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To cite this article: David Chandler (2018) Intervention and Statebuilding Beyond the Human: From the 'Black Box' to the 'Great Outdoors', Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 12:1, 80-97, DOI: [10.1080/17502977.2017.1412108](https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1412108)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2017.1412108>



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Published online: 12 Feb 2018.



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Intervention and Statebuilding Beyond the Human: From the ‘Black Box’ to the ‘Great Outdoors’

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses intervention and statebuilding as shifting towards a posthuman discursive regime. It seeks to explore how the shift to ‘bottom-up’ or post-liberal approaches has evolved into a focus upon epistemological barriers to intervention and an appreciation of complexity. It attempts to describe a process of reflection upon intervention as a policy practice, whereby the need to focus on local context and relations – in order to take problems seriously – begins to further undermine confidence in the Western episteme. In other words, the bottom-up approach, rather than resolving the crisis of policy practices of intervention, seems to further intensify it. It is argued that the way out of this crisis seems to be found in the rejection of the aspiration to know from a position of a ‘problem-solving’ external authority and instead to learn from the opportunities opened up through the practices of intervention. However, what is learnt does not seem to be able to fit into traditional modes and categories of expertise.

KEYWORDS

perspectivism; ‘black box’; ‘the great outdoors’; posthumanism; speculative realism; object-oriented ontology

Introduction

In the late 1990s and the 2000s, discourses of international intervention and statebuilding hailed a new policy-framework: the so-called ‘bottom-up’ approach, which was to overcome the limits of overly prescriptive and generic international programmes which assumed that ‘one size fits all’ (for summaries of the extensive literature on this topic, see Bennett, Foley, and Krebs 2016; Collinson 2016; Chandler 2017a). However, this alternative framework – one which presupposes difference as a starting point, rather than the uniformity of problems and solutions (see Brigg 2008) – similarly has reached an impasse. Alternative approaches seem mired in discussion of the problems of ‘relational sensitivity’ (Chadwick, Debiel, and Gadinger 2013), the ‘local turn’ (Randazzo 2017), ‘hybridity’ (Millar 2014; Nadarajah and Rampton 2015), ‘friction’ (Björkdahl et al. 2016) and new forms of representation and inclusion (for example, Peterson 2012). In fact, as long as these alternatives still share the assumptions of external knowledge and direction, the attention to difference merely multiplies the points of impasse, bringing into focus further limits to external policy-practices and forms of knowledge (see, for example, Debiel, Held, and Schneckener 2016; Heins, Koddenbrock, and Unrau 2016).

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The focus of this article is an analysis of a discursive shift away from these ‘external’ articulations of alternative bottom-up understandings of policy intervention and towards what are described here as ‘internal’ forms of knowing and agency. This can be seen as a two-stage process. Firstly, with the opening up of the ‘black box’ of endogenous social processes, there is the growing recognition of the limits of bottom-up forms of intervention as an attempt to establish a new ground for external problem-solving. Secondly, there is a shift to ‘the great outdoors’ through imagining alternative ways of perceiving and responding: understanding problems as emergent and interactive processes that are invitations to grasp the world in richer and more complex ways ‘from the inside’.

The project presented here deploys some material from the author’s field investigations with leading international agencies in Nairobi in May 2016. The interview material is taken from unstructured interviews with a number of international agencies working in the field of rights, development and conflict management and is informed through earlier fieldwork also concerned with the re-articulation and re-envisioning of policy problems (Chandler 2017b). The Nairobi material is used purely illustratively of the reflections of policy actors and agencies on the ground as they grapple with the need for deeper access to, and understandings of, problems and how they see or imagine the limits and alternatives.

This article is organized into four sections. The first considers how intervention is operationalized in contemporary international relations discourses, orientated to a bottom-up approach, starting with problems understood as contextual and specific rather than amenable to generic, or ‘off the peg’, solutions. Selecting as a starting point the attempt to reach a consensus on the problem in its context already represents a major shift from the assumption that Western knowledge and expertise can just be exported or transferred. Yet, this bottom-up approach runs aground with the increasing recognition of the difficulties of gaining the necessary knowledge or of ‘drilling down’ sufficiently to understand what this ‘context’ might be. The second section considers how the recognition of these limits to understanding ‘the problem’ and ‘the context’ leads to an intensification of the problematization of the Western episteme, expressed increasingly in terms of the need to move beyond the problem of ‘correlationism’. The third section then considers how this move is increasingly welcomed by intervening actors as enabling new opportunities for knowledge and discovery of ‘the great outdoors’ of ‘otherness’, previously excluded to them. The final section considers how, perhaps counterintuitively, these new opportunities for gaining knowledge tend to result in a disintegration of existing categories and forms of expertise. It appears that opening the ‘black box’ results in a collapse of existing forms of knowledge and expertise rather than enhancing them.

