
Anti-Politics as Political Strategy: Neoliberalism and Transfrontier Conservation in Southern Africa

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ABSTRACT

Studies on conservation and development often point out that interventions rely on anti-political manoeuvring to acquire legitimacy and support. Recent ‘aidnography’, in particular, has done much to expand and add nuance to our understanding of the complex, micro- (anti-)politics at work in conservation and development interventions. In doing this, however, aidnography seems to have led the focus away from two crucial, broader issues related to conservation and development interventions: how they are regulated through the wider, neoliberal political economy, and how this fuels and obscures (global) inequality. Drawing on empirical research on a transfrontier conservation and development intervention in Southern Africa, this article argues that the differential workings of anti-politics in practice warrant a renewed appreciation and a more explicit political operationalization of the concept. This is done by re-emphasizing anti-politics as an essential political strategy within conservation and development interventions and as an intrinsic element of the wider political economy of neoliberalism.

INTRODUCTION

Conservation and development interventions often seek political legitimation by constructing themselves as being outside of politics (Bebbington, 2005; Ferguson, 1994). They rely on ‘mobilizing metaphors’, such as participation, ownership, capacity building and good governance, in order to ensure and justify support and resources (Mosse, 2004). Conceptually vague and anti-political policy discourse is ‘*required* to conceal ideological differences, to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests, to build coalitions, to distribute agency and to multiply criteria of success within project systems’ (ibid.: 663, emphasis in original). In practice, however, this often makes it more difficult for intervention agents to effectively mediate the complex political dynamics they encounter during implementation (Harriss, 2002).

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Over recent decades, our understanding of the depoliticization of conservation and development and its effects on interventions has expanded rapidly. This seems to be especially due to recent ethnographic research that builds on critical *engagement* with conservation and development (such as Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Mosse, 2004, 2005; Quarles van Ufford et al., 2003) rather than earlier work based on critical *disengagement* (e.g. Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994). Whereas the latter works focus on development discourses in order to expose underlying worldviews that promote continued inequality, recent ‘aidnography’ relies on actor-oriented ethnography to uncover the subtler political processes at work that explain why conservation and development intervention outcomes are so often contrary to their own stated objectives, yet still retain legitimacy (Lewis and Mosse, 2006). ‘Aidnographers’ show how ‘subjects’ often reinforce and so further legitimate interventions by wilfully playing along while appropriating the intervention for their own ends (Bending, 2003; Mosse, 2005). While acknowledging its valuable contributions to a more nuanced understanding of the conservation and development industry, this article argues that aidnography is still limited in two major aspects.

First, in throwing light on these nuances, aidnography seems to have turned attention away from two broader issues surrounding conservation and development interventions: how they are regulated through the wider, neoliberal political economy, and how this continues to both increase and obscure (global) inequality (cf. Ferguson, 2006). Second, aidnography seems to fall short in explicitly characterizing the multi-directionality of conservation and development interventions in political terms. For example, do the same depoliticizing pressures apply to all implementing agents? Or are those undergoing interventions excluded from anti-political pressures?

This article aims to address these shortcomings by presenting the findings of research on the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project (MDTP) between Lesotho and South Africa. The MDTP was a World Bank/Global Environment Facility funded intervention from 2003 to 2008, aimed at establishing a transfrontier conservation area (TFCA). TFCAs, which have become a global trend in conservation and development, straddle the borders of two or more countries and so bind them institutionally through joint management of an area (Ramutsindela, 2007). As such, they not only combine biodiversity conservation with rural development; they also aim to improve co-operation between states (Wolmer, 2003) under the assumption that increased exposure to each other leads to increased understanding and friendship.

Whether this assumption holds is not of concern here (see Büscher and Schoon, 2009). Rather, by further broadening the mandate of conservation and development interventions, TFCAs have been positioned as the latest neoliberal ‘win–win ideal’, which makes them eminently suitable for illustrating the politics behind the depoliticization of conservation and development. An analysis of the MDTP shows, in particular, how the differential workings

of anti-politics in practice does not mean that a nuanced actor perspective should detract from the more structural issue of inequality in political terms. This will be done by focusing on the differentiation within the anti-politics employed by those who implemented the MDTP, and by examining local reactions to the intervention. Before elaborating on this, however, the article first presents a brief theoretical introduction of the concept of anti-politics in conservation and development studies. This shows that although the concept has been applied differently, it has remained focused on the same idea of technocratization. Moreover, it leads to a call for its re-operationalization as encompassing more than instrumental technocracy and as inherent to the dominant political ideology of neoliberalism.

THE CONCEPT OF ANTI-POLITICS IN CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Anti-politics as a concept has a long history in development studies. Yet, it was not until Ferguson's seminal *The Anti-Politics Machine* (Ferguson, 1994)¹ that the concept came to theoretical prominence. In his study on a development intervention in Lesotho, Ferguson argued that:

'Development' institutions generate their own form of discourse, and this discourse simultaneously constructs Lesotho as a particular kind of object of knowledge, and creates a structure of knowledge around that object. Interventions are then organised on the basis of this structure of knowledge, which, while failing on their own terms, nonetheless have regular effects, which include the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power, side by side with the projection of a representation of economic and social life which denies 'politics' and, to the extent that it is successful, suspends its effects. (Ferguson, 1994: xiv–xv).

Ferguson showed, and many others have since followed, how development discourse and associated technical, apolitical interventions often lead to the failure of development projects to meet their own objectives (Escobar, 1995). Yet, instead of achieving intervention targets, he argued that 'instrument-effects' transpire; side effects that function as an 'anti-politics machine', 'de-politicising everything it touches, everywhere whisking political realities out of sight, all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power' (Ferguson, 1994: xv).

