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Commentaar en discussie

Development-related research in the Netherlands: The (lacking) political dimension¹

Martin Doornbos

1. Development-related research, an intrinsic task?

With respect to the study of the politics of development, few observers would deny the paramount need of developing a proper understanding of basic trends and transitions in the dynamics of Third World politics. These trends are of prime significance in their own right, but they also shape the context and scope for development-related interventions and strategies in many other fields. Current interest in this area is focused, to name but a few topics, on the nature and dynamics of the non-party political process, on the role of new social and cultural movements, on the parameters and 'structuring' of political conflict, on the search for and assertion of political identities, on the emergence of new forms of corporatism, on processes and prospects of democratization, on the question of interest representation (and non-representation), on the preconditions and conditionalities for 'good governance', on the political implications of structural adjustment and the scope for alternative development strategies, and on the role of non-governmental organizations and their relation to government action. Many of these issues refer to the articulation of macro-(and micro-)political processes in Third World countries in the context of institutional and economic developments and directions at the global level.

These issues are basically concerned, therefore, with different aspects of changing state-civil society relationships, particularly with reference to African, Asian and Latin American contexts. A general point concerns changing perceptions of these relationships, and by implication, the different notions of the role and nature of the state, and of various civil society 'projects' which are presently entertained in development and political thinking. Related to this are also interests in the expectations and impacts associated with various political reforms: multi-partyism, decentralization, self-determination, and generally with the donor concern that has emerged for political accountability and the setting of political conditionality. Basic ongoing

questions, meanwhile, concern the changing patterns of cultural and religious political articulation, expressions of ethnicity, and articulations and perceptions of the 'national question'.

This broad area of political enquiry is concerned therefore with the evolution and manifestation of state power in different post-colonial contexts, and by implication with various salient aspects of the dynamic and problematic relationships between state and society in these contexts. Connecting micro and macro analyses, the focus must be on processes of state formation and restructuring and on the emergence of new socio-political linkages and cleavages. With due attention to political-institutional, socio-economic and cultural factors, the problem of state power can be linked to a range of issues – including those of participation, autonomy and identity – currently raised in the context of rethinking state-civil society relationships. A comparative and historical perspective is essential in much of this analysis.

In recent years, moreover, important shifts have been occurring with respect to the perspectives from which Third World politics are analysed and interpreted. In particular there is a move away from the long-dominant 'political development' and 'dependency' paradigms and a reorientation towards more pluriform patterns of political experience. 'Political development' theory was basically concerned with the institutional implications and demands of a transition from 'tradition' to 'modernity' it has postulated as being basic to the situation of post-colonial societies in the Third World. Requirements formulated for 'nation-building' stood very central in its analysis: creating effective and acceptable authority structures, integrating diverse institutional patterns and social segments into common political-legal frameworks, and instilling into it all a sense of common identity and destiny which would fill the political space with fresh meaning and purpose. In contrast, although 'dependency' theory shared a strong orientation on the role of the state with the 'political development' school, the functions it attributed to the state, current as well as alternative, differed diametrically from those in the 'political development' perspective. While it is difficult to summarize the multi-layered dependency debate without distorting it, the least that can be said about it is that it was addressed to the extent to which structural determinants in the world economy which are controlled by hegemonic powers restrict the room for manoeuvre, policy options and growth potential of Third World economies. It saw the role of the state in Third World countries as one essentially facilitating such dependency relationships. In response, 'dependency' theory focused on the scope and means for 'delinking' from international capitalism, and for initiating alternative development strategies stressing equality, autonomy and

internal resource mobilization, among other things. To achieve these ends, a large role was again reserved for the state, which was expected to be engineering an amorphous, victimized but pliable society to new and progressive futures.

However, if 'political development' theory was equilibrium-oriented, with insufficient attention for the contradictions within society, 'dependency' theory, in the view of current critics, was overly preoccupied with international economic forces and class variables, ignoring the cultural specificities and hybrid social formations which have emerged in many Third World countries. Both perspectives, it is argued, have tended to underrate the diversity and importance of historical and cultural experiences, and in their teleological and agenda-setting orientation have tended to distort a proper understanding of actual realities, of the co-existence and interplay of contradictory elements in these realities, and of the significance of the imaginary dimensions in political discourse and institutions.²

These shifts, therefore, further add to the *a priori* interest of this entire field of study of Third World politics. Its task is basically to help clarify underlying processes and dynamics and to provide keys to a better understanding of what might superficially seem a bewildering array of political tendencies and contradictions. Internationally, the sub-discipline has since the 1960s produced a vast and impressive literature and has made important theoretical advances relevant to political science and political sociology more generally. Without any doubt, a continued engagement in this vast area of research should be a matter of high priority to research institutes and universities anywhere, including in the Netherlands. The primary purpose and agenda of such engagement cannot be one of 'applied' science, or of serving the immediate requirements of policy-makers, though one would expect that the latter would benefit enormously from the availability of a sound body of political analysis and the policy options it could help clarify, and that they should, therefore, have a stake in ensuring its continued presence and autonomous development.

