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The ideal of non-coherence in the World Bank's social capital reforms

A textual analysis of “gratuitous complexity”

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This paper presents an analysis of a World Bank document representing a version of the new “Social Capital” approach of International Financial Institutions (IFIs). This stance involves a rhetorical reorientation away from a much criticized unilateral approach to the poor indebted countries and to a more bilateral and participatory attitude. Analysis suggests that this “post-ideological” posture is reflected in the text in the form of a copious rhetoric of “complex differentiation”. This consists of characterizing the world in the abstract terms of multiple independent factors which work against any more coherent picture of the historical process and its contradictions. While such formal elements appear to be conditional on and anchored in concrete content, they are shown in fact to reflect the negation of such content (and thus coherence). In this way, an apparently limitless proliferation of free-floating isolated elements substitutes for faithful representation of the underlying social cleavages. The implications of the analysis for contrasting conceptualizations of abstraction in texts, as well as for the notion of utopian discourse, are critically discussed.

Keywords: gratuitous complexity, abstraction, utopian discourse, Social Capital, form-content division

1. Introduction

It is commonly noted of discursive form and content that whilst conceptually distinguishable, they are inseparable in practice. However, the exact nature of the situated form-content relationship, including its potentially varying and contradictory nature, is generally not explicitly focused on in critical textual analyses. What there has been however are detailed studies of how form obscures aspects of content as part of a discussion of the ideological operation of abstraction in texts.

Generally speaking, abstraction can be understood in two different ways. Firstly, there is the process of thinking and of theoretical development whereby one must break down the world as it presents itself to us, into manageable parts. It is about making sense of our surroundings by 'separating out, focusing and putting emphasis' on only some aspects of one's world, and thus organizing it in sensible ways: "In effect, a piece has been pulled from or taken out of the whole and is temporarily perceived as standing apart" (Ollman 1993: 24–25). The end-goal of this process then would be greater understanding of the concrete whole.

In contrast to this to and fro movement between abstract and concrete, the second meaning of abstraction references a certain mismatch between abstract constructs and concrete reality which inhibits understanding of the latter. It references a 'suborder of particularly ill fitting...constructs' which, whether 'because they are too narrow, take in too little, focus too exclusively on appearances, or are otherwise badly composed...do not allow an adequate grasp of their subject matter'. In this sense they stand for Ollman (1993:26) as "the basic unit of ideology". The textual operation of abstraction in this second sense is illustrated in Fairclough's (2003) discussion of the "report" genre. He takes as examples of this genre excerpts from both a government consultation document on educational priorities in the so-called globalised knowledge economy, and from a book by a management "guru". These texts, Fairclough claims, prioritize the "logic of appearances" over the "logic of explanation" (or of "exposition"). The latter involves emphasizing the concrete whole in the shape of causal and explanatory relations between specific events and processes, in which particular human and social agents are foregrounded. The former is likely to feature more abstract descriptive listing of a diverse range of themes and events in a somewhat arbitrary fashion, with, for example, informativeness reduced to the simple successive addition of seemingly isolated statements of fact. The conservative effects of such texts' eschewal of explanatory logic — thus mystifying aspects of content — is summarised as a limiting of "policy options by portraying the socio-economic order as simply given, an unquestionable and inevitable horizon which is itself untouchable by policy and narrowly constrains options, essential rather than contingent, and without time depth" (Fairclough 2003: 96).

Fairclough has applied such a perspective to textual phenomena which belong to the specific historical period of New Labour's Third Way neo-liberal politics of the late 1990s. This has borne critical fruit for example in terms of the analytic exposure of the undemocratic and anti-dialogue governmental approach to 'consultation' as part of the process of welfare reform (Fairclough 2000). However, it can be argued that there are particular questions raised for the ideological analysis of textual abstraction at a time when wider arguments for abstraction prevail in the shape of a "post-ideological" approach to politics and economic governance.

The abstraction in this case involves a disjunction between political vision and social realities. Whereas the latter is characterized by persistent social and economic bases of widening polarization, the former posits a harmony of social interests. This paper will attempt to consider one way in which critical analyses of texts might aid our understanding of these processes.

To return to the question of the “report” genre, despite the role of the more abstract features in obscuring content, they still appear as meaningful. That is to say, they still operate as “existential presuppositions”, “presuppos[ing] the existence... of entities in a ‘real’ world” (Verschuere 1999:27). There appears to be some substantive essence or content which verifies the different expressions. This does not become an explicit topic in Fairclough’s analysis, where the issue is one of how only parts of the content are obscured. In the present study however the interest is in a tendency for the negation of content *per se*. In this context, suggesting that form presupposes content can be expected to be an important concern if the text is to be taken seriously by its audience. Other studies have shown how implicit acceptance by hearers of particular ideological content is achieved through this content being presupposed, such as in the case of anti-Semitic messages of Far-Right politicians for example (Wodak 2007). So likewise, as will be seen below, we might consider how content *per se* is rhetorically presupposed by a discourse which in fact attempts to posit form alone, as something self-sufficient and autonomous. In this way, acceptance may be achieved for form which in fact substitutes for content rather than, as it can seem, being determined by it.

A link can be made between this notion of free-floating form and the “post-Marxist” theoretical claims of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). In their vision, meaning no longer depends on — or is fixed in relation to — an objective referent, but rather rests on the inter-relationships which make up the self-contained “system of discursive differences” (p.117). This “split...between signified and signifier” (p. 113) means that the structuring principle of social identities is that of the “floating signifier” (p. 134). In this framework, then, ideas seem to take on a life of their own, separated from social and material origins. And it is this tenet which has led critics to view Laclau and Mouffe’s work as epitomizing the ideological tendency which has celebrated diversity as a good in itself (Eagleton 1993, Hammond 1999) and treated class as just another difference of equal weight to race and gender (Sparks 1996).