Ferguson's conceptualization of anti-politics is a technocratic one. Since development institutions are not mandated to mingle in politics, but to

1. Although Ferguson does not generalize his conclusions on development interventions to include conservation, I agree with Escobar (1995) and Bending (2003) that the 'radical critique of development. . . can be extended to this sphere of environmental governance' (Bending, 2003: 9), especially since with the advent of 'sustainable development' the two are often intertwined in theory and practice. In this article I therefore equate development with conservation/development.

stimulate ‘technical’ development, they must follow the political strategy of portraying their development targets as non-political in order to justify their intervention. In general, it is this conceptualization of anti-politics that has dominated the literature, especially the so-called ‘post-development’ literature (Rahnema and Bawtree, 1997). Many of these studies have focused on how anti-political, discursive regimes, conducted by agents of development, structure and determine what constitutes valid knowledge about development, thereby displacing (local) alternatives, leading time and again to the failure of development projects and, worse, the structural dominance of the ‘first world’ over the ‘third world’ (Escobar, 1995). This structural focus has been severely criticized (Schuurman, 2000) and a subsequent key question on the (de)politicization of conservation and development became whether (discursive) development is unidirectional, imposed from above and therefore always top-down (Nustad, 2001).

An important early contribution in this respect is the work by Scott (1985), who argued that ideological domination is not as absolute as often portrayed. In fact, he argued that elite values often do not penetrate into lower classes due to peasants undertaking more practical, material acts of resistance as opposed to ideology-laden ones. Domination therefore is a continuous struggle and never straightforwardly unidirectional. The recent surge in actor-oriented ‘aidnography’ has built and expanded on this theme (Mosse, 2005; Quarles van Ufford et al., 2003). Bending (2003), for example, throws doubt on Ferguson’s ideas on the repetition of failure within the anti-politics machine. If, he asks, the deployment of development is unidirectional and the reasons for project failure are not the result of bad intentions on the side of development agents, why does repeated failure not lead to crisis? Bending employs the familiar analogy of the tale of the emperor’s clothes to solve this problem, arguing two points (*ibid.*: 27):

The construction of development as a unidirectional imposed regime and social movements as unidirectional resistance to that regime risks firstly treating any movement that expresses itself through the idiom of development as just a pawn of the development regime. Instead, we must read this as a legitimate strategic move in a context in which the discourse of development is hegemonic. Secondly, we must be wary of taking the self-presentation of a movement at face value just because they conform to our expectations. We do not want people to tell us that we are clothed or not. What we should really be paying attention to is the counter-hegemonic moment, the political response to an anti-politics machine, the moment when someone says, ‘The emperor has no clothes!’.

Other recent aidnographic work similarly seeks to provide a nuanced view of the micro-politics in conservation and development interventions. Mosse (2005: 238) has forcefully argued that the problem with contemporary development policy is that it uses populist participation discourses to fabricate ‘its separation from political economy and that it becomes isolated from the local or vernacular to which it is nonetheless materially connected’. Accordingly, this ‘produces ignorance of project effects’, something that Mosse

shows can be revealed again through ethnographic research. Li (2007), in her study of conservation and development interventions in Indonesia, employs a historical approach to show how ‘practices of government’ try to replace, yet are always compromised by, ‘practices of politics’. Despite this, Li concludes that certain rationales within improvement schemes seem stubborn over time. Most important is the process she calls ‘rendering technical’: inscribing boundaries within and rationalizing social-political processes in technical terms.

Despite its different approach, aidnography reinforces the general way in which anti-politics has been conceptualized, namely as a tactic through which ‘poverty discussions are increasingly separated from questions of distribution and social transformation, and in which poverty reduction becomes something sought through projects rather than political change’ (Bebbington, 2005: 940). Technocratization, then, is the tool that ensures that the system maintaining global inequality does not get compromised. The alternative to technocratization is therefore logical: ‘there is an important task ahead of reconstituting poverty within the political domain: namely, examining how poverty is produced and the relationship between processes that produce wealth and poverty’ (Nustad, 2001: 488). To be able to reconstitute poverty within the political domain, one must set out to better understand this domain. Yet, much aidnography falls short in describing anti-political processes in explicitly political terms and linking these processes to the wider political economy.² A more explicit political conceptualization of anti-politics is warranted — one that re-emphasizes and builds on Ferguson’s point that depoliticization is an essential political strategy in conservation and development, and that recognizes how conservation and development interventions are subsumed under, and at the same time reinforce, the neoliberal political economy within which they function. Before illustrating this through a case-study of the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project, the following section briefly outlines the theoretical underpinnings of such an explicit political conceptualization.

TOWARDS A POLITICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ANTI-POLITICS

Despite — or perhaps due to the recent financial crisis — few people would deny that we live in neoliberal times. Yet, what this exactly entails remains subject to intense debate. This section aims to spell out several core characteristics of the neoliberal project in order to link it with the concept of anti-politics. The first point to make is a distinction between neoliberalism as a ‘technology of governing’ (Ong, 2006) and as an ideology that favours particular modes of political conduct. As a technology of governing,

2. Li (2007) being a notable exception here.

‘neoliberal rationality informs action by many regimes and furnishes the concepts that inform the government of free individuals who are then induced to self-manage according to market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness’ (ibid.: 4). To this should be added the principle of commodification: the transformation of inherent or use values into exchange values, calculated in monetary terms (McDonald and Ruiters, 2005). The ambition of the neoliberal project, then, is to establish a world where all social and political dynamics are subjected to market dynamics such as commodification and competition.

According to Harvey (2005: 165): ‘to presume that markets and market signals can best determine all allocative decisions is to presume that everything can in principle be treated as a commodity. Commodification presumes the existence of property rights over processes, things, and social relations, that a price can be put on them, and that they can be traded subject to legal contract’. This value transformation through commodification dramatically changes political conduct and is deeply problematic. First, it enables neoliberalism to effectively incorporate and deal with systemic contradictions (Hartwick and Peet, 2003), by commercializing both its alternatives and its excesses (Kovel, 2002). Neoliberal commodification thus has a tendency to discredit transformative, alternative politics. Second, neoliberalism’s ‘uncompromisingly universalist’ pretensions (Richardson, 2001) neatly align its politics to the ‘new development populism’ of participation, all-inclusiveness, consensus and win–win constructions. Problems of incommensurable values are transformed into matters of economic distribution, which in turn are decided by the rule of competition. Both these points imply that neoliberalism is an ideology that favours particular modes of political conduct, such as anti-politics.