Starting with ‘the’ problem

There is a growing policy convergence in international approaches to policy intervention, increasingly covering the fields of peace and security, development and environmental sustainability, and humanitarian emergency (UN 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), cohered through the United Nations’ 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda (UN 2015d). The UN Secretary-General argues:

We must [move] ... beyond short-term, supply-driven response efforts towards demand-driven outcomes ... international providers will need to set aside such artificial institutional labels as ‘development’ or ‘humanitarian’, working together ... to assess what skills and assets they can contribute in a given context, at a particular time (short, medium and long term) and towards a specific outcome. (UN 2016a, 29)

This trope of moving beyond ‘supply-driven’ responses problematizes the established frameworks and institutional arrangements of international intervention, breaking down the silos of expertise and authoritative knowledge that are key to legitimizing international policy-prescriptions. However, the UN Secretary-General goes further in terms of recommending a positive agenda replacing the traditional role and hierarchies of interventionist agency:

A common understanding of context, needs and capacities should then lead to a common ‘problem statement’. The problem statement should identify priorities in meeting immediate needs but also reducing vulnerability and risk over several years; the capacities of all available actors, particularly national and local, to address those priorities; and where international actors can support existing capacities, complement and scale them up, and improve the circumstances of the most vulnerable. (UN 2016a, 33)

This alternative agenda confirms the radical challenge to the previous ‘top-down’, institutionally driven or ‘supply-centred’ policy-approach because the ‘problem’ is not necessarily seen as amenable to resolution through any existing set of institutional skills or policies. The need to start engagement with a concrete context or problem on the basis of the priorities of the ‘most vulnerable’ and a clear view of the capacities of all the actors further challenges and complicates any idea of a quick fix or a simplistic provision of pre-packaged solutions. However, it is argued here that this shift has much more radical implications, challenging the initial assumptions made about the potential for designing forms of intervention, cohered through attention to the problem rather than the provision of pre-packaged ‘solutions’.

The difficulty of re-legitimizing and repurposing international intervention is unlikely to be resolved merely through inverting the focus and direction of agency from the top-down external ‘solution’ to the bottom-up consensual understanding of the local ‘problem’. As the Humanitarian Policy Group highlights, the shift towards bottom-up approaches is driven by the perception that international agencies face a deep crisis of legitimacy – one that goes to the heart of their identity and the belief that international policy-interventions can be neutral or objective in the desire to problem-solve and build capacity ‘regardless of context or culture’ (HPG 2016, 5). This idea of Western ethics, expertise and knowledge as applicable universally has been crucial to humanitarian discourses, to statebuilding, and to liberal internationalist approaches to peace and development assistance. However, it is seen to be problematic today and to represent a ‘Western ethos’ that others would wish to ‘question or reject’:

large parts of the current way the West conducts its ... business – the charity model, the near-monopoly of the UN agencies, the compulsion to create parallel structures, the reluctance to properly engage with and respect local authorities and cultures, the tendency to privilege international technical expertise over local knowledge and capacities, with ‘exogenous “solutions”’ meeting endogenous “challenges” and “needs”’ – [come] into question. (HPG 2016, 23)

Over recent years there has been a refocus of international policy-intervention on the deeper engagement of international agencies and concern with developing new bottom-up approaches as a means of understanding problems and vulnerabilities (COIC 2016; Patel et al. 2016). Rather than waiting for emergencies to happen there is instead a deeper, longer-term engagement with ongoing issues, such as extreme poverty amongst the ‘most vulnerable’. This is often based on designing indirect forms of intervention for community engagement and empowerment rather than traditional top-down policy-assistance at the level of state institutions. As one interlocutor in Nairobi (the Programmes Director for Concern Worldwide, Kenya) explained, the shift in perspective to a bottom-up approach begins to transform the relationship between international agencies and the societies they are engaging with. These societies are now revealed to be much more densely rich and differentiated – much more lively – than in the hierarchical, traditional approaches which worked with broad and reductive categories that only touched the surface of the problem:

It was the issue of addressing extreme poverty which really changed things for us. We could no longer act as if we could just solve problems. It forced us to engage with outlying areas of risk and inequality, which before we were not interested in. We were just saving lives ... now we needed to develop contextual analysis: to really drill down to the community. To ask: ‘what are the differences here?’. To really delve into the risks, vulnerabilities and mitigating factors. This really broadened the way we understood communities.¹

This shift, towards starting with an understanding of context and local community interaction, sought to refocus perspectives and challenge the subject-centred or Eurocentric positionality of international interveners (on the ‘epistemic avatars of Eurocentrism’, see Sabaratnam 2013). Starting from drilling down to the specific concrete nature of the relational interactions through which problems and vulnerabilities emerged – for example, pockets of extreme disadvantage or vulnerability to particular price or climate changes in areas which may otherwise have coping strategies – enabled a new set of interconnections to be mapped out and described: opening the ‘black box’ of the societies intervening agencies engaged with.

International agencies and lead operatives have jumped at the chance to shift from exporting policies – already fixed externally – to in-depth and open-ended engagements with the aim of long-term community empowerment (UN 2016b). It is here that bottom-up approaches demonstrate close affinity to other relational approaches, such as philosophical pragmatism, probably most fully articulated in John Dewey’s classic work *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1991). Herein Dewey challenges rationalist understandings of the public as already fixed and preformed, instead understanding publics as emerging in response to the effects of indirect social and material interconnections which appear in terms of problems that needed to be addressed. This disruption of classical liberal binaries between publics (or subjects) and emerging problems (or objects of concern) is key to understanding the attraction of incorporating bottom-up intervention into processes of interactive emergence. Problems thus do not just appear for publics, but reflect and enable the construction of publics in different ways. Problems and publics are thereby intertwined or co-constructed in an assemblage of emergent effects. As problems are explored, rather than taken as given, publics become contingent and disaggregated, categories and conceptual divisions become more complex and interrelated.

