Original Article

Capturing Critical Institutionalism: A Synthesis of Key Themes and Debates

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Abstract The article aims to provide a synthesis of key discussions within scholarship that is critical of Mainstream Institutionalism. It adopts a thematic approach to chart debate and areas of convergence about key issues. The first section of the article briefly charts the rise to prominence of the mainstream 'collective action' school. Each of the themes identified as central to the alternative critical approach is then examined in turn. These are the 'homogenous community' critique, the avoidance of politics critique (further divided into ideational politics and politics of local empowerment) and the sociological critique. The article concludes by reflecting on the challenge of 'making complexity legible' that faces the nascent critical tradition in institutional analysis.

Cet article fournit une synthèse des principales analyses scientifiques critiques à l'égard de l'institutionnalisme traditionnel. Il s'appuie sur une approche thématique pour retracer le débat et les points de convergence sur des questions-clés. La première partie de l'article récapitule brièvement la montée en puissance de la théorie traditionnelle de « l'action collective ». Ensuite, les thèmes identifiés comme étant au cœur de l'approche alternative sont examinés tour à tour. Il s'agit, tout d'abord, de la critique du postulat d'« homogénéité de la communauté », puis de la critique de l'évitement du politique (lui-même divisé en politique idéationnelle et en politique d'autonomisation locale) et, enfin, de la critique sociologique. Nous concluons par une réflexion sur le défi de « rendre lisible la complexité », auquel est confrontée la nouvelle tradition critique de l'analyse institutionnelle.

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Introduction

This article has two central objectives. First, it seeks to provide a synthesis of the vast and varied arguments that have critically engaged with ideas on institutions responsible for managing natural resources. Second, there is an attempt to highlight the interaction – points of convergence and debates – between academics around key issues within the identified themes. The article forms a part of a wider body of research undertaken by the authors examining 'how institutions adapt to change' and as such it responds to many of the issues that flow from this concern.[1] The mode of analysis undertaken here is thematic in that there is an attempt to identify and explore the motifs around which scholars that are critical of dominant trends in the institutional literature have converged. This is not an exhaustive representation of the topics debated in the literature; the scope of this article does not allow for an evaluation of the various positions within the

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themes, neither is the review aspect of the article restricted to scholarship that would necessarily fall squarely within the study on resource management institutions. Rather, the aim is to highlight some of the significant strands of thought that have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of arrangements for resource management. The strategy used here is a marked divergence from the more prominent reviews that have been conducted in the field as these have either assessed the methodological and theoretical cogency of studies (Agrawal, 2001); identified and discussed the separate bodies of thought that dominate the literature (Johnson, 2004); or focused on a single issue within the context of resource management (Ribot *et al*, 2010).

The first section of this article briefly comments on the rise to prominence of the 'collective action' school and its institutional analysis and development branch. Then the article looks in turn at each of the themes identified: the *homogenous community critique*, the *avoidance of politics critique* (further divided into *ideational politics* and *politics of local empowerment*) and the *sociological critique*. It concludes by reflecting on the current position of and the challenges facing the critical tradition, researching on natural resource management institutions.

Schools of Thought on Institutions

In a recent book, Cleaver (2012) divides the literature on institutions involved in community-based natural resource management into two broad 'schools' of thought: Mainstream Institutionalism and Critical Institutionalism (see also, Johnson, 2004). This follows a line of authors who have mapped the distinctive positions that have attempted to understand and explain institutions that manage natural resources. Table 1 provides a picture of some of the previous attempts at categorising approaches to such institutions.

Mainstream Institutional thinking is used to describe what has been referred to as 'common property'/'collective action' scholarship and is linked to the ideas of New Institutional Economics (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990). Central to this perspective is the view that 'the role of institutions is to provide information and assurance about the behaviour of others, to offer incentives to behave in the collective good, and to monitor and sanction opportunistic behaviour' (Cleaver, 2012, p. 8). The factors above are believed to aid in individual decision making and choice. As a result, both individual behaviours and institutional dynamics in common property contexts have been studied within this paradigm, with the aim of generating a predictive theory of collective action on sustainable common property management (Johnson, 2004). Predictability renders institutions

Table 1: Categorisations used in the commons literature

Authors	*Categorisations used in the commons literature*
Mosse (1997)	Exonomic–institutional explanations/Sociological–historical explanations
Mehta *et al* (2001)	Mainstream approach/Emerging or post-instituationalist approach
Johnson (2004)	Collective action scholars/Entitlement scholars
Agrawal (2005)	Common property scholars/Political ecology scholars
Sandström (2008)	Common pool approach/Adaptive resilience approach/Socio-historical approach
Roth (2009)	Mainstream institutional economics approach/Alternative social anthropological approach
Bruns (2009)	Building/Crafting/Bricolage/Discourse/Adaptation approaches
Cleaver (2012)	Mainstream institutional approach/Critical institutional approach

Source: Cleaver (2012).