I define politics here as the social, deliberative process with which actors make decisions that determine social or public outcomes. Anti-politics, then, aims to do away with this social, deliberative process and to ‘predetermine’ decisions and/or social and public outcomes. As such, anti-politics is inherently anti-democratic. In the words of Marden (2003: 234): ‘Essentially though, [democratic politics] is to recognise and promote discursive contests, to uphold or contest political decisions, to contest dominant hegemonic metaphoric language that disguises alternatives or constrains choice, and finally, to recognise that decisions are made within larger discursive frames that define the parameters of the problems and the possible solutions; to have less is to deny politics’.

This broad definition enables us to move beyond the focus on ‘rendering technical’ of many conservation and development studies, and to follow Schedler (1997) who distinguishes four types of anti-politics: instrumental, amoral, moral and aesthetic anti-politics. Instrumental anti-politics resembles Ferguson’s argument in that political decisions should be made by technocratic experts, based on rational cost–benefit analyses. Any other type of political action, in this view, is seen as irrational ignorance. Amoral

anti-politics entails the privatization of the public domain. It regards human beings as utility-maximizing economic beings whose interests and preferences are derived from what makes most commercial sense. Politics becomes a 'strategic power game' where rational choice prevails. Moral anti-politics quantifies and reifies 'normative arrangements', thereby stifling democratic political debate. In other words, ethics and morals are seen as constituted on quantifiably immutable objectives and outcomes, whereby disagreement is seen as 'immoral' or even 'treason'. Lastly, aesthetic anti-politics stifles democratic politics by replacing words with images, theatre and drama. Democratic politics becomes trivialized by being represented by the visual rather than the deliberative/communicative. According to Marden (2003: 235):

This is the triumph of the symbolic over verbal communication, the virtual over the actual and the ritual over the experience of learning. This is a form of 'bread and circuses' and the spectacle of politics which is regarded as a coloniser because of its potential to replace important elements of public life and *vita activa* with layers of stimulation such as expressions of emotion over plausible argument.

While any political ideology may rely on anti-political strategies, I would argue — following Marden (2003) and Schedler (1997) — that they fit especially well within the neoliberal political economy.³ In order to pursue their aim, neoliberals try to replace political debate over the distribution of interests and power by 'marketized' political mechanisms that enable the quantification and 'trading' of interests and value conflicts through commoditization. It is vital, then, to analyse anti-political tendencies within an explicit context of neoliberalism as the framework within which conservation and development interventions operate and which they often help to expand. To illustrate this point, I now turn to a discussion of Transfrontier Conservation Areas, with a special focus on the Maloti-Drakensberg TFCA between Lesotho and South Africa.

ANTI-POLITICS IN TRANSFRONTIER CONSERVATION IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

In the drive to include an ever-widening plethora of popular concerns in conservation and development interventions, TFCAs are arguably the latest 'fashion'. The global number of such initiatives has grown steadily over the last two decades, from fifty-nine in 1988 to over 200 now. The Southern African region has been a front-runner in establishing TFCAs, most notably through the fundraising and marketing capabilities of the 'Peace Parks Foundation', an NGO established in 1997 with the sole purpose of

3. According to Schedler (1997: 1), the hegemony of neoliberalism has elevated anti-politics to become 'an important, at times even hegemonic element of the ideological universe'.

facilitating TFCA development (van Amerom and Büscher, 2005). Akin to Spatial Development Initiatives that aim to integrate the economic potential of the Southern African region with the global market (Taylor, 2003), TFCAs are increasingly seen as ‘products’ that can provide business opportunities to multinational corporations and local communities alike (Ramutsindela, 2007), while serving as ‘marketing brands’ that aim to lure investors to the region in conjunction with the 2010 FIFA soccer world cup.⁴ Although TFCAs cannot be labelled an exclusively neoliberal invention, their major proponents have proven remarkably adept at turning them into neoliberal constructs that serve the ongoing transformation of the regional conservation/development nexus into a competitive commodity market (Duffy, 2006).

From the region’s twenty or so current and planned TFCAs, the flagship ‘Great Limpopo Transfrontier Park’ between Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe serves as a prime illustration of these neoliberal tendencies. Built around the famous Kruger National Park, the Great Limpopo has been at the centre of attempts by the Peace Parks Foundation, the South African state and others to position TFCAs as central to an African ‘economic renaissance, based on selling “Walt Disney” African wildlife experiences to tourists’ (Wolmer, 2003: 276). Although less high profile, the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation and Development Project (MDTP) also has significant stature in the region. Like the Great Limpopo, the MDTP attracts a lot of donor funding and is one of the most advanced in terms of its intervention structure, with memoranda of understanding, institutions, human and financial resources, and so on. Moreover — and unlike the Great Limpopo — the MDTP combines multiple land tenure systems rather than only protected areas. Its status as one of the most complex and most invested-in TFCAs makes it particularly suitable as a case-study of transfrontier conservation in Southern Africa.

