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Practices of assemblage and community forest management

Tania M. Li

Abstract

Governmental interventions that set out to improve the world are assembled from diverse elements – discourses, institutions, forms of expertise and social groups whose deficiencies need to be corrected, among others. In this article I advance an analytic that focuses on practices of assemblage – the on-going labour of bringing disparate elements together and forging connections between them. I identify six practices that are generic to any assemblage, whatever its specific contours: 1) forging alignments, 2) rendering technical, 3) authorizing knowledge, 4) managing failures, 5) anti-politics, and 6) reassembling. I demonstrate the power of this analytic through an extended study of community forest management. This is an assemblage that brings together an array of agents (villagers, labourers, entrepreneurs, officials, activists, aid donors, scientists) and objectives (profit, pay, livelihoods, control, property, efficiency, sustainability, conservation). Its very unwieldiness helps to sharpen analysis of how such an assemblage is, in fact, assembled, and how it has been sustained for more than thirty years, absorbing hundreds of millions of dollars in programmes from the west coast of Canada to the eastern islands of Indonesia. I do not attempt to adjudicate the rights and wrongs of this assemblage. Rather, I deploy an analytic of assemblage to explore the practices that fill the gap between the will to govern and the refractory processes that make government so difficult.

Keywords

governmentality, assemblage, community, forestry, politics, Indonesia

Introduction

Dispositif, apparatus, technology of government, regime of practices, assemblage – theorists have used various terms to refer to the way in which heterogeneous elements including ‘discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions’ are assembled to address an ‘urgent need’ and invested with strategic purpose (Foucault 1980: 194).
That purpose is the will to govern or, more specifically, the will to improve: the attempt to
direct conduct and intervene in social processes to produce desired outcomes and avert
undesired ones.

In this article I argue for an analytic of assemblage to highlight some aspects of government
thus far neglected. I illustrate with an extended study of community forest management. I
propose an analytic of assemblage for three reasons.

First, assemblage links directly to a practice, to assemble. The other terms, in contrast,
highlight the resultant formation (the apparatus, the regime, the technology) which appears
settled, potentially even complete. Assemblage flags agency, the hard work required to draw
heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and sustain these
connections in the face of tension. It invites analysis of how the elements of an assemblage
might – or might not – be made to cohere.

Although the contingency of assemblage is often mentioned in studies of governmentality its
invocation is rather rhetorical. Nikolas Rose, for example, writes that government is ‘not a
process in which rule extends itself unproblematically across a territory, but a matter of fragile
relays, contested locales and fissiparous affiliations’ and hence ‘inherently risky’ (Rose 1999: 51).
Yet he does not follow through to ask: if there is contestation, how is it manifested? If relays are
fragile, what are the practices that attempt to secure them? If affiliations are fissiparous, how
does this fact shape the resulting formations? If there are risks, who apprehends these risks,
and how do they factor risks into their calculations? The answers to ‘how’ questions such as
these deserve a more central place in studies of government than is currently accorded. Yet I
agree with Rose and others that the analytic of governmentality is usefully distinguished from
the ethnographic study of how governmental interventions play out at a particular time and
place. Examining practices of assemblage enables an expansion of the analytic of
governmentality without loss of focus.

Second, thinking about assemblage as the continuous work of pulling disparate elements
together highlights a particular set of practices that are often implicit in studies of government
but seldom examined in a focused manner. The practice that tends to take centre stage is
problematization, as scholars examine how problems come to be defined as problems in
relation to particular schemes of thought, diagnoses of deficiency and promises of
improvement. Yet there are other practices that are crucial to assemblage, and equally generic,
of which I have provisionally identified six. Here I simply list them, deferring elaboration to
the case study that follows.
1) Forging alignments: the work of linking together the objectives of the various parties to an assemblage, both those who aspire to govern conduct and those whose conduct is to be conducted.  
2) Rendering technical: extracting from the messiness of the social world, with all the processes that run through it, a set of relations that can be formulated as a diagram in which problem (a) plus intervention (b) will produce (c), a beneficial result.  
3) Authorizing knowledge: specifying the requisite body of knowledge; confirming enabling assumptions; containing critiques.  
4) Managing failures and contradictions: presenting failure as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies; smoothing out contradictions so that they seem superficial rather than fundamental; devising compromises.  
5) Anti-politics: reposing political questions as matters of technique; closing down debate about how and what to govern and the distributive effects of particular arrangements by reference to expertise; encouraging citizens to engage in debate while limiting the agenda.  
6) Reassembling: grafting on new elements and reworking old ones; deploying existing discourses to new ends; transposing the meanings of key terms.

The third feature of assemblage is its potential to finesse questions of agency by recognizing the situated subjects who do the work of pulling together disparate elements without attributing to them a master-mind or a totalizing plan. Although there are occasions when a revolutionary movement or visionary leader announces a grand scheme for the total transformation of society – the kind of plan James Scott describes as ‘high modern’ – more often interventions are assembled from an existing repertoire, a matter of habit, accretion, and bricolage. Particular programmes come complete with elaborate rationalizations but the elements from which they are drawn have no singular rationality and no essence.

In addition to contingency, which I have already discussed, the diffusion of agency is usefully elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari who use the term assemblage to highlight the way in which material content (bodies, actions, passions) and enunciations (statements, plans, laws) are linked not in linear fashion but rhizomatically as ‘reciprocal presuppositions and mutual insertions play themselves out’. The case I explore offers a striking example of how ‘reciprocal presupposition' is implicated in the constitution of a social field fit for government. Parties to the assemblage of community forest management use the label ambiguously to describe material content (what social bodies do, what they want) and to enunciate a prescription (what they should do, what they should want). Further, Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of assemblage emphasizes both temporality and spatiality: elements are drawn together at a particular conjuncture only to disperse or realign, and the shape shifts according to the terrain and the angle of vision.
In the next section I introduce the assemblage of community forest management and explain some of the features that make it especially fruitful ground for the application of the analytic I propose. Most obviously its very unwieldiness and the deep tensions that run through it highlight my central question: how the elements of an assemblage are, in fact, assembled.

Community forest management

Community forest management is an assemblage that has endured in shifting forms for at least thirty years and framed interventions of a governmental or ‘improving’ kind from the west coast of Canada to the eastern islands of Indonesia and scores of places in between. It has absorbed hundreds of millions of dollars in programme funds supplied by national forest agencies, transnational aid donors and so-called ‘non-governmental’ agencies of various kinds. Its elements include things (trees, logs, non-timber forest products, tools, documents), socially situated subjects (villagers, labourers, entrepreneurs, officials, activists, aid donors, scientists), objectives (profit, pay, livelihoods, control, property, efficiency, sustainability, conservation) and an array of knowledges, discourses, institutions, laws and regulatory regimes, including some of colonial provenance. Although the configurations vary greatly, as do the interests served, community forest management qualifies as ‘an’ assemblage by the consistency with which the set of elements I have just mentioned are drawn together, and by the resonance of the label itself. Like public education or family planning, the label flags an identifiable terrain of action and debate.

The context of this assemblage, in brief, is as follows. In the global north and south alike state forest bureaucracies claim jurisdiction over national forests for purposes of timber extraction or conservation but their claims are often disputed. In white settler colonies (Canada, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Latin America) and in the post-colonies of Africa and Asia there are counter-claims by indigenous groups who were present in forests before national regimes declared jurisdiction. These groups demand a share of forest products and revenue streams. In large parts of the global south farmers also make claims to forests as the source of land for conversion to agriculture. While national forest bureaucracies are sometimes persuaded to release land to large-scale agri-businesses, smallholders making claims to land as a source of agrarian livelihoods tend to be classified as illegal squatters and subject to eviction. Thus the forest edge is a site of struggle, but it is difficult to control by coercive means. Forest guards are hugely outnumbered by forest users and the terrain, often remote and mountainous, makes surveillance difficult. Laws that exclude people from forests are enforced sporadically and sometimes violently, but it has proven impossible for forest bureaucracies to enforce these laws in a consistent manner. Evictions are routinely followed by re-occupations or new encroachments. Under these conditions considerations of economy and efficiency suggest a governmental approach that seeks to act on actions, setting conditions and ‘artificially so
arranging things so that people, following only their own self-interest, will do as they ought’. Yet divergent interests and high stakes mean that the switch from commanding to governing does not resolve the struggle over access.

