Enlivening the Supra-personal Actor
Vectors at Work in a Transnational Environmentalist Federation

Caroline Gatt

ABSTRACT: Recent anthropological literature on NGOs has focused on the agency and creativity of activists. The focus on the subjects of NGOs and agency in this work is an explicit response to scholarship in which actors are eclipsed by formal and technical analyses of organizational structures. This article revisits the concept of organizational structure by attending to it through the experience of activists of a transnational federation of environmental NGOs, namely Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). On a daily basis FoEI activists encounter and engage with various institutions. In certain situations, such institutions as well as the activists' own organizations are experienced as agentive entities. This article argues that from certain positioned perspectives such entities have material effects as supra-personal actors. Informed by Ingold, Latour and Haraway, but also by the FoEI activists themselves, I present the interdependent concepts of vectors, direction of attention and 'unprotected backs'. This conceptual toolbox is presented as a shared puzzle (Marcus and Fischer 1999), and as such is activism itself, that engages in conversation with environmental activists.

KEYWORDS: agency, Ingold, NGOs, structure, subjectivity, supra-personal actors, vectors

Introduction

Questions of structure, and/or, agency, arise frequently in ethnographies of NGOs. This is unsurprising since the organizational structure of an NGO is considered a distinguishing feature of this form of social association (Hilhorst 2003). NGOs function in what Lister (2003: 178) calls 'legitimating environments', the social and institutional milieus that lend legitimacy to NGOs. Within so-called Northern legitimating environments, NGOs are also delineated according to their organizational structure (ibid.). Social associations that are not organized in a formal sense are rarely recognized as part of civil society (Hann 1996; 13; White 1996). Therefore the structure of associations plays a part in creating the content of the actions, relationships and understandings of NGO actors. ‘For NGO actors, the legitimation of their organization is a matter of (organizational) survival’ (Hilhorst 2003: 8). In many organizational ethnographies of NGOs, however, their authors have focused on the negotiations of the day-to-day lives of NGO actors, or in other words on their agency (see for instance Riles 2000; Hilhorst 2003; Hopgood 2006; Mosse and Lewis 2006; Yarrow 2011) rather than on the constitution of such organizational structures.

This article revisits the concept of organizational structure refracted through the experi-
ence of activist members of a transnational federation of environmental NGOs, called Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). On a daily basis FoEI activists encounter and engage with various institutions. In certain situations, such institutions, as well as the activists’ own organizations, are experienced as agentic entities, distinct from the messy relationships that constitute them. This article argues that from certain positioned perspectives such entities have material effects as supra-personal actors.1 Supra-personal actors come to resemble living, powerful beings, rather than being perceived only as the agglomeration of relationships between the human persons that constitute them. It is in this sense that supra-personal actors can be understood as enlivened.

Depending on an activist’s position, the amount of time they have been an activist and their standing in the eyes of other activists, their perspective and experience of such supra-personal actors changes. Supra-personal actors may limit the effectiveness of activists’ actions, efforts and intentions. At other times activists deliberately construct ‘FoEI’, for instance, as a supra-personal actor that can then be deployed, on this augmented scale, to engage with other supra-personal actors (such as various UN bodies, EU directorates and EU committees). However, what also becomes evident in the ethnographic material is that when activists’ efforts are blocked or limited by supra-personal actors this does not nullify their creativity, their ability to improvise or their ability to negotiate the always unchartered situations of daily life.2

Recent ethnographies of NGOs emphasize the ongoing negotiations of NGO members, often with the explicit aim of deconstructing the rigidity that organizational structure has been understood to impose on human NGO actors. This ethnographic scholarship responds to the body of social theory that takes structure and agency as its focal point, specifically Bourdieu and Giddens. While this literature has given due attention to the creativity of human actors, this article argues that it is also necessary to pay attention to ‘structure’ and the supra-personal actors perceived to emerge from structure. What this article does, in other words, is take seriously (Viveiros de Castro 1998) FoEI activists’ experience and understandings of structural power by proposing a tool box of concepts: vectors, direction of attention and ‘unprotected backs’.