A memorandum of understanding between South Africa and Lesotho dated 1 June 2001 laid the basis for the Global Environment Facility grant that financed the MDTP intervention from 2003 to 2008. The project area stretches out over the South African Free State, KwaZulu Natal and the Eastern Cape provinces, while in Lesotho it covers the districts of Botha Bothe, Mokhotlong and Qacha’s Nek. In these provinces and districts we find the local residents (mostly local ‘communities’ but also commercial farmers and village residents), who make up the ‘subjects’ or ‘beneficiaries’ of the intervention. Those undertaking the intervention are mainly donors, official ‘implementing agencies’ — thematically relevant government departments or parastatals — and supporting ‘Project Co-ordination Units’ (PCUs) set up by the project in each country. Although the implementing agencies were

4. See the recently launched ‘Boundless Southern Africa’ brand: www.boundlessa.com (last accessed 4 May 2009).

officially responsible for the intervention, in practice the two PCUs did the bulk of the work and determined how the MDTP was to be operationalized. The following will mainly focus on how the two PCUs tried to implement the MDTP intervention and the reactions this elicited from what were supposed to be the main beneficiaries — the ‘local communities’.⁵

Implementing the Intervention

From the start of the MDTP, the two PCUs differed significantly on how to conceptualize the intervention and link its objectives of conserving ‘globally significant biodiversity’ and ‘community development through ecotourism’. This difference of opinion led to frequent clashes, to the extent that a year into the project, two external mediators were brought in to assist the PCUs to find better ground for co-operation. The mediators concluded that:

Interpersonal relations between key staff members on each side of the project are brittle and fragile. There is a readiness to allow relatively minor issues to fester coupled with a tendency to present a misleading façade. There is some mistrust and perceptions of self-promotion when one side initiates an action. Intentions are sometimes negatively interpreted and there is some confusion between what is real and what is expected to happen. (Matela and Fraser, 2004: 27)

Exacerbating this issue was the fact that — despite official equality on paper — Lesotho and South Africa are highly uneven partners in practice. South Africa completely encloses Lesotho, rendering the latter totally dependent in almost every way possible. Historically speaking, as Ferguson (2006: 55) has argued: ‘it seems clear that Lesotho’s sovereign status was accepted by the international community more as a response to its status as a British ex-colony than as an endorsement of any internal capabilities to function economically or politically’. Against this background, the Lesotho PCU often felt like the ‘junior partner’ in the MDTP which gave it extra impetus in trying to defend its interpretation of the project. This context should be taken into account in the following overview of how the two PCUs tried to convince each other and outside ‘stakeholders’ of their approach to the intervention.

When characterizing the approaches of the two PCUs, one can distinguish between a conceptual approach leaning towards community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) for the Lesotho PCU and bioregional conservation planning (BCP) for the South African PCU. Although both are

5. Data to support the argument presented here were collected between January 2005 and August 2007. The main methods of investigation were over 100 semi-structured interviews with key actors; participatory observation among a wide range of actors in and around the TFCA; and the collection of relevant project documentation.

based on similar premises, there are distinctive differences between these two approaches. CBNRM as conceptualized by the Lesotho PCU leans heavily on the new ‘development populism’ in combination with accepted forms of CBNRM in Southern Africa, influenced by authors and practitioners from organizations such as the Centre for Applied Social Sciences of the University of Zimbabwe, the Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies of the University of the Western Cape and the regional IUCN office (see Fabricius et al., 2004; Hulme and Murphree, 2001). Although this is not the place to give an extensive overview, this literature is distinctive in that it derives chiefly from the social sciences, has a tendency towards anthropocentric arguments and often espouses an open political agenda aimed at the emancipation of rural communities. In interviews with Lesotho PCU members, these standpoints were clear. The socio-ecologist, for instance, mentioned that ‘we put the primacy on the people, they are involved in all we do’, and ‘I think we are conserving to derive benefits from it, which could promote our well-being’ (Lesotho PCU socio-ecologist, interview October 2005). The MDTP Mokhotlong district co-ordinator mentioned that the purpose of extension is that communities see the benefits of conservation (Lesotho PCU Mokhotlong district co-ordinator, interview June 2005). Many similar statements were noted, highlighting that, for the Lesotho PCU, resource conservation should primarily be about the economic or use value it brings to (local) people.

The BCP approach as practised by the South African PCU derives mostly from the natural sciences, has a tendency towards biocentric arguments and a political agenda that emphasizes technical expertise in the protection of biological diversity (Cowling and Pressey, 2003). It resonates with the work of organizations such as the South Africa National Biodiversity Institute, the Botanical Society of South Africa and botany departments of the Universities of Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. Excerpts from interviews with South African PCU members illustrate their attachment to this approach. The most important MDTP outcome for the South African PCU was a technical ‘Conservation Plan’ for the bioregion. According to the grassland ecologist, this entails a map of the region’s biodiversity indicating what ‘has already been lost, what is most important and what is the most threatened — that is, where are the most irreplaceable areas requiring immediate conservation action’ (South Africa PCU grassland ecologist, interview July 2005). Similarly, the ecologist focused on the major threats to biodiversity and their spatial dynamics. According to him, this should form a sound underpinning for the prioritization of conservation efforts (South Africa PCU ecologist, interview September 2005). Although these are ecologists speaking, their focus on biodiversity conservation was shared by most within the South African PCU. In this approach, the use value for people does not have to be direct. Rather, there are long-term benefits that humans derive from a more constructive balance between human needs and the conservation of biodiversity.

What made the conceptual differences between the two PCUs more pronounced is that they were reinforced by quite distinctive (albeit partially overlapping) networks. As outlined above, the members of the two PCUs were involved in or attached to networks and organizations which reflected their CBNRM or BCP leanings. One brief illustration of the conceptual differences between the two PCUs — and the tensions these caused — was the appointment of a regional planner in early 2006. The MDTP mid-term evaluation in 2005 had noted frictions between the two PCUs and that, as a result, the two countries had ‘drifted apart’ in their implementation. The evaluators recommended that ‘the best way to revitalise transfrontier collaboration is by appointing one person to drive the process’ (MDTP, 2005: 9). It was decided that this person should be a ‘bioregional planner’, drawing together data collected by the PCUs into an overall planning framework for the bioregion. A tender was put out for the post and in the joint PCU assessment of the applications, two candidates came out ahead: a Zimbabwean and a South African. Perhaps not surprisingly, these two candidates were neatly aligned to the respective networks of the two PCUs: the Zimbabwean candidate had long been involved in CBNRM in the region, while the South African candidate had a long BCP history.