Community forest management is the assemblage that has emerged in the space of struggle between villagers and forest bureaucracies on the forest edge. Its central proposition is that people who live in close proximity to a forest can manage it effectively over the long term. It begins, that is, from a proposed solution rather than from a unified specification of a problem. The assemblage is far from seamless. It is a product of popular demand as well as expert diagnosis and prescription. It carries within it a will to govern that sits uneasily with an argument that communities are capable of governing themselves. It includes parties interested in upholding forest laws and parties who deem these laws illegitimate. A rough map of parties to the assemblage of community forestry and their various stakes would include the following:

- **Official forestry departments** seeking to retain or recover control over forest land under their jurisdiction but claimed by forest villagers. By offering these villagers limited benefits from the forest, officials hope to obtain their compliance with forest rules or, in some cases, their signed recognition of the legitimacy of the forest department’s claim to disputed land. Benefits yielded to villagers might include the right to collect non-timber forest products; permission to plant food crops for a few years on logged over land while the timber re-grows or payment in cash or kind for planting and protecting stands of commercial timber.

- **Conservationists** who believe that community control over forests is or can be more ecologically friendly than state-backed corporate logging and more effective than conservation by centralized state agencies incapable of enforcement. They draw upon theories about common property influenced by the ‘new institutional economics’ to argue that properly crafted rules formulated by communities with expert assistance can sustain forests over the long term.

- **Agroforestry experts** – interdisciplinary teams of natural and social scientists who work on combining crops with trees to demonstrate that forest conservation and the livelihood needs of forest villagers can be met in one felicitous package. They seek to validate indigenous agroforestry systems, devise improvements and spread perfected models to new locations. They hope that enhanced productivity will mitigate conflict over rights.

- **Legal advocates** convinced that forest villagers have legal rights as well as moral claims to the forest. They cite customary laws, national laws and transnational legal instruments such as the International Labour Organization’s Convention 169 on Indigenous People or the
Convention on Biodiversity. They aim to secure the land rights of forest villagers from appropriation by national regimes that continue the predatory practices of their colonial forebears.

• Activists inspired by cultural difference for whom community forestry is an object of passionate attachment embraced not only for its efficiency but because it symbolizes the possibility of a moral life characterized by social equity, environmental responsibility and democratic process. They tend to locate this exemplary moral life in indigenous traditions retained intact or in recoverable form by forest villagers who stand in contrast to urbanites, capitalists, bureaucrats and scientists.13

• Donor agencies for whom community forestry programmes help to fill 1980s mandates for sustainable development, environmental protection and poverty reduction and more recent mandates for good governance, the rule of law, conflict resolution, democratic participation and decentralization of powers from central to ‘local’ administrative units.

• Forest villagers, real and imagined, who are the subjects of community forestry initiatives. In general, their goal is to secure maximal control over the use and benefit of forest resources with minimal regulation by experts and officials.

The tensions in this assemblage are obvious from this outline of the players, their positions and stakes. How then is the assemblage of community forestry assembled? How are forest departments seeking to retain their jurisdiction drawn into alignment with legal advocates who deny it? How do activists stressing the natural capacity of indigenous communities to work for common goals relate to experts seeking to craft community institutions for maximum efficiency? What happens in the encounter between forest villagers interested in converting forest land to agriculture and conservationists convinced that forests should remain forests? To assemble this heterogeneous set of interests requires all the practices I outlined earlier – forging alignments, rendering technical, authorizing knowledge, managing failures and contradictions, reposing political questions and reassembling as the ground shifts. In the balance of this article I examine each of these practices in turn and explain the work they do in holding this particular assemblage together.
Assembling community forest management
Forging alignments: the will to govern as a point of convergence and fracture

For parties that aspire to govern, forging alignments with villagers is an essential component of an assemblage that claims the word ‘community’ in its title, but this forging is fragile. Promised benefits for forest villagers are intimately linked with attempts to govern their conduct – attempts that the targets of government often resist. One forest villager I met in the highlands of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi expressed the predicament to me thus: outsiders who come visiting and asking about the forest, he said, ‘are all forest guards, only they wear different colours’.

That the various experts encountered by Sulawesi highlanders as ‘forest guards’ are obsessed with the question of how villagers’ forest-related practices can be governed and improved is a key source of tension in the community management assemblage. On one hand, the argument that communities can and do manage forests is used by villagers and legal advocates to assert their rights against those of the intrusive managerial or extractive landlord-state. For villagers who can fit the bill, the hope is that community forestry will legitimize or, better still, legalize their access to land and constitute a space in which they can conduct their own affairs. On the other hand, the space they can inhabit is limited by the very terms of the assemblage: ‘community,’ ‘forest’ and ‘management’. This is not an assemblage in which anything goes. Communities ‘autonomized’ by community forest management programmes are simultaneously ‘responsibilized’. Often rights to resources are made conditional on performance, adding a coercive element to governmental strategies that operate, as far as possible, through rather than against the desires and interests of their target population (Dean 1999: 209). Yet the legitimacy of strategies of government cannot be assumed. Just as villagers dispute the laws regulating forest access they also dispute the right of authorities – forest guards in various colours – to direct their conduct towards improving ends.

The line of fracture between ‘forest guards’ and communities – the line drawn by the will to govern supplemented by the capacity to coerce – threatens the assemblage. Remarkably, it is the same line that enables diverse authorities to forge workable (though fragile) alignments among themselves: they are all ‘forest guards,’ as my interlocutor observed, despite their different colours. They agree on the ‘urgent need’ for experts to intervene.

For forest departments the need to intervene is obvious: forest villagers do not know how to conserve or replant forests, they must be instructed. For activists who argue that forest communities already have functioning indigenous systems of forest management, there is still
work to do. If not, why would one need community forest management programmes? Activists handle this tension by arguing that communities, and community capacities (in this case, a capacity for forest management), are naturally present, but they have been damaged or they need to be revised to meet modern conditions. They need to be restored, optimized or adjusted to new ends. This argument is a familiar feature of the governmental strategy Rose labels ‘government through community’, in which ‘community is to be achieved, yet the achievement is nothing more than the birth-to-presence of a form of being which pre-exists’ (1999: 176–7). To act as midwife for such a birth – to render communities fit for community forest management or to demonstrate their existing fitness – is to engage in government.

Even when they refer to community capacities, prescriptions for community forest management always carve out a role for experts. Consider this example:

The crucial local level factor in sustainable development is social and political acceptance among rural land users of the idea that the environment requires management and concerted action; and that this (in the long term) is in their interest. It is of fundamental importance that individuals feel responsible for the sound use and management, are involved in joint decision making and abide by the rules that have been agreed. Therefore, it is imperative that decision making power and responsibilities be entrusted to the primary users of natural resources, the rural populations. There are compelling reasons to vest these in strong community organizations and to reinforce participatory principles.16

Note the elision of what is and what should be. Resource users have a natural interest in sustainable management, but they need to be educated and reminded of this interest. Their agreement and compliance must be invoked, and their organizations made strong and participatory. There is, in short, work to be done.