What these points mean in terms of detailed critical analysis of texts is the potential for exploring the situated unfolding of a conflict between ideological preference for free-floating form, and the requirement for meaningfulness (i.e. as opposed to certain expressions appearing arbitrary and fanciful). In particular, there is a question of how this conflictual relationship between form and content is rhetorically managed.

2. The Social Capital Reforms

The present study takes as its historical point of reference the shift since 1999 in the way in which International Financial Institutions (IFIs) — in the shape of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) — have represented their aims and approach with respect to debtor countries of, predominantly, the global South. Previously there had operated what has been increasingly recognized to be a more unilateral approach tending towards the imposition of strict conditions of economic adjustment, often more or less in line with neo-liberal commitments to unbounded market hegemony (Klein 2007). By contrast the newly emerging IFI consensus (the so-called “Post-Washington Consensus”) focused on a more bilateral and participatory approach to poverty reduction as part of the “Second Generation Reforms” (IMF 1999). One of the key reasons for the new approach is to address the problem of world poverty and inequality which continues to threaten achievement of the Millenium Development Goals. The World Bank records some poverty indicators showing improvement, such as the reduction in absolute numbers living on a US\$ a day or less, which owe much to recent economic growth in China and India. However other indicators, such as GDP per person in sub-Saharan Africa, exhibit a backward trend.¹ The International Labour Organisation also records some worsening statistics for the working poor in that “their numbers have increased in low-income countries, but decreased in middle-income countries. There seems to be also a polarization between those low-income countries where the number of working poor are declining and those where they are increasing thus exacerbating world inequalities” (ILO 2005).

This new model thus seeks to engage with Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), including trade unions, in efforts to build the perceived necessary social networks vital to democratic civil society (World Bank 2004a). The stated aim includes the involvement of recipient states and CSOs themselves in drawing up a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) to identify targets for poverty reduction outcome indicators. As a result, wherever IFIs offer loans or grants, CSOs are now supposed to be consulted and ownership of funded projects handed to recipient countries. One clear instance of this approach is a recent document from the UK government’s Department for International Development (DfID) entitled, *Partnerships for poverty reduction: Rethinking conditionality* (DfID 2005) which rejects the previous system of making aid conditional on the adoption of neo-liberal reforms. In the forward to the document President Mkapa of Tanzania is quoted as arguing that “Development cannot be imposed. It can only be facilitated. It requires ownership, participation and empowerment, not harangues and dictates” (DfID 2005: 1). The document subsequently characterizes the revised approach as involving support for national ownership of “poverty reduction plans that take account of the views

and concerns of poor people”, and to foster “aid relationships...based on mutual commitment and dialogue, transparency and accountability” (DfID 2005:4).

On one hand this new approach reflects an apparent commitment by the World Bank to engage with certain theoretical paradigms — emanating from recent study of international relations of “cosmopolitan social democracy” — calling for more transparency, democracy and social justice within IFI deliberations (e.g. Held 2002, Woods 2002). Citing Anthony Giddens — a key proponent of earlier Third Way thinking (e.g. Giddens 1998) — the Bank refers to the development of:

...a more cosmopolitan form of society that acknowledges a newly emerging power structure where government the market and civil society all need to be constrained in the interests of social solidarity and social justice (World Bank 2005: 19).

On the other hand, the more participatory approach has its roots in the notion of Social Capital, which is presented as a non-market and bi-lateral means of addressing imperfections or failures of the market. At a general level Social Capital can be said to refer to “norms of trust and reciprocity and to networks, associations and organization that constitute *social* resources for individuals, and which facilitate collective action for mutual benefit” (Das 2006: 65; italics in original). It resembles a sort of adjustment with a human face whereby elements which may have traditionally felt themselves antagonists, by working together to share information and expertise in a pragmatic, non-ideological fashion, can open up new possibilities for achieving shared development goals. For the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund the development of “social capital” must be seen as part of their wider rubric of “institution building” following first generation “reforms” of neo-liberal marketisation (see, for example, IMF 1999, World Bank 2004b). Thus, even while one can attempt to navigate the intricate and multi-faceted history of the concept of “social capital” itself in social scientific and economic theory (Fine 2001), or note the related array of differing definitions detectable in the IFI policy statements themselves, the interest in the current paper is the common “post-ideological” ideological content which may be presupposed in, and more or less subtly frame, official discussions of the basic IFI policy re-orientation.

One explanation of the rise to prominence of the Social Capital approach is an evolutionary one of gradual development in line with its technical-economic function of reducing “transaction costs associated with formal coordination mechanisms like contracts, hierarchies, bureaucratic rules, and the like” (Fukuyama 1999: 5). However, it can be argued that the shift is also a reaction to the rising anti-capitalist movement marked in the West by the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle; partly also a reaction to financial failures associated with the 1997 East

Asian crisis; and partly a reaction to the self-admission of the IFIs of failure to stem poverty in debtor countries (Fine 2001).

In sum, the Social Capital approach is presented by its proponents as a class neutral bridging of social cleavages resting on a presumption of a harmony of interests. Its advocates “emphasise mutually beneficial coalitions across social and economic divisions...which are assumed to benefit society as a whole as if there were no class (and other) conflicts of interest in society” (Das 2006:71). Emerging partly in response to greater political and ideological polarization, it proffers an optimistic message of democratic bi-lateral involvement in policy formulation and implementation, fueled largely by good will on both sides. It can be likened to the recent Third Way version of the “end-of-ideology” ideology in certain national political realms (Giddens 1998, Weltman 2003) which trumpets a new era of more pragmatic political action free from partisan ideological fetters. While inhabiting the wider sphere of international relations of economic governance, the Social Capital perspective can be similarly viewed as a historical product which plays a conservative utopian role of clouding over the realities of societal division.