In the assessment, the Zimbabwean candidate scored fractionally higher than his rival. The South African PCU subsequently objected to the amount of detail in the assessment scores and claimed that both had scored equally highly. Although the Lesotho PCU did not agree, and remained convinced that ‘their’ candidate should get the assignment, they yielded to the pressure. A compromise was found by asking the candidates to write a position paper, after which the best one would be chosen. Meanwhile, the Lesotho PCU coordinator had already made up his mind that he would hire ‘their’ candidate whatever the outcome; if not for the overall bioregional planning, then for Lesotho’s part of the planning process. In the end, this was what transpired: the South African candidate won the bid and took up the assignment in March 2006, while the Zimbabwean candidate was hired by the Lesotho PCU somewhat earlier.

This struggle over the bioregional planner position clearly illustrates the conceptual differences between the two PCUs. More importantly, however, both sides turned their conceptual preference into an anti-political strategy in order to garner political support for their interpretation of the project, rendering it especially difficult to jointly implement the intervention. The South African PCU relied mostly on instrumental, technical anti-politics, while the Lesotho PCU reacted to this with a strategy of moral, populist anti-politics. Moreover, as a result of this ‘conceptual bickering’, the dynamic of the project changed dramatically: competition over ‘buy-in’ from stakeholders for future implementation started to dominate the process of current project implementation and (especially for South Africa) increasingly functioned to legitimize the advancement of neoliberal technologies of devolved

governance such as ‘payments for environmental services’. To illustrate this, the implementation strategies of the two PCUs and their underlying assumptions and outcomes need to be examined.

At the start of the MDTP, the South African PCU challenged the original project implementation plan and particularly certain elements which they did not deem to be practical or necessary (South Africa PCU co-ordinator, interview July 2005). They also challenged the studies done during the preparation phase, which were intended as baseline information upon which smooth implementation would build. According to one South African PCU member, these data were ‘anecdotal’ and accounted for only about 10 per cent of the information they thought was needed (South Africa PCU ecologist, interview September 2005). Another PCU member mentioned that ‘the idea that the World Bank had, that we could make a flying start because we had all the information that we needed as this was gathered during the preparation phase, is a flaw’ (South Africa PCU socio-ecologist, interview May 2005). In line with the BCP discourse, this led South Africa to embark on extensive data collection with the aim of feeding this into an overall conservation and development plan for the Maloti-Drakensberg bioregion. The South African PCU thus interpreted the intervention in a technical, instrumental sense, focusing on rational planning, supported by ‘hard’ scientific data. In line with the BCP discourse (see Cowling and Pressey, 2003), they emphasized issues such as clear stakeholder participation procedures, the necessity for expert knowledge and the ‘right capacity’ in the planning process, and detailed, multi-layered data maps that could assist appropriate institutions in their implementation responsibilities. The assumption underlying the PCU’s strategy was that if decision makers were presented with up-to-date information about what biodiversity was to be conserved in what manner and in which location, they would rationally make the logical and ‘right’ decisions. Consensus would thus ensue — the core of the South Africa PCU’s instrumental anti-politics.

The Lesotho PCU, however, did not see this logic. They did not challenge the MDTP implementation plan but rather, in the words of the PCU co-ordinator, wanted to ‘get on with the job’ (Lesotho PCU co-ordinator, interview October 2005). The Lesotho PCU prioritized popular outreach; they first wanted the various (local) stakeholders to be informed of and actively participate in (the planning of) project activities. Accordingly, the MDTP in Lesotho erected a number of structures and forums to accommodate local ‘stakeholders’, such as ‘District Steering Committees’ in the MDTP Districts and ‘Managed Resource Committees’ for selected priority areas. To further increase local project presence, the PCU set up satellite offices in the districts. According to the three district co-ordinators, these offices focused their initial attention mostly on awareness raising and the setting up of forums and committees to ensure buy-in from local communities (Lesotho PCU Mokhotlong district co-ordinator, interview June 2005; Lesotho PCU Qacha’s Nek district co-ordinator, interview June 2005; Lesotho PCU Botha

Bothe district co-ordinator, interview June 2005). Reinforced by Lesotho's commonage land tenure, the PCU thus interpreted the MDTP in a relational way, focusing on creating local buy-in for the project through extensive local participation. The assumption underlying the Lesotho strategy was that if communities understood the importance of biodiversity conservation, they would take it in their own hands and better 'manage' their natural environment. Technical expertise was seen as no more, and maybe less, valuable than local or indigenous knowledge, which is in line with much CBNRM literature (such as Fabricius et al., 2004). The Lesotho PCU thus chose the moral high ground, whereby the 'right' behaviour would ensue after 'sensitization' and incentives. Consensus on appropriate action would then 'naturally' develop from the bottom up — the core of the Lesotho PCU's moral anti-politics.

From these positions, the two PCUs engaged each other and further actors involved in the implementation of the project. It was clear that both teams worked in extremely politicized environments. To a significant extent, this related to the historical context of Lesotho and South Africa, mentioned above, but much of the political intensity was also due to the enormous complexity of the MDTP, whereby every implementation move could potentially face political resistance. In interviews and casual chats, many PCU members expressed feelings of immense personal and professional strain; some even stated that, had they known how things would go before applying for their positions, they might have reconsidered. Added to this is the fact that the majority of the South African PCU members are whites, which is considered politically inappropriate in the post-apartheid era (South African DEAT official, interview October 2005). In Lesotho, a major strain was the co-opting of the project by various actors including ministerial departments, NGOs, local communities and chiefs who all wanted a piece of the pie. Amidst these circumstances, the PCUs competed with each other, and within the wider conservation and development marketplace, for legitimacy and acceptance. All of this made any choices within the project very difficult. As a result, the safe thing to do was to limit political space by establishing a certain 'high ground' which was non-negotiable. The South African PCU started emphasizing that the right technical process should be seen as a highly valued non-political principle (South Africa PCU co-ordinator, interview September 2005), while the Lesotho PCU sought to establish moral authority by foregrounding community participation and explicitly linking this to the hegemonic Southern African interpretation of community-based conservation (Büscher and Whande, 2007).

