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THE POLITICS OF CONTINGENCY: EVENTS, TRAVELING MODELS, AND SITUATIONS

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The Politics of Contingency: Events, Traveling Models, and Situations

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The Politics of Contingency: Events, Traveling Models, and Situations

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One of the virtues of my discipline of Geography is that contingency is at the heart of its concerns. Rather than explain away the contingent as a function of something else, the contingency of events, places, regions, practices, environments or materials deserves some respect. The contingent case should not just be considered an example of a general phenomenon. Its specificity and contingency should matter in whatever form this takes. In recent work, one can see the continuing concern with contingency in Geography is manifested, for example, in the interest in the discussion of assemblages, complexity and events (e.g. Massey 2005, Dittmer 2013). This paper is a contribution to the long-standing interest of geographers in the contingent, but my focus is on the politics of contingency (and the contingency of politics).

I'm going to do three things in what follows. One is to develop an analysis of what I have called political situations. The idea of the political situation, I suggest, directs us towards to the temporality as well as the spatiality of the contingent. In thinking about political situations I first draw on the work of the late 19th century sociologist Gabriel Tarde, whose work is of continuing interest. The second theme of the paper is, perhaps unfashionably, to point to the value of causal explanation. My final theme is to stress the continuing importance of 'regional' or at least situationally-specific expertise in geographical and anthropological research. These may sound like very traditional arguments; one aim of the paper is to argue that they are not, and that they have new life that can inform our thinking about the spatiality and temporality of politics.

Contingency

Contingency, of course, has a double meaning. On the one hand, the term contingency refers to those things that should be done in advance in order that unexpected and (sometimes) extreme events can be managed, whether they are floods, violent conflicts, banking crises, or food or water shortages. One of the arts of government is to know what contingencies need to be taken in order that some of the significant consequences of contingent events can be addressed (Foucault 2007). The importance of practices such as risk assessment, insurance, conflict management, and environmental monitoring, for example, reflects the need to take contingencies. Organisations need to plan for contingencies, but new contingency plans also need to be developed as new problems arise.

On the other hand, the idea of the contingent implies something that it is not fully determined. A contingent event is specific to a period or a place, or to particular circumstances or conditions. Specific contingencies cannot be predicted in advance, although they can certainly be expected or anticipated. In a frequently quoted remark from an interview with Vikki Bell, Judith Butler conveyed something of the close relation between politics and contingency: 'Politics has a character and contingency and context to it', she observed, 'that cannot be predicted at the level of theory', (Butler, in Bell 1999: 166). Butler's remarks have two obvious anteced-

ents. One is Antonio Gramsci's essay, 'Revolution Against Capital', in which Gramsci famously questioned determinist accounts of revolutionary change (Gramsci 1994). The second is Michel Foucault, who in a particularly acute observation alerted his readers to the 'multiplicity of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location' that informed the emergence of discipline (Foucault 1991: 138). Rather than avoid any discussion of causes, Foucault wanted to multiply them *ad infinitum*. What he termed 'events' were emergent effects of the conjunction of multiple causes. I will return to this point later.

As Butler's remarks on contingency suggest, the question of the contingent is an important one for political theory. It represents something of a limit for political theorists who, for the most part, are understandably cautious about digging too deeply into the dynamics of contingent political events and may even shy away from everyday politics. Political theorists, after all, are experts about politics in general, not about its specific and varied forms. Nonetheless, some political theorists have been interested in the ways in which universal claims (for equality, democracy, and social justice, for example) emerge in specific conditions. For even general claims, however general they are, are also situated.

Nonetheless, in the interview with Vikki Bell that I've just quoted, Butler went on to suggest that, although they cannot be predicted, political events can be sketched and schematized. In this paper, I address the problem of the contingent from the point of view of an empirical researcher as much as a theorist. Or rather someone who thinks that theory is best developed through the experience of empirical research. I ask, how can we respect what is contingent, its specificity, while also schematizing political events, or what I will call political situations?

Invention and Imitation

In thinking about this problem of the contingent, I draw some theoretical inspiration from the work of the late 19th century sociologist Gabriel Tarde. Tarde's work was rediscovered in France in the 1980s and 90s, informing the work of, among others, Deleuze and Guattari and Bruno Latour, and leading to some discussion of the significance of his work in the UK (Barry and Thrift 2007, Candea 2010). In this paper, I want now to pick up these earlier discussions, but take them in a different direction.