The questions that academics are repeatedly faced with are: How are their analyses relevant? What is the impact of their work? This is particularly pertinent for a journal dedicated to anthropology in action. A fundamental insight emerging from feminism and post-colonial studies is that any action, choice or piece of text is inherently political and situated. Academic analyses and academic texts are political, they are activism. Nigel Rapport (2003: 17) argues that academic discourses sooner or later influence other spheres of life. Accounts that portray humans as determined can lead to unfree lives (ibid.). He takes an ‘as if’ stance: as if humans were all free, all having existential power to shape and carry out their own life projects (ibid.: 12–13). However, FoEI activists argue, through their own experiences, among other things, that not acknowledging domination is one way in which domination can be glossed over. What is needed is an account that responds to the FoE activists’ experiences and concerns, an account that would enable an understanding of both the loss and the achievement of power. This calls for an exploration of how, when, where and in conjunction with what, people shift and change what they can achieve. The three notions – vectors, direction of attention and unprotected backs – are experimental proposals to carry this conversation forward between academics and activists. The concepts themselves are not proposed as a means to settle a discussion; they are not explanations; they are meant as a contribution to an ongoing, shared dilemma, one of the shared puzzles predicted by Marcus and Fischer (1999).3
Beyond Agency, Revisiting Structure

Sherry Ortner (2005) describes social theory in the twentieth century as a struggle over the role of the subject in society and history; in other words the structure-agency debate. She concludes that a focus on subjectivity should emphasize ‘a fully cultural consciousness [that] is at the same time always multi-layered and reflexive, and its complexity and reflexivity constitute the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world in which we find ourselves’ (ibid.: 46). In this vein, the authors of organizational ethnographies have emphasized the complex layers and negotiations in personal daily life, the role of the members, activists or human actors that constitute these organizations and emphatically *not* their structural qualities. This approach has shed light on, for instance, how activists negotiate between the expectations of their legitimating environments, and their own aims (Lister 2003: 188). Mosse and Lewis (2006: 5) argue that NGO actors find the opportunities to forward their own aims in the gaps between policy and practice, aims that may be divergent to those of their legitimating environments. Hilhorst (2003) explicitly emphasizes the actor-orientation of the organization of NGOs. By focusing on the subjectivity of NGO activists in the Philippines she argues that the scholarship emphasizing the form of NGOs obscures the politics of NGOing, in which the boundaries and forms of these organizations are secondary or even illusory (ibid.: 5, 18).

The focus on creativity, negotiations and diversity that make up the day-to-day life of NGOs arises from the need to redress the assumption that depicts this domain as homogenous (Berglund 1998) and a single reality (Hilhorst 2003). These ethnographies counter the portrayal of subjects as what Garfinkel called ‘cultural dopes’ (cited in Munro 2012: 69) or rule-bound automatons playing out already scripted lives. Such ethnographies have produced sensitive and rich descriptions of the creative struggles of NGO actors (cf. Hilhorst 2003; Yarrow 2008). In fact, it is only now that these accounts have brought subjectivity into focus, that it is possible to revisit the role of structure in a way that does not simply restate earlier understandings in which the actor had no agency. The need to pay attention to structural power arises from the concerns and experiences of NGO activists themselves (also cf. Riles 2000; Gatt 2011). A brief description of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI) will highlight the activists’ concerns about power, both personal and structural and therefore be the ethnographic justification for this call to revisit our understanding of structure.

FoEI is a federation of environmental NGOs currently composed of seventy-six national member groups from around the world. Member groups are identified as ‘national’, because the federation allows only one NGO per nation-state to join the federation. Many activists, and scholars (Doherty 2006; Timmer 2007), distinguish FoEI from other worldwide environmentalist groupings by two main features. Firstly FoEI is concerned with environmental justice rather than narrowly focused on issues such as conservation. Secondly, one of the ways that this concern with justice materializes is in its structure as a federation rather than as a centralized organization.

