

Stakeholding and legitimacy in natural resource governance: a radical democratic constructionist critique

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Abstract

Within natural resource governance it has become commonplace to orchestrate what is known as ‘*stakeholder processes*’: an alternative, non-coercive way of fostering collective action through public policy for natural resource management and livelihoods development. However, many initiatives fail to acknowledge their heritage as social projects of liberal capitalism, which reorganises risks and vulnerabilities and social and material divisions of labour to benefit already privileged groups. The adoption of a constructionist epistemology provides a more robust appreciation as to how stakeholders insert their agendas in policy processes and seek to control the collective view on what constitutes legitimate stakeholder agency. Yet, in its present form, neither the constructionist approach to stakeholding offers an explicit theory of how legitimacy of stakeholder agency is actively negotiated. Further, existing mainstream views on legitimacy are conceptually incoherent with the constructionist research agenda. In response, this paper undertakes a radical democratic deconstruction of stakeholding in natural resource management as a phenomenon located in the unfolding of the liberal democratic tradition. After a theoretical critique of the constructionist approach and existing mainstream conceptions of legitimacy it proposes a new framework conceptualizing legitimacy of stakeholder agency in natural resource management as a property emerging from the negotiation of intersubjective reality, where stakeholders exert *legitimizing practices* in located *policy adaptation instances*.

Keywords: stakeholder, governance, natural resources, legitimacy, intersubjectivity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within natural resource governance it has today become commonplace to nurture policies to orchestrate what is known as ‘*stakeholder processes*’: an alternative, non-coercive way of fostering collective action through public policy for natural resource management and livelihoods development. This ambition forms a response to a solid critique of planned interventions and ‘command-and-control type’ management, proposing to replace coercive, hierarchical and/or centralized modes of governance with participatory processes for self-organized collective action to improve the effectiveness and morality of change processes (Holling and Meffe, 1996; Ludwig, 2001; Gundersson and Holling, 2002). As viewed within interpretive policy analysis, the devotion to stakeholder processes serves to replace the reliance of the classical-modernist governing institutions with a re-establishment of policy as a form of practice, in which the role of contestation between discourses and their interpretation seizes primary significance (Dryzek, 2001; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Connelly et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, collaborative forms of management, which espouse strategies of stakeholding, often fail to acknowledge their heritage as social projects of the new forms of liberal capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2008; Hansen, 2009). Within the literature specifically on stakeholding in natural resource governance, a significant body of evidence exists to substantiate how certain types of stakeholder agency is promoted through an intransparent legitimizing of already dominant interests. This phenomenon is known under different labels, including the bypassing of established procedures and cooption by powerful stakeholders (SLIM, 2004; Warner, 2005), the appropriation of the process with a predetermined result in mind (Kaspersson, 2006; Gearey and Jeffrey, 2006), and a ‘domestication’ of public participation (Wakeford and Singh, 2008). In this way, participatory processes in resource management often suffer from the positing of totalizing truth claims in order to perpetuate myths and assumptions regarding people’s identity with destructive consequences for dissenting locales (Nadasdy, 2007; Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

In this paper, I offer a radical democratic deconstruction of ‘stakeholding’ in natural resource governance as a phenomenon located in the unfolding of the liberal democratic governance tradition. I outline the implications of adopting a constructionist epistemology, which provides a more robust appreciation as to how stakeholders insert their agendas in policy processes and seek to control the collective view on what constitutes legitimate stakeholder agency. Yet, in its present form, neither the constructionist approach to stakeholding offers an explicit theory of how legitimacy of stakeholder agency is actively negotiated; and existing mainstream conceptions of legitimacy are incoherent with the constructionist research agenda. In response, after a theoretical critique of the constructionist approach and existing mainstream conceptions of legitimacy, I pursue a framework conceptualizing legitimacy of stakeholder agency in natural resource management. The experiences which have motivated the argument in this paper comprise of a comparative analysis of five action research projects (‘case studies’), which I have been involved in together with colleagues and partners over the past six years. For reasons of space limitations in this paper I have had to omit the accounts of these case studies, and here provide only the theoretical argument, which can be communicated in its own right (for details on the case studies see Larsen, forthcoming).

2. DECONSTRUCTING THE DISCOURSE ON 'STAKEHOLDING'

2.1 The constructionist approach to stakeholding

In research for integrated natural resource management, one prominent tradition, which has a more reflexive approach to the way people insert their interests in policy processes, posits stakeholding as a response to 'resource dilemmas', i.e. the fact that many resource problems ought to be approached rather as 'issues': messy, unstructured, controversial situations with multiple, interdependent stakeholders making often equally legitimate claims to knowing the proper problem definition and its most desirable solutions. In this tradition, stakeholder processes is also approached as a process of social learning, i.e. an interactive form of learning among interdependent stakeholders in the context of integrated resource management (Ison et al., 2007).

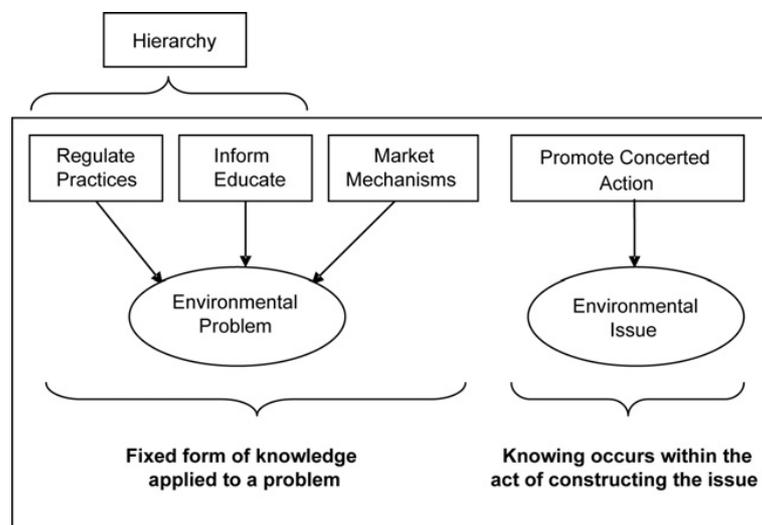


Fig. 3: Stakeholding as a non-coercive policy instrument. Comparison of policy coordination mechanisms reproduced from Ison et al. (2007). Stakeholding is adopted as a strategy on the right side of the diagram, aiming to promote concerted action through a process, in which the problem definition of the problem ('issue') is co-constructed during the policy process.