This process of disaggregation means that it is not easy to turn bottom-up thinking into a viable form of problem-solving. The essential difficulty appears to be that of the barriers to access and understanding, despite an increasing awareness of the need to differentiate and prioritize by drilling down further (getting more micro-level information) and enabling interventions to be more aligned with complex processes of interaction both within and between different local actors and agencies. This is why new digital technologies are often held to be key to the reform of international practices (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013; UN 2014; Meier 2015), highlighted in the fact that the need to integrate new technological innovations is a constantly recurring theme for international agencies. The UN Secretary-General, for example, has urged: ‘Data and joint analysis must become the bedrock of our action. Data and analysis are the starting point for moving from a supply-driven approach to one informed by the greatest risks and the needs of the most vulnerable’ (UN 2016a, 31).

Methodologically, the attempt to overcome the problems of international intervention mirrors broader philosophical and political concerns – within politics and international relations – over the narrowness of the modern Western episteme.² In this regard, Bruno Latour has done much to flag up the radical consequences of the application of digital technologies for knowledge, in constituting the world in much more concrete ways, essential for the grasping of complex interactions; through drilling down to the specific context rather than using broad categories in which differences and distinctions are submerged from vision (Latour et al. 2012). Venturini and Latour (2010, 94) note: ‘The advantage of the new methods is that they allow tracing the assemblage of collective phenomena instead of obtaining them through statistical aggregation. The question of representativeness is thus posed in an entirely different way’. They make a valuable point regarding the ability of digital approaches to enable concrete contextual relations to become clearer, no longer relying on reductive categorizations and generalizations. Drilling down to understand how problems emerge in concrete contexts is not about producing ‘representative’ knowledge that can be generalized but engaging with the context itself through ‘tracing the assemblage’ (see also Concern Worldwide 2016). Here, knowledge is held to be concrete and context-specific, enabling external actors and agencies to trace and design bottom-up interventions in processes of interaction.

The difficulty is, it seems that whatever level of technological drilling down or deeper forms of surveillance and information gathering may be deployed, it is still not possible to capture all the potential variables within any given assemblage of interaction. It appears that any system of data gathering could never be complete or able to grasp processes of interaction in their emergence. It is therefore little wonder that many commentators doubt that the aspirations to use digitally enhanced modes of access to relations in order to fully understand a problem from the bottom up can ever be fulfilled (O’Grady 2016; Read, Taithe, and Mac Ginty 2016). One of the managers of Ushahidi (a major digital platform provider in Nairobi) believes that technology itself can only ever be part of the solution to international interveners attempting to access the processes and interactions which reveal hidden vulnerabilities. She suggests that 90% of the answer lies with enabling community knowledge rather than with digitally enhancing external capacities. Data gathering, no matter how far it drills down, still needs to have the knowledge of the variables to be traced, measured or monitored and can only reach those individuals or

communities which are open to such techniques: just working at the level of community leaders or requiring the use of smartphones for digital tracing is not enough to overcome the limits of these bottom-up methodologies of intervention:

We need the appropriate use of technology; who the audience is is very important and has to drive strategy ... maybe the use of radio programmes or focus groups, we need to innovate our own approaches based on things that people have access to already, not just fancy dashboards and smartphone applications.³

On the ground, it seems that international actors and policy-agencies have much less faith in the promise of Big Data technologies than the boosters in the media and academia (see also Chandler 2017b). Sharing the sceptical mood of policy agencies are those commentators who suggest that even with new data-generating approaches the most vulnerable will be missed or the problems will only be flagged up when it is too late, indicating that ‘external’ approaches of knowing more about the processes of bottom-up interaction and emergence will always be limited. As O’Grady (2016, 78) writes, the data categories used for cross-checking risk factors will always be too wide in scope and not targeted enough, thus increasing rather than ameliorating ‘the problem of rendering invisible those most vulnerable’.

Moving beyond problems and their ‘solutions’

It, in fact, seems to be logically inevitable that any attempt to start from the perspective of the knowledge and technical mechanisms of international agencies and policy-actors will constitute new forms of exclusion and marginalization. Even if not starting from supply-centred approaches, which assume Western superiority, these approaches nevertheless assume the objective knowledge of these intervening agencies. In other words, their subject-centred perspectives (of their own role as the active agents, acquiring greater, more varied or more interactive knowledge) is not (as yet) problematized. Thus failures, to know ‘the’ problem or engage with it successfully inevitably continue to expose external actors to accusations of being too Eurocentric or Western in their views and not being open enough to the systems and societies in which they are engaged. These forms of criticism cannot be avoided by seeking to develop and innovate technologically, whether it is through Big Data, open-source mapping technologies or other means, as whatever the nature of the innovation and no matter how extensive its application and how efficient it may be in delivering information, real and complex life can never be adequately captured.⁴

The application of new technologies increasingly reveals the nature of the problem to be different to how it was previously imagined: they reveal communities to be much more differentiated and reveal that causal chains are often much more mediated and less linear than previously understood. Acquiring greater knowledge of depth, intricacy and complexity inevitably questions previous knowledge assumptions as well as bringing attention to the epistemological limitations of external attempts to know societies and processes from the bottom up (see, for example, Finkenbusch 2016). The density is overwhelming. The problem for international actors tasked with policy intervention is that discussion of and reflection upon the epistemological limits of knowledge is bound up with their own external, Western positionality (see Bagues-Pedreny 2016).