Issues relating to power are central in FoEI. Who has the power to decide? How should one understand and consider the decision-making systems that currently operate within the federation, and in the governments and international forums that FoEI activists address in their campaigns? What alternatives can be created? How does one include people who have very different ways of life and live in very different political as well as ecological circumstances? These are all questions that are a daily part of many FoEI activists’ thinking, reflections and discussions. Therefore, how to make space for cultural and ecological diversity in our governance systems is the first problem of power that worries FoEI activists.
Another familiar, if not daily, experience for activists is that they find their campaigns, their work and their ideas either ignored or watered down by the people or institutions they address. Often those campaigns are initiated as resistance to, for instance, the privatization of water (Strang 2009), the pollution of farming land by oil spills (FoE Nigeria), the destruction of livelihoods and ecosystems by industrial-scale silviculture (FoE Brazil) and so on. In other words resistance, ineffectiveness and failed campaigns are part of the daily experience of being an activist. The powers that ‘block’ their efforts emerge in various forms, such as the impersonal power of institutional entities or the highly personal power of certain politicians, company executives, or powerful members of other FoE groups and so on. And yet, activists continuously devise different approaches in their efforts to fulfil their mission. ‘Mobilize! Resist! Transform!’ is FoEI’s current motto. The implication is that activists and ‘affected communities’, as much as all other people, are understood to be capable of different forms of power: resistance as well as generative power.

There is a resonance here with the work of both Bourdieu (1990) and Giddens (1984), whose work was aimed at obviating the opposition between structure and agency. Like FoEI activists, Giddens and Bourdieu, wanted to take into account both the creativity of individuals and the shaping effect of wider societal factors. Bourdieu (1990: 50–4), for instance, argued that cultural explanations must account for the unexpected in daily life. Rule-based explanations such as Durkheim’s cannot account for the constant improvisation that daily life entails. Giddens (1984) on the other hand focused on the role and presence of prior circumstances and the reproduction of institutions. His theory of structuration emphasizes how such prior conditions are simultaneously enabling and constraining (ibid.: 19–25).

On the one hand, Bourdieu’s and Giddens’ work provided the platform for the practice turn that enabled ethnographic attention to agency and creativity (Ortner 2005). On the other hand, their work downplayed specific aspects of subjectivity, namely reflexivity and intentionality (Starrett 1995; Farnell 2000). Bourdieu’s concepts, such as habitus and doxa, tend to reproduce the static accounts of Durkheimian sociology (Farnell 2000). Giddens’ explanation of the constitution of institutional continuity does not allow for intentional or strategic planning (Gatt 2011: 241). What is needed in order to take FoEI activists’ experiences seriously is an approach that simultaneously takes into account all these diverse forms of power, enablement, constraint and prior conditions, as well as strategic and intentional action.

**Vectors, Direction of Attention and Unprotected Backs**

I elaborate on the concepts of vectors, direction of attention and unprotected backs in two other places (Gatt 2011, n.d.). Here I shall offer a brief summary. The concepts only make sense in a certain understanding of the world. They build on ecological approaches, especially Ingold’s (2000, 2001, 2007), but also aspects of Latour’s work (primarily 2003) and importantly the FoEI activists’ own ecological understanding of the world. What follows is a deliberate ontological proposal, about how the world is, or at least how it could be understood. I place my theoretical assumptions on the proverbial table. Since what is implied by this ontology is constant transformation, the theoretical assumptions themselves are not a priori principles, but provisional tools upon which further conversations may be built.

The world these ecological approaches describe is a continuous field of constitutive relationships. All actors, human and non-human, participate in the ongoing formation of this com-
mon world. In this single, constantly being-born world, all entities and essences, animate and inanimate, are provisional, open to revision. Borrowing from Latour’s (2003) terminology, matters of fact return to being matters of concern, and so on and so forth. A matter of fact, an object may appear stable because certain affordances are taken into account. That is, some affordances are not being taken into account. These ignored affordances are ‘externalised’ (ibid.: 124). Actors direct their attention away from such ‘externalised’ affordances.

The pivotal shift proposed in this relational ontology is that actions, the practices and goings-on of actors as they go about living or just being, in other words the relationships they engage in, actually constitute the world. Relations here are understood as intrinsic, whereas other approaches to structures in anthropology have been based on an understanding of relationships as extrinsic (cf. Ingold 2008). Intrinsic relations occur between entities that are not changed by the process of relating. Intrinsic relations on the other hand are constitutive. In Ingoldian and Latourian terms, such constitutive relationships are continuously bringing the world into existence. In addition, I suggest, these constitutive relationships have direction and magnitude: they are vectors. Vectors also allow for change, in fact vectors are inherently processual and mutable. They imply transformation (Holbraad 2004). Relationships, understood as intrinsic, not extrinsic, are constitutive and vectorial; actors invest a certain amount of energy into one relationship and away from other potential relationships.

