Reconceptualizing International Intervention: Statebuilding, ‘Organic Processes’ and the Limits of Causal Knowledge

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Reconceptualizing International Intervention: Statebuilding, ‘Organic Processes’ and the Limits of Causal Knowledge

David Chandler

This article examines the transformation in the conceptual understanding of international intervention over the last two decades. It suggests that this conceptual shift can be usefully interrogated through its imbrication within broader epistemological shifts highlighting the limits of causal knowledge claims: heuristically framed in this article in terms of the shift from policy interventions within the problematic of causation to those concerned with the management of effects. In this shift, the means and mechanisms of international intervention have been transformed, no longer focused on the universal application of Western causal knowledge through policy interventions but rather on the effects of specific and unique local and organic processes at work in societies themselves. The focus on effects takes the conceptualization of intervention out of the traditional terminological lexicon of International Relations theory and instead recasts problems in increasingly organic ways, suggesting that artificial or hubristic attempts at socio-political intervention should be excluded or minimized.

Keywords intervention; cause and effect; sovereignty; politics; democracy

Introduction

This article seeks to conceptualize a fundamental shift in the understanding of intervention in terms of how intervention and international statebuilding are understood. This shift will be analysed in relation to the decline of traditional disciplinary understandings of sovereignty and increasing scepticism towards Western, liberal or modernist forms of knowledge. Over the last two decades, debates over international intervention have seen a shift from political concerns of sovereign rights under international law to concerns of knowledge claims of cause and effect highlighted through the problematization of interventions’ unintended consequences. This can be illustrated through contrasting the difference between the confidence—today, critics would say ‘hubris’ (Mayall and Soares de Oliveira 2011)—of 1990s understandings of the transformative nature of external intervention with current, much more pessimistic, approaches.
In the 1990s, leading advocates understood international intervention as a clear exercise of Western power in terms of a ‘solutionist’ approach to problems which could otherwise have increasingly problematic knock-on effects in a global and interconnected world (see, for example, Blair 1999). Today, analysts are much more likely to highlight that the complexity of global interactions and processes, in fact, mitigate against ambitious schemas for intervention— aspiring to address problems at the level either of universalizable or generalizable solutions, exported from the West (‘top-down’ interventions), or through ambitious projects of social and political engineering (attempting to transform society from the ‘bottom up’) (see, for example, Ramalingam et al. 2008; Ramalingam 2013).

Today, it is increasingly argued that causal relations cannot be grasped in the frameworks which constituted Western statebuilding intervention in terms of either ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ understandings of the mechanisms of socio-political transformation, which both involved challenges to, or redefinitions of, the conception of sovereignty and self-governance. In a more complex world, such linear or reductionist explanations of policy efficacy appear discredited with growing awareness that any forms of external statebuilding intervention or social engineering will have unintended side effects. It is in the attempt to minimize these unintended consequences that the focus of policy-makers has shifted to the governance of effects rather than seeking to address ostensible root causes. For example, rather than seeking to solve conflict or to end it (resulting in possibly problematic unintended consequences) international statebuilding intervention is increasingly articulated as ‘managing’ conflict, developing societal strategies to cope better and thereby limit its effects (DfID et al. 2011). Focusing on managing effects rather than engaging with causative chains makes the forms and practices of intervention quite different.

The link between conceptual discussions of sovereignty and epistemic questions of knowledge is usefully highlighted by developing Giorgio Agamben’s heuristic framing of a shift from a concern with causation to that of effects, which he understands as a depoliticizing move (Agamben 2014). Debates about addressing causation involve socio-political analysis and policy choices, putting decision-making and the question of sovereign power and political accountability at the forefront. Causal relations assume power operates ‘from the top down’ with policy outcomes understood to be direct products of conscious choices, powers and capacities. Agamben argues that whilst the governing of causes is the essence of politics, the governance of effects reverses the political process:

> We should not neglect the philosophical implications of this reversal. It means an epoch-making transformation in the very idea of government, which overturns the traditional hierarchical relation between causes and effects. Since governing the causes is difficult and expensive, it is more safe and useful to try to govern the effects. (Agamben 2014)