Contemporary debates over the limits to what international actors can achieve thus construct policy interventions as a performative epistemology (see Pickering 2010); the failure of policymaking is seen as a direct manifestation of the limits of a Western way of knowing. This failure is driven by the conflation of epistemological limitations with a Western, Eurocentric or colonial positionality. This positionality is then held to have historically been elitist, hierarchical and exclusionist. The inability to drill down to the required level of depth, to grasp the rich interactive density of complex relational processes, then gives the lie to Western claims of objectivity and epistemic superiority. All interventionist actors (who, by definition, are external agents intervening with instrumentalist intentionality) are caught in the problem of their inability to see the problem in the ways in which it may appear to those more closely involved, despite their claim to be objectively knowing and addressing it. Contemporary political, scientific and philosophical sensitivities necessarily bring international aspirations ‘back down to earth’ in the knowledge that interveners cannot escape their own socially, politically and technologically mediated frameworks of understanding. It appears that bottom-up approaches cannot step outside of their positionality, even with the nicest and most generous of intentions (or with the most reflexive awareness of the recursive processual nature of assemblages and emergent causality; see Körppen, Ropers, and Giessmann 2011; Ramalingam 2013; De Coning 2016).

Bottom-up or post-liberal interventions (see Chandler and Richmond 2015), while appreciating non-linear and emergent causality, appear to be unable to overcome the epistemological limits of international policy-intervention. Intervention as a problem-solving discourse appears trapped in a modernist deadlock, still reproducing ‘objective’ Western understandings in the attempt to externally ‘resolve’ problems. However, it is argue here that this experience has opened up possibilities for these limits to be legitimized or worked around. In response to the problems of legitimizing knowledge claims, policy innovators are increasingly shifting perspective towards a richer ‘posthuman’ understanding of knowledge generation.⁵ Problems are increasingly recast as ones of phenomenology rather than merely epistemology. Access to and the construction of ‘the problem’ is transformed through the attention to the understanding and perceptions of other agencies or actors. A programme manager for Ushahidi describes this as follows:

Especially marginalized groups are very important to the data revolution; with their buy-in and their opinion we will really be able to make a difference. Design thinking needs to emphasize the need to place ourselves in her [the vulnerable or ‘at risk’ subject’s] shoes – what are the language barriers, what tools does she have access to?⁶

Placing oneself ‘in the shoes’ of others opens up the need to see the world as it appears from other perspectives (on perspectivism see, for example, Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2014). This shift begins to go beyond the assumptions that the problems are merely ones of epistemology – of extending the knowledge of external actors themselves. Consideration of the different ways in which the world is perceived – and of how questions are articulated in different ways and with different tools and techniques – begins to raise further questions about the nature of the problem itself (see also Barad 2007). It is at this point that the necessary limitations of bottom-up approaches to designing problem-solving interventions become much clearer. Attempting to resolve ‘the’ problem is then no longer a purely epistemological concern of extending modernist

forms of knowledge deeper into social and cultural processes of interaction by fine-tuning techniques of data gathering and breaking down categories of analysis or speeding up the feedback from digital recording and sensing equipment.

None of these approaches enable international interveners to put themselves ‘in the shoes’ of those they seek to empower or build capacity for. A fundamental gulf opens up between the agency of international policy-actors and the problem itself – or rather the understanding that there is ‘a’ problem constitutes a fundamental gap between the intervener and the society concerned, which is continually apparent when the intervener needs to acquire knowledge in order to address the problem through providing information and assistance or in terms of knowing more about capacities, choices and needs. Although bottom-up interventions emphasize the need for interventions to be bottom-up, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is no ‘bottom’ to be found – no solid ground for external problem-solving knowledge and expertise.⁷ With this shift, inevitably, governing and knowing agency necessarily becomes understood as more widely distributed.

The shift to seeking bottom-up or ‘problem-centred’ approaches for redesigning policy interventions appears to have had the additional implication of making societies and ‘problems’ much more opaque – or rather infinitely complex – than initially imagined, thus forcing problems to be increasingly recast as ontological rather than merely epistemological. The point of the distinction is the vantage point or positionality of the knowledge that is required. An epistemological problem can be solved through an expansion of existing frameworks of knowledge – from the subject position of an external actor (in this case, the international agency concerned). An ontological shift in perspectives also makes the problem itself less clear; even knowing what ‘the problem’ is cannot be resolved through such an extension as it requires indirect access through ways of thinking and relating that are internal to the policy target or situation itself. The question is then no longer ‘how can we understand more?’ or even ‘what do they want?’ or ‘what do they need?’ but an entirely different presentation of the question, away from the initial assumption of the existence of ‘a’ problem. Instead the starting point is more a question of the ways of knowing of others: ‘how do they think?’; ‘how do they see the world?’; ‘what language do they use and how do they use it?’; ‘what tools do they use?’; ‘what instruments or technologies do they use to make sense of the world?’. The knowledge sought is how phenomena appear – how information is processed and things are perceived – to others.