Now to elaborate on the concepts of direction of attention and unprotected backs: when an actor pays attention and takes into account certain affordances, they are also directing a certain amount of energy in a certain direction, towards certain affordances. Necessarily, the actor is thereby directing their attention away from other affordances, directing their energy away from other directions. The ‘directions’ in which an actor does not direct attention can be imagined as ‘unprotected backs’.

Imagine Andrea, Mariangela (two FoE Brazil activists) and myself walking through the streets of Porto Alegre, on our lunch break. All three of us are intent upon conversation. Our attention is directed to the other people and what they are saying. Another part of our attention, though less, is also directed towards where we are walking, crossing streets, avoiding the hanging roots of Ficus trees. We are not paying attention to the bright adverts, deliberately placed at eye-level. Some marketing studies (Krugman et al. 1995) have found that these advertisements have the greatest impact when people are not focusing on them. Although the results of such studies are hotly debated, the idea that focus makes it easier to question something does not require statistical validation to be compelling. By not directing attention to the adverts at that point in time Andrea, Mariangela and myself had unprotected backs to their subtle messages. Although I am referring here to what is present in our peripheral vision, unprotected backs and direction of attention do not refer only to the visual modality, but to all possible ways of perceiving, paying attention and engaging in constitutive relations.

There are at least five non-exhaustive and non-exclusive types of directions (Gatt 2011, n.d.). Vectors may act towards, away from, past each other and alongside each other. Vectors may also exert centripetal forces, or may shift the dimension, the plane or field in which their force has effect.

1. When acting towards each other, the magnitude of force will determine the path of interaction. If actor A exerts a force of 2 directly towards actor B who is also exerts a force but only of 1, the two bodies will travel in the direction of A’s force. If the force is not applied directly at actor B, but at an angle, actor B’s force of 1 may be sufficient to deflect A’s vector.
One of the myriad possible alternatives is that the forces aimed at each other are porous, allowing each other’s force to permeate and therefore interact in different parts of the actor.

2. When an actor’s attention is pointed away from other directions, this leaves a gap that can be filled by other forces, ‘unprotected backs’.

Acting past each other is when interaction does not occur; for instance, the lack of oxidization of gold, since gold and oxygen do not interact.

3. When acting alongside each other, the forces of actors A and B are combined, creating a greater force. This is where Actor-Network Theory’s ‘aligned interests’ (Latour 2005) in a network would be found.

4. Turning in on oneself in a way that does not deny the vectors of other actors but introduces a different dimension, or topology, in which these other vectors have no or little effect. This direction builds on the idea of more dimensions that can have as many directions as they have relationships (Latour 1999).

Supra-personal Actors

During my fieldwork, Mariangela had been working with FoE Brazil for four years. She was first employed for two days a week as a press and communications officer, having graduated in journalism that year. She dedicated more and more time and work to FoE Brazil and by 2006 was fully employed, having found her own funds. She worked on the daily administration of the organization, participating in recruiting new employees, caring for the actual office space, and she analysed research and policy documents from an environmental as well as a ‘communication’ angle. She was also a coordinator of the nationwide Rede Brasil [Brazil Network] that monitors the Brazilian Federal actions and policies related to IIRSA (Initiative for the integration of regional infrastructure in South America).11 Her most exacting task, however, was filling the post of Treasurer on the Conselho Diretor (Executive Committee), handling the annual finances of FoE Brazil, as well as managing the day-to-day finances.

The daily financial management included paying various membership fees including those to FoEI, paying FoE Brazil staff salaries, a number of which were provided by the FoEI Membership Support Fund (MSF). The latter funds needed to come through in time for Mariangela to pay employees’ salaries, including her own, regularly at the end of every month. That rarely happened. For at least two weeks of every month, Mariangela’s main
worry was: will the funds come through on time? Based on her experience of paying salaries Mariangela worked out that when there are delays, they are normally caused by someone in the IS office in Amsterdam not processing the payment forms promptly. The international transfers take at least a week. So if the ‘finance person’, as she called them, does not process the forms at least a week before the end of the month, they then will definitely arrive late in Brazil and Mariangela will have to deal with all the employees in the FoE Brazil office asking when they will get their pay. From more than a week before the funds are due in the FoE Brazil bank account in Brazil, Mariangela begins by sending an email to the Secretariat ‘finance person’ to remind them to process the payments.