In turn, the anti-political strategies used by the two PCUs neatly fitted in and contributed to a wider neoliberalization of the MDTP area. The MDTP case shows that — as with broader trends in development (Mosse, 2004: 645) — the regional conservation/development polity had itself become a competitive marketplace; one in which legitimacy is an increasingly important, yet scarce 'good'. Legitimacy here refers to the right to be involved in

defining the Maloti-Drakensberg public space, something that has become much harder due to increased private pressure on and privatization of the land — for, amongst other things, golf and recreation estates and general tourism uses — and other competing claims by stakeholders such as local communities and various levels of government. The anti-political marketing of the PCUs' interpretations of the project, therefore, was not only meant to gain competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* each other but also *vis-à-vis* other competing claims over the regional public space (South African DEAT official, interview September 2005).

Neoliberalization of the regional space through the commoditization and 'trading' of interests and value conflicts, then, works to 'lubricate' and ease intense political interactions. As such, the bioregional plan, which became the main overall outcome of the project, noted that:

Both countries recognise the vital role that environmental economics tools play in (i) placing a monetary value on ecosystem goods and services (where their lack of monetary value in the past has meant they are treated as 'free resources' often resulting in overutilisation), and (ii) in defining how such values can assist decision-makers in mainstreaming ecosystem goods and services into accounting and other business practices. (MDTP, 2008: 106)

While the overall planning document shows more nuances than this excerpt, the point is that this 'easing' of intense political interactions through the commodification of relations is almost by definition aimed at, and works in favour of, the more influential actors in the region. This does not include the local communities; in general, and contrary to 'community rhetoric', local communities in neither country really benefitted or got involved with the project in a structural way, as will be shown in the next section.

Undergoing the Intervention

Having illustrated the differentiation within the anti-politics employed by those who implemented the intervention, this section examines the local reactions to the Maloti-Drakensberg Transfrontier Project. Notwithstanding their different conceptual approaches, both PCUs attempted to plug the MDTP objectives into local settings through forms of 'community-based conservation'. Below I present one case from each country. For Lesotho this is the village of Nyakoaneng, which lies within the 'Moteng managed resource area'⁶ in the Botha Bothe district. For South Africa it is Obonjaneni, a village that participated in 'Amagugu Esizwe',⁷ an MDTP pilot project in the Amazizi and AmanGwane tribal areas of northern KwaZulu Natal.

6. One of the four specially designated areas for the piloting of improved local natural resources management by the MDTP in Lesotho.

7. The name is isiZulu for 'Treasure of the Nation'.

Despite different settings, intervention types and local reactions, I will argue that the vast majority of inhabitants of both villages employed very similar anti-politics strategies in their interface with the intervention, disguising their political priorities in order to use the MDTP to expand their livelihood options. This type of anti-politics does not fit neatly within the typology developed by Schedler, which is directed at the discursive (policy) level rather than the level of every-day life. I therefore call this ‘pragmatic anti-politics’: hiding one’s political agenda to secure livelihood gains.⁸

Nyakoaneng, Lesotho

Nyakoaneng is a typical Lesotho village of approximately 150 households. Most of the villagers depend on livestock, subsistence agriculture and, although decreasing rapidly due to retrenchments, remittances from men working in South African mines. Nyakoaneng is exposed to many of the livelihood pressures found throughout Lesotho (Turner, 2001): HIV/AIDS, rising crime — especially livestock theft — and increasing pressure on the land. An intervention such as the MDTP could therefore be expected to provide vital extra support, helping people to make ends meet. Interviews conducted in the village in January 2007 seemed to reflect this, even though the MDTP always tied development support in terms of capacity building and training to natural resource conservation. Ntate Phutang Lefaso⁹ is a typical example. Although he worked in South African mines from 1977 to 2005, Ntate Lefaso’s main occupation now is farming: literally, he says that he ‘uses the soil to make ends meet’. He knows a little about the MDTP because he attended *pitsos* (public gatherings). He knows that the MDTP had been trying to set up new grazing plans for the ‘Moteng area and that the project employed capacity-building exercises to reduce pressure on the land and stimulate development, such as the training of herdboys in range management and training in handicraft production. Ntate Lefaso believes that because of this the ‘pastures are well conserved now’ (interview 23 January 2007, Nyakoaneng, Lesotho).

Interestingly, when asked about the environmental impact of the MDTP in January 2007 many people gave similar answers: with the MDTP’s arrival, the grasslands are well conserved. Twenty-year old Selepe Thakabanna received training for herdboys aimed at improving the grazing lands. According to Thakabanna ‘we were taken to grazing fields and taught to protect wild animals and plants’. He considered the training to have brought positive

8. The term ‘political agenda’ here is not meant to deny local (political) heterogeneity or to denote a co-ordinated programme of political action. Rather, it is meant to indicate the general or most common stance of community members *vis-à-vis* the political agenda of the intervention.

9. *Ntate* is the Sesotho equivalent of ‘Mr’; *M’e* is ‘Mrs’.

change: ‘before, some lands were bad, but now they are better’ (interview 24 January 2007, Nyakoaneng, Lesotho). More similar stories were noted, but after several days of doing interviews in the village I noticed we were only visiting people that had been involved in the MDTP. My guide, one of the sons of the family I stayed with, thought this was what I wanted. When returning for several days in May 2007, I therefore decided to conduct interviews by myself. When I asked villagers quite randomly about the MDTP, I found that although some had heard of the project, none could say what it was about. Many said they had ‘forgotten’. With respect to ‘Moteng area, where most people graze their cattle in summer, they did not seem to know about the newly instituted ‘managed resource area’ and its new rules for grazing and range use. Most people still applied the traditional rotational transhumance system, making it clear that access to these traditional grazing grounds was their right. When sharing these findings with the son who had been guiding me in January, he said that if people do not get money out of a project like the MDTP, they tend to ‘forget’. We then walked through the village together again, explicitly aiming to talk to people not involved in the project. When we met the headman’s son, he said that he knew the MDTP and the plans for conserving animals in the ‘Moteng area, but added that many people do not adhere to the rules and regulations and continue grazing as before.