The governance of effects can therefore be seen as a retreat from the commitments of earlier interventionist approaches of the 1990s, in terms of both resources and policy goals. However, the shift from causation to effects
involves a shifting conceptualization of intervention itself; it is this conceptual connection which is the central concern of this article. Intervention conceptualized as the governance of effects relocates the subject position of the intervener in relation to both the problem under consideration—which is no longer amenable to external policy solutions—and the society or community being intervened in—which is no longer constructed as lacking knowledge or resources, but as being the key agency of transformation. Transformation comes not through external cause-and-effect policy interventions but through the facilitation or empowerment of local agential capacities. The regulation of effects shifts the focus away from the formal public, legal and political sphere to the more organic and generative sphere of everyday life. The management of effects involves ongoing facilitative engagement in social processes and evades the question of government as political decision-making (see further, Chandler 2014a).

The Conceptualization of Intervention within International Relations

In the policy debates of the 1990s, international intervention was often conceived of as an exception to the norm of international politics, which was legally based on a sovereign order. Intervention was posed as necessary in the case of crises that threatened the peace and security of international society and the UN Security Council incrementally relaxed its restrictions, making intervention increasingly permissible (IICK 2000; ICISS 2001; Chesterman 2002). The legal and political exception to accepted international norms assumed the problem-solving capabilities of external international actors: the undermining of sovereign rights was legitimized by the hierarchical assumption of the superior knowledge and resources of the policy-interveners, thus discourses of international intervention necessarily assumed that knowledge and power operated in, what are increasingly seen today as, linear and reductive ways.

This article thereby highlights the importance of the epistemic challenge to linear causal understandings in the reconceptualization of intervention and statebuilding: from an emphasis on the asymmetrical and potentially oppressive discourse of the ‘right of intervention’ (based on the superior knowledge and resources of the policy-intervener and the clash of rights of intervention and sovereignty) to an increasing emphasis on the problem of the linear and reductive understandings of policy intervention itself (and the unintended consequences of such mechanistic approaches in the international sphere). The shifting understanding firstly negated disciplinary conceptions of intervention as undermining rights of autonomy (Chandler 2010) and then displaced concepts of autonomy with more organicist understandings of emerging order, immune to traditional mechanisms of intervention. The shift to conceptualizations of intervention as the governance of effects thus removed current approaches to statebuilding from the paradigmatic normative power and knowledge assumptions at the heart of the discipline of International Relations.
International Relations theory has traditionally been concerned with the questions of power and international order: how power-politics and conflict could be tamed by international institutions and norms. In the traditional concerns of the discipline, the institution of sovereignty was seen to be key and intervention was therefore problematized (and contained) as destabilizing international order and potentially leading to the internationalization of conflict (see, for example, Schmitt 2003; Bull 1995). For this reason, advocates of intervention were keen to either keep intervention covert or to legitimize intervention on the basis of redefining sovereignty to enable intervention without destabilizing international legal norms (see, for example, Krasner 1999). As Cynthia Weber (1995, 11) noted, it was not possible to speak of intervention without speaking of sovereignty: without sovereignty there could be no framework of understanding, enabling judgements to be made as to ‘who would be the target of intervention and what would be violated or transgressed’.

Without a co-constitutive relationship with state sovereignty it was not possible to conceptualize intervention. Critical constructivist theorist Helle Malmvig (2006, 16), succinctly argued:

> Whether any given event constitutes an intervention or a non-intervention, is hence dependent on what meaning sovereignty is attributed in advance. In order for something to be portrayed as an intervention, there must always already be an idea of what falls and what does not fall within the sovereign sphere of the state.

Malmvig argued that the relationship worked both ways as the concept of state sovereignty was also dependent on intervention. In discourses of intervention, at stake was the boundary line to be drawn between the inside and the outside of states: what counted as a national and as an international concern. Constructivists thereby argued that the content of state sovereignty was not given in advance—prior to intervention—but was temporally constituted in the process of intervention itself (Malmvig 2006, 17).

Constructivist approaches were undoubtedly insightful in understanding sovereignty and intervention as mutually constitutive concepts (see further, Biersteker and Weber 1996) and in providing useful conceptual tools for the analysis of how the concepts of sovereignty and intervention had been discursively deployed in the field of international politics. However, these approaches have been unable to grasp the transformation and then the severing of the ties between sovereignty and intervention since the heated debates of the 1990s. Today, it is clear that the intervention/sovereignty binary no longer operates as a paradigm or ‘research assemblage’, able to stabilize the meaning of intervention (see further, Law 2004).