In this way, the barriers revealed by the bottom-up approach appear as the barriers of the modern or Western episteme itself, and the renegotiation of intervention as a set of knowledge practices begins to formulate the problem in terms that parallel discussions of posthuman or object-oriented ontologies: as the object of analysis seems to be increasingly obscured, it withdraws or recedes from the direct or unmediated view of the external actor (see, for example, Harman 2016). The more that the external intervening agency or actor thinks that it grasps the problem in bottom-up approaches – understands the processes involved, locates the most vulnerable, finds the mechanisms of mediation, interpretation and translation – the more the problem recedes or disaggregates; and it is clear that what was mistakenly taken as knowledge of ‘the problem’ was merely a self-projection of the categories and understandings of the external

actor itself. Rather than coming closer to the problem, to addressing causes and removing barriers, the problems appear to be further away, or, more precisely, to have much more relational depth.

From human(itarian)ism to posthuman(itarian)ism

The critique of earlier top-down or supply-centred policy-approaches as well of those of the alternative bottom-up or ‘demand-driven’ solutions is precisely that both remain based on projections of Western understandings – of a liberal, modernist or Eurocentric episteme which makes ‘God’s eye view’ assumptions that the epistemological barriers to problem-solving can be overcome while ignoring the possibility of ontological barriers to knowledge (see, for example, Chandler 2015). In the work of object-oriented ontology or speculative realism this problem of ignoring ontological barriers is often termed ‘correlationism’, a problematic first coined by Quentin Meillassoux which is seen to stem from Kant’s transcendental idealism (Meillassoux 2008, 5–7). Phenomenological barriers to knowledge are not taken seriously as it is assumed that we never have access to the inner world of experience of other subjects or objects but only to the world as we perceive and experience it, trapped within our own phenomenological world of perception. Thus problems are always understood epistemologically – within our own set of correlations between the world and ourselves.

Problems thus are always framed as ‘problems for us’, never constructed in the ways in which they may appear for other forms of being or ways of existing. The perceived need to overcome or bypass these limits has been increasingly raised by decolonial approaches (see, for example, Wynter 2003; Mignolo and Escobar 2010; Mignolo 2011; Shilliam 2015) and these fit well (in this regard) with the concerns of posthumanist, speculative realist and object-oriented theorists. For example, Levi Bryant states:

A phenomenology-of investigates how *we*, us humans, encounter other entities. It investigates what entities are *for-us*, from our human perspective. It is humanist in the sense that it restricts itself to our perspective on the beings of the world ... The problem is not markedly different from that of understanding the experience of another person. Take the example of a wealthy person who denounces poor people as being lazy moochers who simply haven’t tried to improve their condition. Such a person is practicing ‘phenomenology-of’, evaluating the poor person from the standpoint of their own experience and trying to explain the behavior of the poor person based on the sorts of things that would motivate them. They reflect little understanding of poverty. (Bryant 2012)

The key problematic for bottom-up forms of intervention is thus that of not taking alterity seriously enough (Carrithers et al. 2010, 175); the study of different local relations and interactions from the God’s eye view of a Western observer or governance agency appears to risk affirming the modernist world view (of ‘phenomenology-of’) rather than questioning the hegemonic Western assumptions about the objective or scientific nature of knowledge; i.e. that the world is single and uniform and only sociocultural understandings and responses differ (181). While bottom-up approaches emphasize the differences of culture and context in order to see how problems emerge through local relational interaction, as Mario Blaser argues, the side effect is that differences become minimalized and the modernist view of objectivity naturalized in a process of ‘sameing’ rather than othering (Blaser 2013, 549).

Martin Holbraad writes that pointing out these ontological limits enables the move from the problem-solving question of why others ‘get stuff wrong’ to the opening up of a challenge to rethink the analytical concepts of international actors and agencies themselves (Carrithers et al. 2010, 184). This turn to phenomenology-for is an ethical challenge to take alterity seriously by starting from taking literally (rather than metaphorically) what interlocutors say. Similarly, for Blaser (drawing on the work of actor network and posthumanist approaches of Latour, Law, Haraway, Mol and others) the turn to phenomenology-for has profound implications as it challenges the assumption that realities are ‘out there’ rather than continually and multiply enacted or performed (Blaser 2013, 551). Here the work of Annemarie Mol is seen as particularly useful: ‘understanding ontology as performance or enactment brings to the fore the notion of ontological multiplicity’, where different stories and practices are neither describing something existing ultimately ‘out there’ nor are they mistaken or metaphorical, but actually enact or ‘world’ (Blaser 2013, 552; see also Mol 2002).

This reversal of positionality in relation to the problem increasingly links new developments in policy practices with posthuman, speculative and object-oriented approaches. In international policy-discourses, bottom-up approaches are fundamentally challenged by the need to go beyond correlationism; beyond merely the projection of a Western external, or modernist, framing of problems and solutions in order to access the problem through a ‘phenomenology-for-them’ approach – to grasp the problem ‘from the inside’ or ‘to put itself in their shoes’. As Meillassoux (2008, 7) puts it, this shift can be understood as an exciting challenge of entering ‘the great outdoors’, no longer forced to be constrained by traditional frameworks of gaining access to problems but rather to explore other ways of being and knowing. This is certainly how it has been put to me in my fieldwork with members of international policymaking agencies (as illustrated above) who have been keen to move away from assumptions that they are there to inform or teach others rather than being there to learn and question their own assumptions.