Rendering technical: framing the arena of intervention

This section highlights the work that must be done to represent the unruly array of forces and relations on the forest edge as a bounded arena in which calculated interventions will produce beneficial results. For ‘forest guards’ of all colours communities must be rendered technical, their internal dynamics, customs and values examined, their interactions with land and forest assessed, their deficiencies identified and interventions devised to secure optimal arrangements.

Many technical descriptions of community forestry programmes present simplified narratives of problem/solution that gloss over tensions to make the assemblage appear far more coherent
than it is. Such texts leave room for doubt about whether the authors know anything about the complex social processes they propose to govern and improve. Rather than dissect a simplified text of this kind I have chosen to explore the arguments supplied by Marcus Colchester (1994), one of community forestry's most sophisticated, justice-oriented advocates. A close reading of his work illustrates just how hard it is to construct community forest management as a bounded, technical domain.

Colchester (1994) presents community forest management in two dimensions: as a political intervention to secure the rights of forest villagers and as a technical intervention to improve their practices. He binds these strands together by offering two separate definitions of sustainability and linking them to 'local people' characterized in quite specific ways. His first definition emphasizes institutions and rights: sustainability as it applies to rural communities means 'that basic needs must be met; that resources should be subject to local control; that local communities must have a decisive voice in planning; and that they should represent themselves through their own institutions' (Colchester 1994: 69). To this definition he adds an environmental hook, tying equity to conservation. If their needs are not met, forest villagers 'will be obliged by necessity to take from the environment more than planned' (ibid.: 70). He balances this predominantly institutional and economic definition of sustainability with another, biological one. Because one cannot know the needs of future generations, 'sustainable use thus involves not only conserving biological diversity, fauna and flora, but also maintaining ecological functions such as soil quality, hydrological cycles, climate and weather, river flow and water quality' (ibid.: 70). He then draws a link between natural landscapes, livelihoods and 'local' requirements. Sustainability 'also implies maintaining supplies of natural products – game, fish, fodder, fruits, nuts, resins, dyes, bastis, construction materials, fuel wood etc. – which are essential to the livelihoods of local people' (ibid.: 70). He links forest dwelling with cultural distinction and political marginality (ibid.: 71), connecting landscape, livelihood and identity in one problem definition and one problem solution: community forest management.

Note in Colchester's description the presumption that 'communities' exist – for how else could 'they' have their own institutions and a 'decisive' voice in planning? This assumption is elaborated in a strikingly technical description of what forest-dependent communities want: 'the right to the ownership and control of their territories; the right to self-determination; and the right to represent themselves through their own institutions' or, even more specifically, 'the right to collective ownership of their communal territories. They want legal recognition granting them inalienable freehold title to their ancestral domains' (ibid.: 72). It is, he states, denial of communal rights that causes land ownership to be fragmented and individualized, and traditions of custodianship and resource management undermined (ibid.: 76).
The critical omissions and erasures in this depiction of exemplary communities, whose desires Colchester claims to know and represent, are not hard to spot: farmers who cut trees to plant crops, timber workers, people who have migrated to the forest edge or been forcibly resettled there, ‘local’ people who know nothing about the craft of weaving and dying cloth because for generations they have bought their clothing in the local market, people whose land is not and never was part of a ‘communal’ territory, people who sell their own land, people who welcome new markets for cash crops and take from the environment not just to meet ‘basic needs’ but to finance education and access urban jobs. People such as these are difficult to accommodate in the niche in nature to which villagers are assigned in Colchester’s rendering of community management. Refractory processes must also be excluded from the diagram. In many parts of the world clearing forest is the practice that establishes private rights to land, and land once cleared is rapidly commoditized and accumulated. Thus villagers’ interest in trees on a forest frontier often has more to do with a competitive grab for land in the context of agrarian class formation than ‘management,’ still less management on a communal basis. Community forest management is not equipped to address processes of this kind so they do not figure in the narrative.

While some unruly forces are ruled out of Colchester’s diagram, forces that can be rendered technical are admitted. Colchester makes the difficulties of implementing community management the subject of a detailed, technical analysis focused on the troubled ‘case’ of Papua New Guinea (PNG) (ibid.: 86–7). In PNG collective land rights are indeed strongly protected by law, yet communities have not conserved their forests. Instead, they have leased their land to logging and mining companies in exchange for royalties. The problem, Colchester argues, is the law’s imprecise definition of who has rights to negotiate land deals, leading to manipulation, bribery and debt leverage by companies. He notes the rapid pace of social change that has made New Guineans unrealistic about what is achievable, and led them to contemplate futures that are not tied to the land. Tribal ‘big men’ have become ‘less accountable and less responsive to community needs and rights’ than they were ‘under traditional circumstances,’ a phenomenon he calls ‘lairdism’ and recognizes to be widespread in indigenous societies (ibid: 87). The resolution of this rather formidable set of counter-indications is to be found, Colchester argues, in a technical intervention: replacing traditional institutions with more democratic and accountable ones, tailored to new purposes.

As soon as an improvement is needed, experts are free to step in to rearrange things. Colchester observes this freedom and finds it problematic. He quotes Jack Westoby, former Director of Forestry at the FAO:
Only very much later did it dawn on the development establishment that the very act of establishing new institutions often meant the weakening, even the destruction of existing indigenous institutions which ought to have served as the basis for sane and durable development: the family, the clan, the tribe, the village, sundry mutual aid organizations, peasant associations, rural trade unions, marketing and distribution systems and so on.
(Colchester 1994: 89)

Colchester seeks to resolve the contradiction that outsiders should facilitate and ‘build the groundwork’ for improved institutional arrangements, but they should not impose, by recourse to the standard two-step of government through community I outlined earlier: communities have the requisite values and skills, but these need to be recovered, reasserted, built upon and democratized in ways that ‘local people’ and experts jointly devise.

The political charge of Colchester’s advocacy is reasserted, disjunctively, by his concluding argument that the ‘essential pre-condition for achieving success [in community forest management programmes] is that the state divests itself of control over land and transfers this “into the hands of those whose survival directly depends upon their careful management”’(Colchester 1994: 92 quoting Chip Fay). Note that the directive ‘careful management’ is reasserted within the discussion of transfers and rights. Note too that there is no discussion of how the state might be persuaded to so divest itself – only a comment that it is bound to resist. Thus the political struggle over rights is present in Colchester’s analysis but submerged by technical prescriptions for reconfiguring community institutions to meet new requirements and ensuring that newly autonomized and responsibilized communities know precisely what they should do. Rendering community management technical enables Colchester to bring rights-based advocacy and expert prescription into a plausible, if awkward, alignment.

**Authorizing knowledge: assimilating science and containing critique**

As advocates acknowledge, the research base to support community management programmes is sketchy. The argument that communities are interested in, and capable of, forest management and conservation has drawn ‘on a small and non-representative sample of places and peoples’ (Peluso et al. 1995: 217). In Thailand, for example, most of the academic research relevant to this assemblage has been focused on the ‘hill tribes’, but these comprise ‘less than two per cent of Thailand’s population and are a small minority of its forest-dependent peoples’ (ibid.: 216–17). In Indonesia attention has been focused on the forest-friendly knowledge and capacities of customary communities, assumed to be social units. In
place of a broad analysis of these communities and how they are changing, scholars and advocates tend to focus on a few exemplary places that serve as icons or models. From places such as these advocates scale up very quickly to forest-managing communities in general, across the nation and beyond. For the transnational advocacy group the World Rainforest Movement, ‘many examples of appropriate forest management, in which environmentally sustainable use is assured while benefiting local communities’ indicate the need to return ‘responsibility for forest management to the communities who inhabit them, considering that they are the ones primarily concerned in the conservation of this resource’ (World Rainforest Movement 2002).