3. The World Bank document

The analytic consideration of these issues will focus on one particular document produced by the World Bank (hereafter the Bank). Published in March 2005, the document is entitled, *Issues and Options for Improving Engagement between the World Bank and Civil Society Organizations* (World Bank 2005). The main body of the text comprises thirty-seven pages of text, plus references and an appendix of sixteen pages consisting of comments from and Bank responses to what are described as “civil society representatives in Argentina, Egypt, Ghana, Indonesia, Mozambique, West Bank and Gaza, and Washington, D.C” (World Bank 2005: vii).

The first paragraph of the document’s introduction provides the following information:

The purpose of this paper is to assess the World Bank’s...recent relations with civil society organizations (CSOs), and to propose options for promoting more effective civic engagement in Bank-supported activities and managing associated risks in the future. This paper was initially drafted by the Bank’s Civil Society Team (CST) anchor as a follow-up to an October 2001 meeting of Bank Vice Presidents, at which time it was agreed that recent internal and external developments warranted a strategic review of the status of the Bank’s relations with CSOs. (World Bank 2005: 1)

In addition to this mention of authorship, the acknowledgements section right at the beginning of the paper makes clear that the content of the document was subject to extensive review by senior management of the Bank together with the Board of Executive Directors, and was revised in the light of their comments.

With the aim of satisfying the above mentioned task of assessment and recommending certain ameliorative actions, the document proceeds through a number of chapters dealing with different but overlapping issues: to map out a changing context relating especially to the rising status and prevalence of CSOs; to consider many different examples of “engagement” by the Bank; to evaluate the Bank’s response to increased mass protests and advocacy campaigns; and finally to set out a list of “priority actions” for the Bank.

Overall the World Bank document provides an extensive and in-depth discussion and evaluation of ‘Bank-CSO relations’ in the language of the particular Social Capital approach outlined above. The prevalence of the words of “engagement” (the root “engage” appears 333 times) and “dialogue” (62 instances) provide a preliminary indication of the overall slant of the document’s concerns with non-adversarial cooperation and bi-lateral participation towards the shared goals of more effective poverty reduction.

4. Analytic approach

The analysis of the document seeks to demonstrate a detailed sensitivity to how conflicting rhetorical tendencies are managed within the text. To this end it draws on the type of approach to ideological analysis emerging out of critical social-psychology and involving close focus on the ambivalent aspects of often inconspicuous discursive detail (Billig 1995, 1999, Weltman 2003, Wetherell 2001). This approach is strongly influenced by Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of ordinary language, which explores how the meaning content of speech is the product of form, in the sense of how we use words. Thus “making sense in everyday life is a matter of the way we use signs which are meaningless in themselves according to certain agreed conventions” (Eagleton 2007:67). However, this approach raises a potential contradiction which is relevant to the ideological analysis of the form-content relationship. For in everyday life “we are mostly content analysts, reading for meaning rather than form”, and thus staring “right through the signifier to what it signifies” (Eagleton 2007:68). There is a kind of routine illusion which leads one to sweep aside words to get at meanings. Psychological words — whether relating to knowledge states, understanding, remembering, or feelings — ripped out of their contexts of use invite us to jump straight to some essential and apparently presupposed mental entity

or process, whereby meaning is treated simply as a finished object. This is as opposed to considering how meaning takes shape as practice, through form.

One useful analytic category for considering how ambivalence between form and content is managed is that of modality (Palmer 2003). In conveying a less than categorical commitment to a claim, referencing the “possible” rather than the “actual”, modal expressions provide some flexibility of meaning: between more “free-floating” speculative claims which seem to be left hanging in existential terms; and something resembling a means for transmitting factual information.

5. Analysis

5.1 Complex differentiation: Classifying the unclassifiable

A striking and pervasive feature of the World Bank text is the repeated characterization of different aspects of the world as complex in the sense that it is their differentiated, heterogeneous, and multiple nature which is foregrounded. The basic idea is one of breaking down the world into independent elements. Rather than the coherent or integrated quality of things being outlined it is plurality and variety which are recurrently emphasized.

We can begin by considering an account of CSOs which appears near the beginning of the document (words and phrases relevant to the theme of complexity and differentiation have been emboldened).

- (1) Classification of CSOs is often **difficult**, given the **heterogeneity** of institutional interests, organizational dynamics and philosophical perspectives. While an individual CSO **may** be classified as local, national or transnational, it **may** operate at more than one of these levels simultaneously. Some CSOs **may** be involved strictly in service delivery, some in capacity building, and others only in policy advocacy or research, but increasingly groups are involved in more than one of these activities at the same time.... In addition, CSOs **vary** widely with respect to their philosophical and ideological orientations, which **may** be influenced by faith, historical commitment to public service, politics, the nature of their membership, or by their individual leaders. This helps to explain the very lively and rapidly **changing** debate within global civil society on almost every facet of CSO organization, structure, and practice, including their **diverse** views on whether, or how, to engage with the Bank. (p. 3)

The above passage describes the extensive differentiation or “heterogeneity” characterizing the CSO landscape, with the “diverse views”, phenomena which “vary

widely” and, as corresponding to the “rapidly changing debate”, are in a process of on-going development (“increasingly”). This variation is presented as a reason for it being “often difficult” to classify CSOs. Given the actual “heterogeneity” in various respects, avenues for “classification” are themselves multiple and diverse. This is presumably different to a hypothetical situation involving a more “easily” classifiable array of CSOs, with differentiation limited by lines of commonality and thus more substantial groupings of CSOs.

The passage portrays a plurality of independent factors in relation to which purportedly “individual” (line 2) CSOs may be characterized. Here as elsewhere the achievement of pluralization involves much more than simply the use of plural nouns such as “interests” and “perspectives” (*cf.* Hodge and Kress 1993) although this is still often an important device. There are four main factors distinguished in extract 1: geographical area of operation, type of work, “whether, or how, to engage the bank” and “philosophical and ideological orientations”. Then there are also various more specific factors representing the assorted forms which these categories may take. Of special note are the references to CSOs which “operate at more than one of these levels simultaneously”, or are “involved in more than one of these activities at the same time”. Being “simultaneously” involved in two still-independent factors itself constitutes an additional factor and so additional variety. This is as opposed to a potential alternative narrative of the declining variety of “increasingly” merged factors as the CSO landscape develops. The theme of simultaneity will be returned to below.

