Institutions, Culture and Change at the Local Level

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In this paper I shall discuss three topics:

i) Spatial scales and their implications for research. How can one be made more aware of **space** in the abstract so as to decide which spatial units of analysis are relevant for the specific topic under scrutiny?

ii) Interpretations of **locality.** What spatial units of analysis have been associated with different paradigms? The discussion will be confined to Latin America and will explore the spatial scales used by anthropologists and historians in discussion of rural people.

iii) **Institutions** and locality. What are the main theoretical approaches that underlie a studies of local institutions?

i) Spatial scales and their implications

Development studies, like most social sciences, has tended to treat space in a highly simplistic, and usually dualistic, fashion. The "local" contrasts with the "global", or the micro with the macro. We seem to be faced with an either/or situation in that emphasis is put either on the micro or the macro; and the choice goes hand in hand with the underlying paradigm. Very often it is hard to ensure that research at both levels is compatible.

In the discipline of sociology, for instance, a focus on the micro level tends to be associated with the underlying assumption that social actors are "free" agents, able to move and act as they will; as individuals they make choices such as whether to migrate, use fertiliser, join a political party and so on. In contrast, a focus on the macro level tends to stress the contraints that structures and institutions place on all social action; structure governs and determines what social subjects can do.

An acceptance of dualistic scales is highly unsatisfactory especially when one comes to plan and execute research. An important part of any research planning is the search for a methodological way out of the micro/macro impasse. There are, in fact, various possibilities open as to how one can escape from dualistic thinking; I shall name only a few. Focus may be put on a chosen set of relations or an institution which is thought to link and mediate between society and individual. These act as channels or filters of social processes.

The family has been seen as just such a central relational complex through which political, entrepreneurial or agrarian history may be viewed (see for example different articles in Smith, 1984). Through studying what happens over time to particular families, one can hope to make sense out of seemingly impersonal phenomena and tendencies. One can record ways that families reflect and refract the reigning political economy as well as the ideals and values found in the society. And one can go on to suggest how institutions such as marriage and familial relations lend support to and serve to perpetuate existing social inequalities and relations of power.

In a similar way, it is possible to see particular professions as exemplifying and illuminating social relations that tend to be hidden from view. An extremely revealing case is the nursing profession, examined by Shula Marx in one of her two lectures at Sandbjerg.[1] Through the history of nursing in South Africa, we are made more deeply aware of the complex interplay between race, gender and class and how values and ideologies held at the societal level, have moulded the opportunities and the lives of both black and white nurses.

An alternative way out of the macro/micro dichotomy is to build up more complex conceptions of space and spatial relations.

All social activities have a setting both in space and in a particular locality. Through an exploration of social divisions expressed in spacial terms, one can get closer to an idea of domains. Certain social groups gain control over space (and what goes on within that spatial unit); these may be largely accepted as "natural" (e.g. women "naturally" belong to the house) or groups contest assumed rights of control (e.g. when liberation struggles contest the rights assumed over territories by colonial rulers). In feminist work, attention has focused on the division between domestic and public

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[1] Shula Marks, "Race, Class and Gender in the South African Nursing Profession" - not included in the present collection.

space, and the way this division leads to the control and restriction of women's lives (see for example, Wilson, forthcoming).

In recent thinking about the nature of localities, attention is paid to the interplay between the structural realities of the political economy and local experiences of individuals and groups. Thus both the potentialities and limitations experienced at a local level are moulded by structures and institutions which take place in "managerial" space. This I shall elaborate further.

We can imagine world views as sets of concentric rings. To take the world view of the individual first: we stand in the middle, in an inner circle signifying home, daily life all that is most immediately known to us. Around this inner core are envelopping circles: the home region, our native country, the world to which we all belong, and even our spiritual universe. Levels can overlap and slide into one another. In each case, there is a personal relationship at stake: a recognition that there are "people like us", speaking the same language, having the same customs, having the same government, having the obligation to fight the same war. Both experience and the ideologies to which we are subjected mould our perceptions of where all we belong and how deep our feelings of belonging are within each and every level.

In contrast to personalised space, managerial space stems from the idea that space is abstract, impersonal and featureless. It is a mere dimension, an object of conquest or colonisation, of management or planning. The managing of space usually entails the institution of clear-cut administrative units, whose boundaries are fixed, and in which identitical management sub-centres can be replicated evenly over space; be they churches or colonial district offices, branches of transnational companies or local government planning offices, health posts or primary schools.