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amenable to design and indeed, institutions can then be crafted or shaped in desirable directions. The most influential of contributions has come from Ostrom (1986, 1990, 2010) who collected and examined numerous robust and long enduring arrangements so as to identify their replicable common features. These common characteristics have been distilled and labelled, 'Design Principles', and set within the prominent Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework. IAD along with other emerging positions in New Institutional Economics (see, for example, Mccarthy *et al*, 2004) is prominent as a tool for researching community resource management and governance mechanisms and informing international donors and developing country policymakers.

The second, still very nascent, school of thought that Cleaver identifies is referred to as 'Critical Institutionalism'. It is contended that academics and practitioners from this position 'question the rational choice and functional assumptions of Mainstream Institutionalism' and instead emphasise: (i) the complexity of institutions entwined in everyday social life; (ii) their historical formation; and (iii) the interplay between the traditional and the modern, formal and informal arrangements. The claim from this emerging alternative to the prominent position is that 'rules, boundaries and processes are "fuzzy"; people's complex social identities and unequal power relationships shape resource management arrangements and outcomes' (Cleaver, 2012, p. 9; Cleaver *et al*, 2013). Critical Institutionalists are not necessarily wholly antagonistic to mainstream thinking on institutions and very often the views and objectives overlap. One key distinction is that these two 'schools' are underpinned by very different assumptions about the nature of human action and society. For example, according to Johnson (2004, p. 415), 'entitlement scholars' (here a part of Critical Institutionalism) differ from 'collective action scholars' (part of Mainstream Institutionalism) in a number of important ways: (i) entitlement scholars emphasise on socio-economic equality and poverty reduction, whereas collective action scholars focus on efficiency and the health of the commons; (ii) both agree that rules are important; however, entitlement scholars interpret them in complex ways and as potentially enhancing access to the commons, whereas collective action scholars see them as existing to regulate use and exclude outsiders; (iii) the entitlement literature favours a structural historical approach as opposed to the collective action school, which seeks to establish a general and predictive theory of the commons.

There continues to be a need for reviews that examine the parameters of both 'traditions' and how understandings and policy interventions have been influenced by their interactions. However, this article, itself written from a critical perspective, stands on the shoulders of other such efforts (for example, Mosse (1997), Johnson (2004), Roth (2009), Cleaver (2012)) by moving on from identification to an exploration of some of the fundamental ideas, which challenge mainstream understandings. Many of the studies from which ideas have been extracted may not necessarily have been written in opposition to mainstream thinking, nor would the writers necessarily consider themselves Critical Institutionalists. In this sense, the aim here is to bring together ideas from disparate alternative approaches to interpreting institutions and to make an evidence-based contribution to these dialogues.

Critique I: The 'Homogenous Community'

Mainstream institutional scholars seem to accept that 'most common-pool resources are more complex than the base theory of homogeneous appropriators taking one type of resource unit from a resource system' (Ostrom, 2002, p. 3). Nevertheless, collective action as characterised within this tradition and its policy applications inevitably rely on the romantic notions of community. Heterogeneity is seen as potentially making it difficult to produce rules, which can

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conserve resources (Acheson, 2006). For example, in an assessment of Maine fishing communities, Acheson found that only five harbours could successfully implement informal trap limits. These were small islands, which were isolated, closely knit and with strong territorial boundaries. On the other hand, 92 harbours tried and failed. These communities were heterogeneous, had both full-time and part-time fishermen with different interests, and the fishermen did not interact much and had little sense of community (Acheson, 2006, p. 128). A key assumption is that 'organizing so as to create rules that specify rights and duties of participants creates a public good for those involved. Anyone who is included in the community of users benefits from this public good, whether they contribute or not' (Ostrom, 2008, p. 2). As a result, mainstream thinking is wedded to the assumption that a social group can be defined by their 'shared interest in conserving their natural resources' (Thakadu, 2005, p. 201).

These ideas have not gone unchallenged. One of the earliest and most widely accepted refutations of the 'commons' or 'collective action' position has been the rejection of the assumption that communities can be treated as static relatively homogeneous entities as is 'so often implicit in today's CBNRM literature' (Leach *et al*, 1999; Goldman, 2003; Blaikie, 2006). This section identifies two of the problems associated with romanticising communities. The first is the identification of the 'myth of community' that can lead to the exacerbation of inequalities and exclusion. The second idea challenged is the presumption that local practices are internally generated.