On one hand, these features echo previous observations concerning the generic feature of abstract lists of equivalent yet independent items which function to background underlying explanatory and causal relations between factors (Fairclough 2000). The above passage amounts to a formalistic description of nominal differences devoid of the specific weightings in terms of content which would mean a limiting of differentiation.

However, things are not so straightforward in that the description of the “heterogeneity” of the CSO landscape in extract 1 involves a marker of *possible* differences in the form of the word “may” (appearing four times). This is as opposed to a more committal vocabulary of actuality: of what *is* and what *are*. As a modal expression it qualifies what might otherwise have been a categorical or absolute assertion (Nikula 1996). However, there is a notable ambivalence to this notion of possibility due to the co-incidence of two different types of modality.

“Epistemic” modality concerns an author’s “subjective attitude towards the truth of the proposition” (Facchinetti 2003:304), and thus their own degree of knowledge regarding the subject matter positioned as an opinion. It includes speculating about objective circumstances external to the subject, rather than reporting such circumstances. This is illustrated in the following utterance:

And therefore they **may** well be asking me back later in the year to do some more work. (cited in Facchinetti 2003: 307).

By contrast, “existential” modality refers to the qualified factual reporting of an actual state of affairs. It involves making a “qualified generalization” whereby a particular description “is said to apply to at least some members of the relevant population, but that it is not guaranteed to hold for all members” (Huddleston 1971, cited in Facchinetti 2003: 304). Thus the possibilities of the actual, of what sometimes or at some point *does* take place, is being reported. Indeed, this type of modality is often paraphrasable in terms of “some” or “sometimes” (Palmer 1990). Thus the line from a scientific text, “And this collagen **may** or **may** not have fibroblasts in it”, can, abstractly speaking, be rephrased as, “And this collagen *sometimes* has fibroblasts” (cited in Facchinetti 2003: 304). One might also suggest that the difference of modalities is represented by the distinction between ‘It is possible *for* this collagen to have fibroblasts’ (existential), and ‘It is possible *that* this collagen has fibroblasts’ (epistemic) (Palmer 1990). The former structure partly explains why there has been some debate as to whether the existential mode is best viewed as a subclass of, rather than completely distinct from, another type of modality. This is ‘dynamic’ modality, which refers to a subject’s real *ability* to do something, and is largely epitomized by the modal *can* (Facchinetti 1993; Palmer 1990).

Arguably, “may” in extract 1 makes both these types of possibility relevant at the same time. On one hand, it affirms something outside itself: not all CSOs will, for example, operate at the “global” level but at least some will. On the other hand, “may” signals the merely speculative or imaginary nature of a description cut off from and not based on the actual. “Mere” possibility of this type then would be inherently tenuous and non-affirmative, lacking any guaranteed hook up to reality.

This ambivalence corresponds to a paradoxical pattern of this text involving the classification of the unclassifiable. The text can be said to demonstrate adherence to a certain ideal. It is one of maximum formal differentiation and multiplicity as negation of coherence. Nominal differences can be arbitrarily isolated out, in a seemingly limitless fashion, in favour of any concrete blending together of different factors such as for example “politics” and “individual leaders” under the “philosophical and ideological orientations” category. In this way form appears as “freed” from and undisciplined by content. Negation of coherence presupposes negation of content, and vice-versa.

We can see this differentiation then as gratuitous, lacking “good reason”, even whilst appearing as non-gratuitous and anchored such that classification would still be possible in actuality. Furthermore, negation of content and coherence means that there cannot be such a thing as complete or total differentiation as that would allow coherence — that is, a limiting of differentiation — to re-enter.

Thus speculative unanchored possibility, possessing no basis or content, means something unlimited and thus *impossible* to describe. Hence it is not a rational or concrete construct but rather a fanciful or senseless one. So despite appearances to the contrary, the passage fails to be informative. The limitless formalistic variety is incapable of substantiating the claim for the “difficult” experience of “classification” because this variety forms the automatic and ever-present backdrop to it. Indeed, to say at this level that classification is “often difficult” sounds like an understatement; “impossible” would seem more suitable.

This analysis helps account for qualifying words such as “almost” prefacing “every facet”. The extreme scenario (“every”) both invokes an ideal range of (un-classifiable) multiple differentiation, but also infers completeness. Its qualification off-sets the completeness — or complexifies it — while also suggesting classifiability. Thus the appearance of the descriptive work as non-gratuitous and as concerned with reflecting concrete content can be maintained.

The observations about the affirmative and non-affirmative “may” flag up a more general point about the World Bank document. It is that complex differentiation can be seen as illustrating what Medvedev (1978) terms the “apophatic method”. This refers to the process of characterizing something by what it is not; that is, by means of “bare negation” and of dissimilarity to something else. In other words, rather than differentiation positing its own positive content, it represents in its hollow formalistic aspect of speculative possibility a striving to be *unlike* something else, to be purely against actual content and thus coherence. Hence, differentiation is perhaps best characterized negatively in terms of what it is not: namely, limitless non-coherence.

5.2 “Recognizing” differentiation

A potential objection to the above comments is that extract 1 appears in the document precisely as a self-consciously abstract and scene-setting survey of the CSO landscape in which no specific agent is mentioned as doing the “classifying”. That being the case, one might expect it to be rather different from more action-relevant passages orientated to concrete issues of Bank-CSO engagement. In fact, however, complex differentiation simply reappears qualified in ways appropriate to more concrete settings. The recurrent reference to “recognizing” differentiation in these passages plays an important role here which will be discussed shortly.

In the passage below, appearing directly after that in extract 1 in the document, further independent factors in relation to which CSOs may be positioned and compared are listed.