This approach builds on an extensive body of theory, including diverse cognitive, psychological, behaviourist, and experiential learning models (Blackmore, 2007), recent decades' developments in extension and farming systems science (Röling and Wagemaker, 1998), post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993), non-linear systems and complexity thinking and adaptive co-management theories (Powell, 1998), and some of the lessons from the so-called 'participatory paradigm' in development studies (Chambers, 1997). The central tenet, which I will focus on here, is the application of an explicitly constructionist epistemology (i.e. an awareness regarding the method determining 'how we know what we know') in defining stakeholders as people, who actively construct their own cognitive-material stake in an issue through their interaction with the human and non-human environment (e.g. SLIM, 2004).

The role of research in such situations is to contribute to mediation between stakeholders' diverging definitions of the resource problems and their solutions in which uncertainty, controversy and

complexity are irreducible characteristics (Blackmore, 2007). This approach aims to rectify the more empiricist/objectivist assumptions of positivism-reductionism, which applies a vocabulary of stakeholding within a knowledge prescriptive approach (i.e. within a pre-defined problem definition, which is non-negotiable), thus remaining on the left side of the spectrum in the Fig. 1). Röling and Wagemaker (1998), as a case in point, launched their research agenda as an 'epistemological paradigm shift' in how to think about innovation processes in agriculture.

2.2 Shifting ontology of the governable world

The constructionist epistemology is by its very nature very appropriate for approaching questions of legitimacy as it explicitly focuses on the way people construct a problem and justify their actions in relation to their interests and perspectives. However, despite its epistemologically innovative approach to stakeholder processes the constructionist tradition of stakeholding has to large extent absorbed an ontological 'modernity narrative' in justifying the phenomena of resource dilemma and stakeholding. This concerns the claim that stakeholding is relevant as we today are witnessing a dramatic transformation in the management and governance of natural resources and livelihoods owing to a shifting ontology (worldview: how the world 'really' is) of the governable world. This ontology embodies the recognition that efforts for sustainable development are now taking place under significantly increased degrees of complexity and uncertainty, which requires a fundamental recasting of the role of knowledge and decision making (e.g. Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993). As a case in point, Ison et al. (2007: 502) argue that the advocated constructionist approach to social learning has seized relevance because we have entered "[t]he age of the environment ... the realisation that the context of human society has changed in quite specific ways".

Most centrally, this age and its new conditions, it is argued, reflects the manifestation of what theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991, 1998) and Ulrich Beck (1992) have described as the contours of late modernity. Owing to processes of globalization and specialization, local resource users are confronted with increasingly complex and more rapidly changing conditions, in which own experiences cannot provide guidance alone. Modernity thus produces an infrastructure of disembedding institutions and abstract codified systems of knowledge associated with public policy, global markets, and social movements, and stakeholders are seen to strive for human self-actualisation through a form of post-traditional life politics while responding to the insertion of phantasmagorical creations (i.e. foreign imaginations) into remote localities (Giddens, 1998).

Whilst modernity theory arguably provides a robust frame for positing the relevance of stakeholding, it locates the sources of motivation somewhere external to the epistemological process which is at the center of the call for the attention to mediation between competing definitions of the resource problems. It thus does not directly appreciate that the advent of stakeholding must itself be considered as an outcome of continuous negotiation and contestation between different groups and sectors. In other terms, when we consider the roles of stakeholders, we still have to position our discourse of stakeholding reflexively in juxtaposition to the purposes of the inherently contested governance situation in which it is nested – thus ensuring a deconstruction (*sensu* Foucault, 1969) of the phenomenon of stakeholder agency itself. Accordingly, if we indeed are to apply an ontological metaphor of some sort of external/temporal shift to explain the phenomenon of stakeholding in

current governance, it must be the breakdown of an unproblematic collective understanding of the world and the search for alternative forms of ensuring social cohesion ('*Erlebnis*' or '*Anomie*') (e.g. Mannheim, 1936; Baumann, 1995; Gadamer, 2006; Wirth, 1936). This requires us to view stakeholding – as governance processes at large - principally as means mobilized to build a (sufficiently collective) sense of legitimacy for existing governing regimes, their purposes, and actions.

There will be different ascriptions of the causes of such a breakdown of collective understanding in different governance contexts. In the liberal democratic tradition – which forms the foundation of the policy processes, which I am most familiar with – the French revolution offers one of the classic examples. With the French revolution 1789-99, the God-given traditional order was broken down and the need for legitimacy emerged as an actual concern for governance (Holmes, 1982). With the establishment of society on the assumption of a 'social contract' between its citizens, the rule of society was separated from religion, monarchy and other absolutist doctrines. In the words of Näsström (2007: 634), the need for legitimization became grounded in the fact that

“since individuals are free and equal by nature, society can no longer be regarded as a natural or divine state of affairs. It is a human artifice, and as such, it raises a claim for legitimacy”.

In current liberal capitalist post-conventional societies metaphysical and religious moral orders have indeed increasingly been broken down and belief in the legitimacy of an existing order is one of the main sources of cohesion which holds back the latent forces which can tear such systems apart (Habermas, 1973). The struggle for legitimacy is thus what Althusser has defined as the dominant instance of society (cf. James, 1985: 149). In one way or another, any consideration of stakeholding in the environment-development nexus must therefore recognize the historical roots of the phenomenon as a manifestation not just of late modernity and its ontological implications for the 'Age of the Environment', but also the unfolding of the capitalist liberal democratic tradition which shapes our governance regimes and our discourses about this governance.