In their discussion on the representations of community within mainstream literature, Agrawal and Gibson (1999, pp. 633–636) outline the three definitions that have dominated conservationist thinking: (i) community as a spatial unit; (ii) community as a social structure; and (iii) community as common interests and shared views. They point out the conceptual lethargy that fails to explain the emergence of these features and then go on to show that these properties, even where applicable in a given context, are not necessarily conducive to the efficient management of natural resources. Similarly, Cleaver (1999, pp. 603–605) exposes the academic and technocratic modes of thought that have ascribed certain characteristics to communities (such as 'unitary community', 'resourceful community') and have actively elided others (power and inequality) in the service of an extremely convenient 'myth of community'. The potential issue here is the fact that myths can be based on ideas that are simply wrong, but they can nevertheless be powerful enough to shape thoughts and interventions (Brockington, 2004).

Without necessarily directly engaging with the way in which the notion of community has been conceptualised, a number of researchers have provided case studies that problematise the dominant assumptions seeking to explain how communities are constituted and how they co-operate (Johnson, 2001; McDaniel, 2003; Roth, 2006; Galvan, 2007; Malley *et al*, 2008). Within mainstream approaches it has been acknowledged in some quarters that one of the major liabilities of ideas such as community-based conservation is its titular reference to 'community', as this term is 'one of the most vague and elusive concepts in social science and [one] which continues to defy precise definition' (Murphree, 2000, p. 4). In response to the critique that identifies local settlements as 'culturally heterogeneous and economically stratified boundaries' and where 'social cohesiveness is fragile', Murphree proposes that it is far more helpful to look at the 'functional and organizational essence' of what is being discussed. He contends that organisationally a community-based committee is directed at units established at 'national or district levels, is conducted through primary relationships, is governed by normative consensus, is legitimated by a sense of collective interest and operates over a defined jurisdiction' (Murphree, 2000, p. 4). The reliance on a community has been dispensed with for an institutional foundation that is altogether more 'constructed'. Yet, the construct retains the notions of *normative consensus* and *collective interest*. The use of these concepts still ignores the potentially contested

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context of the institutional base. If as argued by Brockington (2004, p. 416), 'all societies distribute misfortune unequally', then the misfortunes inherent within the *collective interest* on conservation policies can be 'concentrated upon a minority, who in their weakness and want of numbers are unable to do anything effective about it'.

Mosse (2006, p. 696) has identified a debilitating paradox between, on one hand, the idealisation, homogenisation and traditionalisation that is invested in the idea of community, and on the other hand the modernisation and democratisation that are demanded by contemporary policy objectives. He has not been alone in this endeavour as others have pointed to similar fundamental contradictions in attempts to design local-level institutions (see, Watson, 2003; Galvan, 2007).

Another notable, if a less well-traversed area of concern, has been the assumed insularity of communities. In Mosse's (1997, p. 491) analysis, it cannot be assumed that traditional resource management institutions have been *internally* derived or sustained, as historically the state and the village have always been interlinked. Cleaver and Franks (2008), researching on water-resource governance in the Usangu region of Tanzania, found it difficult to locate communities entirely within village (administrative) or river-basin (natural resource) boundaries. These poorly reflected people's social relationships and migration patterns and their economic trading networks and political affiliations. This was particularly the case as certain stakeholders 'such as the politically marginalised pastoralists, sought support for their rights outside the basin at national and regional (East African) levels' (Cleaver and Franks, 2008, p. 171). Sutton's study of the *falaj* co-operative system of water management in Oman provides another excellent example. She notes that the *falaj* systems have provided water for domestic use and irrigation for 1500–2000 years, and that in common with many modern schemes, *falaj* systems were an imposed technology. Although it was only in the 1970s that the modern state has become significantly involved, the technology, administrative and financial systems, and the traditional workforce, which influence many other aspects of social relations, have all evolved from interactions with the powerful Persian central government structure that had been established upon the invasion of Oman (Sutton, 1984, pp. 8–9). Adding to the credibility of claimed interconnections between state and community is Lund's (2006) contention that even where community-based institutions derive their legitimacy and influence from their opposition or distance to the state, they nevertheless gain symbolic relevance through the language of the state (for example, providing security to citizens) and often can only operate with the state's consent.

This assumed insularity of community is prevalent, despite the fact that there have been numerous welcome and thorough examinations of difference and dissonance within communities. Indeed, there still exists, even within critical approaches, the impression that local cultures and behaviours are 'internally' generated and that 'external' forces are simply interacting with these processes (reorienting them, destroying them, entrenching them and so on). For example, Benjamin (2008, p. 2256) makes a distinction between 'customary' or 'community' institutions which have self-organised rule rooted in the shared social and historical experience of the community and the 'community-based' institutions designed by outside agents and implemented at the community level. However, a more dynamic interface between the local and the state (Komakech *et al*, 2011, p. 1743) must recognise that the local is itself 'translocal' or even 'transnational', meaning a *community's* distinctiveness is carved out from an already interconnected space (Pigg, 1996, p. 165; see also, Agrawal, 2001, p. 1657). The *falaj* illustrates Mosse's point that local practices are not autonomous and illustrates Pigg's point that the transnational resides in local practices as it tends to have interacted at some point with other cultures as populations migrate and interact. Similarly, the 'language of the state' argument presented by Lund makes the case that demands that are decidedly local can be generated from or shaped by meanings that operate at state and even international level. A failure to recognise