There are doubtless many reasons why Tarde was rediscovered at this time, but one evident attraction of Tarde's thought for recent readers of his work, including Latour, is that he didn't appear to assume a clear demarcation between social, material and living things. Certainly, he didn't begin from the idea that a clear distinction had to be made between Sociology, Psychology and Geography. In the early 20th century Tarde's thought was criticised by the sociologist Emile Durkheim who, in his book on *Suicide*, rigorously asserted the separation between Sociology, on the one hand, and Psychology and Physical Geography, on the other. Indeed, I'd argue that Tarde is a thoroughly geographical sociologist. In his analytical framework, the identities of entities, whether they are molecules, stars, animals or persons, are all understood as relational and in process. For Tarde, there can be a sociology of materials and animals, as much as a sociology of relations between persons—a 'more-than-human' sociology one might say (Tarde 1999). Here, however, I am less interested in the ontological implications of Tarde's thought than I am in reading him as a theorist of political geography and history.

Tarde is clearly opposed to the idea that society is bounded or contained within particular spatial limits. Rather than offer us a comparative account of Societies, conceived as enclosed by territorial boundaries (such as French society or British society), Tarde provides us with an

account of the social in flux, traversed and transformed by multiple lines of imitation and invention (Barry and Thrift 2007, Barry 2010, Amin and Thrift 2013). He had a particular interest, for example, in the progressive spread of more or less standard forms of pronunciation across France in the late 19th century, and the imitation of specific criminal acts in particular regions. In Tarde's account, imitation and invention are the two fundamental social processes (Tarde 2001). In effect, the emergence or what he termed the 'invention' of new practices, ideas and affects is the product of the contingent interference of multiple lines of imitation. In his analysis, ideas and practices, beliefs and desires, do not travel continuously **in** space or time. Practices, ideas and desires travel, but they have non-linear trajectories, and as they travel they generate new spatial and temporal relations, and novel topologies. In Tarde's work, 'the temporal and the spatial occupy a single conceptual gesture' (Born 2010) as Georgina Born has put it.

Tarde, in my view offers us an account of the spatio-temporality of contingent events. Events are not understood then as moments in time, but as points of interference between multiple trajectories, which may generate unexpected and emergent effects, as well as new spatio-temporal relations. His work draws us to look closely at moment of inventions, where new practices are emerging (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 216), but he understands such moments of invention as elements of dispersed and extended spatio-temporal envelopes.

Before I develop these ideas further I want to note some important limitations to Tarde's thought. One is that Tarde is an elitist thinker: indeed one might describe him, perhaps, as a liberal imperialist, who viewed Empires as, in Alberto Toscano's words, 'agents of pacification' (Toscano 2007: 599, Barry 2010). He was interested in tracing the emergence or invention of new practices, as I've said, but in the end he reckoned that invention primarily occurred through the work of creative geniuses. He valued the work of scientists and artists, but was rather troubled by the unstable demands of the masses, which might be fomented in the volatile and affective disorder of the crowd. Tarde was absolutely not a supporter of mass protest nor, despite Deleuze and Guattari's interest in his work, a political radical. Moreover, and equally importantly, in Tarde's work there is little sense that the tendencies he describes might be contested or controversial, or that they might be understood in variable ways. There is little sense of the agonistic contested nature of the political situations within which moments of invention or novelty are generated. Although Tarde's work is useful, it needs to be approached critically, not taken to be the basis for a general social theory.

Traveling Models

To illustrate the value, as well as the limitations, of Tarde's approach, I want to offer two examples. The first derives from the idea of travelling models, which was first proposed by the anthropologist Richard Rottenburg. In a remarkable semi-factual book called *Far-Fetched Facts: a Parable of Development Aid*, originally published in German in 2002, Rottenburg introduced the term 'travelling models' via a study of the translation of Western development models into the fictionalized African country of Ruritania:

> *'In the course of analyzing the problem, Western society and its organizational forms are transformed into traveling models that provide the basis for identifying problems in developing countries. Over time, what had initially been merely a figure of thought becomes an objectivist assumption. In the discourse of development cooperation, idealized models from Europe and the United States—for example, civil society, the market,*

> *and rational bureaucracies—are ultimately regarded as tangible realities' (Rottenburg 2009a: 64)*