These testimonies echoed an interview conducted in January 2007 with the area chief, ‘M’e Qhobela. She stated that the MDTP held *pitsos* over natural resources to create more environmental awareness. She maintained, however, that ‘it is very difficult to change the mindsets’ of the people, adding that ‘there is a grazing system, but at night they go grazing wherever they want’ (interview 22 January 2007, Ha Molapo, Lesotho). This begs two questions: whether the environmental conditions of the area have actually improved, and how to explain the differences in the reactions of local villagers. The answer to the first question is inconclusive. Local voices contradict each other and a survey by the MDTP found that if a trend could be discerned at all, it was slightly negative (MDTP, 2007a). This finding suggests an answer to the second question: the differences in how people view the environmental impact of the MDTP seem to be related to the small benefits that many community members did get from the project: modest *per diems* and meals for attending workshops and trainings, access to important networks, etc. Why would people who benefit from the MDTP not be positive? As suggested by Bending’s (2003) tale of the emperor, this is what conservation and development implementers yearn to hear, and it does not jeopardise villagers’ potential future benefits.

While this is the general story for the Nyakoaneng community, this is not to say that there were no exceptions or local political conflicts over the intervention. In terms of benefits accruing from the project, the main exceptions in the village were the brothers who ran the local guest house. They were highly involved in many of the project’s structures and benefitted

from being able to attend the most interesting training programmes. This led to some resentment from others in the village, but at the same time, local villagers themselves had elected the brothers to represent them at the various project fora. Interestingly, while benefitting the most, the brothers were also most critical of the project. In the words of the older brother: 'at the end of the day, there is nothing'. Considering the project's emphasis on tourism, he reckoned that the MDTP 'could have helped with signposts or a road, but nothing for us, no brochures, no management plan, so the MDTP is fumbling'. He believed that 'they just involve us to fill their records' and that 'they are very open with planning and facilitating, but not with implementation and if they implement, they still do it their way' (interview 23 January 2007, Nyakoaneng, Lesotho).

Ultimately, then, life for villagers in Nyakoaneng — including the brothers — seems not to have changed much as a result of the project. Despite its overall size, the MDTP barely intruded into the lives of most ordinary villagers and seemed to be at best an addition to the villagers' pallet of livelihood options, rather than fundamentally changing their way of life.¹⁰ In turn, the villagers did not seem too concerned that they were not effectively represented in the management of the MDTP, or even that the intervention tried to set up new institutional structures, such as the managed resource area. As the effects of these remained limited and easy to circumvent — meaning that they did not hinder access to grazing areas, which people regarded as vital — villagers continued life as normal, taking whatever crumbs fell off the MDTP planning and research table.

Obonjaneni, South Africa

Despite different circumstances, a different type of intervention and more explicit local politics, I found similar results in the South African village of Obonjaneni. Obonjaneni was part of the MDTP-funded pilot project 'supporting community-led initiatives in natural and cultural resource management in the Upper uThukela Region', later renamed 'Amagugu Esizwe'. The project lasted from September 2004 to December 2006 and was implemented by two local NGOs and a university department. The core activities of Amagugu Esizwe were the establishment of various committees and capacity building in the six villages included in the project. The committees dealt with issues such as land care, rock art monitoring, 'wilderness', guiding, livestock, maintenance of *dongas* (irrigation gulleys), handicrafts, tourism, fire and grazing. Capacity building included these issues, but focused on 'committee skills', computer literacy, English skills and financial management as well (MDTP, 2007b: 21).

10. This argument is supported by Wittmayer (2007) who conducted a study in Nyakoaneng from January to April 2007.

Obonjaneni shares many similarities with Nyakoaneng in Lesotho. In terms of livelihoods, villagers depend largely on agriculture, livestock, remittances or jobs elsewhere; social pathologies such as HIV-AIDS and crime are serious problems. There are also some clear differences. Besides cultural differences — Obonjaneni is Zulu while Nyakoaneng is Sotho — villagers get more income from tourism, while being part of South Africa opens up more opportunities in terms of government support and social security grants, although these are still meagre.

As in Nyakoaneng, I interviewed people about the project together with a villager who could translate. Again, my guide first brought me to people involved in the project (March 2007). Later (in May 2007), I interviewed local villagers not involved in the project who seemed more indifferent. A major change from Nyakoaneng, however, was that after some initial interviews, more and more villagers involved in Amagugu Esizwe appeared dissatisfied with the project. Criticism focused on two issues: loss of income after the project had stopped, for those working on *donga* rehabilitation; and the lack of certificates for those who had participated in training. One villager, Siphohle Maduna, a thirty-one year old bricklayer, thought Amagugu Esizwe ‘went all right’. He was in charge of *donga* rehabilitation in the project and thought that the training, especially that on *donga* rehabilitation, was good. What worried Mr Maduna was that there was only one training course according to him, in conservation management, and that although, the project had promised the community certificates, these were not forthcoming (interview 8 March 2007, Obonjaneni, South Africa). In May 2007, Nomalanga Mthombeni, a forty-nine year old woman, was still working ‘voluntarily’ on the *dongas*. She was somewhat disgruntled by the ending of the project, and hoped it would return. She told me that, during the project, the people had worked for money: out of every fifteen days, ten days would be paid. She added that they were promised certificates and qualifications, with which they could go to nearby hotels to get jobs. With the ending of the project, Mrs Mthombeni lost income and feels that her life is worse as a consequence (interview 22 May 2007, Obonjaneni, South Africa).