The intellectual history of the turn to community to reverse the excesses of state and market is a long one. The more specific argument that communities have the capacity to manage forests has a distinct genealogy usefully mapped with reference to Southeast Asia by Nancy Peluso, Peter Vandergeest and Lesley Potter (1995). From the 1950s to the mid-1970s, they find, experts of the FAO and the World Bank emphasized the economic role of forests and promoted commercial timber exploitation. Watershed protection became an ‘urgent need’ only when it affected downstream irrigation and hydro-electric projects. Local inhabitants were characterized as threats to the forest whose encroachment should be stopped. There was no mention of their rights. The expansion of upland agriculture and organized land settlement was encouraged in the name of productivity and development. In the same period anthropologists and cultural ecologists discovered that isolated forest-dwelling groups actively modified forest landscapes to make them more productive, a practice later labelled agroforestry. In the 1960s this second strand of scientific knowledge began to be used to challenge the first. Scholars did not yet question the ecological and economic wisdom of timber extraction and state-sponsored agricultural expansion on forest frontiers, arguments that emerged in the 1970s, but they did begin to defend local forest-related practices and promote a ‘more sympathetic approach by government agencies’ (ibid.: 203).

From the mid-1970s environmental concerns equated with the fate of the forest stimulated new debates, first about downstream flooding and siltation and later about green house effects and the loss of biodiversity (ibid.: 205). The undermining of local rights through intensified state control and elite grabs for timber and land began to interest both scholars and activists (ibid.: 208–9). Coercive conservation requiring forest demarcation and the exclusion of customary landholders was challenged. Bringing the strands together, scholars and activists, picking up on the older indigenous knowledge literature, argued that villagers were the best biodiversity defenders and should therefore be given forest management rights (ibid.: 213). By the early 1990s these arguments were prominent in the assemblage of community forest management.
In the 1990s the constitution of ‘common property’ as a domain of inquiry dominated by rational choice and game theorists further broadened the scientific base of community forest management. It led to increased emphasis on modelling and prediction, referencing long lists of conditions under which resources held in common could be expected to be governed sustainably. Arun Agrawal, among others, argued for development of a generalizing science of the commons based on ‘careful research design and sample selection, construction of causal mechanisms, and a shift toward comparative and statistical rather than single-case analyses’ (2001: 1). Interventions by these scholars certainly presented communities in technical terms, as arena ‘to be investigated, mapped, classified, documented, interpreted, their vectors explained’ and subject to calculated redesign (Rose 1999: 175). Yet the findings of common property research proved difficult to use either politically or as a guide to planning. As field practitioners of community forestry in Zimbabwe lament, the common property literature emphasizes ‘possible positive outcomes rather than on the field complexities’ (Campbell et al. 2001: 595). The emphasis on formal, rule-based systems governed by perfected ‘design principles’ fails to connect to conditions in which resources are low value and rights complex, contested, and overlapping (ibid.: 595). Nor does it adequately grasp the uncertainties of ecology or social relations, or the possibility that what appears to be rational landscape design or ‘management’ is the serendipitous outcome of everyday practices that have quite disparate motives. As anthropologists Melissa Leach and James Fairhead (2000) demonstrated, tethering livestock on a village periphery creates fertile conditions in which trees tend to flourish, but there are no ‘common property institutions’ making this happen, nor is there a plan.

Social scientists have been prominent in the assemblage of community forest management, mainly in the role of friendly critics. They challenge the simplified proposition that communities manage forests, point to the variability of conditions and highlight the risks of homogenizing or idealizing complex practices. They seek to fine tune, adjust and improve on the model, but they seldom propose a radically different approach.22 Indeed, when the alternatives appear to be reduced to community versus state, few scholars concerned about social justice locate themselves on the state side of the divide. For this reason, they self-censor their criticism. They are wary of supplying ammunition – arguments, data or the justification to use live bullets – to forest agencies or others who would exclude communities and coerce conservation in forest areas.23 A few examples will illustrate the kinds of contained critique made by social scientists who do not want their input to unravel the assemblage.

One strand of scholarly criticism of community forest management focuses on the nature of rural property relations. It is a debate between legal advocates arguing that communities have distinct ‘community-based’ rights, generated autonomously by people interacting with each
other and their environment, and anthropologists who study law in practice. The anthropologists find that people's sense of entitlement and their frameworks for justification in property disputes are plural and hybrid. Forest villagers' sense of what is 'customary' is refracted through colonial and post-colonial legal regimes and the brute facts of possession.24 The practical implication of the anthropologists’ critique is that recognition of customary or community-based rights presents as many questions as it resolves.

Just as the basis of community claims is complex and hybrid, so too with the state: state agencies may claim to command large areas of forest but they are not necessarily in effective possession. State assertions of eminent domain become real to forest dwelling people only when ‘forest guards’ take an interest. In many forest areas there are long-standing accommodations that enable people to farm in 'state forest' while guards look the other way.25 Anthropologists and others who study these dynamics worry that de facto compromises might be jeopardized by the new forms of visibility community forest management programmes require, but stop short of condemning the attempt. Containment works here at the level of empirical detail: in a complex field of relations, community forest interventions may – or may not – produce negative outcomes.

Anthropologists often critique assumptions of stability, coherence, homogeneity and localization. They argue, for example, that the community of community management programmes:

compresses individual differences, intentions, and agendas, and presents people, in terms of their corporate membership in communities, as somehow singular, identifiable, and knowable entities. In assuming an unquestionable spatial visibility and temporal viability, the notion that ‘community’ can sometimes be a specific social achievement or a particular political performance is completely disregarded. In the novel form of essentialism, communities become the new tribes, or even worse, the new races of development, environmental or resource management discourses. (Pannel and Benda-Beckmann 1998: 20)

Essentialism, scholars argue, is dangerous when forest villagers find their rights to forest resources pegged to standards of community cohesion and forest conservation they cannot meet. If retention of customary ways is placed at the centre of the rights argument, evidence that custom is dynamic and contested may be used as another reason to deny rights.26 This critique ends, therefore, with the elucidation of risks.
Anthropologists who study law have been especially critical of the discourse of sustainable resource management that creates new resources (biodiversity, the global commons), new bearers of rights (the global community, conservation lobbies) authorized to intervene in people’s lives and new or intensified practices of exclusion, regulation and zoning (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1999a: 2–3). Resource management, these critics argue, is a ‘de-juridified' discourse that ‘constructs a world where there are no ‘owners'; there are only co-managers, resource users, ‘stake-holders...an amorphous public, and an anonymous private sector'; it ‘disenfranchises people as effectively as any colonial regime or despotic state’ (Pannel and Benda-Beckmann 1998: 21). This critique is rather serious because it directly challenges the idea that resource management is a technical intervention devoid of political-economic effects. It can be countered, however, by the reassertion of the ‘urgent need’ to protect forests and bring benefits to impoverished forest communities.

Community forestry discourse notwithstanding, it is important to recall that the argument that poor people are the primary motors of deforestation has not gone away. Many experts remain dubious about local stewardship, notably staff of forest departments who would like support for coercive measures to keep people out of forests. This is the context in which scholars and advocates join forces to hold the assemblage together. Advocates reintegrate evidence that local people do in fact cut down forests in several ways. First, they relativize the charge. Forest bureaucracies and corporations have been the main forest destroyers. No doubt the practices of local communities are imperfect, but they are certainly less destructive than the alternatives. Moreover they can be built upon and improved. Second, they subsume critiques by returning again and again to exemplary places where successful community resource management occurs. If some communities can be good stewards, others can be too, given the proper encouragement, training and appropriate regulatory framework. Third, advocates agree that local people are not ‘ecologically noble savages' nor are they paragons of democratic practice. They cannot be trusted automatically to do the right thing. Therefore they need to be tutored, their conduct conducted in appropriate ways and sanctions applied when necessary. The appropriate ‘conditionalities’ become matters for experts to decide. Critique gives way to a reassertion of the will to govern and improve.