It cannot be emphasized enough that previous approaches to international policy-intervention are seen to have black-boxed societies, being too little interested in the internal workings and relationships of these societies and instead focusing on surface appearances and offering policy advice and assistance on this basis. The opening up of this black box has provided the dynamic which is driving and transforming the design of policy intervention, which increasingly seeks to draw from the rich plurality of the new worlds opened up in the problematization of a narrow bottom-up approach. In fact, as articulated here, it becomes clear that there are two stages of the opening up of the problem. The first stage, external and subject-centred, seeks to drill down, operating within the legacy of the modernist episteme, pluralizing the variables and localizing the factors (as described above). The second stage begins to shift to a less modernist framework with a pluralizing ontology, speculating upon multiple ways of knowing or perceiving reality, or of being in the world.

The attempt to move away from addressing a problem to exploring the ways in which it may appear to others transforms the self-understanding of intervening actors. This shift from a subject-centred humanism or humanitarianism (which assumes a universal or objective positionality) to a posthuman approach is often unclear in the remaking of international discourses of policy intervention because this means dealing with the alien nature

not of objects but of communities constituted as vulnerable or ‘at risk’. Thus Meillassoux’s ‘great outdoors’ becomes recast as an open-ended engagement with the ‘other’, with the ‘local’ or with ‘grass-roots communities’ (see, for example, Mac Ginty and Richmond 2013). The fact that the other can never really be known is not a problem but, on the contrary, positive and enabling, and ‘expands possibilities for opening to “new” understandings of difference’ (Brigg and Muller 2009, 136) where external actors can ‘value cultural difference independently of claims to have or know culture, attend directly to the process of constituting culture, and open to other ways of knowing human difference’ (138).

Regardless of the bottom-up terminology through which this shift is recast, the phenomenological framing is the same; policy interventions increasingly start from the internal perceptions of actors closer to the problem itself and its articulation in its concrete local context. The problem is then posed in terms of the ways of knowing and interacting of the local, vulnerable, marginalized or most at risk. Thus the ‘project design’ shifts from assuming the problem and looking for its solution to a more open-ended enquiry into understanding the perceptions of the other and of the ways in which the problem emerges ‘for-itself’ (see, for example, Bahadur and Doczi 2016). Thus interventions seek to see more intensively ‘from the inside’ of problems, understood as nested sets of constructed worlds of interaction where the ways in which other actors and agents see and understand these interactions is vital to grasping the world in its ‘ontological multiplicity’. This provides a major challenge to the approach of drilling down to access and open up problems to an external understanding, as these bottom-up approaches are limited by retaining the baggage of the modernist episteme.

The end of expertise

Thus posthuman approaches increasingly problematize the external approaches and technical fixes of modernist problem-solving in both its top-down and bottom-up guises. The problem appears to transform into an invitation to explore further, on the basis of its own unfolding relationships to the world and the ways of knowing contained within these material and embodied processes. This shift also appears to be reflected in some contemporary resilience discourses wherein the mantra is increasingly that of rejecting external ‘technical’ and ‘engineering’ approaches of ‘bouncing back’, and instead cashing in on the ‘resilience dividend’ by using the failure of modernist approaches as an opportunity to see the world differently (Pelling 2011; Haas 2015; Rodin 2015). In a world held to be more interconnected and less linear, the subject-centred knowledge of international policy-interveners is no longer knowledge. Rather than exporting ‘knowledge’, interventions become increasingly a ‘learning process’ in themselves; this process of learning then becomes the essence of ‘resilience’. However, without any methodological or philosophical insight into the underlying ontological assumptions driving these discussions, there is as yet very little clarity – even when a unifying signifier is introduced (Brand and Jax 2007; Bourbeau 2015). Debates over the nature of resilience as a policy methodology thus echo those within intervention more broadly, with little certainty over what counts as expertise, the nature of knowledge claims and the possibility of pursuing policy goals (see Chandler 2014a, 2014b).

The focus on the need to approach intervention from a bottom-up perspective, on the one hand appears to draw the focus and attention of policymakers down into a seeming

black hole, and on the other hand offer an alternative to bottom-up understandings, operating as an invitation to explore the ‘great outdoors’. Thus interventions become a learning journey as the world is re-envisioned through the webs of relations and interconnections which are simultaneously revealed through moving beyond the assumptions of external knowledge implied by bottom-up approaches. It is exactly the recessive, withdrawn and intractable nature of the problems addressed – their failure to be captured by external problem-solving – that forces intervening actors to shift their focus to the nature of the interactions and connectivities which construct the world itself. In this way, every problem constructs or maps the world differently through its emergence as a set of material and cognitive interactions and relationships. A policy director for an international agency in Nairobi explains it in the following terms: ‘This really pushed people. We realized that we couldn’t operate in little bubbles. The people, the NGOs [non-governmental organizations], private agencies, government actors, we all had expertise in different areas ... There was a need to link everything together’.⁸

