loyalty of subjects. Indeed, in problematizing the very category of ‘the state’ recent anthropological work on post-colonial Africa poses a question that is particularly challenging to the discourse of democracy: Citizenship of what?

Public authority in local political arenas

Questioning the validity of the state, both as analytical category and as real-life authority, inevitably invokes the notion of *legitimacy*. For anthropologists the fact of legitimate authority is, once again, an empirical puzzle that can only be solved within the context of the meanings embraced (and contested) by the actors whose compliance (or resistance) is at stake. This is quite different from privileging a ‘culturalist’ explanation of legitimacy – one that evokes fixed customary/symbolic referents to explain certain modes of behaviour. The debate between anthropologist Lentz (1998) and political scientist (1993) on the essential nature of ‘African power’ is illustrative.

Schatzberg claimed that the ‘moral matrix of African governance’, unlike the ‘transformative’ nature of Western power, is grounded in cultural parameters linked to consumption (‘father, family and food’). Lentz (1998: 46) counters that social debates about the ‘morality of power and desirable modes of governance’ in Africa are too complex to be reduced to such simple terms. Thus legitimacy is not a one-dimensional quality, to be measured in degrees, but rather a ‘conflict-ridden and open process in which “big men” and politicians as well as their audiences intervene’ (Lentz 1998: 47). In her view, then, ‘big men’ perform the testimony of their legitimacy for specific audiences or ‘moral communities . . . [that] in part overlap and share similar images of legitimate power and wealth’ (Lentz 1998: 47). Actors are not free to invent and manipulate the standards by which they are assessed; structures of ‘expectation’ constrain the ploys of those with public/political ambitions. But although Lentz

differs from Schatzberg on the complexity and, by inference, the substance of the 'moral matrix' of legitimacy, she does not disagree with the basic premise that grounds legitimacy in the realm of socially constructed moral judgement.

A different, albeit not contradictory, approach to the legitimacy puzzle can be found at the juncture of legal history and anthropology. Studies of customary law in colonial Malawi and Zambia (Chanock 1985) and of the historical transformations of legal processes on Mt. Kilimanjaro (Moore 1986) highlighted the complexity of factors affecting the codification of local normative systems. Such studies investigate how a plurality of normative codes compete for legitimacy and how social actors navigate and manipulate these codes in the course of their various economic and political pursuits. For the legal anthropologist, it seems, social actors are fundamentally instrumental actors who draw on whatever normative argument supports their immediate aims. The primary fonts of continuity and change reside not so much in the transformation of moral sensibilities, as in the material forces that sculpt the politico-economic conditions with which actors must come to terms.

At the other extreme, van Binsbergen (1995) inflates the 'moral community' premise into a culturalist axiom. His account of 'grassroots political culture' in two African countries addresses the predominant sub-theme in the Africanist literature on competing modes of legitimacy: the relationship between 'traditional authorities' (chiefs) and the state. He positions himself in diametric opposition to the modernist notion – argued compellingly by Mahmood Mamdani (1996) – that central state authority is more democratic and, hence, intrinsically more legitimate than the traditional leaders' authority. For van Binsbergen, genuine grass-roots democratization presumes the incorporation of traditional – spiritually legitimized – authority. In his view:

The continuity of a cosmologically-anchored local world-view with its own conceptions of legitimate political power and procedure; the interaction between, on the one hand, traditional leaders and, on the other, those of their subjects pursuing modern careers outside the village settings; the prominence of religious alternatives for the symbolic restructuring of society . . . these would seem to be important factors in the production of a democratic political culture in the global sense. (van Binsbergen 1995: 12–13)

This culturalist hyperbole rows vigorously against the contemporary anthropological tide. The actors populating the narratives of mainstream analyses today are far less obsessed with cosmological continuity than with the rational-instrumental ends of material security, respect and power. But what unites all the above-mentioned anthropologists is the conviction that it is vital to have a detailed empirical understanding of what is going on in grass-roots politics.

Rethinking the local state

The study of 'local politics' is a path well traversed by anthropologists. With its extensive literature and blossoming sub-fields such as ritual and performance analysis and religious studies, even a cursory overview is not possible here. Instead, the focus is on a body of work that is unique in the fragmented field of political anthropology for its theoretical and methodological coherence – the research of the 'APAD' school of rural anthropology, which has systematically surveyed transformations of local political arenas, primarily in francophone West Africa, since the early 1990s.²

Olivier de Sardan characterizes the work of APAD as 'development anthropology'; much of the APADian literature deals with development interventions – a theme noted earlier. Unlike most writing on development, however, APADian analyses generally proceed from an elaboration of the social context of the intervention, not from the logic of the project. Thus, while they participate in topical debates about the effects of 'development' in the countries concerned (mainly local sites in Benin, Niger and Senegal), the transcendental value lies in the analysis of fundamental social processes and institutions in these societies.

APADian researchers generally work on the 'local level', but stress the importance of comparative analysis. This is made possible by a common approach – akin to that of the legal anthropologists discussed above – that conceives of local political arenas as 'semi-autonomous fields' occupied by instrument-rational social actors (see for example Lund 1998). These arenas are characterized by a game-like logic of interaction: actors are in competition with one another

for various rewards, and yet, there is no single set of rules, rewards or sanctions governing the political 'game'. Instead

actors all develop personal and professional strategies, deployed in keeping with various criteria: for some, increasing patrimonial land, for others, obtaining a vehicle and the fuel to make it run, . . . : enhancing one's position within an institution, obtaining a better contract, increasing one's network of social contacts, becoming indispensable, earning more money, keeping an eye on a neighbour or rival, pleasing one's friends and relations, keeping a low profile and playing it safe, etc. (Olivier de Sardan 1995)³

Thus while actors are assumed to behave in a strategic, even instrumental way, they can be motivated by virtually any mode of utility, from predatory to altruistic.