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the evolution of social organisation around community resources may have significant consequences for policy solutions as they may impute to communities attributes they do not possess. Again Sutton's study provides a useful illustration. It is argued that, despite over a thousand years of experience with it and centuries of devising social structures for its maintenance and management, user communities can neither fully understand nor copy the *falaj* technology (Sutton, 1984). Here the community must keep alive, through intergenerational transmission within a select group, interactions with Persian governance in the very distant past. It becomes difficult to overlook the convincing analyses that have demonstrated that the local and 'traditional' practices of communities are constituted through historical and usually ongoing relations with wider systems (Andersson, 1996; Pigg, 1996; Mosse, 1997).

Critique II: The Avoidance of Politics

Policy on resource conservation and management over the past two decades, whether related to wildlife, forest or water, has overwhelmingly emphasised on investing power in communities through varying degrees of ownership and control (Twyman, 2000; Brockington, 2004; Blaikie, 2006). Notwithstanding the seemingly benevolent objective at the core of this policy direction, according to Dill (2010, p. 32), the proponents of community-based institutions have been resoundingly criticised for failing to interrogate the structures of power upon which practices and outcomes are constructed. Rather than recognise the complexities of local politics and the broader socio-political field that envelops and invades small arenas (Lund, 2006, p. 687), critics of prevailing policies have shown that state and donor agencies extol the virtues of apolitical institutions (Chhotray, 2007) and/or avoid engaging with institutions that have political dimensions (Watson, 2003). It is not surprising then that the subject of power in its various manifestations (particularly those relations which create or exacerbate inequalities, exclusion and inter-/intra-group conflict) would be one of the most fertile fields of enquiry for 'Critical Institutionalists'. For the purposes of this discussion, the field is divided into two sections: 'ideational politics' and the 'politics of local empowerment'.

'Ideational politics' in this context refers to the political origins of the 'community-based' concept (in its various manifestations) as a policy instrument that has influenced the design or reengineering of resource-management institutions. Thus, the paper draws on the literature that has commented on the international 'sources' and the national imperatives that are the foundation of this paradigm in resource management. The section on the 'politics of local empowerment' highlights critical engagement with the implementation of policies and how the power relations at local levels affect institutional outcomes.

Ideational Politics

There seems to be a consensus among critical scholars that, despite the focus on studying traditional institutions within the 'collective action' literature, the policy instruments derived are patently based on Western ideals of successful and robust institutions. For example, Ribot *et al* (2010, p. 35) claim considerable support from other academics for their proposition that the principle of popular participation 'is reflected more in government and donor discourses than in the experience of rural communities'. Accordingly, Dill convincingly makes the case that in countries such as Tanzania the central state ensured it 'structurally controlled' the local development process and as such the nature of local institutions. The Tanzanian example is, in this respect, congruent with Ghana where nearly two decades of military rule has severely

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weakened the socio-political infrastructure essential for framing effective local governance (Wardell and Lund, 2006). In such cases, it has been proposed that there is a notable lack of 'fit' between domestic norms that constrain popular participation and 'the imported institutional superstructure that is intended to facilitate it' (Dill, 2010, p. 33). In an equally interesting case showing a lack of centralised control, Galvan (2007, p. 80) examined a remote region of Senegal characterised by 'benign state neglect' where locally propelled forms of collective action are dominant. The study found growing significance of a mode of institutionalisation promoted through state and international agencies that reifies the community-based organisation and separates it 'in an unrealistic way from the dynamics of change in the community of which it is both a part and reflection'. Thus, even in contexts where the state has little reach, 'Western' ideas (for example, through conditionality for funding of local organisations by the US and UK agencies) of what characteristics constitute successful institutions have permeated and influenced local modes of organisation.

In a contribution to understanding the historical roots of Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Botswana and Malawi, Blaikie (2006, p. 1950) contends that state formation at and after independence set the political environment for the interface between International Funding Institutions that promote CBNRM and government officials. One of the most interesting facts that Blaikie elaborates on is the convergence in meanings and practice between various countries that seems to be the result of this international and national interface. He highlights the fact that community forestry in Southeast Asia and Natural Resources Committees in Malawi have similarities that have not resulted from congruencies within their separate cultures but from the hegemonic policy design of international donors (Blaikie, 2006, p. 1943). A history of unequal relations at the supranational level has been seen as an integral factor, although in different ways, by a number of other commentators on the subject (Brockington, 2008; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008). In particular, the ideological genesis of a dominant strain of resources management has been the subject of some critical scholars. These academics have explored how wildlife and forestry protection has been structured as a result of a relatively new type of relationship between capitalism and community conservation (Brockington, 2004, 2008; West *et al*, 2006; Büscher and Whande, 2007; Holmes, 2010; Igoe *et al*, 2010; Igoe, 2010; MacDonald, 2010).