- (2) It is also important to **recognize** that **different** levels of capacity, access to power, information and economic resources can be found among CSOs, particularly contrasting large global or national CSOs with community-based organizations. (pp. 3–4)

The passage as a whole sounds more pragmatic in that it exhorts relevant (but unspecified) audiences to act in a certain way — namely to “recognize” the described state of affairs — as against an alternative course of non-recognition. Part of this greater practical engagement is that although there is again a qualified language of possibility (“*can* be found”) rather than actuality, “*can*”, as already noted, epitomizes the dynamic type of modality mentioned above, thus being suggestive of an objective ability (*cf.* Matthews 2003). Hence, within this particular immediate setting it is open to a reading as more affirmative and committal.

However, complexity is still evident in that not only are there various factors listed (albeit resources-related ones which arguably are less arbitrary and, as will be seen below in distinguishing more cooperative “knowledgeable” CSOs from others, have more direct relevance to the “engagement” process), these are also to “be found among CSOs” in “different levels”.

The extract below by contrast explicitly presents the Bank as the actor.

- (3) The Bank today is taking deliberate steps to engage a wider, and more **complex**, spectrum of organizations and constituencies within global, national and local civil society. The Bank **recognizes** the **differing** situations between countries as well as the **different** environments — legal, institutional, political and social — that shape the opportunities for civic engagement. (p. ix)

In this case the “increasingly” “complex” CSO landscape described in extract 1 is reinvoked in the first sentence even though the topic is actual “engagement” which arguably depends on some practical limiting of more arbitrary differentiation. In the second sentence two separate aspects of differentiation which the Bank “recognizes” are described.

In the final example in this section there is further differentiation work in describing types of Bank-CSO “interactions” which, like the CSOs themselves, “vary widely” — and indeed the wording concerning this complexity follows the style of extract 1’s description of the “heterogeneity” of CSOs.

- (4) Just as the actors involved in Bank-CSO relations **vary widely**, so do the types of interactions. To provide a framework to examine the Bank’s civic engagement activities, the Civil Society Team has grouped them into three categories of activity: *facilitation*; *dialogue and consultation*; and *partnership*. Each set of activities **may** take place at the local, national and transnational

levels. An individual CSO **may** be involved simultaneously with the Bank in all three categories, and at more than one of these levels. Many CSOs consider it entirely appropriate to engage in advocacy and accountability activities while also acting as service providers. Thus, it is important to **recognize** that positive relations with CSOs in one area do not guarantee positive relations in another.It is also important to **recognize** that CSOs traditionally have been much more engaged in some sectors of the Bank's work, namely in social policy, social services and the environment, than in macroeconomic policy, trade or finance. Indeed, knowledgeable CSOs often view some units of the Bank quite **differently** from others, depending on such factors as their accessibility, perceived openness to new ideas and perspectives, and track record in providing feedback. (p. 10; italics in original)

The passage begins with two instances of “may” and a self-conscious adoption of an abstract-sounding “framework to examine the Bank’s civic engagement activities”. Subsequently there is a shift to a more concrete context with the passage twice suggesting — again in the apparent disinterested spirit of the document’s author (i.e. the Bank’s Civil Society Team) offering positive, objective, actionable knowledge — that it is “important to recognize” the differentiation. The latter relates to Bank-CSO “relations” and forms of “engagement”. Finally, in the last sentence it is noted how the CSOs “often view” the *various* “units” of the Bank “differently”. And this in turn itself depends on multiple other independent “factors”. We will need to consider this circular type of reasoning in more detail in the next section.

The significance of “recognizing” differentiation can be characterised as follows. Firstly, there is the rhetorical function in arguing against cases where already-existing differentiation has *not* been recognized. “Recognizing” differentiation thus sounds affirmative, and opposed to the seemingly negative situation of non-recognition. In this way, “recognizing” differentiation appears as if compensating for some lack. This is despite the fact that “recognize” can at the same time be seen as itself indicative of some lack — in terms of the absence of affirmative action.

A useful signpost here is the observation of how references in ordinary speech to “recognizing” something can be heard to mean that an “act of recognition” has taken place (Wittgenstein 1953, remark 602). (This feature can be associated with the mention of “recognizing” in more concrete-sounding passages of the document.) This is despite the fact that mundane recognition can appear more like a non-act: “No one will say that every time I enter my room, my long-familiar surroundings, there is enacted a recognition of all that I see and have seen hundreds of times before” (remark 603). In this sense, “recognizing” can be negatively characterized by the absence of surprise or of non-familiarity, and as something which does not make an impression of recognizing. It can be associated with the notion

of continuity, of things remaining the same or, with specific regard to the World Bank document, of not being the harbinger of positive content despite its apparent association with compensating for non-recognition of differentiation. From this angle then it sounds strange to say that “it is important” to do what just happens anyway or automatically and thus constitutes normality.

There is no explanation provided for why it is “important to recognize” differentiation. On one hand, the affirmative compensatory “recognize” suggests that there is “good reason” for “recognizing” differentiation, thus appearing self-explanatory. On the other hand, however, there is the notion of non-affirmative recognition of content-less and arbitrary non-coherence. In this regard it can sound gratuitous and as if there is a notable absence of explanation. Hence, it can be associated with the process of negation; of something destructive.

The theme of gratuitous complexity and explanation will be further explored in the following section.

5.3 A problem — and how to resolve it

The focus of the analysis will now shift to a passage demonstrating a more directly critical and diagnostic treatment of Bank actions within one incident of CSO-Bank “mis-engagement”. This critical evaluation enables the document to draw out lessons for future improvement. In so doing, the potential explanatory function of gratuitous complexity can be highlighted.

