Practical wisdom in Risk Society. Methods and practice of interpretive analysis on questions of sustainable development
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Preface

The research project described in this book has a long history. It all began a little over ten years ago, on a nightly bus drive between Dinhata and Cooch Behar, West-Bengal: “Badam, badam. Peanuts, peanuts.” A peanut seller shows us his merchandise. “Can we eat peanuts on the bus?” I ask Rita, my interpreter, who accompanies me on my trips to the ‘field’. Yes, yes, she nods and I buy us two bags. For a moment we nibble in silence. The dark of night is approaching quickly and the market sellers and repair men light their lamps. “Can we eat chapati on the bus?” I look at Rita from aside. “Oh no, no, no,” Rita fiercely shakes her head, as if upset by the very idea. After some moments of thought I continue: “Why is it that we can eat peanuts on the bus, but no chapati?” I’m teasing her, but I wonder if she’s aware of it. We have been going through this routine before. It is not that I am hungry, or even that we have chapati at hand - our tiffin carrier is empty. I just want to know why. Yet I know she has no answer. Rita shrugs her shoulders lightly. “Emni” she says, “Just because”. And adding: “No chapati on bus,” she discards the subject. While I look out of the bus window into the dark Indian night, I suddenly realise that what we were trying to do, explicating the implicit notions that co-determine our actions, might hold the key to solving the puzzle that the findings of my field work had presented me with.

I had come to India because of my studies in social anthropology, to investigate the reasons why the pump sets that had been installed in the context of an Indo-Dutch irrigation project were used so scantily by their intended beneficiaries, the small-scale farmers in the area. I had set out to find ‘the’ truth about the underutilisation of the irrigation schemes. What I found, rather, were many different ‘truths’. Each of the parties involved in the project, from the civil servants in The Hague and Calcutta to the mechanics operating the engines, attached a different meaning to the pump sets, appreciating them in the light of highly divergent worldviews and objectives. Even though the differences in perspective did not jeopardize the project as such, it did result in a poor match between the actions of the various stakeholders, which in turn resulted in the low utilisation rates. A major obstacle to improving this situation, it seemed, was that these differences were not acknowledged by those involved. The project plans, reports and implementation efforts all presupposed a shared understanding of the project’s means and ends.

Disregarding the differences in perception by the project’s participants apparently was counterproductive to its success. Yet, given the fact that these differences stemmed from the widely diverging cultural and professional background of those involved, it was hardly realistic to assume that some commonly shared perspective on the issue could ever be developed. Given the project’s progress, which was in its final phase of implementation, this was not strictly necessary either. Obviously, in order to engage in
collective action, people need not share the basic values and fundamentals that colour their outlook on life and guide their actions. To add to the puzzle, paradoxically, the alternative approach seemed equally counterproductive. The poet E.E. Cummings phrased the problem most aptly when he answers the plain and simple question ‘what time is it?’ by stating that “it’s by every star a different time and each most falsely true.” Fully acknowledging the existence of varieties of realities might give way to an unbounded relativism that forecloses all possibilities for collective action. The problem, it dawned upon me, was how to acknowledge the multiple rationalities of people when designing a ‘communal’ project, in such a way that, given fundamental differences in purpose and outlook, the community can hope to attain a shared goal. That night on the bus, it occurred to me that in order to facilitate the effective attainment of the practical goals of concerted action, at least some of that which goes without saying, referred to in Begali with a simple *emni*, requires explication.

Back in the Netherlands, trying to mould my findings and views into a coherent thesis, I was put on a track that took my pondering about a potential solution to the puzzle a substantial step further. I attended some courses on public administration at the University of Amsterdam. It was there that I was introduced to the work of Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln.

Guba & Lincoln (1981, 1989) explore the potentialities and practicalities of organising an evaluation in the shape of an inquiry process that is hermeneutic (i.e. with a focus on understanding the usually implicit considerations that co-determine a person’s actions) and dialectic (i.e. with a focus on comparing and contrasting divergent considerations) in character. This approach provides a project planner, evaluator or analyst with a practical way out from the seeming dichotomy between pointless relativism and an unavailing belief in the existence of a single, objective truth. Furthermore, I learned about the vast body of literature in the field of the policy sciences in which such a practical stance is explored extensively. The pragmatism of authors such as Dewey, Merriam and Lasswell as well as recent developments in “argumentative” policy analysis inspired me to consider the possibility of adapting Guba & Lincoln’s methodical suggestions for analysis, originally designed for the review of school curricula, to fit the central question in the policy sciences: how to move from a “flawed present toward an improved future” (Jennings 1987).