The shape of institutions and the nature of protection regimes can be seen, at least partly, as a function of the origin of ideas around the need for conservation of a resource within a given context. Prominent in examining this interaction is Brockington who has investigated the fraught relations permeating the modes of conservation that by 2003 had seen Tanzania commit over 31 per cent of its land mass to national parks, game reserves and forest reserves (Brockington, 2008). The central argument is that tourist revenues from conservation are becoming an integral part of the Tanzanian economy and at the same time generating benefits for local communities. Yet, this success is built on more than the nation's rich biodiversity and has extensive human costs. The legacy of evictions and exclusive institutional structures around these national parks and game reserves are seen as rooted in an 'imagined and symbolic landscape with historical origins deep in the early European encounters with Africa' (Brockington, 2008, p. 571). Brockington and others from this position who examine emerging arrangements for conservation contend that they are incalculably affected by an active reimagining and remaking of economies, landscapes, livelihoods and conservation practice fuelled by capital accumulation processes (Brockington, 2007; Brockington and Duffy, 2010).

The prevailing reinvention of commons management has not been exclusively explained by reference to western ideological dominance. Indeed, what Brockington (2006) refers to as the 'environmental–conservation complex' is as much rooted in exigencies of domestic politics as

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international influence. For instance, it has been argued that government policies to empower local bodies are not as new as is often claimed and have come in waves (Manor, 2004; Wardell and Lund, 2006). According to Manor (2004), across 60 less-developed countries, the first wave of engineered institutional development, which started in the 1980s, was 'mostly undertaken by government on their own initiative' (especially in the early years) and donor interest only emerged later. Conversely, the second wave has been characterised as being driven for the most part by international donor agencies' sectoral programmes, meaning that governments are less enthusiastic and tend to manipulate them in various ways (Manor, 2004, p. 193).

Other assessments have found that the failure of state-centric attempts at managing resources central to people's everyday life has left few options other than a community-based approach (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, p. 632). Similarly, in relation to water policies in India, Mosse argues that the popularity of 'community-based' options results, partly, from the poor performance of many state systems or forced state retrenchment because of structural adjustment. As such, community management offers opportunities for states to reduce subsidies, introduce cost recovery and transfer numerous other costs to local users. Simultaneously, in local and international non-governmental and environmentalist circles, states that encourage the transfer of management often escape the critique that they are imposing western technocratic forms of management on indigenous communities (Mosse, 1997, p. 468). This more sceptical view of the motivation for the design of community resource management policies has widely been commented on in the critical literature and as such is becoming more prominent in research (Leach *et al*, 1999; Chhotray, 2007; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Ribot, 2009).

Politics of Local Empowerment

As seen above, unpacking the interaction between various administrative levels (for example, the interface between district councils and national government) in designing and implementing resource management regimes has been a preoccupation of numerous academics. However, the examinations of power relations as they occur at the local levels in implementing resource management reforms are equally emphasised within the critical literature. Some of the most effective critical insights into this area have been furnished by Jesse Ribot's body of work (Ribot, 2001a, b, 2009; Ribot *et al*, 2006, 2008, 2010). Ribot's work reflects a concern with multiple ways that power has been distributed to and within local institutions. A particular focus has been on how power has been denied to marginal groups or how local participation has been confined to aspects of management that will not threaten existing relations of domination. In this vein, Ribot *et al* (2006) review six countries where decentralisation policies have been pursued and found that 'central governments, regardless of official rhetoric, policy, and legislation, erect imaginative obstacles in the path of decentralized institutions and choices' (p. 1881).

A distinct strand of the critical literature on institutions uses empirical evidence to question how much can be achieved by erecting legal frameworks, which claim to devolve power to local bodies (Manor, 2004; Wardell and Lund, 2006; Wilder and Romero Lankao, 2006; Benjamin, 2008). Here, academics are partly interested in discovering how policies materialise and affect relations of power within localities. There seems to be a general recognition that as politicians transform the governance rights to use/own natural resources, they effectively 'redefine political identities, redirect political loyalties and reallocate authority' (Poteete, 2009, p. 282). Within this epistemic context, a host of writers have called attention to the fact that the national economic and political context cannot be viewed in isolation from how institutional policies will be (formally and informally) operationalised. Thus, both Nelson and Agrawal (2008, p. 578) and