One of the novel features of Rottenburg's argument is that he treats development models as sets of technical practices associated with particular organizational forms. Development models travel, and they are imitated, to use Tarde's term; but in doing so, they become re-territorialised in different settings and decoupled from the political and economic logics that informed their initial development. As the anthropologist Andrea Behrends and her colleagues argue:

> *'beyond the explanation of how a model has been assembled and disassembled in a new situation, the concept [of the travelling model] takes account of the simultaneity of events, of different sites or situations and thus wider linkages or connections' (Behrends et al 2013: 5).*

To take a specific example: one model of conflict management is the revenue-sharing model promoted by the World Bank and various development NGOs. This was embodied in the formation of a Chad Future Generations fund. The model was one of a range of burgeoning efforts to promote what I have termed a form of 'ethical capitalism', built around notions of transparency, corporate social responsibility and good governance (Barry 2013). Despite the passing of a binding revenue management law, however, oil revenues in Chad came to be spent on a series of construction projects such as large public squares, roundabouts and football stadiums at inflated costs, as well as diverted for military purposes (Hoinathy and Behrends 2013: 82). The model doubtless served to legitimize the investment of Exxon, but it did not have its intended effects.

The story is both specific and typical, and thus instructive. In this analysis the model [an economic experiment in revenue management] travels relatively easily—it becomes readily imitated with the support of multinationals and influential NGOs—but it also gets caught up in different sites and contexts. It enters into other situations with problematic effect, generating expectations of better living conditions and wealth distribution in the rural population that will not be fulfilled, while the construction boom attracts migrant workers who are not able to find jobs in the longer term. Certainly it is possible to say that the model has failed; this seems 'intuitively right' as Hoinathy and Behrends observe (ibid.: 85). However, it is not clear whether a critical assessment of the model would be valuable, for Western observers have already recognized that the model was a failure. Indeed, World Bank experts have abandoned this particular model of conflict management and promoted alternative models such as the British Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative instead. The critical work of experts and researchers, from the World Bank, multinationals and elsewhere, informs the way that models such as these are both imitated and transformed. In the work of Rottenburg, Behrends and their colleagues, the analysis of traveling models directs us towards the successive translation or imitation of such models or experiments, their adaptation to new contexts, and their mutation into new forms.

Can the Mosquito Speak?

My second example comes from Timothy Mitchell's *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics and Modernity*. This book is broadly concerned with the manner in which the economy came to be established, in the middle of the twentieth century, 'as a set of practices that puts in place a new

politics of calculation' including the formation of the distinction between what is taken to be part of the 'economy' and what is not. (Mitchell 2002: 8). But the *Rule of Experts* is also centrally concerned with the question of contingency.

Indeed, Mitchell provides us with a powerful statement of the importance of contingency to politics. What he calls 'the chain of events' in Egypt seemed, he observes, to create a triangle, formed 'by the interconnection of war, disease, and agriculture'. But, in practice, the chain is much more than a triangle: 'the connections between a war, an epidemic, and a famine depended (in turn) upon connections between rivers, dams, fertilizers, food webs.... and additional interactions' (Mitchell 2002: 27). Zeroing in on the case of the malaria epidemic in Egypt in 1942, Mitchell directs us towards salient and contingent features of this event. His political history of the Malaria Epidemic includes, amongst other things, the history of chemical research and the development of the insecticide DDT, the history of British colonial rule, the course of the war, the importance of sugar production in the lower Nile, as well as the arrival of the *gambiae* mosquito, which migrated along the Nile valley from Sudan in 1942, with what were ultimately devastating effects on the population. Doubtless this list of trajectories could be extended even further; but in the *Rule of Experts*, Mitchell's intention is to direct us towards the contingent interference *between* these *multiple* histories. In Foucaultian vein, Mitchell therefore multiplies the causes of events, without ever claiming his list of causes to be exhaustive. At the same time, he questions the value of those forms of explanation that place particular 'events in universal frameworks'; frameworks that themselves derive from 'the particular history of the West' (Mitchell 2002: 28-29).

