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# Brokers as Assemblers: Studying Development Through the Lens of Brokerage

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## Introduction: Brokerage in Development Processes

Brokers have long featured in the anthropological literature as figures that connect disparate social worlds. Using their particular knowledge, skills and authority, they bridge gaps between populations, usually disadvantaged, and power-holders. This special issue builds on recent calls to revive the focus on brokers in anthropological analysis, most notably in relation to recent neo-liberal societal transformations and governance transitions (James 2011; Lindquist 2015). It explores the variety of brokers and dimensions of brokerage in settings characterised by rapid societal change. Focusing on brokers' work of connecting and maintaining personal ties among and across different actors, sites and rationales provides insights into development processes and generates a foundation for building theory around new social categories and changing political relationships.

The contributions to this issue present studies of brokerage from South Africa, the Netherlands and Indonesia. While the specific settings range from urban to rural locales and from nature conservation initiatives to youth development programmes, all of the articles emphasise the importance of brokers as central figures who engage in blending, translating and reworking. Brokers are Janus-faced figures whose distinct faces are recognised and addressed by different actors and whose performances align with different logics and rationales. Studying the agentive practices of brokers sheds light on complex societal settings, where multiple forms of authority co-exist, state-citizen relationships are increasingly problematised and policy messages are contradictory. The brokers described in this volume shape the interactions between actors who have unequal power relations and diverging interests. They may operate as gatekeepers, representatives, liaisons, itinerant guides or coordinators, and often as combinations of these (Stovel & Shaw 2012). They may take advantage of the void left by government

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and the market, as James argues in this issue, often extracting rents from their clients. They may also become targets of intervention by public authorities aiming to formalise their operations and appropriate their power, as shown in Lindquist's article in this issue. At the same time, as Chalhi, Koster and Vermeulen demonstrate in their article, brokers may operate in the 'invited spaces' of top-down development interventions where government is key in setting boundaries or, as Van Leynseele shows, in the more unwieldy, 'negotiated spaces' where the state itself appears to be fragmented and internally divided. Together, these contributions show that brokers operate both at the centre and in the shadows of existing governance arrangements.

### **Our Perspective: Brokers as Assemblers**

With the contributors to this issue, we aim to develop a novel perspective on brokerage. This perspective will improve our understanding of, on the one hand, the practices of brokers and, on the other hand, the complex local and translocal settings in which they operate. We approach brokers as 'assemblers', as connective agents who actively bring together the different elements of the development assemblages they operate in and are targeted by. They assemble government, citizen and corporate actors, institutions and resources. Our approach combines an actor orientation with recent assemblage-based scholarship that demonstrates how interventions are the result of an amalgam of different constituent actors and institutions that 'function' together (Li 2007; McFarlane 2011; Koster 2015). An assemblage is not governed by a singular logic and is always in the process of becoming (Collier & Ong 2005). Assemblage theory expands on the concept of *agencement* (translated in English as 'assemblage') as introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari ([1987]2013); it focuses on how different elements amalgamate into productive networked wholes. Assembling is a process of 'forging alignments', of 'fitting' together different actors, institutions and resources, which gives shape to a provisional unity – a (temporary) structure (Phillips 2006; Li 2007: 265; Anderson & McFarlane 2011). Assemblages may be rather short-lived, yet they may also be durable and historically rooted.

In the last 10 years, the concept of the assemblage has gained ground in urban, governance and development studies as a way to understand the dynamic amalgams of actors and institutions involved in specific regimes or interventions. The concept is used more specifically to analyse the interdependencies of local networks, political economies and larger structures – states, supranational NGOs, global social movements – of rule and belonging. We recognise that there is a problematic tendency to objectify the assemblage and thereby obscure actually existing social practices, relations and institutional arrangements (Brenner *et al.* 2011). While assemblage theory generally does not attend to the agency of the social actor, the ethnographies in this issue focus on the acts of assembling done by brokers. They zoom in on how brokers' acts of mediation illuminate the broader processes and settings in which they operate as well as the different building blocks that go into the assemblage. In so doing, our approach takes account of how locally situated dynamics are entwined with global patterns like neo-liberalism and globalisation (Collier & Ong 2005; Blanco *et al.* 2014).