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Ribot *et al* (2010, p. 39) concur that decentralisation and CBNRM policies are likely to be most effective when the value of resources are high and local rights are secure. On the other hand, a dilemma exists as highly valuable resources that can be used in the 'national interest' incentivise central actors to retain control – even to the point of abrogating or subverting formal legal instruments (Fisher, 2008; Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Lange, 2011). Further illustrating the significance of the political context, Poteete (2009, p. 290) notes that CBNRM was introduced in Botswana during a period of increasing political competition and attempts at reversing electoral uncertainty account for partial recentralisation of powers from community-based institutions. The evidence collected along this line of enquiry suggests that powers granted to local organisations 'in theory often fail to materialise in practice' (Manor, 2004, p. 201). In particular, there are questions as to whether local empowerment and participation have been deployed as means of *containment* rather than strategies of inclusion, equity and democratisation (Few, 2000; Twyman, 2000).

The personal interest of actors at various levels is another major point of convergence. On this point, it has been noted that the neoliberal nature of many of the policy reforms related to community resource management have enabled public officials to use their positions to pursue private accumulative interests (Nelson and Agrawal, 2008, p. 562). Blaikie (2006, p. 1951) concurs and adds that even purely rhetorical acceptance of decentralisation has been enough to secure foreign investment and sustain the 'neo-patrimonial' practices through which many politicians reinforce their economic and political positions. These private accumulative practices are seen to operate at all levels. However, there is particular concern with the distorting effects of new rights and institutions, which often lead to unexpected outcomes (Lesorogol, 2010). Komakech argues that the introduction of new institutions and forms of organisation may facilitate the capture of communal systems by new actors. The decisions of these actors are not only exclusively based on financial advantages, but also the potential of increased power within and beyond the local sphere (Komakech *et al*, 2011, pp. 1741–1742). It is in this sense that Lund (2006) notes, 'big men' (inclusive of chiefs, politicians and entrepreneurs) in a Ghanaian context, were 'more powerful the better able they were to combine their stakes in different fields of action' (p. 693).

A number of scholars investigating the political machinations of decentralisation emphasise on the need for institutions that are equitable and downwardly accountable. The unanswered question that emerges for Critical Institutionalism is whether more democratic institutions will necessarily generate more equitable outcomes and vice versa. Ribot, for instance, argues that the empowerment of customary authorities often undermines the authority of nascent local governments and as such recommends that customary institutions be subjugated to the authority of elected, representative, local government (Benjamin, 2008, p. 2260). In addition, according to Nelson and Agrawal (2008), rent-seeking is not only related to the value of the resource in question but also the institutional environment of the state. It is believed that the transparency and accountability of institutions is a determinant of the ability of politicians to capture resources for patronage or profit (p. 575). Yet, on the other hand, Brockington's (2007, p. 845) assessment of village forest institutions problematises such conclusions. The issue raised in this study is whether neo-patrimonial and accumulative practices may be less a function of a particular system of governance and more a manifestation of the established way of 'getting things done' within that cultural context. The corollary here is that 'democracy, transparency and civil society do not reshape practice of themselves; rather, they are shaped by the societies in which they are introduced' (Brockington, 2007, p. 845). Benjamin (2008, p. 2260) also questions the expectation that elected local governments will necessarily enhance representation and equity, even when they function as intended. He argues that these are externally imposed governance structures that

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are introduced into distinct political economies and cultures. Consequently, such structures cannot escape being distorted in the process.

Critique III: Socially Inadequate Analyses

Further complicating the subject of power relations within state–local interactions is the well-founded conclusion that the state is not the sole institution sanctioning rights within particular resource contexts (Lund, 2009; Sikor *et al*, 2009, p. 190). Although it is usually the state that guarantees rights to resources, there are numerous examples where claims are underwritten by local authorities or social norms (Meinzen-Dick and Nkonya, 2005). In this sense, it can be argued, following Lund (2006, p. 700), that 'politics is not only about politics'. In traditional assessments it deals with questions of identity, of control and distinction, but political relations are intricately interwoven into the social fabric of societies. As such, politics is a factor in structuring the nature of the quotidian routines of everyday life that often escape the gaze of the social scientist interested in institutions. The very limited engagement with the relational dimension of resources by those who propose 'institutional crafting' has meant that 'natural resource management is based on concepts which are inadequately socially informed' (Cleaver, 2002, p. 11). Four issues are dealt with in this section. First, it acknowledges influential critiques that have influenced mainstream positions by convincingly arguing for institutional analysis and reform to incorporate social analyses. Second, we examine the old and new literature that speaks to the multiple roles of institutions and how they are to be understood in a social context. The third point of interest here are those studies that highlight the symbolic role of resources within communities and the implications for management. Finally, this section engages with the critical literature dealing with resource scarcity, its social basis and how it may be used by certain interests.