Although he doesn't refer to Tarde, Mitchell's account of the contingent interference of colonial politics, warfare, the sugar industry, dam construction, the circulation of capital, and the migration of mosquitos could certainly be described in Tardean terms. In Mitchell's post-colonial critique, one of the limitations of the social sciences is that they tend to locate material objects such as the Aswan dam or living organisms like the mosquito outside the frame of analysis. This is a familiar enough line of argument in human and environmental geography. But Mitchell's point is political and historical rather than ontological. What continues to be provocative and suggestive about his book *Rule of Experts* is that Mitchell directs our attention to the contingent interference of a series of radically distinct things—including state politics, capital, infrastructure projects and mosquitos—that have radically different kinds of spatialities and temporalities and, indeed, power. Whereas some takes on actor-network theory, following Tarde, have tended to flatten differences between actors, and ignore power relations, Mitchell is at pains to stress that his approach 'does not mean introducing a limitless number of actors and networks, all of which are somehow of equal significance and power' (ibid.: 53, see also Barry 2013, Mouffe 2013: 81). In his analysis, the mosquito parasite, the nonhuman, acts as a disturbance, arriving from outside, forcing doctors and planners to act to contain its effects and, by implication, forcing social scientists to take it seriously too. And testifying to this direction in his thought, Mitchell has once more confronted the challenge of how to write a different set of materials and sciences into political history and geography in his more recent book *Carbon Democracy* (Mitchell 2011).

Political Situations: Retentions and Projections

I've focused thus far on the multiple tendencies and histories that enter into any one contingent event—whether it is the construction of the Aswan dam or the introduction of a petroleum

revenue management law in Chad. Models, practices, laws and techniques are repeatedly imitated and progressively differentiated. But political events such as these do not just contain distorted 'retentions' of other pasts and places: they are also associated with anticipations and expectations about possible futures.

The Chad Future Generations Fund, for example, embodied the notion that one could be rational about the future. It was rational, according to World Bank economists, to not consume now, and instead to invest. But in practice, an event such as the construction of a dam, or the development of an oil field, also generates anticipations and expectations –amongst investors, speculators, affected populations and governments. The formulation of a petroleum revenue management law therefore generates anticipations of the future, while also borrowing from models designed and tested elsewhere. I could make a similar observation about the model of transparency that I encountered in my research on the oil industry in the South Caucasus; this was promoted by NGOs, multinational oil corporations and the Blair government as a way to foster better resource revenue governance. It was expected to promote a more rational future, while also serving as a model for similar initiatives elsewhere (Barry 2013).

These kinds of events — the development of the petroleum revenue management law in Chad and of a transparency regime in Azerbaijan and Georgia — should not, then, be considered as isolated moments *in* time and space. They are more than regional events. They don't just occur in Chad or Georgia, or West Africa or the South Caucasus at particular moments or over a period of years. These events are both informed by multiple experiments and models that have been tried out previously and elsewhere; and they involve projections of futures, or what Ben Anderson has termed 'anticipatory knowledges' (Anderson 2007, Kama 2013). In this way they hold out models of futures that will themselves travel and enter into contestation in new sites; and in this sense they entail 'a temporal politics' (Born 2006). Such events are, then, extended spatially and temporally in discontinuous and shifting ways, but of course the future never exactly corresponds to what is expected of it. The situation adjusts as the anticipated future is never realized.

At this point I want to introduce the term *political situation to describe this spatio-temporal 'stretching' of political events, into the past and into the future, as well as into other places.*

The notion of a political situation, in other words, points towards the way in which any event — whether it is an urban protest, the construction of a dam, the implementation of a petroleum management law or a transparency regime, or however one wants to describe the event — contains both retentions and projections of others spaces and times (cf Whitehead 1920). Political events are constituted in shifting sets of dispersed and mutating [or evolving] relations. There is no definitive description. This is what I term a political situation.

Analysing the Political situation

But I want immediately to introduce four further clarifications into this initial account.

The first follows from the example of the petroleum revenue management laws in Chad and transparency in the South Caucasus. In these cases, the notion of the 'resource curse', widely recognized by development economists, could be understood as an analysis of the problem. Accounts of the resource curse might suggest why the petroleum revenue management law is necessary and why it doesn't work in practice. But if we are interested in analyzing cases such as these from the point of view of political geography — rather than economics — then discussions about the resource curse, and the practical work of development economists, not only

provide an analysis of the situation, but themselves enter into and form part of the evolving situation. The resource curse, then, is not simply a commentary on the model of how to foster good governance in resource rich economies, but has itself come to form part of the model, and of its political geography.