The body of literature on action-oriented participatory research in the developing world that I explored at the Biology and Society department of the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, which became my working environment after I took my degree in public administration, provided an additional inspiration to further elaborate this research interest. I came to conclude that, in essence, social issues require a cross-fertilisation between the disciplines of social anthropology (focusing on the question why it is that people do whatever it is they are doing) and the policy sciences (using the insight in
peoples' motives for action to instigate societal change). The question how to decide legitimately on the direction that such change should and may take, moreover, inevitably addresses the discipline of political science as well. I was therefore glad to be given the opportunity to investigate, at the Political Science department of the University of Amsterdam, the potential contribution of 'hermeneutic and dialectic' forms of analysis to deal with issues of sustainable development.

This book presents the results of that investigation, in which I elaborated on Guba & Lincoln's work through reflection on actual analytic projects. The case studies of these projects have two functions in the book. They illustrate the problems involved in making the 'sustainable development' concept operational in practice, and the implications of organising hermeneutic and dialectic ("interpretive" is the word used in this dissertation) analytic projects for coping with these problems. Secondly, they serve to provide the material from which lessons are drawn regarding methods and practice of interpretive analysis on questions of sustainable development. In the absence of a universally valid blueprint for dealing with complex and uncertain policy issues, we have to learn from experience in order to improve the current 'unsustainable' situation and to enhance the potential of policy analysis. I hope this book may contribute to the attainment of both objectives.

Many people have played a role in the realisation of this dissertation. I would like to take the opportunity to thank some of them here for their particular contribution.

First of all, I would like to thank John Grin, whose involvement with this Ph.D. research has been crucial to the project in many ways. Not only did he introduce me to the work of Guba and Lincoln; he also encouraged me to pursue my academic aspirations in the first place. In the ensuing years, he was an intellectual sparring partner as much as a conscientious critic of my work. He never failed to express his confidence in this project, for which I am very grateful. I thank Robert Hoppe for the critical yet constructive attitude with which he supervised the research project, challenging me to explore to the fullest extent the consequences of any proposition I made. As a result, the discussions we had on theories and preliminary findings were inspiring and intellectually challenging. Furthermore, I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Amsterdam, Political Science department for their encouragement and companionship, among them Liesbeth Bervoets, Maarten Hajer and Marijke Mossink. In particular, I thank Henk van de Graaf who always found time to discuss solutions to the practical and theoretical problems that I ran into in the course of the project, kindly sharing with me his vast experience and knowledge. Many thanks also to the 'practitioners' at the National Initiative for Sustainable Development (NIDO) for allowing me, over the past two years, to look over their shoulders at how they deal with questions of
sustainable development in practice. The creativity and enthusiasm with which they approach these difficult issues inspired me to finalise this book.

I am much obliged to the STD organisation and the Rathenau Institute for sharing so willingly their information on the analytic projects described here. Also, I thank all those involved in these projects, who by speaking their mind frankly, enabled me to carry out the case studies that form the core of the research. Naturally, responsibility for any inference presented in this book that is based on this information rests with me entirely.

A special word of thanks goes to my friends and family. Jacqueline Broerse and Marja Dreef I thank for their willingness to share the pains and the pleasures of writing a thesis, allowing the companionship we had as colleagues and roommates to develop into friendship. I thank Marleen Verheus, Maartje Eijkelboom and Caroline Verheus for being the sisters one wishes to share one’s days with. The latter I am particularly indebted to for editing substantial parts of this text. I owe gratitude to Eva and Tycho for making happiness ‘come to life’ and for helping me see this endeavour in proper perspective. Last but not least my gratitude is to Ernst, my beloved, for his unflagging support in realising this dissertation of ‘thousand and one night’ but, most of all, for being there. I dedicate this book to my parents who each in their individual way have taught me about the thin line between sustainability and impermanence. I recall their enthusiastic encouragement at the onset of this project. They would have been glad to know the job is finally done.

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