Managing failures and contradictions
The practices I address in this section concern those that attempt to present failures as the outcome of rectifiable deficiencies in technique, to smooth out contradictions and to devise compromises.

Key to the legitimacy of community forest management, as I noted earlier, is active public demand. For forest departments, donors and advocates alike the rationale for community
forest management is that it addresses peoples’ needs and solves their problems. An initiative does not qualify as community forest management if it is simply imposed upon villagers by parties seeking to profit from their labour, control disputed land or access donor funds. Advocates police the boundaries of the assemblage on the basis of this criterion. For Lynch and Harwell:

References to community-based natural resource management...should be used only with regard to initiatives that are primarily controlled and authorized from within a community. Externally initiated activities with varying degrees of community participation should not be referred to as community-based, at least not until the community exercises primary decision-making authority (Lynch and Harwell 2002: 3)

Thus these advocates follow stricture with compromise: external initiatives can qualify so long as they are eventually taken over and owned by ‘the community’.

Donor agencies supporting community forest management programmes in the global south routinely claim that their programmes are ‘owned’ by a local constituency, although such ownership is seldom achieved. Similarly activists and non-government organizations (NGOs) claim that they merely facilitate initiatives that are community based but this claim is contested. Sceptics argue that NGOs ‘sell’ the term community in order to access donor-funded projects. Donors monitor the relations between NGOs and villagers to detect signs of less than ‘genuine’ participation. This puts NGOs in a bind. They must service their client, the donor, and deliver the agreed outputs on schedule and on budget. Their institutional survival depends upon successful projects and further donor funds. The communities in which they work become the ‘target group’ or the ‘beneficiaries’ of initiatives designed for them and imposed, however gently. On the other hand, donors committed to concepts of public participation and empowerment want to select NGOs with a credible constituency, a public mobilized enough to define its own agenda. Spreading donor largesse helps an organization to acquire and keep such a constituency, but risks undermining its authenticity.29 The relay points in this assemblage are fragile and held together by compromises of various kinds, as I will demonstrate with some examples from Indonesia.

Public anger about the conduct of the forest department is widespread in Indonesian villages within or adjacent to state-claimed forests. At one national gathering of forest villagers convened by advocates there were ‘[a]approximately 160 people, with 160 stories of how state-sanctioned forest industries had taken their lands’ (Fay and Sirait 2002: 131). For forest villagers there is no doubt about the nature of the problem. Many parties, including forest villagers,
have converged on community forest management as the solution. Yet this does not make community forest management the pure product of popular aspiration. The assemblage shapes the ways in which popular demands are articulated and determines whether or not demands will be recognized, validated and acted upon.

Advocates and donors focus their attention upon communities that already fit, or can be made to fit, the ideal of sustainability. Exemplary villagers, for example, reportedly told a timber concessionaire that they ‘could not agree to convert farmlands and orchards...into timber plantations because the land is their life and culture and is also part of the last remaining forests in the world’ (Lynch and Harwell 2002:101). But there are cases where an alignment cannot be forged. In a part of Sulawesi I know well, farmers who occupied a corner of a national park claiming the right to land and livelihood were unsuccessful in representing their activities as community forest management, although they tried. An adjacent group also farming inside the park was successful in gaining the support of activists and, after a struggle, recognition from the forest department because it was able to document the ecologically friendly character of its indigenous land-use system. In the sixty-plus villages around the park, all of which covet park land for farming and often consider they have an ancestral claim to it, there were cries of ‘unfair’ (Li 2007).

Successes are unstable. Villagers deploy maps of village territory and land use made with the help of NGOs and donor funds to defend their land from state-backed timber corporations, but they use the same maps as a basis for selling timber rights to these corporations. They use the maps to secure claims against neighbouring villages seeking to sell the same timber in an atmosphere of intensified competition and distrust. These are not the happy outcomes community forest advocates expect from their sponsorship of community mapping. Advocates accommodate refractory cases in which the activities of villagers threaten to destabilize the assemblage by a shift in the discourse. They point out that communities are not harmonious. Greed and graft are to be expected. They argue that disputes are part of a normal process of competition. The urgent need is for mechanisms for dispute management. Improvement rests in the engineering of appropriate processes and institutions to encourage approved behaviours.

Even in refractory cases, advocates, donors and forest bureaucracies still prefer liberal strategies that set conditions and act on actions. Recourse to coercion lays bare contradictions in the assemblage, indicating that villagers do not want what community forestry programmes offer. Coercion makes forest agencies vulnerable to the criticism that they are interested only in timber and the associated income streams and have no genuine concern for ‘the people’ for whom they profess to care. Coercion is particularly awkward for donors whose principal
rationale for intervention is the utopian desire to bring order and efficiency to the interaction between people and forests and to enhance the welfare of the population. They insist that problems should be addressed not by brutality but by enhanced technique of the kinds that experts are there to supply.

In practice, contradiction is managed less by technique than by compromise in its dual sense: parties to the assemblage make compromises and, in so doing, they become implicated, their positions compromised and their critiques contained (Li 1999). I have already examined the compromised position of scholars, myself included, who set aside their scepticism about diagrams that purport to render messy actualities technical and manageable in order to protect the assemblage from attack. Compromise similarly characterizes the position of the Sulawesi forest villager I quoted earlier who lamented the omnipresence of forest guards. His village benefited from the work of NGOs that helped persuade officials of their sustainable, indigenous forest management system, thus averting their eviction from a national park. After our first meeting at his forest village, I met him again at the office of the NGO in the provincial capital and again in the capital city where he was making arrangements for a trip to China to represent ‘forest communities’ at a gathering of NGOs. He too had become an expert.

To point out the complex positioning of a forest villager is not to suggest that he had become corrupt or somehow less authentic – as if his only proper place was in the village. In each of these sites he was a legitimate social actor, positioning himself in a complex field of power that opened some avenues for action just as it foreclosed others. Assemblages such as community forestry cannot be resolved into neat binaries that separate power from resistance, or progressive forces from reactionary ones. It is difficult to determine who has been co-opted and who betrayed. Fuzziness, adjustment and compromise are critical to holding assemblages together.

Anti-politics: keeping the assemblage governmental

This section considers how parties to the assemblage attempt to re-pose political questions as matters of technique, and to close down debate about the legitimacy of forest laws and the distributive effects of particular arrangements. Rose alerts us to the ‘switch points where an opening turns into a closure’ (1999: 192) as an ethico-politics inciting debate settles into a new programme to direct conduct, or popular demand is captured and redirected by expert prescription. Just as significant, in my view, are switches in the opposite direction as expertise is challenged and political contestation resumed. Yet I find the metaphor of a switch point too mechanical, too solid. It suggests an either/or. By thinking of anti-politics as a practice I seek to explore how the re-posing of political questions comes about.
For state forest bureaucracies the recourse to a governmental ethos of improvement backed by coercive conditionalities is a means to deflect a deeper challenge to the legitimacy of state-claimed forest boundaries. Framed more positively, the governmental ethos is what enables state forest agencies to position themselves within the community forest management assemblage. If communities were perfectly responsible they could be autonomous and a state agency mandated to manage forests would have no techno-scientific rationale for its own existence. Recognition in the community forest management assemblage that there are deficiencies in communities enables state forest agencies to retain their customary role as the party that produces policies, plans and regulations, prescribing and enforcing the proper relations between people and forests. Further, support for community forest management helps forest departments to absorb the critique that state forest management has failed. It enables them to recognize their deficiencies and restate their commitment to redress the errors of the past, including their neglect of communities.