The point is a general one. In the analysis of political situations, there is an evident need to consider the work of, amongst others, anthropologists, human rights lawyers, security experts, specialists in conflict management, civil society and 'peace-building', as well as lay-experts, journalists, activists and public relations professionals, along with political analysts and politicians who claim expertise in judging the situation. All of these specialists and 'lay-specialists' contribute to the definition of the situation of which they are a part. Their interventions enter into the political situation, stretching it into the past, and augmenting (or managing or limiting) its significance in the present as well as the future. Those experts who know how to anticipate and assess evolving and emerging political situations, whether they are working as market analysts, consultants or government officials, have considerable political and economic value (cf. Rottenburg 2009a).

Disagreement

The second clarification follows on. Namely, when we consider the contingency of situations such as these, there is likely to be disagreement about the political history and geography of the situation, and indeed what should be considered political and what should not. Is the collapse of a bank an index of a wider crisis in a particular form of capitalism, or a crisis in capitalism in general, or merely a technical or regulatory failing, which can be rectified through better government oversight or intervention? Is the development of fracking an unfortunate but necessary part of the transition to a post-carbon economy, or a sign that that the responsibility for achieving this transition is being evaded? Or to refer to a case from my own fieldwork in the South Caucasus: was the presence of a bomb site that I located near to the route of an oil pipeline resulting from the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 a sign, as some observers argued, of the geopolitical importance of Georgia in the global oil economy? Or was it an index of the relations between oil and violence more generally? Or was it just a coincidence? (Barry 2013: 177-179). In general, we should expect that there will be disagreement about the history and antecedents of a situation, its geography, its key moments and locations, and its future implications. Indeed, there will be disagreements about what the boundaries of the situation are, and whether it is something worthy of disagreement or politics at all. Situations, in this sense, are not given objects, but contested and evolving multiplicities.

Gramsci, of course, was acutely aware that ideology has to be seen as part of the situation, noting that 'the Bolshevik revolution is made up of ideologies, rather than events, it is a revolution against Marx's *Capital*' (Gramsci 1994: 39). In his account, the specificity of the events (the course of the Russian revolution) mattered less than the fact that the revolution did not follow a predictable course or occur in a predictable time and place. It follows that the multiple (ideological) mediations of situations form part of the definition of the situation itself. It might seem perfectly reasonable, then, to understand political situations through the lens of political theory. But this is to ignore how political theory, whether implicitly or explicitly, is itself likely to get into and influence the evolving situation. In my own work, and in a range of other work in political geography, accounts of, for example, 'civil society' are understood as part of the object of analysis and as themselves having potential effects. Similarly, talk of 'crisis'

might be best understood as a form of intervention in many ongoing political situations, such as the financial crisis or the sovereign debt crisis (Roitman 2013). The idea of crisis suggests that political history is linear and that there are particular moments of crisis when systemic change might be possible or necessary. But in practice, talk of crises often attempts to render the situation (the crisis) into a definite and confined problem that, having been identified, is susceptible to being solved.

Material Political Geographies

A third clarification, which follows on, is that natural scientists as well as political activists are engaged in disagreements about the identity of situations, and the problems that they generate. Rottenburg and his colleagues' research on travelling models, for example, points to the politics of a whole host of issues, including the prevalence of tropical illnesses, the extent of water scarcity, estimates of the quantity of natural resources, and the sources of pollution. While Kärg Kama, in her research on the political geography of oil shale, has interrogated the shifting role of the geosciences in the constitution of parts of the Estonian subsoil as a national resource—oil shale. In her analysis, the oil shale does not just exist in the present; its present existence includes retentions of its past and projections and anticipations of its future (Kama 2013). In my own research, I've been particularly interested in the ways in which engineers and geoscientists disagree about the fragility, structure and stability of material assemblages, including tracks, pipes, landslides and houses (Barry 2002, 2013). In other words, materials themselves have both multiple and contested histories and futures. In short, the geo and environmental sciences, including physical geography, play a critical role in political situations. I'm currently interested in the way in which the notion of the Anthropocene is understood both as epoch in geological history *and* an intervention in the political situation that has developed around climate change. The concept of the Anthropocene extends this political situation into both the past and the future, yet the significance and definition of the concept remains contested (Barry 2014).