An influential group within the critical institutional literature has attempted to address the question of a sociological deficit in the collective action school of thought by identifying those relational factors that affect the effectiveness of institutions in managing resources (Meinzen-Dick, 2007, p. 15200). For instance, Poteete and Welch (2004) explore the impacts of the complexity of resources on the potential for cooperation. They do so by attempting to distinguish the effects of complexity from other aspects of the collective action problem. In addition, in his authoritative review article, Agrawal (2001) comments on the predilection of collective action scholars to focus on institutional characteristics within a locality. He instead proposes that researchers examine the context in which localities are shaped and produced (p. 1657). A further example of attempts at identifying relational factors may be found in Merrey *et al*'s (2007, p. 195) discussion of agricultural and water management reform. The authors begin by asking: How can 'reform processes be made more effective for achieving food security, environmental sustainability, economic growth, social equity, and poverty reduction?' In response, they suggest that bureaucracies begin to see management as a social and political as well as a technical issue. Second, it is posited that policymakers support more integrated solutions as various disparate livelihood sectors may be interlinked (p. 194). Despite making leaps towards a more sociological understanding of institutions, this strand within the critical literature may itself be criticised for focusing on 'the management instrumentalities of getting the institutions right' (Roth, 2009, p. 197). Similarly, Mosse (2006, p. 700), asks whether the enterprise of gaining insights into collective action would not be better served by moving beyond the economic or formalised prerequisites of cooperation (such as the mechanics of meetings and sanctions

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and so on) in favour of interrogating the role of resource control 'in expressing or reproducing relations of power and authority'.

Social analyses of how communities have organised to control resources pre-date the intellectual engagement of new institutional economics scholars with the problem of collective action. For example, the International Irrigation Management Institute (1987, p. 3) reported that, as early as 1961, Leach explored irrigation institutions in Sri Lank so as to examine issues around kinship and social organisation; Geertz in 1967 and Potter in 1975 respectively, used traditional systems to understand important principles of rural organisation; Robert Hunt and Eva Hunt in 1976 used irrigation as a case study in investigating political power in Mexico; and that in 1976, Mitchell studied irrigation systems to analyse political and ritual life. These studies illustrate a profound issue that has concerned critics for a substantial period: institutions responsible for natural resource management (in that they determine access to land, water, fisheries, wildlife and so on) also have other functions and capacities within their social context (Cleaver, 2000; Watson, 2003, p. 297; Cleaver and Franks, 2005). In examining water control in Kenya, Fleuret (1985, p. 112) found that the physical layout of the canals, access to the fields they serve and management of canal water all hinged on features of the ethnic group's social organisation and the reproduction of that social organisation through the generations. Thus, one of the major fallacies of the prevailing paradigm is the conceptualisation of resource management institutions as if they were designed purely to perform those functions (Leach *et al*, 1999; Watson, 2003). In this way, the academics and policymakers who overlook the interconnections miss the ways in which new institutional rights and forms potentially distort existing relations and set in motion often bitter contests between institutions for authority and legitimacy (Roth, 2009).

Perhaps the most common flaw in the readings of institutions emerges from a lack of careful evaluation of the symbolic role of resources. Poteete (2009, p. 283), for instance, notes that CBNRM follows from an 'understanding of wildlife and wilderness areas as sources of wealth and poverty, opportunity and loss'. Even within the critical interrogations of institution and institution building, there is a sense that without significant direct benefits, communities, and the individuals within them will have little interest in conserving or collectively managing resources (Nelson and Agrawal, 2008; Poteete, 2009; Ribot *et al*, 2010). Yet, as a rejoinder to such propositions, a number of commentators have, through various means, persuasively depicted the natural and man-made environment as 'repositories of symbolic resources' (Mosse, 1997, p. 472, see also Johnson, 2001; Mosse, 2003, 2006; Mehta, 2007). Similarly, Peters (1987, p. 78) argues that definitions of rights, or relative claims 'are not only embedded in specific historical sets of political and economic structures but also in cultural systems of meanings symbols and values'. In an interesting examination of fisheries conservation, Johnson (2001, p. 966) notes that fishing was just one of the many pursuits around which villagers could form an allegiance within competing economic and cultural interests. Contradicting the narrative of the need to protect the fishery was a more 'modern view about life in the village'. This view questioned the wisdom of religious ideals and traditional livelihood strategies and instead embraced symbols of the modern global economy. However, 'using important "symbolic resources" such as the importance of fishing to Muslim–Thai culture and the encroachment of non-Muslim capital', conservation leaders were able to attract the support of even individuals whose interests were outside of coastal fishing (p. 971). This position responds to an imperative to introduce Bourdieuian analysis into this field by reintegrating the management of resources into a wider set of social, political and economic exchanges (Mosse, 1997, p. 473). Alternatively, this 'tradition' imperative within Critical Institutionalism may be characterised as seeking to understand the 'social life of things' and gather all there is to learn about peoples' relationship with the things themselves, 'for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories' (Ferguson, 1988, p. 492).