- (5) 1 There also has been frustration expressed by global CSO networks
 2 regarding the outcomes of a number of high-profile stakeholder
 3 engagement processes that were jointly initiated with the Bank. Three
 4 recent processes in particular — the Structural Adjustment
 5 Participatory Review Initiative (SAPRI), the World Commission on
 6 Dams (WCD) and the Extractive Industries Review (EIR) — have been
 7 the subject of scrutiny. Each process has had its own **distinct** and
 8 innovative elements: SAPRI involved CSOs, government officials, and
 9 Bank staff in joint analysis of the impacts of structural adjustment; the
 10 WCD was an international, **multistakeholder** panel; and the EIR was led
 11 by an independent secretariat that organized a global consultation
 12 involving CSOs, governments and representatives of extractive
 13 industries. Despite good intentions in all three processes, each has led to
 14 some dissatisfaction among the **various** parties concerned, as a result of
 15 **differing** assumptions and expectations of what outcomes each process
 16 would yield. In the case of both SAPRI and the WCD, the Bank helped
 17 launch the process but was later perceived by some CSOs as having
 18 ignored or distanced itself from the recommendations. Lessons learned

19 from these processes include the need to establish clarity of purpose and
20 process up front; to **recognize the heterogeneity** of organizations
21 involved and to manage their **varying** expectations; to be clear in the
22 roles and responsibilities of third parties involved; and to be **flexible** in
23 making adjustments to the process midstream as needed. (p. 15)

According to one account found in this passage the problem to be explained consists of “frustration” amongst CSOs with a particular instance of engagement. Hence, despite the initial mention of the differentiated nature of the “stakeholder engagement processes”, each having “had its own distinct and innovative elements” (line 5), it is still the case that all three processes are subsequently grouped together as sharing a common feature (“each has led to some dissatisfaction”, line 10) for which an overall explanation is subsequently offered.

An acute ambivalence is detectable in this extract. On one hand there is the notion that negative perception (“was later perceived by some CSOs...”, lines 12–13) or feeling “frustration” is specific to some CSOs (“global CSO networks”, line 1), thus suggesting a picture of relative bi-polar opposition (with its attendant coherences) between the CSOs on one side and the Bank on the other.

On the other hand there are various occasions when such a picture is undermined. These involve a vagueness indicating avoidance of a concrete limiting of pluralization including through bi-polarization. We have what could be described as abstract markers of multiplicity (we will explain in what sense this is the case in a moment): “*multistakeholder*” (line 7), “dissatisfaction among the *various* parties concerned”, “*differing* assumptions and expectations”, “*heterogeneity* of organizations” and “*varying* expectations”. In addition, what might have been presented in terms of activity processes involving human agents appear as agent-less nouns (Lemke 1995): “dissatisfaction”, “assumptions and expectations”, “good intentions” and again “multistakeholder panel”. Arguably, these descriptions together contribute to the ironing out or backgrounding of important distinctions between different participants: for example, the idea that differences between CSOs and extractive industries were more significant than those between extractive industries and the Bank.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning the final recommendation to be “flexible in making adjustments to the process as needed”. As seen earlier in extract 3, and to be illustrated further below, recognizing differentiation is occasionally expressed in terms of sensitivity to the dependence of events on varying contexts and circumstances. In this sense the reference to being “flexible” — especially one lacking specifying content such as would limit it within the terms of a more coherent and “inflexible” position — can be seen to reflect the ideal of complexity.

However, while the above descriptive elements may be characterized as abstractions there is an important question concerning the sense in which this is the

case. On one hand, abstraction can connote a conditional moving (“from below”) away from and renunciation of the concrete fullness of underlying coherences or content, thus providing a somewhat partial representation of it. While this deduction from the object can be seen in more generous terms as having illumination of the concrete whole as the ultimate goal (Medvedev 1978), it can also be understood in terms of a mystifying function, such as with the “backgrounding” of lines of bi-polarization. This approach to abstraction is illustrated in an analysis of a speech by ex-British Prime Minister Tony Blair where Fairclough (2000) considers how a reference to “change that sweeps the world” involves a nominalization of the notion of “change”: “Nominalisation involves *abstraction from* the diversity of processes going on, no specification of who or what is changing, a backgrounding of the processes of change themselves, and a foregrounding of their effect” (Fairclough 2000: 26; italics added. See also Lemke 1995). On the occasions however where descriptions lack positive content of their own, Fairclough’s conception would seem to be insufficient. Gratuitous differentiation can be seen as abstract in the sense of precisely *not* being based on objective content. And it is as if this very baselessness and hollowness is reflected in a proliferation of self-sufficient form, which substitutes for and transcends the limits of content.

It follows that as opposed to the “closure” or “limiting” implied by partial representation of the concrete whole, the analytic spotlight would rest upon the open-endedness of the above textual markers of multiplicity, a topic which is considered below.

Arguably, it is only this perspective on the markers of multiplicity which can account for the treatment of differentiation in the document as a type of universal explanation, frequently throwing up circular accounts of the world. Thus, in extract 5 the problem, a subjectively-framed one of “dissatisfaction”, is made complex. And this situation of variously scattered dissatisfaction is itself apparently due to subjective variation (“differing assumptions and expectations”). This differentiation is in turn due to the variety or “heterogeneity” of “organizations involved”. Variation is both invoked as an explanation for the problem and yet at the same time it is not in itself presented as something bad to be ironed out. Although there is mention of the need to “manage” the “varying expectations” this is more suggestive of adapting to such variation rather than suppressing it. The same point applies to the recommendation to “recognize” the “heterogeneity of organizations involved”, and to be “flexible in making adjustments...as needed” (lines 16–17). The latter description suggests greater accommodatory sensitivity to differentiation. Thus, it seems as if the solution to the problem of variation is greater appreciation of it.

Here we see the results of an exercise in trying to explain whilst lacking means of explanation in terms of positive content. It is not possible to invoke coherence either as a cause of a problem or as a solution of it.