In analysing the radical shifts in the formal disciplinary understanding of the concept of intervention, from the 1990s to the 2010s, three frameworks or models can be illustrated heuristically. These frameworks can be demarcated both in their conceptualization of the formal political categories of sovereignty and intervention and in their approach to causal knowledge claims. It is these
discursive linkages that enable evolving forms of intervention and statebuilding which tend to no longer engage at the level of formal political authority and thus no longer require legitimization on the basis of hierarchical claims of power or knowledge superiority.

Solutionism: Intervention against Sovereignty

The view of intervention and sovereignty as conceptually opposite and as mutually constitutive was predominant in the 1990s. In this period, there were heated debates about the clash of rights of intervention and rights of sovereignty, demonstrating the hold of the traditional International Relations and international law perspective of the co-constitution of these two concepts. Even the Responsibility to Protect report of 2001 sought to maintain this conceptual binary: arguing, in the constructivist vein, that sovereignty was conditional on the state’s will and ability to maintain human rights and that therefore the increasing permissibility of intervention meant the definition of sovereignty was changing to make this a condition of sovereignty (ICISS 2001). Sovereignty and intervention were still co-constitutive opposites, affirmed by the fact that states were understood to lose their sovereignty if they failed to uphold the human rights of their citizens.

The ‘solutionist’ cause-and-effect model—the archetypal model of intervention in the policy debates in the 1990s and early 2000s (particularly around the legal and political concerns of the right of humanitarian intervention and regime change under the auspices of the War on Terror)—operated on the basis of crisis or the exception. In this framing, the policy response tended to be one of centralized direction, under United Nations or United States and NATO command, based upon military power or bureaucratic organization, which often assumed that policy-interveners operated in a vacuum, where social and political norms had broken down, and little attention needed to be given to the particular policy context.

This hierarchical model was articulated in universalist terms. Intervening states and international institutions were understood to have the power, resources and objective scientific knowledge necessary to solve the problems of conflict and human rights abuses. This framework of intervention reached its apogee in international statebuilding in the Balkans, with long-term protectorates established over Bosnia and Kosovo, and was reflected in the RAND Corporation’s reduction of such interventions to simple cost and policy formulas that could be universally applied (Dobbins et al. 2007).

Debates in the early and mid-1990s assumed that Western states had the knowledge and power to act and therefore focused on the question of the political will of Western states (see, for example, Held 1995; Wheeler 2000). Of particular concern was the fear that the United States might pursue national interests rather than global moral and ethical concerns (Kaldor 2007, 150). In this framework, problems were seen in terms of a universalist and linear understanding.
For ‘solutionists’, humanitarian and human rights interventions, even including regime change and post-conflict management, could be successful on the basis that a specific set of policy solutions could solve a specific set of policy problems. This set up a universalist understanding of good policy-making—the idea that certain solutions were timeless and could be exported or imposed—like the rule of law, democracy and markets.

This policy framework was highly mechanistic. The problems of non-Western states were understood in simple terms of the need to restore the equilibrium of the status quo—which was understood as being disrupted by new forces or events. Illustrated, for example, in the popular ‘New Wars’ thesis, which argued that stability was disrupted by exploitative elites seeking to destabilize society in order to cling to resources and power (Kaldor 1999) or that the lack of human rights could be resolved through constitutional reforms (Brandt et al. 2011). The assumption was that society was fundamentally healthy and that the problematic individuals or groups could be removed or replaced through external policy intervention which would enable equilibrium to be restored. This was a mechanistic view of how societies operated—as if they were machines and a single part had broken down and needed to be fixed. There was no holistic engagement with society as a collective set of processes, interactions and interrelations. The assumption was that external policy interveners could come up with a ‘quick fix’—perhaps sending troops to quell conflict or legal experts to write constitutions—followed by an exit strategy.