2.3. A radical democratic perspective on stakeholding

Liberalism originally emerged as a governance response to authoritarian rule and served as an ideology to legitimate citizen revolutions against royal and religious tyranny. It was at that time nurtured by the Enlightenment movement and instilled with central presumptions regarding the liberties and autonomy of the individual over the collective, thus launching a movement for human freedom from the mythic. However, very soon after the liberal tenets were formulated they themselves came to be seen as eternal truths, enabling them to serve as instruments of vested interest opposing further social change. As John Dewey (2000), one of the most influential pragmatist philosophers, notes, “...nothing is clearer than that the conception of liberty is always relative to the forces that at a given time and place are felt to be oppressive” (Dewey, 2000: 54).

For this reason, it is impossible to dissociate the advent of a discourse of stakeholding from the global struggle for reorganising risks and vulnerabilities and social and material divisions of labour

between interest groups. Owing to the characteristics of modernity, including the increasing globalisation and codification of existing forms of ownership and control, new international capitalist elites have emerged, who pursue their interests through different forms of transnational imperialism as propagated by strong states, corporate actors and/or acclaimed ethical social movements (Petras and Veltmayer, 2001; Chomsky, 1996; Hobsbawn, 2008). Much stakeholder agency is thus concerned with legitimising inequitable distributions of surplus social products generated in different capitalist networks (Habermas, 1973). This appreciation provides a frame for understanding the selective promotion of certain interpretations of the notion of 'sustainable development' to serve the interest of such elites. As a case in point, this takes place partly through offering

“easy consumption-based solutions to the environmental crises inherent in late market capitalism...produced and supported by a “transnational capitalist class” of corporate executives, bureaucrats and politicians, professionals, merchants and the mass media” (Igoe et al., 2010: 490; see also Brockington and Scholfield, 2009).

In response to the shortfalls of current expressions of the liberal governance tradition, an alternative conception of democracy has attracted attention within natural resource management over the past decades, known under the label of radical democracy. This approach is often traced back to the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1996: 193) and their formulation of a new socialist alternative affirming a more explicit interest in how social order is actively constructed through the *“partial limiting of disorder; of a meaning which is constructed only as excess and paradox in the face of meaninglessness”*. In contrast to other alternative approaches to governance, such as for instance networked/multilevel governance and deliberative democracy which are today popular within research communities addressing natural resource management, this offers a more explicit epistemological revisionism as well as an interest in dynamics which do not depart from the nation state or formal institutions as the centers of attention (see also Görg and Hirsch, 1998; Cohen and Fung, 2004). Radical democracy thus reacts against the tendency of both liberalism and Marxism to assume an objectively validatable ontological nature and physical reality (Castree, 1995). Whilst differing in their aspiration for collective emancipation from the macro-structural and the self-sufficient individual, both liberal and traditional leftist theory and ideology, respectively, are founded on the assumption of sovereignty of the subject and the unity of consciousness (Devenney, 2004). In contrast, the radical democratic approach to operationalising democracy in concrete terms is concisely captured by Dewey who describes how

“the method of democracy – inasfar as it is that of organized intelligence – is to bring ...conflicts [of interest] out into the open where their special claims can be seen and appraised” (Dewey, 2000: 81).

In this regard, Jim Woodhill has provided perhaps the most explicit analyses of multistakeholder processes from a radical democratic perspective. He shows how stakeholding may undertake to critique capitalist liberalism and its social relations *“not simply as a contestable theory about social and economic life but as an ideology with distinct political-economic advantage for some groups”* (Woodhill, 1999: 165). This implies a questioning, on their ideological basis, of the theoretical arguments made by those whose interests are being served. It also involves challenging fictions of

liberalist social contract theory which are promoted by already privileged conservatives (Näsström, 2007). As expressed by Noam Chomsky (1996), this enables us to challenge ready-made formal institutional accounts of the modern constitutional representative democratic republic and reject claims that the well-being of people depends on the presence of any single brand of institutional arrangement.

Clearly, such a radical democratic perspective is implicit in the constructionist approach to stakeholding referred to above. Yet, what I wish to propose is the need for a shift in *emphasis* regarding how we consider the role of stakeholder agency in relation to people's interests and how we motivate recognition of such agency – moving from an ontological modernity narrative to a more explicit radical democratic perspective. The notion of resource dilemma can then be profiled not just as a response to uncertainties and complexities in our modern 'age of the environment' but also as a recognition of conflicts of interest as a given of our human condition, which enables approaching the interactions equally as a political process of claims making. In making this argument for a more explicit radical democratic appreciation of the ideological nature of stakeholder processes I build on past work on power, negotiation and conflict in stakeholder processes and the special requirements it surfaces for those charged to facilitate these interactions (e.g. Powell, 1998; Leeuwis, 2000; 2002; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2001; Funder, 2010, Westberg, 2005, Woodhill, 1999).

The reflexive deconstruction of stakeholding as a phenomenon located in the unfolding of the liberal democratic tradition provides a radical democratic entry point into critically examining how stakeholder agency is legitimated as part of larger ideological struggles. We become interested not only in formally denoted 'stakeholder processes' or so-called 'alternative policy instruments', but how people (stakeholders) continuously, in each and every encounter, insert their agendas throughout the governance system (Fig. 4). In turn, we become sensitive to how policy processes permit or otherwise harbor phenomena of *policy adaptation*, manifested in the interplay between a wide number of sectoral policy processes and in the face of diverging stakeholder agendas and perspectives. In this view, policy adaptation denotes the process and outcomes of how stakeholders exerting their agency into spaces of ambiguity to revise political goals and affect their interpretation, navigate institutional vacuums, and/or engage in rule bending and self-organised action (e.g. Powell et al., 2011).