5.4 Indefiniteness and the bank's "bad" internal complexity

A notable feature of gratuitous complexity has been its rhetorical versatility. At times it is invoked as part of a more favourable portrayal of the current practice of a Bank which "recognizes" differentiation. On other occasions, where Bank practice is put in a more critical light, the suggestion is that differentiation is insufficiently "recognized". This may apply for example to differences between various "stakeholders", or amongst the narrower constituency of just CSOs. However, whether in the favourable or the critical contexts, much as with discussion of CSO perception of the Bank, "recognition" of complexity appears as always something desirable, and thus a good, with complexity itself being something to be accommodated to or "managed".

It turns out however that the rhetorical usefulness of invoking this desirable complexity is limited to particular occasions. In fact, the same striving to negate coherence means that at times it is the opposite evaluative framing of complexity which must manifest itself: as something problematic and to be overcome. Such is the case when we come to the question of what we might call the "ultimate" explanation for the problems in CSO-Bank relations. This concerns the underlying cause of the Bank's inability to respond in the most appropriate way to the growing complexity of the new civil society. Is it now at last time to invoke some coherent institutional mindset which must be, and can only be, challenged politically?

- (7) While the overall trend has been one of broadening and deepening engagement of CSOs in the Bank's work, approaches to engagement vary widely, and **some** significant constraints exist. **Some** member governments and Bank staff remain cautious about CSO engagement, which **can** be attributed to **many** factors, **including** concerns about the roles, representation and accountability of CSOs. Other institutional constraints to effective civic engagement **include**: a lack of reliable and/or easily accessible data to monitor and evaluate the Bank's engagement with CSOs; insufficient guidance to staff on good practices and procedures to follow when engaging with CSOs; disclosure and transparency issues; weak incentives for Bank staff to engage CSOs; and funding and procurement limitations. Cost-benefit considerations are of particular concern for the Bank, as it aims to improve the cost effectiveness of its operations and to reduce the costs for developing country clients of doing business with the Bank. Likewise, **some** CSOs are wary of engaging with the Bank because they find it cumbersome to do so, or they do not believe it will yield much benefit. Bank management has acknowledged the need to address **many** of these internal and external concerns. (p. x)

In addition to the problem of wide variation (“vary widely”) in “approaches to engagement” there are also various different “constraints” such as “cautiousness”, which itself “can be attributed to many factors”. This variation clearly contrasts with a potential alternative attempt to invoke one common ideological mentality (despite the seemingly more totalizing reference to “institutional constraints” in the fifth line).

This passage provides an opportunity to expand on the theme of the open-endedness of descriptions of multiplicity as a reflection of the ideal of non-coherence. In extract 7 there are various markers suggesting that the lists of factors are characterized by an indefinite pluralization.

Thus for example, if the final line had mentioned simply “the need to address these internal and external concerns” without the “many of”, it would have implied some limits, some determinate set of concerns. The addition of the “vague numeral” (Zamparelli 2005) in “many of” avoids this relative closure. Even though expressed as a proportion of the whole, it is indefinite proportion.

In lines 3–4 it is suggested that cautiousness “can be attributed to many factors, including...”. “Many factors” points to something which in theory involves a fixed amount whilst remaining very vague and non-informative. The latter effect partly relies on the word “include”, appearing again in the subsequent sentence. This word leaves it unclear whether it is simply a sample of the full list which is provided rather than the complete list, and if it is indeed a sample how many other items have been left unmentioned. At the same time, it can still be read as affirmative description of specific factors.

In this way, the unlimited inclusiveness of “include” means that the latter marks negation: non-exclusion and non-closure (related points could be made about the three instances of “some”). Rather than abstract fixed statements which exclude mention of concrete relations in the pattern of Fairclough’s “backgrounding”, we have exclusionary negation by means of “inclusion”: of the sheer addition of nominally different factors. The open-ended *amount* of different items recognized appears as the criteria of a more complete explanation. Thus, as with the openness of “possible” differences of extract 1, there is gratuitous eschewal of “positive” limits on nominal description of more differences.

The indeterminately long lists of factors does not simply miss out explanatory relations but rather in substituting for them transcends the limits of this content.

This brings us back to the issue of simultaneity. The range of apparently self-sufficient, origin-less factors spread out horizontally (note the frequent reference to “wide” variation) in the same shared time of an eternal present. Change and increasing complexity does not correspond to a historical process heading into the future, but a proliferation of differentiation which is frozen in the *now*, including in the form of internal splitting of actors. In extract 1 single CSOs were

described as inhabiting “more than one” role “at the same time”. In extract 4 this is seen again but with reference to more coherent groupings of CSOs. And at one point elsewhere in the document the “dual roles” (p. 2) of such CSOs is referred to. The Bank also is subject to internal and external differentiation on the axis of the present. This all contrasts with an image of multiple factors which, whilst possessing specific significance and forms nonetheless evolve within a single internally-contradictory historical process with common determinants.

It remains finally to note how in extract 7 there is a progressively more formalistic order of accounting for the problem. At the lower, more specific, level what is problematic is various, involving “many” different factors. At a higher, more general, level the variousness of something (“approaches to engagement vary widely”) itself is the problem. This variation in “approaches to engagement” here appears as an overall product of the various problematic factors listed through the passage. Presenting the variation of something as itself a problem arguably represents a final destination of the striving to negate all content and coherence. Consider for example the extract below.

- (8) Despite this body of experience supporting the role of civic engagement in development effectiveness, many Bank staff and their counterparts in government remain cautious about engaging CSOs. One of the contributing factors is the lack of clarity, **fragmentation**, and the **ad-hoc nature** of the existing operational guidelines for staff...Focal points that have been established during the past few years to promote engagement with specific constituencies like faiths, children and youth, disabilities, foundations and trade unions are located in **different** vice presidential units across the Bank, somewhat **disconnected** from one another as well as from regular operational and policy decision-making processes. This often gives rise to **wide variances** in engagement practice across the Bank. (p. 7)

Instead of the reference in extract 7 to “inefficient guidance to staff” (lines 6–7) we now have a description of the complex differentiated nature of the “existing operational guidelines” (“lack of clarity, fragmentation and the ad hoc nature”) which is itself the problem. Interestingly, what was earlier in extracts 3 and 5 conveyed in terms of the seemingly context-dependent and “flexible” approach now manifests as the non-desirable “ad hoc”.