It may at first glance appear counterintuitive, but the focus on the epistemological barriers to seeing ‘the problem’ in bottom-up ways that can ground solutions is enabling, perhaps even ‘emancipating’, for external agencies and actors who are freed from the need to ground a set of policy interventions in the search for and transformation of causal chains of interconnection. The world palpably becomes their oyster, as every problem is no longer a constraint or a burden (necessitating the pronouncement of a truth and the making of policy judgements and decisions) but rather an open-ended offer or invitation to explore the great outdoors, beyond existing institutional knowledge and sectoral expertise. The view of policy directors on the ground thus echoes closely the ontological framing of Bruno Latour:

The point of this navigation is that it does not start with substitutable individuals ... but individualizes an entity by deploying its attributes. The farther the list of items extends, the more precise becomes the viewpoint of this individual monad. It begins as a dot, a spot, and it ends (provisionally) as a monad with an interior encapsulated into an envelope. Were the inquiry to continue, the ‘whole world’, as Leibniz said, would be ‘grasped’ or ‘reflected’ through this idiosyncratic point of view. (Latour et al. 2012, 599)

Policy interventions become more about discovering the world in its intricate complexity than about applying pre-established forms of expertise. In fact, it could be argued that this was already the emerging trend in the late 1980s, when discussion of ‘holistic’ and ‘integrated’ approaches became fashionable (Macrae and Leader 2001), only for this to be submergled by the clamour for emergency responses in the militarized and ‘exceptional’ interventions *ex nihilo* of the 1990s and early 2000s (see Chandler 2017a). However, there is the vitally important proviso that the return of integrated approaches takes place not on the basis of the modernist unity of science but on the rejection of a unified approach on the basis of the subject – that the new unity takes place on the basis of the rich (intensive and extensive) complexity of the problem itself. Each problem invites a different way of seeing the world through its lenses – a world of indirect experiential learning that can only be grasped by moving beyond disciplinary expertise and taking alterity seriously.

The world constituted through this approach is very different from the one conceived in earlier approaches to international policy-intervention. Attempts to grasp the specificity of

problems in their unfolding interrelations necessitate a reconstruction of the world as a continuous process of working inside the problem, which at the same time continues to recede or to appear in more and more complex and interrelated ways. If this is the case, pre-existing knowledge and approaches will inevitably be inadequate and the more ‘objective’ or ‘scientific’ they are, the less adequate they will be. This may seem counterintuitive, but the shift away from the bottom-up approach to that of attempting to grasp a problem in terms of the phenomenology-*for*, or from the inside, necessarily challenges the assumptions of correlationist science, which can only ever grasp appearances at the level of universal generalities rather than from the alternative perspectives of the actors and agencies involved.

Thus, intervention necessarily develops an open or ‘flat’ ontology: all problems have the same ontological status.⁹ All problems thus offer new opportunities to explore the great outdoors – the depth and intensity of interactivity; to think in other ways and reflect differently upon the world as it is. Ian Bogost develops a useful analogy when he talks of the need for ‘tiny ontology’ and suggests that all objects are like black holes of infinite density. The useful aspect of this framing is that there are two sides to being:

On the one side of being, we find unfathomable density, the black hole outside which all distinctions collapse into indistinction. Yet, on the other side, we find that being once again expands into an entire universe worth of stuff ... Things are both ordinary and strange, both large and small, both concrete and abstract. (Bogost 2012, 22–3)

Bogost – following the lines of enquiry of other object-oriented theorists such as Bryant (2011), Harman (2009) and Morton (2013) – seeks to give being two aspects: on the one side an infinite density of complexity that always withdraws or recedes from view and can never be entirely accessible but on the other side being expands into infinity, like the explosion of the Big Bang. Things, objects – or ‘units of being’ in Bogost’s ontology – are thus worlds among worlds, infinitely entangled. Drawing from object-oriented approaches such as Bogost’s can be insightful for analysis of the crisis of knowledge in international policy-intervention. What does it mean to understand the problem ‘for-itself’ or from the perspective of other actors and agencies? We can see already, as a logical necessity, that the problem evades the modernist grasp, or subject-centred understanding of bottom-up approaches on two levels.

Each level responds to the two aspects of its being. Firstly, the problem recedes; no matter how much external actors attempt to drill down to the specificity of the context, it seems that they will never grasp the infinite complexity of causation and emergence. The ‘hidden’ vulnerabilities, which intervening agencies seek to address, will, to a certain extent, always be hidden – despite the development of new techniques of digital and algorithmic data gathering. Secondly, the problem reappears as a demand to remove the distinctions and bridge the many policy ‘silos’ of international policy-intervention. The discovery of depth, multiplicity and interconnection means that the approaches of development, security, humanitarianism, resilience, human rights, etc. become increasingly merged together. These two linked processes are infinitely expanding; exploring problem-solving ‘from the inside’ reveals new depths and complexities which increasingly dissolve the distinctions of the policy areas and fields of traditional forms of policy interventions.