The universalist framework legitimizing policy intervention thereby established a hierarchical and paternalist framework of understanding. Western liberal democratic states were understood to have the knowledge and power necessary to solve the problems that other ‘failed’ and ‘failing’ states were alleged to lack. It was therefore little surprise that these interventions challenged the sovereign rights to self-government, which had long been upheld after decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s. Many commentators have raised problems with the idealization of liberal Western societies and the holding up of abstract and unrealistic goals which tended to exaggerate the incapacity or lack of legitimacy of non-Western regimes (see, for example Heathershaw and Lambach 2008; Lemay-Hébert 2009). Beneath the universalist claims of promoting the interest of human rights, human security or human development, critical theorists suggested new forms of international domination were emerging, institutionalizing market inequalities or restoring traditional hierarchies of power reminiscent of the colonial era (see, for example, Chandler 1999, 2006; Bain 2003; Bickerton et al. 2007; Hehir and Robinson 2007; Douzinas 2007; Duffield 2007; Pugh et al. 2008; Dillon and Reid 2009; Barnett 2010).

Endogenous Causality: Building Sovereignty

The ‘solutionist’ perspective, with its clear hierarchies of power and knowledge, began to be transformed with less linear and universal and more plural and
endogenous views of causation. This shift began to be articulated in ways which understood sovereignty and intervention to be compatible, becoming increasingly predominant in the 2000s. This second model took local context much more into account, understanding problems as results of complex processes of social and historical path dependencies that needed to be carefully intervened in and adjusted. Thus the relation between external intervening actors (as agents or causes of policy changes) and the subsequent policy outcomes becomes understood to be much more socially, politically and historically mediated and contingent. This model is exemplified by the work of Roland Paris in the early 2000s on the need for ‘Institutionalization before Liberalization’, in which it was argued that external interventions needed to work ‘bottom-up’ on the social and historical preconditions for statebuilding rather than ‘top-down’ with the wholesale export of Western models and assumptions (Paris 2004, 179).

This model was popularized in the discipline of International Relations by Stephen Krasner (2004, 2005), who argued that the concept of sovereignty could be ‘unbundled’ into three types of sovereignty: international legal sovereignty, the right to formal legal recognition; domestic sovereignty, the capacity to maintain human rights and good governance; and ‘Westphalian sovereignty’, the medieval concept of autonomy and self-government, where whatever the Prince declared right was accepted as law. Krasner argued that fragile states, which lacked the full capacities of domestic sovereignty, required international intervention but that this intervention should not be viewed as undermining sovereignty. Instead, international legal sovereignty should be used to sign international agreements allowing external governing intervention in order to build sovereignty, understood as a set of functional capacities. In this way, the Westphalian sovereignty of political autonomy was weakened but in exchange for the strengthening of domestic sovereignty.

This position gained further traction as international statebuilding and the extension of peacekeeping interventions led international interveners to expand the remits of their policy interventions well beyond the initial problem-solving policy interventions with their short time-spans and exit strategies. The response to the shock terrorist attacks of 9/11 appeared to intensify the trend towards extended international policy interventionism. The 2002 US National Security Strategy expanded and securitized the interventionist remit, arguing that: ‘America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones’ (NSS 2002, 1). The recognition that we live in a globalized and interconnected world seemed to bind the needs of national security with those of human rights, democracy and development, creating a powerful interventionist consensus around statebuilding as sovereignty-building (see Mazarr 2014).

The ‘intervention-as-sovereignty-building’ form of intervening shifted away from addressing causes in universal and linear ways and towards a focus on endogenous processes and new-institutionalist framings, easing a transition to the governance of effects. Rather than going for quick problem-solving fixes, policy advocates increasingly argued that policy needed to be concerned more holistically with social processes and analysis of state–society relations in order
to overcome the ‘sovereignty gap’ (Ghani et al. 2005; Ghani and Lockhart 2008). However, this perspective can still be understood as having some legacies of universalist cause-and-effect understandings in that it aimed at establishing viable market-based democracies and still presupposed that external policy-interveners had the necessary superior knowledge and resources to shape policy outcomes (see, for example, Bliesemann de Guevara 2012; Kühn 2011; Tadjbakhsh 2011).

Governing Effects: Intervention without Sovereignty

The third form of intervention, that of governing effects without a concern for causation, which is increasingly prevalent today, is a framing that entirely evades any discussion of the relationship between intervention and sovereignty. Western policy-interveners increasingly claim not to be taking over decision-making processes, to be setting external goals, or to be measuring progress using external yardsticks. Rather than the external provision of policy solutions or the use of ‘conditionality’ to guide states in specific directions, international actors are more likely to understand intervention in terms of enabling organic systems and existing knowledges, practices and capacities. This model forwards more homeopathic forms of policy intervention designed to enhance autonomous processes rather than undermine or socially engineer them (see, for example, Drabek and McEntire 2003; Kaufmann 2013, on emergent responses to disasters). These forms of intervention cannot be grasped within the paradigm of claims for political authority central to the discipline of International Relations.