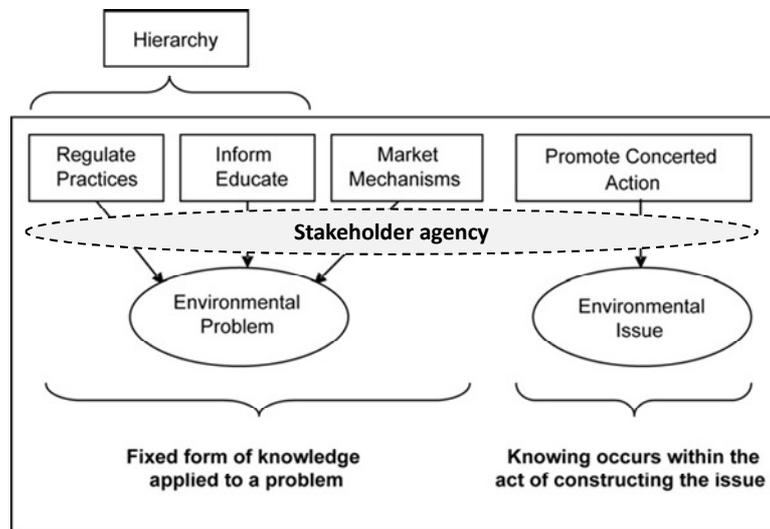


Fig. 4: Stakeholder agency as an inherent undercurrent in all policy processes. Adaptation of original reproduced from Ison et al. (2007).

3. CRITIQUE OF MAINSTREAM CONCEPTIONS OF LEGITIMACY

Above, I have argued that the constructionist approach to stakeholding goes a long way in rectifying the shortfalls of mainstream approaches to stakeholding in attending directly to how stakes are constructed and negotiated amongst different interest groups. I then argued that if we are to position our discourse of stakeholding reflexively in juxtaposition to the purposes of the inherently contested governance situation in which it is nested then this requires us to view stakeholding – as governance processes at large - principally as means mobilized to build a (sufficiently collective) sense of legitimacy for existing governing regimes, their purposes, and actions. In turn, we need to a more explicit theory of legitimacy – specifically regarding the legitimization of stakeholder agency in processes of policy adaptation.

Whilst there are significant bodies of theory on legitimacy in disciplines such as sociology, organizational studies and political philosophy, it is far from straightforward to apply these guidelines to efforts under the special conditions offered by natural resource governance. In this section, I will briefly justify this claim and demonstrate the need for operationalising an approach to legitimacy in a radical democratic perspective on stakeholding for research interventions in natural resource management. The purpose is not be exhaustive but to substantiate a sufficiently strong suspicion that existing scientific views on legitimacy are inadequate for guiding natural resource governance. This ought to provide the motivation for pursuing, in the latter part of this paper, a more coherent theory on legitimacy for our purposes. Below, I will review four of the most recurrent theoretical

perspectives, which one finds in the literature on policy processes and critique their conceptualization of legitimacy.

3.1 Existing theoretical perspectives on legitimacy

Theoretical perspective 1: Agency is legitimate when it matches the 'stake'

Let us start within the traditions, which actually acknowledge that stakeholding is a relevant formal approach to resource governance. Here, the legitimacy of someone's actions/agency depends on whether one is recognized as a legitimate stakeholder. In fact, the significance of the notion of stakeholding is that attention is shifted from *a priori* structural and institutional mandates and rights to actual stakes. This represents a fundamental motivation for tools such as 'stakeholder identification', 'stakeholder mapping', and 'stakeholder analysis' as methods proposed to ensure analytic power and inform strategic decisions in whose claims should be heeded on specific management issues (Grimble and Wellard, 1997; Ravnborg and Westerman, 2002; SLIM, 2004; André and Simonsson, 2009).

But what if, as in many cases, stakeholding is just one of many co-existing approaches to governance, stakes are never formally recognized, and legitimacy depends on multiple sources outside the recognized sphere of formal stakeholding (Lister, 2003; Poulsen, 2009; van Bommel, 2008; Bäckstrand, 2006; Muller, 2008)? Clearly, as argued by Baumann (1995), any negotiated codex is only relevant to those who submit to it.

Theoretical perspective 2: Agency is legitimate if power is exercised according to justifiable rules

A broader view is provided within sociology in the definition of power – and by extension agency – as legitimate when it is exercised according to justifiable rules. This view follows Max Weber's (Kalberg, 2005) functionalist distinction between power and legitimacy as distinct attributes which combine to create authority (legitimate use of power). In some corporate traditions of stakeholding, which rely on this approach, legitimacy is identified as one of several attributes, which in addition to stakeholder power and urgency compose the salience of the stakeholder recognition (Mitchell et al., 1997; Friedman, 2002). Beetham (1991) has provided one of the most extensive analytical accounts of this view on legitimacy vis-à-vis power and identifies three requirements for legitimate agency: 1) it must conform with formal and informal rules, 2) these rules must be justified by reference to beliefs shared by both dominant and subordinate groups, and 3) there must be clear evidence of consent by the subordinate to the particular power relation. Arguably, this view is partly rooted in a classical legal positivist political theory with its contractualist definition of a legitimate democratic order as dependent on a shared conception of justice (Habermas, 2003).

As admitted by Beetham, this view on legitimacy requires the social scientist to be able to stand partly outside the social relations, which are subject to analysis. This in itself is a difficult task when researchers are deeply engaged in actual resource management efforts. Further, one need only look at very few concrete management situations, including the example from Greenland above, to assert that Beetham's three requirements for legitimate agency are routinely ignored. In fact, it is well appreciated that classical liberal pluralist assumptions, which are often found in deliberative

democratic approaches to governance, regarding genuineness and equal access to negotiation processes do not hold in most contexts (Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2001; Benn et al., 2009). Is this because stakeholder agency is generally illegitimate and power is the main factor which holds governance regimes together, or can legitimacy be explained in a way which more specifically appreciates the fragmentation between stakeholder interests?