Paradoxically, the world of international policy-intervention is a doubly disappearing one; the problems increasingly dissolve into deeper and more complex and differentiated processes of interaction, and at the same time the existent policy-mechanisms, distinctions and fields of expert knowledge increasingly dissolve into indistinction. A further paradox can be added to this: the bottom-up approach to problem-solving becomes increasingly indistinguishable from its more object-oriented displacement of ‘learning and discovery’ as both become increasingly totalizing and never-ending. Both approaches, those with the God’s eye view and those without it, are caught in the infinity of depth of processes of emergence. This means that interventions with the aim of micro-managing adaptation towards desired goals blur into (or can easily flip back and forth with) journeys of discovery, listening to and learning from the ‘other’.

Conclusion

This article seeks to bring clarity to the discussion of the limits and possibilities of the practices of international policy-intervention which brings to the surface the difficulty of maintaining the legitimacy of the internationalist imaginary of intervention from a universalist, detached, objective perspective (even if it were possible for policy interventions to be free from the blinkers of power and ideology). Understanding the ‘conditions of impossibility’ for traditional and modernist conceptions of international intervention – the inability to legitimate the separations and cuts necessary to demarcate a distinct or separate policy-sphere – shines an important light on the frameworks through which policy interventions are understood and contested today. It also suggests that to dismiss posthumanist, speculative realist and object-oriented approaches, as somehow not ‘policy relevant’ would be to miss the broader context in which both academic and policy processes are evolving.

Ian Bogost suggests that the problem of speculative realism and object-oriented approaches has been their inherently abstract presentation, and that the task for philosophy today is to develop a practice – to search for a ‘pragmatic’ or ‘applied’ speculative realism (Bogost 2012, 29). As demonstrated by the discussion above, this perhaps inverses the problematic; rather than philosophy emerging as an abstract theory unrelated to the world, and practices following later, it would appear that the practices and discourses of the policy world also facilitate shifts in philosophical perspectives. Perhaps it is policy-makers looking to legitimize new frameworks and approaches which have, in part, driven this shift towards seeing problems as continually withdrawing from reach, while at the same time calling for the end of distinctions in policy areas and approaches and transforming international interventions into journeys of discovery in ‘alien’ worlds. The policy world of international intervention seems to be a very real example of ‘pragmatic’ or ‘applied’ speculative realism in ways that appear to increasingly displace views of Western expertise and generalizable knowledge.

Notes

1. Interview with the Programmes Director of Concern Worldwide, 9 May 2016, Nairobi.
2. The modernist or Eurocentric episteme, which is being rejected, is usually understood as deterministic and reductionist, assuming Cartesian divisions (between subject and object,

mind and matter, and culture and nature) and seen as exemplified in the fixed deterministic laws of classical Newtonian physics (see further, Barad 2007; Mitchell 2009).

3. Interview with a programme manager of Ushahidi, 11 May 2016, Nairobi.
4. Critics have argued that new scanning and mapping technologies may distance humanitarian actors even more from these societies (Meier 2015; Scott-Smith 2016; Duffield 2016) and that they may reproduce epistemological blind spots and exclusions in different forms (Kitchin 2014; Aradau and Blanke 2015; Read, Taithe, and Mac Ginty 2016).
5. Posthumanist phenomenology is often seen as starting with Thomas Nagel's famous essay 'What Is It Like to Be a Bat?' (Nagel 1974) or with Deleuze and Guattari's popularization of Jacob von Uexküll's 'ethology' (Deleuze 1988, 124–6), drawing attention to how our perceptions of the world are very different to those of other actors and agencies. This approach pluralizes the world, enabling us to see it as constituted through many multiple ways of being, decentring the human as an all-knowing actor. A variety of related approaches – such as speculative realism, object-oriented ontology, actor network theory, new materialism and post-phenomenology – have extended the pluralizing perspectives of critical, gender, feminist, black and de-colonial studies to the nonhuman, thus radicalizing perspectivism (see, for example, Ihde 2009; Bryant 2011; Bogost 2012; Morton 2012; Harman 2016).
6. Interview with a programme manager of Ushahidi, 11 May 2016, Nairobi.
7. I first came across the problematic of depth or of adequately drilling down in bottom-up discourses in November 2009 when I took part in a seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) entitled 'Changing the Subject: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Emotional Well-Being and Social Justice' at Nottingham University in the UK. The problem at issue was the suboptimum choice-making of teenage boys and girls from economically deprived areas of the city of Nottingham (such as the high levels of teenage pregnancy and low levels of university take-up). It was argued that the problem stems from low levels of confidence and self-esteem and early school year interventions were advocated for. One of the Labour Party MPs from the area contributed his view on the problem, highlighting its depth and suggesting that pre-school intervention might be better – and that it would be better still 'if intervention were possible while they were still in their mother's womb'. The audience agreed. Apart from the poisonous view of a working-class cultural environment, the view of how to tackle social and economic problems is notable in the desire to trace causation downwards in a never-ending ontology of depth.
8. Personal interview with the Programmes Director of Concern Worldwide, 9 May 2016, Nairobi.
9. Analogous to Levi Bryant's object-oriented onticology of the 'democracy of objects' (Bryant 2011). Latour (1993, 169) calls this process 'irreduction' in that '[n]othing is by itself either reducible or irreducible to anything else' – i.e. no problem can be reduced to another problem, all problems constitute the world in infinitely multiple ways.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the University of Westminster's Strategic Research Fund [grant number xxx].

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