For the first few years that Mariangela was the ‘finance person’ at FoE Brazil, she used to send emails to ‘Stine’ at the IS. The two had only met briefly during a World Social Forum meeting held in Porto Alegre, but at the time did not interact much due to the business of the event and the language barrier. But over the years they had built up ‘some sort of relationship’, Mariangela used to say. The relationship was based on a mutual understanding of ways of writing emails. Mariangela felt that she struggled with writing emails in English. But after three years of correspondence she had come to be confident that ‘Stine’, this person whom she knew mainly through an email address, understood her particular way of writing. In 2006 she stopped receiving emails from ‘Stine’ and the emails were instead coming from ‘Diana’ (running a membership fees before the BGM in Nigeria, September 2006). When Mariangela wrote emails to ‘Diana’, however, she did not reply in the same way that ‘Stine’ had done. ‘Diana’ rarely responded directly to Mariangela’s emails, most often sending other emails some time later with no reference to Mariangela’s previous emails. At that time some payments were almost a month late.

A few months later, when I had arrived in Brazil, Mariangela, still exasperated by the situation, called me several times to check the English of her emails to ‘Diana’. She was worried that since Diana did not know her as well as Stine did, she might think her emails were rude, or that they were unclear. Mariangela began feeling blocked in relation to what she called ‘foi’ (to sound like soy), the acronym for Friends of the Earth International (FoEI). Her actions no longer seemed to have effect. She would send emails, but would not receive a reply. The emails she did receive from Diana, addressed uniquely to her, contained no more than one or two short lines. In fact, it turned out that Mariangela began referring to ‘Diana’ as the ‘finance person’, whereas before she simply spoke of ‘Stine’.

If we think of this example in terms of vectors and direction of attention, we can see that the Secretariat became increasingly opaque for Mariangela. Based on how well, or how poorly, she felt she could communicate with particular persons there, the ‘Secretariat’ either blocked her efforts, and was experienced by Mariangela as a solid entity, or enabled her actions, and became transparent. When her single channel to the IS closed (because ‘Diana’ became the ‘finance person’) Mariangela’s efforts to make something happen, to have the payments made on time, did not work. Due to Mariangela’s lack of familiarity with the IS, she had no alternative points of entry. That ‘foi office in Amsterdam’ became a solid, immovable body.

Mariangela began exploring different strategies for ‘getting through’ to Diana, and for making the IS less opaque, more penetrable, and therefore more responsive to her efforts, her apparently smaller vectors. As stated, she asked me to check her English. In addition, she wrote more emails than she used to. She wrote to Stine, too, asking for help. She considered telephoning, but then did not; as she felt even less confident in spoken English. Even though Mariangela directed some of her attention to-
wards the FoE office, her lack of familiarity, her lack of relations created an ‘unprotected back’. The IS office, though itself constituted by an assemblage of human and non-human actors, became a single vector that actually had the effect of a supra-personal actor, more powerful than Mariangela’s efforts, not allowing her to influence its actions (such as when to process FoE Brazil’s MSF money) (see Figure 1).

Her final strategy at the time was to send out an emissary to build new relations with ‘Diana’. She asked me to get to know ‘Diana’ and find out what was happening. Why was Stine no longer her email contact? Why were the payments delayed so often, and so on? By the time I got to the Secretariat for fieldwork, Mariangela had left NAT Brazil to start her PhD in Politics and International Relations at Buenos Aires.

By using vectors we can trace the relationships that constituted this unfolding of events. Including factors such as the geographic distance between the offices in Amsterdam and Porto Alegre, the types of communication technology in use, and Mariangela’s perception of the IS office as a solid being, a supra-personal actor, her experience of helplessness, her actions to redress this and the effect of this interaction, sometimes salaries were paid on time, other times they were delayed. Vectors can cut across the material and conceptual, showing Mariangela’s ability, for instance, to imagine and attempt different strategies to influence what happens in the faraway office.