The shift from intervention at the level of causation to intervention at the level of effects has been predominantly discussed in relation to the need to take into account the ‘law of unintended consequences’. The problem of ‘unintended consequences’ has become a policy trope regularly used as a shorthand expression for the profound shift in the understanding of intervention, addressed in this article, and can be understood as a generalized extension of Ulrich Beck’s view of ‘risk society’ with the determinate causal role of ‘side effects’ or of Bruno Latour’s similar analysis of today’s world as modernity ‘plus all its externalities’ (see further, Beck 1992; Latour 2003). It seems that there is no way to consider intervention in terms of intended outcomes without considering the possibility that the unintended outcomes will outweigh these.

While, in 2002, the US State Department was focusing on extensive statebuilding operations to address the crucial question of state failure, in 2012, a decade later, the US Defense Strategic Guidance policy is illustrative of a different set of assumptions: that US forces would pursue their objectives through ‘innovative, low-cost, and small-footprint approaches’ rather than the conduct of ‘large-scale, prolonged stability operations’ (DSG 2012, 3, 6). In 2013, discussion over potential coercive intervention in Syria was dominated by fears that the unintended outcomes would outweigh the good intentions of external actors (Ackerman 2013). General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned...
that policy caution was necessary as: ‘We must anticipate and be prepared for the unintended consequences of our action’ (Ackerman 2013; see also Phillips 2013).

As Michael Mazarr argued in the influential US foreign policy journal Foreign Affairs, in 2014, securing US goals of peace, democracy and development in failing and conflict-ridden states could not, in fact, be done by instrumental cause-and-effect external policy interventions: ‘It is an organic, grass-roots process that must respect the unique social, cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts of each country … and cannot be imposed’ (Mazarr 2014). For Mazarr, policy would now follow a more ‘resilient mindset, one that treats perturbations as inevitable rather than calamitous and resists the urge to overreact’, understanding that policy intervention must work with rather than against local institutions and ‘proceed more organically and authentically’ (Mazarr 2014). This shift is also reflected by high-level policy experts in the US State Department; according to Charles T. Call, senior adviser at the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations, current US approaches seek not to impose unrealistic external goals but instead to facilitate local transformative agency through engaging with local ‘organic processes and plussing them up’ (cited in Chandler 2014b).

Intervention, today, is increasingly understood to be problematic if it is based upon the grand narratives of liberal internationalism, which informed and drove the debate on international intervention in the 1990s, when issues of intervention and non-intervention in Africa and the Balkans were at the centre of international political contestation. International policy intervention is not opposed per se or on principle, but on the basis of the universalist and hierarchical knowledge assumptions which informed policy interventions and produced the hubristic and reductionist promises of transformative outcomes (see, for example, Owen 2012; Stewart and Knaus 2012; Mayall and Soares de Oliveira 2011; Mazarr 2014).

‘Organic’ versus ‘Political’ Understandings of Intervention

The critique of cause-and-effect understandings of intervention has a long scientific heritage in similar critiques of modern medical interventions based upon antibiotics and other artificial chemical and technical remedies (see, for example, Thacker and Artlett 2012; Krans 2014; O’Neal et al. 2014, 877–878). The reductionist understanding of intervention in the biomedical sciences has often been problematized for its lack of attention to unintended consequences, which can easily mean that the cure can be worse for individual and societal healthcare than the initial affliction. These critiques have operated as a readily available template for the rapid development of a critical conceptualization of intervention in the discipline of International Relations—one that bears little relation to traditional concerns of international stability, international law, sovereign rights of independence or to post-colonial sensibilities.
These critiques of linear and reductionist cause-and-effect approaches have tended to focus upon the value of organic, natural, or endogenous powers of resistance and resilience which have been understood to be unintentionally undermined through the mechanistic assumptions of modern Western science (see, for example, Capra 1983, 118–165). In the parallel arguments in discourses of intervention and statebuilding, the organic processes of endogenous development tend to be prioritized over universalizing, mechanistic or reductionist approaches to policy intervention which seek to introduce policy solutions from the outside. For example, while markets, development, democracy, security and the rule of law might be good when they develop organically, it is often argued that when they are extracted from their context and applied in a ‘pure’ form they can be dangerous as they lack the other ingredients connected to institutions and culture.