A state forest agency willing to govern and improve itself in dialogue with its critics, learning from scientists and the new experts in community, strengthens its claim to govern. Reformers within the bureaucracy help to translate the terms of community forest management into a language that fellow officials can accept and make their own. Donors willing to supply significant funds to forest departments for training, pilot projects and the scaling up of community forest management projects into mainstream programmes run by (reformed) forest departments are key to the forging of this particular alignment.31 Again, the alignment is fragile. State agencies cannot tolerate versions of community forest management that require them to cede control over forests to communities, giving up the territorial prerogatives they inherited from colonial regimes and the associated income streams. As Michael Dove (1995: 327) argues, no amount of training in community forest management ‘principles’ or ‘attitudinal change’ in forest officials will lead to a change in the structural position of the state apparatus vis-à-vis forests or forest communities. In the case of state resource agencies in India, Amita Baviskar and Vasant Saberwal find similarly that ‘[t]echno-hubris as an attitude was (and remains) firmly grounded in political economy, in the great gains from remaining in control of government funds and infrastructure’ (2002: 45).

Pulling the assemblage together – uncertainly – is the concept that modern rulers should seek to govern and not simply to pillage. If this was not the case forest departments in the global south would have no part in community forest management. Rather than reject the assemblage outright, or attempt to justify their right to pillage, forest bureaucracies seek to forge alignments that help to contain challenges. Often they adopt the language of community forest management but insist on treating it as a contract between villagers and the forest department in which the department dictates the terms. Sometimes they recognize that there
are some traditional communities that manage forests sustainably and grant them permission to continue undisturbed, but – drawing upon the exaggerated portrayals of advocates – define the approved ‘niche in nature’ so narrowly that few forest villagers can expect to qualify. They also continue to evict people, the scandalous fate of tribal communities caught in the wake of the massive Joint Forest Management programme in India sponsored by the World Bank.

Bilateral aid donors, multilateral development banks and foundations have invested extraordinary resources in community forest management with the twin objectives of improving communities and improving forest bureaucracies. The second relay is at least as difficult as the first. Donors must tread softly, attempting to reform bureaucracies by engaging in ‘policy dialogue’, ‘capacity building’ and conducting ‘pilot projects’ in which to nurture new ideas and practices. Yet these pilots often end without donors securing commitments from state forest agencies to ‘scale up’ pilots into programmes, still less to change their policies, which still include the harassment and eviction of forest villagers. Further, endless workshops fail the test of new audit requirements that expect donor agencies to manage ‘by results’.

Donors pursue their improving agendas within the limits set by their need to continue to engage with the state apparatus. They can be pro good governance and they can be suspicious of opportunistic officials seeking to access project funds, but they need officials to sign off on memoranda of understanding, issue visas and so on. Thus they cannot be anti-state. Nor can they upset the status quo by engaging in an explicit political challenge. Baviskar and Saberwal’s examination of the relationship of the Ford Foundation to India’s ruling regime illustrates the anti-politics embedded in donor promotion of community management. In the 1960s the Foundation concluded that involvement in Indian land reform would be futile. It was wary of accusations of political interference and stepping too heavily on sensitive administrative toes (Baviskar and Saberwal 2002: 18–20). In the 1980s the Foundation turned to community management on marginal lands, a strategy that enabled it to address poverty without tackling issues of land access or the mobilization of rural people as workers. Indeed, the anti-politics of this strategy was explicit: Robert Chambers, then a Ford Foundation programme officer, argued that securing marginal resources for the poor was a “politically realistic” strategy that would not be seen as threatening rural power structures’ (Baviskar and Saberwal 2002: 54). From then on a focus on communities and institutions closed down the space for ‘an engagement with politics in terms of the class character of the state and support for basic redistribution of land-related assets’ (ibid.: 61). Rather than seeking to reform the refractory state apparatus, Ford began to avoid it and work directly with NGOs (ibid.: 61). Later, it stressed ‘collaborations between groups with multiple perspectives and a plurality of approaches’ (ibid.: 68).
The commitment to pluralism, to multi-stakeholder dialogues in which diverse views and cultural differences are respected, is claimed by advocates of community management as a moral charter. The same move displaces debate about access to rural resources by focusing attention on their management. Ford’s community forest management programme in Indonesia is a case in point. It assembles forest villagers, NGOs, the forest department and others in multi-stakeholder working groups. Rather than press for a political resolution of forest ownership, forcing a confrontation, Ford staff argue that ‘[o]nly through the messy process of experimentation in the field can forest-dependent communities and the forestry ministry reach some sort of negotiated settlement on how to manage these forests’ (Campbell 2002: 123). Through a participatory process with ‘clear but flexible guidelines,’ facilitators will assist communities ‘to discuss sustainable and equitable management options, and to develop indicators to monitor and correct their progress’ (ibid.: 123). Officials will learn to operate as facilitators and regulators, rather than revenue extractors, and to move towards incremental policy change (ibid.: 124).

Managing multi-stakeholder dialogues to contain politics is, however, no easy task. Sparks fly. Disgruntled parties walk out. There are risks involved in assembling people in one place. I had the opportunity to witness how the assemblage is defended in Indonesia in 2002 when I was invited by the organizers to attend a large workshop titled ‘Reflections Four Years after Reform: Building Social Forestry in the Era of Decentralization’. The workshop was paid for by the Ford Foundation, the Asian Development Bank and Britain’s Department for International Development. There were 174 invited participants selected to represent various stakeholders: state forest agencies, industry, donors, scholars, activists and forest communities. I was given the role of ‘reviewer’ which meant attending all the sessions, assessing their significance and providing input to the organizers on a recommendation to be presented to the Forest Minister. It was a dream assignment for an anthropologist interested in practices of assemblage. It gave me privileged access to the organizing committee and their internal debates, as well as the large gatherings. The following, in brief, are my observations.

At the outset of the meeting participants were handed a neatly published booklet of some 100 pages. The booklet stated the purpose of the meeting, offered a deliberately vague and inclusive definition of social forestry, described some of the well-known exemplary cases and also offered a full set of recommendations. So what, I wondered, was the purpose of the meeting if the relevant database (the exemplars) as well as the recommendations were known in advance? The purpose was stated to be the preparation of input for the minister who had declared his intention to launch a new social forestry programme as a measure to help solve multiple forest problems: illegal logging, fires, a dysfunctional forest industry, rehabilitation of
logged-over land, conservation and the new dynamic created by administrative
decentralization. The organizers argued, reasonably enough, that the minister should be
encouraged to devise the new social forestry programme with reference to the lessons learned
from experiences with community forest management to date.

The plenary sessions were heated. Workshop participants challenged senior officials from the
Forest Department and from the state timber corporations with incisive and passionate
critiques. The officials had to field sharp questions about the destruction of forests, the
prevalence of illegal logging and state failure to recognize the rights and needs of forest
communities. For the most part, the officials acknowledged their collective failure to manage
the forests and stated their commitment to a better future working with communities.

In the small group sessions that followed participants were asked to share their own
experiences with community forest management, identify the problems they faced and
propose ways to overcome them. Time constraints meant that it was not actually possible for a
mixed group of officials, activists and forest villagers from across the archipelago to ‘share
experiences’, which are hugely diverse and embedded in the complex politics of particular
locales. As a substitute, participants were asked to capture the key points by writing with a
marker on a large sheet of paper. The identification of problems and solutions became
similarly simplified. Problems were to be written down on index cards which were then sorted
by the facilitators into clusters, all specificity reduced. What is one to make of a card that states
‘lack of communication between the relevant parties’? What is the story behind it? The
solutions were equally banal: ‘Increase coordination between all parties.’ Participants were
bored. The facilitators had to work hard to keep participants on task and to corral the outputs
into acceptable formats. By the third day the anger and critique that dominated the plenary
sessions had dissipated and lists of ways in which each of the ‘relevant parties’ should improve
themselves had taken their place. Villagers should cooperate with each other; officials should
be sympathetic to villagers’ livelihood needs; NGOs should be more effective mediators;
scientists should offer villagers agroforestry packages that are both sustainable and lucrative.39

The report published following the workshop reveals the fractures within the assemblage,
even as it attempts to hold the assemblage together. It declares on the first page that the
participants ‘agreed not to debate concepts and definitions, instead declaring themselves
willing to work together to reverse forest degradation in Indonesia’ (CIFOR 2003: ix).40 It
presents the harder hitting critiques of forest policy and practice – the unilateral declaration of
forest boundaries, impoverishment and displacement of villagers, timber extraction that is out
of control. Yet it combines these critiques with harmony language, pointing to a way forward
defined by more coordination, consultation, participation, constructive debate and mutual learning by all parties. It is a masterful piece of assembly work.