Issues of decentralization and local power constitute a major theme running through the work of APAD. The general thrust of APAD's and similar studies is that decentralization has become part and parcel of a donor-endorsed agenda of state reform, and has a recurrent (if uneasy) status on the agendas of 'good governance' and 'democratization' promoted by the international 'development community'. Decentralization is widely recognized to be a problematic element in state reform; the successful devolution of powers and responsibilities from central government is never smooth, owing to the shortage of qualified managers and the weak institutional capacity of bottom-rung administrative structures in post-colonial states.

Decentralization remains popular with donor agencies, however, for many reasons. As an aid conditionality, demands for decentralization can be used to undermine the power monopoly of an entrenched political elite. Also, the possibility of channelling aid to an empowered local administration promises to shorten the distance that development resources have to travel from donor to ultimate recipient (and to lessen the possibilities for rent extraction by intermediaries). Furthermore, the combined effect of prolonged fiscal crisis, economic stagnation and downsizing of the public sector under structural economic adjustment have tremendously weakened the capacity of central government to regulate and administer rural areas. In any event, then, with or without an explicit programme of decentralization, most African states are undergoing a process of 'decentralization by default'.

Decentralization reforms are seldom implemented as planned, owing to capacity problems, and because of resistance among upstream politicians and within civil service bureaucracies based in the capitals. Thus it is not only the effects of the policies that need to be documented, but also the discrepancies between official intent (as expressed in policy guidelines) and real outcomes. Both the intended and the unintended aspects of a reform affect the 'rules of the game' of local politics, creating risks and opportunities for different sets of actors.

However, APAD's interest in decentralization is not primarily concerned with advancing the reform agenda, with making local administration more efficient, or with improving the mechanisms of civic participation in decentralized governance. Instead, the approach starts from the premise that any effort at radical state reform is fraught with contradictions. Particular studies then proceed to investigate the ramifications of attempts to decentralize government for the local, empirical exercise of power. APAD's empirical research demonstrates how decentralization reforms have important, if unpredictable, implications for the configuration of power in local political arenas. Whole new categories of actors can be brought to the political forefront – as when a decentralization reform creates a niche for locally based organizations and entrepreneurs to tender for the contracts to provide certain public services. Some familiar actors find their conventional roles, and options, radically changed in the new configuration. And above all, the relations between different actors – private/public, formal/informal, centre/local, political/administrative, 'modern'/'traditional' – are transformed, as mechanisms of power and political alliances are reorganized through processes of contestation, negotiation and accommodation.

Conclusion

Over time, the research agenda of anthropologists interested in the state and democratic politics has evolved, and this is quite natural. From rather simple, quasi-moral characterizations of political relationships (clientelism, corruption and so on), efforts are now emerging to formulate more rigorously

non-normative conceptualizations of the professional and personal strategies of local state actors – clearly a basic precondition for understanding the limits of democratic local governance. From a rough dualistic opposition of state to non-state, the analytical framework is moving toward a more complex configuration of public authority, including a rethinking of legitimacy beyond ‘the state’. Clearly this sort of examination is central to any meaningful attempt to understand both ‘decentralization’ (as a donor-driven programme of liberal state reform) and the possibilities of democratic politics. The question that remains is: Are localized analyses such as these adequate to grasp the full scope of the issues at stake?

One possible obstacle is a persisting fetish of ‘the local’. There is much talk about the impact of globalization on local political arenas, yet the anthropological predisposition toward in-depth, localized fieldwork renders translocal factors hard to grasp. The participation of transnational actors – international private aid agencies (‘INGOs’), private corporations, and public agencies – in local processes is acknowledged, but the trails of these players are not traced ‘up’ or ‘across’ all levels and processes, to garner a fuller image of their strategies, aims and means.

Anthropologists are beginning to see what critical students of international relations have known for some time: ‘democratization’ is a translocal phenomenon in which transnational actors such as financial institutions, public aid agencies, and private advocacy organizations are key players. Detailed empirical research of the kind carried out by anthropologists indicates that citizens at the grass-roots seem to have gained little from the ‘third wave of democratization’. At the risk of appearing cynical, it is perhaps fair to ask whether the transnational actors that are most vigorously pushing the reforms are not the real beneficiaries? To answer such a question, and to understand the scope of its implications, will require marrying the anthropologist’s attention to site-specific empirical detail to a sophisticated cognizance of complex aggregate tendencies at the transnational level. A related issue, deserving an essay of its own, concerns the normative (non-)alignments of such inquiry. How should anthropologists position themselves in the diffuse, dispersed and multi-sited field of transnational political forces?

Notes

- 1 Shils's immediate reference is to sociology, but he equates sociology with anthropology in a way that justifies the substitution here.
- 2 APAD is an acronym for the *Association Euro-Africaine pour l'Anthropologie du Changement Social et du Développement*. Olivier de Sardan (1995) summarizes the theoretical and methodological resources APAD scholars draw on.
- 3 Olivier de Sardan's (1995) book will be published in English by Zed Press in 2004.