2. The role of the Netherlands

In the light of the demands and agenda for research in the politics of development, the role and contribution from the Dutch research community in this field is extremely disappointing. In contrast to other countries such as Britain, France, the United States, Canada or Sweden, or similarly to Third World countries like Argentina, India, Uganda or Fiji, the contribution of Dutch political science in this regard is – with rare exceptions – embarrass-

ingly minor and virtually negligible. In each of these other countries, what is usually labelled as the politics of developing countries, politics of development, or Third World politics constitutes a key and intrinsic input in the political science curricula and research agenda at the universities. In the Netherlands, in contrast, the politics of development sub-discipline is conspicuous for its absence within the political science departments at the various universities. By and large, attention for the political dimensions of development and the politics of developing countries in the Netherlands is restricted to the offerings at several regionally-oriented research institutes – for Africa, China, India and Latin America, for example – and to those of development-oriented institutions like the Institute of Social Studies and the Nijmegen Third World Centre. Significantly, the political scientists concerned at these institutions almost all received their education at universities abroad; Dutch political science itself has not developed any reproductive capacity in this respect.³

The resulting state of affairs (one cannot speak of 'state of the art' in this context) is quite sobering and leaves virtually the entire field of Third World politics in the Netherlands open for strengthening and improvement, except for some aspects of international relations that have received attention, some work that has been carried out on local institutions in development administration, and some research on the politics of ethnicity which has been taken up by anthropologists.

3. 'Infrastructure'

To seek an explanation – and possible remedies – for the causes of this situation, one must consider a complex of contributing factors. Central among them is the orientation of political science at the Dutch universities, which, so much unlike the development of the discipline in other countries has had a very narrow and provincial perception of its own role and scope for far too long. This has precluded a widening of its conceptual and geographical horizons which might have enabled it to embrace theoretically challenging fields such as that of the politics of development. Second and closely related are additional factors of university politics and resource strategies. In fact, the Dutch situation is deviant from other countries in a double sense: there happens to be a striking coincidence of the relative absence of political science in Dutch development studies with a very high profile and presence of anthropology in the same field and in Dutch academia generally. Jokingly, this is exemplified in the often heard (but probably correct) observation that the Netherlands has the world's highest per

capita ratio of anthropologists. Whether or not influenced by the latter's representations, for decades Dutch universities, individually and collectively, appear to have been reasoning that a proper understanding of the 'non-western' regions, countries and societies in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and elsewhere in the Third World required understanding of their different cultures, for which, already many years ago, anthropology departments had been established. Dutch anthropology has flourished well proceeding from this point of departure. Until today it occupies a dominant position for the study of virtually any aspect of social and political reality in African, Asian or Latin American contexts. One implication is that young scholars intending to undertake Ph.D. research in these regions almost invariably must do so via the route of anthropology (plus, increasingly, social geography) in the Dutch university framework, for the simple reason that there is hardly an alternative. This in turn has two further consequences, both of them affecting the prospects and possibilities for development-related research. One is that anthropology as a discipline concerned with 'other cultures' tends to reproduce itself through the foci of selected dissertation topics. A cursory glance over the titles of 'non-western' dissertation topics of recent years will show that a preponderant selection is oriented towards research on culturally very specific features or practices in various countries. Implicitly, this emphasizes 'difference' and may indirectly nurture a taste for 'exoticism', which is a peculiar trait of western culture. Taken together, it certainly creates a false picture of the nature and magnitude of many of the problems and transformations that most African, Asian and Latin American societies are subjected to. The second, seemingly contradictory consequence is that anthropology, in rising to the challenge of the vacuum left by Dutch political science in not addressing itself to key issues of Third World politics, runs the danger of overstressing itself. It does so in its attempts to accommodate, through its course offerings and research priorities, not only its own disciplinary agenda but also the requirements that spring from the need to grasp political dynamics and contradictions at the macro level, such as that of the ideological, economic and power base of state formation processes and the manner in which these are being influenced and shaped by global-level developments. Thematic priorities typically include foci on state formation processes at macro, meso and micro levels, on political networks, conflict and decision-making, on the state, peasants and markets, on spatial power and political conflict, on regional power groups in specific Third World countries, on urban politics and shanty-town dwellers, on politics and violence, on the politics of sustainable development, etc. In its move to fill the macro-political vacuum, anthropology is joined to some extent by political geography, devel-

opment economics, and law, though anthropology generally retains a lead in this regard. But, given the silence from political science proper, should one not appreciate that these interests are at least taken up from another disciplinary angle?