A fourth and final clarification in conceptualizing political situations is how their unfolding is affected by what one might call travelling models of politics, or what I have called 'genres' of political practice (Barry 2013: 98). Disagreements and negotiations do not just occur discursively, but in particular sites and institutions, mobilizing distinctive practices, and using a variety of media. Institutions and practices such as parliamentary democracy, demonstrations, public inquiries, experimental projects, occupations, blockages, audits, artistic interventions, types of violent action, and a variety of forms of participatory engagement all take generic forms, all of which are replicated elsewhere and at later dates, while being transformed in the process. Social scientists, including geographers, have sought to promote new democratic and participatory forms of political practice, as we have seen here. Political practice takes more than discursive forms. Despite Tarde's conservative antipathy towards and disdain for the bodily presence of the crowd, the dynamics of crowds and public spaces do continue to matter (Barry 2013).

Conclusions: Situations and Method

The analysis of political situations that I have sketched here has methodological implications. Consider the location of the researcher. Ethnographers have for a long time emphasized the conceptual value of immersion in specific locations, communities or cultures; indeed, according

to one recent anthropological commentator, they are even returning to 'bounded' field sites (Candea 2007). In this view, the intensive ethnographic encounter with a particular community or culture can generate theoretical insights. I would agree: an intensive focus on particular sites, settings and cultures remains of enormous importance. As Merje Kuus has argued we need more ethnographies of bureaucratic, political and scientific institutions, such as the institutions of the European Union; the object of her own research (Kuus 2013).

But here I argue that ethnographic and historical research may need to occur not just in particular places or in relation to specific communities or institutions, but also in relation political situations, whether briefly or over extended periods of time. Such an approach may demand expertise in a region, but situations are often more than regional or local; they are not 'bounded' and they do not just occur in the present. In these circumstances, researchers may need progressively to acquire multiple forms of specific knowledge so as to be in a position to both understand the situations with which they engage. This may include expertise in languages, but also in the history of particular states, regions and political genres, in specific fields of the law or science, and in particular everyday skills. This may sound a rather traditional agenda for political geography and related fields, including political anthropology and science and technology studies. But my suggestion is that rather than imagine that it is possible to encompass the politics of a region or a place holistically, such research should focus on situations, in the discontinuous, distributed, and emerging form in which they are likely to be encountered (cf Strathern 1999).

But not all the complexity of a situation can be captured or needs to be captured. Although, as Foucault suggested, we can multiply causes *ad infinitum*, there is no need to. There is no need to describe all the complexity or every dimension of the situation, if that were indeed possible. How could one capture the entirety of the political situation following the financial crisis, or that surrounding Britain's membership of the European Union? It is not relevant to detail everything; and some details will be more relevant than others depending on the situation. On the one hand, there is a need to multiply causes. On the other hand, there is a need to focus on apparently marginal details, which might be otherwise unnoticed. In my own research on the oil industry in the South Caucasus, it became apparent that strikes by oil workers about working conditions and pay went virtually unreported by NGOs, and Western and local media. The exclusion of the question of the politics of labour was part of the political situation in this case and elsewhere. Accounts of political situations are more than heterogeneous networks of actors and problems; they also involve common mechanisms of exclusion such as this, which may be more or less widely known or, despite my earlier remarks, even anticipated.

In this paper I've referred to the work of Behrends, Mitchell, Rottenburg, Kama and others for a reason. All of these authors highlight the importance of experts, but most of the experts with which they engage are not academics. This focus, I would argue, reflects the current and changing conditions of academic work. No longer can academic researchers possibly aspire to be the only experts on many given topics. The world described by these authors is a world in which corporations, consultancies and non-governmental organisations also lay claim to expertise (Rottenburg 2009a). This includes expertise in such matters as conflict management, resource economics, environmental impact assessment, socially responsible investment, human rights law, and the conduct of clinical trials (Petryna et al 2006, Rottenburg 2009b). It includes expertise attuned to quite specific locations and regions and situations, and which addresses new contingencies and emerging futures. In these conditions, academic research inevitably has to coexist with other analyses and other interventions, other concerns and interests, and it has both to address the significance of the work of other experts to the evolving political situation

too. Whether this coexistence should or could involve collaboration is a judgment that needs to be made. There is no general rule; we need to pluralise our modes of engagement and intervention. Today, the view that academic research is autonomous from the political situations it describes is no longer possible to defend.[1]

1 This working paper is based on the text of the Political Geography plenary lecture given at the Royal Geographical Society annual conference, London, 28th August, 2014. The argument develops from discussions with Richard Rottenburg, Andrea Behrends, and their colleagues and students, at the Seminar für Ethnologie, Martin-Luther-Universität, Halle-Wittenberg in April-June 2013. My thanks to Georgina Born for her comments on an earlier draft.

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