The meshing of personal space with managerial space produces a complex, multi-layered local context without any clearly defined physical form.

The phenomena and relations we choose to analyse by our research therefore belong to particular spatial scales, use space in a particular way and are constituted within particular localities. Once conscious of this, we can better appreciate the choices particular researchers have made with respect to their locality. By way of illustration, I shall compare two examples: James Scott's discussion of peasant resistance in Malaysia, and Karen Spalding's reconstruc-

tion of the relations between "indios" and Spanish in the Peruvian highlands.

The starting point for Scott is an understanding that subordinate classes throughout history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organised political activity. Instead their aims have more often been to "work the system to their minimum disadvantage." In his book <u>Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance</u>, published in 1985, Scott wishes to illustrate the "low profile techniques of peasants," and "their foot-dragging evasions." He bases his research on one small village of some 70 households and he describes events and relations in loving detail. He justifies his choice of a single village with the observation that the popular culture of resistance when multiplied many thousand fold can make an utter shambles of the policies dreamed up by would-be superiors in the capital.

Scott organises his material under three headings according to how immediately relevant the processes described are to people's daily life. The contours of the post-colonial state and economy form the background to people's lives. Though socially constructed, actors at the centre of the book rarely give much thought to this envelopping context; it is the medium in which they live and breathe. But certain social and economic facts are felt more sharply. These constitute a middle ground and are subject to people's active interpretation. In the foreground is an array of phenomena and events that the villagers are most deeply pre-occupied with.

Scott admits that he has used his own judgement to discern what things pre-occupy people most. In his opinion changes in tenancy relations, the massive transformation of agricultural techniques, and social changes following from the introduction of double cropping have been central significance for the way class relations have developed in the village in recent years.

Karen Spalding's book <u>Huarochirí: an Andean Society under Inca and Spanish Rule</u> published in 1984 is the product of 12 years' research and thought. Her aim is to reflect on relations of inequality and oppression which have characterised a small province of the Peruvian central Andes over a long period of time. She looks for long term processes of structural change dwelling on the particular character of a society's integration into the expanding European world. Her work stands in contrast to the dominating dependency paradigm current at the time in Latin American thought, in that she

chooses to emphasise the diversity of experience under colonial rule.

Spalding sets her analysis at the provincial level, an area that is roughly the size of Massachusetts. As she argues, it would have been inappropriate to have undertaken a study of a single community, especially since the supposedly traditional "indigenous" communities and households were themselves largely the product of Spanish intervention. At a regional level, she seeks to depict those structures that clearly refer to a traditional Andean pattern of social organisation and to set these structures against the overlay of institutions and relations later introduced by the Spaniards.

In the course of the three centuries of colonial rule, the Spanish overlay tended to merge with the older structures to form a "salad" of elements from different times and different social systems. The contradictory and conflicting relationships that resulted formed the essence of what was the colonial system. Given that the indigenous past in Huarochirí was similar to but not identical with indigenous culture elsewhere, this has meant that the region retained its specific identity over time despite subjugation under Spanish rule.

In comparing the two works, we can see that Scott focuses on a single, small, yet representative village in order to exemplify peasant insubordination in general. In contrast, Spalding explores a much more extensive locality - a region - in order to highlight the differentiated response to colonial rule. Through a community study Scott could observe local class relations in action; Spalding on the other hand is primarily interested in relations of ethnicity and race. She underlines the perpetuation of an indigenous presence and an indigenous experience despite Spain's conquest and management of space. The region of Huarochirí is both a colonial administrative unit ruled by Spain and a social division with its own ethnically based economy and having its own ethnic history.

Furthermore the two examples suggest that choice of spatial unit is related to choice of time perspective. Scott by using a single community assumes unchanging or frozen spatial boundaries; this is no great disadvantage since he is primarily concerned with sketching in the contemporary "foreground". Spalding, by taking a vast historical sweep, cannot make any such assumption; in her study the chosen spatial unit must be large enough to encompass processes of change which changed population distribution and led to the creation of communities.