This approach provides both an analytical and a methodological coherence to settings characterised by complex public–private arrangements, different political economies, and multiple, yet often mediated, landscapes of meaning and power. In the last two decades, anthropologists have distanced themselves from linear and structured understandings of the sociopolitical realities they study. They have demonstrated that realities are complex, that governance arrangements are disjunctive and that numerous political sites are interrelated through intricate tensions and connections. In general, these studies understand politics as enacted along different and overlapping layers of meaning, while power operates through distinct forms of sovereignty and counter-sovereignty (Hansen & Stepputat 2006). In order to make sense of these complex political realities, scholars have turned to notions such as assemblages (Latour 2005; Sassen 2008; McFarlane 2009) and meshworks (Ingold 2011). Such writings convincingly theorise the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors, and open up spaces for rethinking political realities as temporally and spatially situated. Others have noted the challenge of understanding these realities as inherently messy (Law 2004).

We agree that sociopolitical realities are complex and messy. Amidst this complexity and messiness, there are new analytical possibilities for an anthropology of brokerage that lets go of its traditional focus on mediation as taking place between given political entities and hierarchical scales (see also Lindquist 2015). We see that people make sense of the mess around them, organising their lives through more or less structured social constructs, even in very conflictual or ambiguous situations. As the contributions to this special issue show, from an emic point of view, situations may be complex but not necessarily messy. For example, we illustrate how transmigration patterns (Lindquist) and finance assemblages of lending and indebtedness (James) may be stabilised and maintained through mediation. We demonstrate that an anthropology of brokerage allows us to move beyond the apparent messiness in descriptive terms. Combining an actor orientation with an in-depth study of the connected components of development assemblages provides a privileged vantage point for analysing political complexities and messy social realities that come together under the banner of ‘development’. More succinctly, the broker is an analytical starting point for tracing the assembling and reassembling of local practices in relation to supra-local drivers and global forces. We thus emphasise the verb form of assemblage: to assemble. While taking account of the interconnectedness of different elements in sociopolitical realities, we ask: ‘who does the assembling and how?’ In so doing, the contributions to this issue put the actor back into the assemblage and foreground mediation as an ordering process.

This issue presents a variety of cases in which developmentalist frameworks and planned interventions by state and non-state actors provoke practices of alignment, coercion and resistance and also spur experiments aimed at reconciling old and new subjectivities and modes of organisation. It is here that we can start to understand how micro-practices in the field of development are connected to the larger forces that ‘produce the world’ (Bierschenk 2008: 11). With our emphatic focus on the conditions and institutional settings of development in which situated practices unfold, we invite well-grounded anthropological analysis of the development assemblages in

which the lived realities of people become amalgamated with supra-local forces and political economies.

## Revisiting the Anthropology of Brokerage

For understanding current development processes the anthropology of brokerage is of great analytical use. Virtually all literature on brokerage situates actors in contexts of rapid societal change, mapping how they straddle different social worlds and combine different repertoires, languages of development and organisational styles. Brokers as research subjects are interesting precisely because their work as mediators connects different sites and makes it possible to approach sociopolitical organisation in terms of translocal relations. The first anthropological studies of brokers were written alongside decolonisation and emergence of new nation-states. In these studies, brokers operated in discrete political spaces, between their peers on the one hand and the bureaucratic or religious authorities on the other (Geertz 1960; Wolf 1971[1956]). In these accounts, brokers were situated within relatively stable patron–client relationships and played an active role in the embedding of local communities in a changing wider society (Lindquist 2015). We see how, in these early accounts, the figure of the broker provided anthropologists with the opportunity to demonstrate the interrelations between their community-based ethnographies and the structural transformations that were taking place at national and international level.