Theoretical perspective 3: Agency is legitimate if it coheres with shared normative structures

The proposition above can be considered as a subcategory of an even broader view, also originally hosted within sociology but having found its way into many other traditions. This defines legitimacy generally as the moral dimension of power relations. Giddens (1984) thus defines legitimation as one of several structures which is created through norms as the modality, and is separate from power. Legitimacy is here considered a normative structure, which is associated with norms and the more emotional content of social relations, which compel us to act in a certain way or cast judgment on a person and/or act (Giddens, 1984). Early models of political legitimacy were partly contingent on the normative emphasis in mobilizing behaviorist psychology to conceptualize legitimacy as a secondary social reinforcement working through the provision of symbolic rather than material rewards (Merelman, 1966).

However, whilst it may not have been the original intent of Giddens and other theorists taking this line, it is not uncommon to find that legitimacy of stakeholder agency within this perspective is treated only as a 'normative' problem more or less separately from substantial and/or material aspects of policy adaptation processes. This is a concern when natural resource management is so specifically concerned with the use and distribution of concrete material resources. A common sleigh of hands has been to argue for a consideration of both 'procedural' and 'outcome' legitimacy (e.g. Hegtvad and Johnson, 2009), in which both the norms of the interaction and the actual results are included in the equation. Yet, a separation of the normative and/or symbolic from the material appears fraught with persistent risks of ignoring the unavoidability of the messiness and complexity of the 'local' level in policy processes, which prefer to generalize across localities (Steyart et al., 2007).

Theoretical perspective 4: Agency is legitimate if it advances collective purposes

Another sub-category of the 'normative approach' exists in political theory and political philosophy, focusing more specifically on formal institutional structures. Here, legitimacy is examined as a characteristic of institutional structures such as states and public polities and administrations. In this view, legitimacy depends on the normative relationship between a political authority and its subjects. This departs from the traditional liberal democratic view on society as premised on the assumption of a 'closed system' or, as Terry Macdonald (2008: 13) argues, the presumption of a polity as "*unified agent of public power advancing collective purposes*". It also rests on the further assumption that authority emerges due to the surrender of judgment of the subordinate citizens/subjects (Warren, 1996). Dryzek (2001: 666) thus suggests to seek sources of legitimacy in "*the resonance of collective decisions with public opinion, defined in terms of the provisional outcome of the contestation of discourses in the public sphere as transmitted to the state or other authorities*

(such as transnational ones)". 'Transnational' stakeholders are here, owing to taking classical democratic institutions as the point of departure, typically defined as non-state actors operating between nation states (Erman and Uhlin, 2010).

Altogether, this reflects a search for more optimal governance arrangements motivated by democratic theorizing, typically in the inclusion of interests in a representative polity. Consequently, it does not provide a perspective which sufficiently appreciates the agency of stakeholders across formal institutional domains, i.e. the fact that people may actively pursue roles which are not captured by accepted categories of the state and non-state, or the public, private and civil society. It also takes the notion of 'transnational' very literal with the risk of ignoring other transboundary forms of agency, i.e. the trans-sectoral, trans-institutional, trans-cultural - or simply transboundary in wide sense.

4. PROPOSING AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK FOR FOSTERING LEGITIMATE STAKEHOLDER AGENCY

4.1 Transactions in intersubjectivity

From the above critique, we have seen indications that rather than conceiving legitimacy based on 'stakes', justifiable rules, normative structures or collective purposes, we require a framework which is sufficiently broad to enable attention to the impressive multiplicity of conscious and unconscious strategies typically employed by stakeholders in the exerting of agency and negotiation of legitimate agency. In proposing an alternative framework for conceptualizing what can be more coherently implied with the notion of legitimate stakeholder agency in natural resource governance, I suggest we depart from a central supposition implicit in the constructionist approach to stakeholding. This concerns the claim in line with the interactionist and structuration perspective of Giddens (1984), that stakeholder agency is recursive social activity, where people both react to and reproduce the conditions that make their activities possible. This means that people's practical actions in everyday life create the social structures experienced and reacted to as objective reality, which in turn is the basis for claims to knowledge and plausible policy options (Fox, 2006). In effect, this appropriates a relational view on power and the notion of reciprocal coupling of socialisation and individuation in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1977; Kemmis, 2008). It also adopts a view in which social order is a dynamic, contingent ongoing accomplishment of "*contexts of accountability in which both individuals and institutions are given identity and reproduced*" (Lindstead, 2006: 399).

Altogether, the constructionist perspective on stakeholding is thus approaching stakeholder agency as forms of praxis, which are dually legitimated by and reshaping the totality of the *intersubjective* order in which it takes place. The notion of intersubjective consciousness is well established in the constructionist, hermenutical and phenomenological philosophies of science. In brief, the emphasis on the intersubjective acknowledges that whilst the individual is the perceiving subject, shared (i.e. agreed 'objective') reality consists of intersubjective consciousness which emerges from the combined effect of the agency of various actors. This broad view of legitimacy is coherent also with the radical democratic approach, in following the shifting meaning of democracy from a child of the individualistic Enlightenment to the "*process of relationship – the unencumbered capacity of people*

to sustain the meaning making process” (Gergen, 2003: 46). As Midgley (1993) has pointed out, whilst objectivism and subjectivism makes sense within realist and idealist philosophies of science, respectively, intersubjectivity is the primary locus of interest within a constructionist approach to stakeholding (Midgley, 1993).