17

ii) Changing interpretations of "locality"

The books by Scott and Spalding were published at roughly the same time; their choice of spatial unit differed partly because they were intent on elucidating different research questions. But one can also argue that choice of spatial unit and locality for research will alter over time in that they reflect underlying theoretical paradigms of the day. I shall illustrate the contrasting interpretations of locality held different paradigms with reference to the study of rural people in Mexican anthropology. I shall draw on an excellent recent book by Cynthia Hewitt de Alcantara in which she explores how anthropologists have depicted rural "otherness" in Mexico.

When researchers go to the "field" they tend to carry with them pre-conceived images of what will make a suitable location for research. These images derive from the paradigm in which they and their mentors are working. If one looks back over time at the objects of anthropological enquiry then one can distinguish several phases, each phase being marked by a somewhat different interpretation of locality.

During the early years, in the 1920s, the chief pursuit of anthropologists was to isolate and record the particularities of "primitive" societies. They travelled far and wide to find the most "natural" and least "contaminated" folk in order to observe their exotic life. No attempt made to generalise; the locality under observation was restricted, isolated and unique.

As a reaction to particularism, a later generation of anthropologists became increasingly interested in looking for patterns and proces-ses. Society should not be seen as just a collection of social facts but as being brought together and functioning as an integrated entity. Men (sic) were shaped by society's norms and rules; and they inter-acted, usually harmoniously with each other. Culture provided the glue that held the parts of society together and allowed it to become a smoothly functioning whole.

Amongst the early functionalists working in Mexico in the 1930s was Robert Redfield. Studying the culture of Chan Kom, in the Yucutan, he was impressed by the success and internal harmony of the small, isolated community. Despite the rigours of the physical environment, the community was able through traditional practices to meet the requirements of daily life; people were quite prosperous and though illiterate, they appeared to have little need for moder-nity.

Redfield's emphasis on the functionality of folk cultures tempted his students to then look purposefully for communities that had retained strongly collectivist traditions. They stressed the continuity of traditional institutions governing access to land and control over water, collective forms of labour service and reciprocal exchanges of goods. Integrative institutions, and traditional rules and norms were seen in a positive light. In contrast, modernisation and a subjection to urban life were seen at first in highly negative terms. Modernisation generated severe psychological stress that came about as a result of individualisation, secularisation and disorganisation.

Under functionalism, the small rural community was the principal locality under study. When classified, communities could be ranged along a continuum, their position depending on their degree of openness to urban influence; cultural change was largely to be be studied in terms of mentalities.

But in line with overwhelming changes taking place in political thinking in the late 1940s and 1950s, the functionalists' designation of rural peoples was totally transformed. No longer was there an appreciation of the capacities and capabilities of rural folk, instead they were being re-labelled as backward and ignorant and in need of the civilising influence that came from modern urban society. In short, they needed education, integration and "development".

Anthropology in Mexico and the Andean countries in particular, was also strongly influenced by an older paradigm, whose roots went back to early post-colonial intellectual thought: this was "indigenismo" whereby non-Indian Latin Americans tended to take a caring but paternalist interest in the fate of indigenous society. There were several different versions, but the main objective was to analyse relations between "Indian" and non-Indian society. To do so, the boundaries of the relevant spatial unit were broadened so as to include both "Indian" community and Spanish/mestizo town.

Under the liberal variant of "indigenismo" that continued to dominate thinking, although the achievements of Incas, Mayas or Aztecs might be admired, contemporary indigenous society was represented as down-trodden and subjugated. The oppressed and humiliated race was in need of the modernisation that a liberal state could offer, even though this was in fact predicated on an obliteration of indigenous culture. Other interpretations tended to stress the exploitation suffered and the necessity for Indians to themselves take action.

19

A rather different trajectory of thought was coming to the fore, especially in the US during the late 1950s, cultural ecology. This was a paradigm that could encompass a newly developing Marxist-inspired tendency within anthropology. This marked a radical departure. Categories of observation were re-organised so that national and international levels were no longer ignored; and with the emphasis on ecology and environment, greater notice was being taken of the material base of society.

Immediately the basic assumptions of functionalism came under attack. Once international and colonial relations were taken on board, then no longer could the roots of the Indian social organisation be found in the timeless harmony of interests among inhabitants of truly isolated communities. Indian cultures bore the marks of a violent history. Indigenous peoples had been subjected to conquest and dispossession; they needed to reconstruct a shattered countryside in order to defend their people from extinction.