More examples were noted but the overall sentiment remained. Many community members involved in the project were disgruntled about losing income and about not receiving certificates for their work or training. As a consequence, some kept on working on the *dongas*, hoping the project would return, hand out certificates and resume payments. The latter issue was acknowledged in the final project report (MDTP, 2007b: 10–11) but was also qualified by noting the disturbing effect of another intervention in the AmanGwana part of the project area. Payments had not been foreseen in Amagugu Esizwe — the project was about capacity building (MDTP, 2007b). This, however, became problematic when a private company (Rand Water) started paying people for *donga* rehabilitation in AmanGwana. Since the villagers in Amazizi could not get involved in the Rand Water project,

they began demanding payments for participation in the Amagugu Esizwe project, to which the implementers eventually agreed.

The South African case is less straightforward than that of Nyakoaneng in Lesotho. Local people in Amazizi were much more critical about the Amagugu Esizwe intervention than local people in Lesotho were about the MDTP there. Moreover, there was more local political activity over the resources accruing from the project. At one point, staff from the local NGOs implementing the project were sent away, even threatened by the Chief of the Amangwane Traditional Authority. The socio-ecologist of the South African PCU reckoned that either the traditional authority just wanted to 'flex its muscles' or that it had to do with the power struggle that was going on in the area between the two main political parties (IFP and ANC) (South Africa PCU socio-ecologist, interview September 2005). As a result, the project had to be put on hold for three months. Exactly why this incident happened was not clear, but later in the project it did appear that local (party) politics was highly influential in inter-community relations *vis-à-vis* the project, especially in terms of the benefits accruing to the various local 'community facilitators' and their distrust of each other (Droog, 2007).

Despite these and other local issues, two general points about the case stand out. From the side of the villagers, they still wanted the project back, despite their criticisms. On the side of the project implementers, there appeared to be little they could or wanted to do about the local criticism. The issue of the payments was mentioned in the project report as a 'setback', leading to 'recommendations' for subsequent interventions. This is the generally accepted, instrumental way of dealing with local dynamics and intervention setbacks that allows feedback into the mechanics of the conservation and development bureaucracy.

I would like to give a different, more political interpretation, namely that the politics of the Amagugu Esizwe intervention was inherently different from the politics of the majority of community-members. Amagugu Esizwe's ultimate political objective, which had been pre-set by the World Bank, was 'effective conservation management'. This clashed with the local people's priority, which was mainly to get benefits or jobs. Hence, the communities kept on working on the *dongas* for other reasons than the project implementers and the MDTP would have wanted. This seemed to be an open secret: the implementing partners were well aware that one of the people's highest priorities was to get jobs in order to augment their livelihoods (former director Farmer Support Group, interview March 2007). However, neither they nor the villagers could change the political agenda of the intervention. As a result, and despite the occasionally fraught local politics, villagers went along with what was presented in order to extract livelihoods benefits. Thus, even though villagers in Obonjaneni did not commend 'the emperor's fine clothes' as readily as the people of Nyakoaneng, they nonetheless resorted to the same political strategy of pragmatic anti-politics. In doing so, they

did ultimately provide legitimation for the project's attempt to further the constitution of the MDTP polity in neoliberal terms.

CONCLUSION

Conservation and development interventions are highly politicized constructions. With the advent of transfrontier conservation and development, this politicization has arguably reached new heights: the increase of scale means that (even) more actors, institutions, cultures, ambitions, etc. have to be taken into account. Consequently, the pressure on implementers to satisfy all human and environmental needs and demands has also been ratcheted up. This article has argued that this is inherent in a neoliberal conservation and development climate in which all values seem to be interchangeable but can be dealt with by reconstituting conservation and development arenas into marketized, commodity spaces. What the empirical evidence of the MDTP confirms is that, within this setting, anti-politics is a necessary political strategy to try to 'make things happen in' (the PCUs) or 'get things out of' (the villagers) intensely politicized and increasingly commoditized environments. A more extended re-conceptualization of the concept of anti-politics is essential, for it allows a better, multi-directional understanding of the politics in anti-politics.

Reinforced by their respective networks, the South African PCU resorted to instrumental anti-politics to legitimate its interpretation of the project while the Lesotho PCU employed a moral anti-political strategy. This led to repeated clashes between them and difficulties in jointly implementing the transfrontier project. Despite the different conceptual frameworks, the 'intervention subjects' in both countries also resorted to anti-political tactics in their interaction with the project. This evidence supports nuanced multi-directional analyses in conservation and development such as Taylor's (2003) study on spatial development initiatives in Southern Africa. In both Lesotho and South Africa, different local people had a similar stake in hiding their real priorities, as this enabled them to augment their livelihoods.

This is not to say, of course, that all actors have equal power in an intervention. This nuanced multi-directionality in conservation and development must be seen within the framework of a hegemonic conservation and development discourse (cf. Bending, 2003). However, whereas aidnography would emphasize 'the political contests, the feigned compliance, the compromises and contingencies involved in the accomplishment of rule' (Mosse, 2004: 645), I argue that we must not lose sight of the structural point of view, based on the more abstract dominance of neoliberalism and its propensity to maintain and increase inequality (Harvey, 2005).

Anti-politics in the context of neoliberalism puts both implementers and subjects of conservation and development projects under similar pressures to avoid the realm in which inequality could be addressed. This is the messy realm of politics, characterized by grey zones, winners and losers

and trade-offs rather than populist win–win ideals. As a result, there is a tendency to focus on discourse, offering a retreat for those who can make a living out of models, frameworks, plans, discussion pieces, maps and so forth. A neoliberal setting is thus convenient for those who start from more advantageous positions of power. Local villagers generally start from an inferior position; this makes a political strategy of challenging what is on offer both risky and often unproductive and so in fact legitimates a further widening and entrenching of neoliberal conservation/development interventions. Neoliberal inequality becomes systemic as both the subjects and the implementers of a conservation and development intervention are constrained from pointing out that the emperor has, in fact, no clothes. As studies on the micro-politics of conservation and development become ever more nuanced, this bigger picture should not be forgotten but should be repeated frequently and in no uncertain terms.

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