Arguably, this understanding provides a vantage point which establishes an initial view of legitimate stakeholder agency as follows:

Legitimate agency is constituted of practices (praxis), which cohere with the totality of the intersubjective order in which it takes place – coherence which the agency itself is concerned with creating.

4.2 Legitimizing practices

One of the implications of approaching legitimate stakeholder agency as transactions in the intersubjective is that it focuses attention on how the notion of agency is contingent on that of ‘reality maintaining/creating practices’. That is, the constituting parameter of membership in communities of praxis, which share a dominant sense of the intersubjective reality, and thus the regulatory principle of inclusion/exclusion into negotiations of legitimate agency (e.g. Wenger, 1998). Such communities of praxis are the dynamic social structures in which actors position their bodies as fields of perception and action and through which individual actors represent to themselves the presence of others, and may come to accept other subjectivities invested with equal rights (Merleau-Ponty, 1964). In the sphere of the intersubjective, we therefore become alert to reality maintaining/constructing practices – or, rather, legitimating practices, which shape the active creation of collective / intersubjective consciousness, as the most suitable focus of investigation and intervention (Althusser, 2008).

In order to envision a situation in which an inquiry into legitimacy of stakeholder agency is relevant in the first place, arguably, we need a minimum of three core types of legitimating practices. This concerns the interrelated roles of stakeholders who enact a form of agency (*Creators*), those who contest it (*Contesters*), and – finally – those who sanction this agency in order enable it to continue despite contestation (*Sanctioners*). Together these three sets of practices form what we may consider triads of *legitimizing practices*. Through their praxis stakeholders engage in order to create, sanction, and contest, respectively, certain praxis of stakeholder agency in their intersubjective reality. In fact, this role of legitimating practices is an implicit or explicit effort for what Berger and Luckman (1966: 110) has termed ‘second-order objectivation’, functioning “to make objectively available and subjectively plausible the ‘first order’ objectivations which have been institutionalized” through the primary agency. This view also posits how the praxis of stakeholders is in effect a composite of ‘agency’ (actions which are seen as directly contributing to certain transformation processes) and ‘legitimizing practice’ (efforts to render these actions acceptable and credible).

Altogether, this proposition motivates the following conception of legitimacy of stakeholder agency in policy adaptation for the governance of natural resource management and livelihoods (Fig. 3):

Stakeholder agency is legitimate when it coheres with the intersubjective reality in which it is exerted. This coherence is created, maintained and challenged through triads of legitimating practices in the intersubjective spaces, which makes a type of agency (Creator) sufficiently acceptable in the eyes of someone else (Sanctioner), who is in a position to endorse the undertaking of this action, in the face of a third party (Contester) who reject its acceptability (and may be victimized by the actions which it motivates).

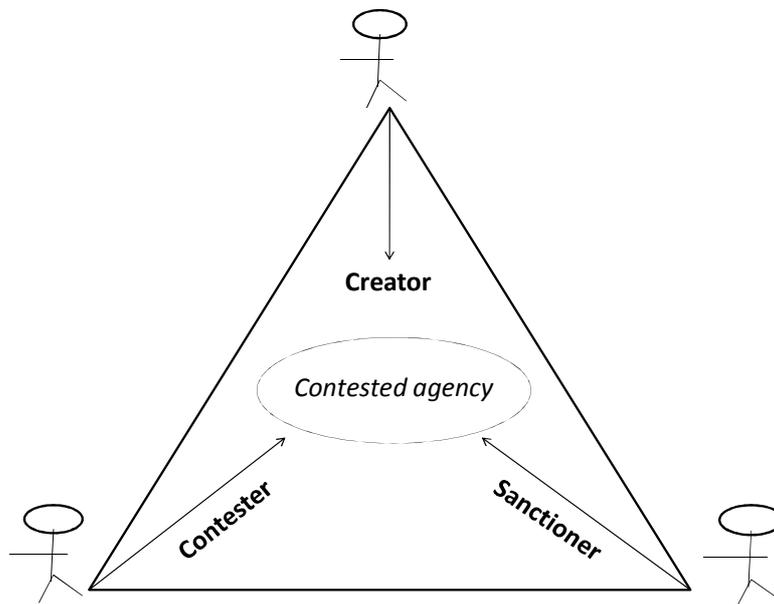


Fig. 3: Fostering legitimate agency. Schematic depiction of how legitimate stakeholder agency is fostered. Stakeholder praxis is composed of 1) agency and 2) legitimating practices (Creation, Contesting, Sanctioning).

This triad of legitimating practices distinguishes stakeholders in relation not to a defined issue or a transformation process (agency), but in relation to a form of legitimating practice as a creating force of intersubjective reality. This means that the three core roles involved in the negotiation of what constitutes legitimate agency are discerned vis-à-vis their influence on an intersubjective phenomenon, which contributes to determining the legitimacy of stakeholders *when* they engage in concrete issues and change processes. In fact, the intersubjective phenomena which are the loci of struggles between Creators, Sanctioners and Contestors may typically be linked to motivating several forms of agency and change processes. The identification of these three roles in the triads of legitimating practices breaks down the notion of legitimacy from a generic either/or and attaches it as a descriptor of specific relationships, thus highlighting the concrete locations of possible interventions in the fostering of legitimate agency in research projects. It also highlights how legitimate agency can be fostered through interventions in different phases of the praxis: as changes in the agency itself and/or as shifts in the relationships between the legitimating practices.

However, in taking this view we have to acknowledge that people's roles in the triads of legitimating practices may often not be static. Stakeholders, who play the role of the Sanctioners in one situation of policy adaptation can be the Contester in another. The important conclusion from this observation is that it is not justifiable to emphasise only one triad of legitimating practices, when one set of relationships can only be understood and acted upon once they are considered in context of the 'neighbouring' triads of legitimating practices. Probably, the real transformative potential lies in connecting the interdependencies between dynamics in neighboring triads, casting critical praxis in an infinite n-dimensional space of legitimating practices.