Under the paradigm of cultural ecology, rural people were no longer seen as a "folk" but a peasantry. No longer was exchange taken as evidence of reciprocity, instead, the peasantry as a class was subject to unequal exchange, exploitation and to the extraction of surplus whether in the form of cash, goods or labour by dominant, "white" classes. This situation remained intact through power, force and coercion. The predominating institutions were not benevolent, but were been primarily set up so as to organise the extraction and exploitation.

With this paradigm, there is no possibility that the locality can be envisioned as a closed entity, isolated from the rest of society. Instead complex links and relations connect localities to the wider society and economy and brokers or intermediaries are required to provide the links to the outside world.

While cultural ecology continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s to inspire many, anthropology also came under the influence of dependency and structural Marxism. A turning point had been the publication around 1965 of detailed and largely statistical analyses of agrarian structure in Latin America on a country by country basis. Here, for the first time, it was possible to gain an overview of the gross inequalities in land tenure and to estimate the numbers of people belonging to the different socio economic strata.

The theoretical questions raised under dependency concerned modes of production and the fate of the peasantry within the agrarian sector as a whole. As a result, the idea of locality was often entirely lost from view. Even anthropologists could not resist the temptation to assume a relatively undifferentiated periphery and to treat all regions as being subject to the same forces and tendencies. This perspective offered little opportunity for recording difference or for allowing social subjects to "create" their own history; instead people's lives were seen as determined overwhelmingly by processes of change over which they had neither influence nor control.

The fundamental determinism and the absence of locality and history that had tended to be the hallmark of anthropological works adopting a dependency perspective were challenged by the following paradigm which came to stress popular resistance and popular struggle. Mainstream social science theory is being criticised for its exclusion of social groups which the West has defined as "other". These have included women, Third World societies, blacks, immigrants, refugees, ethnic groups. Colonial ideology had involved the belief that, in Eric Wolf's words, Europe faced peoples without history.

The response has been to pay much greater attention to the reconstruction of mental histories and world views of those previously classed as "marginal" and had been "forgotten". From Latin America, there appeared a spate of life histories told in people's own words: like the account given by Domitila Barrios de Chungara of her life and political struggles as a miner's wife in Bolivia. For many anthropolgists, it marked a return to a fascination with mental as opposed to more material worlds. As Michael Taussig notes in the opening chapter of his book, The Devil and Commodity Fetishism, his aim was to elicit the social significance of the devil in the folklore of contemporary plantation workers and miners in South America. He sees that the Devil is a stunningly apt symbol of the alienation experienced by peasants as they enter the ranks of the proletariat.

iii) Institutions and locality

There would seem to be three principal theoretical starting points that can be employed for the study of local institutions. They are distilled from out of the paradigms and themes of analysis outlined in the previous section.

a) Institutions and holistic views

21

The greater attention paid to depicting localities has meant that once again the particularity and specificity of place is being emphasised. Localities encapsulate life worlds, and mental histories. With a more holistic view clusters of institutions present in a locality can be described. A connection is assumed between consciousness, culture and environment, however, it is not an exclusive one. If consciousness were shaped entirely by the particular and unique material circumstances in which people live, then it should vary spatially with these conditions. But we can only interpret our surroundings through the concepts and languages available to us. To some extent, these are common to a range of different groups in a range of different places. Localities shape individual consciousness but we live in conjunctures where boundaries are in fact arbitrary and overlapping. A holistic approach does not of itself therefore imply a retreat to the "particularism" of the 1920s.

b) Socio-cultural institutions

Studies of social and cultural institutions focus on issues of inequality and the exercise of power in localities. They may begin by asking how the practices that stem from social inequality are embedded in local institutions and how they are reproduced over time. But once attention becomes focused on resistance and social movements, then the meaning of social change is also under enquiry. By what actions and events do social institutions become transformed? How do those defined as lacking in power, still have the capacity to affect and alter in a permanent way the structures in which they live?

c) Economic institutions

However much stress might be laid on culture and on mentalities, we should never forget that peoples' lives are profoundly affected by the material base and by relations of production. Virtually all social struggles involve some kind of economic relationship and the rights and access of different groups to productive resources. There are still many unresolved theoretical debates concerning the way capital transforms economic and social relations in the Third World as well as the nature of non-capitalist production. For rural people, institutions regulating the distribution of land and water, giving access to labour and to credit are profoundly important.

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