From my insider location I came to know something of the struggle over the recommendations regarding land rights. The Forest Minister had told the organizers before the meeting that the issue of forest department's territorial control was not up for debate and should not be discussed. His attempt at containment failed at one level: virtually all of the written and verbal submissions by the participants raised the problem of land tenure directly and repeatedly, as the report observes. Yet he succeeded at another level. After several drafts and iterations, in the final version the recommendations hedge. Rather than a frontal critique they adopt the way of the ant. This is Indonesian activist idiom for conducting a political campaign indirectly by identifying small openings and digging tiny paths, winning by persistence. The recommendations ask the Forest Department to ‘rationalize’ the forest estate by ‘engaging in dialogue’ and ‘coordinating with other departments’. The department should recognize existing social forestry initiatives. It should begin a process that relinquishes some territory and affirms peoples’ rights (CIFOR 2003: x). The recommendations stop short of demanding a radical reconfiguration of ownership and management of state-claimed forest land. They do not specify how much territory should be devolved to forest villagers, an issue that had been openly debated at the workshop, complete with maps and numbers, and explicit too in early drafts of the recommendations. Nor do they call attention to the illegitimacy of the department’s claim to control 70 per cent of Indonesia’s total land mass, its tolerance of destructive logging both ‘legal’ and illegal or its rent-seeking practices – topics that were front and centre of the plenary sessions. They compromise.

Hedging vis-à-vis the Forest Department the report is more direct about another disjuncture: ‘The forest industry will surely lose out if social forestry is properly implemented. For this reason, thought should be given to how their interests can also be accommodated in social forestry’ (CIFOR 2003: 33). This observation appears in the concluding paragraph of the report although it was not discussed in the report or at the meeting. Bringing the timber industry into the assemblage would be work indeed, though my scepticism was modified by a conversation I had with the Director of Development for a major para-state timber corporation. When I asked him why a very senior manager such as himself had chosen to use his valuable time to attend a three-day meeting about social forestry he replied that, of the hundreds of thousands of hectares of logging concession under his jurisdiction in the Indonesian island of Kalimantan, much was closed down due to conflict with villagers who were blockading logging roads, burning equipment and uprooting new seedlings as fast as they were planted. He saw no prospect for a forest industry in future unless the villagers actually had an interest – a hard-nosed, economic interest – in planting and protecting trees. Popular mobilization had
made it impossible for him to conduct business as usual. This fact, combined with the hope of finding a technical solution to a tough, political problem, had brought him into the assemblage.

**Reassembling: community forest management in the age of neoliberalism**

The practices I treat in this section are concerned with grafting new elements onto the assemblage, reworking existing elements for new purposes and transposing the meanings of key terms. They are well illustrated by shifts in community forest management in the context of neoliberalism. There are two potential relays or points of connection. First and most obviously, the emphasis on community is compatible with a neoliberal concern to downsize and decentralize bureaucratic functions. It is easily assimilated to agendas stressing the need for ‘good governance’, democracy and the rule of law. Second and more contentiously, community forestry is being promoted as a way to promote entrepreneurialism and market efficiency. Communities, advocates of this version propose, can supply forest products and services at a competitive price. Here I tease out some of the ways in which market thinking might be grafted into the community forest management assemblage while pointing out the stresses that make it difficult for it to take hold.

For some time, and with increasing intensity since about 2001, the World Bank and other agencies have been promoting the formal registration and titling of land in the global south, arguing that this measure improves tenure security and transparency, encourages investment, enables landholders to raise capital by mortgage and fosters an ‘efficient’ land market. Proper land policies, the experts argue, are essential to growth and poverty reduction (World Bank 2003). Security, in this instance, is the key word that has been re-signified. The need for tenure security as a basis for livelihoods – the concern of advocates for forest communities – is reframed as security for market efficiency, with a crucial shift. Whereas advocates arguing on behalf of forest communities seek security from arbitrary expropriation by the state and state-sponsored corporations, proponents of the neoliberal version highlight the virtues of security as a means to facilitate commerce. The overlapping discourse of security is one relay point at which distinct agendas might – or might not – be aligned. Critics have not been slow to point out that ‘efficient’ land markets equate, in practice, to the enhanced ability of investors to acquire land cheaply from the poor. It renders them deeply insecure. There are popular mobilizations to protest Bank land policies.

A further re-crafting of community forest management to bring it in line with market agendas hinges on the idea of issuing title to communities. Although the World Bank has thus far emphasized the superior efficiency of private individual freehold tenure, it has started to take
up the argument of advocates that communal tenure can also be private, as long as the community has established a legal personality. The benefit, from a market perspective, is that ‘the community’ could then sell, mortgage or lease its assets to corporations that can use it efficiently. This is a significant reversal of the project of community forest advocates who seek to use communal tenure to protect communities inexperienced with markets from the risk of losing land to more savvy market operators, and to protect vulnerable villagers from the actions of unaccountable leaders who might connive with outsiders to dispossess them.

Following the paternalistic approach of colonial regimes, advocates argue that communal land should be inalienable. They worry that the World Bank’s communal titling policy facilitates the bulking of land into large parcels endowed with just the kind of legal certainty corporations require. Suddenly communal tenure looks risky and the fuzzy boundaries and ad hoc compromises wrought between villagers and guards on the forest edge look oddly secure. Advocates still press for the legal recognition of communal tenure but demand tight restrictions, insisting that a market in communal land is the last thing forest villagers need.

A third element that grafts market thinking into the assemblage is the idea that community forest management can be linked to conservation and poverty reduction by making conservation pay. The organization Forest Trends ‘works to accelerate development of markets for forest ecosystem services (such as watershed protection, biodiversity conservation and carbon storage), to expand markets of sustainably produced forest products and to advance markets that serve the interests of forest communities’ (Forest Trends 2003).43 Its discourse aligns the elements in a new sequence: good governance requires that authorities recognize the property rights of forest communities including their right to sell forest products and services. Thus communities will manage forests sustainably not because it is their custom to do so, or because they have direct use for forest products, but rather because experts have set the appropriate conditions and market incentives to encourage the approved behaviour.

Finally, it is worth observing that transnational conservation organizations such as Conservation International and the Nature Conservancy, frustrated by the difficulty of governing through communities and recalcitrant forest bureaucracies, have also shifted to a market logic, buying up large tracts of forest land or acquiring long-term ‘conservation concessions’ in which they can do as they please and neither communities nor forest bureaucracies have any say.44 Yet these concessions still face the problem of enforcement. It is possible for a transnational corporation to fence off a high-value enclave such as a diamond mine and police it with para-military force, but much more difficult to control the action of tens of thousands of forest villagers in remote locations, especially when they dispute the legitimacy of their exclusion from the forest estate. Corporations will still need ways to govern
as well as command, and they might well draw on the community forest assemblage even as they reconfigure it.