This perspective first began to be argued in relation to intervention in the Balkans in the late 1990s, when interventionist policy-making began to shift attention to the endogenous or internal capacities and capabilities of the local society rather than seeking externally managed ‘military solutions, quick fixes [and] easy, early exits’, associated with simple cause-and-effect understandings (Bildt 2003). However, the critique of cause-and-effect assumptions, which focused on the knowledge and expertise of external policy-interveners, rapidly extended beyond the critique of coercive or military interventions to cover a broad range of policy interventions, including ‘bottom-up’ attempts at socio-political engineering, associated with liberal internationalist goals of promoting markets, democracy and the rule of law.

The governance of effects, increasingly taken up by international policy-interveners, thereby insists that problems cannot be dealt with merely at the level of causation, by identifying and categorizing a problem as if it could be understood in the reductionist terms of cause and effect. Intervention based on the governance of effects therefore has no need for ready-made international policy solutions that can simply be applied or implemented, and therefore implies little possibility of learning generic lessons from intervention that could be applied to all other cases of conflict or of underdevelopment on the basis that if the symptoms appeared similar the cause must be the same. Crucially, this framing takes intervention out of the context of policy-making and policy understanding out of the political sphere of democratic debate and decision-making.

The focus therefore shifts away from international policies (supply-driven policy-making) and towards engaging with the internal capacities and capabilities that are already held to exist. In other words, there is a shift from the agency, knowledge and practices of policy-interveners to that of the society, which is the object of policy concerns. As the 2013 updated UK Department for International Development Growth and Resilience Operational Plan states: ‘We will produce less “supply-driven” development of product, guidelines and policy papers, and foster peer-to-peer, horizontal learning and knowledge
exchange, exploiting new technologies such as wiki/huddles to promote the widest interaction between stakeholders’ (DfID 2013, 8).

‘Supply-driven’ policies—the stuff of politics and of democratic decision-making—are understood to operate in an artificial or non-organic way, and to lack an authentic connection to the effects which need to be addressed. The imposition of (accountable) external institutional and policy frameworks has become increasingly seen as artificial and thereby as having counterproductive or unintended outcomes. Effects-based approaches thereby seek to move away from the ‘liberal peace’ policy interventions—seeking to export constitutional frameworks, to train and equip military and police forces, to impose external conditionalities on the running of state budgets, to export managerial frameworks for civil servants and political representatives or to impose regulations to ensure administrative transparency and codes of conduct—which were at the heart of international policy prescriptions in the 1990s and early 2000s (World Bank 2007; Eurodad 2006; ActionAid 2006).

It is argued that the ‘supply-driven’ approach of external experts exporting or developing liberal institutions does not grasp the complex processes generative of instability or insecurity. Instead, the cause-and-effect model of intervention is seen to create problematic ‘hybrid’ political systems and fragile states with little connection to their societies (Roberts 2008; Mac Ginty 2010; Richmond and Mitchell 2012; Millar 2014). The imposition of institutional frameworks, which have little connection to society, is understood as failing, not only in not addressing causal processes but as making matters worse through undermining local capacities to manage the effects of problems, shifting problems elsewhere and leaving states and societies even more fragile or vulnerable.

This approach is alleged to fail to hear the ‘message’ of problematic manifestations or to enable societies’ own organic and homeostatic processes to generate corrective mechanisms. Triggering external interventions is said to shortcut the ability of societies to reflect upon and take responsibility for their own affairs and is increasingly seen as a counterproductive ‘over-reaction’ by external powers (see further, Desch 2008; Maor 2012). There is an increasingly prevalent view that, contrary to earlier assumptions, policy solutions can only be developed through practice by actors on the ground.