These critical notes come from a political scientist who, in his training and research, has taken in a strong dosis of anthropology, and who has in fact found more hospitality and interest among anthropologists for his research than in his own discipline. Yet, with all due respect for the excellent work that has been done by anthropologists in many different areas, it is just not certain that anthropology as a discipline, with its strong culturalist and *a priori* micro inclination, is adequately equipped for such a vastly enlarged task thrown at it. The imbalances that have come to exist with respect to the capacity of Dutch social science *vis-à-vis* the analysis of development politics and policies are quite grave. Perpetuation of these imbalances may cause a situation to continue in which Dutch academia fails to generate adequate intellectual capacity that can contribute towards executing a basic research agenda on Third World politics and towards analysing macro-level political processes – for its own benefit as well as for that of various counterpart efforts it seeks to relate to. Due to a combination of disinterest especially in university-based political science plus university human resource policies that have failed to redirect resource streams towards intellectual requirements posed by the problems and situation of Third World countries today, the Dutch academic performance in this regard is lagging behind that of comparable countries by several decades. It will again take several decades or more to make up for this gap – provided at least an initial effort is made to close it.

Notes

1. This short article is a slightly expanded version of a commentary written at the request of the organizers of an international conference on 'Development-related Research: a second look at the role of the Netherlands', which was held at the University of Groningen, 9-10 December, 1992 under the joint auspices of the University of Groningen, the Advisory Council for Scientific Research in Development Problems (RA WOO) and the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS). Scholars representing a broad range of academic disciplines were invited to reflect on the state of affairs with respect to 'development-related research' within their respective disciplinary areas as constituted in the Netherlands. Responses were solicited under some broad questions and headings, viz. a) Is development-related research an intrinsic task? b) The role of the Netherlands, and c) Questions of infrastructure. The present author was asked to respond to these questions with reference to the field of political science in the Netherlands.

2. James Manor, ed, *Rethinking Third World Politics*, Longman, London, 1991, Introduction.

3. Foreign-educated political scientists offering specialized courses and researching at Dutch non-political science institutions and university departments currently include dr Jean Carriere and dr David Slater at the Centre for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA), University of Amsterdam; dr Christoffel Lieten (India-specialist) at the Anthropological Sociological Center, University of Amsterdam; dr Tony Saich, Institute of Sinology, University of Leiden; dr Patricio Silva, Department of Non-western Sociology, University of Leiden; dr Robert Buijtenhuijs, African Studies Center, University of Leiden; and dr Tanh Dam Truong, dr Peter Waterman and the present author at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague.

Inleiding

Macht en afhankelijkheid zijn veel gebruikte begrippen in social-wetenschappelijke literatuur. Niet alleen in academische disciplines als de politiekwetenschap, de sociologie en in de leer der internationale betrekkingen zijn ze veelvuldig aan te treffen en bestaat er een meer systematische aandacht voor het interpreteren van beide begrippen. Er kan dan ook gerust gezegd worden dat de termen macht en afhankelijkheid een prominente plaats innemen in de verhoudingen en verklaren van internationale betrekkingen.

De bedoeling van dit artikel is niet te gaan op welke wijze men hiervoor bepaalde opvattingen in het denken over macht en afhankelijkheid hebben opgeleverd tot verrijking en verdieping van het inzicht in beide concepten. Door verkenning van het veld van studies naar macht en afhankelijkheid wensen we om een beeld te vormen van de hotspots die van macht en afhankelijkheid aangaan.

Als we beginnen met het maken van enkele algemene opmerkingen, dan is het in de eerste plaats opvallend dat macht en afhankelijkheid over het algemeen als universeel bruikbaar begrippen worden beschouwd. In hoge mate geldt dit voor het machtsbegrip, hetgeen niet verwonderlijk is de 'klassieke' theorie over macht van Hans Morgenthau en Bertand Russell in de jaren '30 en '40. Het begrip macht wordt dan ook zeer frequent aangehaald in vakstukken uit diverse disciplines. Of het nu gaat over racisme, religie en strijd, de exploitatie van de staat, de familie of de arbeider, de opstand der horden die de transmissie verdragen over oorlog en vrede, over handel en samenwerking of over liefhebben of dood en verlies gaat, komen, het we ook met elk van ons, macht kwam op een of andere wijze aan de orde. Consequenties hiervan is wel dat het aanzien van macht zeer gemakkelijk een waaier aan filosofische opvattingen oproept. Het paradoxale feit doet zich voor dat de afhankelijkheid over het belang van