In the 1970s, transactionalist studies emphasised the processes of communication (conceived as transactions) in which brokers were involved (Paine 1971; Boissevain 1974). Brokers were considered nodal points between different networks. Jeremy Boissevain, in his classic *Friends of Friends*, argued: ‘Every individual provides a point at which networks intersect. But not everyone displays the same interest in and talent for cultivating relationships’ (1974: 147). He argues that, in complex societies, people with an interest in and talent for cultivating relationships become increasingly important. He introduces the metaphor of the ‘many-bladed Japanese or Chinese hand fan’ with ‘each blade representing an activity field, but all converging at one point, the person at the centre of this network’ (Boissevain 1974: 29). Boissevain’s influential study emphasises the agency of brokers, especially in terms of their ‘good measure and cunning’ and even their manipulation (1974: 158). Boissevain sees the broker as an entrepreneur, ‘a professional manipulator of people and information who brings about communication for profit’ and who occupies ‘a strategic place in a network of social relations’ (1974: 148–149). Such transactionalist studies emphasise the individual strategy and entrepreneurialism of brokers and tend to lean on a rational choice perspective; in so doing, they sometimes overlook the social embeddedness of brokers and the inherent cultural repertoires and constraints.

After these transactionalist studies, attention to brokerage virtually disappeared in anthropology. Marxist analyses seemingly excluded attention to individual transactions, following the idea that the actor was limited by structural constraints. During the 1990s and into the 2000s, the adoption of poststructural approaches also effectively sidelined the question of agentic brokerage practices.

Governmentality studies focused on how structures of authority, both within and 'below and beyond' the state, disciplined populations (Appadurai 2002; Chatterjee 2004). While these studies included the role of mediating institutions, operating in 'civil society' or 'political society', their wider analyses of how dominant power constellations are challenged by forms of 'counter-governmentality' did not take account of the individual agents who operate in these fields. As a result, as Lindquist (2015: 872) writes, the 'local-level broker appeared increasingly insignificant in both empirical and analytical terms'.

However, more recently, brokers have returned to centre stage in anthropological research (James 2011; Piliavsky 2014; Lindquist 2015). In contexts in which many novel actors and institutions have entered the public arena, due to globalisation and a shift from centralised government to decentralised multi-actor governance, brokers once again have found the spotlight. Moving beyond anthropology's localism, Marcus's (1995) notion of multi-sited ethnography encouraged anthropologists to study the relationship between different social and physical spaces. Investigating a particular object of study in different sites enables researchers to understand the cross-cultural character and 'travelling' dimension of current phenomena. This contains parallels to the research strategy of 'studying through' in the anthropology of policy (Wedel *et al.* 2005), a strategy for studying a certain policy in different sites and settings, from the setting of the initial agenda to its implementation and its impact on the target population. To anthropologists who are involved in such multi-sited studies, we would argue that brokers are of high empirical and analytical interest. They bring together different sites and actors, and, at an analytical level, they are a means of demonstrating coherence among seemingly fragmented or decoupled fields. In addition, the current emphasis on interconnectedness and agency, not in the least due to the focus in actor network theory on human–non-human interplay, reinvigorated studies of the inherent connections of social and material structures. Here we see, for example, how actants can be critical interlocutors in maintaining complex translocal collective relations and engagements (Latour 2005).

In recent years, against the background of these methodological transformations, brokerage has been studied in a variety of fields. It has been studied in the field of electoral politics, with political canvassers as brokers between changing electoral and governmental constellations and the population (Koster 2012); in relation to access to land and land claims, where land brokers coordinate a (re)distribution of titles (James 2011); in the field of human rights, with activists as mediators between local legal systems and (supra)governmental human rights institutions (Merry 2006); in finance, with local 'consultants' helping people to obtain loans (Palomera 2014); in management, where middle-managers broker between different organisational levels (Gastelaars 2013) and in development, where state agency and NGO frontline workers, participating in networks of practice, translate meaning in a bid to create stable and unified fields of intervention (Mosse & Lewis 2006).