As noted above, following Agamben, the conceptualization of policy interventions in terms of the governance of effects evades the traditional disciplinary understanding of intervention as an exercise of external political power and authority. It does this through denying intervention as an act of external decision-making and policy direction as understood in the political paradigm of liberal modernist discourse. This can be illustrated through highlighting some examples of policy shifts in key areas of international concern: security and the rule of law; development; and democracy and human rights.
Policy interventions are increasingly shifting in relation to the understanding of conflict. There is much less talk of conflict prevention or conflict resolution and more of conflict management. As the UK government argues, in a 2011 combined DfID, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Ministry of Defence document, conflict per se is not the problem: ‘Conflict is a normal part of human interaction, the natural result when individuals and groups have incompatible needs, interests or beliefs’ (DfID et al. 2011, 5). The problem which needs to be tackled is the state or society’s ability to manage conflict: ‘In stable, resilient societies conflict is managed through numerous formal and informal institutions’ (DfID et al. 2011, 5). Conflict management, as the UK government policy indicates, is increasingly understood as an organic set of societal processes and practices, which international policy intervention can influence but cannot import solutions from outside or impose them. This understanding very much follows the approach long advocated by influential peace theorist Jean Paul Lederach (1997, 94), who argued that: ‘The greatest resource for sustaining peace in the long term is always rooted in the local people and their culture’. For Lederach, managing conflict meant moving away from cause-and-effect forms of instrumental external intervention which see people as ‘recipients’ of policy, and instead seeing people as ‘resources’, integral to peace processes, therefore it was essential that:

... we in the international community adopt a new mind-set—that we move beyond a simple prescription of answers and modalities for dealing with conflict that come from outside the setting and focus at least as much attention on discovering and empowering the resources, modalities, and mechanisms for building peace that exist within the context. (Lederach 1997, 95)

One of the central shifts in understanding conflict as something that needs to be ‘coped with’ and ‘managed’ rather than something that can be ‘solved’ or ‘prevented’ is the view that state-level interventions are of limited use. Peace treaties can be signed by state parties, but unless peace is seen as an ongoing and transformative inclusive societal process these agreements will be merely superficial and non-sustainable (Lederach 1997, 135).

Just as peace and security are less understood as able to be secured through cause-and-effect forms of intervention, reliant on policy interveners imposing solutions in mechanical and reductive ways, there has also been a shift in understanding the counterproductive effects of attempts to export the rule of law (Cesarine and Hite 2004; Zimmermann 2007; Chandler 2014b). The governance-of-effects approach is driven by a realization of the gap between the formal sphere of law and constitutionalism and the social ‘reality’ of informal power relations and informal rules. This perspective has also been endorsed by Douglass North (1990, 140), the policy guru of new institutionalist economics, who has highlighted the difficulties of understanding how exported institutions will interact with ‘culturally derived norms of behaviour’. The social reality of
countries undergoing post-conflict ‘transition’ is thereby less capable of being understood merely by an analysis of laws and statutes. In fact, there increasingly appears to be an unbridgeable gap between the artificial constructions of legal and constitutional frameworks and the realities of everyday life, revealed in dealings between individual members of the public and state authorities.

Development

A key policy area where the shift from addressing causes to the governance of effects has had an impact has been in the sphere of development—the policy sphere previously most concerned with transformative policy interventions. Coping with poverty and with disasters is clearly a very different problematic from seeking to use development policy to reduce or to end extreme poverty. However, discourses of disaster risk reduction have increasingly displaced those of sustainable forms of development because of the unintended side effects of undermining the organic coping mechanisms of communities and therefore increasing vulnerabilities and weakening resilience (see, for example, IRDR 2014; UNDP 2014). Claudia Aradau (2014, 81) has highlighted the importance of the UK Department for International Development (DfID) shift in priorities from poverty reduction strategies to developing community resilience, which assumes the existence of poverty as the basis of policy-making. As she states: ‘resilience responses entail a change in how poverty, development and security more broadly are envisaged’; this is clearly highlighted in DfID’s 2011 report outlining the UK government’s humanitarian policy:

Humanitarian assistance should be delivered in a way that does not undermine existing coping mechanisms and helps a community build its own resilience for the future. National governments in at-risk countries can ensure that disaster risk management policies and strategies are linked to community-level action. (DfID 2011, 10, cited in Aradau 2014)