Figure 1: The FoEI IS becomes opaque and immoveable when a personal contact ceases.
in Amsterdam. Vectors also make sense of how Mariangela’s attempts were constrained by relationships that were both tangible and intangible.

Conclusion

As well as acknowledging and encouraging people’s personal, generative power, FoEI activists are concerned about taking into account various forms of subjugation and control. Therefore, beginning with the activists’ experience of powerlessness as well as personal power is very simply to follow the anthropological approach of exploring the actor’s ‘point of view’ (Malinowskis 1922: 25). When, in the activists’ experience, their personal agency is limited by a supra-personal actor, my approach has been to take them seriously (Viveiros de Castro 1998), and not attempt to explain away their experience of the agentive power of institutions or organizations. I have proposed a set of conceptual tools, namely vectors, direction of attention and unprotected backs by means of which to take into account the agentive power of supra-personal actors without having to nullify human agency.

Since vectors imply that force (or power) is deployed in specific directions as a concept they enable us to envision, to understand how one person, such as Mariangela, may have the power to influence a situation at one point, when her relationship with Stine by means of communication technologies was functioning, but be helpless at another point, when she experienced the FoEI IS as opaque, that she could not get through to. In this account, vectors allow us to trace and understand in very concrete terms the way Mariangela was constrained by the situation, which included the conceptual and material aspects of the FoEI organization. This did not reduce her complex subjectivity, her ability to improvise, to attempt different strategies based on her reflexive analysis of the situation.

Shifts in power, in the case of Mariangela, illustrate the way that organizational relations can be transformed into supra-personal actors. Such augmented actors, depending on what vectors are in play, can have actual effects on the actions of particular human actors within FoEI. What this makes evident is how, in concrete terms, structures can be both enabling and constraining (Giddens 1984). Vectors enable us to acknowledge reflexivity, as well as providing a method to interrogate organizational relationships. The concepts, vectors, direction of attention and unprotected backs are heuristics; they enable particular types of attention. And, as with all academic discourses, these concepts contribute towards, or ‘plump for’ (Humphrey 2008) certain possibilities of action in the world.

Caroline Gatt is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen. Her research interests include environmentalism, anthropology of ethics, research theatre and design anthropology. Gatt is working on a book manuscript entitled An Ethnography of Global Environmentalism: Becoming Friends of the Earth (Routledge). Her publications include ‘Emplacement and Environmental Relations in Multi-sited Theory/Practice’ (2009).

Notes

1. The ethnographic material in this article is based on my doctoral research, which included six months of participant observation with FoE Brazil, five months with the FoE International Secretariat in Amsterdam and six months with FoE Malta, as well as the three years between 2003 and 2006 during which I was engaged with FoE Malta as an activist. It also included attendance at nine international meetings between 2003 and 2007 and continuous participant observation by email throughout the period from February 2003 to December 2007. I gratefully acknowledge the University of Aberdeen’s Sixth Century Studentship award, which funded the research, and the Sociological
Review Fellowship, which is a one-year writing fellowship that enabled the writing of this and a number of other pieces, as well as my forthcoming monograph.

2. On improvisation in relation to the concept of creativity see Ingold and Hallam (2007).

3. I consider academic contribution, concepts among other things, to be serial closures, pauses that allow reconsideration, in order for the discussion to go on, possibly in a different vein to what it had been before (Gatt 2010). I am grateful to Jen Clarke for pointing out similarities between my approach and both Stengers’ (2005) ‘slow science’, and Latour’s (2003) ‘speed bumps’.


5. English-speaking activists call it FoEI, pronounced ‘foe-I’.

6. For more details on the decision-making forms see Gatt (2011: chapter 9).

7. See http://www.eraction.org/ for details.


9. This interest in agency is somewhat separate from the interest in agency developed within Actor-Network-Theory (see Latour 2005).

10. I am grateful to James Leach for articulating the point that these theoretical proposals are, in fact, ontological proposals.

11. One of the more well-known projects implemented by IIRSA was the trans-Amazonian highway.

12. See Gatt (2011: chapter 7) for an extended discussion on the use of communication technology

References