Although the anthropology of brokerage has long dealt with situations of social change, an important difference between classic and current studies lies in the fact that today brokerage is analysed in complex and dynamic networks in which actors

and institutions change, jump scales or substitute each other at high pace. Brokerage thrives in dynamic settings in which personal and institutional ties may be rather tenuous (Lindquist *et al.* 2012). Radically changing markets, official recognition of traditional leadership structures and property redistribution appear to be fruitful settings for new brokerage practices (James 2011). Comparing recent brokerage studies with those of the 1960s and 1970s, we see that ‘while previously it was generally clear what the broker was mediating between, the village and the national capital, or more generally, encapsulated political structures, in the contemporary context of unbounded fieldsites this is not immediately obvious’ (Lindquist 2015: 874). It is from this point that we develop our notion of brokers as assemblers, zooming in on the brokers’ agentive assembling while taking account of the dynamic and complex assemblages in which they operate.

### Comparing the Articles: Differences and Similarities across the Globe

The geographical and thematic variety of this set of contributions allows us to juxtapose insights that point to the present importance of brokers and the need to study brokerage in different domains of development. Through a cross-fertilisation of studies from across the globe, this issue moves beyond publications that examine brokerage in one particular site (Auyero 2001; Koster 2012), as well as collections that study brokerage within one geographical region with an allegedly defined political culture (Hilgers 2012; Piliavsky 2014). In what follows, we outline the most significant similarities and differences that emerge from the contributions.

First, regarding the similarities, our issue shows that brokers emerge and thrive in periods of societal transformation and governance transition. Brokers act as translators between populations and increasingly sophisticated registers of public authorities, fulfilling key roles in citizen participation and political mobilisation and connecting previously unconnected economic worlds. Using particular sets of skills and competencies, they shape translocal relations and ensure the flows they rely on are kept open. A second similarity is that brokers, apart from connecting groups, also bring together different logics, representations and meanings. In joining these, they also explore and re-emphasise the (blurred) boundaries between distinct economic and political rationales and moralities. In so doing, they often end up in the middle, as compromised figures, vulnerable to accusations of being dishonest or disloyal (Merry 2006). A third similarity, most clearly articulated in the article by Chalhi, Koster and Vermeulen, is that all brokers have a certain degree of autonomy. Although highly dependent on the other components of the assemblages in which they operate, they create, negotiate and maintain their own room in which to manoeuvre. While a more general view of brokers – as spokespersons or representatives of a certain group – depicts them as an extension of either the population or the government (Stovel & Shaw 2012), this issue shows that brokers also have their own position and point of view. Brokers are not part of either of the groups they represent, nor do they merge different groups into one whole; instead, they bring groups together while leaving room for difference and for their own ‘independent’ position.



The most important differences between the studies are related to the specific contexts in which brokerage takes place. First, based on the articles in this issue and other recent studies of brokerage, we see a difference between the global North and the global South. In the global North, under neo-liberal conditions, the deliberate rolling back of government creates more competition over scarce resources through processes that privatise public services and compartmentalise knowledge in decentred policy communities. Governments emphasise the need for active citizenship, as citizens have to assume responsibilities that have now been cut from the public budget. In addition, governments praise existing government-paid brokers – social workers, community workers, youth workers – for their crucial role, while simultaneously severely reducing their resources (Chalhi, Koster and Vermeulen). Meanwhile, in the global South, redistributive policies, decentralisation and social welfare programmes in post-colonial states are particular settings in which political voids have to be filled. Such transitions within states intertwine with market-led developments and the formation of high-risk consumption spaces, which are often hierarchical and historically sedimented, and which require particular forms of connection (James; Van Leynseele). Economic uncertainties and possibilities may prompt flows of people across borders, in turn creating contexts where brokers mediate between regulatory authorities and labour migrants (Lindquist).