As George Nicholson (2014), Director of Transport and Disaster Risk Reduction for the Association of Caribbean States, argues explicitly: ‘improving a person’s ability to respond to and cope with a disaster event must be placed on equal footing with the process to encourage economic development’, highlighting the importance of disaster risk as a strategy for managing effects versus the cause-and-effect approach associated with development policy interventions. Whereas development approaches put the emphasis on external policy assistance and expert knowledge, disaster risk reduction clearly counterposes an alternative framework of intervention, where it is local knowledge and local agency that counts the most. Disaster risk reduction strategies stress the empowerment of the vulnerable and marginalized in order for them to cope and to manage the effects of the risks and contingencies that are concomitant with the maintenance of their precarious existence.
As emphasized above, the management-of-effects approach does not seek to assert sovereign power or Western hierarchies of power and knowledge; in fact, the governance of effects operates as both an epistemological and ontological challenge to the cause-and-effect understandings of intervention, dominant until the last decade. These points are highlighted, to take a recent example, in Bruno Latour’s (2013, 343) critical engagement with modernist modes of understanding: arguing that Western societies have forgotten the lengthy processes which enabled them to build liberal institutions dependent on the lengthy process of the establishment of a political culture, which has to be steadily maintained, renewed and extended and cannot be exported or imposed (see also Collier, 2010).

This shift away from formal universalist understandings of democracy and human rights is increasingly evidenced in the shifting understanding of human rights-based approaches to empowerment. Understanding empowerment in instrumental cause-and-effect terms based upon the external provision of legal and political mechanisms for claims is increasingly seen to be ineffective. Rights-based NGOs now seek not to empower people to access formal institutional mechanisms but to enable them to empower themselves. The governance-of-effects approach places the emphasis on the agency and self-empowerment of local actors, not on the introduction of formal frameworks of law, supported by international human rights norms (Moe and Simojoki 2013, 404).

The approach of ‘finding organic processes and plussing them up’ (as articulated by the US State Department policy advisor, cited earlier in the article) is not limited to government policy interventions but has been increasingly taken up as a generic approach to overcome the limits of cause-and-effect understandings. A study of Finnish development NGOs highlights that rather than instrumentally selecting groups of civil society elites, new forms of intervention appear as anti-intervention, denying any external role in this process and stressing that there is no process of external management or selection as policy interveners work with whatever groups or associations already exist and ‘have just come together ... it is not our NGO that brought them together but we just found them that way’ (Kontinen 2014 [none, unpublished paper]).

A similar study, in south-eastern Senegal, notes that policy interveners are concerned to avoid both the ‘moral imperialism’ of imposing Western human rights norms, but also to avoid a moral relativism which merely accepts local traditional practices (Gillespie and Melching 2010, 481). The solution forwarded is that of being non-prescriptive and avoiding and ‘unlearning’ views of Western teachers as ‘authorities’ and students as passive recipients (481). Policy intervention is articulated as the facilitation of local people’s attempts to uncover traditional practices and in ‘awakening’ and ‘engaging’ their already existing capacities: ‘By detecting their own inherent skills, they can more easily transfer them to personal and community problem solving’ (490). These processes can perhaps be encouraged or assisted by external policy interveners but they
cannot be transplanted from one society to another, and even less can they be imposed by policy actors.

Conclusion

The shift in understanding policy intervention from addressing causes to the governance of effects, focusing on the problem society’s own capacities and needs and internal and organic processes, has been paralleled by a growing scepticism of attempts to export or impose Western models. The governance of effects thereby evades the political problematic of sovereign power and is often understood as non-interventionist because of its organicist conceptualization. Interventions of this sort require no specialist knowledge and, in fact, tend to problematize such knowledge claims, and instead could be understood to require more therapeutic capacities and sensitivities, more attuned to open and unscripted forms of engagement, mutual processes of learning and unpredictable and spontaneous forms of knowledge exchange (see, for example, Duffield 2007, 233–234; Jabri 2007, 177; Brigg and Muller 2009, 130).

In the illustrative examples of the governance of effects given above, it is clear that problems are no longer conceived as amenable to political solutions in terms of instrumental governing interventions on the basis of cause-and-effect understandings. Those subject to new forms of empowerment and capacity-building are not understood as citizens of states—capable of negotiating, debating, deciding and implementing policy agendas—but instead are caught up in never-ending processes of governing effects at the local or community level. Politics disappears from the equation and with it the clash of the co-constitutive concepts of sovereignty and intervention and the legitimating claims of power and knowledge through which these claims were contested.

Notes on Contributor

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