4.3 'Grounding' the radical critique: policy adaptation instances

With this proposed alternative conception of legitimate stakeholder agency in natural resource governance, let us briefly return to the implications for the ambitions of fostering a more radical democratic critique of stakeholder processes. This is specifically pertinent as radical democratic approaches have been criticized for challenging 'orthodox models' of liberal democracy without offering coherent alternatives (Little and Lloyd, 2009). Similarly, within political philosophical theorizing on democracy, stakeholding has been criticized for counting some more than others, thus undermining the equal worth of each citizen (Agne, 2006; Näsström, 2010).

The radical democratic approach to stakeholding as a phenomenon in the liberal governance tradition rests, as we saw above, significantly on the relevance of the relational view on power. As a case in point, this is partly inspired by the Foucauldian approach, which defines discourse as an intersubjective field of regulation for various positions of subjectivity, governed by the construction of the rules of formation and points of choice, which are left free by the discourse to its participants (Foucault, 1969). Radical critique also relies on meta-theoretical claims made through the extrapolation of the notion of 'hegemony'. This is partly based on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony (Forgacs, 1988) as one of the best known manifestations of the post/neo-Marxian movement, which incorporates into the economic determinism, ontological universalism and structural class differences in classical Marxism a theory of intersubjectivity, power, and discourse (Barrett, 1991; Cameron, 2005). It involves a decentering of the subject into the world of discourse to establish a network, in which the subjects are constituted through discourse, replacing the episteme with an interest in the social apparatus/dispositive of reality creating practices (Ashenden, 2005). This approach to the intersubjective builds on the convergence between poststructuralists and so-called Grand Theorists such as Kuhn and Althusser in undertaking an absolute analysis of the contradictions of reality, to which we should attend, in bodies both external to the individual subjects and distinct from the material base (Skinner, 1985; Hiddleston, 2009).

Whilst the radical humanist paradigm of Marx comprised both subjective and objective strains (Burbank and Dennis, 2009), the notion of hegemony represents an approximation to the view on human agency in symbolic interactionism, and the dynamic co-construction of self and society/social order (Strauss, 1977; Mead, 1977). The genealogy of the concept of hegemony in leftist praxis thus reflects a response to the over-determination of struggles and the deficiency of historical determinism and normative epistemology. It contends that the hegemonic discourse silences all other discourses, and that:

“historically speaking we hear only one voice because a hegemonic discourse suppresses or marginalises all antagonistic class voices...yet remains in dialogue with the discourse it has suppressed” (Dowling, 1984, p. 131).

This attention to larger hegemonic and discursive fields of struggle and meaning making provides a useful radical democratic framework for pursuing investigations of how legitimate agency is constructed through practices affecting the intersubjective. However, within natural resource governance, the contestation of different forms of agency typically is so severe that it is impossible (and practically undesirable) to speak of larger ‘ideologies’, ‘hegemonies’ or specific groups of ‘dominant’ and ‘sub-ordinate’ classes without a clear specification of where in the policy adaptation processes we are engaged. In guiding concrete and constructive interventions (i.e. research actions which can support a greater coherence in the modes of justification amongst stakeholders), it is irrelevant to posit such general claims when a multiplicity of stakeholders exploit the policy adaptation process in very specific ways and we need to attend to these located practices and those actors who are involved in each moment.

The articulated conception of legitimacy of stakeholder agency as created through legitimating practices also provides for a ‘downscaling’ of the larger radical critique of ideologies and hegemonies to more humble and manageable units in which those who are present can attend relationally to each other and the contestations which may surface. This implies an emphasis not on distanced and abstract critique of certain ‘capitalist and/or neo-liberalist orders’ but the concrete ‘*policy adaptation instances*’ in which stakeholders employ their legitimating practices within such supposed orders and what can be constructively done to improve the situation. Whilst supporting an argument that legitimacy depends on its intersubjective justifiability, we must thus also underline the importance of a pragmatic emphasis on explaining how legitimisation is constructed to accept or refute a certain process, inquiring into practical options “*here, now, about this issue*” (Conelly et al., 2006: 271). In most cases, the concern of stakeholders is not in a larger transcendent form of legitimacy, but in ensuring that their actions are just *sufficiently legitimate* in order to move on with that they need to do. This observation implies that we must be extremely specific if we seek to make informed and constructive claims regarding the formation of legitimacy and be cautious to ground the general ideology critique in particular moments of policy adaptation.

Instead of a pervasive ‘hegemony’ the articulated view on legitimacy enables us to focus on the vast and often bewildering variety of specific instances of policy adaptation, in which improvement is happening or prevented. This also enables us to consider specifically those people involved in a particular instance of adaptation, and how they depend on each other for securing a sufficient sense of justifiability of their actions. This view also has the advantage of locating tangible, concrete ‘things’ (e.g. the access to a certain ‘resource’, the choice of terminology in a meeting etc.), which often can be addressed for practical reasons without being seen to overtly challenge people’s positions, or to tackle contentious political and/or abstract discussions head-on.

In response to the critique of the radical democratic undertaking in relation to stakeholding, such an emphasis on located policy adaptation instances and their legitimating practices can not only critique the myth of bounded political communities, which can control their own destiny (Bartelson, 2008),

but also suggest concrete solutions in such policy adaptation instances. Whilst other governance approaches and research disciplines are concerned with promoting most desirable institutional arrangements, such a radical democratic form of research instead departs from the *de facto* situation in existing policy adaptation processes. In other words, it is concerned with picking up the pieces when the formally endorsed and abstractly defined is shattered in complex and contested localities.