Conclusion

My goal in this article has been to advance an analytic of assemblage. I have taken up the Foucauldian emphasis on ‘how’ questions and deployed it to examine how heterogeneous elements – discourses, institutions, laws, administrative measures, scientific knowledge, moral prescriptions, material interests – are assembled to constitute a technical field fit to be governed and improved. I delineated six practices that contribute to holding disparate elements together: forging alignments, rendering technical, authorizing knowledge, managing failures, re-posing political questions and reassembling as the ground shifts. I emphasized agency – the work that situated individuals do – without re-inscribing the self-sovereign subject with a master-mind, a master-plan or a singular interest and intention. I also emphasized contingency and fracture – the ever-present possibility that an assemblage may disintegrate under the weight of its own contradictions or be reassembled in forms so different that they can no longer plausibly travel under the old name.

I examined the operation of the six practices I identified through an extended study of community forest management. To sharpen the focus on how disparate elements are drawn together I selected an assemblage that is riven with very deep tensions and yet has endured for more than thirty years. Sensitive to the need for an analytic that addresses ‘how’ questions of a potentially generic kind, I did not offer an ethnographic analysis of what happened to community forestry instantiated in a particular programme in a particular place although I believe such an analysis has value, especially when brought into dialogue with studies of government (see Li 2007). For the purpose of this article I focused on practices that must exist to keep any assemblage together, whatever its specific contours. The critical feature is that the assemblage be traversed by a will to govern and not simply to coerce. In the case at hand, if the conduct of villagers on the forest edge could be effectively coerced, there would be no need to work upon their desires, practices and beliefs; likewise, the forest bureaucracy. An analytic of assemblage foregrounds the practices that fill the gap between the will to govern and the refractory processes that make government so difficult.

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Notes

1. See also Dean (1999: 21) and Rose (1999: 52).
2. For an outline of the concept of government as the ‘conduct of conduct’ and intervention in
   the relations between ‘men and things’ to secure the welfare of the population, see Foucault
   (1991). See also Dean (1999), Gordon (1991) and Rose 1999). I explore ‘the will to improve’ in Li
   (2007).
3. Barry (2001: 10–11, 218, fn. 38) similarly stresses agency, process and emergence over the kind
   of completed order suggested by Foucault’s term dispositif. See the extended ethnographic
   treatment of assemblage as emergence in Moore (2005).
4. See Rose (1999: 19) and Dean (1999: 31). In Li (2007) I argue for bringing studies of
   government into dialogue with histories and sociologies of rule without collapsing one into
   the other. My argument builds upon those of Clarke (2004) and O’Malley et al. (1997) who
   critique the neglect of practice and instability in studies of government.
5. Rose (1999: 48) calls this process ‘translation’, a term that suggests the uni-directional
   conversion of something that is fixed. I prefer ‘forging alignments’, which leaves open the
   question of how lines are adjusted to accommodate divergent agendas. See O’Malley (1996) and
   Li (1999) for empirical studies of how programmes were altered by their ‘target groups’.
6. See Rose (1999: 33) on the bounding and dissecting of a technical domain.
8. On the attempt to constitute active citizens while containing critique, see Cruikshank (1999).
9. For a helpful discussion of changing concepts of agency in the earlier and later Foucault, see
10. Scott (1998) outlines the combination of utopic dreams and concentrated powers under
    which high modern schemes emerged. I situate Scott’s approach in relation to studies of
    governmentality in Li (2005). Compare Cruikshank (1999: 42) on government as an accretion of
    ‘small things’ rather than totalizing systems. Karl Polanyi neatly captured the contrast when he
    argued that the creation of an unfettered market for land and labour in the nineteenth century
    was a grand utopian scheme – ideologically driven then as it is in its contemporary neo-liberal
    guise. Yet the array of interventions needed to keep populations alive and productive under
    market conditions emerged in piecemeal and pragmatic fashion: ‘Laissez-faire was planned’,
    he argued, ‘planning was not’ (Polanyi 1957 [1944]: 141).
13. For an example, see Banuri and Marglin (1993).
16. Huijsman and Savenije (1991: 25, quoted in Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1999a: 1,
    n. 3).
17. Similar strategies that blend discussion of rights with projects for improvement are present in texts by Owen Lynch and collaborators (Lynch and Harwell 2002; Lynch and Talbott 1995) and the advocacy group Down to Earth (DTE 2002).

18. See, for example, the study of invisibilities in the forests of British Columbia by Willems-Braun (1997).

19. Struggles of this kind in Southeast Asian contexts are described in Hirsch (1993) and Li (2007). See also Rocheleau and Ross (1995).

20. In Indonesia, the ‘cases’ of Krui in Sumatra and Bentian in Kalimantan loom large in the advocacy literature. See Fried (2000) and Michon et al. (2000).


22. My own critical engagement with community forestry fits this pattern (Li 2002).


29. The donor demand for NGOs to have authentic constituencies is discussed by Jim Igoe (2003).


31. Fairhead and Leach (2003: 151–3) describe the role of donor funds in assembling community forestry in Guinea.

32. I make this argument in the context of Indonesia in Li (2001).

33. The World Bank’s new version of the programme has attempted to correct the problem, apparently without success (World Rainforest Movement 2005).

34. The Joint Forest Management programme in India has received massive donor investments, mainly in the form of loan funds from the World Bank (Sundar 2000; World Rainforest Movement 2005). In Francophone West Africa a similar approach, known as ‘gestion des terroires’ (territorial management), has been widely pursued. There have been forty projects covering 2500 villages at a cost of US$280 million in Burkina Faso alone (Batterbury 1998: 872).

35. An evaluation of the community management programme of Canada’s International Development Research Center applauds its provision of well-documented case studies of pilot projects as ‘learning opportunities’ that prove ‘the validity of the concept’ and demonstrate to
policy-makers that alternatives to (failed) state management do exist (Gonsalves and Mendoza 2003: 4). The authors note that the programme has not yet produced policy shifts or commitments by government agencies to scale up pilot projects, although they expect this ‘pay off’ to occur in future years (Gonsalves and Mendoza 2003: 14, 28, 37, 41). Nowhere do they raise the possibility that existing state management regimes serve vested interests. All that is lacking for improved management is perfected technique, generated in projects and packaged in ‘methods briefs’ and ‘policy briefs’ (see Gonsalves and Mendoza 2003: 24–5, 38). Fairhead and Leach (2003: 48) also note the intrinsic anti-politics of donor-sponsored ‘projects’ that supply resources without threatening entrenched interests.

36. Fairhead and Leach (2003: 150) describe donors’ narration of their role in protecting forest villagers from corrupt state foresters.

37. Ford’s work on community management in India was dominated by an ‘exemplary place’ – a village called Sukhomajri in which the model was perfected. The model proved very expensive to create and maintain and could not be replicated in large part because the state bureaucracy saw little to gain from it. The institutional imperatives of the village were studied exhaustively, but those of the state apparatus were overlooked. See Baviskar and Saberwal (2002: 54–9).

38. ‘Reform’ signals the period that began in 1998 with the resignation of Suharto, president for thirty-two years. Decentralization of control over natural resources to hundreds of district governments was a measure introduced by his successor, Habibie, with donor support.

39. Fairhead and Leach (2003: 101–5) describe a corralled consultation process convened by Conservation International that was set up to confirm prior framings, although various sets of participants ‘saw through’ the process leaving it unclear whether ‘consensus and support’ had in fact been produced.

40. This document is in Indonesian. All translations are my own.

41. See McCarthy (2006) on the neoliberal inflection of community forestry on Canada’s west coast.

42. See critiques in Food First (2002).

43. See <http://www.rightsandresources.org/> (accessed 30 January 2007) for an updated statement of this platform.

44. See Fairhead and Leach (2003: 42).

References


63. Scott, D. 1995. ‘Colonial governmentality’. Social Text, 43: 191–220. [CrossRef], [CSA]
69. World Rainforest Movement (2002) ‘Community-based forest management is not only possible, it is essential’, WRM Bulletin 63.