Subsequently the various “disconnected” “focal points” are said to “often” give rise to “wide variances in engagement practices” across the Bank (note that it is “variance”, rather than the earlier “variety”, which is now used to infer an undesirable complexity).² However, again, we can say that the latter “variances” need not have been represented in a circular fashion as due to geographical disconnection (i.e. formal non-coherence) of the “focal points”. In extract 7 for example variation

in “approaches to engagement” is portrayed as resulting from a variety of meaningful factors.

It remains to note that the solution proposed in the document to the Bank’s internal differentiation involves managerial intervention in the interests of engineering formal coherence. This includes for example, introducing measures to improve “Bank-wide information sharing, coordination and strategic management” (p. 36), or to provide for “a more structured and integrated learning program for Bank staff and member governments on the changing role, nature, and perspectives of civil society” (p. 32).

6. Concluding remarks

The analysis has highlighted a particular type of formalistic discourse reflecting the separation of form from content and the substitution of the latter by the former. In this way, the text is characterized by an undisciplined and gratuitous proliferation of differentiation, or non-coherence. The mystifying function of this arbitrary and free-floating multiplicity relates to the nature of the Third Way-style Social Capital approach which posits, in liberal utopian fashion, a vision of bi-lateral co-operation and harmony of interests at the expense of concern with actual material conflicts. We can view the separation of form from content in the World Bank text as corresponding to the more general separation of political form from social foundation/content (or ends from means) which defines liberal utopianism (Draper 1990).

In the classical Marxist tradition utopianism was that approach which “cut the road to the future off from social-historical realities, and substituted ‘general, abstract dogma’ for scientific inquiry into political and social tendencies and forces” (Draper 1990: 20).

Of importance here is on one hand, the notion of substituting one thing (“abstract dogma”) for something else in the form of dreams and visions of the alternative future society organically emerging out of practical (intellectual and physical) engagement with the observable tendencies of actual historically developing society. In this sense a system founded on the “reasoning of reason” is posited as a replacement for close regard for and disciplining of ideas in relation to actual material means of emancipation developing from below. This includes, centrally, the “gradual, spontaneous class organization of the proletariat” (Marx and Engels 1948/1998: 73). Such a system would thus in fact constitute an arbitrary or fanciful construct, imposed on society from without or above. In a statement which has clear relevance to gratuitous complexity, Engels notes that the more the utopian socialists’ schemes “were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drift-

ing off into pure phantasies” (Engels 1880/1993:64). The precise blueprinting for the minutiae of societal life becomes an index of imaginative arbitrariness and escape from the guidelines of objective historical development.

Gratuitous complexity can thus be seen as echoing the reactionary form taken by utopian schemes in some situations. The advocates of such schemes effectively worked to dampen down actually developing struggles, tending to support a passive standing apart from the class contest in the hope that the pure persuasiveness of the ideas, together with financial support from rich members of the bourgeoisie, could achieve the miraculous jump out of present society into the alternative harmonious world. The result was what the *Communist Manifesto* describes as a consistent “endeavour...to deaden the class struggle and reconcile the class antagonisms” (Marx and Engels 1948/1998:74–75).

Likewise, the rhetorical thrust of non-coherence in the text can be understood as a self-sufficient, top-down development, concerned with the denial of historically constituted conflict. If it is indeed useful to talk of a “utopian discourse”, then it may be more accurate to say that whereas most of the analysis is concerned with a utopian picture of “good” complexity, in the final section it is really dystopian “bad” complexity which is the topic. In both cases the evaluative framing is subordinate to the basic function of a universal account of non-coherence which nonetheless appears as concretely anchored.

On one hand, of course, the document appears as doing various forms of work, and thus as action-orientated. In addition to the language of action (“important to recognize”), there is also a strategic dividing up — including via qualified complexity — of the world in various ways. This applies especially to description of the growing movement of opposition to IFI policies. Thus, there is extensive work done in the World Bank document distinguishing between different groupings of CSOs, separating off supporters of confrontation — including those “tolerating” “violence and obstruction” from those still willing to engage in “constructive dialogue” (p.25). On the other hand, it has been seen both how the language of action can represent the opposite, i.e. non-action, and that apparent attempts to explain or intervene in the problems remain immobilized in a quagmire of circularity.

That the analytic findings are based on examining a single document need not necessarily be cause for doubts about their more general significance. It is certainly not too hard to find pronounced instances of gratuitous complexity in other documents sharing the same programmatic agenda. An example could be the 93-page main section of the text jointly produced by the IMF and the World Bank (published September 2005), entitled, *Review of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Approach: Balancing Accountabilities and Scaling Up Results*. The aim in this case is claimed to be one of evaluating the progress of the Poverty Reduction Strategy approach in helping to create an environment favorable to poverty reduction.

But any chance that such an exercise may implicate underlying objective conflicts, is partly off-set by a “realistic” rhetoric of unlimited abstract differentiation being used to discount what are referred to as “unrealistic expectations” (p. 26).

The present analysis may be seen as recommending a more explicit critical materialist engagement with idealist discursive strategies across of a range of political domains. This particularly applies in a period of deepening economic crisis, where attempts to obscure conflicting class interests takes on a heightened political significance. Textual analysis faces a serious test, for example, in confronting current attempts to universalize the interests of the bankers to the nation as a whole (Kumar 2004), and in helping to question the persistent argument that “we” are all in the same boat.

Notes

1. An overview of poverty from the World Bank can be found at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:20153855~menuPK:435040~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:430367,00.html>. [Accessed 5 December 2009].
2. There is also reference at one point to the “uneven” quality of consultations between the Bank and CSOs, as well as “disparity” between them.

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