4.4 Realizing interdependencies: From issue to existence

This proposed framework for conceptualizing legitimacy of stakeholder agency has several implications for how we plan research interventions in natural resource governance. I wish here to focus on what I perceive to be the major such implication, namely how it changes the way we think about interdependencies between stakeholders and our meditation in these relationships. The constructionist approach to stakeholding aims to promote conditions for people to realize and respond to their mutual interdependencies as stakeholders in relation to common issues. This reflects that, in the constructionist tradition, stakeholder interdependencies are generally expressed in terms of their interests, i.e. ‘stakes’, in a certain resource dilemma (e.g. Ison et al., 2007). The notion of interest here implies conscious desires connected to identified issues, where it is the very nature of natural resources and their frequent transgressing of managerial boundaries as well as the human nature of existing and living interrelations which form the basis for interdependencies between stakeholders. Most analytical frameworks (e.g. Checkland and Scholes, 1999; Ulrich, 2000) thus place greatest emphasis on the roles of stakeholders vis-à-vis a transformation process and/or the resource dilemmas, defined as a question of conflicts of interest between the interdependent stakeholders. Altogether, this reflects an axiology (view on the source and substance of values), which – while appreciative of the different normative structures and dispositions of stakeholders – nonetheless assumes that value arises in connection to an interest associated with an issue. In this regard, it is evident how the constructionist approach, together with other post-foundationalist responses to positivism and other forms of research as a mode of objectifying and controlling the other, continue to adopt influences of a rationalist emphasis on conscious interests in the defining of stakeholder agency. Arguably, this partly reflects that the constructionist approach legitimizes itself through a negation of earlier research traditions and in so doing is struggling to “*connect the resulting hermeneutical, post-modern, and critical research traditions to the hopes, needs, goals, promises of a free democratic society*” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3).

The presented framework above have emphasized a two-layered conception of stakeholder praxis: ‘agency’ as a form of action by stakeholders in relation to certain issues /resource dilemmas and change processes, and ‘legitimizing practices’ as the creative forces which shape our intersubjective reality and the coherence of agency with this reality. In this creation of intersubjective reality, stakeholders are concerned not only with creating definitions and images of ‘ecosystems’, ‘resources’ etc. but in fact actively co-creating the social identities and existences of one another in a broader sense. Overall, this shows how the legitimacy of agency is generated in the decision whether to let others participate in the co-construction of a shared social and physical order – which in effect is an active construction of one another as interdependent subjects in a shared intersubjectivity. When

considering the fostering of legitimacy, this proposes the need for recognizing that stakeholder problems concerns *existential conflicts* rather than solely *conflicts of interest*.

If stakeholder agency is mainly defined in relation to specific 'interests' there is a risk of disavowing the full experiential and existential foundation of the being of those who are involved. Other recent research into conflicts in natural resource management has similarly highlighted the relevance of moving from a view of conflict as the incompatibility of interests and/or perspectives/goals to how people create, maintain, accept and/or reject roles and identities adopted by self and others (e.g. Hallgren, 2003; Ångman et al., 2011; Idrissou et al., forthcoming). Recognition of larger existential conflicts reflects a recollection of the full consequences of accepting reality as an intersubjective negotiated order. In fact, the significance of the notion of discourse *per se* is that the self concept is plucked from the head and located in the sphere of social discourse (Gergen, cf. Bragg, 1996). It enables us to address conflicts more holistically as emerging from axes of differentiation in an open-ended temporality of human action and an existential problem of time (Markell, 2003).

This also means that we in research interventions, which target legitimating practices, ought to foster a joint awareness regarding the interdependencies specifically regarding how stakeholders co-create one another through practices which sanction, contest and/or create points of dispersion in the intersubjective policy adaptation instances. We must move from identifying interrelations between interests to how sources of legitimation are co-dependent, and thus also inquire into the fragility of legitimizing claims which seek to construct a desirable image of reality. As Scanlon (1998) describes, we tend to chose to live in ways which allow us to share as much time as possible with others who share our notions of justifiability and reasonable rejection of claims to legitimacy, that is, where 'what we owe to each other' is not constantly in jeopardy and casting us into existential problems. It is in the tangible policy adaptation instances that we poke such 'existential holidays' (Rorty, 2009), where we may come to know who our concrete others are and have the opportunity to come to stand in an ethical relationship with them (Benhabib, 1992).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have offered a radical democratic deconstruction of 'stakeholding' in natural resource governance as a phenomenon located in the unfolding of the liberal democratic governance tradition. I have appraised the value of a constructionist approach to stakeholding, which provides a more robust appreciation as to how stakeholders insert their agendas in policy processes and seek to control the collective view on what constitutes legitimate stakeholder agency. However, through the critique I showed that neither the constructionist approach to stakeholding offers an explicit theory of how legitimacy of stakeholder agency is actively negotiated; and that existing mainstream conceptions of legitimacy are incoherent with the constructionist research agenda.

In response, the paper has proposed a framework conceptualizing legitimacy of stakeholder agency in natural resource governance. In essence, it is proposed that stakeholder agency is legitimate when it coheres with the intersubjective reality in which it is exerted. This coherence is created, maintained and challenged through triads of *legitimizing practices* in the intersubjective spaces, which makes a type of agency (Creator) sufficiently acceptable in the eyes of someone else (Sanctioner), who is in a

position to endorse the undertaking of this action, in the face of a third party (Contester) who reject its acceptability (and may be victimized by the actions which it motivates).

This view provides for 'downscaling' of larger radical critique of ideologies and hegemonies to more humble and manageable units in which those who are present can attend relationally to each other and the contestations which may surface. It implied an emphasis not on distanced and abstract critique of certain 'capitalist and/or neo-liberalist orders' but the concrete *policy adaptation instances* in which stakeholders employ their legitimating practices within such supposed orders and what can be constructively done to improve the situation. This also means that we in research interventions, which target legitimating practices, ought to target more explicitly *existential conflicts* and aim to foster a joint awareness regarding how stakeholders co-create one another through practices which sanction, contest and/or create points of dispersion in the intersubjective policy adaptation instances.

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