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Assessments of the contested meanings within resources contexts are not inconsequential to the ways in which they are controlled and distributed. According to Mosse (1997, p. 473), the strategies used by individuals or groups to accumulate symbolic capital exist to address certain ecologically determined needs. Here again it is impossible to escape the proposition that human relations and activities are in constant interaction with ecological processes (Molle, 2007). People's actions and practices may conserve or reproduce existing ecological features or processes, but they may also transform environments. These actions may 'involve precipitating transitions of ecological state that push ecological processes in new directions or along new pathways'. In addition, such actions may be intentional or unintentional but still have significant ecological consequences (Leach *et al*, 1999, p. 239). An important variable here, which begs analysis, is the symbolic terms in which people perceive resources, their community and their place within the community (Johnson, 2001).

Indeed, frequently within Mainstream Institutionalism the conclusion is drawn that the core problem of resource management is one of the scarce resources being depleted/destroyed by the rapidly growing community, or by commercialisation and modernisation (Potkanski and Adams, 1998; cf. Leach *et al*, 1999). Despite the dominance of this perspective, another persuasive position exists in the literature: inasmuch as risk and scarcity can be seen as providing incentives for cooperation, risk and scarcity can be used as tools to ensure that 'relations of power are expressed and legitimized through systems for the control of commons resources' (Mosse, 2006, p. 706). Mehta (2007, p. 655) argues that within resources debates, even those who point to socio-political, technological and cultural changes that a society must use to respond to scarcity, fail to distinguish adequately between the socially constructed and biophysical aspects of scarcity. In the context of water management, Ahlers (2010, p. 215) depicts scarcity partly as a 'consequence of the historic and contemporary social relations and transformation in the struggle for control'. This is a well-evidenced proposition that has been widely corroborated (Fleuret, 1985; Leach *et al*, 1999; Mosse, 2006; Ahlers, 2010). A less well-supported but nevertheless convincing argument is that claims of scarcity are often mobilised by personal and economic interests as excuses to reconfigure social relations around resource management (Johnson, 2001; Mehta, 2007; Ahlers, 2010). The latter point returns this analysis to its starting point – the inextricable link between the social and the political – as it highlights the difficulties in separating the issue of who sets the rules and that of how and why it is possible for them to do so.

Conclusion

This review has aimed to provide exposure to the fact that investigations being carried out by disparate critical commentators on resource management often coalesce around certain areas of concern (although divergent positions are held). Three themes have been identified and discussed in the foregoing sections: the homogeneous community, the avoidance of politics and the inadequate social analyses. What these discussions have illustrated is a frustration with the rigidities of Mainstream Institutionalism. As an alternative, the critical literature generally tends to reflect complex and unequal relations around natural resources management within and between the local, national and global levels. This focus creates significant challenges for those working from a critical perspective. Not the least of these is the challenge of 'making complexity legible' to the policymakers, NGOs, donors and others involved in the design and implementation of the programmes that will shape how resources within communities are managed (Peters, 2004, Cleaver, 2012). As noted by Cleaver (2012, p. 17), the practical appeal of Mainstream Institutionalism resides partly in the fact that the rigorous empiricism of this approach (such as

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Ostrom's usage of thousands of case studies to distil design principles) can be easily translated into policy and project documents. On the other hand, the exploring of institutional nuances, which in the critical literature are usually unaccompanied by practical guidelines means that even profound reflections on institutional complexity remain largely illegible to policymakers.

This is not to suggest that the critical commentaries here can be seen as working towards a grand theoretical narrative that can be more easily utilised. Indeed, one point of consensus among numerous Critical Institutionalists is that there is evidence to 'be pessimistic about the possibility of a universal theory of the commons' (Johnson, 2004; Agrawal and Chhatre, 2006, p. 164; Ribot *et al*, 2010). There is, however, reason to be optimistic about the progress of some critical ideas that have begun to impose themselves on the mainstream. Dill (2010), for instance, notes that within influential organisations such as the World Bank 'concern has shifted toward facilitating the emergence of governance institutions that will improve the ability of citizens to make choices'. In addition, it is argued that the 'new consensus' in development studies is not exclusively about procedural participation but 'is far more agnostic as to what the final institutional end state will look like' (Dill, 2010, p. 29). There is no evidence that such adjustments have dislodged an ideological reliance on neoliberal principles and a concomitant omission of power/social relations. This means the imperative remains for critics to develop and use flexible concepts that explore and explain the dynamic processes surrounding individual and collective action.

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