Second, we see differences when brokers operate in invited or negotiated spaces. The notion of ‘invited spaces’ is coined in the literature on citizen participation to indicate governance spaces that were formerly closed off to public scrutiny but to which the state now actively invites citizens to participate (Gaventa 2002; Cornwall 2004; Newman & Tonkens 2011). In such spaces, sometimes formalised as part of governance assemblages, the government invites brokers to assume certain responsibilities and to carry out specific tasks. Brokers operate, at least partly, within these governmental policy arrangements. Such invited spaces require bureaucratic and technocratic repertoires of mediation and build on forms of community-based organisation for channelling resources. ‘Negotiated spaces’, on the other hand, are spaces of governance centred upon local needs and aspirations, in which, as we show, brokers often mobilise and coordinate people to negotiate their needs with the state or state-like actors like corporations (Baud & Nainan 2008). Negotiated spaces imply an openness in sites where brokers find recourse through broadening categories of membership, plural meanings and the possibility of new intermediate layers and actors.

We observe that the assemblages in which brokers are active may be designed by the state – with the state as an important regulating actor and structuring force – or bear similarities to ‘negotiated spaces’, in which practices emerge from beyond or below the state. These different types of assemblages are associated with differentiated levels of openness and regulation, demanding in turn that brokers possess different competencies and repertoires. In negotiated spaces of development, brokers give voice to the needs and aspirations of their ‘clients’, trying to achieve their goals vis-a-vis particular public or private institutions. Lindquist’s study illustrates clearly how the government may attempt to incorporate negotiated spaces and the brokers active therein, in order to make them amenable to control. The labour migrant brokers he discusses answer to the population’s economic needs and aspirations, where the state failed to



do so. Currently, as Lindquist shows, the state is regulating these brokerage spaces in an attempt to bring them under the state's licensing programme. The case shows in particular how these efforts at regulation rework the category of the broker and set out to expand state space.

Brokers are also active in state-designed assemblages, consisting of public, private and citizen actors, institutions and resources. They may be active as volunteers (although often some form of remuneration is involved) or as professionals, working for the government or for state-contracted organisations. The article by Chalhi, Koster and Vermeulen examines how youth workers, as professionals working for subsidised welfare and youth work organisations, are instructed to mediate between the government and their organisations on the one hand and unruly youth on the other. They are supposed to implement government development policies aiming at 'socialising' young people. In practice, as the article shows, this involves a constant negotiation between the seemingly irreconcilable world of the policies and the world of the young people.

The two contributions on South Africa show the state as less coherent in addressing unexpected or unwanted forms of brokerage. Van Leynseele's article illustrates that, in a setting where the state is contradictory, at once challenging and inviting brokers to participate, the dividing lines between negotiated and invited spaces become blurred. His study presents a white landowner-environmentalist broker in a changing political landscape, who struggled to stabilise a form of trusteeship by translating international conservation frameworks to the area and embedding these not only institutionally but also in material terms through acts of place-making. Brokerage practices in this case involved simultaneous engagement with and distancing from statist frameworks, highlighting in turn the multi-sited nature of brokerage. James analyses how different categories of brokers involved in mediating credit provisioning and indebtedness – the 'credit machinery' – contribute to the blurring of the boundaries between state and market. Court action initiated by the state and activists focused on a problematic category of entrepreneurial brokers. It met with courtroom responses from organised informal lenders, who also rebuffed accusations regarding their moral ambiguity by emphasising their crucial role in sustaining a large section of the economy. Both cases reflect brokerage as practices of readjustment and as innovative arrangements. Although brokerage evolves with changes in the policy environment, these cases also illustrate that the assemblages brokers constitute reflect a remarkable continuity in terms of sustaining a particular political economy of privilege.

As the contributions to this issue show, all these different types of assemblages are valuable sites of ethnographic enquiry, where practices unfold and more or less institutionalised settings structure power relations and give shape to a hierarchical reordering of social life. As such, they are relevant analytical entry points for analysing how individual strategies to defend and (re)appropriate political space are connected to efforts by authority-holding agencies to maintain and expand their reach. The perspective on brokerage presented here, we argue, provides us with a vantage point to better understand the different elements that go into the making of each assemblage, how intrinsic power relations are distributed in each assemblage and how assemblages are shifting in

relation to the interplay between changing opportunity structures and agentive broker-ing practices.

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